

“The Birthday Party”

Fiction

“‘The Explosions and the Affections’:  
Variable Focalisation and the Nuclear Family in  
Contemporary Narrative Fiction”

Dissertation

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## DECLARATION

This thesis contains only sole-authored work, some of which has been published and/or prepared for publication under sole authorship. The bibliographic details of the work and where it appears in the thesis are outlined below.

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Material from this conference paper has been reworked for inclusion in the arguments made in Chapter One, Chapter Two, Chapter Five and Chapter Six of the dissertation component of this thesis.



## ABSTRACT

Fiction: “The Birthday Party.”

The creative component of this thesis is a novel written in a realist style and focusing on the quotidian suburban existence of the contemporary Western Australian Sinclair family, a nuclear group comprised of father Rob, mother Laura, daughter Alice, and son Nathan. The narrative is set on the day Laura turns forty and follows each of the four characters through personal challenges: thirteen-year-old Nathan is confronted by the performative nature of sexuality; sixteen-year-old Alice’s dreams of becoming an Olympic swimmer are denied; Rob, a kindly teacher, succumbs to stress and physically harms a student; and Laura’s ambivalence about family life peaks as new financial circumstances make her question whether she should stay, or go. The surprise party the rest of the family throws for Laura’s birthday forms the climax for the individual stories and the narrative as a whole, as the four Sinclairs confront their circumstances and reluctantly seek solace in family, despite it being to varying degrees a cause of their conflict. The narrative is presented in short chapters that focus on each of the characters, and are linked by a third-person narrative voice. In this way the four family members are represented as equal parts supporting a whole. Moreover, limiting each chapter to the thoughts, feelings and actions of one character allows their representations of their world and of one another to be combined and contrasted, presenting Sinclair family life as simultaneously an individual and collective experience. In the Sinclairs’ suburban middle-class nuclear context, family is inescapable.

Dissertation: “‘The Explosions and the Affections’:

Variable focalisation and the nuclear family in contemporary narrative fiction.”

The critical component of this thesis is an exploration of the use of multiple limited third-person viewpoints as a narrative technique in three contemporary novels focusing on Western middle-class families: *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen (2001), *The Good Parents* by Joan London (2008), and *The Ice Storm* by Rick Moody (1994). The term “variable focalisation”, developed by Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1980), is used to describe the narratives’ movement between the perspectives of the

various members of the fictional Lambert, de Jong, and Hood families respectively. It is argued that in these three texts, as in the accompanying novel manuscript “The Birthday Party”, the depiction of each family member’s viewpoint by a third-person narrator highlights the ways in which the individuals feel disconnected from and disappointed by family life, while at the same time making explicit the characters’ irrevocable links to one another and the group. In *The Corrections*, the Lamberts’ competing and at times contradictory impressions of each other informs and complicates some of the events of the novel, while in *The Good Parents* and *The Ice Storm*, the particular way in which each narrative is presented through the perspective of each of the family members reinforces the themes of separation and loneliness in both novels.

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## **A NOTE ON REFERENCING**

As this is an Australian thesis, all quotations from non-Australian or -British sources have been standardised to Australian spellings throughout, in order to maintain consistency. All other anachronistic spellings or denotations in quotes have been marked with [*sic*].

In-text citations are used in the dissertation, following the MLA style. References in the fiction are placed in footnotes, as in-text citations are not a convention of creative writing. The bibliography refers to texts cited in both the fiction and the dissertation.

In-text citations follow a convention whereby any quotation denoted with only a page number, and no author's surname, can be assumed to relate to the most recently mentioned author in the text. All new authors are introduced with their surname, either in the statement or in the parenthetical reference.



## “The Birthday Party”



## 1. Laura

Laura Sinclair sank into a crouch and lifted her digital camera. The bay spread out before her, its eastern side met by a flat expanse of rock that jutted into the Southern Ocean. The angle she took tracked low across the stones so that they filled the lower third of the frame, with the white-clean line of sand in the middle ground and the steep incline of the bushland above, cut through by steps leading up to the road. It was eight a.m. on a June morning and there was no one else around. Greens Pool, Western Australia: it was just the place.

She checked the composition and lighting in the LCD screen and smiled when it looked as perfect as she'd hoped, the right side of the image warmed by the weak winter sun while the left sank into blues and greys. Peering back through the viewfinder, Laura carefully shuffled the focus until the crest of the rock was sharpest, then narrowed the aperture to make sure the bushes weren't too blurred. She wanted the dark crimson boulder to rise in the foreground with the beach and bushes lying gently behind it, giving the viewer a sense of suspension over a spread of tranquillity; a sense of escape. She adjusted the shutter speed and ISO, and she was ready.

The shot was so good.

Laura fell into it, beginning the photographer's loop of snapping, checking, adjusting, and repeating. She was glad she'd taken a risk and left her tripod in the boot of the car, since the curve of the wet rock would have made it tricky to get a steady shot. Instead she scuttled like a crab across it, trying to get the best span of beach, the neatest peak of stones, the boldest line of stairs. Her mind felt as clear as the water.

She took these solo trips once or twice a year; just for a few days, a week at most. Alone, she spread luxuriously across springy motel beds and drove for hours looking for the perfect shot. It was wonderful. And her husband was so good about it, especially considering he never holidayed alone. Rob preferred for the four of them to be together: himself, Laura, Alice and Nathan.

She didn't know how long she stood out there on the rock, except that afterwards she had thirty-nine pictures. Some time near the thirty-ninth a headache gathered and solidified into a hot cleaver, its blade running along the centre of her skull. She drew back from the viewfinder and squinted against the sharp pain.

After a moment, it eased. Slowly she straightened and looked at the bay. So beautiful. She took a few more shots, then the pain began again. Though she'd never had a migraine before she knew this must be something like it, the intensity of the pain clouding the corners of her vision and making her limbs feel suddenly weak. She put the lens cap on and started back towards the beach, her steps small and careful on the wet rock.

She came to a pit of smaller stones sunk beneath the water. A yellow-brown crab eyed her beadily. She couldn't remember how she'd crossed it on the way out, but now she'd have to wade through to get to drier ground. Slowly, slowly. Climbing up to safety, she bent to roll up the heavy damp hems of her jeans, her hands shaking.

Then she was totally alone, lying on a deserted beach at the end of a nowhere road. The redness of light and pain was inside her eyelids and she put a hand over her face. Motionless on the sand, for a moment her world was just the agony in her head. She'd heard that the brain had no pain receptors, but that couldn't be true: the feeling in her skull was so vivid, so excruciating, that she could see it; the glinting blade burrowing through the soft folds.

She might be having a stroke, or an aneurysm. Gritting her teeth, she raised both arms, feeling them quake with the strain. They remained in the air. She knew there were other signs of clots, of gummy knots plugged in the brain, but couldn't remember them. She stood up.

Climbing the stairs back to the road, she had to lean against the handrail. At the top she saw another car parked beside hers. As she fumbled with her keys she thought she heard a door slam, but when she was finally in the driver's seat and glanced in the rear-view mirror, she couldn't see anyone. Relieved, she switched on the engine and revved it, spitting gravel with the steep angle as she reversed.

Back at the chalets in Denmark she was shocked to find it was only nine-thirty; the day had barely started. Laura took refuge in the cool of her en-suite, tugging open the heavy window to let in some air. Taking three painkillers from her travel bag, she filled a paper cup and drank. Suddenly she couldn't get enough liquid. Laura filled the cup over and over again, gulping as if her throat were lined with salt.

After a minute she became aware of the stretch of her belly and the cold water trickling down her chin, and she stopped drinking. She rubbed the moisture into her neck and then held a shaking hand under the tap, splashing the stream against her face, her chest, her forearms. Her head thrummed. She looked at her pale face in the mirror and rubbed her forehead again, then sank to the floor and went to sleep spread across the coolness of the tiles.

When she woke a few hours later she felt confused and hot, and she couldn't convince herself to get up. She could hear voices.

Later, when the headache was gone and she felt well enough to go outside, Laura realised there was just a thin brick path between the back wall of her unit and another chalet. The open window over Laura's toilet faced directly into the flyscreen of that chalet's bedroom, and the guests – whom Laura never saw – must have been lying on their bed, talking, as she dozed. But as she lay on the tiled floor, exhausted and disoriented, she felt as if the voices were closer, were inside. Inside *her*.

“Don't you want to?”

A moment's silence.

“Hmm? Don't you want to?”

The tone of the voice was wheedling, though she couldn't make out if it was a man or a woman. It seemed familiar, somehow. “Don't you want to? ...You know.”

Laura didn't know. She couldn't move.

“You know. A baby.”

In her dazed state, Laura felt like she'd had this conversation before, in her own mind. She'd played both roles, too: the silent, and the persistent.

“We have to talk about it sometime.”

She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to know about it. There was tension spreading down her jaw.

“Don't you want to have...?” The pause was deep and creepy. “A *ba-by*?”

Though Laura's husband had had a vasectomy years earlier, she could see him mouthing the words to her. But at the same time *she* was saying it to him, deep-

throated and teasing, trying to pretend she wasn't serious. In her mind they urged one another on. Her headache was coming back.

She didn't want a baby. She'd had two, she couldn't have any more. She was tired.

"You'd be great at it, everyone says so. And you know I want to have kids some day." Then the voice dropped and Laura could feel the bass of it low in her stomach. "But we can always *practise*... yes we can... now, now, how about now...?"

Laura flinched and opened her eyes. There was no one there. Gradually the images of herself and her husband disappeared and a metronomical thumping began, reverberating through her sore head. *Thud. Thud. Thud.* The sound of sex. Baby-making. It disgusted her.

She dozed off again, and when she woke up everything was quiet. Laura got up, feeling weak, and drank three glasses of water with more painkillers, then wandered out into the main room. Her eyes were filmy as she flicked through the television channels, the hyper-coloured faces of regionally-produced daytime television even more depressing than the ones piped in to Perth from America. Laura watched as a model with neon teeth grinned over an all-in-one apple corer, slicer, and juicer, unable to believe the convenience.

Four hundred kilometres away, in an old house on a big block with the noise of the freeway behind it, her family would be coming home from school. Laura imagined the kids bursting out of the car, calling to each other playfully and pretending to smoke cigarettes as the cold June air whitened their breath. Her husband would rub their heads and promise takeaway for dinner, and inside the house they would play cards around the table, drinking steaming Cup-a-Soups as the winter evening descended.

The afternoon programme cut to an ad for washing powder and Laura closed her eyes. She didn't know what Rob and the kids were doing four hundred kilometres away. She didn't even know what they were doing when she was home.

In the morning the migraine was gone, leaving Laura feeling strange. On a light walk around the resort she discovered the narrow path between her chalet and the one behind. The sound of the bed-head hitting the wall again seeped through the open window, and the disturbing monologue from the day before suddenly made sense. For a second Laura considered peeking through the flyscreen to see the sweaty, rutting owner of the voice, the person who wanted a baby so badly, then decided against it. She thought she might never have sex again.



She went back to the chalet and rang her boss, Julian, and then Rob. The Great Southern was so beautiful she wanted to extend her trip, take as many photos as possible. She'd be back at the end of the week. Julian sounded distracted when he told her to take all the time in the world, while Rob told her, worriedly, to enjoy herself, and that the kids were fine. She hadn't even asked.

## 2. Life Begins

Fifteen months later, Laura lay stretched across the recliner in her lounge room, drifting in and out of sleeples.

The sound of birds outside the window brought her round. It was still dark. Her daughter Alice would be up soon. Getting up before God, Laura's father would have said. As an insomniac, Laura didn't understand this behaviour.

But then, there was a lot she didn't understand about her children.

She shifted in her seat until its mechanisms snapped it back upright. She wasn't keen on Alice or Rob catching her strung across an armchair at five a.m., a whiskey glass on the coffee table holding the viscous remains of Bailey's Irish Cream. Slipping out of the room, Laura paused to look at the photograph mounted on the wall behind her chair. The beach at Lancelin on a cloudless day, soft waves frozen on the sand. She could feel the warmth in her picture, the calm she'd discovered, by herself, an hour before dusk, and she smiled a little before switching off the light.

She shuffled carefully across to the master bedroom, not wanting to wake Rob. He'd have to get up soon enough, but she didn't want to deprive him of the few remaining minutes of sleep before Alice came knocking. Laura of all people knew how precious those minutes could be.

For the past six years, ever since their damp daughter had burst home full of the news that her school swimming instructor had praised her tenacious freestyle and suggested she might want to join a local club, Rob had been the one to drive Alice to swimming practice at the leisure centre near Fremantle. Laura had been wary of the time and the money and the intensity – she considered Allie intense enough – but Rob,

who'd seen his dreams of parenting the next great Australian sporting legend resurrected after producing two ball-dodging, fine-boned children, had enthusiastically agreed to be her taxi. Even after her holiday in Denmark, when Laura lost her job at the photography studio and really had nothing better to do, he continued with the routine, climbing out of bed at half-past four and drooping into his dinner every night.

Though she enjoyed the solitude this granted her, alone in the lounge with her books until past midnight, it also made her feel bad. But she couldn't do it: discipline herself into a child's bedtime and wake in the pitch dark just so she could drive their daughter for twenty silent minutes. So Rob lost because he was the better loser.

She turned the bedroom doorknob carefully, pushing it down into the wood to avoid squeaks. The house was new, but the door handles were all slightly loose and didn't catch the latches properly half the time, so you could be stuck, twisting and twisting and unable to get out. This time the latch retracted.

In the gloom she could see her husband lying spread-eagled on his back, the sheets bundled at his feet where he'd kicked them away. After her father died in his sleep, Laura had been haunted by the potential for people to go to bed and never get up. Though as a kid she'd often crept into her brother's room to listen for his faint snore, the anxiety hadn't been too bad until she had Alice and then Nathan and didn't sleep properly for five years. The possibility of cot death made her lie on the floor of their bedrooms, and if they were too quiet she'd reach through the slats and prod them just a little, to hear that sharp intake of breath. When it turned into an enraged cry, she would cry too.

Part of the problem was that her two kids had slept so differently she couldn't work out what was normal. Nathan, who was younger, had slept a lot: stretching out on the lounge-room floor in the sunlight like a dog; drooping sideways in his car-seat when the engine started. Alice, on the other hand, had never been a big sleeper. Laura had taken pains to recline the soft, bird-like creature gently in her cot at night, separating skin from her own millimetre by millimetre. Finally extricated, Alice looked up at her patiently. "Ni-night, Allie," Laura cooed, waiting for the pearlescent baby eyelids to gently close, the way they did on ads for infant painkillers. Mother and daughter regarded one another in the dark, Alice blinking and flexing her tiny fingers.

She wondered how a third baby would have slept, if she'd had one.

She curled into the small space beneath Rob's right arm and tugged a corner of pillow from where it was bunched under him. Rob breathed on, undisturbed. It was as if she wasn't even there.

Of course, now she was in bed, Laura was wide awake, waiting for Alice's alarm to sound at the other end of the house. *Any minute now*, the mad chattering of the birds suggested, but Laura had no way of knowing when because they didn't keep a digital clock in the bedroom. It was an insomnia-fighting tactic she'd read about in a magazine, the theory being that she would only stress further as the red numbers showed just how much sleep she was losing.

She'd have to go be particularly well-rested to cope with today.

She opened her eyes to the dark bedroom. In it, she knew, was a stack of books lent to her by her friend Caroline, sitting on the floor since they still had no bedside tables, despite being in the new house for eight months. Underneath this pile was a piece of paper, perfectly squared and tucked away. There was a square exactly the same size in the middle of her consciousness. Though she tried not to think about it, she was always thinking about it. She had to do something about this letter today.

Laura pulled her knees closer to her ribs. She always slept like this in a bed designed for more than one person. The discomfort was obviously bad for her insomnia and yet she couldn't make herself relax, even when Rob wasn't there. If anything, having all those metres of mattress to herself made it worse. She felt adrift, their bed a giant raft on a carpet ocean.

It was stupid. They'd built the house for the space. Out here in the suburbs the houses were able to take up fifty-one percent of the block and the builders stuck to this faithfully, pushing their facades as close to the kerb as the council would allow. Their old place in Como had been built after the war, with an enormous front yard and ceilings higher than the rooms were wide. That house had a strange way of absorbing sound, with the noise from adjoining rooms somehow magnified while words spoken right in front of you came out muffled and toneless. Still, it was on a good block and the property market kept booming, so the new owners had paid a nice price to be able to knock it down and build a three-storey mansion with river glimpses. The price was so nice that not only were the Sinclairs able to build a big new house in the outer suburbs, but they could also afford for Laura to stay in it all day, doing nothing.

The new place conducted sound properly and there were *two* bathrooms, rather than one; more than that, Laura got one all to herself since Rob used the one at the

kids' end of the house so as not to disturb her in the mornings. He also kept his clothes in the spare bedroom so she got all the wardrobe space, and he'd hung her landscapes in every room of the house. She was surrounded by her self-created images of beauty and escape.

Oh, the guilt. It caught in her chest and clenched.

At last Alice's alarm went off at the other end of the house. Laura sighed and relaxed a little. It would take a few more minutes for them to leave, but then she'd have some chance of dipping back under a few more times before Nathan got up.

When she was working, she would sleep from after midnight to around ten. The portrait studio's most popular bookings were at dinnertime, when the dual-income families shuffled in, blinking and cranky as if emerging from a minor car accident. Laura would stay back late to sort through the day's images, marvelling at sheet after sheet of near-identical poses and wondering, if she could somehow print them on transparencies and lay them on top of each other, whether they would all form the same false smile. Back home and with everyone else just getting into bed, Laura would unwind on the couch with a Bailey's and bad midnight television before falling into the sweet reliable sleep of the gainfully employed, all thoughts of nocturnal deaths just about erased from her mind. Now she still stayed up alone, but though she was bone-tired, sleep never came.

In the predawn quiet she could track her daughter's every move. Alice's morning routine had been the same all year: into the kitchen for fruit, back to her room to change, short stops in the bathroom and master bedroom, and a quick exit through the garage. The order and duration – nine minutes – never changed.

Laura heard Alice rummage in the fridge. This was the only variable moment, but because her daughter was a good girl and ate every type of fruit (and, you might say, rarely exercised free will), her choice depended on which particular items were within easy reach. Once, when Allie was twelve, Laura had tested her by putting a row of plums at the front of the fruit tray for a week; when she went into the kitchen each morning the bin was topped with a glossy purple seed. After a few days the results of the whimsical experiment began to upset her. Was this normal? she wondered, piling bananas and apples and pears at the back, leaving a five-centimetre space around the sole opening plum. She should probably be speaking to someone about this. But in the end it was easier to just stop doing it.

Hearing the fridge door shut, Laura wondered idly what fruit her daughter had selected this time. What had been there the night before? Apples and bananas – all normal houses had apples and bananas, didn't they? Or maybe grapes: Rob had come home via the IGA, and he often bought a bag. Her tired mind hooked itself on the guessing game and would not let go. *Grapes*. She tried to think if Nathan had been eating any in front of the TV the previous night. He was a grazer, but picky, unlike Alice. While her daughter ate with steady, joyless determination, her son had quirks. She had seen him eat whole half-loaves of bread still stiff from the freezer, nibbling the crust off each slice and then around and around in ever-decreasing circles, clockwise. Grapes he ate by the bunch, peeling each with his teeth and sucking the pocket of skin from the tip of his tongue before swallowing the naked fruit like a tablet.

From the bathroom came the hum of the fan, and with a sudden rush of relief Laura remembered there were no grapes, only more boxes of the fetta pastries Rob had apparently developed a taste for. Seeing him stack them in the laundry freezer she'd felt nauseous at the thought of them in the oven, swelling like sped-up footage in a nature documentary. There was entirely too much food in that freezer, and yet there never seemed to be enough for them to eat: every week her Coles trolley was half-filled with damp cardboard packaging, things that could be placed on trays at two-fifty degrees and forgotten about for thirty minutes. She should learn to cook, to properly cook. It wasn't like she was doing anything else with her time.

So. Apples, bananas, mandarins, and now Alice was padding toward their bedroom. Laura cheated by dropping the apples from her list, since she hadn't heard any loud crunching. *Banana*, she guessed. Then the knock came.

Rob rolled away from her, heaving himself up. Then the whisper of his cotton-clad shoulder against the wall as he balanced himself; the rustle of bare feet sliding into sneakers; the two clicks of the latch as he opened and closed the door; and finally the footsteps down the hallway. Laura lay tensed for the final note, the growl of the Toyota. Only then would the big house settle back into silence.

Eyes shut tightly, Laura tried to imagine she was on a photography trip down in Busselton or up at Kalbarri. When she'd gone away by herself she never had any trouble sleeping, either. She made sure to book rooms right on the ocean roads, flinging open the windows to the soothing crash of waves and the tang of salt in the air. To hunt the best shots, she dressed like an explorer in boots and T-shirts. The

estate where they lived now was twenty kilometres east of any beach and the artificial pond in the middle, which they weren't allowed to swim in, smelled like nothing. She hadn't used her camera for months.

She had to get away.

There was a knock and the door clicked again. "Rob?" she asked, stretching in the direction of the still-dark doorway. "What is it?"

She couldn't see his face. "I just..."

He trailed off. Laura's chest caught with the fear that he had somehow found the letter she'd hidden. Though she'd never seen his judgemental face before, somehow she had always been able to imagine it perfectly.

"Happy birthday," he said at last, then paused again. "Go back to sleep, love. Sorry." And then a final click as he left.

Laura was sorry, too. Today she turned forty.

Hearing the low drone of the garage door, Laura slid to the floor, lifting the books and patting blindly at the carpet. She felt the corner of the letter and exhaled with relief, then piled the books back on top of it and slipped into bed.

### 3. The Swimmer

Alice bent in front of the open fridge. Two bananas lay on their sides at the front of the fruit tray, but today she decided to bypass them in favour of a mandarin near the back, craving the satisfaction of peeling the segments apart.

She was a creature of habit. Six years ago, when she'd first started training, another girl, Angela (long gone; couldn't hack the pressure), fainted getting out of the pool and cracked her head on the ladder. The sight of blood in the water made Alice's stomach somersault, but she'd skipped breakfast so she didn't heave. When Angela returned from the change rooms, their coach, Jenna, had gathered the group together and crossed her arms. "Did you eat breakfast?" Half of the girls looked away and Jenna sighed. "You've got to have something in your stomach. You're doing fifty laps a day!"

When a backstroker whined about feeling heavy in the water she was told to eat fruit, and since then Alice's first act on swimming days had been to eat whatever she could find at the front of the crisper tray. Usually she wasn't picky – fruit was fruit was fruit, who cared? – but today the thought of trying to swallow a mushy wad of banana made her feel sick. She was going to learn her fate as a champion athlete this morning.

Throwing the mandarin skin in the rubbish, Alice walked back to her bedroom to change. Despite the chill of the early-September air, once she'd taken off her pyjamas she stood naked in front of the mirror for a moment. She was skinny, she knew; she wasn't tall enough to be called lean. She was built like a ballerina, narrow-shouldered and hipless, and yet could do the 800-metre freestyle in less than ten minutes. Her dad called her the Lungfish but her mum just kept asking, *Have you been*



*eating?* Of course she had. Alice didn't want to face-plant the tiles like Angela. She would die of embarrassment.

She put on a one-piece and tracksuit, then headed to the bathroom. Bending over to pull a towel from the cupboard she could taste the mandarin coming back up. *Weird*, she thought, swallowing. Every other time the squad lists were posted her guts had been as hardy as the rest of her. Every other time she'd made it to the top.

Alice tapped at her parents' door and listened for the creaks and shuffles of a body making its way out of bed. Dad; always her dad. There was this look her mum got whenever they talked about swimming, and she got it worst whenever someone broached the idea of her driving to the pool. A look of horror and disbelief, like she'd just got some really bad news. It was only ever for a second before Laura caught herself and put on a motherly face, but Alice saw it.

Her dad slipped out of the bedroom, heavy-eyed and smiling faintly. He mouthed *Hi*; she mouthed it back. He shut the door carefully behind him and they went into the kitchen where a stack of his marking lay on the table, ready to be taken with them. He was a history teacher at a school near their old house. Since they'd moved there wasn't anyone else close enough to carpool to the leisure centre with, so her dad would bring some work along and do it in the foyer while she trained.

Seeing his sleepy eyes in the darkness, Alice loved her dad so much it made her stomach hurt worse. He made her sad, though; this life he lived was all for everyone else. He wanted so much happiness for her that she couldn't bear to tell him when bad things happened in case it hurt his feelings.

Just as Alice put a hand on the doorknob to the garage she felt a tug at her sleeve. Rob signalled something in the dark and shuffled away.

Her stomach sloshed the mandarin around and she flexed her fingers with frustration. Why today? The schedule was tight; there wasn't a spare minute. They had to be reversing out of the driveway by 4:42, because if Alice was late Jenna's scalpel tongue would peel strips from her until she climbed into a locker and refused to get out. It had happened to stronger girls, girls with thighs and shoulders.

Alice heard murmuring from the bedroom and then her dad was back. Soon they were in the car, the dashboard clock flipping over to 4:41 as they backed down the driveway. Alice let out the breath she'd been holding for the last two minutes and her stomach groaned.

Rob heard it. "All right?"

“Just a bit of a tummy.”

His forehead folded. “Want to stay home?”

In her six years with Commercial Swim Club, which operated out of a leisure centre in the industrial part of O’Connor, Alice had stayed home from training exactly twice, both times on doctor’s orders. She swam with headaches, period pain, allergies, viruses and fever. At the state championships two years ago she’d had gastro for a week; she plugged herself with anti-emetics and beat her PB. “That’s okay. Let’s go.”

But her dad didn’t put the car in gear. Instead he placed both hands in his lap and looked at her. “Big day today, Lungfish. Mum’s birthday. Might be better if you sleep for a few hours.”

No. He was wrong. The big part of the day would happen in half an hour, when the squads for the summer season were announced. Alice had been in the top squad at Commercial since she was thirteen, but her times had been stalling for the past six months and there was a chance – just a chance – Jenna would drop her back a level before the summer events. But her dad didn’t know that because she hadn’t told him.

The celebrations for her mum’s birthday were going to be day-long and elaborate, with guests dropping around from breakfast-time until the surprise party planned for that night. Her dad had come up with the idea all by himself and was immensely proud of it, going over the details excitedly for weeks. “I got green balloons as well – I thought the red ones looked a bit too much like Valentine’s Day.” “We have *four* confirmed vegetarians now, so I’m going to buy another packet of those frozen spinach and fetta pastries, just to make sure.” “It turns out Sandra can come after all. Her son’s concert was cancelled because they found pills in the music teacher’s desk.”

Her dad already had the blondeness and bright eyes of a Labrador, and the party – just fifteen hours away now – was like a tennis ball held in front of his nose. Alice was interested in seeing the look on her mum’s face when she came home to find everyone she knew standing on the patio, holding plastic cups of champagne and screaming happy birthday.

She tried to look healthy and calm. “Dad, we’re already in the car.” The dash clock read 4:42. “It’s fine. It’ll be fine.”

He looked at her for a moment longer, his expression twisted with concern. Alice didn’t know how you could have so little control over your own face that you let

it display what you were thinking all the time. “All right. But if you feel sick you just come out and get me and we’ll pop straight home.”

“Yeah, of course.” The clock flipped over to 4:43.

The lights on the main road heading toward Fremantle were usually green this early in the morning, but the two heading northwards to the leisure centre were totally crap. The second one could stay red for a full minute, even with nothing coming along the intersecting road. Alice had nightmares about traffic lights that burned red as clocks ticked endlessly over to five, six, seven a.m.

But oh thank God, there was another car idling at the intersection. She could have kissed its bumper when the light reluctantly switched as they approached. Alice eased back into the seat with a sigh, her stomach soothed.

Or not. She clamped her teeth together and slouched, using her diaphragm as a lid over the bubbling saucepan of her guts.

“Allie...”

“It’s fine.”

“You look pale, Fishy.”

“I’m not.”

Her dad tried to study her more carefully but was too cautious a driver to keep his eyes from the empty roads for more than a few seconds at a time. “You’re not going to be very happy if you vomit in the water.”

“Neither will the others.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“Dad, I’d never let that happen.” She remembered Angela’s blood dripping from the chrome ladder. “Gross, *never*.”

Rob made a dissatisfied noise in his throat, but they were at the pool now and she was jabbing desperately at her seatbelt. Before she could vault into the car park, however, his big hand was on her forearm. “*Dad –*”

“Just sit for a second and take a deep breath. You look like you’re about to jump out of your skin.”

She tried, but the clock was glowing 5:56 and it took three minutes to get inside, get her stuff in her locker and get onto the pool deck. “I really have to go I’ll see you after thanks for the lift bye,” she babbled, diving into the stream of swimmers all moving towards the big announcement: the swimming squads for the year ahead.



Before Jenna would say anything they had to do their sets. Bending into her stretches, Alice stared hard at a corrugated line tile of the ground, like a sailor fixing his gaze on the horizon. Trying to keep her equilibrium.

“Right, warm-ups,” Jenna barked, and the other girls dropped into the pool like synchronised swimmers. Standing at the end of the line, Alice decided to take the steps; a rookie mistake. The icy morning water enveloped her ankles and she froze, focusing on the meniscus of warmth on the surface of the pool, below which was agony. Yellow and purple blotches bloomed on her skin. Everyone else was already setting off on their laps as she finally lowered her shivering torso into the water, wanting to cry from the cold.

A dozen lengths of butterfly and breaststroke finally warmed her, but the water in the pool seemed thicker than usual and Alice was having trouble moving her arms through it. She couldn't cut into her somersault at the right angle and kept losing her sense of direction, battling to the surface sideways. After her twelfth try she bobbed at the end of the pool, catching her breath. Turns were a problem anyway, her light body fighting against the rush of water she brought down the lane behind her. In competition most of the time she got it right, but *most of the time* wasn't all of the time, and it should have been.

They turned to kick sets. Usually Alice was as diligent about them as she was about everything else, refusing to use the time to gossip like the others did. This morning her legs felt too leaden and she battled through the water.

A head bobbed up in the next lane: Portia. She was an excellent freestyler but she had to breathe too often during kick sets, lifting her scarlet face from the water to cough and gag. Her crap lungs were a mystery: no asthma, no smoking and a wide swimmer's chest. Most of the squad, kicking at top speed, could make it all the way down the pool on a single breath, but Porsh had to come up at least three times to make the distance. So Alice wasn't the only one not to have mastered a simple skill. A skill that could make or break.

Except Portia didn't care so much about being broken. She'd already asked Jenna to drop her down a squad so she could focus on getting into Law at uni. Alice couldn't understand why she'd bother staying, paddling down the pool like a happy

idiot, when it should be all or nothing. Give your best or give your resignation. Get in or get out.

Portia dropped her pace to stay next to Alice. She glanced around to make sure Jenna wasn't watching, then frowned. "You look shit."

"My stomach," Alice explained, gazing at her kickboard over her tensed-up arms. Her slim, fish-like muscles trembled.

"Morning sickness," Portia said, predictably.

"Yeah, right."

"What is it, the announcement?"

Alice tried to shrug.

"Come on, you've been in the National Development squad for like three years."

"But you've got to swim a national time."

"You've done that before."

Alice *had* done that before. The only problem was, it had been when she was fifteen, and she'd swum a fifteen-year-old's time. Now she was sixteen, and she couldn't get herself under the new time even if she broke her back trying. Which she'd almost done.

She wasn't usually the kind of person who looked for compliments and reassurances. She hated to hear herself say, "Do you really think Jenna won't drop me?"

Portia recoiled from her desperation. "Well, you know," she said, then made a show of putting her face under again. Soon enough she had to surface, panting, and noticed Alice still keeping pace. She sighed. "I mean, the decision's already made, really, so there's no point worrying about it now."

But Alice couldn't help it. She worried and worried until she pulled herself out of the pool and power-walked to the change-rooms to throw up.

When the waves of nausea had passed, she sat on the closed lid, chin in hands. Alice hated vomiting. She felt betrayed by her body, these stupid airy bones with their thin insulation of muscles that wouldn't do anything she told them to do. She had always felt that her *self* was the one thing in the world she could control, but maybe not. Then what?

There was a knock at the door. "Alice?" It was Jenna.

"It's fine." Alice's voice shook a little.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it.”

“I need you back in the pool. You’re not supposed to be in here.”

Jenna thought she was trying to find the squad lists, Alice realised. She burned with embarrassment. “I’m – I threw up.”

The coach paused. “Are you sick?”

“It was just –” But she couldn’t confess to nerves, not to Jenna. Jenna already had reservations about her strength. “Just a bad mandarin.”

“Oh.”

“It was a bit brown. Pretty brown.”

“Right. Well.” Alice could hear her coach breathing on the other side of the door. Jenna inhaled in sharp bull-like snorts, a hangover from her butterfly career. “Take a minute, get yourself together and get back in the pool.”

“Sure, thanks Jenna.” But the coach was already gone, the door squeaking behind her. Alice took the minute she had been given, counting the seconds out in her head, and as soon as she got to sixty straightened up and headed back. Her stomach was empty and she could dry-retch underwater. She’d done it before.

It was time for sets of laps, and she felt relieved. She loved this portion of the day, swimming two kilometres of freestyle in ten two-hundred-metre sets. She could do it with her eyes closed and her brain switched off; she *did* do it with her eyes closed and her brain switched off. The time always seemed to vanish quickly, as if she’d been sedated. Except for when she lifted her head at the end of each set and Jenna’s face scrunched up as she screamed the time, furious as Alice’s took longer and longer with each two hundred when she was supposed to be improving. “We’re aiming for three minutes, Alice! Pick up the pace!”

Except, for the past few days, the coach’s expression had been soft as she called Alice’s time. Which was either a good sign or a bad one.

Stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke. For the past six months Alice had been completing the sixteen lengths of her chosen race – even the third quarter, which was usually the hardest to maintain – with a consistency that was getting weird. Whenever Jenna timed her, she finished within half a second of nine minutes twenty-five. Fastest time, in July: 09:24:30. Slowest time, in May: 09:25:29. For a while Jenna hadn’t seemed too unhappy, but as the identical times kept piling up despite additional sets and gym work, her irritation began to show. Alice had last been timed two weeks

before, and though she'd *felt* like she was cutting through the water at an extraordinary pace, *felt* like she was blasting seconds off her PB, when she rose, gasping, out of the water, it was a good thing her eyes were already red and streaming as the coach barked, "Nine minutes twenty-four point three-three."

Nine minutes and twenty-two seconds was the cut-off time for sixteen-year-olds to qualify for the Australian Age Championships in April, so she had seven months to swim two-and-a-half seconds faster. Put like that, it seemed easy, but in picking the new squads Jenna would have to decide if she thought Alice could do it. If Jenna had the faith, if the past six months of dormant times hadn't worried her, then today she would leave Alice in Commercial Swim Club's top squad, National Development, and train her intensively to make the qualifying time. But if the faith was gone she would be dropped down into State Development, where the gym and morning sessions would stop and making the national competition would be almost impossible. State Development swam in the afternoons, and Alice was even crappier in the afternoons. If she didn't qualify for the Age Champs she wouldn't be one of the top ten eight-hundred-metre freestyle swimmers in her age group, and if she wasn't one of the top ten in her age group she wouldn't get into WAIS or the AIS, and if she didn't get into WAIS or the AIS she wouldn't get into the FINA Championships or the Olympics, and if she didn't get into the Olympics then she'd be lazy and un-special, just like everyone else. She was already sixteen: this year was her last chance.

Alice had made the Age Champs for the past two years, coming sixth in the eight-hundred the first year and fourth last year. She was so close to medalling; to moving up to the big time, where she was meant to be. But now at training the other girls were creeping up, swimming around her in the lane like drivers passing a broken-down car on the freeway.

Alice settled into the effortless pull-and-kick of the laps. Time and thought were suspended. All she knew was the tug of each muscle, the cool rush of water over her body, the slipperiness of the wall as she pushed herself off. The wonderful emptiness had embraced her from the very first day she swam with the club, and it was such a relief. Before, she'd always felt bored and frustrated by the relentlessness of the world: the close walls of her bedroom; her brother and his friend, Sarah, playing shrilly outside; her mum in the bathroom all morning, drawing in pointless eyes and lips for work. Everywhere other than the pool things were too loud, too messy, not serious enough. Now there was this place into which she could literally dive and the world

would pause for as long as she was down there. She only wished she could do laps for the whole two hours; for the whole day. Forever.

But Alice was naturally competitive as well, and she had to race. Luckily, from the start she'd been really good at that, too, her skinny legs sending water out behind her like propellers. Despite her size, she didn't have Portia's breathing difficulties: it was as if, beneath the skin, she was all lung. Alice would have swum the fifteen hundred if they let girls her age do it. She just swam and swam and swam, so happy that these two things had come together – her love of winning and her love of escape. It was the greatest gift she had ever been given; it was worth the four-thirty starts and the nerves and her mum's false enthusiasm. Alice Sinclair was a swimmer.

But now the pool seemed to be rejecting her. Water and chlorine thickening up. Though she didn't think about it, *couldn't* think about it, she knew it. She had reached 09:24:30, and she could go no further.



#### 4. Fulfilment

Rob Sinclair considered himself a keen feminist. At uni his friend, Caroline, had told him about the Third Wave and dragged him along to her Women's Studies lectures, where the other female students earnestly explained to him how they'd been wronged. Rob felt his learning had been somewhat curtailed by the fact that he wasn't actually enrolled in the unit and therefore not entitled to graded assignments, and so, with the dark shadow of the patriarchy always falling across his mind, he decided the safest thing to do was to defer to the judgement of women as much as possible. He'd learned this from his father, whose Bunbury legal practice attended mostly to frustrated country women who wanted divorces from men who said nothing at the dinner table and spent their weekends clustered in pubs. Mick Sinclair performed at double capacity when representing these women: not only did he manage to siphon money from their rusted-tractor husbands, but he – handsome, thoughtful, a teetotaller and good conversationalist – was also evidence of their rightness in believing that more sensitive men were out there. Cashed-up and validated, they immediately moved to Perth in search of masculine sensitivity.

Rob loved Laura not only for her thick dark hair and wry sense of humour but for the support he was able to give her artistic ambitions. He was sensitivity itself. When they'd first met she took Polaroids of cobwebbed corners of Art Deco buildings and of people looking sad, but after a year at an English art school she became a landscape photographer. She'd framed a few shots from her time in Europe, but his favourite pictures of hers were from home: the groyne and bent pylon at Cottesloe hanging in the kitchen; an empty span of the Treetop Walk panographed across the

main wall of the bedroom. To get that shot Laura waited twenty-two minutes for the tourists to clear, then snapped in a semi-circle so the squares could be knitted together. Waiting a little way along the path, Rob jiggled a grizzling baby Nathan and monitored four-year-old Allie's sombre examination of tree bark, feeling awed by his wife's dedication.

Of course, once Rob father's clients were divorced, his job was done. But fulfilment in marriage, Rob quickly learned, was a different matter. His parents – fifty years together and “never an angry word”, or so they said – had made it seem too easy. In the new house Laura stayed up until the early hours and then slept through to lunchtime, even though she no longer had to work at the studio in town. Laura loved sleeping, and Alice loved swimming. The two were incompatible, and so he was the one to answer the knock at the door every morning, because Rob was a feminist who loved his daughter and his wife.

He *loved* Alice, but seeing her pale little face under the streetlights that morning, he was less worried about her being sick than about the evening ahead. When he'd first had the idea of throwing Laura a surprise bash for her fortieth – he'd seen it on an ad for life insurance, the streaming grateful face of the surprised mother as a child held a cake aloft, with gentle voiceover encouragement to *Savour the good times* – he'd envisioned a group of loved ones gathered behind his wife, singing, and her face lit by candles and pleasure. Laura, happy. The image had excited him the same way the idea of proposing to her excited him seventeen years earlier, or signing with the builders of the new house two years before.

He'd had to cling tightly to this feeling as he realised that he'd never really planned a party before and, actually, it was bloody hard. He'd have liked a good sleep-in to prepare for it and even thought of taking the day off work, but that would have made Laura suspicious. Now, walking blearily through the double-doors of the O'Connor leisure centre, he felt even more scattered than usual, mind bouncing rapidly from the order the *hors d'oeuvres* had to go into the oven to the main points his students should have covered in their essays on the First World War.

The last straggling club members passed through the double doors to the pool, leaving Rob alone in the leisure centre foyer. He sat down on one of the chairs that were bolted to a frame along the wall, and immediately his buttocks cramped. The seat was moulded plastic, its arse-furrow so deep that aligning himself with it threw out his back. Familiar with the poor design – the kids at school had to sit in similar

monstrosities and eventually tilted sideways with mild scoliosis – Rob scooted forward onto the flat front section, which was hell on the soft meat of his cheeks.

Aside from the bad seating, Rob liked the rec centre. The honey-brick building was located in an industrial complex near Fremantle, on the right side of the nearby egg farm so the morning easterlies blew the stink back towards the port. It catered to the sports of swimming and indoor cricket, with photographs of various teams lining the foyer walls: swimming squads along the side that led off to the pool, with the cricketers facing them. The rows of healthy smiles pleased Rob. Over the automatic doors, squad uniforms had been strung up in proud, disembodied poses, and the tang of chlorine in the air made the whole place feel clean and fresh.

Rob unscrewed his thermos and took a sip of coffee. Next, jaw popping in a wide yawn, he fumbled in his pockets for his pen. After spending the week neck-deep in 1914, he had only six essays left to mark.

Forty-five minutes later the first three essays were scrawled with comments by turns insightful, witty and sympathetic. The grades he assigned were so appropriate Rob saw himself winning a teachers' award: his picture in the community news, the modest cheque in one hand and the shoulder of a smiling student in the other. Satisfied, Rob rewarded himself by leaning back into the arse-rut and letting his eyes close for a minute, breathing in the chemical smell of the centre. The darkness was lovely and soothing and he floated in it for a moment, dimly aware of the world beginning to shift and change behind his eyelids. For a moment he was suspended, away from everything.

“Mr. Sinclair?”

Rob opened his eyes. Jenna Mendelssohn, Alice's coach, stood at the reception desk. Rob knew his daughter's coach wasn't a people person; like Alice she had a darting, fishy nature. But she'd agreed to let him do his marking in the foyer in the mornings, though he could tell she didn't want to, and she even made attempts at small-talk. Rob appreciated that. “I'm just going to do some work here for a few minutes,” she explained, gesturing at the desk.

“Of course.” Rob checked the clock and frowned when he saw it was past six, then went to locate the next unmarked essay in the pile. “Here we g– oh.”

It was Verity Mellenger's. When he'd started marking earlier in the week he'd deliberately dropped hers to the bottom of the stack as he always did, but in the fumble it had somehow risen to the top. Though he arranged his marking to go easy on

himself, starting out softly and leaving the difficult students for last, it somehow felt like cheating to skip Verity's assignment.

So. He clicked his pen.

The problem with Verity Mellenger, he recognised from the first overblown, impassioned sentence, was that she was all over everything like a fire-hose. The girl was clever, but not nearly as clever as she thought. No one was as clever as Verity thought she was.

He'd been a teacher for twenty years and had encountered all types of students. Verity Mellenger wasn't the first to have an ego bigger than her intellect, and yet she annoyed him in a way that few other students had. It was because she was *almost* as smart as she thought; as if intelligence were a ladder and she'd reached the next-to-last rung but still claimed the top because she was able, if she stretched, to brush it with her fingers. Near enough, good enough. This offended Rob because it was unfair. Unfair, and undignified.

Though he didn't mean to, as his kids got older, it was becoming harder for Rob not to compare them with his students. His Alice, though a year younger, was a natural rival for Verity because there was something about their faces that was the same, something in the steel-blue eyes and prematurely wrinkled forehead of the dogged self-believer. Their speech patterns were similar, too; statements instead of questions. Except Allie had dignity.

Chugging from his thermos, Rob scribbled all over Verity's paper, ticks morphing to crosses morphing to ticks again until his pen ran out. "*Bugger*," he hissed, scratching the nib against Verity's conclusion. "Sorry, Jenna, would you –" But when he glanced up the reception area was empty.

Levering himself up off the bench, he passed a framed photo of the 1992 Barcelona squad, Jenna at the back with the other butterflyers, and saw his reflection superimposed on the smiling swimmers. He wondered if it was lack of sleep or the chlorine in the air that was sending his hair a dull silver and his skin grey. He looked like the Tinman.

There was a new red pen on the front desk, capped and shiny, lying at a perfect diagonal on top of a sheet of paper. Relieved, Rob picked it up, and was unable to avoid noticing the heading written below: **Summer Season Squad Lists.**

Though he'd been driving his daughter between home and swimming for six years, Rob actually had very little knowledge of how the sport worked. Oh, he knew

the difference between the various strokes and the controversy about advancements in uniform design and the pearly-toothed, cereal-selling fame of Ian Thorpe and Kieran Perkins, but his understanding of things like squads and sets and competitions was limited. In the first couple of years, as Allie was asked to attend more and more training sessions and stump up entry fees for more and more races, Rob had tried to keep track of it all, but when he started having to take her to swimming eight times a week the energy required to know the conditions and outcomes of every meet became more than his exhausted mind could grasp, and he decided to hand over complete control to his quick and talented daughter. What he knew was that she swam the eight-hundred-metre freestyle, she was in the top squad in one of the top clubs in the state, and she wanted to make it to the Olympic Games, like Jenna Mendelssohn. And that was fine with him.

Months ago, a pamphlet about the AIS appeared on their old kitchen table, delicately placed by Alice in the morning break between training and school. It lay there for days before he finally flicked through it one Sunday evening, and then took it into the lounge to wave at Laura, who was reading. “Did you see this?”

She barely glanced at the glossy prospectus before setting it aside. “She’s too young.”

“But when she’s older.” Rob took it up again. “It says you need a FINA-standard score to get a place. I wonder if she’s got one.”

His wife didn’t say anything.

“She’s very good,” he said.

“I know that, Rob.” Laura returned to her book and spoke as if to herself. “It’s just, it’s a big commitment. You want to be ready for something like that.”

As usual, he couldn’t bring himself to argue with her. She was right anyway. Of the two of them, Laura definitely knew best the perils of throwing oneself into something too big to handle. Just after they met, as he was finishing up his Education degree, Laura had dropped hers to go to the Camden Art School in London, where she ended up failing for taking too many pictures of trees. The idea of it, those snooty cigarette-smoking tossers saying Laura’s beautiful nature shots weren’t up to scratch, filled Rob with a rage that he didn’t know what to do with. He calmed it by telling himself that if she’d stayed there they wouldn’t be married. Ashamed of this selfishness, Rob deferred to Laura’s painful experience. And anyway, even if he thought that Alice might like the pressure, like a fish in the Mariana Trench, what if,

like Laura's London, Canberra wasn't what Alice expected? He didn't want his daughter to be hurt by a ruined dream.

Alice's name on Coach Mendelssohn's list caught his eye and he smiled unconsciously. Then he noticed the bolded title above, harshly double-underlined in the pen he was borrowing: **State Development Squad**.

He frowned. That didn't sound right.

"Mr. Sinclair?"

Alice's coach had come back from the toilet, and here he stood reading her private notes. His sense of propriety forced him to confess immediately, even before she had the chance to realise. "I'm sorry, Jenna, I looked at this."

Her face knotted with confusion, then surprise, then resignation. "Oh."

"I was looking for a pen."

"Oh."

Now Rob wasn't sure whether it was fair to keep the pen, so he put it back. When he looked up Jenna was still staring at him.

"I'm sorry," he said again.

Jenna folded her arms tightly, then sighed and put her hands on her hips. "Well, I was going to let you know, actually."

Now Rob was confused. "What's that?"

"Your daughter takes things..." Jenna paused. "Let's say, very seriously. She'll probably be upset about it. I thought it best for you to know beforehand, and then you can comfort her right away without making her more upset. I've seen some parents who – I'm not saying you're like this but – they have their hopes pinned on a swimming career the same as, more than, their child, and they can react very badly, which I don't think is appropriate. Especially in this case." She attempted a smile. "I think Alice will punish herself enough, don't you?"

Rob felt like he'd dropped an armful of balls and had to go skittering after them. "For what?"

"I've had to take her out of National Development." She put a hand against the sheet of names as if to close a wound. "Just for the time being. Her most recent times don't warrant the attention."

"What times?"

"She hasn't been able to better a nine-twenty-four since she cracked the fifteen-year-old cut-off last November."

Rob had no idea what any of that meant. “Of course,” he said. “But isn’t it a bit ... harsh, to pull her out of the squad like that? The year isn’t even finished yet.”

Jenna’s brown forehead wrinkled. “I re-evaluate the squads at the end of every winter. You did know that?”

He grimaced. “Oh yes, I forgot, silly me.”

“She can still get into the national competitions in the lower squad. In fact it might be an incentive to try harder, even though the state squad doesn’t train as much.”

An incentive to try harder. Alice already tried as hard as she possibly could.

But he couldn’t help the whispered thought: *if the other squad doesn’t train so much, maybe I’ll be able to sleep in some days.*

He was being selfish again.

“Well,” Jenna said. “Just to let you know.”

“Yes. Yes. Of course. Thank you.”

She disappeared back into the office, leaving Rob staring at the squad pictures on the wall. The rows of smiling young swimmers, trapped behind glass.

## 5. Rising

Every morning when he woke up, Nathan Sinclair's hand went straight to his crotch. Unlike most thirteen-year-old boys, though, his impulse was not to fiddle but to perform a blind inspection. His fingers gently mapped any changes from the soft curled snail he'd gone to bed with the night before, chest seizing with thrill-dread if he found differences in size, temperature, or dryness. The exam lasted just a few seconds, with Nathan unwilling to conduct the prodding he knew was necessary to make anything else happen down there.

He didn't have brothers and hung around mostly with girls, so the thing between his legs and what it might be capable of so far remained pretty much a mystery. His dad, who usually liked to over-explain things in the hope that that would somehow make them okay, had so far managed to avoid the issue and Nathan hoped he would forever. Nathan went deaf when his Phys. Ed. teacher said the word "erection" during the session on sexual health. (God, even the word: *sexual*. It was disembodied red lips, dressing gowns falling open, r'n'b music played at such low decibels it made your insides quivery.)

Because he was a small kid with duckling-fuzz hair who loved acting and plays, Nathan had been forced to develop a kind of super-self-awareness, a sixth sense for anything that might draw the wrong kind of attention from other kids. So far, the only time his willy seemed to change state was in the morning, but from what he'd heard this bliss wouldn't last. Schoolyard myths about getting out of a chair with a tent in your shorts terrified him. As for actively intervening in the situation – *having a wank* – well, *gross*. He knew about masturbation in theory, but the actual mechanics of



it escaped him. Several months ago he'd conducted an experiment in patting, squeezing, and pulling, only to emerge from his room after twenty minutes with raw skin and the desperate need to wee. He hadn't tried again.

He'd taken encouragement from a few pages of John Marsden's *Dear Miffy*, which Candice and Sarah had shown him. In the book, the boy had been able to work himself to a conclusion over Miffy without using his hands<sup>i</sup>, so obviously Nathan should be able to do the same thing if necessary. An immaculate orgasm, of sorts: in private, quietly, and with a shower running. That might be okay.

That Friday morning Nathan stayed in bed for a while, pressing himself deep into his mattress. In winter the new bedroom was nippy, its white walls holding the cold. His old room had been made cosy with the couch his parents stored in there and the mass of blankets he'd taken from the laundry cupboard, but his mum made him chuck most of that stuff when they moved. "You'll be in a high school next year," she'd said, holding up a *Little Mermaid* doona. "Do you really need this on your bed?"

The pile for the Good Samaritans sat on the veranda for a week, and every day when he got home from school Nathan stared moodily at the smiling Ariel on top. He thought about sneaking her back into the house, but he knew Laura would find out and wear her disappointed face. *Na*-than...

Now his bed had a cheap monochrome quilt from Target. His pillow was under the window, and every morning the light cut through the blinds and woke him up. Angling his head to look through the wooden slats, he saw a flat milk-coloured sky and, below it, the utilitarian grey waves of the side fence.

It was a big day. Tonight was his mum's surprise party, and he and Sarah would probably hide behind the house making fun of the adults, then eat the good food and stay up way late watching Friday night movies for mature audiences. Before that were the auditions for the Year Eight play, the one-act, *thirty-whole-minute* production his class would spend the rest of term rehearsing for. This time, their teacher had arranged a selection of scenes from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and he was going for the part of Lysander. Nathan loved auditioning. He was going to be an actor one day.

But the first thing he had to do, he acknowledged, finally shedding his blankets, was to wake up his mum. It was Nathan's job to make sure she was up and dressed by eight-thirty for her first outing, which was breakfast with Mrs. Grant, Sarah's mum.

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<sup>i</sup> Marsden, *Dear Miffy*, p.53.

When his dad asked him to do it (like you could ever say no), he'd baulked. "Wake her up?"

His dad said it would be great: Nathan could burst in to give her a present, or sing, or some other adorable child-like display.

Allie, who'd been hovering, raised her eyebrows. "Oh, she'd love that."

Nathan had proof she wouldn't. On his own birthday a few months before, while his dad and sister were at morning swimming, he'd approximated a tap dance on the carpet of the master bedroom. The excitement of teenagerdom compelled him to show off. Pumping his hands in front of him like the handle of a pogo stick, he'd beamed at his mum as she peered over her doona. They were *partners in arms*, two *artistes*, united against the unimaginativeness of everyone else. His mum had been to Europe to take photos and he was going to be on the West End and Broadway. He tried to click his heels in the air and missed.

"Nathan?" His mum was white-faced, as if she'd been smacked. "What are you...?"

He'd stopped immediately. After a couple of seconds his mother remembered and came to life, like a mum was supposed to, but it was too late. The embarrassment was wedged in him, like a pip in his throat.

And the pictures she took were pretty boring, actually. Anyone could take a photo of a beach.

But his dad insisted, and now it was quarter-past seven and he was shuffling reluctantly down to his parents' room. The door was shut. He paused, struck by dread. It was the same feeling as in drama class, standing offstage waiting for your cue: a profound sense of *I don't wanna*. But you had to do it or you'd ruin everything, and so Nathan squared his shoulders and tapped on the door before he had time to think. "Mum?"

Silence. He knocked louder. "Mum?" And louder, in a sing-song, "Mu-um! Happy birthday!"

From inside came a groan. "Nathan, please."

"I can't hear you," he lied, pushing the door open. "Happy birthday!"

His mother was curled up in a far corner of the bed, not moving. "*Nathan.*"

"What? Aren't you excited? It's your fortieth, that's a big day, wow. Life begins at forty, you know. Why don't you get up and I'll make you a coffee and give you your present?"

His mum squinted up at him from the mattress and for a second it was like she hated him.

Hurt, Nathan walked over to open the blinds in retaliation. “Mrs. Grant’s coming over.”

When he turned back around Laura was struggling to sit up. She blinked in the wash of light, her hair fuzzy around her face like a little kid’s. “What?”

“Mrs. Grant’s coming around at eight-thirty.”

“Why?”

“Um, I think she wants to take you out for breakfast.”

“I don’t eat breakfast.”

“I think she wanted it to be special,” he apologised.

“Surely it’d be more special to let me sleep in, on my birthday.”

He wanted to surrender before her meanness: *it’s not my fault*. Instead he went to get her a coffee.

The kettle had almost boiled before she shuffled into the kitchen, dressed in a giant old T-shirt with a faded Union Jack on the front and a pair of leggings with cuffs under the feet. Both items were older than Nathan – the shirt was from before his parents got married and the leggings appeared in several of Allie’s baby photos. The shirt had holes at the neck and under the arms, and still his mum wouldn’t wear the nice striped pyjamas Nathan had bought her for Christmas, the ones he’d seen Sarah’s mum wearing.

She yawned, showing fillings. “Lots of sugar, please,” she instructed, flopping over the kitchen table. “What’s the time?”

“Twenty past seven.” Nathan ladled sugar into her mug and carried it over.

She knotted her fists in her hair and moaned.

He sat at the other end of the table. The fact of her birthday made Nathan feel like he should stay around her, waiting for instructions. In the Sinclair house, birthdays were often an excuse to boss everyone else around in half-seriousness. Before Allie had starting training so early they’d had a tradition of floating blown-up balloons into the birthday boy or girl’s room in the early morning and crowning them with a circle of yellow cardboard at the breakfast table. Nathan had loved it. Then Allie started swimming and his mum stayed in bed, and there wasn’t time any more.

Nathan noted the way Laura drank coffee in breathy slurps, and the angle of her neck as she looked through the sliding door to the patio. She scratched her cheek and yawned.

It was weird to be around his mum in the morning, because usually she slept in. For a while when she stopped working, she'd tried to get up at the same time as him, but it hadn't really worked. He already had a routine from years of his dad coming back from the leisure centre at dawn. At the old house Allie had shared lifts to the pool with her friend, Portia, so Rob had just done the early run. Not wanting to wake Laura, he would instead slip into Nate's room just after five and stretch out on his couch to snooze. After the alarm went they'd ready themselves for school in companionable silence, negotiating the shower and cereal with ease, making sandwiches side-by-side. Since they'd moved, though, his dad had had to stay at the pool with Allie, and Nate missed the quiet mornings together, the hours without any girls around.

Laura finished her coffee. As Nate rose to rinse the cup she rested her chin on crossed arms and stared out the window. When he walked behind her chair he saw she was watching wagtails flitting around the bougainvillea along the side fence.

"Looks like they're doing cartwheels," he said.

Laura lifted her shoulders and lengthened her neck, like an elegant water-bird unfurling from its feathers. "When do they sleep, do you think?"

"Um." Under the spotlight of her attention, he froze. "I don't know."

"Oh." She turned back to the birds.

Nathan pushed his mouth into a smile. "I'll go get your present."

## 6. Need

As a teenager Laura had spent a lot of time smoking and fighting with her mother, usually about smoking. Mostly, though, she'd been good: good at school, very good at reading and drawing. The fighting and smoking were meant to temper this goodness. She didn't want to get too unpopular.

But it happened, didn't it? Teenage girls fought with their mothers, broke rules, knew that the world was stupid and out to get them and totally unfair. Look at Laura's best friend's daughter. Sarah Grant was thirteen and rolled up the hem of her school skirt so high you could see her knickers if she bent at the waist. When Caroline complained about juice cartons being thrown around the kitchen in anger, Laura wasn't surprised.

The cruelty of children was at the forefront of her mind as, twenty-three years old and just engaged, she'd sat in Caroline's bathroom staring at a plastic stick with a blue cross on it. She was pregnant, and the rest of her life was set out so incontrovertibly it was like it had already happened. She imagined herself as a sixteen-year-old, painting bleak pictures in her bedroom and sneering smoke in her mother's face when Abby opened the door to remind her of the rule about no cigarettes in the house. She remembered waking in the middle of the night to hear the frightened murmurs of her parents and then jumping out of bed when her brother finally came home on his motorbike, holding his right shoulder where all the skin had been scraped off. Bum freezing on Caro's bathroom floor, the pregnancy test in her hand, she was terrified. Even unborn children could be cruel.

But, in an undeserved twist of fate, her children were not awful at all. Laura felt she could be objective, given that so much of the time she didn't really feel like their mother. The two of them were the perfect report cards. Punctual. Diligent. Respectful. They made their beds and did their homework. They rang their grandmother without being prompted. (Even Laura had to be prompted.) Other parents stopped her in supermarkets to gush about how wonderful they were. She took none of the credit, though, as it was clearly Rob who'd instilled these Scouts' values in their children.

And thank God he had, of course. It was ridiculous for Laura to watch Nathan go off to get her birthday present and secretly wish at least one of them would display the pouty, resentful, narcissistic qualities of the unrepressed teen. Just so she knew where they were coming from.

She must have fallen asleep at the table briefly, because time skipped and Nathan was back. "Mum? Mum?"

"Hmmm?"

The silver package came over her shoulder, wrapped badly but with good intentions. She knew what it was from its shape, with the rigid perimeter and slight depression in the centre, though she tried to keep smiling. "You didn't have to do that," she said, carefully unsticking the thick tape so the paper could be salvaged, though she didn't know why she bothered. Her mother had always done that, re-using the wrapping according to a strict roster that made sure the new receiver hadn't seen it before. Laura couldn't bring herself to recycle gift wrap – they weren't *poor* – though she also couldn't just throw it away, so the used paper piled up in a desk drawer alongside yellowing recipes and newspaper articles. Moving to the new house, she'd hoped for an expunging of that drawer and of all others like it. The new start was about spaces that were tidy or, even better, *empty*. The display homes had all been so clean and sleek and bare. Unfortunately, though, life piled up.

As she'd guessed, he'd given her a photo, in a roiled papier-mâché frame. From the picture Nathan himself beamed out at her, with Rob on one side and Alice on the other.

Laura had spent seven years taking this photo. Not of her own husband and kids, but of other people's; sitting them on stools of different heights, pulling down whichever sponge-printed background (blue-grey, purple-blue, purple-grey) didn't clash with someone's tie or skirt, and trying to coax them to smile. She'd sat through the hungover parents and crying babies and squabbling kids and told them it was

normal (it was) and she didn't mind waiting (she did). She'd bared her teeth and nodded at the mothers and fathers who wanted to see every single shot and compare it with the next one, and the next one, and let's see the next one, and actually can we go back to the first one again, and who, in the end, picked ones where their kids' eyes were dulled and their own smiles were as plastic as Laura's because they thought the ones where everyone actually seemed *happy* "didn't look right". Saying this they looked at Laura, as if it was her fault. It was why she didn't have any such photos of the four of them.

Just before she stopped working there her clients got into Photoshop, asking if she could erase a few wrinkles from Nanna's eyes and the freckles from Tammy's nose. Luckily, Julian, her boss and old friend from Fine Arts at uni, had a no-retouching policy mounted at reception, which Laura could indicate with a sympathetic smile when the issue was raised (never as subtly as she thought you would, if you actually stopped and thought about the fact that you were asking a stranger to change your husband's appearance). But for Jules it had been a pragmatic thing. "It'll just end up being a headache," he told her, hanging the sign next to his Department of Commerce rego. "Once you start they won't be happy until they look like a foetus."

Laura had always worn makeup to work, but when the customers began interrogating their own appearance she started laying it on thicker. Please find me attractive enough to take your photo.

Her son's papier-mâché-framed gift was different. Nathan had been creative, cutting the three faces from other images and laying them together. The lines between them were clearly visible and the perspectives skewed, so that Nathan entered the shot close-up at the collarbone while Rob stood further back with too much space above his head. Alice, ducking away from the camera, had her shoulder cut off so that she appeared to be slinking out from behind the wall her dad posed in front of. Except that wall was actually, when Laura squinted, inside the front room, which meant that for Allie to creep around him she would have to melt through the side of the house.

Nathan reached over her shoulder to pinch a corner of the frame. "I was going to get just one picture of the three of us but then I thought, who's going to take it? 'Cos we couldn't ask *you!*" He chuckled with the slap-stickery of it and Laura smiled. "The one of me is at Candice's. Sarah took heaps; that was the best one." He was pulling the picture away from her now, pointing at each image. "The one of Dad he let me take

one day last week. You were asleep. I tried to take a photo of Alice but she wouldn't let me, so I found that one in the study. I think it's at the old house, moving out."

Laura peered at the right-hand third of the photo. Yes, there was the old carport in the background. Her daughter stood in front of it, body twisted to protect herself from immortalisation, a sliver of packing box in front of her. Laura wondered what Alice had been carrying when she was caught.

Nathan handed it back to her, suddenly shy. "So, yeah, happy birthday."

"Thank you, sweetie," she said again, taking his head in both hands and pronouncing a loud kiss on his crown. His scalp smelled of nothing, like a child's. When she released him she thought he'd go and get ready for school, but instead he held the back of her chair and bobbed like a chicken, looking uncertain.

"Do you know what we're doing tonight?" she asked after a moment, hoping he'd stop.

He did. "What?"

"What."

"Tonight?"

"What's happening tonight?" she asked again.

"It's your birthday," he said, his baby face strangely fearful. "Dinner. We always have dinner."

"Yes," Laura said, feeling newly tired at the thought of the four of them and her mother making strained conversation at some middling restaurant. "But did Dad say where?"

"It's a surprise," Nathan said.

Usually Nathan loved hoarding news, parcelling it out until the receiver was ready to throttle him. "Guess what! Guess again. Guess again. No, guess *again*." But now he was pliéing against the back of her chair as if desperate for a wee, his eyes fixed on the wagtails outside. He seemed – for Nathan – slightly annoyed. It interested her. "What would you be doing, if it wasn't my birthday?"

Nathan shrugged expressively. "I don't know. Gone round to Candice's."

Candice was the other in Nathan and Sarah's trio of players, a nice girl with complicated braces and enormous breasts. Laura felt sorry for her, a thirteen-year-old with the upper dimensions of a men's mag covergirl who somehow – maybe because of the self-effacing slouch their weight induced, maybe because of the braces – managed to be anything but sexual. Candice had an air of perpetual embarrassment, of



failing to live up to something. Laura didn't doubt that, in making friends with Candice, Sarah Grant had latched on to this need to please.

Realisation settled: Nate was in love. Laura was thrilled that her boy was inclined to sweet girls like Candice, though she knew what would happen: he wouldn't tell her directly but would amp up their friendship, listening to her problems and going out of his way to do her special favours in the expectation that, like in a romantic comedy, one day she would look at him and just *know*. Meanwhile Candice's attention was stuck on Sarah; whether platonically or not, who knew. It amounted to the same thing, anyway – Nathan's feelings were going to get hurt.

Laura felt frustrated at the thought. She wondered if she should gently encourage him to give up now, since no girl respected "the friend", then remembered a twenty-one-year-old Rob. "Say no more," she said. "You go to Candice's. You don't have to be here tonight."

"Yes I do, of course I do, it's your birthday."

"Don't be silly. *I* don't even feel like celebrating my birthday."

Nathan's eyes filled with panic, probably at the thought that he'd ruined his father's plans. "No, no, it's going to be fun, it's going to be cool, we'll all go out and have a nice dinner, you have to."

Seeing his goggly face Laura felt the twin tugs of sympathy and irritation her son had been inspiring in her since he was a baby. "Okay, okay."

He smiled with relief, then lifted the delicately-unstuck wrapping paper from the table and folded it carefully in half. "You go and have a shower. I'll put this away."

Suddenly it seemed terrible that her son knew about the recycling of gift wrap; that he accepted it and would probably one day have a junk drawer of his own that spat gnarled ribbon every time it was opened.

"Mum?" Nathan's face pushed into her eye-line. "Why don't you have a shower?"

Laura put a hand on her forehead. "Later."

"Mrs. Grant will be here soon!"

Oh, that – Laura had forgotten. Still, she had ages yet, though you wouldn't know it from Nathan's scared look. Both of her children took everything seriously – that was from Rob – but Nathan was a worrier, too. As a baby, if he wasn't asleep he was crying; long, inconsolable sobs. Laura rang her mother, who had rocked him for hours. "This child is stressed out."

“He’s six weeks old.”

“Exactly! It must be something about the environment. Do you sing to him?”

Laura coughed derisively.

“Not funny, Laura. Children need calming environments. Are you providing a calming environment? I seem to remember Alice never slept.”

“She pokes him,” Laura tattled.

The lines in Abby’s forehead sharpened. “She’s three years old.”

Now when Laura read newspaper articles about bonding she felt a fizzing anxiety across her chest and shoulders. She wondered if she had done something wrong with Nathan, and that was why he couldn’t cope. Then again, she’d treated Alice the same way – the terror that she would die in her sleep, the reading aloud from adult books and refusal to talk in the sickening *coochie coochie coo* voice – and she was so easy, it made Laura confident enough to have another baby. Though he was now guided by his father’s rudder of moral behaviour and earned the attention he craved by being good, Nathan had been born without equilibrium. His toddlerhood was a mess of crying jags and sprawled death sleeps, of abrupt changes in taste so that a teddy bear he’d flung furiously at the wall one day was screamed for the next. He liked to touch her face and look into her eyes, and it distressed him when Laura wouldn’t participate.

But he got that from her. As soon as he was playing by himself, she wanted him with her again so she could squeeze his little hands in her own, run a finger down his belly, brush her nose against his forehead. He was amazing, and she couldn’t believe he was there. She’d never got used to it. It was the same with Allie: Laura needed to pick her up all the time, though her daughter didn’t like it. “Mum, I want to get down,” she’d say, kicking herself loose. Embarrassed, Laura tried to wean herself off her babies, to treat them more disinterestedly and authoritatively. She made sure her hugs didn’t go on too long. It was unbecoming for a mother to cry when her toddler didn’t want a cuddle; it was supposed to be the other way around.

Now that Nathan was older and could parcel out his need, sometimes she gave in and bought barn-laid eggs at the supermarket or arranged the spices into alphabetical order to humour him. But today was supposed to be her day, and she was tired. “I’ll have a shower later.”

Nathan’s shoulders curled. “Whatever,” he muttered, disappearing into the bathroom.

Laura cupped her forehead with both hands. Left alone at last, she felt strange. It was the same feeling she'd had at uni years ago, one morning when she woke to realise the big essay she thought was due the following week was actually meant to be handed in *that day*. It was the missed-deadline anxiety; the nerviness that came with knowing a letdown had occurred, a disappointment, and now she would have to patch things up badly. She had to do something, and time was running out.

Instead she sat there, running a finger along the lip of Nathan's photo frame, staring at the three mis-sized heads: her Frankenstein's monster family. She could hear the fuss of water from Nathan's shower, the squeak and clank as he shut off the taps. Every morning, every morning. Later Alice would be in there, and then Rob; and the next morning, Nathan, Allie, Rob; squeak-clank, squeak-clank, squeak-clank. Always the same.

Thinking of Alice reminded Laura of her early-morning guessing game over her daughter's breakfast scraps. Suddenly energised, she stood and hurried to the kitchen, eager for the little blast of satisfaction the banana skin would give her. It was a little thing that had somehow taken on a ballooning, superstitious significance. Banana, and she could get a hold of herself. Banana, and everything would be okay.

Banana, and maybe she could answer that letter, shoved deep beneath her pile of books and out of sight.

On top of the rubbish bag was a mass of mandarin skin pocked like cellulite.

She turned and yanked open the fridge. The fruit tray sat on the third shelf. At the very front were two bananas. Either there had been a mandarin nestled between the two fruits, or Alice had broken her habit and made an active choice. These things couldn't be predicted, of course. It had been a stupid game in the first place, and it was equally stupid to feel the stinging heat of tears in her eyes.

Nathan re-emerged from the bathroom, a towel at his waist and his hair spiked wet. His skin was tissue-paper over his ribs. "Shower's free."

"Thanks."

He watched her for a moment. "Okay?"

"You'd better get ready for school."

Nathan went into his room, leaving her stranded in front of the fridge, unable to close the door.

## 7. Alice

The previous November, when Alice was fifteen, she won the eight hundred at the State Champs with a time that qualified her for the national age competition. It was the fastest she'd ever swum and she was still trying to get her breath when she looked into the crowd to find her mum. At races Laura usually sat in the far corners of the stands, where she said there was more space. That day she was in the southern tier, behind the dais, so Alice had to twist herself into a helix to spot her. Laura was reading her programme, but after a few seconds she looked up and caught Alice's eye. Alice grinned and turned around.

Though Alice loved to win, she hated medal ceremonies at swimming meets. Lined up behind the dais listening to her fellow place-getters dissecting the race down to the tiniest detail while rows and rows of spectators watched, she wanted to cross her arms in front of her for protection. But that would look sullen or smug, or worse, afraid, and they were bad looks for winners. You were supposed to look open, to smile back and welcome the admiration being poured down on you, and if you spoke to the other girls you should mention minor improvements you could make so they didn't think they would have beaten you if only they hadn't slipped a little on their dive.

Alice hadn't had time to cool down properly after the race, so a layer of sweat coated the chlorine already embedded in her bathers and skin. She shifted her shoulders in her zipped jacket, feeling itchy.

Someone turned on the CD of the national anthem too early, and a shiver went through her. The round introductory notes of the chorus unfurled in Alice's mind as a

beautiful staircase, regal footsteps elegantly descending to a triumphant homecoming. Then someone cut it off.

Her coach Jenna stood at the end of the pool with some officials. She smiled at Alice with her lips closed, but her eyes were shiny even from twenty metres away. When the medal went over her neck Alice pretended she was Shane Gould at the Olympics, boy-bodied and fast, blowing the other swimmers out of the water. According to her own plans, she would be twenty when she made it to the London 2012 Games: maybe not as impressive as fifteen-year-old Shane, but a gold medal was a gold medal.

In the change rooms afterwards Alice stood between her squad-mate, Lizzie, who'd won bronze, and the Northern Suburbs Swimming Club girl who'd come second, the three of them lazily changing into their tracksuits. When you medalled in your last race you slowed down after the presentation, combing your damp hair and folding your towel so as to fully absorb the attention of the girls who changed with bare necks, eyeing you jealously. When someone from the club passed and squeezed your shoulder with congratulations, you thanked them but didn't have time to look up from lacing your sneakers, you were so languid with success.

"Good race," the Northern Suburbs girl told them, unwinding her wet braid so she could get the full effect of retying it.

Alice nodded over her stretches. The winner didn't have to speak.

"Felt good," Lizzie agreed. "Better than this morning."

Neither of the other two had made the finals in the two hundred or four hundred. Privately, Alice thought they were spreading themselves too thin by competing in so many events. Swimming was about concentration: on the black line, on the number of laps, on the stroke.

They fell into companionable quiet. Before the race, the girls from the other clubs, even the girls from your own squad, were the enemy. Afterwards, they were the only people who understood, though you couldn't let them understand you too well.

"You were really good," the girl from the northern suburbs told Alice. "How'd you go at the Age Champs last year?"

"Sixth."

"Going for the AIS?"

Alice wasn't used to having to talk this much after a race. She'd *won*, damn it. She was supposed to be silently admired. "I haven't really thought about it," she lied.

“I’m going to apply next year. Get in for when I’m seventeen.”

That was Alice’s plan exactly. “You think you’ll have a good enough score by then?” she said, then winced at having asked a question. “I mean, you’ll have to cut, like, fifty seconds off your time.”

Which was also what Alice would have to do.

“I reckon. I mean, I’ve only been in a club for a year, and I’m already coming second in state comps.” She shrugged, cool as. “And you only beat me by like point two of a second.”

Alice knew that, having felt the girl right beside her in the next lane, impossible to shake off. She frowned into her socks.

“I mean, if you’re serious about it, you go for it, hey,” the north-of-the-river girl commented mildly, devastatingly, her fingers moving in slow motion through her hair. “I mean, what’s the point otherwise?”

They might have become friends if Alice didn’t hate her so much.

On the way home, Alice and Laura took a detour to check on the progress at the new house. The walls were up, though there was still no roof or windows. The cement pad sat on grey sand, the rows of red-grey bricks sucking away your sense of perspective to expand endlessly, like a maze. In corners empty cans and burger wrappers collected and the whole thing smelled of damp grit.

Alice didn’t want to walk through it. “Are you sure we’re allowed?”

“It’s our house.”

She looked at the *No Trespassing* signs and wasn’t sure.

The builders were gone for the weekend. Locking the car, Laura walked carefully over the sand and through the entrance, which was just a big hole. Alice followed reluctantly. There was a dirty puddle in the middle of the hallway.

“This is the front room,” her mother explained. “And this is the master bedroom.” Both rooms were nothing. They went to the back of the house. “Oh, good,” Laura exclaimed, peering into a bricked dead-end. “This wasn’t here yesterday.”

Craning around, Alice saw small circles of pipe embedded in the slab floor. “What is it?”

“The toilet.”

Alice couldn’t believe her mother came here every day. But then, she thought, her mother didn’t have much to do now that she wasn’t working. Before, when a meet had run over onto a school day, her dad would take a day off to drive her there. Her

mother had been home from the studio for four months now and she was always around: before school, after school, at teatime. All she talked about was the progress of the new place and the things she'd bought for it or wanted to buy, and in the afternoons there was the choking reek of paint as Laura prepared the Como house to be sold. She'd mown all the long grass down to a starved fuzz and the passionfruit vine had been cut off the back fence. They were retracting from the house in preparation, or the house was retracting from them.

Alice didn't want to move, not that anyone had asked her. She was used to the small house with its brimming cupboards and narrow spaces, the shady yard that was big enough to run around when you were stressed. When it was finished the new place would look just like the Grants', where she'd been dragged for countless barbeques already and it wasn't even Christmas yet. That house was white, cold, empty. Alice, who thought she would like the sleek designs, decided she actually liked familiarity better.

As they walked through skeletal rooms that stank of mud Laura threw her arms in the air to demonstrate proposed feature walls and the arrangement of island benches. Alice was barely listening. She was thinking about leaving.

The national age champs she'd qualified for that afternoon would be held in Sydney in a couple of months' time, and already Alice couldn't wait. She loved interstate competitions and training camps: the organisation, the atmosphere, the focus. When she got into the AIS and the proper swimming squads – for the Pan Pacs, FINA, the Olympics – she would be away all the time, and the further away she could get, the better she'd be doing. Her whole life would be the black line, and she wouldn't have to think about her family or school or sickly-smelling box houses. Alice wanted to be an international swimmer because it meant she would live her life alone in the pool, just like she wanted.

Watching her mother inspect a damp recess that would apparently be the pantry, Alice knew she wouldn't understand. There was some lack of ambition in her that managed to extend to the rest of the family: none of them ever did anything. Her dad had never been outside the country. Her brother was scared of all shadows, including his own. Her mum had spent seven years behind the desk working for Mr. Ong, never even getting out to shoot a wedding or school ball. She'd go on her solo trips to take photos but never seemed to enjoy herself: before and afterwards she always pulsed with irritation. She read travel guides all the time, but Alice didn't know

why because she never went overseas. She'd actually done a trip to Britain before they were born, though she couldn't remember anything if you asked her about it. *It was a long time ago*, she'd say, not looking up from her book. But how could it all be gone, when the framed evidence was all through the house: Big Ben lit up at night; the tessellated rocks of Northern Ireland; the misty sunrise over a boxy red train bridge?

Hanging Laura's photos was the equivalent of tacking Nathan's running-writing certificate to the fridge. Now that they'd done it they need never do it again.

And yet something swelled in Alice's chest when she looked at her mother's photos. It was something to do with the play of colours and shadow that brought them to life, and the distance they represented. The excitement of leaving. The places Laura had lit were at the same time familiar and unreal; they loomed in the image as more than themselves.

Alice followed her mother out to inspect the sandy backyard and mentioned her excitement about qualifying for Sydney. Laura, running a hand along the back fence, grunted. Unencumbered, Alice had started to gush, explaining how the national competition could lead to qualifying for intensive squads and other national meets and hopefully, eventually, a scholarship at the AIS. Which was when Laura, dull and gawping at the grey asbestos fencing, turned on her.

She *strongly advised* against trying to get into the AIS or anything like that. Her objections were as flimsy as the gritty cement Alice thumbnailed out of the walls while she spoke. Alice was young, her mother pointed out. Canberra was on the other side of the country. She mentioned the cost and infrequency of flights and Alice felt the rage-tears burning. She talked about school, schoolwork, exams, study, and other words for the exact same thing. The whole time Laura kept interrupting herself to reassure her that "You're a good *swimmer*", as if to make up for all the other ways in which she was outlining Alice's ineptitude. You're a good *swimmer*, but you will fail at landing in the right city, learning how to count, dressing yourself in the morning. For Alice, whose distinct first memory was of pulling on elastic-waisted jeans all by herself, this was an outrage. She was not a failure. Her mother was a failure, ticking off "trip to Europe" on her list of Things To Do before coming back home to get married and wedge herself deeply into the suburbs, taking the same picture every day and drinking the same drink every night in front of the frozen testaments to her adventurousness. Just because she was happy with that didn't mean Alice had to be.



On the way home Laura stopped for cones at McDonald's as a gesture of peace, but Alice couldn't eat. She fiddled obsessively with the medal around her neck, the pads of her fingers tracing its imprinted figures. After rubbing the text on one side, she would flip it to the other, following the overarm figure. The next flip was in the same direction, and the next, and the next.

Laura in her jumble of arguments had said something strange. She'd told Alice off for digging out too much cement and had gone over to smooth her own thumb against the chip in the wall. Her eyes went as glossy as Alice's were now, sitting in the backseat of the car strangled with anger. She'd said, "You can go too far down a path before you realise it isn't the one you want to be on."

"But I know I want to be on it," Alice objected. "I've been swimming for ages. I want to be in the Olympics."

Laura winced and turned around. "Just think about it. Okay?"

Which, as Alice reasoned, struggling to unwind the twisted ribbon around her neck, wasn't actually a 'no'. Typical of her mother not to make a decision, to hedge and get ice-cream. When Laura leaned over in the drive-thru to squeeze Alice's knee, she wanted to say to her: *I don't want to be a failure like you.*

## 8. Lazy

“So I got twelve bottles of red and twelve bottles of white at the bottle-o on the corner, what’s it called, but it was much more expensive than I thought it would be since it’s apparently the other chain does the buy-five-get-one-free deal, and by the time I realised I already had about twenty bottles in the trolley and was too embarrassed to take them all out again or, which is worse, just *leave* them, then some poor checkout kid would have to put them all back – ”

Sitting next to her father on the way home from training Alice was receiving everything at a delay, as if she were a long way away. Every time he stopped speaking it took her several seconds to respond, her *mmms* froggy from the weight in her sinuses.

“So I thought, look, I’ll just get the wine here, the red and the white, a dozen of each, and I’ll ask your Grandma Abby to source some champers through her wine club, I thought another dozen bottles would do it, enough so everyone can have a toast even if they don’t really fancy the sparkling, which can be a bit tart especially if it’s cheap stuff, which is really all the wine club can afford since they want to skim off some profits for their charity –”

At seven o’clock, Jenna had started taking people aside about the squads. Alice was last alphabetically and kept practising her dive as the names were called. The other swimmers had started to slack off but Alice stuck tightly to her routine, afraid she’d jinx herself if she didn’t. Which was stupid, because the decision had long since been made. But still she dived, swam to the ladder, returned to the blocks, dived.

At five past Lizzie had come out of the office, mouth pulsing in an attempt to hold back her smile. Alice's hairline prickled. So Lizzie stayed in the top squad, even though eight months ago Alice had beaten her in the eight hundred by four sweet seconds. But Alice knew better than anyone that old results didn't count: what counted was what you swam last week, and last week Lizzie had come in at nine minutes twenty-one exactly.

Alice dived, swam to the ladder, returned to the blocks, dived.

Another girl strolled out of the office, followed by Jenna. "Alice Sinclair?"

By now everyone else had given up on their sets to cluster in groups, gossiping. Walking to meet the coach, Alice passed Portia, who'd said "Good luck," uncertainly.

But it wasn't luck. It was skill.

In the office Jenna – but Alice didn't want to think about that.

Strange how in the water she'd felt as if she were floating on air, and now out of it was like she was drowning.

"Anyway, Fishy," her father continued, eyes on the road. "I wanted to talk to you about..." He stopped.

She assumed he wanted to tell her more about the stupid party. He couldn't shut up about it. She felt a sudden rush of frustration at her dad for his enthusiasm, his dizzy, excited planning. She was mad at him for hoping.

Instead, he said, "I wanted to tell you about this student's essay I marked this morning."

After six weeks of nothing but party talk Alice missed the sudden turn in the conversation and had to reverse slowly to take it again. "What?"

"One of my Year Twelves. She's a, what I would call a type-A personality. Do they still talk about them like that? A perfectionist. She wants everything to be done right. Do you understand? She has expectations of how things should be for her. They should be perfect. You know?"

He paused and Alice said, "Okay."

"Well, and this essay, you see, it isn't perfect. It's very *close* to perfect and I think – she's about your age, a year older – she thinks it *is* perfect, probably." Rob snorted. "She thinks everything she does is."

Alice was sitting forward in her seat, squeezing her ankles. Her dad was always telling her stories like this. Staffroom arguments, strange sights on the oval, drunk kids at the dinner dance. It usually made her feel grown-up. "Right."

He slowed for the same traffic light that had earlier swept them through. Alice squeezed her eyes shut against the taunting red. “Anyway, but I’ve had to give her an eighty-five. Because the essay isn’t perfect.” The car stationary, he shifted into neutral. “So she’s getting an eighty-five, and she’s going to be upset about it. But there’s nothing *wrong* with an eighty-five, you know? If they could all get eighty-fives I would be very happy for them, it would make my day. But this girl, Allie –”

She opened her eyes. “The Year Twelve.”

“The Year Twelve.” The light turned green and they set off slowly. “She’ll be upset she didn’t get ninety, but really an eighty-five is a wonderful mark, and she should be proud of it, and she can try again next year.”

Alice frowned. “Won’t she be at uni then?”

“Next essay. I mean next essay.”

“Oh.” She looked out the window. She’d heard her father’s words, but they didn’t mean anything. Not from this distance.



When they got back, the house was quiet. Nathan sat at the table in his school uniform, eating an apple and looking miserable.

“Where’s your mother?”

“Bedroom.”

Rob went to find her. Alice frowned at her brother, who was peeling his fruit with his bottom teeth and suckling on the long whorls of skin. In front of him two bananas lay on their sides. “Where’re the cornflakes?”

He shrugged. “Mum told me to finish up all the fruit in the fridge.”

“You didn’t ruin the surprise, did you?”

He looked terrified. “I said we were going out for dinner.”

Alice felt strangely spiteful. Her brother was such a sook. He was thirteen but barely looked ten, with his nose-freckles and his wet eyes always poised for grief. “Dad wanted her ready by the time we got home.”

“She wouldn’t have a shower.”

She rolled her eyes.

Nathan muttered something into his apple. Alice descended like a crow. “What? *What?*”

He lifted his voice just enough for her to hear, lips moving against the white flesh. “I said it’s not like you did anything to help.”

“I had swimming.”

“‘I had swim-ming’,” Nathan repeated in a sing-song. “You’ve always got swimming.”

When they were younger Alice and her brother often spent weekends at their grandmother’s, and in the afternoons when Grandma Abby had her sleep they would lie on the squashy floral couch, knees hooked over the armrests and heads sharing the same cushion, reading their books together. One day when their grandma was on the phone she and Nate uncovered an old box of Dominoes under the couch. They didn’t know how to play properly but they’d seen chains of the numbered tiles pushing each other over in pretty patterns on TV, so they spent the afternoon forming long snakes across the lounge room floor. Alice liked to set them up meticulously, so that all the corners lined up, and then let Nathan do the topple. He was always ceremonious about it, pushing the first domino slowly so that a delicious rush of anticipation flooded them both. Seeing each black rectangle slump in perfect alignment against its neighbour, she would squeeze her little brother’s hand with the joy of it.

“You’re a dickhead,” she told him now.

He sucked at the apple skin and gave her the finger.

Alice picked up a banana and peeled it slowly, trying to separate the skin into perfect quarters without any gritty veins coming away and sticking to her fingers. Her dad came back into the room as she was pulling apart the last seam. “Still in the shower,” he reported.

Nathan frowned. “She’s been in there for ages.”

Rob shrugged and checked the kitchen clock. “I’d better get in the shower myself. You two, give out her presents when she comes out. Make a bit of fanfare.”

“I already did,” Nathan said, waving something under Alice’s nose, but she barely noticed. The present. The – fucking – present. In her shaking hand the undressed banana swayed slightly, then collapsed on itself. She’d spent months listening to her dad plot the party down to each individual toothpick, and she’d never even thought of buying a present. For her, the date of her mum’s party had signalled the squad decision first and the actual birthday a distant second.

“Yep,” she said.

Her dad was looking at them strangely. For a second she thought he might ask her what her present was, but instead he swept over and put an arm around each of them, drawing them against him in a hug. He smelled of old sleep and for a second she felt an urge to burrow into his chest like a pillow.

Finally her dad went to have a shower and Nate stood up from the table. “Did you forget to get a present? I did her a photo collage.”

“I’ll get something after school.”

“I made the frame and everything.”

“Great, Nathan.”

Her brother’s eyes went soft. “Sarah’s mum lent her this big stack of books ages ago and reckons she hasn’t given any of them back. She must really like them. Maybe you could get her another one of those?”

A tiny trickle of relief moved through her. “Thanks.”

Nathan shrugged and went to his room, leaving Alice in the kitchen. She picked up the wooden thing lying flat on the table, which must have been her brother’s present for Laura. A blobby frame surrounded their three faces, cut out and stuck together. So this was why Nate had been following her around with a camera all last week. She hated having her picture taken.

The collage looked pretty nice, though. Her dad and brother were smiling widely, Nate with his vampire incisors prominent as usual. Her mum was missing, obviously.

“Morning, Allie.” Laura came into the kitchen wearing a black dress, her face immaculate. Alice wished she’d inherited her mum’s dark hair. No one took blonde teenagers seriously, especially when chlorine made your hair turn green.

She lifted an arm in a half-embrace. “Happy birthday, Mum.”

“Thanks, sweetie.” Laura distractedly brushed Alice’s back with her hand as she moved away again. “Have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

“What did you have?”

“A mandarin.”

Laura frowned.

If you asked, Alice would probably say that Portia was her best friend, but Porsh’s own best friend was definitely her mum. Every day when Mrs. Choi picked her up from swimming, the two of them would wrap themselves around each other and

hobble out to the car park together. When the Sinclairs lived at the old house, Alice always got a lift with them after training, and in the car their conversation would be just as tangled, each talking over the other, answering questions that hadn't yet been asked and breaking off sentences to dissolve into gasping laughter. Portia was going into Law because her mum was a registrar at the court. In the evenings she and Mrs. Choi did laps of breaststroke together in their backyard pool, their heads above the water so they could chat. Talking, Porsh never had to stop for breath.

Alice and her mum never talked like that. A conversation with Laura was like playing with a deflating basketball; it bounced once hollowly and then lay on the floor, shapeless.

"I got you a present," she told her mum, who was looking at Nathan's picture. "I'll give it to you after school."

Nathan came out of his room, giant backpack hanging from his shoulders like a baby orang-utan. At the same time, Rob stepped out of the bathroom in his worn flannelette dressing gown and beamed when he saw his family arranged in front of him. "Lovely day," he clucked. "Lovely day."

Alice was beginning to feel sick again.

There was a sharp rap at the front door, followed by Caroline Grant calling through the flywire. "Yoo-hoo! Where's the birthday girl?"

Relieved at the distraction, Alice said goodbye to her mother and brother, and went to her room. She was supposed to change into her school uniform and walk to the bus stop but instead she just kept wandering aimlessly around, staring at nothing. Eventually she heard the crunch of the lock as her dad left for work, unaware she was still in the house. She'd be late for school. She'd never been late before.

She couldn't go. It wasn't that she was embarrassed – Portia was the only one in the squad who went to her school, and she knew never to bring up failure, inside or outside the pool. No, she couldn't go because she had set a plug firmly in her brain so she wouldn't think about things, and since she thought about things constantly when she was out of the pool, she was jammed up. It felt like one of those dreams where she couldn't move or speak. She'd read somewhere that when you had one of those dreams your heart was actually stopping.

But she couldn't stay in the house, either. There weren't enough distractions here; too many towels and goggles and swimming caps spilled out of drawers and

cupboards. She needed to be somewhere there were people around, ones she wouldn't have to talk to. She needed the white noise.

She'd go and buy her mother a present.

Underneath Alice's bed was a small jarrah chest, carved and varnished by Granddad Mick down in Bunbury. This was where she kept all her swimming medallions, the heavy metal discs resting on their finely woven neck-strings. Tucked into the side of the chest were nine crisp fifty-dollar notes: one for every time she'd won a race at a meet. They were a present from Grandma Abby, and Alice, not wanting to spend them, would preserve them like flowers behind her certificates; a symbol of her success. They were brilliantly yellow and smelled like varnished wood. Alice had been hoping there would be a tenth after the Age Championships.

She zipped the money into a pocket of her tracksuit pants and put the chest back under the bed, then drifted out of her room and into the kitchen. Her banana peel was slumped on the table. Instead of picking it up she went into the lounge. Laura's domain, with the stink of old milk liqueur in the air. There was a book about Italy lying open on the armchair. Alice remembered Nathan's advice about the present and managed to wander over to her parents' bedroom door, which was shut, as usual. Opening it, the doorknob rattled from loose screws and Alice's shaking hand.

A skinny stretch of trees spanned the wall above her parents' bed, and in the gloom she could make out the pile of books by Laura's side. She leaned over to pick up the top one and knocked the stack over, glossy covers skidding across the carpeted floor. The surprise and irritation made her feel like crying, and she held her stomach until it passed. She flicked on the light and gathered up the novels, glancing at their covers at the same time. The books were all part of a series, the sequence of which was printed in black on the spines. Number three, *Body in the Bushes*; number four, *The Russian Spy*; number eight, *A Murderous Plan*. Alice thought her mum only liked travel guides and photography books. The last one in the series was number nine, *Red-Lipped Lady*.

When Alice picked the book up, a piece of paper fluttered from its pages. It was folded into thirds and then in half, but where the top fold fell open Alice could see the purple half-star logo of a bank, a Subiaco branch address printed underneath. In the centre, right along the fold, was stamped NOTICE OF INVESTMENT RENEWAL and the date of her mother's birthday. With careful spider fingers, Alice unfolded the letter and saw the final third, marked with corrugated dashes, was still attached, with



unticked boxes beside words like ‘reinvest’ and ‘principal’ and ‘interest’. At the bottom of this section the day’s date was again printed in bold. Laura must have been using the letter as a bookmark and had forgotten to reply, and it was almost too late.

Operating automatically, Alice smoothed out the statement and placed it on her parents’ doona for Laura to see. Then she left the house, still in her tracksuit and bathers, to catch the bus to the city. She had a birthday present to buy.

## 9. Scars

Rob knew about the improbability of love and happy families. With the introduction of no-fault divorce when he was in primary school, his father's small family law practice boomed, unleashing a relatively steady stream of separated women and men into the south-west. Lonely and confused, the newly divorced often began to form new pairings in their social groups, if they didn't move away first: Brent Declan's mum with Ty Keely's dad, Ty Keely's mum with the metalwork teacher Mr. Scarriff, Mr. Scarriff's ex-wife with a hitchhiker on his way to Perth. Meanwhile the kids shuffled between houses, gloomy looks on their faces as they carried bags through the back streets. For a long time it seemed like everyone was sad.

But still, Rob felt born to be a family man. He knew it could work: just look at his own. His father was a saint, his mother was a sweetheart, and his two older sisters thought he was the greatest thing in the world. He'd been protected by a Teflon coating of love at all times and, knowing how lucky he was, he felt duty-bound to try and replicate it with a family of his own.

He'd had girlfriends ever since he was fourteen, when he got a reputation for being mature enough to date girls properly – that was, he paid for them at the pictures and didn't try to unhook any bras. Life being lovely, there was no shortage of girls he liked enough to take out. They were everywhere: at school, with his sisters, playing netball beside the tennis courts. The first half-dozen relationships had petered out after a couple of months of hand-holding and hopeful smiles, and though Rob had been slightly perplexed he wasn't too worried; he just found another girlfriend and added the old one to his long list of best friends.

Joy was the last girlfriend he'd had in high school, and Rob thought he would marry her. Their meeting at Rob's Year Twelve Ball was serendipitous: she was the cousin of a school friend, Mark, whose parents wouldn't let him have a girlfriend in case he didn't get into Medicine in Perth. Rob's own partner was Caroline, who was his most recent ex-girlfriend. After two songs Rob asked Joy to dance and it was on.

At first his relationship with Joy scared him. It wasn't pleasant like the others had been; he didn't feel courteous all the time. At the movies he *wanted* to stick a hand in her bra, and further down. She teased him and teased him, and where with the other girls he would have found it charming, Joy drove him crazy. They fought. Rob couldn't believe it. He was seventeen years old, filling out through the trunk and with a newly blonde chin, and he'd never fought with anyone. He wanted either to scream at her or to wrap her hair around his hand and stick his tongue in her mouth. He felt like when his father first taught him to drive and, not used to the temper of the accelerator, he sped around corners, the steering wheel threatening to tug itself out of his hands.

Rob felt frustrated at being out of control and out of control because he felt frustrated. He wondered if this was why other people's marriages broke up. One night at a party, when he couldn't find Joy and someone said she'd already left, he went outside and smashed a bottle on the paving so hard that several shards bit into his shins. Everyone believed him when he said he'd dropped it accidentally, but when he saw the lines of dark red blood tracing down to his ankles he was afraid. Even now, though the scars had faded he knew they were still there, a faint reminder of one of the few times he'd ever lost control.

But that was what all the movies and songs were about – loving someone even though it stuffed you up. His ex-girlfriends seemed jealous of his feelings. As Caroline helped him pick glass from his skin Rob wondered whether, if Joy had been there, he would have flung the half-drunk VB at *her* feet. (He knew he didn't have it in him to throw anything *at* anyone; but near someone, in their general vicinity: that suddenly seemed possible.) He knew it needed to stop. Not the relationship – he was *in love* – but the gut-boiling highs and lows.

He put on jeans to hide the patchwork of Band-aids on his shins and went to his dad for advice. Mick patted the back of Rob's hand calmly and said nothing about Joy's worthlessness or the doomed nature of the relationship. "Just breathe, Robbo. In for ten, out for ten."

"That'll fix it?"

“It’ll make the world slow down enough so that you can deal with it.”

It drove Joy nuts. “You know that heavy breathing sounds completely derro, right? Stop looking at me like that.”

“Just take a deep breath,” he told her. “Just calm down.”

“I am calm!”

But she wasn’t. She had been, when he was flinging shit around; back then she would stroll away, cool as anything. Now Rob’s patience was like a broken thumbnail caught under her skin. “*Stop* it, Robbie!”

When they broke up – Joy said she needed more passion in her life, and there was already another boy waiting in the wings – Rob thought he’d be destroyed, but it turned out he wasn’t. He was exhausted. He realised then that love could burn out; not just a person’s emotions, but itself. When Joy paraded the new boyfriend around Mark’s nineteenth birthday party, Rob nursed just a tiny puff of emotion, barely enough to turn his head.

That was why he’d chosen to marry Laura. When they first met at uni – at another Ball, coincidentally, though this time she was a friend of Caroline’s – he liked her immediately, slouched but still dainty in her seat, face crinkled like she couldn’t believe how ridiculous everything was and yet it was so much fun. Still regrouping from Joy, he watched and waited, taking note of her wryness, her long dark hair, the artistry that infused everything she did. She wanted to go to photography school in England, she told him over coffee. She wanted to have her work exhibited. While she was away he got five letters and he smiled at all of them, especially the Christmas one with its comedic Polaroid of Laura rugged up to the ears, staring at a lit pudding in horror. When she got back they got together for a drink, and then he asked her out again, and again. After a few dates they kissed, which he also liked – not just the kiss itself but the fact that it had taken a while, which was a relief after Joy’s flustered hands in his pants on their first trip to the pictures. He decided he would marry Laura after they slept together for the first time and her curled white back in the morning made him think of the coolness of water, the tranquillity of going with the flow instead of fighting against it. Rob had coiled himself around her and felt a contentment reverberating through him that he didn’t think would ever dull.

Of course, he reflected maturely, as he drove to work the morning of the surprise party, a pile of history essays on the seat beside him, his marriage hadn’t been

effortless. There were undercurrents, sticks and stones in the riverbed. But these were to be expected. Even his parents had argued sometimes.

Shifting down to turn into the school car park, Rob groaned as the water analogy reminded him of Alice. Her coach had warned against reacting badly to her demotion at the swimming club, but Alice would see any reaction as a bad one because she was hard on herself. She took commiseration as a personal insult – at least she had the last time she'd confided in him, when she was about thirteen and had missed out on a cooking elective at school because it was full. It was no fault of her own, but when Rob said it was a shame she had turned such a violent shade of red he thought his pity was choking her. So he'd decided to pretend he didn't know, instead alluding to Verity Mellenger and the case of the imperfect essay, but Alice hadn't bitten.

He wouldn't push her, of course. His daughter could come to him if she needed to.

Even if she never did.

Parking on the hill behind the school, Rob wrenched up the Toyota's handbrake and killed the engine. He didn't get out. The sight of the scattered demountables beyond the windscreen made him yawn enormously. He was left slumped in his seat for a few seconds, exhausted.

“Mr. Sinclair!”

The suddenness of the two boys leering into his window caused him to jerk up in his seat. “Yes?”

One of the pair pointed downwards, thick eyebrows raised. Rob couldn't work out what he meant until he saw the other boy, a sharp-faced kid with twin silver lip rings, making a circular motion with his hand. They wanted him to wind down the window. As Rob did so the second boy converted his gesture into a brief but unmistakable mime of wanking, then put both hands behind his back.

He didn't know that kid, but the one pointing was in his Year Twelve history class, the one with Verity Mellenger. Jason Berwick's essays also went to the bottom of Rob's piles, not because they were self-important like Verity's but because they were incomprehensible. Jason had mistaken Senior History for a how-to seminar on wars and invasions, and Rob longed to tell him that an obsession with the games Risk and Doom weren't good prerequisites for studying German hyper-inflation and the forming of the League of Nations. Less professionally, Rob thought his gelled platinum hair and scabby hands were seedy. Jason's mother worked in the school

canteen and had the same crusty hands, as Rob noticed every time Mrs. Berwick served him his salad sandwich. “Yes?” he said again.

“We’ve got history today, hey?”

“After recess.”

“You reckon you’re going to have our essays back by then?”

The bloody essays. Rob longed to put his face in his hands. After the swimming coach’s interruption that morning he hadn’t returned to Verity’s essay or the other two in the pile, one of which, come to think of it, was Jason’s. “Sure thing.”

“You’ve had them for weeks, but.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“I thought we were supposed to get stuff back after two weeks.”

Rob made a show of checking his watch. “Aren’t you going to be late for class?”

“Aren’t *you?*” Jason sneered. Laughing, he and his friend ambled off through the car park, tugging down their waistbands to show shiny boxers. Rob felt like honking the horn suddenly to make them jump and stammer and look stupid, as he had, but instead he just put his head against it like a pillow and closed his eyes.

## 10. The Spaniel

When Nathan left the house, his mother and Caroline Grant were standing on the lawn beside the Grants' big four-wheel drive. Laura held herself around the waist with one arm and blocked the weak sun from her eyes with the other. Through the car's passenger window he could see his friend, Sarah, pressed against the glass.

Mrs. Grant, a bouquet of flowers in her hands, broke off whatever she was saying when she saw him. "There he is."

"Hi, Mrs. Grant." Nathan liked Sarah's mum all right, but she was weird. Sometimes she acted like she was his mother, telling him to loosen his laces before he took his shoes off or to sit up straight at the dinner table – things Laura didn't care about – and the rest of the time she teased him, the way Sarah did. Nathan didn't always like it. And Mrs. Grant had a temper, which he wasn't used to, since no one in his house ever shouted. Sarah reckoned her mum once threw a two-litre container of orange juice at her, but missed. "How are you?" he asked.

"Hop in the back with the girls there." Mrs. Grant's smile was too big for her face. "We'll drop you at school on our way to breakfast."

"Lovely," Laura muttered to the grass.

Nathan yanked open the door of the Landcruiser and slid inside, out of the line of fire. Sarah's little sister sat in the very back, reading a Harry Potter book. "Hi, Jessie."

Jessie barely looked up. "'lo."

Sarah wrenched herself around from the front seat. "Good morning, Gogo."

"Good morning, Didi."

Candice was Pozzo. They were the only ones in Year Eight who'd read *Waiting for Godot* all the way through. Even Ms. Coldwater, the drama teacher, had only seen it live.

"Your mum looks pissed," Sarah observed.

Nathan couldn't see Laura's face from where he was sitting. "Yep."

"It's her birthday."

He shrugged.

"What is she, forty? My mum got so drunk at her fortieth. She kept threatening to flash her boobs."

Laura drank Bailey's topped with milk every night. It looked like choc milk and once, when everyone else was out, Nathan had snuck a glass of his own. It tasted like poison. "Lame."

"Heaps lame," Sarah agreed, turning back in her seat. Actors had no need for drink. They were high on life, and the stage.

A lock of Sarah's hair snaked around the headrest to the back of her seat. It was shampoo-ad hair, a perfect shiny curl. Nathan couldn't stop staring at it. He didn't know how they did it, girls, with their flowery hairclips and their brightly-coloured pen sets and their glossy mouths. Every morning they looked new.

Nathan and Sarah had been best friends pretty much since they were born because Mrs. Grant was best friends with his parents. The two of them had married each other a million times at the old house, with Jessie as their baby. Recently, though, Nathan had become aware of Sarah as a person, a *girl*, separate from himself; her interests and dreams and demands unfurling. They could really get married one day. The more he became aware of this, the less he wanted it to happen. He wanted to suppress it, like the threatening stirrings between his legs in the morning. He wanted to be Gogo and Didi forever.

Sarah was looking at him in the rear-view mirror. "Auditions."

"Auditions."

"You'll be a fabulous Lysander."

"You'll be an epic Hermia."

In the scene Ms. Coldwater had picked, Lysander and Hermia kissed<sup>ii</sup>.

The car door opened and Laura got in, Mrs. Grant's flowers wedged in the crook of her elbow. He shifted along the back seat and took the bouquet while she

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<sup>ii</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, pp. 131-46, I. i.



buckled her seatbelt. In the front Sarah's mum yanked the rear-view mirror back from where Sarah had positioned it, directing raised eyebrows toward the back. "Off and racing," she announced, revving the engine.

His mum was looking out the window. In the fumble to get seated her dress had ridden up a bit, showing spotty thighs. She'd dropped her shoulders, making her tummy pooch out a bit. She looked over at Nathan and gave a sad little smile, and he was hit by a crashing wave of affection for her, this sad lady in the nice dress who was also his mother. He went to hug her but his own belt restrained him, leaving a triangle of dead air between their bodies. "Happy birthday, Mum."

Laura squeezed his upper arm briefly. "You're a good kid."

Other images of Laura that made Nathan love her, instantly and sharply: walking into the lounge to say goodnight and seeing her still holding her book, mouth wide in sleep; creeping around the shopping centre car park in the Toyota on a Saturday afternoon, giggling at her commentary on other people's atrocious driving before she executed a flawless reverse-parallel park on the median strip; watching her hit 'redial' over and over on the phone to the ABC's competition for tickets to *Grease*, which she knew he wanted to see, and buying him and his friends Hungry Jacks on the way home from the show.

Other times, loving her was harder.

"Your mum loves you," his dad kept telling him. He said the same about Allie: "Your sister loves you." It annoyed him. Of course they loved him – families have to. Even families as weird as his.

No one ever said that his dad loved him, but Nathan didn't need to be told that. Rob was a sponge for love, sitting soft and squishy in a puddle of it.

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His first session on Fridays was Maths, which sucked, but at least Candice was in his class. Metal teeth skewed her smile, and Nathan felt lucky not to need braces. "Gogo!"

"Hey, Pozzo."

"I'm *so* excited about auditions," she said as he slid into the next desk. She spoke carefully around the rubber bands but there was still a juiciness to her words. "I'm freaking out."

"You'll be great."

“*Na*-than.” This was the way girls said his name when they wanted something from him: the popular girls who had to borrow a pen in science; his sister when she needed him to do the dishes. “At the auditions, I was thinking, you know, what if I maybe went for *Hermia*, instead?”

He squinted. “But Sarah’s going for *Hermia*.”

“Yeah, I know.” She faced forward in her seat again and fiddled with her stuff, putting a file on top of her textbook and then shifting it off again. “I just thought, maybe I could go for it.”

“But Sarah’s going for it,” he said again.

“I know.”

The teacher called the class to attention. As she turned to the whiteboard and drew a parabola, Nathan began to panic. Candice was supposed to be *Helena* and Sarah was supposed to be *Hermia*. The three of them had decided. Candice and Sarah never competed on anything. They couldn’t.

“*Helena* is crap,” Candice whispered, copying the graph into her notebook.

“She’s a lead.”

“Ha.” Spittle hit the point where her *x* and *y* axes intersected. “She’s the one nobody likes.”

“They like her in the end.”

“When they’re all drugged.”

The teacher turned around. Candice clamped her lips shut over her braces and bent to her work. Furious with worry, Nathan quickly drew a curve. Sarah was going to be really, really mad.

He peeked at Candice again. With each line she copied she methodically shuffled her page upward and out of the way of her breasts, which rested the edge of her desk. Candice had the biggest chest in Year Eight; probably in the whole school. She wore boy’s shirts in a size XL and still the buttons popped open with the strain, so she carried safety-pins in her pencil case.

At lunchtime the day before, Candice had rehearsed in a corner of the quadrangle with Nathan as *Demetrius* and Sarah as the audience. She knew all the lines by heart. “*I am your spaniel,*” she exhorted, throwing herself at his feet. “*And, Demetrius, the more you beat me I will fawn on you.*”<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>iii</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, p.166, II. i., lines 203-4.

Over Sarah's shoulder a group of Year Ten boys gathered, nudging one another and making faces. Candice looked down at her chest, then jerked up.

Sarah frowned. "Hands and knees, Pozzo."

The boys burst out laughing behind them. Candice faltered. "Ah..."

"Didi –" Nathan said uncertainly.

"*Use me but as your spaniel,*"<sup>iv</sup> Sarah prompted.

"Use..."

"*Use me but as your spaniel!*"<sup>v</sup>

The boys were playing at laughter now, falling over one another to be most obnoxious. "*Spaniel!*" one of them hooted. "Spaniel! Spaniel!"

Finally realising, Sarah turned and regarded them for a second, then settled back and rolled her eyes. "Jerks. Ignore them."

Candice fixed her gaze on Nathan. The corners of her mouth and eyes were wet. He could see right down her shirt. "*Use me but as your spaniel,*"<sup>vi</sup> she whispered.

Now he heard her swallow wetly, vacuuming stray spit from the elastic that strung her jaws together. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the tops of her breasts quiver every time her writing arm bumped them. The sums blurred on the board. He wanted to tell Pozzo that she was beautiful and the guys yesterday were stupid and she should do whatever she wanted. But you didn't just *say* that.

In a play, maybe.

"Do what you want," he whispered, eyes facing forwards in case the teacher looked around again.

"What?"

"Go for whichever. Be Hermia. If you want to."

He heard spit move in her mouth as she smiled.

The next parabola to copy was upside-down, its sides dropping steeply towards *x*. Nipping his tongue with concentration, Nathan drew the glorious ascent through the axes, smoothing it gently near its highest point. There he paused, his pen going blobby on the paper as he examined the line the teacher had drawn for them. He looked down. He looked up. He looked down again, sighed, and traced the second half back down to zero.

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<sup>iv</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, p.166, II. i., line 205.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

## 11. Lakes

Caroline Grant had kissed Laura's husband.

This fact came to mind sometimes when she looked at her friend over coffee, or through a fly-wire door. After all, Rob and Caroline had been boyfriend and girlfriend in high school and had gone to their Ball together. Laura often looked at their photo, holding her Bailey's aloft so she didn't slop it on Rob's old album. The evidence. In it Caroline stood to the right of Rob, her hair piled high and curly, and her dress tight around the waist and flouncy below the hips. Her red lipstick matched her dress, which matched Rob's bow-tie. Youth and lesser-quality film made their faces smooth and indistinct at the edges and you had to squint hard to know it was them.

Looking at the picture Laura was drawn to the demonstrative way the two figures held one another. It was in the foregrounded arms, she'd decided: her husband's left and her friend's right. Rob's left shoulder was pushed back so he faced the camera squarely, and, since his arms were short, he clutched Caroline high up on her waist to compensate, thumb just touching the curve of Caroline's right breast where it was visible below her own arm as she held the sleeve of his tuxedo. She stood at ninety-degrees with her neck wrenched so she could pout at the camera. Neither of them was smiling and there was a thick panel of curtain visible between their two bodies. It didn't take seven years of portrait photography to know it was a bad photo, and yet Laura opened the album again and again, shivering a little at the exaggerated angles, the thumbtip against breast, the defiance in their eyes.

The photograph and Rob's brief description when she'd first met him ("So how do you know Caroline?" "Oh, we go back ages, we went out for a bit in high school")

were all the information Laura had. She assumed that somewhere along the line they must have at least kissed. She didn't want to know anything else, and she stopped Rob the few times he'd tried to tell her.

It wasn't that she was *jealous*; actually the opposite – she didn't want her fantasy destroyed. Laura liked the idea, abstract as it was, of Caroline and Rob having been together. It gave her the impression of her husband as a man someone else might desire. It gave her the feeling that, somehow, she had won something over her friend.

She knew this was stupid.

Now, Caroline was obsessed with taking her to breakfast. Laura didn't eat breakfast, but this was no excuse. "It's your birthday," Caro kept saying.

They dropped the kids off and headed towards the river. Where roads in other areas might have passed by rows of trees, the highway was lined with high exterior walls of dozens of estates, their emptily tranquil names – 'The Groves', 'Orchard Pines' – printed on them in iron cursive. Every now and then, a side road granted entry to the rows of seemingly infinite houses and Laura could see the wide emerald lawns of the estate parks, each with a depression like a bellybutton in the centre. These had been filled with water to form artificial lakes. Before the estates started to go up, the land at this end of the highway had been mostly hobby-farms and swamp, and the developers had to drain to stop the new white houses sinking into sludge. Now Laura saw the lakes as a symbol of the new communities: decorative and lifeless.

As they headed towards the river, there seemed to be a lot of people on the streets. Through the windows of passing cars people smiled at her openly.

Caroline glanced in the rear-view mirror. "I feel like a chauffeur."

"It's my birth-day," Laura drawled, adjusting her dress where it had ridden over her knees.

"Play the birthday card," Caroline agreed, turning onto Mill Point Road. "I always do."

"Pun intended?"

Her friend's face narrowed for a second and then she smiled. "Ah yes, very droll."

"Thank you."

At the riverside café Caroline pointed her towards a table by the window. Laura put her handbag on the floor and looked out at the foreshore, her chin balanced on scrunched hands. Again the strangeness of the day appeared to her from the other side

of glass: exhibited, untouchable. The river was a seam of diamonds in the morning light, the skyscrapers looming over it, their flat blue panels reflecting the sky.

Caroline came back from the counter and launched into a story about the misinterpretation of her order and her fear that, though she'd repeated it *several* times, Laura's eggs would emerge scrambled rather than poached. ("Didn't even seem to know what poached *was*. Is this a breakfast place, or what? He'll probably spit in my coffee, now.") She sat with her shiny, fit legs stretched out in front of her and Laura had the feeling she sometimes got that she was just a squash court for the speeding rubber ball of Caroline's life; vital only as something to bounce off.

Her thoughts were so grim today.

"So what do you think?" Caroline asked, blowing out her fringe.

Laura wasn't sure what she meant, so she said, "Lovely day, huh?"

"Glorious," Caroline said, but kept looking at her. "Your birthday."

"Mmm."

"You know I counted, and we've been friends twenty-one years. Did you know that?"

Laura's throat clagged. "Really?"

"We weren't even twenty-one when we *met*. That's more than half our lives."

"Wow."

"Our friendship should be having a big champagne breakfast." Caroline crossed her gleaming legs at the other ankle. "Our friendship should have people making drunken speeches."

"I never even had a twenty-first the first time around."

"Oh, right, you were away."

The day she turned twenty-one Laura woke early in a shitty hostel in Edinburgh. From Waverley she took the first bus to South Queensferry, had a wee in the public toilets, and then waded into the sea with her camera. Purple blotches grew up her legs as she waited, shivering, for the cloud to lift over the Forth rail bridge. At the moment of her birth, six-thirty-eight a.m., just as she was beginning to cramp from cold and hunger, the cumulus pulled itself apart like cotton wool to reveal the purple-orange of the rising sun and Laura took the best picture she'd ever taken. When she came back to Australia she showed it to Rob, who had it secretly copied and framed as a gift when he proposed. It was part of the reason she'd said yes.

“That sucks,” Caroline commiserated, frowning. “Wouldn’t you love a big blowout party?”

Laura shrugged. “Not really.”

The waiter arrived with two plates. “Excuse me, poached eggs?”

“Hallelujah,” Caroline said.

He blinked. “Poached eggs?”

“They’re hers,” she indicated.

“Poached eggs,” the waiter confirmed a final time, slipping one plate in front of Laura and the other to Caroline. “Scrambled eggs and salmon,” he nodded, taking their table number with him as he went.

“How are we supposed to –?” Caroline began.

Before she could get too fretful a girl in the same style of apron appeared with two giant mugs on saucers and deposited them on the table.

“Oh,” Caroline muttered. Slightly pink, she unwrapped the serviette from her knife and fork. “Well then.” She looked up at Laura. “Happy birthday, hmmm?”

Laura’s eggs shone wetly in the natural light of the café. This was why she didn’t eat breakfast – everything seemed so much more *alive* in the mornings. She sought the solace of her coffee, lifting it in response to Caroline. “Cheers.”

She watched as her friend ate, grunting with pleasure over each forkful and nodding as if in verification of her own tastes. Caro believed in good food, though, like Laura, she didn’t believe in cooking: when her husband, Milton, came back from the mine site he managed, they went out for dinner several times a week, and at home they ate expensive reheated meals from supermarkets near Caro’s western-suburbs school. Not cooking for oneself was part of Caroline’s theory of pleasure, which also included regular salon haircuts, running five kilometres a day, and wearing slinky items to show off one’s cardio-toned body and good hair. In her expensive blouses Caro’s breasts were steep, muscled pecs, exercise smoothing down the neat teacups brushed by Rob in their Ball photo. Laura could imagine dozens of teenage boys focusing on them as Caroline stood at the gym lectern in the expensive private school where she taught, twisting the microphone towards her cleavage and lecturing on the importance of consent. Caro was the only female Phys. Ed. and health teacher at the school and relished the opportunity to provide sex education lectures, during which she could impart her pleasure philosophy to a sea of minds newly whirlpooled by testosterone.

Rolling a condom gently over the curve of a banana, Caro would have to be careful not to smile.

Earlier that week Laura was folding towels in the laundry when she heard Nathan's friends lounging in his bedroom. Caro's daughter Sarah talked the most, and the other two were her devoted audience. "You know in that scene when Lysander and Hermia go to sleep<sup>vii</sup>, you know he's trying to have sex with her, right?"

There was giggling. "No-o-o-o," someone objected, sounding thrilled.

Sarah waited for her turn again. "Hermia runs off with him instead of marrying Demetrius. I bet that means Lysander *cares about her orgasm*."

Laura paused for a moment with a bathmat held in front of her, wondering if she should intervene. It would be nice to lean in the door and ask Sarah to explain this concept for them more clearly, to see her pixie face squish up with embarrassment, but she didn't want to be one of the finicky traditionalist mothers who wrote to Caro's principal to get their boys out of her class. She worried, again, that she was making her children repressed, keeping them in this stunted prepubescent stage. Alice, for example. Surely, as the other female in the family, Laura had the responsibility of preparing her daughter for womanhood. She'd never shown Allie how to wear makeup or taken her shopping for a bra and she wondered if this had effectively left her daughter behind, languishing in preadolescent androgyny, identifiable as female only by her long blonde hair. Laura didn't even know if Allie got her period or if she had staved it off with too much exercise and too little white bread, and she didn't particularly want to know.

Rob would know since he shared Allie's bathroom, and anyway, she had effectively handed the mothering over to him. During the seven years she'd worked late at the studio, he had been designated feelings-soother and tucker-inner, but it was pretty much a chicken-and-egg situation. Rob had always been better at it; had been able to separate discipline from love but perform them simultaneously. There was calmness in him as long as she'd known him. When, as babies, Alice or Nathan cried, he'd taken them carefully in his arms, cradling them in the right while cupping his left hand against the little forehead. "Mmm," he would croon, a primal sound that made Laura think of the blood-rush of a seashell at your ear, and the kid would gulp and shudder and settle. Her mother and Caroline marvelled at it. "It's so – *sexy*," Caro had

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<sup>vii</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, pp. 169-77, II. ii.



confided during a dinner party, when baby Jessie couldn't be calmed and Rob had worked his magic. "Man soothing baby, what dreams are made of."

The sweet sound came so low in Rob's throat that the first time she heard it Laura thought it might be a train in the distance, or problems with the pipes. It was the first night they'd spent together, him draped over her turned back, and she was uncomfortable. Just as she was about to ask if he heard that weird noise too he'd sighed and wrapped her tighter, pressing his chin to the top of her head, and she felt the vibration through the back of her skull. "What are you doing?"

"I'm just happy."

Rob reminded her of a carnival game where you fling balls at picture of a beaming clown, trying to knock it flat, only for the panel to swing back upright on its hinges every time.

Once she'd stopped working and was free to do the mothering, set loose in their new house in which there was, let's face it, little to do except watch *Oprah* on the big TV and clean the endless tiling grout, Laura floundered. It was she who'd wanted to move to the estates after hearing Caroline's gushing praise of their palatial new place and feeling trapped by the walls of the Como house, and now she didn't like it. She should have known better, she sometimes thought, standing in the middle of the giant kitchen, unable to traverse the sheer amount of space; the choices she made when she was bored and unemployed and afraid had never been particularly authentic.

So she was a housewife. Her ironing was sub-par. She couldn't cook. Seven years ago, when she was home all day, there were small children to protect, but now they didn't need her. In the morning her kids got out of bed before she did and made their own sandwiches, and in the afternoons they retired quickly to their bedrooms with the self-enforced discipline of homework first, *then* TV. Nathan didn't need picking up from school because he walked home with Sarah. For a couple of weeks Laura attempted to give Allie a lift, since she hadn't changed schools in the move and had to get the bus, but she'd always been late despite having nothing to do at home and eventually her daughter returned to public transport. Laura tried to do some gardening but the soil was sandy and the plants kept dying. All she could do was lower herself to the floor, dip the scourer in the stinking ammonia, and scrub until her eyes watered.

Her expensive digital SLR, which she'd brought with her to the northern-, southern- and westernmost points of the state as well as Sydney and Christchurch, remained in a box carefully lined with bubble wrap and slotted under the half-

assembled desk in the study. The new house was so big and there was so much unpacking to do that for the first few months she'd associated the camera with guilt, remembering all the long weekends she'd spent away. Her last trip had been the one to Denmark, where she'd been crippled by her migraine and ennui and stayed for much longer than planned, returning to find Rob uncharacteristically sullen. Later that week Julian had let her go, and though she knew it was nothing to do with her the shame stayed, so she packed up her camera and left it there. Now she itched to find it in its box, to lift it to her eye and hear the satisfying whirr of electronics.

Caroline groaned with delight and pushed her plate away. "Hedonism."

"Mmm." Laura still had an entire gelatinous egg to go. She guzzled the rest of her coffee instead, feeling the anxiety of the morning distil itself into a heavy ball behind her breastbone. Putting her mug down, she knew it was the weight of certainty.

Caro looked at her. "Ready to go?"

Laura felt her smile shake. "More than ready."

## 12. The Little Mermaid

One Saturday when Alice was ten and had just started with the swimming club, she came home from training shift and restless. There was nothing to do. Her mother was in the bedroom with the door shut, as usual. Nathan was sick – he got sick a lot – so her dad wheeled the TV into his room and told her not to go in there unless she wanted inflamed tonsils too. She drifted around their old house like a dandelion caught on the breeze, dropping lightly on something every so often only to pick up seconds later and waft away.

Eventually she landed in front of the bookshelves in the sleep-out. Alice was a good reader and had already been through everything that looked interesting. In one corner was a pile of Grandma Abby's old kids' books that were falling apart, the spines held together by silver industrial tape. Usually Alice, the only one in her class who had read *That Eye, The Sky* by Tim Winton, wouldn't have bothered with them, but that day she was desperate. She crossed her legs on the fluffy carpet and hunched over a collection of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales.

Afterwards she was obsessed with the story about "The Little Sea-maid"<sup>viii</sup>. The story was just right – at the start the heroine was ten, *Alice's age*, which couldn't be a coincidence; she gave up her voice for love, and Alice didn't consider herself to be a big talker either; and at the end she didn't get the prince, which struck Alice as being somehow right<sup>ix</sup>. Sometimes at swimming, when Jenna wasn't watching, she kicked both legs at the same time, trying to launch herself out of the water with her

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<sup>viii</sup> Andersen and Hesse, *Stories and Tales*, pp. 60-80.

<sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*

imaginary fish's tail. She pretended to be mute and drove Portia and Laura crazy with her wistful sighs and poignant staring out of windows. When her dad bought her a blanket adorned with the green curves of Ariel from the Disney version, she thanked him and quietly slipped it into the laundry cupboard, embarrassed that he thought she would be interested in the happy-ending version of the story.

Now, standing at the city bus station at the end of rush hour, she was struck by another detail of the original story: the phantom knives that cut the mermaid's new feet with every step she took<sup>x</sup>. The agony of being on the land.

There were just so many *people* here, so many green buses lurching by, so many coded signs: D3 Leederville via Fitzgerald Street, C1 Morley via Alexander Drive. Old women took up positions beneath them, narrowing their eyes at her over their knitting.

Alice saw the exit signs but couldn't bring herself to follow them. She stood where she'd disembarked watching men jog in the direction of the train station, hands on their suit buttons so they didn't gape. Under the sign for D4 a young man with three full shopping bags stared at her without blinking. Water pooled on the cement floor even though it hadn't rained for days.

A bus arrived and groaned as it settled into the bay. The door wheezed open and a line of people started weaving around her to climb aboard. After a few moments the driver finished counting his change and gazed down the steps at her. "All right, love? Boarding this bus?"

She wasn't sure what to say.

"Balcatta?" the driver asked.

"What?"

"Stirling? Tuart Hill?"

"No..." she said slowly.

His forehead folded. "Where are you headed?"

Someone muttered "Excuse me" in her ear and she jumped aside. The figure scuttled up the stairs and past the driver, who craned in his seat to look at her. "The city," Alice finally said.

His face didn't change. He pointed over her shoulder. "You want to walk about two hundred metres that way."

"Oh," she said. "Thanks."

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<sup>x</sup> *Ibid*, p.74.

Shaking his head, the driver turned his wrist beneath the wheel and the bus came to life, the doors snapping closed in front of Alice. When it pulled away, the man with the overloaded bags was still standing on the opposite platform, watching her.

□

The first bookshop had a whole shelf dedicated to the series of novels her mum was apparently reading. Alice eyes started to cross as she skimmed them, the black numbers difficult to see on the burgundy spines. She started pulling books out to look at their covers but they were all out of order and the shelves loomed high over her, threatening to spill their contents.

A very tall sales assistant approached her. “Are you looking for something in particular?”

“I’m looking for the tenth one.”

“What’s the title?”

Alice shrugged. The sales assistant turned and ran a finger along the row of spines, murmuring to himself. “These are all out of order.”

“I know.”

He started rearranging them. Alice waited, not knowing what to do with her hands. The shop was very bright in the milky morning and her head ached from the glare.

The guy finished. “It’s not here,” he said, turning around, “but we’re also missing number four and, what is it, number six. We have another branch on William Street, do you want me to give them a ring?”

He was already striding towards the register, and Alice had to skip to keep up. “It’s just, I don’t really know if there is a tenth one. I just wondered if there was.”

The sales assistant looked at her like the bus driver had, his neutral expression revealing exactly what he thought. It was the same look Laura gave when Alice asked for the new streamlined Speedos. It was her coach’s face after she’d clocked her eighth consecutive nine-twenty-five. The bookseller looked away. “Let’s look it up on the computer.”

Thirty minutes later Alice had picked up and put down every vase in Myer, wishing that stupid writer could have just done a tenth book. She had no idea what her mother would like. In the new house everything was sleek and glass and matching, but

a present like that seemed too impersonal, especially after Nathan's homemade collage. Alice stared at a clear tube filled with little iridescent pebbles and mentally placed it on a shelf in the front room where it would fit perfectly, dissolving into the background like everything else Laura had bought. It was only her mother's pictures that added any colour. She thought about getting something completely wacky, lime green with orange piping or a womb-shaped red bulb, just to see her mum's reaction, but Alice had trouble making jokes and Laura had trouble getting them.

Tonight's party was not going to go well.

The one good part of the evening was that Uncle Ben, her mum's brother, was coming in from Sydney, where he worked as a pilot for Qantas. The whole family adored Ben, who flew the Sydney-Beijing route and listened to jazz. He was often in the middle of a divorce from a younger, foreign woman the rest of the family never got to meet. "She's too smart for me," he lamented. Alice didn't think it was so smart marrying a fifty-year-old who'd already been married more than once.

Uncle Ben told long stories about international travel and enchanted you with his frog smile. He napped at strange hours and the rest of the house went flat waiting for him, then tensed with excitement at his heavy footsteps in the hallway. He'd lean into the room. "What are we doing, kids?"

"Watching *CSI*," her dad would explain shyly.

"Terrific."

Alice still had a stuffed toy plane that Ben had sent her years ago, a bulging jumbo with a sewn-on grin that she kept on her chest of drawers next to her swimming trophies. He was her favourite relative after Nathan. She liked the freedom he brought with him. None of the Sinclairs was free. Down in Bunbury they drove Commodores and took their holidays in Capel, playing cards on the veranda of a dinky old caravan. Uncle Ben sent through postcards from Vladivostok and Ulan Bator.

Alice's mum always acted funny when her brother was around. She would bring him dishes of peanuts, standing awkwardly as he took some and then lost himself in a gesture, flicking nuts to the corners of the room. She moved at twice normal speed, insisting they go out for dinner every night and piling Ben with bus timetables and tourist maps on her way to work, forgetting he'd grown up in Perth, too. If she had a new photo she would present it to him with the corner of her mouth twisted by nerves even though he always called it a triumph. "You really are something special,

Laur,” he would say as he handed it back, and Laura’s hand would shake a little as she took it.

The pronouncements always irritated Alice, who would leave the room when Laura began bringing over frames for Ben to examine. She didn’t like the word ‘special’, because you could be special without really doing anything about it. You had to apply your specialness, extend it, improve it through determination and effort.

Oh, in some ways Laura was determined, like how she would wait for ages to get a shot without anyone in it. Alice remembered being seven or so on a spring evening at Cottesloe, waiting with her mum for the beach to clear. Her jacket was in the car and it was getting cold but Laura wouldn’t let her go back for it, holding her arm tightly as she scanned the sand. Finally, freezing, Alice pulled free and ran down the steps, rubbing her upper arms and shouting “Get out of the way, get out of the way, my mum’s trying to take a photo.”

It was in the kitchen now, a beautiful beach scene. Her mother took excellent pictures, but no one else ever saw them. Alice cut entry forms for photography competitions out of the local paper and Laura nodded and went off to work. Alice didn’t understand it, but then, packing up the old house, she’d come across a pile of the newspaper cuttings in an old desk drawer, yellowing and past their deadlines. She threw them in the bin. Her mother was lazy, Alice had decided, staring angrily up at the beautiful shot of the red bridge at sunrise. She was never going to clear a scene for her again.

Absently she reached out for a plain glass vase in a teardrop shape, the neck so narrow only a couple of stems would fit. She couldn’t really see the point of the thing, which made it perfect.

Before he’d thought up the surprise party, her dad had actually proposed something much better – taking Laura to Paris. “I thought we could take three weeks,” he’d suggested shyly at tea-time one day. “A week in the city and a fortnight in the countryside, in some very Gallic *chateau*.” He pronounced the word in exaggerated French, silly with the excitement of it.

Laura squinted as if looking into the sun. “Who would look after the kids?”

“We can look after ourselves,” Nathan announced. He was a quick thinker.

“Don’t be silly.”

And an optimist.

“Your mother has kindly volunteered,” Rob said.

Her dad couldn't read moods. Nathan was like that, too. They just went on laughing and joking and didn't notice the storm approaching.

"It's a bit much, don't you think? It's only a birthday."

"It's a special day."

The year before, when her dad turned forty, they'd bought his second-favourite cake because the cake shop was out of Fruitful Pavlova.

"Maybe we could go down south for the weekend, or something," Laura said. "Go to Capel."

Alice frowned.

"France is better."

"You've never even been there."

"As good a reason to go."

Laura picked up her cutlery decisively. "I don't think we should."

Across the table Rob's face sagged. "Oh."

A trip to France offered to you on a plate, and her mum had sent it back. Alice couldn't believe it.

Still in Myer, a faint corner of Alice's brain, the always-alert place that stopped you from weeing in your sleep, was aware of her grip on the teardrop vase becoming at the same time tighter and more slippery.

Since she was ten Alice had never thought about being anything other than a swimmer. She didn't even know what her dreams had been before that, if she'd had any. She wanted to be a mermaid, submerged in the cool blue stillness forever.

When you swam you were always chasing something, even if it was just yourself. You met one goal and immediately set yourself a new one. Floating in one spot, eggbeater-kicking, wasn't swimming. You couldn't afford to rest, because if you did then someone else – Lizzie from the squad, the girl from the northern suburbs – got ahead of you, and then you had twice the work to do. Every time Alice had finished on nine minutes twenty-five she was actually slipping further and further behind. Getting to the Olympics, already a gruelling task, became impossible.

So Alice wasn't going to be a swimmer. Not the swimmer she wanted to be. She was going to end up like her mum, doing some poor impersonation of her dream. Stuck forever in endless suburbia.



In the middle of the homewares section of Myer, Alice's whole body went slack. Her eyes lost focus and she released her grip. As smoothly as poetry the vase went with gravity, rushing to the mock-marble floor.

### 13. Rob

Eight months earlier, Rob lay on the old couch in Nathan's bedroom, staring into the dark and waiting for the alarm. They were moving into their new house today. His wife was home every night, his daughter wanted to get into the Australian Institute of Sport, and his son was auditioning for an acting school. There were so many things to be happy about.

He usually found it easy to sleep, curling into the foetal position and forcing himself to doze. He felt that being able to will oneself to sleep was the sign of the truly contented: you could only do so if you didn't have any worries, like a teenager or a retiree. But now Rob suddenly felt completely nocturnal, staring into the night with wide black eyes.

In June his wife went away for a weekend that turned into a week, and then she'd been sacked. These facts alone concerned him. This was what they were talking about every night on the news, the cameras shoved into the faces of grey-cheeked men who spoke with sad anger about losing their jobs. As a public school teacher with permanency and government super, Rob had never quite understood these problems, but now that his wife had lost her own job, he was inflamed. Sure, okay, it hadn't been such a wonderful form of employment, what with the late hours, but it was a job and she liked it and it wasn't fair that she'd lost it.

Except Laura didn't think she'd been hard done by. "He gave us the money," she said, hauling plant roots out of the backyard soil. "That's all he has to do."

*The money* was paltry; a quarter of Laura's yearly salary. She'd been there for seven years. Rob knew Julian, who drove a Lexus and had no children, could have

coughed up more than that. He was taking advantage of these laws people on TV complained about, but Laura wouldn't talk about it.

In the middle of the week she was down in Denmark she'd stopped answering her phone. Rob, frustrated, rang Julian at the studio, and a recorded message provided a mobile number. When Julian finally answered he sounded windswept and distant. "Julian Ong Photography."

"Jules, mate, it's Rob Sinclair here."

It took a moment. "Rob. How are you."

"Good, good, I'm just looking for Laura. She isn't answering her mobile."

"She's not with me."

"No, I know." Rob tried to laugh, so as not to feel stupid. "But she would have to have called you to get the extra week off, so I just wondered if she told you what she was up to."

Sticky silence.

"If she was going out of phone range, or whatnot."

"I'm sorry, Rob, I'm not sure where she is." There was the shuffling sound of the phone being moved. "I'm quite busy here, I'm sorry."

"Oh, yep, no worries. Sorry, Jules."

Hanging up, he'd wondered where the photographer was that was so distracting. In the middle of a picturesque country town, maybe.

Did he really think his wife had spent the week with Julian, and then he had fired her? Did he really think Laura had cheated on him?

*No.* He breathed noisy relief into his pillow. *No.* She wouldn't. Twenty years of friendship; why start sleeping together now? And even if they had – though they hadn't – but if they *had*, why sack her afterwards? No matter what the employment climate, that was a lawsuit waiting to happen.

Laura wouldn't talk about it.

*Of course not*, he reminded himself, shifting around to lie on his back. *Because nothing happened.*

In the early-morning gloom, though, it was hard to keep hold of what was the evidence for, and the evidence against.

Exhausted, Rob briefly drifted into a memory-dream from years earlier, jealously watching Julian and Laura as they peered through the viewfinder of a camera

together. Their words were quiet and their shoulders touched. He and his wife hadn't had sex since she got back from Denmark.

Surely it wasn't that unusual, he thought miserably as he woke up again. It had only been a few months. These dips and lulls happened as couples got older, or so a furtive reading of the women's magazines at the physio had led him to believe. It was normal for life stresses to have their impact, and Laura was obviously very stressed, what with the upcoming move (the most stressful life event, after the death of a partner or spouse) and her recent unemployment.

Unless she was unemployed because she'd been sleeping with her boss.

He knew he was being an idiot. It couldn't have happened. But still, in his mind's eye he saw the women of his country town lined up to thank his father, divorce certificates held tightly in their hands.

He was angry with himself. He'd somehow got to sixteen years of marriage and completely lost the ability to seduce his wife. When she'd come back from Denmark he'd made a few half-hearted attempts at rubbing her back and making the right noises before he gave up. Now he woke every morning stiff and ready for a fight, and at the same time feeling impotent in a way he hadn't since he was seventeen. With Caroline.

The two of them had been together for four months at the start of their final year at school. For a while it was like all his other relationships: plenty of movie trips and visits to the beach, hair-stroking while watching videos on the couch, wet pressurey kisses goodnight. It was fine. He liked Caroline but there was something about her that was different. She was more personal, more intense than the other girls. She wanted a lot of eye contact and to tell him how she felt. Then she suggested that they sleep together, which none of the other girlfriends had ever done.

Of course he wanted to have sex. He had, however, consigned this desire to the box in which all his future plans were kept, folding it carefully and placing it beside Getting A Job and Buying A House. Lying in his teenage bed with his hands behind his head, trying to ignore the blind shiftings of his roused penis, he considered the parallel exigencies he had until now taken for granted: that he should go out with girls in good faith and monogamy; and that he would one day find a girl to propose to and have his perfect life with. They would have sex with each other. Thighs tightening reflexively, he realised that at some point these tracks would have to merge, and maybe now was the time. Would he marry his girlfriend Caroline? He might. She was lovely.

Rob felt he had a healthy view of sex. At the beginning of the year his male classmates had been segregated for a presentation on condom use and consent, and he noted the health teacher's comments carefully. His sister Jenny's boyfriend, Dave, slept over in the granny flat on Saturday nights, though both of them had to come to breakfast fully dressed. From the age of thirteen he'd masturbated about three times a week, always careful to hide his tissues under empty chip packets for when his dad emptied the bins. If he had sex with Caroline, everything would be fine.

Caroline's parents went up to Perth for the weekend and Rob rode his bike to her house. They got under the quilt of her single bed, even though it was the middle of an April afternoon. There they took their clothes off, mostly under their own steam, though there was kissing. Rob touched Caroline's breasts and wondered why he hadn't done so before, becoming so engrossed in them that she eventually needed to encourage him to move on. He apologised and rolled on the condom, careful to pinch the tip as per the teacher's instructions. He said, uncertainly, "Okay." Caroline shifted her position.

They tried for a while. They were both very reassuring, neither knowing which one of them was meant to be upset. Caroline moved her hips and Rob tried different angles, but they remained separate. They stopped and removed the deflated condom and kissed for a while. Rob rolled the condom back on. Caroline lifted a knee to her chin but that seemed so awful and unromantic that Rob begged her not to. It was very hot under the quilt, and not in a sexy way. Finally, exhausted and fed up, they slept.

In the morning, the sheets pushed to the end of the bed, he gazed at Caroline's cool white mounds of bottom. She liked to sleep on her front, uncovered. Running his eyes upwards from bottom to neck there was the misty dip in the small of her back, then the smooth white arch spreading sideways into shoulder-blades. The sight of it was enough to stir him to try again, and so he woke her up. But it still didn't work.

Rob's father had taught him never to give up on a task, and so they kept trying every time they got the chance. He sometimes found his way for a couple of minutes before faltering, misplacing himself, and starting again. The most successful encounter lasted about four minutes; Rob, terrified he would make a mistake, went slowly and routinely, like he was lifting weights. Caroline's eyes glinted up at him from the pillow. His back started to hurt and he wasn't getting anywhere. That night Rob decided he and Caroline were probably better off as friends.

The day the Sinclair family moved, instead of driving up the highway to the new estate Rob forgot himself and took the route back to the old house after school. It was only when he was unlocking the door and heard the weird echoes in the empty rooms that he remembered: while he was at work a truck had taken everything away. He stopped on the mat and pressed both hands to the flywire, the wonder of it coming over him. They no longer lived here. Rob imagined opening up the house again and walking through it, gazing at the slatted sleep-out windows and the high ceilings. The strange rush of draughts and the ghosts of furniture on the carpet.

This was the first house they'd moved into after they got married. Rob could remember Laura, her belly beginning to distend with pregnancy, slowly taking the steps up to the veranda while he watched from the lawn. When she got to the top she paused, probably exhausted, and leaned her elbows on the wrought-iron railings. She dropped her head so that he couldn't see her face, and her shoulders started to shake.

Pregnancy hormones, Laura had called it every time she acted strange on their week-long honeymoon in the Great Southern. Sometimes she didn't want to wake up or to get out of the shower, and then later she would be firing on all cylinders, dragging him down to the beach and wading into the water without rolling up her jeans. When she stopped talking on the five-hour drive home from Denmark he told himself that this was normal for marriage and for pregnant women. *See the forest*, he told himself as they entered the Peel Region in silence. *See the forest, not the trees*. He'd married the beautiful, funny woman he loved and they were having a baby and moving into their own house. If she was a bit temperamental, well. Looking sideways to see her frowning at the sunset, he reminded himself that she was an artist who required fulfilment. Even if she hadn't taken any photos the whole week they were on their honeymoon.

She didn't seem to have any pictures from her most recent trip to Denmark, either.

Rob pulled the key from the door of the Como house and returned to his car. He immediately brought the engine to life and twisted around in his seat to reverse out of the driveway, not looking at the house again. He was driving to a new start. Don't look back in anger. Instead, he folded his feelings tightly and pressed them down, down, deep down inside him, where they wouldn't get out.

## 14. Sage Advice

When Rob went to his office at recess on his wife's birthday there were six missed calls on his phone.

“Ro-bert. Ro-bert. Ro-bert.” His brother-in-law made the syllables a heartbeat. “So there is a bit of problem. Passenger taken ill somewhere over Port Moresby, we've had to land in Cairns to get them to a hospital and now they won't let us take off again until who-bloody-knows-when.” There was a rush of static as Ben sighed. “We'll get going eventually, but as of five minutes ago the window during which I would still be able to make the original Sydney to Perth flight expressly *closed*, which means I will be late.” He sighed again. “Please be sure to have whiskey on hand for my arrival. I get the feeling I'm going to need it.”

Rob swore over the mechanical voice reciting the date and time of the call. Ben's arrival had been timed perfectly so that he would be Laura's last visitor of the day. She was meant to be so giddy at her brother's unexpected appearance that walking her into the surprise party afterwards would be the equivalent of covering her eyes and spinning her like a top. Busy reconfiguring the evening in his head – if Ben got a flight soon they would still be in the clear, but if the plane left any later than four p.m. Sydney time, no, wait, when did daylight savings start? – Rob missed most of the second message, which was a registrar from Alice's school requesting he ring back about something or other. He was just scribbling her name down when Ben Nolan's baritone cut in again. “Me again. Still *grounded*, as they say. I'll call when we look anything like taking off.”

The time of that call made him at least two hours late. If the next message indicated take-off he might still arrive for the start of the party.

“Robert, it’s Abby. Just checking that you wanted a dozen bottles each of the red and the white from the wine club. And I’m just wondering, you didn’t want any sparkling wine, did you? Because you really should have bubbly for the toast, but I suppose you’ve sorted all that out. Anyway just double-checking, Harry needs to know quite shortly so if you don’t call me back we’ll just go ahead. Oo-roo.”

*You really should have bubbly for the toast* reminded him of his conversation with Allie that morning and he suddenly realised that instead of asking his mother-in-law for twelve bottles of champagne from her wine club he’d repeated to her the order he’d already filled: twelve bottles of red, twelve bottles of white. He’d been in the garage when he rang her, pushing at the Liquor Land boxes with his toe to ensure they were safely hidden under the old tarpaulin that lay in front of Laura’s birthday gift, and he must have unconsciously rabbited what he saw. Recently his brain kept storing its information wrongly, constantly telling him to purchase more frozen puff pastries (the laundry fridge was full of them, their cardboard boxes warping as he stacked them in Tetris-style configurations) and forgetting important things like staff meetings and his seatbelt. Now he’d forgotten the champagne: champagne to toast with, champagne to fill the fifty flutes he’d hired. Good Jesus, he had ordered *forty-eight bottles of wine* for fifty people, at least four of whom were under eighteen.

Swearing again, he jabbed hard at the ‘call return’ button, hoping Abby hadn’t rung the club yet.

“Hello?”

“Abby!” He was flooded with relief. “The wine!”

“Yes, it’s all fine now,” she told him brightly. “Harry is even going to deliver it to the door, if you can believe it.”

Rob believed it.

“I told him six o’clock,” Abby continued. “Ben’s taking Laura out at five, is that right?”

“No – no – ” He got stuck on the word like a scratched record. “No –”

Abby’s voice rose. “What’s that? Rob? When is Ben coming?”

“He’s going to be late,” Rob managed. “He was stuck in Cairns at nine o’clock this morning.”

“How late?”



“Well, I don’t know if his plane has left yet,” Rob said. “He said he’d call when he knew what was happening, but I haven’t checked all the messages on my phone.”

“*Poor* boy,” Abby clucked, and Rob felt gratified for a second before realising she was referring to Ben. “Well, Harry’s going to bring around the twelve red and the twelve white at the start of the party. Such a dear, he gave me an extra discount on top of the discount, another five per cent off.”

“Speaking of Harry, you’re probably right about the bubbly, and I wondered if there was any chance –”

There was not.

Even with the extra five per cent off (which, Rob worked out later, came to six dollars), buying another glut of bubbly at retail prices was still going to stuff up his budget. He couldn’t get cheap fizz, even if everyone was going to be limited to one glass; they would know and the nasty taste would curdle their smiles in the photographs. But even if he *could* spend more money, when was he going to have the time to buy the stuff? He didn’t have a spare five seconds to piss between school finishing and Laura being walked into the party.

Rob farewelled Abby as cordially as possible and went back to his voicemail. The final two messages were from Ben. “Still haven’t left. I know I said I’d ring when we do, but I’m very, very bored.” And then, “Still here. Patient had appendicitis, in case you’re interested. I hear it was touch and go. I actually think they might be grounding the bloody plane until he’s been operated on and convalesced for return to Sydney. *Friday. Ten-thirty-one a.m.*”

Rob checked his watch, forgot the time, checked again, forgot why. He put a sweaty hand on his sweaty head. What time was it in Sydney? Except Ben was in Cairns. Invisible hands of anxiety squeezed his lungs, leaving him with enough oxygen to stay alive but not enough to think clearly. He sat down heavily at his desk. Who could distract Laura? Caroline was already enlisted, then Abby. Fumbling in his briefcase, he found an old guest list and began jabbing a pen at the names.

Most of them were actually friends of his, he realised; their long marriage making them Laura’s friends by default. His wife didn’t have anyone who wouldn’t be inconvenienced, truly inconvenienced, by having to come out and entertain her for two hours at dinner-time. He tried to banish the thought but it wedged in the back of his mind. His options had already been exhausted, and they consisted of Laura’s mother,

her brother, and one friend. He thought briefly of Julian Ong, and then his lagging memories caught up and he drove the pen through the paper in frustration.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he twitched around in his chair. Miles Whatley grinned at him with baked-bean teeth. The head of geography, Miles was deferential and unruffled. He often took pity on Rob at recess and brought coffee from the staffroom as he madly tried to catch up with marking he'd slept through in the swim centre foyer.

Again something kicked at the back of Rob's consciousness. The *marking* –  
“Last-minute planning for tonight?” Miles and Gwen were invited, of course. Maybe Gwen could intervene – but she barely knew Laura.

“Bit of a hiccup,” Rob said vaguely.

“Wouldn't be a party without one!” The other teacher squeezed Rob's shoulder again, beamed, and moved toward the door. Rob again lowered his head to the list, and Miles stopped. “Going to class?”

Rob checked his watch again, finally registering the time. “Oh, sh... sure.”

When he got to the history classroom his Year Twelve students were standing in the hallway in a shifting clump like a giant, pulsating amoeba. Inside, he hadn't even put his briefcase down on the desk before Verity Mellenger's hand went up. “Verity?”

“Have the essays been marked yet?”

The hands clutched at Rob's lungs again. For a second he imagined he was back in the social studies office, looking down at the pile of papers lugged from kitchen table to leisure centre to car to desk. The red marks he had made so carefully, so lovingly, on twenty-two-and-a-half of them meant nothing outside of the actual classroom. Somewhere in his muddled morning he'd planned to finish off the last couple, but that obviously hadn't worked out. He had to fall on his sword.

“I'll have them for you tomorrow,” he said, then remembered he wouldn't be in bed until late tonight and then there was more swimming in the morning. “Sorry, the day after.”

“That's Sunday,” she frowned.

“Monday,” he amended.

The organism began to shift and rustle. They'd handed their essays in *weeks* ago. Exams were coming up. Verity Mellenger looked like she was going to cry.

“Dude,” a low voice drawled from the back of the room, and Jason, the swaggering kid from the car park, leaned into the aisle. “You said you’d have them for us today.”

“Well, I don’t, unfortunately.”

The chattering got louder. “You *said*, but,” Jason boomed.

“I’m aware of what I said, Jason, but it just wasn’t possible.”

“Yeah well, if it’s *possible* for us to have them in on time or else we get a zero, then it’s *possible* for you to give them back to us so we know something before the frigging end-of-year exams.”

The amoeba muttered its assent. “That’s what I’m saying,” Verity whined over the top. “That’s what I’m *saying*.”

Rob wanted to tell Jason that it wouldn’t have mattered if he’d marked the boy’s assignment the second he got it, he was going to fail the exam because he was stupid. “Come up here,” he said instead.

“What?”

“Come up here.”

“Why?”

Rob didn’t know why. He was just saying words. Words that sounded authoritative. “Just come up here.”

Jason rolled his eyes and eased himself out of his chair with infuriating slowness. All eyes were on him so he turned his walk into a strut, again yanking at the hem of his shirt. One thick eyebrow hovered in midair. Rob saw the black disc wedged in his earlobe and felt his own ears heat with fury at the needless mutilation. Jason Berwick would be a father some day – Rob hated to think so, but Caro had schooled him thoroughly on the ratio of random sexual encounters to condom use, especially amongst shits like Jason – and even if he smartened his drill, even if he got a job and stopped looking at everyone with that dead-eyed sneer, he would still have that useless stringy earlobe. Forever.

Jason stopped a metre away from him and leaned into his cocked-out hip, shoulders curled. “What?”

Rob wasn’t sure what to say now. “How long did you spend on that essay, Jason?”

“Huh?”

“Pardon.”

*“Pardon.”*

Someone snorted. To the left of Jason, Rob could see the bug-eyes of Verity Mellenger. “How long did you spend on that essay?”

“I don’t know, why?”

“I’m trying to... Let’s think for a minute here. There are twenty-five students in this class. Essays take twenty minutes to mark. How much marking is that?”

“Der, I’m not doing *calc*,” Jason said, his voice heavy with contempt.

“That’s eight hours and forty minutes of marking.”

“Twenty minutes,” Verity piped up from the front.

“What?”

“Eight hours and twenty minutes.”

Teacher and student stood a metre apart, the teenager still slouched into the cradle of his pelvis. Jason had his back to the others, and most of them craned forwards in their seats.

His hands moved, almost unconsciously, to Jason’s shoulders. The boy glanced down and then up again, his face twisted with disgust. “What are you *doing*?”

A few more students leaned forward.

Now that Rob was holding Jason he couldn’t pull away, not yet. He couldn’t show fear or intimidation. He had to pretend he’d always intended to do this; he had to make some sort of point. “Jason, Jason, Jason,” he began, rocking back on his heels, a parody of a grandfather dispensing sage advice. That’s what he would do. He would tell the boy, tell all of them, something meaningful about Life. They would leave here with their eyes opened to the world. *Mr. Sinclair’s so great*, he would overhear a couple of them say. The thought made him smile benevolently. “Let me tell you something.”

Something shifted like a snake in Rob’s pocket and he jerked with surprise, hands pinching Jason’s shoulders. “Ow!” the boy hollered.

It was Rob’s phone, buzzing and wriggling.

“*We’re* not supposed to have phones in class,” Jason sniped, squirming under his grip. Their eyes met. Jason’s were dark brown and unremarkable, except for a small patch on the lower right lid where no eyelashes grew. The hairless spot was bluish, pearlescent along the rim. The eyes narrowed with sudden anger and the collarbone again twisted underneath him. “*Fucking* double standards,” Jason spat, a small spray of rage misting over Rob’s cheeks. He reacted with instant revulsion,

flinging the thing in his hands away as if it were a stinking container from the back of the fridge.

The thing was Jason. He stumbled backwards, knees buckling, and his hip hit the edge of Verity Mellenger's desk. The force of the collision took life in the air: it was the shattering of glass, the shrill electronics of a ringing phone; it was the cold punch in the sternum. The violence was onomatopoeic. Their audience reared back as one, shocked at the turn the performance had taken.

In the silence his phone rang.

## 15. Play

The high school Nathan went to was only a couple of years old, built for all the families who'd moved out to the estates. The place was shiny and new and glutted with computers. Every courtyard contained a sculpture to embody the school's spirit, but both sculpture and symbol were artificial: an infinite fold of metal meant unity; a solid cut of jarrah surrounded by smaller, lacquered stumps was respect. At lunchtime the popular groups sat around the jarrah sculpture and bounced hacky-sacks off it.

On Fridays Nathan had drama after Phys. Ed. and before lunch, which meant he had two minutes to get from the oval to the theatre demountable on the other side of the school. The sports teacher thought soccer was the most important part of their education and never blew his whistle before the siren went, and if the scores were tied, not even then. When he finally let them go there was the changing room to deal with: Nathan wouldn't strip to his undies in front of anyone, ever, and there were only three loos and three showers for thirty boys. If you changed in the showers everyone said you had a small dick, even though they couldn't see it – which was the whole point of changing there in the first place – so he had to line up with half the other guys outside the toilets, pretending he needed a wee. Nathan was always late for drama on Fridays.

When he finally got there, Candice and Sarah were sitting on opposite sides of the room. Nathan hovered in the doorway, hoping Ms. Coldwell would start the class so he could slip in and sit somewhere neutral.

At recess Candice raised the idea of auditioning for the role of Hermia, which hadn't gone down well.

“I'm sick of being the ugly one.”

Sarah's face curled. "It's a *play*."

"I don't care. It says something about me."

She turned to Nathan. "Gogo, tell her it's a *play*."

"Yeah, it *is* a play," Candice shouted. "That's why it's *important!*"

Sarah shook her head. "You're crazy."

Nathan wondered what it was like to have male friends.

Now Candice was mouthing along to her script, throwing a hand against her chest and then clenching it into a fist. He wanted to go and sit with her but she was on the other side of the room. He imagined Didi's slow-motion reaction as he strolled past: hair standing on end, fire erupting in the background, the end of the world.

"Gogo." Sarah patted the seat next to her. He walked over with his eyes still on Candice, who didn't look up. "I'm pumped. Are you pumped?"

"Pumped, Didi." He tried to see Candice over her shoulder but Sarah kept wriggling into his way. "So, you still going for Hermia?"

Her face sharpened and her corkscrew hair fell forward. "Don't get involved."

When they were little Sarah had stayed with Nathan's family for three weeks when Jessie was born. The backyard of the old house was enormous, with three sheds, an old catamaran and a proper fallen tree to make up their pretend world, though his big sister had sometimes been hard to convince. Allie preferred the boat to be a boat; she could stretch her imagination to a car (roughly the same size, shape, and purpose), but no further. Sarah once wanted it to be a plane, and Allie flatly refused. "It doesn't have wings."

"Just pretend, but," Sarah whined.

"*It doesn't have wings!*"

The two of them still didn't like one another. At barbeques at the Grants' house Sarah looked at Allie with cat's eyes. "Doesn't she have any *friends*?"

"Didi."

"What?"

He couldn't articulate it: his own frustration with his sister and her lack of imagination; how she bossed him around and never smiled; the way she barely even acted like a proper girl. Allie wasn't a sister the way Jessie Grant was a sister, or Candice's big-breasted twenty-year-old sisters were sisters, but still he loved her fiercely, more than anyone else in the family. If anyone made fun of her he wanted to kick them in the face. He dreamed about it sometimes, the mean laughter and his leg

waving in the void, and woke up with his chest tight. When she was being nice Allie was the best person to talk to about things like their mum and whether she would divorce their dad one day, or how weird Mrs. Grant was, or bullies at school. She sat in the front row for all his plays and clapped the longest. He wanted her to win a gold medal at the Olympics. Maybe that would make her happy.

He didn't know why Didi hated her so much.

□

That was the problem with regular school, Nathan thought later. There were only five Year Eight boys who did drama in the first place, and the other four all wanted to be Bottom. In the end Ms. Coldwell had to forcibly assign the main roles and Nathan was made Lysander automatically, though he insisted on reading a soliloquy since he'd practised and everything.

*"I am, my lord, as well derived as he, as well possessed. My love is more than his, my fortunes every way as fairly ranked –"*<sup>xi</sup>

"Great, great."

Nathan returned to the audience. He tried to catch someone's eye for a sympathetic frown, but Sarah's attention was fixed on Candice, who wouldn't lift her head out of her book.

In the end neither of them got the part opposite him. Two-thirds of the girls wanted to be the delicate, dainty, over-loved Hermia, and the role was given to a delicate, dainty, over-loved popular girl. Muttering dejectedly, the Hermias left the stage and the Helenas took their place. Candice joined the end of the queue, arms crossed over her shelf of chest.

Sarah sat back down next to him. "What a bitch."

He felt sick instantly. "Who?"

"Ms. Coldwell. She doesn't know anything. I wish we had Mrs. Lessiter."

Mrs. Lessiter taught the other class and wrote her own plays, all of them about the dangers of taking drugs. She was obsessed with the idea of pot giving you the munchies, which was awesome because everyone who played a druggie in one of her productions got to eat heaps of chips during rehearsals.

"What part are you going to go for instead?"

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<sup>xi</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, p. 138, I. i., lines 99-101.



“I’m going to be the stage manager.”

“Really?”

Sarah nodded. The stage manager got to stand in for all the parts when people weren’t there and shout at people who missed their cues.

A couple of Helenas waggled petulantly across the room and Ms. Coldwell made notes in her book, stifling a yawn. Nathan watched Pozzo as she stood at the edge of the stage, mouthing lines to herself and staring up at the ceiling. Sarah leaned toward him. “Excited about the kissing?”

“What?”

She rolled her eyes and dug him in the ribs, then pointed. The girl who’d been given the role of Hermia stood watching the auditions with her head sideways and her hip out, a finger twisted in her hair. “*Andrea*. You guys have to pash.”

Nathan’s bowels heated. He’d forgotten about the kiss. The kiss that made him go for Lysander in the first place, a little bit. Andrea was another always-clean girl, her legs and hair shiny, a million bracelets jangling on her wrist. She had boyfriends in Year Eleven and flirted with the prac metalwork teacher. He was going to be crap at kissing.

But Andrea knew he was going to be Lysander and went for the part anyway. Even though it meant she’d have to kiss him.

So had ten other girls. So had Didi and Pozzo.

Nathan scooted a little closer to the door.

It was Candice’s turn to audition. She strode out of the line of Helenas, stopped at the invisible X, and paused. When her eyes met his he gave her an encouraging smile.

Abruptly she changed, throwing herself on all fours and exposing the soft skin inside her wrists. Along her shirt, nappy pins tugged and glinted under the demountable’s lights. “*Use me but as your spaniel,*”<sup>xii</sup> she pleaded to no-one in particular, her voice deeper than usual. She pushed a knee out of her skirt and leaned into it. It was “sexy”, Nathan realised, and his intestines rolled with discomfort. It was Candice’s two older sisters moving through the Reyes’ kitchen on a Saturday evening, breathing vodka in his ear. It was Mrs. Grant in a silky dressing-gown in the afternoons, offering him cheese-on-toast and asking him what kind of man he planned to be. Nathan, the cheese waxy in his mouth, hadn’t known you were meant to pick.

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<sup>xii</sup> Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, p.166, II. i., line 205.

He wondered when his dad had picked and what the choices were. He was afraid of choosing wrong.

Candice finished her speech and resumed her place in the queue of Helenas, who all exchanged a look in a Mexican wave of judgement. Ms. Coldwell hadn't written anything in her book.

"Jeez," Sarah said, then saw Nathan wasn't where she expected him to be. "Why did you move?"

"Better view?"

Ms. Coldwell finally interrupted the muttering. "Thank you, Candice."

His friend's face was bright red and she stared at nothing, bunched fists slowly drawing together at her thighs.

When someone else was given the part, Candice nodded and took her seat, opening her textbook again and refusing to look up. She didn't go for any of the other parts and nodded mutely when Ms. Coldwell gave her one at random. Beside him, Sarah had her arms crossed and an indistinguishable look on her face. By the time the bell finished ringing for lunch Pozzo had slid behind the curtains and out the fire exit.

## 16. The Dress

Laura wanted to move to Europe ever since she was fifteen, when Ben left Ansett for a job with Air France. On the phone he would tell her about his journeys all over the continent: day trips to Soviet Bloc territories with their blocky buildings and drawn faces; the churches and piazzas of the Mediterranean countries, filled with fresh foods and nightlife; overnight trains through forests and across snow-covered plains. The pictures Ben sent were blurry and inexpert, an afterthought to his wonder. On the back of them he wrote, *You could take some nifty shots here.*

She wanted to take her camera and leave as soon as school finished, but Abby insisted she get a degree before she tried to live off her photos. Laura relented and applied for Fine Arts, and when her mother, Abby, found out, she elbowed her through the forms to split her enrolment with Education. Whatever, Laura thought afterwards, stubbing out a cigarette and snapping photos of polystyrene coffee cups discarded in sandstone nooks; the second she graduated she was going away, anyway. No way was she becoming an art teacher.

Laura found it hard to form friendships with the other art students, who were either too eager or not eager enough. Faced with someone who took their degree seriously, she felt like sneering and asking what great painters ever came out of a dinky little university in Perth, but if anyone else acted so cynical she wanted to shout at them to get the bloody ciggie out of their mouth and do some fucking work. The only person she liked was Julian Ong, who was not only a good photographer but a shameless businessman and pragmatist, but he was too busy hustling for freelance work to be a proper friend. So she was relieved when Caroline latched onto her during

a second-year Ed tute and began aggressively pursuing a friendship. It was flattering. Caro thought she was just like Julian – artistic *and* sensible – and Laura liked that.

It was just after the America's Cup and Fremantle was the place to be, so the uni gang went down every weekend to drink wine in the park and talk like they knew anything. Caroline was in love with her old boyfriend, Rob Sinclair. Everyone knew it except Rob, which was how those things went. Caro made sure to always sit next to him; down on the Esplanade, if they'd had a few beers and she thought no one would notice, she'd swing her legs across his thighs while keeping her face as expressionless as a mannequin. Laura, from the vantage point of disinterest, found it a bit juvenile that Caro thought she could make herself Rob's girlfriend without him noticing. They'd been out before anyway – Caro talked about how charming and romantic and wonderful Rob had been as a first boyfriend, though if you asked for any juicy details she became annoyingly coy – and no matter how great she thought Rob was, it obviously hadn't worked.

Laura shouldn't have been so down on Caroline, since she herself had managed to miss Rob's prolonged interest in *her*. "I liked you from the day of the Ed Ball," he told her three years later, trying to be charming.

"You're joking."

He smiled and pulled her closer. "I knew if I bided my time..."

The choice of words was poor, though Laura wasn't opposed to a bit of grabbing.

Her friendship with Caroline and the others filled the time before she left for Europe. She'd sent her portfolio to a famous art college in London and cried with happiness when they actually accepted her. Laura deferred her final semester and got on a plane, a camera her only hand luggage.

Her brother met her at the airport. At the time Ben's first marriage was swaying on stick legs, his East German wife not sharing his fascination with the fall of the Soviet Empire. "I tell her I like the idea of communism in the *abstract*," Ben explained to her in the cab to his flat. "She doesn't like that, either."

But he didn't seem particularly sad about it when he flew to Mykonos that night. Laura imagined having a life like her brother's and it made her shivery with the realisation that she was an adult now, and she could have it if she wanted it. She was actually free.

She took up smoking again and drank whiskey; she wanted a gravelly voice like Lauren Hutton or Kathleen Turner. It didn't work. She moved in with an old school friend, Sally, on the Camden High Street and went to pubs every night until her money ran out. Two weeks after she'd arrived, she woke in Hyde Park, the stomach of one of Sally's male friends her pillow, and thought of poor Caroline in love with dippy Rob Sinclair back in Perth. But the sun was coming up through the trees and she rifled through her bag for her camera, joy rising in her like hysteria. It was the first time Laura had photographed nature, as opposed to hunting out its blemishes – graffiti-ed underpasses, old houses being demolished, faceless suits on city corners – and suddenly she felt the pure fun of it rather than the flat coolness of “art”. It was a good picture. The next weekend was her birthday and she took the train up to Scotland, chasing the simple loveliness of the green highlands and gothic buildings.

School started. Laura had hoped to like these classmates better than her uni ones, but here she was faced with a different problem: their talent. Aside from Julian, Laura thought everyone in her class in Perth had been pretty crap. The first day in London their lecturer, Delphine, a reed-thin woman with a blunt haircut and searching eyes, led them through an exhibition of their portfolios. “These are your colleagues,” she told them, and Laura was embarrassed to hear the even, bell-like pitch of Delphine's voice instead of the deep intonation she'd been cultivating.

Pinned to the walls were heart-rending watercolours, devastating oils, shrewd black-and-whites. The photographs of rubbish and vandalism were ten times better than Laura's, and she went stiff with fright every time anyone went near her shot of a homeless man sleeping it off under a Norfolk pine. Returning to their desks, she overheard another student say something about Delphine being exhibited in Brighton. Her grip on her pen became slippery as Laura realised that these were all *artists*, while she just took pictures.

Later, during their first one-on-one meeting, Delphine spread Laura's photographs across a table and made comments that Laura felt too sweaty to listen to. The last thing she said was, “London is a good choice for an urban photographer, though when you graduate you might look east. The comparison between the West and the end of socialism is ripe ground.”

The idea of attempting to make a political statement made Laura feel sick. She didn't know fuck-all about this stuff. “I've actually been moving into landscapes.”

To her credit, Delphine's face barely changed. “Oh?”

“Yeah, you know, I mean, the stuff here is just... so different... from Australia. It’s much... more... *European*.”

“That’s true.” Delphine picked up the photo of the drunk by the pine tree and regarded it like an X-ray.

“These are just postcard sized, but...” Laura reached into her satchel and pulled out the prints from Hyde Park and Edinburgh. “This is what I’m into, at the moment.”

Delphine glanced at the photos. “The format is a bit touristy.”

“Well, I am a tourist.” Laura laughed loudly.

Delphine nodded and handed them back. “You don’t have to finalise your major project for a while yet.” She stood up, gesturing for Laura to follow. “Keep tinkering,” she smiled, and closed the door in her face.

Caroline wrote to Laura all the time, telling her about her days in exacting detail. She’d got a job teaching health and science at a small Catholic school, since the Education Department hadn’t offered her anything and she wasn’t willing to go country while Rob Sinclair was in Perth. The old group had mostly disbanded and she hadn’t been to Freo in *ages*, and she missed Laura desperately.

Laura, feeling her eyes well up behind the viewfinder, missed Caro too.

□

Nineteen years later, Laura staggered through the door of the master bedroom, shoulders caught in her dress as she struggled to pull it off. It’d been so long since she’d worn the stupid thing she forgot its underarm pinch and the itchy seam along the unscratchable centre of her back. After a few moments of tugging it came free, slithering down the incline of her arms and onto the carpet. Relieved, Laura bent over the foot of the bed to rub her thighs, still aching from Caro’s post-breakfast power walk along the foreshore.

It took her a moment to recognise the piece of paper lying on the doona. When the letter came the month before, Laura opened it once and immediately refolded it on its creases, blood rising in her cheeks as she wedged it beneath the stack of Caroline’s mysteries. She hadn’t read it since.

Laura put a hand on the smooth quilt. Everything else in the room looked normal. Had she taken it out this morning, and forgotten? Rifling through the books after Rob left, did it somehow get dislodged, floating up to the bed on some kind of

draught? Or had someone gone through her things and found it there, leaving it in plain view as if to say, *I know?*

A sharp knock at the door made her gasp. She imagined the grave faces of two police officers through the screen. Stupid; it wasn't that kind of crime. No, it would be Rob, his arms folded. He would say, "Why?"

And she wouldn't be able to tell him.

Shaky, she pulled her husband's dressing gown from the back of the door and slipped it on. The wool was heavy on her arms and she could smell Rob in the gown, his neck and soap.

On the other side of the screen door her mother had daffodils and Laura sighed. "Happy birthday, sweetheart," Abby said. "Shouldn't you be dressed?"

In the kitchen Laura cut the stems and slid them into an empty jam jar. They looked fine to her but she plucked at them with trembling hands, knowing her mother expected her to do some sort of arranging. When Abby looked satisfied she put them beside the bouquet Caroline had given her that morning.

Flowers were a strange gift, Laura thought as she poured her mother a glass of water, trying to distract herself from the memory of the piece of paper, lying open on her bed. Cut from their roots, their very purpose was to die. And you gathered them and gave them to the sick, the bereaved; and, worse, to the supposedly healthy, the supposedly celebratory.

"Have you had a nice day?" Abby accepted her drink.

"I had breakfast with Caroline, then we went for a walk."

"That's lovely." She placed her glass on the table. "Well, I hope your walk helped with digestion, because *I'm* here to take you for lunch!"

"Oh, no."

The groan was audible. Her mother's eyes widened.

"Sorry." Laura felt shitty. "I'm just so full after breakfast."

Abby spoke as if nothing had happened. "You like *sushi*, don't you?" she asked, pronouncing the word self-consciously. "There's a place right in town, I went there with Cath a few weeks ago. The food goes past on little conveyor belts! Nice and cheap, too. You just pick out as many plates as you like."

Laura sighed. Abby finished her water. "I'll shout you, of course. A birthday treat. Oh!" Flustered, she ruffled through her bag and produced a gift, the string on top

perfectly curled. Laura could never manage to do that – the scissors always stuck in her thumb when she tried.

“Thanks, Mum.” When she reached for it, Laura could feel the itchy weight of Rob’s robe. She started to peel back the sticky-tape carefully, then changed her mind and pulled a hand right through the seam, tearing it.

Abby frowned. “Don’t you save your wrapping paper?”

“Sometimes.”

The box was cream and lavender, the script across the top naming a very expensive lingerie boutique Laura had never been to. Inside lay a pool of soft mauve silk. When Laura lifted it the material unravelled in a fluid sweep, becoming a floor-length nightgown with a cowl neck and thigh-high split. The stitching around the hem and neckline was the light green curl of ivy, with neat floral detailing at the hip. “Mum.”

“It’s just a little something pretty,” Abby said. “I thought you might feel a bit down in the dumps about today.”

“Well, I am forty,” Laura said distractedly, holding the gown against herself.

“Time marches on, darling. All we can do is appreciate it.”

Her mother accepted everything, embraced everything. *You can’t fight the world*, Abigail Nolan had often said with calm resignation. *You just make things more difficult for yourself*. Attempts to “fight the world” included expecting to be an artist, fretting over your new marriage, not wanting to be pregnant when you were, worrying about colicky babies, wanting to be pregnant when you weren’t, wanting a bigger house, sulking over your brother’s absence, resenting your fatherlessness, and depression.

Abby binned the torn wrapping paper and smiled. “Better get dressed, then, love. Wear something nice, all right? We might go shopping.”

Back in the bedroom, Laura hung up Rob’s dressing gown and the beautiful new nightie, kicked the discarded, too-tight dress under the bed, and began to rifle through her side of the walk-in wardrobe for something to wear. Her irritation mounted. Jeans, jeans, all she had was jeans, worn with a billowing *Ong Photography* dress shirt at Julian’s studio and endless Kmart T-shirts around the house. She had the pinching dress for more formal events – Rob’s fortieth, Nate’s primary school graduation – but she was never wearing the bloody thing again.



Finally, behind a torn winter coat she hadn't needed since London, she discovered the outfit she'd worn to Jessie Grant's christening eight years before: a sliver slip dress and ruffled bronze cardigan. She couldn't remember where she'd bought it from, only that the price had been as exorbitant as if it were woven from the precious metals. At the time she hadn't cared; she remembered that. She'd been looking for something that would hurt Rob come the credit card bill, wanting him to feel the same winded disbelief she'd felt when, leaving Caroline's after visiting the newborn Jessie, he said he was thinking of getting a vasectomy.

A week before that, standing over the perspex crib in the hospital nursery, Laura ached with longing to hold the tiny body and feel the hot cheek pressed against her own. Now that she was older, she knew she could control herself, be the benevolent disciplinarian parent instead of a clingy mess. She traced a finger down the skinny leg of the squalling baby, smiling. Bringing up a kid and feeling, *knowing* you were doing the right thing: the possibility made her giddy. Her life came together in a second, imprinted on the crimson chest of the crying infant in front of her. Get her shit together. Fill her days. Do something right. For days she'd walked around with the warm certainty flooding through her. *She was going to have another baby.* Then her husband made a decision of his own.

Luckily, though, the expensive dress had looked great on her; everyone said so. "I'm jealous," Caro kept saying, bouncing Jessie in her arms. "I'm jealous." But Laura was too embarrassed to wear it again, though she'd brought it here to the new house in a rubbish bag with the poorly lined coat and a T-shirt Rob had got printed with his and the kids' faces on it, cheap tat from a crappier studio that she couldn't bring herself to wear.

The dress and little cardigan still fitted her, as did the guilt of the purchase. She stood in front of the mirror, smoothing the material over her thighs and chewing her lip. So much money. Then her stomach untwisted as she remembered: she'd paid Rob back. When Julian gave her a job a few months after the christening, she'd started slipping tens and twenties into Rob's wallet until the debt was gone and only the shadowy trace of her bitterness remained. He didn't want any more of her children.

Was that the start of the secret-keeping? It was hard to tell. She thought her helpless crying while her toddlers quietly played with blocks had been a secret; she thought her smoking in the backyard and looking in through the window while they napped was a secret. Apparently not. So she started actively monitoring herself,

feigning disinterest when Rob peered through his wallet, saying “I could have *sworn...*”, and saying nothing when he crowed to friends that Julian had personally headhunted her for the studio job, rather than her ringing him up and begging for something to get her out of the bloody house. Secrets. She got so good at lying that years afterwards, when he sat up in their enormous new bed at two a.m. and nervously asked why she didn’t seem interested in sex since she came back from her trip to Denmark, and she told him it was just that being fired had made her a bit depressed, she wasn’t even sure if that was true or not. In her mind she heard the *thud, thud, thud* coming from the next chalet.

What she had lied about, she thought, gazing down at where the bright white letter lay on the bed, was the circumstances of Julian letting her go when he decided he could no longer afford to keep the studio open. Laura was surprised to find she was surprised, given the obvious drop-off in bookings as point-and-click cameras with more and more settings got cheaper, and the suspicious remoteness of his voice when she extended her Denmark holiday. She took the redundancy cheque, kissed his smooth cheek, and emerged dizzily into Subiaco’s main street in the middle of the lunchtime rush. At the next corner was the bright purple signage of a bank Laura had never belonged to, and she staggered in its direction. In five minutes the entire amount was deposited and she was in her car, heading for the freeway and feeling a little drunk.

When Rob came home and she told him what had happened, he was outraged on her behalf, but she couldn’t summon the same emotions. She was sick of taking the same photo, she thought. She didn’t care if she ever took it again. After all, she was rich now. She could take her camera and photograph the moon.

“Did he... compensate you?” Rob asked eventually, his eyes on the floor, embarrassed to discuss finances.

“Of course.”

He looked up and the question was all over his face, but he couldn’t make himself ask. His sad-dog look made her feel suddenly contemptuous, and she spat out an amount. Looking relieved, Rob pulled her into a hug, and Laura turned to cement against his chest. She’d lied.

The next week she drove back to the Subiaco bank and asked to withdraw half of the new money, the same amount she’d let Rob think was her redundancy. Barely

blinking, the teller printed off a cheque, then asked what she'd like to do with the rest. "Put it in a term deposit," Laura said.

"No worries," the girl said casually, entering things into the computer. "When would you like that to mature?"

Laura slid the bank cheque into her pocket the way she'd secreted twenty-dollar notes into Rob's things seven years earlier. "My birthday."

## 17. The Spy-Ghost

The band-aids on Alice's foot pulled and stung as she limped around the city malls. Myer's first aid officer in Homewares, a soft-faced saleswoman named Rose, had had a difficult time negotiating the shallow cuts, the broken skin leaving little space for plasters. "Sorry," she apologised as the tacky end of one caught on a gash. "Sorry, sorry."

They hadn't made her pay for the smashed vase, which was nice. When Alice said she still wanted to buy one Rose took it from the shelf and carried it over to the counter, then advised looping the plastic bag around a wrist for safe-keeping.

As she left the shop realisation flooded through her: she wasn't good enough. The reality of it, not articulated in language so much as shivery, dread-filled certainty, was now at the base of everything. She couldn't escape it. It must be what it was like to have killed someone.

It was hot and crowded in the malls. Alice's stomach cramped with hunger. She had a headache from the bright white walls of Myer and her foot hurt. She wasn't sure why she was still here. She didn't want to go home. For long minutes she stood outside mobile phone and shoe shop windows, not seeing the displays. She was starving, but instead of getting food, Alice went into a clothes shop and wandered around the racks, brushing her hand against the garments. It was freezing in the air-conditioning.

A salesgirl shoving dresses onto a tightly-packed rail smiled at her. "Hi."

Alice stopped, wondering if they knew each other. "Hi."

The girl shifted the hangers until they were all wedged on the rack, then glanced back at Alice. “Need some help?”

Then she was in the fitting rooms. The dress was dark purple, made of stiff silky material, strapless and with a flounce around the hips like a collared ruff. It looked like a giant, squashed eggplant.

Alice put her face close to the mirror, regarding the grey of her eye sockets. The blood-blister colouring of the dress and the harsh overhead lights made her freckly and anaemic. She ran light hands over her upper arms, the skin goose-bumping in the air-conditioning. God, she felt sick. She craved the smooth liquid of laps, the gentle rush of cool water. Even at the nationals two years earlier, after a night spent vomiting and shitting in the hotel ensuite, her gastro had subsided for the whole time she was submerged. Swimming was the only thing that always made her feel better. But it hadn’t this morning.

Maybe swimming would never feel good again.

“How’d you go,” the salesgirl asked when she came out.

Flustered, Alice blurted, “I’ll get it.”

At the counter Alice gave the girl several of the fifty-dollar notes Grandma Abby had given her for swimming, the smell of varnish hanging in the air after them. The ugly dress bagged, she hitched out of the shop with the weight on her good foot. The pale sky hurt her eyes and cars flashed sharply along the street perpendicular to the mall. She wandered towards them, squinting and feeling nauseous, hoping to find a public toilet or a bus stop with destinations she recognised.

She wasn’t sure what came first, the recognition or the fear: both crashed across her in a cold wave. Coming up the street were her mother and grandmother.

Seeing them so unexpectedly without them seeing her felt wonky and wrong. She’d had the same feeling once before, during the inter-school sports carnival at her dad’s school, when she’d walked past his classroom by accident. He stood by the board, one hand cupping his neck and the other waving a sheet of paper at the class, and she felt like a spy, or a ghost. She could see some of his students staring out the window or up at the ceiling, none of them listening. She felt like she’d caught him on the toilet: the dad she wasn’t supposed to see.

But where the sight of her dad had been disappointing but ultimately somehow familiar, like she’d known all along that this – the thin pink part in his hair glistening under the lights – was what you’d find if you watched him for long enough, with her

mum it was the complete opposite. It was like she'd had plastic surgery, or had only ever been glimpsed in a blurred old photograph. It was her mum but it *wasn't* her mum, this clear-faced woman in a beautiful silver dress, striding up William Street swinging a handbag on her arm. She looked happy.

When she was seven, standing on the grass at Cottesloe Beach with Laura's hand on her wrist and seeing her tears of frustration at the swelling crowd, Alice realised that her mum had trouble getting happiness to stick. Even when she was taking photo trips or going to work Laura walked around with the grey eyes Alice had seen in the fitting room mirror, and now that they'd moved to the estate and she didn't take pictures any more she'd become invisible, sleeping all day or moving as if through walls, perceptible only by the squeak of a doorknob or the pungency of ammonia. She never even did her make-up any more.

But here she was.

Alice's grandmother stopped to tap a finger against a shoe-shop window and Laura looked with her. From thirty metres away Alice could see her sigh. Then Abby put a hand on her back and her mouth went to Laura's ear. Laura's shoulders hitched and she pressed her forehead briefly against the shop window, then leaned against her mother's shoulder. The casual intimacy of it made Alice feel even more disoriented, thinking of the stilted kisses and hand-to-shoulder hugs that Laura usually gave. The sweating hand on your wrist holding you aside, but keeping you close.

The two of them moved away from the window. Alice felt the back of her neck go cold as they turned the corner into the mall, but neither saw her. Laura laughed at something Abby said as they went into a Japanese restaurant.

Alice stood there for a minute with her elbow around the light pole, the weight of the teardrop vase making the plastic bag's handle cut into her hand. She felt dizzy. A blank-faced old woman reached through her arm to activate the pedestrian crossing. The stinging pains in Alice's foot told her she still existed, but for a second she was finding it hard to believe.

Above her, the blinking red man turned green and Alice was swept into the wash of people crossing William Street. On the opposite footpath she saw a line of taxis, their drivers leaning out of windows to talk. A man in a suit coming from the opposite direction bent next to the first driver. "Fremantle?" she heard him ask, and the light above the car went off.

Adrift, Alice caught the word and clung to it tightly. Maybe she could be saved.

The driver of the next taxi was Indian, with sagging jowls and the smell of mint chewing gum in the car. "Can you head towards Fremantle?"

He nodded. Buckling herself into the back, she named the leisure centre and they pulled out into Hay Street. As they drove she ran a finger over the Band-Aids on her foot, enjoying the needles of pain. Grandma Abby's money was almost gone.

It was after one o'clock and Jenna was taking a seniors' aqua-aerobics class, leading them through squats in the shallow end of the pool. From the desk, Alice watched as the dozen or so ladies and a few men dipped up and down, the water distorting their figures as they sank into it, making their skin white and smooth. Submerged they were simplified and indistinct, like children's drawings. Everything was so much better below the surface.

After a few minutes the class ended. Standing at the bottom of a ladder to help one of her clients, Jenna looked up and saw her. The coach nodded once, then hitched herself out of the pool on strong brown arms. "Office," she instructed, and Alice followed, staring at the triangular back of Jenna's Speedo suit.

The office had no windows and old, boxy computers, and the desks were piled high with paper and spare goggles. Jenna went to a small fridge in the corner and took out a tub of yoghurt, slamming the door shut so it would stick. She sat down and nodded to Alice to sit opposite, then peeled off the lid. "You want to talk about the squad."

Alice nodded but couldn't say anything.

"You know how this works, Alice. You're smart. The club can't afford the effort that goes into having you in National Development, given the likely result."

"You think I won't qualify for the Age Championships again."

"Do you think you will?"

Alice shrugged, feeling the insignificance of her small build. "It might just be a lull," she said, her voice choked.

Jenna looked sympathetic. "It might be. And you can still get into the championships from the State Development squad, if you swim fast enough."

"If I do, will you put me back in the other squad?"

"Of course. But you know, it doesn't hurt to have a look around at what else might interest you in life. Not put all your eggs in one basket."

“That’s what my mum says,” Alice croaked.

The coach ate a spoonful of yoghurt. “Smart lady.”

Alice saw her mum in her silver dress, smiling and laughing, her dark hair in the wind. Maybe Laura was smart. The thought had never occurred to her before.

“Shouldn’t you be at school?”

There was something in her throat and it was hard to answer. She wanted to say, *I never waggged before*. She wanted to say, *I’ve been so good*. She wanted to say, *I tried so hard, Jenna. I put everything into it and I lost and now what?* The words came out irregularly around the blockage and Jenna frowned. “Pardon?”

“My foot hurts.”

When she fell against her coach it was with the force of a wave hitting her from behind. The tears soaked Jenna as if she’d gone to help someone who was drowning and they’d pulled her into the pool in desperation. Alice held Jenna like that, as if it would save her life.



## 18. The Hulk

For the second time that day Rob sat in the car, staring blankly through the windscreen. The school in front of him had been silent since lunch ended half an hour before, but everyone was still on their break when he'd left Anna's office, moving, shell-shocked, through the crowds. As he walked he was sure he'd seen kids whispering, and when he approached the gate to the teachers' car park Verity Mellenger was standing there. "Are you in trouble, Mr. Sinclair?"

"Have a good weekend, Verity," he said automatically, not looking back.

The back of his throat tasted sour. He had pushed a student: put both hands on his shoulders and pushed him, as if they were in a pub brawl. The child's collarbone had been like china under his hands. He'd used force and the boy had stumbled; he could have cracked his skull. As it was, Jason was stained with a red line from the point of his hip around the curve of his buttock. "From when you shoved him," Anna said at one point.

"Pushed."

His principal had seemed surprised, but she was diplomatic. "Pushed him, then."

Replaying the scene in his mind Rob was convinced that "push" was the more appropriate term. It seemed imperative to have the right word for this, to describe it exactly. Precision, Rob felt, unsticking the collar of his shirt from his neck, could help to contain the problem. The word "shove" had its own force behind it; it indicated determination or planning. "Push" implied simply getting the boy *away* from him, while "shove" put emphasis on where the boy *went*, that was, into the corner of

Verity's desk. Rob had pushed him, he would admit to that – he *had* admitted to it, taking Jason to Anna as soon as he could settle the class. But he had not *shoved* him. Push had not come to shove.

It was just words, he realised emptily, staring at the science block beyond the fence. He'd used force against a student. It didn't really matter what you called it.

As soon as he flung Jason from his grasp he'd known he was fucked. He'd known it squeezing the kid's shoulders, even calling him up from the back. Maybe he'd known it all day.

At the same time, a cold rationality had moved through him and he put both hands together as if in repentance. "Jason. Jason. Jason." He'd spoken loudly, as if the kid were on the carpet slipping in and out of consciousness instead of standing bent sideways, clutching his bruised buttock. The rest of the class was white noise. "Jason. I'm going to take you down to the principal's office, all right?"

"You fucking shoved me!" That word, for the first time. Rob winced at it.

"We're going to go down and tell Ms. Cavill exactly what happened."

"You're going to tell her that you fucking *shoved* me?"

"You can tell her everything." Somehow he couldn't say it in front of the class. They all knew he was guilty, and yet something told him not to use the words "pushed" or "sorry" without a lawyer. He felt strangled. "Verity, you're in charge."

"But... what are we supposed to do?" she asked, her voice squeaky. "Maybe I should come with you. An independent witness."

"No. Just go through the questions in the back of the book."

"Which ones? Only it was *my* desk he slammed into."

*Slammed into.* He preferred "bumped into". "Thank you, Verity."

Jason limped dramatically out of the class, keeping a space between them all the way down to the admin block. "Through here," Rob said at the staff entrance, but the boy lurched around to the main door instead. Luckily there was no one waiting in the foyer, though the two registrars looked alarmed to see Jason stumble inside like a crime victim. "Can you get Ms. Cavill for us, please," Rob told them before he could speak.

Nell went to find Anna. The other registrar, a new one whose name Rob didn't know, leaned over the desk as Jason pulled his boxers down to lightly rub his bruise. "Did you have an accident?" she asked.

"It was no accident," Jason said.

The younger registrar frowned, though with sympathy or disbelief, Rob wasn't sure.

This was the best thing that had ever happened to the little bugger, he realised. This was Jason's starring role as victim. He'd probably had his lines stored up for months. Muttering them to himself while playing video games in his bedroom, clutching the controller with hands still dirty from his last wank and nose-pick.

After the principal called them through and Rob explained what had happened, Anna and Jason went to speak in private. Alone in her office, Rob squeezed his knees with sweaty hands and heard the boy through the wall demanding his mother, a lawyer, special dispensation from exams. *I'm disabled! I'm disabled! Look at this bruise!* Anna came back in, offered Rob a coffee, and went out again. His phone buzzed in his pocket. She came back in and spoke. She left. Rob sat hunched over in his chair staring at Anna's diplomas. They'd been to the same university, though she'd graduated with honours and was younger. She came back in, left.

Rob wasn't sure how much time had passed when he heard Anna out in the hallway. "Mrs. Berwick? Thank you for coming down so quickly."

"I was just up at the canteen." Mrs. Berwick sounded as uncouth as her son. "It's supposed to be corn chowder day and we're running behind."

"This won't take a moment," Anna said.

"Because it's no good if the soup's too hot or too cold."

"Of course. If you'd like to come through."

He heard the door to the next office shut firmly. There was some brief murmuring, and then Mrs. Berwick's voice suddenly became very high and clear. *He did what to my son? That's illegal! I'll sue you!*

Rob almost smiled. He thought of Nathan, of the cliché drills he ran with his friend, Sarah, in the games room. His thirteen-year-old son could have written this better.

Anna said something and the woman quietened down a little. Rob stared at his hands, their muffled conversation oozing through the thin wall until, finally, the urgency of their tones eased. They'd probably come to a mutual decision to have him sacked.

Anna came back. "All right, Rob." She looked tired. "What on earth happened?"

Though she must have been in her mid-thirties, Anna looked quite young, and she tried to make up for it with stark eighties-inspired power-dressing: heavy shoulders, bright colours, thick belts. Today her suit and lipstick were both fire-engine red. When she clasped her hands together on the desk he could see her nails bitten right down.

He spoke robotically, trying not to colour the story too much, to make excuses for himself. On pushing Jason he'd felt his sense of right and wrong, momentarily dislodged, click back into place. The only way to salvage himself in his own mind was not to try and salvage himself to his boss.

When he finished, Anna Cavill looked at him like he was a confusing piece of art. "Rob."

His face felt hot and itchy. "I was just so frustrated, you know? It's no excuse. But I was so *frustrated*."

She held out a box of tissues with her sore-looking fingers. He realised his cheeks hurt from crying, and he pulled a wad out and pressed them to his face.

Anna drummed her hands on the desk for a second. "I think you should go home for the day."

"I'm going to get sacked, aren't I?"

Crying had wrecked his voice and Anna squinted, trying to work out what he was saying. When it registered she sat back in her chair and sighed. "Rob."

His heart stopped for a moment.

Anna's tone grew deep and a little loud. "Mr. Sinclair," she began, and Rob again had the feeling that people were reciting lines to him. "Having been informed of the situation with her son, Mrs. Berwick has asked that you be formally reprimanded. So." She paused. "You are being formally reprimanded."

He blinked stickily. She put two nubby fists on the desk and leaned her breasts on them, her voice returning to normal. "Christ, Rob, you know the rules as well as I do, but let's go through them again, shall we? You are not allowed to make bodily contact with a student unless you are protecting them, another student, or yourself. Do you understand?"

His voice shrank. "Yes."

Anna's voice changed back, almost as if she wanted someone to overhear. "I am making a note of this incident for both of us and it's going to have to go in your

file.” Then she softened again. “But you and I both know you haven’t done this in twenty years and you’re not going to do it again, are you?”

He felt the tears rise again. “Jesus, no.”

“Well then.” Sitting back, Anna regarded him carefully. “You look terrible, Rob. I really do think it’s best if you go home for the day.”

“I’m so sorry, Anna.”

She barked a short laugh. “I’ve had worse.”

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“Go home. I wouldn’t go past the canteen, though, because Mrs. Berwick’s headed back up there.” She smiled a little. “Thank God for corn chowder.”

“Thank you, Anna,” he said again, reaching an automatic hand out to shake hers. Her red lips gave him déjà vu.

Now the students were starting to filter out of their classrooms again, moving around each other in solemn lines. The thought of them seeing him staring like a paedophile made Rob turn the Toyota’s key quickly, grinding the starter motor. He drove home in a daze, unable to forget the dull thunk of hipbone against plastic and, bizarrely, Anna Cavill’s sad red-lipped smile, which reminded him strongly of something that kept sliding from his grasp, like the cotton shoulders of Jason’s shirt as he shoved – *pushed* – him away.

□

When Rob got home the house was empty. Good. He walked through to the kitchen and sat down at the table, laying a cheek against it and closing his eyes. In the cool wood he could hear the thrum of blood rushing through his body.

He remembered the smashed beer bottle at the party twenty-five years before; the shock at what he was capable of. He remembered the self-imposed leash he’d tightened afterwards to make sure he never did anything like it again. He’d trained himself fiercely and well, wanting to be as good as his father. He never really thought about what would happen if the knot got loose, but apparently it ended with him pushing teenage boys into furniture.

Who the hell did he think he was, the Hulk?

The front door rattled as Laura and Abby returned from their lunch date. Fresh sweat burst from him at the thought that they’d know he was there from the Toyota in

the driveway, then remembered with cold relief that he'd parked it in the garage. He didn't want his wife to see him, so he slid out of his chair and into the laundry as he heard them come inside.

"Just a small one, thank you," Abby was saying. "Just a *very* small one. I really must get going and leave you to your special day."

He heard the snap of the kettle being switched on. "I just want to sleep."

Silence. Rob waited until the water began to boil noisily before slipping out of the laundry and into his son's bedroom. It smelled like cheap boy deodorant and sneakers, with the bed made badly and the floor tidy. The walls were tacked with posters from Nathan's school plays and the TV on his desk was newer than Rob remembered. His wastepaper basket was full.

Rob wasn't sure what to do. Sitting on the bed or floor felt childish, but just standing there was creepy. Through the half-open door he could hear Laura and Abby murmuring over their drinks. Finally he crept over to the director's chair Nate's friend, Sarah, had given him the previous Christmas, "Mr. Sinclair" written on the back in puffy paint.

For a second Rob moved outside himself. He was a forty-one-year-old man standing in his son's bedroom, waiting for his wife and mother-in-law to leave the house so he could start setting up for a party with too much wine and not enough guests. Also, he had pushed a student.

In his pocket his phone started ringing again, and he seized up.

"Is that a telephone?" he heard from the kitchen.

"Rob must have left his at home."

"It might be for you."

"I have my own phone, Mum."

"Still."

But he knew Laura wouldn't bother getting up to look for it, and she didn't. The kitchen went quiet again.

Eventually their bright-sounding murmurs led off to the front of the house. The screen door banged and there was the shuffle of his wife's feet as she came back inside. Rob heard the clunk of whitegoods as Laura began filling up the washing machine, the dicky lid crashing down every time she let it go. Without thinking he rose from Nathan's chair and took a step towards the wall that separated his son's bedroom from the laundry. He could picture every move his wife was making in there: every

bend to the pile of washing, every stretch to the powder on the high shelf, where they left it even though their kids were no longer in any danger of mistaking it for sherbet. Laura was a metre away, and she didn't even know he was there.

## 19. Nathan

A year earlier, just before they moved into the new house, auditions were held for the Year Eight intake of the special drama school in the city. The woman who led Nathan into the space at the back of the theatre called it a green room, like he'd read about in books, and he pretended not to be surprised that it was actually painted blue. At the time Nathan was twelve, and he would have given anything to go to this special drama school and perform in this theatre. His primary school's stage was the bitumen undercover-area where they held assemblies, and you couldn't do anything too rambunctious because of the loose gravel. Nathan had learned this after the Year Four play as he gingerly peeled the yellow felt lion costume from his bloodied knees after an energetic battle with Sarah, who was the tiger. The high school closest to the new house had a stage but no curtains and the chairs had to be brought in in stacks for every performance, like it wasn't even important.

The drama school had proper, numbered velvet chairs whose bottoms snapped up when no one was sitting in them. There were lights along the aisles like in an aeroplane, and a hole under the stage where the orchestra went. Seeing it, Nathan thought he would cry. Musicals. They could do *musicals*.

He was third in line to audition, after the two other kids sharing the squashy blue couch. The boy at the other end was looking at the ceiling and muttering to himself, and kept frowning whenever Nathan leaned forward to watch him. Between them was a girl with long golden legs and arms, who sat very still. He wondered if she was doing a monologue about being a statue. That was a pretty cool idea, actually.



Another woman beckoned the muttering boy from the doorway, and he got to his feet and strode out. The tanned girl came to life. “Do you know who that was?”

“Um.” Nathan tried to remember the name that had been called. “Daniel something.”

The girl rolled her eyes. He was sure she couldn’t be twelve, too. Perfumed air came off her in waves. “He was the Boy in *Waiting for Godot* when they did it at the Maj.”

“What’s that?”

The girl looked appalled. When she managed to get over it she closed her eyes and moved her shiny lips wordlessly, refusing to answer. Nathan looked at the carpet and tried to remember what she’d said: *Waiting for Goddo*.

Sarah was still in the hallway, waiting. Their audition times were forty-five minutes apart, but she’d wanted them to go to the school together. His mum drove and took them through McDonald’s on the way, and he felt a flush of pride at how normal she was being. Seeing the drama school *and* getting a Quarter Pounder was so exciting he could barely eat any of his burger and instead had to hover outside the boys loos for fifteen minutes in case he yakked. Sarah slouched against the wall beside him, gazing around with glittery eyes and whispering to him about how they’d rule the school when they got there. Nathan couldn’t agree until he was sure he wasn’t going to throw up.

The girl next to him started rolling r’s in the back of her throat and making buzzing sounds through her lips. When Nathan glanced over only the top part of her face responded, but he knew what her expression meant. He looked at the carpet again.

He was whispering to himself when the door opened and the woman from earlier pointed her clipboard at him. The tall girl was gone. Following the lady out, he went to ask for some water but his tongue was too dry.

Nathan couldn’t see anything but the white glare of lighting the bottom of the stage, and the depthless seam of black above it. Someone said, “Name?”

“Nathan Sinclair.”

“Hi, Nathan, I’m Toby Prior. I’m one of the drama teachers here.”

Nathan croaked, “Hi.”

Toby Prior laughed a little. “Hi, hi. All right then, Nathan, are you ready with your monologue?”

He'd chosen the "*Friends, Romans, countrymen*"<sup>xiii</sup> speech from *Julius Caesar* that his dad suggested. Rob could recite the beginning bit from memory, chest expanding as he strode purposefully around the lounge. Nathan liked how grand it sounded and had memorised it by walking back and forth along the back fence, the library copy held in front of him. He knew the words by heart, but now on the hot stage of the drama school he realised he didn't know what a single one of them meant. They were just a line of beads coming loose from their string and he kept tripping over them, his gestures coming too slowly behind. He clattered along all the way to the end, his cheeks fiery, and then bowed.

"Okay, thanks, Nathan," Toby Prior's voice came from the blur. "Now we'd like you to tell us a story."

"What?"

"Tell us a story about something that happened to you recently."

He squinted. "Why?"

There was murmuring and the sounds of paper being shuffled. Another voice explained, "We'd like to see how you handle pressure, whether you can improvise, and your capacity to tell an interesting story."

"Oh." Nathan closed his eyes, trapping heat behind his eyeballs. "Okay."

"Whenever you're ready."

Nathan walked to the front of the stage and sat down, dangling his legs over the side. From this close he could almost see the panel of people in front of him, but if he tried too hard he might go blind. Instead he stared at the intricate arrangement of lights and cables suspended from the ceiling, the metal tracks holding them together reminding him of Laura's picture of a big red bridge. He'd helped his dad take it down to pack away for the move, and halfway through Nathan had turned around to see his mum in the doorway. She stared past him at the photograph, a strange look on her face. Then she went into the big bedroom and closed the door.

He spread his hands out to the side and leaned back. When he spoke, his voice was clear. "We're moving house soon, and so there's a lot of packing and stuff to do. One morning my mum comes into my room with this big box, and she puts it on my bed and goes, *Can you go through all this stuff and get rid of anything you don't want*. It was a box of all my, um –" He flushed. "Um, *dress-up* stuff, you know, for acting

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<sup>xiii</sup> Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, p. 91, III. ii., line 74.

out plays. And, oh! There was this old puppet theatre that me and my friend Sarah – she’s auditioning soon – we made back when we were, like, six. It was really cool.”

Nathan heard a pen scratching.

“So anyway, I went through all the stuff like Mum asked, chucking some, keeping some, but then at the bottom of the box was all this other stuff.”

He peered at the box through the darkness.

“There was this folder full of old photos. Not, not really old, but I don’t know. From a while ago. They were folded in half, which I don’t think you’re meant to do with photos. But yeah.” He frowned, seeing them in front of him. “One was of all these businesspeople walking in a clump, except the heads had all been cut off so they were just bodies in suits. There was a hospital wall that had directions to a burns unit and then some graffiti below it, except I couldn’t tell what it said. And a man lying in the grass below a really big tree.”

Nathan kicked his feet against the edge of the stage.

“My mum takes photos. All the time. She used to do it for a job but they let her go, and actually I don’t think she’s taken a picture since then. But anyway, you know, she takes – took – pictures, but not like that. She takes pictures of trees and people, now. You know, nice pictures but um.” He winced. “Not, you know, *art*. But these ones.” He shook his head. “I don’t know, I thought they were pretty cool. I’d take photos like that, if I were a photographer.

“So, anyway. They must have been Mum’s. Must have been! So I thought they were cool, and I went and took them in to her in the kitchen. I go *Mum, Mum*, and I show them to her. *Where’d you take these? Can I have them?*” He shrugged. “You know.”

Nathan looked into the haze and saw it happen, and his forehead itched with the heat. He looked at his knotted hands.

“Anyway, she ripped them up,” he said. “She ripped them all up. She said they were just old junk.”

He stopped, realising how stupid and boring and embarrassing this story was. He couldn’t make it go anywhere or do anything, and so he just stared out at the haze of judges, his smile sliding down his face. Finally Toby Prior broke the silence. “Okay, Nathan,” he said. “Thank you.”

□

A week later, the phone rang once and fell off the wall. Their particular model wasn't meant for wall installation, and so it hung precariously in the kitchen, coming loose from its hook at the slightest vibration. Nathan was doing homework at the kitchen table and he screamed when the receiver crashed into the sink and buzzed like a dying fly. Calming himself, he answered it. "Hello, Nathan speaking."

"Hello, Nathan Speaking." Mrs. Grant's regular joke. "How are you, bubs?"

"Fine, thank you. Um, Mum's out the back at the moment –"

"I'm actually not calling for Laura, I'm after you."

His stomach sank. "Oh."

Sarah had got a letter from the drama school and wasn't coming out of her room, Mrs. Grant told him. Would he come over and talk to her?

Twenty minutes later, Mrs. Grant honked the Landcruiser's horn from the front of the house. Nathan told his dad where he was going and went outside, stopping on the way to check the letterbox. Folded into a supermarket catalogue was a white envelope addressed to him. He tore the top in his excitement and had to hold the pieces of letter together with shaking hands to read it. Under his name, in bold capitals, was the word **OFFER**.

Mrs. Grant spoke to him from the front seat but Nathan wasn't listening. *Of-fer of-fer of-fer* went his heartbeat, and he stared out of the window at the passing cars as if they were a procession just for him. "*Friends, Romans, countrymen,*"<sup>xiv</sup> he mouthed. The words made total sense now.

Out the front of the Grants' big new house, Sarah's face sank into a distressed pout. Shutting her bedroom door behind them, she flung herself on the bed beside a smoothed-out letter and pressed her face into her forearms. "I can't *believe* it."

Nathan bent over her shoulder to read the note. *We are sorry to advise...* "Oh, Sare."

"I told you I stuffed up my monologue and they wouldn't let me start again, right?" Sarah had picked the balcony speech from *Romeo and Juliet*<sup>xv</sup>, in the style of the wicked Baz Luhrmann version, but kept saying "catapult" instead of "Capulet". "It was totally unfair."

"What about your story?"

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<sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xv</sup> Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, pp. 55-65, II. i.

She sat up, red-faced. “Mine was *awesome*. I swear, I never made up anything better. I wanted to write it down and send it to the newspaper.”

“Made up?”

“They must be total idiots. I don’t even want to go to their stupid school.”

He looked at the letter again. *We are sorry*. “I’m pretty sure you weren’t supposed to make it up, though.”

Sarah’s face shuttered. “What?”

“It was meant to be true.”

She paused for a second. “No it wasn’t.”

“I thought it was.”

“They said, *Tell a story*. A story is, like, made up.”

“I didn’t –”

“You told them something *true*?”

Hesitant, Nathan nodded. Sarah barked laughter like an obstinate puppy. “What did you tell them?”

“I told them – it was about finding some of my mum’s photos.”

Sarah frowned. “Did they like it?”

Shyly, he pulled the torn letter from his pocket. “I guess so.”

Her eyes widening, Sarah snatched it and scanned it quickly. “A second audition. No fair.”

“What?” Nathan took it back. “No, it’s an offer.”

“For a second audition.” She jabbed the line below the bold title. “There’s a time and date and stuff. It’s next week.”

“Oh.”

Seeing Sarah’s scowl, he had a bad thought: *well, they still think I’m better than you*.

She seemed to hear it. Twisting from her spot on the bed, she latched two hands to his elbow. “Are you going to go?”

“Well, yeah.”

Sarah let him go. “Oh.”

“What?”

“Well if you go, and you get in, that’s great, but I won’t be going.”

Realising, he looked down at the letter in his lap.

“I’ll be at a different school. So you won’t really know anyone.”

Nathan thought of the slim-limbed gold girl in the audition room, and the guy who talked to himself and was in *Waiting for Goddo*. “Yeah.”

“So yeah.” She lifted a hand to rub below her eye, though he didn’t think she’d actually been crying. “But totally do what you want.”

“Yeah.” Nathan folded the letter back into his pocket and lay down beside her on the bed.

Sarah put a hand on his shoulder. It felt heavy and he didn’t really want it there, but he couldn’t ask her to move. They lay like that and listened to the late spring wind rushing down the main street of the estate. He closed his eyes and imagined being alone at the new school.

There was a muffled sound. Confused, Nathan opened his eyes to look around, eventually realising that Sarah was snoring. He relaxed and lay back to face the door.

Mrs. Grant stood in the hallway looking through at them, a plate of Tim-Tams held out in front of her. Her red lips parted in a smile.

## 20. Confessions

When the final bell rang on the Friday of his mother's birthday, Sarah was already waiting outside Nathan's classroom with her arms crossed. "*Finally,*" she groaned, grabbing his arm and pulling him out of the rush of students. "Come on, let's go home."

"Aren't we going to pick up Candice?"

"No."

She was yanking his arm just about out of its socket. Usually the three of them met in the quadrangle to go back to Candice's house, where her mum made spiders for them with ice-cream and soft drink before they ran up the stairs to Pozzo's room to write plays. The walk to Sarah's house, which was next closest to the school, took half an hour.

Nathan could picture Candice standing by the canteen, waiting for them to come around the manual arts block and pick her up. "We should at least tell her we're leaving."

"She'll be gone by now anyway."

No she wouldn't. He knew Pozzo: she would wait for ages.

The grounds emptied slowly, kids crushing to get out the few exits in the school's giant metal fence, which was designed to prevent opportunistic weekend hooligans from nicking the media centre's TVs. Every time there was a fire drill or bomb scare – every few weeks in the lead-up to exams, when kids started getting dodgy older brothers to make stupid phone calls – it took forever to get everyone out.

Finally popping through the rear gate, Nathan and Sarah trudged across the oval. Upper-schoolers shot past them on bikes, gouging out hunks of soft earth with their tyres and flicking them everywhere. Nathan skipped out of the way as a Year Eleven on a tiny bike twisted his wheel at a dirt clod like kicking a soccer ball. “You’re a poof,” the boy snorted at him, then cycled away, his arse held high in the air.

Nathan touched his hair self-consciously. Didi’s silence at the attack made him feel hurt. If Candice was there, or Allie, they would have said something.

Sarah finally spoke. “Hey –” Her tone was the same as Candice’s in maths that morning; petulant and searching. It grated. She stopped under a tree and grabbed his wrist, then let go. “I want to tell you something.”

Nathan’s scalp instantly began to sweat. No one had ever said those words to him before, but he’d read enough books and seen enough TV to know people never bothered making preparations for something you wanted to hear. “What?”

Sarah dug a foot into the soil. He took a step out of the shade, feeling trapped by the low branches of the tree. “I think my parents are going to get a divorce.”

“Oh.” Seeing Didi’s eyes get so wide he thought they would fall out of her head, he amended. “*Oh.*”

But it wasn’t a surprise. Mr. and Mrs. Grant were the worst married people he knew. He knew a lot of them: Candice’s dad did twelve-hour shifts working at the mechanic’s and four-hour shifts drinking at the pub, and sometimes when Mrs. Reyes brought them their spiders she had a sad mouth and smudges under her eyes. In Bunbury, his Auntie Jenny treated Uncle Alistair like a fourth kid: once, after a particularly intense game of backyard cricket in the sun, she sprayed Nathan’s three cousins with deodorant, then turned to Uncle Al. “Lift!” He pulled his T-shirt over his head and she coated both armpits with spray. “There you go,” she said, patting his belly as a signal, and he ran off with the boys for another innings. Auntie Noelle, on the other hand, was cheerfully rude about her ex-husband, Uncle Stuart, and his almost unfathomable stupidity, while Granddad Mick was deaf, so Nanna spent the whole day shouting. On the other side of the family, his grandfather was dead and Uncle Ben was always breaking up with women.

Even his own parents were fairly bad. One time Nathan had come home from Sarah’s a different way than usual, heading toward the house from the east end of the street instead of the west, and he’d seen his dad in the driveway, washing his car. His mum was talking on the phone in the front doorway, which would have been obscured



from the west-end view by the garage, and she was watching his dad with this look on her face like she couldn't believe he was actually there. His dad just kept washing the car, whistling to a song only he could hear.

But Sarah's parents were another story. Mr. Grant ran a small mining company and wasn't around much since he had to go up to Karratha all the time, but when he was home, bloody hell. Nathan had been there for full-blown fights; the Grants didn't care if he saw. Mrs. Grant would accuse Mr. Grant of sleeping around and he would just look at her, a bit like Nathan's mum had looked at his dad but a billion times colder, like he wished she'd never existed.

When he wasn't there Mrs. Grant went off about him, like Aunt Noelie but with a hornet's sting. "He's just a terrible person," she said once, mixing a cake at the same time. She'd looked past Sarah, right at Nathan. "Did I tell you he didn't get me anything for my birthday? He said I didn't need anything."

"Okay."

"Your dad is much nicer than Milton." Mrs. Grant said this chattily, like they were talking about school. "You're lucky."

"Mum," Sarah groaned.

"What?" Caroline Grant stirred the cake batter more furiously. "Tell me if I'm saying things that aren't true."

Nathan wondered if Milton Grant did sleep with women who weren't his wife. When he was home he moved around like he was itchy, his hands always fiddling with credit cards or hot-smelling coins. Nathan couldn't imagine him even speaking to women, but then again, he'd managed to get Mrs. Grant pregnant twice, so maybe they didn't find him so gross.

"Who said they were getting a divorce?" he asked.

Sarah pushed herself off the tree she'd been leaning against and stalked over to the footpath. Nathan hurried to catch up. "It's just that they're fighting, like, all the time."

They always fought all the time. "Oh."

"Dad wants to move up near the mine but Mum doesn't want to."

Nathan kicked a rock, not really listening.

"He reckons he isn't even going to your mum's party tonight."

"Oh." He wasn't sure how many people were actually going to be there. There was Uncle Ben and his grandma, and his two aunts from Bunbury coming up to stay in

a hotel, and some of his dad's teacher friends. There was going to be too much food.  
"He should come."

"You know what he reckons?" He could see a smile in the corner of her mouth.  
"This is so freaky, Gogo."

"What?"

"He said it last night. I was still up and they were in the lounge room and I heard him."

"What?"

"It's *so* fucked."

"Did he cheat on your mum?"

"What?" She stopped walking. There was an electric anger all around her.

"It's just that your mum always says –"

"*My dad* does not cheat on *my mum*," she hissed.

He retreated. "Okay, sorry."

Sarah switched to moody silence again. Trying not to annoy her any more than he'd somehow been able to, Nathan skipped along the path, saying nothing. Every so often he could read rude comments that had been carved into the cement while it was still fresh. The woodchips between the path and the kerb smelled dirty and Nathan wished he was at Candice's sticking a long silver spoon into a glass of gently fizzing vanilla ice-cream and Coke.

After a minute or so, Sarah went back to anger. "Well? You don't even care what my dad *said*?"

"Oh, yeah." Nathan was panting a little. "What was it?"

She sighed. "He *said*, and you won't believe it – my dad, he said he reckons my mum's in love with your dad."

There were too many *mums* and *dads* in that sentence, too many *mys* and *yours*.  
"He reckons my mum's in love with my dad?"

"No, *my* mum's in love with your dad."

"Oh." Sarah had slowed down a little, trying to read his face, but Nathan kept going. He thought about the idea for a while, then abandoned it. "I don't know."

"What?"

"Well, your mum reckons your dad cheats on her, and you said that isn't true."

“*Yeah.*” Sarah was spoiling for a fight. She had been since she’d argued with Candice at recess and Candice wouldn’t fight back. “*But,*” she continued, “Mum’s also always going on about how great your dad is, so.”

Nathan began to walk faster. Soon Sarah was tripping on her own ankles trying to catch up. “Hey. *Hey.* Don’t you want to be step-brother and step-sister?”

“Shut up.”

They were silent for the rest of the walk. The clouds from the morning had parted and the afternoon sun cut through Nathan’s shirt, making him sweat underneath the heavy straps of his schoolbag. The cars passing them on the main road whined like mosquitoes and he just wanted to get home and have a shower.

They finally got to his house. “Okay, well, I have to go help my dad –”

Sarah said, “Wait a second.”

“What?”

She was flushed by the walk and spat a curl out of her mouth. “We can’t be step-brother and step-sister.”

“What?”

“We can’t be step-brother and step-sister.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean.” She stopped and crossed her arms, looking down at her chest. When she looked up again her eyes were funny. “If we were brother and sister it would be a problem.”

“Why?”

He saw her throat move as she swallowed. “Because I *like* you.”

The road was quiet. Nathan could feel two beads of sweat, one from each armpit, drop somewhere inside his shirt. Sarah’s lips were quivering around her half-smile, like she was holding a pose at the end of a scene. She had the script and he didn’t. He wondered if, according to her version, he was supposed to do something like kiss her now. He wondered if she’d be doing this if Ms. Coldwell had made her Hermia.

After a moment Sarah stepped back and uncrossed her arms. Whatever the script was, he apparently hadn’t followed it. “And, you know, because Candice likes you too.”

Nathan’s head jerked with disbelief. “Are you serious?”

“Don’t tell her I told you,” she said automatically. “She’d be really mad.”

He couldn't imagine Pozzo mad.

"So anyway."

It was too warm out here. "I'd better go inside," he said.

Sarah shrugged. "I might not come tonight. I might stay home and keep my dad company."

"Oh."

"Unless you want me there."

"Well, you're invited. And so's your dad."

"Whatever."

Her eyes were a challenge, but he wasn't sure to what. He went into the house and it was nice and cool and quiet. He called out tentatively but no one was home. Weird. Maybe Allie and his dad were out shopping for more wine.

Dizzy with the day, he dropped his schoolbag and lay down on the cold tiles in the entry, spreading his arms and legs out like in snow. After a moment his hands went unconsciously to his chest. He thought of Candice's spectacular boobs and of her pose in Drama that day. Her need to be sexy instead of ugly. He heard Sarah say *Candice likes you too*. That might not be true, since Sarah had been crazy today. Still, he recited it, imagining Candice crouching and seeing the dark, amazing line of her cleavage. It felt like he was lying on his pants funny, the material caught too tightly under his bum, but he wasn't. He enjoyed the discomfort for a moment. Then he remembered how they'd left Pozzo alone in the quadrangle, staring down at the grass, and he felt sad.

## 21. Moving On

Laura pulled up in front of the closed garage door at seven o'clock that night. She'd spent the past two hours walking around the estate that backed onto the big shopping centre on the other side of the highway, at first deep in thought, and then later, panicking, because she was lost among the identical houses and dead-end streets. The delicate material of her dress sticking under her sweaty armpits, she'd finally found an uneven footpath shaded by low-hanging branches that went through to the estate hairdresser, which was clear on the opposite end of the mall from where she'd parked. When she found her car she sat in it for a few minutes, trying to catch her breath, her hand circling and circling the ribbed spot over her heart.

The house was quiet. There was a light left on in the lounge room like it always was whenever the four of them went out, partly to fool the dumbest of burglars that someone was home and partly because if you switched it off too soon after turning it on, the globe tended to blow. Getting out of the car, she dared to hope that even if it was her birthday, her family had gone somewhere and left her alone. That, she thought, weary with the weight of the day, would be the best present of all.

As she pushed open the front door she heard the scuffing of steps coming up the driveway behind her, and when they stopped abruptly, she sighed and turned around to see who it was who'd come to annoy her now. But there was no one there.

Strange.

As soon as she stepped into the hallway, Nathan appeared. Her heart sank on seeing his buttoned shirt and carefully greased hair, which was his uniform for school

socials, seeing plays, dinners out, and trips to the airport. Maybe Ben was coming in from Sydney as a surprise, she thought, and perked up slightly. “Hi, sweetie.”

“Hi, Mum.” He rushed in for hug, and his teenage cologne smelled of toilet spray. “Did you have a nice day?”

“Very nice,” she said, one of the automatic lies you tell your children. As Nathan pulled away, she patted the left side of her chest as if touching wood, feeling for the new cheque tucked inside her bra. It was safe. “Very tiring, though.”

He didn’t seem to be listening. “And it’s not over yet!”

Overcome with exhaustion, Laura shuffled sideways into the lounge and fell into her chair. “Thanks, sweetie, but I’ve been eating all day,” she lied again, thinking of the barely-touched eggs and sushi. “You guys go.”

“But it’s your birthday,” Nathan pouted.

She reclined with a groan. “It’s just a day, Nathan.”

He looked devastated. “What do you mean?”

She chose not to continue down that path. “Did you have a good day at school?”

“It was kind of weird, actually.”

That was Nathan, rolling out his need like so much fishing line, and tonight Laura couldn’t bring herself to bite. Besides, her son’s threshold for the bizarre was pretty low: he’d once told her, sitting in the bath as she washed his hair, that “feet were really weird”. Now she yawned and said, “Monday will be better,” thinking of how far away Monday was.

After a long silence her son’s smile resurfaced. “There’s something outside I want to show you for a sec.” He stood to one side and spread his arms as if to guide her to a game show prize pack.

Laura looked past him to the long dark hallway. “Is Ben here?”

“Huh?”

“Is that the surprise? Did Ben fly in?”

“What surprise? There isn’t a surprise.”

“Then what’s out the back?”

He gaped at her for a second. “Uncle Ben’s not here.”

She lay back again and closed her eyes, wanting to sleep for a hundred years. “Not now, Nathan. Why don’t the rest of you go out for a nice dinner and I’ll stay here and have a nap.”

After a moment, she heard the front door open, and she looked around, astonished that Nathan might really have gone. Instead, she registered the new arrival in the hallway just as her son hissed, “Didi!”

Laura sat up. Despite the cool of the evening, Caroline’s daughter wore only jeans and a little halter-neck top. Thank God Alice never dressed so stupidly. “What are you doing here?”

Sarah saw her and jumped. “Oh, sorry.”

She didn’t know why the girl inspired such disgust in her, but she did. “Do you usually sneak into our house uninvited?”

“Gogo invited me.”

Laura massaged her breastbone, again feeling for the square of paper underneath her dress. “Can you two refer to each other by your real names, for God’s sake?”

The girl scowled. “*Nathan* invited me.”

Laura’s son was pulling nervously on his hair. Through the thick gel she could see his tender baby scalp and it made emotion wash over her; the fierce, face-pinching affection that had wracked her when he and Alice were babies. The memory of her floppy bunny boy encouraged her to look upon his friend with new benevolence. “You kids go and do whatever,” she said grandly, lying back for a third time and re-entering the warm pink light behind her eyelids. “I’m going to have a bit of a sleep.”

Nathan’s tone was stricken. “I just need you to come outside for a bit, first.”

“Not now.”

“Please, just for a sec.”

She steeled her own voice. “No.”

“But Mrs. Sinclair,” Sarah wheedled.

As quickly as it had come in, the tide of Laura’s love went out. She heard the two children leave, and in her mind’s eye she saw Nathan left on an empty beach among the clumped, stinking seaweed. He fell sideways and retracted into a ball, holding his head in agony. Alone.

□

Exactly ten months after she left for London, twenty-two-year-old Laura Nolan flew home to her mum. The day she took the Tube to Heathrow was grey and soggy.

Slumped in her seat as the Piccadilly Line hauled itself aboveground like a dumped swimmer gasping out of the ocean, the instant rain on the windows opposite made her feel like she was already crying, though she was trying not to. It didn't seem appropriate to cry when she wasn't actually that sad to be leaving.

Despite Delphine's downturned mouth and the whispering of the others, she'd continued with her landscape photography. The endless brilliant canvases of her classmates made her feel constantly nervous, and after a day in the developing room breathing the chemicals and feeling her peers frown as her tourist-pap images formed, the prospect of a weekend trip to the east coast or the midlands was all that kept her going. It was a vicious cycle. As the deadline for the submission of their final projects loomed closer the shots she produced became shaky, the viewfinder blurred by stress and the constant tears clouding her vision, and she had to pull the roll tight in front of the light source to find an image that wasn't terrible.

The day before her portfolio was due, Laura laid out all her photos on her bed at Camden High Street. Resting her trembling hands against her stomach, she looked at them all: bridges, castles, beaches, moors. She'd expected to panic at the paltry selection, but instead she began to feel calm. She loved her pictures. Unlike her classmates' with their complications and juxtapositions and ironies, hers were beautiful in their simplicity. No graffiti, no poverty, no people. Even if the structures were man-made, they were empty of noise and movement, and in that way were as natural and soothing as the land. Laura thought about writing this down in her accompanying essay, but instead she left a polite note in Delphine's mailbox and booked a flight to Australia for three days' time.

The calm didn't last. At home, Laura was adrift, amazed that she'd quit the art programme on its final day. On the flight back she'd reasoned that, with an "incomplete" on her record, she could return one day when she was ready, but now this seemed ridiculous. Surely they'd just failed her. She took daily trips out to the letterbox to ensure any Camden correspondence was ripped up before her mother saw it, and slowly the anxiety of the past few months began to ease, leaving emptiness in its place. To get Abby off her back, she re-enrolled in her degree, but otherwise had nothing to do except take photos. She begged to be allowed to borrow Abby's car so she could take drives out of the city with her camera, wading through knee-deep beach grasses like a sleepwalker.

She had no idea what she was going to do with her life.



Her friendship with Caroline clicked back into place with the sudden, then dulled pain and relief of a dislocated shoulder. Caro was renting a little flat in Highgate and had a high-interest loan for a new Citroen. She loved teaching at the private school, the curriculum of which both enthused and outraged her. It was clear she thought of herself as a kind of Miss Jean Brodie, subverting the system, amassing and grooming her followers. “They closet these kids,” Caro told her passionately during a pumping walk around the river. Laura thought of all the ways in which Caroline, with her perfect Bunbury childhood and easy passage through university and dead-end crush on Rob Sinclair, had been closeted. Did she know Jean Brodie was a narcissist? “There are things they need to know that they aren’t being told.”

She meant sex. She wanted to teach them to express themselves physically. A bunch of fourteen-year-old Catholic girls.

“It’s not part of their religion, Caro. You’ve got to respect that.”

“They’re better off learning how to respect themselves. Condoms. They could all get AIDS.”

“It’s the Pope, though. You’re not going to change their minds.”

Caroline went silent, stewing in her own juices. Determined to be their sex ed. saviour.

Still moving about in a fug, it had taken Laura a few weeks to realise Caro no longer talked about Rob all the time. She was dating someone else, a leather jacket-wearing bloke named Milton Grant who she’d tripped over at a John Farnham concert. Such had been the power of Caro’s crush on Rob, though, that Laura couldn’t be sure her new relationship wasn’t just an elaborate play for his affections; an attempt to show him what he was missing. Which he wouldn’t notice, either.

At the university, Laura began to feel flies buzzing around her head all the time: in the refectory, in lectures, in toilet cubicles. The whine seemed to emanate from just beyond her eardrums, and in the corner of her vision she would sometimes see a zipping black dot. Stretched out on the lawn with her textbook, she kept waving a distracted hand in front of her forehead, like a tic. The drone kept on.

Abby caught her lying on the couch in the early hours, the TV’s sound turned off, an arm over her face. “Shouldn’t you be in bed?”

“Are there flies in here?”

“Don’t be silly.”

She moved her arm. “What am I going to do, Mum?”

Abby frowned. “About what?”

“My life.”

“You can get a job when you finish uni,” her mother said. This was her approach to life. You do a course, you get a job, you meet a man, you get married, you have children. If that man dies you go full-time and take up gardening.

That was unfair.

“I don’t know what I want to do.”

“You make things difficult for yourself.”

Laura shielded her eyes again.

“Turn off the television if you’re not watching it.” There was the soft pat of footsteps as Abby shuffled away.

The next night, at teatime, Rob rang. He’d heard she was back and he wanted to take her out for a drink. She didn’t tell Caroline, not knowing how her friend would take it. Laura was beginning to feel like it was a game of Caroline’s – against which one of them, she didn’t know – not to mention Rob, and she didn’t want to ruin it. And also, secretly, she didn’t want to know what Caro thought.

Of course Rob was blissfully unaware he’d caused any damage to Caroline. “How is she?” he asked during their date, when Laura brought up their renewed friendship. “She’s a good egg.”

He was such a puppy, she thought, watching him manage to smile and sip a beer at the same time. Nothing would stop that dizzy glee at life, and it annoyed her that he was overflowing with it while her tank was completely dry. For a second she wanted to hurt him, to tell him how Caro had been in love with him and poke fun at his oblivion. The news would upset him. He moved flawlessly through the world like a Pik-Up Stik lifted from the very top of the pile, and it would cut him to know that he’d actually disturbed what was below. Laura smiled woodenly back at him.

She knew now that, if she’d told, he wouldn’t have kept going out with her. She would have wounded him with it and that would have been the end of whatever was happening with them, since everything, especially relationships, had to go perfectly for him. And he would have felt awkward and awful around Caroline and they wouldn’t be friends anymore, either. Everything would be different.

Though Rob’s endless bounciness had been a bit annoying, it was also enticing: he found the world so easy, he loved everything. Laura had hoped it would rub off on her, and though it didn’t, it was still surprisingly nice to be around. When you open the

door and someone is standing behind the flywire with a giant grin, it's hard not to smile back. He didn't tell her she made things hard for herself. He was barefaced and clear in his adoration, and though the words made her uneasy – *I loved you from the first time I saw you*, he said; *don't you think it's meant to be?* – she was comforted by the physicality of it. Rob wasn't a tall man, but he was broad and wore T-shirts that smelled consolingly of fabric softener.

They slept together. In the morning, Laura said, still curled away from him, “I don't know what to do with my life.”

Rob was lying on his back. He lifted the arm closest to her and placed it on her hip. “You're an artist.”

His voice was so full of simple confidence that she found herself countering it. “But I failed.”

“What do you mean?”

“I failed art school. I couldn't go back.”

Laura didn't know why she said that. What really happened was too hard, too embarrassing, to explain. And she had failed, in a way.

Rob looked at the ceiling for a while. Then he said, “I like your pictures.”

“Really?”

“I like that bridge one. That's a cool bridge.”

She rolled over to snuggle into the warm span of his chest, feeling the reverberation there that freaked her out the night before. Today it was nice. He put a light arm around her. “You were already an artist before you went.”

Laura pressed her forehead to his armpit and closed her eyes.

Caroline's face when Laura finally told her they'd been seeing each other was amazing; not a hint of emotion came across it. They were eating dinner in a pub beer garden at Caro's insistence, even though it was really too cold for it. “That's wonderful,” she'd said in her self-help voice. She could afford to be breezy; she was fist-deep in Milton Grant's jacket.

Laura was worried. She remembered the warmth that had welled in her when Rob told her she could do whatever she wanted to do. She'd thought then that marrying him and having children might as well be that thing. What else was there? “But seriously, Caro,” she said. “Are you okay?”

“With what?”

“Well, you liked him for a long time.”

Caroline shrugged and sipped her wine.

Maybe she was over it, Laura thought with some relief. Maybe it hadn't all just been a game. Still, she'd give it one more try. Speak now, or forever hold your peace. "So you wouldn't mind if we were –" She had trouble saying it. "– In love."

Caroline rubbed her cheek against the collar of the jacket. "Well that's a silly question since you're not in love," she eventually said.

Laura let it go. When they went back to their food, Caroline carefully sawed her steak into perfect sugar cube-sized bites, and didn't eat any of them. She and Milton were engaged a month later.

□

When Alice came into the front room her skin was as translucent as Nathan's, blue-purple veins showing through the undersides of her arms and across her undulating ribcage. Her cheeks were bright red. "Hi, Mum."

"Hi, sweetie."

Then her daughter was holding something under her nose, pushing it forward like she wanted to get rid of it. "Happy birthday."

Laura had to refocus her eyes to make out the white box, shaking slightly in Alice's little hand. Realising it wasn't wrapped, she smiled with gratitude. "Thank you."

Watching her open the lid, Alice slouched, hitching up a foot that was patched with band-aids leaking their grey glue. From her knees to her breasts she was wrapped in a thick purple towel that bulged at the waist.

The gift was a small glass vase, the flute narrow and the base swollen into a smooth bowl. It was cool and understated, and best of all, empty. Laura didn't think she could stand another cutting of plant sex organs. "It's beautiful."

Her daughter stepped forward. "Look." She shook her head. "I know you're going to hate it, but Dad's set up a party for you outside and we really need you to walk out and be surprised."

It took Laura a moment to process. "Pardon?"

"People have been hiding for half an hour."

She struggled to a sitting position. "Jesus, *what?*"

"I know you won't like it, but Dad's really excited. And Nate."

“Who’s here?”

“Heaps of people. Grandma Abby, Mrs. Grant, some friends of Dad’s, those people who used to live next door to us at the old house, Charlie and what’s her name.”

“Joan?”

“Yeah.” Alice bent away to cough. “You’d better come outside. Dad heated up about a thousand pastries and there’s too much wine.”

The anxiety running through Laura’s system had reached critical mass. Her mind felt blocked out by imprecise terror. She didn’t want to step onto the patio and into the company of the people she knew. She didn’t want to present herself and her life for their judgement: failed artist, failed mother, lying around her too-big house all day. Selfish embezzler of family funds. For a moment she imagined herself in a town square in Italy, safe behind her camera, the buildings emptied and lit for her convenience. Escaping all this. Clutching the cheque against her breast, she wondered if this was what it was like to be the crazy person she’d always secretly feared she was.

After a moment, Alice seemed to realise something. Putting her shoulders back, she made the same face she had when she was a toddler and wanted to be left alone. She walked away.

## 22. Jellyfish

Alice walked through the kitchen and slid open the patio door. Twenty guests rose from where they'd been crouching since they heard her mother's car in the driveway, and her dad stepped out from behind the barbeque. "Well?"

Again his hopeful face made her angry. "I don't know, Dad."

"Is she coming out?"

*"I don't know, Dad."*

He stood shifting his hips like he didn't know what to do with himself. He took a step toward the table, rocked back, then started out again. He stopped beside the drinks and picked up a wine bottle, waving it thoughtfully in the air. After a moment he put it down and moved his hand towards the Coke, but then he took back the wine and filled his glass. He was swallowing his first mouthful when everyone else's attention shifted over Alice's shoulder. Looking around, she saw her mum walking hesitantly through the kitchen in her crumpled silver dress, tiredness spreading under her eyes. She wasn't wearing makeup. "Hello, everyone."

There was a staccato sputtering of "surprise" from a few people while others returned her hello or said "Happy birthday". Alice's dad kept his wineglass tilted against his face.

"Thank you," Laura was saying. "So sweet, thank you."

Alice watched her dad put the glass down and hoped he would say something. She didn't want him to make a scene; just a little dig. Her dad never got pissed off so if he said anything, anything at all, it would mean he was mad. All the time and money and effort he'd put into this ridiculous party and she just left them all waiting in the

dark for twenty minutes because she couldn't be bothered. Her dad tied himself in all sorts of knots trying to please people, trying to be the best, and Alice thought he was entitled to feel angry at Laura for stuffing him around.

Rob stepped forward from the table and put both arms around his wife.

Alice was suddenly aware of how sick she felt. There didn't seem to be enough air under the awning, making her light-headed, and her legs ached with the stress of standing. People spoke to her through crumby lips, the cheese-and-olive crackers she'd made collapsing in their hands as they asked her about swimming. One hand pressed to her sternum, she crab-walked around groups of people to her dad, who was beaming stupidly at Laura's movements through the crowd.

"Dad," she said. When that didn't get his attention she shouted, "Dad!"

"What's up, Fishy?"

"I'm going to go lie down for a bit."

Rob turned and looked at her until his eyes became clearer. "Still not feeling well?"

She shrugged.

He set his wineglass crookedly on the window ledge and took her upper arms in each hand. His face was pink and damp. "Thank you for what you've done," he said, voice slipping over the side of the short vowel sounds and then catching itself in a hiccup: *wha-at you've do-one*. "You've done so well, and you should have a bit of a rest now."

Alice had never seen her father drunk before. It wasn't very funny.

"Dad —" she warned as his poor balance pulled her forward. He let her go and put a swift hand against the side of the house to get his equilibrium, then swept up his glass again and walked away.

Dismissed, Alice went back in the house. Inside it was dark and blurred and too hot, especially at her cheeks and forehead. Moving down the hallway, she saw the light on in her brother's room. She wanted to tell him she felt sick but instead found Sarah Grant standing in the middle of the carpet, arms crossed against her chest and face bowed.

"What are you doing?"

Sarah's head jerked up, her curly hair bouncing on her shoulders. "Oh, hey." She didn't move.

"You're in Nate's room," Alice pointed out.

“I’m just borrowing a book for homework.”

Sarah Grant would look at you with shining eyes as if she wanted to reach into her own chest and offer you her heart. You couldn’t believe her for a second, though Alice thought she might actually believe herself.

Alice had actually been friends with Sarah when they were little. The Grants had lived in a little unit with a crappy backyard near their old house, so with Nathan they’d spent hours playing at the Sinclairs’ big block, climbing magnanimous weeping willows and picking the passionfruit vines that burrowed under the back fence. Then, the summer Alice was nine, just before she’d taken up swimming, the parents had all disappeared. Mr. Grant, who wasn’t usually around anyway, kept flying up north because he was trying to set up a mine there, and Mrs. Grant always had to look after baby Jessie, who kept getting sick. Alice’s dad was teaching tennis at the leisure centre during the day so Laura was supposed to watch the three of them before she went to work at her new job with Mr. Ong, but she was always in her bedroom with the door shut. As soon as their dad’s car pulled into the long driveway Laura would burst out the door, trailing tripods and heavy bags, barely saying goodbye before she was gone.

So it was easy for the three of them, when Alice got bored with stupid pretend games, to slip out on their bikes and explore. Eventually they found their way to the freeway bridge and over the river to the foreshore, where, at the spot where the land pushed pointily into the water, there was a shop that sold pies and ice-cream and had a cool playground.

They spent weeks there, pumping their legs hard along the bridge underpass and hearing the rumble of the cars overhead, then coasting along the footpath to the Point. Allie and Nate had no money, but Sarah’s mum gave her a five-dollar note every day. With this power she made them do things for an icy-pole: push her on the swing or order other kids off it; climb the highest tree; ask random picnickers for a sausage; pretend to be her pet dog for ten minutes, twenty minutes. (No one had a watch, so these little performances could go on for as long as Sarah wanted.) One day Sarah had enough money for three Golden Gaytimes, but in order to get one, Alice and Nathan each had to pick a jellyfish out of the river.

Nathan was immediately terrified. “It’ll sting, but.”

“No it won’t,” Sarah said, but she seemed unsure.

The three of them waded ankle-deep into the water, where jellyfish floated like big translucent boogers. Nathan reached for one cautiously, but retracted his arm with



a squeal before he touched it. “It’ll sting! It’ll sting – *aah!*” he shrieked, seeing one wafting near his toes, and hopped back to shore.

Alice wasn’t scared. Uncle Ben had just been over from Sydney, taking them to the beach in his wicked red rental car and lifting the stinging orbs from the sea so Nathan could swim in peace. She scooped up the jellyfish, careful to get a pool of water between its stumpy tendrils and her palms. It had a spotted back like a hamburger bun.

She offered it to Sarah, who squealed. “Keep it *away!*”

“Drop it, Allie,” Nathan called from the grass, his forehead crinkling. “Drop it drop it!”

Alice stood in the river, shells scratching her feet. It was a hot day and she wanted an ice-cream badly. “Can I put it back now?”

“Wait.” Sarah looked around. There was a little tin runabout parked in the shallows. “Put it in there.”

“In the boat?”

“Yeah.”

She took a step, then stopped. “It’ll die.”

Sarah shrugged.

Alice looked down at the jellyfish, then at the tinnie. “That’s mean.”

“It’s a jellyfish.”

“Yeah, but.” The curved metal of the boat was too bright to look at. “What if the person driving it is scared of jellyfish?”

“You said they don’t sting.”

“They don’t but Nathan’s scared.” She frowned at Sarah. “You’re scared.”

“Fine, if you don’t want an ice-cream,” Sarah pouted, slipping her hand into Nathan’s. “Come on.”

“So he gets one even though he couldn’t pick it up?”

Sarah pulled Nathan up the grass to the café. Gently Alice lowered her hands back into the water and the jellyfish pumped itself to freedom.

When she went back to the café the other two were energetically licking their wet popsticks. Sarah was speaking so loudly she could be heard around the corner, but she stopped when she saw Alice. Her face serious, Sarah pushed the plastic chair back and stepped towards her, offering a folded paper bag. “Here.”

It was a giant jelly snake, patterned in chunks of lime and orange. The worst flavours. “No, thanks.”

“But we got it for you,” Sarah said, waving the bag in the air. “Take it.”

“I don’t want it.” Alice walked past them and over to where they’d left their bikes in the grass. “I’m going home.”

“No-o-o,” Nathan whined. He had a bit of nut stuck to his chin.

“Wait, Allie,” Sarah shouted as Alice started to pedal away. “Wait, Allie!”

The two of them grizzled around their sticky halves of jelly snake as they followed Alice over the bridge, but she just tucked her chin to her chest and rode faster. The next day she refused to go out with them and went into her bedroom to read instead. From the other end of the house she could hear her mum telling them they weren’t allowed out on their bikes if Alice wasn’t with them, and all afternoon there was Sarah’s whining and crying from the veranda, right below her window. Alice didn’t get up.

Now Sarah stood in front of Nathan’s bookshelf in just her singlet and pyjama pants, her skinny arms twisted uncomfortably around one another. There was something dark about her eyes. “Do you think my parents will get divorced?” she asked.

“What?”

“I think they might be getting divorced.”

The heat of the light was making Alice’s forehead prickle. “Did they tell you that?”

“My dad wants to move up north, near his mine. He said if Mum won’t go with him, that’s it.” She tightened the lock of her elbows. “I don’t want to move away.”

Alice groaned and leaned against the doorframe.

Sarah squinted. “What?”

“I don’t feel well. I’m going to go lie down.”

Sarah sprang free from her knot, pouting with concern. “Oh, sorry. I hope you feel better.”

“Yeah.” Alice waited. “Are you going to get out of Nathan’s room?”

“Oh, whoops!” She went to the shelves and grabbed a book. “I just wanted to get this,” she explained, finally going out into the hallway. Feeling dizzy, Alice lay down on her brother’s bed, hoping it would stop Sarah from coming back in. She didn’t trust her.

When she opened her eyes Sarah was still there, watching. The younger girl smiled instantly. “Night-night. Do you want me to tell everyone not to bother you?”

“No, don’t.”

“I’ll make sure they leave you alone,” Sarah trilled as Alice closed her eyes again.

She wouldn’t be surprised if the Grants did get divorced, she reflected, stretching out on the cold sheets with relief. Mrs. Grant was always at their house without Mr. Grant, talking about how hard her life was with such a useless husband. Except Mrs. Grant had a big house and a new car and nice clothes, and Nathan said a cleaning lady and an ironing lady came over sometimes. That must have come from Mr. Grant’s money, because Mrs. Grant was a teacher like Alice’s dad and they didn’t have any cleaning people, not even when Laura was working. Mr. Grant, when you did see him, was always eating things or scowling. He was creepy. Alice used to like Mrs. Grant, with her strong legs and runner’s discipline that reflected Alice’s own. She’d wondered what it would be like to have a mother who understood training and diet and dedication. But Mrs. Grant didn’t seem to get anything out of her exercise, unless you counted the little clothes she wore to show off her tanned body. A properly fit body wasn’t meant to be attractive, Alice believed, imagining the thick shoulder and thigh muscles of the swimmers she envied; a fit body was just utilitarian, functional.

Alice wondered if Mr. Grant liked Mrs. Grant’s body, then realised he probably didn’t, if they were going to get a divorce. Why did people even *get* married? Alice had never had any interest in it, though it might be something she would have to do now, since she wasn’t going to get into the Olympics.

Face buried in her brother’s pillow, Alice could feel tears welling behind her eyes. Through the open door she could hear old music; her dad’s awful Traveling Wilburys obsession. She coiled herself into a tight ball against the doona.

In her mind she drifted to the bottom of the pool, knees tucked to her chest, bottom gently grazing the black line. Everything fuzzed green-blue, her eyes stinging sharply without her goggles. When she exhaled, her gaze followed the bubbles to the surface, where the slow-motion kicks of white legs cut the crystallised light. A red rectangle moved over her; Portia’s foam kickboard.

The water was velvety, the exact temperature of her skin. Easing into a starfish position, she realised that the feeling of solitude she loved didn’t just come from her endless laps across the surface; here at the bottom, her mind was equally buoyed. The

waterlogged clicks of the pool echoed in her ears, faint shouts and laughter and whistles. Her hair drifted around her face like seaweed. She hoped they wouldn't see her down here and dive to retrieve her. It was so nice, even if it was hard to breathe.

The lights went out and the hard fibreglass at her back went soft. She was in her brother's room. Was the party still going? A figure stood silhouetted in the doorway. "Nate?" she tried, but it didn't respond. "Sarah?"

The figure moved.

"Sarah," she croaked. "I feel really sick. Can you get my dad?"

Stillness again. She felt so hot her face and armpits hurt.

"Ask my dad to come here," Alice said, and the figure went away. Relieved and exhausted, she closed her eyes and sank back into the comforting suspension of the pool. From below, the slap of Portia's kickboard sounded like a door closing.

## 23. Surprise

All was right with the world. His wife shimmered in her metallic outfit. His mother-in-law's companion, Bosco, had become his great friend, and, by staying deep in conversation with him, Rob had managed to avoid Miles Whatley's eyes. The female guests all loved Nathan, this thirteen-year-old who didn't yet loom lankily over them and sneer through a sparse moustache, and one at a time went up and asked him about school and the little plays he did. Rob beamed and held Laura tightly.

It was fine that they'd crouched on the bricks for half an hour, waiting. That was really his fault: when Laura had gone out again that afternoon, after her mother left, he'd been so relieved at not actually needing to find someone to distract her that his tired brain again confused the two thoughts, making it so that Laura *had* been taken out and would be home for the cheering masses at seven o'clock on the dot, as planned. And the surprise, well, he was silly for thinking things would go the way they did on TV. It had been his idea to have her out all day, as well, so no wonder Natey and Allie had so much trouble getting her up off the couch! But it'd all turned out fine: no one had left, and in the interim there was plenty of wine. If he remembered earlier events for too long, he just had another sip. There was so much of it, after all.

Apparently, Harry Bosco was having difficulty sourcing wine at a reasonable price from an up-and-coming Riesling producer near Pemberton. It was a fine balance between keeping a name for himself in the wine club as someone who could source good wine, and being known as someone who could source *cheap* wine, he stressed to Rob. And the members, they didn't understand. Oh, Abby did, she was a gem, happy to pay twelve dollars for a bottle that was really worth it, wasn't she wonderful,

Robert? but some of the others thought everything should be eight bucks a bottle, since he was buying in bulk. Bulk! They didn't know what bulk *was*! Some of these places were getting multiple-thousand-bottle orders from BWS for *nine dollars* a bottle, for crying out loud, and these old geezers, pardon his language, thought they should be able to get a six-pack for forty-five dollars flat! I mean!

Rob, who taught economics to Year Tens, sipped his shiraz and nodded thoughtfully. He felt Laura slide out of his grasp, but Harry was still talking and it felt rude for him to leave, too. When the man finally stopped for a cheese-and-olive cracker Rob looked around and saw her standing with the old university crowd: Caroline, Sandra and Helen. Laura had slotted herself into the group but Caroline and Sandra hadn't made quite enough room between them, so she had one shoulder angled towards them. They were all bending in a little to better hear Helen, who was softly-spoken, and to Rob it looked as if the group might suddenly fling itself backwards in a version of the Hokey-Pokey. The thought reminded him again of Jason Berwick falling, and he sipped wine to stop the memory.

He wondered what Laura would think of what he'd done that day. If he led her into the garage now and told her all of it: the early-morning start; the stress of the party increasing with the wine problem and Ben's delays; Jason's sneering face at his car window and then in class, goading him; the loss of control, the sho – *push*. Should he tell her about his meeting with Anna Cavill, in case the Berwicks went through with their threat to sue, and a current affairs crew started banging on the door?

Laura was frowning at something Helen said. Rob cupped his wineglass and took another deep swallow.

Then Caroline was next to him, all of her shining under the decorative lights of the patio. She'd arrived early in a skin-tight red dress and lots of suggestively dangling accessories, and Rob had to have a drink every time he looked at her. Milton stood a foot away, staring at the fence.

"This is going so well," Caro enthused, red lips puckered over her drink. Rob felt the flickering déjà vu of the principal's office again and he realised that *Anna* had actually reminded him of *Caroline*, of the school Ball they'd gone to together. They'd been broken up by then but remained partnered, the two of them matching in red – dress, tie, lipstick. The night had been strange, slippery, full of meaningful looks. Dancing to "Time After Time", Caroline had clutched him and he'd clutched back. Was this what happened after you had sex with someone? he'd thought, unable to look

away from her. Break-ups with the other girlfriends had all been easy, relatively emotionless. Not so with Caroline. He wanted to kiss her but didn't think he was meant to. She looked at him and pouted her big red lips and oh Jesus. But then Mark came late with his cousin, Joy, on his arm.

Laura had moved away from Helen and stood on the grass, hugging herself and talking to her mother. He said, "Good."

"Laura looks so pleased, don't you think? So nice to be surrounded by the people you love."

When he didn't say anything, Caroline narrowed her eyebrows. "So, do you like my dress?"

He was afraid to look. "Of course."

Next to them, Milton hooked his hands in the pockets of his jeans and went into the garage. Rob saw little Jessie Grant watch her father from where she was slouched in a lawn chair, her chopstick legs not touching the ground. When the kid's moony gaze fell on Rob he tried to grin at her but got nothing back. Jessie had always been a miserable child. It was as if the colic that seized her as a baby had never really gone away, making her shift with discomfort and grizzle endlessly. Rob remembered seeing the tiny baby in the hospital – he was the first to visit, since Milton had been up north at the time, trying to secure contracts – and the outrage that creased her face as she rocked dementedly in her carrier. "Pick her up," Caroline encouraged exhaustedly, and Rob wondered if post-birth delirium had rendered her deaf.

Rob found it difficult to admit he didn't like a little kid – they couldn't help themselves, after all – but he hadn't liked Jessie. Her squeals made him feel like his jaw would crack from tension, and every time he held her, pressing his hand to the small forehead and humming forcefully to try to shut her up, he felt such a profound disconnection from the scrunched-up face he thought he might drop her. Laura liked to tease him and pretend she wanted another baby when they visited Caroline, but Rob knew she must be joking. She even acted upset when he told her he wanted to get a vasectomy, though after he'd had the snip the teasing stopped. She must have felt as badly as he did that it was their best friend's child who made them want to get sterilised.

Rob glanced around the rest of the party. Nathan stood in a corner with Charlie and Joan from their old street, the gelatinous old hands gripping his shoulders. Looking at his son entertaining their former neighbours, Rob was reminded of himself

as an eleven-year-old, doing yo-yo tricks for the lady clients at his dad's work. "He's such a lovely boy," the women would whisper loudly as Mick showed them in to his office, winking at Rob cheerily over the tops of their heads. He felt that same pride now, looking at Nathan. Of course, he was also proud of his daughter, even if he couldn't see her. "Where's Allie?"

Caro sipped her wine slowly. "Hmm?"

"Where's –" He smothered a hiccup. "Where's Alice?"

She shrugged. Her raised eyebrow was slightly leery.

The sliding door rumbled open and Sarah Grant stepped onto the patio. "Sarah," he said, and she looked around, pouting instantly. "Have you seen Alice?"

"She's sleeping."

Rob checked his watch.

"Swimming tomorrow," Sarah explained.

He remembered his chat with Coach Mendelssohn that morning; the way his daughter's dreams had been felled like noble old-growth jarrah. She was actually going to go back, after that?

"She said to let her sleep."

"Righto."

Caroline was staring at him. He thought for a second that she was trying to read his mind and he lifted his wineglass to his forehead. Nothing could penetrate the shiraz blanket. Realising his stupidity, he dropped his elbow and sloshed cherry-coloured liquid over his hand, but she didn't seem to notice. She proffered her own glass. "Cheers!"

Someone heard them, and the sentiment repeated through the party. So that was the toast. No need for champagne after all, thank God. Then the guests seemed to expect cake, and his mother-in-law went inside to get it. Laura was left standing there, looking bewildered at the sudden commotion. Beside them, Miles waved at him encouragingly, but Rob just put his face in his wineglass.

As soon as everyone started to sing he felt his eyes go hot, that Pavlovian reaction to sentimentality and good feeling. It took him a moment to realise he wasn't actually singing, and so he joined in on the final line with gusto. "Hip hip," he called, and the guests responded, "Hooray!" "*Hip hip*," he screamed, and their reply was duller. He stopped. Was that enough times?



People started bringing presents through from the kitchen. Nathan rushed back inside to give Laura her gift a second time. Rob watched his wife carefully thread her thumb under line after line of sticky-tape and carefully unwrap one-dollar paper from variously-shaped boxes. He could feel his every corpuscle swelling with wine, which was in his mind a similar colour and density to blood. As he strode over to the garage to get his own gift, he tried not to look at the ground, where the bricks floated either two centimetres above or below the soles of his shoes, like he was looking along the base of his glasses, where the perspective changed. He wasn't wearing glasses.

He'd forgotten how heavy his present was. It had been sitting in the garage for a month now, slotted behind the old table-tennis table and covered with tarpaulin. Burning with fear that his idea would somehow be taken away from him (Laura getting it done herself, problems with upsizing, delays at the printers, a nuclear strike), Rob had started organising it in June. It was ready in a week. He remembered driving into town after school on the last day of the month and heaving it into the boot of the Toyota, his upper arms wobbling with the strain and excitement. It was the biggest, best picture he'd made for her yet.

Of course he knew Nathan had given her a photograph for her birthday as well, but that was different. It was Rob's thing to enlarge Laura's genius for display on their walls, though he hadn't done one for a long time because of the move. But it was tradition, and this was an important birthday, so he'd gone searching. Luckily, flicking through the "Pictures" folder in their computer, he happened to come across some of the best images Laura had ever taken. Though they were unlabelled, he knew she'd never shown them to him: he would remember these. So it would be a double surprise.

He noticed Milton was still in the garage, reading the instructions above the Sinclairs' reticulation system. Rob smiled at him. "Coming out for gifts, Milt?"

"Caroline will give her ours," Milton muttered, upending his beer.

Rob got a grip on the frame and lugged it through to where his wife sat with Abby at one elbow and Nathan at the other. Laura saw the wrapped package resting against his thighs. "What's that?"

His cheeks aching from the stretch of his grin, Rob carefully laid it down on the table. "Happy birthday, darling."

"Wow, Dad," Nathan muttered.

Laura knew what it was, of course. Seventeen years married. "I haven't taken any pictures recently."

“I’m not actually sure when you took it.”

She frowned briefly and tore the paper open. Rob had laid it face-down, so the rip revealed blank plasterboard and nothing else. He, Harry and Nathan set about turning it around for Laura, who sat back in her chair, the fine wobbling of one cheek showing that she was chewing the inside of her mouth with wonder.

He still couldn’t believe his wife had taken such a photo. It was perfect. The clarity of rock in the foreground with a beach behind, a slim cap of water separating sand from stone. Above the bay were scrubby rivets of stooped land, a seam of wooden steps cutting perfectly through the centre. The beach was empty but warmth was just beginning to fill it, with gold filtering into the cool blues and greys tingeing the left of the image. The scene was familiar, and something bloomed in Rob when he looked at it. Laura was by nature a modest person, but he couldn’t believe she’d never shown this one off. It was gorgeous.

They tilted it towards her and Laura gasped as the glass caught the light. For a second Rob thought she must be delighted, and maybe she was. So delighted the family collage she’d been holding slipped from her hand and over the silk of her skirt, smashing on the ground.

## 24. Swingers

It was cold in the park that night. While cycling there as fast as he could Nathan's shoulders and thighs burned, warming his whole body, but now the hairs on his legs and arms stood up from their tiny mounds and the only heat to be found was deep within his armpits. He crossed his arms tighter and leaned against the pole of the swingset, trying to be cool.

Candice had picked up the phone almost on the first ring, as if she'd been waiting. He barely said hello, he was so furious at all the pouty old faces who offered useless sympathy when his gift cracked across the bricks. *D'you want to meet at the park?* Her voice was funny when she said okay, but he didn't have time to think about that. He just needed to get out.

As he glided away from the house, trying to get his footing properly on Allie's bike – it was the easiest one to get to in the garage – Nathan had almost been knocked over by a car door opening onto the footpath. He jerked the handlebars in the opposite direction, bending them to such an angle he had to plant a foot on their neighbour's lawn and hop off as the bike collapsed against him. One pedal caught his shin. "Ow!"

"Shit mate." The offender stepping out of the taxi was his Uncle Ben, huge-shouldered in his coat, long mouth twisted in concern. "You okay?"

"Hi, Uncle Ben."

Ben smiled and to Nathan there was a blown-egg hollowness to him. He couldn't really be the way he was all the time; it must have been such an effort. Nathan knew this, as an actor.

Ben took his arm. "How are things, nephew mine?"

“Good.” Nathan tried to mirror his enormous smile but didn’t have the facial muscles for it. “How are you?”

“Being stuck at Cairns Airport all day is *not* for the faint-hearted.”

Nathan had no idea what he was talking about. “Oh, right.”

“And how is your good mother?”

“Good.”

When Ben hugged him he smelled of rich amber cologne spread over manliness – day-old skin, light sweat, a touch of alcohol and spiced foods. Nathan wondered what he smelled like to his uncle. “It’s good to see you,” Ben said, his voice less sonorous now.

“You too.” Released, Nathan stooped to pick up his bike.

“What’cha doing?”

“Oh.” He realised how rude he looked, biking away from his mum’s party at full speed. “It’s just, I’m meeting this girl.”

When he got serious Uncle Ben’s white eyebrows ran together in a straight line. “It’s your mum’s birthday.”

“It’s okay, we did the cake.”

When Ben kept looking at him, Nathan could feel anger lighting up under his guts. He had done everything he could for this birthday. He’d woken his mother up and dealt with the slick coldness she poured over everything like an ice-rink. He’d come home after the weirdest day at school ever, thinking he could have five minutes alone, and opened his eyes from his cooling floor-nap to see his dad standing over him with a face like someone had killed his dog and a leaking balloon in his hand. Then the crap at the front door, with his mum refusing to get up and go outside. He’d been humiliated. *Humiliated*, he thought, relishing its suitable dramatics. And then the *pièce de résistance* – his mum ruining his present. She’d apologised and said she’d fix it, but that wasn’t the point. That was *completely not* the point.

“I won’t be long,” he’d muttered, struggling to get Allie’s bike upright on the footpath as the front wheel-frame kept turning into itself. His sweaty palms couldn’t get a proper purchase on it. “*Shit!*”

From behind came his uncle’s big hands, catching the bike at the seat and handlebars and steadying it. “Thanks,” Nathan said, slipping one leg over, but Ben didn’t let go.

“You seem upset.” In the moonlight Ben’s face was wide with sympathy.

“Mum broke my present.”

“I’m sure it was an accident.”

“Sure.” Nathan looked down at the handlebars.

“Your mum loves you, Natey.”

He kicked at the pedal, making it spin. “Then how come she’s so mean sometimes?”

His uncle let go of the bike with surprise and Nathan almost tipped over again. “Things have been hard for her, since she lost her job.”

She could be mean when she was working, too, but Nathan didn’t say so.

“Will you be home before the party finishes?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know.”

He pursed his long lips. “It would be nice.”

Nathan shrugged and Ben finally let go of the bike. “You should be wearing a helmet,” he said wryly, and Nathan stamped his foot against the pedal until he got it at the right angle and rode away.

Shaking a little in the breeze, Nathan tucked his hands deeper into his armpits and started wandering around the playground. He was more nervous than cold, pacing across the soft tar padding that stopped kids breaking their coccyx as they came off the slide. Under the weak floodlights, he knelt to test the sponginess with his hand, pushing at it and then bouncing on it with the side of a fist. When he stood up again, Candice still wasn’t there, so he sat the wrong way on the belted baby swing, with his bum cheeks in the leg-holes and the back-strap fastened over his crotch. It pulled too tight when he tried to swing, the metal hook cutting into the soft white skin above his pubic bone, so he moved across to the regular one. Just as he pushed off, Candice appeared.

He stopped. “Hi.”

“Hi.”

She stood next to a light-pole on the edge of the playground, an arm twisted around it and behind her back. She stared down at her left shoulder. Her dark hair was out of its ponytail and it looked really pretty.

“Sorry about today,” Nathan said. “I wanted to wait for you. To walk home.”

“I know.”

They didn’t say anything for a minute. Nathan spun in his seat, twisting the chains around themselves. They squeaked.

After a while, Candice's chin twitched like she was going to look at him, but she didn't. "How was the party?"

He shrugged. "It took ages for Mum to come out for the surprise."

"Really?"

She was smiling, so he continued as if it was funny. "Yeah. We're all like, just come outside for a bit, just come outside, but she's sitting in her chair going *No thanks, I'm too tired!*" Candice giggled at him. "So eventually Allie has to go back into the lounge room and tell her that everyone's outside and she'd better come."

"No way!"

"Everyone else was hiding from the time she got home until she finally came outside. Took about twenty minutes."

"No!"

He wasn't sure what to say next so he started to swing, just a bit at first but then, when Candice finally looked at him and there was a matching swinging *whoosh* in his stomach, higher and higher, so that he could feel the tug in his legs as he pushed himself. The air against his skin was pleasant now. It was such a nice feeling he thought he should do it more often, but then he thought of the Year Elevens on the oval after school: "Gay." "Poofter."

He wondered if Allie got this feeling when she swam. If that was why she did it.

Candice had unlaced herself from the pole and was stepping towards him. "That looks fun."

"Whee," he responded, nervously missing the beat of the back-and-forth and kicking his legs against himself.

Like a hesitant bird, Candice took a few seconds to resolve herself and walk over to the other swing. When she sat, her hips wouldn't fit and she perched awkwardly on top of it for a bit, then slid off. "It's too small."

He reversed his kicking, pushing out during the backfall and backwards on the rise, shortening his arc. When he'd stopped, he took his hands off the chains, releasing the sweaty scent of metal. "You want a go?"

In the pause, Candice resumed the look she'd had in drama that morning: tilted chin, big eyes through her fringe, strange lips. He felt his stomach swing again. "We could go together."

He wasn't sure what she meant. "Okay?"

Candice walked over to his swing. He was a little frightened by the look on her face. With a deep breath she lifted her leg and threaded it between his waist and the metal chain, her inner thigh resting partially on the edge of the rubber seat and partially against his hip. Taking the chains in both hands, she hoisted herself off the tarred playground surface and eased her other leg through the same space on Nathan's left side, pushing her hips forward to get her balance. The swing bucked wildly and bits of Candice's heat and fabric pushed up against bits of Nathan's. When the swing settled she was left sitting in his lap as they stared at each other.

Nathan was very aware of his breathing. Night air and anticipation had brought his childhood asthma back, and he tried not to wheeze. The more he noticed his breaths the more they seemed out of sync, the inhalations long and ragged, the exhalations truncated with worry about her smelling the cheese pastries he'd eaten at the party and climbing off with rocky disgust. He noticed they were making eye contact and immediately looked away. That was no good either: there were her breasts, closer to him than they'd ever been before.

Her thighs tightened against his hips and he realised she was pointing her toes straight down, trying to get purchase against the soft ground. Her centre of gravity was thrown forward so their chests touched. He gasped.

"Oh, did I hurt you?" she asked.

He wished he had some Ventolin. "No. Um, Pozzo –"

"Can you not call me that any more?"

"Um, okay."

"Let's swing," she said, scrabbling a bit against the ground and then leaning back into the swing, pushing her legs out again and then tucking them back, pushing them out and tucking them back. Every time she did the mystery point at the top of her thighs came a tiny bit closer to his own.

"So Hippolyta," he said. "That's a good role."

Together they were heavy and inert, the swing rocking reluctantly, and Candice was beginning to show the effort. "What?"

"It's small but it's good."

She huffed. He wasn't sure if it was exertion, or annoyance.

"I could call you that instead."

Candice took a moment to hear him. "What?" she said again

"Hippolyta. And I'll be Lysander."

After a second he felt the muscles in her thighs slacken and her warm weight slide backwards a little. “What are you talking about?”

She was definitely annoyed. He looked over her shoulder into the black park. “I mean, special nicknames. I wouldn’t give Di – Sarah – one. Stage Manager, you could call her, actually. Such a stupid job, hey.”

Her bum was on his knees now, her breasts rearing away from him. The swing had stopped and he was tilting forward a bit. “Nathan.”

He knew what he should say. It should be something like, “Just joking” or “Never mind”, only that wouldn’t turn things around fast enough: it had to be “You’re really pretty” or a suave, whispered “Come here” like in the movies, and then the kiss, because why else would she have put her face so close to his except that she thought he would kiss her. Only he couldn’t do it. His asthma, his panic, he would cough into her face. Clash teeth, bite her tongue, get stuck in her braces. She was squashing him. She had a pimple on her chin anyway. He fixed his eyes on it. “Did you know Sarah’s parents might be getting a divorce?”

Getting off was harder than getting on. Candice twisted angrily, yanking a whole leg out and then tipping dangerously after it. Her right thigh was hot against his crotch and he winced. She couldn’t get her left leg underneath her and finally slid off, grabbing at his shirt in a flail for balance and pulling him over her onto the ground. One of his knees stung as the skin grated off. Splayed on the asphalt, her shinbone pressed against his penis and his face was in her armpit. This close, her smell was sharp: soap, evening, frustration.



## 25. Dislocation

It was ten-thirty and the party was winding down, tired-eyed guests slipping into their four-wheel drives and peeling out into the quiet street. The music had been turned down. In the backyard Laura sat in a circle of lawn chairs with the other dregs: her brother, Ben, one hand gently reassuring his belly while the other held a Scotch; her mother, with her male friend standing behind her; Caroline in her skimpy dress; her husband, Milton, who regarded the rest of them with dark birdlike eyes; and Rob. When she looked at her husband she heard the whine of dozens of fast-moving flies, their fat black bodies zipping out of her line of sight just the way they had when she'd come back from London eighteen years earlier.

During the evening Rob's geography-teaching friend, Miles, and his wife had done their party-guest duty and taken her aside to give her a gift, praise her outfit, and make fairly large small talk about their upcoming long-service-leave trip to New Zealand. Then Miles said, "Rob's handling it awfully well, isn't he?"

Laura was locked in her own head, trying to work out what she was going to say to her husband about the photograph, about the bank account, about so many things, so she said "He's done a good job", meaning the streamers and cracker biscuits with capsicum faces.

Miles leaned closer and Gwen mirrored him. "Can I say, if I had the kid in my class, God knows I'd want to wallop him every day."

At first Laura, confused, had assumed they were talking about Nathan, the only boy-child all three of them knew. She felt a roller-coaster drop in her stomach, scary and sickening but with a thin rippling edge of thrill, at the thought of Rob smacking

him. They'd never hit their kids: Rob refused to, saying it would scar them, and while Laura wasn't morally opposed to it, on the few occasions it might have been justified they'd both seemed too tiny, too composed of cartilage rather than strong resilient bone.

Then Miles kept talking and it was clear that Rob hadn't laid a hand on Nate but on a kid at school. Laura quickly worked out that she should pretend she already knew; that her husband had told her in the spirit of open communication and sharing within the glorious union of marriage, and that she was grave and concerned even though she didn't know what the hell was going on. Looking past Miles to Rob, she hadn't known what to think. There was the man she'd known for twenty years, who talked about the joy of developing young minds with such earnestness you almost forgot the cliché of the sentiment; there was the man Miles Whatley described, who compromised the quality of those minds by shoving their smart-arse owners around; and there was the man stretching his arm around the shoulders of a guest and waving his empty wineglass in the air like a maraca. What was she supposed to say to these men?

The black spot of a fly flashed in the corner of her vision.

Ben was regaling the circle with the story of his day in far-north Queensland after a passenger had cramped up halfway to the toilets, vomited twice, and collapsed mid-way between Beijing and Kingsford-Smith Airport. This caused panic and disgust among the surrounding passengers, a couple of whom were so appalled by the half-digested fish curry trailing the aisle, they threw up in their own laps. Ben described his difficult landing in Cairns with glee, the rapid descent and strong headwinds making another dozen of them sick. Two hundred passengers and crew sitting in a plane stinking of seafood chyme and sweaty revulsion while the ambos took out the collapsed passenger on a stretcher.

The appearance of her big brother, just five minutes after she'd been presented with *that* picture, had definitely been her favourite gift, better even than being left alone. She wanted everyone else to go away so she could grab Ben and cry into his shoulder like Nathan used to when he was little, body heaving and startled, and have her broad capable brother fix her. Ben was the only one who knew about the terrible, mind-altering migraine she'd suffered through the previous June; the only one who knew about the money she'd hidden; the only one who knew she'd quit art school

instead of officially failing it. Right now, she felt like he was the only one who knew her.

This was not, she knew, a particularly grown-up thought to have. Nor was it particularly realistic. Ben could only save a person for so long: just look at his marriages.

She looked around the circle. Caroline crossed her legs and smiled as Rob, sitting beside her, used his arm to breach the gap between them, holding her plastic armrest as if it were a hand.

Laura stood up suddenly, her chair scraping against the bricks, and Ben pursed his lips over his story. "I'm just going in for a minute," she said, to weak protests. Inside she sought refuge at the sink, downing three glasses of water in chunky swallows. Her stomach distended, Laura wiped a shaking forearm across her wet chin. Through the window she could see everyone else still leaning in from their chairs, laughing at whatever Ben was telling them now. Laura was beginning to feel dizzy and vague, like when she'd woken up immobilised on the bathroom floor in Denmark the previous June. Detached from the world. She refilled her glass.

The sliding door opened and Rob was there, one hand held to his head as if protecting a hat from a strong wind. For a second Laura had a strong sense of dislocation: she didn't know him *at all*, this man with the deep print of sweat in the underarm of his shirt; he was unfamiliar, an uninvited guest, an intruder.

She dropped her glass into the sink and the crash awakened her. It was her husband, they were married, they had kids. She'd chosen all this.

"Did I surprise you?" Rob asked apologetically, hovering in the doorway.

"I was just thinking."

"Oh." He stepped through and closed the door behind him. Laura retrieved her glass, righted it, filled it again. He watched her with a distracted half-smile, looking pale. Well, he had orchestrated a surprise party, and also apparently attacked a child. It had been a full day. She drank deeply, watching him over the tilted rim of the cup. "Having fun?" he asked.

Swallowing, Laura reflected. Though the evening hadn't been as bad as she'd assumed it would when Alice told her to come outside, she couldn't call it "fun". Could she tell him she'd rather have been left alone? Shouldn't he know? She put the cup back in the sink. If he knew, he wouldn't have thrown the party in the first place.

Maybe he, too, had felt the same dissociation, the mini-stroke strangeness, when thinking about what she might want.

“It was a nice idea,” she said.

Rob leant against his forearms on the breakfast bar. His forehead was sweaty. “Laura,” he said. It was strange to hear him say her name. “I’ve done something bad.”

He dropped his head and his shoulders shifted, but it was only when she heard the syrupy inhalation of breath that she realised he was sobbing.

“Miles told me.”

Her voice came out harder than she’d intended, so she put a damp hand on his back. He felt warm.

“You shoved a kid,” she continued, trying to be gentler.

Her husband lifted his head, his eyes red-rimmed whirlpools of fear. “Pushed.”

He moved suddenly, edging her out of the way of the sink. Bending double, he opened his mouth and she gave a short scream at the scarlet current that came out, thinking it was blood. Through the window, the ring of their remaining friends all turned to look.

Rob finally pulled back, his breathing coming quick and burnt. He drew the back of a hand across his face miserably.

“That isn’t blood, is it?”

“It’s wine.”

“Why did you drink so much wine?”

He squinted at her. “Why do you think I drank so much fuh-hucking wine?” he hiccuped.

She didn’t say anything. Through the window, Caroline lifted her shoulders and eyebrow to demonstrate concern. Laura shook her head.

Rob groaned and Laura thought he might throw up again. Then he closed his eyes and said, “I *pushed* a kid.”

“Why?”

He said something she didn’t catch.

“What?”

“I think I might be a violent person.”

So many times over the years Rob had managed to comfort her, becoming a human straitjacket around her insecurities, and all she could do was pat him as if he were a dog. It was a strange effect of being married for such a long time, she had

found, that you could only summon pure emotions for your partner during some sort of crisis, when things were occurring at a heightened frequency, leaving you deaf to all other niggles and complaints. Or maybe it was just her. She felt suddenly *drowned* by love for him: the same as when her father died and she watched Ben lift the coffin onto his teenaged shoulder; the same as when she woke in the cold park in London and lifted her camera towards the beauty of the rising sun; the same as in the hospital bed holding her tiny baby, Alice, the little face still screwed and blotchy from birth; the same as when she'd unwrapped the framed picture of the Firth of Forth on their six-month anniversary and looked up in wonder to see Rob crouched on one knee, his face rosy and open. She tried to hold onto it. This was how you were supposed to feel. This was family.

She'd opted out of her life, she realised, watching her warm, stoic husband cry like a child. First she'd opted out of her art by choosing Rob's safe offer of a family instead, and then later, simultaneously terrified by the passionate desire for a child rising within her and petulant at her husband's denial of the third baby she knew would fix all her mistakes, she'd opted out of her family by scurrying back to art, to a late-night job and weekend trips by herself. Seven years later, with the end of all that on the horizon, she'd copied her friend in building a big new house in the outer suburbs, which was going to make everything better if a new baby wouldn't. Didn't the ads along the highway show smiling blonde families, their arms linked with joy at their new estate lifestyles? Laura knew, suddenly and clearly, that her own family would never be like that, but she couldn't even *try* as long as the secret sum of money swelled in a Subiaco bank account. The secret of it, the freedom of it let her sleep all day and wander around at night like a ghost, as disconnected as ever. Her self-imposed punishment had been leaving her camera gathering dust in a box, but she saw now that not taking photos just made her more determined to liquidate the term deposit and escape. To opt out, completely.

That afternoon, Laura had driven into Subiaco and parked outside the purple-logoed bank. The teller, who wore a smiley-faced pin on her shirt, took the investment slip from her hands, gave her an arsehole smile and looked at the clock. "Just made the deadline with this one!"

"I'd like to withdraw, please."

"Pardon me?"

"The full amount."

The teller held her fingers over the computer keyboard. “And what account would you like to deposit it in?”

“I’d like a cheque.”

The teller had come down with Friday-afternoon deafness. After a second, she looked around. “Sorry?”

“A bank cheque for the full amount.”

As the woman typed Laura felt a weird urge to explain herself, even though, with the economy the way it was, the teller must see this all the time. “It’s for a holiday.” When she didn’t respond, Laura continued, “A really big holiday. I don’t like to be extravagant, but it’s been a long time coming.”

The teller’s eyes remained on the screen as she said, disinterested, “That’s nice, are you going with anyone?”

Laura wasn’t sure how to answer.

The bank cheque was tucked carefully inside her bra. Enough money for a ticket to Europe, and then months renting Italian and Greek villas, photographing the picturesque countryside. This time she wouldn’t make the mistake of trying to be artistic or worrying what people thought, and she would be free. Snapping late into the evening or waking for the sunrise, feeling the exquisite suspension of scoping out a shot, of making angles in the mind. Withstanding icy water or the baking heat, waiting for the sun to drop or people to leave. Being alone, sleeping through the night again. Culture, history, not this endless suburbanness, with its flatpack houses whose facades were all variations on a theme: master bedroom, entry, garage; garage, entry, master bedroom; entryway straight-on to the street, entryway at angle; entryway two doors, entryway one door; garden features with shiny black stones, garden features with smooth white stones. The sheer number of permutations ensured that no two houses were exactly the same, and yet they all looked that way. Not so the Italian villas. She hoped.

But of course she wasn’t going. Even as she freed the cheque and laid it flat on the kitchen bench in front of her husband, she knew she wasn’t going. Somewhere along the line she’d chosen this man and these children, and flying away from them was never going to work. And even if it was, she realised, she still shouldn’t do it. Most of her didn’t even want to do it. She could show him the money without being afraid because it was now theirs again. She had to come back in.

The side door opened and Milton Grant came inside, his younger daughter slung sleepily over one shoulder and Sarah trailing behind. “You okay, Rob?” he asked, not looking at either of them.

Laura’s husband was staring at the cheque and didn’t speak.

She turned on the tap, washing the remains of Rob’s regurgitated wine down the sink. “Where’s Caroline?”

“I don’t know.” Milton hitched Jessie higher so they couldn’t see his face.

Laura took a step back and aimed at the ceiling, “Natey? Allie? The Grants are leaving.”

“Dad,” Sarah Grant muttered into her father’s elbow, “Let’s just go.”

“Wait to say goodnight to your friend.”

When nothing happened, Laura looked at Milton. “They’re not outside, are they?”

“Haven’t seen them.”

“*Na-than!*” she hollered. “*Al-ice!*”

Ben gestured through the kitchen window. She opened it and he raised an eyebrow. “Nathan went off on his bike a while ago.”

“How long?”

“Just as I got here.”

“What about Alice?”

He shrugged. “Haven’t seen her.”

Laura turned back to the people in the house. Rob was smoothing the cheque out with a shaking hand, a drop of red syrup hanging from his lip. “Where is she?”

Sarah Grant played with her ringlets. “Maybe she went with Gogo.”

“I told you to stop calling him that ridiculous name,” she snapped.

Milton shifted Jessie. “We really have to go, Laura.”

“You’re leaving without Caroline?”

He didn’t say anything. Jessie looked up from his shoulder with eyes like puddles.

“Alice!” Laura shouted, staring at Sarah. “*Alice!*”

Rob finally turned around. “She’s sick.”

“What?”

“She threw up this morning, and then before the cake she said she wasn’t feeling well.”

Sarah pinched Milton's elbow. "*Dad.*"

Laura pushed past the others into the hallway. Alice's bedroom door was open, but when she switched on the light there was no-one inside. *She's sick. She wasn't feeling well.* Her daughter never felt unwell – never admitted to it, anyway. Alice was so much stronger than she was. Her chest tightening, Laura rushed through the house to the lounge, but her recliner was vacant. She checked her own bedroom. "Alice!" she yelled, rushing back to the kitchen. "*Alice!*"

Rob was staring down at the bench again and Milton and Jessie were gone. Sarah Grant stood by the kitchen table, twisting and knotting her hair. "Maybe she's in Nathan's room."

Laura's arms went rigid and she formed fists. She bent closer to Sarah and opened her mouth to say something cutting. God, she hated this kid.

But the girl must know that, she thought, retreating into the hallway again. The very way she acted was a pig-headed defence against everyone's hatred.

Nathan's door was closed. Laura fumbled with the knob, swearing as it swivelled uselessly in her hand. Angry, she rattled it and rattled it until something clicked, and she pushed it open. "Allie?" she whispered, flicking on the light.

Allie lay on the bed with her limbs spread, ugly little dress drawn up to her ribs. Laura gasped, thinking that something terrible had happened, then realised her daughter was scalded red and shining with sweat, trying to escape the heat of the fabric. She twitched like an eel on the bed.

Laura went over and put a hand on the little forehead, then pulled away at the rage of the fever.

"No swimming. No swimming."

She was delirious. Laura panicked, remembering a time she'd entered Nathan's room when he was a baby and felt the same roaring fire along his little brow. Back then, she'd been useless. "Rob!" she shrieked now. "Rob! Rob!"

But her arms were underneath the spindly form, cupping her at the superheated crook of her knees and neck. Thank God she was so small. She was so small.



## 26. Baptism

Nine-year-old Alice sat on the grass hill at the edge of the community pool, pressing her goggles into her eye sockets to test the suction. She was bored. On the rug in front of her, the Grants' new baby was making lawnmower sounds and kicking away Mrs Grant's hands whenever she tried to put on her swimmers, while a few metres down the hill Nate and Sarah played mummies and daddies with Jessie's spit-soaked teddy bear as their baby. The three of them weren't allowed to get in the pool without Mrs Grant, which was so stupid.

On the other side of the fence were the tennis courts. Through the latticework Alice could see her father standing in front of a group of kids, looping a ball high in the air in front of him and following through gently with the racquet. His sweaty blonde hair disappeared in the sunlight. When he looked over at them, Nathan showed off with misshapen somersaults and Mrs. Grant dropped the baby swimmers to wave, which made changing Jessie take even longer.

Soon after being left with the jellyfish, Alice was forced into a car with terrible Sarah at the hottest point of each day. Rob had taken on extra tennis lessons late into the afternoon, so Laura would pack Alice and Nathan up after lunch and drop them at the Grants' house on her way to work. Even though the baby was still fussy Mrs. Grant said she was happy to have them, *happy* to have them, then took them straight to their dad. Alice felt sorry for him as he went red in the sun, fumbling for his car keys so she could go hunt for coins to spend at the kiosk.

Mrs. Grant wore floral bathers that pulled down at the front with the weight of her milk-filled breasts. She kept leaning into them, plumping them against her upper

arms. At least she didn't breastfeed the baby at the pool, because the sight of the tiny wet lips pushing against the purple bud made parts of Alice curl up. Mrs. Grant took the opportunity whenever the baby suckled to teach the three of them about the wonders of human biology. Alice now knew about gestation periods and placentas and hormones and mastitis and post-natal depression, not to mention s-e-x. It was all completely gross.

Once, after Rob had picked them up, Nathan leaned against Alice in the car. She let him. "Can daddies get sad after babies are born, too?"

"I don't know."

"Then what's wrong with Mr. Grant?"

At the shops, at the pool, in the park, they were everywhere: big hairless animals, teated for their young. At Christmas down in Bunbury their four-year-old cousin, Brendan, lay in Auntie Noelle's arms, staring at them as he sucked his fingers. In the plastic dome of the corner bus-stop, two teenagers attached themselves at the face, tongues wadded together like chewing gum. Alice lay awake at night waiting for Laura to come home from work, her body tensed for bedroom voices, or worse. Only when the house went silent did she sleep.

"I've cooked the dinner," Sarah shrieked, in the throes of her game with Nathan. Bored, Alice craned around to watch. "Can you *please* pick your towel up from the bathroom floor? This house is not a hotel, even if you treat it like one."

Nathan bent and mimed picking up the towel, arranging it on the rail.

"Aren't you going to eat this meal I've cooked?" Sarah demanded, stamping a foot into a tangle of weeds and tearing it out of the dirt. "I've been slaving away!"

Nathan pretended to eat, complete with belly rub. "It's delicious! Thank you!"

He was copying their dad, of course. This seemed to enrage Sarah, who threw out her arms. "Why don't you listen to me? Why don't you listen to what I'm *feeling*?"

Nate, unsure of how to proceed, stopped. He looked to Alice for guidance but she didn't know how to listen to feelings either. She wished Mrs. Grant would hurry up.

"Oh, that's right, go to work, you always have to go to work!" Sarah yelled at Nathan, who hadn't moved. "I never should have married you!"

Looking frightened, her brother approached Sarah tentatively and slid an arm around her shoulders. She wore it for a couple of seconds, then shrugged him away.

“No,” she whined, “You’re supposed to say, ‘Who else was going to marry you? R – ?’”

“Right, that’s enough,” Sarah’s mum interrupted, yanking Jessie’s final shoulder into the swimmers and picking her up. Her furious cries were at the same time squishy and dry. “Off you go.”

It was like a starter’s pistol, the three of them clamouring down the hill and skipping across the tiles to comply with the *No Running!* order tacked to the fence. Approaching the diamond sheen of the water, Alice felt joyous relief swelling up inside her and she leapt into the air above it, spreading her limbs in the piercing midafternoon sun.

□

Too hot. Too hot. Sweat in the elbows, sweat in the knees. Cheeks on fire. The sun, the sky, everything blinding. Are her eyes closed? They hurt. She hangs there above the water, forever above the water, wanting to drop into the sweet relief, but she can’t move. She can’t move. Sand in her throat, in her eyes. The soft shimmering coldness of the pool below. She can’t move.

So it has rejected her. Keeping her here, in the harsh light. She swims to get away from the light.

Everything hurts.

There is a low drone in her ears. It sounds like her dad humming a lullaby. Her chest reverberates with the sound. *Dad?* The words can’t get through the sand. It is caked, yellowy, industrial.

It’s so hot. And yet cold at the same time, one on top of the other. Sweat-cold on top, hot at the core. Or hot outside from the sun, shivering below the skin. Both. She itches, shakes, but she can’t fall into the pool.

Humming. *Dad?*

She tries to open her eyes. Where’s Nathan? She’s supposed to watch Nathan at the pool. He isn’t that good a swimmer. He’s scared of the skimmer box sucking his guts out.

Then her feet are cool. She’s meeting the water. Softness at her ankles and knees, at her elbows. Her hair floats mermaid-like around her. Submerged, the water is

dark, elastic, sleepy, holding her in an invisible sling. The tension goes out of her. She is back.

□

When Alice came to, the first thing she saw was her mother's face, pushing nervously into her own. "Allie?" she was saying. "Are you all right?"

Alice tried to speak but all that came out was a gravelly cough. Her hands ached. Disoriented, she turned to look at them. One held the upper arm of Laura's cardigan, while the other curled around her neck and latched at the collar of her dress. Her arms around her mother. She couldn't remember the last time she'd done that.

Laura was carrying her. "You were burning up," she explained. "I was trying to cool you down. Do you feel better?"

They were chest-deep in water, Alice realised, processing things as slowly as she had that morning in the car. They were outside, the stars spreading above them. The earth hummed with trucks on the highway, and there was no one else around.

She did feel better.

Laura glanced around as well, looking embarrassed. "I just ran you down to the lake," she said. "First place I could think of to get your temperature down. A cold bath would've taken too long."

You weren't supposed to swim in the lakes. Ducks didn't even bother. The pools lay flat like mirrors.

"I think it's probably the flu." Laura shifted Alice a little in her arms. "You were getting delirious."

"Really?" she croaked, intrigued by her unusual break with reality.

"You were talking about swimming," her mum said. "You said, *No swimming, no swimming.*"

Alice swallowed with difficulty.

"All right?" Laura asked worriedly. "Anyway, you don't have to go to training in the morning, if you were worried about that. You're much too sick."

Her eyes hurt. "Mum," she said.

"Mmm?"

Alice stopped, not sure where she'd been going. "You know when you went away on that trip?"

Laura looked confused.

“When you went to Europe to take photos.”

Her mother bobbed them gently in the water, causing the coolness to rise and drop against their collarbones.

“What was it like?” she asked.

“Oh.” Laura paused. “It was a nice adventure, but not for me.” She repeated herself. “Not for me.”

Alice began to feel hot again. Laura stopped bouncing and looked at her. “What’s happened, Fishy?”

Her mother never called her Fishy.

When she didn’t say anything, Laura said, “You know, your school rang me while I was at the bank this afternoon. Did you stay home because you felt sick?”

“I went to buy your birthday present.”

In the trees, the birds began their night-time chorus. Laura said again, “What happened?”

Alice closed her eyes, but again the tears wouldn’t come. They didn’t know how to. “Jenna took me out of the top squad.”

“Why?”

She rested her head against her mum’s damp cardigan. “*No swimming*,” she murmured. “*No swimming*.” The water held her in all the places Laura couldn’t. Though her face and eyes still burned, below the neck she was cool and still.

“You’re a much better swimmer than I was a photographer,” her mother told her.

Alice was so surprised she didn’t know what to say. After a second, Laura continued, “How’s your swimming been going, though? Okay?”

“Crap,” she said, letting it out. “I’ve been so crap. I have to quit.”

Her mum looked shocked. “Alice.”

“I can’t get much under nine-twenty-five. My body won’t do it.”

After a moment, Laura asked, “What’s wrong with that?”

Beginning to feel cold, Alice tightened her grip on her mother and recited the train of logic that had been running through her mind all day, the words lit red with alarm. “If I’m not in the top squad I won’t get into the Age Championships if I don’t get into the Age Championships I won’t get into an intensive squad if I don’t get into an intensive squad I won’t get a good FINA score if I don’t get a good FINA score –”

Laura interrupted. “They won’t let you into the Age Champs if you aren’t in the top squad?”

“It’s not that,” Alice grumbled. “If I’m not in the top squad I won’t get the extra training to get my time down to a nine-twenty-two.”

“What is it now?”

“Nine twenty-four thirty-three.”

“That’s close, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Alice admitted reluctantly.

“When do you need the time by?”

“November.”

Laura pulled away to look at her for a second, then drew close again. “Did you ever think,” she said quietly, the air gentle around them, “about doing something else?”

Alice felt like she would choke. “No.”

“I don’t mean –” Laura paused, then began again. “How about long-distance swimming?”

In Alice’s mind, a tightly-closed box began to unfold itself. Its sides flattened to a bright, straight path. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t people swim much further than eight hundred metres? To Rottneest, and places like that? Didn’t that woman swim to Cuba?”

“Well, from Mexico.”

Laura’s eyes widened. “Isn’t that far enough?”

Alice giggled involuntarily.

“When I can’t get a good photo, when they keep blurring or the light is bad, instead of fixing what’s wrong, I think I’m not supposed to be there.” Laura laughed to herself. “Maybe it’s the same thing. Except you won’t give up, because like I said.” She cleared her throat. “You’re a much better swimmer than I was a photographer.”

“Do you think so?” she whispered.

“Opt in, sweetie.” Her mother was staring out across the lake. “Don’t try and avoid getting hurt. Everyone’s going to get hurt by something anyway.”

Alice’s eyes ached as the tears came.

Laura pushed herself up with a whoosh and lake water streamed off them. The night air against Alice’s soaked dress and skin was cold, and she tightened her grip on her mum as the two of them made their way back to the house. Her hot cheek pressed

tightly to Laura's sternum, it took Alice a while to realise that below the crowing of the night birds and the rumble of industry on the edge of town, her mother was making a strange sound: a seashell hum.

## 27. The End of the Line

Rob stood at the kitchen bench, slowly running his thumb over the creases in the cheque Laura had left. Five-figure sums like this should not be bent, wrinkled, or spoiled in any way. He wondered briefly if he could iron it.

Everyone had gone home except for his brother-in-law, who lay on the couch in the main room, knocked out by jet-lag. Outside, the CD player blindly selected a new song to pump into the empty backyard: “End of the Line”, by the Travelling Wilburys. The ends of streamers floated in the night-time breeze. Rob kept smoothing the cheque, trying to make it what it should be.

He didn’t know where the money had come from or what it was for. Laura had put it next to him without saying anything, and now she’d gone off somewhere. He thought he’d heard her call for him but by the time he looked up everyone had left.

One corner of the slip was bent and Rob pressed his finger against it. For some reason, his hands were shaking.

It was a beautiful amount.

The song finished and for a second the house was quiet. Rob could hear the blood moving through his body. The jaunty strings opened again, then cut off. This happened over and over in a truncated loop, like his thoughts: *Where did the money come from? What was it for? Where did it come from? What was it for?* Rob went outside to turn the skipping CD off.

“Hi.”



Caroline was still sitting out there, her silk dress riding high on her crossed thighs. She ran her fingers along the arms of the chair and smiled at him. The CD skipped again.

“I thought you went home?”

“Milton took the girls,” she said, and then frowned. “Is that blood on your shirt?”

He looked down at the dark stain. “It’s – wine.”

Caroline smirked and revolved her own wine in its glass. “At least there was plenty of it.”

“So bugging up the drinks order was a good idea.”

She laughed.

He went over to pause the CD player. When he returned, Caroline had uncrossed her legs and was holding her knees together primly, red lips still twisted into a little half-smile. “Great party,” she said.

“Exhausting.”

“Well, you put in a lot of effort.” She swigged her drink. “Too bad Laura didn’t appreciate it.”

“What?”

She counted off the indiscretions. “She wouldn’t come outside. She smashed Nathan’s present. And – where is she now?”

“She went somewhere with Allie.”

“Hmm.” Caroline pouted sympathetically. “Oh, love, don’t feel bad. You know Laur somehow finds it difficult to enjoy herself. If it was me, I would have loved it.”

Rob looked down at the cheque in his hand. “I just want to make her happy.”

Caroline sat back in her chair and skulled the rest of her drink. Lowering her glass, her smile was tired and drunk. “We’ll probably be moving soon,” she told him languidly.

“What?” The Grants had only been in their house two years, and it was bigger and nicer than the Sinclairs’. That house was why Rob had agreed to move in the first place.

“The house is too big. Milton’s having problems with his new deal and he says the market’s about to crap itself. Problems overseas.” She looked at her hands. “I don’t know.”

“You only just built.”

“People will pay for an established home,” she said. “Lazy buggers don’t want to do it themselves.”

Rob turned to take in the custard-coloured brickwork of his own home, the perfectly-laid lawn with the stone border he’d spent a weekend arranging so that none of the dirt showed below. Bags of smooth stones were expensive and bloody heavy. In the dark, the house had a dull brown tinge to it, like a bore-water stain.

“Milton’s going to move up north for a bit,” Caroline continued. Drinking wine had made the edges of her words deteriorate and leak. “Try to ingratiate himself with the community. There isn’t enough money.”

“For what?”

When Caroline didn’t respond, Rob tightened his grip on the cheque.

“I don’t want to be divorced,” she finally said. “I’m lucky the schools hire me as it is.”

“You’re getting a divorce?”

“Not if we go up north.”

“I thought things were even more expensive up there.”

Caroline ran a pointed tongue around the rim of her glass, making Rob feel tingly. “One house is less expensive than two.”

He looked around at the outdoor area. The ground was littered with crumpled wrapping paper and plastic plates. On the table, platters of crackers and pastries were going stale. Rob started to pick up bunched serviettes and used glasses, only to put them down again, not sure where to start. He should get a rubbish bag from inside and junk everything: plates, cutlery, even the broken CD player. Clear the place out and go to bed. The cheque would buy them all new things.

Holding an icing-smearred plate, he turned back to Caroline. “Are you all right?”

“I’d be good up north,” she slurred. “I’d be a novelty.”

He smiled. “You’re a character.”

“I can’t be a divorced person,” she repeated. For the first time, the plate drooping in his hand, Rob wondered, *Why not?*

A door banged shut. He put the dirty plate on the table and went inside, turning to ask Caroline if she was coming. She sat rubbing at her red lipstick and staring around the yard, and didn’t respond.

Laura was bent over in the kitchen, rifling through the medicine drawer. Her cardigan clung to her thin arms and her hair was ragged wires. She was soaked. “What happened?”

“Allie isn’t well. She was burning up, so I –” She stopped to read a packet of painkillers, shook her head, and kept rifling. “I dunked her in the lake to get her temperature down.”

Rob let go of the sweaty cheque with surprise and it wafted to the tiles. He picked it up. “What?”

“She’s feeling better now, though.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

Laura twisted around from the open drawer. “It’s fine, now.”

Soon after they’d had their second baby, Rob had come home to three-year-old Alice whimpering in the front hallway: “Natey’s sick, Natey’s sick.” From the opposite end of the house came the dying bird sounds of their six-week-old, his whole body scarlet and sweating as Laura desperately tried to hook the teat of a water bottle in his mouth. When she saw Rob in the doorway she’d given up, dropping the bottle into the crib and stepping back as if a doctor had arrived. “Do you think we should take him to the hospital?” she asked, voice coiled tightly in her throat, and when Rob lifted the baby his joints seemed to creak. Two minutes later they were in the car, Nathan lying on a soaked teatowel in his carseat, Alice on Laura’s lap. Whenever he looked around at his wife she was staring out the side window, a hand on Allie’s round toddler head to hold her in place. It was lucky they hadn’t had an accident.

Later Laura and Alice slumped in the visitors’ chairs, asleep, as Rob stood over the plastic trolley and watched thin plastic veins pump antibiotics and fluid into their son. Though he was exhausted too, he kept his gaze on the purple eyelids and drum belly. This would probably be their last baby, after all. He didn’t think his wife could cope with any more children.

In the kitchen Laura found the packet she’d been looking for and stood up. Rob stepped in front of her and held up the crumpled slip of paper. “What’s this?”

Laura glanced at it distractedly. “Oh, yeah.”

“Where’d you get it?”

“It’s some money of mine I thought we should both have. Can you get me glass of water?”

He filled an empty cup at the sink and when he looked up Laura was walking through to the front of the house. He followed her. "That's a lot of money, Laur."

"Ssh," she instructed, waving at Ben stretched out silently on a couch, his mouth cavernous.

In the front room Rob went to speak again, then saw another sleeping body: Alice, curled up on several towels in her mother's favourite recliner. Her breath was wheezy and rushed. Concerned, Rob watched as Laura checked her forehead, then shook her shoulder gently. "Allie, honey, wake up, I've got a pill to make you feel better."

Their little girl moaned sulkily. "No swimming."

"She won't be going to training tomorrow," Laura said over her shoulder, crouching to feed her the tablet.

Rob closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, remembering Alice's coach's grave words that morning. Had it only been less than twenty-four hours ago? *Your daughter takes things... Let's say, very seriously. I think Alice will punish herself enough, don't you?* Jenna was right: the bad news had made her sick.

He moved over to the couch and saw that someone had rested the blown-up photo of the rock beach against it. He admired again the perfect arrangement of scrub and sand and stone. "Such a great shot."

Laura put a finger to her lips.

"I can't believe you didn't show it to me earlier," he whispered.

"Where did you find it, anyway?"

"The computer."

Laura sat next to their daughter and began to stroke her arm.

"Which beach is it?"

"Greens Pool."

"Where's that?"

She put her face close to Alice and whispered, "Denmark."

With a crash, Rob remembered: the weekend break that went on for days. The lack of contact and the weird phone call with Julian. Laura returning to say she'd been sacked. The months without sex.

He'd balled up the cheque in his fist. Slowly he relaxed, pulling it at the corners so that it spread into a sloop. In the belly lay the five-figure amount, which may or may not have been a pay-off from Julian Ong after he slept with Rob's wife.

Rob remembered sitting in the car on his last day at the old house, wrapping up his anger and packing it away along with everything else. It was just like when he was eleven years old, standing in his friend Brad Keely's room and helping him twist newspaper around his model cars for the move up to Perth with his mum, the other boy purple with fury and held-back tears. Rob had decided not to tell Brad what he'd heard in the schoolyard about his dad and Brent Declan's mum, knowing that his friend needed any excuse to crack.

Rob looked at the photograph again. At the bottom, tucked into the frame, was the little collage Nathan had made. Someone must have untangled it from its own cracked housing and put it there for safe-keeping. Rob looked at himself and his son and his daughter the way Nate envisioned them: Allie pulling away, trying to hide behind her own shoulder so that no one could look at her directly; Rob with his wide smile, the empty space above him making him seem smaller than he really was; and Nathan, with his bare-gummed grin and bouncy-ball cheekbones. Laura was missing, of course. Like she always was.

But then he saw again the image of the beach that surrounded them, protected them from further damage. They were in Laura's landscape. She was all around them, even when she wasn't there.

Calmly, Rob knelt within himself and put his arm around the preteen versions of him and his friend Brad, comforting them against the pain that was rising up. When he let those long-suppressed feelings surface, Rob was surprised to find that instead of anger came attentiveness. He closed his eyes and in the strawberry light he saw his whole world: The cool white walls of the room he was in; the elegant lacing of golden thread through the floral-patterned curtains; the leather suite and the warm carpet. The new photograph and Nathan's collage inside it. On the walls, more pictures of bridges, of bays, of interesting geological formations. Behind the glass doors of the sideboard, lines of crystal tumblers, martini glasses, decanters; piles of cake forks and cheese knives amassed over seventeen years. His view expanded into the rooms beyond; the furniture, clothes, grocery items, present-wrapping paraphernalia, ironing boards, rattly doorknobs, exploding lightbulbs, toiletries, pictures, bent paper plates, an army of wine. All their beautiful junk.

He'd been with his wife for seventeen years, and here was what they had to show for it. And this thought was not a petty one. This was how they played their lives; in stuff. These were the traces they left. Their house, was them.

Rob opened his eyes. Laura was curled beside their sick daughter, wiping damp hair off her forehead. He noted the shape of his wife's calves, the faint imprint of nipple in her wet dress. He realised that he could just ask her what had happened in Denmark. That the knowledge, whatever it was, might help him to stop shoving students into desks.

He knew he didn't actually believe she'd been with Julian. That would have been the easy answer, the middle-class stereotype. Whatever had happened must have been much more complicated.

But then he thought, whatever she told him, what was he going to do? He needed her. He was in trouble at school. Their daughter was sick. Nathan still wasn't home. She may have spent their honeymoon not talking to him, she may have taken a job that kept her late at night, she may have barely had sex with him in over a year, she may have hated the birthday party he'd gone insane planning, she may never have fulfilled her artistic ambitions, and she may have difficulty expressing love to her mother and her children and even him, her own husband, but she was his wife and they lived in this house and she had given their daughter a life-saving baptism tonight. She surrounded them. And there was the cheque.

His brother-in-law emerged from the other room like a bear awakening from hibernation. Ben blinked. "Natey back yet?"

Rob shook his head and Ben smiled. "Not to worry."

Laura unpeeled Alice from her arm and got up to embrace her brother. They held one another for a long time, Ben stroking her hair as she pushed her face into his chest. "Okay?" Rob heard him whisper.

Laura nodded and stepped back. "You're going?"

"Airport hotel. My flight's at six a.m."

"Oh," Rob said, disappointed.

"No rest for the wicked!" Lights flashed in the front window. "There's the taxi. Be good, all." He put a wide hand on Alice's forehead and she groaned faintly. "Get better, small child."

Rob's sudden lucidity had retreated and he felt listless. Not really knowing why, he followed Ben out into the street, waiting until his brother-in-law cocked his taxi's passenger-side doorhandle to speak. "Ben."

The big man turned to him.

"Did Laura tell you about the money?"

He nodded.

“Is it from Julian?”

“It’s from the redundancy.”

“Is it –” Rob wasn’t sure how to say it. “Under the table?”

Ben frowned, his white eyebrows folding. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Embarrassed, Rob kicked at the kerb and said nothing. Eventually Ben leaned into the taxi window to talk to the driver, then pulled back and stepped closer to Rob. “When she got the whole amount she thought she might keep some for herself, because she was unhappy. Now she’s rethought it.”

“What was she going to do with it?”

Ben sighed and touched his shoulder. “She isn’t going to do it any more.”

After a moment his brother-in-law gave his arm a squeeze and opened the taxi door. As he was sliding in, Rob said, “I shoved a kid today.”

“I’m sure he deserved it,” Ben said, and closed the door.

## 28. Cake

Lying on the soft bitumen of the playground in the second before Candice moved underneath him, Nathan was going to say something. He hovered on the precipice of telling her he loved her, and all he knew was the sound of her breath, her breast next to his ear, the pressure of her shin between his legs. Time expanded endlessly, giving him the space to amass his courage. He said, “Candice.”

At the same moment, she pushed him off her like a blanket. As she stood up, Nathan noticed whatever pins and buttons she had used to hold her shirt together had come loose, revealing her entire right breast harnessed in its bra cup. The thick fabric was beige like skin, and at the apex was a little nubbin of material like a nipple. Time closed again as he watched her run down the street.

A sprinkler had come on where he'd left Allie's bike, and no matter how hard he wiped it with his shirttail the old seat stayed moist. Eventually he just got on, wincing at the wet itch between his legs. Things still felt warm and tight there from the swing so he pedalled slowly, thinking about Candice's soft inner thighs clenching around his hips and the warmth of her bottom on his lap.

To get home from the park he had to go along the main street of their estate, the one where Sarah's house was. In his daze he didn't see Mrs. Grant walking along the footpath until he was almost on top of her. He braked and momentum pushed his tender crotch into the nose of the seat.

“Nathan,” she commented as he struggled to control the handlebars for the second time that night. “What are you doing out?”

“I'm just going home.”



She put her weight on one hip. She was shaking a little in the cold and her voice was high. “Well, I hope you wore a condom like I’ve told you.”

“That’s gross,” he said without thinking, then reared back as she stepped suddenly towards him.

“What was that?”

“It’s just – I’m only thirteen.” Nathan remembered the funny feelings he’d been having all day. He wasn’t sure he liked them.

Though Mrs. Grant stood still, there was something wobbly about her. “Did Sarah tell you we’re moving?”

“What?”

“Up north.”

Stunned, Nathan shook his head. “I thought you were – she said you might –”

“We’re not getting divorced,” she interrupted. Her red lips looked bloody in the streetlights. “Sarah’s so dramatic.”

He tightened and released his handbrakes, feeling a strange relief. “Oh.”

Mrs. Grant looked along the road at their two-storey house, the biggest on the street. Following her line of sight, Nathan noticed that one of the cars was missing from the driveway. “What would I do without my husband?” she asked him. “I have to go with him.”

Nathan wondered if she really was in love with his dad. They’d been friends for a really long time, he knew; basically, Mrs. Grant was his dad’s Sarah. By that logic, even if she was in love with him, his dad most likely didn’t love her back.

When he didn’t answer she scowled at him and went back up the driveway, unsteady in her high shoes. At the front door she patted her waist briefly as if searching for her keys, but there was nothing in the tight fabric and she had to pound a forearm against the wooden door instead. There was silence from inside the house and Nathan wondered if he should go down and help her somehow, but instead he just hopped on his bike and rode away.

□

Nathan coasted up the driveway and returned Allie’s bike to the wall of the garage. It was dark and creepy in there and there was some kind of weird ticking, like a bomb or a giant threatening bug. Chest tightening with fear, he hurried into the light of the

backyard, where the CD player was lit up and clicking as it paused on a scratched disc. He went over to turn it off and saw the broken frame of his collage lying on the table, the pictures taken out of it. When he picked it up, the loosened glass fell out and onto the tablecloth, leaving his homemade papier-mâché border intact. Salvageable, then, if his mum could be bothered.

He unplugged the CD player and moved to the sliding door, then stopped. His parents sat in the yellow light of the kitchen, their heads bowed towards one another. He couldn't hear what they were saying. Rob reached out to touch a slip of paper lying on the table in front of them, and Laura put her hand on his fingers. His dad took his hand away and she picked up the slip, then put it down again. Their mouths moved as if blowing bubbles underwater.

After a while his dad went out. Laura put her head in both hands and stretched her mouth as wide as it would go. Through the glass Nathan thought she was screaming, then realised it was a yawn. He remembered how late it was and the itch of his bum from the sprinklers, and he slid open the door.

Laura looked up. "Oh, thank God," she groaned, scrabbling up to pull him into a suffocating hug. "I was just about to ring Candice's mother."

"She would have been pissed," he mumbled into her cardigan, which was damp for some reason.

He thought she would let go of him, but she didn't. She smelled vaguely of chlorine, like Allie always did, and somehow her thin arms were enveloping when wrapped around his ribcage. Then he was crying with tiredness and the misery of his chafing arse and his mistakes with Candice, and Laura didn't push him away or tell him not to show off.

Over the sounds of his snuffling, he heard footsteps on the tiles and his dad's voice. "What's wrong?"

Nathan finished and pulled away, embarrassed. His mother let him go.

Not getting a response, Rob turned to Laura. "She wants to sleep on the couch tonight."

"Okay."

"Who?" Nathan asked.

"Alice," Laura told him. "She isn't feeling well."

He wiped his face and went to peek at his sister, who lay in the front room, her open mouth small like a mouse's. He felt sorry for her.

Back in the kitchen Laura drank a cup of water at the sink while Rob rapped the thin edge of his paper slip against the table. He'd spilled wine on his shirt. "Natey!" Rob said in the jovial way he often spoke to him, which reminded Nathan of his Uncle Ben, and of himself with his mother. Could no one in this family talk to anyone else normally? "Feeling better now?"

Nathan pulled wadded wet underpants out of the space behind his testicles. "Yeah."

"Good." Rob smiled. "How would you like to go on a trip?"

"What?" He looked at Laura, who grimaced at him over a fresh glass. "Now?"

"In the summer holidays. Everyone will be free for once."

"You won't be teaching tennis?"

Laura swallowed and said, "Dad might be taking on some more administrative tasks for a while."

Nathan didn't know what that meant. "What about Alice and her training?"

"She's going to take a bit of a break," Rob said.

The world had gone mad, so he asked, "Are we going to France?"

"We'll have to see where everyone wants to go."

Disbelieving, Nathan turned to his mother again, to see if she would ruin the fun. She just rinsed out her glass, put it carefully on the rack, and smiled. An image that made him love her.

He said, "I'm hungry."

□

Outside, the table was still littered with serving bowls and plates, though not much food was left: a few smiley-face crackers, dregs of chips, a corner of cake. He took a mini fetta croissant and bit into it, teeth battling to pull the cold, hardened pastry apart. His dad joined him, scooping a hand through the remaining chips and licking them off his palm. Rob's damp eyes began to leak. "Salt and vinegar," he wheezed, reaching for one of the warm half-empty wine bottles but then grabbing a bottle of lemonade instead.

After a while the door rattled open and Allie came through, a dressing gown wrapped around her and her face bright red. Rob looked concerned, and Nathan waited for him to press a hand to her forehead and ask her how many Panadol she'd taken and

tell them that feeling unwell just made you appreciate it all the more when you felt better, but instead he just handed her a broken biscuit with some olive on it. Allie took it wordlessly, shuffling into the space between them to join the scavenging.

They ate quietly. From the highway came the gentle rustle of cars heading back from a Friday night in town. The backyard was still and there was a sliver of moon. Nathan looked for Venus but as usual couldn't find it. He took the last sausage roll and ate it in one bite, using his tongue to dislodge the cold meat from the roof of his mouth. He watched his dad and sister and felt better despite his damp bum and the cool air. It was the weekend; he was Lysander; he was a man.

Rob took a plastic fork and used the side of it to cut the chunk of cake into four equal squares. The side door opened for the last time. Laura had changed into a nightie, a proper one this time: silky and purple with green stitched flowers on it. It looked a bit like the dress Mrs. Grant had worn to the party, but much nicer. "Isn't anyone going to bed?"

Rob held a slice of cake out to her on a serviette. To Nathan's surprise, his mother stepped down onto the doormat and reached out to take it.

“‘The Explosions and the Affections’:  
Variable Focalisation and the Nuclear Family in  
Contemporary Narrative Fiction”



## Chapter One: Introduction

Gary Lambert, the eldest son of the Lambert family in Jonathan Franzen's novel *The Corrections* (2001), is a proponent of conservative family values. Raised in the post-World War II midwestern United States by traditional breadwinner-homemaker parents, he alone among his siblings yearns to replicate an apparently ideal model of the nuclear family. His wife and children do not share this desire, however, causing Gary to reflect that "the nature of family life itself was changing – that togetherness and filiality and fraternity weren't valued the way they were when he was young" (Franzen *The Corrections* 190). In fact, as the novel demonstrates, family life was complicated in Gary's childhood. Gary's experience represents the failure of lived reality to match his idealised form of family life<sup>1</sup> (Dell 180-3). This forms the basis of Franzen's novel: by accessing the inner life of each character in *The Corrections* in order to demonstrate the connection between the disappointments they experience and their ongoing familial dysfunction, the narrative shows how Gary and his family members' lives fail to meet their expectations, and force revised idealisations of the family. In this way the novel works to correct idealised nuclear family representations, established as "normative" in Western countries since industrialisation (Bittman and Pixley xii) and perpetuated through multiple forms of discourse, including the mass media<sup>2</sup>, popular culture<sup>3</sup>, and government policy<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> As sociologists Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley argue, "there are endless inconsistencies between 'the family' that most people hope for and the family as they experience it" (xi).

<sup>2</sup> Sociologist Kerreen Reiger states that, between 1947 and 1966 in Australia, the boom in consumerism was matched by advertising that "played on women's emotional responsibility for family happiness" (59). Today's advertisement of products such as household cleaners, food, and clothing is also frequently positioned this way: as one example, the website Sociological Images provides the advertising image of a product called Mr. Clean, which features a woman and her daughter with the caption, "This Mother's Day, get back to the job that really matters" (Wade and Sharp par. 1). Whether the "job" referred to is that of cleaning or mothering is up for debate. The idea of advertising promoting the ideal family lifestyle is referred to in "The Birthday Party" manuscript, as explained on p. 256 of this dissertation. Tamra Lynn Horton has completed a PhD thesis on how contemporary female writers demonstrate in their novels that "the idealised nuclear family is an oppressive and ultimately unattainable archetype staunchly preserved primarily for its serviceability to capitalism" (ix).

<sup>3</sup> As Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley argue, television programmes for example are often based on the effectiveness of a generally accepted appearance of the family: though these programmes often depict families that deviate from the myth, this is where narrative interest develops as "the viewer knows what *should* happen"; that is, what is normative (1).

<sup>4</sup> Kerreen Reiger argues that, in Australia, the government effectively constructed the "ideal family" by endorsing a "type" by, for example, setting wages (54). A more current manifestation of this can be seen in the present Gillard Government's 2011/12 Budget decision to freeze family tax benefits at a combined household income of \$150,000 or higher, a move that sparked public debate about the point at which the average family becomes "rich" (AAP, par. 1).

This dissertation will explore how *The Corrections* and two other contemporary novels, Joan London's *The Good Parents* (2008) and Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm* (1994), depict the experience of Western middle-class family life. It is argued that the presentation of each character's individual viewpoint through a common third-person narrative voice works to establish the novels' families as being at the same time a discrete unit and a group of individuals. This serves to highlight the conflicted nature of family life and the often paradoxically shared nature of misunderstandings within the group. The previous portion of this thesis, the novel manuscript "The Birthday Party", makes a similar, imaginative examination of these issues by applying the techniques utilised by authors like Franzen, London and Moody in order to tell the story of the Sinclair family in a realist style; that is, one with the following, among other, traditional characteristics<sup>5</sup>: "the use of descriptive and evocative detail"; "adhering to the requirements of probability"; "focusing on the present and choosing topics from contemporary life rather than longing for some idealised past"; "emphasising the social rather than the individual"; and using "colloquial idioms and everyday speech, as well as directness and simplicity of expression" (Habib 471).

Starting with Henry Fielding in *A History of Tom Jones: A Foundling* (1749), classic realist texts following these conventions also often deploy "the traditional omniscient narrator", according to John Mullan (43)<sup>6</sup>. This kind of narrator is able to derive and present information about characters from many sources: externally (their appearance), internally (from within their own minds), or by privileged means (those that cannot be made apparent by appearance and interior qualities alone). In *The Corrections*, *The Good Parents*, *The Ice Storm*, and my own manuscript "The Birthday Party", omniscient narrators convey characters through observation of their and others' thoughts and actions; moreover, the focus on an individual character's thoughts and actions usually extends to discrete sections of varying, though substantial, length.

The term I will use to indicate the focus on and through a particular character for an identifiable segment of the narrative is "focalisation", as outlined by the narratologist Gérard Genette (189). The justification for the term, its applications, and

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<sup>5</sup> Of course, "realism" is a problematic concept, as I go on to explore in Chapter Two; however, when the literary style is discussed, these features are often considered to be central.

<sup>6</sup> Referring to the accessing of individual perspectives, James Wood argues that "third-person 'omniscient' narration is generally more partial than omniscient" (*How Fiction Works* 6). John Mullan concurs: "Omniscience, we should say, is a way of describing potential knowledge rather than practical revelation" (43).



the implications of its structuralist source will be analysed in more length in Chapter Two. Put briefly, the focalisor can be defined as the agent “*who sees*” in a particular work (186; original italics). That is, it is the source of the perceptions that the narrator imparts. In the novels that I explore, the focalisors are usually<sup>7</sup> those members of the family that is their subject: in *The Corrections*, for example, the lives and perceptions of the five Lamberts are at the centre of the novel, with scenes, or particular sections of scenes, granting access to the thoughts and opinions of just one of them. Of course, there is a pragmatic reason for this structure: in all four narratives, the members of the family are usually not together, encouraging this switching and reinforcing the disconnection of the members. Still, when the characters are together, this is often narrated from just the one viewpoint<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, this restriction of focalisors to those belonging to the nuclear family grants readers an internal, private view of the group, revealing its complexities and misunderstandings. External viewpoints, if they appear, are brief: the family is constructed as a relatively self-contained unit.

This dissertation is thus concerned with the way that one character’s perceptions may inform a reader’s understanding of the individuals and events portrayed in various contemporary family novels. Necessarily, further questions arise: Who is the focalisor at which points in the novel and what are the resulting effects? What does that character perceive that other characters do not? How does the selectiveness of the focalisation inform other parts of the work and the reader’s understanding of the narrative as a whole? What kind of power is granted by focalisation? How is the family’s shared history represented and conveyed through narrative methods? These questions have also been tacitly considered in the novel “The Birthday Party”. This thesis, made up of the novel and accompanying dissertation, is thus an examination of how variably-focalised novels present the nuclear family, both in practice (the novel) and in theory (the dissertation).

The argument begins with a broadly introductory chapter that provides a brief background of the nuclear family structure in fiction and history and explains how this particular family formation has been mythologised and normalised in contemporary Western societies, touching on ideas of how normative presentations of family can be

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<sup>7</sup> Focalisors who are not members of the family include family friend Chuck Meisner in *The Corrections* (311), Maya’s housemate Cecile in *The Good Parents*, and neighbour Mike Williams in *The Ice Storm*; however, the perceptions of all three are narrated for less than 10 pages of each novel.

<sup>8</sup> Examples of this include Chip focalising the Christmas breakfast in *The Corrections*; Jacob focalising his family watching him through a window in *The Good Parents*; and Nathan focalising the four members of the Sinclair family wrapping up the surprise party in “The Birthday Party”.

interrogated by art and literature. The concept of focalisation and its appropriateness to family novels is then elucidated before I move into a broader exploration of subjectivity in fiction. The chapter then considers focalisation in narrative realism and provides a general history and theorisation of the literary style.

In the following three chapters I extend this survey of the cultural and literary foundations of my argument into a more specific exploration of three chosen texts: Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections*, Joan London's *The Good Parents*, and Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*. The novels are united in their focus on fracturing Western middle-class nuclear families living in the closing decades of the twentieth century and into the turn of the twenty-first.

In *The Corrections* the Lambert family gathers for its final Christmas in the fictitious American Midwest town of St. Jude, with each member perceiving the others, especially the patriarch Alfred, based on obsolete or partially revised – “corrected”<sup>9</sup> – information. I use this chapter as a means of illustrating how variable focalisation works to build up a reader's idea of the family and the characters in it. It is argued that focalisation in all fictions, and quite meaningfully in family fictions, functions to reveal more than one side to a story, making the novel into a plausibly complex representation of social and individual experience.

The de Jongs of regional Western Australia in *The Good Parents* are a nuclear family undergoing the traumatic disappearance of the elder child. In this novel London presents various forms of character perception not only to present the family as made up of individuals with their own view of the collective story, as Franzen does, but also as a means of reinforcing the changing emotional and physical distances between its members.

Finally, Moody's novel covers the day after Thanksgiving in an upper-middle-class part of Connecticut, U.S. Here, as in *The Good Parents*, the narration of the individual Hood family members' points of view works to reveal loneliness within nuclear family life. However, while in London's novel the degree to which the characters' perceptions are shared reflects the degree to which they feel emotionally intimate, *The Ice Storm*'s particular form of focalisation and narration underlines the extent to which the characters attempt to make a connection. Here, I argue, Moody

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<sup>9</sup> Other theorists who discuss what is “corrected” in *The Corrections* include Dell (171); Edwards (82); R. Poole (276); Wood *The Irresponsible Self* (202).

employs a narrator who is at the same time character-bound and omniscient in order to represent sympathy and isolation within the family unit.

In all three novels family lore is conveyed and complicated by the presentation of the thoughts, history and perceptions of each of the family members. This extended access to the characters reinforces the narratives' emphasis on social disconnection, as the use of narration and focalisation makes readers aware of the characters' sentiments and, paradoxically, their inability to communicate them. In this way Franzen, London and Moody each offer a realist portrayal of contemporary family life, as I too hope to have achieved in the creative portion of my thesis.

As in the other novels, "The Birthday Party" manuscript portrays a contemporary Western middle-class family, the members of which are all becoming increasingly disillusioned with suburban domestic life. The Sinclairs live in the new estates of outer suburban Perth: father Rob, a teacher; mother Laura, a former studio photographer and now housewife; sixteen-year-old Alice, an aspiring Olympic swimmer; and thirteen-year-old Nathan, a theatre-lover on the cusp of puberty. As in *The Ice Storm*, the narrative takes place on one particular day, in this case the day of a surprise fortieth birthday party the family has planned for Laura. Over the course of the narrative the characters' lives are complicated by a combination of their family situation and wider societal forces.

For Rob, the pressures of providing for a disengaged wife, parenting his children, and teaching those of others culminates in him physically harming a student; an event that leaves him questioning whether he can confide in Laura and, from this, the very basis of their marriage. Laura, apathetic about her marriage and family ever since the collapse of other, more artistic options, is deciding whether to go overseas alone after acquiring a large sum of money. Alice envisions her future freestyle career as an escape from the suburban existence of her mother, whose life choices she is critical of, but does not understand. Nathan's interest in performance is a similar form of escape from what he sees as the banal lives of his parents, to whom he cannot divulge his problems with school and girls.

The manuscript is therefore a study of a family who, like the Lamberts, de Jongs, and Hoods, are unable to communicate, but who see their lives in relation to one another: each character's view of the world is a result of, or reaction against, the way they see the others in the family unit. Like the other three novels under discussion,

“The Birthday Party” utilises a realist mode of presentation, cycling between individual third-person perspectives to reveal the conflicts and connections of family.

## Chapter Two: The Family in Realist Fiction

### *I. Introduction*

In contemporary English-speaking societies, the word “family” has many meanings and applications. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides over a dozen definitions, all of which operate as a means of classifying entities with some similarity or relationship: a “family” is a collection of persons, animals or objects, connected by location, genealogy, profession, religion, politics, function, or appearance (“Family” *OED*). The definition most applicable to this dissertation, and arguably the one most commonly utilised, is: “The group of persons consisting of the parents and their children, whether actually living together or not; in wider sense, the unity formed by those who are nearly connected by blood or affinity” (*ibid*). The family, then, is a group of individuals with genetic or emotional links<sup>10</sup>.

These types of relationships form a common topic of narrative fiction. Genres like the family saga, domestic novel, family romance<sup>11</sup> and family chronicle are all grounded in marriage, procreation and family life. The literary form of the novel has been the site of more explorations of family’s meanings, conflicts and significance than one could possibly count.

This chapter provides a brief sketch of the issue of families in literature and the means by which they may be represented. It is designed to provide an historical and theoretical background to the arguments made in later chapters about the function of variable focalisation in particular contemporary family novels. The portrayal of the family in narrative is far too large a topic to be surveyed within the confines of this dissertation, given the historical span of imaginative writing and the variety of methods that have been applied – both in society and in individual works – to the exploration of the concept of the family during this time. As this dissertation concerns itself with realist novels, I will locate the origins of my argument within this style and

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<sup>10</sup> The idea of family as also consisting of emotional links allows for current, shifting definitions of family that go beyond the strictly biological or nuclear forms.

<sup>11</sup> The genre of the “family romance” differs from Sigmund Freud’s concept in his essay “Family Romances”. For studies of how this kind of family romance – in which the child imaginatively separates himself from his parents by inventing a “real” family from which he has been removed – forms the basis for various novels, see Catherine Backès-Clément and J. Dickson, “Family and Fiction” and Christine van Boheemen, *The Novel as Family Romance*.

the time period during which this form came to prominence<sup>12</sup>. Even so, only a few canonical texts will be able to be examined. These have been chosen for their ubiquity in studies of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evolution of narrative form.

## *II. The family in classic realist fiction*

The origins of the word family lie in Latin terms for “household” (“*familia*”) and “servant” (“*famulus*”) (“Family” *OED*, original italics), and the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century definitions of the word thus in part conceive of the family as “the body of persons who live in one house or under one head, including parents, children, servants, etc.” (*ibid*). Two of the most well-known English novels of the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe’s *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), make references to the family in this sense. In the later stages of exile on a desert island, the eponymous Crusoe considers the small grouping of himself, his man-servant Friday, Friday’s father, and a shipwreck victim as a “family”<sup>13</sup> (Defoe 245); one he seems to develop more feelings for than he does his eventual wife and children back in England<sup>14</sup>, who are briefly and neutrally described as “not either to my disadvantage or dissatisfaction” (298). The use of the word “family” to describe those stranded with Crusoe, while also drawing on its household/servant definition, appears, I believe, to reflect his emotional attachment to the site of his exile: those who live with him at “home” are his family<sup>15</sup>.

Richardson’s *Pamela*<sup>16</sup> features the following description of the B. household by the character Miss Darnford: “I never saw such a family of love in my life: ... they twice every Sunday see one another all together ..., superior as well as inferior servants” (II: 255). Those working for Mr. B. and his wife, then, are also part of their “family”; moreover, the affinity between employers and employees makes the entire group one of “love”. The epistolary text also considers the family according to another definition, wherein being “of family” means being “of noble or gentle descent”

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<sup>12</sup> For a tracing of the origins of realism as a literary style, please refer to pp. 213-5 of this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> This is an evolution from Crusoe’s first thought regarding the two new companions, which is that he looks “like a king” with all these “subjects” (Defoe 240); still, Crusoe proves to be a fatherly king who immediately supplies Friday’s father and the Spaniard with shelter, food and a place to rest (241).

<sup>14</sup> T.G.A. Nelson draws attention to the sparseness of Crusoe’s “account of [his own] childhood” (and therefore family life) as well (195).

<sup>15</sup> Christopher Flint argues that the family arrangement Crusoe enters into on the island is a way for him to “renew the social obligations of the individual” despite being in exile (118).

<sup>16</sup> For more on the representation of family life in *Pamela*, see C. Flint (161-206).

(“Family” *OED*). Lady Davers’ early objection to the marriage between her brother Mr. B. and former servant Pamela is due to the B. family’s place as one of the oldest and greatest in England (Richardson I: 228), while Pamela’s parents are poor and in debt, though they produced “a great family” (I: 412). Here “greatness” in families is irretrievably tied to history and wealth, and not to morality or achievement.

Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (1891) also deals with the significance of family nobility in England, this time during the Victorian period. Here the protagonist Tess’s working-class Durbeyfield family is found to be one of the last lines of the lauded d’Urbervilles. The town parson tells Tess’s father that there was “hardly such another family in England” (Hardy 4). This revelation is the catalyst for Tess’s downfall when she seeks work at the Stoke-d’Urberville household, whom her family mistakenly believes to be wealthy cousins, not knowing that the name d’Urberville was chosen by that family because of its connotations: “the very possibility of such annexations was unknown to them; who supposed that, though to be well-favoured might be the gift of fortune, a family name came by nature” (44). This sets up a contrast between the “naturalness” of biology and the manipulations of culture. The later complications of Tess’s heritage and its management, rejection, and eventual acceptance by her husband Angel Clare furthers this idea of the family name as a tool, I believe; the applications of which may be ideological rather than functional<sup>17</sup>.

Family names also have significance in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861). The novel attempts to do away with the importance of family names by establishing the narrator Pip and his beloved Estella as orphans<sup>18</sup>. As Kate Flint states:

The relegation of the importance of biological origins is of crucial importance to *Great Expectations*. First, it allows Dickens to indicate how one’s way in the world should be dependent on one’s own efforts, rather than on the status, power, or wealth of one’s predecessors. ... Second, and more emphatically, Dickens’s choice of priorities allows him to stress the importance played by culture and by upbringing in the life of an individual. (xvi)

According to Kate Flint, then, Dickens’ plot underlines the misguided nature of placing importance on one’s parentage and thus place in society, while at the same

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<sup>17</sup> For more about the relevance of the family story in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, see Tess O’Toole, who finds that, in the novel, “the family history motif functions in large measure as an investigation of the impact of narrative on the human subject” (85).

<sup>18</sup> Charles Hatten draws attention to the “blighting influence” of the novel’s substitute parents on the orphaned children (130).

time drawing attention to heredity and its impacts. Despite – or perhaps due to – his orphanhood, Pip’s parents are central to the narrative, with his childlike misunderstanding of the inscriptions on their tombs described in the opening pages of the novel<sup>19</sup> and this visit to the cemetery, like Tess’s father learning of his origins in Hardy’s novel, setting the events of the narrative in motion: this is the place where Pip meets Magwitch, his tormentor and later benefactor and “second father” (315), and the real father of Estella. The novel’s rejection of family in fact serves to make familial ties all the more apparent, and important.

In a similar way to *Great Expectations*, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, and *Pamela*, the novel *Middlemarch*<sup>20</sup> (1872), written by George Eliot, depicts a societal preoccupation with “good families”. In it, the character Rosamond Vincy is unhappy with her status as a manufacturer’s daughter (Eliot 104) and therefore infatuated with her husband’s relation to the wealthy Lydgate family. By comparison, Lydgate finds the Vincys endearing not because of their title but because of how pleasant they are (170). Here “pleasant” and “good”, though synonyms, are set up in opposition: goodness is a matter of reputation, while pleasantness is a quality of manner. Eliot’s narrative also deals with family rivalries and the apparent realities of marriage. Eliot sums up marriage thus:

Marriage, which has been the bourne of so many narratives, is still a great beginning, as it was to Adam and Eve . . . . It is still the beginning of the home epic – the gradual conquest or irremediable loss of that complete union which makes the advancing years a climax, and age the harvest of sweet memories in common. (889)

Here the author notes the preponderance of marriage in literature and its foundational relations to other types of narrative. From a traditional or conservative perspective marriage signals the commencement, or “great beginning”, of family life.

Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karénina* (1877) is likewise concerned with both marriage and family<sup>21</sup>. The Russian realist novel opens with the famous meditation: “All happy families resemble one another, every unhappy family is unhappy after its own fashion” (Tolstoy I: 1). Indeed, all the families depicted in Tolstoy’s nineteenth-century

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<sup>19</sup> Penny Kane has drawn attention to the importance of Pip’s childhood to the novel as a whole (50), of which the visit to the cemetery is only a part.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Hatten calls *Middlemarch* a story of “domestic breakdown and familial alienation” (217).

<sup>21</sup> *Anna Karénina* is also a novel that presents different, limited points of view: Percy Lubbock has examined the way Tolstoy focalises (though he does not use the term) his narrative through the members of the extended Scherbatskaya family, arguing that “each of them is a centre of vision, each of them looks out on a world that is not like the world of the rest, and we know it” (238). Writing fifty years later, James Wood (*The Irresponsible Self* 100) and John Mullan (67-8) concur.



Moscow and St Petersburg endure their own types of misery. Dolly Oblonsky's family life suffers at the hands of her philandering husband Stepan Arkadyevich Oblonsky, who remains a bachelor at heart (I: 332) and whom Dolly despises but is unable to leave, as she does not wish to break up her family (I: 158). Her brother-in-law Levin has a much happier relationship with his longed-for wife Kitty, but nonetheless realises that his happiness was "in a different way from what he had anticipated; and, notwithstanding certain unlooked-for delights, he was met at every step with some new disenchantment. Married life was utterly different from his dreams" (II: 126). This sentiment echoes Dorothea Brooke's words to Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*: "Marriage is so unlike everything else. There is something even awful in the nearness it brings" (Eliot 854).

Given its title, Anna Karénina's domestic life is clearly central to Tolstoy's novel, and proves the most tragic. Early on, Dolly notes of her sister- and brother-in-law the Karénins: "there was something false in the relations of their family life" (Tolstoy I: 87). This is not entirely fixed when Anna leaves her husband for Vronsky, a man who is earlier described thus: "from his view as a bachelor, the family, and especially the husband, belonged to a strange, hostile, and, worst of all, ridiculous world" (I: 75). Their relationship is made socially illegitimate by Anna's failure to obtain a divorce from Karénin, and the world they live in indeed proves to be "strange, hostile, and ... [quite possibly] ridiculous" (*ibid*). Of the final days of their relationship, the narrator comments: "Many families stay for years in some place that is unpleasant and inconvenient, simply on account of differences, – simply because there is no full agreement or harmony" (II: 389). The disharmony of Anna and Vronsky's life ends in her suicide.

This brief acknowledgement of some of the renowned realist novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries identifies the narrative potential of family: it may be explored from without, analysing the place of the family group and/or name in contemporary society; or it may be considered from within, with attention paid to instances of Tolstoy-like unhappiness, difference, and disharmony (*ibid*). Of course, in focusing on the one aspect of the family, a narrative will unavoidably make reference to the other, as the actualities of the family go hand-in-hand with its presentation in wider society. Similarly, though I give my attention to the representation of familial difference from varying points of view, the larger role and appearance of the family

will also have to be considered. I will begin by providing a brief sociological review of the family.

### *III. A sociological view of the family: actual and ideal*

Though the classic realist texts referred to above and canonical family sagas such as Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* (1901) and John Galworthy's *The Forsyte Saga* (1921)<sup>22</sup> often focus on an extended family, narrating the experiences of grand-parents, aunts, uncles and cousins as well as parents and children, the family type portrayed in the novels to be examined is that of parents and children only. This structure is referred to in most sociological and other texts as the "nuclear family" (eg. Gottlieb 12; Burguière *et al* 532; M. Poole 5). Though "nuclear" should here be read as a collective core, its more ominous connotations – those of stress, pressure, and detonation – may also apply, as they do in the novels under review.

According to sociologist Françoise Zonabend, this kind of pragmatic biological bonding is a characteristic of our species: "family groupings have existed all over the world and at every stage in history, occurring in a variety of forms whose role can be seen as more or less fundamental to the organisation of the oral and written laws that govern, or governed, the societies in question" (9). Of course, this is a broad claim, since much of human history is available to us only through the meagre and partial evidence of skeletal or fossil remains. However, groupings of biologically-related individuals appear to be an ancient feature of human society: in the same collection, Claude Masset explains that linguistic and tomb-related evidence demonstrates that both language and family systems had by 3000 BCE "both clearly attained a degree of organisation and complexity that has not been exceeded since" (90).

Different family structures exist in different cultures at different times. However, Beatrice Gottlieb notes: "The outstanding fact about nuclear-family households is that all through the past in the Western world, no matter where we look or how far back we go in time, they were extremely common. ...The very earliest evidence about household structure in England, dated several decades before ... 1350, suggests that things were similar then [as now]" (13). Here, "similar" is a flexible term; still, André Burguière *et al* agree that the nuclear family as we know it today

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of narrative point of view and irony in *Buddenbrooks* and *The Forsyte Saga*, see Lilian R. Furst. For an examination of the representation of the family in *The Forsyte Saga*, see Yi-ling Ru, and Penny Kane.

likely emerged during the Middle Ages (532). Jack Goody points out that the influence of the Church on marriage and family construction in the early Modern period may have led to the seeming ubiquity of features “often considered characteristic of the western European family”, such as love marriages and couples living separate from their parents (2).

Such characteristics are often seen as “ideal” in contemporary Western culture. As Desmond F. McCarthy shows in his study of the family in recent American fiction, many Western countries can at present be seen to be deeply concerned about the future of the “rigid, societally prevalent ideal of the monolithic family” (1)<sup>23</sup>. Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley define the modern concept of the private and caring nuclear family as the “normative family” and argue that it remains an ideal to which modern families continue to look, despite the artificial nature of the structure as “a set of historically and socially produced expectations, values, desires and yearnings” (3). Historian and sociologist Kerreen Reiger also refers to the Western construction of an “ideal” family (44) that, like all types of families, is “shaped by society – by place, time and culture – rather than being ‘natural’, inevitable and unchangeable” (43-44). Theories of family literature such as those provided by McCarthy (1) and Kerstin Dell (36) have also acknowledged the deeply cultural nature of family construction.

This sociological examination is necessarily brief as the popularity and perpetuation of the nuclear family structure is not the main concern of this thesis. Rather, the focus here is on *representations* of modern families, as evident in three family novels written in the past 20 years. The fact that parent-child groupings are still frequently idealised in Western society is important as it is nuclear families, and their associated cultural worth, that are depicted and interrogated in the works under review. Bittman and Pixley note: “The myth of the family has its own reality despite the deep tensions that most people feel for their own families at different stages in their lives” (xii). They argue that, in Australia, there are “uneven tensions, both inside the family and outside, created by the employment system and governments’ family policies” (xiv). Martine Segalen agrees that, among European families post-World War II, “[o]ne characteristic proper ... is the normative weight of a single family model, any departure from which is deviance” (401). It is the same in the United States, where there is “an ideal-typical American family” (Varenne 424). Thus, in comparable

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<sup>23</sup> According to Christopher Flint: “[social historian and sociologist] Jacques Donzelot suggests that this process of re-representing the family as under siege is a recurring leitmotif in anthropological and sociological studies of the family in Western culture” (78).

Western societies in the second half of the twentieth century, cultural myths persist regarding the ideal form and image of the family.

However, as Hervé Varenne<sup>24</sup> states, “constructing such an image is not easy” – it requires dedication to particular modes of action and presentation (423). Marianne Hirsch has explored how the practice and purpose of photography is in part to construct such images of the family, arguing that family photography responds to both the “familial look”, or the ways in which the members of the family simultaneously see and are seen by one another (9), and the “familial gaze”, which is “the image of an ideal family and of acceptable family relations” within a given cultural context (11). Accordingly, photography can both engage with and reveal mythical images of the nuclear family:

I would like to suggest that photographs locate themselves precisely in the space of contradiction between the myth of the ideal family and the lived reality of family life. ... [P]hotographs can more easily show us what we wish our family to be, and therefore what, most frequently, it is not. (8)

Hirsch argues that, as Roland Barthes does in *Camera Lucida*, such representations can be interrogated by “[w]riting the image”, such as through prose narrative (3). In the novel manuscript “The Birthday Party”, these metaphorical and representational roles of family photography are incorporated into the narrative, with the character Laura recognising the artificiality of staged family portraits, and her husband Rob finding a mismatched collage produced by her son to be much more symbolic of what her family is “actually” like<sup>25</sup>.

This is not always easy. In their study of actual and fictional Canadian families, Susan McDaniel and Wendy Mitchinson argue: “It is difficult to sift out the real from the imagined family, the fact from the fiction” (11), partly because, compared with the mediated nature of fictional representation, actual families can seem confusing and harsh (12)<sup>26</sup>. In their essay it is argued that family stories, myths and images can never be separated from their fictionality:

... since these form the stuff of family legend and self-image, as well as enhancing our enjoyment of family traditions and common rituals. Fictions and realities blend to

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<sup>24</sup> Hervé Varenne also argues that “[m]iddle-class families”, like those in the novels examined here, may find it easier to imitate the perfect family (423).

<sup>25</sup> This point is expounded upon on pages 254-5 of this dissertation.

<sup>26</sup> This same notion – that narrative “transforms life into destiny, a memory into a useful act, duration into an orientated and meaningful time” – is the basis for Roland Barthes’ argument *against* the novel form in his essay “Writing and the Novel” (98).

form families and to shape how we live in them. The attempt to separate fictions and realities must perhaps be futile. (13)

Thus in contrast to Hirsch, who sees representations of the family as something to be investigated, McDaniel and Mitchinson believe myths and images to be vital to the formation of real familial identities. In the novels reviewed here, idealised notions of the family are presented as both fundamental and detrimental to the family's understanding of itself.

This brief examination of the origins, features, concerns, images and myths of the modern family shows the theme is packed with literary possibility. In considering whether writing a novel about a family “may be the hardest [fiction] of all to justify” due to its ordinariness, Jane Smiley concludes that, rather, the topic appeals to the novel form's engagement with the manner of daily life (104). As McDaniel and Mitchinson conclude in their study:

The family is a topic which abounds with imaginative potential. What other subject provides scope for generational conflict, love, frustration, hate, sex, laughter, jealousy, and almost every other known emotion? (24)

Or, as the critic James Wood states: “What is larger, as a subject, than the eternal corrections of family?” (*The Irresponsible Self* 205).

In each of the three texts under review, as well as in “The Birthday Party”, characters engage with the concept of the ideal nuclear family. In *The Corrections*, the mother Enid Lambert hopes for one final, ideal Christmas at the family home, before finally realising that her family is not all she imagined it to be. *The Good Parents* gives an external, idealised view of the de Jong family through the perspective of their aunt Kitty, who only understands the actualities of her brother's family's life when she moves into their home. The father in *The Ice Storm*, Ben Hood, lists his family's material possessions as a means of accounting for his life; the inventory of their emotional assets, however, proves to be much smaller. Finally, in my own manuscript “The Birthday Party”, the father Rob is made aware of the imperfections of his romanticised domestic existence when he cracks under the pressure of keeping up appearances.

Other theorists have examined the way notions of the family have been represented in Western fiction, and I now turn to certain past studies.

#### IV. Studies of families in fiction, 17<sup>th</sup> century – present

As I have suggested, this “largest of subjects” has been central to the arrangement of fictional plots since before the eighteenth-century emergence of the realist novel<sup>27</sup>. Much of the scholarship examining the family in fiction has focused on how literary representations related to the experiences of actual families in the 1700s and 1800s. From at least the eighteenth century, it appears, prose fiction has operated to explode notions of family harmony by using the problems of courtship, marriage, and child-rearing as plot points in genres from the domestic novel and the realist novel to the scandal chronicle and the gothic novel.

Christopher Flint, in *Family Fictions: Narrative and Domestic Relations in Britain 1688-1798*, uses both conduct literature<sup>28</sup> and prose fiction to examine the extent to which eighteenth-century novels both reflected and helped to shape the family at a time when, as now, the role and future of the nuclear unit was in question. Flint finds that eighteenth-century novels evolved from marginalising, to justifying, to rejecting the family, as, amongst the middle class, “many felt estranged from the most intimate and yet explosive of social experiences – family life” (10-11). Christopher Flint shows that eighteenth-century authors were concerned with the decline of the family group, which was seen to be an organic arrangement in both natural law and the novel form (17).

George E. Haggerty also finds that women novelists of the pre-Victorian era specifically wanted to reject idealised nuclear formations, as the writers, in detailing the negative aspects of domesticity, “seem committed to a deconstruction of the ideology that celebrates family for its own sake.” (24) That is, the women writers of the period were opposed to a mindless support for and continuation of an uncomplicated view of the nuclear family.

Though the nature of family may have been challenged by these authors, Cindy Weinstein finds that American sentimental or domestic novels of the nineteenth century championed families consisting of elective or contractual ties, configurations

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<sup>27</sup> For example, in his study of realism through the ages Erich Auerbach describes a scene in the fifteenth-century work *le Réconfort de Madame du Fresne* by Antoine de la Sale in which a husband and wife talk in bed as “generally human” and far more “real” than anything featured in the French courtly literature of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries (246). Thus the family connection in literature has been seen as humanising and authentic for at least five hundred years.

<sup>28</sup> According to C. Flint, “conduct literature” is a type of advice writing that “itemised conjugal, parental and filial duties” (13).

that could only be achieved after the destruction of the biological family. For Weinstein, these fictions were completing the “cultural work” of “an interrogation and reconfiguration of what constitutes a family” (9). The novels she examines challenge the ideal of the biological family by revealing its inadequacies, and see families of choice as better providing for the needs of individuals.

The contemporary American authors Desmond F. McCarthy writes about come to similar conclusions about the benefits of chosen families over those of consanguinity: “In the contemporary climate of confusion over the future of the family, some novelists are imagining compelling alternative or reconstructed families grappling with realistic and recognisable conflicts, crises, and pressures” (2-3). Studying John Irving’s *The World According to Garp* (1978), Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple* (1982), E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime* (1975), and the first four books of John Updike’s *Rabbit* series (1960-1990), McCarthy argues that these works demonstrate the problems associated with keeping “the family in a state of isolation from society” (20), with Updike alone believing that remaining in the misery of the nuclear institution is preferable to the pursuit of “reconstructed families” (133). That is, families with a societal, rather than biological, composition.

Remaining in the biological family of origin may in part be miserable because of its circularity: parents have children with unhappy lives, who then have their own children with unhappy lives. According to Margot Gale Backus, in Irish gothic fiction this cyclical structure is an effect of British rule. Backus argues that Irish gothic literature represents the introduction of what she calls the “capitalist family cell” (36) into Ireland at the expense of its sense of community and identity, by constructing narratives of “autophagous” (90) or self-devouring families who are the instruments of their own repression. Here, then, the biologically Irish family consumes itself in response to colonial forces.

Not all theorists of family fictions consider negative narrative portrayals to be a commentary on actual families. Charles Hatten argues, like Christopher Flint, that while mid-Victorian literature celebrated domestic fiction’s focus on the idyllic family, by the late nineteenth century “alienation” was the more typical representation (14). Hatten finds, however, that this decline did not reflect a societal lack of faith in the institution; rather, the increasing sophistication and complexity of mid-century private life influenced authors “to avoid the overt moralism and sentimentality of the domestic

mode” (15). In keeping with this notion, the texts I discuss also evade simplistic categorisations as “moralistic” or “sentimental”.

Equally, T.G.A. Nelson argues that family representations in narrative actually grew more positive with the advent of the novel form. Nelson examines various forms of early-eighteenth century discourse such as novels, stage plays and periodical essays, finding that in the first half of the century the rise of the novel form was accompanied by a movement from negative depictions of the family, with children as burdensome to their parents, to positive ones, reflecting a general change in societal attitudes (50).

Societal theorist Penny Kane also sees fictional representations of families as reflecting positive changes in family construction in the nineteenth century. In *Victorian Families in Fact and Fiction* Kane utilises realist novels, biographies and letters to explore why couples of the period began limiting their family size, to their perceived benefit. Social mobility and the rise of the middle class, a focus on education, more rights for women, the focus on and expense of childhood, and increased faith in science over religion all played a role in the characters and citizens of the time moving towards the smaller nuclear group that remains the demographic trend today (156-9).

As can be seen, the above texts are largely focused on family as a topic in literature and the degree to which the novels of their period of study reflect actual family conditions. Furthermore, genres as disparate as family chronicles, domestic novels, family saga, scandal fiction, sentimental novels, realist novels and gothic literature are included, making for a broad frame of reference. Acknowledging this last issue, the literary theorists Yi-Ling Ru and Kerstin Dell have attempted to streamline investigations into family fiction by defining as the “family novel” a subgenre of literature that considers contemporary family life. Ru first conceptualised the genre as emerging in the twentieth century and having the following characteristics:

... first, it deals realistically with a family’s evolution through several generations; second, family rites play an important role and are faithfully recreated in both their familial and communal contexts; third, the primary theme of the novel always focuses on the decline of a family; and fourth, such a novel has a peculiar narrative form which is woven vertically along the chronological order through time and horizontally among the family relationships. (2)

Ru states that the subgenre also utilises the “psychological exploration of conduct” (10), depicts a “parallel family” alongside the primary one (33) and works “as an



encyclopaedia that allows us to look into the people, the life, and the atmosphere of one particular nation.” (38) This final claim is, of course, fairly broad.

Kerstin Dell highlights the problems with this argument, claiming that Ru’s definition is not precise enough (30). Dell holds that it is family *sagas* that deal with multiple generations (31), and that the subgenre’s themes should not be restricted to that of the family in decline (29). Dell does not criticise the other two features of Ru’s definition – the patterning of relationships and importance of family rituals – but assimilates them into her own definition. Her focus is therefore on novels that depict nuclear families without necessarily seeing the structure as doomed. Dell conceives of the family novel as being:

... generally focused on the conflicts of a two- (or three-) generational (post)nuclear family. These conflicts are connected to a wide range of contemporary socioeconomic, cultural, and even academic developments and discourses. The protagonist of a family novel is the family as a whole, i.e. the perspectives of its central members are portrayed. Representing a microcosm of society, the family is functionalised for the author’s social criticism. Often, but not necessarily written in the realist style, family novels expose those aspects of society that authors find fault with most. (210).

Though Dell’s thesis is problematic in that she does not keep to her own definition in the selection of texts<sup>29</sup>, she draws attention to three arguments of this chapter: that the nuclear family is at the same time an enduring and far from idyllic structure, with people’s expectations often falling short of the concomitant cultural myth; that multiple perspectives can be utilised to tell the “whole story” of the novelistic family; and that realism is a style these novels follow.

This dissertation differs from Ru’s and Dell’s in that characters’ views of their world and each other are at the forefront of my investigation. As studies in genre, Ru’s and Dell’s theses begin from a broader base (defining the family novel) and posit a larger conclusion (what the genre says about the future of the family). Though both works pay attention to the ways in which the novels they review construct character through the narration of individual impressions, with Ru arguing that, “in the process of their seeing, the spectators’ personalities are revealed clearly, while the traits of the observed characters come into view indirectly as well” (103), this is not their main

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<sup>29</sup> I would argue that Don DeLillo’s *White Noise* (1984), one of the texts Dell examines at length, is not a “family novel” according to the definition, namely because the only perspective given is that of the (step-)father Jack Gladney, who speaks as the first-person narrator of the novel. The other family members are discussed and described, true, but only through Gladney’s eyes.

focus. My short study is intended to illuminate how contemporary authors may use the narrative technique of focalisation to underscore the feeling of being in the unideal fictional family. Unlike Ru and Dell, I do not extrapolate this idea into a discussion of what the texts may reveal, in a generic sense, about the family in society. While Ru and Dell investigate genre, I investigate technique.

This leads to a consideration of narrative focalisation and how the depiction of various perspectives can convey to readers the story of a particular family in and through time.

#### *V. Variable Focalisation in Narrative Fiction*

Though the term “point of view” is often used in discussions of fiction, the ambiguity of the expression can make it somewhat deceptive<sup>30</sup>. In every narrative there are in fact two types of agents who may view the events (though the same actor may play the two different roles): the agent who perceives and the agent who conveys. The narratologist Gérard Genette distinguishes between the two by asking the questions “*who sees?*” and “... *who speaks?*” (186, original italics). The focaliser “is the point from which the elements are viewed” (Bal 146), while the speaking or conveying agent is the narrator. The focaliser is whose impressions we get; the narrator is the voice we read.

It is these terms I will use to distinguish between the two roles, though the concept of “focalisation”<sup>31</sup> originates in structuralism and this is not a structuralist work *per se*. That is, I will not be looking for so-called deep structures in family novels and how focalisation contributes to these (as Yi-Ling Ru does); rather, I examine how the perceiving agent in an individual work sheds light on family histories, issues and conflicts. It is true that structuralism has largely been replaced as a literary theory by deconstruction, poststructuralism and postmodernism, among others; however structuralist theorists continue to publish (e.g. Bal) and many narratologists now take context into account (e.g. Kearns; Palmer). Further, the representation of the thoughts of characters is an established convention of third-person fiction: as Ann Banfield states, “one can plausibly maintain that there is scarcely a novel – and most especially a novel in the third person – which does not

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<sup>30</sup> Susan Lanser argues that the double meaning behind the term “point of view” – defined as both an objective position and a subjective attitude – is the reason why it has endured (17-18).

<sup>31</sup> According to Michael Kearns, the term “focalisation” for the orienting perspective of a story was first used by Emile Benveniste in 1966 (108).

show this form” (231). Dorrit Cohn, interpreting Käte Hamburger, writes that this is because “narrative fiction is the only literary genre, as well as the only kind of narrative, in which the unspoken thoughts, feelings, perceptions of a person other than the speaker can be portrayed” (7). The mental states of another person – focalisation – can only be explained in language, and can only be justified by fiction.

The feature is thus continually addressed by contemporary critics, albeit under different names: Percy Lubbock writes of “centre[s] of vision” (238); James Wood uses “inwardness” (*The Broken Estate* 35) or says that authors “claim the interior” (36); Wayne C. Booth conceives of “centre[s] of consciousness” (153) and “inside views” (163); John Mullan refers to “viewpoints” (68), “point of view” (*ibid*) and the “sentiments of the character” (76); Jane Smiley also uses the term “point of view” (90); Alan Palmer writes of “free indirect perception” (48) and “aspectuality” (52); and Mieke Bal adds “narrative perspective”, “narrative situation”, “narrative viewpoint” and “narrative manner” to the collection (143). The term focalisation is a good catch-all for these myriad ways of describing the same concept and has been defined extensively in narratology, so it is useful to apply to this rhetorical study.

Further, though quotations from structuralism are used here to elucidate points about the technique, this is due to theorists’ interest in evaluating its potential effects. This is one of the concerns of this dissertation, which adheres to Wayne C. Booth’s argument in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*: “Let each work do what it ‘wants’ to do; let its author discover its inherent powers and gauge his techniques to the realisation of those powers” (378). That is, various fictional techniques, including types of focalisation, are not of themselves essentially “good” or “bad”, but should rather be judged in terms of the way they contribute to a text’s impact.

G rard Genette argues that most theorists before him combined instances of focalisation and narration as “point of view” (188). Genette replaces common terms with comparable degrees of focalisation: actual omniscience, the narrator knowing more than the characters know, is re-named “nonfocalised”; a narrative in which the narrator knows only as much as the characters<sup>32</sup>, depicting their consciousness, is

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<sup>32</sup> For example, in the final section of Rick Moody’s novel *The Ice Storm*, the focalisor is the character Paul Hood, waiting at the train station for his family. When they arrive and Paul gets in the car, his father Ben suddenly starts crying: “And then [Ben] started to choke or something. Paul had never heard anything like it. He thought it might be a joke” (278). Paul does not know why his father is crying, but readers – and the narrator – know it is because he found their neighbour Mike Williams dead that morning, and because he and his wife are getting a divorce. However, this part of the narrative conveys the puzzlement that Paul feels, because he is the focalisor.

known as “internal focalisation”, which is in turn either “fixed” (in the mind of one character), “variable” (different characters at different times) or “multiple” (different characters perceiving one event); and a narrative in which the narrator never descends into a character’s mind, even if the narration concentrates on them, is one with “external focalisation” (189-90; original italics removed). Further, any text can feature different types of focalisation at different points in the narrative (191). Each text to be examined here uses focalisation in various ways at various times, however I am interested in the points at which a character’s view of the world is narrated; that is, this dissertation examines instances of variable internal focalisation.

In *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, Dorrit Cohn outlines the three novelistic modes for narrating a character’s thoughts in third person: “psycho-narration”, “quoted monologue”, and “narrated monologue” (14). These modes have been renamed “thought report”, “direct thought” and “free indirect thought” by Alan Palmer, who draws attention to the verbal nature of the original terms (13). Palmer further widens the categories so that they describe the narration of not just what a character *thinks* but what is going on in their mind more generally, thus allowing descriptions of “dispositions, feelings, beliefs, and emotions” to be included (19). This allows us to consider internal focalisation as being a depiction of the character’s viewpoint in the broadest sense.

Cohn’s (and Palmer’s) three modes of mind report differ in the degree to which the sentiment or thought is “voiced” by the narrator instead of the character. At one extreme, in “psycho-narration” or “thought report”, the narrator summarises what the character thinks or is thinking about (narrator’s voice) (Cohn 14; Palmer 54), while at the other, “quoted monologue” or “direct thought” has the narrator transmit verbally the content of the character’s mind (character’s voice) (Cohn 14; Palmer 54). In the middle of this spectrum lies “narrated monologue” or “free indirect thought”, in which both voices can be heard in the sentiment: the character’s language is used, but expressed in the narrator’s third-person and in past tense (Cohn 100; Palmer 54-5). As Cohn states, “the effect of the narrated monologue is precisely to reduce to the greatest possible degree the hiatus between the narrator and the figure existing in all third-person narration” (112). John Mullan (76) and James Wood (*How Fiction Works* 9), among others, refer to this as “free indirect style”. Wood explains that through this mode:

... we see things through the character’s eyes and language but also through the author’s eyes and language, too.... A gap opens between author and character, and the

bridge – which is free indirect style itself – between them simultaneously closes that gap and draws attention to its distance. (*How Fiction Works* 11)

Thus it is this narrative mode that most usefully highlights not only that two consciousnesses are present – narrator and focalisor – but the frequent difficulty of pinpointing and separating the sentiments of each agent.

The importance of determining the source of the sentiments expressed is emphasised by Lisa Zunshine in *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, an application of cognitive psychology to literary theory. Zunshine explains that a source and a sentiment together constitute a “metarepresentation” (47). In internal focalisation the source is the focalising character, and so readers are granted a metarepresentation of that character every time one of their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, etcetera, is conveyed. Zunshine argues that “[k]nowing *whose sentiment it is* constitutes a crucial aspect of our understanding of the psychological dynamics of [a] particular scene and [a] novel as a whole” (47; original italics). That is, the particular subjectivity we are given access to impacts on our comprehension of what is going on in the focalising character’s mind, the scene, and the narrative.

Such sentiments aid readers in their understanding of the character who imparts them (Bal 150). For example, in Rick Moody’s *The Ice Storm*, teenager Paul Hood sees his family as “[f]eeble and forlorn and floundering and foolish and frustrating and functional and sad, sad”, which tells us something about the Hoods while also giving us an insight into Paul himself (274). This situation operates in reverse when a focalised character becomes the focalisor and his/her view of the original character is divulged. Susan Lanser (240-1) states that readers of such novels must negotiate these multiple perceptions in a process not unlike the way individuals engage with others in society, as Lisa Zunshine’s use of “Theory of Mind” terminology indicates (6). Thus it is imperative that readers and authors consider whose thoughts, feelings and perceptions a narrator is representing as these inform and influence every aspect of the novel.

Alan Palmer, borrowing Marie-Laure Ryan’s term, refers to a character’s ongoing thoughts, feelings and perceptions as that character’s “embedded narrative” (Palmer 183; M. Ryan 156). Further, all novels with multiple focalisors also contain “doubly embedded narratives”, which are “a character’s mind as contained within another character’s mind” (Palmer 230-1). That is, the embedded narrative is what a character, such as Laura Sinclair in “The Birthday Party”, thinks (in all senses of the word), while the doubly embedded narrative is what another character, such as Alice

Sinclair, *thinks* that Laura thinks. This doubly embedded narrative emerges through Alice's impression of Laura: what one believes the other is thinking must be derived from what that one knows of the other.

The sum of Laura's embedded narrative and all the other characters' doubly embedded narratives of Laura is what Palmer would call Laura Sinclair's "situated identity" (231). I will in part consider how characters' perceptions of themselves and their families' collective perceptions of them form their individual situated identity in the novels to be examined.

The practice of a narrator descending into a character's mind and reporting what is found there has a long history, with theorists variously identifying Samuel Richardson's 1740 novel *Pamela* (Watt 175-7), Henry Fielding's 1749 novel *The History of Tom Jones: A Foundling* (Cohn 22; Fludernik, quoted in Palmer 59), Jane Austen's 1815 novel *Emma* (Booth 244; Lodge 48; Wood *The Broken Estate* 37), and Gustave Flaubert's 1857 novel *Madame Bovary* (Lubbock 85-6; Doležal *Truth and Authenticity* 16-17) as examples of the crossover from overt narratorial judgement of a character's thoughts to the commentary-free use of techniques such as free indirect style<sup>33</sup>. Internal focalisation is now so conventional in literature it seems commonplace for a reader to be able to access the thoughts of a "person" who is not oneself. Cohn has drawn attention to the notion "that narrative fiction attains its greatest 'air of reality' in the representation of a lone figure thinking thoughts she [*sic*] will never communicate to anyone" (7). The irony is this: on the one hand, what could be more authentic than having a character who thinks, hopes, dreams and believes like a "real person"; but on the other, when in life are we ever granted such an insight into the workings of another mind as we are in fiction?

Cohn refers to this privileged view as the "paradox [that] lies at the very heart of narrative realism" (7). Leaving aside the impossibility of ever gaining such access to the sentiments of another in life, I will now focus on the narrative realism inherent in presenting the mind of a character to readers, starting with a brief overview of the realist mode itself.

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<sup>33</sup> Dorrit Cohn also points to Honoré de Balzac and William Makepeace Thackeray as early users of the style (22-5).

## VI. *The realist mode*

The term “realism” is a contentious one with as many definitions as there are theorists and as many applications as there are modes of representing the world. A current definition, offered by the reference text *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms*, calls literary realism “a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or ‘reflecting’ faithfully an actual way of life” (Baldrick 212). Erich Auerbach has traced the development of the realist style from the *Odyssey* and *the Bible* to the period between the two World Wars, noting that types of realism, which he defines as a “mixture of styles” of presentation (474), were popular in antiquity, the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance. Auerbach calls the form’s nineteenth century incarnation “modern realism” (485) and argues that it “cannot represent man [*sic*] otherwise than as embedded in a total reality, political, social, and economic, which is concrete and constantly evolving” (463). This modern approach to realism developed in line with its scientific twin at the time of the Industrial Revolution, with writers of naturalism hoping to produce the same kind of objectivity scientists had begun to aim for in their observation of the world (Habib 471). For example, Henry James praised the novel mode’s ability to recount everyday impressions and experiences, stating that “the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me to be the supreme virtue of a novel” (17). That is, the novel form is powerful to James (and others) because it allows for the reflection of life as lived.

It is widely acknowledged (e.g. Watt 11; Habib 474) that – despite the beauty of James’s and others’ writing – such attempts are qualified by the impossibility of achieving scientific objectivity in a novel. This is in part due to the particular construction of narrative, as George Levine states: “Fiction is shaping, giving precedence to form over reality and even plausibility, when necessary” (241). Taking this argument to its semiotic conclusion, Roland Barthes states, “‘What takes place’ in a narrative is from the referential (reality) point of view literally *nothing*”, meaning that narrative is a matter of language and logic only (“Structural Analysis” 295, original italics). By this argument, calling a novel “realistic” is meaningless because its events never actually occurred; it is not actually “real”.

However, as the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* explains:

Modern criticism frequently insists that realism is not a direct or simple reproduction of reality (a ‘slice of life’) but a system of conventions producing a

lifelike illusion of some ‘real’ world outside the text, by processes of selection, exclusion, description, and manners of addressing the reader. (Baldrick 212-213)

So realism is a narrative style with its own conventions, like any other. As the novelist Jane Smiley states: “Over the centuries, more authors have probably placed their bets on the realistic novel than on any other type.” (241) She continues:

Realism is naturally interesting because most people can relate to realistic characters and problems, and realism is natural to the novel because of the mundane – let’s say, prosaic – nature of prose. But realism, too, makes compromises. ... Realism is no less subjective than fabulism or surrealism, but realists and their readers agree that there is a generally accepted form that reality takes; that it can be depicted, read about, and agreed upon; and that its boundaries are fairly clear and separate it recognisably from unrealities ... (241-2).

The idea that realism has particular conventions just like any literary or indeed artistic genre can actually be seen as an impetus to innovation. James Wood, arguing in support of realism, believes that “the writer has to act as if the available novelistic methods are continually about to turn into mere convention and so has to try to outwit that inevitable ageing” (*How Fiction Works* 186-7). Kerstin Dell believes this is happening, writing that:

In the U.S., many authors have been abandoning radical postmodernist narrative strategies in the past decade and turned to realism again. However, it seems that the new interest in realism is not simply a return to old times, but a re-thinking of realist depiction with the background of postmodern insights into the nature of representation. (159)

M.A.R. Habib denotes as “reconceived realism” the kind of realism that arises from modernist modes of inquiry, writing that this form “attempts not so much accurately to reflect the world as to express mental states in all their incoherent flux” (476). Though not modernist *per se*, mental impressions do contribute to the realism of the works reviewed here, as my focus on focalisation indicates. Thus realist writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are returning to portrayals of the world as we (seem to) experience it, but with the knowledge developed by other literary forms: the mediating nature of language, discourse, and narrative fiction and the subjective nature of interpretation are acknowledged and even employed in many contemporary realist works, as these notions too have their place in the world as we know it<sup>34</sup>. The inclusive

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<sup>34</sup> Joseph Dewey includes both Jonathan Franzen and Rick Moody in a list of authors who are “part of a new movement in American fiction that has reanimated a hipper sort of realist novel, turning narrative away from the absorbing experiments in tale-telling that defined the postmodern heyday of the



“we”, of course, may not be appropriate to all ethnic, class, gender, sexual preference, and other groups.

The representation of consciousness is central to literary realism (Cohn 7), which can be seen in the use of free indirect style and internal focalisation (112). In texts such as *Emma* and *Madame Bovary*, the narrator’s privileged knowledge, rather than being delivered explicitly, is demonstrated through selective descriptions and irony (Booth 245; Lodge 48; Lubbock 85; Palmer 171; Wood *The Broken Estate* 37). As Erich Auerbach explains, in the latter novel, “Flaubert does nothing but bestow the power of mature expression upon the material which [the character Emma Bovary] affords, in its complete subjectivity. If Emma could do this herself, she would no longer be what she is” (484). That is, through his writing Flaubert explains Emma’s thoughts and feelings in such a way that we find out something about her that she could not recognise herself; indeed, her blindness contributes to our knowledge. Thus the narrator guides us to a deeper understanding of the focalised Emma’s thoughts.

In texts with variable focalisation such as the ones I will examine, there is an amassing of several such mediated subjectivities. This can amount to what the theorist Mikhail Bakhtin calls “heteroglossia”, a “multiplicity of social voices” (263). According to Palmer, “Bakhtin’s position is that the information contained in the discourse should be presented not within the single field of vision of the narrator, but within the various fields of vision of a variety of characters” (155), and so “[t]he narrative can therefore be analysed in terms of the intersecting, evolving, and conflicting fields of vision that comprise it” (156). I look at family novels in this way: by analysing the points of view in the novel and scrutinising the three-dimensional images of the family that result from their interaction.

### *VII. Conclusion: Realist fiction’s family consciousness*

In “The Birthday Party”, the four main characters Rob, Laura, Alice, and Nathan Sinclair all perceive events differently. Their varying views of one another and the world structure the manuscript: each of the twenty-eight chapters takes as its focus an individual character, deploying the technique of internal focalisation in order to convey that character’s perspective. This makes explicit the aspects of their lives the

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midcentury and returning it to recognisable characters in recognisable landscapes ... who are caught within the anxious haunts of the everyday” (13).

family members are hiding and others' interpretations of these (such as Laura's extended holiday in Denmark, Western Australia after a personal crisis, and her husband's reading of this incident as a secret affair), and, conversely, those histories that the characters secretly know about each other (for example, when Rob learns about his daughter's failure to get into a top swimming squad but decides not to discuss this with her directly). Readers are given access to four very different subjectivities, with each representation working with and against the others in order to build up a many-sided view of the family's domestic, suburban life.

As stated, the utilisation of one subjectivity – of one mind, of one focaliser – tells us about the world of the novel, and also about that focalising character. It thus stands to reason that the subsequent or concurrent presentation of another subjectivity adds to our understanding of the narrative world, the original focaliser, and this newly focalising character. In addition, what both characters cannot recognise about themselves, as indicated by the narrator, helps readers to judge why they see one another the way they do. Alan Palmer states that “[c]haracters create their own narratives, their own perspectives on the storyworld of the novel; and the extent to which their own narratives are consistent with the narratives of the narrator and of readers will obviously vary” (121). We get various sides of the story, as it were, and the more sides we get, the more multifaceted things become. Furthermore, whose side of the story could be more substantial (though still subjective; more subjective, in fact, than any character without such a weighted history) than the members of one's own nuclear family? Palmer writes that “[t]he interest of many novels is to see how the various embedded and doubly embedded narratives interweave, merge, conflict, become reconciled, and so on. Rich and complex patterns result” (233). Characters' views of the world and of each other are thus fundamental to fiction writing, not only because of their realist qualities but because of the intricacy they add. James Wood puts it another way:

...[The novel] gives the best account of the complexity of our moral fabric. When Pierre, in *War and Peace*, begins to change his ideas about himself and other people, he realises that the only way to understand people properly is to see things from each person's point of view ... (*How Fiction Works* 135).

Thus, in tracking the opposing viewpoints of characters in a novel, the technique of variable internal focalisation may also reveal the inability of these characters to understand one another.

This dissertation explores this notion as it manifests in the contemporary family novels *The Corrections* by Jonathan Franzen, *The Good Parents* by Joan London, and *The Ice Storm* by Rick Moody. Each of these texts utilises variable focalisation in its tale of late-twentieth-century Western middle-class family life. The presentation of the points of view of each member of the Lambert, de Jong, and Hood families contributes to readers' understandings of the novels, as they give an inside view of family dynamics. In this way the narratives reveal both the external, ideal view of the family, and the internal reality of disconnection and discord. These multiple points of view, in the broadest sense of the term, build up our vision until we see the three families for the complex and dynamic entities they are.

### Chapter Three: Family Views in *The Corrections* (2001)

Jonathan Franzen's 2001 novel *The Corrections* is essentially the story of a family; of the miscommunication and misunderstandings between ageing parents and their grown children. The five Lamberts come from middle-class Middle America during the second half of the twentieth century: a seemingly idyllic time and place. Yet none of them is contented, and none can communicate this discontent to their family. As Kerstin Dell notes in her study of *The Corrections* as a family novel:

The nuclear family, which is the normative model of family in *The Corrections*, is depicted as an arrangement that suggests the stability, comfort and fulfilment each character secretly or openly longs for; on the other hand, most of the characters' serious troubles are linked with family. (188)

This chapter will explore how the use of variable internal focalisation conveys to readers the characters' familial dissatisfaction.

From the outside, the Lamberts would appear to be relatively comfortable and successful. Septuagenarian father Alfred is a former railway engineer with a strong moral perspective; his wife Enid is engaged in the community; elder son Gary is a banker in Philadelphia with his own nuclear family; middle child Chip is a former academic living in New York City; and daughter Denise is a renowned chef who has appeared in the *New York Times*. Inside views of the five individuals, however, give readers a very different and far more interesting story. As has been noted (e.g. Wood *The Irresponsible Self* 203), each family member is undergoing "correction", with Alfred's physical, mental and emotional strength withering into Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases, Enid becoming less and less deluded about her life, Gary's mental health devolving into paranoia and depression, Chip's personal and professional lives slipping away like the salmon he attempts to smuggle down his pants leg in order to provide lunch for his parents and sister, and Denise losing her sense of guilt, shame, and personal coherence.

The novel is split into seven parts, with each member of the family operating as focalisor of various points in the third-person narrative. Regarding style, Kerstin Dell's exploration of *The Corrections* contributes to her argument that contemporary writers are reapproaching realism from a new, postmodernist-informed perspective (159); a view echoed in Ralph J. Poole's study of the novel (281). *The Corrections* can thus be seen as a realist narrative with postmodern influences.

Much has been written about the book's non-involvement in the commercial Oprah's Book Club, when Franzen withdrew permission for the novel to feature on the programme *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and whether the author's discomfort with his inclusion actually improved the sales and literary reputation of his novel<sup>35</sup>. Academics and reviewers have also considered *The Corrections*' fictional representation of, among other issues, mental health (Freudenthal) and its effect on masculinity (Toal); telephone communication, food consumption and list-making (Mullan); capitalist markets (Annesley); justice and representation (Polley); consumer culture (Lelito); and the Midwestern United States (R. Poole).

Though the novel's engagement with family is apparent from the outset<sup>36</sup>, since its publication many reviewers and readers have had difficulty theorising the nature of this engagement. For most, family is seen as merely a theme of the work; it is just one of the ways in which the idea of "correction" manifests itself (for example Leavis 438; Wood *The Irresponsible Self* 203). Further, even when it is acknowledged that family is integral to the very structure of the work, there is confusion regarding genre, with reviewers variously locating *The Corrections* as an "ambitious family saga" (Leavis 438), a "family romance" (Edwards 82) and "more than a satiric family novel" (84). This muddling of the genres of family literature has been largely clarified by Kerstin Dell, who provides definitions for these and other categories, including "domestic novel" and "family chronicle" (31-5). Separating the family novel from these, Dell states that the twentieth-century family novel as a genre arose from Western society's concern with the nuclear family (36)<sup>37</sup>. Dell's argument is that, in contrast to other forms, the family novel has a tighter foundation but broader concerns, and she convincingly defines *The Corrections* as such<sup>38</sup> as it uses the realm of the private – the conflicts of a nuclear family, seen from the perspective of each member presented in a realist style (210) – to comment on a particular social world.

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<sup>35</sup> Theses written about this phenomenon include Kelley Lewis, "Literary Fiction and the Collision of Reading Practices: Jonathan Franzen and the *Oprah* Debate" and Bonnie Kathryn Smith, "The Common Reader Writes Back: Literacy for Life Change". Thomas Edwards' review of the novel in *Raritan* also discusses the incident.

<sup>36</sup> The blurb of the 2002 Fourth Estate edition of the novel informs readers that "The Lamberts ... are a troubled family living in a troubled age", amid which "Enid sets her heart on gathering everyone together for one last family Christmas."

<sup>37</sup> Dell states, erroneously I believe, that "it was not before the twentieth century with the establishment of the nuclear family as the main unit of organising social life in the private realm that the family novel came into being" (36). As shown in Chapter Two, the nuclear unit was fundamental to family life long before the beginning of the previous century.

<sup>38</sup> In fact, Dell calls *The Corrections* "a perfect example of a family novel" (5). In his essay "Meet Me in St Louis", Franzen himself also refers to *The Corrections* as a "family novel" (289).

One of the “social concerns” (Ru 12) the novel engages with is the cultural ideal of the compassionate nuclear family. The narrative is driven by this myth as the Lamberts head inexorably towards a last Christmas in the family home before the ageing parents agree to move to the eastern United States, nearer their children. Though this image of a perfect family Christmas is invoked by Enid, there are other ways in which the characters fail to achieve similar ideals, such as Gary’s dreams of the Lamberts eventually moving closer to his own family: “He’d imagined nieces and nephews, house parties and parlour games, long snowy Christmases on Seminole Street [where he lives]. And now he and Denise had lived in the same city for fifteen years, and he felt as if he hardly knew her” (Franzen *The Corrections* 250). Enid wishes her daughter, who is divorced from an older man, had had a traditional St. Jude wedding instead of eloping: “It was the same problem Enid had with Chip and even Gary: her children didn’t match. They didn’t want the things that she and all her friends and all her friends’ children wanted” (139). Enid has suffered a similar disappointment when, even after her careful selection of suitors in response to her parents’ tough marriage, her husband turned out to be emotionally deficient (308-9). Additionally, during Enid’s last pregnancy, Alfred himself hopes to be closer to the new baby than he has been with his sons: “A last child was a last opportunity to learn from one’s mistakes and make corrections, and he resolved to seize this opportunity” (323). This fails before the child is even born, after the sexually puritanical Alfred has intercourse with his pregnant wife and considers his daughter “betrayed” (*ibid*). Dreams of a happy family life are thus consistently thwarted for the characters of *The Corrections*.

As a family novel, *The Corrections* reproduces family rituals, during which the group is ideologically able to demonstrate closeness (Ru 12). The family rite towards which Franzen’s narrative progresses is Christmas Day. Drawing on and defining the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski’s view of ritual as “a key process for the re-creation, transmission and maintenance of [myth’s] normative regulations”, sociologists Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley (20) argue that Christmas is about family and obligation, creating mixed feelings among the celebration’s participants (21). This sense of having to partake in ostensibly joyous family gatherings is incorporated into each of the novels examined here: Christmas breakfast in *The Corrections*, a failed family reunion in *The Good Parents*, and post-Thanksgiving

leftovers in *The Ice Storm*. The depiction of the celebrations dramatise the function of the family unit, often with unfortunate results.

The mythical Christmas breakfast Enid Lambert longs for is doubly significant because of the date and the manner of its observation – a shared meal. John Mullan comments: “What kinds of novel feature meals? Sometimes the satirical, but invariably the familial. A meal is a focus of ordinary social and family life. ... [M]ealtimes are for the essential chemistry of a group” (203)<sup>39</sup>. Enid Lambert’s last Christmas breakfast in St. Jude is in this way a prime example of the “family rites” that Yi-Ling Ru argues are fundamental to the genre: “Without family rites, the family would appear dead” (17). In *The Corrections* the devolution of this rite into argument and bewilderment is the final sign that any perfect image of the Lamberts is well and truly a thing of the past, if it was ever correct at all. Ralph J. Poole writes of the novel: “There is no way for everything being all right (again), since that never has been the case” (280). The idealised family never existed.

The Christmas breakfast scene is also structurally important because it is the only one in which all five Lamberts are together<sup>40</sup>; further, it takes place during the novel’s penultimate section and pulls together the strings of the narrative. Christmas is when Enid’s fantasies fade, when Denise’s nervous breakdown is in full motion, when the extent of Alfred’s deterioration is realised, and when his love for his son Chip is finally voiced: it is, in other words, when most of *The Corrections*’ corrections take place.

This scene is perceived only by Chip, who is the last to arrive after fleeing his illegal marketing job in Lithuania. He has no idea what has been going on in St. Jude, where his siblings have been staying with their parents. Chip therefore does not understand why his sister and father both cling to him, what Denise and Gary are talking about when they refer to Enid taking drugs, why his brother is able to walk out

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<sup>39</sup> The ability of a meal to dramatise group relations can be seen in Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927). In it, the dinner party hosted by the protagonists, the Ramsays, serves as a compression of the characters’ myriad concerns (90-121): feelings of modernist dissociation with the world, reflections of personality flaws, and musings on social and family life flit in and out of the characters’ minds like the rooks Mrs. Ramsay notices flying outside the window before dinner, to be soothed somewhat by the appearance of the main course.

<sup>40</sup> That is, unless we count the Dinner of Revenge, another mealtime scene, during which Alfred, Enid, eleven-year-old Gary and seven-year-old Chipper eat liver and rutabaga while the foetal Denise “could see as clearly as anyone. She had ears and eyes, fingers and a forebrain and a cerebellum, and she floated in a central place. She already knew the main hungers” (Franzen *The Corrections* 318).

on them “with Alfred on the floor and Enid’s Christmas breakfast in ruins” (629)<sup>41</sup>, and why their father seems so pleased to see him. This is an example of how the novel utilises variable internal focalisation: though the scene is written without giving context to these events, readers do not share Chip’s bewilderment, as we have had the reasons behind these seemingly strange reactions explained through the prior perspectives of his parents and siblings.

Marianne Hirsch in her investigation of family albums argues that family rituals – such as Christmas celebrations – are often portrayed in photography; indeed, photography “constitutes a prime objective of those rituals” (7). The importance of family photographs is referenced in *The Corrections* by Gary, who sombrely uses his home darkroom to prepare an “All-Time Lambert Two Hundred” photo album as his gift to his relatives (Franzen 162), including “a family Christmas card” (606) containing the following image:

The chubby, mop-headed, vaguely Semitic little girl in the picture was Denise at about eighteen months. There was not a particle of trouble in her smile or in the smiles of Chip and Gary. She sat between them on the living-room sofa in its pre-reupholstered instantiation; each had an arm around her; their clear-skinned boy faces nearly touched above her own. (*ibid*)

The image of baby Denise, happy and embraced by her brothers, is in stark contrast to the Denise at Christmas who is unemployed and reckless. The photo thus creates an idealised image of family life that does not necessarily conform to the facts.

Another means of comparison between the real and the ideal in family novels in general and *The Corrections* in particular is the utilisation of what Yi-ling Ru calls a “parallel family” that “appears different [to the main family] in many ways”, though they share some qualities (33). The presentation of the parallel family causes the group to “learn about” itself (*ibid*), and in Franzen’s novel the Passafaro-Callahan family, a rich, middle-class Philadelphian father, mother and two daughters, help Denise to do this. Denise, who “had a lifetime of practice at arriving late in a family of four and being loved by all” (Franzen *The Corrections* 469), ingratiates herself with them to such an extent that she has sex with both adults, resulting in the loss of her job and the temporary emotional destruction of Robin Passafaro.

In *The Corrections*, Kerstin Dell argues, each Lambert, through a combination of “disorder, discontent, disease – and imminent disaster” (173), reaches their lowest

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<sup>41</sup> Chip works it out quite quickly, though: “behind the cold front of Gary’s wordless departure: his brother was afraid” (629).



point, at which they must decide whether to pursue “individualism” and illusion, or family life and “constructive corrections” (189). Thus, though its myriad disadvantages are noted and catalogued, in the novel, “a huge part of ... meaning is derived from a functional family life” (197). I would argue that this “meaning” actually derives from recognising that family life vacillates between being functional and dysfunctional.

Dell provides an excellent study of how Franzen’s novel represents family life in a particular time and place, and with a particular view of its function and future. She considers the characterisation of each Lambert and theorises what their individual construction and journey means to the narrative. However, Dell’s thesis is about the family novel as a genre and the claims it ultimately makes about families. Closely examining *The Corrections*, Dell argues that “fin de millennium family novelists are intent on providing meaning without enforcing norms and rules” (201). *The Corrections* does this, Dell argues, by giving each Lambert a fantasy life that eventually succumbs to crisis in part caused by family, with their only escape being *through* family: “stability (which is conceived of as an ideal towards which people strive, but are rarely able to get) can be found in family” (202). Dell thus in part traces how notions of the ideal family affect the individual Lamberts, and locates their ultimate success in the ability to come close to this ideal through more rational means: by seeing its negatives as well as its positives.

This chapter works to fill gaps in this argument. Dell’s conceptualisation of the family novel hinges on the idea that “[t]he protagonist ... is the family as a gestalt. Most if not all of the family members’ points of view are reflected” (37). She gives less attention to the precise form and significance of the third-person omniscient point of view in the novels she examines<sup>42</sup>. My dissertation centres on the use of focalisation as a narrative technique to reveal the inner lives of various fictional families. In Franzen’s narrative we see the Lamberts from various angles, allowing us to note connections that they, in the course of the novel, have trouble making, and I explore some of these in tracking the characters’ recurring failure to conform to the ideal. *The Corrections*, due to its establishment as a novel that depicts the failure of family life to meet individual expectations, is here used as an example of aspects outlined in the previous chapter. Moreover, though I agree with Dell’s argument that Franzen’s novel presents the family as a site of both “alarming dysfunction and moments of comfort

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<sup>42</sup> Attention is paid, however, to Franzen’s choice of the third-person omniscient narrator as a return to realist techniques, albeit combined with modernist and postmodernist influences (Dell 197-9).

and redemption” (170), the statement that family here also has “transformative potential” (188) seems to bestow a new kind of idealism on post-postmodernist views of the family. I would argue instead that such characters tend to shed their idealistic notions altogether and resign themselves to the realities of family life, good and bad.

Others have given attention to *The Corrections*’ psychological construction of each Lambert, though the exact form and result of Franzen’s dips into consciousness have again only been sketched. Dell herself notes: “Franzen is interested in processes of psychological entanglements and disentanglements as they mirror the intricate interactions between individuals, family, and society” (200). James Wood praises Franzen for “cleaving to the human, when he is laying bare the clogged dynamics of his fictional family” (*The Irresponsible Self* 201) and where “we gather a sense of each Lambert” (203), though he does not describe exactly *how* this occurs.

David Lodge specifically refers to the novel’s utilisation of various consciousnesses, providing this description: “In telling his story of the fraught relations between an elderly American couple and their three grown-up children ... Franzen moves confidently between the five principal characters, rendering their divergent points of view” (88). However, this is just a footnote: Lodge does not embellish upon the result of being presented with these five viewpoints, which is that readers must weigh up the different characters’ perceptions in their understanding of the novel.

The complexity inherent in deciphering “what really happened” in *The Corrections* has been noted briefly. Thomas R. Edwards addresses the fact that we are presented with different versions, stating that the work consists of “fragmentary stories” from which we, in the novel as in life, “construct our sense of the world” (83). Ralph J. Poole draws attention to the presence of such opposing viewpoints and the need to balance these. He likens *The Corrections* to “the panoramic model of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century family novel where the real corrections are not up to the characters, but up to the readers” as we “are given the task to weigh and compare alternate or even opposing versions of truth and reality”, with Franzen’s role only to “act as challenging mediator” (281). However, aside from a brief character study Poole does not provide an examination of how and where this weighing-up occurs. I will do so in this chapter.

A family is made up of its members, and so we cannot form an understanding of the family’s story, dynamics or mythology without some sense of each individual that makes up the group. Comprehending the five main characters in *The Corrections* is not a straightforward task because the narrator, as Ralph J. Poole notes, does not

overtly judge them (281). Instead we are granted access to each individual mind, to each embedded narrative, which leads to thrilling complexities because, as family members do, each *thinks about the others*. This affects our conception of both the character thinking and the character being thought about. It is this variable focalisation, with perception building upon perception, interpretation building upon interpretation, that provides Franzen's novel with the "psychological entanglements" (Dell 200), "clogged dynamics" (Wood *The Irresponsible Self* 201), "fraught relations" (Lodge 88) and "fragmentary stories" (Edwards 83) referred to above.

Before one attempts to work out what the characters think of one another, however, there is negotiation involved in determining how they see themselves. Because *The Corrections* is voiced by an anonymous third-person narrator, it can be difficult to determine when a sentiment about a focalising character actually belongs to him/her, and when it is the author alerting readers to aspects of that character that they could not see themselves, through the deft manipulation of language and perception. Here it becomes a matter of the reader determining whether a particular quality is one of which the individual would be aware. Such a determination is more straightforward for metarepresentations that tend to be complimentary<sup>43</sup>, or use a character's own idiom. For example, when we are informed that "[i]rresponsibility and undiscipline were the bane of [Alfred's] existence" (Franzen *The Corrections* 77) it is easy to see this as a paraphrasing of the world-weary and moralistic man's sentiment. It is also easy to consider instances of wild criticism to be focalisation, as the narrator's tone precludes objectively describing Enid, for example, as having a "hundred daily conscious failures as a mother" (293); indeed, the word "conscious" shows that this is Enid relishing insulting herself<sup>44</sup>.

At other times, however, it can be difficult to ascertain which source is conveying a certain aspect of a character's persona. For example, when we are told that when Gary joined a mid-size regional bank, "[a]t first his intention was simply to avoid his father's mistakes<sup>45</sup> ... but before long, even as he was proving to be an outstanding portfolio manager, he became more specifically allergic to ambition"

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<sup>43</sup> Additionally, such statements would show us the kind of traits the character admires, thus revealing to readers even more about their personality.

<sup>44</sup> Much like her earlier satisfaction upon commenting that she is a "big nothing": "(How strangely good it felt to say this! It was like putting scalding water on a poison-ivy rash)" (Franzen *The Corrections* 114).

<sup>45</sup> As Kerstin Dell argues, Gary's need to be different from his parents is "[t]he effort that dominates his life" (181).

(223), we must pause in considering which entity has determined this. Would Gary be aware of his avoidance of ambition? I would argue that, given the narrator's avoidance of overt commentary regarding the characters' personality traits as part of the novel's internally focalised structure, this observation is actually an unconscious one of Gary's, given voice by the narrator. The character is elsewhere constructed as smug but unsatisfied and making excuses for his family problems, and it follows that he would be aware of his failure to achieve the image of the corporate go-getter, even if his pride may muffle the realisation.

Frequently, what the narrator tells us the character believes about him- or herself actually tells us something very different by way of irony. Early in the narrative Chip is caught outside in the rain: "He was clutching Denise's umbrella in his fist without opening it, and still it seemed unfair to him, it seemed *not his fault*, that he was getting drenched" (37, original italics). The italics indicate Chip's thoughts in free indirect style, and combined with the image of a wet man with a closed umbrella and the use of the word "still"<sup>46</sup> we come to another level of understanding about Chip: that he is the kind of person who considers himself hard done by even when what aggrieves him is of his own doing. "*Not his fault*" is a direct indication that this is all his fault.

This kind of ironic revelation of character occurs most often with Enid, who prefers outward impressions to life's less desirable actualities. Free indirect style is often used to convey Enid's perspective on a situation, such as when she "made the best of the mortifying position in which Denise had placed her" following her daughter's elopement with her much older boss (140). The word "mortifying" is clearly Enid's, as such a situation is not objectively humiliating. Again the narrator shows us what Enid Lambert thinks of her life, and we make conclusions about her character from what these thought patterns signal; that is, a woman who worries more about what others think of her than about her family's happiness.

It is apparent that readers are helped to understand character in *The Corrections* through each Lambert's perception of him- or herself and the narrator's contribution, through the use of language and/or irony, of qualities s/he may not acknowledge. But the perceptions do not end here: to these two sources we must also add the others' views of each character; that is, the doubly embedded versions of each Lambert.

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<sup>46</sup> This word in fact indicates one end of James Wood's "bridge" that connects the narrator and the character (*How Fiction Works* 11).

The rest of the family's view of an individual member may be uniform or contradictory depending on the character's history and interactions with others. Often a character's view of themselves is not reflected in others' views of them, as Alan Palmer argues: "An informative way to look at narratives is to examine the distance between a character's view of their own embedded narrative and the doubly embedded narratives of others relating to that character." (233) The portrayal of Enid Lambert by her children is quite consistent: all recognise how her allegiances to her offspring change according to her whims. "*Fine, go ahead ... fixate on whoever isn't here and oppress whoever is*", Gary thinks of her (Franzen *The Corrections* 568, original italics), a sentiment echoed by Chip, who "knew that Enid was skilled at playing her children off against each other" (60), and Denise when recognising that "as quickly as that, Enid's sympathies shifted away from her daughter and back to her son" (594).

On the other hand, when it comes to Alfred there is a chasm between the perceptions of his sons, who see him as "a shouter and a punisher" (25) and "a *loser* by temperament" (195, original italics), and wife, who realises that "[t]his was a *bad* husband she had landed, a bad, bad, bad husband who would never give her what she needed" (320, original italics), and that of his daughter, who "loved the lovable" in him (490). The narration of Alfred's thoughts when his children are young, however, shows him to be crippled by his own authoritarian views.

While Gary and Enid retain their perceptions of Alfred as stubborn and frustrating throughout the novel, Chip towards the end begins to understand his sister's opinion of their father. Faced with the full extent of Alfred's neurological problems, Denise realises:

The odd truth about Alfred was that love, for him, was a matter not of approaching but of keeping away. She understood this better than Chip and Gary did, and so she felt a particular responsibility for him.

To Chip, unfortunately, it seemed that Alfred cared about his children only to the degree that they succeeded. Chip was so busy feeling misunderstood that he never noticed how badly he himself misunderstood his father. To Chip, Alfred's inability to be tender was the proof that Alfred didn't know, or care, who he was. Chip couldn't see what everyone around him could: that if there was anybody in the world whom Alfred did love purely for his own sake, it was Chip<sup>47</sup>. (605)

Soon after, Chip comes to the same understanding:

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<sup>47</sup> Indications that this second paragraph is Denise's sentiment rather than the narrator's conclusion comes from the term "unfortunately": it is unfortunate only for Denise and the rest of the family that Chip feels this way; the narrator has no vested interest in what Chip is like.

Chip seemed *beloved* to the old man. He'd been arguing with Alfred and deploring Alfred and feeling the sting of Alfred's disapproval for most of his life, and his personal failures and his political views were, if anything, more extreme than ever now, and yet it was Gary who was fighting with the old man, it was Chip who brightened the old man's face. (629)

As readers we must negotiate these conflicting portrayals of Alfred as bossy tyrant and loving father. While we may be more likely to follow the second, more positive account, with Denise seeming more sympathetic and warm than her eldest brother<sup>48</sup> and Chip evolving into a stronger and more reliable man than the one who stood in a downpour with his umbrella stubbornly shut, it is important to recognise that Gary and Enid's knowledge of Alfred is not wrong. Alfred does not explain himself to any member of his family: Chip and Denise are, in the narrative, granted access to a side of their father he would prefer them not to see, and so they are able to come to more sophisticated conclusions about who he is. Gary and Enid, for personal and logistical reasons, are not, and so they see only the cruelty that Alfred willingly projects. Marie-Laure Ryan explains that: "Just as we manipulate possible worlds through mental operations, so do the inhabitants of fictional universes: their actual world is reflected in their knowledge and beliefs, corrected in their wishes, replaced by new reality in their dreams and hallucinations" (22). Enid and Gary Lambert know the patriarch to be bossy and remote; this is their reality and it is valid. But how to negotiate between this version of Alfred, and Chip and Denise's more empathetic one?

We do not actually have to choose: Both Alfreds are the "real" Alfred, viewed simply from opposing angles<sup>49</sup>. As Susan Lanser states: "Sometimes a text will provide us with many perspectives on a character, allowing us to piece together a view that is more authoritative than the perspective of any individual character" (210). I would argue that in its very creation this authoritative view remains fragmentary, as part of accessing many perspectives is recognising where they come from and how they were formed.

Denise's "truth" regarding Alfred stems from the fact that she has always loved her father more than her mother, and is also in possession of information about him

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<sup>48</sup> Denise calls Gary a "bully" who "gives orders" (578) and wants attention placed on him at all times (602); conversely, Gary sees his sister as being proper to the point of difficulty (250) but also "stylish and talented" (566). It is Chip who praises the youngest Lambert the most: he seems almost in awe of Denise, variously referring to her "intimidating air of moral authority" (34); her intelligence and principles (60); her "emotional maturity" (91); and her steady nature (509).

<sup>49</sup>I would like to thank Dr Tony Hughes d'Aeth of the University of Western Australia for making me aware of this point.

that no one else in the family knows. A railway engineer, Alfred was poised to benefit financially from the buyout of the Midland Pacific Railroad just before his planned retirement; in an apparent change-of-heart, however, he quit with just seven weeks of service left. Early in the narrative both Enid and Gary refer to this decision, which “made no sense at all .... But he gave no explanation, then or ever, to Enid or to anyone else, for his sudden turnabout” (Franzen *The Corrections* 176). However, late in the narrative and plagued by hallucinations, Alfred conveys enough of what happened to his daughter for her to understand that he quit rather than be blackmailed by an employee who seduced the teenage Denise<sup>50</sup>. Finally understanding, Denise decides that “if you loved [Alfred], as she did, you learned that you could do him no greater kindness than to respect his privacy” (605). Isolation is thus at the heart of the apparently communal family, as will be seen in *The Good Parents* and *The Ice Storm*.

This aspect of Lambert history is never conveyed through Alfred, as by the time Denise finds out he is lost to Alzheimer’s, with the rest of his focalisation reflecting his confusion. Having had to piece it together from her father’s deluded mumblings, Denise never finds out the full story, and nor do we as readers: it is trapped inside Alfred’s rapidly degenerating mind.

In *The Corrections*, each character is affected by the idealisation, expectations, and ramifications of family. Through the presentation of the viewpoint of each Lambert, which is taken and weighed against others, the perfect image of a young Denise flanked by her brothers is deconstructed. In contrast with notions of the loving, supportive nuclear family to which the picture refers, misunderstandings and disillusionment form the basis of Lambert relations: even those who truly love each other – Alfred and Denise, or Alfred and Chip – make remoteness the rule. Kerstin Dell argues that a sense of “stability” can come from post-postmodernist characters seeing family for what it really is (202); I would say that since this too is “an ideal” (*ibid*), locating instead various stabilities may – and in Franzen’s text, does – appear more fruitful.

In the revised essay “Why Bother?”, Jonathan Franzen writes of his hope for the future of literature residing in what he calls “tragic realism”: fiction that aims to “raise more questions than it answers” (91). This occurs in *The Corrections*, where the story of the Lamberts can never be truly complete, due to the variation in perspectives.

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<sup>50</sup> To Kerstin Dell, Alfred’s ability to keep Denise’s secret is an indication that he is not a “bad” character (193).

However, the narrative's mysteries are in themselves designed to reflect a fuller understanding of family life: that we can never know everything about these people to whom we are genetically, physically and emotionally closest. The focalisation of the five Lamberts is thus vital to readers' conception of *The Corrections*, and the family, as a whole.



#### Chapter Four: “Intermental Thought” and Distance in *The Good Parents* (2008)

In Joan London’s novel *The Good Parents*, the West Australian de Jong<sup>51</sup> family exists in a liminal space between togetherness and separation. When parents Jacob and Toni are left in Melbourne after their eighteen-year-old daughter vanishes, with their teenage son remaining in their small wheat belt town, the four learn what it is to be alone, experiencing a distancing – physical, mental and emotional – from one another that foreshadows the future of their nuclear family. Variable focalisation is utilised to highlight and reinforce the de Jongs’ disconnection, with the family members’ individual perspectives allowing readers a multifaceted view in a way similar to that already explored in *The Corrections*. However London goes further in allowing the narrative technique to reflect content, with the focalisation of Jacob and Toni alternately merging and diverging to illustrate their growing or lessening sense of themselves as single entity, the “good parents”. At the same time the perspective of their daughter is absent for large portions of the novel, mirroring Maya’s absence from the family. This chapter will map and discuss the ways in which focalisation in *The Good Parents* reflects the novel’s contemporary concern with the family.

London’s narrative begins with Maya de Jong fleeing Victoria with her boss and lover, Maynard Flynn, and covers the weeks until she is located in Brisbane by her mother’s ex-husband. During this time her parents, staying in Maya’s Melbourne house, become increasingly alienated from one another, with her father developing feelings for his daughter’s housemate and her mother eventually leaving for a Buddhist retreat. At the same time their son Magnus remains at the family home in the fictional town of Warton, Western Australia, to eventually be joined by Jacob’s sister Kitty, who is back in Australia after many years living in London. This linear trajectory is broken up by flashbacks of Jacob and Kitty’s Perth childhood, and Toni’s marriage to underworld figure Cy Fisher and subsequent escape with Jacob. The events are mainly focalised through the five de Jongs – the nuclear family and their sister/aunt Kitty, who serves as a parental figure to Magnus – with brief sections conveying the thoughts and impressions of both Cy Fisher and Maya’s housemate in their first meetings with the protagonists<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>51</sup> As Jacob and Toni are not married, the family is not technically the “de Jongs”, as Toni does not share this surname. However, the term “the de Jongs” will be used in this chapter for convenience.

<sup>52</sup> From this description it is apparent that *The Good Parents* is not narrated from the third-person point of view of the characters of nuclear family only, due to the presence of lengthy focalisation through

Though there is yet to be an extended critical consideration of the novel<sup>53</sup>, it is clear that *The Good Parents* adheres to features of the family novel genre as theorised by Yi-Ling Ru and Kerstin Dell. It focuses on a two-generational family by taking up the third-person viewpoint of each member, while addressing a range of social and cultural issues in the realist mode (Dell 210); further, it sets up a “parallel family” for comparison with the focal family (Ru 33) and gives attention to “family rites” (12).

One of the socio-cultural issues with which the text is most concerned is the role of the nuclear unit, set as it is on the cusp of the de Jong family’s inevitable dispersion into its constituent elements – children becoming adults, adults shedding their parental selves. In this way, like *The Corrections* and *The Ice Storm*, London’s novel takes the condition of the modern middle-class Western family as its subject. Everyone in the novel is affected by family in some way, even minor characters: for example, Maya de Jong’s housemate, Cecile, is obsessed with her half-sister; and the Warton High School principal, Kershaw, remains in town despite being widowed because of his love for his “difficult wife” (London 112).

The de Jongs themselves have specific ways of being and performing the ideal family: references are made to the group’s kindness (337) and shared way of talking on the phone (55), and how, when entertaining a Brethren friend of Maya’s, the group “showed off a bit to him like a family in a sitcom” (146). Reporting Maya’s disappearance to the police, Jacob tells them that “we’re a perfectly ... *functional* family” (56, original ellipsis and italics) and later reassures Toni that “Warton had provided an *idyllic* childhood” (214; original italics). This notion is reflected by his sister Kitty, who, having never seen the de Jongs’ house before, reflects:

So this was Jacob’s great idealistic venture. All these years she’d thought of them as a sort of Holy Family, leading a radical spiritual life<sup>54</sup>, a reproach to her frantic worldly pursuits.

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Kitty de Jong (who, as Jacob’s sister, is really a member of the extended rather than the nuclear family) and brief focalisation through Cy Fisher and Cecile. However, as will be shown, the character Kitty acts as mother to Magnus when he is under her care, legitimising her position in the family, though at the same time she, like Cy and Cecile, gives readers an insight into how the de Jongs may be viewed from the outside before she forms an intimate knowledge of the family from the inside – that is, the Warton house. These other “outside views” are presented, I would argue, largely to give a context to the main characters and set up their external appearance. The sense of the de Jongs being viewed from outside is central to these short descriptions, with Cy “watch[ing] [Toni] as she set off” (62) and Cecile’s section introduced as “This was how Cecile saw them as she came into the house” (43).

<sup>53</sup> This chapter attempts to form a starting point for a critical analysis of the family in *The Good Parents*, and as such is evidence of the originality of this dissertation.

<sup>54</sup> This is a reference to Jacob and Toni’s plan to bring the values of a communal lifestyle to their existence in Warton; their vision of the perfect nuclear family is therefore even more spiritual and communal than that imagined by Enid Lambert in *The Corrections*.

Now she saw the ordinary muddle of people everywhere, bringing up children without a great deal of money. (171)

Here, the myth of the nuclear family is directly engaged and exploded in one scene.

As in *The Corrections*, family photography is described in *The Good Parents*. The most important photograph is that of Jacob and Kitty's parents, in which their mother Arlene faces away from their sailor father Anton, who later went missing. Jacob reflects:

You could almost see a line of tension between the sole of Anton's propped-up shoe and Arlene's floral back in the photograph. Had they had a fight? Did they realise they had nothing to talk about? Anton was reading the way you read when you want to forget about what is around you. If time was so short, why wasn't he playing with his little boy? (76)

This imperfect image is the only one Jacob has of his father, and it later appears on a photo-board Kitty discovers in Maya's old room, which she believes shows the teenager's "strong affections" for her family (195). In Melbourne, Maya herself insists that her boss and lover Maynard Flynn show her an old picture of his wife and baby son, in which Dory Flynn appears happy (18). Family photographs in *The Good Parents*, as all photographs do, thus fix a past that can only be seen in relation to the present.

Another recurring image in family novels is that of a "parallel family" (Ru 33). In *The Good Parents* two such families can be identified: the Flynns, Maya's boss's family, and the Garcias, the de Jongs' neighbours in Warton. Like the Callahans of Franzen's novel, members of the de Jong family become involved in illicit sexual entanglements with members of the parallel families: Maya has an affair with Maynard Flynn and later falls in love with his son, Andrew; and Kitty becomes romantically involved with Carlos Garcia after his wife leaves him. This leads Maya to romanticise the life her lover must have had with his dying wife (18), while Kitty reflects that her relationship with Carlos is dependent only on his wife's absence (210). Thus the fragility of the Flynn and Garcia families highlights the precariousness of the de Jongs' situation, as the departure of one – Maya – could mean the destruction of the entire group.

The de Jongs' existence as a family unit has always been relatively unstable. Jacob and Toni do not have the bond of marriage<sup>55</sup>, as Toni never actually divorced her

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<sup>55</sup> Of course, the strength of marriage bonds in general or in particular is up for debate; what is important here is the significance of marriage as a *symbol* of eternal connection.

first husband, Cy Fisher. Cy is thus, as Toni recognises, the source of her family: Toni believes Cy made it possible for her to have children with Jacob when he forgave her for leaving him (272), and it is he who brings the family back together by finding Maya (330).

So Cy Fisher, though he remains Toni's husband, effectively created these "good parents". Parenthood forms one of the main concerns of London's novel, as evident in the title. After recounting of Jacob's and Toni's adolescence the narrator tells us: "All this happened a long time ago. Long before Jacob and Toni met. Long before they became parents" (100), drawing attention to the caregiver role they share as being the second most important factor in their lives, after their being together. Both reflect on the beauty of parenthood: Jacob feels that "he really knew how to love. Toni and the children had taught him" (288); while Toni wonders "if she'd ever really be in love with anyone apart from her kids" (182). The yawning gap between the partners' notions of whom and how they love is just one manifestation of the distance that is emerging between them.

At the time of Maya's disappearance, Jacob's and Toni's parental roles are preeminent. With Maya and Magnus gone they literally do not know what to do:

They lounged, moody and listless, flicking through *The Age*, waiting, always, for the phone to ring. For years they'd said how they couldn't wait to stop being slaves to their children's freedom and start experiencing their own, but now that they were here, with no one to look after, not even a dog, they were unable to enjoy themselves. Nurture had become a habit, not only as parents, but in their work and their life in Warton. Nurture had come to define them, it was how they related to the world. Without it they were at a loss, like soldiers out of uniform. They had nothing to talk about together. (110)

A part of this desire to nurture is the desire to fix past mistakes. In her *New York Times Book Review* of *The Good Parents*, the novelist Roxana Robinson argues that London's novel takes as its premise the notion that "[e]very parent tries to improve on what came before, but how should parents be? What should you offer your child, and why is your offer always deficient?" (11). This echoes Franzen's concern with the "correction" of family: parents correcting, and correcting their own mistakes through, their children (Wood *The Irresponsible Self* 203).

Jacob de Jong grew up the son of a single mother who preferred work to family, and though he wishes to be good to his children he fears "that he didn't really know how to be a father, not having grown up with one" (London 114). A teenaged Toni Parker is picked up during a rainstorm by Cy Fisher and trades her own family

for his, which, as Robinson states, “breaks her mother’s heart” (11). When the two meet, flee Perth and have children, their lives become ones of ritual domesticity:

They ended up with a house, a dog, a TV and video, a four-wheel drive. They grumbled about bills and teachers’ pay. Like the farmers around them, they had good and bad seasons. They went to funerals and weddings and quiz nights, just like everybody else. (London 273)

At the same time, the couple find themselves unable to outrun their histories: like his mother, Jacob “cut[s] himself off from family life with his desire to create [film scripts]” (222); while Toni reflects that “[e]veryone is replaceable ... . If she died or disappeared, all the family would find substitutes”<sup>56</sup>, just as she as a teenager replaced her own mother with Cy Fisher’s (177). These fears of abandonment and replacement are realised when Maya, already distanced by her move across the country, disappears from their lives completely, effectively doing what Jacob’s father Anton did to his family, and Toni to hers.

The idea of parenthood has also “fascinated” Kitty de Jong (196), who at the end of the novel discovers she is pregnant to Chris Garcia. Kitty has spent years thinking she couldn’t have children after multiple abortions and considers herself scarred by her own childhood, during which “[s]he’d had to teach herself how to be alone” (*ibid*). Isolation, society tells us, is the counterpoint to family, with an individual having either one or the other. London’s novel reveals that it is indeed possible to have a family – as Kitty did when she had to become independent, as Jacob does when he spends all his time alone in his shed – and feel, or wish to be, alone.

Each de Jong expresses or fulfils this desire over the course of the novel, and once Toni goes to a Buddhist retreat the four members of the nuclear family are left in different geographical locations: Jacob in Melbourne; Toni in regional Victoria; Maya in Brisbane; and Magnus in Warton with Kitty, who also has “an aloneness about her” (203). Distanced from each other in this way, the parents reflect on their individual futures once Magnus turns eighteen, with Jacob prepared “to drop the parental role altogether, and reveal himself” (292), while Toni would prefer to be by herself and wonders if her devoted partner will let this happen (300).

Jacob and Toni’s longing for the opportunity to become who, and live how, they wish signifies the alienation from oneself that can occur when one adopts familial

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<sup>56</sup> Both Toni and Jacob share this sentiment, though at different times, unlike many other thoughts and feelings to be explained in this chapter: at the end of the novel Jacob learns that “[i]t was a mistake to think that you were indispensable” (London 345).

roles. In its depiction of such disengaged parents and children, *The Good Parents*, like Moody's *The Ice Storm* in the next chapter, suggests that isolation is presupposed by family life. This is supported by the end of the novel, which depicts the nuclear family (without Kitty) heading for a reunion that is never narrated, leaving readers with Maya's rumination that "[s]omething was missing, she was filled with nostalgia, but for what? They were all here and yet it wasn't enough" (349). Though we know that the de Jongs will meet in Melbourne, London does not narrate this climactic event; this signifies that, though they will eventually be together, they are all still in some way alone.

The loneliness of family is not just a central concern in London's work, but is also reflected in the use of narrative techniques. As stated, the novel features the variable focalisation of Jacob, Toni, Maya, Magnus and Kitty. As in the other family novels under review, this variation of perspective sets up embedded and doubly-embedded narratives of each de Jong: we know them not only according to how they see things, but also through their family members' representations of them. I would argue, however, that this technique is utilised in *The Good Parents* not as a reflection of the multifaceted "truths" of family life – though this does occur – as in *The Corrections*, and not as a means of one character exploring the other's psyches, as will be shown in *The Ice Storm*, but as a way of reinforcing content through form. Here, characters' perspectives are either linked, separated or absent in order to reflect their current emotional bond.

In *The Good Parents*, Maya's sudden absconding acts as the catalyst for a slow familial disconnection. At the same time, the novel contains lengthy flashbacks, charting Toni and Jacob's adolescence and eventual partnership. The novel hence features two narrative strands: one of connection becoming disconnection over time (from their arrival in Melbourne to Maya's return from Brisbane); and one of disconnection becoming connection (from adolescence to fleeing Perth together). Throughout the novel, the degree to which the couple feels unified is communicated through the presence or absence of a kind of joint focalisation, with seemingly individual thoughts, feelings and assumptions communicated through a collective ('they') rather than single ('he' or 'she') pronoun.

Alan Palmer refers to this as “intermental thought” (218)<sup>57</sup>. As he explains, Lubomir Doležel and Uri Margolin have begun to theorise the concept of shared character thought (Palmer 219), with Doležel finding that groups develop a shared knowledge of their world (*Heterocosmica* 101). While Palmer states that this work focuses on “formal large organisations” and their practices narrated in the first-person, Palmer himself explores more “informal small groups” narrated in the third-person (219). He argues that the concept “is obviously essential to analyses of fictional presentations of close relationships such as friendship, family ties, and, especially, marriage” (163). Toni and Jacob’s marriage-like relationship in *The Good Parents* can thus be interpreted through the often overtly shared nature of their thoughts.

Jacob and Toni do not meet as teenagers in Perth in the 1970s, but grow up with similar concerns. Jacob in his twenties travels extensively, believing of the time that “a bright new ragged army was lining up against everything that had oppressed him about his future as a man, the nine-to-five, the mortgage, the retirement plan”, showing that, as a younger man, Jacob explicitly rejected what would be his role in the ideal family (London 69). When he returns to Australia, his beliefs cement in his decision to join a commune. Meanwhile, sixteen-year-old Toni, having accepted a lift home from school with Cy Fisher, eventually marries him and drops out of university. Fisher is characterised as a member of Perth’s 1970s and 80s underworld, but despite his shadowy status he is ultimately viewed as positive when he uses his connections to rescue Toni’s daughter Maya from Maynard Flynn. Over time in her marriage, however, Toni comes to feel trapped, knowing that “*she couldn’t bring a child up in this world*. She hadn’t been aware that she wanted children” (135, original italics). She makes her escape with Jacob, who has been hired to paint Fisher’s flat, and they briefly join a commune south of Perth before moving to the wheat belt town of Warton where they discover Toni is pregnant. Though Toni never divorces Cy because she fears the consequences of antagonising him, “there was no question that they [she and Jacob] would stay together” (272). Here, the presence of a child makes family life inevitable.

In this fictional history, the appearance of the collective pronoun “they” in descriptions of thought or feeling can be used to track the couple’s evolution into a connected being, “the good parents”. Significantly, this sharing of sentiment begins in Warton, where they serendipitously stop during their drive to the commune and have

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<sup>57</sup> As a synonym, Palmer uses the term “joint thought”(220); however, I use “joint focalisation” to maintain the consistency of the use of Genette’s terminology in this dissertation.

lunch in the Federal Hotel: “Did it stick out all over them, **they wondered**, that they were on the run? The beer went to their heads and for a moment **they felt** daring and glamorous like heroes in a movie” (231; emphasis added). There is no indication in the narration, at either this or any other point, that this is a direct or indirect quotation of dialogue between Toni and Jacob. As the two highlighted verbs refer to thought and feeling, it is logical to conclude that the sentiments are non-verbalised, but shared, as indicated by the collective pronoun.

In the commune Toni herself reflects on this connection, noting that it comes easily to Jacob: “He had become her familiar, at her shoulder, always with her, watching out for her, muttering his point of view. ... *We*, Jacob said. She wasn’t used to *we*”, she ruminates, utilising the first-person collective pronoun (258, original italics). Thus the deployment of a kind of joint focalisation is not just a stylistic choice, but a means of emulating the way the couple considers and refers to itself. Toni and Jacob are conscious of their connection, which is more deeply forged when they move from the commune to Warton and have the “shared project” of pregnancy (272). Over the course of their relationship before their daughter disappears, Toni and Jacob are frequently shown to think of themselves in the same way, think about things in the same way, and feel the same way. No longer individuals, they are absorbed into their joint role as parents.

At the same time, however, the “present” narrative charts their detachment back into individuals. Arriving in Melbourne to see their daughter, Toni and Jacob are told by her housemate that Maya has been gone for several days. Upon hearing the news:

They felt shocked, like jilted lovers. Sick with disappointment. They hadn’t realised how much they’d been counting on seeing Maya. Now they must wait a little longer. Surely there was a good practical reason for her absence.

Or were *they* the reason?

They felt shamed, rejected, in front of this sophisticated young woman. (46-7)

At this point, then, Toni and Jacob are still sharing their view of the world and their reactions to it: shock, shame, (silently) questioning themselves. Almost immediately, however, they begin to have independent, though similar, thoughts about the situation: “Visions crossed their eyes but they didn’t share them. Both thought they were stronger than the other” (48). As the days pass and they wait for word from their daughter, this slow extrication continues as Toni leaves the house every day while Jacob is left behind due to a foot injury: “Each morning they woke up a little more



separate from each other”, the narrator tells us, demonstrating that the process of detachment is both physical and mental (109). As noted, Toni’s move to a spiritual retreat on the outskirts of Melbourne puts a geographical distance between them as well.

When they meet again and make their way by taxi to the airport to meet their children, the use of the word “they” indicates a shared space but not a shared viewpoint: the pair is “lost in separate dreams.” (344) Jacob’s is of the last lines of *Paradise Lost*, with Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden: “*They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,/ Through Eden took their solitary way*” (346, original italics). It is my argument that in using this quotation, “solitary” means not just alone together, but isolated, still, from one another. Thus *The Good Parents* charts Toni Parker and Jacob de Jong’s movement to and from a shared viewpoint, using a kind of joint focalisation to make this apparent through both the narration and the use of narrative techniques.

Similarly, the absence of eighteen-year-old Maya from the rest of her family is symbolised through the absence of her focalisation. Though the novel opens with Maya’s third-person point of view as she is persuaded to fly to Brisbane with her boss-lover after his wife’s death, from here her voice effectively disappears, reflecting the silence experienced by the rest of her family, especially Jacob and Toni. Maya’s running away is the final manifestation of her physical, emotional, and communicative distancing from her parents, which was put in motion on her move to Melbourne but was in process long before.

The opening chapter of the novel prefaces this sense of disaffection and lack of communication by referring to Maya’s inability to tell her family about her relationship with her boss, which “cut[s] her off, from her own past, her own family” (15). We learn that Maya is yet to write home, though she has made several attempts (2). Peering at herself in a bathroom mirror, she wonders in free indirect style, “When do you stop being haunted by your parents?” (*ibid*). Toni has breached the communication gap by sending a postcard with details of their upcoming visit to Melbourne, which upsets Maya, who “couldn’t bear to think of their familiar, expectant faces here in this house. She was a different person now” (29). Maya’s move to Melbourne and into the adult world has created an unbridgeable chasm between herself and her family, and she secretly leaves with her boss in part so that she no longer has to hover over its precipice; moving to Brisbane, however, just widens the

space between them, both literally and figuratively. The opening chapter of *The Good Parents*, focalised through Maya de Jong, therefore establishes for readers the geographical and emotional distance, and lack of communication, between the character and her parents. Thus confirmed, Maya disappears, and so does her perspective.

The absence of Maya's focalisation for a large portion of the novel (around five-sevenths of its 350 pages) presents readers with a narrative that is suddenly missing one of its main characters. The next chapter is depicted from the joint viewpoint of Jacob and Toni without the privileged knowledge that Maya has gone<sup>58</sup>, inviting readers to experience the familial impact of the news, and its consequences. From here readers are put in the position of Jacob and Toni: we know Maya is gone (and, given her earlier focalisation, we also know where and with whom), but we do not know what is happening.

Though the narrative does not return to the daughter character's perspective until late in the novel, her voice is not entirely absent. Several telephone conversations between Maya and her brother Magnus are depicted, though until chapter seventeen they are told from Magnus's viewpoint. This places readers in the same position as Magnus: all we have to go on are Maya's sporadic and furtive phone calls.

In *How Novels Work*, John Mullan examines the use of phone conversations in contemporary narratives, including *The Corrections*. While Franzen's novel, as Mullan says, "beautifully exploits the capacity of telephone dialogue to reveal misunderstanding, to focus incomprehension" (144), *The Good Parents* works differently, instead revealing to us the closeness between Maya and her brother<sup>59</sup>: Magnus is the only person – aside from Maynard's son, Andrew – whom she calls while she is gone. When the novel returns to Maya's focalisation in chapter seventeen, we learn: "The only person she wanted to speak to was Magnus. The only one she could bear. Because he wouldn't be shocked or worried, and he wouldn't ask questions", since "[k]ids growing up together got to know each other in a deep, realistic way" (London 304). As Mullan notes, "[n]ovelists keep rediscovering how phone conversation brings people together just so that they can discover their distance

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<sup>58</sup> This is done in the same way as the narration of *The Corrections*' Christmas breakfast scene, seen from the point of view of a naïve Chip.

<sup>59</sup> Maya thinks of Magnus that "[a]ll the purest channels of the family ran towards him" (London 304) and, though her only source of income is Maynard's change, she attempts to save her money in order to get him a gift (317).

apart” (146-7). Through the use of phone conversations in *The Good Parents*, readers are made aware of the de Jong family’s simultaneous but seemingly contradictory states of being: they are apart, but they still know one another intimately.

This, then, is the crux of the de Jongs’ existence: they are disconnected at the same time as they are together. Even as the narrative moves towards the reunion of the nuclear family readers are refused the catharsis of the experience, as the absence of the scene reinforces the ultimate separation which is the de Jongs’ future and has in a way always been their past. This underlying theme of the novel is reinforced through London’s careful manipulation of variable focalisation, as the appearance of a character’s perspective speaks volumes about his or her degree of closeness to the other members of his or her family, whether that closeness is physical, emotional, or both. Not only does the use of internal focalisation grant readers access to the characters’ subjective stories, building a multi-dimensional view of the family in the same way as occurs in *The Corrections*, but the narrative technique helps to both stage and reinforce the ultimate story of the de Jongs, which is one of a family at once together and separate.

After leaving the commune in which their relationship formed, Toni and Jacob enter into a family life based on the ideals of a communal society. Moving to the rural town of Warton, Western Australia, the pair find that “[t]he values they’d aspired to, sharing, hospitality, community, turned out to be country values, not radical at all” (London 273). These values are also associated with the idealised family. However, the narrative’s utilisation of point of view, in reflecting the emotional closeness or otherwise of the de Jongs, serves to question the myth of the nuclear family as an enduringly caring, supportive, and unified group.

## Chapter Five: Narration and Focalisation in *The Ice Storm* (1994)

As I have established, this dissertation takes as its focus family novels that variably focalise through all the members of a nuclear family using third-person narration. While *The Corrections* and *The Good Parents* follow this formula, the final text to be examined, Rick Moody's *The Ice Storm*, deviates from it in a way that bears close examination. Though most of the novel appears to adopt these same conventions, indications of a divergence from the third-person mode of narration appear at various points. Finally, at the conclusion comes the revelation that, far from being impersonal, the voice that has imparted the preceding events is actually a deeply personal one. I will begin this chapter with an analysis of the form and function of this narrator, as the unveiling of Moody's unusual authorial choice forces a complete re-reading of the perspectives portrayed and, therefore, the story as a whole.

*The Ice Storm* takes place over less than twenty-four hours, opening on the Friday evening after the American Thanksgiving<sup>60</sup>, 1973, and concluding at midday the following day. Overnight the eponymous storm, a once-in-a-generation event, descends upon the upper-middle-class town of New Canaan, U.S. Its cracks and tensions affect and reflect the lives of the nuclear family through whom the story is (or appears to be) focalised. The Hoods have impeccable suburban credentials, as indicated by the expository narration. They live "[i]n the most congenial and superficially calm of suburbs. In the wealthiest state in the Northeast. In the most affluent country on earth" (Moody 3). The parents are long married, with the father a trader and the mother a homemaker, and they have a pigeon pair of children and a dog. The story of that frozen night is a collective one, depicting the experiences of each Hood in a pattern moving from the father Ben to daughter Wendy, to mother Elena to son Paul. This sequence breaks down only twice, at points of high stress: in the section where the Hoods' teenage neighbour Mike Williams is electrocuted, during which the narrator explicitly takes on "a characterisation of the mind of God" (205), and when the ambulance with Mike's electrocuted body arrives at the Williamses' house in the penultimate section.

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<sup>60</sup> The selection of this particular date sets up the atmosphere of familial loneliness and despair that permeates the novel. Thanksgiving is a holiday celebrated in America by extended families, but, in the novel, the day afterwards can be seen as a melancholic one, with the happy gathering completed, Paul returning to boarding school, icy weather descending, and only leftovers – as the Hoods eat on this Friday night – to look forward to.

Thus Moody's narrative aligns with the conventions of the family novel<sup>61</sup> genre, as developed by Kerstin Dell and Yi-ling Ru and outlined elsewhere in this dissertation: it focuses on a nuclear family, explores various social issues of its era, and features realist conventions<sup>62</sup> (Dell 210), as it attempts to provide authenticity of time and place (Baldrick 212), albeit in a stylised manner; it portrays family rites in practice and importance (Ru 12)<sup>63</sup>; it presents a "parallel family" for comparison with the main family (33); and it utilises the point of view of each family member (Dell 210). On this final point, however, the classification of *The Ice Storm* becomes complicated.

The story opens with the "framing device" (Mullan 31) of a first-person "self-conscious narrator" (Booth 155) who proposes, "[s]o let me dish to you this comedy about a family I knew when I was growing up" (Moody 3), and later comments on "the congruency between me, the narrator of this story, the imaginer of all these consciousnesses of the past, and God" (206). The narrative voice is therefore an embodied one who claims to convey the impressions of each of the characters (which is seemingly impossible<sup>64</sup>). Such intrusions appear so infrequently a reader may forget them for the extended periods of seemingly third-person narration<sup>65</sup>. However, in *The Ice Storm*'s final paragraph it is revealed to readers that the narrator is actually the character Paul, the family's elder child, looking back from twenty years on: not only has a personalised narrator been claiming knowledge of other minds to which, in a

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<sup>61</sup> In an interview with the novelist Jill Eisenstadt, Rick Moody calls *The Ice Storm* a "family novel" (Moody and Eisenstadt 59).

<sup>62</sup> The realist qualities or otherwise of *The Ice Storm* are an area of debate. The reviewer Joseph Dewey calls writers like Moody "neither realist nor postmodernist" (15), though he disputes the realism of Moody's work in part because Moody has never lived the kind of lives his characters live (13), which appears to me to be a short-sighted interpretation of the style. Moody himself has criticised the conventionality of the realist form (quoted in Wood *How Fiction Works* 168).

<sup>63</sup> These include, perhaps somewhat bizarrely, the "attention visited upon [Wendy's] ass in the Hood household" during rituals of anal temperature-taking and spanking on the bottom with a hairbrush - "in the lore of the family, the bristle side was occasionally used" - as a form of punishment (Moody 237).

<sup>64</sup> Several theorists have pointed out the incompatibility between a narrator who claims a humanlike first-person existence and one who has the ability to see into the thoughts of other characters, including Susan Lanser (162). While Alan Palmer states that "(narrative theory tends to assume that characters in novels do not know what other characters are thinking and feeling. However, as we have seen, philosophers and psychologists say we *can* know these things. Narrators say we can" (136, original italics), he seems to be referring to characters being able to infer *in general* what others think and feel, rather than knowing the exact content of their thoughts, as we are dealing with here. Palmer also holds that "third-person ascription" (the description of one's personality by another) is often more dependable than that of a person cataloguing their own traits (125); this too, however, seems more connected to an external view of someone than an internal one.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Dewey argues that readers never forget that they are being told a story (30).

realist world, he could never obtain access<sup>66</sup>, but the source is also one of the focalised characters.

Moody's use of narration is unusual: as Michael Kearns points out, "a narrator who looks into other characters' thoughts is usually not present in the story as a character" (102), though Lubomir Doležel, among others, notes the potential for a narrative to be framed in this way (*Truth and Authenticity* 19-20). The passages from Paul's point of view have been narrated by an adult version of himself; so too the passages focusing through his mother, father and sister. While the presence of a first-person narrator who claims intimate mental knowledge of a family s/he "knew" (Moody *The Ice Storm* 3) automatically invites questions of plausibility, the disclosure that this narrator is in fact one of these family members – until now referred to in the third person – makes such questions all the more vital and complex.

Given Paul is both focalisor and narrator, then, is his evidence subjective or objective? As Reudiger Heinze writes in an essay on all-knowing character-narrators, in *The Ice Storm*, "the unusual knowledge the first-person narrator displays in the course of events is never disputed or relativised: they are given as the factual, expositional statements of an authorial narrator" (291). Readers are given no indication that we should mentally interpret the focalised sections as being an invention of Paul's, even if this would account for any real-world impossibility.

Heinze borrows Gérard Genette's term "paralepsis" to describe narration such as this: a first-person voice conveying "the thoughts of another character in the course of a scene where the hero himself is present" (Genette 207) or describing "what happened when s/he was not present" (Jahn N3.3.15). Taking a narratological approach, Heinze explains that this form of narration cannot be regarded as an example of concepts such as "unreliability", "omniscience" or non-anthropomorphism (282-4). In *The Ice Storm*, Paul Hood presents himself as an "I"-figure commensurate with readers' understandings of "real" people: he plays a role in the events of the novel, is seen as a person to other characters in the novel, and has human qualities (aside from

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<sup>66</sup> This knowledge includes that of past events occurring before Paul's birth (such as his parents' courtship); events that occur while members of his family are alone (such as when his mother, reading in the library, is the only Hood in the house); events that occur to characters outside of the Hood family (such as the loner Sarah Joe Holmes, when walking along a street); events that occur simultaneously in two planes of existence (such as when Sandy Williams dies); and events, including direct thought and fantasy, that occur within the minds of other characters. In one particularly fantastical divulgement, the narrator not only knows the exact content of a dream Ben has, but also states – revealingly – that the son Paul would have the same dream years later and "retell it and in the retelling become his father's imaginer as well as his father's son. His father's narrator" (206).

omniscience). As readers we are likely to accept such a narrator's extra-human knowledge at the same time as his/her human presence because as Heinze states, "one of the most prominent effects of first-person narrative (and indeed of all fictional narrative) is exactly the projection of a human consciousness" (281).

*The Ice Storm*'s all-knowing narrator gives us a brief explanation of his presence – "a family I knew" (Moody 3); "Me. Paul. The gab" (279) – and we readily consent due to its "naturalisability" (Heinze 293). This instinct can be explained by Marie-Laure Ryan's "principle of minimal departure", which holds that readers, unless directed otherwise, imagine narrative worlds as aligning with the world they know (51). If the narrator tells us that s/he is a "person" in the narrative and s/he (mostly) behaves as such, then readers are likely to accept this<sup>67</sup>.

To Heinze, Paul's co-presence as narrator and narrated leaves readers unable to achieve closure, as his reliability remains forever in question. The function of this, Heinze argues, is thematic, reinforcing the novel's depiction of "a time which the characters experience as contradictory, making no sense and beyond the roster of received cognition" (291). That is, over the course of the narrative the characters in *The Ice Storm* experience things they are unable to process, and Moody conveys this impossibility to readers by making them, too, unable to locate any kind of "truth".

For Joseph Dewey, Paul's storytelling is an exaggeration of truth: he argues that the result of this "patently contrived thing" is a "sole triumph: the sheer verbal suction of the storytelling act in a world hopelessly given over to brutality, accident, and loneliness" (30). Dewey thus sees Paul's narration of his family's inner lives as a means of making sense of a world as fragmented and lonely as Moody's 1970s Connecticut. Somewhat concurring with this reading, Kenneth Millard believes Paul's voice is used both as a frame for the omniscience within and "to provide a vital personal element to Moody's otherwise clinically dispassionate social satire" (253). The three analyses, then, posit that the voice of Paul is Moody's attempt to use language<sup>68</sup> to mediate the complexities of existence.

I would like to take Heinze and Dewey's conclusions one step further, given my particular focus on the family in fiction. Heinze points out that Paul's narrative

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<sup>67</sup> This may be why Kenneth Millard imagines Moody's novel as being "notable for its use of both first-person and third-person narrative voices" (253): this explanation of the form of *The Ice Storm* may be the easiest way to conceive of the information granted in the narrative.

<sup>68</sup> In an interview with David Ryan for the *Mississippi Review*, Moody acknowledges his specific interest in language: "What form, besides one made out of language itself, could better get to the heart of the difficulties involved in making oneself understood?" (D. Ryan and Moody 127-8).

leaves readers unable to know if they can rely on what he tells us. It is true that the text presents both positions – Paul-as-omniscient-narrator and Paul-as-realist-character – without indicating which, if any, overrides the other. Paul must *not* be guessing about the other characters’ mental states (as omniscient narrator); and yet he *must* be (as realist character). As Paul tells us, he is both “the *imager* of all these consciousnesses of the past”, and analogous to God in his ability to know everything (206, italics added). While Heinze states that we cannot reconcile these two positions, I would argue that we can operate from both<sup>69</sup>, simultaneously relying on what Paul tells us is happening (because, as Heinze states, beyond its impossibility there is no indicator of unreliability in the text), and being aware of it as Paul’s imaginative search for understanding<sup>70</sup>.

The dual position of Paul Hood as a realistic character and all-seeing narrator has implications for my view of *The Ice Storm* as a generally realist narrative. Given the features of the form as provided in this dissertation, much of the novel is realistic in scope and action. Moreover, though as stated the character Paul’s privileged knowledge of his family is logically impossible (and thus strictly unrealistic), its presentation as narratorial omniscience is another realist aspect of the novel.

Dewey calls Rick Moody’s realism “an amalgamation, an uncanny simulation of realistic fiction, real-enough-ism”, seeing it as a movement beyond postmodernism back to the narrative portrayal of quotidian life<sup>71</sup>, but operating as if at a higher frequency (13). While Dewey sees this as problematic, as the explicit storytelling nature of the fiction to him compromises its reality, the fact that Paul Hood is trying to make sense of the (fictional) world by telling this tale is significant and resonates with James Wood’s concept of realism as “*lifeness*: life on the page, life brought to different life by the highest artistry” (*How Fiction Works* 186, original italics). Through his storytelling Paul portrays the unknowable inner lives of his closest relations, those from whom he feels alienated, in an attempt to know them. They, his immediate family, are supposed to be physically and emotionally closest to him, and yet from a

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<sup>69</sup> As narrator, Paul’s claim that “that’s how I remember it, anyway. . . . That’s what I remember” (Moody 279) seems to indirectly validate both readings, due to the nature of memory as being at the same time linked to actual events (making Paul’s narration objective “truth”), and notoriously unreliable (making it invention).

<sup>70</sup> Here Paul-as-character can be seen to be doing what Paul-as-narrator suggests is one of the only means of escape from “personal trouble” (272): “you could write your life down and hope to make peace with it” (273).

<sup>71</sup> This is also what Kerstin Dell (164) claims Jonathan Franzen is doing in *The Corrections*.



distance of twenty years he admits that, despite his reconstruction, he has “never really understood” his mother at least (279). As Dewey states:

...Paul alone as narrator taps into language’s adhesive quality, launches his prose as a bold affront ... designed to shatter his own loneliness by offering him the opportunity to violate the hard exteriors of his characters/family (each chapter shifts its narrative perspective, although the style is consistent, and re-creates a convincing, psychological interior sustained entirely by the manipulation of voice).  
(29)

Paul’s personal narration and presentation of a vision of his family to which he could never be privy thus takes one step further the idea of the variably-focalised family novel as an attempt to connect those who are at the same time together and alone.

As Joseph Dewey finds (25), the interminable loneliness of family life is apparent from the opening pages of *The Ice Storm*. Left in the guest bedroom in the house of the woman with whom he is having an affair, Ben Hood becomes suspicious about whether she will return. Alone in a transitional space in someone else’s house with the autumn light fading, the stage is set for a consideration of isolation. Ben reflects that:

He had been lonely even in his wife’s arms, lonely in crowds, lonely at meetings, lonely throwing tennis balls for his dog, lonely playing *Operation* with his kids. He had been lonely during commuter conversations, lonely during late-night heart-to-hearts with old fraternity brothers. His dad, living alone up in New Hampshire, made Hood lonely. The severe landscapes of November made him lonely. Only Janey [whose house he is lingering in], for reasons Hood wasn’t likely to analyse, distracted him from this isolation. (Moody 5-6, original italics)

Eventually this train of thought develops into memories of his courtship of and marriage to his wife, Elena, and rumination on family life in general. Loneliness, then, invariably leads to reflection upon those people ostensibly closest to oneself, and to the incapability of fulfilment therein. Married in the 1950s, Ben explains the union by reasoning that “love was close to indebtedness. In settling this debt, he married Elena O’Malley. Family was a bad idea he got because there were no other ideas in those days” (14). He married his wife because he felt he owed her; he had children because everyone had children. Family is therefore the product of passiveness, with Ben’s only active choice being his recent adultery. His two extramarital ventures are presented to readers as being far more decisive than Ben’s marriage proposal: during the first he was “close to tears ... , though he was determined to go through with it” (17); while the second is described as something Ben could “execute”, with all the connotations therein (19).

No longer choosing to “surrender” to family life like Gary Lambert (Franzen *The Corrections* 272), Ben Hood’s focalisation sets readers up for a narrative of family dysfunction. This kind of life is to be escaped at every opportunity, whether through activity or fantasy. This view is reflected by the other Hoods: where Ben has his extramarital dalliances, Elena has self-help and popular psychology, Paul his comic books<sup>72</sup> and unrequited love for a classmate, and Wendy her sexual experimentations. These short-term solutions are barely successful, however. Despite their desperate searches for love, which are the basis of all these pursuits, the Hoods experience ever-present feelings of loneliness<sup>73</sup>: ironically, they are linked by the impossibility of their connection. The character Elena notes this: in a passive-aggressive fight with Ben, the two of them are “apart, attracted and repelled” (Moody 72).

They are, like Franzen’s Lamberts and London’s Maya de Jong, simply unable to communicate. Sexually ungratified by Janey Williams, Ben reflects that “[h]is wife took no notice of his comings and goings, ... [H]is children wouldn’t speak to him” (29). Wendy, beset suddenly by existential questions, wants to but does not ask her father to explain the world to her (50-51), while Paul, talking to Wendy on the phone and filled with an urge to talk about “how this wasn’t going to work, how no girlfriend was ever going to work, and how he was always going to live in this windowless vault where no one ever touched his skin” (182), does not say this because “[w]henver he told someone in his family this kind of thing, they always asked him if he could pass the dill spears or the apricot chutney” (183). As Joseph Dewey shows, the characters’ incapacity for meaningful conversation is highlighted by incidents such as Ben’s painful mouth ulcers and Elena’s penchant for lengthy silences (27), as well as Elena washing out her daughter’s mouth with soap when Wendy swears. Alongside this symbolism, the novel’s variable focalisation both highlights and bridges the four characters’ disconnection: though their individual passages reflect their apartness, the single narrative voice – belonging to one of them, in fact – indicates the fears and inabilities they share.

This familial loneliness is channelled through the water-pipes in the Hood house, which has been left empty overnight. As the temperature drops and the Hoods’

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<sup>72</sup> For a detailed exploration of comic books as metonym in *The Ice Storm*, see Marc Singer, “Embodiments of the Real: The Counterlinguistic Turn in the Comic-Book Novel”.

<sup>73</sup> Wendy is “always missing something” (36); Elena recognises her own “bottomless pit of loneliness” (67); and while in Libbets Casey’s New York apartment, with his two companions passed out, Paul feels “as alone ... as he could be” (190).

sense of isolation peaks, the pipes freeze, followed by a climactic offstage bursting. Likewise, the loneliness of each Hood ruptures and leaks during the night, leaving each with a crisis as overwhelming and as difficult to fix as a flooded house.

After attending a neighbourhood key party<sup>74</sup> Elena has sex with their neighbour, Jim Williams, in her first act of infidelity after realising the extent of her husband's own unfaithfulness. At the same time Ben is ignored by Janey, who is Jim's wife, and passes out drunk on the bathroom floor of the house where the key party is held, then discovers Mike Williams' electrocuted body in the morning. Meanwhile, Paul drugs the girl he likes and masturbates against her unconscious body, and Wendy spends the night undergoing sexual experimentation with Sandy Williams before being found the next day by her mother and Sandy's father Jim, who have spent the night together.

Thus the four Hoods each attempt to overcome their loneliness through sex, arguably confusing a psychic need with a physical one. As Joseph Dewey points out, "[t]he more sexual activity Moody records, the colder the text becomes", both literally and figuratively (27). Each character feels starved of affection, with Paul believing he will never find a girlfriend, Wendy desperate to experience intimacy, and Ben and Elena having had no interest in sex with one another for over a year. With the exception of Paul, the focus of the Hoods' collective sexual attention is the parallel family: their neighbours, the Williamses. As in *The Corrections*, where Denise Lambert becomes sexually involved with both Brian Callahan and his wife Robin Passafaro, and *The Good Parents*, where Maya de Jong falls for Maynard Flynn and then his son Andrew, in *The Ice Storm* Elena spends a night with Jim Williams; Ben has been sleeping with Jim's wife; and Wendy becomes involved with the brothers Mike and Sandy. None of them finds satisfaction in their pursuits, with the possible exception of Wendy, who is nonetheless castigated by Elena<sup>75</sup>. Each is frustrated by their search for intimacy through sexual activity, as the leap proves an impossible one<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>74</sup> The narrator explains the phenomenon thus: "The rules were appallingly simple. The men tossed their house keys into a convenient container ... and the women, at evening's end, selected a set at random. And then the party retired to taste novelty." (Moody 110)

<sup>75</sup> Elena washes Wendy's mouth out with soap after her daughter says while being told off, "Why, Mom, what are you going to do, *fuck me*?" (238). This word, so often forbidden in familial company, here has the added impact of being a euphemism for the physical acts to which the Hoods have desperately turned.

<sup>76</sup> Not only does the Hoods' desperate search for a human connection so often lead to them pursuing sexual entanglements but, for Ben and Paul at least, it to an equal degree results in a depressed act of

Like the release of pressurised loneliness represented by the breaking of the Hoods' pipes, Moody provides us with another symbol for this desperate belief in sex as a means of connection: a garter belt belonging to Janey Williams, stained with Ben's semen when he masturbates into it. Ben hides the soiled garment in the cupboard of Mike Williams, where it is later found and coveted by Wendy, who thinks the stain is Mike's. (The use of internal focalisation makes readers aware of its true source, as this is not narrated explicitly in Wendy's scene.) Suffering a breakdown upon learning of his death by electrocution, Wendy puts on the belt, cuts her wrist and staggers into the drawing room where her parents are discussing the end of their marriage. Seeing her, a horrified Elena reflects upon her own mother, an alcoholic who would enter rooms unsteady on her feet (Moody 268). Family life thus comes full circle in an act of despair.

*The Ice Storm* features various instances in which the Hoods are unaware of profound connections such as this, which are made clear to us through focalisation and Paul's narration. These are often linked to the search for physical intimacy that takes up so much of the narrative. For example, in pursuing their first extramarital dalliances Ben and Elena, unbeknownst to one another, both have sex with illicit partners in a car. Also, Wendy is twice discovered in a compromising position in the Williamses' house by a parent: first with Mike in the basement, by her father; and later with Sandy in the guest room, by Elena.

Perhaps the most amazing and mysterious link between two Hoods, however, and one that has nothing to do with sexual gratification, is the dream Ben has while passed out in the bathroom at the key party, which is repeated in Paul's mind many years later (205-6). With the exception of Paul-the-omniscient-narrator, who knows he and his father have had the exact same dream, and Wendy knowing of her embarrassing discovery by both parents, none of the characters is aware of these shared moments; moreover, they *cannot* be, or else the recurring theme of loneliness would not be sustained. Instead the narrator informs us of these instances, the significance of which is made clearer when we note that it is the characters' inability to

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self-administered sexual gratification. While this pastime need not be an objectively desperate or pitiful act, in the context of Paul's longing for an experience of "free love" (87) and Ben's search for a way out of his isolation through sexual engagements with women, their acquiescence to the most individual of sex acts – what Ben actually refers to as "self-abuse" (24) – is a double reflection on the pair's loneliness and hopeless quest for love.

know what they share – as reflected in their internal focalisation – that makes them feel so isolated.

As in *The Corrections*, the multiple perspectives also allows the four family members to reflect on themselves and on one another, deepening our understanding of each character through embedded and doubly embedded narrative. For instance, Ben Hood's acknowledgement that he is unattractive (Moody 6) and that, temperament-wise, "[h]e loved his wife and children, and he hated all evidence of them" (14) is somewhat mitigated by his son's vaguely sympathetic understanding that his father "couldn't terrorise with real commitment. ... He hated the world, hated mankind, hated his family, but loved people, loved kids and dogs" (80). For his part, however, Ben Hood over the course of the novel rarely thinks about his son, aside from remembering the awkward lecture on masturbation he once delivered to him (24), but gives great thought to his daughter. Compared with the Williams offspring, of whom he is peevishly critical, Ben considers Wendy to be "the only sensible kid on the block" (19), an instance of cognitive dissonance given he also knows his fourteen-year-old has shown her genitals to Mike Williams (14). Wendy, however, considers her father to be fake (46), though she is not above getting comfort from him when it is offered<sup>77</sup> and deciding from this that "[s]he would stay with her family for now" (51). Family can thus be a source of consolation, if only briefly: like Maya de Jong in *The Good Parents* and the three Lambert children of *The Corrections*, Wendy Hood's sense of emotional estrangement from her family may soon be realised in physical terms, reinforcing my point that, while the family may have *stabilités*, the "stability" Kerstin Dell finds (202) may prove more elusive.

Clearly, far from having an idealised view of their parents, Paul and Wendy have come to similar and depressing conclusions about Ben and Elena: Paul calls them "sad" (Moody 89), while their marriage means nothing to Wendy (249); neither wants to be anything like them. Though the children's criticism is lessened by instances in which they parrot their parents' beliefs as well as by Paul's realisation that when he is in trouble, "[h]is parents could get him out of what he had done" (191), the fact that the second generation feels critical of and remote from the first – the generation who will

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<sup>77</sup> Sheepish about castigating Wendy and Mike upon finding them in the Williamses' basement, Ben offers to carry his daughter home through the slush (51), an instance of the character's apologetic nature that Paul later catalogues in his comparison of his father with the comic book character "the Thing" (80).

pass the torch; the generation they are supposed to outlive<sup>78</sup> – spells trouble for the family ties of *The Ice Storm*.

The fraying of these ties is one of *The Ice Storm*'s central concerns. This is connected to the recurring idea of loneliness. As stated above, despite the fact that the protagonists are genetically and proximately close to one another, and despite sharing many of the same sentiments, experiences and even dreams, the four Hoods habitually reflect on shared origins as a “flawed system of attachment” (11). Yet on the surface the Hoods' family life is normative for the time:

[Ben] married Elena and they had the kids in '57 and '59 and they traded up in houses and they traded up in cars. To afford the family car, the Corvair, in '63, Hood had been forced to trade in the Jaguar he had driven in college. It was all economics now. Or maybe he overlooked the subtlety of feeling that was beneath economics. Beneath math. He made \$48,000 a year not including the annual bonus. Income from stock held by Elena, \$3,600; income from his own bad investments, a little less. Savings account. Joint returns. Public school meal allowance. Power boat. Life insurance. (His father had sold insurance.)

He had wanted another sports car ever since. (15)

As with Alfred Lambert's reflection on his many calm and loving dinners with his family (Franzen *The Corrections* 389), Ben Hood has spent “years full of evenings when the habit of marriage astonished him, when its repetition comforted him like nothing else ever had. Then this period came to an end” (Moody 14). With it comes the end of any claim the Hoods have to an idealised family lifestyle<sup>79</sup>. Ben then decides that “[j]ust talking to your family in the morning, before coffee, was heroic” (222)<sup>80</sup>. Again, his sentiments are unwittingly shared by the rest of this family with whom he finds it so difficult to communicate, as his son “wanted to make a better family than the one from which he came” (102), while Wendy considers family to be “the worst torture of all” (240).

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<sup>78</sup> Wendy reflects that, in the constant fight against her mother, she the teenager will win because she will “live longer” (240), while it is soberly noted when Jim Williams gets into the ambulance with the body of his electrocuted son that “[s]ons should bid farewell to fathers” (257).

<sup>79</sup> In an interview with Jill Eisenstadt, Moody comments on the perpetuation of the normative family: “It's complicated, there's this idea that if you just keep the family together that it's going to somehow work out” (Moody and Eisenstadt 58).

<sup>80</sup> Ben Hood also concludes that “[t]he modern domestic tale always features the ordeal and dismemberment of a father” (Moody 215), a notion true to *The Corrections* and the family novel *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith, at least. The role of the father is reflected on at length by both Yi-Ling Ru (47) and Kerstin Dell (46) in their studies of family novels.

The attitude to marriage and family life displayed by the Hoods and perhaps all the couples and families<sup>81</sup> in *The Ice Storm* is best summed up by Janey Williams when she informs Ben that she will not compromise her marriage for their affair because, though she and Jim live separate lives, her family is her security (124). In this seeming contradiction we see that, for the families of *The Ice Storm*, the comforts of family lie on the surface, supported by a kind of mythic scaffold; beneath this shell is hollowness. However, as has been shown, through the novel's variable focalisation and shared voice, we as readers can see the internal connections that exist in this seemingly empty space. Unfortunately, however, the characters are not aware of them, and this too is shown through the narrative mode Moody has chosen.

The four Hoods spend the night of *The Ice Storm* in desperate pursuit of connections, struggling to fill the gaping hole that the closeness of family exacerbates rather than fills. This is reinforced by Moody's narrative choices: the simultaneous presence of Paul Hood as both third-person focaliser and first-person narrator presents us with information that is at the same time objective and subjective; the product of Paul's knowledge (as omniscient narrator) and his perceptions (as humanlike focaliser). This double arrangement allows readers to not only find the portrayal of Paul's father, mother and sister reliable, but to also see it as part of the character's attempt to make sense of his world. This narrative mode, moreover, highlights the characters' loneliness and quest for meaningful relationships outside the family unit. Through variable focalisation and first-person narration, readers are able to see the despair shared by the four Hoods; despair that is a product of their (again shared) loneliness. Paul's place as both narrator and lonely character emphasises this irony: in his external context, he sees it; but internally he, like his parents and sister, does not. Thus Moody's novel, like Franzen's and London's, utilises the narrative techniques of narration and focalisation in order to present a view of families as both together and apart.

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<sup>81</sup>The Hoods and Williamses are not the only dysfunctional family group in *The Ice Storm*. Libbets Casey, Paul's love interest, is left alone in her rich family's New York City apartment over Thanksgiving (Moody 186), while at the key party Elena is accosted by a neighbour, Mark Boland, who she knows despises his own wife (157).

## Chapter Six: Conclusion

The novel manuscript that forms the creative component of this thesis, “The Birthday Party”, represents modern suburban middle-class family life through the use of techniques similar to those of *The Corrections*, *The Good Parents*, and *The Ice Storm*. In the narrative, the Australian Sinclair family symbolises, recognises, and evaluates itself according to various constructions of family identity; that is, through photography, group ritual celebrations, and comparison with a parallel family.

The mother, Laura Sinclair, has recently been made redundant from her job taking studio photographs of families. Dissatisfied with the repetition and artificiality of these images<sup>82</sup>, Laura has located her sense of artistry in her hobby of taking landscape photography, a solo pastime that leads to her increasing estrangement from her husband and children. On the day much of the narrative takes place, Laura has not used her camera in over a year.

The significance of family photography is recognised by Laura’s younger child Nathan, who constructs a collage of images of himself, his sister, and his father for his mother’s birthday. The father, Rob, realises that Nathan’s artwork, made uncannily by the pictures’ varying perspectives, illustrates the family’s traits: the son’s eager face fills his section, while the private daughter shrinks from the camera and Rob himself is pictured as insubstantial due to the empty space above his head. Laura is missing from the collage, demonstrating her detachment from the family. Towards the end of the narrative, after the protective glass is accidentally broken, the collage is tucked into the corner of Laura’s blown-up shot of Greens Pool, Western Australia, which is Rob’s present to his wife. At first identifying the absence of Laura from their son’s collage as a manifestation of her indifference, Rob later reflects that the larger image symbolises Laura’s absent presence in their lives: “he saw again the picture of the beach that surrounded them [in the collage], protected them from further damage. They were in Laura’s landscape. She was all around them, even when she wasn’t there” (p.179). Laura may not always be present with the others, but as “mother”, she still has a vital role in the life of the nuclear family.

Family photography is thus represented in “The Birthday Party” as a mechanism for both self-deception and self-awareness. The staged, professional photos

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<sup>82</sup> There are no family photos in the Sinclair household other than a poorly-printed image of Rob, Alice and Nathan on a T-shirt that Laura hides in her cupboard but cannot bring herself to throw away.



Laura took at her studio job are images that conform to what Marianne Hirsch calls the “familial gaze”, or the figural arrangement of cultural myths of the ideal family (11). Nathan’s picture, on the other hand, framed within the wider image of Laura’s, represents the Sinclair family more authentically.

Families also represent themselves through ritual. Hervé Varenne argues that, in modern American society, family rites include “birthday parties and ... graduations” (421). In the manuscript, the surprise party thrown for Laura is an instance of family rites in Australia, here analogous to the United States. The apathy and misery each of the characters feels for the celebration – Laura is unaware of it, and uncomfortable when she finds out; Nathan is distressed when he is unable to lure his mother into the surprise; Alice cannot engage with the festivities and, feeling sick, departs early; and the stress of the party’s management leads to Rob suffering something of a breakdown – is illustrative of their dissatisfaction with the practicalities of family life.

In defining the family novel, Yi-ling Ru argues that such works feature what she calls a “parallel family”, wherein, “[t]hrough observing another group, the characters of the main family learn about their own” (33). In “The Birthday Party”, the parallel family is the Grants: Caroline (Rob Sinclair’s teenage girlfriend and Laura’s default best friend), Milton, and their daughters Sarah (Nathan’s best friend) and Jessie. Throughout the narrative the Grants operate “as a foil” to the Sinclairs (Ru 33), with Caroline, who is still in love with Rob, attempting to undermine his relationship with Laura, and Sarah, discovering Nathan’s romantic interest in a different friend, turning on the Sinclairs by deliberately forgetting to tell the party that Alice has become dangerously ill. As in *The Corrections*, *The Good Parents*, and *The Ice Storm*, then, the main family has multiple intimate involvements with the parallel family. Additionally, eight-year-old Jessie Grant has functioned as a catalyst for Rob and Laura’s growing disconnection: as a colicky baby Jessie evoked such sympathy in Laura that she resolved to have another child, a dream thwarted by Rob’s decision to have a vasectomy so that they did not have a sick child, which is a situation that Rob believes his wife could not handle. Neither spouse communicates this decision to the other.

The Grants in “The Birthday Party” also refer to the potential for divorce, highlighting an outcome of marriage that Rob and Laura Sinclair, despite their problems, actively ignore. At the end of the manuscript Caroline Grant decides to move north with her husband rather than undergo what she sees as the indignity of

separation. At the same time Rob Sinclair chooses to remain with his own wife despite her difficult personality, while Laura, seeing a billboard advertisement for the estate she lives in that features a blonde, smiling family of four, decides that, although her family will never match this ideal image, they will move even further from it if she leaves them to travel overseas alone.

Such practices as photography, ritual events, and comparison with others are depicted in “The Birthday Party” to illuminate how the Sinclairs defer to, but do not achieve, the ideal of the normative nuclear family. The characters reflect that their own family lives fail to meet the expectations constructed by images, celebrations, other families, and various forms of discourse. The inability of the family to function as they wish leads to dissatisfaction and disconnection amongst the Sinclairs. Nathan sees his mother and sister as different from how he would like them to be, and feels unable to confide in his father. Rob, who like *The Corrections*’ Enid Lambert has put a happy face on family life for so long, cracks under the pressure of the façade and is forced to re-evaluate his mode of existence. The household’s two males thus revert to idealised notions in their view of their own family; the females, on the other hand, take refuge elsewhere. Alice dreams of becoming an Olympic swimmer in order to escape a future of suburban monotony in the image of her parents, while Laura, who has never felt properly engaged with her family, has spent a year attempting to play the competent housewife and mother in the family’s new, oversized, and flimsy house in Perth’s suburban estates. She spends the day of the narrative contemplating whether to use a large, secret sum of money to escape to Europe for the foreseeable future. Thus none of the Sinclairs feels fulfilled by contemporary suburban family life, and yet they cannot communicate this melancholy, except in their own minds.

In the final chapter of the manuscript, however, the four Sinclairs gather around a table of food scraps from the surprise party and eat together in comfortable silence, as the family members variously acknowledge the familiarity the nuclear group can provide when the unfulfillable requirement that it reflect those in homebuilding and life insurance commercials<sup>83</sup> is discarded. The family is instead seen for what it is: something akin to Ben Hood’s dismissal as “a flawed system of attachment” (Moody 11), in which the attachment can outweigh the flaws. As I argued in Chapter Three, the

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<sup>83</sup> Just as their move to the estates is an attempt to emulate this ideal image of the family, an emotive life insurance ad that encourages viewers to “*Savour the good times*” (p.24) is the motivation for Rob to plan the surprise party for his wife that forms the crux of “The Birthday Party”.

family is comforting not for some overarching sense of “stability” (Dell 202), but because of its various, though fragmentary, strengths.

Structurally, the manuscript is narrated in the third person, with the Sinclairs’ perspectives accessed in a repeating pattern. As in other novels using this technique, these perspectives tell us not only about the thing being perceived, but also about the entity that perceives: the angle they take and the language they use gives us an idea of their personality and approach to the world. We thus combine his/her impressions with our impressions and knowledge of him/her in a “metarepresentation” (Zunshine 47). The addition of another source of information, especially that of an entity that has been represented by the original character, gives us a multifaceted picture of what is happening in the text. In the novels written and reviewed here, that multifaceted picture is one of disillusion, loneliness, and discontent.

It is my contention that the incorporation of focalising characters that have a heightened degree of intimacy can add to the interest and complexity of the variably-focalised novel. Impressions of one another based on collective history and (mis)understandings can add depth and variety to a narrative while also making it accessible, as readers all have experiences of relationships such as those depicted in the fiction. These are very often family relationships, as shared space, blood, traditions and memory complicate and intensify relations between characters who may fundamentally be very different. “You can choose your friends, but you can’t choose your family”, as the old saying goes; in literature, however, the author *can* choose the families and personalities, adding layers of meaning to common experience.

These narrative choices often lead to a depiction of the family as a site of disconnect: as Yi-ling Ru states, family novels centre on “conflicts within the family and ... on human relationships as revealed in family circles” (28). In doing this the genre tells the story of a family in a specific time, place and culture from the perspective of all its members, joining the ever-evolving realist tradition (Ru 2; Dell 210). In adhering to the style of realism, the original aims of which are “to offer a truthful, accurate and objective representation of the real world, both the external world and the human self” (Habib 471), they replicate through narrative the general experience of being in a family; of being simultaneously and significantly an individual and part of a group.

These novels challenge widely-held Western notions of the idyllic existence of the nuclear family by presenting the group in relation to one another, portraying the

disappointments, miscommunications and feelings of isolation that are so often the family experience. As the sociologists Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley state: “There is a social efficacy about the ‘romance’ of family life – from boy meets girl, to ‘having babies’, right through to life as an elderly couple – which involves tenacious hopes that in some way the family can live out this optimism” (xii). Of course it cannot always do so – if it can at all – and this is depicted in the family novels reviewed in this dissertation. They are “realistic” in terms of uncovering the truth behind the nuclear family myth, and further, because they represent the effects of this myth on the characters in the narrative and, by extension, real people.

In addition to contributing to its authentic quality, focalisation can also be used by authors to reflect the ideas of a narrative. The use of variable internal focalisation in *The Corrections*, for example, reinforces the conflicts and misunderstandings in the novel, as it is an explicit display of the divergent points of view from which the Lamberts operate as part of their failing attempts to live an idealised family life represented by Enid Lambert’s romanticised “last Christmas”. Moreover, the presentation of five different strands of the family narrative reveals the story/ies to be more than themselves, functioning both singularly and as part of a larger, multifaceted tale. In her study of family novels Kerstin Dell argues that the portrayal of multiple viewpoints positions the family as a “gestalt”, an object that is more than the sum of its parts (37). Indeed, through the use of variable focalisation, the novel *itself* becomes more than the sum of its parts.

Other authors deploy focalisation to achieve different, but functionally similar, ends. In Joan London’s novel *The Good Parents* the approach to focalisation reinforces the degree of distance felt between particular members of the de Jong family, whose seemingly perfect life in regional Western Australia is collapsing. When parents Toni and Jacob feel close their thoughts are shared to the degree that they become the joined entity, “the good parents”; the subsequent erosion of their bond, however, is reflected when their thoughts are narrated individually, inviting the assumption that the couple no longer feel they are a team. Similarly, the physical absence of their daughter Maya is reflected in the absence of her focalisation for much of the novel, inviting readers to understand her family’s sense of trepidation and frustration. In addition, of course, the use of multiple perspectives operates in the same way as *The Corrections* in making the story a variegated and intricate one.

Focalisation is, of course, intimately connected to narration, indeed, it is a vehicle for narration, and it is this bond that author Rick Moody exploits in expressing the themes of misunderstanding and loneliness in *The Ice Storm*. Ostensibly narrated by a neighbour of the Hood family until the final revelation that this voice actually belonged to the son, Paul, the whole time, the novel thus constructs a double position of all-seeing narrator and focalising character. This invites readers to see Paul's versions of events as reliable narration and at the same time acknowledge his narrative as an attempt to understand his family. Like the other novels, the text also explicitly deals with the upper-middle-class but highly dysfunctional family's inability to live up to the model image they present by narrating their feelings of being lonely and misunderstood, paradoxically demonstrating how much they have in common.

These features and effects of variable focalisation in family novels are applied practically in the creative portion of this thesis, a manuscript with a similar structure and concerns to the three works I have analysed. In "The Birthday Party", the focalised passages are of a similar length and presented in a particular pattern, conveying a sense of repetition and claustrophobia that reflects the nature of the Sinclair family's experiences. Though *The Ice Storm* is structured similarly, focusing on a nuclear family over the course of one day, that novel features changes in its order of narration and focalisation that my novel does not. Further, Moody's narrative, as discussed, is a stylised attempt by the narrator to both tell the story of and understand their nuclear family. "The Birthday Party" aims to symbolise through its paratextual chapter construction that, though they are literally and figuratively side-by-side, the characters find it impossible to bridge the gaps – or chapter breaks – between them. The equal attention given to the four members of the Sinclair family (each is the focus of seven chapters, with one of these chapters establishing how his/her past has affected the present), combined with the single third-person narrative voice, is designed to portray them as four pillars holding up the same structure: that of the (un)ideal, but functional, Western middle-class nuclear family.

In their explorations of twentieth- and twenty-first-century family novels, Yi-Ling Ru and Kerstin Dell come to differing conclusions about the genre's attitude to the family. Ru finds that the works *The Forsyte Saga*, *Les Thibault* (1940), and *The Turbulent Trilogy* (1940) all depict a family in decline (2), but Dell disagrees, stating that of the novels she studies, only *The Wapshot Chronicle* (1957) has the same resolution, while *White Noise* leaves the family in a holding pattern and *The*

*Corrections* sees hope for the nuclear group (204-9). While my concern is not whether the texts I have studied posit a dark future for the family, this dissertation has demonstrated that *The Corrections*, *The Good Parents* and *The Ice Storm* all locate the contemporary nuclear family in a space of disconnections, misunderstandings and emotional isolation, contrasting strongly with still-pervasive messages about the idyllic and normative nature of the parent-child group.

In *Thirteen Ways of Looking at the Novel*, Jane Smiley writes that the decision to write a novel about “an ordinary family” (104) may seem difficult to defend, due to this ordinary and therefore connotatively “boring” focus. However, as Smiley goes on to argue, this very ordinariness is tied up with the notion of the novel as evidence of the “conviction that everyday existence is something to be observed and learned from” (*ibid*). This dissertation has considered such “everyday existence[s]” as represented in three contemporary novels and my own manuscript. In these narratives, daily life is family life. The observations of this life beneath its normative surface reveal the richness of the topic and the potential of prose narrative’s modes of presentation to develop and portray this richness. As the character Wendy Hood states in *The Ice Storm*, among families, “[t]he explosions and the affections [come] out of the same place” (35). It is authors of family novels who locate and narrate this place. In this way I argue for and agree with Smiley’s conclusion: that writing and reading the novel of everyday family life is highly justifiable.

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