

‘ACACIA HOUSE’

Novel

**‘ TEXTS: ETHICS, LITERATURE, & CARE FOR THE
DYING’**

Dissertation

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ABSTRACT

Fiction: *Acacia House*

Texts that portray the dying experience usually include reflections on life and relationships, the society that either sustains or inhibits such relationships, and the mutuality or discord that occurs during the dying process. *Acacia House* is a work of realist fiction, which conforms to this tradition of the literary examination of individuals interacting with others during the terminal phase of life. Told from the perspective of caregivers, it demonstrates how quality care and nurturing relationships may transform the dying experience. In the novel, the hospice 'Acacia House' operates at a time when quality palliative care is under threat in Western Australia, and, as a consequence, the nurses Alice, Maeve and Gabby have to contend with interpersonal and institutional tensions.

Alice, an Australian, trained to nurse by strict routines in Adelaide, has previously been powerless to relieve the suffering of the dying. She has escaped a marriage to a troubled Vietnam veteran, and raises her son alone in Perth. Deeply committed to both her son and the hospice, Alice questions ideas of God that inevitably arise in the hospice setting, and becomes an outspoken advocate for pacifism in the aftermath of the 2001 terrorist attacks in New York. An Irish nurse, Maeve, helps to care for her dying brother in her hometown of Sligo. Enamoured with a young surfer from Perth, she then moves to Australia. She nurses at Acacia House partly to honour her brother, but she harbours unresolved guilt over aspects of his death. Maeve's narrative demonstrates her acceptance of death and dying, the prolonged nature of grief, and also her grief for the Ireland she once knew. Gabby, from South Africa, experiences sporadic shame and grief after reluctant migration with her family to Perth. Her narrative raises refugee and migration issues and, at its conclusion, issues of global health inequity as she confronts the AIDS crisis in KwaZulu Natal.

Acacia House describes both the caring ethos and the conflicts that arise in hospice institutional life. Familiarizing its reader with a topic that is often difficult to discuss, it details both the practical aspects of care and the relationships between caregivers and the dying, their families and friends. It also confronts important ethical, social, political and economic issues that have an impact on end-of-life care, including apportioning of resources, accommodation of religious and cultural beliefs, advanced care planning, euthanasia, administration of life-extending treatments, the use of opioids

and sedation, and compliance with alternative therapies. The privilege of caring for the dying and their loved ones is evident in the nurses' narratives despite the vast emotional toll such caring sometimes inflicts. The intersection of the nurses' professional and personal lives ultimately reveals both the force and frailty of the compassionate hospice ethos. The final death, the death of the hospice, breaks institutional relationships but becomes a catalyst for hope in the individual narratives.

Dissertation: *Caring Texts: Ethics, Literature and Care for the Dying*

The critical component of this thesis takes as its premise the assumption that people are more likely to give and receive appropriate end-of-life care if they have given prior consideration to dying. It assumes that thanatographical, fictional, poetic, and cinematic texts engaging with this often taboo topic may encourage discussion of vital issues and enhance the potential for quality care. The dissertation investigates a range of texts that explore events and relations at the end of life. Because the self exists in relation to others, understanding of the dying process may encompass various textual perspectives: that of the dying, loved ones and caregivers. The dissertation investigates texts from each of these perspectives and illuminates issues germane to caring for the dying: depersonalization and its antithesis in the health care setting, denial and acceptance of impending death, the tension between autonomy and beneficence, grief, and quest for meaning. The dissertation also explores these issues as they arise in 'Acacia House'.

The critical framework inherent in the recently formulated 'ethics of care' informs the discussion of each text. Assuming a relationship between texts and their readers, the dissertation asks how literary works might raise questions about the nature of appropriate end-of-life care. While observing that 'Acacia House', by presenting alternative perspectives on social, political and economic issues encourages readers to reach their own conclusions, it notes that the novel is resolute in its advocacy of a strong caring ethic.

CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

This thesis does not contain work that I have published, nor work under review for publication.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iii
Candidate's Declaration	v
Acknowledgements	vii
Fiction: 'Acacia House'	1
Dissertation: 'Caring Texts: Ethics, Literature, & Care for the Dying'	235
Introduction	237
Chapter One: Caring for the Dying in Literature: Depersonalization and its Antithesis, the Ethics of Care	242
Chapter Two: Care for the Dying in Literature: Tension between Autonomy and Beneficence in Literary Texts	256
Chapter Three: Care for the Dying in Literature: Denial and Acceptance of Impending Death in Autothanatographical Texts	269
Chapter Four: Disease, Dying, Grief and Meaning in Thanatographical Texts	284
Conclusion	301
Bibliography	305

Acacia House

Prologue

Perth, Western Australia, 2004

The morning sun fills the chapel with amber light. The stained glass windows depict a spreading acacia, its clusters of yellow blossoms glinting with flecks of gold. The windows, lustrous now, lose their colour by the close of day. Then sickle-shaped grey leaves dominate the glass.

There is no altar. A glass-fronted cabinet holds a silver cross, a hand-beaten singing-bowl and a padded wooden mallet. Comfortable chairs are arranged around a low central table. On the table is a handwritten journal for the dying and those who cared for them.

Once the room was crowded with people in beds and wheelchairs, their families, friends and staff. Then a timber crucifix hung behind an altar, a volunteer played a harmonium, the chaplain wore a cassock and the singing was often strained.

A middle-aged man comes in. He crosses the room to the cabinet, takes the singing-bowl and mallet, and moves to a chair. He sits upright and breathes deeply, his gaze fixed on the glass. He tilts the bowl slightly in the palm of his left hand and nestles the mallet in his right. He massages the bowl's outer rim and a single note fills the room. When he ceases stroking, the sound is still audible. He rests the bowl on the table.

The man is a newcomer to the singing bowl. He closes his eyes. He's learning to bring his thinking to rest, but today his thoughts are unsettled. People, their conversations and conflicts, drift into his mind.

It's the nurses he sees most clearly. Maeve is holding the hand of a young woman lying in her bed in the chapel. She jokes about his unwritten book: *Arboretum: a hundred ways to contemplate a tree*. Gabby is insisting that the acacia in the window

isn't Western Australian, that it is Eastern Australia's golden wattle, *Acacia pycnantha*.
And there's Alice, the complicated one.

The man meditates until his mind is calm. He remains still for several minutes before taking up the bowl again, reversing the mallet this time. Once more he strokes the rim. The sound is lower-pitched now. He imagines a vast circle of belonging, wider than he can understand.

Chapter 1

Alice

Adelaide, South Australia, 1966

Adelaide is a city built on a grid of straight and orderly streets. Founded by free settlers, it values order and propriety, respect and self-control. People still go ‘to town’, wearing suits, hats and gloves. Pubs take last orders at six in the interests of family life. Adelaide is also the city where this year three children disappeared, just disappeared from a beach. They will never be found.

*

The Vespa weaves between the cars jammed in Hurtle Square and clips a wide wing mirror. Now I’m ahead of the pack. The icy wind whips my hair and my song into the slipstream behind. Rarely do I feel so free. Bob Dylan’s *Freewheelin’* LP cost me five-ninety five, and I can sing every song with his gravel and twang and soulful intensity. I give a tug to the canvas leg-cover. Beneath it are chunky lace-up shoes, twisted thick black stockings and a woollen Black Watch mini too short to warm my crotch. My knees grip a bag crammed with lecture notes, fags and a box of uppers to see me through the night. Lady Luck is with me: five sets of greens and I’m at the hospital in record time.

Three of us stand at the mirror in the basement change-room struggling with our collar studs. Pins, studs and starch are the armour of a nurse. A stiffened white cap battened down with three-inch clips hides my unruly hair. A white apron starched to

stand-alone strength covers my pink uniform. Two stripes on the sleeve show experience: fourteen months of duty, two of them on nights.

Flurries of nurses in billowing white are rushing to their wards. I walk past Casualty, quiet and dark, towards the modern East Wing, past the ancient Light and Flinders wards where beds stretch in lines along the walls. Nurses sweep the wooden floors there, and fires burn on cold nights.

Last night Casualty overflowed, filling our surgical beds with random admissions: a diabetic coma, a drunkard with concussion and a threatened abortion who lost her baby in a wash of blood and tears. That hollow-eyed solitary woman disturbed my sleep, today.

‘Jones!’ There’s a call from behind me.

‘Cog! How was the wedding?’

Cog and I met in early winter, in the chorus of *Sleepers Dare Awake!*, the hospital revue. She was off last night for her sister’s wedding. She’s bubbling over with talk of the best man’s ribald speech and the sergeant on wedevac, back from Vietnam. Marriage is not for us. Seven school friends have knotted themselves and my sister Susannah is married in Melbourne, but Cog and I will travel the world when we qualify. Nurses can always find a roof above their heads. The sick are everywhere.

We ascend five floors in the lift to reach our ward. We swing open the double doors to a darkened corridor. It’s not yet nine o’clock. Visitors have been tossed out at eight before a round of bottles, pans and pressure care, then Amytal and Moggies: our patients will sleep through the night. ‘Big drink. Down the hatch. Good night. Gotcha bell?’

Freddie, the weary evening nurse, rushes her handover. Five patients to prep for theatre, the rest of the ward post-op, half of them confused, all sedated. She’s prepared a pair of handover sheets – a list of thirty-two surnames. Seven drips running to time. Four-hourly narcotics recorded in red for the cancers that can’t be cured, people begging their gods to hurry them on, to pluck them out of this place. We’re in for a hell of a night.

A quick whip round, bedrails up – most patients are asleep. Tucker, a cancer in the side room, is moaning. An open and shut, two weeks post-op, he’s on four-hourly Pethidine. Best leave him be. He’s sleeping, after all. We have so much to do. Pressure care, fluids, pills, drips and drains and snatches of compassion. Deciphering doctors’ dashed-off orders in generic and proprietary forms.

Tucker's groaning becomes louder; thank God we've shut his door. We ease ourselves in and flick on the light. His bed is a tangled mess of sheets and his gown is sodden. His mouth is dry, his lips are flaking, and there's chalky stuff on his teeth. His abdomen is distended. When I rest my hand on his arm he flinches, then suddenly grabs my wrist. Where does he get his strength? Greasy black hair clings to his head. He wants a needle for his pain.

His Pethidine isn't due for an hour so we spin him out with a sponge and wait for Sister Schmidt. He trembles as we wash him, every breath a moan. Cog offers him a drink but he knocks it from her hand, and then tears off his top sheet. I try smearing lanoline on his peeling lips but he pushes me away. We raise the bedrails and Cog stays with him while I go to page Sister. It's narcotic time.

Sister comes from an emergency, a ninety-year-old cardiac event now safe in Intensive Care. She helps Cog hold Tucker down while I slip the needle in. He yells and breaks from Sister's grip, striking her upper arm.

'Repeat his Amytal,' she says. Give him a decent sleep.'

I'm dispensing the morning's pills into numbered paper pots when Cog returns from supper.

'Hungarian goulash. Second time in a week.'

'Bugger that. Give me toast and uppers. And a curse be upon the sodding Sister who keeps splitting my nights off.'

It's two hours since his needle, and Tucker's howling like a dog once more. Cog is trying kindness but he's writhing in pain. His sheets are sodden again. His left leg, jaundiced and bloated, is jammed through the rungs of the bedrail and we can't get his knee to bend. His Pethidine isn't due for two hours.

'Mr Tucker, you've got yourself stuck. We'll try to lift you out.'

I turn to Cog. 'Australian lift?'

Cog leans over the bedrail, reaching under his thigh for my hand. We connect in a weak monkey grip and wedge our shoulders hard behind his.

'Up in the bed, one, two, three, shit. Let's try that again.'

He's heavy, a hundred kilos or more – half of it tumour and fluid. We slowly ease his leg from the bedrail, prop him up with pillows, restrain him with a folded sheet tied

tightly across his chest, and lift the foot of the bed onto blocks to prevent him slipping down again. We'll break our backs on this.

He may be straightened but he's still in pain so we page Sister once more. 'Yes, ring the resident. He certainly needs to be seen.'

'Who's on tonight? Brendan? Oh shit and shit again.'

Bedrails are rattling; Tucker's in a rage. I page Brendan repeatedly. He'll get here when he can. Bloody hell. On the chart there's an order for Phenobarb that hasn't been given for a week, but it hasn't been discontinued. Give it a shot. Intramuscular? Fat chance. I jab it deep into the jaundiced leg and fluid seeps from the site.

Brendan is on the phone. 'Where the hell are you? No, I can't repeat the Pethidine unless you write it up.'

Brendan's busy elsewhere. The patients' callboard is lighting up and I scan Tucker's charts again. The Amytal's ordered as a nocte dose but the frequency column is blank, so I repeat the dose and add Doloxene for his pain. He swallows like a man possessed. There's gurgling now as he breathes, fluid stuck in his throat. We tie his wrists to the rails and cushion them with pillows to keep him safe. I can't bear what we're forced to do.

Brendon comes in a rush, orders more Pethidine, and then disappears into the night. Should we give the regular dose too? Sister thinks so. We must follow the doctor's written orders.

Two hours later Tucker's whimpering in his sleep. His breathing is rapid and shallow and his skin has a coal dust tinge. I record his temperature, pulse, respirations and blood pressure, disturbing him as little as I can. His blood pressure has dropped and his pulse is thready. I let sister know. I'll check it again in two hours. We have pressure care, observations, drips, drains and pills for the rest of the ward to do.

Tucker's dead when we flick on the lights for the six-o'clock wake-up round.

'Oh hell. Was he Catholic? No?'

Brendon comes quickly to certify him. We give him a sponge and turn him, staunching a stream of darkened blood that trickles from the corner of his mouth.

'Internal bleeding.'

'Nothing we could have done.'

We pack his mouth, nose and anus with sheets of cotton wool and cover his eyes with swabs. A bandage is stretched under his chin to a bow on top of his head. A combine dressing is wrapped around his penis and secured with ZO tape. A narrow bandage

crosses his toes, wraps around his ankles and is tied, holding his legs together. A label with his name and Unit Record Number is attached. Next the shroud, then a mortuary sheet, fastened with pins and tape. The orderlies come singing, pushing their bier, heave him on, and take him away. When the day staff arrive, Sister rings the wife.

‘I’m sorry to ring you so early. Yes, it’s about your husband. I’m sorry I have bad news. Yes, he died peacefully in his sleep.’ She waits, and then hangs up. ‘Coghlan and Jones, you may go.’

There’s no rush home for me. I’ve a compulsory lecture at nine. In the change-room we strip in silence and dump our aprons into the hospital laundry bag. I have an hour to kill, so I climb the stairs to the nurses’ lounge. I shiver beneath the ticking clock in the smoke-filled fluorescence. A body on the sofa grunts.

‘Wake us for nine would you Jones?’

‘Sure. How was your night?’

‘Shit.’

‘Yours?’

‘Same.’

Revision. Lecture notes blur on the page; my head is back in the ward. Fragments of night are rewinding, played out, again and again, and my muscles tense against the glare of Tucker’s angry eyes. What else could we have done?

We stumble into the lecture room, a mass of yawning faces. There are plenty of vacant seats. Eighty nurses reduced to fifty after only fourteen months. A few left because they were pregnant. Perhaps they were the lucky ones. The rest just couldn’t hack it.

Pharmacology Theory. The tutor sister stands in silence, beneath the layers of her veil, surveying us over her spectacles, waiting for full attention. Her smile is brief and benign. She breathes from her upper chest and maintains a very straight back. We listen, not a yawn between us, cut by the clip of her words.

‘The aim is to administer medications safely and efficiently. Drugs are to be calculated and administered only by a nurse who has completed pharmacology theory. Remember to always check carefully. Give only medications as prescribed. Give the correct drug and dose. Give via the correct route. Give at the correct time. Observe the patient for adverse reactions.’

O God, give us a break.

*

Cog has suggested we share a flat after our stint of night duty but for now I'm living in Plympton in the family brick and tile. Why would I pay rent when all I do is sleep? I'm half an hour from the hospital, and now that my sister Susannah's married in Melbourne I have the room we hated sharing to myself. Mum and Dad hardly see me but they leave their calling cards. *Cleanliness next to Godliness* is a favourite. A new card every morning on the dresser by my bed. Today, *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

King is my next-door neighbour. He and two of his motley mates have won the national lottery. They've been conscripted. Their farewell party has throbbled all afternoon, the Byrds and Easybeats LPs hammering the neighbourhood. *My weariness amazes me, I'm branded on my feet, I have no one to meet.* It's time I went in to say goodbye. I slip through the jagged gash in the fence, a relic of fifteen years' friendship as rough as the gap itself. Despite a pair of purloined Moggies guaranteed to knock me out, I've had a day of splintered sleep but I'm not about to complain. I'm not going to war. Service to Queen and country. By the look of these beer-swilling, bearded specimens of longhaired modern manhood, the queen and country must be desperate. They're hanging around the rented keg like a trio of thirsty sheep, lambs for tomorrow's slaughter at the hands of the army barber.

I've brought a farewell present for King, the double-blues Sturt football club beanie Mum knitted that I wear to every game. It's a sacrifice, this gift. He unwraps it with a crooked smile, holds it to his face and breathes deeply, a sign of how drunk he is. He's a Magpie, through and through, even his Holden is black and white, and he mocks the Blues at every opportunity. But tonight he gives his derision a miss, pulls the beanie over his Beetle cut, and raises a longneck to me.

'Carn the Blues. Thanks Alice. If I wear this instead of their bloody slouch hat I might bring myself some luck. The luck of the Blues? Not likely.'

I look around for something to drink but there's just the boys-own keg in the garden and some extra longnecks for King. King's Mum, sorry old Pinchlips, hovers by the creaky fly wire door with a plate of party pies.

'Nice jumpsuit Alice. Hawaiian is it? Suppose you made it yourself?'

Thanks Maureen. Always the innuendo. Yes I made it myself, that's why the seams are puckered, my tits hang out and I'll need help to peel it off.

I take a party pie. 'Did Mum and Dad come in?' Not likely. The neighbours are not their choice of friends, but they might want to see King off – and wish him well in the green machine. And pray he never returns. Dad will fix the gap in the fence with reinforcing rods.

Three fat uncles stand in line to deliver advice to the boys, each with a frothing beer in his hand and sacrifice on his lips. One's even wearing his medals.

'Speeches. Don't you hate 'em?' King has come up behind me and must have lost his longneck because both hands are circling my hips. He's still wearing my beanie and he nuzzles it into me.

'That one was a Rat of Tobruk. The next one rotted in Changi. Uncle Charlie will try to talk but his eyes will fill with tears. There goes Dad for another beer. And they reckon we'll become men, over there.'

I look around for Pinchlips but she's disappeared with her pies. King's her youngest son and she can't bear to see him go.

It's time to leave for work. 'Bring back my beanie in a couple of years,' I say. 'And look after yourself. Okay?'

Damn. There's a lump in my throat. I give King a hasty kiss on the cheek and turn to slip through the fence but he's grabbed the belt of my jumpsuit.

'Come and see me off in the morning, Alice?'

I know that beer-edge of hope in his voice but I'm not going to Keswick Barracks to stand with the sad Maureen.

'Promise you'll write to me then?' I've never heard him plead before. Despite the beery bravado, he's really scared.

'How can I write to you King? I wouldn't know what to say.'

'You could tell me that you love me.' That piss-hope in his voice again, but this time it's sucked me in.

'I've always loved you King.'

He drags me in, closer then, and smothers me with kisses. I break loose and he lets me go.

Another frantic night at work and an icy trip home on the Vespa. My fingers burn inside their gloves, and I can't turn the key in the lock. Mum rescues me with hot Milo and her woolly-covered hot water bottle that I clutch to my chest in bed.

An hour later, I still can't sleep. I've dredged up my childhood Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild. Kneeling at the bedside with Mum intent on every word. Did I recite it for her or was it really meant for Jesus? Let me smell your hands. You mustn't touch yourself down there. Go and wash them again. The memories in this room. I reach again for the Moggies. Outside there's a slamming of car doors and I imagine King with raw-red eyes, wearing my Blues beanie, taking one last look at Hawthorn Parade before the army makes him a man.

I've always loved you King. Whatever made me say it? To him. King who teased me for fifteen years. Who flung my beret on top of the lunch sheds and refused to get it down. You climb up there Alice. I'll hold the ladder for ya. Sixpence a squiz at Alice's knickers. King who refused to partner me for my debut. Partner you, carrot-crop? Find yourself a donkey. Who ogled me over the fence when I was sun baking with my friends. Give up Alice! There's no space between ya freckles. Who left school at fifteen to be a jackeroo up north on McGregor Station and returned with a special gift for me – a drawstring kangaroo pouch – then laughed like thunder with his filthy mates as I gently stroked its fur. It's the big fella's balls, Alice. Don't you know balls when you see them?

There it is again in my head, I've always loved you King, and again he's pressing in to me and I'm melting into his skin. I bury my head in the blankets, the hot water bottle on my belly, and drift into stupefied sleep.

*

'How about it Alice? You could do worse than your old King.'

Eight years after King's farewell party we're at a school reunion at Sellicks Beach but we've wandered away from the cricketing crowd, the pyros gathering driftwood for a bonfire, and the neolithics building dry stone walls to protect their encampment site. The cars that have dotted the beach all day have moved to safer, higher ground. Two reckless Holdens still on the sand will probably need to be rescued, raising more ire than income for the local fisherman with his tow. Above the beach the furrowed cliffs are ochre-tipped in the late afternoon light. They fall away to sun-bleached stones washed for eons by the sea.

‘You could cobble the road back to Adelaide with all the pebbles on this beach.’ King’s hand, loosely around my waist, slips to my silky bikini pants and his thigh brushes my hip. I lean to pick up a small grey pebble shaped a bit like Australia and try to skim it over the sea but it’s swallowed in the chop of the tide.

Yes, I could do worse than King. I did worse in London with beer-swilling Klaus who was always late with his rent, believing in payment in kind, service calls if you like. I did worse with Den on the Contiki, who flicked me like flotsam in Amsterdam for a doll who could get him a fix, and worse with Adonis the Greek, who took me on his pillion and whose name was probably John. Perhaps the worst was to come. I could be sitting, a wizened spinster, on the shelf next to Auntie Else with her freckles and copper curled hair. Or with Auntie Alice, next shelf down, who gifted me her fossil of a name. They blame their spinsterhood on the thousands of suitors who were killed in World War Two but I have no such excuse, Vietnam only claiming four or five hundred of mine. The rest have been washed up here on the shore, damaged husks of their former selves. I was in London when King returned from his tour and London was a good place to be. I wasn’t here when his wheels fell off, when he languished for weeks in Repat, for his time at home on high alert, or when he returned to McGregor Station to work with the shearing team. Dad heard it all. How he lost his cool and lost his job, and how the leading shearer threatened to dock more than just his pay. I won’t talk about that with King.

He pulls cigarettes from his khaki shirt and offers one to me. ‘I get angry Alice. Real angry. Like when the blokes turned their backs on me down the pub on Anzac Day. Like when you ask about your fucking beanie. You wanna know about your beanie? It came undone where I tugged it down, right down to cover my ears. I covered my eyes with it too. It started unmaking itself. I unravelled it more, every day for each letter you didn’t write.’

I did write in the beginning, but there wasn’t much to say. I could hardly tell him my life was revving while he was picking through minefields and blasting out the VC. Besides, he only wrote in the beginning. He says his letters went astray. ‘They censor them you know.’

We’ve walked beyond sight of the reunion crowd to the gulch at the end of the bay where the gully winds rush in most evenings to confront the heat from the day. We sit at the water’s edge digging our toes into the coarse and pebbly sand.

‘And there are dreams, over and over, this wakey wakey voice telling me to take my boots off, I won’t need them any more, but the Iroquois are thumping above me and

I'm trapped inside the hootchie and I'm stuck without my boots. And there's shouting and yippee shooting and then I'm trying to run but the bloody rifle's empty and there are bodies and piss everywhere.'

We turn onto our bellies then and lie very close, the tide washing over us, the rough sand and tiny pebbles scarifying our sunburnt skin. I hardly feel the pain of it; I have so much pity for him.

'Marry me Alice? I could order you, you know. And never question an order until after you've carried it out.'

We laugh together then and I know we can be happy, that I can help his recovery. But Mum and Dad won't understand.

*

King has drained the whisky bottle and is snoring next to me. We've been married for two years. I close my book, Joy Adamson's *Born Free*. I've read how the lion cub Elsa has been trained to survive in the wild. Tonight, she was released. Will she remain in the savannah, or lead a double life, or return to domesticity? I nudge King onto his side and flick off the reading light.

I'm half asleep when King grabs my arm, and crawling on his belly, drags me to the edge of the bed. We're in combat zone again.

'No King, No! Wake up! Wake up!' I snatch wildly behind me for the light switch, and he's stunned by the sudden brightness, his face beaded in sweat. Oh shit, he's fouled the bed. The usual bedtime stench of whisky is sweet compared to this.

'Burning, all burning. Bloody Slopes. Johnnie's burning! Smell the burning!' He yanks at my arm again.

He sits on the side of the bed then, shaking, staring at the floor. I ease my arm from his grip and gently stroke his hand. 'It's okay, King. You're home now.' I take the top sheet, wrap it around his waist and drape a fold between his legs. 'Stand up King, it's okay. Come on.'

In the bathroom, I slip from my nightdress, folding smears of shit out of sight. I wash my hands, tie up my hair, and step into the shower and scrub. King, still wrapped in his soiled sheet is sitting in silence on the dun, draped like a swami, staring blankly at me.

I leave him then to shower alone and return to clean up the bedroom. I dump the linen in the laundry trough for him to wash while I'm working tomorrow; I spray Airozone with abandon and open the windows wide.

King lies next to me smoking, silently staring at whorls of smoke rising to the ceiling. Alert. I lie on my side facing him, making circles on his belly with my fingertips. Curling dark tufts of his hair.

'Can I come with you tomorrow when you visit Doctor Greer? I'd like to talk with him too.'

'No you bloody can't.' He pushes my hand away.

'I'm so worried, King. Perhaps . . .'

'Shut the fuck up would you. Shut the fuck up! You don't get it, do you? You don't get any of it! Never do! Just wrap me in your fucking sheets and think you can put out the fire!'

He lights another cigarette. I watch him exhale, a long steady breath, then flick the ash to the floor.

Silence. I reach an arm across his chest, and pull myself in close.

'I'm sorry King. I'm sorry.' But he pushes me roughly away again, pushes my head from his chest, forces my face to the mattress, heavy fingers pressed into my scalp. A scream is stuck in my throat. For the first time with him, I'm terribly, terribly scared.

'Bloody woman. Leave me alone, can't you?' He lurches himself from the bed to go and watch TV.

I don't move a muscle. I can still feel the pressure of his fingers. A distinctive sulphuric smell mobilises me. I rush to the bathroom, plunge my head under the tap and pick at the pain on my scalp. His cigarette is stubbed out in my hair.

*

Adelaide, South Australia, 1977

Alice is shedding memories at the Adelaide Railway Station. She has removed the wide leather luggage straps from two steel-cornered suitcases, and is feeding their contents into the jaws of the Inland Mission bin. Stuffing in a shrunken Fair Isle jumper with stiffened batwing sleeves, she has a flicker of regret. She remembers watching the black and cobalt strands slip through her mother's fast-knitting fingers, and the Ulysses butterfly emerge. She almost rescues the jumper but instead lets it drop.

After clothes, the books and pictures. There's a final sighting of Jesus, the faded Light of the World, jutting awkwardly from His broken frame as she eases Him into the bin. In go *Roots* and *Exodus* and the copy of *Peyton Place* that her parents never saw. She shoves in an expensive pair of knee-high pigskin boots, smooth and soft when new, but now hardened, crackled and crazed. King had dried them too close to a campfire at a time when she knew how to forgive.

King is at the Coorong this weekend shooting rabbits with his Nasho mates. They'll be staring into the fire at night with their longnecks and shortened talk. Alice will have a fire of her own at home, burning photos, cards and letters. She has saved a small bundle of letters stamped with his army ID and tied it with black binder twine. She'll never forgive her parents for concealing them from her.

She runs a weary hand over her belly. Cog is living in Perth now and Alice will take refuge there.

Chapter 2

Gabby

Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Africa, 1993

In November, humidity seeps into Umzinduzi Valley between Durban and the Drakensberg Range where the city of Pietermaritzburg lies. Moisture clings to a mix of buildings: Free Renaissance, Baroque, Georgian, Cape Dutch and the inevitable modern. There is little symmetry here. Humidity seeps through the leafy, well-to-do northwest, the coloured group area in Woodlands, the Indian area of Northdale, and into the worn commuter belt, to Imbali and Edendale, the sprawling Zulu communities mostly stripped of their trees. Dampness clings to people's skin and leaches their energy. This capital of KwaZulu Natal is also known as Msunduzi, The Garden City and The City of Flowers. Now the Natalia bougainvillea, jacarandas, and Cape chestnuts bloom.

*

After the overnight rain, the air is filled with flying ants. The lawn is a moving carpet of females shrugging off their wings and lifting their abdomens, their pheromones attracting mates. The males also shed their wings and trail the females in tandem, their antennae tapping the tail ahead.

Gabby carries her empty teacup and walks slowly from her seat in the garden, eyes downcast, watching the ants burrowing into the soil to lay their precious eggs. Another African moment to capture and never forget. In other years, she would have

gathered the ants, depriving mantids and lizards of their high-protein breakfast. She would have squashed them into tall coffee jars to freeze and feed wagtails in winter. Next winter the wagtails will fend for themselves. She wonders fleetingly if there will be flying ants in Western Australia.

Samuel, in his long black gumboots, is sweeping the path near the kitchen, singing something in Zulu.

'...zonke inyoni amakhulu yena khala amakhulu'

'What does it mean, Samuel?'

'Ah, Missus. All the birds are a-crying.'

She considers the song for a moment, and then returns to preparing his breakfast. Twice a week at daybreak, Samuel takes two minibuses from Sweetwaters to Clarendon and then works all day in her garden. On a floral plastic tray, Gabby piles his breakfast: an egg with thickly sliced buttered bread, peanut butter and jam, tea and date loaf.

Samuel comes to the door for the tray, and hands her a small beaded bracelet that he has found in the garden. Her daughter Cassie has been careless again.

'Siyabonga Samuel. When you finish breakfast, would you sweep the pool? Make sure you get it very clean. Then please would you mow the lawn again?'

Perhaps pulverizing wingless ants will fertilize the grass. Gabby returns to the kitchen to prepare their lunches: pilchards, bread and pumpkin for Samuel and sandwiches for herself. Thembile would usually make his lunch but she's on leave this week. Later Samuel will relax with his meal observed by thieving monkeys, but Gabby will eat on the go, grabbing bites between bends on the Durban road.

The drive will take almost an hour. On the passenger seat with her sandwiches is the leather-bound journal she will show Doctor Starling for the first time today. Driving past the Wykeham Collegiate the car suddenly feels warm. Gabby flicks on the air-conditioner and reaches for her sunglasses. She pulls out to avoid a group of pedestrians spilling onto the road. She thinks again of those ants. How did they know the day would be hot, that today was the right time for flight? It has been cooler and wet every day for a week, and she's had to retrieve winter jerseys she had already packed in a trunk.

*

2nd February 1993

Doctor Starling suggested this journal, to document my feelings. I once kept a journal in high school but lost patience with the thing. I couldn't keep pace with my life while striving for prose reminiscent of Gallico's *The Snow Goose* or Bosman's *Mafeking Road*.

The wind was like a girl sobbing out her story of betrayal to the stars. The capricious nature of my memory! These lines of Bosman's flash before me after twenty years but I can't recall the title of the book I read last week.

Leo made the decision to emigrate. Married people follow each other like the ants. And their children follow too. It feels imperative now to recall my past and to measure its worth before it is lost. Where should I begin? My memory feels like a great jellyfish, once a free-swimming creature, now washed up by the tide. I will probe it with my pen. That will please my ageing doctor who sits in his studded chair, nodding silently as he webs his fingers under his folding chin.

13th February 1993

Alopecia. Little bald patches that the doctors can't explain have appeared on my scalp, and the hair on my pillow in the mornings is distressing. While Leo has joked that I'll be like a vulture dipping its bald head into its prey, I prefer my children's analogy: Cassie and Gordon have likened me to the beautiful Southern Bald Ibis we saw nesting in the Eastern Transvaal. Yes, I'm wading into muddy waters and I need to protect my chicks. Hats have become necessities and I wear shirts that are floral and flecked so the falling hair doesn't show. There seems to be no cure, but Cindy, my hairdresser, disguises the patches with curls and assures me the hair will grow again once we're settled in Australia.

Doctors, half of them bald eggs themselves, have little sympathy. Less hair to go grey, they laugh. I could try a Queen Elizabeth scarf or a Brethren triangle, a Muslim hijab or a turban. I see the frizzy-haired Zulu women holding their proud heads high and tightness stiffens my jaw. What did Doctor Starling say? Write your feelings down, Gabby. Or write your stories – let the feelings come. Get it down on the page.

19th February 1993

Our marriage was smooth at first. The surface of our little family pool rarely suffered ripples – but now the current has swept us up. Leo has no fear. Still waters await us in Perth, he says.

Have I fallen out of love with Leo? He's changed his ideas and his manner and my respect for him is dwindling. For twenty years he's criticized our friends for taking flight to the outside world. 'What this country needs is commitment', he used to say with successive emigrations. He had no hypocrisy then. He worked for years as a volunteer with the KwaZulu Training Trust, teaching carpentry to school leavers, giving leg-ups to small businesses, even helping with investment. He only lost patience when teaching work ethics. For Leo, ethics is as simple as arriving on time and being courteous and hard working. We both volunteered to teach the life-skills course. Leo felt less comfortable, but to his credit he mastered strategies in effective communication and conflict resolution. So how did our communication fail? And when did he change his mind? He won't discuss the process now – the outcome is a *fait accompli*.

When Nelson Mandela was released from gaol and all the world was applauding, Leo's face remained dour. The night we saw the great man on TV addressing the dappled crowd outside Victor Verster prison was when Leo told me of his decision. The flood of emigrating white school leavers had caused his change of heart. It was time for us to leave. If we waited for Cassie to finish school, we might have left it too late, and the world might have slammed its doors on old bolters from Zim and SA. The children might even leave without us. If they remained in the new South Africa their work prospects would be stymied – blacks would be given priority over whites.

Leo listened selectively to justify his decision. South Africa was bleeding to death, fifteen hundred recent killings, and Inkatha had declared war on the UDF – the United Democratic Front. A bloodbath was a certainty – one settler, one bullet, even church leaders would be stabbed. The land was sliding into socialism with its new labour relations act. Our char, Thembile, would work less than nine hours a day! The private schooling Cassie and Gordon enjoy would be unaffordable when her wages soared. How would people cope with more children than we have, and people with live-in maids? And maternity leave for domestics? Leo thinks the concept ludicrous in a country with a large labour force, but me, I'm not so sure. I am loyal to Thembile. But Leo has statistics at his fingertips and always has the last word. They breed like flies! Three thousand babies a day! One every twenty-six seconds! If you think we suck from the hind tit now, where will we suck in ten years' time?

10th March 1993

South Africa was welcomed back into the fold of international cricket; we played first in India in November 1991, and last year our team was in Australia, our Springboks

playing Pakistan in Brisbane in a one day International. Leo had friends for a bat-and-bowl breakfast starting at 4a.m. then a *braai* and beer at fifty overs, the boys not missing a minute of Jonty Rhodes, our man from Maritzburg. I was on an early shift and put my head into the lounge before leaving.

‘Gabby! It’s at the Gabba, a place named after you, hey! Green and walked over by men. Grab us more coffee would you?’

When I returned from the hospital in the late afternoon, Gordon was waiting to unlock the gates with Rastus, our black Labrador. The wives had arrived for the *braai* and neighbours had joined in the jolling. Gordon couldn’t hold his excitement. The Springboks had won by twenty runs and Jonty Rhodes was a hero. He had made a spectacular dive with the ball, and breaking the stumps, had run Inzamam out. Gordon had set up his stumps on the lawn to re-enact Jonty’s dive, and primed Leo to imitate Inzamam, walking crestfallen from the crease. I applauded them loudly and Leo wrapped his arms around me. Thembile would clean up the mess inside. Leo had saved me some sosaties. Everyone was happy then.

14th March 1993

In the compact nest of grass, twigs and leaves in the dwarf erythrina tree near the pool there are two young black sunbirds. Leo and I sat with our binoculars this afternoon to see the male arrive, his pitch-black feathers in the sun a gorgeous metallic purple. He was extracting nectar from the erythrina flowers and feeding it to the nestlings.

16th March 1993

Conversations are resurfacing, keeping me from sleep.

I marinated a leg of venison overnight to roast in the Weber. Six friends came for dinner. If Leo’s rants leave me jaded, dinner parties, peppered with fear and rumour, blight my appetite. Canoeists had been attacked near Blue Lagoon. They’d lost shoes, watches, wallets and shirts.

‘Will they keep canoeing?’

‘Of course. We mustn’t be intimidated.’

Firearms sales were soaring: people needed to protect themselves. Clive had a pair of Smith and Wessons ready for emergencies.

‘You wouldn’t really give little Wendy a gun if she were home on her own at night?’

I remember Clive leaning into me then, emboldened with Nederberg red, his customary gentleman Jekyll then a splenetic Hyde.

‘Gabby, my dear, I don’t just give her the gun, I instruct her on how to use it. Never ask questions. Shoot.’

The table became very quiet. Clive was usually more circumspect.

‘The Zulu sangomas can remove the bullets. Traditional skills! Who needs a doctor or pharmacist? They dispense their muthi for pain. They can even write legitimate sick notes now! Did you hear those barbaric sangomas are going to teach African medicine in the varsity medical schools? We’ll be the laughing stock of the medical world.’

I tried to argue with Clive, to remind him that traditional healers were being trained in diagnosis and referral, but he had the louder voice. Why did I think they needed training? Because sangomas were applying cow dung to umbilical cords at birth. Because post-partum sepsis was rife. Because by the time patients with STDs, TB, or leprosy finally saw a real doctor, death was a beckoning friend.

Somebody mentioned AIDS. I had heard from Prestbury hospice nurses that traditional healers could be helpful with some aspects of palliative care. But Clive wasn’t interested.

‘Gabby, only fifty percent of varsity students today are white. Do you hear that? Fifty percent! And you don’t think standards will slip? Our degrees are becoming worthless in the outside world.’

I remember lying on my side, trying to think, listening to the familiar clicks and clunks as Leo locked the external doors, the seven passage doors, and padlocked the fridges, freezer and pantry. He hadn’t supported my stand at dinner, and, for the very first time that night, I knew his decision to emigrate was final.

27th March 1993

It’s garbage night tonight. As always, in two bins, one for salvageables, one not. That way there’s no rubbish strewn in the street after the scavengers call; I’ve done their sorting for them. It’s our recycling programme.

2nd April 1993

They say that the sun never set on the British Empire, never on its last outpost in Natal, and that it shouldn’t set on an argument, but Leo will let it set on my unrest because he

is able to sleep. Perhaps he is right. Sunset can carry the heat of the day in a haze that dims perspective. The time when we reflect is often before sunrise, before the hadeda's raucous calls, when we lie together, awake. Strangely, he won me over on the morning that he admitted his misgivings about emigration to Australia. But if we stayed, the children's education would suffer. It was as simple and complicated as that. Leo agreed there were other standards in life, like commitment, solidarity, loyalty, and pride in the land of your birth, but the children's futures were at stake and we simply couldn't take the risk. Despite my acquiescence, I still feel that we're fleeing a friend on the brink of her rebirth.

23rd April 1993

What a surprise this afternoon! When I took Cassie and Gordon to the library in Churchill Square, we met Thembile with two of her daughters, Jabulile and Judith. They were in their school uniforms, neatly presented, and both had beautiful manners. It was such a delightful encounter, watching the children comparing books. Both the girls want to be nurses and had borrowed books in the Cherry Ames series. I wonder how well they read? I could give Judith, the young one, the old nurse's apron that is in the dress-up box, but I'd better ask Cassie first. She's never worn the thing and is unlikely to be possessive, but she's become less predictable lately.

6th May 1993

I've started packing photo albums and collating a range of stray pictures into piles on the lounge room floor. I look at photos of Leo, building the Edwardian country doll's house he made for Cassie when she was four. There are pages filled with its tiny rooms, windows and winding stairs, and miniature pendant lighting. There are photos of Cassie 'helping' Leo paint terracotta tiles on the lift-off roof and gluing friezes onto the walls. The building project gave her a precocious knowledge of architraves, cornices and joists, (how she struggled with per-pen-dic-u-lar) but sadly she had little interest once the model was complete. There are photos of her with hammer and nails, with a square and plywood pieces, but few of her with dolls. There are some of little Gordon parking his cars between the antique wickerwork, seating his dinosaurs at the dining table, and tucking his rubbery green reptilian friends into the four-poster bed.

Two albums are crammed with photos of holidays at the Berg cottage we share with eleven close friends. We're leaving so much behind. Swimming in the Umzimkula. Picnics at Mermaid Pool and *braais* of boerewors, sosaties and steak.

Sunbirds flitting in the white stinkwood outside our bedroom window. I remember the night, windows wide open, our room lit by a full summer moon, and Leo loving me – the same night his best leather boots were stolen, through the burglar bars. The mountains, so dry in winter and deliciously green come November, the sweep from Giant’s Castle right up to The Rhino. Leo’s already found a buyer for our share of the cottage. *Loskop*, he calls me, shaking my head. Loose-headed dreamer I am.

Shall I pack our books and albums of trees, indigenous plants and exotics? The Australian eucalypts and Port Jackson willows have run feral in this country, but other trees are a welcome sight. In Maritzburg, there are glorious trees that announce the coming of Christmas – the Australian Wheel of Fire, *Stenocarpus sinutus*. Will I find any plants in Perth that have migrated from South Africa, or is it only people – deracinated Zimbabweans and threatened South Africans – that have taken root over there?

Leo loves to propagate trees, in particular thorny acacias. His favourite is the flattish crowned burkei with its spikes of cream and white flowers. Considering his cabinet-making hobby, this passion is curious. The burkei’s timber is so difficult to work. He gathers the seeds, files them a little, and then drowns them in boiling water, soaking them overnight to help them germinate. He plants the swollen seeds in tiny cardboard pots and protects them as they grow. Will an Australian tree ever evoke the passion the burkei brings to him, with its boyhood associations of Umfolozi, the Northern Transvaal and the Kruger Park? He’s checked with Australian Customs but the import of seeds is prohibited. Our trees may introduce disease.

17th May 1993

Leo had been skimming the papers when he saw the article on AIDS. A hundred thousand people had tested positive. And right here in Natal, contaminated instruments had infected some hospital staff. He thought I should change my career. I owed this to him and the children.

How could I abandon midwifery? We met in Cape Town, at rugby at Newlands, watching the Maties and Ikeys at war. I was doing midder at Groote Schuur and Leo was at Stellenbosch. I was wearing my new flared jeans and chartreuse anorak but I can’t remember what he wore, something khaki I think. I do remember the tension in the stands and police patrolling with batons, Cape Town’s bitter response to the Soweto riots that June. Nineteen seventy-six. So much tension in the air until Leo, sitting

behind me, sloped his Castle down my neck and offered to lick it off. I didn't shower before duty that night and we slept together within the week. He liked the taste of me.

How could I give up midwifery and the neonatal nursery and relinquish my expertise in the place where I felt most at home, where Gordon and Cassie were born? I groped for excuses to stay. There were universal precautions. And the new national antenatal HIV/AIDS survey would identify those who were positive. But I doubted my own argument. There were always occasions when time was too short for slipping on gloves or gowns, and resuscitating babies barehanded was quicker than when I was gloved. I had already put myself at risk and surely would do so again.

Maternity is awash with blood and it hadn't bothered Leo before, but that night, he was reluctant to sleep with me.

I went to Matron's office the following day and asked about a transfer. I suppose I agreed with Leo. They offered me a medical ward and some work in the oncology clinic, which is squashed in a corner of the X-ray Department. I needed to do extra training, but it has given me further experience to take to Australia.

9th June 1993

Family dinners have always been important to us. Manners are essential there, and the discussion around the table becomes more lively every year. Cassie has found her political voice and Gordon now eats with his elbows tucked in and he swallows before he speaks. They both know not to interrupt, to hear each other out, to leave the last for others and to offer to others first. While this is all very pleasing, recent developments at the table have diminished my appetite. The bantering discourse we used to enjoy has been stifled by a sense of *indaba*, as if meals are business meetings, with Leo holding the chair.

His written agenda is placed next to his wineglass, and every item must be resolved. Last night he asked about the doll's house. Should we take it to Australia?

I remained silent, wondering how Cassie would handle this. Had I been forewarned, we might have discussed it first. The house has been neglected by Cassie. It migrated from the playroom to the lounge. Displayed on one of Leo's low yellowwood tables, it has been admired for its craftsmanship. He invested more of himself in that tiny house than any woodcraft project since.

Cassie knows her indifference to the house has disappointed him, but she has no interest in domesticity. She wants to give it to her friend Melanie for her baby sister. Melanie's mad about miniatures.

Leo couldn't conceal his regret, and suggested she leave it with his mother, Gogo – just in case we come back. Cassie might one day have a daughter who might be fond of dolls. Finally Leo surprised me.

'It's your decision Cassie. It's your house, after all.'

I loved him so much for relinquishing control.

I've been packing my great grandfather's Baltic pine trunk with heirlooms, trinkets and books. I have a notebook in which I record each item and its history I can remember. Leo questions some of my decisions.

'Why *The Practical Guide to Health*, published in 1908?'

It belonged to my mother, and her parents before her, and I'll hand it down to Cassie or Gordon. Laced with outdated morality – it warns against theatre and dance! – it has sentimental value for me.

What will Cassie miss when she leaves – apart from her friends at school? Both she and Gordon are approaching this move as if preparing for a week at the Cape. But Leo's final agenda item tonight might have brought reality home. He told them that the school reports they take to Australia must be exemplary. They must attain maximum marks to ensure places in the highest classes at the best schools in Perth.

25th June 1993

Tony, a young man with metastatic testicular cancer, died in the ward tonight. The family was all with him, and Ellen, his Prestbury hospice nurse who has expertise with the dying, came in near the end. How does she cope with patients dying when I find it so difficult?

Once home, I flopped on the sofa next to Leo. Deaths are very hard when patients are so young. Usually when I come in late Leo listens quietly, massaging my shoulders or feet, but tonight he was restless, inattentive to my tears, itching to hear the last of it, to give me some news of his own. He brought a beer for us both – we had something to celebrate.

He had spent the night with his figures, which were of little interest to me. His sideline in office equipment has proven lucrative and he sold another house today. Houses are generally selling well despite regional unrest. People may be on edge, but most whites are staying it seems, and there is a good balance between buyers and sellers. One or two cheeky blacks and Indians are moving into Scottsville and Hayfields, but that won't affect Leo's sales. Before the general election next year and

anticipated universal adult suffrage, the market is sure to change – there will be more killings and intimidation – can an election like this ever be representative? He shook his head in despair. But we will have sold by then. We will be well off.

I couldn't see the point in his financial deliberations. We can't get the money out of the country. What is the limit now? Sixty thousand rand? Our assets will be frozen here. With a slight shake of his head and a hint of a smile he took my hand in his. We cannot start from scratch in Perth and educate the children well. We will struggle without capital.

I had no idea what he'd been up to: moving money to Hong Kong beneath my nose. For two years he's had a pair of business mules collecting their commission. His account has been supplemented with inflated payments for the office equipment he imports.

It took me several minutes to comprehend the enormity of his actions. I'm not averse to bending the law when it's justifiable, but I was bewildered by his blatantly illegal action. I felt too tired to argue, but I offended him nevertheless with my naivety and lack of gratitude. Did I think the Good Lord would provide? Houses are expensive in Perth. Two hundred and fifty thousand rand in Clarendon will buy us a matchbox there. Do I want to rent forever, to send the children to schools in the slums, with Aborigines perhaps – because our money's frozen here? We must take a stand against unjust legislation. There are regular public seminars on avoiding the foreign exchange laws. Everybody's doing it.

He was belching beneath his breath, leaving a hydrochloric curry odour lingering in the air. He didn't like the meal tonight. Who made it –Thembile or me?

Thembile used to cook, clean, and launder for us but we recently reduced her service, giving her time to find an alternative position. Thembile made the curry.

I ran a lavender-scented bath and checked on the children. Gordon was snoring softly, cuddling his favourite lion, his gnawed, threadbare Imbube. I took the cricket bat signed by Jonty Rhodes from between his sheets. Cassie was still awake, immersed in her new library book, *Anne of Green Gables*. She gave me the briefest of kisses, unwilling to interrupt her reading. She has fallen in love with feisty Anne, with her unruly red hair and behaviour, but despises the smug Gilbert Blythe.

I eased myself into the steaming bath, allowed my eyes to close, and breathed in the soothing vapour. I let myself go and tried to empty my mind, but the bedside emotions at Tony's death and Leo's anger jostled against each other, refusing to

dissipate. Tony's weeping parents, and his sister holding his hand. Leo's incredulity. A trickle of cold suddenly hit my forehead, spilling over my breasts and belly. I hadn't heard Leo come in. He was sitting on the edge of the bath drizzling the last of his beer over me. It wouldn't blend well with the lavender but I wasn't about to protest. I closed my eyes again, but he wanted to talk. He had only just noticed that the doll's house was missing. Had I taken it to Gogo's? He'd seen his mother today and she hadn't mentioned it.

I felt sorry for him in a way. But what was a little plywood house in the context of my patient Tony dying? He had said it was for Cassie to decide and I'm proud of her decision. I don't think I wanted to hurt him. She gave it to Thembile, for her twins, Andiswe and Mbali. They are only four. And Jabulile and Judith, the older ones, will play with it as well.

If Leo had been angry before, now he was apoplectic.

'Thembile's brood! What do they want with a miniature Edwardian house? The electrics will never work. Did Cassie at least keep the fittings Gogo brought from Derbyshire? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't Cassie ask me? Why didn't she discuss it with me?'

I let my ears slip under the water to muffle the barrage of rant. Now this is written. Perhaps I will sleep.

5th July 1993

I met Ellen, the Prestbury Hospice nurse, at the Park Lane Spar yesterday. We were struggling in the chilly wind in the car park pushing our laden trolleys and she suggested we have coffee. She's a familiar face in Oncology, liaising with our staff to reduce patients' hospital visits. Over coffee she asked why I had moved from Maternity. Prestbury Hospice husbands had also been worried about their wives nursing HIV/AIDS patients. The hospice had run an in-service program to educate husbands, nurses and volunteers – and even the hospice board members. It was comforting to me that Leo wasn't alone in his concern. Ellen also mentioned undeclared HIV, masquerading as cancer. (I won't share that insight with Leo.) She used to work with AIDS patients in Johannesburg, most of them gay white men. When I asked about hospice care for Zulus, she threw her hands in the air. The Zulu nurses at Edendale do hospice home care voluntarily, using their own cars. They have a room in the undertaker's office. Continuing care has been difficult because of differing

political affiliations – nurses who see patients in hospital can't always see them at home.

In nineteen ninety we were all aware of the seven-day war between Inkatha and the ANC at Edendale, and subsequently the media has bombarded us with the continuing violence, but until talking with Ellen yesterday I hadn't considered the nursing consequences. Edendale feels so remote, although it must be less than ten kilometres away. I nurse in a separate world where the greatest concern in recent times has been the theft of linen, and insufficient towels and sheets for standard hygiene care.

19th August 1993

In my dream I was on a ship watching a body bag containing an AIDS patient being bundled into a stormy sea, thrown like an anchor at the far end of a chain. As the chain unwound and slipped into the depths of the sea, I realized I was fixed as a counterweight at its shipboard end.

2nd September 1993

The bridge game at Barbara's today was peppered with the usual stories about thieving maids and the escapades of cheating men.

Elizabeth's cautious bidding replicated her prudence in life. Sanctions against South Africa eased long ago, but only now is Elizabeth modifying their guesthouse on Old Howick Road to accommodate Japanese tourists. She is replumbing bathrooms, removing rooms four and fourteen, and has bought new twin beds, plum tea and packets of miso soup.

Marjorie complained about diminishing support for the Maritzburg Housewives' League. Their membership has dwindled; no one bothers to object any more to high prices and profiteering, poor goods or services. She says we're all apathetic. I argued that it's the cost of petrol driving prices up, that complaining is a waste of time. She dismissed me with a bid of four spades.

Barbara, who teaches drama, is involved in HIV and AIDS education. Forty percent of South Africa is infected and it is worst in Natal. The system will never cope. She's convinced we must teach communities to care for their own at home.

I couldn't eat my scone. We are leaving in two months.

10th September 1993

Thembile showed me an advertisement for a qualified maid, a sleep-in position in Hilton commencing next month. The duties included laundering, cleaning and cooking, which requires her to read recipes. The remuneration is negotiable and includes two weeks paid annual leave. She needs a reference from me.

I discussed the job with her. Her sister can help with the children, but I worry that a sleep-in job will leave Thembile little time for them. I can give her an excellent reference (although she may need help with the recipes) but I must try to find her something more suitable that won't take her from her family.

12th September 1993

I've been sorting through our books, taking rejects to the charity shop.

'Sawubona Eunice.' How I will miss the Zulu greeting. Eunice was washing windows, slopping soapy water onto a bed of daylilies drooping over the path. I felt I was seeing their vibrant colours for the first time today.

Marjorie was ready at the desk to take my latest discards. At bridge she never forgets a card and she never forgets a book either – nor the people who bring them in to the shop. She likes to analyse people by the books they read.

I heaved in the Britannicas and the Life Nature Library series that Leo had as a boy.

'What do these tell you, Marjorie?' I soon wished I hadn't asked.

She looked briefly at the collection. 'Some people pass on the books they love, others the ones they despise, and some simply reject books that are old – they might have told good stories once, but haven't kept up with the times.' She led me with a conspiratorial smile to the spirituality shelf. 'Inscribed books are the most fascinating.' She picked up a copy of *The Prophet*, pristine in its golden dust jacket, and read an inscription inside.

Dearest Carol, An exquisite book of inspiration for an exquisite soul friend. I will miss you forever, but you will always be in my heart. Lynette.

She closed the book with a flourish. 'So what do you make of Carol?'

I don't want to contemplate Carol. Did she die or did she take flight? In a way, perhaps they're the same. Marjorie may be assessing Leo and me, but she hasn't seen the books we will take. I've started an inventory. *Jock of the Bushveld*, *Washing of the Spears*, *Cry The Beloved Country* and *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. I'll be sure

to include van Wyk's *Complete South African Cookbook* and my annotated Hall's *The Best of Cooking in South Africa*.

I told Marjorie that Gogo would be keeping some of our books – just in case we return. She raised her eyebrows at that.

'No one ever returns, Gabby. The grass is greener on the other side and the people are whiter too. They don't call it the chicken run for nothing.'

I left then, hurriedly.

Chapter 3

Maeve

County Sligo, Ireland, 1990

Sligo County in the northwest of Ireland attracts Yeats pilgrims. Those with faery on their minds have a fondness for the landscape there. Yet not all visitors to the area are Yeats devotees. The coastal village of Strandhill, six kilometers from Sligo Town is famed for its powerful beach break. There is talk amongst surfers of waves up to twenty feet on the outer strand bar.

Tully, an itinerant surfing instructor, has never heard of Yeats. He has no interest in poetry. He's a blue-eyed Australian who teaches surfing by day and pulls beers at The Strand Bar at night. One day he'll return to his hometown of Perth in far-away Western Australia. He started a science degree, once. But he has nothing to hurry him on.

Knocknarea Mountain rises sharply behind Strandhill. Tully ran it barefoot this morning for a bet. The Strand Bar counted on him helping out tonight but he's in no condition to stand. A crowd has come to hear a band from Roscommon and service is uncommonly slow.

Maeve, nursing in Galway, is home in Sligo for the weekend. She's staying with her family in the village of Tamhnachmore where her brother, Daniel, is ill. She'll sit with him tonight. But for now, she's at the bar with an empty glass, a hand tapping rhythms on her thigh, singing chorus lines with the crowd. When she moans to Sean the barman that it's a long way she's come and that she'd never planned to go home sober,

he points to a table by the wall. Maeve is a nurse, is she not? Can't she get that Tully lad back on his feekin' feet and ask him to pour one for her?

Maeve had seen Tully pulling pints at the Strand Bar the last time she'd come home. She'd noticed how his shoulders and pectoral muscles were packed into his black T-shirt and seen his relaxed, easy manner at the bar. She'd liked the way he tied his dreadlocks back to open up his face. When she'd laughed at his banter in the Wipeout of the Year Award she knew she'd caught his eye.

Tonight Tully's at the table with a surfing crowd, a growing line of empty glasses and a pile of pizza plates. Maeve isn't of a mind to interrupt the gathering but when Sean signals to Tully, he gets up and limps towards her. She knows then that she's been set up. There follows a discussion of scratched feet and twisted ankles and her ignorance of treatment in that field. Nursing in Galway in a medical ward, she can best direct advice to his liver. But it's a drink she's wanting, not an argument.

Tully considers his options for a second before swinging himself behind the bar. Three hours later when the music has died, his swollen ankle resting in her lap, he watches the sway of her sandy hair and feels himself caught in a comfortable trap. Her fingers gently coursing over his injured foot are the sweetest touch he's ever known.

*

On the day Maeve's brother Daniel was born in the village of Tamhnachmore, Edna O'Flaherty and Myrna O'Rourke brought coddle, colcannon and chicken broth, knowing his mother was exhausted: he'd had a hard time coming. For twenty-four years now they've watched out for the lad. Fidgeting and fiddling at Mass. (They bid him be silent with a finger on their lips and chocolate caramel Oatfield Emeralds, individually wrapped, in their pockets.) Traipsing in the evening to the library, kicking pebbles and scuffing his shoes, and tearing through the village with sister Maeve at his heels when his feet were too slow for his face. Dribbling his football down Carroll Street to meet his father Feargus off the bus, then dribbling it home again. Riding proud as Sean Kelly himself, hands-free down Whitethorn Hill on Feargus' boyhood bike that gleamed with a slap of surplus paint, the very red of Edna's front door. Driving into Sligo Town on New Year's Day, pulling oars with Feargus up the Garavogue all the way to Lough Gill. The rowing became a tradition for them.

With his own mother Mairéad working shifts at Stiefel Laboratories, Edna and Myrna were like mothers to the lad. They helped prepare him for his first Holy Communion, slicked his cowlick back, and pressed the creases from his new white shirt. Edna gave him a satin tie embossed with a golden chalice and Myrna pressed three coins into his palm.

Edna and Myrna shared his parents' pride in Daniel's education, and at eighteen when he left for University College with a bag and a swagger on his hip and an extra punt in his pocket, the honour felt like their own. Like Mairéad and Feargus themselves they waited to know Daniel's mission in life in the fullness of His time.

Time is not always filled. The headaches came first, then dizziness and nausea followed by double vision. Daniel had an aggressive grade four glioma, the most malignant of brain tumours. He endured surgery, radiation therapy and chemotherapy, but in the end he was taken home to die.

For three months now Edna and Myrna have coordinated a cluster of relatives and local women to help Mairéad in the home. They've remained with Daniel while she has shopped or taken a rare evening off, and when she travelled to Knock for a vigil they sat with him around the clock. They've helped Una, the woman from the village who has special talents with the sick. On occasions they've assisted with his hygiene, and have commented then on how the colour has seeped away from his skin. His aunts, who often sit with him, like to say the Rosary, and Mona, the eldest, has travelled to Lourdes as a pilgrim with a petition for his healing. It brought peace of a kind. Every day Father Michael brings Communion to Daniel and says the Rosary with his family, relatives, neighbours and friends. There was a day he gave Daniel the last rites. Daniel's head was about to burst, he moaned incessantly, his tears soaked the pillow, cold packs were applied to his brow, and Mairéad was so desperate that she doubled his pain-killing drugs. But when Deirdre from the hospice came with dexamethasone, Daniel rebounded. The drug reduced the swelling and the pressure on his brain. 'It's extra time,' said Deirdre, 'like in a football game. You will kick your final goal without that headache of yours.'

Maeve returns to Tamhnachmore on her days off and helps Mairéad in the home, as she has for most of her life. For hours the bus jolts on pot-holed roads, Charlestown, Tubbercurry, Callooney, Ballisodare. Tayto crisps, smoke and friendly pensioners lurch in and out of her dreams. Mícheál ÓMuircheartaigh on the radio: the voice of Gaelic

games. Maeve's brother Patrick comes from Connemara, and when their visits coincide, they go together to Tobernalt Holy Well, a sheltered, shaded place, where water streams away into Lough Gill. Maeve ties a scrap of fabric torn from Daniel's fishing shirt onto a whitethorn bush, and then they stand before Our Lady, say the Rosary, and offer prayers for him. Here alone Maeve is calmed, for Tobernalt was a holy place even in the time of Medb, the legendary warrior queen.

Maeve is devoted to family, but when Tully phones and says the sea is 'hell glassy' and suggests they climb Knocknarea, Mairéad urges her on. Catch a pig by the leg when you can, she says, but hang the last of the washing first? Mairéad doesn't know that Maeve has lain on her back, that Tully has caressed her breasts, how he's likened them to Knocknarea itself, her nipples firm as the cairn at its top.

Before she leaves, Maeve looks in on Daniel watching TV with the Sligo lads, each with his Heineken; they're the boys he relaxes with best. They know to keep the volume down and the light away from his eyes. And they know to bring him chips and pizza for his appetite that's grown, just like the moon of his face, since his dexamethasone began.

'Feckin' off are you Maeve?' Daniel's head doesn't lift from the recliner and the ancient comforting smell of his Gran deep in its tapestry.

'Be sure to carry a rock to the cairn, the heavier the better, and bring yourself some luck. And Maeve, I want to meet this lad o' yours.' His words are slow and faintly slurred and there's a fallen smile on the side of his face that droops its worst in the mornings, the side where Maeve squeezes lubricant in the eye that never shuts. Deirdre says Daniel's eye is like the damaged grille on jeweller O'Ryan's window; it never completely hides the sparkles on display inside.

High on the plateau of Knocknarea are forty thousand tons of stone, the Neolithic cairn of Queen Medb, the legendary Celtic warrior. Within the stone is her tomb, it is said, from where she will watch her Ulster enemies into eternity. In a field at the base of the mountain, Maeve selects a blue-grey limestone rock beneath a clump of golden gorse. It may have belonged to a stone wall once or a bothy or a castle or an abbey. Rocks have multiple lives it seems, reincarnated almost, always part of a grander design. The rock resembles a squashed soccer ball and is nearly too heavy to lift, so she rolls it into her backpack; she's determined to carry it alone. Tully sees the skull-like shape of the rock but doesn't comment.

‘Queen Medb. You named after her? Was she as stubborn as you?’ They’ve entered a patch of fog on the steepest slope of the mountain where the path is slippery from recent rain. Tully follows Maeve, aware of her breathlessness, and he reaches a hand to support the load that drags her shoulders down.

‘Medb was fierce stubborn. She had three demands of her men: that they be fearless and generous, and not the jealous kind – a tally of lovers she had.’

‘And was Queen Medb the jealous kind?’

‘I wouldn’t be testing that thought.’

Maeve hesitates at the base of the cairn on the plateau of Knocknarea. The fog has lifted now, but between the mountain and Tamhnachmore a wispy patch remains, shrouding all but St Brigid’s spire. She considers the cairn again. To climb it would be desecration, but to leave her rock at its base would diminish her sacrifice. She decides to climb. Tully’s urge is to dash to the top. He ran marathons in Australia. But today he’ll run the paths to the plateau’s edge while Maeve sees to her spiritual stuff.

Maeve eases the rock from her backpack and carries it like a precious child up the stony slope. Knocknarea is deserted. At the top, she raises the rock to her chest and stretches it out to the west, towards the grey Atlantic, then north to the mass of Benbulbin, around to the ancient tombs at Carrowmore, and then lifting it high above her head she offers prayers for Daniel. She no longer prays for miracles. She knows he’s going to die. She slowly lowers the rock to her feet, and then eases it onto the highest point of the cairn, this holy-feeling place. But the peak is a lonely spot to be so she takes it down again and makes a nest, a cradle, a refuge for it amongst the other stones. As she turns to descend the cairn, light rain begins to fall. Tully is waiting for her.

Edna and Myrna are in the doctor’s waiting room, Edna with a persistent cough despite having travelled to Ballymote in February for the customary blessing of the throats. Myrna has a scaly patch on her forearm that she suspects might be skin cancer. Or ringworm. That blessed cat of Mairéad’s is always in Daniel’s room. In the waiting room with seven others, they shuffle their newspapers and magazines and discuss Sligo’s haemorrhage of young people, the problems of teenage drinking and the sex diseases clinic to open at the hospital. There’s been talk of AIDS in Sligo.

‘And the waiting time for spectacles is two and a half years now. Mrs Doyle imprisoned there in her home; she can’t even watch TV.’

‘And who do we think will be winning the Housewife of the Year? It used to be cooking and dressmaking and singing well in the choir, but now it’s pony plaiting, golf, aerobics and bridge; the values are changing, so they are.’

Just as ageing Brendan O’Neill shifts the conversation to dwindling fishing stocks and seals in the Garavogue River, Deirdre the hospice nurse appears at the surgery. She greets the room, and turns to Isibéal who sits silently on reception nursing her own opinion on AIDS, the bleeding of youth and fish. Deirdre has a message for Doctor O’Leary. The waiting room falls silent, and even Edna’s cough is suppressed, as each one strains to hear what information it is she brings. When Isibéal turns to the silence and shares the news that Daniel has died, their sad sigh is followed by shuffling, as if shaking off their maladies, and they gather their knitting, fold their *Champions*, return magazines to the shelf, slip bunions back into ill-fitting shoes, fasten zippers, buttons and studs, and hasten to Mairéad’s house as one. The waiting room is deserted.

*

Mammy and Dad are seeing Father Michael about Daniel’s funeral arrangements. We thought we might be with Daniel alone – Patrick, Sheridan, Eileen, Aislin, Caitlin and me. We’re after months of relatives and neighbours and Daniel’s friends from school, university and football. Even those boys from engineering who had him sailing at Rosses Point have been. I had thought they were superior, talking tillers and rigging and lines, but I had to whitewash my mind. Popular he’d been, and without a hair left on his head he’d been determined to sail in the bay.

When Daniel died there was quiet, even when Deirdre walked into the house. She’d loved Daniel like one of her own. She could laugh and cry with him, and she was gentle in a way I’ve not known nursing in Galway with so many tasks to be doing. And she could talk about dying, and the dreams he was leaving, and some that he’d take for the road.

The curtains are drawn and there’s a hollow in the house like I’ve never felt before. The still and silent and cold where his breath used to be, where warmth was only last night.

Mammy and Dad are at the undertaker’s now and the neighbours and aunts are in, the dishes are stacked, the floor is swept, the shelves are dusted, the furniture’s not where it was before and the kettle is never cool. There is ham on a shelf in the fridge. The front

step and path are swept and old Brendan who used to have Hardware has tightened the hinge on the gate. They tell me how lucky for Mammy I'm a nurse; how she treasured the days I was home, for the cooking and washing and helping with Daniel. Thank God I was here when he died. I have 'the touch', they say, I can make light of heaviness, but they don't know the weight in me.

I'm resenting some of the presence, the talking that's coming at every turn and how my concentration won't hold; it's like a shock or an accident, concussion almost it feels, acute and blunt all at once. Waking is a good and proper thing but what's this performance I'm making, all courage and strength like a play, my lines and my face as if they're rehearsed without any hiding away. No holy place to be. Patrick's nodding like a festival clown and I know he's feeling it too. When I slip upstairs, Aislin and Caitlin are crying and I'm holding them close to me.

Mr Donlan the undertaker comes to take Daniel for the coffin and calls Daniel 'the remains'. Holy Jesus, this is Daniel. But his soul is taken of course so he calls Daniel 'the remains'. His body is all that remains.

The house is quiet now. Mammy and Dad are behind their door and the neighbours and aunts are shopping and cooking, preparing for waking Daniel. Eileen and I start on sandwiches while Caitlin and Aislin have towels in their hands checking glasses, crockery and cutlery for smears and smudges and lipstick that haven't come off in the wash. The china might come from the cabinet. It's rarely been out before.

When Mr Donlan brings Daniel back in the coffin, Mammy stands rigid between Eileen and me gripping my hand so tight. Dad, Patrick and Sheridan help bring the coffin into the sitting room, then Dad comes back and takes Mammy's hand and leads her back in there. Edna and Myrna have candles and we light two of them on the table, on the left and right of him. Daniel's a better colour; he looks stronger than he did in the end, yet he was peaceful then too. Deirdre had seen to that. Now he's more like an angel, in his white graduation shirt, white silken drapery and Rosary beads in his hands. I bend and kiss his cheek, cold and firm it is, and I know that he's really gone.

Kettles are boiling and food's coming round, there are cans in the kitchen for the men, and two bottles of Bushmills Dad saved from Christmas, presents we'd given him. All of the neighbours are here and a trickle of relatives come, the rest will be here tomorrow, the death notice on the radio at eight o'clock, ten, one and five. In the paper the family are named: Sheridan in Dublin, Patrick in Connemara, Eileen in Cork and me in Galway, and donations please to the hospice home care in lieu of flowers, and to the Royal National Lifeboat Institute for all of the lives they save. We've all of us known it

was coming, and there are stories of Daniel I never knew told and some better left unsaid.

Mammy stopped the clock in the living room on the morning Daniel died, but now it's midnight and Sheridan says the Rosary there where Daniel lies, and there's a peace about us then. Edna and Mynra sit with him until morning while we get some rest. Rest. If only I could. Eileen's turning and twisting in her bed and my tears are wringing out of me and she reaches across for my hand first then she crawls into my bed and we hold each other tight.

Patrick, Sheridan, and old school friends gather to dig the grave with their shovels, picks and spades. Patrick knows about digging graves. He dug one down in Connemara and needed a kango hammer to smash up the stones down there. Three feet wide, five feet deep, Daniel's grave is a work of art, so it is, fitting for an engineer.

Another day and night, kettles on the boil, washing dishes at the sink, family coming from Cork, mass cards spilling from the basket, the attendance book pen running dry, the Rosary said again at midnight, and the auburn in Daniel's downy hair that grew after his chemotherapy caught in the candlelight. My old school friends have all come by, and Mariam, nursing with me in Galway, has come for her two days off. Her father died in the winter and she knows the grief in me. So many people coming through that gate, bringing chickens and eggs, quiche and roast beef and two whole porter cakes, and Brendan directing the flow through the house, seventy-six he is. And I'm thinking and hoping Tully will come through the gate but he never does.

Mr Donlan the undertaker invites us to say goodbye, and we kiss Daniel and reach a hand to his head and say 'See ya Daniel, God bless and safe journey'. Then Mr Donlan removes Daniel's pillow, eases his head down, and brings the shroud to cover his face. My throat is tightest then.

The men carry the coffin out front of the house and put it on chairs on the path. Aunt Mona says three Hail Marys, and when the coffin is lifted up, Myrna knocks over a chair to keep any more death from our house. Some village people are staying behind to clean up the dishes again, but we go to the church for reception prayers and Father John is there from Galway too. And he invites the congregation, because so many have travelled so far, to O'Brien's for drinks and sandwiches. Daddy will pay for that. For a second I think of Patrick, Sheridan, Eileen and me bringing our pay portions home, just a moment and then it is gone. The coffin stays in the church. All alone Daniel is. All night.

Mass is at midday and we're all wearing black. There's a white cloth over Daniel's coffin now and the priests and the curate assisting Father Michael are in white and the flowers are white and I think of Daniel in his best white shirt inside the coffin there. Father Michael says how Daniel was an outstanding son and brother and friend. There's prayers but I lose concentration; I'm thinking of Daniel going fishing, and how I'll be praying for his soul at home, and there's the Creed and the Offertory and gifts to the altar and the mementos of Daniel's life, his fishing rod, and his football boots and jumper, books and U2 posters, his sailing hat and photos and messages for him. Father Michael takes up a golden-framed photo of himself with Daniel after his first Holy Communion, Daniel in his short trouser suit, his rosette and his medal proud on his chest, and I think Father Michael's going to cry. He knew Daniel all of his life. I remember what followed that photo. Daniel puffed himself up and went bragging to Tommy Pearse of how much money he'd made. Daddy was furious then because that money was 'given' not 'made', but Daniel still had his roast chicken dinner and the trifle with tinned orange segments, and Daddy went down to the pub with the uncles and Daniel's godfather, Uncle Stephen, who little Caitlin called 'godafter'. And after that first Holy Communion, at school, Daniel was taken away from me; the boys and girls were segregated.

Some family say prayers for the faithful and Sheridan reads from Sirach, the Old Testament it is; his voice is strong and doesn't falter, like a preacher himself, it's the whisky he's had. *He who fears the Lord will have a happy end; even on the day of his death he will be blessed.* Then Patrick reads but his voice is flat, his tongue crushing his words. *Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit.*

Mary, Mother of God. What fruit can come of this?

There's a hymn that Daniel sang solo when he was eleven, *I heard the voice of Jesus say.* Some of us can't sing it with the memory that is there. Father talks about Daniel's achievements, the credit he was to his family and how he wasn't without fault, and about being presented faultless in the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. And Father gives thanks to our family, steadfast is what he says we were, and says how I'm a nurse and was faithful helping Mammy when Daniel took bad, steadfast again is what he says. But what I'm remembering is peeling paint, flakes of it falling from the ceiling, ancient mould marks on cornices, smears on the dun-coloured sheet, the heat and the sweat on my skin, the smell of fries drifting in from the pub, the gin bottle and the glass we shared, Jesus crucified on the wall, and Tully lying next to me with a joint

he called a joker. He never came to meet Daniel, even though Daniel asked; Tully said sickness wasn't his thing, he wouldn't know what to say. I took myself to the Sligo Abbey and wished on the old love knot there, but still he didn't come, he didn't come to wake Daniel either, and he isn't at the Mass today.

We meet at O'Brien's for soup and sandwiches after we come from the grave, but Edna and Myrna aren't with us. The evening has turned cold and they're home lighting the fire. They'll be packing a box of sandwiches, roast beef and porter cake for me to take on the bus in the morning. I'm on duty tomorrow night.

Chapter 4

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 1991

Perth is twenty-seven hundred kilometres from Adelaide but every hour of my journey was another hour away from King. Days become nights on a transcontinental bus. Stiff from my seat, I stretched out when we stopped at servos selling Chiko Rolls, Choc Milk and chips – or ice creams to melt in my hand. Pregnant, I craved greasy food. The heat of Perth was no worse than in Adelaide. When my son Dave was born, seven months after I fled, the fans and wet flannels came out. But the sea breeze in the evenings meant we could sleep at night.

Cog has been my closest friend here but I've come to depend on Sunny, a mothercraft nurse, now a friend, who helped me when Dave was young. Having Dave minded by another woman was like severing a part of myself, but I was desperate for money, nursing demanded shift work, and childcare was my only option. Sunny was once a neighbour of Cog's. She'd been alone since her husband died, and she adopted us in Perth. She taught me about babies and toddling children, fish curry, satay and lemon grass, peanut sauce and firm rice cakes. She told me how amahs in Malaysia kept poppy seeds under their nails for unsettled babies to suck on, saying she'd never stoop to that. She also told me one day she'd nearly latched Dave on her breast in an absent-minded moment, but swore it wouldn't happen again. We joke about it now.

As Dave grew, Sunny insisted I needed a social life. 'Where water, there fish. Time you meet man lah. New husband. Enjoy self. Go dancing. Movie. Dave he sleep night. You no worry.' Sunny was right of course. So I went dancing, went to

movies and had a series of men, but warning signs always surfaced, like rip-signs on the beach: if you swim beyond your depth, Alice, you'll be dragged out and drowned at sea.

Now Dave's post-pubescence is punishing me but Sunny has been spared. Surges of hormones have morphed my boy into a grumpy, unpredictable youth. Sadly, he now reminds me of King, with his barbed comments and flashes of anger and extended sullen spells. He even smells the same. He has an unsightly splash of acne and they call him *Agent Orange* at school. Sunny connects well with him like a grandmother, but Dave's declared war on me, his arsenal ranging from silence through a series of grumbles and grunts to his biggest guns, the deafening clang of *Nine Inch Nails* and *Tool*. He's probably old enough to leave alone when I'm working but Sunny won't hear of it. She arrives with Malaysian coffee, Mee noodles, pork and fresh choy sum, and suggests they play two-handed mahjong once he's finished his homework.

Sunny was waiting with more advice when I returned from a late shift last winter.

'That hospital. Too big, lah. Go in, operation, go out. You loosing life. No good, lah. How many year? Fourteen? Four unlucky number. You talk to Cog. She working in hospice, very specially, nearby Maylands, she very happy.'

*

Cog and I are at Cottesloe beach de-stressing from our day at the hospice. We've been lapping between the groyne and the pylon, and now we've collapsed on the soft warm sand to watch the sun sink into the sea.

Where would I be without Cog? I'm completing a course in palliative care, she's helped me through new pharmacology, and this week she's helping with an assignment on the pathophysiology of pain. After fifteen years of hospital nursing, I knew little of holistic care, pain management, grief or bereavement. But I knew the way that people died was very rarely satisfactory. And I'm regaining my compassion.

Cog's exhausted. Today she admitted two patients for symptom control and one for terminal care. And her closeness to Tina, a young woman with lung cancer, is hurting her. I'll never forget Tina's utter panic when she arrived at Acacia House, her flailing arms and air hunger, her demands that the windows be opened. I learned so much watching her settle with Cog's gentle guidance. Tina's responded well to treatment, and she has the reassurance that she'll be near people she loves and not gasping for breath when she dies.

The sun slips below the horizon and Cog rolls onto her belly.

‘Listen to those feral lorikeets. First the little rainbow shriekers eat my grapes and figs then they disturb our peace at the beach. They don’t belong in Western Australia. The council should put a bounty on them and distribute slingshots to little boys.’

I’d been vaguely aware of squawking gulls but only now I hear the screech of lorikeets flocking to the sheoak trees. Further down the beach a Buddha-bodied woman stands at the water’s edge, her arms outstretched to the apricot sky.

‘What do you think she’s doing down there?’

Cog turns her head. ‘A moment of thanksgiving?’

‘And who do you think she’s thanking?’

‘*Sol Invictus*, The Unconquered Sun? Triton, God of the Sea? Loricide, the Great Vengeful Slaughtering Lorikeet Who Swoopeth down from the Sky? Take your pick. They’re all the same.’

I laugh but she’s on a roll. ‘Imagine a benevolent deity lurking beyond the sea. What would you give thanks for?’

‘Easy. For a second bite at the great sweet apple of this abundant life. For the chance to rethink myself. For you, Sunny and Dave. For the hospice community. Happiness. What about you?’

Cog’s expression is close to a sneer. ‘How would my thanksgiving go? Thank You God for my excellent health, for my old friend Alice and my perfect girls. Thank You God for my good husband Martin who is currently running that rebel son of Alice’s down to North Cott and back. And thank You God for the bounty we share while half of the world misses out. And thank You God for the war in the Gulf and for all who will lose their lives there. It’s bollocks, Alice.’

Cog’s anger is new to me and she hasn’t finished yet.

‘And what a shame, God, about sweet young Tina grieving in room nineteen for the loss of the rest of her life. And a shame for her grief-stricken husband Frank and for her two sweet frightened daughters with tangles in their uncombed hair. The arrogance of giving personal thanks in the face of such misery.’

‘Oh Cog.’ Her anger is overwhelming, but I simply can’t feel any guilt for my personal thankfulness. What can I say to her, my oldest friend in Perth?

‘Every night and every morn some to misery are born.’

That line of Blake’s poetry was one of our favourites from *Sleepers Dare Awake!*, the hospital revue where we met. It was satirical at the time, but now my timing is inept, the sentiments absurd. Cog ignores my pitiful attempt to dispel her wretchedness.

‘People who are dying are the ones who need their gods. I think they always have a touch of fear. Fear of how they’ll die. Fear of the great alone. Fear of the great unknown. It must be comforting to have a god to believe in at the end.’

‘Might depend on the nature of your god. Vengeance or love. Can I take my pick again?’

‘Spiritual chaos, Alice. If you don’t know the nature of your god, what’s the point of a god at all?’

I think of patients who are dying, sleeping in peace with dope in their pumps, drifting downstream to their deaths. There is no chaos there. But what is it like before they begin their drift, when they’re facing the great unknown?

‘I need to think it through. It’s a mystery. Perhaps that’s why I don’t feel at ease yet with people who are dying – let alone their families. I never know quite what to say. Nothing comes naturally. And it’s something we never learnt. All we learnt in our training was how to make people better – not how to be there as they died.’

Cog smiles at that. ‘Today that new chaplain was with Tina. Had his Bible open and she was hanging on tight to every word. Stuff about love and fear, fear driven out by love. So how does Tina get to feel that love that comes with a capital L? Magic? Maybe. But maybe it’s up to us: we pour on the love and they interpret it as god. A hell of a responsibility. What if we get it wrong? What if we can’t get it right? Perhaps I’ll believe in the Magic after all. Being a god substitute is too hard.’

My head is spinning and Cog is losing her steam. ‘Perhaps if we’d lived through plague or famine we could face death more easily.’

There’s a familiar shriek from the darkening beach where Dave and Martin are sprinting the final leg of their run. If Martin is true to his usual form, he’ll have added fish and chips to the lure of the last hundred metres. Panting like a pair of happy dogs they fall on the sand next to us.

Martin grabs Dave by the ankle. ‘I need to lift my game. Dave’s legs are getting longer – runs like a shitless emu. Hamburger deprived I reckon. He’ll need more meat on those skinny bones before next year’s rugby scrums.’

I doubt that Dave will ever play rugby but he enjoys a run with Martin. While they go in search of food, Cog and I wash the sand off ourselves under the outdoor shower. The night is gloriously warm. Can life be better than this?

Chapter 5

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

8th November 1993

I've closed the door on the bedroom of the tiny house we're renting in Perth. Where else in this place can I find peace? I laugh when I remember myself in Maritzburg starting out on this journal. Seated at my grandmother's Edwardian mahogany secretaire, performing extraordinary exercises to prompt my memory, I was like a caricature of the old lady. Once I even wore a ruffled blouse in an attempt to enhance my prose – a ludicrous self-deception, considering the aim of the journal was to create a space from which my 'self' could emerge, as Doctor Starling so eloquently put it.

My writing was for my eyes only – another instance of self-deception. I knew from the beginning that I would show it to Doctor Starling. I was keen for his approval. Now that we're in Australia, my writing may change. I think it was Virginia Woolf who said that writing for yourself alone 'loosens the ligaments'.

I came to enjoy writing at random when the secretaire was packed with our chattels, either dockside in Durban or on the high seas – while we were staying with Gogo. I wrote on my lap, in the garden, or in bed while Leo watched TV. I even took my journal in the car to make occasional jottings.

After a period of what Doctor Starling called 'anticipatory grief', when we left our home of thirteen years, many ties were already fraying. Where once the children's wing of our home had felt so light and spacious, now it was cramped and dark. The kitchen

was cluttered and the carpet worn. Although we were taking our favourite books, the library, bereft of its many old books, was curiously disturbing.

I will always miss the view from our bedroom's bay window across the azalea grove in spring. But the gorgeous red flowering *Schotia capitata*, which we planted when Cassie was born because of her fiery red hair, became diseased in our final winter and succumbed before we left. When the removalists arrived, I felt conflicting relief and sorrow.

12th November 1993

Perth. I feel that I've come to a desert. The city is so dreadfully parched after the lushness of Maritzburg. Our chattels should have arrived but there's been an inexplicable delay. We have a short-term rental on a small brick house in Doubleview while we look for a place of our own. While waiting for our belongings, we've bought a kettle, an iron and a radio, and have borrowed a few items from David, a contact of Leo's from Durban: three mattresses, four coffee mugs, cutlery and plates, an electric frypan and an old black and white TV which sits on a banana box in the lounge. We're living like some African blacks.

David's wife Tiggy has been dispensing expatriate advice. There are no servants in Australia, so I must buy myself a pinny with pockets and I will need some thick rubber gloves.

This house has been rented for years. Only the most stubborn plants – woody lavenders and rosemary – have survived in the front garden. The back 'garden' has two features that appeal to Gordon – a sturdy rotary washing line and a leafy, spreading fig, laden with small green fruit. Whether swinging from the clothesline or climbing into the fig, Gordon retreats to a world of his own.

I must ask Leo for money to buy myself new clothes. Australian women tend to carry more weight and dress more casually – at the shops without make-up or jewellery, even wearing flip-flops – and the way people dress in the City of Perth is appalling. Perhaps I should have anticipated this after Pretoria. We were well groomed for our consular interview, wanting to make the best impression – Leo wore his business suit and I a discreet, mid-calf short-sleeved frock with two strands of colourful beads. Gordon, as always, was compliant, but a bribe was required for Cassie to substitute her takkies for court shoes. What a waste of energy – we were distinctly overdressed. The Australian official who interviewed us had hair that fell in his eyes, a button missing

from his outdated powder-blue safari suit and a belly that bulged onto the desk. He was jovial, at least.

15th November 1993

The house that we're renting in Doubleview is on the wrong side of the street. The other side, with ocean glimpses, is being gentrified with seclusion walls, palisade fencing and remote control entries, reminding me of Maritzburg. Mary and Joe, our next-door neighbours, in their modest brick home with an Australian flag, say they are 'standing firm'. They introduced themselves with a plate full of lamingtons, which, but for their shape, reminded me of a dung beetle's brooding ball – pieces of sponge cake dipped in chocolate and rolled in coconut. The children devoured theirs instantly. Mary and Joe are good-natured folk who admire 'that man Mandela' and want to help us in any way they can.

17th November 1993

Leo went to the city and returned with a spring in his step and a bottle of Australian red wine. He has enrolled for some units in Western Australian law with the Real Estate Institute. He's been offered work in an office in Scarborough and will be able to conduct transactions when he completes his certificate. We celebrated with a bobotie, cooked in the electric frypan. The dried apricots here don't have the flavour of those from the North Karoo or the Cape, and before I attempt it again, I must make my own fruit chutney.

Leo looked for a Pinotage in two wine shops but no one has heard of it! He patiently explained Pinotage – the Pinot Noir and Cinsaut cross, its peculiar paintbox nose, and its international success – but these people were too parochial to even feign an interest. The Australian shiraz was drinkable, and certainly mellowed our evening. Although I often feel resentment at the hardships we're enduring, the bonds that had slackened between Leo and me before we left Maritzburg are tightening again. I'm reminded of our student days in the Cape. Western Australia will never be Africa, but the sense of camping together – sharing a mattress on the floor, eating cereal from a mug, and sitting on the warm front steps in the late afternoon watching colours change in the sky – reminds me of our happiness then.

27th November 1993

Our belongings still haven't arrived. With few possessions and no property, we have more time for reading and for exploring Perth. The beaches are loveliest in the morning, and we have spent many late afternoons picnicking by the river and exploring parks where the children enter their own magic worlds. Today while Cass and Gordon played in the Kings Park water gardens, we met an elderly gentleman, who introduced himself as Arnold. He pointed out various honeyeaters and silvereyes and we were lucky enough to see a rainbow bee-eater and a yellow-rumped thornbill. I needed my binoculars! Some species from Arnold's childhood are now extinct in Kings Park. When he realized we were South African, he asked if we'd be kind enough to take home 'all those damned weeds, those invading alien species' – the Karroo thorn plants, veld grass, gladiolus, freesias and capeweeds. Leo's gall was rising so we left.

I'm missing Thembile. My neck and back are aching from endless ironing of linens and cottons.

I've taken the children for interviews at five of the very best schools, none of which have vacancies. I've been close to tears with each rejection, but the children don't share my dismay. They're enjoying their 'holiday' exploring the city and swimming at Scarborough Beach. The holiday cannot last. We must turn now to a government school, which will be obliged to take them in.

My sinking spirits were uplifted when I spotted a flowering Schotia in a nearby street today. 'Cassie, Cassie, your Schotia!' It was my first 'aah' experience since leaving the avenue of flowering pink Cape chestnuts along Montgomery Drive, and not the first of our beautiful flora that I've seen growing here in Perth.

Gordon is missing Rastus and their little games together. The dear dog was fourteen years old and we had no choice but to put him down. I miss the security of him in the house – although we have little for a burglar to steal. And, strangely, I miss Gogo. How many women would cross an ocean and miss their mothers-in-law! But a moment before we left at the railway station in Maritzburg continues to bother me. Was she simply excusing our cowardice when she thanked us for taking her grandchildren to a better, safer place? If she could see us now.

2nd December 1993

Our belongings have not yet arrived. We've discovered the process can take over three months! We should have packed up earlier, sold our home earlier and stayed longer with Gogo instead of camping here. But Leo wouldn't pack. The market was rising and

he was determined to wait, knowing that a house that was nicely furnished would always fetch a higher price.

I'm lonely without family or friends. I have a disturbing, disconnected feeling – as if I'm not properly here, as if there's someone else in my skin. I was never a churchgoer, but I went one morning, alone. Perhaps I need more faith. I crave a sense of belonging but there's nothing to belong to. I want to return to work, but with no support for the children, I can only work at night. I've arranged interviews at two hospitals and ironed my beige linen suit.

Cassie and Gordon have been tetchy, irritating one another. I'd like to get them a puppy but the yard isn't fenced at the back. Perhaps Leo can salvage some scrap from the waste discarded on roadsides here, and construct a makeshift fence. I can hardly believe I'm thinking like this, that we might scavenge from the side of the road like Africans at home, but the children need a pet.

4th December 1993

Moira from the local government school knocked on our door last night. She sat with us on the floor and had a cup of tea. Perhaps she thought we were refugees. I have never been so embarrassed but she didn't seem to mind, and invited us to a school Christmas function. At last we will meet some local people and the children may find some friends. We have only to take a plate and we have four of those.

We were still in bed this morning when Moira's husband Don came to the door. He had a trailer load of furniture, destined for their beach house, which we can borrow until ours arrives. Leo and the children helped him unload the trailer with all the excitement of Christmas, but I was too teary-eyed.

5th December 1993

In my dreams I was in the game reserve, my eyes trained on a frothy mass suspended over a pool, the nest of the green and yellow striped tree frog. The spawn, becoming tadpoles, were falling into the water to swim. The beginnings of new life. Is there a moment of fear when they fall?

12th December 1993

We've attended our first social function in Australia. I cringe when I recall my humiliation on producing an empty plate! I wish Moira had been more explicit. To 'bring a plate' means a platter of food for everyone to share.

So much is different. Unlike the uniformity found at similar functions at home, where all parents are professional whites, amongst the fathers last night were a dermatologist, a plumber, a miner and Praveen, the Indian from the local wine store (who hadn't heard of Pinotage either); amongst the mothers are a librarian, a receptionist and Donelle, a woman who sells cleaning products. There were Chinese and Vietnamese, and Cassie met a girl from Nicaragua. I don't think there were any Aborigines but I can't be certain.

Although I asked many questions about Australia, after their initial politeness, people didn't seem very interested in South Africa. As I entered their conversations, I caught myself saying a 'when-we'. How we ridiculed the 'when-wes' who came to Maritzburg, always comparing, contrasting, 'when we were in Rhodesia...' How careful we must be not to make the same mistake.

I was dipping strawberries into dark chocolate, talking with some women about schooling, a safe topic, and could hear snatches of Leo's voice in the distance, regaling an all-male audience with his time as a parabat. I wish he wouldn't do that. Highly esteemed. Like marines. Tough. Trained by Afrikaners – they were trained by the British you know. Running twenty kilometres. Full pack. Never marched. Ran.

Cassie was instantly popular, with a clutch of girls around her, but Gordon was far less relaxed and kept returning to me. I hope he'll soon find a friend.

There were raffles during the evening and our family won half of them. Hampers of food, vouchers for the butcher's shop, an Aussie Rules football and *Anne of Green Gables*. I gave Moira a thankful smile – she had done her homework well. The children couldn't believe their luck but I know that the raffles were rigged for the refugees in the derelict house. I was grateful for their kindness, but also discomfited. I'm not used to being patronised.

13th December 1993

There are white-tailed black cockatoos here, different from the feral ring-necked cockatoos we used to see in Durban, and today a sudden raucous screeching announced a flock of them in the banksia tree, a plant in our protea family, growing across the road. Joe and Mary, who had been on their knees weeding their manicured lawn, joined us on the steps to watch these magnificent birds – perhaps thirty or more – attacking the banksia fruit. Gordon eyed them for a while, and then asked if the red-chested cuckoos would be leaving Maritzburg soon. He ran down the path towards the tree, calling 'Piet-my-vrou Piet-my-vrou' at the top of his voice, and frightened the cockatoos away.

15th December 1993

Christmas is ten days away and we have been inundated with invitations. Come and share our turkey, bring a plate, come as you are, don't bring a thing, we love waifs and strays at Christmas – these invitations have come from three Australian families and two South African. We were even invited to join a family at the beach! My preference is for Moira and Don's where the children would be happiest, but Leo has argued against it. He wants to have Christmas with South Africans to further his business opportunities. We'll be having a when-we Christmas.

10th January 1994

I had my hospital orientation today, I have a sheaf of documents to complete, and start night duty in Oncology tomorrow. I feel like a frightened child approaching her first day at school.

Chapter 6

Maeve

County Sligo, Ireland, 1991

You'd be proud of the tombstone, Daniel, speckled like a sparrow's egg it is. Uncle Aidan had been reading a story by Yeats, *The Old Men of the Twilight*, and it was he who suggested the heron carved into the stone, and I think he paid for it. I've brought fresh pinks from the strand and rosemary from Edna's hedge. Who is it bringing fish bones to your grave, picked clean and fanned out like bracken and placed at the heron's feet? Licked white by the weather they are.

What am I to do, Daniel? My money is running out. I've tried Sligo, Galway, Dublin and Cork, going in person there, with marks, reports and references presented neat in my folio, polished shoes, no runs in my tights and a smile spread wide on my face. Mariam's the same. Near the top of the nursing school she was but there are no positions left. Remember how we filled my form applying for nursing training? How you laughed when they asked for Daddy's employment and you said they'd never accept me, you said it was the daughters of engineers and doctors and politicians they wanted, and I should write that Daddy was a merchant, so important it seemed. It all seems pointless now.

Mariam's going to Sydney, Australia, plucky as a robin she is; she suggests I should go too and Mammy's encouraging me to leave. Necessity knows no law, she says, I need to go where the work is, but with the three of the aunts in America she thinks I'd be better there. Blood is thicker than water she says. Tully asked me to go to

Australia, to leave my sadness behind, to make a new life for myself. And it's Tully I'm thinking about, and it's hunger for him I feel. He's waiting in Perth for me.

*

'You must embrace Western Australia.' I'm nursing for the Agency and a lady on dialysis is giving me advice. 'When I first arrived, I hated Perth with its stifling heat and flies,' she says. 'But we'd never own a house or a pool back in England – or be able to buy a boat.'

Each day I return to the Jolimont flat that Tully's mother found for me. On the first floor with a tiny balcony it's a place where I feel safe. Tully was on a field trip when I arrived in Perth; his mother asked him to call but he hasn't. Do you know these Australian fields, Daniel – thousands of acres they are, but I'm thinking it's fields of mushrooms or poppies that Tully will be tripping on now. It's a fool that I have been.

I unpeg my swimsuit and towel from the line; you'll see me at the beach every day, swimming further into the sea.

I'm embracing Australia like the lady said but I'm at the Irish Club tonight, at the bar with Aislinn, a nurse from Cork who's happy as a blackbird in the spring – but there are no blackbirds in Perth. You'll see that my smile has shrunk. After the mountains of Sligo, Perth is as flat as the dregs of the Guinness and I'm missing the damp and green of home and the comforting grey slate roofs. The red roofs slapped on the houses in Perth are detestable to me, as if the hot dusty red of the desert is hovering over my head. Roofing should be dark, grey like a Dublin sky.

When Aislinn's nursing friends arrive I feel I've known them all my life. Aussies have been friendly enough, but never is it like this. Some of the nurses have working visas but others have citizenship, they've been naturalized. Being Australian is natural and being Irish isn't. And being Australian is ignoring the flies.

Another round of drinks and you'll be hearing why we're here: sunshine, jobs and adventure. Then the talk turns to TV and *Neighbours*, and we remember huddling in our sitting rooms with the heavy curtains drawn, how it was cold and damp outside, but Charlene and Scott were falling in love under a clear blue Australian sky.

Then you'll hear Brigid singing 'Suddenly you're seeing me just the way I am', three verses and three choruses and all of us joining in. It was Scott and Charlene's

wedding song but I know it wouldn't suit me because I never could be just one way like Charlene was supposed to be. I don't think anyone can.

Brigid had seen that Fred Parle book, *Australia, will I go?* The book was her tipping point, she says, but it's more the tipping she's done since she came. Australia, will I leave, she says. She can't make up her mind. She knows there are jobs at home now, the economy is mending and she's missing her family. But we never drank wine at home.

Cathleen is older than me. The Victorian government recruited her when their nurses went on strike, sponsored with her airfare paid and contracted for three years. She says they expected a religious woman and were shocked when she opened her mouth. There's a lot of feekin' in there.

And Aoife, just like me, looking for work in Ireland when jobs were tight and money short and family depending on her, saw an advertisement for Australia on the Dublin bus, the sand pure white and the blue sea sparkling, and a couple were carrying surfboards, tanned, strong and healthy. Aoife hadn't noticed how the bare-chested man strode ahead of the woman, how he walked with his chin in the air and how all his muscles were flexed, and how the woman was lagging a little behind, all in awe of him. Aoife had never known Tully.

I tell these newfound friends about Tully's promise to meet me here in Perth, how Australia was short of nurses and how he said Irish nurses were the best (as if he would know anything), but I've told you all of that. And I've told you how witless I was to believe he'd be waiting for me. As reliable as the ESB clock, as Mammy used to say.

I tell them I'm with the agency and how Daddy's injured his back and I send home part of my pay. And I tell them I want to nurse in a hospice, but in Sligo my grief was too raw. They see my eyes glazing over, and Brigid asks if it's too raw now.

Yes it pains me now, knowing you're not home, Daniel, an engineer you'd be, slipping notes into Mammy's hand to see her through the week, and fishing and sailing and helping Dad. But here I can't miss you the same, I don't see your bed and your U2 posters, the eerie Joshua Tree, and Mammy dusting your trophies and photos. I'm not there when they go to the grave and when they're thinking of you in Heaven, or for the memorial masses and prayers for your soul.

Sometimes it's hard to talk to you because you've never been in Perth. Then I'm talking to myself. But today you seem close and I can tell you I'm missing home, the burst of the whitethorns, turning pink then delicate green, the golden whin and the

bluebells, and walking with Mammy ahead of the tide down at the Lower Rosses and her grabbing my hand like a child. The dunlins scampering on the sand, then the tide coming so fast, the dunes splashed with sea pinks and golden bird's-foot-trefoil, and the larks and the swallows singing summer is coming, hovering and swooping overhead. And I think of the peat-stained necks of the swans gliding on the Garavogue. In Perth the swans are all black.

I'm remembering the wheelchair Deirdre brought and how we took you to Slish Wood – Patrick, Eileen and Sheridan, pushing you, laughing, stumbling over roots, the oaks and hollies and bracken, and Lough Gill lapping there near our feet and Eileen in for the swim. It was then you forgot some favourite lines from *The Lake Isle of Innisfree* and how frustrated you were when we chanted them, 'And I will have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow', and how the 'dropping from the veils of the morning' brought quiet to us all. Smart, your mind had been, then blunted, and tears streamed down your cheeks. The mayflies came in early that year, but you were too sick for fishing by then.

And I'm thinking of Mammy and worrying that she's not minding herself any more.

Chapter 7

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 1992

The hospice is quiet today. Visitors are scarce and there's no laughter in the passage. Windows have been opened to the scent of frangipani. We have three empty beds and three admissions on their way.

Charles, a seventy-two year old man brought in by ambulance this morning, doesn't respond when I knock. He's lying motionless in his bed, focussing on something outside the window. His sallow skin, stretched across his cheekbones, sinks towards his chin. Stomach carcinoma with liver and bone metastases. I put a vase of flowers on his chest of drawers, then rest my hand on his shoulder and follow the line of his gaze.

'It's Willy. A wagtail. There's always one, wherever I am, a chatterbox Willy, twitching his tail at me. You know they disappeared from Perth because of DDT? It made their eggshells paper-thin. This little fella's happy to be back. Listen. *Sweet pretty creature. Sweet pretty creature.* Can you hear his call? He lost me when I was in hospital but he's tracked me down again.' Charles winces as he turns to face me and squints at the badge on my chest. 'What's your name?'

'I'm Alice. What would you like us to call you?'

'Call me Charlie.' Although his face is leathery, there are plenty of laughter lines. 'What do you call this place?'

'It's a hospice, Acacia House.' He doesn't respond. 'You flinched when you moved then Charlie. Have you got some pain?'

‘It’s okay, Alice. Just my tail. That morphine kills the pain in my belly but doesn’t touch the bit that I sit on.’

I pull the curtain and Charlie turns over for me to inspect his backside. There are folds of flaking, reddened skin, and over his bony sacrum, he has a bleeding pressure sore.

‘It looks painful, Charlie. I’ll put a spongy dressing on it and find you a cushioning fat pad to sit on. Can you lie on your side for now?’

‘Sure Alice. I’ll lie here and talk with Willy. Look at him flitting about, gorging himself on insects. *Sweet pretty creature*. And thanks for the flowers. Grow them yourself?’

‘Absolutely. Grew them just for you.’

Most of our flowers come from funerals. They’re donated by the families, and the funeral people bring them in. Roses, gladdies, chrysies and gerberas and never a blemish in sight. My posy of roses and gypsophila has been reassembled by volunteers. Our vollies rip the wreaths apart and knock up lively bouquets without a hint of funereal perfection. There are enough twirly ribbons in the flower-room for a maypole festival.

Barry’s poring over Charlie’s documentation. ‘I need to ring for some drug authorisations. Fifteen minutes?’

Fifteen minutes. Then a phone call or two, pumps to write up, a patient feeling down, relatives at the door. Barry’s a doctor who can’t say no. How old is he? Thirty? Where did he learn to slip into patients’ shoes and tread in their tattered soles? Not in medical school. He’s just had his second baby. I hope he has time for her. ‘Page me when you’re ready.’

Charlie, true to his word, is lying on his side. Barry shakes his hand and we pull up chairs together. I jot details into the nursing notes to save Charlie from repetitive questions.

‘Did any family come with you, Charlie?’ I flip to the genogram page.

‘Nah. The wife died two year ago now. Breast. The son, he’ll be in later. Neil. Got a good job at the zoo, in that numbat breeding work.’ His smile is as wide as a father of the bride.

‘Do you live with Neil? Is he married?’

‘Nah. Got my own place in South Perth. Beryl and I lived there forty years. Now there’s just Buster and me. Buster’s a bit of a Beagle; he’s over with Neil now.’

‘Forty years in one house. A lot of memories. A garden?’

‘Beryl did the flower garden. I’ve let her down a bit now. Kept up her roses though. And her blessed lemon tree. I grew vegetables. Best silverbeet in Perth.’

I flip to occupation, interests and hobbies.

‘So you’re a gardener. What kind of work did you do before you retired?’

‘You name it, Doc. Turned my hand to anything before they demanded certificates. Bloody papers. Who needs ‘em? Plumber, electrician, painter, carpenter. Repairing washing machines. Fishing up north. Farm hand. Trucking. Then for ten years I was a caretaker for a block of flats on the river in South Perth. Never touched any woman’s work until Beryl got sick on me. Then I learnt in a hurry.’

‘So Charlie, what do you cook for yourself?’

‘Nothing much since July – haven’t had the stomach for it. I don’t mind a bit of fish.’

Barry opens Charlie’s notes. ‘There’s a letter here from the hospital. Your operation was in July. It’s hit you pretty fast then. Looks like you’ve lost a bit of weight.’

‘Yeah. Pretty fast, Doc. A lot of weight.’

‘So what do you know about it? What have they told you?’

‘Well I know it’s cancer. After they took out the tumour, they did scans. It’s in the liver, the spine and here, in me arms.’ He crosses his chest and rubs his upper arms.

‘You had radiotherapy?’

‘Yeah. Not the chemo. The wife had that. It gave her extra time, but I’ve had long enough.’

‘Any other children, or people special to you?’

‘There’s Tilly, our daughter, up in Geraldton. She’ll be down on the weekend. My brother Sid over east. There’s the bowling club and the women at Beryl’s church. I don’t want ‘em all coming in. And there’s Connie who cooks and cleans and does my washing for me.’

‘So Charlie, why have they sent you here? How can we best help you?’

Charlie looks Barry in the eye but doesn’t answer for a while. He takes a deep breath. ‘It’s the end, isn’t it? No one tells you, but you know. Time to fall off my perch. Or you can push me. I’d rather die at home, but there’s no one there but me. Silver Chain nurses helped with my shower, but I slipped when they weren’t there. Lucky I didn’t break a leg, they said.’ He’s silent again for a while. ‘I don’t want to die in pain. Can you do that for me, Doc?’

Barry takes his bony hand. ‘We should be able to manage your pain. Is there anything else?’

Again, Charlie is silent. We wait.

‘The little white pills for the vomiting. What if I can’t swallow them?’

‘That’s okay Charlie. We’ll put a tiny needle under your skin with a syringe driver attached. It will control your pain and nausea, and we might add something to help you relax.’

‘Relax. Yeah. I might need that. You know, I’m ready – to join Beryl or whatever, but what do we really know?’ Charlie looks down at the knots in his hands.

Barry waits a few moments. ‘Have you been sleeping okay?’

‘They gave me pills at the hospital. It was so bloody noisy in there. Bells, buzzers and talk. And all night long checking my heart or blood pressure or wanting me to take a piss. Can I shut the door here at night? And what if I need another pill to help me sleep after midnight?’

Barry scribbles something in his notes that could be hieroglyphics. ‘That’s fine, Charlie, and the nurses will disturb you as little as possible. How is the plumbing?’

‘Pissing like a lager on tap.’

‘And your bowels? Any problems there?’

‘Plenty, Doc. It’s that morphine. Rocks. You know how they say – shit a brick. Like boulders blocking a stream. Need some dynamite.’

Barry laughs. ‘We’ll give you a more gentle explosive that will do the trick. We’ll have you right in no time.’

I help Barry quickly examine Charlie who has exhausted himself with banter. His belly is distended, his ankles swollen and his heels reddened, his skin is like tissue paper. His chest is apparently clear. Barry shakes his hand before he leaves. ‘Our chaplain Derek might put his head in the door. He’s a pretty nice bloke. Oscar might put his head in too. He’s the hospice dog.’

He doesn’t mention Nerfy, the cat, who is often seen in the chapel, and who has an uncanny habit of sleeping on the bed of the patient next to die.

I’ve dressed Charlie’s bedsore and he’s sitting on his fat pad again.

‘Worn out, Charlie?’ His face has relaxed and he’s silent. I take his hand. ‘It’s okay. It’s a huge effort being bundled in here, probed with questions and cups of tea. Have a rest. Then I’ll see if Fred in the kitchen has some Dory for your lunch. Later, if

you'd like to go outside, we'll bring you a water wheelchair. Luxury model cushioned with water for your delicate backside. Only the best for you.'

Cog and I are writing our notes. New waves of nurses are trained in turgid prose. *Integrity of integument and exogenous elements*. This is not for us. We were trained in clarity.

I go to find a newspaper before I go off duty. Donald has promised me his. He's gazing blankly out of the window, and doesn't turn when I knock. I squat on the floor at his side. Nerfy, sleek and grey, is sleeping at the foot of his bed. 'Are you OK? Anything I can get you?'

'A new brain if you've got one.' His speech is slurred. Donald was a journalist, strong on the polemic. He's challenged us on nuclear issues, East Timor and the Gulf. Now his brain tumour's left him a hemiplegic. He comes to the hospice for respite care, to give his wife a rest. His mates take him swimming at Cott in the mornings and he writes in the afternoons, but his computer is idle today.

'Can't help. Sorry. Your old brain was top of the range. There's a high demand for those.'

He gives a wry smile and hands me his paper. 'Have a good night, Alice. Is your boyfriend taking you out?'

'No boyfriend, Donald. I've told you that. They don't make them like you any more.'

*

I'm on a late shift. Dave will have hours of homework, and I've left him a tuna casserole. I feel guilt with every evening away, during this, his last year of school, but he seems to work well on his own. Sunny will pop in to watch TV when she finishes work at the crèche. She's had a key for sixteen years.

There's a chill in the evening breeze off the river. I walk to the western balcony, near the native garden, where Charlie sits with his son Neil. They're watching a pair of black swans strutting across the dichondra lawn.

Neil had come to us after handover for advice. Last night Charlie was sleeping when he visited. What should he say today? How much longer does his father have? Does Charlie know he's going to die? Should he ring Charlie's brother Sid to come over from New South Wales?

Charlie had been frank with us yesterday but he hasn't discussed dying with his family. Or maybe they haven't listened. Some people prefer to live the pretence, dispense the get-well cards, she'll be right mate, keep up the fight, you'll soon be up and running, so keep your pecker up. How must it feel to be dying without discussion, to be alone with your terrible knowledge and fears locked away inside?

I remember Dave coming home one Christmas to confront me with The Truth. Julie, his grade one teacher, had told him Father Christmas was a lie. I was furious, wanting to prolong the fantasy for as long as I possibly could.

'If Father Christmas is really Dad, does Dad come to our house at Christmas when I'm asleep and I never see him?'

It was so much for Dave to take in. Several years later, he admitted how he'd tricked me. The teacher had said nothing; there are ways of discovering truth.

What did Charlie know before he talked with Barry? Oncologists rarely tell patients they're dying; they'd rather pull another rabbit out of their chemical hats. Yesterday's bravado could have been Charlie's first admission that he was very soon to die.

Charlie sees me coming. 'Giddy Alice. You met my son, Neil?'

Neil answers for me. 'Yeah, I met Alice.'

I pull up a chair next to Charlie and take his chilly hand in mine.

'How are you going, Charlie? Your hand feels cold.'

'Nah. I'm fine. Got a swag o' blankets here.'

'Did you sleep okay last night?'

'Like a lamb, Alice. Thanks for all you did. Look, there's Willy again. Soon I'll have him eating banana. He'll be with me til I die.'

Neil looks uncomfortable. What have they said to each other?

I show Neil how to operate the reclining water wheelchair then leave them alone to talk.

Neil stays with Charlie on the balcony until dusk. The evening light often softens the raw edge of talk around here. I duck out periodically to check on them. They've shared a brandy together, and now Neil is coaxing Charlie with a meal he has no wish to eat.

'Don't worry, Neil. Is there something else I can get you Charlie?'

Charlie shakes his head. He's lost his appetite. A cup of tea would be nice.

Neil follows me inside. 'He'll starve to death if he doesn't eat! Shouldn't he have a drip, or one of those tubes in his stomach?'

‘It’s okay. It’s natural for people to eat and drink less as they’re winding down. It’s natural to ...’

Neil cuts me off. ‘No! You want him to dehydrate? Do you know what it’s like to be dry? Like when you’ve been on the piss, your mouth’s crusted and dry, caked like a cocky’s cage, when every breath is a throat full of fire? You wouldn’t bloody know but I won’t have that for my Dad.’

I think he’s had more than one brandy. Easy does it Alice.

‘I do know, Neil, but this is different. When you’re passed out legless, who moistens your mouth and lips? We won’t let him dry out. Why don’t you ask about hydration when we have the family meeting?’

Neil nods, says no more, stirs three heaped spoons of sugar into Charlie’s tea and takes it out to him.

We rarely hydrate patients. It isn’t natural. But I remember Cog’s patient Tina with her face caving in, her husband Frank and his horror. We gave her sub-cutaneous fluids and kept her looking sweet. We probably prolonged her death – and the family’s agony. But it gave them time for their final goodbyes, and for her to be ready to die.

*

I swat a mosquito on my arm. ‘The motorbike frogs are excited tonight, but they’re not winning with these mozzies.’

‘We need bats. Eat hundreds of insects a night. Learnt it in biology.’

Dave and I are on the front porch with tea and toast before turning in. He’s been struggling with his Japanese homework.

‘Sorry I can’t help you Dave. I did Latin at school. *Hasta hasta hastam, hastae hastae hasta*. All so helpful in this life. Don’t ever tell your grandfather you’re learning Japanese. Fifty years since the war and he still won’t buy a Japanese car.’

*

Team meetings. Case studies. Love them and hate them. A time to stretch out in the comfort of the lounge, to reflect and discuss how we might have done better. Everyone’s ten-cents is valued the same – from Lisa, the hospice director, to the rest of the speckled staff: the nurses, doctors, chaplain, psychologist, social worker and

diversion therapist. The pharmacist puts in her bit. A glorious time when it's working right and a barrel of angst when it's not. A pat on the back for a death well done or the stuff that nightmares are made of.

Sonia's thumbing through our presentation notes. Charlie died last week, the first of a run of seven.

Waiting for the team to arrive, my eyes close for a second, and last evening floods in. Simon, a young plumber with metastatic melanoma. Most of his life in the sun. His wife Tamara, her bed in his room, stoic, laughing with friends, never leaving his side, grasping every second with him. His urinary retention, resisting catheterisation, his slowly ballooning bladder. Discomfort. Agitation. Trickling taps, hands in water, nothing working. The final humiliation, Tamara dabbing at tears, leading her to the lounge, Gavin with his catheter pack ready to do the deed. Will the catheter hurt him, what will happen next, how much longer do I think, what about his breathing, she's heard about a death rattle? She dreads a life alone.

Today Simon didn't want breakfast, refused his shower and remained in bed. We deterred all visitors.

I'm struggling to stay awake.

'People die as they live.'

Who said that? Someone rationalising a troubled death, a banker who demanded control. If a bloke's been a control freak all his life, he'll want to control his dying, but it's hard as he gets near the end. If he loses control he might freak. Let him call the tune, feed him ideas – gently ease him in. And out. What music does he like? Play his favourite CDs. Hold his lonely hand. Listen to what he says. Then when the time comes for him to let go, we'll have an idea what he wants. Put a sheepskin under his reddened ear when he lies on his side. Give him a gentle massage. Perhaps no one has loved him like this since he sat on his mother's knee. Give him morphine to take away his pain or whatever works best for him. Anticonvulsants for neuropathic pain. Corticosteroids for the oedema pushing on his tumour. That'll lift his mood and appetite. Maxolon for the nausea or maybe Haloperidol. Antidepressants for his misery. Why should he die as he's lived if there's a better way to go?

'Alice?' Sonia's nudging me. 'We're on first. Wake up.'

'You speak. I'll nod.'

'You're nodding already.'

'I'm half done in.'

Our previous chaplain used to start with a prayer but Derek tries other things. Jesus, Shakespeare, Leunig, Tosser Jack from Gundagai. Today it's Mother Teresa.

'Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work.'

Sonia takes to the floor with a summary sheet, balancing her rimless glasses right at the end of her nose.

'Thanks Derek. Today Alice and I are presenting Charlie X, an amenable seventy-year-old man with stomach carcinoma, liver and bony secondaries who died peacefully with his family after six weeks in Acacia House. Although his care was straightforward, hydration was an issue. It was explained to his children, Neil and Tilly, that hydrating Charlie could prolong his life – something he didn't want – and that we could ease him from the unpleasant effects of dehydration with appropriate oral care. Despite insisting that he and his brother Sid were not close, Charlie on several occasions mentioned their childhood together. They talked on the phone a few times. Neil and Tilly decided to bring Sid over, and asked us to hydrate Charlie until after his visit. Alice?'

'Thanks Sonia. We felt manipulated in a way. Neil and Tilly discussed hydration at the first family meeting. Neil was quite aggressive. In the light of Sid's visit, and with Charlie deteriorating, it seemed a legitimate request, so we administered subcutaneous saline every night for ten days. As I see it, we prolonged his life, but that extra week was of value. His symptoms were well controlled, and there were some issues he resolved with Sid that gave them some peace in the end. Derek helped out there.'

Lisa usually likes to comment. 'In terms of compassion, we did the right thing. But there's another side to this. There are so few palliative beds in Perth and a lengthy waiting list. We shouldn't think in economic terms, but that hydration cost us. A week or more of extra care at hundreds of dollars a day. The government gives us twenty, the same as a nursing home bed. Charlie wasn't privately insured.'

I know the hospice struggles for funds but should we be counting the cost? *To give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest.* These are the chants from my childhood.

I check on Donald on the balcony before going off duty. He's drowsy and can't lift his head any more. I offer him a drink then recline his water wheelchair, repositioning his head in the shade. There will be no more respite care. He's deteriorating – on the

slippery slope, soon to take the train, not buying green bananas. I sit with him for a while, holding his hand, and as on every other day, I look around for the wagtail, but amazingly he hasn't returned since Charlie died.

Chapter 8

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

4 March 1994

I'm at the kitchen table, the only one in the house. I've a quiet hour before the children finish school. I'm working like a well-oiled machine, but my reserves are depleting fast. I nurse, sleep fitfully, collect the children from school, cook supper, clean up, help with homework, read to Gordon, and then leave for work again. Gordon, the most untroubled child in Maritzburg, now clings and whines every night. He's too old for this behaviour, and although Leo assures me he 'falls into line' as soon as I drive away, it chokes me nonetheless.

Cassie has a gaggle of friends, but Gordon is miserable, saying little, spending much of his time alone. Moira's boy Ben invites him over but he's frequently too tired to go. Even at the library he's restless, flopping into a beanbag with a bundle of books, most of which he rejects. I'll take him to the children's book readings during the next school holidays.

Leo tried various strategies when our chattels finally arrived. He located the cricket bat and set up the stumps, but Gordon quickly lost interest, complaining of aching legs. Next Leo found our binoculars. He bought a local bird book, and we drove to the Perth Hills early on Saturday morning for bird watching and breakfast. The children's eyes are sharp. They spotted a striated pardalote, a white-browed scrub wren and a little wattlebird. We found the calls harder to identify than those we were used to at home, but heard the little wattlebird's 'fetch the gun, fetch the gun', and the

pardalote's 'pick it up, pick it up'. On the way home, Cassie quizzed us with a mix of Australian and South African birds.

'My mother is dead, and my father is dead, and my children are dead, and my heart goes doo-doo-doo-doo-doo-doo.'

'Emerald-spotted dove!'

'Good Lord, deliver us.'

'South African nightjar!'

'Too puddly, too puddly, too puddly.'

'The black-collared barbet!'

I never heard 'too puddly' at home. To my ears the barbet's call was like a short sharp screw on a squeaky bed, but I won't share that with the children.

Gordon was happy birdwatching in the Perth hills but his happiness didn't last. With nagging guilt for abandoning him five nights a week, today I took him to the doctor who suggested growing pains – not unusual for ten year olds.

16th March 1994

Leo has completed his units and can now conduct transactions. We will buy a second car, and his will be tax-deductible. He's also getting first glance at new houses coming onto the market. Cassie loves exploring homes, her imagination scampering ahead of her steps, planning sleepovers and refurbishments. Gordon is less discerning, but there was one house he instantly disliked at the rear of a battle-axed block, its small 'garden' all pavers and paint. We can't afford a block here the size of ours at home, but I would like enough space for Gordon to play and to grow fruit trees and vegetables. One of the few advantages of living in Perth is that no monkeys will harvest our crops.

Celia, the school guidance officer called us for an interview – she considered Gordon to be in the wrong year group. She showed us samples of his in-class writing which were barely legible, whereas his work in Maritzburg had been flawless. We have been dubious about the teachers here. Unlike his teacher at home, who had expectations, perms and pleats, Gordon's teacher has spiked black hair – reminiscent of African blacks – and three earrings in one ear!

Celia said Gordon rarely contributes in class and hasn't made any friends. When she mentioned possible depression, Leo queried her qualifications. He has always doted on the children and taken pride in their accomplishments. He questioned the lack of an

achievement ladder in the children's classes. Cassie and Gordon topped their respective ladders at home.

Australian education doesn't believe in achievement ladders. Celia suggested Gordon attend a small support group that she facilitates, and that I join other parents who help with class activities.

Leo was bristling with undisguised hostility, but when I said, 'We know Gordon is unhappy,' he became very quiet. We both knew.

I was off duty that night. Restless, we lay behind the bedroom door. One thing was certain for me: I couldn't continue to work. I must give Gordon my time. Not for the first time I felt cast on a thread, as if spun out by the Moirai, those Greek goddesses of fate, my life beyond my control. But in another way Gordon's misery anchored me, gave me a *raison d'être*.

For Leo it was different. When he makes up his mind, he's more stubborn than Die Groot Krokodil Botha, but in this he was uncertain. Didn't I think Gordon old enough to be over his Oedipal phase?

25th March 1994

I'm sitting on our makeshift bed facing a blank yellow wall. Our rental agreement stipulates no wall hangings. A breeze has come in from the ocean, and a card from Thembile flutters to the floor. She's happy in her new position. Her daughters are doing well at school, and Jabulile is still determined to be a nurse like me.

My resignation from work angered some oncology nurses who had invested time in me. Just as I was becoming accepted, I became an outsider again. The nurses had carried me in the first few weeks as I learned drugs and protocols. But there were some things I could never accept, and these I was happy to leave: pre-recorded handovers with no chance for discussion; the restriction of narcotics when patients' pain was uncontrolled; patients with neutropenic fever, sick to the gills with poor symptom relief, being pumped with intravenous antibiotics; patients consenting to chemotherapy trials, unwilling to abandon hope; the cachectic treated aggressively with nutritional support, as if the medical goal was victory over mortality itself; and, as an admission of final defeat, dying patients with terminal restlessness shunted to a room at the end of the ward, away from the nurses' station. In vigorous acute and curative mode, palliative care wasn't practised; how I missed Ellen's guidance then. Every night we were 'flat strap' as they say here, with little time to hold a saddened hand.

12th April 1994

We rarely saw our neighbours in Maritzburg – they were hidden behind high fences, lush vegetation and razor wire. In this house our secrets are displayed – it's the downside of Neighbourhood Watch.

Mary invited me in for coffee. Although Leo and I had resolved to keep Gordon's problems private, Mary's gentle probing drew the whole story of Gordon's unhappiness from me – and a dam-burst of tears into her prickly home-brand tissues. Another layer was then added to the pillar of my guilt – I'd breached a family confidence. Unlike Dr. Starling, who always encouraged me to find my own solutions, Mary had a quick fix.

'Gordon needs a pet. Go to the Dog Refuge. You need to meet more young Australians. You could work as a volunteer. Why don't you ring Acacia House, that hospice over in Maylands?'

When I confessed my indiscretion to Leo in a second burst of tears that evening he took me in his arms and let it pass. He thinks he has found our perfect house on a small block overlooking a park which has excellent sporting facilities. And the back yard is enclosed – ideal for a dog.

11th May 1994

I long to touch my home soil. Nelson Mandela has been inaugurated as the first black president of South Africa. On TV we saw him speaking of that sense of personal renewal each time we touch the soil of our land. Our country will be healing its wounds without us. Unbelievably this great man even thanked the warders who had become his friends during his twenty-seven years in prison. And he dedicated the day to those who had sacrificed their lives for freedom in South Africa. I feel very small indeed.

6th June 1994

Should I be grateful to Mary or resent her prescription for our lives? So much has changed for us. On both counts she was right, but I am pleased we have moved from her sightline to our new home on Abbett Park. This house is certainly a poor relation to our home in Maritzburg, but it has a native garden which should flower in spring, an enormous garage where Leo can tinker with his timber, and best of all it's ours.

Gordon is happier, both at home and at school. We have always had purebreds at home, but on Mary's recommendation, we took Gordon to the Dog Refuge Home and he fell for a bedraggled collie kelpie cross pup. Jonty is an intelligent dog and is responding well to grooming and training.

Unlike Cassie's wide circle of friends, Gordon has one special friend, Minh, a well-mannered Vietnamese boy from Celia's support group. Cassie calls him Minestrone which annoys Gordon intensely, but Minh takes it with good grace. Gordon often brings him home to play cricket and exercise Jonty. And at Celia's instigation, they have joined the Scarborough Surf Life Saving Club, where they meet every Sunday morning in their club cozzies, shirts and caps. It's gratifying to see Gordon with a purpose in life, with a smile on his face again.

17th June 1994

After a country where menial tasks have always been performed by blacks, I'm still occasionally surprised when I see whites employed as cleaners or gardeners and in other service positions.

Today I searched the supermarket shelves for ingredients to make Leo's favourite honey and molasses loaf. Supermarkets here have a wider range than I'm accustomed to finding at home, but unable to find molasses, I asked a young dark-skinned man who was packing sugar on shelves. The way he glared at me took me aback. My own voice still in my ears, I knew I had spoken in the manner in which I was accustomed to speaking to blacks. The young man was polite without deference. He led me to another aisle where a fair-skinned youth was packing.

'Hey Daimo! Where's the molasses?'

'What's molasses?'

'You know. That shit for cakes.'

The store had no molasses.

How pleased I am that Dr Starling set me on this journal. I have no one in Perth with whom I could share these reflections.

30th June 1994

Taking Mary's advice, I made an appointment at Acacia House to discuss volunteering – and emerged with a nursing position! The hospice accepts patients with motor neurone disease for two weeks' respite care, and they require extra help – which coincides with Gordon's school hours. I know little about MND but have access to the hospice library and the nurses will mentor me. Jeremy will be my first patient and I'm faintly terrified. He has the ALS form of the disease – Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. He's fifty, was diagnosed eighteen months ago and has recently deteriorated. His wife Patricia needs respite and is taking their boys to Albany for a break on the family farm.

Strangely, at the hospice, no one wears a uniform. Lisa, the director, said they avoid the institutional look; the hospice is more like a home. But how do people know who is in authority? Hospice nurses in Maritzburg wear uniforms with epaulettes to display their seniority, qualifications and experience.

Another curious thing in such a wealthy country, Acacia House struggles for funds. At the entrance is a produce stall and a perpetual raffle, and surprisingly, an honesty box with neither lock nor chain.

8th July 1994

Coming to Australia has made me increasingly aware of myself; it is unlikely that the self that is me would have ever developed here. I had not previously considered the profound effect of my country, how much it created me, and how seriously I look at life compared with Australians. Yet now I feel myself changing. It's not like those religious conversions that you see on TV, the miracle, the swooning, the saving, the forever walking free. Nursing Jeremy is humbling. I can't express it in any other way. The hospice community has enfolded me; kindness to its staff a prerequisite for nurturing patients. The strangest thing of all is that I've never laughed so much. I wouldn't have expected that.

Cog mentored me on my first day and I followed her like a lamb. I'd read up on MND, but there was an untilled field of incompetence between my reading and nursing Jeremy.

When Cog knocked at the door of his room, Jeremy's groaned response sounded more animal than human.

'Jeremy, this is Gabby, the nurse I told you about. She's come from South Africa – and she's green. We must be gentle with her.'

Jeremy slowly turned his eyes, his smile destined to melt my anxiety, but when he tried to speak, I froze. Despite his daily speech therapy, his muscle control was poor.

'We'll use the board to show Gabby.' Cog reached for his communication board and painstakingly pointed to letters in response to Jeremy's blinking eye movements.

'Tell Gabby who is boss.'

We both laughed then and Cog turned to me. 'Jeremy is a cellist. He was in the Quaffers Green Quartet. Typical ALS – an intelligent high achiever. And a good businessman. He'll flog you a CD before the day's out.' Cog took his fingers in hers. 'Not only is he a cellist – he tries to conduct us here. But we'll never be musicians. We get our timing wrong, we come in too early and we're hopelessly out of tune.'

We sat at his bedside, and in a slow conversation that always included him, Cog explained Jeremy's problems and their management. He's like a teenager, liking to sleep in late, but the routine he established at home has been modified at Acacia House. Medications have resolved his stiffness and joint pain, but his speech is deteriorating, he has trouble chewing and swallowing, and this distresses and frightens him now.

Poor Jeremy. He's read all the literature on MND, is aware of the changes ahead, but not when each will strike. He knows that everyone has a different timeframe, and that most people die within five years.

The morning passed as fast as cascara (a favourite saying of my Grandpa's). Cog showed me how to turn Jeremy – he can't roll himself – how to elevate his heels a fraction so they don't burn. How to apply his soft collar, transfer and shower him, protect his flailing arms, and manage his oral hygiene. Once in his wheelchair he has more independence; he's able to operate it with a slight leg movement, and he positions himself near the window to work on his computer which responds to a faint touch of the mouse.

I also helped the nurses with other patients' hygiene care, preparing pumps, being a general dogsbody. I'm being eased into palliative care and I'm comfortable with that.

I had imagined that my two free hours before the children returned from school would be a frenetic preparation for supper, but instead, on that first day, I felt somewhat numb. I unlocked the front door, acutely aware of my fingers turning the key. I let Jonty inside, and for once was glad of his bounding exuberance. Making myself a pot of coffee, I noticed every movement of my hands: unscrewing the lid on the coffee jar, lifting the kettle and controlling the pour, slowly depressing the plunger and squeezing the top of the milk carton to release a steady stream of milk. I bent down to fondle Jonty and picked a grass seed from his coat, aware of the pincer action. Jonty followed as I climbed the stairs carrying the coffee tray. I glanced at the hastily-made bed where Leo and I had made love in the morning. That was another world. Unlocking the secretaire, I took the Basildon onion-skin writing-pad, slipped the guiding lines into place, and wrote to Ellen in Maritzburg.

15th July 1994

I'm at my secretaire again. It gives me comfort at the end of my shift to return to this faithful friend. Some people think that possessions die with their owners, that they lose their innate animation. I feel differently. I remember how my mother prized this piece,

how Buellah lovingly waxed and polished it, and their adoration still imbues it with life. On some days it feels almost spiritual, sitting here with my pen.

Jeremy. I manage most of his care alone, requesting help only with transfers. Although his arms flail in rag-doll fashion, he can weight-bear and transfer into a chair with two of us assisting. How did Patricia manage this alone? As I position his lifeless arms into the troughs on his wheelchair, I stroke his once-talented hands.

Those who knew Jeremy before his illness can interpret some of his speech, but I've found it impossible. If Jeremy is disheartened – or even exasperated – he doesn't show it. When I'm overwhelmed with my failure, he always perseveres; we use his communication board. I have learnt to leap in early, predicting what he might say, and from my hilarious mistakes, there are roots of a friendship, founded in his tolerance and endless thankfulness. I know that MND patients express gratitude in extremes – perhaps fearing that support may dwindle just when they need it most.

I left the hospice after feeding Jeremy his lunch, a puréed arrangement of colours and flavours: chicken and vegetables, peaches and sago cream and a cup of thickened orange juice. Panadol crushed and dissolved in thickened peppermint water. Cog has shown me how to position his head – upright and slightly forward – and the suitable tiny amount of food to place on his shallow spoon. Today his meal took longer than usual and we watched TV to help pass the time – from the end of *The World At Noon* until *Consuming Passions* at three. At least he didn't choke. I suggested giving the cooking program a miss – kangaroo steaks and 'Bon appétit' hardly seemed appropriate – but Jeremy insisted. He assumed that if we ate springbok at home we would also eat kangaroo. It's rich in iron and low in fat. I promised I would try it.

20th July 1994

I made a foolish comment yesterday while massaging Jeremy's hands –projecting my feelings onto him; I suggested his life must be awful. I didn't say as much, but I thought that if I were in his position, I'd want to put an end to it. He didn't respond at the time, but last night refused to go to bed. He was awake for much of the night, at his computer, laboriously writing. The night staff fed him breakfast and put him to bed at dawn.

I was surprised to find Jeremy awake when I crept into his room after morning handover. He directed me to his computer, to a letter on the desktop.

Gabby,

As my ALS nears the end of its inexorable journey, I want you to know my life isn't awful, but that I cherish every day, not least because both at home and here I receive such special care. What makes me value this life? The giggles of nurses in the passage, the softness of my boys' skin against mine, the glorious differing shades of green in the native garden. My perspective is enhanced, not diminished; outside in my wheelchair I'm privileged to have once again a child's eye view of the world. The smallest shrubs have doubled in height and the melaleucas by the river stand tall, the papery bark on their branches whispering in the wind.

Without my old pain and stiffness I have a new lease on life. (This expression we use so flippantly has renewed meaning for me now.) Do you know Boethius' classification of music? I no longer perform for others, and this grieves me of course, but I'm learning his 'musica humana' – a harmony of body and soul.

Before ALS, I had friends, but a new community, driven by a common purpose (ME!) has now developed, some of them old friends, many of them new, some professionals in the MND Association. These people have enriched my life – just as you have – but the amazing thing to me is that they insist I've enriched theirs. You are fortunate to belong to this hospice community, as am I. My life is far from awful.

Now I know you will let me sleep in.

Jeremy

When I turned, his eyes were closed. I have never done such a thing before, but I bent over, kissed his forehead, and slipped quietly from his room.

28th July 1994

Yesterday morning there was a sound like a bull elephant's trumpeting coming from Jeremy's room. I rushed down the passage. His call-bell – a tiny bulb clipped to his pillow that responds to a slight movement of his head – had become detached. His head had fallen backwards, his neck painfully extended. I'd never seen him agitated like this.

He'd been desperate for a urine bottle and finally wet the bed. I got him up immediately, showered and dressed him, but he seemed turned in all day. Although I regularly give him bowel treatment – his sloppy diet and lack of activity have slowed his gut peristalsis – wetting his bed this morning has inflicted a great indignity.

The feeling of letting Jeremy down was overwhelming me. I needed a change of scene. Everyone at work had been talking about an Australian musical film, *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert*. Sonia, who has returned to night duty to pay for a holiday in England, had seen the film and added one of the songs, 'I Will Survive', to her post-handover repertoire.

'Think I'd crumble? Think I'd lay down and die? Oh not I, I will survive.'

Both Alice and Sonia remarked on the spectacular scenery in *Priscilla*, saying that Leo and I would see another side of Australia. We hadn't called a babysitter since arriving in Perth, but Mary had offered, and we decided it was time.

Priscilla was colourful in every respect. I felt uncomfortable at first – I hadn't known the movie was about drag queens – and at one stage Leo whispered that we might leave, but by the end, despite the vulgarity, the comedy won me over. Leo was restless throughout, but Alice and Sonia were right. The scenery was spectacular and we saw another side of Australia.

5th August 1994

Jeremy goes home this week but will come to Melaleuca, the day hospice, once a week so we can keep in touch. We had a disturbing conversation today.

'Will you come tomorrow?' Interpreting this simple sentence took me several minutes, but Jeremy as usual was patient.

'Of course. I'll be here, getting you up, to the toilet, showered, shaved and dressed, settled in your wheelchair and fed, then I'll leave after your lunch, when you're having your massage. As always. I'll play your cello concertos.' He didn't respond for a moment, then blinked to the board again.

'I'm no good in bed at night.' Another five minutes to interpret this. I felt I was being tested and wasn't sure how to respond. I thought I had a grip on his humour and sensed the start of a smile. He couldn't mean sleep. The night staff say he's slept like a lamb since we've dealt with his stiffened joints. Photos of his children on the heart table seemed to offer salvation.

‘I think you must be good. Look at those gorgeous boys. I’m sorry I haven’t met them.’ When his face remained blank I was mortified. I’d made a terrible mistake. ‘I’m sorry – don’t you sleep well at night?’

‘I’m no good in bed. I’m better in the chair.’

Again I couldn’t read his face. I’d known him then for two weeks, we’d had about forty hours together, I had thought I was reading him well, had entered his frame of mind, had a handle on his humour, but I wasn’t sure I could handle this. For once he wasn’t helping me. I’d go for the yes and no answers – like on an ouija board, I’m told, the easiest way to communicate.

‘Forgive me Jeremy. Are you talking about sleeping?’

‘No.’

‘Sex?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you concerned about when you go home?’ No response.

‘Do you two need some help?’ I had no idea what help was available. He didn’t answer for a while, and then blinked out ‘S _ O _ R _ R _ Y.’

I tried to engage him further but he had retreated to his computer. ‘I’m sorry Jeremy. I’ve let you down. I’ll see if Cog can help.’

Cog was understanding. ‘Can you imagine how creative those two need to be? A good thing they both have a sense of humour. I’ll see Patricia. I’ve talked with her a lot and can raise it.’

At that, we both broke up.

7th August 1994

Cog pulled me aside at work today. I’m not sure that it was very professional, but she had supper with Patricia last night. Patricia knew she needed respite from Jeremy, but she’s missed him intensely. She’s already addressing their sexual problems - she’s seeing a counsellor about their difficulties, and has booked regular massages for herself. I can’t imagine losing the special touch that only a lover can bring.

Chapter 9

Maeve

Perth, Western Australia, 1994

I had an interview at Acacia House. Lisa, the Director of Nursing, asked me why I wanted to be a hospice nurse, and I talked about knowing Deirdre, how I admired the way she was, and how when I helped her care for my brother, I felt most like myself. I told her about agency nursing, how time with patients was stripped away, how it felt like the military. Hospice nursing would give me more time for people.

Lisa listened carefully and her eyes never were leaving mine. ‘I know what you’re describing,’ she said, ‘but we get very busy here too. How long is it since your brother died?’

‘Three years now,’ I answered, but I was feeling it more like three weeks. Lisa’s manner reminded me of Deirdre’s – she set me at my ease. Then I was telling her that because I’m in Australia I sometimes forget you’re not home, Daniel, but other times when I’m remembering I’m roiled around with the sadness.

‘We never get over the death of someone we loved,’ Lisa said. ‘I lost my mother ten years ago, and I have a special place in the garden where I still talk to her. Her responses aren’t always clear,’ she laughed.

She suggested that I enrol for units in the palliative care course. There was no nursing position at Acacia House but praise be to God she offered a month at Melaleuca, the day hospice next door, while their enrolled nurse was on leave. I quickly agreed. Take the ball at the hop as Mammy would say.

‘Would you like to charm Major Lang today? He’s often out of sorts.’

I’m at the window with Lettie, she’s the day hospice co-ordinator, and we’re watching a giant of a man who might be acromegalic with his enormous jaw and hands, easing himself from a small sedan. Brian, a volunteer, is a dwarf at his side.

‘Is it “Major” you call him? It seems very formal.’

‘His name is Tantalus Lang,’ Lettie says, handing me his notes. ‘There’s some history behind the name that he’s sensitive about.’

I look again at Major Lang, and I’m seeing how he holds his head high and how he’s striding towards the door with his very long stick and ignoring Brian’s hand. He may be standing tall but his shoulders are like a coat hanger beneath his navy blazer, so much weight he must have lost.

‘From the way he walks, I’d not be picking him as sensitive.’

‘Everyone is sensitive but some are better at hiding it.’

I feel myself blush and know this to be true. I scan his notes. Rectal cancer three years ago. Resection and colostomy. Chemotherapy. Recently diagnosed liver secondaries. Major and his wife Eunice are aware of the significance of this. Melaleuca once a week, respite for her. He enjoys music, armchair travel and massage.

Brian interrupts my reading. ‘Oh good, it’s you, Maeve. I’ve taken Major to the treatment room. He’s asking for a nurse right away. Got a real paddy up he has – sorry Maeve, no offence. From the odour driving in, I’d say his rifle’s fired.’

‘His rifle’s fired?’

‘His way of describing it. Colostomy problems. You’ll sort it, Maeve. But first, I’ve brought you a present. It’ll save you a lot of trouble.’

I unwrap the tiny parcel Brian hands to me. It’s a laminated name badge that he’s made with a border of shamrocks and harps, and *Maeve: Rhymes with Wave* in careful lettering.

Major is sitting on the edge of his seat and his back is rigid. I introduce myself.

‘I’m Maeve.’ I point to my new badge. ‘Rhymes with wave. Tell me I am wrong, Major, but is it your colostomy giving you trouble?’

Major stands and loosens his trousers. His colostomy bag is ballooning so I release the air – and the faecal odour.

‘What do you think is the problem?’

‘Malaria,’ he laughs. ‘I thought you were the experts.’ He zips his fly, buckles his belt and sits firm again in his chair.

‘The colostomy is three years old now. You’ll be the expert. Has it behaved like this before?’

‘Yes – after beer and mushy peas. Friday fare. I’ve been almost airborne. This time it’s different. Hasn’t worked for three days. Nothing but gas. There’s a blockage there. Calls for a cleaning rod.’

‘Maybe, but have you changed something else, like your diet or your drugs?’

Major shakes his head.

‘Do you have nausea?’

‘Sometimes.’

‘Do you have pain?’

‘Yes, but I take extra morphine for that. And whisky helps. I think the cancer’s spreading. Blocking the gut again.’

His voice has dropped and so has his jaw and now he’s avoiding my eyes. ‘That may be, Major,’ I say, ‘but I suspect the extra morphine is the culprit. It is causing constipation.’ Thanks be to God I learnt this from Deirdre. ‘The gas is passing through, and that’s a good sign is it not? Your aperients may be needing increasing. I’ll find a doctor to see you, but will you join the others in the day room for a cup of tea for now? Carter will be playing the piano. A gentle touch he has.’

A grin spreads over his face. ‘You’ll work it out, will you? Is that Georgina woman there today? She’ll help you. Gives me the shits, she does.’

*

Toni is a lymphoedema specialist who comes to Melaleuca twice a week. The most of the lymphoedema patients I meet are women with breast cancer. I feel sad for these women with heavy, painful arms swollen like giant marrows. The lymphoedema can’t be cured, but the bandaging, elastic garments, exercise and massage push fluid from their arms and bring them some relief. Patients come from Acacia House for treatment too, and they join in meditation and have lunch with the day patients; many they already know from their own Melaleuca days. What warmth and jollity there is amongst these women nearing the ends of their lives!

Sally was diagnosed so late in her disease she refused oncology and had only naturopathy treatment. Her husband Darryl came to Melaleuca with her, for Toni to

teach him the massage technique. Later, when people were playing cards, I gave her a foot massage. She had a new compression garment on her arm, it was elevated on two pillows, and she said this was the best she'd felt since her diagnosis. Even though she was so sick, she had a dignity I haven't much seen in Australia. She knew she would never be cured. She told me about her spiritual advisor who would support her to the end, a woman not of the church. I told her about priests and religious sisters bringing spiritual care in Ireland, but also the *Anam Cara*, the soul friends who share sacred intimacy with people who are dying.

Listening to Sally I knew I would never reject mainstream medicine. I would want every treatment option. Still I'm sad for you Daniel, and there's a hollow in my heart where Tully used to be, but my life since joining the hospice is now more precious to me than romance.

Chapter 10

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 1994

The day hospice isn't busy today, so the Irish nurse Maeve is helping us at Acacia House. We're in the treatment room preparing a new syringe for a twenty-four hour sub-cutaneous pump which will deliver a narcotic, anti-emetic and anxiolytic cocktail. Gavin is stocking the medicine cupboard with drugs from patients who have died. Sonia's rifling through a bag of nightwear donated by families. She holds up a powder-blue camisole.

'A stunner for your trousseau there Sonia.' Gavin fingers the silky fabric.

Cog appears at the door. 'Anyone coming to tea?'

Maeve and I take the syringe to the bedside of man in his terminal phase. His wife has stayed overnight. We check his notes, the insertion site, the pump and the line. I leave Maeve talking with his wife and join Cog in the tearoom.

'Who divvied up the patients this morning? I thought we were working in teams.'

I pour a freshly brewed coffee for Cog. Gabby, the new South African nurse, never a hair out of place, every bit the model from Vogue, every 'hello' with three syllables, is reading a magazine at the table. I'm feeling aggrieved. My patient allocation has changed, just before my days off.

Cog ignores my question. 'Hi Gabby. How's Jeremy? Eating out of your hand today? Speaking of eating, where's the cake?' The morning tea platter has been

reduced to crumbs. Cog disappears in search of food. She's astute enough to know I'm peeved, but the issue won't be discussed in front of Gabby.

Gabby looks up from her magazine. 'Bad morning?'

Is my mood so poorly disguised? 'I've been moved to East, I don't know the patients, my wings have been clipped. I'm a new bird in the East Wing aviary. A rufous-crested bristle bird.'

Gabby laughs. 'My daughter Cassie has your lovely hair colour. But she's more of a russet warbler.'

Gabby's English is stiffer than the Queen's but I like her. I can like anyone who likes the colour of my hair. 'Jeremy's going home soon, isn't he? What happens to you then? Are you nursing somewhere else? Or sunning yourself on the cappuccino strip?'

She looks affronted. 'Yes. No. Jeremy leaves tomorrow and so do I. But Lisa wants me to do MND home assessments and I'll do some casual shifts before the next patient comes in. And I help at my children's school.'

Cog returns from the kitchen with squares of strawberry sponge and Gabby gets up to leave.

'Problem?' Cog avoids my eyes, licking the cream from her cake.

'I hardly know the patients on East. It's not fair on them. Why move me one shift before my days off when I know the West patients so well?'

'Lisa did the patient allocation. She's protecting you.'

'Protecting me? From what? From whom?' Despite myself, I giggle. 'How did Margaret Thatcher respond to rumours of dissent in the ranks? "What? Whom? When? Where?"' Imitating Thatcher is a bad mistake with a mouthful of cake and cream. 'Lisa protecting me?'

'Give yourself a break, you've worked ten days straight and you're developing owly eyes. Any plans for your days off?'

'It's pretty exciting. Cooking, cleaning, shopping, washing, being there for Dave, keeping his body and soul together. Paying the bills, another payment on the house, it'll be mine in forty years. Sleep, if only I could. How did my life become so boring?' I pick up the magazine Gabby was reading. Pisces. You will need extraordinary sensitivity this week. Show restraint and trust the opinions of others. I check the date. It's three years old. I tear out the crosswords for Dave.

Is this what is meant by burnout? Perhaps I've lost perspective. I've felt robotic today. Sponges, showers, drugs and dressings, families I haven't known. Yawning my face off. I won't take a sleeper. I simply can't steal pills from this place.

'Thanks for a lovely day.'

'And you, Maria. Sorry I wasn't more help.' The ritual of thanking each other at the end of every shift.

*

I'm on my back with my legs outstretched, arms alongside my body, palms facing the ceiling, at the Hatha Yoga Centre in Maylands. It's seven o'clock and I'm releasing the hospice anxiety.

'Keep the chin slightly tucked into the chest, finding a comfortable position where you can be in stillness.'

The roof of this deconsecrated Anglican church, spanned by great jarrah beams, reminds me of an upturned boat. Have bored parishioners for the last hundred years cast their eyes to the heavens, counted the interlocking panels, felt like floating animals beneath a capsized Noah's Ark? I'm up there now, looking down at the creatures lying motionless on the floor. Now I'm back on my mat.

'Paying attention to your breath. Noticing the movement of the belly. Pay attention to the quality of the breath. Is the inhalation equal to the exhalation?'

The breath. It smells like a zoo down here. People should wash their feet before yoga.

'The sound of your breath is very rhythmic and slow. Your body is in a state of relaxation. Hear the name of the body part, simply be aware of it. It's not a time for moving. It's not a time for sleeping.'

The woman on the mat next to me is snorting like a pig at the trough.

'Right palm, left palm, left shoulder, right shoulder.'

Someone had beans for lunch. What is this Eastern music? Surely Bach would be better in a church. Or that William Byrd CD Mum sent over that I gave to Derek for the hospice chapel. *I Will Not Leave You Comfortless*. Only lasts a couple of minutes. A power-yoga piece that one. Close your eyes, Alice. Here come Gabby and Cog and Jeremy. Simon. Dave at his desk, piled with books, music jammed in his ears. How can he study like that? Breathe.

‘Visualise your whole body and everyone in this room. Slowly and gently begin to make any movements your body wants to make. Perhaps stretching the fingers, pointing the toes...’

I’m not a yoga junkie but when I’ve been marooned on the fringes of sleep I sometimes give it a go. Sunny has a shrine in her bedroom where she sits alone to meditate. She has no trouble sleeping.

‘And keeping the eyes closed, slowly roll onto your right side, and pause there in stillness, valuing this feeling of calm. Using both hands to push up from your mat...’

We’re sitting upright with our legs crossed, hands in the prayer position. Who is hearing my prayers? How do people get their knees to the floor when mine are just flanking my chin? I press my hands together. Let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

We gather our mats and amble towards the door, everyone seeming so relaxed their bodies could be boneless. Should they drive home in this condition? *Massive Collision in Maylands. Government Bans Yoga.* Yoga buses on the roadside. Have you attended yoga tonight madam? One long, steady breath thank you, legs locked behind your head.

John, a stressed Terrace accountant with an apartment on the river who half-covets an alternative life, is holding the door for me.

‘Coffee?’

‘A very relaxing idea. We’re supposed to go home to bed.’

‘If you’d prefer.’

‘Thanks, but no. I need to get home to the boy. TEE coming up.’

We did try a relationship once but it was never going to work.

Dave doesn’t hear me come in. He’s at his desk with his headphones on, poring over a newspaper. Cryptic crosswords. Does he ever do any homework? I flick his light off and on, and then take a seat on his bed.

‘Finished your homework?’

He nods, easing the phones from his ears. ‘Finished enough. How was yoga?’

‘Fine. Maybe you should come with me sometime. It helps focus and relax the mind.’

He’s slipped his headphones back on. ‘Can’t hear you, Mum.’

‘Sure. Get that grunge out of your ears.’ I bend down to kiss him goodnight. I wish he’d wash his hair.

Chapter 11

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

12th October 1994

I have a favourite place to read and write in the garden – a cushioned jarrah bench that Leo restored and placed beside the *Eucalyptus caesia* tree. This tree, which was adorned with pretty pink flowers and attracted honeyeaters in winter, now displays masses of pretty silvery bell-shaped gumnuts. Local people call it the Silver Princess.

It's almost a year since we left home. Perth isn't home to me yet despite months of putting down roots. 'Getting rooted,' Leo says, 'isn't as easy as you'd think, considering the sandy soil.'

He's right about the sand; the soil is impoverished. While the native garden thrives in this soil, I miss the rich Maritzburg loam. There is so much I miss. The azaleas will be flowering in Maritzburg now, their blooms to the top of the fence-line, unlike the stunted Perth specimens. Although we ring Gogo regularly, I miss her coming for supper, sitting with the children and patiently listening to their stories. I feel such longing when nurses at work talk of their families. When I see family members with their loved ones who are dying I have further pangs of grief. Who would be at our bedsides if we were dying? We only have each other. We will fly back when Gogo needs us, and we know that Lindiwe, whose family has served Gogo since childhood, will always be there for her.

Most people in Perth are from elsewhere. There's a diaspora of South Africans in the northern coastal suburbs, and Perth is awash with nurses from the British Isles. The city is famed for its isolation.

15th October 1994

I thought the movie *The Lion King* would be light entertainment for us all, and the values it embodies prompted discussion over supper. I was reminded of our suppers in Maritzburg when Cassie discovered her voice. We talked about Simba and the responsibility that comes with growing up. Leo observed that Simba's father, who was in the best position to see the good and evil in the world, ruled the house and commanded obedience, yet obviously loved his son. I didn't like where the discussion was going, especially as Simba's mother's primary role was to keep her family fed and clean, but the movie's theme song gave me the opportunity to discuss the natural cycle of life and death. I didn't mention Simba's guilt about the death of his father.

I was working with Sonia the following day and mentioned *The Lion King*. She had taken her niece in the school holidays and despised the values it promoted. She thought it was like Genesis, Paradise and the Fall. Simba is Adam, Scar the Devil. She thought it was racist, sexist and homophobic. Scar and the hyenas were black, Scar's language and mannerisms were effeminate.

I suppose most narratives moralise, but we're selective in what we see. Sonia, without children of her own, would have seen the film differently.

21st October 1994

The hospice has been short-staffed and I've worked a number of short casual shifts, mostly caring for patients with cancer. In only four months, I've seen patients return for successive admissions – symptom control or respite care, and finally coming in to die. Familiar with us by their second admission, some say it is like 'coming home', but could home ever be like this? Rooms with views of the river and a stretch of native bushland. Walls of donated art work – landscapes, abstracts, still life and slumped glass. A lounge and a music room and a place for therapy. A choice of company or solitude. A chapel. A meditation space.

28th October 1994

Grey hair growing is from my alopecia bald patches. I'm getting older. Nina, a patient with Ca Pancreas, is only fifty-three – fifteen years older than me. Diagnosed in

January, she's had a beastly time with chemotherapy. Her nausea and pain are now under control but she's profoundly fatigued. Her body's little more than a bag of bones that struggles to get out of bed. She maintains a little hope, but is also realistic – knowing that pancreatic cancer has the worst prognosis. She comes to the hospice to gain some strength, and to better know the community where she may choose to die. One of her favourite people is Jennie, a volunteer therapist, who gives her daily Reiki.

I knew nothing of Reiki before Acacia House. There are other alternative therapies, like aromatherapy – I do think lavender oil is relaxing – and I've seen patients respond positively to art and music therapy, but am I to believe in this Reiki energy? Is Jennie its earthly conduit? Nina talks of feeling the warmth, of how Reiki relaxes her and imbues her with inner peace. Jennie has offered to train Nina's family, so they can support each other at home.

I talked to Cog about the ethics of alternative therapies. If they cause no harm, we shouldn't have a problem with them. Patients have taken weekly taxis to naturopathy clinics for Vitamin C infusions. Cog has given both coffee and shark cartilage enemas, and she's even turned a blind eye to a patient's belief in drinking the goldfish's water. Hope. Hanging the Christmas stockings when the chimney's been bricked in.

1st November 1994

Last year I was oblivious, but now I've experienced my first Melbourne Cup Day. Diversion Therapy, usually a gentle space with patients talking quietly, listening to music, painting, or having their feet or hands massaged, was transformed with gaiety, flowers, bold hats, finger food and champagne. Lisa won the sweep for the main race, and my horse, Paris Lane, came in second, paying me seven dollars. I had less success with the race of snails which Sonia was running outside in a short course she'd constructed, bounded by slippery plastic which the poor creatures couldn't scale.

1st December 1994

I became the devil's advocate today. I was nursing a new patient, Major Lang, (who insists we call him 'Major'). He was anxious and unsettled, buzzing us all morning. Alice thought he might be "brewing a bleed" so we put some dark red towels in his room and prepared Morphine and Midazolam for rapid sedation if necessary. When I saw Jennie, I suggested she offer reiki. I am still sceptical (who knows what took place behind the door?) but Major was calmed within the hour, and slept all afternoon.

3rd December 1994

Jeremy has returned to the hospice – it's less than three months since he left. When I saw him at home I was shocked by his weakened condition and his paranoia. He is convinced that Patricia is having an affair, and despite the neurologist's reassurance that this fixation is a manifestation of frontal lobe involvement, they have each become desperate.

Jeremy is drooling. He finds swallowing so difficult that his intake is minimal, but he refuses to have a PEG – a gastrostomy – to maintain his nutrition and hydration, because he doesn't want to prolong his life. Is this single-mindedness also due to changes in his temporal lobe? Patricia says we must respect his decision, that his quality of life is poor, but I think it a shame. I'm concerned about his hydration and he's simply wasting away.

There is talk on TV about advance care directives, or living wills legislation – too late for Jeremy – but would an early directive have changed the course of his remaining life? And there has been heated discussion in the tearoom on legalizing some forms of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. Everyone has an opinion, but I'm confused. I think of dear old Rastus, our dog, of our sadness, but also the kindness – and convenience – when we finally let him go.

I discussed euthanasia with Leo before we went to sleep last night. He sometimes surprises me with his wisdom. For him, one size will never fit all. He admires the work I do, and he'd like palliative care for himself, but the time might come when he'd had enough, and then he'd like to go like Rastus, cradled in my arms if possible. He thinks we should each write a living will.

At that moment, in our togetherness, I thought of Alice who lives alone with her son, without a man to share this special intimacy. I held Leo close to me then, his head against my breast. We've come a long way since Maritzburg.

4th December 1994

In my dream last night was a cluster of a familiar yellow-flowering shrub growing wild in Natal. As we lay together this morning, I tried to tell Leo my dream, but couldn't remember the name of the shrub.

'You must remember! It grew wild - along the Duzi, up in Woodlands, out at Edendale. Everywhere. As prolific as the Zulus themselves.'

'When did you ever go to Woodlands or out to Edendale?'

I hadn't told Leo that before we left, Ellen took me on her hospice run, to give me a glimpse of her work. We went to the undertaker's office at Edendale to deliver supplies to the Zulu nurses and to discuss their patients with them. Like the Prestbury Hospice, they receive no government funding, but unlike Prestbury, the Zulu community is far too poor to give substantial financial support. Nurses without transport visit patients on foot, so we gave a lift to one. In my mind's eye, I see flashes of yellow along the sides of the muddy road.

Ellen and I also visited Coloured patients in Woodlands, Indians in Northdale and an emaciated white woman in Wembley. The Coloureds and Indians had attentive families, but the white woman's husband had died and her children had settled in England. She had refused to leave. I remember her saddened face, her houseful of memorabilia and her faithful Zulu maid who slept at the foot of her bed. I told Leo about it this morning. Why couldn't I tell him then?

'Gogo's as strong as an ox, but if she were dying surely we would go back?'

I can edit out the 'when-we', but since starting work at the hospice, I catch myself being a 'what-if'. What if either of us falls ill? What if Gogo needs our care?

Leo seemed preoccupied. 'Do you know there were over a thousand paddlers in the Fish River Canoe marathon this year?'

Leo too has relinquished a lot, although he rarely discusses it; he'd rather look forward than back.

Chapter 12

Maeve

Perth, Western Australia, 1994

Mammy always said heavy purse, light heart and I know that the opposite is true. Regular hours with no penalties can't match my agency pay. I phone Mammy every two weeks, and she's so grateful for my money that I can't send less, so now it's my special account I'm chipping at where I'm saving for a trip back home. Lisa's given me Saturday shifts at Acacia House to help out. It's temporary, she says. She won't have me burning out.

Brigid sees to that when she takes me to hear an Irish band.

'Did you never have a life?' she asks. 'Boxed up in that tiny flat on your own, nursing people with no hope, your head always stuck in Sligo, still pining for that Tully fellow who's probably back in Sligo himself trawling for further trophy cailíns to be dragging home to his bed.'

Brigid drags me up to dance. On show she is, like Madonna, all tits and titillation in her new wonder bra and gleaming rhinestone on her belly that flashes in the disco light.

'A bleak situation, it is,' she says, 'to be losing your dancing legs.'

I'm remembering dancing at Strandhill rugby club, my skirt splashed with Ritz and beer, three of us looking about for a lift, for a fella with a smell of petrol on him to drive us into town for curried chips.

How long is it since I danced, let the music take a hold of me? My body is softening, the music breathing into me, the rhythms unlocking my shoulders and hips

and slipping the knots undone. And I'm seeing a lovely girl dancing then from a place outside of myself, her sandy hair brushing her shoulders, her body bending and arching; beautiful so she is, a dancer known to the dance. And the music is then like a pounding ocean, wave after lashing wave, before it settles at last to calm. And in the stillness I sway like a mighty tree under a Sligo sky, its roots anchored firm in the ground.

The music breaks and Brigid has vanished, so I edge my way to the bar. The rhythms have cracked the thick in the air so strangers are now best friends. Then a man his friends call Healy with an Italian look pulls me up to dance.

'Healy's a name from Lough Arrow, in County Sligo where I'm from,' I say.

He laughs, 'I'm a Kimberley man,' but then his voice is drowned by the dance. This time when I dance I don't leave myself or see the music breathing life into me, but see only him, feel us move together, and when he takes the both of my hands in his, his eyes never leave my face.

A builder he says he is as he's driving me home, maybe thinking of my masonry. His business was first in Broome, then these past seven years in Perth. His name is Colin but his friends call him Healy.

*

Remember the organ in St Brigid's church, how the bellows were repaired, and then the music changed? That's how I'm feeling now, Daniel. Saturdays at Acacia House remind me of being with you, how in your sickness we laughed, how I learnt to move with your mood, feel something of what you felt, and how the Sligo lads learnt to feel that too, and I'm reminded of Deirdre, how relaxed she was and how much you loved her. And there are nurses at Acacia House like Deirdre, and I'm loving them the same, and others who are different.

I'm seeing Lisa's hand in the allocation book and I know she's watching out for me. I'm not given the young patients to care for. I'm not nursing anyone your age.

At last it must be that I've proved myself because Lisa calls me into her office to offer me a contract at Acacia House. The extra pay means I will book my trip home but I'm shamed to tell you the longing to return isn't as strong as before. There's Colin Healy holding me here.

Chapter 13

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 1994

The hospice staff are lethargic this morning. We've finished the morning handover but none of us move from our chairs. It must be the weather. Our energy is low. Two patients who've died overnight are still in the repose room. The funeral directors have been called. I'm working with Maeve, whose laugh has a husky edge. She's had a night on the tiles again.

Gabby offers to give us a hand while Jeremy sleeps.

'I hope he sleeps 'til ten.' We have eight high dependency patients.

Maeve checks the documentation before calling the funeral director. 'The both of them for cremation? At home nearly everyone is for burial, but here it's nearly always cremation?'

'Real estate, Maeve. Small country Australia. Not much room out there. Better to pollute the planet by cremating them.'

Gabby and I go to Fiorella, one of our terminal patients. Her husband Giovanni has stayed overnight, sleeping on a creaky fold-a-bed. On duty on top of the wardrobe, an illuminated hurdy-gurdy Madonna is rotating slowly with outstretched arms to the music of *Ave Maria*.

Giovanni leaves us to sponge and turn his wife. We check her pump, massage her heels, elbows and shoulders, comb her hair, moisten her mouth and apply soothing balm to her lips. Her face is relaxed, we see no hidden pain, but her breathing is shallow, her

extremities dark; she will die today for sure. Maeve pops her head in to check a needle with me.

‘On your way to God,’ she says softly to Fiorella, before sighting the Madonna. ‘Jesus Mary and Joseph!’

We find Giovanni in the lounge. The family are coming with fresh batteries. The Madonna won’t run down.

Alisha, one of the vollies, is leaving Nina’s room. She’s often called in for counselling and has been here half the night. Nina’s family are estranged from her, and although two of her children have made fleeting visits, Tom, the eldest, has failed to show.

Alisha’s too intense for me.

‘Nina cried a lot in the night. At least she’s expressing it. But how can she find peace? That Tom’s a heroin addict! She’s got so much to grieve about.’

‘So what’s stopping Tom coming in? Surely if he’s had his fix he’ll be right to see his mother? They can compare their opioids.’

Alisha gives a weak smile. ‘It’s not so simple. They haven’t seen each other for years. There is so much work for me to do in barely a blink of time.’

Gabby and I wish her luck and move on.

Gabby is worried. ‘What if...’ She stops herself.

‘What?’

‘The son, Tom, if he’s unstable. He may not be safe.’

The thought of screening visitors as if our patients were prisoners. ‘Do we vet all the people that come in here, check their veins, their pupils, their breath? Proceed in faith or banish them all. You’ve been shown the emergency bell?’

The dysfunction in families like Nina’s makes their suffering seem to ferment. Family dynamics. It’s rattled off at handover like a symptom for alleviation. Years of toxic relationships that come back to bite when you’re dying. But Nina’s psychological pain has touched a tender nerve in me – her children’s neglect reminds me of my own. My relationship with Mum and Dad is all but lost.

Chemotherapy has punched a sizable hole in Nina’s hope-bucket. Today she’s so lethargic that we give her a hot towel sponge in bed. She lies motionless as we cover her body with steaming soft white towels and gently press their soothing heat over her shrivelling skin. She relaxes in the warmth, for now.

Gabby and I meet our new admission. Dragan, a cachectic, almost skeletal elderly man, reeking of fish and tobacco, is sitting upright on the ambulance trolley, clutching a precious pouch and asking for a light. He's very short of breath.

'Okay if we give you a shower first?' His smell is nauseating. 'Can you stand on those pins of yours?'

We ease Dragan onto his feet and remove the long johns and trousers rigid with salt and grime that hang from his bony frame. His arms are so stiff and painful that we take scissors to the cardigan, jumper and cabled vest that have all but fused together. We lift him onto a shower chair, and soak off several pairs of socks in a bowl of warm water while we shower him. Layers of skin, sand and salt are peeling from his scaly feet. He grimaces with pain.

'Sorry Dragan. I'm going to get the doctor. You need something for the pain in your feet before we get those socks off. Maybe local anaesthetic spray.'

We dress his bleeding feet and a gaping sacral sore then ease him into a pair of fleecy pyjamas from our community cupboard. I recognise the pyjamas. They belonged to a wealthy businessman who died with us last year, and were donated by his family, along with cognac for the happy hour trolley – and a hefty bequest. I've shampooed Dragan's matted hair but it resists my wide-toothed comb. 'Do you mind if we cut your hair?' He nods in silence then asks again, 'Got a light?'

I find a vullie to sit with him while he smokes. No point in premature cremation.

'Are you free for that admission now?' Lyndal, the doctor, finds me in the treatment room, preparing a pump with Maria. She hands me the nursing notes.

'I rang Megan, the district nurse. She's been checking on Dragan intermittently, but he's deteriorated recently. He has no next-of-kin; he's a bit of a hermit up there. Lives in one of those beach shacks on the coast near Lancelin.'

Lyndal shakes Dragan's knobbly nicotine-stained hand, I open the window, and we pull chairs to the bedside. Dragan stubs out his cigarette, and sits, facing the wall, his audible shallow breathing broken by a phlegmy cough. I pass him a tissue box. Sputum. Vile. So many years have passed since my training in Adelaide when we emptied sputum mugs with indifference. Now it makes me want to puke.

'You had a long drive down. They tell me you've got a special place up there. Right on the beach. Have you been living there long?'

Dragan gives Lyndal a long look before replying.

‘I am going back. Milo is waiting.’ Dragan’s accent could curdle fresh milk. Does he think he’ll return to his shack? And who is Milo? Dragan fixes Lyndal with his eyes.

‘Do you have family, cousins, friends?’

‘No.’

‘You saw Megan, the nurse, didn’t you? Why do you think she’s sent you to Perth?’

Dragan shrugs. ‘Cancer. Six years. For six years I fish, I smoke, I fish, I smoke and now they say cancer some more.’

‘You seem to have pain when you move. We can help you with that, and give you something to help your breathing. How does that sound?’

Dragan remains silent as Lyndal listens to his chest, feels his skinny abdomen and checks his legs. His feet are blue and his ankles swollen. She turns to me. ‘Have you checked the skin on his back?’

‘I’ve dressed a sacral break.’ I wonder how long he was in his hut before the district nurse found him. By the look of his parched lips and skin, he’s poorly hydrated.

Lyndal helps me lift Dragan up in the bed to an easier breathing position. We pack pillows into an armchair formation to support his back and aching arms. Lyndal takes his hand.

‘Is there anything else we can do for you? And who is this person Milo? Can we contact him?’

Dragan looks at her in surprise, and the beginning of a phlegmy laugh breaks into a terrible cough. His face becomes darker as he coughs and coughs. Lyndal has her hand on his back.

‘Linctus Codeine. Ten mls.’

Cog checks the drug with me, and we return to Dragan’s room. His breathing has eased, but Lyndal wants it given. We leave him to rest, then return to the staffroom to work out a plan of care.

‘We need to contact Megan. And have a word with Lisa. Do you think there’ll be a problem with another dog around here?’

‘Milo’s his dog? Will he look like his master? A matted, mangy, flea-eared dog with worms and weeping eyes?’

*

‘Is it our responsibility?’ A group of us at lunch are discussing Dragan’s dog. Maria is short on sympathy, but most of us agree that Milo should come to town.

‘The local vet is looking after him, so he’ll be clean when he arrives. He won’t be any trouble. Megan says he’s an old dog, ready to die himself. He won’t leave Dragan’s side.’

‘When he arrives?’ Maria isn’t happy. ‘So it’s a *fait accompli*?’

Gabby looks up from her salad of beans, sultanas and crispy carrot sticks. She’s drinking rooibos tea that she brings each day in airtight cellophane bags. ‘What will happen to Milo when Dragan dies?’

‘We’ll have to ask Dragan – you know he still talks of returning to his shack, whether he believes it or not, and of catching a few more fish. Bringing Milo down may help him come to terms with dying here. In a way, Milo’s his next-of-kin. There’s no one else out there.’

Maria gets up to leave. ‘Next of kin! I suppose he’ll need a taxi voucher? Who will finance that? We’re already running on empty.’

She’s getting up my nose. Fair enough not to be fond of dogs but if a dog is your only friend? I turn to Gabby. ‘How about it Gabby? You’re off tomorrow aren’t you? Fancy a drive up the coast?’

*

Gabby’s phoned to decline my offer. Something about school commitments. I’m not entirely disappointed. I won’t have to wash and vacuum the car, clean up the parking tickets that are scattered over the floor and sniff out apple cores. I’ve never known perfection like Gabby’s; every aspect of her manicured life appears as clipped as her consonants. Contending with a mangy dog could have been the making of her.

Dave has finished his exams, survived the Rottneest Leavers, got his motorbike licence, completed his two day training, and now he works as a postie. A Postal Delivery Officer. PDO. The Christmas overtime hasn’t started yet, so he agrees to help on my mission. There will be a trade-off – lunch at the Lancelin pub. Between my work and his study commitments, we’ve had little time together this year and I’m glad of the chance to talk. I do my best to relax in the passenger seat as he drives north through Wanneroo, past the pine plantations and stretches of banksia trees.

‘I suppose Dragan lived around here somewhere – down one of these sandy tracks through the banksias. They look menacing to me.’

‘Bad banksia men.’ Dave laughs. ‘Did he have a car? Did he drive?’

‘Not that I know of. There’s no bus service here, but someone must have helped him with his pension, his sugar, bread and coffee. He wouldn’t have gone without coffee. Strong and black, three sugars.’

‘What a life.’

‘Nothing you’d aspire to?’

‘I don’t know what to aspire to. That gap year we talked about. I’m going to take it, make a bit of money, maybe go up north, get some work on the mines, maybe some station work – like Dad used to do.’

We haven’t discussed King for a while. Is he what this gap year’s about? Dave’s eyes are on the road.

‘I might even try to find him.’

It had to come sometime. I’d want to find my father too if I’d never met him. I’ve never hidden our story from Dave but now he’s old enough to imagine there might be a different script. Perhaps he needs to find King before he can move on with his life. He’d have to be curious.

‘You could be disappointed. Where will you start? Veterans’ Affairs? Or there’s a Vietnam Vets Association.’

‘I’ve already contacted them.’

I buy a beer for Dave and a squash for myself. We talk through the year ahead. While I know he’s doing the right thing, there’s a knot gripping my guts, and I feel surges of regret for times we haven’t shared. I’ve worked full-time to keep us both afloat but wasn’t there when he learnt to swim. There’s suddenly a lifetime of fun I want us to have together. Other parents take their kids to Bali, to concerts, the Hopman Cup and to fancy restaurants. What have we done but survive? He’s finished up pretty well-rounded, but thanks to me or despite me? Thank God for Sunny and Martin’s support. I had considered visiting Mum and Dad this year but I’m going nowhere while Dave’s still at home.

Tim, the vet, leads us out the back of his clinic to meet Milo who’s stretched on a beanbag sunning his belly. He’s old and sad and clean.

‘Is he mostly Kelpie?’

‘I don’t think he’s mostly anything, poor old thing. He’s miserable without his mate. He’s been dewormed, and had anti-inflammatories. I’ll give you some to take with you. Those hips of his are shockers. He’ll feel better when he sees Dragan again, and when he gets more tucker in.’

Dave strokes Milo’s chin while I ask Tim about Dragan.

‘He’s one of the old salts up here, used to grow vines in the Swan Valley, retired with his wife to grow olives and to fish, but she died suddenly. He’s lived in that shack in the dunes on his own – maybe fifteen years? We’ve all kept an eye on him. He wanted to die out there with old Milo, but I guess it wasn’t to be.’

Tim carries Milo to the car and eases him onto a blanket on the back seat. Dave climbs in next to him.

We buy some strawberries from a roadside stall in Wanneroo, have an easy run back to Maylands, and head straight for Acacia House. Milo hasn’t budged from his blanket. Dave carries him inside.

‘Christmas decorations up already. Can’t be too merry here.’

‘You’d be surprised, Dave. Some patients say they’ve had the best Christmas of their lives.’

As we approach Dragan’s room Milo’s ears prick up, he gives a sudden bark and struggles in Dave’s arms. Dragan has heard the bark and a toothless smile breaks free.

‘It’s okay Dave. He can go on the bed.’

‘But ...’

‘It’s okay. A little contamination goes a long way here.’

Milo licks Dragan’s face, his neck, his hands, his chest, and the old man holds him close.

‘Thanks Dave. You’re great. Won’t you sit with Dragan while I organise some bedding and a couple of bowls for Milo? Ring the bell if you have any worries.’

As we’re leaving the hospice, Maria comes towards us with a clutch of cleaners, her face reddened and her lips sucked in.

‘Does Lisa know about this?’

‘Yes. It’s fine. Dragan won’t be with us long.’

‘Who’s expected to feed the mutt and take it for walks outside?’

Dave jumps in before me. ‘Don’t worry – Maria is it? We don’t live far away. I’ll drop in twice a day to walk and feed Milo.’

I look at him in admiration. He's silenced the delegation.

Chapter 14

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

December 12th 1994

It's been fun identifying the established plants in our native garden. Most appear to have been chosen as 'waterwise summer survivors'. As I write now at the secretaire by the bedroom window, I can see a stunning, spreading, red-flowering gum, *Eucalyptus ficifolia*, on the other side of the park. A festive-looking tree in bloom for Christmas.

Our second Christmas in Australia. I posted our overseas parcels two months ago, and we'll phone Gogo on Christmas Day. We have expenses looming with Cassie commencing secondary school at St Clare's College next year. We turned down the opportunity for Gordon in year six at St Albert's. He and Minh are inseparable. Year eight will be different. I expect Minh will go to Scarborough High, a government school.

Leo is extending his business – linking emigrating South Africans to houses in Perth. He'll be able to tax-deduct the fare of any visits we make home. When not working, he tinkers in his shed, and fashions various tables out of richly-coloured jarrah timber from demolition sites.

I'm dreading Christmas Day. I'd like to have dinner here – our first Christmas in our new home with turkey and all the trimmings. Leo says we should invite the when-we folk who had us for Christmas last year, but they're too Afrikaner for me. I don't seek their company. I'm developing my own friendship network – women I play tennis with – Moira, Margaret from Cape Town, and Sylvie from Acacia House.

My working hours are less flexible and I can't take holidays until January. These friends have come to my rescue, helping with the children when necessary.

December 13th 1994

There have been complaints at work about smoking. I don't mind a cigarette myself, but with increasing concerns about passive smoking, the latest missive from management has come as no surprise. We now take patients to designated areas in the garden for their cigarettes. Dragan, whose scruffy dog Milo is on his bed at all times, seems content with the arrangement, saying he likes the fresh air! Milo has improved since his admission – some pain relief and decent food have restored life to the dear old dog, but Dragan's deteriorating, becoming increasingly short of breath, and always needs a nebuliser when he returns from a smoke outside.

The restriction on Dragan's smoking pleases Jeremy. Despite the solid wall between them, Jeremy has complained of the stale cigarette smell that drifts in through his open window. He's too weak to get out of bed any more and only manages sips of thickened fluid. He listens to music; he's withdrawn. Patricia and the twins come in every day and we wheel his bed onto the balcony – away from the smoking zone. She wants to take him home to die. We've had a family meeting with Barry and the counsellor from the MND Association and discussed the likelihood of a chest infection. Jeremy's refused further antibiotics.

December 18th 1994

Leo, the children and I went to carols at the hospice this afternoon, and to the party in the garden which followed, a gathering of patients, families, volunteers, people from Melaleuca and the wider hospice community. Jeremy's boys wheeled his bed onto the balcony where the Quaffers Green Quartet were playing – with their new cellist. Jeremy's going home tomorrow.

Although Cassie and Gordon were relaxed and happy, Leo was on edge at first, quite out of his comfort zone, yet afterwards we all agreed that it was the loveliest Christmas event we have ever attended – including the parties at the children's schools, both here and in Maritzburg. There were two touching highlights. Alice, her son Dave, Gordon and I went inside to visit Milo. Dragan is in his terminal phase, sedated and comfortable, turned by nurses two hourly. I had told Gordon he would be asleep, that he was soon to die. While we were all focussed on fondling Milo who was lying at his

feet, Alice bent over and kissed Dragan's cheek, and said 'Happy Christmas Dragan. I hope you catch an angel fish in the Ever-ever Afterlife.'

The second highlight for me was towards the end of the evening as the light coruscated on the river. When a lone black swan was seen at the water's edge, Tony played an unaccompanied solo piece, Camille Saint-Saëns' 'The Swan', from *Carnival of the Animals*. There was hardly a dry eye at the party, but this beautiful, sad music gave the celebration a special holiness.

We drove home to Scarborough, under a vast pink-flecked mackerel sky, the first I've seen in Perth.

December 19th 1994

My procrastination with the when-we crowd has paid off. Cog has invited us to join her family for Christmas dinner. Her husband Martin and Leo hit it off at the hospice party, sharing an interest in rugby in a city that worships Australian Rules football. Cog's family has a tradition at their Christmas gathering. They ask for donations to charity, and each take just one present, a "pre-loved" book. She has asked me to bring one for Alice. Alice's friendship with Cog always surprises me. Alice may be a hospice diamond but she is rather roughly cut. I have no idea what she reads, but I'll look in the second-hand bookshops. I certainly don't wish to part with any of my treasured books.

December 21st 1994

Dragan died today, a 'good death' as they say here, sedated and pain free, with no breathing anxiety. He'd asked that Milo be put down and cremated with him. Alice, although off duty, came in with Dave to get Milo and take him to the vet. It was a sad time for us all seeing Dave leaving the hospice with the floppy old dog in his arms.

December 23rd 1994

Today I visited Julia, a woman with bulbar MND, cared for by her husband Jim and a team of community helpers. The Silver Chain nurses have requested respite care for Jim who's on the verge of collapse. Julia is keen to be home this week, but will come to the hospice after Christmas, when the celebrations are over. I couldn't help but wonder how her family will celebrate because she wails incessantly. Perhaps it's like a crying baby – either the cry drives you crazy or you stop hearing it.

Julia could slowly type on her computer. She typed only two words: help die.

Jim spoke where Julia couldn't..

‘Julia’s not afraid of death, are you love? It’s the dying that worries her. Before she got this bad, she started planning her death, planning to end her own life. But she left it too late.’

I nodded and gently rested my hand on Julia’s. ‘We can’t help you die, Julia, but we can help keep you comfortable as you’re dying. We can continue your peg feeds so that you won’t dehydrate. And we will care for you like a princess.’

I turned to Jim. ‘Have the Silver Chain nurses discussed changing Julia’s medications when she is closer to dying?’ I looked at her medication regime: analgesics, aperients, anti-mucoids. Some antidepressants might help.

‘This must be terrible for you.’ As I heard myself say it, I knew I’d done it again, as with Jeremy, but this time I knew Julia’s feelings about the quality of her life. We talked about the care she could receive at the hospice from the nurses, the physio, diversion therapists and the many volunteers. I didn’t mention reiki. And I didn’t mention her medications. I’d leave that to the medics.

Julia’s plight and its effect on Jim has affected me deeply. I wouldn’t want to be a burden either. If it were Leo with MND, would he be a burden to me? How long could I give all of myself before he began to wear me down? And I know he would. I am only human as is he. We’ve known the best and the worst of each other. Or have we? Is the best or the worst to come? I remember that poem of Browning’s: *Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be, The last of life, for which the first was made.* Possibly.

I imagine being mentally alert, but having increasing weakness, being unable to write, muscles no longer supporting my body or initiating any movement, pooling saliva that dribbled from my mouth, a tongue that couldn’t help me swallow, being unable to blow my nose, dependent on others for hygiene, and the hovering sorrow of family and friends. The terrible burden on others. Losing a happy repartee and moaning for my needs. The terrible loss of rest. *Help die.* If only I could.

I must believe in palliative care. To give respite for carers like Jim and comfort for people like Julia. It will take careful listening and observation to meet her changing needs, to make her know that we care about her. I hope that we’ll succeed.

Alice told me about an MND patient she’d nursed who could never master the communication board. Finally they discovered his secret – the man was illiterate. The occupational therapist created a board of pictures and he learnt some word recognition. Imagine learning to read at that point in life!

24th December 1994

There was a small memorial service in the chapel today for Dragan and Milo. As we waited for Derek, Alice and I thumbed through the communal journal there. Jeremy's wife Patricia had entered something of Rilke's that I liked: *The future enters into us, in order to transform itself in us, long before it happens.*

28th December 1994

Books! Christmas dinner at Cog's was pleasant, if hot. There were twenty-six people there! Alice's Dave, sitting next to me at dinner, was the eldest 'child', all but adult, and was interested in South Africa. Unlike so many I've met whose imaginations have been captured by the film *The Power of One*, Dave was critical of its simplification, cynical even. I may lend him some of my books.

A cousin of Cog's was responsible for my book, Kevin Gilbert's *Living Black*, an indictment of white Australia for its treatment of Aboriginal people. Perhaps she was suggesting solidarity – that we all are culpable. A different cousin had done his homework well, giving Leo a book about Australian inlaid timberwork.

After more than a couple of beers, Dave entertained our end of the table with tales from his PDO life. Postal Delivery Officer. He told us how a 'derro' complained to Australia Post that he rides like a Hell's Angel and that he's stealing Christmas mail. Dave and Alice felt sorry for the old fellow, so took him a hamper on Christmas Eve. Dave played it down. 'Just Mum's specials from the pantry. Crap we'd never eat.'

Dave's Christmas book was a compendium of crosswords. Alice says he's addicted to them.

5th January 1995

Gordon has presented another dilemma. On Christmas morning, he burst into our bedroom with his gift for Leo, a tiny sprouting plant in a pot: an *Acacia burkei*. It transpired that he had smuggled seeds from Maritzburg – he planned this gift long ago. At Minh's house, he had filed his seeds, soaked them in boiling water, potted them in milk cartons, watched the seeds germinate, and then nurtured them for six months. He proudly told us that two of his burkei had germinated. What was Leo to do, caught between gratitude and the law?

'How many of these seeds do you have, Gordon? Please be honest with me.'

Gordon admitted to a cache of perhaps twenty or thirty seeds.

‘We can’t plant them here, Gordon, but I can’t bear to destroy them. Perhaps we need to plan a trip to South Africa.’

It was the first I heard of it.

Chapter 15

Maeve

Perth, Western Australia, 1995

Every day there's more to learn at the hospice. Some patients want to talk and others need their peace. When visitors are exhausting, we nurses must be advocates for our patients, easing visitors away, but how difficult is this, trying to be sensitive and respect people's feelings when I don't know the half of the lives they share? Alice says some people crack hardy, pretending they're holding up when in truth they're tumbling down but are too polite to say. 'He's very tired' is what I'm telling visitors because that is never a lie. But how do people know when to leave, to read a face, not talk too much? I learnt some of that with you, Daniel. When five or six of the lads in the room were talking between themselves you could relax a bit, but sometimes it disturbed you. We had to read you. You wanted to see people to stay connected, so you said. But some of your mates came for themselves, for another feather in their virtue caps or to offload a guilt from their chests. Like dump trucks people can be.

Patients often talk most during hygiene care. Derek says caring for people's physical needs reaches their inner person too.

I'm getting accustomed to a chaplain who isn't of the Catholic Faith. Derek sees to everyone and it is not just religion he brings. His readings before our team meetings are usually about relationships, and sometimes he reads Irish poetry, like *The Old Woman* this week.

As a white candle in a holy place,
So is the beauty of an aged face.

As the spent radiance of the winter sun,
So is a woman with her travail done,
Her brood gone from her and her thoughts as still
As the waters under a ruined mill.

I thought then of Mammy's old and lovely face and how her brood are not yet gone, Aislin and Caitlin fourteen now. And I'm doubting her thoughts to be still, like the woman's in the poem.

Priests don't often come here, but there are lady acolytes who visit Catholics every day and whisper blessings in my ear. With Derek and the acolytes I'm double religion-dipping.

I see Derek in the garden talking with Frederick; he's an atheist professor. He comes to Acacia House after his chemotherapy to build himself up – to raise his white cell count. He's a pale, grey-haired wiry man and he likes a talk and that is helpful to me because back in Ireland Patrick's joined the Dublin Humanists and that I'd like to understand. Near the end when you were dying, Daniel, Patrick was fit to burst with anger at God but he told it only to me because the faith was everywhere then.

'Is a Humanist an atheist too?' I ask Frederick. For how could Patrick be angry with God if he didn't believe in Him?

'Humanists reject the supernatural aspects of Christianity. They arrive at their sense of morality through science, reason, nature and history.'

'I couldn't come at that,' I say. 'Religion's been there all my life, at home, church, school, hospital, in everything we do and say. It's the fabric of life, praise be to God. And it goes deep, right back in nature, the Celtic is in there with it, like the fabric strips and tokens at the holy well, they were once atonement to the Goddess, but we pray there to Our Lady too. A peaceful place, so it is. Spiritual. If life is without religion what about when ...' Holy Jesus, I almost asked about dying. But Frederick knows his chemotherapy is palliative and so he has read my mind.

'When I'm dying? I won't need religion. I know your prayers and rituals bring comfort to believers, but they also bring judgement, you know.'

'And forgiveness.' I am quiet then, thinking of Father Michael and Communion, the calm that came to you, Daniel, and people I nursed in Galway, and the peace that came upon them after the Sacrament of the Sick, the anointing. The sense of grace, so it was. And how the decade of the Rosary brings peace and stillness to families here when a loved one dies.

'Thank you Frederick, I'll think about what you say. See you soon again.'

My pager is vibrating and Major needs help. He's weaker and can't go to the bathroom alone. It is sad to see him here, closer to the end. Eunice, his wife, comes every day. She brings him whisky, sits for an hour then takes his linen away but they don't seem to talk very much. Apart from her, he's alone. No children, no friends.

'Wave!' Major says, peering at my name badge. 'About time. Now help me to the bathroom and then we'll have a drink. I've got my own Glenfiddich.' He winks at me.

Major was agitated after admission but then Alice found out what his problem was and his whisky supply was restored.

'I'll be pouring one for each of us,' I say, 'but you'll be drinking the both of them and that will not be such a bad thing either.'

*

Outside Major's room, in the corridor, Alice is telling me about an emergency admission.

'Sally's her name. You knew her from Melaleuca?' Can you go and help? She'll need a familiar face. She's had a fall at home and her breast tissue's broken down.'

I remember Sally's swollen arm, how she suffered with her lymphoedema, but when the ambulance arrives, my God it is terrible. I hear Sally crying before I see her, the ambulance officers wheeling her in and Darryl, her husband, holding her hand, desperate he is.

'Help me Maeve,' she whispers between her shivering lips, perspiration pouring and her skin on fire. Alice and Barry are suddenly there and we slide Sally onto her bed, support her with pillows and cover her. Barry assesses her quickly; we give her pain relief, and then wait.

I hardly recognise Sally from the dignified woman I knew at Melaleuca. It takes half a day to control her pain, see to her dressings and restore her calm. We start intravenous antibiotics. I watch how Alice is firm and gentle to gain Sally's confidence, how she assesses her pain, how she attends to her dressings using soft tulle gras gauze and kaltostat to stop the bleeding, and the way she grinds the Flagyl pills and sprinkles on the powder to control the odour that is there. And I see Sally's anxiety melting right away.

Late in the day I'm locking medications in Sally's drawer and an elderly woman comes to the door. Sally doesn't see the woman giving a nod to Darryl or how quickly

he leaves the room. I know I must leave too. I see the woman go to the bedside and the relief on Sally's face. This is her spiritual advisor, I think. I find Darryl in the day room.

'It's not for me,' he says, 'but she helps Sal. I expect I'll have to swallow it if she is with us at the end.'

The volunteers are coming with their happy hour trolley. 'Maybe it's something stronger you're needing to be swallowing now,' I say. 'Let me get a drink for you. And something to eat? It's a long day you've had.'

I am late home as always, and Colin is waiting for me.

Chapter 16

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 1995

I've had four days off duty and I'm rostered on this afternoon with Gavin who knows our patients well. Nina is back again – surely for her final admission. She's given up on her chemo, no longer able to cope. 'Chemical warfare,' she calls it. She just wants to lie down and die. She says the cancer feels like a giant crayfish squirming beneath her diaphragm. The fluid in her belly has increased, making her breathing more difficult. Yesterday, she had two litres drained off. Lip salves, crushed ice, lemon and glycerine are relieving her dry mouth.

Sylvie's handing over.

'Remember Tom? The addict. Alisha tracked him down and she's been helping with visits at home. She says he's very attentive. He's here with her today.'

'Good for Tom. Happy ending. How's his heroin going?'

'Alisha says he's stable. God knows where he's getting it – or the quality of the stuff. He's agreed to go on the methadone programme – after his mother has died.'

'We could open a book on that one. But at least he's talking the talk. Nina might die in hope.'

Gavin and I do a circuit, greeting familiar faces, meeting new patients and families, checking charts, pumps and medications.

Nina's not in her room, but there's an unshaven man snoring on her bed in a black anorak and jeans. His boots are resting on the patchwork quilt. He shows no signs of stirring.

Simone, the lawyer who comes in *pro bono* meets us outside Nina's room. Nina wants to change her will. She goes with Gavin in search of Nina while I see a new patient, Sohan, a sixty-three year old man admitted from hospital. He looks Indian. I introduce myself.

'I'm Alice.'

'Yes, Sister.'

'You can call me Alice.'

'Yes.'

'What would you like us to call you?'

'My name is Sohan, but everyone calls me Sam.'

'Sam. That name means 'to hear'. What does Sohan mean?'

'Handsome,' he laughs, and sweeps his hair back. 'But please call me Sam. Even in Burma, as a boy, British officers coming to my father's store always called me Sam.'

'Okay handsome. Sam it is.'

Sam smiles. 'Mother England herself. It is strange that here in Australia we are still in thrall to Mother England. And Burma and India – they are independent!' He looks at me with pride.

I don't mention Aung San Suu Kyi or political prisoners.

'So,' I turn to his charts, 'it looks as if you've had a rough time.'

Sam's gall bladder carcinoma was diagnosed last year and has spread to his liver and lungs. He's been through the wringer – surgery and stent, then chemotherapy. His main problems are pain, nausea, shortness of breath and insomnia. I have a series of questions: does he have any pain now, where is he feeling it, can he give it a number, from one to ten – if zero represents no pain at all and ten the worst he's ever had?

Sam says the liver pain is a 'number two' but he doesn't want analgesia.

'Two is okay. I will tell you when it is four.'

I sit on the edge of the bed and take his hand. 'Don't let it get to four, Sam. Better to hit it early. That way we can regulate your pain control – make you a happy man again.'

Sam nods but says nothing. I wait a moment then ask about his other problems.

'You will be here when I am going to sleep, Sister? Sleep isn't easy.'

‘Doctor Lyndal has ordered you a sleeper. It will be much quieter here than in hospital. Do you always have trouble sleeping?’

Sam shrugs and is silent.

‘Let’s see how you go tonight. Take it from there. And call the night staff if you can’t sleep.’ He nods and I move on.

Sally’s room is opposite Sam’s. We’ve managed her pain, the discharge and odour, and she’s relaxed with hot towel sponges and massage. We’ve slit her pretty nighties to slip them over her head, painted her nails her favourite vermillion, and she’s had a shampoo and blow-wave. Her husband Darryl has brought in her Walkman; he looks up from the book he’s reading to give me a nod and a smile, but Sally, away with her music, is unaware of me. One lingering problem is the occasional odour leaking from her tumour site. Our liberal application of topical Flagyl has largely resolved the smell that had Darryl retching at home, but sometimes a waft still escapes. Today, all I can smell is lavender from a burner at her bedside.

Nina’s in the garden, sleeping in her water wheelchair. We check her several times during our shift to change her position, give her pills, and empty her catheter bag. When I deliver her tea, Tom feeds her.

‘Perhaps you’d like something to eat too?’ I ask. ‘Can I get you a sandwich or some soup?’ His face is almost as gaunt as his mother’s.

Nina gives me a grateful smile. We leave them in the garden until dusk, then Tom brings his mother back inside.

‘Getting chilly out there?’ I bring bowls to give Nina a wash and help clean her teeth. ‘What are your movements Tom? Do you have far to go home?’

Visitors usually leave around eight, but Nina has other plans. ‘I’d like him to stay, if that’s all right. I’d rather sleep in my chair. It’s more comfortable than the bed.’

Tom helps us recline the chair, turn Nina on the draw sheet, and adjust the pillows until she’s comfortable. She seems truly relaxed. Later, from the passage, I see his boots back on her bed.

Maria’s at handover and working up a head of steam.

‘You’ve placed us in a vulnerable position! With only three staff on duty, anything could happen!’

‘We often have family members staying overnight. What’s the difference? We don’t check their health records. What’s the worst that can happen? Any worries, call the cops.’

‘Nina’s not terminal. It’s not appropriate.’

‘She’ll be terminal if Tom doesn’t stay. This means a lot to her.’

A movement at the door catches my eye. It’s Tom, his skinny body framed in the doorway like a handle at the back of the broom cupboard.

‘Sorry to interrupt. Mum’s asleep. I think I’ll be going. You can tell her I couldn’t stay.’

I walk him to the door. ‘Thanks for coming Tom. I know how much you mean to your Mum. Do you need a lift to the train? My son Dave is picking me up. He’ll be here in fifteen minutes.’

He gives me a look I can’t read, then he’s gone.

I wait for Dave outside Acacia House, half expecting Tom to slip out of the shadows and ask for a lift. I’ve heard people say, ‘there but for the grace of God go I’, and now that disturbing thought bubbles up. As if God might bestow His grace on some, but withhold it from the unfortunate, as if such grace is rationed, inadequate for all to share. Are His recipients selected at random or can I petition Him for a serve? Nothing to lose, I toss a prayer for Tom towards the spangled sky.

Dave is running late, but says he’s made us food. He has something to celebrate; his work as a postie is over. No more early sparrowfarts at the mail sorting frame, the nine-hundred slots in the rack representing the run that he takes. No more ‘daily’ bike checklists to complete at the end of each week. And no more customer complaints. He’s tracked King down to Whiteface Station in northern South Australia and he’s booked a flight to Adelaide.

‘Whiteface. Never heard of it. What do they grow there? Racists?’

‘Nah. Sheep. I asked Dad about that. The station’s named after a bird – the chestnut-breasted whiteface, it’s a mix of brown and white.’

‘You’ve spoken with him?’

‘A letter. Then he phoned tonight. There’s a vacancy for a station-hand – if I’m interested.’

‘And?’

‘I’m taking it. I can bail if things go wrong.’

He's made a pair of pizzas with bases of Lebanese bread and opens a bottle of his home brew. 'Try it?'

I can't think when I've seen him this happy, but I can hardly swallow for the tightness clamping my throat.

'And if things go right? How long ...?'

'I'll be back for uni next year.'

*

Sam has a series of bad nights despite changes to his medication regime. Jennie has given him reiki and he has lavender in his room, but the night staff handing over tell us nothing works.

'He garbles things. I don't think it's English. He gets upset. We tried an anxiolytic, but with the condition of his liver, God knows if he absorbs it. We can't sit with him all night, and we couldn't get a vullie – can we arrange for one of his family to stay with him tonight?'

Maeve and I are working together, having a quiet morning. Diana, our new staff educator, has been training vullies to help with nursing procedures, and today a pair of psychology students are showering ambulant patients, freeing us up for others, giving us more time to talk with patients if they wish. We tread a tightrope between their need to be alone and their desire for company.

Maeve is sitting with Frederick.

'Help me Alice? Frederick says the hospice is called Acacia House because Acacia wood is everlasting – it's a symbol for victory over death. Am I to believe him?'

'I didn't know that, Frederick. The God squad talk of victory, sorry Maeve, but where's the victory for an atheist?'

'Victory is being without fear. I'm a victor because I have no fear of not being. And I have no fear of dying because I know you good people will see me out.'

I speak with Maeve in the passage. 'I'm worried about Sam. I'd like to spend time with him. Can I leave you with the rest?'

Sam's lying on his side, staring out the window. His walls are pasted with ludicrous Get Well cards from friends and family. His skin is more sallow today.

‘Another bad night?’

He nods.

‘Apart from the sleeping, how’s everything else?’

‘Okay, Sister. But my slippers are tight.’

His feet and ankles are swollen. ‘I can massage your feet if you’d like, and maybe adjust your slippers.’

I go for massage oil and a towel. The aromatherapy chart prescribes Ylang-Ylang for tension, panic, and fatigue so I add a few drops to the oil. Some say it’s hocus-pocus but I think it’s even money.

‘Stay slightly on your side if that’s more comfortable.’ I position pillows to ease the drag on his belly, then warm my hands and massage the oedema from his feet with gentle effleurage. ‘Does that feel okay?’

Sam closes his eyes and I continue in silence.

There’s a photo of his family on the dresser. I wait until he opens his eyes again. ‘I haven’t met your family. Have they been in?’

‘Yes, Sister, but my wife Daya isn’t well. She has cancer of the breast. She had treatment – chemotherapy – and now she is resting at home. But the family are coming this afternoon.’

‘I’m sorry Daya is unwell. Does it tire you when your visitors come?’

‘Yes, sometimes, but family is good. Do you have a family?’

I tell him about my family – or lack of it.

‘I’m sorry. My parents, they, they...’ He falters.

‘You don’t need to tell me if it’s too hard, Sam.’

‘No, no. My parents, they... you know Burma?’

‘Not much. *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. My mother’s favourite film after *The Dam Busters*.’

He smiles. ‘British films! Always the British! Did you ever see a film about Indians in Burma?’

I don’t know of such a film.

‘We left Rangoon after the bombing. Firecrackers for the British Christmas.’ He gives a slight smile. ‘My father talked with officers coming into his store. The cart was packed and we left in the night, sixteen in our family, all of us walking. Walking to India.’

‘How old were you then?’

‘Ten. Just ten.’ He’s quiet for a while. ‘My grandfather was Indian, my father Burmese Indian. There were maybe a million Indians living in Burma then. My mother, she was Burmese, but her father was English. My mother was a teacher.’

I continue to massage his feet. I’ll have to add disclosure to the list of benefits of Ylang-Ylang.

‘We were going to Prome, to cross the Irrawaddy, to take a track through jungle hills to the Bay of Bengal, to take a boat to India. The police took our money, two rupees each to cross the Irrawaddy, but then the Burma government said no; they stopped us crossing the river. They stopped the supplies for the route to Taungap so no one could get food. Many would starve on that track. There were too many thousands of Indians moving, and the government needed labour in Rangoon. They said they would evacuate the people if it became necessary.’

‘My father refused to go back to Rangoon. We would go north to Kalewa and Tamu and cross the mountains to Manipur, but my uncle, my aunt and my cousins all went back to Rangoon. We pushed and we pulled our cart.’

I wait but Sam says no more.

‘This seems sad for you Sam. And you’re tired. Would you like to rest for a bit?’ Before he can answer, there’s a gentle knock at the door. Harry, a vullie, with tea.

‘I have a surprise for you, Sam.’ He hands Sam his tea in a porcelain cup. ‘Taste it!’

‘Assam tea! How...’

‘You met Judy the volunteer yesterday? She lives near me. She tipped me off. And what about some cake?’

Sam gushes with gratitude. ‘You will have a cup, Sister?’

Later, revived, he wants to talk again. ‘Many were without water. There were no supplies from the Burma government. There was water in the ravine and many were scrambling to it. But there were bodies – so many people had died there – and the bodies were decomposing. My father forbade us to drink this water. We were thirsty but he rationed our water. Then for many days on the track there were bodies we were treading between. And the smell. I can smell it, even today. I would vomit but my belly was empty.’

Again he is silent. I wait. Horrified. He was only ten.

‘The smell. Now I know there were thousands who died on that road. When motor convoys of Europeans came we moved to let them pass. Many Indians remained in camp in Tamu, waiting there for transport, but my father knew we must move on. He

knew the rains would come and bring cholera and malaria. My mother and my sisters...’

I sense that Sam is struggling. I take his hand.

‘The robbers stole our food and money. Then at Manipur, again the guard wanted money before we could pass. I thought we would surely die, but my father had more rupees sewn inside his coat.’

Sam becomes quiet. I sit, holding his trembling hand until his tension eases and he falls asleep. I pull up his quilt, clip the bell to his pillow, close his blind and slip from the room. Later, when he’s awake, I’ll take the scissors to his slippers. For now, I must document his disclosure and suggest a counsellor. And a family meeting. Those get-well cards bother me. I can’t imagine what happened to his mother and sisters all those years ago. There’s a reason why he needs to tell us about being a child refugee. I hang a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on his door. There’s a faint odour in the passage – Sally’s dressing needs attention. We must move Sam around to East where the scents of frangipani and hoya will waft into his room.

*

I need to find more chairs. Sam is wheeled into the meeting room where his family, Lyndal, Derek, and the bereavement counsellor Trish are waiting.

Lyndal addresses the family, introducing everyone. ‘It would be good to hear from all of you. We’ve called this meeting so we all understand where Sam is at, to give us all a chance to ask questions, and to see how we can be most helpful.’

She talks about Sam’s cancer, his liver and lung complications and the treatment he’s endured. She talks about his pain, his nausea and shortness of breath, and how the drugs to control his symptoms, while improving his quality of life, have increased his drowsiness.

‘Is this how you understand things are going?’

The family nod. ‘Yes, Doctor.’

‘We know you’re very tired, Sam. How else do things feel to you? We know you’re unsettled at night. Where do you think you’re at?’

Sam is quiet a moment, and then takes Daya’s hand. ‘My body is failing me now. My life is draining from me.’

‘How is that for you, Sam?’

He looks briefly at his family. 'My family know of this. I see my mother every night. Her face has changed, and she can't control her bowels. We are a little way from the road, my father is holding her, slowly feeding our precious water into her mouth. Water trickles down her chin. My sisters have a fever; they have delirium. I cry out to them but they don't answer me.' Sam looks at Derek now. 'We have so little water, but my mouth is dry. I am drinking the water. I am drinking their water. I am drinking the life-saving water. I taste it still today.'

Derek speaks, for the first time. 'These are very sad memories to have at this time, Sam. How is your strength?'

'God is the strength of my heart. I pray He will forgive me this.'

Derek leans forward in his chair. 'Sam, this was long ago. God is faithful, and forgives our sins, and cleanses us. Just as you forgive those who wrong you, He has forgiven you this.'

The room is quiet. Lyndal turns to the family. 'How are you all going?'

Daya answers for them. 'The Lord is our strength.' We are indeed blessed to have each other at this hour of Sohan's trial.'

I didn't need to worry about those get-well cards. This family are denying nothing.

'Sam, you know you're approaching your last days; can you tell us where you'd like to be?'

Sam continues holding Daya's hand. 'I wanted to die at home with Daya, but she isn't well. I will die here if I may, Doctor.'

Daya remains quiet, her head bowed. His family are silently nodding.

Within two days, arrangements are made to admit Daya to the hospice. She shares a double room with Sam, and the scent of flowering frangipani wafts in through the open window. Sam jokes with Derek that he must be forgiven because he knows now he is in heaven. But he still cries out in the night.

I'm having tea with Derek. 'I don't get it. He became a Christian in Burma as a boy, so he's had a lifetime with the doctrine of forgiveness. So why still the guilt?'

Derek shrugs. 'Perhaps there's more that he hasn't told. Or perhaps his idea of God is a little more vengeful than yours.'

'Mine?'

Chapter 17

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

14th February 1995

I'm at my bench in the garden again this afternoon, watching the New Holland Honeyeaters flitting in and out of the creamy-yellow *Banksia grandis*. There was a nest there in the spring, an untidy affair of intertwined twigs.

Cassie joined me briefly here after school. A boy on the bus had given her a red rose for St Valentine's Day. She said she knew him vaguely, but wouldn't say any more. What do we have in store? She's only thirteen!

It's seven weeks since Christmas. Leo rang the Perth Zoo, suggesting they grow his burkei to feed to their giraffes instead of *Acacia longifolia* from suburban gardens. The horticultural officer said the burkei is listed in *The Global Compendium of Weeds*. Leo has a duty to destroy it.

Gordon's plants were facing destruction – until Leo compromised. We both despise bonsai – plants should be wild and free – but this was Leo's suggestion – he would stunt the two burkei. They will be lasting mementos of our lives in South Africa, and as bonsais, they won't go feral. Apparently the bonsaied burkei will thrive indoors.

My work with MND patients is coming to an end. The hospice can no longer afford a registered nurse exclusively for them. Most patients aren't privately insured and they're a huge drain on hospice funds. Lisa has offered me work as a general hospice nurse – much of which I've been doing in a casual capacity – and she would like me to continue

assessments of incoming MND patients. I'll be on the roster, working around the clock, just as in Maritzburg. With Leo's more flexible hours, I think I can manage it.

22nd June 1995

Each year the hospice has a fundraising dinner at *Le Bateau* to coincide with the winter solstice, but many people boycotted last night's event. France plans a resumption of nuclear testing in the Pacific, and I've heard grieving relatives blaming cancer on nuclear testing, so the boycotts seemed a sign of respect. But following protests at the French Embassy in Canberra and a fire in the French consulate here, the venue for our dinner was changed to a Thai restaurant in Northbridge. I'd never eaten Thai food before – there was no Thai restaurant in Maritzburg – but I liked the combination of hot, sweet and sour flavours.

Terry, one of the cleaners, now trained as an MND assistant, won the raffle of wine and chocolates and shared it around.

Few people remained at their original tables, and I talked with staff, volunteers and 'behind the scenes' people that I'd met only briefly before – grief counsellors, fundraisers, maintenance people, gardeners, and representatives of service groups and charities that support the work we do. Despite people having disparate backgrounds, the gathering had a family feel – we're all pulling for a common cause.

I was surprised – and sorry – that Lisa wasn't at the dinner. Cog said she was preparing for a meeting that we're all required to attend. Working mainly in the mornings, I've avoided most hospice meetings. Alice was cynical. 'There'll be more change. There's nothing as constant as change.' There's one change I've noticed already. Where Lisa used to be on the ward each day, talking with patients, staff and families, and willing to lend a hand, now she rarely leaves her computer.

30th June 1995

Ms Clarkson, a Health Department representative, addressed the gathering of staff to "discuss" the government's financial commitment to the hospice. I thought shoulder pads had vanished with the eighties until she stepped onto the podium – and I'm still surprised by women in black – a colour rarely worn at home. I was sitting with Maeve who had the smell of the sea about her. She'd been walking at Trigg Point, near our home, the beach where the surfers go.

Ms Clarkson talked in terms of productivity and efficiency and stressed the term "throughput". I became confused and jotted down a few notes. Efficiency of

throughput is calculated by the ratio of output to total input. Our funding is dependent on our performance within the parameters of hospice best practice frameworks, on our full accountability. Changes must be made to our documentation practice. There will be key performance indicators. Any incremental increases in salary will be linked to personal productivity. The current indicators of a job well done – boxes of chocolates, bequests, donations, and letters of gratitude – are not quantifiable.

Cog was on her feet at question time. Surely Ms Clarkson could see that palliative care was a qualitative intervention and was largely unquantifiable? By caring for the dying and their loved ones, hospice work aims to ease people's grief. It is well recognised that unresolved grief can cause profound health problems and loss of productivity – thereby draining the public purse. Surely the department accepts that good palliative care is an unquantifiable measure of preventative health? I had never thought of hospice in this way. Cog also stressed that if our patients remained in acute hospitals they would cost the government very much more – and in most instances they wouldn't receive the palliative care they needed. I'd never seen Cog angry before. She challenged Ms Clarkson to table the difference in funding between a hospital and hospice bed, and also to focus her energies on palliative education. I could see Lisa from where I was sitting but I couldn't read her face.

Ms Clarkson was furious. As she started gathering her papers, Audrey, a grey-haired volunteer who comes to the hospice with her husband every Saturday, was on her feet, waving her stick, looking as if she might topple over, insisting she be heard. I've seen her sitting with dying patients but I've hardly spoken with her. I didn't know her son had died with a brain tumour – an astrocytoma – seven years ago, that she and her husband had helped at the hospice ever since. Acacia House has given them purpose, as it has hundreds of volunteers. How much did Ms Clarkson consider she was worth?

In Maritzburg, the hospice receives no government funding. There are two major differences between that situation and the one here in Perth. There, the community are strongly committed to fundraising and volunteer support, and most people die at home, cared for by their families. The nurses' roles are like Silver Chain's here, but there's no inpatient hospice to fall back on. I'd certainly prefer to die at home, but if Leo and the children couldn't cope, I'd love a place like Acacia House.

14th March 1996

This journal has been neglected. It has sunk to the bottom of a stack of novels I haven't had time to read. Like the other hospice staff, I'm exhausted. Acacia House has changed, dramatically.

We're all worried about Alice. It's a year since Dave left home, saying he'd be back for varsity. She knows he's alive but little more. She's compensated by throwing herself headlong into work which has become increasingly demanding. The more willing the horse, the heavier the load. On some days she seems almost manic.

Accountability. We can't escape the word. It has spread like the superbug MRSA, infecting us with its buzz-words, but unlike the management of MRSA, there are no attempts at containment. There has been a restructuring. Our funding has improved, but there are budgetary strings attached. Registered nurses, once so wise on the floor, have risen to management. Enrolled nurses have been 'up-skilled' to perform tasks once exclusive to RNs. They're committed and they're cheaper. More cleaners like Terry are being trained as patient care assistants. They're committed and they're cheap. More volunteers are being trained in patient care. They're committed and they're free.

At a team meeting recently, Lisa referred to the staff as human resources. What an impersonal term! It reminds me of the Pilbara, that mining area up north that we saw on promotional videos before coming to Australia. It sounds as if we've been dug from the ground, as if we are raw materials to be shifted and shafted at will.

Some staff say they've seen the light and have moved to Silver Chain Hospice Home Care. They haven't been replaced. There have been occasions when I've struggled to find a nurse to check a narcotic with me. The evening nursing co-ordinator, whose counselling role with families was unquantifiable, has made a seamless shift to the floor, and the evening ward clerk has gone.

People visiting the hospice, especially for the first time, often feel ill at ease. They used to be met with kindness, accompanied to the bedside, and sometimes asked to limit their stay if the patient was very tired. Now we catch visitors when we can and scrawl messages for families on whiteboards beside patients' doors.

Accountability demands higher motivation. Before the last team meeting, we were shown an inspirational video, the theme music the Pet Shop Boys' *Go West*: 'Together change our pace of life/ together we will work and strive.' The rhythm is appropriate for marathons, for running, swimming or cycling, but I think not for palliative care.

Accountability affects bed occupancy. A quaint custom at Acacia House (which surprised me in the beginning) was the practice of leaving rooms to rest for a day after patients died. It was a token of respect, but also gave the nurses a breather, a moment for grief. That changed with Nancy, in room fourteen, whom we'd nursed for a month or more. Every day in the beginning was charged with difficult symptom control and her anxious and angry family. But they slowly warmed to us. Gradually they all relaxed – including Nancy, who was shamelessly pampered. Manicures, pedicures, massage and aromatherapy. Her daughters helped with her spa in the evenings, sometimes bringing champagne. They brought in a pair of parlour palms to grow in the spa bathroom. Once the family unwound, there was always laughter in that room. We knew we would grieve when she died, but we grieved even more when we learnt the meaning of the new 'turnaround time'. A new patient was admitted to Nancy's bed almost before it was cold.

Accountability means committees, and everyone must serve on one, attending compulsory meetings in our own, unpaid time. The positions on the social committee were the first to be snaffled up. I joined a committee to investigate the needs of people from diverse religions and cultures, and to write a reference booklet about it. Maeve joined a group researching alternative therapies. Sonia is more militant. She's on a committee to examine wages and conditions and to work towards an enterprise agreement. She says we're going to be screwed.

Sadly, our practice now must be measured, right down to the minutes we work, and the loss of our autonomy has slashed the bonds of professional trust and goodwill.

Accountability has brought another change: we have been admitting fewer MND patients. Even with most of their care being performed by patient care assistants, their support is so intensive; it could never be cost effective.

Accountability has ushered in changes to the hospice domestic economy. Fred, the chef, has had his budget cut and has lost his versatility. There is talk of meals becoming "outsourced", and he's applying for other jobs. He has a knack of creating small, tempting meals for patients who've lost their appetite, so he will be sadly missed.

The tiny features of hospice largesse that made us feel cherished, like filter coffee and cakes in the tearoom, and champagne after a stressful phase, could not be sustained. Many of us responded initially by bringing gourmet tea and coffee and homemade treats to share, but our goodwill soon petered out. Our anger has been deflected from the health department onto management, and there are moments when I have a sense that it is directed towards each other.

The better side of accountability has taken us through a competency programme, tightened our documentation, forced participation in nursing research and compliance with performance appraisals. And we're mentoring nursing students and other health professionals. Given more staff and time, some standards could improve.

The gallows humour has remained. In the foyer to Acacia House where a Constable print used to hang, now hangs our Mission Statement and The Dying Person's Bill of Rights. In the handover room, two other documents hang – a Fission Statement and a clumsy male nurse caricature, The Dying Person's Bill O'Frights.

None of us has been able to determine the meaning of 'productivity' in the palliative care setting. But Sonia remembers the woman in black, whom she likens to Margaret Thatcher and calls 'The Baroness', saying our salaries and conditions depend on it. Sonia says we've all been handbagged, and that productivity is for pig farmers, not for hospice palliative care. She laughs at what she calls the 'piggy-mother-fucker of all', the ubiquitous 'Best Practice'.

'It's a joke! We're seeing sicker patients, later in their lives, often they need more intervention and we don't have the staff or time or resources.'

Had we but world enough and time. I remember the lines from Marvell. *The Grave's a Fine and Private Place.*

June 22nd 1996

The annual winter solstice dinner was held last night. There were fewer people there than last year and the mood was less jovial. I was at a table with Alice and Maeve, Gavin and a clutch of vollies. Alice was quiet. I think she's missing Dave desperately. And there isn't a man in her life.

Maeve tried some jollyng. 'Do you know today is World Humanist Day?'

I didn't; neither did Alice.

'It's the summer solstice in Ireland, and Humanists at home are celebrating the light and their delivery from darkness, bollocks that it may be.'

I was puzzled. 'So on World Humanist Day, when the Irish Humanists are supposedly enlightened, the southern hemisphere remains in darkness? Hemispherical enlightenment?'

Alice was curious. 'Humanists in Catholic Ireland?'

'Tell me about it. Or tell Patrick, my Humanist brother – he would back a legless nag in your priceless Melbourne Cup.'

We were interrupted by the raffle draw, a hamper of gourmet goods that weren't shared around this time.

July 2nd 1996

There has been heated discussion in the tearoom about the Northern Territory legislation that allows voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill. I listen to the arguments, and hear people insisting palliative care is able to relieve all symptoms. I think of Julia, the woman who wailed incessantly. What about feeling a burden on those you love who can't bear to see you suffer?

'I've heard of people in the Netherlands who never wished to die but had no choice.'

'And Northern Territory has no hospice and no palliative care specialist. The terminally ill would naturally want to die in that situation.'

'Euthanasia's the easy way out. What society needs is better palliative care – and more of it, everywhere.'

Is it quantifiable?

Leo and I lay together discussing euthanasia and advance care directives. If Leo had a terminal illness, I'd want to give him the very best care, to keep him comfortable and safe, I'd want to love him until he died. But Leo isn't so sure. He might take too long to die. He might not want to continue – unless the Springboks were playing the Wallabies, or the Test was on TV. He didn't mention being a burden, whereas I can only think in terms of the burden I might be.

September 30th 1996

On one of the noticeboards in the staffroom is a collage of newspaper articles commending Acacia House for the excellence of its care. There are testimonies from patients and families affirming the work that we do, photos of happy patients in diversion therapy, and the inevitable encouragement to the community to support our fundraising drives. There's also a newspaper clipping on the board about a man who died in the Northern Territory with the help of Dr Nitschke and his infamous machine. Before he died, the man observed that he would have been prosecuted for keeping a pet animal in his condition.

Only last week the angry son of a mesothelioma patient said, ‘I wouldn’t let my dog die like this!’ Was he angry because his father was dying or the way in which he was dying or because he, the son, couldn’t cope?

October 5th 1996

I’ve worked with Alice for the last few shifts – evenings I’d rather forget. Patients’ symptoms have been out of control, there haven’t been enough staff to cope, and Malcolm, the new doctor, unfamiliar with palliative care, has needed extra support. His induction would have been easier with a nursing co-ordinator at his side.

Today Leo was taking the children to the Perth Royal Show and would stay until after the fireworks, so Alice suggested some fireworks of our own, that we have ‘tea’ together at her place. It was the first time Alice had invited me home. She showed me around, and led me to Dave’s room in the enclosed back verandah. She’d made new curtains, but otherwise the room was exactly as he’d left it last year. His cat Thompson was asleep on the bed.

‘Do you hear from him often?’

‘Rarely. And ringing him is hopeless. He’s on a remote outstation, and the crackles on the line are like fireworks. Tin cans and string would work better. Three thousand clicks of string.’

Alice was out of firelighters, but she got a good blaze going with a dash of olive oil. She made a bowl of pasta and pesto with cherry tomatoes chopped into it – a new taste experience for me – and pulled out a bottle of red, a ‘cleanskin’ from under her bed, ‘the coldest place in the house’. I’ve seen wine without labels at Praveen’s and assumed it was inferior, but this shiraz was drinkable, and it certainly loosened our tongues. Productivity, throughput and exit strategies. Like me, Alice is appalled by the new language that has infected our hospice lives.

‘Which committee are you on, Alice?’

‘Professional Development – staff education.’ She put me on the spot then. ‘The palliative care we give – what’s the difference between our practice and physician assisted suicide? We may not be as rapid as Nitschke and his blessed machine, but do the drugs we give for symptom control shorten people’s lives?’

A grieving family once accused us of murder. ‘But we always explain the possible double effect of our treatment. How else can patients and families trust us? Loss of

concentration with some analgesics. Drowsiness. But we're easing suffering. Patients have already decided not to prolong their lives with active therapies. Usually they agree – even ask – to be sedated close to the end.'

Alice gazed into the fire. 'Yes, the double effect. Death may come more quickly. It's all about our first intention. We're likely to be challenged on that.'

I asked her how she would like to die, half expecting she might opt for Nitschke's death machine.

'You know, Gabby, most of us will languish, dribbling porridge down our whiskery chins, in a public hospital or an aged care facility – don't you hate that term? When did a place of care become a 'facility'? Sounds like an ablution block or a prison. Most people think they'd rather have a sudden heart attack. No suffering for them – but that's not for me. Dave would be devastated. There'd be something he wished he'd said, or he wished he'd done, a forgiveness he needed to hear. And he might want to care for me. I wouldn't deny him that. I'd opt for cancer every time – but with perfect management. A blast of curative oncology with its chemicals and radiation – and alternative therapies too. Then if my body didn't respond, perhaps a little palliative chemo – and radiotherapy too – to zap the secondaries. Just for symptom control. I'd want an honest oncologist and a palliative specialist to work together, hand in glove. If it were caught too late, or even too late in life, palliative all the way. Cancer's a back-handed gift, don't you think? It'd give me the chance to order my untidy cupboard of life. There'd be no burden for Dave when I'd gone. I'd like you to nurse me, Gabby. You're gentle. I'll write you an advance care directive for the music I'd like. No country and western! And no ukulele!'

I laughed. I'm flattered that Alice would like me to nurse her, but I can't help wondering why. We're cut from different cloth. But I felt compelled to tell her I'd be happy for her to nurse me too. Would I? She's an excellent palliative nurse, but we're not exactly soul mates. I'd prefer gentle and efficient Maeve with her laugh like folding silk and her intuitive understanding of need.

Chapter 18

Maeve

Perth, Western Australia, 1996

This morning there are surfers at City beach where I usually swim. I watch them for several minutes until I know Tully isn't there.

Perth is balanced on sand. A tiny tilt to Australia and the city would slide into the sea. The beach sand is finer and whiter in Perth than ever I've seen in Sligo and I'm here most days at the ocean, even now in October, winter scarcely past, the sand is warm under my toes and I'm watching the waves rushing to shore and glints of sun on the sea.

Colin starts building houses at daybreak, so he never is here with me. He is calling me Selkie because he took his nephews to see *Roan Inish* and because I'm never in my bed in the mornings and the sea temperature is just nineteen. He's back from a week in Bali, a trip with the football lads, thirty degrees he said the sea was. He brought me a beach-bag, a swirly sea-green sarong and bath oil from the duty free.

When I'm at the beach before breakfast I meet people who've been swimming here since childhood. By lunchtime I have the beach to myself. I drop my sarong, run and dive, feel the icy sea needle my skin, then dart through the waves.

Before heading back through the dunes, I glimpse a dark shape in the sea. A shark I'm thinking of first, fond of selkies so they are. I scan the ripples until I see it again and again; there are two of them out there. They're humpback whales, never known around Sligo but Patrick has seen them in Cork. Thanks be to God I've seen them here too.

*

I've one last patient to give medications before helping with teas. Howard is a thin arthritic man with bony secondaries from prostate cancer and he is special to me. I know not to be too close, not to become attached, but our friendship started the day he came in and I'll not be deserting him now.

His room is dark but there's rustling in the bed. I turn on the night-light, grope my way to the window, fumble for the cords and raise the blind.

'Look, Howard, the sunset, lovely is it not?'

'Leave it Bridey'. Howard flicks on his bed light. 'What do you want?'

He's often gruff and his dour; it softens the hardness deep in me. I take his cold fingers in mine and feel the smooth film of Tegaderm on the back of his hand. There's a patchwork of these transparent dressings on his fragile skin, sealing rips and tears.

'Have you heard from your boys today? Did your fax come in this morning?'

Howard's not answering me. His sons returned to Sydney last week and he went quiet then. His wife gone these last ten years, he turned to books, he said, but his eyes won't focus now. Lyndal stopped the medications she thought responsible and the lads organised new glasses, but still his vision is blurred. I brought talking books in from the library but the voices bothered him. Volunteers offered to read to him but he's sent them all away.

'I thought you might like the sunset. There's a pair of honeyeaters in the grevillea. Bless me with one of your rare smiles, Howard. Your tea will soon be here and I have some pills for you.' An empty glass on his table has froth clinging to the sides. 'I see you're after your Guinness.'

Howard reaches for his monkey pole and pulls himself up in the bed. 'I'll smile when you leave me alone, Bridey, but give me the pills if you must. And don't come back with tea. Teeth are already out.' He bares his shrunken gums at me. 'Let me sleep. I'm done for. Leave me alone until breakfast.'

I wait while he swallows his pills and give him a squirt of Nystatin for the thrush colonising his mouth, then I fluff his pillow, straighten his sheepskin, and pull the quilt to his chin.

'Warm enough, my lovely? I'll save your tea for you, and I'll be back at eight with the MS Contin for your pain.'

‘Contin. Give it me now would you? And the sleepers. Then leave me to sleep in peace.’

‘I can’t, Howard. You need to take the Contin regularly, every twelve hours, to be comfortable. I’ll be seeing you at eight.’

I lower the blind, kiss his cheek and flip the ‘do not disturb’ on his door.

Terry and I work quickly, preparing patients for tea, then I sit to feed Kathleen. She has breast cancer and cerebral metastases. Her room is like a gallery of photos and finger paintings and there is always a balloon in the corner.

‘Another new turban, Kath? Gorgeous blue it is, like the Indian Ocean this morning.’ Kathleen seems withdrawn so I hold my humpback story that would gladden her face other days. She’s not her ravenous self today and only wants her dessert – puréed peaches and ice cream. I run a finger over her brow.

‘What’s this furrow on your pretty face? Is it your headache back my lovely?’

She gives a faint nod and I reach for her charts. ‘Panadeine helps does it not?’ I crush and dissolve the tablets and mix them with a little purée. It won’t be tasting gourmet but Kathleen doesn’t mind. I rest a cool pack on her forehead and recline her bed a fraction, then dim the bed light. ‘I’ll be back soon again my lovely when your head’s feeling better.’ I clip the bell to the sheet by her hand.

I need a pen to sign the medication chart but it isn’t in my pocket. Feck, I’ve left it in Howard’s room.

‘A pen, a pen, my kingdom for a feckin’ pen.’ The ward clerk’s desk is securely locked against pilferers like me and there are no spare pens on the desktop and none in the handover room or the doctors’ desk either. If ever I leave this place I’ll shower it with pens.

I flick on my pencil torch and slip into Howard’s room. He’s quiet, so I shield the torch with my hand and search the bedside locker, the heart table, the chest of drawers and the floor. No pen. Feck. What is it that turns my head to where I know Howard is sleeping, away from my pinpoint of light?

There is a plastic bag on his head.

‘Jesus Mary and Joseph! What are you doing my boy?’ I whip the bag from his head and flick on the bed light. His face is wiped of feeling, his eyes closed.

Now I’m cradling his lovely head and he’s whimpering in my arms and I’m overcome with a turbulence worse than any Donegal sea. Our bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit taught us before starting school. I’m holding Howard and thinking then of

Patrick going Humanist, and gnawing at all my belief, like the woodworm in Mammy's press. Sanctity of life, he'd sneered at me with the Bushmills beneath his belt; people should choose when to die, one person's dignity was another one's hell. Did I really think Daniel wanted to linger on for as long as he did?

Oh Daniel, your suffering was worst for Patrick I think.

Howard isn't moving, but I can feel his warm breath on my arm. I reach under the covers for his icy hand. Sitting near the head of his bed, I cradle him, my body rocking, ever so slightly, as with a sleeping child, but perhaps it's myself I'm rocking. In my head I'm hearing 'Be still, and know that I am God' and it's comforting to me.

Howard opens his eyes.

'Leave me would you Bridey. Let me go.'

'I can't, Howard. I can't. I'm sorry, I can't.'

Then, in the shattered stillness, where I thought I was knowing God, my pager vibrates. Terry's needing help. I reach for Howard's call bell and the vollie Judy comes. Praise be to God it is Judy. She knows sitting, listening, gentle, how just to be.

Howard stiffens as I ease him back onto his pillows.

At home, Colin holds me close and the tears break away from me. I've come to trust him with my life but I cannot tell him about Howard. I cannot breach the hospice confidence that's fit to burst in me.

'Come on Selkie. I've run your bath.'

I love him calling me Selkie, a human-seal creature of irresistible beauty he says, but I'm feeling sullied now. He's lit candles at the head of the bath and he's added my new bath oil. I slide into the steaming water and he hands me a glass of cognac; it's come from the duty free. In bed he massages knots in my neck and shoulders, and I'm quiet under his touch.

'I saw humpbacks this morning at City Beach. Two of them playing out there. A gift they were to me.'

I don't fall asleep in Colin's arms. I'm thinking of Howard and his loneliness, of how he's suffering, not with pain but deep within himself. I'm having wicked thoughts, seeing myself not removing the bag, taking his hand in mine, and sitting with him until he breathed no more, in the same way families and volunteers sit with other people who are dying. What am I thinking? I would be breaking all laws; it is right that I saved Howard's life. Then I imagine myself in another way, turning my back, turning off the

light and slipping out of the room, leaving him as he wished. But I couldn't leave him to die alone. Even gangs of whales buoy their loved ones up to breathe until they die on the surface of the sea.

I need to confess my bad thoughts.

Then I'm thinking of dead whales falling down to the ocean floor for other creatures to feed on, and how strange it is in Australia that most people are cremated. And then I'm thinking about the sand that lies under this city again, and Dad digging blood and bone into his vegetable patch, and what a waste to the earth is this cremation business and how the temple of the body could enrich God's earth if it were six feet under a mighty tree. And I'm thinking of poor Howard again and how he just wants to die.

Chapter 19

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 1996

Everyone at work is talking about Howard. Everyone has an opinion. We've come to the end of handover but Maria hasn't finished.

'It's because of that Nitschke man. Him and his death machine.' She folds her arms. She's added another name to her bevy of whipping boys. 'How many patients of ours ever ask for euthanasia? Maybe one or two want to hasten things along, but who would deny themselves our care? People think they've come to heaven when they're admitted here.'

'All things are relative, Maria.' I don't want to argue with her, but the hospice feels less heavenly than it did a year or two ago. The average length of stay has been cut from twenty days to seven – evidence we've improved our throughput. We hardly get to know some patients, let alone families, and pressure-packed care in a few short days falls short of my heavenly mark. Heaven. As if. If heavenly bodies run helter-skelter like us, I'll book my passage to purgatory.

'Seriously.' Maria never lets up. 'Maybe one or two have asked, but I'm not even sure they were serious. It's family members, not patients. They think to die slowly is suffering.'

'Have you forgotten Suzy?' Gabby's buying in. Suzy, a young woman in twenty-seven whose pain we couldn't control, despite her spinal nerve block. Even Mary, our psychologist, knew we didn't stand a chance. Suzy was too close to dying. There simply wasn't time. When she asked for an end to it all, Lyndal couldn't

honestly tell her that we would keep her comfortable; we had demonstrated that we couldn't. We failed, and we all saw her tortured face at night as we tossed about in our beds.

Now it's Maeve who is affected, suffering in her own way, calm and kind at the bedside but a mess in the handover room. Lisa's arranged some counselling, and tried to move her to East but she insists on caring for Howard. His room has been cleared of plastic bags, the psychiatrist has seen him, and Derek's with him every day. I think he sees Maeve too.

'Yesterday Derek was in there,' she says, 'and I'm hearing "valley of the shadow of death". Howard wasn't religious. Why did I keep him alive for such a dark and frightening place?'

None of us can help her; all we can do is listen. 'You did the right thing, Maeve. We'd all have done the same in your position.'

'I know it was the right thing, so why this sense of betrayal? Two weeks on the happy pills, faxes from his sons every day, they fly in on weekends, two weeks lavish attention, and still he says it to me, "Let it go, won't you Bridey?" In the spa, in the garden, at the river, he doesn't care for life any more. He doesn't drink his Guinness and he's starving himself. And what's happening with his pain? Lyndal's increased his Contin but I don't think it's touching him. He's feekin' miserable.'

'And you're feekin' miserable too.' I put my arm around her just as Lisa comes into the staffroom. She may be glued to her desk these days but she still has an ear to the floor.

'Days off tomorrow, Maeve? Here, this might help. Open it when you get home.' She hands Maeve a familiar cream envelope embossed with a golden flower. I know the envelope. It'll be a voucher for a facial or a massage at *Golden Glow*, a local beauty salon, owned by a volunteer who does beauty therapies for patients. I hope her business is thriving; she's donated so many of these. We could be sending her to the wall.

I haven't nursed Howard for over a week and I'm startled by the change in him. His face has collapsed, and he's lying still, but there's tension stretched there in his jaw. I take his hand in mine.

'Do you remember me, Howard? Alice. I'll be looking after you this evening. Are you comfortable?'

Howard sighs but doesn't answer.

'Fed up?'

He shrugs.

‘Pain?’

He nods.

‘Can you show me where?’ He sighs loudly again and moves a hand to his lower belly.

I check his belly, catheter and charts. Bowels not opened for two days. That shouldn’t be a problem with the tiny amount he eats. ‘Any nausea?’ He gives a faint shake of his head.

‘I see you’ve had extra morphine during the night and this morning. Has it been helping?’

He nods. His jaw is clenched.

‘Okay Howard. I won’t be long. We need to get you comfortable. Lyndal has increased your MS Contin dose, starting this evening. That’ll help. But I’ll get you a breakthrough now.’

I return to Howard’s room to give him a wash once his pain has settled. He wants to remain in bed. I cream his skinny back, his bony ankles and heels, gently resting them on a sheepskin. As I grope for a comb in the recess at the side of his locker, a grey handkerchief falls to the floor. There’s a knot loosely tied in its corner.

‘Something special you want to remember, Howard?’

Suddenly he’s wide awake. ‘Give it.’

Too late. A cache of tiny purple-flecked pills slip from the knot and scatter over his quilt; they’re too small for him to see. His hands are scrabbling after them but I’ve already scooped them up. I can’t bear the misery on his face. He turns away from me.

‘Oh Howard. I’m sorry. No wonder you’ve been in pain. It must have been awful for you. How many days...?’ I count the MS Contin. He’s been hoarding for over a week.

We always supervise patients’ narcotics, and we’ve been even more diligent with Howard since the plastic bag incident. Are we to run a finger around his gums to be sure he’s swallowed them? And this is dying with dignity? I lean across and gently comb his hair.

‘I’m sorry, Howard.’ What else can I say? ‘I’ll ask Lyndal to come and see you.’

‘Close the door, would you?’

I hesitate, but close it behind me. Why shouldn't he shut out the world? But I'll find a vullie to sit with him.

Kathleen's room, opposite Howard's, is filled with flowers and balloons. Her bed has been pushed to the lounge where she is laughing with her family and friends, celebrating her fiftieth birthday. The lounge has been transformed with streamers, there's a bar set up in the corner, and platters of finger food are being passed around.

'Alice! Come and have a drink!' Kathleen's brother waves a bottle at me. 'We're just at the end of the video.'

I stand at the door and see the last of young Kath performing the cancan at the Burswood Theatre, high-kicking a flurry of petticoats and cartwheeling across the stage. The video is followed by a collage of stills of a woman I would never recognise.

'Thanks, Jack. I'll save the drink for later. Happy birthday, Kathleen. How beautiful you look. And another stunning turban! Happy-parrot green I'd call that one.' She looks unbelievably cheerful. 'I probably don't need to ask if you're comfortable?' She introduces me to her sister who has flown in from America and to a brother down from Darwin.

'Here – take these for the nurses.' Irene, Kathleen's mother, hands me a plate of samosas, curry puffs, dolmades, spring rolls and three-tiered salmon sandwiches. She too looks remarkably happy for a mother celebrating the last birthday her daughter will ever see.

'Thank you! Have fun. Call if you need us. Do you mind if I close the door?' Jack's turned up the music. There are some who might not wish to die to the sound of *Maxwell's Silver Hammer*.

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Maeve and I gently ease Howard over – his body is completely relaxed – then I support him while Maeve washes and creams his back.

'There Howard. How's that? Could you be wishing for anything more than Alice and Maeve fussing over your precious self?'

Howard has a syringe driver. He's sedated and pain free. He's unconscious but is he unhearing? Maeve doesn't think so. She patters away softly to him.

'They tell me hearing's the last sense to go but I don't know about that because I haven't gone there yet.'

We cream our hands and take his in ours, gently caressing them. Lyndal has been careful with his syringe driver – although he was keen to die quickly, the cautious Morphine, Clonaz and Metaclopramide mix won't tip him over the edge. It's four weeks since his plastic bag, two of them in misery and two in the great unknown.

Maeve chooses a CD. 'Listen to this my darling. There really are harps in heaven.'

*

'Alice! You're looking flat. Join me for a night on the town?'

How does Sonia do it? She'll spend a day doing comfort, dealing with stress and anger, empathy one moment, rolling laughter the next, dash out her documentation, rattle off her handover, leave work an hour late, then ratchet up her energy and rage away into the night.

'Sorry Sonia, I need an early night.'

'Then just come for a drink at The Watch.'

The Watch is a local café, and Jon, its owner-would-be-counsellor never forgets a face. The cuisine is Dutch colonial – satays, laksa, and Rijsttafel, – but the décor is the drawcard – the walls are scattered with famous Dutch Masters adorned with designer watches. Rembrandt's mother with a Gucci, The Potato Eaters in Omegas, Saint Anthony tempted and blinded by the Rolex on his wrist.

The café is well patronised by hospice families and staff. Sonia has arrived before me and has chosen a quiet table. We order chicken satay with peanut sauce and Sonia raises her glass.

'So what is it Alice? You've lost your sparkle. Face like a worm going fishing. Time for a holiday? When did you last take leave?'

Sonia doesn't do subtlety. Our friendship is tougher than that.

'Eighteen years, just Dave and me. They say it's the empty nest, but it feels like grief. I still cry in the night sometimes, check his empty room; I can smell him there. I should be over it. A year, I thought. It's been nineteen months. Every day I hope he'll ring to say he's coming back.'

Sonia takes my hand. 'Alice, Alice. Of course you're grieving for him. But he'll be back. He loves you. We all know that.'

I'm not so sure.

I'm on my bike but Sonia follows me home – in case I 'fall asleep on the road'. She sees me in and brings me Milo in bed, reminding me of a time with Mum before life's great obligations – Dave, work and bills. I dream of being nurtured again, free of responsibility. A bit like a hospice patient. Did Dad ever hold me? I can't remember. I'm desperate for sleep.

Sonia's massaging my feet. 'Stay the night if you want, Sonia. Sleep in Dave's bed.'

My letters from Dave are in a folder on the bedside table. I read a page before nodding off.

Dad's fine when he's off the bottle so the outstation life suits him well. We share an addiction – can it be hereditary? – he's crazy about puzzles of any kind, especially cryptic crosswords. TV is a snowy affair, so each night we hit the puzzles while the generator cranks. It'll be another world when they get solar and satellite out here.

We ride into Whiteface once a week to meet the mail truck, swoop on our consignment of papers and puzzles, gather up our groceries and return here to Qandahar. Have I told you that this place was named by Afghan cameleers? From the little I know of Qandahar, they must have had a sense of humour! Afghanistan's mountainous isn't it? This place is as flat as your yoga mat. Some of the cameleers' descendants still live in Marree. I borrowed a book about them from the travelling library – there were over 20,000 camels brought out to Australia! Four or five generations on, their descendants flatten the Whiteface fences and trample the water troughs, keeping Dad and me in work.

Dad's dog Biffy is a great dog for mustering, but I've extended her with agility training – her record jump is over two metres! I've created a course of hoops, tunnels, obstacles and jumps and she's improving her time every day.

Have you ever thought of getting a dog?

Sonia's opened the bedroom blind and is stretched with the sun on her back, framed by the architrave, like a suspended star-jump, Dave's threadbare winter pyjamas gaping at her waist. She's brought me tea and toast.

'Thanks Sonia. Sleep OK?'

‘Yes, but no thanks to that bed – a whole new meaning to a night on the tiles. No wonder your boy left home! You?’

‘Fine, Sonia, thanks for the toast. I’ve been thinking you’re right. I need a holiday. I’m going to visit Mum and Dad.’

‘A holiday? How long since you’ve seen them?’

‘Six years. After they moved to Melbourne. An ungodly experience that one. We don’t phone often, and it’s always hard, especially if Dad’s on the line. If they were to die tomorrow, there’d be things I’d wish we’d said.’

‘Heavy stuff, Alice.’ Sonia’s dropped from the architrave and is sitting at the foot of my bed scratching Thompson’s chin. ‘Why don’t you take a real holiday?’

Maeve and I arrive early for our shift. Maeve makes tea while I rifle through drawers searching for a leave request form. There’s one week of Christmas available but that’s the last time of year I’d choose to visit. The errant black sheep from the West who abandoned her parents and husband blowing in for Christmas redemption. I don’t think so. There’s too much debris under the mat to try pulling that one off.

Gavin’s changing allocations on the whiteboard. Two empty beds out of thirty-six and one of them is Howard’s. He died two hours ago.

‘Is Howard still here?’

‘He left weeks ago.’

‘Yeah. And his body?’

‘Still in the repose room. Easy Over just rang. They’re on their way.’ *Clarity Funerals* have broken from the sombre undertaker image. Their staff wear soft white uniforms and buttercup-yellow felt caps.

‘Thanks.’ I grab my papers and go to find Maeve. She’ll want to see Howard off.

Gavin’s handing over. He’s had a demanding morning with two deaths – first Howard, then Lonnie, a young woman whose family believed in a miracle cure and were in denial to the end. None of the staff could reach them, her husband clinging like a barnacle, telling her she’d be healed if her faith were strong enough. The children were inconsolable when she died. Gavin’s voice is faltering.

‘Sylvie will hand over Nellie, the Aboriginal woman she’s admitting. But before I go, Lisa wants our opinion on changing to recorded handovers. Good enough for general hospitals, good enough for us?’

‘Never. I like to see your face. How can I know what you’re thinking if I only hear your voice? It’s a denial of body language. I like your body. What’s her rationale?’

Gavin laughs. ‘Cost-cutting. What else? The new hospice ethos. But think about it. We’ve been interrupted with pagers buzzing, patients needing breakthroughs, relatives with questions, phone calls ... With recorded handovers there’d be no time wasted and adequate staff on the floor.’

‘But we’ve been interrupting too. We discuss, negotiate, clarify. Tried this? Try that? We learn from each other. And it’s a time to say ‘well done’ and to offload our own bag of angst. Like Lonnie. You needed to share it. You would have been fantastic this morning, but that kind of death takes its toll. Better to spill it here than hit the bottle at home, or run your car off the road.’

‘Or be taking it out on Robert.’ Maeve has a soft spot for Gavin’s partner.

Sylvie arrives with a bundle of notes and Gavin gets up to leave. ‘Thanks Alice. Maeve. Saved my life again.’

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Sylvie’s flustered. ‘Did Gavin tell you about Lonnie? Yes? Terrible. So young. And how long was she here? Four days. We hardly knew them, nor they us. Those poor little children! None of them prepared. What were we supposed to do?’

We listen. Lonnie’s family will be seen by grief counsellors for just as long as they need, but we’re left to counsel each other. It’s not grief for the one who has died, but for a death that wasn’t done well, for the children in particular. Sylvie finally gets to Nellie.

‘Lyndal’s admitted Nellie, the Aboriginal lady. She’s Noongar and lives in Vic Park – not far for her family to come. Metastatic breast cancer diagnosed in July. She’s refused all treatment, pain her biggest problem – she’s had several hospital admissions with pain out of control. You can read the doctor’s frustration in the referral letter. We’re supposed to get it sorted and send her home as soon as possible. I haven’t nursed Aboriginal patients here, have you?’

None of us have. ‘Gabby’s on the culture and religion committee. She may be able to help.’

Chapter 20

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

November 22nd 1996

Leo is having a night out with his work colleagues. It's quiet without him at home. The children are doing their homework. I'm sitting at my secretaire where I can concentrate my mind.

Our family will be apart this Christmas for the very first time. Gogo will be seventy. She's asked us to go home to celebrate, but I can't take leave from work. Although the hospice is central to my life in Perth, I even considered resigning so that I could go, but then Cassie jammed a rigid spoke in my wheel. She refused to go to South Africa. She has holiday plans with her friends from school, and Briony has invited her to Bali. So Leo and Gordon will go home together – a special bonding time for them before Gordon starts high school next year. He will boomerang his burkei seeds and plant them back in South African soil. Leo will also be working, seeing his real estate friends.

We must make a decision about Gordon's secondary schooling. His name is down at St Albert's College but he's determined to join Minh at Scarborough High. I couldn't bear for him to become unhappy again, but he must have the best education, and there are lifelong networks to consider. Having experienced Cassie's rebellion, I couldn't cope with them both in revolt. Perhaps Gordon will change his mind after his visit to South Africa.

A curious thing happened at work. Nellie, our first Aboriginal patient in eight years, was admitted to the hospice. No one knew about her special needs, so turned to our culture and religion committee. To our shame, we had researched Baha'is, Buddhists, Jews, Chinese, Hindus, Jehovah's Witnesses and Muslims – but hadn't asked the Aboriginal community about their end-of-life care needs. I've done some reading since then and discovered the lives of Aboriginal people are a litany of loss – of their land, their extended families, their culture, their language, their dignity and their health. If I had lost all these things, I'm not sure what would fill the vacuum.

Fortunately, Nellie had family. One sister arrived with her, but four more sisters and six children followed. Nellie said little and the sisters were remote – except one, Raylene, who told us Nellie would be embarrassed, even ashamed, if other family and community members learnt of her cancer. I was reminded of some AIDS patients in the Zulu community – people who would rather remain untreated than face the stigma of their disease.

Raylene admitted to Nellie's poor compliance with her medications. I've learnt that taking analgesics can be interpreted as a sign of weakness amongst Aborigines. Nellie and her sisters were upset about drugs which she had been prescribed without consultation. And they were angry that Nellie had been rushed to us without family discussion.

According to the referral letter from the hospital, Nellie's husband died last year. Fortunately, when taking Nellie's history, Lyndal knew not to mention him. That was one thing we got right.

We did our best to communicate, but there was a lot of silence in that room. With little discussion we were never sure if the sisters understood Nellie's prognosis.

Lyndal suggested one sister remain to help with her care but all five wanted to stay. If that made Nellie happy, there were others it didn't impress. Some cleaners complained about the makeshift beds, the family using the bathroom, the monopolisation of the lounge, and the mess in Nellie's bathroom. Nellie was often in the garden, but her room was never vacated for the cleaners' daily attack. Her sisters slept on her bed. Mrs Newton-Jones, in the room opposite Nellie's, suggested the Aboriginal people be invited to beauty therapy, to have their nails painted, and her husband brought strawberries for the children.

The only overt trouble we had was when the children ran amok. We have a small crèche, but they weren't interested. They were happy by the river, but when they

wanted to explore the hospice we had to draw the line. Patients have the right to privacy.

Sonia was on night duty and took the boarders in her stride, even when they bobbed up in the pan room. Nothing was going to faze her. It would take a while to earn the trust of Nellie's family, to reach a position where we could negotiate Nellie's symptom control and talk about her dying, even to talk about spirituality, and how best we could all help.

Our committee did its research. There are many Aboriginal spiritual perspectives on serious illness and dying. What did Nellie believe? She was a Noongar woman from the Kaniyang language group around Bunbury. There's a huge range of belief between and within Aboriginal cultural groups, from traditional Aboriginal spirituality related to place and plants and animals, right through to Christian faith. For many, their faith is a mix. Derek talked with Nellie's family every day and offered to pray with them. They never turned him away.

After Nellie had been with us for a week, Josie, one of her sisters, asked Cog, 'What is palliative care?' Perhaps she'd been puzzled by the mission statement in the foyer. Cog was terrific. I never would have referred to us as the 'palliative care mob', or to patients as 'people who won't get better', but Cog did. She talked about the cooperation between chaplains, priests and elders, and about the 'palliative mob' helping the family to care for the one who 'wouldn't get better'. She promised that we would always listen to what Nellie and her family wanted.

That conversation with Cog began to open new doors. The ultimate breakthrough came when Dolores was cleaning Nellie's room. Jeanie, one of Nellie's sisters, was stretched out on the bed, watching Dolores clean, and commented that she used to clean at Royal Perth Hospital. Those two struck up a friendship that opened better lines of communication than the rest of us had achieved.

Perhaps they always knew it, but then Nellie's family began to admit that Nellie would be 'passing on', and began to discuss the best ways to manage her 'big pain'. The sisters became united in their goals for Nellie's comfort, but they didn't believe she'd comply with medications when she returned home. Finally it was decided to bring Florence, their mother, to Perth from Bunbury. The sisters believed their mother would put Nellie's comfort first and insist she take her drugs, and that Nellie would respect the judgement of her mother as an elder.

I found this fascinating. From my limited observation, white Australian society is dismissive of the wisdom of its older women. Nellie was finally transferred to

Bunbury, to be cared for by her mother and family and Bunbury's palliative care services. I think we all felt sad when she left but we knew she needed to go. She will die down there with her family nearby. I'd like to see the family again; I had become fond of those sisters. If we met in the street, would they be able to mention Nellie? I don't think so.

Chapter 21

Maeve

Perth, Western Australia, 1996

I love to stretch out on my balcony on these balmy summer evenings. The real heat of summer has not yet arrived. Colin is out tonight. It is a calm winding down time after an evening shift, sitting here alone to think.

An elderly man with wavy yellow-grey hair hobbled into the hospice this evening with his walking stick, his face a collage of patches and splotches; there was a lifetime of sun damage there. And suddenly I was thinking of Tully, the remnants of zinc on his nose and trapped in the lines of his eyes, his lips chapped rough like a pitch pine tree, the salt stuck fast on his skin, and stiff in his lashes and hair. Tully. The taste of him. And how I called his mother. She said he's back in the sea again, the surf's an addiction for him, but it's the weed that's taken him down, and she was crying there on the phone that she's only seeing him when he's desperate and that's less often than before.

The old man coughed then asked me if Alice was on duty. She was not.

'I've come early for the memorial service in the chapel,' he said. 'Maybe Cog or Sonia or Alice? Are they on duty this evening?'

'I'm sorry, they're not. Can I be helping you?'

He pulled from his pocket a tatty leather-bound diary and slowly thumbed through its pages.

‘What about Gavin or Doctor Lyndal?’ he asked. ‘Or the volunteers, Beth or Jennie or Harry? Or Odd Roger?’ Again I couldn’t help. My pager was vibrating, the corridor lighting up with calls, and how I wished our evening ward clerk would return.

‘Would it be alright if I just walked down the passage there and looked into room seventeen?’ His eyes were watery then.

‘That room is special to you?’ I asked. ‘Your wife?’ I was guessing it wasn’t his mother. He nodded.

‘You poor man. How long?’

‘Five years,’ he said.

‘That’s so sad,’ I said. ‘Tell me your name.’ I took his arm and walked with him to room seventeen.

‘I’m sorry Albert, but you can’t go inside the room, there’s someone in there now. Was there another special place you liked to be with Joan? The lounge or the balcony?’

Judy the vollie was coming down the passage.

‘Albert! How lovely to see you. Give us a hug! There’s the man. How are you going? Maeve, you never knew Joan, did you? She kept a leather-bound birthday book and no staff were forgotten. How long was she here? A year?’ Judy led Albert to the lounge.

Do you know, Daniel, it seems we’re like part of the family sometimes, then after people die, most families have no reason to see us, and they never bump into us in the street because scattered we are all over Perth amongst the million people here. How different it was in Sligo. Hospice staff met us in the street, and that’s where I used to see Deirdre.

I met Judy in the volunteer’s kitchen. ‘Joanie didn’t die here, Maeve. She was with us for a year and not dying fast enough. She was an English teacher, had a touch of Alzheimer’s, and the birthday book was an exercise that she and Albert did together. They made us birthday cards. Their occupational therapy. Sometimes other patients helped – and her children and grandchildren too. ‘Albert used to fill the birthday box with card, paper, stickers and ribbons and then everyone chipped in. We adored them both, but some people thought she should be moved on. Her cancer was in abeyance. We were a hospice, not an aged care facility. It divided the staff. Then there were issues with funding and she was moved to a nursing home. Most of us cried when she left. And she died there two weeks later.’

Judy set a tray for Albert, made a pot of tea and a sandwich. ‘Albert applied to be a volunteer, you know, but he wasn’t up to the training. He would never have achieved the outcomes.’

‘Could he not have continued as the birthday boy?’

‘Not in the job description.’

I’m thinking, Daniel, about after dying, about people who knew and loved you, all caring for each other, all sad at your passing together. And how in Sligo everyone knows, but how in Perth there’s been no one to grieve with, no one who knew you here. It could have been Tully, but he didn’t care for that. Now I’m not home for anniversaries, and I could have gone to America, I would have been closer then, but Perth is too far away, the underside of the world it is.

And I’m thinking about Patrick back in Ireland saying you wanted to die sooner, but I don’t believe that, because I remember you with the lads and how there was laughter in your room, and how special Father Michael was to you and how you lived life right to the end and how Deirdre helped make it that way.

Colin wants to take me out of myself. ‘Let me take you to the Kimberley, the country where I grew up,’ he says, ‘before your trip back to Ireland. You’ll love it there, and then I’ll know you’ll be back. All expenses paid, Maeve. I’ve got a mate on a station who owes me a favour. A job I did for him years back in Broome when the white ants honeycombed his house. Roofing timbers, the lot. He was stony broke back then.’

‘I’m saving my leave to have longer at home. Eileen’s getting married and I want as long as I can.’

‘A week. Just one week?’

To my shame, I’m thinking of Tully. His mother says he surfs up north during the winter months. Is there surf in the Kimberley?

Chapter 22

Alice

Melbourne, Victoria, 1996

‘We wondered why you were coming.’ Mum’s voice is strong despite her frailty.

I’ve taken the midnight horror flight to Melbourne and snatched a few hours sleep at a guesthouse. In my in-flight fantasy I’d imagined Mum and Dad might have welcomed me, perhaps offered me a room. A Milo even. But Mum is feeble, her steps are measured and she’s shrunk into herself.

I press my face into the yellow roses I bought at Flinders Street Station but they have no scent at all.

‘We thought something must be wrong.’

Mum has the kettle on and is running a crooked finger over two fine porcelain teacups checking the rims for chips. Dad’s mug is on a separate tray with a saucer and two buttered scones. He’s been polishing the Vauxhall since I arrived and won’t be joining us for tea.

‘No Mum. Nothing’s wrong. Where do you keep your vases?’

She’s confounded for a moment, gazing at the teacups, then places them back on their saucers, slowly, deliberately. I watch her careful movements.

‘Vases? Vases.’ She gazes at the teacups again, turning them once more. ‘Vases. Yes. The laundry. Through there.’

I take my time with the flowers, leaving her to focus on tea, then place the vase on the kitchen table. The same cross-stitch hangs over the table that Susannah and I read

every day of our childhood: the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. We used to spell it backwards.

‘Shall I take Dad’s tea to him first?’

‘Yes.’ She grips the edge of the tray and adds a serviette in its ring before finally letting it go.

Dad’s intent on his polishing.

‘It’s gleaming, Dad. Like new. You’ll be the reason it rains tomorrow. Would you like me to vacuum the inside when I’ve finished my tea?’

‘No thank you. You can leave my tray on the bench in the shed.’

‘Sure.’ I try to catch his eye but he’s avoiding mine.

The shed is immaculate. Shadow boards on two walls with every tool in its place. Dymo labels on shelves and the cement floor cleanly swept. An adage hangs over the workbench: *Be Strong and Do not lose Courage, for there is Reward for your Work.*

Mum is standing behind her chair, the tea set out on the table. She’s found an embroidered linen tea cloth and serviettes to match. There’s a scone for each of us.

‘Why have you come, dear?’

That ‘dear’ almost undoes me. How much kindness is tucked inside that tiny four-letter word? I’m struggling to begin, and here it comes again. ‘Why have you come, dear?’

She may be frail, but she refuses to let go. Again I hesitate. I’m not sure what to say. I’ve left my run too late.

‘I’m sorry ...’

I’m sorry I’ve disappointed you. I made a mistake with King, but you made your mistakes too. I’m sorry I flew the stifling, critical, foul-feathered, God-fearing coop. I’ve enjoyed my life in Perth, but I’m sorry our bonds are ragged and torn and that I’ve been a poor daughter to you. I’ve seen too many people dying with bad blood stilled in their veins to want that for either of us. So I want to make peace with you now. I want peace for us all when we die. But it’s too late to tell you this.

‘I’m sorry ...’

We stare at each other in silence. There’s a blemish like a basal cell carcinoma high in the centre of her forehead, and she dabs a senile lid ectropion, the lower right lid pulling away from her watering red eye. She must have lost weight recently because her teeth don’t fit very well. She adds extra milk to her tea and drinks it quickly. I wonder what she’s thinking of me.

I stay in Melbourne a week washing windows, cooking casseroles and sitting with Mum and her various photo albums. I admire pictures of sister Susannah and her brood, successful at every turn. Businesswoman of the Year for her logistics company. Mum says it's all about fashion. Susannah and I were never close. Albums of Mum and Dad's travels, confined to the eastern states. Dad stays outside. He plants his beans in neat rows, hammers in stakes at each end, and ties taut lengths of string between. He pinches out tiny side shoots from his tall Grosse Lisse tomatoes and wraps newspaper around his celery to keep the stalks from the light. I want to help but he works alone.

'You tend to your Mum.'

When it's time to leave she whispers to me, 'God bless you Alice dear. Will you come again?'

'Yes, I'll come again next year. And the year after that.' She has a tight hold on me.

The plane back to Perth is only half full and sitting in my window seat I can turn my tears to the sky. The man on the aisle introduces himself. Bruce. Maybe forty-five. Receding hairline. Please don't be a talker, Bruce. I'm sleeping all the way home. He gestures to the empty seat between us.

'Do you mind if I put some papers here?' He has a laptop computer.

'Go for it. Could you wake me when dinner arrives?'

'What about the movie? *Shine*. You shouldn't miss it.'

'If it's a weepy I don't need it.'

Bruce doesn't probe but asks if I like Rachmaninov. No idea. Is it something on the menu? After a dinner of industrial curry and rice I recline my seat. How do patients with dyspnoea sleep in this position?

The film is therapeutic, shifting my thoughts from Melbourne to Dave. I've never been domineering, but should I have been more ambitious for him? How long will he waste in the bush with King? Bruce packs up his laptop and papers.

'Enjoy the movie?'

'Enormously. Thanks. And I loved that Rachmaninov. Do you play the piano?'

'Badly. You?'

'No. And I don't trampoline either.'

Bruce's smile betrays a mouth of even bridgework. 'Like a cognac before we land?'

I see no reason to refuse. He wants to talk, asks if I work. Show me a woman who doesn't. I don't tell many people that I work in a hospice. Hospice, what's that? Oh that must be so sad! How do you do it, they say. Bruce responds differently. His mother was in a Melbourne hospice, but then they took her to a cancer retreat near the Cathedral Range where she used to climb as a child with her father. She died there, with a palliative nurse, in the country, just as she wished. A good death, he said. But his father died in hospital with cardiac disease. Not a good death, anxiety, and the resuscitation paddles out in the end. They never said their goodbyes, nor gave their thanks to each other. They never had an end-of-life discussion and he's regretted it ever since.

Bruce is making amends for three hours of in-flight silence. There were about fifty thousand divorces in Australia last year and his was one of them. He has two teenage girls, both on the rails, and he shares custody with his ex. He works in human resources for a mining company and often flies to Perth. Would I like to meet him for dinner?

He doesn't waste any time. I don't have my roster, so he hands me his business card. Yes, I'll call him. Perhaps. I'm wary of damaged goods.

Sunny meets me at the airport and we survive her dodgem-car drive home. She's swept the leaves from the front porch, put bunches of lavender in the lounge and left a Malaysian vegetable biryani on the cooktop.

There's a phone message from Cog offering me another week off. I'm overwhelmed with relief. Another from Dave from Port Augusta with important things to discuss. There will be a letter in the post. I check the mail immediately. He must be coming home. I'll buy that new mattress for his bed and a computer with a modem.

After a week of nightmares in Melbourne I sleep the sleep of the dead, happy he'll be home at last.

Dave's letter takes ten days.

Dear Mum

Thanks for the food parcel. Dad says your Anzacs are as good as he remembers them. Sunny also sent some Malaysian treats that you

could break your molars on. Dad wouldn't touch them. I should have known him when they taught us about xenophobia at school!

I'm sorry you weren't home when I rang. Your letter telling me you were going to Melbourne arrived just a week ago. How were the Mumps and Grumps?

Working here, I've learnt a lot– mustering, fencing, shooting, shearing, mulesing, crutching, slaughtering, and windmill and motorbike maintenance. It has taught me how to get on with Dad, and that hasn't always been easy. I think you'd say it's taught me resilience.

I've had time to think about my future. I don't think it fair that you support me through uni and Dad has refused to help. He'll never be convinced of the need for a degree. 'Wankers' is his response whenever I mention it.

I know you're expecting me back in Perth, but earlier this year I applied for entry to ADFA, The Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra. I went to Adelaide to the Recruitment Office and survived a medical, general knowledge test, leadership assessment and psychological assessment. Although my TEE mark had been checked, they kept trying to break me, telling me it wasn't high enough! Two weeks later, I had to go down again, to appear before a military panel – and now, at last I can tell you that I've been accepted, or should I say 'selected'. My goal is a career in cryptologic linguistics, so I'll do a four-year arts degree – through the University of New South Wales ADFA campus. Please don't be disappointed that I won't be studying in Perth. You can take yourself on holidays with the money that you'll save.

It's surprising that I passed the assessments. After spending so long in the bush, I felt like an alien in Adelaide. When I entered a shop for a new pair of jeans I felt weirdly unsure of myself.

I went to the Adelaide Mosque in Little Gilbert Street built by the Afghan cameleers a hundred years ago but I couldn't find the confidence to go inside – it's a pretty simple, single storey building but its minarets shoot to the sky, they must be twenty metres or more!

The weather's hotting up here, already nudging the forties, and we've had our first dust storm of the season, coating the house in red,

both inside and out – dust in the cups and between the sheets, in my hair, my ears and nose, and clogging the air filter and chain on the bike. Dousing down is never enough – I’m longing for the Indian Ocean again – and a hefty serve of Carlo’s famous fish and chips.

I have to go to Canberra for an enrolment session in January. I’ll be paid to do my degree and guaranteed a career and I reckon that’s all right. And the accommodation looks half nice.

Dad knows a truckie who’ll take me to Perth, so expect me in a few weeks. Will Christmas be at Cog and Martin’s again? I’m looking forward to that. I’ve seen enough saltbush for a lifetime.

With love, always

Dave

PS Sad, I’ll be leaving Biffy here with Dad.

Never have I felt so numb. The Australian Defence Force Academy. Military Training. Bullying. Then a return of service obligation. The chance of another Vietnam. Returning screwed up like King. The nightmares, rage and panic. Constant living in fear. Post traumatic stress disorder they call it now. I’d support Dave for life rather than this.

Chapter 23

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

January 17th 1997

I've almost completed an obligatory term of night duty. Now, at home, in the middle of the night, I'm alert. My relaxation CD has failed and I've resorted to the brandy bottle and my journal. I'm anxious for the boys to come home.

It didn't feel like Christmas with Leo and Gordon away. Cassie and I went to Cog's again. She cooks a delicious turkey, roasted wrapped in ham fat, and I took a Cape brandy pudding. The book exchange was its usual success, but the rift between Alice and Dave cast a pall on the occasion. Dave's started preparations for the Defence Force Academy, doing daily endurance training, and Alice is struggling. I suspect I would feel the same. Martin seemed oblivious to Alice's feelings, congratulating Dave on his selection, arranging a day's bushwalking in the Darling Range, telling him how highly trained he will be. I don't doubt that he's bright enough, but I'm concerned about his military training. Despite his time on the station, and his consumption of beer over lunch, he's hardly a macho man.

When I started at Acacia House, there were designated night duty nurses, most often with young children, who were paid penalty rates for their shifts. Now we all must do a stint of nights and penalties have been axed. I nominated my stretch to coincide with Leo and Gordon's time in Maritzburg and Cassie's in Bali. I've worked mostly with Maeve and the patient care assistant Di.

Nights have been either frantic or perilously quiet. In the silence one night, struggling to stay awake, Maeve and Di shared ghost stories. They told tales of bells going off in rooms where patients were comatose, and of TVs coming on unprompted. I had previously heard a story of the woman in room seven. Patients have seen her, sitting alone in the corner as they lie awake in their beds at night. The woman in room sixteen is more curious, only seen in the daytime. She's elderly, wears a skimpy grey cardigan, and has a tight little poodle perm. I'd like to see a ghost. I don't discount the supernatural but have never experienced it, not even after Mum or Dad died. Now in my routine hourly rounds, my senses are on alert. I neither see, feel, nor hear anything unusual, but I encountered a patient in the passage one night.

'Where are you going, John?'

'Just following him there behind me.'

He may have been confused, but perhaps John sensed something I didn't.

Vollies sometimes come at night to sit with anxious patients, like Doug, who had mesothelioma. Despite an epidural, breakthrough opioids, and treatment for neuropathic pain, he became anxious and breathless when he was alone. Our attempts to increase his medication met family resistance. There was a compensation case pending and they didn't want him sedated. They were prepared to remain with him around the clock to help ease his anxiety.

A companion roster was working well but on the night Doug's niece was getting married, everyone would be at the wedding, so a vullie sat with Doug instead. The bride and groom visited between the ceremony and reception, (it was an extra-happy hour), had photos taken with Doug, and talked with other patients. I think their visit brought happiness – a glimpse of joy in the world that people would soon be leaving.

Doug's brother George returned after midnight, bringing us lobster, chocolates, cake and champagne. We saw the vullie out the door with a plateful.

The wedding behind them, the family's primary focus was Doug. They grieved, and were often found huddled in twos or threes, anxious and angry. One night, Doug's brother collared me at the bedside and harangued me about his disease. I motioned him into the passage. He talked of the villains in the asbestos industry and the public health system. Doug was an unwitting victim. Why wasn't he referred to us earlier for his symptom relief? I could only listen. They were seeing a counsellor. The family's grief was complicated by their compensation claim – the company argued his disease was not

asbestos related so they'd have to wait for an autopsy. Doug died two weeks later, never knowing if his wife would be compensated.

I know that South Africa has been called 'the mesothelioma capital of the world'. We were still mining and exporting blue asbestos last year. Mesothelioma and AIDS. Again I feel culpable, leaving it all behind.

A stream of money has been flowing in since Doug's niece's wedding. The young couple had lived together for years, and they requested that instead of gifts, donations be made to Acacia House. We were surprised when Doug's family sent a cheque, considering their anger. Sonia reminded us all that according to the 'Clarkson Code', such bequests are unquantifiable, like the chocolates, cards and thank you letters we receive nearly every day.

The glow of human kindness faded a little when a painting was stolen from the patients' lounge. It was one of my favourites – a group of ancient Baobab trees in the Kimberley, in the northwest of Western Australia, like those in the Limpopo. (Australians call them Boabs.) The trees appeared so humanoid, some dancing, some weeping; so reflective of hospice life. I cannot imagine the mentality of a person who would steal from a hospice. Maeve too was distressed by the theft of that painting. Her partner Colin is from the Kimberley and he's going to take her there.

I am careful with my private life, but nurses often share their secrets in the stillness of the night. Maeve has found comfort with Colin, but in her heart she isn't free of the surfer-boy who lured her here to Perth.

I'm glad to have finished nights, but some things I miss: the special times sitting with patients, the camaraderie with Maeve and Di, and the orange splash of the morning sun on the radiant Western Australian Christmas trees, the *Nuytsia floribunda*, on my drive home each morning. Their flowering has almost finished.

We are trialling something new at work: Fentanyl, a synthetic opioid used in anaesthesia for years, is now in transdermal patches. These patches could revolutionize pain control, especially for patients remaining at home.

How the hospice dominates my being! So many of life's emotions seem compressed into that crucial time before death. We see the best and the worst in people.

We recently farewelled a woman who'd been with us for six weeks but wasn't ready to die. Given a prognosis of several months, she decided on a cruise with her friends. Her only son happily told us it would be cheaper than a nursing home bed and if

she were to die at sea, he would save on funeral costs! He came to see us last week to give us the news of her death – and of the sea burial coordinates, somewhere east of New Zealand. He was so bright and cheery, and laughingly told us hake was served on board ship that night. But when Alice gave him a hug, his laughter turned to tears.

Leo and Gordon return tomorrow. Despite special moments with Cassie, I've missed them frightfully. Gordon's had a happy time doing 'boys things' with Leo, but I'm sad to have missed this phase of his life.

I'd sent the usual Christmas package to Thembile in October, but Leo took another – a rich fruitcake I'd baked. Thembile is working in Hilton and Jabulile has started nursing. Leo has filled my shopping list: Maltabella porridge, packets of rusks, mebos and guava rolls.

Gordon has agreed to attend St Albert's College – I suspect with Leo's coercion. I'm concerned for Minh who rang last night. I told him about Umfolozi where Gordon and Leo spent a weekend and threw their burkei seeds to the wind.

Chapter 24

Maeve

Western Australia, 1997

Just a week I'm giving to Colin. We flew for over two hours to Broome and now we're driving in a four-wheel drive with swags and a dinghy on the top, and what a distance it is that we're going. Colin is like a preening peacock showing off his Kimberley that is bigger than Ireland itself, he says. Queen Victoria's Head, the King Leopold Range, he's right up there with royalty. He's leading me up an embankment that a mate has told him about near Queen Victoria's Head. We find a bowerbird's nest, an arrangement of gleaming gewgaws – glass, flowers, and feathers, and shells from the sea. Colin talks about granite, dolerite, bauxite and basalt and rocks I've never heard of. We're clambering down some gorges called Lennard and Windjana to waterfalls and pristine swimming holes. He shows me butcherbirds and friarbirds. He knows there are no crocodiles and so we're skinny-dipping.

Then we're bumping over eroded roads that Colin calls corrugated, visiting his mate on a station, a property larger than Sligo itself and he's frightening me with an army of tree frogs decamped in a toilet bowl, and then we're into wilderness. We're bathing at night in shallow creek beds under a milky sky, sleeping snug in our swag as the temperature drops and I'm waking early to Colin's campfire, damper, butter and jam.

I've never seen colour like this. The intense blue heat of the sky, the red heat of the rocky gorges, the cool green vegetation, and new shoots on the boab trees. And I'm

feeling something spiritual here that I used to feel in Sligo, like an ancient heart in the place.

We're taking the dinghy and a cool box onto a lough where he'll be fishing for a barra. He could bake his fish in this sun; it must be thirty-five degrees. Colin's filling the bailer with water from the lough and pouring it over me. 'Go on,' he says, 'have a swim. There are only freshies in there, not salties. These crocs are small, scared of humans. Trust me. You know you can.'

Sonia's warned me crocodiles are fond of the Irish, and Alice taught me a saying of Sunny's, 'Don't think there are no crocodiles because the water's calm,' so there's fear rising up in me.

'How do you know they are small and won't bite?'

'I grew up here. We're too far inland for salties. We're landlocked.'

My heart is pounding as I slip off my hat, my long-sleeved shirt and bra. He's watching every move. I'm pulling off my shorts and knickers and reaching for the tube of sunscreen and slowly, carefully, spreading it on, stalling for precious time. Mother Mary watch over me and deliver me from danger. Colin takes the tube and is slipping behind me, rocking the boat just a little. I'm curling forward clutching my knees as he sweeps the hair from my neck to cover my face and breasts and smears lotion over my back and my neck, caressing, kissing, prickling my skin. My heart is all over the place. And suddenly there's a violent rocking, there's a splash and Colin has gone and I'm fearing capsizing and wrestling my knickers and pulling them on again. The dinghy steadies and the ripples fan out and I'm scanning the water for Colin. Nothing. Colin has gone.

It seems minutes before he surfaces maybe twenty-five metres away and makes bold strokes to the furthest bank, then he turns and is yelling to me, 'Bring us a beer would you Maeve?'

I'll have no fear of crocodiles here.

At night we're eating the barramundi he caught with his magic lure. Twelve kilos is his estimate and it's the sweetest, firmest flesh.

'Smart bastards these barra. Fight like hell, escape the hook. Takes a smarter bastard to catch one. You know these fish start out as males? They change to female at five. This fella would be a boy. The big ones are girls, believe me.'

'Colin, I do believe you, smart bastard that you are.'

Three more days we're camping, walking to high waterfalls and swimming holes and places where palm trees grow. And by night we're lying, snug in our swag, beneath the

blackest heaven, the Milky Way tossed out there like a bridal veil, and in the north, Orion, the saucepan, hanging upside down. And Colin's showing me the Alpha and Beta Centauri, and how they point to the Southern Cross, and how to calculate south. Never did I see stars like this at home. Are you out there somewhere Daniel? Where is Heaven out there?

On the flight back to Perth I scan the Kimberley book Colin bought me in Broome.

'We didn't see Aboriginal cave paintings or Wolfe Creek crater or the Bungle Bungle Range.'

'Just whetted your appetite. I want you back.'

'And look, Colin. Mount Hart. Hart's a Sligo name. And Lissadell Station. We have a Lissadell House in Sligo, a grey limestone mansion on the Bay. Yeats wrote a poem about it – or about the women who lived there. It once had beautiful gardens but it's all overgrown now.'

'That'd be right. Those Duracks had Lissadell. They were Irish. Owned half the Kimberley, but they must've gone troppo if they named Lissadell after a place in Ireland.'

Can you believe it, Daniel? All these Kimberley places stuck with Sligo names.

*

I thought my savings would grow on night duty but the hospice has changed the pay structure. Everyone's base rate of pay has increased but now we're receiving no penalties to be saving for travelling home.

'Who benefits?' Fred, the cook, was in the kitchen shouting at anyone ready to listen. 'Don't tell me my pay won't change. How am I supposed to pay my mortgage without a bonus for weekend work?'

We had a farewell for Fred at The Watch. He said he wasn't exactly fired but his job description changed and so his job no longer existed. He has a good reference. Patients' meals are coming now direct from a central supply and Alice calls them cardboard cut-outs. Cost-cutting it is to be sure, and I know that to be necessary, but I'm missing Fred creating meals in a flash and his tiny portions of colour and flavour for tempting anorexic people. 'It's increasing throughput,' Alice says. 'Look at your dinner and die.' We feel so sad for kind-hearted Lisa; enforcing changes like these must be breaking her up inside.

*

Some people say Carter is gay but I don't care about him being gay or straight, or even if he has AIDS because we practise universal precautions. He was admitted with lung cancer. I remember him at Melaleuca, sometimes playing the piano and being the life of the party with a repertoire of Irish jokes because he was after seeing Dylan Moran in Edinburgh.

We're so busy that I hardly have time to see Carter this evening. But when I put my head in his room with his medications or his tea, it's like a celebration in there, and he's introducing me to his friends, suggesting a date or two, and telling ancient Dave Allen Catholic jokes because he and Dave have a lot in common, each practising atheists. Twice I've given him breakthrough morphine and more pillows to sit him straight – but his best friend Dale says he's breathless because he's ripping off his oxygen with every joke he tells.

His friends are asking should they go but Carter wants them to stay. He's happy and that's what counts and there's plenty more beer in the cool box but he's not drinking it. I wheel him to the toilet. He's so breathless he can't walk, and I ask would he like his friends to leave but he's insisting that they stay.

Dale remains at night when the other friends leave and then Carter is anxious again.

'Why didn't you bring the lamp from home, you know I wanted it here. And the bottle of Glenfiddich. My circulation is bad. Where are my fleecy socks? I need to clean my teeth. Maeve, I need more morphine. And be quicker this time. Is that oxygen on? Where's the bell? Maeve, are you on duty all night?'

I've learnt my lesson in calm from Alice. I check his oxygen, take his hand in mine and gently stroke his forehead. 'Your oxygen is fine, Carter. Here's Lorazepam for your breathing. Hold it under your tongue.'

While Dale is driving home for the night lamp I sit and talk with Carter. 'It's a big day you've had, Carter, such fun you've had in here, a good friend you must be, but now you've exhausted yourself. There now, you're breathing easier, we'll go to the bathroom, a bit of a wash and clean your teeth. When Dale's back with your lamp, a pair of sleepers to see you to morning. But I'm thinking if you need the toilet in the night you could be breathless again, and a uridome might help? It's like a condom with

a drain in the end for your urine to flow into a bag; it's like policemen on point duty have strapped onto their legs.'

Alice comes to check on me. She's handed over to the night staff and the other evening nurses have left. Alice won't be leaving without me.

'Come and join the party,' Carter laughs. 'Maeve's going for the condoms – if she can find them big enough.'

'You want a condom on that?' Alice asks Carter when I return with the uridomes. 'Is it cold in here or what? Are cherry tomatoes in season?'

'The best things come in small packages,' he laughs.

When Dale returns with his lamp, Carter's mood is better and he's sorry he was anxious but asks what if he's breathless again? Dale offers to stay overnight but Carter wants him at home with his cats.

'Carter, you'll be fine,' I say, trying for calm again. You've had your pills, you'll be sleeping well, already you're relaxed and yawning, you're slurring your words like Moran on the turps, you won't need to go to the toilet and your bell is right here, tied on. It's Gavin who's on tonight. Will you have your door open or closed?'

Alice and I both kiss him goodnight and a smile spreads over his face. Carter always has the last word. 'Maeve, how did a sweet Irish lass like yourself come to say "on the turps?"'

Alice locks the hospice door behind us. 'You're a marvel, Maeve,' she says. 'I thought he'd have trouble settling. He was revved up all afternoon. You wound him down beautifully.'

That's nice to hear from Alice. I thank her for her help, an extra hour she's stayed.

I wave to Dale driving out the gates the next morning. He will have brought Carter's breakfast: fresh croissants, orange juice, strawberries and espresso. I'm needing a coffee myself; I couldn't sleep last night.

There were three deaths overnight and Gavin says Kathleen's on the train with the terminus in sight. I'm checking red crosses on the whiteboard and I'm shocked to find one by Carter's name.

'What? What happened? He was so happy when we left. What happened?' I'm hearing the tremor in my voice. How could this be? I promised him. He wasn't ready to die.

Gavin was quiet. 'It was terrible,' he said. 'He was frantic, confused, clambering out of bed. We repeated his Morphine and Lorazepam, I stayed with him and called Dale in, but nothing seemed to work. So I rang Lyndal and got an order for Midazolam and that bombed him out. He was a shocking colour. It might have been a bleed.'

It might have been a bleed. My heart is breaking. 'How was Dale?'

'He was fine. Said Carter was impossible at home before he came in here. He thanked us for all we did. Thank God he didn't see the worst of it.'

I'm hearing Carter's laughter and seeing the smile across his face as we messed with his uridome, and I'm feeling the way he relaxed, seeing the curl of lashes on his cheeks when I promised he'd sleep well, and I'm overcome with grief. But there's no time for grief, for Kathleen's brother Jack is at the door and he thinks she's died.

Kath has certainly died, and with so many people in her room she'll be saving them some air.

'She's at peace,' they say. Her mother Irene is still holding her hand, pale as it is.

'She looks beautiful.' This voice I'm hearing, is it mine? This role I'm playing, is it me? Slipping in and out of character, from Carter to Kathleen, with no time to draw my breath? 'You were a wonderful family to her.'

'Bloody oath,' says Jack. 'She deserved it. Dying was the only way to get rid of us, we all adored her so much. What now?'

'We have your instructions for the funeral director. That is all we need. We'll be giving her a little wash now, dressing her in a clean nightie. Would anyone like to help? There's no need, just if you wish.'

Irene squeezes my arm. 'Yes, I would, Maeve,' she says. 'The first and the last. It seems right.'

The family leave the room. I remove Kathleen's catheter and pump, and Irene chatters away to her daughter while we wash and turn her, change the sheets, and dress her in a fresh nightdress and turban. Irene reaches into her bag and sprays some perfume on Kath's wrists. We cross her hands over her chest. She is beautiful indeed.

'I was the first to bathe her,' Irene says. 'She was born in a rush on the farm near Wandering, not even a midwife there. She was in a hurry all of her life, naughty girl, but that's all forgiven now.'

'Would you like some time with her alone?' I ask.

She nods, her tears are brimming, and I leave.

Kathleen's dying has left me calm, smoothing out the sorrow I'm feeling for Carter. Derek finds me in the passage. 'Would you like to talk?'

Will you believe it Daniel? We sat in the chapel, him not a priest, and sadness and guilt tumbled from me, how I'd promised Carter he'd sleep okay and what a lie that was in the end. And I told Derek about you, Daniel, more than I ever told Lisa, the guilt that is there in me. And we prayed together, Derek and me, and comforting that was, but Carter won't let me sleep tonight. I try to wash my mind with all the beautiful deaths I've known, people like Kathleen dying peacefully with family loving her near, and then it is I see Carter, anxious and frightened again.

Chapter 25

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 1997

Dave phones me every week but he's only sent one letter.

... You might like to picture me on my first day in mess dress, a suitcase in one hand and an ironing board in the other, walking uphill to my div, led by a third year cadet. I've got tram-tracks in my trousers. I have to iron them again and again!

Picture the SUO – the Section Under Officer informing me I have to meet the DCC – the Division Cadet Captain.

Picture me standing at the rec room, my patent-leather-look-alike toes pressed right up to the line, staring straight ahead (no eye contact allowed), reciting the specified request. "Excuse me please Sir. May I please enter the rec room? Nervous, failing, repeating it, trying again and again.

Picture me with sandpaper, sanding the pits from my brass, then with Brasso, endlessly polishing. Shining brass, spit-polished shoes, the mark of an ADFA man.

Now see me on the squash court belting the shit out of the ball. After twenty years of pacifism, (thank you) now I'm learning aggression.

On the phone he always sounds positive, but what am I to believe? When he talks of Reveille at six I know he'd rather sleep in. When he talks of cooking from ration packs, I know he yearns for our pantry at home. But when he compares his salaried, HECS-free life with his friends' lives at uni here, the only other voice is mine.

Sunny shows me a letter he wrote to her. He's met a young woman who plays mahjong. He hasn't told me that.

Cog has me over for drinks while Martin's at rugby training. She knows I don't need another serve of his love affair with Defence. We stretch out on deck chairs in the garden under the apricot Leander rose with glasses of chilled chardonnay. Cog and I have bucked the trend for unwooded chardonnay, preferring a heavier wine laden with butter and oak.

'Elegant nose?'

'Best I've smelled all day.'

'Butter and peach?'

'Juniper, nutmeg, mace? Bushfire over the hill? A little ash on the nose?'

Cog has an agenda. 'Acacia House – it's running our lives. We need some diversion therapy.' She hands me a brochure. 'University Extension. Singing, dancing, Italian, Wine Appreciation, Olives for Beginners. Or we could walk the Bibbulmun Track.'

'All thousand clicks? Albany to Perth?'

'Why not?'

'I'll take Olives for Beginners.'

'What about a day walk? Walking into Balingup. That's only a few hours south. We can stay at the backpackers. Sonia's done it before and Maeve says she's up for it. Maybe even Gabby.'

'Gabby? You're joking. Is there a hairdresser in Balingup?'

'Bitch. She's into birds. She'd be great.'

'When?'

'April or May. Don't tell me you've got plans.'

'I have. His name is Bruce. We've found a different brochure. Pamper your partner, Massage for Beginners, Tango and Salsa and Jive.'

'Serious? Have you rung him?'

'No. Get off my case. Any news from last night's meeting?' Cog's the hospice management filter and she keeps us well informed.

'Yes. It's official. We have a no lifting policy. We're only to use slide sheets and hoists. No more broken backs, sciatica, ricked necks or workers' comp.'

'Brilliant. No more fumbling for your hand beneath a set of elephant thighs? The end of the Australian Lift. I'll drink to that. Panadol sales will slump. Anything else?'

‘The board want us to open our doors to non-malignant disease. They say chronic lung and cardiac patients need palliative care too. Fair enough. Just find us a few thousand more beds. What’s the betting there’s some board member’s spouse, privately insured, with a terminal chronic disease?’

‘Cynic.’

‘Maybe. But there’s more to it. You were in Melbourne when Morgan came in. Lovely bloke. Heart failure. Exhausted, dyspnoeic, cyanotic, and desperate. Should have had palliative care in hospital. They hadn’t even discussed dying with his wife and family. All so scared he would die, but they hadn’t had the conversation. Why don’t hospital staff address the bleeding obvious? He died after only three days.’

*

The non-malignant patients are trickling in. End stage renal failure, heart failure, and respiratory disease. Complicated symptom management. But Mrs Foley with severe osteoporosis is the most difficult.

She snaps her orders at us. ‘Heat my wheat bag, no more than two minutes. Don’t touch that. Give me my glasses. Pass my perfume. Lift my head. Gently! Dial the number for me. Now leave me. And shut the door.’ There are no manners or gratitude. I know pleasantries fade when people are in pain but hers have been wiped out.

Gabby’s not intimidated. ‘We’re not your servants, Mrs Foley. You can’t speak to us like that. You say you’re not in pain, but it seems to me that you are. If we increased your analgesics, you’d be much happier. You might even be polite.’

Her physical pain is caused by crumbling bones but her spiritual pain we can’t reach. She respects Gabby for standing up to her, but now deference has become dependence. ‘Where is Gabrielle? Get her. No you cannot help me.’

Mrs Foley is nursed on an airbed. She forces us to negotiate everything we do. Attending to her takes an inordinate amount of time and we’re getting tetchy, prioritising other patients, taking time to answer her bell. Sonia suggests she should book a short holiday at the Nitschke terminal resort in the Northern Territory.

Derek’s her only advocate. ‘She’s had a miserable life. Her husband died last year and her only son died in circumstances she refuses to discuss. Her extended family is in England. She’s got no one, and she’s lost her God.’

Barry's less sympathetic. 'I'll talk with Mrs Foley and bring in the social worker. If she won't let us manage her symptoms, we'll move her on. We're not a nursing home.'

Gabby's arguing, her pager vibrating, and we know who it will be.

'It may seem paternalistic, but can't we be heavy handed? Why don't we treat her pain? Deny her the right of refusal. She'll be drowsy for a while, but we know what's best. And when the drowsiness subsides, she may be a nicer person. Why should she determine her own treatment?

Barry shakes his head. 'The ethical dilemma of the modern age, Gabby. They've stripped us of paternal beneficence. Patient autonomy is winning, and it's not always in people's best interests. All we can do is negotiate and Mrs Foley won't come to the table. And here's another ethical issue. Mrs Foley is privately insured. She has a high dollar value to us.'

'Surely that's irrelevant!' Gabby's ethical colours are glowing.

Barry laughs. 'Of course.'

Mrs Foley is discharged three days later. No one is sorry to see her leave – not even Gabby.

Sonia helps me remove the mountain of pillows from her room. 'What a sad and lonely woman. And she's missed her opportunity for Nitschke's exit strategy. The Northern Territory's legislation's been overturned. Did you hear?'

*

Cog has called a planning meeting at The Watch to discuss the Balingup weekend. Gabby arrives late with apologies – she's been assessing an MND patient for possible admission.

'The home was so full of equipment, the kids couldn't get into the bathroom, it felt like a hospital. I wonder if families crave a normal life – or if they forget what normal was like.'

Sonia pours her a drink. 'This is normal, Gabby. Get into it. Life on the Bibbulmun Track. Not an MND in sight.' She has maps spread out on the table and a notepad in her hand. 'I've booked two nights at the Balingup backpackers. We have a three, and a two-bedded room. The five-bed was already booked. Any preference for sleeping companions?'

‘Alice snores.’

‘Cog talks in her sleep.’

We draw straws and as luck would have it, I’m sharing a room with Gabby. I guess she can teach me about birds.

Although we’ve ordered platters to share, Gabby’s scanning the menu.

‘Look, there’s milk tart and apple pie! And koeksisters – actually, they’re not Dutch, they’re Cape Malay.’

Sonia reins her in. ‘Can you cook that stuff? Then bring dessert. I’ll do a curry.’

Sonia delegates the rest of the food and Cog offers to bring the scroggin – ‘to keep the pecker up’ – sultanas, chocolate, raisins, orange peel, ginger and nuts.

Maeve looks up from the map. ‘There’ll be peckers on the track?’

Sonia’s eyes roll. ‘Believe me, I’ve walked it before, the peckers you see on this bit of track haven’t been up for a while.’ She turns to the map again. ‘We can get a lift at dawn to the Blackwood River, climb Cardiac Hill, then breakfast at the Blackwood Campsite. There’s a stunning view from there, and a mist rising from the valley if we’re lucky.’

‘Cardiac Hill?’ I’m dubious. My fitness regime goes no further than the daily ride to work. All ten minutes of it.

Cog is quick with advice. ‘You’ve two months to get trim and fit. Ring that bloke on the plane. Martin says that sex burns off a hundred kilojoules a minute.’

‘And he’d have no vested interest in that particular theory.’

Sonia’s interested. ‘A hundred! I thought only twenty. I’d like to see his style.’

‘I doubt that you ever will.’

*

I postpone phoning Bruce. I’ve lost my confidence. I’m comfortable with the spectrum of life that palliative care throws up, but I can’t ring a guy who asked me to dinner nearly six months ago. I can’t be hungry enough.

‘Alice?’

‘Sorry Lorin. My head was elsewhere.’ I’m giving a slow needle, over five minutes. ‘Is it hurting?’

‘No, not at all, but it’s been five minutes. Ara is here. He’ll take me out for a smoke.’

A smoke for Lorin, a blind eye for me. Lorin's appetite has been slow to return since her last bout of chemo, and she says the cannabis helps. An AIDS patient a few years ago swore it helped his neuropathic pain. I guess it needs more research. There's sure to be a queue of ageing hippies suffering chronic disease and offering their bodies to science.

Cog's in the passage with a baby in her arms.

'Our patients are getting younger.'

She laughs. 'I've been lent this one to spread a bit of cheer. Say hello to Rosie.'

Rosie reaches for my watch. 'Take her to visit Olive. She's wearing her diamantes today.'

Olive's perkier than usual after a blood transfusion, unaware of the dispute it caused in the staffroom.

'What's the point? She'll die in a few weeks.'

'Olive will never say die.'

'So why is she here? It's not palliative care! The transfusions prolong her life. More work for us and a waste of precious blood.'

'She's not ready to die. It's about quality of life.'

'Fair enough if there's unfinished business, relatives coming from overseas. But Olive? At her age? Propping her up for another party?'

'Why not?'

Who should make the decision of when to withdraw some treatments? If we were in the developing world, it wouldn't be an issue. That argument has all the power of Mum's line on rejected food. The poor in Africa would love my cauliflower. I still hate cauliflower and Africa's a long way away.

I go from room to room, filling in charts, changing care plans. I hear shrieks of happiness. Olive's in her water wheelchair, a cognac at her side. Rosie's on the armrest, fingering the strands of sparklers draped around her neck.

'Look what the stork brought, Alice! And you thought I was on my way out!'

'So the tumour was misdiagnosed?'

'Obviously. But Alice, in case we're wrong, promise one thing before I die? Ring that chap on the plane? Life's too short to miss the fun.'

I promise her I will.

*

‘Bruce? It’s Alice. We met on the plane last year.’

It might have been yesterday. There’s a small frisson of the new, but he talks like a family friend who’s hung around all my life. He’ll be in Perth again next month.

Chapter 26

Gabby

Balingup, Western Australia

May 26th 1997

I've returned home tired but happy after an exhilarating time in Balingup with the hospice girls. Paradoxically, being away from the hospice seemed to bring us closer together. Leo is watching crime on TV, but after a weekend in the bush, TV is anathema to me.

I hadn't been away with women friends since Leo and I were married, so it was almost with girlish excitement that I squeezed into Cog's hatchback with Maeve, Alice and Sonia. Three hours later, arriving at the Backpackers at the rear of the old Balingup post office, we eased our stiffened joints out into the freezing night air. A back door led into a lounge, to the warmth of a roaring log fire, eight pairs of running shoes neatly in a line, and eight pairs of dark, deep-set eyes. The young men watching TV scrambled to their feet. Could they carry our bags? Would we like some tea or an apple? Would we like to use the kitchen? Would we cook our evening meal before they cooked theirs? I felt as if I'd arrived in a foreign land.

While Sonia heated her curry, these men offered us their seats in the lounge. Mohammed and Daoud, who spoke reasonable English, were spokesmen for the group. I'd read about young Hazaras fleeing the Taliban, and had seen reports of their rickety boats, but this was my first experience of Afghan men. They were getting a foothold in Australia picking apples. Others had paved the way for them – there was a Halal

butcher nearby. They gave us a bag of crunchy pink lady apples to take with us on our walk.

Curled in our beds before sleep, the icy air needling our faces, a branch repeatedly brushed the window. I was reminded of my time at Groote Schuur, sharing a room with three nursing friends, talking half the night, hearing strange noises outside.

Although Cardiac Hill wasn't the workout Sonia had described, Maeve was puffing, and peppered the climb with a trail of her Irish 'fecks'. Sonia took the opportunity for a companionable dig at Alice. 'A bit short of breath there girl. I can see you haven't rung Bruce yet.'

Alice surprised us all. 'That's where you're wrong, my friend. There's been one too many good dinners. More weight to heave up this hill.' She refused to be drawn further.

We made the elevated Blackwood Campsite in time to see the morning mist rising from the valley below. For a moment I was back at the Berg cottage, cumulus clouds over Bamboo catching the first shafts of morning light, and Rastus warming my feet. There was none of the Drakensberg grandeur here, but the scene was awesome in its way.

Cog sat next to me. 'How about this, Gabby? From the underworld of sickness to the scented heavens above. Breathe in the eucalypt.'

It was coffee and scroggin time.

From the vantage point at the campsite, we saw our first wedge-tailed eagle, circling on the thermals. Further on in the bushland, we spotted numerous birds: gorgeous blue splendid wrens, red-breasted robins, a rufous whistler and flock of red-tailed cockatoos.

Maeve called warnings along the narrow path. Feckin' emu shit, land mines, then crapshoot. Despite the option of infinite bushland, emus deposit their faecal heaps in the centre of the track.

Alice had never been bird-watching, but became quite ebullient, spotting and identifying with me. Before the walk, she was unaware of the pallid cuckoo's song, its ascending succession of semitones, so commonly heard in Perth. Later in the day, sitting on a log with our tuna sarmies and tea, she made a bizarre analogy, likening the cuckoo to the military, forcing youth from their mothers' nests, and laying their own eggs to hatch there instead. 'The green machine. It just sucks and fucks,' she said.

Twenty-one kilometres from our starting point we stumbled into Balingup at dusk, and lined up our dusty hiking boots next to the familiar row of runners. Again we were met by the Afghan men, politely eager to please.

‘You had good day? You like tea?’ The kitchen was spotless.

We complained of aching legs, but our weariness soon dissipated. After a day of obscenities on the track, drinking tea with these well-mannered men, even Sonia, Maeve and Alice managed some decorum. As the men relaxed, they told us about themselves. Daoud’s mother had sold the family’s tractor to enable her son to escape. She insisted he leave Afghanistan after the Taliban took his father. Could the family survive without a tractor? I didn’t like to ask. The Talibs rounded up young Hazaras to fight on their frontlines. Older men were taken for ransom. Shia Hazara often flee to Iran, but these young men had drifted to Australia crammed into a boat. Three of them had left wives behind, and one, two small children. He had such sadness about him.

Alice talked about Afghan cameleers who had taken supplies to outback people in Australia for over a hundred years. I hadn’t known about them, but Daoud knew stories of men who had walked every day with their camels throughout central Australia and to the goldfields in the west. Thousands and thousands of miles. And we had complained of our aching legs!

As on the previous night, the men declined our curry, saying they would eat after us – but they accepted my koeksusters. In Afghanistan their mothers make a similar pastry called fingers of the bride.

Sonia had drunk enough tea. ‘Is it okay with you fellas if we open a bottle of wine?’ The men didn’t mind, but they didn’t want any. I wondered where they prayed. Was there a prayer room in the post office? I didn’t ask. It might accentuate their difference.

Our bedroom was icy again.

Alice pulled up her thermal leggings and massaged Tiger Balm into her knees. With hair as wild as a boxthorn and never a lick of foundation, I hadn’t believed her story about a suitor, but her painted nails and silky calves suggested she might have been serious.

‘Can I ask about Bruce?’

‘You can ask.’

‘How’s it going?’ I was on eggshells.

‘I like him. We have fun.’ I didn’t push her further, but she’s happier than I’ve known her and I’m glad.

I pulled on another jersey and pinned my hair in place. Lights out, I was drifting off when Alice spoke again. ‘Those Afghans will do well in Australia. We have a passion for underdogs.’

There’s something about Alice that powder-coats me in guilt, just for being who I am. I’ve never been an underdog.

Chapter 27

Maeve

County Sligo, Ireland, 1998

You wouldn't believe it Daniel, I'm home here in Tamhnachmore, and Gallagher's farm has been carved up for houses, slivered like Mammy's Christmas chicken: a small portion for everyone (but yours always biggest I'm thinking), then enough left for eight rounds of sandwiches on St Stephen's Day.

You'll be recalling Gallagher's farm where we went for eggs when our hens went off the lay, and Mrs Gallagher bringing scalded cream and lamb when you were sick. Gallagher Estate they're calling it now and there's Gallagher Terrace, Gallagher Green, Gallagher Fields and Gallagher Court. A house called 'The Maeve' is on Gallagher Rise, grand it is with five bedrooms and three reception rooms and a yard as big as a paddock, almost. Forty smaller houses there are, and talk of more on McSharry's, from the Garda up to the graveyard, 'executive' they will be. Daddy's taken to mumbling. *'Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey, / Where wealth accumulates and men decay;'* These Goldsmith lines you'll know, Daddy's recited them all his life, and his father and his father before him. Next I'll hear them in Irish for he and Mammy are in Irish Speaking; there are groups all over Sligo now.

Mammy has new central heating, but the fire is lit in the sitting room because we're all home today. There's talk of the May referendum and the Good Friday Agreement and the assembly that will include Sinn Fein and the disarmament that will wait two years and already there are cars of explosives and how fragile is the peace. And Gerry Adams, Belfast's Nelson Mandela, what a load of shite that is, an insult to

Mr Mandela. Eileen is happy as a robin thinking only of her wedding; she's not caring about any peace agreement, but she's taking the teapot to the kitchen and humming *Days Like This* and checking Mammy's new washing machine.

'You happy or what?' Patrick yells after her. 'She could have saved her money at the Registry Office,' he tells us under his breath. 'A hundred marriages a month in Dublin. Why bring God into it?'

'You'll not be stirring that pot here,' Mammy glares at him, 'and what's a shopkeeper, farmer or auctioneer doing in the business of marrying? It's business, nothing more. Our Father Michael knows relationships, pre-marriage courses he runs.'

I show them my Kimberley photos and Daddy takes my hand, smiling his eyes into mine.

The twins are after exams and working in a Sligo catering business for people too busy in their jobs to care about cooking at home. Entrepreneurial, Mammy calls it.

How I miss you, Daniel. Patrick has your boots on his feet and Caitlin's pasted Sinead O'Connor and Nirvana over the walls of your room. Your trophies have moved to the passage and your photos to the mantelpiece. Sometimes I catch your shadow in the street or sitting in Grandma's recliner and I see your smoke rise behind the henhouse. Before tea we walk to your grave that Mammy's been tending with bulbs and picked flowers, and Patrick's laughing that it's her allotment and suggesting rosemary for remembrance and maybe spring onions too. Mammy's not laughing though. She doesn't laugh much any more.

I'm missing cups of tea with Edna and Myrna because they're in Majorca now. Mammy's reading *The Sligo Champion*, and I'm skimming all the papers she's saved with your memorial notices – your month's mind, birthdays, anniversaries. Eight years of them.

'Thanks for saving them,' I say. How long will she be doing this, keeping alive your memory – as if it could ever die. There's a notice here for Mr Boyle who died forty-seven years ago. Was a payment made for perpetuity or has Mrs Boyle grieved all these years? Does grief last until we die?

I don't remember all this advertising.

'Mother of God, the First Holy Communion is looking to be an industry!' The perfect occasion the advertisements say: restaurants, shops, garments, footwear and accessories for children and adults – and a video for posterity.

'Prosperity,' Mammy says.

'You made my communion dress, Mammy. Beautiful it was.'

‘Times have changed, Maeve. But I’d still make your dress today. I’d have made Eileen’s wedding dress but she had modern ideas. Maybe when it’s your turn.’ She’s reading her paper, not looking at me and I’m seeing the set of her face. I haven’t talked about Colin or marriage or remaining in Australia. There’s a change I’m seeing in Mammy, a protective shield that’s keeping her from talk of a personal kind.

Sitting with Father Michael, a blessing wraps around me like the warmth of a mid-winter coat. We’re watching a pair of cheeky brown wrens snatching at seed in the sun.

‘The king of all the birds, the wren.’

‘Some wrens in Western Australia are iridescent blue. And there’s a purple-crowned fairy wren in the Kimberley.’

‘Praise be to God. The male of the species no doubt. And do you have a special friend now Maeve? A man as colourful as your wrens?’ He’s giving me a sideways smile.

‘I’ve come to talk about Mammy. But I do have a friend in Australia. He’s kind to me.’

‘Kindness. *That which makes a man desirable is his kindness.* Proverbs. But you’re wanting to talk about Mairéad.’

I tell Father Michael how Mammy’s locked inside, how there’s solid where once there was soft, how her tread is slow and her eyes are down and there’s no laughter like before. How we walked on the Rosses Strand, and I clutched her into the wind, but it was like the Sidhe had taken her soul.

We sit silently for a moment. ‘And how is it within you, child?’

I’d never confessed to Father Michael. It was the unknown priest in Galway who heard what I had done, who silently heard my cries, who put his finger through the grille and held mine gently in his, who gave me just one Hail Mary and told me to pray for you Daniel, and talk to you too, and it wasn’t the lecture I expected from him but it was God’s forgiveness instead.

I tell Father within me I’m fine.

‘You’re right to care about your Mammy,’ he says. ‘She’s a mother who lost the special hope only a son can bring, but you’re bringing now a different hope and that is a blessing to her. And thanks be to God, in their Irish-speaking group is another couple who lost a son. Each of them has agreed to take a Chernobyl child this year.’

I know nothing of any Chernobyl child. Father Michael says they come from Belarus and stay with Sligo people. Mammy hasn’t mentioned them to me.

Two days before I leave, I meet Deirdre at Hardigan's pub. We hug like sisters and slide into a booth with our beers.

'I love these booths, I've found none in Perth. How is it with you? *Sláinte.*'

'Well,' she says. 'Is it good to be home?'

'Too much has changed in seven years. When I left we made our own soda bread but now there's panini, baguette and brioche. Coffee was cappuccino or espresso, now it's macchiato, skinny latte, lungo. Caitlin wants to be a barista and I'm thinking barrister. Praise God you're the Deirdre we all came to love and it's only your hair colour changing.'

'Hiding the greys,' she laughs. 'Can't let the patients know there's a Granny on the job. But much has changed, even in hospice since I was seeing to Daniel. We know more about pain and suffering. And people are thinking more spiritual than religious – religion's more belonging than believing. And there are new opioids – but you will know that. I think back to Daniel's time, how we followed the Kubler-Ross order, mapping the stages of grief, and how we focussed on breaking denial. I hope I'm a better nurse today.'

'You were the best nurse for Daniel,' I say. 'For all of us. But I'm worried for Mammy now.'

Deirdre won't break any confidence, and she won't tell me of Mammy's counselling but I think I'm hearing it. She knows about the Chernobyl children.

'They come from Belarus, malnourished, and they stay with host families here. They have medical and dental care and with luck their immune systems respond. Twelve years on, there are many still living in poverty, surviving on bread and water, and many after having thyroid surgery, the Chernobyl necklace they call their scar.' She draws a line across her own neck. 'Having a Chernobyl child may help Mairéad and Patrick, but Father Michael will be looking out for them.'

I tell Deirdre about the Acacia House people and the beautiful setting by the river. And only Deirdre do I tell that I'm glad to be returning, that Colin will be there for me. She doesn't ask about Tully. Nobody does. My shame came home before me.

I'm after leaving Deirdre and passing the road to Tamhnachmore because I'm taking the Strandhill Road. I watch the sun setting over the sea, the whirls of gold and grey. I'm shivering on the sea wall, the spray dripping down my face, and in my mind I'm hearing Tully at the Strand Bar, a pint and a bowl of chowder, him knowing everyone there. It's

another language they're speaking, fully sick, sweet sessions, getting nailed and epic, and the girls fawning all over him because he's Australian. The chicks are part of the job he says, charisma is what he has, like Prime Minister Hawke in Australia, a champion pisspot who had his way with the women. But it's me Tully took to his room because he didn't mix business with pleasure, and pleasure is what we knew there. Stories he told of Australian surfers, dole bludgers he called them, and how he'd never be one of them, responsible he was. And my tears now are flowing for seven years lost and there's heaviness deep like the grey of the sea that's tamping the spirit in me.

Chapter 28

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

September 13th 2001

From my seat at the bedroom window I'm watching red wattlebirds feeding on nectar and insects in the magnificent tall *Grevillea eriostachya*'s green and gold flower spikes.

I'm compelled today to return to my journal after four years of neglect – most of which have been preoccupied with work and monitoring the children's education.

How proud we were when Cassie was accepted to study Law at Murdoch University! Gordon has maintained his friendship with Minh and is knuckling down to study at last. He anticipates a gap year in South Africa before starting Environmental Science. Leo is against him going – he says the country isn't safe. We've found contentment here.

Our complacency now seems naïve. When we watched the celebration of the new millennium, and the Sydney Children's Choir singing their Dawn Mantra on the sails of the Opera House, the shivers in my spine seemed to signify the germ of new national pride. Then came the Olympics, another inkling of pride, although aspects of the opening ceremony were definitely weird. That business with lawnmowers? *Quelle horreur!*

And now our world has irrevocably changed.

Everyone was talking at once in the handover room. We had been stunned – not into silence – by the terrorist attack on the twin towers in New York last night. A TV was set up and the shocking scene replayed several times in just twenty minutes. Everyone seemed to know someone in New York. Then Cog, whom I usually admire for her levelheaded compassion, floored us.

‘In other settings, those innocent people would have been classified as ‘collateral damage’. Hiroshima, Vietnam, Mogadishu.’ There was instant and awful quiet. ‘Shall we get on with our work? How are our patients going to feel when they turn on their TVs today? How can they die with hope for their families after this?’ When no one answered, she pushed back her chair and left the silent room.

It was a sombre, anxious day, with too many TVs on, the horror replayed in too many rooms. Visitors and people with foreshortened lives fascinated by tragedy. Everywhere I go, I hear talk of Osama bin Laden, Iraq and Afghanistan. I think of Mohammed, Daoud and the others, and hope they’ll be safe in Australia. Innocents too often share the blame for the sins of their countrymen.

Chapter 29

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 2002

Bruce is staying in Perth for a week but I'm wretched company. With media talk of forthcoming war I'm sick with worry for Dave. Sunny prays for him every night, kneeling at her tiny rosewood shrine. I wish I had her faith.

Tonight Bruce has a late meeting and I'm alone watching TV, still wearing the shorts and floppy T-shirt I pulled weeds in this afternoon. A panel is discussing Afghanistan and the war on terror but I've lost concentration. I'm hearing the Afghan men at Balingup talking of their families at home, and seeing Dave as a navy sub-lieutenant. I suddenly feel very cold.

The doorbell rings and there's Bruce, armed with a bunch of red tulips, a small bottle of cognac, and a smile that doesn't match my mood. His jacket is slung over his arm and he's tugging at his tie, unbuttoning his collar. A taxi pulls away from the kerb.

'Can I come in?'

'Maybe not. I'm miserable.'

'All the more reason.' He brushes his lips over mine then follows me to the lounge. The men have disappeared from TV, and now a lone crewman with his machine gun stands at the tailgate of a warplane above dusty Afghanistan.

'Every night and every morn, Some to misery are born.' When I bend for the remote control, Bruce grabs the hem of my shorts.

'William Blake.'

'You know it?' I'm surprised.

'Auguries of Innocence. Melbourne. First year uni. Could I forget? *'Every morn and every night, Some are born to sweet delight. Paradoxes.'* He drops his jacket on the sofa and places the bottle on the table. 'Sweet delight. Would you rather I left?'

'No. Please don't. I'm sorry. You deserve better company than this.'

We find two glasses and a vase for the tulips. We sit at either ends of the sofa, our legs pressed together, the cognac warming in our hands.

He raises his glass. 'To loss of innocence. Have you considered political action? Writing to your MP? Joining a protest march?'

'Like during the Vietnam War. I remember a march in Adelaide, mostly uni students. We nurses had a world of our own. Did you ever march?'

He's slow to answer, swirling cognac in his glass. 'Now you've nailed me, Alice. Yes. I joined the protest movement – briefly. Dad saw me on the TV news chanting 'Stop the War' with the mob. Others were chanting 'Ho Chi Minh'. I was gated. Dad threatened to stop paying my uni fees. And did I rebel? No. I had my hair cut, pulled my head in, and lost my radical friends. I'm a gutless lover, Alice.'

'You had a lot to lose back then. What would you do now?'

'Now I have no choice.'

When Sonia spotted the deep red tulips with their velvety, dark centres, she wagged a warning finger. Tulips were the symbol of burning desire. The next day their heads had drooped. Bruce laughed and replaced them with a potted red geranium, a symbol of enduring friendship, he said. It will flower forever with a little care. I press a leaf between my fingers and breathe in its scent.

Bruce leaves tomorrow. He's taken me out tonight. My appetite has returned and I've made quick work of a tender beef steak, mushroom confit, sweet sugar snap peas and steamed baby vegetables – potatoes, carrots and beets. As we're waiting for dessert, Bruce leans across the table with a book he's found for me.

'Songs of Innocence and Experience: Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul. William Blake.' I turn the pages slowly, poring over the poems and their exquisite colour plates. I've never seen a book like this before.

Chapter 30

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

June 30th 2002

Despite the nip in the air, I'm in the garden again. I am most likely to find tranquility here. Whoever planted this native garden did their homework first. There is something flowering almost the year around. The display of red and gold on the pincushion hakea, *Hakea laurina*, is over, but the north facing native wisteria, *Hardenbergia comptonia* is now a mass of deep purple flowers.

There was an incident yesterday that I can't put out of my mind.

In Maritzburg, Indian Muslims were always present, but peripheral. If Muslims were in Australia when we first arrived, they were all but invisible. Perhaps like the Hazara men in Balingup, dressed simply in jeans and shirts; they lacked religious identification. But women are now trickling in, from Afghanistan and Iraq, conspicuous in their veils and long dark flowing cloaks.

The Olympic opening ceremony promoted multiculturalism, but ever since the terrorist attacks, I have felt, at times, not threatened, but less at ease with those who are different from me. Is it the series of counter-terrorism laws passed by Australia's government, or are my fears justified?

Before my late shift yesterday, I detoured into the city to buy Cassie a book. As the traffic inched its way past roadworks in Wellington Street, I watched a lone Muslim woman walking along the pavement. Some of these women have striking features, and although this one didn't seem so blessed, she carried herself with pride. Suddenly a

motorbike mounted the kerb, and sped down the footpath towards her. She ran, clumsily, gathering her skirts, dropping papers that she carried. I was horrified, but like the other drivers in the gridlock, remained behind the wheel. By the time I was able to pull off the road the woman had disappeared. I gathered some fluttering papers: unidentified Centrelink forms. I had no way of finding her and I'd never recognise her again.

September 7th 2002

Leo accuses me of self-flagellation. 'Dusting off that mantle of guilt, Gabby? Come to bed and make yourself feel better.'

I know that I'm so tired that I'm diminished as a nurse – and as a wife and mother too. My empathy quotient has dropped. We have two patients with gliomas, both over a hundred kilograms. Despite our new no lifting policy, nursing them is physically hard. And I don't seem to connect any more. Yes, Leo, I feel guilty. I'm letting down my patients, letting down the team, but in truth most of us are struggling. I remember when the hospice was buoyant, brimming with *joie de vivre*, and how infectious that was back then.

When Lisa received some health department funding earmarked for staff development, she employed Pamela, an external facilitator, to run a workshop for nurses. The workshop was a macabre mix of infantilisation and catharsis. Pamela talked about 'bones of contention', and produced a series of bone shaped cards on which to write our discontents. At the end of the session she gathered the bones into two piles. One represented powerlessness, hopelessness, exhaustion, not feeling valued, and fear. In the other was one issue alone: inadequate time to build relationships with patients and their families. Cog was outspoken.

'We've become too clinical. We're losing the spiritual. We used to have time to preserve patients' beauty, to maintain their dignity, to facilitate relationships, to enable last words to be said. And we're not caring enough for each other, valuing each other. Remember when we used to thank one another, the vollies, the kitchen, cleaners and clerks at the end of every shift?'

I hardly remember that. We are grieving for a standard of care we've lost, or at best, have compromised.

I need a holiday. A return to South Africa. I want to set my feet on Maritzburg soil, to see Gogo and my old friends. I want to talk to Ellen about palliative care. Her work seems so different to what I experience here. I want to go back to Umfolozi and

share a *braai* of boerewors, sosaties and sweet potato under the African sky, and lie beneath a mosquito net listening to lions at night. I want to hike in the Berg again. Next year.

One exception to the general malaise at Acacia House is Alice. She's a fireball of energy and her relationship with her man, Bruce, isn't responsible. Dave's Return of Service Obligation could see him sent to a war zone. Alice has joined the Anti-war Alliance and is working feverishly to prevent Australia supporting an attack on Iraq. She floods the tea room with articles denying Saddam's cache of WMDs, and demonstrating the lack of connection between Saddam Hussein and Al-Qaeda. Slogans are appearing on noticeboards. *No blood for oil! There is no evidence of WMDs! Fund Palliative Care – NOT WAR! Iraqis have children too! Violence cannot end terrorism. NO to Euthanasia: YES to War???* Today she begged us to send small bags of rice to the Prime Minister's office, with a message, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink." She's even offered to pay the postage. She distributes white flags to hang in front of our houses to demonstrate opposition to an invasion.

'If there are white flags all over Australia, surely the PM will take notice?'

The Watch Café has a white flag flying. Jon, the owner, had a brother who died in Vietnam. But some hospice people complain. A hospice isn't an appropriate place for political propaganda. Our funding is already precarious. Do we want to jeopardize that?

I often think of the Muslim woman being pursued down Wellington Street. Did she have family in Iraq?

October 13th 2002

A nightclub in Bali has been bombed, killing and maiming locals and tourists, many from Australia. Cassie sat with us weeping, watching the news on TV. She and Briony loved the gentle Balinese people. People with shocking burns are being flown to Perth for treatment. We will donate to the Red Cross appeal.

Chapter 31

Maeve

Perth, Western Australia, 2002

I'm on an evening shift, sponging a wasted man who has been with us just today. I don't know him and I never will. He was barely conscious when he was admitted this morning and his family have gone home. We will keep him comfortable and a vollie will sit with him if we have one to spare.

Remember Uncle Aidan in the sitting room, Daniel, teaching us Art before taking us to Dublin, to the Grafton and National Galleries? How strange that fifteen years later on the underside of the world I'm to be glimpsing what his Art was about, for a patient's space is like an empty canvas when they first arrive, then it fills with colour and texture as stories trickle out. Some pictures are filled like that man Brueghel's, and some are showing the sadness in life, like our own Sean Keating's. Some are hidden and blocked, like those abstract paintings you said had all the merit of pocket handkerchiefs. Others are like those Surrealists, all curiosity and symbols that aren't quite what they seem. And now it's sadness I'm feeling, Daniel, because I'm seeing more handkerchiefs in the hospice than any other Art because people are so short a time here.

Derek says he's dreaming funerals. People with no church of their own like him to lead their service, and he leaves eulogies in the tearoom for everyone to read, so on tea break we read about patients' lives and feel sorry we never quite knew them, and we see that three people in one family all know different things. In Ireland there never are

eulogies like these but I could have painted the Sligo sky with the stories told at your wake.

*

We're outside St Mary's cathedral, early for the annual service to remember people who have died, to acknowledge people's grief, and to renew our commitment to palliative care.

Brian touches my arm. 'Look at us,' he says. 'How grief brings people together. Inside, all ecumenical. And here, doctors, nurses, volunteers, cleaners, all the best of friends.'

Sonia raises her eyebrows and I'm knowing there are some who never will be her friends. 'Fred is missing,' she says. 'He always used to come to St Luke's.'

I've been to the cathedral before and it is a beautiful holy place. Sonia knows a man sitting alone at the back.

'Max, it's lovely to see you. Would you like to sit with us?'

Max shuffles in his seat. 'Thank you Sonia – it is Sonia isn't it? But ... I'm waiting for my new friend.'

Sonia's not missing a beat. They hug and we leave him smiling.

'Men,' she whispers, when we're settled in our pew. 'They grieve, but they don't hang about. And good luck to them, I say.'

I'm not arguing with Sonia here in the Cathedral but I'm thinking of Howard, how he grieved for his wife and how reading was his comfort before he lost his sight. An ensemble called Angel Sounds are playing *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*, and it's surely the harp and flute and cello that make the sweetest music of all. More people are taking their seats and I'm seeing families I remember well but others whose names I've lost. There's a procession of clergy in white and then there's time to remember people grieving after the Bali bombing. 'Thrust into loss and bereavement' is what the Reverend says, and I'm thinking what a shock that must be. Then it's the saddest hymns we're singing, *brother, sister, let me serve you... let you be my servant too... we are pilgrims and companions on a journey... I will hold the Christ-light for you*; and I'm glad Wesley Church Choir is swelling the hymns because they're shrinking in some of us. And then a Silver Chain doctor reads *Walking with Grief*, it's Celtic I'm sure, it pleads with us not to hurry with grief, to be gentle with one who is grieving and gentle

with ourselves too. And Daniel, I'm not here for my grief, twelve years it is since you died, but I didn't know to be gentle with myself then.

A prayer to God through Jesus Christ jolts me from my dream. This service is beautiful for me, but how would Patrick be feeling? I hope he would be comforted but it could make him angry. What about families of Mrs Ng the Buddhist, the proud Muslim Mr Aziz, and Frederick my lovely atheist who died contentedly?

Then we're lighting candles for people who have died in the last year and for victims of terrorism. I cheated and lit one for you Daniel because I'll not let your flame go out. When the main cathedral lights are turned off hundreds of candles flicker, dancing their light and shadows too on the marble, the brass, and the bishop, and we pray together to God, and I'm remembering Father Michael's blessings for people he called anonymous Christians and I'm thinking Patrick to be one of them now.

Then all of us who work in palliative care are asked to stand and renew our commitment; if we weren't committed we wouldn't be here, but I'm standing anyway, reading the lines, compassion for human suffering, commitment through palliative care, and praying for a few more staff on the side because terminal commitment is burnout.

At supper people are hugging me, splashing their tea, thanking me again and again, and lovely it is to see you, yes a beautiful service it was, and how are you getting on, yes the grief is there every day, and do be gentle with yourself, a holiday, that's lovely, and I'm feeling so sad for you, life losing its meaning like this, desperate lonely you seem, and then I'm out of my depth and thank God Derek rescues me. And I'm nudging Sonia; the man with the crimson cheeks, was he the son of that man in seven? And the woman in the navy suit, she's familiar. Faces I remember, room numbers even, but too many people have come and gone and I cannot remember them all.

Colin, bless him, is waiting at home watching a video. Our informal living arrangements are pleasing to me but they wouldn't please Mammy or Dad. Colin's not the marrying kind. He says he wants independence. I sit on the floor between his legs and he massages my shoulders.

'How was the service?'

I'm melting into his hands. 'Beautiful it was. And your day?'

He flicks off the TV. 'There's a job coming up in Broome. Might take six months. Next year, in the dry. Coming?'

I haven't been home in four years and Patrick's been begging me back. The dry in Broome is summer in Ireland.

'Sligo's calling for me now. But I'll be back again please God.'

Chapter 32

Alice

Perth Western Australia, 2002

The anti-war rally is in Fremantle. Derek, Cog, Sunny and I take the train. Cog, more than anyone, knows my opposition to this war. Some in the crowd are tie-dyed to the sixties in their cheesecloth, hemp and dreads and see-through harem pants. They could have joined the Salvos with their tambourine and drumming skills.

We're dressed more sedately – Cog is even wearing her heels. Why should yesterday's hippies be the only opponents to war? The cameras have no interest in our banners – Cog is waving \$\$\$ *not for war but Health!* Derek has *Blessed are the Peacemakers*, and I'm holding a bleeding purple heart, painted with ancient bottles of gentian violet and mercurochrome.

On the TV news at night, the anti-war pollie on the podium is upstaged by a solitary heckler, there is a brief glimpse of a banner, *No War for Oil*, but the one that captivates the cameraman is a simple *Fuck War*. The rally in Melbourne where Bruce has marched has thousands crowding the streets. Perth seems irrelevant.

*

It may be Christmas, but my only decoration is a wreath on the door that Dave made in year four. The baubles are hanging in the passage at the hospice but Christmas has lost its shine. Maeve and I are on a short morning shift, and only three of our patients are

well enough to return home for Christmas dinner. The rest have been with us for less than a week and neither of us knows them well.

A family brings us cold champagne and I pop the cork before handover, pre-empting Maria's argument that it should be donated to the raffle. Maeve's leading us in a rollicking *Twelve Days of Christmas*. The afternoon staff arrive to a melee of turtle doves, leaping lords, swimming swans and Merry Christmas all around.

I give Maeve a hug. 'Thanks Maeve. You go off now to that true love of yours and I'll hand over. Merry Christmas.'

I check one last patient before leaving. Her daughter is at the bedside.

'It was good to hear your fun out there. We'd hate Mum to die in a dismal place. It wouldn't suit, would it Mum?' Tears are welling in her eyes and I put my arm around her.

'You could have joined in. I can never remember all those lords, ladies and assorted birds. Would you like a glass of champagne?'

I'm the last morning staff member to leave. A young man with a tan and dreadlocked hair is waiting at the hospice door. He has the look of a late riser about him. In his hand is a small Christmas gift.

'Is this the hospice?' he asks. 'Are you a nurse? Does Maeve work here? Could you give her this?' He doesn't meet my eye.

'You can leave it at the desk,' I say. 'You've missed her today.'

'No. You take it,' he says. He thrusts the package at me and walks awkwardly away.

Bruce's turkey is served in Melbourne and Dave's on the Indian Ocean. I arrive late and alone for lunch at Cog's, in time to see the blue flames dying on Gabby's brandy pudding. Martin gives me a hug, a glass of champagne and a raised, twisted eyebrow.

'It's a bloody heavy Christmas we're having. We've done Saddam Hussein and his WMDs in convoys terrorising the sea. You're lucky you missed that one. Now we're onto Africa. Leo's three sheets to the wind.'

I drop a donation into the Christmas bowl for Gabby's South African hospice, and take a seat next to Gordon.

Leo's more choleric than usual. 'The country's a basket case. Vrot. The president denies the link between HIV and AIDS! Public patients can't access

antiretrovirals. It's taken a court order for the government to supply Nevirapine to prevent maternal-foetal transmission!

'But Leo, there is progress. South Africa won their case for cheap generic medicines. Isn't that grounds for hope?' Cog. Who else would take on Leo?

Leo gives a dismissive flick of his wrist. 'Ninety thousand die each year!'

He reaches for his beer and Gabby's hand is on his arm, her voice, as always, placating. 'And those dying need palliative care. Thank you everyone for your donations. The money will buy things we take for granted here: aqueous cream, soap, multivitamins, Theophen, Panado, Sejo porridge. And Community Care Workers to care for AIDS patients at home.'

'Don't families look after them?' Martin's topping up my glass.

'Sometimes. But families often turn their backs. HIV/AIDS brings disgrace. So people conceal their serostatus, pretend they just have TB, and deny themselves proper treatment.'

I've seen it here. The stigma, the shame. But that was ten years ago. We don't see AIDS patients now. Cog puts a plate of prawns in front of me and I raise my glass to the table. 'Happy Christmas everyone.' Silence.

'I'm going, anyway.' Gordon's voice next to me. 'I'm taking a gap year. I'm eighteen. You can't stop me. I've been saving.'

Leo turns towards us, the colour rising in his neck. 'You'll need saving! You're not going.'

Gabby reaches for Leo's arm again. 'This is no one else's business. We will discuss it at home.'

I join Cog who's fiddling with the stereo. 'Have the fireworks just begun or did I miss the main display?' She casts me a wicked grin and presses the play button. Joy to the World fortissimo.

*

Valentine's Day, a bucket of hearts and a heady phone call from Bruce, and today I'm back in the city, protesting again. We must prevent this war. The heat is up and so are the numbers – by about ten thousand – and the tie-dyes are in the minority. Off-duty hospice staff and volunteers are milling on the post office steps. I haven't seen the vollies this wound up since Princess Diana died. Maeve and Colin are in Forrest Place

with *Workers against the War*. Gabby arrives with Gordon and Cassie but Leo is out selling houses. I'm surprised when Martin turns up.

'Never thought I'd see you here.'

'I'm against an invasion, Alice. I'm not against defence. I'll be just as sad as you if Dave gets caught up in this.'

'When you're in the machine you have no choice.'

'Aren't we choosing for him? Isn't that why we're protesting? Democracy at work. We believe we can make a difference, that politicians listen.'

'I don't believe. It's blind hope.'

A vibrant band of percussionists gets us onto our feet, belting out their rhythms on rubbish bins and recycled trash. As we join the energised crowd of marchers, for a moment, I do believe. I wave my bleeding heart.

Chapter 33

Maeve

Perth, Western Australia, 2003

Is it possible, Daniel, to extinguish love? Father Michael taught us forgiveness to smother the hatred in us – and a hard lesson that was to learn – but what of smothering love that lingers, that roils around inside you, then settles there beside your heart and simply refuses to die? I doused mine with anger and poisoned it with bitterness, then spread a blanket of sadness so thick that never should it breathe, then Colin planted a new gentle love where the old one wilted, and Father Michael knows about that.

So why is it Daniel that my feelings for Tully, stifled, poisoned and doused, remain in the heart of me?

Alice met me when I arrived at work. ‘There’s gift for you in the staffroom, Maeve, from some surfer-looking bloke.’ My heart was then filling with jelly again and pumping hard enough to burst. I took the tiny parcel into the garden and opened it alone. Silence these twelve years and then comes this gift, exquisite it is, a single pearl necklet on a silver chain, delicate as a snowdrop, whatever was I to think? The small card carried no message, but just the one word, *Tully*.

Only Gabby knew of Tully because I’d confessed to her on night duty. The night is a time when defences are weak and secrets that are better guarded by day sometimes make their escape. Gabby doesn’t share her intimate life or anyone else’s either. She watches her words. It was Alice who teased me about a secret lover before handover in the staffroom until the redness crept to the roots of my hair and prickled my scalp with shame.

For two months I did nothing. The pearl lay, barely touched, in its box beneath the mattress. Just once I slipped the chain around my neck and it felt electric on my skin. Such was the beguilement of this tiny necklet that sleep was then lost to me. I could not tell Colin.

At last I telephoned his mother, and yes, Tully was staying there. Go kindly, Maeve, she said, but I lost a hold on any kindness when I heard his voice, there was anger welling up from a sump in me, and I yelled at him, 'Where the feckin' hell have you been, coaxing me here to the end of the world, you said you'd be waiting, and Jesus it's a lovely gift Tully but how dare you do this to me?'

And today I'm after my morning shift, changed and ready for a swim, stifling hot it is in the car, and he's walking up Acacia Drive beyond the hospice gates. I know him at once, his dreadlocks the same and sunglasses hiding his eyes, but the thrust of his walk has weakened as if his pride has abandoned him. He has a weathered and drawn look about him and he's thinner than ever he was in Sligo. There is something pitiful there, and I'm confused at the sight of him but I know hospice eyes are gawking and tongues set to overdrive, so 'get in' I say and with barely a word we drive to City Beach, and thanks be to God without calamity because my heart is threatening rupture and a stricture is gathering in my throat like the string on a poor man's purse.

'You go on,' he says when I lock the car, and I'm not sorry to leave him there and dash through the dune path alone. I drop my shirt and sarong on the burning sand, and run and dive and swim until there's no more breath in me. At last I turn back and see him coming through the dunes. His gait is awkward, stumbling, his hands deep in his pockets, and then he sits like a lifeguard there on the sand staring out to sea. I strike south again with slow, long strokes. For twelve years I have pictured this day, a chance meeting I thought, but my mind's eye has always failed me and each canvas has been wiped clean.

I walk slowly back along the beach, weaving my way through bounding dogs chasing sticks and balls. Tully sits like a rock on the sand. The sinking sun brings a shiver to my skin and I can feel his eyes on me. I wrap my sarong around my shoulders and sit by him, not so close.

'Tell me everything,' I say, and he needs no more invitation, his story rushing ahead of him like the face of the waves he rides, how he never finished his science degree, he couldn't see the point, but he was too ashamed to tell me, it was best to make a break he thought, and surfing was his life, not here in Perth but Indonesia, Margaret River, Gnoraloo. He's not seen a winter since Sligo. He's done hard yakka, he says,

earning good coin, weeks at sea on the fishing boats, Lancelin, Geraldton, Carnarvon, and picking fruit at Carnarvon too, bananas, mangoes and melons, and then grapes at Margaret River, and the bushies are best down there, he says, best weed anywhere. And he talks of Gnaraloo past Carnarvon, a nothingness next to heaven, his Engel fridge and Holden ute, the white desert sand and freedom, and awesome waves that reach down the reef five hundred yards or more, epic, solid, eight foot or twelve foot plus, a shame I never learnt to surf. Pods of dolphins there. Then fishing for tailor, trevally and snapper and always the campfire and beers with the mates and retelling the waves of the day. And hooking up with other chicks as if I was going to care. His talk is all brass and bluster but I'm hearing a rasping edge to his voice that's dulling the shine of it all.

'And you, Maeve,' he says, 'you haven't returned to Sligo. What's keeping you in Perth? There's no ring on your finger. You haven't found a man to love?'

'It is no business of yours, Tully, but yes, I have a man to love. And I am soon to return to Sligo, but not for long. Colin is good to me.'

'Good? Good? By hell, that must be exciting,' he laughs. 'How do you contain yourself?'

Never have I slapped a man - or anyone for that matter - but a devil takes hold of my hand in that moment and in the second my hand stings on his skin my anger effaces itself, and I'm seeing us together at Strandhill again where we're wrestling and laughing and I'm discovering excitement for the first time in my life and knowing how that word 'sensational' means the senses all coming alive.

Tully doesn't wrestle with me now. He is brushing the sand from his face and straightening his sunglasses. He reaches into his pocket. Would I like to share a joint? I tell him I don't do pot any more, I know it can do your head in and make you irresponsible and cruel. Then I glare at him, 'Take your sunglasses off. I want to see your eyes,' and I know there's cruelty in me too.

He lifts his sunglasses onto his head. I'm expecting to see defiance, but I can no longer read the deep of his eyes.

'Irresponsible, cruel', he says over and over, chanting is how it sounds, then we sit still in our own reflecting and watch the last of the sun and the faint shimmer on the sea. Then I ask him why is it after twelve years that now he is back in Perth and why didn't he stay away?

For minutes he's quiet then he reaches down and removes his runners and lifts a leg of his jeans, and even there in the fading light I'm shocked at the sight of it, the stretch of muscle wastage, his leg a landscape of red-purple and white, shining patches

of skin grafts and filigrees of ugly scars spreading down to his toes – of which only four remain, and they with a withering look.

‘Holy Jesus,’ I say. ‘Whatever happened to you, Tully?’ And I’m hearing now the change in my voice because it’s sorrow I’m feeling for him.

He isn’t meeting my eyes. He could tell a tale, he says, a fishing boat slipping its moorings, trapping and smashing his legs, and his compensation claim, or the mate he saved from a shark in the surf and the bravery medal he’ll win. He called this ‘skiting’ in Sligo, it was part of his hero repertoire, and it pulled in fast the chicks from the pub into his surfing class.

And then he blurts out, ‘I never saved a mate. It was all my own fucking fault. Driving too bloody fast on the bulldust, fucking roos everywhere. Gutful of piss. Rolled the ute. Total write-off. And not just the ute. The end of life as I know it.’ Then he pulls his sunglasses down from his head and reaches into his pocket again.

End of life. What does he know of the end of life? And again I think of your last days, Daniel, and how Tully never came to meet you, how he was protecting himself from the end of a life and that never is a natural thing.

‘I’m so sorry, Tully, but praise God you’re alive,’ I say. In my mind I’m seeing him fierce scared, his utility rolling over and over, alone out there in the desert, hitting a rock or tree or a kangaroo. Or was he too far gone for fear? Then suddenly it occurs to me, ‘You were alone, were you Tully?’

He has another pull on his rollie. ‘Am now.’ And then there’s quiet between us.

He says no more so after a time I ask him about surfing with just four toes, and I think at first he hasn’t heard me, but then comes a tide full of flotsam from the last year of his life, surgery, gangrene, rods and pins, physiotherapy and pain, and no work for a man with a gammy leg and how the therapist tells him it is determination he needs, and of course he can surf again. But he cannot drive, it’s his licence he’s lost, and it’s then the tears stream down his cheeks because it was a chick in the ute there with him, both of them with a skinful, speeding and snogging and just fucking stupid and he’ll never forgive himself. And I fold my arms around him and feel his tears on my skin and my old love for him is there, but it is also love and pity and sadness for what has become of him and for everything we have lost.

You might ask, Daniel, what there was to gain and I cannot answer your question. Colin had left for his job in Broome and it was natural to take Tully home. You cannot leave an injured dog on the side of the road to die.

Chapter 34

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 2003

There's a huddle of staff in the carpark when I go to unlock my bike. Nurses, vollies, the cleaner Dolores, and Ron, the maintenance man.

'Have you heard, Alice? Sylvie was at the photocopier and overheard Lisa on the phone. There was a Management meeting last night. Sounds like beds are closing.'

'Management! Cluster bomb council more like.'

'That vollie Mary knows someone on the board. It's funding issues again.'

'How can they close beds? There aren't enough palliative beds in Perth. We're always full. Silver Chain's been on the phone all day trying to get patients in, people not coping at home. Has Lisa seen the waiting list? And they want to close our beds?'

'The last two nurses to leave haven't been replaced.'

'And Melaleuca's reduced its hours.'

'Are our jobs secure? I've a mortgage and two kids to feed.'

'That productivity woman was here last week. What was her name? Clarkson. The facts and figures chick. Quantifiable.'

'Accountable.'

'Formidable.'

'Throughput.'

I ring Cog once I'm home. Lisa's calling a meeting. She's heard there's been a leak. Cog refuses to discuss it.

There must be some mistake.

Our tiny lecture theatre is crammed and everyone is talking. Derek's appealing for calm. He's reading something called 'Oceans' from that *Divine Beauty* book that's like another Bible to him.

'I have a feeling that my boat has struck, down there in the depths, against a great thing. And nothing happens! Nothing ... Silence ... Waves ... Nothing happens? Or has everything happened, And are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?'

Lisa steps onto the podium. The room is hushed. She's lost her usual poise and her voice breaks when she begins to speak. For over ten years she's been staving off threats to Acacia House and Melaleuca. She thanks us for our dedication to care during restructuring and staff reduction. She's striven to keep the hospice afloat. Her voice is wavering. I feel so sorry for her. This really must be the end. Derek hands her a glass of water. We should be proud of the way we have acceded to demands for accountability and best practice. Striving to maintain excellent care has often come at personal cost. And now, she really breaks down. The tissue box is out. I know nothing of her own suffering – she's been remote to us for so long. She composes herself again. Our commitment hasn't been matched by those responsible for funding. The health industry is determined to integrate palliative care into mainstream medicine, to focus on education, to reach people in rural and remote areas and to promote further hospice home care. At the expense of Acacia House and Melaleuca. The charities that have carried us have confirmed they will support us no further. It is with the greatest sadness that she brings this news as she believes the hospice community and ethos is integral to a healthy society. She anticipates closure within the year. We will continue to provide excellent care until then. She will assist us in our redeployment. The papers will have the story tomorrow. We should be wary of journalists.

We were angry at first, now there is shock and dismay. Questions are coming like bullets. Where will the dying go when their families can't cope at home? We're much cheaper than hospital beds! It makes no sense at all.

Chapter 35

Gabby

Perth, Western Australia

March 18th 2003

I've brought my journal to the beach. I need to hear the sea. On the other side of this pounding ocean is South Africa.

How, in a few short months, can life change so dramatically? Where last year I felt in control, now I have a sense of predestination, as if life is a gruelling story that long predates us, a sad predetermined narrative within which we have no power.

Gordon is adamant. He will spend a year in Maritzburg as a volunteer with the Natal Parks Board before commencing Environmental Science at university, and as sign of his commitment he will leave his beloved dog Jonty with Minh. Quietly, I support Gordon, but Leo's jaundiced view of South Africa has deepened in the last year. He has a daunting set of crime statistics, supplied by the exodus of chicken runners buying houses here, people just like us, justifying their flight. Twenty thousand murders, half a million assaults, two hundred thousand robberies, fourteen thousand carjackings, ninety thousand car thefts.

Leo fails to understand Gordon. Crime is his rationale for returning, not his reason to remain in Perth. Crime has driven away the educated and skilled, and Gordon wants to take something back. He has even suggested university in Maritzburg, but not within earshot of Leo.

Gordon, unlike Cassie, never quite left South Africa. His team won the school debate last year in favour of drug decriminalisation, his argument focussing on South Africa where cartels and the illegal drug trade are the primary drivers of crime. Gordon eloquently demonstrated that the harm attributed to drug abuse is far exceeded by the crime that supports it. I was so proud of him. His team cited the success of decriminalisation in Portugal and that country's winning decision to focus on rehabilitation. Leo was furious. How to drive society into the mire! Drug users are criminals! How to create drug tourism! How to fill our mental institutions!

Leo, they're full already.

That Cassie helped Gordon prepare his argument further enraged Leo. What the hell are they teaching her in her law degree? The Faculty's a hotbed of communism.

There has been discord in our home ever since the debate but Gordon's embarrassing defiance in front of our friends at Christmas suggested more than the standard dissent of a rebellious teenager. Leo was so angry that he proposed foregoing our trip to South Africa during Gordon's placement. Let the boy find the truth the hard way! But the story was already written for the torrential sorrows to come.

There was appalling news at work. Acacia House will be closing. We're giving too much to too few, and palliative funding must be more widely spread. That the spread will be thin is inevitable. There have been numerous appeals to the Minister, but closure is certain. The combined charities that support us are no longer willing to fund the standard of our care. I am perplexed by the funding arrangements. Surely the health department is compelled to uphold the national standard in palliative care provision?

Leo says that sale of the hospice property by the river will make a killing. He should be more careful with his words.

Behind the calm façade of Acacia House is a vortex of grief and anger. We need more hospices, not fewer! Who will provide respite care? Where will people die if their families or friends can't cope at home? In impoverished regimented nursing homes poorly versed in palliative care? Competing with the acutely ill in understaffed public hospitals? Oncology wards have improved, but I remember the tattered dignity there.

*

Derek opened the team meeting today with a Buddhist text. He seemed close to tears.

This existence of ours is as transient as autumn clouds.
To watch the birth and death of beings is like looking at the
movements of a dance.
A lifetime is like a flash of lightning in the sky,
Rushing by, like a torrent down a steep mountain.

He likened how we felt to anticipatory grief, but urged us to maintain hope. We were seeing the death of the hospice, a friend who had nurtured us, who had made us better people. We now owed it to society to return the privilege of caring for the dying – and to support it in the process. Sonia was sceptical. ‘Great sentiments, Derek, but is society ready? Where will people go to learn? Don’t we need a centre of excellence?’

I weep for the loss of the hospice. Africa may have made me, but I’ve been remodelled by Acacia House, by the community there. I feel as if I’m losing a precious part of myself.

March 20th 2003

The latest ghastly news today: the US has invaded Iraq. ‘Shock and awe’ they’re calling it, blasting onto our TV screens like some crazed computer game. Leo always said it was inevitable, that the hopes of the global protest movement were fundamentally naive. I hate him being right. I loathe the media spectacle, the embedded journalism. And Martin was wrong, democracy doesn’t work. Poor Alice.

I will resign from Acacia House. I’ll be in the vanguard of natural attrition. I need to go home to South Africa and turn my back on this disappointing world.

Chapter 36

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 2004

Bruce thinks I'm depressed. I call it down in the dumps, the doldrums, melancholia or sadness. Coping when my work is my life and my workplace is stripped away. All of us are grieving. We're losing a part of ourselves, our community, our friends, our identity, our commitment to a better way.

Dad used to say, 'get on yer bike'. Sure, with a heavy headwind, deflated tyres and a handful of sand in the cogs. Cog. I thought we had solidarity, that we'd fight the closure together, but then she left so fast our resistance was gutted. Was she given a redundancy cheque? She's bought herself a new car. She says she's no renegade, change was inevitable, palliative care had to go mainstream, not be the preserve of the few. But she wasted no time setting up at Swan Private. There's suspicion everywhere. Who will benefit? I thought I could trust Cog.

'Penny for them.'

'What?'

'Penny for your thoughts. Something Mum used to say.'

'She didn't value your thoughts very highly.'

After a lazy afternoon at South Cottesloe I'm watching the winter sunset with Bruce. Surfer-ants on the apricot sea catch their final waves, paddle in to the shore, and dash up the sand with their boards. I shiver and snuggle into him.

'Do you?'

'What?'

‘Value my thoughts.’

‘Very much.’ I pull myself in closer and dig my icy feet into the sand. Heavy clouds are gathering behind us.

‘Then come to live in Melbourne. What’s to keep you here? Not the hospice any more.’

‘I know, but I can’t walk away. Acacia House is more than a hospice. It’s community. It’s deep in my skin. It made me who I am. And patients have given me more in these years than I have ever given them. Trust. Care. Easing total pain. It works both ways. Families too. Everyone feels the same. It’s what makes us worthy. It’s our community.’

‘It’s over, Alice. It’s over.’

I’m close to tears, shivering. Bruce is holding his coat around me. ‘I love you, Alice. And I want more of your love. There are hospices and communities in Melbourne. You’re going to have to let go here. Acacia House is dying. And Dave no longer ...’

I won’t let myself think about Mum and Dad but Bruce has touched on something else. Dave always returns to Perth on leave, so why would I move to Melbourne? And if he were medevacked ...

‘You know that when you love something you need to set it free?’

‘Referring to Dave or yourself?’

‘Or Acacia House.’

Our day was intended to buoy me up but now it’s Bruce who’s sinking. At home he pulls out *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, and flicks to ‘A Poison Tree’. He’s been reading ahead of me.

I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.

Every night and every morn some to misery are born. I’ll spare Bruce that line tonight.

*

Acacia House feels alien, like a family after a quarrel; the volunteers, clerical staff, therapists – everyone is grieving and there’s anger everywhere. It’s quiet, there is no laughter, not even the usual birdsong. Bruce has lost patience with me and returned to Melbourne angry. I need my friends to understand.

I put a carrot cake in the fridge and wander into the staffroom. Nurses writing notes in silence.

‘Hi Alice. Nice weekend?’

‘Yeah. You?’

‘Read the communication book.’

There was a time when we used to talk. I skim a lengthy memo from Lisa. Equitable health provision, accelerated downsizing, redundancy, restructuring, redeployment, EOIs Swan Private and Canning Private ...

‘What’s EOI?’

‘Expression of interest.’

‘Not interested. What will happen to Oscar and Nerfy?’

‘They’re putting in EOIs.’

I return to the fridge, take my cake and a knife, and carry it back to the staffroom.

‘Here, I made this for us.’

The nurses look up, puzzled. ‘What’s the occasion?’

‘Never used to need one.’

Handover is tense. Nurses are looking for other positions or applying to work at Swan Private where ten medical beds have been designated palliative. There’s a letter from Lisa in my pigeonhole asking for my intentions. We’re down to eighteen patients and an uncertain dwindling staff. Sonia is furious.

‘Yesterday we had four deaths, four groups of grieving families, and four admissions. Only two of us out there, Maeve and me.’

Memories collapse and resurface. Beds closing, staff leaving, art works falling from walls. Haven’t these paintings been donated? I remember Arthur who adored that stick-figured print of a Drysdale hanging over his bed. The only person who ever did. What will happen to the patchwork quilts donated by the quilters’ guild? Memories cling to paraphernalia and place. Where will they go when we leave?

It’s bizarre, but Lisa’s resurrected the journal club that folded when our work overwhelmed us. CVs will be more impressive if our presentations are included. Today Maeve and Sonia are reviewing a *Lancet* article on dignity. Inpatients are more likely to suffer loss of dignity than those being nursed at home. Autonomy, independence and dignity can be better maintained there. Patients whose dignity is compromised have less will to live. People need to feel valued and honoured, but that’s difficult when they

sense they're a burden, dependent on others for bathing, for their appearance, and pain control. I'm watching Lisa and I'm suddenly angry.

'What is this about? We've been so good at dignity! It only fell apart when you tore our staff away.' My voice is rising but I can't stop myself. 'And isn't dignity why we have – or had – respite care? Why we had the day hospice? To ease the burden for caregivers? Where will people go now?'

I have to leave the room. I've compromised my own dignity.

We meet at The Watch after work. I'm missing Cog, and curiously, Gabby. When Sonia goes for drinks, I join Maeve beneath a picture of a cheeky-faced gypsy girl with a fob watch between her breasts.

'Sorry I cracked back there.'

'We're all of us cracking.'

'Are you writing EOIs, Maeve?'

'I won't be going elsewhere, Alice, I can't do this grief, Acacia House, the memories, I can't stay to see it close. It will break my heart, so it will. I'll be going home for a while. Ireland's booming now, and I'll visit my brother Patrick; first he's with those Humanists and now it's the Buddhists, can you believe it? The country's crazed on pleasure, everyone with their fancy fast cars, new bathrooms and huge TVs – and then, sweet Jesus, Patrick's backing the Buddha. I'll see Daddy and Mammy in Sligo. Have a day on the bog like old times bringing in the turf. And there'll be Grandad on his bike to the shop, with his pounds and his punts in his jar at home and now it's euros he's pinned in his pocket. And Patrick will take me to a retreat, it's for grief and bereavement he says, and I'm not minding that idea.'

'You'll come back? What about Colin?' I don't ask about the other man.

Sonia interrupts with our drinks. She's been talking with volunteers at a window table. 'Here's to dignity. And The Watch.'

'Where will this place get its custom once the hospice closes?'

'The clientele will be better heeled. The vollies saw the plans at the council. Luxury apartments with river views and jetties for the boats.'

A wake was half-planned for Acacia House: a party for staff and volunteers, former patients' relatives, benefactors and representatives of the charities that had supported us. In the end, it never happened; no one was in the mood. We had moved from denial and

bargaining, and accepted that the hospice was closing. Defending our cause was futile and we were scattering then like angry ants, life-times of work destroyed.

*

At Swan Private our patients have single rooms, each with a view of bare walls. Windows for light, not air. Tea comes in paper cups. There is no fresh air, balcony, garden or birdsong, no diversion therapy or happy hour trolley, no lounges or rooms for grieving families and no crèche or corner to comfort a child whose mother may be next to die. Ten beds do not a hospice make. It's a hospital fuelled by frantic staff condemned to double shifts, drifting into incompetence after ten hours on the job. The best we can give in such circumstances won't ever be good enough. Anxiety is everywhere, and we yearn and grieve for Acacia House, the fresh air, and the calm of the garden. Solidarity brings us here, but we're unhappy in this sterile space where no Oscar or Nerfy roam, where patients' bells ring like fire alarms during the day and night, where most people die within three days and a good death is a relative thing.

Home is hot. I set up a fan on the front verandah but the mozzies are turbocharged; they'd navigate through a cyclone for a swig of my succulent blood. There's no one to bring me tea. Bruce used to drink his strong and hot in the chipped Vasco Pyjama mug.

Dave's been home for two weeks but hasn't stayed with me. He's entertained Grace, his mahjong friend, showing her Perth and Margaret River and dining at wineries. They've come twice for tea.

I forget to feed and water Bruce's geranium. It survives despite the neglect, and thanks me with a flush of flowers when I remember it again. Enduring friendship, as he said.

Chapter 37

Gabby

Pietermaritzburg, Natal, South Africa

October 10th 2003

With the sun on my back in Gogo's garden, I'm enjoying again the view over Maritzburg to our very own Table Mountain. Below me the city is flecked with mauve, maroon and crimson, the early jacarandas and schotias already on display.

Gogo is having a rare afternoon nap, allowing me my tea alone. Lindiwe, who cares so well for Gogo, is spending three weeks with her family. I'm ashamed to realize how easily we slipped into our old ways soon after we arrived: leaving dishes unwashed, rooms untidy, washing and ironing waiting. The initial discomfiture we felt lasted but a few days.

Last week the red-chested cuckoo arrived from the north of Africa. Piet-my-vrou, piet-my-vrou. Gogo's response was amusing. 'Lindiwe's teaching me Zulu,' she said. 'It's *uPhezukomkhono*, not piet-my-vrou!' As in the past, we rang old friends to tell them we'd heard the cuckoo's call although we hadn't caught sight of it. A little like the cuckoo, we have returned and settled into Gogo's nest as if it were our home.

A pair of long-tailed widowbirds, *Euplectes progne*, keep returning to the pond where I sit. Last evening, Gogo, Gordon, Leo and I watched them in silence together. When the pair had flown away, Gogo resumed the patter that has scarcely abated since our arrival.

'What sexual show-offs they are! Take a lesson, Gordon. A fine black long-tailed coat and crimson epaulettes will always attract the ladies.'

Gordon has received many such lessons: remember, there's safety in numbers; to thine own self be true; a leader should be like a shepherd, always behind his flock.

I remember on night duty at Acacia House, the wandering man 'following him there behind me'. Am I a leader or a follower or am I led from behind? How long are we to remain in South Africa? Seeing Zulus holding their heads high, working in former whites only jobs, gives me such hope for the country. But patience is required.

November 8th 2003

Leo is surprising me. Having revived his old passion and rejoined the canoeing fraternity, he's no longer a conduit for chicken-runner negativity – he's behaving like a religious convert! He's helped Gogo make a generous donation to Taddy Blecher's (almost free) university in Johannesburg where black students are successfully working towards their business degrees. He's thrown himself back into real estate and restored a number of friendships. Australia, he now says, is a pushover – it holds no challenge for us; the work to be done is in South Africa, particularly in education. We have secure investments in Australia so we can manage some philanthropy. I'm not sure what he has in mind.

Today I met Ellen at Msunduzi Hospice to discuss some part-time work. I was met by a fine young Zulu nurse I didn't recognise. It was Jabulile. She has completed her nursing degree, is working with Zulu staff at the Edendale branch, and has invited me to visit. I might.

January 30th 2004

Dazzling yellow peanut butter cassias growing on the Edendale roadsides will remain in my memory like bold parentheses around today.

Soaked in perspiration, travelling without air-conditioning, I joined Jabulile visiting her Edendale patients, all of whom have HIV/AIDS. The tiny hospice car struggled with the gradient, but Jabulile deftly double-declutched, slipping from second to first. We rose high above the valley floor, above the palms and mealie gardens, whining our way past hot-as-hell houses, boxes of concrete block, their spiky protective fencing laced with razor wire. Further up the hill the soil was rich with clay, but little was growing there. Fences were absent or broken, and animals had trampled the soil. Jabulile sounded her horn at cows and goats on the road. Nguni cattle! It's twelve years since I've seen their speckled hides ambling on roads like these. We waved to a small boy herding his flock – he stared, and then shyly responded. A single spreading

acacia, a relic from a happier time, was the only shade on that hill. How did it miss the swing of the axe when this government housing was built? Almost at the top of Imbali, my spirits sank further as I gazed down the valley over hundreds of matchbox houses to the haze of Maritzburg.

Jabulile parked opposite a rusting corrugated iron tuckshop selling mealies, bananas and apples, sweets and bottles of fizz. She grabbed a bag of food from the boot, locked every door, then led me up a steep, rain-rutted path between grey cement block houses, past shrieking children in pepper-red T-shirts splashing water at a communal tap. It was thirty-eight degrees in the valley and there was no relief high in the hills of Imbali, not even on the scabby rooftop of that world so different from mine.

The door was open to the single roomed house, its walls unpainted and bare. *Sawubona*. A trained caregiver, Mncedisi, who calls in daily from the clinic, was sitting opposite Lillian, an HIV/AIDS patient with advanced pulmonary tuberculosis. She was forty-two. Lillian gave us a broad gingivitis-stricken smile and lifted a wrinkled hand to brush flies from her gums. She sat on the edge of a mattress on the floor, her bony collar bones protruding above a faded pink cotton dress, her skeletal legs like a pair of crutches outstretched on the hard cement floor. Sheets of newspaper made a floor mat where flies hovered over bottles and jugs, a tin plate and cutlery. A light switch dangled above her head, suspended from exposed wires, but everything else she needed was spread about the floor: a washing tub, a plastic drum of water, and a crusted two-plate electric hob raised on a pair of bricks. In one corner, a low shelf was piled with pots, pans and plastic. In the opposite corner, her toilet.

Lillian stayed on her mattress. She could no longer stand alone. Like a pre-walking baby, she bum-shuffles across the floor to cook or to go to the toilet, causing deep and painful sores to form on her heels and her folded buttocks.

Jabulile talked with her in Zulu, but when she introduced me, Lillian spoke in clear, dignified English to tell me she used to work as a maid, and saved money to educate her children. Education is the most important thing. Now her three children have well-paid jobs – in Durban and Johannesburg.

The concrete-block house was cooler than the cloying air outside, but would heat up in the course of the day. The windows couldn't be opened because Lillian couldn't reach to close them. She needed to be locked inside to keep out thieves and rapists. Neighbours never come near, except to steal her food, but there is one kind woman who washes her clothes who is also HIV positive.

Lillian told me in careful English how her children are successful and busy in the city, that once she stayed with her daughter but will never go there again. The uncles all abused her. Tears pooled in the wells of her eyes.

Jabulile related her medical history. Although Mncedisi took her to the clinic once, Lillian can't commence TB treatment because there's no one to regularly help her into a wheelchair and inch her down the steep hill. The clinic cannot visit her – they simply don't have the staff. Lillian's CD4 count is below two hundred; she should be treated for TB, then commence antiretroviral drugs (ARVs), but policy demands commitment from the family to undertake AIDS and antiretroviral education, someone to take responsibility before treatment can be commenced. Lillian has no one.

The doctors at the clinic have requested a Disability Grant, but Welfare need to assess her and there is no one to take her to Maritzburg for assessment. Welfare need her bones assessed before they'll admit she can't work. Lillian has no income and no means of survival.

Jabulile left the bag of food by the tiny hob. Samp and mealie meal, tinned fish and powdered soup, rice and kidney beans. A bar of soap for the carer who comes to wash her each day.

Lillian gave a weak smile of thanks. 'You are my only hope,' she said. Mncedisi locked the door behind us. She will unlock it again tomorrow.

For a moment I considered offering help – I could drive her to the clinic at least – but the hospice has eight hundred HIV/AIDS patients! And only nine registered nurses. We visited eleven patients, meeting caregivers who dispensed aqueous cream, soap and multivitamins. Care would be impossible without them.

At the end of the day we picked up Nombuyiselo, a community worker who works with AIDS orphans, and whose car had been stolen. She directed us to the patchwork corrugated iron home of Lungile, an eleven-year-old child caring for her mother who had been on ARVs for five years and was now deteriorating. Her father died three years ago.

Faded curtains divided the dwelling into rooms. While Jabulile and Nombuyiselo talked with her mother, Lungile invited me to sit on a rough wooden bench, gave me cordial to drink and showed me her Memory Book. Although the Zulu community, like Australia's Aboriginal people, are disinclined to speak of the dead, with so many of their people dying, children are in danger of identity loss if their families aren't discussed. Her Memory Book was a collection of personal documents, memorabilia,

writing and drawing, depicting her birth, life and family, ancestral stories, hopes and dreams. Her genogram, showing her family tree, was pock-marked with sickness and death. On the branches of another spreading tree she had drawn were the names of her confidantes, those people on whom she could depend, and share her troubles, hopes and fears.

‘Those are people for when I’m sad,’ she said.

Pages of poetry were dedicated to her mother whose life story was mapped out, and there was an unrecognisable photo taken two years ago.

When Nombuyiselo joined us, Lungile went for more cordial. ‘See how well Lungile has gathered her documents and arranged her memory book. See here, the copies of death and marriage certificates, her birth certificate, identification papers and school reports; these will be necessary to prove her identity when her mother dies. Without them she would have no hope. She could not receive assistance. She would be an alien.’

Lungile returned with another drawing – the river of life, a fast flowing stream filled with dark bobbing crosses, each with its own name. On the near bank were images of negative things, like her mother sick in bed – and on the opposite bank were the positive, a handbag and a diamond ring. There was no bridge to cross.

Lungile shook my hand as we were leaving. And she promised Nombuyiselo she would attend a camp for AIDS orphans to learn more about resilience. Many of her friends would be there.

Strangely, amongst the Zulu people, I wasn’t discomfited. But I felt awkward thanking Jabulile before driving home.

‘Thank you for coming,’ she said. I heard you were working in hospice but I never thought I’d bring you here.’

‘Thank you for inviting me.’ I didn’t like the way I sounded. I tried again. ‘You have such courage here.’ Again, I sounded patronising, but I was truly in awe of those nurses and the problems they confronted.

But then Jabulile’s poise seemed to crumple and her eyes dropped. She confided that she will be leaving next month to work in Birmingham, England.

I was stunned, but in no position to remonstrate. ‘You’ll be missed,’ I said, my arm around her. ‘I’ll be here when you return.’

Chapter 38

Maeve

Ireland, 2004

At Luton Airport before my flight to Dublin, people were shaking tins, collecting for a local hospice. A man with a stubbled chin thanked me when I slipped my sterling in. In all of my time in Perth I've not seen a tin for the hospice. Sonia says England rattles with them – in shops, theatres, galleries and museums – it is different how Perth people think.

Dublin has changed. I can see it and breathe it this time. Patrick told me about the smoking ban but I hardly believed it true. Sheridan and Patrick meet me in a Volvo that smells like a saddlery.

‘What happened to the old car?’

‘You were here in ninety-eight. Three cars I've had since then.’

‘Doing well, are we, Sheridan?’

‘You could say. This year's project is the Kerry house; we'd be taking you this weekend but for Dubya.’

‘Dubya?’

‘President Bush. He's flown into Shannon today, sharing the welcome mat we Irish laid out for his troops going to Iraq. The west will be thick with security, there's talk of chemical and biological attack, twenty-thousand demonstrators they say, shameful as it is. It will not be good for business.’

I'd joined the protests in Perth but since the invasion of Iraq I've not been hearing debate. Perth doesn't know the political that is part of our Irish blood. The closure of Acacia House would start a protest movement here.

Patrick is scoffing at Sheridan. 'Business! Is it all you care about?'

'There are five hundred American companies in Ireland today that employ ninety-thousand people. You're wanting to bite the hand that feeds you?'

'I'm not fed by America. And Bush is here for one reason only. The photo shoot. It's an electioneering stunt to sweeten thirty-million Americans with nostalgia for the Emerald Isle. Maeve, did you hear about that nurse Mary Kelly single-handedly disarming that American warplane on the tarmac at Shannon?'

'I did not. Tell me about it.' A nurse to have taken such action! I think of Alice and her Anti-war Alliance. But it's exquisite to be home again.

'Who does feed you Patrick?' We have left Dublin, Sheridan, Emma, their sparkling chandelier and my two perfect nieces and we're heading up the N4 to Sligo in Patrick's rusted and reliable Escort.

'Man doesn't live by bread alone. I'm working in a Sligo bookshop now, *Encounter Books*.'

'Is that full time?'

'When I'm there.'

'And when you're not?'

'Later, Maeve, later.'

We've but three days before our retreat, and I'm feeling a thrill in my skin as we drive into the Curlew Mountains heading to County Sligo.

'What is this? It is new.' We're at Curlew Pass, Roscommon, and approaching a colossal and shining piece-welded sculpture of a bold Gaelic Chieftain on horseback. Patrick stops and opens the car doors to an icy wind I've not felt since my last visit home. He unzips his jacket to make a windbreak for us both.

'Formidable, is he not, Maeve? The battle of Curlew Pass. Fifteen ninety-nine. And what an outlook today – no sign of the Celtic Tiger. Breathe in the air. Listen. No military planes. No fast food, coffee shops, shopping malls. Ireland at its best. Welcome home again.'

'Thank you Patrick. He's grand.' I lean in to Patrick, shivering.

'Grand indeed, but tell me what has changed in four hundred years? There will always be wars and rumours of wars.'

‘That’s Biblical, is it not? Are you over your flirt with Humanism?’

Patrick re-zips his jacket and I’m blasted with cold air once more. ‘War is but one reason I’m now a Humanist, Maeve.

We leave the Gaelic Chieftain and his battlefield behind us and drive on to Sligo County.

I’m hardly recognising Tamhnachmore. What is it they’ve done to our village? There’s another estate of new houses, a holiday village where the road petered out at end of Brennan Street, a French restaurant opposite the Spar and a modern café by the library. From the cars filling the street, the pubs are surviving the smoking ban, three months it’s been now.

For a moment, Daniel, I’m back in Carroll Street before the kerbing went in, picking bilberries from the hedgerows, you’re tearing at my hair ribbon, and there I am chasing you, tears spilling and bilberries too and Patrick laughing fit to burst.

Mammy’s better than before. She has new colour in her hair, I’m hearing her laughing this time, she’s over darning socks and turning collars and I know she’s well once more. Daddy’s face is furrowed with pain but he’s back at Hardware again and he says he’s not feeling it. I can’t be believing him. His face is corrugated like Carroll Street before the bitumen macadam came.

‘Will you be long at Patrick’s retreat?’ Mammy has a curl on her lip.

‘Three days Mammy, no more. Then I’m home with you a month. I’ll be here for Garland Sunday, for the pilgrimage to the Holy Well.’

‘It was Father Michael that helped me.’ That is all she says.

Patrick takes my hand as we walk to your grave. He knows I’m still troubled within. The retreat will help me, he says. Ireland is thick with grief.

*

This place on the cliffs is surrounded in beauty; it’s a sanctuary high on a slab of rock almost tumbling into the sea. Gulls are whooping in the updraught, rising, gliding, vanishing; it’s like a playground in bird paradise. The sanctuary is not like a church or a chapel; the chairs are not firm and it’s light and warm. I will learn meditation here. Our meditation guide is Buddhist, but the retreat is for people with faith and those with no faith at all. There are pictures of the Buddha and meditation masters. The Dalai Lama’s picture is there; Patrick says he’s a living Buddha.

Patrick's sitting, legs crossed in his lap, with a German volunteer. When did he learn to sit like that? He is the only one; the rest of us are needing our feet upon the floor.

We're invited to take some tea. Patrick helps volunteers ladling bowls of thick soup and offering soda bread slices like doorstops, heavy with seeds like I never saw in Australia. I've a sense of coming home here – to a home that was never like this.

After tea, Sandra is guiding us; she sits on a dais, she's cross-legged and calm, the still grey sea stretched behind her. I had imagined flowing tangerine robes, sleek plaited hair to the floor, and a glazed face like a saint, but she's wearing a moss-green tunic and a pair of black stretch pants; her hair is cut in a neat black bob and her face is natural and kind. Thirty of us are here and everyone is grieving; grief is a normal way of being, she says. Grief doesn't go away. The person we love has died but our relationship with them is alive. Some people's grief is raw, for others it's been many years. Sandra's mother died twenty years ago and still she's aware of her, like Lisa and her mother.

Sandra invites us to silent reflection, to accept grief as part of us, and identify our hopes. That does not come easy. I don't want to let go of you Daniel, fourteen years it has been, but guilt and grief still well up in me and I'm looking to find some peace. Sandra asks people to share their hope and there's grief pouring everywhere. Mary, a middle-aged woman lost her husband only this six months and talks with him every night but her friends tell her she should move on. Never did I hear in Australia such talking in torrents as this.

Sandra lights a candle on a remembrance table and we place our mementos there. A simple act of sharing, not of letting go, she says. I'm the last to stand my photo of you rowing up the Garavogue. The table is strewn with wives and mothers, husbands and fathers and there are other young people too. And I place on the table a golden bookmark of pressed acacia flowers that Alice made for me.

We practice meditation. Sandra gently strokes a shining brass singing-bowl; its resonance is soft like no church-bell, more like a holy-man chant, rippling out like the sea. She invites us simply to be, to be open. Feel yourself as a mountain she says, strong, invincible, tall; your mind like the open sky. My back is straight, my hands on my knees, I'm feeling the strength of the rock face itself. Spaciousness, she says.

Bringing the mind home, bringing the mind home. Our scattered thoughts are like mud in a water glass, they'll settle at the base, like clay. Calm. Simply be.

I'm watching the patterns on the sea. Calm. Then into my mind you come steering your skiff of a boat, your cap turned back over your neck. You holler something to me but it's snatched away by the frisky wind that's flapping the slack in your sail. Bring the mind home, release and relax, Sandra says. How vast is the empty sea now. The eyes are the doors of luminosity, she says.

The sea. My thoughts aren't turning to clay. I'm swimming before my shift at Acacia House. There's always one more wave to catch and I dash out to sea again before bolting to the hospice.

Let your thoughts settle. Bring the mind home. The breath, the breather and breathing dissolving into one; and I'm watching it, flowing in and out, shifting scree down my mountainside.

I wake in the night to a crisp crescent moon shimmering on the sea. I'm thinking you're out there somewhere, Daniel. I count the rhythm of a distant lighthouse then drift into sleep again.

This morning at meditation practice we're sitting quietly in the present practicing just to be. There is spiritual growth in grief, Sandra says. Nature brings the self home, the thoughts in our minds are like clouds passing through sky. Honour the feelings thoughts bring, she says.

Shakespeare says there is nothing either good or bad, only thinking makes it so. How can't I think about that? Sandra says that was Hamlet, a prisoner of thinking, I think.

She tells a story of a desperate woman who wanted her dead child alive, and went to the Buddha in the mountains. He promised her a cure, if she would bring him a mustard seed from a house where no one knew death. The woman visited all homes in the village and heard tales of loss at each one. The Buddha told her nothing living is permanent, that we are all like flickering candles, one moment lit then extinguished. And so everywhere there is grief.

Sandra knows about loss, the feeling of ripping away. The Jews symbolically tear clothes when someone close has died, and I think now of the curtain in the temple after Jesus was crucified.

Grief is natural, an overwhelming emotion, a suspension of reality, a liminal space, she says. We Irish know about waking the dead three days, but it's the rituals of

grieving we've lost. What to say when the funeral's over? There is nothing to say, just be.

I think of Acacia House closing, of the loss of our hospice dream, how we shared our grief. Solitary grief is hard. I was strong for Mammy and Daddy when you died, Daniel. Did that help them then? Sandra says we will always feel grief, it will heal but never resolve, that we can grow around it. Or maybe we grow through it. Oak trees in Sligh Wood are growing around boulders, and eucalypts in the Kimberley sprout from solid rock.

Feelings. What did I feel when you died? Your death comes back like yesterday, and I'm drenched in sorrow again deeper than a Kimberley wet, and it comes again, the scrambled brain, the tears that won't stop, the guilt, and little will to be leaving my bed where I've lain half the night unsleeping. Losing memory and mixing my words. Nominal aphasia, expressive dysphasia, words that had been my friends abandoning me then, as if the speech centre of my brain had suffered a mighty blow. Pass me the honey please when it's the apple sauce that I really want. Barely nineteen I was.

And the surge of anger to strike the ones who told me I'd get over it, how it was worse for Mammy and Daddy, and worse for poor Nell who only had one brother, how I was lucky to have two more, it was time I got on with my life, focus on the positive, then I would forget. Time always heals, they said. But time is another skin, that's all. Or brittle bark on the trunk of a tree.

Sogyal Rinpoche tells us death is a mirror where the true meaning of life is reflected. I know it from Acacia House. That final concentration of living, and joy in the little time left. Memories, affirmations, sharing stories, lashings of love and compassion, and people holding people they've known for a lifetime who've rarely been held before. Acacia House was healing for me but it's lost to all of us now.

Patrick helps volunteers ladle vegetable curry and quinoa, salad and rhubarb crumble. He joins me on a bench outside; we can't get enough of the sea. There's one tiny boat in the bay.

'I've not tried fishing since, Patrick. I told Daniel I would, but I can hardly bait up a line. I needed him to teach me. I never gave him my time. I spent too much time with Tully. But how are we meant to live? Imagining someone might suddenly die, ourselves even, and ticking off all the boxes, a pre-emptive strike if you like?'

‘There’d never be enough time. Not enough time just to be. There will always be regrets. It’s what to do with them.’

Sandra talks about Loving Kindness. She says it’s friendliness towards ourselves and others in the world. It’s the antidote to fear. She reads a poem about finding kindness through sorrow. We sit still and silent, calm. In our mind’s eye we find a presence representing unconditional love. It might be the Buddha, the Blessed Virgin or a prophet or Sweet Jesus Himself, but if I am to be true, it’s another sense that I see. Wonder is what I’ll call it. Wonder doesn’t judge, so Wonder has nothing to forgive. Wonder is loving kindness for me. I ask that loving kindness to enter me, fill me with light. May I be happy, may I be well, may I be safe.

I leave Wonder to consider this unconditional love; I found it at Acacia House. Not for Mammy nor Daddy, nor Patrick, not even you, Daniel, and never for myself. Such love for myself was a sin. I was taught to be unkind to myself; I have to unlearn that now.

Sandra talks of unfinished business. This is something I have in my mind from Acacia House, problems that gave patients no rest, family members too, and on this they destroyed themselves: disagreements unsettled, anger in haste, wounds and hurt and bad feelings and guilt that gnawed at people into the night. Mary the psychologist would listen, Derek would listen too, and sometimes people would tread the path to reconciliation. Other times they couldn’t resolve it and death wasn’t so good then.

Sit quietly, Sandra says, and in your heart find the willingness to meet your problem one last time and let it go, to really feel heard and to really listen to the perspective of the other person. I sit quietly and I’m willing. Now visualize the person, she says, with whom you have the problem, and Daniel I’m seeing you there but in sepia and your eyes aren’t mischief now and I know you love me and you’re listening to my thoughts. And I tell you things because I’m telling the very best of you, merging all the best fragments of you that you never wore at once and my tears are coming again.

Someone gives me pen and paper, and I write just to you, how much I loved you but resented you too, all the mornings I gathered the eggs and cooked your breakfast when Mammy was on early shift, and cleared up after you too, how you had the meat when we girls did not, how I worshipped the linoleum you walked on but begrudged the mopping of it, and hated Mammy and Daddy always listening to you when it was me who was saying things first, and then there was university and everyone so proud of

you, and you bringing your clothes every weekend for us to be washing and ironing, and you talking the politics with Daddy while I'm bringing the meal for the table and when I'm asking a question I'm too young to know. And remember about the fishing, how you tousled my hair and said you'd teach me fishing but how I denied you that, how I wanted it, but I denied you for spite and all. And every weekend home you suggesting you teach me, and me always refusing you. The game it was between us, you with fishhooks for my birthday, then sinkers for Christmas that I sewed into the curtain hems to keep them hanging dead-straight, so no more peep-slits for the likes of you to tease me for my tiny tits. And you scooping out lumps from your custard, the sinkers is it here Maeve? And where is it that I've put the fishhooks, you'll not want to piss fishhooks you said. But Daniel I'm sad I never learnt fishing, never sitting with only you near me, just you and me, you telling me stories and untangling my line and drinking a thermos of tea, because of the malice in me. And then at home when you're sick, and Mammy and Daddy always there, pandering to you like always, more and more of the same, and I'm out with Tully then, over at Strandhill, sucking the gin and the joker joints instead of being with you.

And then it was thin and grey-skinned you were looking and Father Michael came to bless you and your friends were there with you, seeing you off, so they were.

And I'm sitting with you after Deirdre has been and Mammy's needing some rest; it's my very own time to be with you. And I must wake Mammy if I think there's a change but you should sleep like a lamb tonight. I hold your hand that hoisted the sail and it's thin, translucent and limp, and I shade the lamp from your face and sit three cushions on the chair so my head lies by your hand and I listen to you breathe, my breath breathing with yours, and I finger a hole in the top sheet until its frayed edges are flat, and sleep it is taking me, I've worked eight days straight, and when I wake, your hand is cold on my face.

We opened the window, setting your spirit free. Mammy said that's how it is in Cork, it's not a Sligo thing, but you had her Cork spirit in you and best we let it be free.

Sandra says to write for you now, for you to tell it from your side, your side of loving kindness that is. And Daniel, you're talking to me.

Don't be sad for me, you say. It's a better place that I'm at. I'm sorry we never went fishing too, but in truth if you'd said you were ready to go I might have stalled you then; a game it was that we played and you beat me in the end. Cute as a fox you were. It was tough for you as the eldest girl, Mammy's right hand you were, waiting on

Patrick, Sheridan and me, and the girls too young for it. And I know that you were cooking and cleaning and washing my sheets – that was expected of you – and that you were there for Mammy and Daddy. I knew that then, it was the way things were done, training you for six of your own. And don't be minding begrudging me, because why should you think you'd be perfect when Sweet Jesus forgives you that, and I forgive you for being with Tully when you might have been with me. You needed a life after all. But you needed to be there for me to die because Mammy wouldn't let me go. Your sleeping by me was natural. But get one of those men in Australia to teach you how to fish and be sure to dedicate your tackle to me because my tackle was mighty good. I'll always love you, so I will.

With all the sadness in this place I've come over light and smiling.

I sit quietly and relax my mind and there are blessings for Daniel and Patrick and Mammy and Daddy and Howard and Colin and Tully and a backwash of blessings for me.

Eleven hours I've slept when Patrick is waking me with a steaming mug of lemon and ginger tea. There's a heaviness lifted from me. A blackbird is perched on the wall, chatter-singing to his wife but she is not to be seen. There was a poem we used to say: *What little throat has framed that note?* The bird is next to the bold lilac Hebe, its flowers deeper than the purple of Lent and Advent and Holy Saturday and the Sacrament of Reconciliation; his strong orange beak, flamboyant it is, like the rings that circle his eyes. It's nature that does the best art. Aborigines in Australia say the souls of the dying migrate to the birds, and I've a mind to be believing that now. There's a swell on the sea, and I think of St Patrick coming over from Britain to convert Irish pagans, the weight of the Church on his back. And centuries of monks at prayer in their monasteries. And I think of the Phowa and the order of it, and how it's the forgiveness and healing and unconditional love for me first and it's then loving kindness for others. And how Father Michael had us place others first.

Patrick and I take the narrow path that leads along the coast, past the delicate crimson fuchsias, tufts of New Zealand flax, blazing bushes of golden gorse and onto an open meadow. We skirt a steep ravine where a chasm opens and slate falls away to the surging sea far below. Our track descends through bluebells and buttercups to a mossy

alcove tucked under the path seen only by terns at sea. And together we sit there in silence, Patrick, Daniel and me.

Chapter 39

Alice

Perth, Western Australia, 2004

I return to Acacia House to retrieve a cake plate that I left in the handover room. The last patient has died and clerical staff are dispersing property. By the end of the week just the shell will remain. Art works, stereos, TVs, quilts, curtains and knitted knee rugs are piled by the front door.

In the garden, the blackbutt tree is defying the perishing trend with a mass of pale lemon flowers. *Eucalyptus woodwardii*, Gabby called it. The memorial fountain, statues and seating have all disappeared.

Sonia and I make our strike at night.

‘I hope they’ve dismantled surveillance.’

‘Afraid of losing your job?’

We’re both wearing headtorches. Sonia takes the cordless drill from her backpack and inserts the screwdriver attachment. I support the heavy jarrah plaque while she removes the masonry screws.

‘Okay Alice?’

‘It’s heavier than my grieving heart. Leo fell in love with our jarrah. Used to pick it up at demolition sites. Said we had no sense of its beauty, that we took it for granted.’

‘Is the inlaid work marri wood?’

‘No idea. You’d think he would have used acacia. Funny bugger that Leo.’

We are out of there in twenty minutes, walking the riverside track in single file, carrying the sign, *Acacia House*, high above our heads.

DISSERTATION

**‘Caring Texts: Ethics, Literature and Care for the
Dying’**

Introduction

The novel ‘Acacia House’¹ is a fictional response to an urgent need for greater consideration of end-of-life issues in Australia – in particular care for the dying. Despite the country’s changing demographic which sees people living longer, often in compromised health,² few Australians effectively consider end-of-life care, as evidenced by the limited uptake of Advance Care Directives³ (ACDs). As a consequence, people die without ACDs and often receive inappropriate care in acute and expensive hospital settings designed primarily for curative medicine.⁴ The novel ‘Acacia House’ presents an alternative end-of-life model, hospice palliative care,⁵ and illuminates issues which may arise in its delivery.

¹ References to the novel ‘Acacia House’ will be indicated by quotation marks, whereas references to the hospice will be without quotation marks.

² Joanne Lynn, ‘Living Long in Fragile Health: the New Demographics Shape End of Life Care’, *Improving End of Life Care: Why Has It Been So Difficult? Hastings Centre Report, Special Report 35*, no. 6, 2005, S14-S18.

³ Australian Health Ministers’ Advisory Council, *A National Framework for Advance Care Directives*, September 2011, p.10. www.ahmac.gov.au, accessed 12/08/12.

⁴ Ken Hillman, *Vital Signs: Stories from Intensive Care*, Sydney, UNSW Press, 2009, p.11 notes that up to seventy percent of Australians die receiving acute hospital care. See also Beverley McNamara & Lorna Rosenwax, ‘The Mismanagement of Dying’, *Health Sociology Review*, Vol. 16:5, December 2007.

⁵ Palliative Care is the active total care of patients whose disease is not responsive to curative treatment – a definition adopted by the *British Medical Journal*. The low priority given to palliative care in Western Australia is indicated in Andrew Allsop, *Palliative Care Matters*, Palliative Care WA, February 2011 p.1, which reports that less than half a percent of total state government health expenditure was directed to palliative care in the 2011 Western Australian State Budget.

When thinking about one's own death or care for others whose death is anticipated, pivotal questions about life and living inevitably arise.⁶ Nurses in 'Acacia House' consider themselves enriched by the experience of palliative care which encourages profound respect for the individual, negotiates care, fosters relationships, alleviates symptoms, promotes comfort and security, and supports loved ones.⁷ They are drawn to contemplate the fabric of their own lives, their preferred manner of dying, and their relationships. For them, care becomes fundamental to life.

Such privileged and informed contemplation is not readily available to the Australian public. Indeed, discourse on dying, for many in Western society, is a lingering taboo.⁸ Psychologists Paul Wong and Adrian Tomer, who encourage discussion of death and dying⁹, suggest that an exploration of this 'traditionally dark subject matter'¹⁰ would lead to a fuller understanding of life's meaning and a better preparation for living well and dying well. They argue that

We need to learn to talk about death in a way that is liberating, humanizing, and life-enhancing. Through an increased understanding of death acceptance, we may learn to treat each other with respect and compassion.¹¹

Film, fiction, thanatographies, and poetry, which have both rational and emotional appeal, and which offer opportunities for informed discourse about anticipated death, dying, care for the dying and bereavement, are discussed in this dissertation. Aspects which are explored include depersonalization and its antithesis, autonomy and beneficence, acceptance and denial, and grief and quest for meaning. The fictive works investigated include Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*, Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Helen Garner's *The Spare Room*, Denys Arcand's film *The Barbarian Invasions* and Tamara Jenkins' *The Savages*. Although Martha Nussbaum asserts that the novel's 'complex and mysterious construction' is the *only* (my italics) means to reach a fully

⁶ The justification for caring for the dying *per se* is central to the philosophy of Epicurius, who states that 'to practice living well and to practice dying well are one and the same', cited in Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, London, Granta Books, 2008, p.46.

⁷ For one exploration of the relationship between circumstances of death and the physical and mental health of the bereaved, see Margaret Stroebe, Henk Schut, & Wolfgang Stroebe, 'Health Outcomes of Bereavement', *Lancet* 12/8/2007, Vol. 370:9603, pp.1960-1973.

⁸ Sally Cline, *Lifting the Taboo: Women, Death and Dying*, New York, NYU Press, 1997.

⁹ Paul T. Wong, & Adrian Tomer, 'Editorial: Beyond Terror and Denial: The Positive Psychology of Death Acceptance', *Death Studies*, Vol. 35, 2011, pp.99-106.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.101

¹¹ *ibid.*, p.101.

humane moral consciousness,¹² thanatographical works are also examined for their perspectives of caring relationships associated with dying, death and bereavement. Such memoirs, after all, are, like fiction, shaped by both experience and imagination, are a cultural performance, selectively styled and ordered in narrative form, and are not simply mirrors of an objective reality.¹³ Of the two autothanatographical narratives examined, Donald and Myfanwy Horne's *Dying: A Memoir* is in chronological form, whereas Christina Middlebrook's *Seeing the Crab* is disintegrated and fragmented, the form itself a metanarrative on the vulnerability of its subject.¹⁴ Giving valuable insight into how the manner of dying affects bereavement, Caroline Jones' reflective thanatography *Through a Glass Darkly: A Journey of Love and Grief with my Father* is explored. I also consider Christopher Reid's Costa Prize-winning collection of contemporary poetry, *A Scattering*, included for its stark yet emotive portrayal of dying and normal grief. As the dissertation focuses on engagement with literary texts to promote the discussion of caring for the dying and their loved ones in the contemporary setting, all texts considered are contemporary, except for Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* which is an especially potent text with contemporary resonance.

To appraise these literary works, conceptualization of the 'good death'¹⁵ is helpful. In each work, anticipation of death offers the chance of dying well, a process by which caregivers (who may include loved ones) ease both the dying and the loved ones' burdens. Anticipation gives time for acceptance, for all parties to adjust to the dying process, to complete unfinished business, for therapeutic physical, psychosocial and spiritual interactions to ease the dying, and for affirmation and farewells.¹⁶ Simon Woods, in *Death's Dominion: Ethics at the End of Life*, enumerates some parameters of a 'good death': 'the quality of experience of the dying person, the quality of the

¹² As noted in John Wiltshire, 'The Patient Writes Back: Bioethics and the Illness Narrative', in Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman & David Parker (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.183.

¹³ As Bran Nicol comments, confessional memoirs are ideologically loaded, and they depend on 'the pretence that terms like 'genuine' and 'faithful' are non-problematic.' Bran Nicol, 'The memoir as self-destruction: 'A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius'', in Jo Gill, *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, London, Routledge, 2005, p.107.

¹⁴ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan notes that fragmented thanatographies can be threatening and unintelligible, that they 'subvert the cure-promising authority' which 'sometimes leads to them being re-written by physicians and other caregivers', in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 'The Story of "I": Illness and Narrative Identity', *Narrative*, Vol. 10:1, 2002, p.22.

¹⁵ Simon Woods, *Death's Dominion: Ethics at the End of Life*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2007, pp.27-48.

¹⁶ John Ellershaw & Chris Ward, 'Care of the Dying Patient: the Last Hours or Days of Life' in *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 326, 4/01/2003, pp.30-34 insist that such facilitation of a good death is a challenge for all of society.

experiences of third parties, the timing of the death, and the coherence of the death with the rest of the person's life'.¹⁷ This coherence is of particular importance when caring for dying people in Western societies, where the dying and their loved ones hold a range of religious and spiritual beliefs.

Consideration of the concept of the 'other' and of the 'self-in-relation' is also of value in an analysis of these works. Emmanuel Levinas argues that there is a moral obligation to respond compassionately to the suffering 'other', and that because the self is always in relation, to neglect the suffering of others is to alienate the self.¹⁸ Whilst the dying process inevitably involves some form of physical, psychological or spiritual pain, the quality of interactions with others conditions the extent of suffering.¹⁹

The critical framework through which the dissertation appraises this issue and the literary works that embody it is informed by the ethics of care, articulated comprehensively by Virginia Held in *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*.²⁰ While not directly addressing care for the dying, the ethics of care may inform critique of these works because both dying and caring selves are part of a deeply resonant human milieu. My critique cannot simply focus on a self-realizing, individuated dying character because care involves ongoing interconnectedness, interdependence and self-reflexivity. Virginia Held argues that rather than altruistic beneficence,²¹ caring 'is a relation in which carer and cared-for share an interest in their mutual well-being'.²² In caring for the dying, such mutuality is a significant factor easing the grief of bereavement.²³ The two contrasting paradigms of care – the individuated and the interrelational – are seen in the opening chapters of 'Acacia House'

¹⁷ Simon Woods, *Death's Dominion: Ethics at the End of Life*, Maidenhead, Open University Press, 2007, p.43.

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, edited by R. Bernasconi and D. Wood, London, Routledge, 1988, p.159, cited in Stan Van Hooft, 'The Meanings of Suffering', *The Hastings Centre Report*, Vol. 28:5, 1998, p.17.

¹⁹ Carl Goldberg & Virginnia Crespo, 'Suffering and Personal Agency', *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol. 8:2, July 2003, p.87.

²⁰ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006. The impetus for the development of the ethics of care was Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge Mass, Harvard University Press, 1982.

²¹ Held cites Lawrence Blum, in *Moral Perception and Particularity*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.175, who argues the altruism/ beneficence aspects of compassion, in Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.34.

²² Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp.34-35.

²³ Complex factors, however, which include the physical and existential, and which can adversely affect the wellbeing of both the dying and the bereaved, are discussed in David W. Kissane & Sidney Bloch, *Family Focused Grief Therapy*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2002, pp.86-87.

as Alice, the Australian protagonist, relocates from a hierarchical background of prescriptive nursing ethics to a communitarian hospice environment where a caring ethic is practised.

The dissertation is also concerned with the relationship between text and reader. Care, as ‘both value and a practice’,²⁴ may also inform a critique of the literary qualities of texts discussed in this dissertation. Held asserts that ‘the autonomy sought within the ethics of care is a capacity to reshape and cultivate new relations’,²⁵ and interactions which promote critical self-reflection.²⁶ Released from its popular perception as ruggedly individualistic, this notion of autonomy recognizes the fundamental interdependence of human beings. Marilyn Friedman describes such interrelational autonomy as ‘relatively unimpeded by conditions such as coercion, deception and manipulation’.²⁷ The relationship developed between text and reader, if one of mutuality and general reciprocity, will encourage intellectual autonomy by raising questions. Empowered by the examples examined in this dissertation, ‘Acacia House’ seeks to manifest this ideal.

²⁴ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006, p.9.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.14.

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.103.

²⁷ Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2003, p.14.

Chapter One

Caring for the Dying in Literature: Depersonalization and its Antithesis, the Ethics of Care

Love, death and conflict provide momentum for literary and cinematic narratives. Fictional, poetic and cinematic texts, which invite readers to empathise with characters, generally portray death and dying as tragedy. Love and empathy may be diminished or absent, and the one who is dying may be depersonalized. Alternatively, the dying process may be portrayed as an opportunity for the expression of love, as an example of the ethics of care. In this chapter, I will consider literary and cinematic works which exemplify a preoccupation with caring for the dying, texts which manifest either the ethics of care or its absence.

In existential terms, depersonalization refers to a denial of personhood, and is characterized by objectification of the person and the denial of human values such as autonomy, subjectivity and agency. Such a situation diminishes the moral status of the 'other'.²⁸ Dehumanization, the denial of the other as a self-in-relation, has been cited as the ultimate tragedy for many who are dying in modern society: a tragedy characterized by dying in an alien space, by denial of spiritual nourishment, and by dying with loss of

²⁸ This phenomenon is explored in Steve Loughnan, Nick Haslam, Tess Murnane, Jeroen Vaes, Catherine Reynolds and Caterina Suitner, 'Objectification leads to depersonalization: The denial of Mind and Moral Concern to Objectified Others', in *European Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol. 40, 2010, pp.709-717.

hope.²⁹ Hospital technologies and punishing pharmacology often result in dehumanized, isolated, lonely deaths.

Sickness, and cancer in particular, is fertile ground for language which depersonalizes the subject. In her work *Illness as Metaphor*,³⁰ Susan Sontag observes how people are often characterized by their disease. She cites how the body of the person with cancer ‘degenerates’, is ‘desexualised’, ‘shrivels’ or ‘shrinks’. (pp13-14) She states that ‘A disease of the lungs is, metaphorically, a disease of the soul’. (p18) The belief in a cancer-prone character type, that the ‘sick man himself creates his disease’ (p46) stereotypes the person. Cancer and its treatments are demonized by medical metaphors of warfare: cancer’s attack on its victim, invasion, and colonisation, and the bombarding counter-forces of treatment. (pp64-65) According to Sontag, the subject, whose body is integral to ‘personhood’, that is, to a sense of the integrated, embodied individual who is not reduced to a vehicle for illness, is characterized when ill as a war zone in the battle against disease.

Various attempts have been made to restore personhood to medicine’s management of suffering. The physician Eric Cassell, for instance, rejecting the philosophical and medical dichotomy between mind and body, defines suffering as ‘a state of severe distress associated with events that threaten the intactness of a person’.³¹ On the centrality of personhood, he argues that

All the aspects of personhood – the lived past, the family’s lived past, culture and society, roles, the instrumental dimension, associations and relationships, the body, the unconscious mind, the political being, the secret life, the perceived future, and the transcendent being dimension – are susceptible to damage and loss.³²

In a similar vein, Richard Zaner, advocating a fuller perception of patients, suggests that

Everything about a patient must be considered as a symptom: lifestyle and circumstances (past and present), feelings, words, expressions, as well as

²⁹ Robert Twycross, *Introducing Palliative Care* (4thed), Abingdon, Radcliffe Medical Press, 1999, cited in Jacqueline H. Watts, ‘Journeying with Morrie: Challenging Notions of Professional Delivery of Spiritual Care at the End of Life,’ *Illness, Crisis & Loss*, Vol. 16:4, 2008, p.310. ‘Hope’ in this context refers not to hope of cure, but to comfort and hope for family and relationships.

³⁰ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977.

³¹ Eric Cassell, *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, p.32.

³² *ibid.*, p.42.

bodily displays ... there are no diseases apart from the persons suffering from them.³³

As the denial of any aspect of personhood devalues the textual subject, readers who experience such denial in literature are also likely to objectify that subject. Yet fiction has a role to play in restoring personhood to the sick subject by evoking reader empathy. Depersonalization of the other in literature is diminished or negated if the reader can recognize the subject as psychologically close to the self. This recognition may occur either between fictional characters in the text or between the assumed reader³⁴ and a textual character – if the fiction evokes the reader’s empathy. Pavel Nikolayevich Rusanov’s experience in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Cancer Ward* elicits such empathy:

The hard lump of his tumour – unexpected, meaningless and quite without use – had dragged him in like a fish on a hook and flung him on to this iron bed – a narrow, mean bed, with creaking springs and an apology for a mattress. Having once undressed ... said goodbye to the family and come up to the ward, you felt that the door to all your past life had been slammed behind you ... In a matter of hours he had as good as lost all his personal status, reputation and plans for the future – and had turned into eleven stones of hot, white flesh that did not know what tomorrow would bring.³⁵

This passage evokes a profound sense of aloneness and loss of the autonomous self. Caring others with potential to restore the self-in-relation are absent. Reduced to eleven stones of hot, white flesh, Pavel Nikolayevic is depersonalized. The reader is encouraged to empathise with Pavel Nikolayevic in this passage through a rhetorical device – the slippage from the third person “him” to the second person “you”.

Penelope Lively utilizes various strategies to elicit reader empathy for the dying in her novel, *Moon Tiger*.³⁶ The protagonist – lucid seventy-seven year old Claudia Hampton, a historian and former war correspondent – is slowly dying in her hospital bed, depersonalized by staff and visitors alike. The reader, however, invited into relationship

³³ Richard Zaner, ‘Parted Bodies, Departed Souls: The Body in Ancient Medicine and Anatomy’, in Drew Leder (ed.), *The Body in Medical Thought and Practice*, Dordrecht, Kluwer Academic, 1992, p.105, cited in Jean P. Rumsey, ‘Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies’, *Hypatia*, Vol.12:1, 1997, p.100.

³⁴ For an interesting analysis of readership – the actual, authorial and narrative – see Peter J. Rabinowitz, ‘Truth in Fiction: A Reexamination of Audiences’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 4:1 (Autumn, 1977), pp.121-141.

³⁵ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Cancer Ward*, trans. Nicholas Bethall and David Burg, London, Penguin, 1971, pp.17-19.

³⁶ Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger*, New York, Grove Press, 1987.

with Claudia, is unlikely to objectify her. The framing device of impersonal third person narration of events in Claudia's hospital room, juxtaposed against her perspicacious first person narration and acute third person recollections, draws the reader's attention to the omission of a relational ethic of care on the part of her visitors, medical and nursing carers.

In the novel's opening pages a nurse patronizes and dehumanizes Claudia:

'I'm writing a history of the world,' [Claudia] says. And the hands of the nurse are arrested for a moment; she looks down at this woman. ... she becomes busy again, she heaves and tucks and smooths – 'Upsy a bit, dear, that's a good girl – then we'll get you a cup of tea.' (p1)

The nurse's dismissive response and her ensuing dialogue with a doctor admit Claudia's former personhood but negate her selfhood in the present, now that she is an 'old ill woman'.

'Was she someone?' enquires the nurse ... And the doctor glances at his notes and says that yes, she does seem to have been someone, evidently she's written books and newspaper articles ... (p2)

Drawn into Claudia's private world through intimate first-person non-chronological reflective narration, readers quickly discount the professional staff's assessment of Claudia, the narrator-protagonist. Readers discover and relate to an intelligent woman armed with acerbic wit and a fulfilling life history. From her brittle narration, much of which is focused on Egypt during the war, emerges an emotional revelation of her love affair in Egypt with Tom, their plans to marry, his death in action, and the baby she miscarried. Claudia tells how, on that occasion too, as she was losing their baby, nursing staff exhibited no empathy: 'Matron's expression is blandly impersonal – a professional face'. She recollects that they were 'unremittingly cheerful', they always patronized her as 'dear', and vocalized what they wish to hear: 'Not feeling too bad?' After her miscarriage, the nurse tells her, 'Over and done with now, it is. The best thing you can do is forget all about it.'(p132) Claudia's deathbed recollection of this tragic memory illustrates the lasting legacy of patronizing depersonalization when experienced in the medical setting.

Claudia's sharing of intimacy and intellect affirms the personhood of the assumed reader who is likely to be attracted by her willful independence, her ironic tone and mischievous humour. Unlike the hospital staff, the reader knows that Claudia is 'someone'. Indeed, the reader encounters Claudia's individual complexity. She has no absolute identity: 'I am composed of a myriad Claudias who spin and mix and part like sparks of sunlight on water'. (p2) As she says of her love for her brother Gordon, 'he was my sense of identity, my mirror, my critic, judge and ally.' She states, 'Without him I am diminished.' (p187) The sentiment is similar to that expressed in John Donne's poem, *No Man is An Island*: 'Each man's death diminishes me / For I am involved in mankind.'³⁷ Both works acknowledge that identity is always bound to relationships.

Claudia's first and third person narration is a pastiche of random time periods and tenses – a 'history of the world' (p1) which intertwines alternative histories, her own history from differing perspectives, philosophical questioning, and her strong opinions on a wide range of topics from evolution to lexicography and European architecture. As she says of one of her works, 'Like everything else: it enlarges me, it frees me from the prison of my experience; it also resounds within that experience.'(p159) At once self-affirming and self-deprecating, she says, 'Egocentric Claudia is once again subordinating history to her own puny existence.'(p29) The histories which form the substance of the book, as subjective human constructs rather than objective facts, are an assertion of her personhood, and sharply contrast with the brief but anchoring hospital-room episodes where care is perfunctory and personhood diminished. The nurses patronizingly address her as 'dear' throughout the novel. This impersonal term is also used by her 'adopted son' Lazlo who dismisses her as confused. Both professional staff and family have a limited view of Claudia, and discuss her like a zoological specimen. Over her bed, a nurse discusses Claudia with her sister-in-law Sylvia as if she isn't present. (p21) While there is some irony in Claudia's exclusion, (in relations with her brother Gordon, Claudia had excluded Sylvia), the reader, respecting Claudia's dignity, may find such deathbed condescension demeaning.

The novel doesn't discuss Claudia's dying wishes; there is no negotiated death. Yet this novel also leads the reader to certain questions. Is it perhaps appropriate that Claudia's

³⁷ For a discussion of the connectedness with others implied in Donne's poem, see Dennis L. Sansom, Dennis L., 'Ethics and the Experience of Death: Some Lessons from Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Donne, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 44:4, 2010, pp.25-27.

intellect be discounted on her deathbed in the same way as she has cruelly discounted that of ‘congenitally heavy-handed’ Sylvia, her sister-in-law? Claudia, after all, had referred to her less intelligent sister-in-law as ‘someone’s sister ... someone’s wife’, and mercilessly excluded her, when relating to her brother Gordon. (p23) To die alone, as Claudia does, may appear cruel to the reader, denying as it does any final self-in-relation. But other readers may note that apart from Tom and Gordon, both of whom have died, Claudia has related poorly to many others. Perhaps it is fitting that she dies alone with her recollections at sunset, with prisms of colour from raindrops refracted into her room, tree branches silhouetted against an orange sky, ‘as though the spectacle has been laid on for her pleasure,’ (p207) as if in death her selfhood is affirmed by the nature she loved.

Fiction, then, which personalizes the dying subject while illustrating medical and nursing depersonalization, may evoke differing reader responses, even if the suffering or dying subject earns the reader’s empathy. Another work of fiction, Leo Tolstoy’s novella, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, provides a further instance of a literary engagement with the care of the dying. Again in this work, the dying subject is alienated, but where Lively’s Claudia appears self-sufficient in her dying, the dehumanization that Ilyich endures intensifies his suffering. Reading his dying process in the context of the whole novel, it may be argued that his depersonalization is coterminous with his relationships prior to his illness.

The novella’s initial objective and ironic tone invites the reader to collude in the depersonalization of Ilyich, whose upwardly mobile, pleasant and dutiful life is portrayed as inauthentic, a pretence, and often defined in terms of his possessions. The inauthenticity is accentuated by the Latin and French clichés employed in the initial chapters: Ivan was *le phénix de la famille*, (p110) his watch chain medallion is inscribed *Respice finem*, (p111) and he both chooses a wife and buys antiques which he considers *comme il faut*. (pp114, 121) Notions of pleasantry, propriety, deception and falsehood recur in the text.³⁸ Ilyich pretends at cards and puts on appearances in court. His marriage allows him ‘personal satisfaction [while] doing what persons of the loftiest standing looked upon as the correct thing’. (p114) The relationship with his wife

³⁸ The consequences of deceit and decorum are explicit in the text. ‘In the name of decorum he had served all his life long’, Ilyich suffers the pretence that he would be well, and ‘deceit enacted over him up to the very eve of his death’, in Tolstoy, Leo, *The Cossacks / Happy Ever After / The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1960, p.143.

becomes superficial and estranged through failures of empathy, jealousies, and hostilities. Subsequently, he requires of his marriage ‘only those conveniences – a wife to manage his house, meals and a bed – which it could give him, and in particular, the keeping up of appearances as ordained by public opinion.’ (p116) Ilyich, immersed in his professional life, is defined by office. As a public prosecutor, he enjoys the sense of his own power, of dignity, of esteem, ‘the feeling of being able to ruin anybody he wish[es] to ruin’. (p117) In essence, Ivan Ilyich is presented as an unlikable, inauthentic, unreflective character, who, initially, without any central purpose, depersonalizes himself, dehumanizes those under his power, and distances the reader.

When Ilyich becomes seriously ill following a fall from a ladder – symbolizing the social ladder he had been climbing, and adding further significance to *Respice finem* – the reader who has found Ilyich unlikeable may feel a certain schadenfreude. Does Ilyich deserve his misfortune? ‘The airs that he put on in court for the benefit of the prisoner at the bar, the doctor now put on for him.’(p126) Doctors depersonalize Ilyich, treating him merely as a set of organs under their exclusive control:

It was precisely what Ivan Ilyich himself had done in equally brilliant fashion a thousand times over in dealing with persons on trial. The doctor summed up just as brilliantly, looking over his spectacles triumphantly, gaily even, at the accused. (p127)

Tolstoy’s early ironic tone suggests legitimization of the impersonal responses of his family, colleagues and medical practitioners who fail to take Ilyich’s condition seriously. Readers may be slow to empathize when Ilyich’s unease regarding his health is introduced at the beginning of chapter four. Their hesitation will be informed not only by the ironic undercutting of the initial chapters, but also by the prior knowledge that Ilyich is going to die – made explicit by both the novella’s title and the opening chapter which describes his dead body in specific detail.

The reader’s deeper understanding of Ilyich is most strongly evoked in the passages of pain and exclusion, through passionate dialogue, agonizing interior monologue and gestures. The omniscient narration, focalized through Ilyich, closes the distance between text and reader which has been created by objective and ironic narration in the initial chapters. The reader, feeling Ilyich’s pain and parageusia, (the symbolic bad taste in his mouth) perceives the relationship between the physical and psychological –

how disagreements with his wife, rebuffs in court and bursts of passion intensify his symptoms. The objectification that Ilyich endures both from his wife and at the law courts attracts reader empathy because of the focalized narrative. The reader enters Ilyich's consciousness to sense that his life is poisoned, to feel the pain, fear, and disabling sleep deprivation, and to understand his desire to continue the pretence of work so that he might preserve some dignity against the forces of alienation. Tolstoy induces empathy through the imagery of profound abandonment: 'And he had to live thus on the edge of the precipice alone, without a single soul to understand and feel for him.' (p132) But despite growing empathy, the reader is constantly reminded of Ilyich's baser qualities. 'He smiled venomously' as his wife kissed him, and 'hated her from the bottom of his soul while she was kissing him, and with difficulty refrained from pushing her away.' (p136) Moments of deeper focalization occur when the narrative slides into the present tense: 'With his whole soul he detests her. And when she touches him he is swept by a paroxysm of hate.' (p147) Ilyich faces death alone and terrified, the hatred he feels for his wife deepening the chasm of exclusion.

Dishonesty in relationships and the failure of others to admit he is dying further dehumanizes Ilyich. He feels patronized by his doctor:

The doctor smiled with a bland condescension that said: 'What can we do? These sick people, you know, do sometimes get such foolish fancies, but we must forgive them.' (p144)

The pretence that he is simply ill, not dying, torments Ilyich. 'This falsity around and within him did more than anything else to poison Ivan Ilyich's last days.' (p144) Yet Ilyich's entire life was imbued with falsity. At the end, his personal integrity is restored through Gerassim, the peasant servant whose care is the catalyst for Ilyich's true self-awareness.

Howard Brody observes that the self-absorption associated with illness and pain brings discontinuity to the narrative of life, diminishes relationships with peers, and that the resulting solitude increases suffering.³⁹ As psychiatrist and palliative care researcher

³⁹ Howard Brody, *Stories of Sickness*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987, cited in Janice L. Williams, 'Alienation and Imagination: The Literature of Exclusion', *Annals of Internal Medicine*, Vol. 126:11, 1 June 1997, p.923.

Harvey Chochinov notes, sickness can bring feelings of degradation, shame and embarrassment:

A deterioration in one's appearance, a sense of being a burden to others, needing assistance with bathing, ... and having pain, [are] ... associated with an altered sense of personal competence and autonomy and, perhaps most burdensome, with an altered sense of self and inherent worth.⁴⁰

Similarly, psychologist William May notes the alienating effect of terminal illness. 'The gregarious become reclusive; the manic somewhat depressed; the witty, slurred and slow of speech; the dominant detached; the dependent, demanding.'⁴¹ In the event of a person becoming unreasonable, the respect of the carer is more likely if a relationship of mutual trust has developed over time – a situation that did not exist between Ilyich and his wife. Existential healing, the restoration of personhood, demands 'showing by one's deeds that one really does care in all the ways one can.'⁴² This requires empathy, compassion, touch and conversation.

In Tolstoy's novella, rather than family, friends, colleagues or doctors, the peasant servant Gerassim affirms Ilyich's dignity and brings him towards existential healing. His care for Ilyich advances reader empathy. The realist narrative, focusing on the painful, humiliating, literal descriptions of Ilyich's suffering, shifts when Gerassim's care and empathy is introduced. His willingness to gently and skillfully perform menial tasks related to Ilyich's sanitation and comfort eliminates falsity and restores personhood to Ilyich. Gerassim, respecting Ilyich's autonomy, takes directions from him. His response to Ilyich is simple and honest, in sharp contrast to the lies of his family and doctors. 'What's a little trouble? It's a case of illness with you, sir.' ... 'If thee weren't sick 'twould be another matter but as things are 'twould be strange if I didn't wait on thee' ... 'We shall all of us die, so what's a little trouble?' (p143) By genuinely relating to Ilych, Gerassim enables him to exhibit similar authenticity. Gerassim carries the weight of Ilyich's legs on his shoulders, the only position Ilyich finds comfortable,

⁴⁰ Harvey Max Chochinov, Thomas Hack, Thomas Hassard, Linda J. Krisjanson, Susan McClement and Mike Harlos, 'Dignity in the Terminally Ill: A Cross-sectional, Cohort Study', *The Lancet*, Vol. 360, 2002, p.2029.

⁴¹ William May, 'Attitudes Toward the Newly Dead', in Peter Steinfels & Robert Veatch (eds.), *Death Inside Out: The Hastings Centre Report*, New York, Harper and Row, 1974, p.57, cited in Jean P. Rumsey, 'Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies', *Hypatia*, Vol. 12:1, 1997, p.104.

⁴² Daniel Sulmasy, *The Healer's Calling: Spirituality for Physicians and other Health Care Professionals*, New York, Paulist Press, p.35, cited in Jack Coulehan, 'Compassionate Solidarity: Suffering, Poetry and Medicine', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, Vol. 52:4, 2009, p.594.

sometimes for the entire night. Ilyich finds Gerassim's presence a comfort because he experiences genuine compassion, touch and conversation. By touching and holding the sick man, he affirms Ivan Ilyich as a person, responding to his need to be loved. In turn, Ilyich discovers a level of personal authenticity. This is demonstrated in a passage that evokes the mother/child caring relationship:

...[Ilyich] craved more than anything – ashamed as he would have been to own it – for someone to feel sorry for him just as if he were a sick child. He longed to be petted, kissed and wept over, as children are petted and comforted. ... And in Gerassim's attitude towards him there was something akin to what he yearned for, and so Gerassim was a comfort to him. (p144)

'Pity', a recurring word in the final chapters of the novella, an emotion felt by Gerassim, Ilyich's son Vasya and finally Ilyich himself, translates from the Russian as *zhalko* or *zhalet'* 'to love', the kind of love that unites people and enables them to love.⁴³ Gerassim's love is the means by which Ilyich comes to love.

Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* promotes an ethic of care while also encouraging readers to think critically about authenticity and compassion. Through the rhetorical devices described, it positions its reader to see the wisdom of living an authentic interrelated life and of providing unconditional loving care for the dying. The reader, encouraged to feel the same pity for Ilyich as his worthy servant Gerassim feels, notes the general reciprocity of such pity. Before he dies, Ilyich turns from self-pity to love for others, and in desiring the end to their suffering, ends his own, in what has been interpreted as a religious conversion. Or, in Sontag's interpretation, 'The lies that muffle Ivan Ilyich's drawn-out agony ... reveal to him the lie of his whole life; when dying, he is, for the first time, in a state of truth.'⁴⁴ The message is unequivocal: to die (or to live) in peace one must renounce inauthenticity and feel love for the other. The intense aloneness and depersonalization possible when dying is alleviated by a loving interrelated approach to end-of-life care.

Denys Arcand's 2003 film *The Barbarian Invasions* also deals insightfully with care of the dying. The opening of this seductive and often humorous movie sees Rémy, a highly autonomous and selfish academic, a socialist, sensualist and womanizer,

⁴³ Leo Tolstoy [Diary entry for 27 November 1906], in PSS, LV, 1955, p.278, cited in David Shepherd, 'Conversion, Reversion and Subversion in Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Il'ich"', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 71: 3 (July 1993), p.405.

⁴⁴ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977, p.42.

depersonalized in his suffering with advanced cancer, sharing an understaffed and inadequately equipped hospital room in Quebec with strangers from other cultures, his symptoms sliding out of control. Sébastien, his wealthy, alienated capitalist son, returns from London at his mother's bidding, and through ingenuity, bribery, and willful violation of the law, organises a private, redecorated room, private nursing, and a ready supply of heroin for his father's poorly-managed pain. He summons an array of close friends, lovers and former lovers to cherish his father, and share memories of his life, views on sex, politics and religion.⁴⁵ Together they affirm and celebrate life until the time of Rémy's assisted death in the fading light, at an idyllic lakeside setting – a sharp contrast to the former blue-grey cold of the clinical hospital ward. At all stages, Rémy's friends and family endeavor to keep his personhood intact, including respecting his wish for euthanasia.

Cinema, culturally associated with leisure and entertainment, has the power to either imbue the viewer with certain values or to stimulate debate. *The Barbarian Invasions* is a seductively joyful film despite Rémy's impending death. His symptoms become well controlled. Friends and family are reconciled and re-united. The group of close and clever friends who bring a form of spiritual comfort share memories that respect Rémy's personhood. Affirming each other, they recall their lust for life and the multiple 'isms' they've exhausted – atheism, Marxism, Maoism, structuralism, and feminism. The viewer is seduced by the intellectual milieu and the loving kindness these friends and family share. A heroin addict is redeemed. A relationship between father and son is restored. Paradoxically, at the point of death, Rémy's personhood is most intact. He knows that he will remain in the memory of the ones who loved him, those he learned from and those he taught. With a strong sense of transcendence imbuing the death-bed lakeside euthanasing scene, the viewer is most likely to conclude that surely, this was a 'good death'.

The film presents ambiguities which lead viewers to questions: If socialised medicine fails many patients, is it reasonable that the capitalist Sébastien, in a series of conciliatory acts, can purchase comfort for his socialist father? Who are the 'barbarians' of the title – the suicide pilots seen on TV in the public hospital, the

⁴⁵ Examples of other works which stress the importance of reciprocal affirmation during the dying process are Ulla-Carin Lindquist, *Rowing Without Oars*, translated by Margaret Myers, London, John Murray, 2005, and Christina Middlebrook, *Seeing the Crab: A Memoir of Dying Before I Die*, New York, Anchor Books, 1998.

wealthy capitalists like Sébastien or the invasion of drug dealers? Is Sébastien humanised by his role in Rémy's end-of-life?⁴⁶ Has capitalism defeated Rémy's socialism? Is atheism or religion the victor in a film that mocks a nursing nun who talks of the 'mystery', and which rants against the Roman Catholic Church for its silence when Primo Levi was sent to Auschwitz? Was it reasonable for Sébastien to break the law – bribing unionised hospital employees to enable Rémy to move to a beautifully decorated private room in a closed ward of the hospital, organizing a supply of heroin from an addict, and enlisting the assistance of a hospital nurse to euthanase his father? Viewers are thus led to multiple questions, but these questions ultimately distract from a powerful polemic on end-of-life care, which advocates initial adherence to palliative care principles, then death by euthanasia as the least dehumanising outcome. The film assumes that there is no caring alternative. Yet Roger Hunt, the longest-serving palliative care specialist in South Australia, argues that

A most striking feature of the intentions of both palliative care and voluntary active euthanasia is that of compassion. Both practices are morally equivalent in that virtuous humane motives underlie the effort to ease suffering in the way desired by the victim of the disease.⁴⁷

Despite the common ground that the two manners of dying share, palliative care and euthanasia emerge from different philosophical bases: hospice palliative care from a communitarian religious tradition, and physician-assisted suicide from an individualist and humanist legacy. In ethical terms, palliative care leans more towards beneficence, whereas physician-assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia are founded on autonomy.⁴⁸ Paradoxically, *The Barbarian Invasions* diminishes the viewer's autonomy with its own brand of beneficence, and denies viewers an open discourse through which they might consider alternative means of dying.

The novel 'Acacia House', by contrast, demonstrates two different models of end-of-life care and suggests a third. Its opening chapter, set on night duty in an Adelaide hospital ward, sees patients routinely sedated, depersonalized, identified by their surname, bed

⁴⁶ Roberta Imboden, in 'The Barbarian Invasions' (Les Invasions barbares), *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 58:3 (Spring 2005), p.50, likens Sébastien to a Goth entering Rome, because he becomes civilized, humanized by his father's life.

⁴⁷ Roger Hunt, 'Palliative Care – the Rhetoric-Reality Gap', in Helga Kuhse (ed.), *Willing to Listen – Wanting to Die*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1994, p.125.

⁴⁸ See Ian Maddocks, 'Hope in Dying: Palliative Care and a Good Death', in John Morgan (ed.), *An Easeful Death?: Perspectives on Death, Dying and Euthanasia*, Armadale, The Federation Press, 1996, pp.57-60.

number or disease (for example, ‘Tucker, the cancer in the side room’). Task-oriented nursing staff only have time for insincere ‘snatches of compassion’. Opportunities for interrelatedness are limited because nursing runs to rapid routine and allows little scope for patients’ individual needs. In such conditions, both patients and nurses are inevitably dehumanized.

Personhood is further diminished in this hospital setting by the presence of pain and anxiety. Many patients are suffering with cancer, their pain poorly managed. Concepts of total pain or existential pain, which consider the relationship between the totality of personhood and pain,⁴⁹ are not considered, either in the ward situation or in the lecture theatre. Narcotics are restricted for fear of addiction, anxiolytics are not prescribed, and no loved ones are present at the bedside to ease anxiety.

The concept of loving those who are dying is the second model of care. It is built on the motivation to care for the dependent and vulnerable, as elucidated in Carol Gilligan’s seminal work, *In a Different Voice*,⁵⁰ and explicated comprehensively by Virginia Held in *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*.⁵¹ This model recognizes a relational nature of care which values both carer and cared for, and manifests the ethic of care which is strived for at Acacia House. In a semi-reverie at a team meeting at Acacia House, Alices muses:

‘People die as they live.’

Who said that? Someone rationalising a troubled death, a banker who demanded control. If a bloke’s been a control freak all his life, he’ll want to control his dying, but it’s hard as he gets near the end. If he loses control he might freak. So let him call the tune, but feed him ideas – gently ease him in. And out. ... Hold his lonely hand. Listen to what he says. Then when the time comes for him to let go, we’ll have an idea what he wants. ... Give him a gentle massage. Perhaps no one has loved him like this since he sat on his mother’s knee. Give him morphine to relieve his pain or whatever

⁴⁹ Peter Strang, Susan Strang, Ragnar Hultborn & Staffan Arnér. ‘Existential Pain – An Entity, a Provocation or a Challenge’, *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, Vol. 27:3, 2004, p.243, cite the work of Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, New York, Basic Books, Inc., 1980. Any care for the dying which attempts to address ‘total pain’ needs first to locate the origins of a person’s existential suffering. It may have its origins in guilt for former unethical decisions – a situation which may require facilitation of reconciliation. It may be founded in issues related to the meaning of life (including religion, spirituality and relationships). Alternatively, the pain may stem from a sense of existential isolation, or its source may be a fundamental death anxiety which inevitably imposes greater intensity and heightened authenticity on a person’s remaining life.

⁵⁰ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1982.

⁵¹ For developments in understanding of the Ethics of Care since Gilligan’s 1982 work, see Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

works best for him. ... Why should he die as he's lived if there's a better way to go? (p64)

Alice is expressing both respect for personhood and the value of negotiated care before dying. The dying person is a self-in-relation to the care-giving other.

A third model of care is implied in the novel. While demonstrating respect for the dying self-in-relation in its depiction of palliative end-of-life care, 'Acacia House' also confronts euthanasia. Opinion is divided on whether the practice respects or disregards personhood. The novel illustrates the difficulty that palliative care practitioners face when patients are given terminal sedation – the doctrine of double effect,⁵² and how the practice evokes accusations of 'euthanasia in disguise'.⁵³ Readers, having become accustomed to the portrayal of excellent palliative care, are confronted with choices when the novel depicts patients with deep personal suffering beyond control. They hear the desperate request of a woman with motor neurone disease who planned to self-euthanase but left her decision until no longer competent, and they may empathise with Howard, the loner, who attempts to end his life. It may be argued that these patients suffer institutional dehumanization, despite palliative care's best efforts to prevent it.

'Acacia House' encourages its reader to make decisions about personal and professional ways of caring for those who are dying. The topic is often the subject of conversation between nurses in the text. As fiscal constraints are implemented, staffing levels in the hospice fall, length of stay is shortened, total care is compromised, and the nursing staff too, as selves-in-relation to patients, find themselves dehumanized. The inclusion of the dehumanizing plight of the Zulu woman, Lillian, in the closing chapters of the novel demonstrates global disparities which are related to both ethos and funding. Empathic readers are invited to consider care not only for the novel's characters, but also for their own loved ones, themselves, and the wider community.

⁵² A defence of the doctrine of double effect in the palliative care context is made in Simon Woods, *Death's Dominion: Ethics at the End of Life*. Open University Press, Berkshire, 2007, pp.129-135.

⁵³ The principle of double effect justifies acts or omission of acts when four conditions are met. The act must be good or morally neutral, the intent is for good effect, a bad effect cannot be the means of the good effect and the good effect must outweigh the bad effect. The principle is discussed in Stephen J. Freeman, *Grief and Loss: Understanding the Journey*, Belmont California, Thomson Learning Inc., 2005, pp.36-39. See also Ilora G. Finlay & Victoria J. Wheatley, 'Ethical Issues in Palliative Care', *Medicine*, Vol. 36:2, 2007, pp.111-113, and A. Gallagher & P. Wainwright, 'Terminal sedation: promoting ethical nursing practice', *Nursing Standard*, Vol. 21:34, 2007, pp.42-46.

Chapter Two

Care for the dying in literature: Tension between autonomy and beneficence

Of those dying in the fiction discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, it would appear that Rémy, in *The Barbarian Invasions*, has the greatest claim to the ethical principle of autonomy: he deliberates on his objectives and causes others to act under the direction of this deliberation. Rémy asserts, rather than negotiates his will, and his family and loved ones respond. Many responses are empowered by an existing relationship, but others, like that of his son, form part of a reconciliation process. Although it has been claimed that care for the dying is compromised by the trend towards increased patient autonomy,⁵⁴ viewers of this persuasive film are likely to disagree, their own autonomy having been manipulated into acceptance of a single interpretation of appropriate end-of-life care.

Yet autonomy, according to the relational approach of care ethics, is founded on the belief that people are ‘fundamentally social beings who develop the competency of autonomy ... in a context of values, meanings, and modes of self-reflection that cannot

⁵⁴ A. Bradshaw, ‘The Spiritual Dimension of Hospice: The Secularisation of an Ideal’, *Social Science and Medicine*, Vol. 43:3, 1996, pp.409-19, cited in Beverley McNamara, ‘Good Enough Death: Autonomy and Choice in Australian Palliative Care’, *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 58, 2004, p.931.

exist except as constituted by social practices'.⁵⁵ Reviewing *The Barbarian Invasions*, then, is Rémy's autonomy one of selfish or social individualism? From the outset, he is depicted as a wilful, self-indulgent extrovert. His impending death, however, becomes the focus for a more social individualism, as his emotional and physical comfort becomes dependent on effective negotiations with others, who, in turn, have the opportunity to engage in a unique nurturing and caring relationship – that offered by impending death. The reciprocity that occurs is mutually beneficial; that old friends care for him, share affirmations, and that reconciliations occur suggests a shift to social, inter-relational individualism.

The demand for patient autonomy is evident in recent academic publications which consider end-of-life care. Baby-boomers in Western society who have controlled so much of their lives have little desire to lose control at the end. Many of the principles of a 'good death' which emerge in publications are profoundly individualistic, and include a death ordered by advance care directives and a requirement for control over the timing and place of death, its management, and those present.⁵⁶ The scope provided by advance care directives to appoint enduring guardianship recognises the need for pre-negotiated advocacy to enhance end-of-life care and mutuality.

A communitarian stance is taken by Robert Burt in his analysis of autonomy at the end of life. Focusing on relationships around care for the dying, Burt argues against both the physician's autonomy in decision making for the dying, and the autonomy of the dying patient.⁵⁷ His work, 'The End of Autonomy', asserts that distrust of physicians fuels the desire for autonomy of the terminally ill. Contrary to philosopher John Christman's requirements for autonomy – rationality and self awareness⁵⁸ – Burt argues that patient autonomy at the end of life is potentially a dangerous concept because humankind has no cognitive ability to comprehend death, an inability which is intensified during the dying process. He states that

⁵⁵ Marilyn Friedman's understanding of autonomy as cited in Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.47.

⁵⁶ See for instance, 'Debate of the Age Health and Care Study Group', *The Future of Health and Care of Older People: the Best is Yet to Come*, London, Age Concern, 1999, cited in Richard Smith, Editorial: 'A Good Death', *BMJ*, Vol. 320, 2000, pp.129-130.

⁵⁷ Robert A. Burt, 'The End of Autonomy', *Improving End of Life Care: Why Has It Been So Difficult? Hastings Centre Report Special Report 35*, no. 6, 2005, S9-S13.

⁵⁸ John Christman, 'Autonomy and Personal History', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 21:1, 1991, pp.14 &17, cited in Merle Spriggs, *Autonomy and Patients' Decisions*, Oxford, Lexington Books, 2005, pp.152-153.

The ironic consequence of the autonomy principle – that decisions about death are the legitimate prerogative of no one but the dying person – is that blame, too, will attach only to the dying person, and will be attached by the dying person to himself.⁵⁹

For these reasons, Burt argues that any decisions which could hasten death should be acted upon only after consensus between many people, and that no individual should be able to exercise exclusive control. While members of society may strive for control of their own dying, each person as a self-in-relation is part of a community. Ultimate control, even in the instance of various forms of euthanasia, always has inter-personal ramifications.

Burt argues against the liberal individualist conception of autonomy. Yet as understood by the ethics of care, autonomy needs to be comprehended in its ‘capacity to reshape and cultivate new relations.’⁶⁰ It is based on a conviction that ‘persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants, which include race, class, gender, and ethnicity’.⁶¹ Further, Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement, points out that

The ethical principles of care have to balance patient autonomy or control with the justice owed to society as a whole. Our choices do not take place in a purely individual setting ... [patient] autonomy must be seen in the context of society as a whole.⁶²

The two different concepts of autonomy, then, may cause ethical dilemmas during the dying process. Tension may arise between one means of dying which is both constrained and supported by community and tradition, and another which leans toward an ethos of individualism. Historically, in most societies, dying people have adhered to the traditions, values, beliefs and practices of the community, but increasingly in modern society, individuals are demanding more control of the way in which they approach death. In the absence of negotiation, justice for carers may be

⁵⁹ *ibid*, p.11.

⁶⁰ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.14.

⁶¹ Catriona Mackenzie & Natalie Stoljar, ‘Introduction’, in Catriona Mackenzie & Natalie Stoljar (eds.), *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p.4.

⁶² Cicely Saunders, ‘In Britain: Fewer Conflicts of Conscience’, *Hastings Centre Report*, Vol. 25:3, May-June 1995, p.44, cited in Simon Woods, *Death’s Dominion: Ethics at the End of Life*, Berkshire, Open University Press, 2007, p.96.

sacrificed, as occurs in Helen Garner's *The Spare Room*, a work of fiction – arguably a memoir⁶³ – in which selfish autonomy and denial collude against the justice inherent in an ethics of care.

Garner's work demonstrates how the behaviour of a non-relational autonomous dying person can undermine friendships, and how justice is lost when a carer succumbs uncritically to the needs of a dying person and is neglectful of the self. Nicola, the dying friend in Garner's novel, has end-stage bowel cancer with liver and bone metastases and has abandoned chemotherapy. She arrives in Melbourne to stay with her old friend, the narrator-protagonist Helen, while undergoing 'alternative' therapies for her incurable condition. She assumes full unnegotiated, non-interrelational autonomy, disregarding the deleterious effect her decisions have on others. This individualistic autonomy, the antithesis of that understood by the ethics of care, precludes apposite caring relationships.

Jean Rumsey has proposed that an 'appropriate relationship between the one dying and her caretaker(s) is characterized by love and fidelity, built up and experienced over time between the persons involved'.⁶⁴ Under such conditions, if the dying person loses the ability to make reasonable responses to choices, the carer can become an advocate, one who represents the person's former rational state.⁶⁵ Without such a former appropriate relationship, the carer may lose respect for the one who is dying, advocacy is more difficult, and both mutuality and general reciprocity are less likely.

Garner's text suggests that although Helen and Nicola share a long friendship, Nicola's personality has been the more superficial and inauthentic. Her individualist autonomy and inauthenticity contribute to the later failure, by both Nicola and Helen, to confront Nicola's impending death, which in turn becomes a dishonest nexus within their relationship. Narrated in the first person, the fiction dramatically recounts Helen's gradual loss of love and respect for Nicola who holds to unrealistic hope, and is determined, to her detriment, to endure a three-week 'war-zone' of bizarre, ostensibly curative pseudoscientific therapies at the 'Theodore Institute'. Convinced that the

⁶³ Robert Dessaix asserts that *The Spare Room* is a memoir, a 'hard hitting, flinty-eyed report from the front, not a novel', in 'Kitchen-Table Candour', *The Monthly*, April 2008, p.58.

⁶⁴ Jean P. Rumsey, 'Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies', *Hypatia*, Vol. 12:1, 1997, p.107.

⁶⁵ Lorraine Code, 'Persons and Others', in Debra Shogan (ed.), *A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993, p.3, cited in Jean P. Rumsey, 'Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies', *Hypatia*, Vol. 12:1, 1997, pp.104-5.

bogus therapies exacerbate Nicola's symptoms and make her increasingly ill, Helen attempts advocacy, questioning the treatments and their side effects, but her attempts at intervention only intensify Nicola's dismissive and individualized intransigence. Failing to accept her fate honestly and prepare for dying, Nicola does not negotiate with family, friends or health professionals for end-of-life care to ensure a death which would offer kindness to both herself and her community. Sicker than ever, she becomes increasingly dependent on Helen while simultaneously drawing her into collusion with her self-deception. At one point, she says, 'I have to trust the vitamin C. By the middle of next week it'll have the damn thing on the run. I need you to believe in it too.' Helen then takes her 'first real breath of it, the sick air of falsehood'. (p59) As with Ivan Ilyich and his family, their relationship is poisoned by lies.

Helen remembers the loving care received from her mother when she was ill as a child and is keen to give similar care to Nicola. Although willing and competent in her caring for Nicola's physical needs, the inauthentic psychosocial aspects of care become both grueling and relationship-damaging. Helen muses, 'Death will not be denied. To try is grandiose. It drives madness into the soul. It leaches out virtue. It injects poison into friendship, and makes a mockery of love'. (p89) The 'It' of her musings appears not to be death, but its denial.

Unnegotiated care can set the scene for self-sacrifice that breeds resentment. Helen, sleep-deprived from round-the-clock nursing care, comes to begrudge the sacrifice of her work, family and social commitments. The limits of her mercy are tested. Living a lie, colluding with Nicola's sense of hope, enduring her selfishness, being patronized and demeaned, intermittently brings her to the point of rage. 'Where was this rage in me? It gushed up like nausea.' (p139) Concomitant to Helen's rage is guilt. 'What was all this anger? I needed to be kinder to her. Dying was frightening.' (p74) Yet, 'I wanted to smash the car into a post, but for only her to die – I would leave the keys in the ignition, grab my backpack and run for my life' (p184) and '...if I did not get Nicola out of my house tomorrow I would slide into a lime-pit of rage that would scorch the flesh off me, leaving nothing but a strew of pale bones on a landscape of mud.' (p193) Garner demonstrates in this passage the nihilistic consequences of resentful self-sacrifice.

It is only when Helen refuses to collude further, when she confronts Nicola with the effect of her autonomous decision-making and her inauthentic effervescent smiling

brightness and stoicism, that Nicola is forced, temporarily, to face her situation, and Helen, too, escapes from the lie. Her honesty is an opportunity for justice:

You're using that bloody clinic to distract yourself ... From what you have to do ... You've got to get ready ... We can't find you any more ... where have you gone? ... We can't bear what you're going through ... we can't bear to lose you. We want to look after you. You're so dear to us. But you crack hardy. You hold us away. We can't get to you ... You wear us out when you keep on being stoical ... It's like a horrible mask. We want to smash it. We want to find you. (pp142-3)

This passage illustrates how inauthenticity and performance has damaged the relationship. When Nicola then responds authentically, Helen is in a position to affirm her:

We looked each other in the eyes and away again, open and free. It was like being submerged to our chins in calm water. Our limbs were weightless, and so were our hearts. (p145)

The weightlessness is short-lived. The final chapter of *The Spare Room* deals with the period after Nicola leaves Helen, and finds other people willing to collude with her hope for survival, both in Melbourne and Sydney. But the toll of caring is extreme, as seen when Helen visits Nicola before her death:

I might have guessed that she would resist the hospice until the contents of her lungs began to bubble up into her nose and throat, until everyone around her was deranged with exhaustion, fury and despair. (p191)

Garner's novel leads the reader to consider the relational aspects of the ethics of care by depicting the terrible consequences of the alternative. It illustrates the high price the carer pays when colluding with individualistic autonomy and denial of impending death, and thereby suggests the wisdom of honest interconnectedness between the carer and cared-for in the interest of justice for all parties. In her article 'Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies', Jean Rumsey, interrogating the Western tradition of dichotomizing justice and care, especially between caring friends,⁶⁶ concludes that even within that "private" world, care and justice are necessary for a 'moral experience'. She asks where the justice lies if caring for a dying loved one entails sacrificing other relationships, responsibilities and valued projects – aspects of the relational self. Her

⁶⁶ Jean P. Rumsey, 'Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies', *Hypatia*, Vol. 12:1, 1997, pp.99-112.

work describes how destructive the temptation to ‘succumb uncritically to the demands others impose’ can be, as witnessed in *The Spare Room*. A similar sentiment is captured in the Adrienne Rich’s poem, ‘A Woman Mourned by Daughters’:

You are puffed up in death
like a corpse pulled from the sea;
We groan beneath your weight ...
And all this universe
dares us to lay a finger
anywhere, save exactly
As you would wish it done.⁶⁷

Initially, in *The Spare Room*, the reader’s sympathies tend to lie with Nicola because of her illness. Despite the flinty narration, characterized by sharp, short sentence structure and a surfeit of forceful action verbs, the reader’s empathy is likely to shift and rest with Helen. She is depicted as considerate and empathic as she prepares the spare room. She second-guesses Nicola’s needs and responses, wishing to give the greatest comfort and aesthetic pleasure. As the frontispiece quote from Elizabeth Jolley reads, ‘It is a privilege to prepare the place where someone else will sleep.’ Reader sympathy remains with Helen during the narrative as she concerns herself entirely with Nicola’s wellbeing, responds to the heavy demands of her physical nursing care, attempts advocacy, rages against both the ‘Theodore Institute’ and Nicola’s selfish individualism, and is drawn, herself, into inauthenticity, unwilling to deny Nicola her hope. The strong first-person narration of Helen’s consciousness and emotional state sustains the empathic relationship. A metanarrative, an alternative manner of dying which hovers over the text, is glimpsed early in the novel as Helen reflects on her sister Madelaine’s ‘good death’, a product of interrelational care:

She accepted her death sentence quietly, without mutiny ... She laid down her gun. She let us cherish her. We nursed her. In less than a year, with her family near her, she put aside her knitting and died, in her own house, in the bed she had shared with her husband ... (p35)

The reader cannot avoid the contrast. Nicola’s brave front, her ‘enraging brightness’ and perpetual smile are a barrier to realistic relationships. She takes Helen’s care for granted and places extraordinary demands on her own psyche, which, because of

⁶⁷ Adrienne Rich, ‘A Woman Mourned by Daughters’, in *Poems Selected and New*, New York, W.W. Norton, 1975, p.57, cited by Jean P. Rumsey, ‘Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies’, *Hypatia*, Vol. 12:1, 1997, p.103.

increasing self-absorption – a corollary to illness and pain – she is unable to manage. Her uncontrolled symptoms, transformed to suffering, are poorly disguised by her stoicism.

Unlike *The Barbarian Invasions*, this text offers an alternative narrative to Nicola's: Helen suggests palliative care. Although Nicola refuses to see palliative care personnel, saying they are 'the last thing before death', (p69) the narrative informs the reader of the work palliative practitioners do – giving advice on symptom control and support to both the sick and their carers. It illuminates and dispels myths about palliative care. 'It's not the angel of death,' Helen tells Nicola. 'They were not just for cancer patients or for the dying.' (p92) The narrative also repudiates a common misconception about narcotics: Nicola's quality of life improves when she overcomes her unfounded fear of addiction and accepts narcotics for her pain. (p76)

Nicola's inauthentic self-centred autonomy and denial of impending death have an impact on Helen's other relationships, especially with her family. 'How had I got myself into this? Death was in my house. Its rules pushed new life away with terrible force. I longed for the children next door, their small, determined bodies through which vitality surged...' (p80) Rather than death, however, it is the failure of the two friends to negotiate Nicola's care to their mutual benefit that is at fault.⁶⁸

Garner's fiction is crafted to attract an empathic response from readers with an urge to care. Crafting is evident, as with the 'mirror' framing strategy, which symbolises Helen's concern for Nicola's psychological wellbeing and foreshadows their fractured relationship. As she prepares for Nicola's arrival, 'She might take it the wrong way if her room lacked a mirror ... I selected a discreet spot for it ...' When the mirror falls and smashes into fragments which penetrate the carefully chosen Iranian rug, Helen painstakingly picks them out. 'The fragments of mirror were mean-shaped and stubborn, some so miniscule that they were only chips of light.' The rug is personified. 'They hid against the rug's scalp, in the roots of its fur.' A metaphor for Nicola's resilient yet broken body, the fractured mirror pierces the fabric of its host.

⁶⁸ Virginia Held, in *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.55, asserts that 'Mutual autonomy is different from individual autonomy. It includes mutual understandings and acceptances of how much sharing of time, space, daily decisions, and so on there will be, and how much independently arrived at activity.'

Beyond the metanarrative that suggests the wisdom of an honest, interrelational ethic of care, this work poses few questions for readers. It does, however, raise the question of responsibility for care for a person such as Nicola. How else could Helen have responded when Nicola refused to admit the gravity of her illness, pursued pseudoscientific cures, needed extreme care, but resented receiving it?

Notions of autonomy are more difficult to address when ill people lose competence. Tamara Jenkins' film, *The Savages*, as it deals with this problem, leans towards a prescriptive ethic of care. The film depicts an alienated father, Lenny Savage, who suffers with dementia, has diminished competence and loss of autonomy, and needs beneficent advocacy. It illustrates the dilemmas confronting estranged siblings when faced with such responsibility. Abandoned by their mother and abused by their father in their youth, Wendy and Jon Savage share neither emotional or geographical closeness nor financial security. Nevertheless, they feel a duty to provide care for Lenny and to negotiate an appropriate nursing home placement.

Unlike Garner's work in which the reader empathizes with Helen, Jenkins' film strives for an alienation effect, a technique which encourages its audience to be consciously critical observers. While the film may offer situational empathy, viewers are unlikely to have an empathic response to its characters as their interior lives are thinly drawn.⁶⁹ Empathy is more readily felt when characters are like ourselves – and neither of the sibling protagonists in this film are appealing. Wendy and Jon engage in destructive behaviours, and each is in a relationship without emotional commitment. Wendy is a dishonest, anxious, failed playwright who lies to her brother and steals from her workplace. She shamelessly appropriates medication from the cupboard of her father's deceased partner. Jon, like an actor in the Brechtian theatre which he teaches, as if distancing himself from the part he interprets, is emotionally detached from his Polish girlfriend, his sister and his father. His life is almost one-dimensional – his focus being the book on Brecht which he is writing.

By forcing its viewers to objectively observe and evaluate its protagonists and their situation, *The Savages*, too, has elements of Brechtian theatre. Indeed, Kurt Weill's *Solomon's Song* from *The Threepenny Opera* is included in the soundtrack. The

⁶⁹ For theories of the empathic response to fictional works, see Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *Narrative*, Vol. 14:3, 2006, pp.207-236.

unpleasant realism of the film encourages an objective viewer response. The initial scene in Lenny's home depicts his faecal wall painting of 'prick' in response to the psychological cruelty of the man who identifies himself as a 'home health-care professional'. In the first hospital scene, after a long camera shot focused on a full urinary drainage bag, a nurse talks over Lenny, infantilising him: 'only if he promises to be good ... are you going to be good Mr Savage?' Lenny's autonomy is diminished and the hospital staff's attempt at beneficence is patronizing.

Jon investigates nursing homes for their father in a businesslike manner. He reports to Wendy, 'Yes, it smells. They all smell. Inside these places are all the same.' When Lenny is admitted to the apparently insalubrious Valley View, Wendy and Jon are faced with advance care directives and funeral arrangements. In a café with Lenny, Wendy, more sensitive than her brother, is unable to discuss dying – an inability likely to be shared by many viewers – and resorts to the euphemism, 'in case something happens'. Jon, by contrast confronts Lenny, 'if you were in a coma, would you want a breathing machine to keep you alive?' Lenny's response indicates the intermittent acuity of his mental state. 'What kinda question's that? ... Unplug me. Pull the plug!' In response to further tentative questions, he replies, 'Bury me! What are you? A bunch of idiots? Bury me!' In this scene, as in many with their father, Wendy and Jon appear to be more observers than interactants, barely relating to their father or to each other.

Wendy's wish for a higher class of care for Lenny takes the trio to Greenhill Manor, an expensive and more aesthetically pleasing institution. Yet Jon tells Wendy that her motives are selfish, that 'the landscaping, the neighbourhoods of care, they're not for the residents, they're for the relatives ... who don't want to admit what's going on here ... people are dying ... and inside that beautiful building, right now, it's a fucking horror show ... and death is gaseous, gruesome, and filled with shit and piss and rotten stink.' Comedic touches to the film, as when this dialogue is overheard by another family, intensify the alienation effect.

In Lenny's dying days, he is inexplicably removed from the familiar Valley View where he knows and trusts the staff and is transferred to hospital, to a room with intravenous therapy and a monitor. When he dies in this alien environment, Wendy and Jon show little emotion, the only dialogue between them, 'that's it' and 'yeah.'

Despite such scenes of alienation, this film, while drawing viewer attention to interpersonal shortcomings, supports the ethics of care's suggestions for relationships. Held points out that

The ethics of care recognizes that human beings are dependent for many years of their lives. ... All persons need care for at least their early years. Prospects for human progress and flourishing hinge fundamentally on the care that those needing it receive, and the ethics of care stresses the moral force of the responsibility to respond to the needs of the dependent. Many persons will become ill and dependent for some periods of their later lives, including in frail old age.⁷⁰

Held also asserts that the ethics of care has intertwined values, or 'moral emotions' of sensitivity, empathy, responsiveness, and taking responsibility – all of which require cultivation. Wendy and Jon's situation is difficult because they lack such cultivation – the emotional knowledge for advocacy, to negotiate care for their father. The film advances this knowledge.

The issues raised in *The Savages* about confronting end-of-life consequences of personal estrangement are more forceful because of the film's denial of empathy and its commitment to critical detachment. The family name itself suggests that such estrangement is uncivilized. Lacking a relationship with their father, only situational empathy which aims at meeting immediate needs is possible. Viewers who identify with the absence of an established caring relationship and pre-negotiated advocacy are likely to dread a similar situation. The end-of-life decisions forced on Wendy and Jon suggest both the need for advance care directives and the value of developing caring relationships.

The film also confronts viewers with social inequities. As Held asserts, 'those defending the ethics of care have successfully shown why it should be seen as applicable to political and social life and not limited to the "private" sphere of family and friendship.'⁷¹ Viewers of *The Savages* will not fail to notice that the carers at Valley View who are most sensitive to Lenny's needs, who exemplify care and can offer advice to the siblings, are all African American. The staff at prestigious Greenhill

⁷⁰ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.10.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, p.119.

Manor, by contrast, are white. While that institution is aesthetically attractive, it refuses care for Lenny once he shows his cantankerous side.

The linking of personal and global issues in the novel 'Acacia House' reflects the broader context of the ethics of care.⁷² The work addresses issues including migration, racism, war, health spending, and global and domestic injustice. 'Acacia House' also illustrates the ramifications of both individualistic and relational autonomy. Nurses who witness both trustful and dysfunctional family relationships discuss advance care directives. They consider palliative care and euthanasia and the privilege of caring and being cared for, yet also express their fears of becoming a burden. (p104) A scenario for those who have made no directives is articulated by Alice as she tells Gabby, 'most of us will languish, dribbling porridge down our whiskery chins, in a public hospital or an aged care facility...' (p128) Readers, like the nurses, may be prompted to engage in discussion with their loved ones and prepare advance care directives.

The alternative to negotiated autonomy is demonstrated in 'Acacia House' with the care of Mrs Foley, who refuses appropriate pain control and inflicts misery on her carers. (p168) In that instance, Barry, the doctor, weary of the woman's refusal to negotiate her care, discharges her. Mrs Foley becomes the victim of her own individualistic autonomy. To 'not go gentle', as advocated by Dylan Thomas in the poem 'Do not go gentle into that good night'⁷³, but to 'Rage, rage against the dying of the light' in the face of inevitable, anticipated death, could only appear appropriate under the ethics of care if all parties are cognizant and consenting, no party is compromised, and the concept of justice is given full consideration.

The majority of patients encountered in the novel 'Acacia House' enjoy negotiated autonomy. Palliative care practitioners discuss dying wishes and care with patients and their loved ones. Towards the end of the novel, however, the patients who are admitted to the hospice are sicker and their length of stay shorter. Often they are beyond competence, and families, sometimes dysfunctional, become their advocates in negotiation with palliative care practitioners. A further depiction of the complexity of

⁷² Joan C. Tronto, in *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, London, Routledge, 1994, demonstrates the way society demeans the importance of caring to perpetuate the power of the privileged.

⁷³ Dylan Thomas, 'Do not go gentle into that good night', Dylan Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1934-1952*, London, J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1967, p.116.

patient autonomy is seen in the narratives of two different patients with motor neurone disease – Jeremy, who becomes paranoid with increasing frontal lobe involvement in his illness, and Julia, who had planned to euthanase herself before losing competence, but who lost her chance for autonomous action when her condition deteriorated. (p104) The novel, then, by revealing the individual needs of different patients, may lead the reader to consider different interpretations of the ethics of care.

Chapter Three

Care for the dying in literature: Denial and acceptance of impending death in autothanatographical texts.

Sigmund Freud's 1918 essay 'Our Attitude Towards Death'⁷⁴ suggests that, although society recognizes that death is 'natural, undeniable and inevitable',⁷⁵ most people tend to ignore it, and that even in imagining our own death, we survive as spectators. Fiction, Freud observes, is where people know how to die, and 'there alone the condition for reconciling ourselves to death is fulfilled',⁷⁶ but with the understanding that life remains permanent for the reader. He concludes:

Were it not better to give death the place to which it is entitled both in reality and in our thoughts and to reveal a little more of our unconscious attitude towards death which up to now we have so carefully suppressed? ... *Si vis vitam, para mortem*. If you wish life, prepare for death.⁷⁷

In the 1930s, Walter Benjamin also cites public avoidance of witnessing dying:

Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers in eternity, and when their end approaches, they are stowed away in sanatoria or hospitals by their heirs.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Our Attitude Towards Death', in Sigmund Freud, *Reflections on War and Death*, Translated by A. A. Brill and Alfred B. Kuttner, New York, Moffat, Yard & Co., 1918; Bartleby.com, 2010. www.bartleby.com/282/. [accessed 01.04.2011].

⁷⁵ Ibid., paragraph 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid., paragraph 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid., paragraphs 34 & 35.

⁷⁸ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn, London, Fontana, 1992, p.93, cited in Ruth Robbins, 'Death Sentences: Narratives of Terminal Illness', in Jo Gill (ed.), *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, Hoboken, Taylor & Francis, 2005, p.161.

Psychologists and sociologists today disagree about death-denial in Western society.⁷⁹ Understandings vary from suppressing the pain of loss to a prolonged refusal to accept dying and recognize its reality. Periods of death-denial, however, which may serve as temporary coping strategies, are experienced by many suffering with anticipatory grief, and are legitimate defense mechanisms which serve to keep unpleasant realities away from conscious awareness in the short term. While health care professionals and loved ones may sometimes collude in denial, it becomes problematic when it impacts adversely on the sufferer's wellbeing and relationships with caring others – as observed in Helen Garner's work of fiction, *The Spare Room*.

If denial is not resolved, it can inhibit the potential for a 'good death'. Unfinished business may be postponed, futile treatments undertaken, differences with loved ones continue unresolved and advance care directives remain unwritten as the selves-in-relation perform inauthentic roles.⁸⁰ Denial of death may have profound and long-lasting deleterious consequences for loved ones and caregivers. By contrast, when a terminally ill person accepts their impending death, optimal care may be negotiated – with the ill person, family, loved ones, care givers and health professionals. Acceptance, both cognitive and emotional, in the months before death, has been cited as a key element in enabling a good death, although for some people, this may follow a long period of emotional defiance.⁸¹ The acceptance of impending death by both the dying and their others optimises interrelational care.⁸²

Because of society's reluctance to confront issues around death and dying, readers are more likely to encounter it fortuitously in fiction than in life writing. Christina Middlebrook mentions the 'tiny library of books, not so popular, written by a few who write about the journey'.⁸³ These 'few' thanatographies, written by the dying and their loved ones, give insight into both denial and acceptance of impending death. Such

⁷⁹ Society's denial of death which precludes discussions of dying and advance care planning is discussed in Camilla Zimmermann, 'Death Denial: Obstacle or Instrument for Palliative Care?: An Analysis of Clinical Literature', in *Sociology of Health Illness*, Vol. 29:2, 2007, pp.297-314. See also Allan Kellehear, 'Are we a 'Death-Denying' Society? A Sociological Review', *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 18:9, 1984, pp.713-721.

⁸⁰ Management of death-denial is discussed in Paul Rousseau, 'The Art of Oncology: When the Tumour is Not the Target / Death Denial', *Journal of Clinical Oncology*, Vol. 18:23, (December 1), 2000, pp.3998-3999.

⁸¹ L. Sandman, *A Good Death: On the Value of Death and Dying*, Open University Press, Berkshire, 2005, pp.84-90.

⁸² The distress that emotional defiance may cause carers is noted in *ibid.*, pp.89-90.

⁸³ Christina Middlebrook, *Seeing the Crab: A Memoir of Dying Before I Die*, New York, Anchor Books, 1998, p.204.

writing may be personally therapeutic, altruistic or both. John Wiltshire observes that the task of the illness narrative is to make sense of devastating or mortal illness.⁸⁴ Harvard psychiatrist Wesley Boyd further notes that

Stories of medicine often are attempts to claim authority and power over illness, whether the story-teller is a patient or a caregiver. When patients write about their experiences of illness, they often seem to want to reclaim authority over themselves ... denied them by the machinations of medicine.⁸⁵

Regardless of the rationale for their writing, thanatographies offer a relationship between text and reader concerning both dying and care. By articulating daily events, moral dilemmas and personal anguish, these memoirs are inevitably informed by both reason and emotion.⁸⁶ John Wiltshire suggests that they also offer strong arguments for non-rational ways of deciding ethical issues about care, and sustain strong arguments for patients' independence and autonomy. He notes thanatographies' plurality of viewpoints, their depiction of transformations of the self, and their attempts to 'rescue' the moral being capable of rational choice during cascades of crises. He appropriates Martha Nussbaum's phraseology to insist that such memoirs are a 'complex and mysterious construction, full of indefiniteness and obliquity, periphrasis and indirection'.⁸⁷ Because of their complexity, readers may find thanatographies offering unique opportunities for insight.⁸⁸

Australian public intellectual Donald Horne's *Dying: A Memoir*⁸⁹ offers insights and guidance relevant both to the dying process and care for the dying and their loved ones commensurate with the ethics of care. This tripartite publication comprises a journal of

⁸⁴ John Wiltshire, 'Biography, Pathography and the Recovery of Meaning', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 29:4, 2000, p.412.

⁸⁵ Wesley J. Boyd, 'Seeing the Crab: A Memoir of Dying', *Psychiatry: Interpersonal and Biological Processes*, Vol. 60:4, 1997, p.347.

⁸⁶ The value of pathographies to patients, caregivers and health professionals is discussed by John Wiltshire in 'The Patient Writes Back: Bioethics and the Illness Narrative', in Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman, and David Parker, (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁸⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, p.60, cited in John Wiltshire, 'The Patient Writes Back: Bioethics and the Illness Narrative', in Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman & David Parker (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.183.

⁸⁸ John Wiltshire cites illness narratives as 'both genuinely rational and superior in richness and value' in John Wiltshire, 'The Patient Writes Back: Bioethics and the Illness Narrative', in Jane Adamson, Richard Freadman & David Parker (eds.), *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.183.

⁸⁹ Donald Horne and Myfanwy Horne, *Dying: A Memoir*, Camberwell, Viking, 2007.

Donald's approach to dying with terminal pulmonary fibrosis ('Journal of a Terminal Illness'), his wife Myfanwy's account of his illness, his dying and her bereavement, ('Requiem'), and a series of Donald's essays ('A Last Look Around: Essays and Talking Points').

Both Donald and Myfanwy Horne accept that Donald is soon to die. While one reviewer has commented that Donald 'acquiesces to extinction with the torpor of the aged',⁹⁰ his acceptance of impending death, as expressed in the memoir, is not universal amongst the ageing community.⁹¹ His informative and sensitive memoir, much of which affirms both himself and his family, enhances his last days, functioning as it does as a therapeutic outlet for personal, cultural and political contemplation. Further, it attempts to influence public thought on the important issue of dying. Continuing to give talks, write and rework essays while he is able, Horne shares his ethos, 'to seek knowledge, wonder, wisdom, and so forth, in a general exploration of human behaviour'. (p19) The interrelational nature of support from family and health professionals enables Horne to continue living as fully as possible at the end of life. In one instance, he documents how such support equips him to overcome his breathing difficulties prior to addressing graduands at the University of Sydney. His speech on that occasion values the imagination, curiosity, and the critical spirit. (p39) The final exhortation of this speech reappears in his funeral's order of service, and perpetuates Horne's ethos of living beyond his death:

Go, in the name of imagination, of wonder and curiosity, of the spirit of inquiry, of critical engagement, of the ethic of the producer and of enterprise, and see what you can make of them. (p44)

By sharing with readers the anticipatory grief that accompanies acceptance, and the behaviours and therapies from the caring community that bring physical and psychological relief during his deterioration, the memoir functions as an act of care to its readers. The tone of Donald's 'journal of a terminal illness', is dignified, sometimes sad, sometimes humorous. The reader witnesses the close relationship between the Hornes who each accept Donald's prognosis, yet also express sadness, doubt and despair:

⁹⁰ Antonella Gambotto-Burke, 'Review, Dying: A Memoir', *South China Morning Post*, 18/11/2007.

⁹¹ That not all of the ageing community accept impending death is evident in Caroline Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly: a Journey of Love and Grief with my Father*, Sydney, ABC Books, 2009.

Myfanwy and I stood in the street outside the doctor's rooms, silently holding each other, tears in our eyes. Not through fear of death but through sorrow at the coming to an end of our relationship – a relationship I see as having an existence beyond the lives of the two of us. Like a star. (p17)

When Donald is too ill to join Myfanwy on a trip to the mountains, he writes 'Suddenly I am overcome with sadness, thinking of Myfanwy on her way to the mountains, never again to be accompanied by me.' (p.35) Such sad moments of acceptance appear as landmarks on Donald's journey of anticipatory grief.

Demystifying the dying process for readers, the memoir demonstrates the way the Hornes, despite their sorrow, put both practical and personal affairs in order in preparation for death. Woven through expressions of grief are the practical provision of physical and psychosocial care by family, health professionals and caregivers. Practical concerns like ill-fitting dentures, continence aids, bowel management, appointments, disability aids, provision of oxygen and pharmaceuticals are all discussed, as are Donald's ruminations in the night, troubling dreams, and financial anxiety for Myfanwy. The memoir illustrates the calming presence of loved ones, just by 'being there'.

Obliquely instructive to carers, the memoir documents the manner and attributes of the caring community. The occupational therapist is 'calmly spoken, with a no-nonsense manner softened by unexpected touches of girlishness.' The palliative care specialist is 'quiet and sympathetic'. Part-time home helpers are like 'part of the family' despite the home becoming more medicalised, both with objects and personnel. Nurses who assist with daily hygiene tell amusing anecdotes. Donald has confidence in the care he receives because everything is well explained. Demonstrating the need for interrelatedness, he cites how he and Myfanwy 'grasp at shared connections' with new care-givers. Finding common ground enhances the interrelatedness essential for optimum care.

Horne's memoir describes features which enrich the last phase of his life: the confidence, friendliness and pleasure of the palliative care team that gives support to Myfanwy and 'leaves us happy', and the importance of 'celebrating those occasions which proclaim our values, even in sad or perilous times, as an essential feature of our life as cultural beings.' (p96) Like Kathleen's birthday party at the hospice described in 'Acacia House', Donald delights in an immediate-family gathering for Myfanwy's

birthday. For him, larger gatherings would be stressful, but small is comforting. The memoir also recounts palliative management of Donald's breathing difficulties, the use of opiates and corticosteroids. It describes his Living Will, which refuses artificial prolongation of life, which, despite having no legal status, nevertheless gives him peace of mind. (p131) In his final journal entry, he describes the way he would like to die, drifting away with the morphine given to ease his breathing. 'I would want to be among my memories, with Myfanwy whom I love holding my hand.' His wishes, in part, were met.

In the same volume, *Requiem*, Myfanwy's contribution to the memoir, illustrates her care for Donald, the practical and personal difficulties she faced caring for him, and strategies which enriched their last days together. While there is inevitable sacrifice of elements of the self during caring for the dying, in their negotiated regime of care, the text gives no sense that Myfanwy sacrifices the self in an onerous way – the temptation when caring for dying loved ones.⁹² John Wiltshire notes features that such third-person illness accounts like Myfanwy's have in common – that they are usually written by 'care-giver' relatives or lovers, and that the intimacy of care-giver and patient mimics the relation between mother and child.⁹³ This initial impetus for Gilligan's ethics of care theories is thus played out both in care for the dying and in its documentation. Myfanwy's memoir functions as personal grief therapy, an attempt to make sense of Donald's death, and as an act of care for the reader.

When Donald is four days from death and Myfanwy is concerned that she cannot care for him adequately, a nurse suggests his transfer to a hospice. 'Let them do the looking after and you do the loving,' she says. The move is negotiated with all family members and health care practitioners. Myfanwy writes:

I want Donald, if he is to go anywhere, to be in an atmosphere where the primary concern is dying, where all attention is focused on it. And I know that the hospice, if it's at all possible, will arrange a bed for me in his room. (p134)

⁹² Jean P. Rumsey cites the potential for carer demoralization when sacrificing other relationships, responsibilities and valued projects, and how caring for the self enhances the ability to care for the dying, in 'Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies', *Hypatia*, Vol. 12:1, 1997, p.103.

⁹³ John Wiltshire, 'Biography, Pathography and the Recovery of Meaning', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 29:4, 2000, p.413.

In the hospice, medications offered to ease Donald's breathlessness and congestion are described as 'not life-prolonging'. Acknowledging that death is near, affirmations are made. Donald tells his family that he loves them. A chaplain who has no problems with Donald's liberal humanism talks with them, then tells Donald, 'I didn't know you, but thank you for all you have done.' These affirmations, the last of many in the text between Donald, the family, and the caring community, demonstrate to the reader the value of expressing gratitude in 'final conversations'. Myfanwy's memoir further privileges the reader with the moment of Donald's death. Relieved of breathing difficulties, he dies peacefully. The family 'sit for an hour or so, quietly talking as Donald's body loses its warmth.' Readers experience the natural calm in the aftermath of death.

Donald Horne's son Nick, in his eulogy to his father, points out that 'Donald died well. ... Up until his last week, when the laws of nature took their course, he certainly did not want to die, but he was a realist about death. It had to happen sometime.'⁹⁴ Because Donald and his family accepted his impending death, while grieving the imminent loss of their relationship, they could live their last days together optimally.

The collected texts in this volume act as a work of care, the convincing first-person chronological accounts encouraging readers to an acceptance of dying as part of life. Within his memoir, Donald argues against the idea that only fictional works are imaginative (p39), an indicator of the creative elements in his own work. While Myfanwy's work is more prosaic, Donald's prose pleases the reader with its poetic imagery. As he contemplates the manner of his death, he writes, 'I have met no one else who has this disease. As a coquette, it is a lonely shadow.' (p18) Similarly, concentrating on his breathing, and suggesting some loss of personhood, 'I become my own breathing. In-out. In-out. I imagine I am one of those creatures that lies on the bottom of the sea, slowly palpitating. I am breathing in and out, an animal on the bottom of the sea, absorbing oxygen.' (p64) He likens his breathlessness to being in a gale, he suffers gale-like breath storms. (p60) His alveoli are like Wordsworth's daffodils, but instead of dancing, they are 'rigid and crackling'. (p10) At the Independent Living Centre, they enter 'a world of distortions ... like reflections in a funfair's hall of mirrors', (p21) a reflection, perhaps, on the way pulmonary fibrosis has distorted Donald's sense of self.

⁹⁴ Donald Horne & Myfanwy Horne, *Dying: A Memoir*, Camberwell, Penguin, 2007, p.2.

Thanatographies, while noted for their selectivity and re-ordering of elements to create coherence and meaning, may offer autobiographical consolation to those who are approaching their deaths and also to their loved ones.⁹⁵ Works like the Hornes' are inevitably works of mourning, an intrinsic part of the dying process which brings those who grieve to greater self-awareness.⁹⁶ The Hornes admit the reader into a mutually constructed space.

While Donald's text leads to few questions about caring for the dying, Myfanwy's *Requiem* is more challenging. While readers are likely to agree that Donald had a good death, her account expresses a concern of many who care for the dying at home. Would they be better in a hospice or hospital where their symptoms could be better controlled? Myfanwy writes:

I delight in the easing of his discomfort, and wonder (something I am to continue doing) whether, in spite of the conflicting messages I was getting, I should have insisted on the hospice earlier. It is some consolation that, almost to the end, he has not wanted to leave home. (p139)

Recognising the privilege of accessible palliative care, Myfanwy obliquely suggests an alternative:

I wonder about situations where medical intervention is not available. There are stories of soldiers in war shooting mortally wounded comrades, and who could blame them? Or others who relieve terminal suffering? (p135)

The reader may also ask why the ambulance officer, on Donald's final journey to the hospice, uses a heart defibrillator. This is only mentioned as an aside in Myfanwy's memoir, but the action violates Donald's wishes. Why does Myfanwy fail to mention the distress the defibrillation inevitably brought – or that it contravened Donald's living will? To explore such distress would detract from the account of Donald's 'good death', but its omission sits uncomfortably with his ethos of promoting knowledge, compromises the ethics of the text, and has the potential to leave the reader feeling manipulated.

⁹⁵ Consolation found in the exchange between literature and 'being toward-death' is discussed by Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* translated by Kathleen Blamey, Chicago, 1992, p.162, cited in Kate Soper, 'Love's Work', *New Left Review*, Number 218, 1996, p.155.

⁹⁶ Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, London, Granta Books, 2008, p.xxvii.

If Donald and Myfanwy experience denial, it is excluded from the memoir. A bolder autothanatography, *Seeing the Crab*, by Jungian psychoanalyst Christina Middlebrook, suggests that denial is a coping mechanism, which, as it retreats, performs a therapeutic function: the liberation of emotion and the clear visualization of realities including the knowledge of certain death.⁹⁷ Unlike *Dying*, in which Donald, his family and health professionals all admit there is no hope of cure, Christina is given hope by the medical fraternity despite her diagnosis of metastatic carcinoma. While admitting that her disease is inevitably fatal, she simultaneously experiences denial. In her experience

Denial is the great tsunami. Anger, suffering, jealousy, envy, fear – all are invisible far out to sea. They ride, unbidden, behind the great wave. Then, unexpectedly, denial approaches the shore, approaches where we *really* live. The tsunami crashes, destroying all the pretty structures at the water's edge, disrupting the daily chores, the summer sunshine, the pretense of calm. Denial creeps back to sea, retreating with a mere remnant of wave. Anger, suffering, the clear view of mortality, the knowledge of death, loss, grief – all these clutter the shore like the bleached remains of crabs and clams. We cannot find denial again. (p10)

Denial, with its strong links to hope, is, in fact, experienced again by Christina after her recovery from extensive and grueling treatment – a radical mastectomy, several courses of chemotherapy, radiation therapy, blood pheresis to collect peripheral stem cells, bone marrow harvesting, and autologous stem cell rescue (bone marrow transplant). (p172) When at last she is in remission, she temporarily deludes herself that ‘remission’ means ‘cure’. Stable and treatment-free, she even proselytizes to others with cancer, and ‘regress[es] into the bootstrap theory of serious illness.’ (p174) Christina’s alter ego, however, personified as ‘the nasty creature,’ is ever present. It challenges her denial and forces her to again accept that she is going to die. In the final chapter, ‘The Dier’, Middlebrook encourages readers to accept and face death as integral to life. She explains the Jungian concept of Life, and its partner, death, as belonging to the Psyche, how death comes in its own time, and is not of Ego’s choosing. (p191) Middlebrook’s illumination of suffering and its alleviation in this work is an act of care for both healthy readers and those suffering a terminal illness. It encourages readers to face their own and others’ deaths as part of life, irrespective of terminal illness.

⁹⁷ Christina Middlebrook, *Seeing the Crab: A Memoir of Dying Before I Die*, New York, Anchor Books, 1998, p.10.

Middlebrook's work also illustrates denial within the medical fraternity. 'Medicine and high technology,' as 'twins born of logic' and belonging to the Ego, fail to prepare Christina for dying. Her oncologist doesn't explain that his treatment is potentially lethal, that it will, at best, relieve her symptoms and prolong her life but that her disease will eventually kill her. Instead, his language suggests victory, and denies the possibility of death. He will 'hit the tumour hard and early ... hit it out of the ball park. Send it into the stratosphere.' Middlebrook doesn't apportion blame. She and her husband chose the oncologist because of his reputation for aggressive management. While it is her prerogative to clutch at life, the potential quality of that life, both while undergoing and as a result of treatment, isn't explained by the oncologist.

The text evidences the importance of a caring community. Following 'lethally high-dose chemotherapy', visualizing herself as an ugly hairless depersonalized zoo creature, unable to swallow, speak, or communicate in any way, perpetually vomiting and haemorrhaging, Middlebrook writes, 'All it knows is to look to the chair at the side of the bed in hopes that a visitor is there, keeping watch'. (p56) This scene illustrates, as in Horne's work, the value of the caring other, just 'being there'. Conversely, Middlebrook is disappointed by the evasions and denials of those who, discomfited by her imminent death, cannot offer honest support. Some people ask if the treatments have killed all the cancer but then ignore her response, that 'distant metastasis always recurs', that 'recurrence is inevitably fatal.' (p97) Christina knows she is only buying time, and that her condition is incurable. When she wishes to discuss with a friend the future of her husband and their children after her death, the reply precludes discussion. 'You didn't go through all that bone marrow misery for nothing. You are going to be just fine.' (p99) Denial precludes care in this instance. An honest relationship, as understood by the ethics of care, is impossible when truth is denied. In Middlebrook's final chapter, 'The Dier', she contrasts 'those who choose to turn away from the darkness of terminal illness' with Jungian sufferers who 'struggle to accept every event of [their] lives' and are 'zealous believers in integration and vehement enemies of repression'. (p193) She points out that 'The Ego's hold on the taboo that forbids us to speak of death, I have learned, is its strongest hold, stronger even than its censure of those other unmentionables: sex, money, incest, voting Democratic in the 1990s.' (p206) With its occasional lacing of humour, Middlebrook's breaking of the taboo is an act of care for the reader.

Unlike the Hornes' more formal and gentle narrative, Middlebrook's narrative is a spirited, strong, and often humorous work, rich in metaphor, which integrates various aspects of experience and care to elicit empathy from its readers. It describes in detail the extreme medical procedures she endures, the appalling side effects, and the effect on her psyche, interpersonal relationships and emotions. The appealing first-person narration is profoundly human, forthright and honest. As testimony to her truthfulness, she admits to past peccadilloes, sexual difficulties associated with her therapy, problems with excrement, and various embarrassments associated with her disease. Her honesty thus declared, she then attacks various alternative cancer theories which place an onus of responsibility on the sufferer. Despite having turned to promises of mind-over-body cures when first diagnosed, when reconciled to dying she admits:

I dislike theories and, most of all, the jargon and categories that bury meaning alive. Intellectual understanding pales before experience. What I know is that I don't know. Analytic psychology gives me the equipment I need to face not knowing. 'One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious.' (Jung) (p194)

By rejecting the attachment of moral significance that some theorists attribute to cancer, and damning the 'new age tyranny' which suggests cancer sufferers 'need' their illness 'to resolve some previous life issue that lies rotting beneath the surface' of their lives, her judgments liberate sufferers to accept their disease – to make the 'darkness conscious' – but not assume responsibility for it. (p199) Although Christina's scorn for alternative theories may challenge some readers, a sufferer may yet reach the conclusion of Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, who, seeking meaning in his disease asks, 'Why these agonies?' Middlebrook's inner voice, like Ilyich's responds, 'For no reason. They are just so.'⁹⁸ Acceptance in these texts appears easier when meaning is not attached to disease.

A means, for Middlebrook, to assist making the 'darkness conscious' is achieved through other thanatographies, authored by people cognizant of their imminent deaths. Like Middlebrook's, such texts are acts of care. She cites Barbara Rosenblum: 'you cannot know the aloneness of one who faces death, looking it squarely in the eye'. The inherent empathy of those who write 'matter-of-factly' (indeed, like Middlebrook) of

⁹⁸ Leo Tolstoy, *The Cossacks / Happy Ever After / The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1960, p.154. Christopher Reid reiterates these sentiments in 'The Unfinished', in his sequence of poems, *A Scattering*, discussed in Chapter Four of this dissertation.

their approaching deaths, who include their fear, anxiety, anger and grief, offers her the greatest care. (p206)

Initially, readers may be frustrated by the fragmented nature of Milbrook's narrative which frustrates a quest for chronology. 'Time has lost its linear qualities' (p163) Middlebrook explains, in a statement that both reflects on the effects of illness and treatment, and functions as metanarrative. Her work makes frequent shifts between temporal dimensions, and incongruities occur between grammatical tense and apparent narrative time. The memoir, but for the final chapter, reads as pastiche, reminiscent of Claudia's narrative in Penelope Lively's fictional *Moon Tiger*. The fragmented unfolding of the narrative and rapid switches between historical present and simultaneous present, while creating intense dramatic effect,⁹⁹ allow the reader little sense of cause and effect. Further discontinuity occurs with sudden switches to third person narration, as with the description, in the historical present, of herself as a zoo creature – when she is in isolation after stem cell rescue:¹⁰⁰

The zoo creature is very dopey. Its left eyelid sags. Its back is covered by a hideous, pussy rash that itches. The body has no hair on its face, arms, legs, underarms, or now-sexless crotch. (pp55-56)

The destabilizing effect of narration change, analepsis and prolepsis, and the disruption of narrative with memories, anchors only one time-frame in the work, the time of Christina's dying. Denial of death in the reading of this work is disallowed.

Despite difficulties because of its discontinuities, Middlebrook's blend of stark realism and metaphor is appealing reading. The literal meaning of 'crab' in the book's title is also a metaphor for cancer, which is crab-like in the way it presents – difficult to grasp and resistant to control:

There is a moment when the crab appears ... you have to go for it right then, without hesitation. Just grab... It is a moment of faith. Faith that the hold you've taken will keep the wildly swinging claws out of reach... The crab is a shifty beast. (p14)

⁹⁹ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan cites the 'historical present' as a convention for telling the past vividly, creating a dramatic effect of intensity and 'presentification', in Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, 'The Story of "I": Illness and Narrative Identity', *Narrative*, Vol. 10:1, 2002, p.21.

¹⁰⁰ This episode is reminiscent of Claudia Hampton's narrative when viewed in her hospital bed through a porthole, in Penelope Lively's *Moon Tiger*.

The reference to other people, who are ‘swinging buckets and making an oblivious racket’ while crabbing, suggests both the failure of empathy amongst the medical fraternity attempting to catch and control her cancer and the importance of an empathic community of friends, family and care-givers.

Middlebrook appropriates the lexicon of war for her description of cancer and its treatments – as observed by Sontag.¹⁰¹ Having chosen aggressive therapy, she invokes the extended metaphor of war to interpret her own physical and psychological destruction, her combat and defense likened to that endured by soldiers in World War II and Vietnam. Her cancer is random and destructive. The metaphor powerfully depicts her return home from hospital as the soldier home from the war, his voice stuck, stoic in public, crying only with other soldiers, remembering ones who have died. She is ‘tired, shell-shocked’, she has ‘breathed too much poison gas’. (p76) Her alter ego, a traumatized soldier, is her constant companion whom she visualizes inside her pocket like a talisman. She, like the soldier, tries to decide whether to carry on after the nightmare, living with physical illness and post-traumatic stress as she readies for the next battle:

Bad weather. An unexpected infection. The battle, which is to say the bone marrow transplant, has been postponed. I find no relief in the delay. The soldier inside me is ready ... to run through waves onto a beach while shells and mortar and bullets and grenades burst at my head ... (p81)

And

As cancer continues its assault from hiding places neither general nor oncologist know exist; we remain shivering, cold, wet, sick, and always trying our best. Possibly wounded. Certainly frightened. Possibly dying – or already dead. (p83)

As Middlebrook approaches death, her soldier alter ego adopts feminine qualities:

What matters is to continue, with all the enduring and long-suffering aspects of the feminine – determination, endurance, obedience, love, patience – which, suddenly, my boy-soldier has assumed. Acceptance and fear of death. (p85)

She is aware of the change from ‘a blast-your-way-out-of-it Rambo way’ to a ‘waiting-on-the-beach way, a tramping-through-the-jungle way,’ and is resigned to dying when it comes.

¹⁰¹ Sontag, Susan, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977, p.65.

Middlebrook confesses to using metaphor as a means of ameliorating the reality of cancer, a means of avoiding the truth. She says that, 'Unmetaphorized war, cancer and death are stark and terrifying.' (p203) This statement holds true for both author and reader. Middlebrook's metaphors both mediate the realist narrative and bring the reader closer to the mind of its author. Reiterated dreams become metaphors. She dreams of 'the great system of canals and locks that had been scoured clean' prior to chemotherapy (p195), and the repetitive dream of a lost or scorned child. (p196) Her dreams suggest that metaphorizing hardship, death and disease is a natural response.

The forthright, unsentimental nature of Middlebrook's memoir leads the reader to questions. How appropriate is medical science's prolongation of life when it fails to assess and sometimes shows 'wanton disregard' for the quality of that life? (p191) Surely such unnegotiated potentially fatal treatment with no preparation for dying falls short of an ethic of care? Although Christina insists on discussing dying with her children, she allows her mother to avoid the topic, and learns from her husband Jonathan that her mother doesn't wish to be present when she dies. Does accepting the denial of another constitute an act of care?

The reader will observe and perhaps be challenged by the oscillation between ego and other aspects of the psyche in this work. Ultimately, 'the battle' changes Christina. She moves from disinterest in 'enlightened death' to 'I cannot imagine an enlightened life without including thoughts of an enlightened death.' Despite her ego still clinging tenaciously to life, she asks, 'How could I have considered one without the other?' (p201) Having relied on Jungian theory throughout the memoir, Christina poses questions in her final chapter, 'The Dier'. 'Facing a terminal illness, I wonder how much Jungian theory is mere speculation. Is it, perhaps, a mere egocentric construction to defend against hopelessness? Could it be a technique for deflecting the blunt harshness of life?' (p196) The affirmations that conclude the memoir obliquely ask further questions of the reader. Would my Ego or Psyche prevail if confronted with dying? Middlebrook thanks a dying friend for telling her that death was 'not the worst thing in the world'. She affirms a 'powerful bunch' of dying women in a support group, her husband, children and friends who have accepted her dying and have therefore been able to support her. Such affirmative reciprocity, fundamental to the ethics of care, would be compromised in the absence of acceptance.

In the novel, 'Acacia House', there are few opportunities for the reader to vicariously experience denial. Although the hospice admits patients for day care, symptom control, respite and terminal care, there is rarely any question that ultimately they will die. Rather, because patients accept their forthcoming deaths, they are able to negotiate their end-of-life care and live the remainder of their lives to the full, supported by staff and loved ones.

Families and friends sometimes exhibit denial when they are unable to cope with a forthcoming death. This is alluded to in the novel with Alice's concern over Sam's 'Get Well' cards – a concern that proved unfounded. (p119) One true instance of denial in the novel occurs in the case of the young woman Lonnie, whose family believe that if her faith is strong enough a miracle cure is possible. Their denial adds guilt to her dying, disallows any goodbyes, final acts of care, or a peaceful death. Her death profoundly distresses her children, and in turn, the nursing staff. (p140)

A further instance of denial in 'Acacia House' is related to medical staff. When Charlie is admitted to the hospice, he 'knows' he is dying, but his doctors haven't discussed it with him, and there has been no conversation with his family. But, as Alice says:

maybe they didn't listen. Some people prefer to live the pretence, dispense the get-well cards, she'll be right mate, keep up the fight, you'll soon be up and running, so keep your pecker up. Death: the last taboo. How must it feel to be dying without discussion, to be alone with your terrible knowledge and fears locked away inside? (p62)

The reader may argue that 'Acacia House' is unethical at this point. The novel as a whole, because the hospice is its primary focus, argues against denial, and there is no counterargument in the text. Yet, as the palliative care practitioner in Garner's *Spare Room* tells Helen, some people choose to fight to the end. (p94) Although the ethics of care would suggest that such an approach could be appropriate if denial did not preclude justice to other interactants, this scenario is not explored in 'Acacia House'.

Chapter Four

Disease, dying, grief and meaning in thanatographical texts

The desire for healthy grief and bereavement amongst loved ones is one rationale for the hospice care described in 'Acacia House'. Grieving is accepted as a natural state for both patients and loved ones, and it presents in various guises in the text. The novel recognizes anticipatory grief, grief immediately after people die, and during bereavement – at the St Luke's Day service. Because the novel focuses on care prior to death, however, it does not fully explore the manifestations and management of grief in the hospice context. Grief, nevertheless, is a major theme within the novel, explored most fully through the character of Maeve, whose course in life is informed by grief for her brother Daniel. Aspects of grief colour Maeve's thinking and behaviour until the conclusion of her narrative when the Buddhist meditation of loving kindness allows self-forgiveness for her hitherto unresolved guilt. That grief may also be felt for the loss of an institution is demonstrated in the novel's final chapters. People grieve for the death of the hospice, for their relationship with it, for the loss of an ideal, for the memories that accompany place, and, as when someone dies, for a loss of part of the self. As Gabby says, 'I feel as if I'm losing a precious part of myself.' (p204) Alice reflects, 'It's deep in my skin. It made me who I am ... It's what makes us worthy.' (p206)

As Maeve discovers at the Irish Buddhist retreat, grief is a condition that heals but never resolves; that instead, people grow around it. Thanatographies which engage in quests for meaning are one means of facilitating this growth, as evidenced in the two texts explored below: *Through a Glass Darkly: A Journey of Love and Grief with my Father* by Caroline Jones, the former presenter of the spiritually focused radio programme, *The Search For Meaning*, and Costa prize-winning poet Christopher Reid's *A Scattering*. Meaning in the context of dying has been defined as the connectedness to something that imbues life with a sense of purpose, and which, for many, is the essence of spirituality – for both the religious and secular.¹⁰² This spiritual connectedness involves relationships with family and friends, with others who are similarly suffering, and with those engaged in their care and support. In the texts examined here, care is comprehended by Christopher Reid on a secular level, and by Caroline Jones in terms of an immanent God.

Certain literary critics and public intellectuals, however, criticize the trend, both in literature and life, to attribute meaning to disease, suffering and death, an attribution which invariably lays responsibility on the sick person. Susan Sontag decries associations of illnesses with character types or particular mental states, and also refutes the idea of illness as a test of character, as a curse, super-natural punishment, or embarrassment.¹⁰³ Disease, for Sontag, 'just is'. Levinas argues that suffering is intrinsically meaningless.¹⁰⁴ Joan Didion writes of 'the void, the very opposite of meaning, the relentless succession of moments during which we will confront the experience of meaninglessness itself.'¹⁰⁵ John Wiltshire cites mortal illness as representing the 'world's unmeaningness, its chaotic and incoherent quality'.¹⁰⁶ He asserts that the sense of meaninglessness is a condition faced 'as much by the care-giver

¹⁰² J.P. Cassidy & D.J. Davies, 'Cultural and Spiritual Aspects of Palliative Medicine', in D. Doyle, G. Hanks, N.I. Cherny, & K. Calman (eds.), *Oxford Textbook of Palliative Medicine* (3rd ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p.954, cited in Harvey Max Chochinov & Beverley J. Cann, 'Interventions to Enhance the Spiritual Aspects of Dying', *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, Vol. 8, Supplement 1, 2005, pp.4-5.

¹⁰³ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977.

¹⁰⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, 'Useless Suffering', in *The Provocation of Levinas: Rethinking the Other*, edited by R. Bernasconi and D. Wood, London, Routledge, 1988, p.159, cited in Stan Van Hooft, 'The Meanings of Suffering', *The Hastings Centre Report*, Vol. 28:5, 1998, p.17.

¹⁰⁵ Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2005, p.189.

¹⁰⁶ John Wiltshire, 'Biography, Pathography and the Recovery of Meaning', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 29:4, 2000, p.413.

as by the patient,' a notion which is comprehensible in situations of optimal empathic, even embodied,¹⁰⁷ interrelated care-giving.

Illness narratives respond to this meaninglessness as 'processes of meaning-creation'.¹⁰⁸ Attempts to explicate our world are intrinsic to human nature and a quest for meaning is a traditional purpose of literature. The focus of thanatographies, which attempt to draw meaning from a subject which in itself is meaningless, must therefore be care for the authorial self-in-relation.¹⁰⁹ In his discussion of illness narratives, Wiltshire points out that

accounts by relatives ... complicate the distinction between biography and confession. The narrative is as much about the self that is implicated, or discovered through the history of the other, as it is about that other person, the patient.¹¹⁰

Understood by the ethics of care, however, thanatographies also create meaning by exhibiting care for others. Because of their explication of dying, death and bereavement, they encourage discussion of care. They offer comfort in their conservation of precious memories, and they transform meaningless suffering into works of potential beauty. They may provide an outlet for authorial anger, perhaps for the manner in which the loved one died, for unresolved conflict, or for pure rage for the loss of life. They care for the readers-in-relation who may find solidarity and succour in grief of their own or in grief to come. And because they offer a vicarious understanding of grief, they suggest ways of responding to the grieving other.

Narratives which reflect on both good and bad deaths demonstrate the nature of grief to the reader. Grief is a natural emotional part of bereavement involving sadness, numbness and sometimes guilt and anger, feelings which fade over time. Grief is

¹⁰⁷ M. Katherine Maeve explores the inter-subjective nature of nursing the dying in 'Weaving a Fabric of Moral Meaning: How Nurses live with Suffering and Death', in *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 27, 1998, pp.1136-1142.

¹⁰⁸ John Wiltshire, 'Biography, Pathography and the Recovery of Meaning', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 29:4, 2000, p.413.

¹⁰⁹ Caroline Jones cites telling the story during bereavement 'as a crucial step in recovery' in Caroline Jones, *Through a Glass Darkly: a Journey of Love and Grief with my Father*, Sydney, ABC Books, 2009, p.311.

¹¹⁰ John Wiltshire, 'Biography, Pathography and the Recovery of Meaning', *The Cambridge Quarterly*, Vol. 29:4, 2000, p.410.

considered ‘complicated’,¹¹¹ however, when such emotions are long lasting and so painful that normal life cannot be resumed. It can be so debilitating that it can have long-term damaging effects on mental and physical health.¹¹² A significant factor which influences the grieving process is the perception of both the means of dying and circumstances surrounding death. As Marilyn Webb asserts, ‘the way death occurs in families has tremendous weight and can leave a legacy that is lasting’.¹¹³

Caroline Jones’ *Through a Glass Darkly* illustrates how the manner in which her father died compounded her grief. This thanatography functions as an act of care in the ways mentioned above, but also, significantly, in its challenge to medical practice. The opening paragraph of this suffering-focused testament of grief proffers an indictment of modern medicine:

My father died in Sydney’s North Shore Private Hospital on 30 July 2000, eight weeks after open-heart, coronary bypass surgery, at the age of ninety-three. The final eight weeks of his life were a terrible ordeal for him, and for me. (p.xv)

Jones searches for spiritual significance in suffering. Not focused on by Jones during her father’s illness, there was a failure of interrelational care at several levels. Her father Brian’s death had never been discussed and no advance care plans were written despite their close relationship and the inevitability, considering his age, of impending death. A palliative end-of-life alternative to surgery was never considered.¹¹⁴ Unlike the Hornes, who had accepted that Donald was dying, Jones and her ninety-three year old father never negotiated the easing in of death.

The deep love Jones had for her father is evident throughout the careful crafting of this work and endears him to the reader. The journal documenting Jones’ grief is intertwined

¹¹¹ For an understanding of the term ‘complicated grief’, see Stephen J. Freeman, *Grief and Loss: Understanding the Journey*, Southbank, Victoria, Thomson Brookes/Cole, 2005, pp.81-89.

¹¹² See L.J. Kristjanson, S. Aoun, ‘Palliative Care for Families: Remembering the Hidden Patients’, *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 49, pp.359-365, and L.J. Kristjanson, J.A. Sloan, D. Dudgeon & E. Adaskin, ‘Family Members’ Perceptions of Palliative Cancer Care: Predictors of Family Functioning and Family Member’s Health’, *Journal of Palliative Care*, Vol. 12, 1996, pp.10-20, cited in Susan McClement, Harvey Max Chochinov, Thomas Hack, Thomas Hassard, Linda J. Kristjanson, and Mike Harlos, ‘Dignity Therapy: Family Member Perspectives’, *Journal of Palliative Medicine*, Vol. 10:5, 2007, p.1076.

¹¹³ Marilyn Webb, *The Good Death: The New American Search to Reshape the End of Life*, New York, Bantam Books, 1997, p.xxiii.

¹¹⁴ A palliative alternative to end-of-life heart failure is discussed in Louise M.E. Gibbs, Julia Addington-Hall & J.Simon R. Gibbs, ‘Dying from Heart Failure: Lessons from Palliative Care’, *British Medical Journal*, Vol. 317 (7164), October 10, 1998, pp.961-962.

with various aspects of her father's personal and professional life, much of which is taken from his unpublished memoir. The reader is drawn to appreciate Brian's gentle humour, intellect, homespun activities, his love for the natural world and for Mary, his elderly wife. The life-fulfilling details in his autobiographical fragments which give some comfort to Jones provide a sharply contrasting backdrop to the chronicle of terrible suffering both he and Jones endure during his final depersonalizing weeks in hospital, where his selfhood often seems reduced to that of a malfunctioning machine.

Jones repeatedly states that it is not her father's death, but rather his suffering that causes her profound distress. Exacerbating her grief is thirty-one years of shared but unspoken grief for her mother who had suicided. Jones describes her grief in a manner with which many readers may identify: as 'a sort of severe illness, bordering at times on derangement; an illness that dislocate[s] me physically, mentally, psychologically and spiritually.' (pxvi) As she compares her own grief with the sorrowful, philosophical expressions of grieving others, an association is strongly suggested between the extent of a loved one's suffering during the dying process and extreme, incapacitating grief. Years after Brian's death Jones continues to have flashbacks of her father's suffering in Intensive Care. (p271)

The love Jones has for her father means that she suffers physically, psychologically and spiritually during and beyond his suffering and death. Although the text avoids blame, the reader is likely to question the wisdom of performing such invasive surgery on a ninety-three year old. The failure to negotiate with family is at variance with an ethic of care which would involve all parties in decision-making prior to surgery. The decision for surgery was made between Brian and his doctor, with no opportunity for Jones to be well-informed or to express her concerns. As there was no preoperative discussion, and Jones was unaware of likely morbidity, she is shaken by her first and successive visits to Brian in Intensive care. 'My dear father seems mortally wounded and I cannot imagine him ever recovering from such an onslaught'. (p25) Jones has her first experience of anticipatory grief.

When her father returns to theatre with internal bleeding, she notes that 'once you take the first step there is no turning back. You have entered a process in which you lose all autonomy.' (p28) At one point Jones asks herself 'Were we supposed to know? Should we have asked more?' (p31) Brian's aged body, failing to respond to treatments,

endures increasingly aggressive technological interventions performed by clinically detached staff – including defibrillation, renal dialysis, and finally a tracheostomy because of his prolonged need for ventilation. Unable to speak because of damage to his vocal cords caused by the initial endo-tracheal tube, in his third post-operative week, her father struggles to write, ‘Please take me out back and shoot me’ (p83) and later, ‘I want to end this sorry farce’ (p88) and ‘It must be bleeding obvious that I want out. Some money for a gun and anonymity.’ (p99) Jones states that

They’ve demonstrated that it’s possible, with massive surgery, to postpone or even to thwart death – but at what cost? Who is monitoring the psychological and spiritual effects of all this cleverness...? (p80)

Jones’ concern and care is not just for her father, but also for the emotionally desensitizing effect such aggressive treatment has on staff. There is no institutional pastoral care. Nevertheless, Jones cites her gratitude for moments of interrelatedness between Brian and various members of staff which developed during his long hospitalization. When Jones is away for a weekend, her father has a cardiac arrest, and resuscitation fails. (p135) Jones, who has witnessed the horror of a resuscitation attempt in Intensive Care, will carry that memory into bereavement rather than one of a peaceful death.

Jones engages her reader in her quest for meaning, to make sense of both her own and her father’s suffering. This theme, established in the first section, ‘Hospital Diary’, continues into the second half of the book – a chronicle of grief suffused with chaos, anger, disorientation, sleep deprivation, poor concentration, incapacitation, unpredictable emotions, guilt and most disturbingly for her, diminution of faith. She writes, ‘Dad’s suffering has changed me and I may need to find new ways to think about God and faith and hope because what I’ve got isn’t working any more and it’s a great loss.’ Reminiscent of Middlebrook’s deliberation over Jungian theory, Jones speculates, ‘But what if these are fairy stories we have invented because, without them, we would sink into despair?’ (pp173-174) Jones’ doubt at this time intensifies her grief.

Suggesting to readers the importance of care, Jones states, ‘Could the kindness of strangers be the best evidence we’re offered that there is a god of love?’ (p217) And ‘...perhaps God has no place in it at all. Maybe it’s just an inherent human characteristic, this love which brings us both the height of joy and the anguish of pain

and loss.’ (p236) Jones grapples with the idea of an immanent God, evidenced both in those who suffer and those who care, and is able then to affirm the caring community, reflecting on the ‘extraordinary skill and compassion’ of those who cared for her father. As she grieves, she discovers that while some people, unused to discussing death and dying, struggle to respond to her grief, other ‘privileged friendships’ enrich her life. She takes great comfort in readings from John O’Donohue’s *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*,¹¹⁵ which suggests the immanence of God in care.

The epilogue to Jones’ work, written seven years after her father’s death, focuses on justification for suffering. Jones explains suffering as ‘a function of the spirit’, ‘a universal experience and integral to being alive’. The way ahead, for her, is to ‘hold joy and suffering in equilibrium’, for although grief knows no end, it has enhanced her capacity for compassion, heightening her awareness of others’ suffering. (pp306-308) As Helen Black states in a study on those witnessing suffering and death:

it is the consequence and function of the meaning system that is significant in its capacity to offer reasons for suffering and make sense of death. A meaning system must facilitate feelings of comfort, control and hope when confronting events that are beyond human understanding.¹¹⁶

While Jones’ faith appears to have helped her find meaning and comfort in her grief and she has rationalized her father’s suffering, some readers may be less forgiving. One who is inclined to attribute responsibility is unlikely to find satisfaction in the final voice in the book, that of Ray Raper, head of Intensive Care at Royal North Shore Private Hospital. Considering the intense grief Jones suffered – to which her exclusion from initial negotiations of her father’s health management arguably contributed – Raper’s defence of medical decision-making is jarring. He states that he is ‘unsure’ that informed consent for surgery is ever ‘really possible’, and that to fully inform the patient ‘may well increase fear and impede rather than assist sound decision-making’. (pp330-332) He fails to consider Jones’ absence in the negotiation process, yet notes that ‘elderly patients ... don’t have the resilience to get over the initial and subsequent insults’ of invasive surgery. (p334) The reader may wonder whether Jones’ inclusion of

¹¹⁵ John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*, London, Bantam Press, 1997.

¹¹⁶ A. Glicksman, ‘A Mighty Fortress is our Atheism: Defining the Nature of Religiousness in the Elderly,’ *Journal of Religious Gerontology*, Vol. 14:1, 2002, pp. 69-83, in Helen K. Black, ‘How the “Not Religious” Experience and Witness Suffering and Death: Case Studies’, *Journal of Religion, Spirituality and Aging*, Vol. 19:2, 2007, p.83.

Raper's defence in the book is an act of grace, compassion, or defiance, or a political act to encourage discussion between the public and the medical profession.

Like Middlebrook, who finds solace in the writing of others who are dying, in her memoir Jones finds comfort in poetry. She turns twice to Kenneth Slessor's 'Five Bells', repeating 'In air, the Cross hangs upside-down in water,' (pp181,286) a reflection, perhaps, of her continuing ruffled faith. She repeatedly reflects on Les Murray's poetry, which, she believes, 'has no modern peer in the poetry of human grief'. She cites poets like Murray as 'friends of the spirit'. (p179) Jones offers her memoir to readers, as to her self, as a similar act of care.

A far less troubled but nonetheless powerful and emotive work of uncomplicated grief and loss is Christopher Reid's collection of poems, *A Scattering*, which demonstrates mutuality and general reciprocity true to the ethics of care. Unlike Jones' work, the collection manifests no overt quest for meaning, but nevertheless creates meaning through care on various levels. The collection demonstrates both care for Reid's wife, Lucinda – who suffers with a brain tumour and dies – and her care for others. The poems also care for the authorial self; they are therapeutic in Reid's grief in the way they bring Lucinda to life in language. *A Scattering* is a work of beauty which transcends the couple's suffering, is a shrine to Reid's wife, and leaves an enduring affirmation of his love for her. The poems care for the reader, too, offering solidarity with those who have tasted grief and insight to those who will. They enable the reader to encounter the intimacy of dying and grief; they break the taboo on discussion, and, by keeping the loved one 'alive' in memory, rail against society's avoidance of speaking of the dead.

A Scattering comprises four poetic sequences in various forms, which disclose the anticipatory grief and love Reid had for his wife, her hospice care and peaceful death, his intense grief and sense of loss, and finally, although grief remains, an inkling of authorial hope. Lucinda's joy, humour and *joie de vivre*, which inflect many of the cherished memories expressed in the poems, accentuate the deep sense of loss they convey. Emotion and style are enmeshed in these works. As Eskin argues, 'Style reveals a person's view of life and the world and gives expression to value. In style, the ethical transpires aesthetically, and, conversely, the aesthetic is imbued with the

ethical.’¹¹⁷ Reid’s poems are easily intelligible, often readable as prose, and reflect the author’s elegiac, yet whimsical and sometimes inchoate thoughts. The poem ‘A Scattering’, from which the title of the collection is taken, refers to elephants encountering bones of their own kind and scattering them as an apparent ritual. Reid, too, in these sequences, gives the impression of scattering his grief as he tries to reorder his ‘own sad thoughts’ in ‘new, hopeful arrangements’. With sporadic end and internal rhyme, the collection engages the reader in a variety of verse and lyric forms, which always work closely with feeling. And like Middlebrook, who finds ‘unmetaphorized’ death terrifying,¹¹⁸ Reid too acknowledges the ‘space/ of the mind where the wilful/ metaphors thrive’. In the first sequence, the reader’s senses are seduced by Arcadian imagery as the couple enjoy a respite holiday on Crete. *The Flowers of Crete* appeals to all the reader’s senses. There’s a ‘squeaky-wheel bird’, ‘velvety-ochres and greens on the steep hill and a blue-green glaze on the bay’, and ‘our breakfast of coffee and yoghurt out in the sun’. The ‘sting-toting insects’ are merely on reconnaissance. Yet there is also a sixth sense of narratorial disquiet. The sun is personified, a ‘dangerous beast’ on its ‘morning prowl’... ‘not seeming to want to murder us, much...’ Ominously, it ‘lays the landscape out’ and trades only in ‘days and hours’. Although rejoicing in Lucinda’s exuberance and her defiance of her tumour, Reid’s language is a foil, succinct, lean, without sentimentality, ‘hollowed out’ like mourning in the anticipation of death.¹¹⁹

I find myself doubling
the Minotaur
in his puzzle-lair
(now the scarcely troubling
rumour of a rumour)
with an immediate threat:
your skulking sarcoma. (p12)

Acknowledging Lucinda’s inevitable death, Reid’s poetry notebook offers him ‘some safe way out’: writing as self-care. The first sequence of poems is an acute yet sensuous celebration of their holiday, the form varying from clipped, notebook style entries to

¹¹⁷ Michael Eskin, ‘Introduction: The Double “Turn” to Ethics and Literature?’ *Poetics Today*, Vol. 25:4, 2004, p.565. Eskin cites Ludwig Wittgenstein (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Philosophische Untersuchungen (Leipzig: Reclam)1990 [1921], p.88 [6.522]), who asserts that ‘in style, the other side of propositional language simply “shows itself”’.

¹¹⁸ Christina Middlebrook, *Seeing the Crab: A Memoir of Dying Before I Die*, New York, Anchor Books, 1998, p.203.

¹¹⁹ Derrida writes of the anticipation of death coming “to hollow out the living present that precedes it” in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2001, p.151.

longer, more relaxed compositions, in keeping with the sporadic nature of anticipatory grief. When out walking:

Birdsong and goatbells
bring distance closer:
an improvised music – (p16)

and when eating snails:

... twists of griddled succulence
tweaked from their shells with a slack
twang of reluctance, chewed,
then chased down with a wine
described on the menu as black. (p18)

The poems offer care through solidarity to those who know the vagaries of anticipatory grief. While Lucinda delights in rambling, identifying flowers, Reid is more circumspect. Although he attempts to suppress the existence of her sarcoma, there is always a sense of foreboding: thistles appear amongst flowers, there are snags and stumbles on the path above the bay, before the monastery where the garden is ‘trim as a marginal/ vignette from a Book of Hours’, is the ‘Bible-illustration wilderness’. While Lucinda inspects ‘new beauties’, Reid sees ‘different, ill-matched flowers/ each of them sinister.’ His work further suggests anticipatory grief when interpreting the unhelpful ‘tinkerings of scholars’ at a ruin. The reference is probably to Arthur Evans’ scholarship at Knossos; the girl vaulting the bull is symbolic now of Lucinda’s defiance of her minotaur-sarcoma – the imaginary contrasting with the stark reality of ruinous disintegration:¹²⁰

You don’t want their botched text.
You want the breath, pulse and footfall
of the girl who dashed out

into sunlight like today’s
through where maybe that door was
then slammed it behind her. (p15)

¹²⁰ The reader may reflect on this scene, when in ‘Lucinda’s Way’, the final sequence of poems, Reid writes of Lucinda living in ‘the present-future/ a tense of your own invention.’

This passage, which suggests the sense of exclusion sometimes felt by loved ones in the period prior to death, may offer some readers comfort. Reid is suffering for the inevitable loss of fragments of his being.¹²¹

The elliptical sparseness of many of the poems – the untitled death scene, for instance – allows the reader imaginative space. This first poem in Reid’s second sequence, *The Unfinished*, relates the tender moments of Lucinda’s death in a London hospice. The scene demystifying a peaceful hospice death is a universal act of care for readers in its emotional understatement and its avoidance of sentimentality:

Sparse breaths, then none –
and it was done.

Listening and hugging hard
between mouthings
of sweet next-to-nothings
into her ear –
pillow-talk-cum-prayer –
I never heard
the precise cadence
into silence
that argued the end.
Yet I knew it had happened.

Ultimate calm.

And

Kisses followed,
to mouth, cheeks, eyelids, forehead,
and a rigmarole
of unheard farewell
kept up as far
as the click of the door. (p23)

The untitled poems in this section, which work chronologically backwards, retrace Lucinda’s last days in the hospice and illustrate the ethics of care in practice. Prior to her death, the cocktail of drugs in Lucinda’s syringe-driver eases her symptoms, allowing her to maintain her identity and dignity, ‘to meet/ death with all gallantry/ and distinction’, to care and be cared for. That she enjoyed literature, repartee, and relished gourmet food with friends was a source of pride and delight, consistent with the rest of

¹²¹ Stages of anticipatory grief – acknowledgement, grieving, reconciliation, detachment and memorializing are discussed in Stephen J. Freeman, *Grief and Loss: Understanding the Journey*, Southbank, Victoria, Thomson Brookes/Cole, 2005, p.20.

her life. Also consistent was Lucinda's inclusion of the social collective, the mutuality in care and concern for others, including her husband, Reid:

It was inspired
brave, funny and subtle
of her to interpret
the role of patient
so flat against type –
cheering her nurses,
feeding advice and support
to friends, encouraging
her husband to address his
possible future
with something of her hope. (p31)

These 'hospice' poems value the care which enables Lucinda to live life as fully as possible until her dying phase. Reid relishes Lucinda's delight in the simple pleasures of food and drink (drinking coffee through a straw 'with puckered sucks' is 'tougher work than playing an oboe'). He too has found comfort in care, suggested by the favorable comparison of sharing a table in seaside France. Reid doesn't shy from the more difficult moments, Lucinda's confusion – a common problem in end-of-life care – and admits to his uncertain response. Initially annoyed at her irrationality, when cognizant of the cause he indulges her – in one instance transcribing passages of *Northanger Abbey* at her insistence. When she becomes confused and argumentative, Reid's mode of care changes, becoming more redolent of the mother/child relationship, the basis for Gilligan's ethics of care. Her 'shouting mad things' frightens him. She's 'Furious as I'd never/ known her before/ in any of our quarrels.' Lucinda's loss of dignity is spared by a caring 'kindly nurse' who 'hurried towards us with a syringe'. By preserving Lucinda's dignity, the nurse is obliquely caring for Reid.

The care when Lucinda is post-competent is strongly reminiscent of the pre-terminal hospice care described in 'Acacia House', but is the view from the inside. Prior to her death, in 'drug-drowse, coma-comfort' friends come 'to keep her company, to talk, to weep', and Reid reads her favourite Yeats poems and plays Schubert, aware of his 'clumsy, husbandly/ bedside manner'. Lucinda lies as the nurses have arranged her for comfort, but her 'reposeful beloved' appearance seems strange. She has been sedated following convulsions, disorientation and hallucinations.

Reid's work contributes to honest discussion about disease, dying and bereavement. Like Sontag, he rejects any attribution of either divinity or human moral agency to disease or dying. In a poem which borrows from Bunyan to deny meaning, Lucinda's tumour is neither 'hobgoblin nor foul fiend'... 'just a tumour'. Rich with embedded alliteration, his wife's tumour is 'No imp or devil/ but a mere tumour ... malignant but not malign', doing:

simply the job
tumours have always done:
establishing faulty
connections, skewing
perceptions, closing down
faculties and functions
one by one. (p27)

Reid recognizes that elements of grief too are unwelcome guests in society. In 'Exasperated Piety', a poem from the *Widower's Dozen* sequence, Reid identifies with Henry James' experience, as articulated in the 'Preface' to *The Altar of the Dead*.¹²² Reid cites instances of 'gross metropolitan snub', as if those who have died are ostracized, are unmentionable, denied by 'the left-over living'. Reid has encountered taboos when mentioning his wife. 'A beat of silence, of shared fear and sick shock, falls', (p47) malaise that James, in his 'Preface' calls 'the awful doom of general dishumanisation'.¹²³ Reid's poetry, courageously placed for public consumption, strikes against such silence¹²⁴ and encourages readers to talk freely of loved ones who have died.

The third sequence of the collection, *A Widower's Dozen*, perhaps grants the reader the greatest insight into grief. The poems are an act of care both for those who identify with Reid's grief and for those who lack understanding. They commence with 'Conundrum', a poem of self-portraiture, the title and content of which recalls the conundrum in Crete posed by the incomprehensible script on the Phaistos Disc:

¹²² Henry James, 'Preface' to 'The Altar of the Dead,' in Henry James, *Novels and Stories of Henry James*, London, Macmillan & Co, 1922.

¹²³ *ibid.*, p. viii

¹²⁴ Derrida suggests that through us the dead may 'speak', that it is only by speaking of or *as* the dead that we keep them alive. "To keep alive, within oneself" asks Derrida, "is this the best sign of fidelity?" (p.36) in Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, edited by Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2001. Henry James further recognizes the relationship between the dead and the living necessary for healthy grief. He states that 'The sense of the state of the dead is but part of the sense of the state of the living', in 'Preface' to 'The Altar of the Dead', *Novels and Stories of Henry James*, London, Macmillan & Co, 1922, p.ix.

I'm the riddle to an answer:
I'm an unmarried spouse,
a flesh-and-blood revenant,
my own ghost, inhabitant
of an empty house. (p37)

Reid describes an 'emptiness so heavy ... behind the sternum, mid-thorax, not far from [his] heart.' It drains his energy, causes breathlessness, and feeds on memories, sorrows and remorse, striving to 'distil pure tears' which come 'voiceless under the avalanche'. Akin to Joan Didion's 'magical thinking', he senses Lucinda coming into bed late at night, and hears her voice at the end of the day, but rationality denies him the experience. With no belief in the supernatural, he recognizes cerebral trickery. He attributes the experience to his crafty brain, 'turned whimsically ventriloquist' with 'its sleight-of-sound.'

Reid articulates his acute sense of loss in the domestic setting, of household items which hold meaning only when shared – an almost universal experience in spousal bereavement. The reader is privileged to enter into many quirky scenes capturing Reid's endearment for his wife and the humour that they shared:

The bathroom scales, too,
stand abandoned. No one now will be consulting
the age-fogged dial for its little fibs
and trembles of error
with precisely that peering down frown. (p44)

Symbolic 'trouvailles-turned-knickknacks' that evoke Lucinda's wit, like a rusted metallic fragment that she named *Mother and Child, without the Child*, and an elongated flint, *Russian Peasant Woman Walking Through a Snowstorm* now have significance for him alone, and will be lingering dust-gatherers until 'a decision has been announced/ by the Senior Curator, Department of Private Jokes.' (p46) Similarly, Lucinda's singing in the home, 'Songs that sprang from solitary activity/ sewing or cooking – but that sought/ and touched my solitude' are now silent, 'final and hard to listen to.' Her 'songbook' is 'permanently lost/ as a language or a culture is lost'. (p41) Reid's aloneness is most acute in this sequence.

Following these vignettes, the domestic scenes in the closing sequence evoke less of a sense of loss, but rather seem life-enhancing, celebrating 'Lucinda's Way':

we crossed on the stairs.
Unprompted, you announced, 'I love our house' –
an outburst of the plainest happiness
that the high stairwell
enshrines still. (p62)

Addressing Lucinda in the second person in these last poems may encourage those who grieve to attend to their loved ones similarly. In these works, form and feeling collide. Lucinda now merges with his poetry as Reid grasps at memories:

You lived at such speed that the ballpoint script
running aslant and fading
across the faded blue
can scarcely keep up. Many words are illegible. I miss
important steps. Your movements blur. I want to follow but
can't. (p55)

Despite the sense of her elusiveness, these final poems hint at hope, especially in the garden scenes. In 'The Widower's Dozen', in the garden, Reid grieves that there is nobody to share the 'annual miracle' the flowers '... all missing the welcome and blessing/ of the one who had planted them there.' But in the closing poems of 'Lucinda's Way', the garden appears as a source of enrichment. Although more anarchic than when she tended it, the garden now nurtures him – a horticultural expression of reciprocity.

Readers may notice the absence of community care for Reid, as if writing alone nurtures him. While Lucinda appears to have exemplary care, at no point in *A Scattering* is there mention of supporting Reid in his grief. There are only two moments of touch in the collection – at the deathbed scene, and in the poem of grief, 'Late', where Reid adjusts his arm in bed 'for the usual/ cuddle and caress'. While an absence is impossible to interpret, it nevertheless heightens the sense of Reid's aloneness. Describing a sentiment common to widowers, Reid's poetry articulates the desire for closeness to the feminine in a way that offers further empathy – and perhaps permission – to others who grieve. He visits an Italian market: 'a mêlée/ mainly of women,/ a bargain-driven, mid-week bacchanale' to observe women's 'chatting and chaffering', to taste the strong, feminine element that his life now lacks.

Grief, for Reid, seems solitary and intensely self-aware, his experience similar to that which Henry James describes in his Preface to *The Altar of the Dead*.¹²⁵ James notes the ‘general black truth that London was a terrible place to die in’¹²⁶ amidst the ‘monstrous’ and ‘impervious masses’. Invoking James, in London, Reid describes grieving in London as: ‘gagging on the ghost-rich air/ of a fashionable salon, a terrible place to cry in.’ (p47) James, in the ‘Preface’, comments on the ‘brutality’ of London society, where to speak of the dead is to be branded as morbid.¹²⁷ James’ horticultural metaphor urges those who grieve to cultivate the precious plants and finer flowers of memory despite ‘the bloom of a myriad many-coloured relations’.¹²⁸ Reid’s poems honour James and care for himself by gently tending to the memory of his wife.

Unlike Caroline Jones, whose bereavement focuses on her faith, Reid’s atheism denies him supernatural comfort. Yet he offers another comfort to the secular reader. In the poem ‘Afterlife’, in a further expression of Lucinda’s ethic of care, we discover she has willed her body to an institution for medical science which Reid often passes:

... the place seemed preferable to either Heaven or Hell,
whose multitudes meekly receive whatever the design teams
and PR whizzes of religion have conjured up for them.

My wife is in here, somewhere, doing practical work:
her organs and tissues are educating young doctors

or helping researchers outwit the disease that outwitted her.
So it’s a hallowed patch of London for me now. (p49)

Reid’s inclusion of the donation of Lucinda’s body to medical science is a reciprocal act of care for society. Readers may not have considered the possibility of caring in such a way.

Ultimately, the ordered outpouring of poems *A Scattering*, in their recollection of and gratitude for and love of Lucinda’s life, all but restore her to life. It can be no accident that the collection as a whole commences with ‘Blessed’ and ends with ‘blessing’. The

¹²⁵ James, Henry, in ‘Preface’ to ‘The Altar of the Dead,’ in Henry James, *Novels and Stories of Henry James*, London, Macmillan & Co, 1922.

¹²⁶ *ibid.* p. viii.

¹²⁷ *ibid.* p.x.

¹²⁸ *ibid.* p.ix

blessing for Reid is Lucinda, memorialized in his text. For readers, the work demonstrates well-managed dying and uncomplicated grief as a natural part of bereavement. The universality of Reid's sentiments imaginatively expressed or evoked serve as a work of care. As Jean Rumsey writes:

... caring work must continue after the other's death. [The] emotional work of sifting and integrating memories of the dead and finding appropriate ways to commemorate that life is crucial.¹²⁹

It is to be hoped that readers of this emotive, sensitive, and unsentimentalised rendering of grief and care may be drawn to reciprocity.

¹²⁹ Jean P. Rumsey, 'Justice, Care, and Questionable Dichotomies', *Hypatia*, Vol. 12:1, 1997, pp.108-109.

Conclusion

The relationship between readers and stories and the general reciprocity engendered by those relationships has resonance with the interconnectedness described in the ethics of care. Wayne Booth, in *The Company We Keep*,¹³⁰ observes amongst the qualities of ‘reading friends’ the responsibility that texts grant the reader – the level of reciprocity between author and reader.¹³¹ My contention is that texts about death and dying which engage the reader and reflect the ethics of care, yet raise questions about caring both by and for the dying, invite the reader to venture one step further, and, in Held’s words, build ‘relations of care and concern and mutual responsiveness to need on both the personal and wider social levels.’¹³² Narratives that effectively explore unfamiliar terrain inevitably increase self-awareness. Booth discusses the effect of both otherness and familiarity on readers, and cites the quality of narratives as being ‘what the reader is likely to learn about *ways of dealing with* the unfamiliar or the threatening’.¹³³ Stories offer insights on embracing otherness. As Martha Nussbaum writes, ‘Literature extends

¹³⁰ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1988.

¹³¹ *ibid.*, pp.179-180.

¹³² Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political and Global*, Oxford University Press, 2005, p.28.

¹³³ Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1988, p.195.

our lives, making us reflect and feel about what might otherwise be too underestimated.¹³⁴ Literature is a safe environment to develop emotional understanding of issues beyond the quotidian.

Narratives that deal with care for the dying and for those who grieve challenge readers with a topic which engenders widespread unease. Such texts then, inviting engagement and acceptance of an authored 'pattern of desires',¹³⁵ need to extend the hand of friendship fully, and offer intimacy, strong story lines, believable, familiar characters and engaging rhetorical devices, so that readers may indeed, as Booth suggests, be tempted to richer and fuller social selves. Readers' desires, when focused on the fate of characters, are simultaneously drawn to the mindset of their implied author. There, in Iris Murdoch's 'air which the author breathes',¹³⁶ second-order desires which distinguish personhood, and which are defined by Booth as 'the-ethos-I-would-prefer-to-have-and-will-therefore-cultivate', are suggested.¹³⁷

The 'authorial breath' of 'Acacia House' suggests that effective caring for the suffering and dying enhances personhood and weaves 'a fabric of moral meaning'¹³⁸ into the lives of carers which they then take to the wider community. The narrative allows the reader responsibility, however, for deciding an appropriate manner of care. By interweaving three nursing narratives and presenting opposing points of view on some contentious issues, the work offers its reader ethical questions to ponder.

Whereas 'Acacia House' deals explicitly with care for the dying and their loved ones, the 'textual friends'¹³⁹ discussed in the dissertation more obliquely suggest ways of negotiating the often uncomfortable terrain of such care. Some texts play a further role,

¹³⁴ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge : Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1990, p.47.

¹³⁵ Wayne C. Booth, in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1988, p.201, explores how narratives invite readers to pursue a 'pattern of desire' imposed by an 'other', the implied author.

¹³⁶ 'Literature and Philosophy: A Conversation with Bryan Magee', in Peter Conradi (ed.), *Existentialists and Mystics, Writings on Philosophy and Literature: Iris Murdoch*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1997, p.28.

¹³⁷ Wayne Booth explores Charles Taylor's essay, 'Responsibility for Self', in Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (ed.), *The Identities of Persons*, Berkeley, 1976, in *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1988, pp.268-273.

¹³⁸ In a study of nurses caring for the suffering and dying, Katherine Maeve concludes that such caring imbued nurses with 'thoughtfulness and courage towards dilemmas of their own lives', in M. Katherine Maeve, 'Weaving a Fabric of Moral Meaning: How Nurses Live with Suffering and Death', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 27, 1998, p.1138.

¹³⁹ Wayne Booth introduces the metaphor of textual friendship in Part I of Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkley, University of California Press, 1988.

offering empathy and comfort to those facing death or to those who grieve. Through their engagement with readers, these works encourage critical thought about different aspects of dying and care.

Optimal care during the dying process demands honest respectful interrelation – fundamental to the ethics of care. A less honest approach, which precludes discussion – as demonstrated in many of the texts explored – undermines true personhood because it denies the authentic self-in-relation. Ivan Ilyich is tortured by the pretence that he is not dying but simply ill, ‘tortured by the fact that they refused to acknowledge what he and everyone else knew, that they wanted to lie about his horrible condition and to force him to be party to that lie’ (pp.102-103). In *Moon Tiger*, the hospital staff address Claudia inauthentically, so in her dying days she resorts to her memories. In Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room*, Nicola, Helen, and their relationship suffer because of failure to face and discuss the truth. Similarly, when Christina Middlebrook accepts she is dying, friends who respond inauthentically thereby deny her the support she needs. Like Donald Horne, however, Middlebrook openly discusses her prognosis with her family, aware that their mutuality prior to her dying will ease their later grief. In *The Barbarian Invasions*, Rémy, his family and friends are honest about his dying and are thus able to devise ways to eliminate his suffering, optimize his care and enable his last days to be fulfilled. In ‘Acacia House’, an honest approach to care is possible because there is general acknowledgement that death is the ultimate outcome, whether patients are visiting the day hospice or admitted to Acacia House for respite care, symptom control, or terminal care. The rare instance where dying is denied brings distress to all concerned.

The reluctance of Western society in relatively recent times to refer to death and dying precludes honest relationships. Yet philosopher and ethicist Simon Critchley notes:

It is the deaths of those we are bound to in love that undo us, that unstitch our carefully tailored suit of the self, that unmake whatever meaning we have made. In my view, odd as it may sound, it is only in grief that we become most truly ourselves.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers*, London, Granta Books, 2008, p.xxvii.

In grief, elements of falsehood may be stripped away from the self, but encountered in others, as observed by Christopher Reid in 'Exasperated Piety', when the mention of his dead wife Lucinda is met with shock and discomfited silence.

Uncertainties in 'Acacia House' and in the texts explored in this dissertation are potential catalysts for discussion on death and dying, encouraging readers to consider care for both others and for themselves. Confronted with dying, would readers negotiate with loved ones or, like Nicola, rage alone against the inevitable? Would justice be sacrificed? What memories would readers, like Penelope Lively's Claudia, take to their final days? How could they care for their loved ones as they approach their deaths? And what of spirituality? Would they suffer, like Jones, and question their faith, like Middlebrook, and find spiritual comfort in others, or like Reid, follow a lonely secular path? Would they re-evaluate the authenticity of their lives on the strength of Ivan Ilyich's experience? By what means could they discuss issues related to dying with those for whom they cared? Should they negotiate and write advance care directives as an act of care for themselves and their loved ones? The question of guilt, an emotion often experienced by the grieving,¹⁴¹ may be evoked by the reading of 'Acacia House'. Reconciliation, designed to ease the burden of dying and bereavement, is facilitated at the hospice. Maeve's narrative, by contrast, demonstrates the debilitating and prolonged potential of bereavement guilt.

Spanning four decades, 'Acacia House' demonstrates changes in the way society has responded to some of its most vulnerable – the dying and those who grieve. Yet its interplay of ideas between the way society cares for its dying and its social and political issues – the country's defence expenditure, the social impact of war, care for refugees, and the AIDS crisis in South Africa – suggests the microcosmic nature of the ethics of care described in the hospice setting before its fragmentation and demise. The work encourages its readers to not only embrace care for the dying and their loved ones according to the ethics of care, but to give wide resonance to their reading.

¹⁴¹ See Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2001, p.164.

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