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Novel and exegesis for PhD (The practice of goodness)

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Abstract

The thesis consists of two parts. The first, a novel entitled *The Practice of Goodness*, is the fictional memoir of a woman who has a terminal illness. The protagonist seeks to understand the significant events of her life and her own agency in these events in the time that is left to her before her death. The memoir is concerned with complex family relationships; the challenges of living with a terminal diagnosis, and state and domestic violence. As she progresses through her illness, the protagonist also engages with the wider world in her encounters with asylum seekers detained in the Woomera and Baxter Detention Centres in 2002.

The second part of the thesis is a theoretical perspective on the main themes suggested by the creative piece. The exegesis consists of two parts entitled: On Death, and How, then, are we to live?

The themes examined are death and dying, domestic and political violence, and forgiveness. Through engagement with literary theory, popular cultural representations of dying, and current academic literature on human rights, and forgiveness, these themes are theoretically unpacked. The relationship between creative writing and theory is shown to be complementary through the use of theory to analyse the creative piece. The composite form of the thesis further exemplifies this marriage between theory and practice.
Declaration of Originality

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not been submitted already for any degree, nor is it being currently submitted for another degree. I certify to the best of my knowledge that all sources of reference have been acknowledged in this body of work.

Jennifer Wilson
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The Practice of Goodness

A Novel

by

Jennifer Wilson
Prologue

Her given name is Jennifer. In the course of her life she has used several last names taken from her father, her grandfather, her stepfather and two husbands. She now belongs to no one and has not yet decided how best to name herself. Another first name, perhaps, in Spanish or French?

Her English grandmother called her Angelica, *little angel*: Nanna had no way of knowing that with this pet name she was giving her granddaughter a two-edged sword. She can see nothing cherubic in photographs of her younger self: she’s plain but has a wide smile. Angelica is the name she chooses for herself, because it came from the woman she loves best in the world.

She's of average height and a little overweight. After forty, a woman must choose between her face and her figure: a little extra fat fills out the wrinkles round the eyes and mouth, and softens the age-tempered planes of the face.

Her hair is fair, straight and streaked with grey. It falls to her shoulders and is cut in a deep fringe that partially hides her face. Perhaps by the end of this account of her life she’ll sweep it all back off her forehead because there’ll be nothing left to hide. There’s an unsettling prospect.

Angelica comes from a family of pretenders. It was with a great deal of apprehension that she started tearing down the veils. Though almost everybody’s dead (which is why she can finally do this) she still can’t rid herself of the irrational fear that somebody is going to grab hold of her and put the smile on the other side of her face for having the temerity to talk about them.

Today Angelica read that the Australian imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay is growing his fringe very long so he can use it to keep the prison lights out of his eyes when he wants to go to sleep at night. This intimate revelation speaks of the man’s human frailty. She feels sorry for him. Some people become exasperated when she tells them this. She should have been called Jude, after the patron of lost causes. Some powerful and inconsistent force in the world determines whether or not a cause is lost and why, and Angelica has never been in tune with it.

Her eyes are grey or sometimes blue. A romantic would say they change colour according to mood but she’s never noticed. Is this something people generally observe
in themselves? She always thought such changes of colour were a trick of the light. Light becomes important as one grows older. Light her well and she’ll look half her age.

Angelica likes comfortable clothes, loose trousers, shirts and long cardigans in neutral shades. Almost all her clothes have threads hanging from them, as if they are preparing to unravel themselves. Even new and expensive garments begin this process as soon as she puts them on. This is both funny and disturbing, and she hasn’t yet been able to let herself look deeply into its meaning.

Some time ago Angelica was discovered to have a rare and indolent lymphoma, a death sentence, they told her, but so is life, she said.

_The moment I’m born I’m old enough to die_, she quipped, and they stared at her in dismay, as if they found her attitude cavalier. But she’d lived for many years with a husband who spoke frequently in quotations, and this method of communication has never let her down.

After receiving this dismal news, Angelica went home to consider her future. She’d recently moved from the city to a coastal village on the far north coast of New South Wales, in the wake of irreconcilable differences with her second husband. She considered confiding in her new friend, Julia Bennington, a widow who lived alone in a large house on the edge of the rainforest. Later, Angelica would move into Julia’s house. But at the beginning, every time an opportunity to talk to Julia came up Angelica chickened out. It was as if she didn’t want the diagnosis let loose in the world, as it would be if she began telling others, even Julia, to whom she’d quickly become closer than anyone else in her life.

Angelica was much taken with the name of her illness. It sounded refreshingly non-medical, even poetic. In.do.lent. **Having or showing a disposition to avoid exertion. Sluggish,** she read in the dictionary when she looked it up, the better to get a handle on the nature of the intruder. She imagined this Indolent Lymphoma loafing on a Caribbean beach in a Panama hat, sunning itself under a striped umbrella, with a pink cocktail in its hand and a bag of weed in the pocket of its board shorts. She imagined herself confronting it.

‘We need to talk,’ she’d begin, with formal purpose and pedagogic authority. ‘You’re on my cloud. You need to get off. Your attitude is costly for my life and this situation cannot be allowed to continue.’
When she got up close she saw that the creature had reptilian eyes and a self-satisfied leer. It winked at her and sucked on its roach. It didn’t speak, but roused itself enough to adjust the umbrella to keep the sun off its face. Then it idly threw the last of the roach into the warm turquoise sea. Angelica lost her temper.

‘Fuck you and the horse you rode in on!’ she yelled.

At times Angelica has a very bad mouth. There was a period in her life when her children were young when she did her best to control it, but now she’s come to the conclusion that words are meant to be used, even the bad ones.

‘This isn’t fucking over yet, you know!’ she shouted.

One of the consequences of her diagnosis was to make everything else in Angelica’s life seem insignificant. She’d been writing a book on ethics for several years. In Australia in 2001 there was plenty of material for a book on ethics: asylum seekers banished to indefinite detention in desert camps because they’d arrived uninvited. The Children Overboard fiasco. More formally at subsequent Senate inquiries it was re-named A Certain Maritime Incident: an intriguing title belonging more to a work of fiction, she thought. A title that ultimately did more justice to the grave complexities of the affair in which asylum seekers were accused of tossing their offspring into the sea so as to be admitted as refugees. She regarded these events and others like them with a critical eye, she was deeply engaged with the political world and had forgotten there was any other.

A general election also took place that year. Because of the asylum seekers, public emotion ran high; a generalised and unexamined anxiety about the possible invasion of the country by unwanted foreigners smouldered yet again in the national psyche. The fire was fuelled by the Solicitor General at the time who grimly observed in the High Court: Today, invasions don’t have to be military … they can be of diseases, they can be of unwanted migrants. His tone and the message it conveyed were ominous, as if preparing the country for war; as if he was signalling, Angelica thought, caught between amused disbelief and outrage, an untimely and unanticipated end to our days of frolicking thoughtlessly on beaches in the southern sun. The time had come for everyone to grow up and be alert to and alarmed by the unruly and disobedient hordes of people who would not queue for legitimate entry, and were set upon making this
desirable democracy their home. Good grief! Angelica and her friends exclaimed, at this government incitement to anxiety and fear. Really!

It was a time of hunkering down, Angelica noted. A time of desperately inventing and then at all costs protecting, a fantastical and inviolable utopian sovereign space.

Invasion: entrance as if to take possession or overrun; the act of invading or entering as an enemy.

This was exactly how she felt about the Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma. Invaded, like a sovereign country, against the combined will and protest of all her constituent parts.

It was something of a mystery to Angelica as to how asylum seekers came to be recast as ‘unwanted migrants’. The juxtaposition of ‘disease’ and ‘unwanted migrants’ seemed to warrant extrapolation as well. But she couldn’t take it on. She was consumed by fighting off her own personal invader, struggling to grasp the reality of her own suddenly shortened life expectancy.

And then there was her complicated family, her estranged mother and half-sisters, her unknown father and her dead stepfather, all her sorry history that had been rearing its ugly head demanding to be sorted, and finally laid to rest. Angelica couldn’t take on any of that, either. Discovering you’ve got a terminal disease can make anybody self-absorbed in the worst possible way, and Angelica was no exception.

Finally she managed to pull herself together. She decided it was time to make some kind of accounting, to make sense of the experience she called her life while she still had the chance. That was her intention though every time she thought she’d got a handle on it, it all slipped away. The more she knew, the more there was to know, and the more there was she would never know. This position is sometimes promoted as the beginning of wisdom, but Angelica had never felt less sagacious.

Her project was perhaps overly ambitious. Telling your life story while you are living your dying is an intense and complicated task. She didn’t know who to ask for advice about it. What to include? How to retrieve what memory had apparently banished? With almost everyone dead and only a boxful of photographs, how was she going to do this?

There were times when she wished she was a small child who believed in authority in the form of big people who know things. God would do. A loving father who knew what was best for her and wouldn’t let her suffer. She wanted somebody, human or divine, to take her burdens away.
This was not a new desire for Angelica, born out of the most recent bad news about her body. She frequently wished for someone to take it all away. Nobody ever had thus far. Again and again, faced with decisions and terrible confusion, she was forced to understand that as with everyone, when the chips were down, the buck stopped with her. What is most offensive about clichés is that they are so frequently true. Making order out of her private chaos became her most urgent responsibility on every level, from the state of her workroom to the state of her soul. Being given a time limit can focus the mind quite wonderfully, once one gets over the shock.

‘I don’t know how long I’ve got,’ she thought, when she’d recovered enough of her senses to think about such things. ‘What do I most want to do?’

She had grandchildren as yet unmet at the other side of the world. There were exotic countries to see.

‘Can I? Dare I?’

Fear reared its unattractive head. Fear was her Achilles heel.

‘What if I get sick? Really sick in a foreign country?’ she worried in the middle of the night.

‘But does it matter where I get really sick? Does anywhere feel like home to me? Do I have any strong feelings about where I want to die and be laid to rest? Or do I care only about how best to live for however long I’ve got?’

Angelica considered these questions only in the abstract, as generalised philosophical meditations, as a scholar rather than a sufferer, and got nowhere. There are times when knowledge fails to make the necessary journey from the head to the heart.

‘Stuff everything,’ she thought one day. She was exhausted. Burned out with raging against her fate. Frustrated by her inability to recover what hovered out of reach on the edges of her memory. So important. So lost.

‘Stuff everything!’ she wept and kneeling on her bed, she thumped her fists into her pillows as if they were somehow to blame.

‘I’ve had enough!’ she wailed. ‘Enough! We’re all going to die! What do I care? I don’t. I don’t! Fuck it!’

People are rarely attractive in their most extreme moments.

Angelica didn’t know if her conclusions could be seen as rational, but they were the closest she could come to reason at that stage. Later she discovered that this was a routine step in the process of coming to terms with mortality, a stage during which
people often took to reckless gambling and promiscuous behaviours of all kinds; the sort of mental state that frequently afflicts citizens in the midst of war. A heady mixture of helpless rage, despair and euphoria. The reckless flinging of everything to the winds because you won’t be here to see the consequences. A bittersweet freedom. A desperate revenge, but on whom?

It took her a very long time to get to the ‘stuff everything’ point. The path was tortuous. Looking back, it seemed to her that she spent much of that time pacing her house, ensnared in a web of misery and self-pity. She walked the beaches and the rainforest until she became thin and gaunt. Keeping still was impossible unless she’d first medicated herself with alcohol and non-prescription calmatives. She was on the run from her life, past present and future, snarling devils snapping at her heels and ill-willed goblins perched shrieking on her shoulders. An agitated depression, somebody called it. Non-Hodgkin’s Lymphoma with an agitated depression on the side. So? Sometimes naming things can be helpful, Angelica knew that. Other times naming is only an obfuscation that prevents you getting anywhere near the heart of the matter.

Angelica felt overwhelmed by circumstances of such magnitude that her mind rebelled against admitting them. Our culture teaches us to be shallow about death. Faced with its enormity, many of us quail. She tried to take in a little information at a time, like a post-operative patient returning to solid food. That stand of casuarinas at the beach, for example. As she walked down the track, hopping from the heat of the sand on the soles of her feet, she thrilled each time to the sight of the cobalt ocean and the white beach glimpsed through the feathered branches of the she-oaks. That view will live on without her. But would it, she wondered, be lonely for her own particular appreciation of it? Is this what it’s like when anyone leaves? She asked these questions of some as yet unformed being newly resident in her imagination, but who is this being she wondered, and how did it give birth to itself without her even noticing its gestation?

Does everyone take with them their own unique handle on things, and then we’re all a little less for the loss of their point of view, she wondered. Or was this just the idle fancy of a desperate solipsist, overcome by the horror of imagining the world completely unaffected by her stay in it?

…one had best correct the soul if one does not want the body to get the better of it, she read in the middle of a particularly desperate night, and rectify the body if one wants it to remain completely in control of itself.
Is it ever too late to correct the soul? And how does one rectify the body, because the body seemed to Angelica to do pretty much what it likes. Who can tell her what all this means? She asked around not as she should, sensibly, about the practicalities of her situation, but about the nebulous and unsubstantiated etheric possibilities.

Eventually, she admitted she was boring herself. It was time for action, not stasis. She was accomplishing nothing staying where she was, except a kind of self-torment that verged on the masochistic. She also wanted very much to start smoking again after twenty-four years of abstinence. Instead, with what felt to her like the last of her reserves of self-care, she asked Julia if she’d like to travel with her in Mexico. Her son The Chef lived on the Mexican Caribbean coast with the grandchildren she had yet to meet. What better journey could she make?

Julia agreed without hesitation. Angelica would spend three months with her family, they decided, then Julia would fly out to Cancun and they’d take it from there. Pleased as she was with this arrangement, Angelica knew that Julia would have to be told about the illness well before the trip.

Finally, Angelica packed up the notes for her book in archive boxes. She gave up trying to remember her past, and put the photographs away as well. She stored her winter clothes in mothballs. Where she was going it was always summer. She got the ticket. She said goodbye to everyone, as if she never expected to come back and deep down, she didn’t. Julia would join her in three months time and they would stay in Mexico for as long as they felt like it.

She packed her bag and boarded the 10 am Qantas flight from Sydney to Los Angeles, to Dallas, Fort Worth, and on to Cancun, Mexico. A thrilling optimism took her over. No regrets! No tears goodbye! She’s going to swim in the Caribbean. The Caribbean! Hola! Buenos Dias, Senors y Senoritas!
I.

Cancun, Angelica discovered, is a city of sprawling hotels built on a narrow neck of sand between the Caribbean Sea and a vast lagoon. The hotels are built long and wide to minimise hurricane damage, some in the shapes of pyramids that are dubbed ‘Maya’ or ‘Mayan’ in insubstantial reference to the original inhabitants of the Yucatan Peninsula. As pointillist Aboriginal drawings are reproduced on tea towels for the tourist in Australia, they are intended to convey the illusion of a diluted acquaintance with ancient indigenous civilisation.

It’s almost impossible to see the ocean because of these hotels, she found. They are painted in pastel shades, soft hued against the intense cerulean sky, elaborately decorated with white balconies, turrets and flags of all nations. The finished products resemble nothing so much as block after block of wedding cakes displayed for the nuptials of sky gods who look down into our world as if into a dolls’ planet. Many hotels were still ruined from the previous year’s hurricane, and they cast another blight on the partially reconstructed landscape. They looked like carelessly autopsied bodies, Angelica thought, their innards hanging in the wind, their coiled intestines littering the white sand, their soggy internal organs of carpet and silk drapes and ruined mattresses revealed half buried in the beach at every change of tide. Angelica found these images of sudden disintegration disturbing. They activated some deep, inarticulate horror in her to do with the inevitable disintegration of all her personal internal systems, what use this liver, these arteries, this dead and silent heart?

For some time in Cancun Angelica was dogged by a sorrowful anxiety, an anxiety that could only be relieved by the presence of her grandchildren. She walked in the garden every day with Jean-Paul, who liked to put his doll George in Lila’s toy pram and wheel him round the swimming pool. It was Jean-Paul’s habit to take several steps then stop, lifting his head as if listening for instructions from some invisible galactic being, then gently and wordlessly tug at her hand to let her know it was time to take the next steps. Once she asked him what he could hear: he gazed at her from under his blonde curls and slowly shook his head. She was not to ask; he was not permitted to tell.

Lila was of a more boisterous disposition and kept up a breathless chatter, a mixture of English and Spanish that Angelica was frequently hard-pressed to understand. It was
their touch that comforted her: their silky skin; their small hands confidently placed in hers; their baby breath on her face as they whispered secrets in her ear; their violent embraces round her knees; their sweaty night-time bodies that she carried to the bathroom where they peed without opening their eyes. ‘Ganga,’ they sighed when she put them back to bed, ‘I want water, Ganga,’ then they turned on their sides and sucked the middle fingers of their right hands as they fell back into sleep.

In Mayan ‘Cancun’ means ‘nest of snakes,’ she read in a guidebook one humid, sleepless night.

In between the hotels were the shopping malls, ‘temples of capitalism’ Angelica called them. The shorter her future seemed to be the more cynically she viewed the material world, the more questioning she became about the necessity of stuff and the wisdom of a life’s energies being dedicated to possessing it in whatever form appealed to the personal aesthetic. These malls had been constructed with faithful and unquestioning reverence for the need for their existence; they soared towards the white-hot sky, like cathedrals built by the conquistadors, like the pyramids at Chichen Itza, imbued with spiritual purpose. The objects they contained were lovingly arranged, like icons, to invite human worship and desire, and to suggest their unattainability in this world, except by a privileged few initiates. Downtown Mexicans could only stand and gaze.

_You come into my country. You take my land. You build upon it temples and fill them with things only your wealthy can buy. I serve you. My wife and children serve you. In my country I am servant to the invader from the north._

In the new millenium, Angelica thought, accumulation and ownership of material goods had become more the norm by which success was judged than ever before in her lifetime. The wealthy entrepreneurs protest it’s not about the money. But none of them offer to give all the money away, she observed.

If accumulation and ownership were beyond you, she thought, then it was expected that at the very least you nurtured and acknowledged desire for what was out of your reach. Desire was all. To be without desire for more than what was necessary was regarded with suspicion: a religious insanity perhaps? A sign of imminent death? How could anybody sane not want all the stuff they could get, that was the general attitude as far as she could make out. Angelica harangued the weary Chef with these opinions, as they took coffee together in his office in the famous hotel where she’d met up with him.
after her visit to the malls. He wore his chef’s whites, the tall hat and black clogs. His Mexican assistants popped in and out with questions. He conversed with them in fluent Spanish. Angelica watched, amazed. He’d hated school. Hated languages, hated studying.

The tyranny of choice ruled the rich world, she raved on at him when the Mexican assistants left, freedom transformed into its opposite as daily life became increasingly consumed by trivial decision making: which mobile phone plan, which brand of toilet paper, winged or wingless sanitary products, which brand of jeans? He gazed at her, appalled. He’d just ordered quantities of abalone to be flown in to the hotel for a rich man’s feast at unthinkable expense. Is this what freedom of choice boiled down to in a market economy? Angelica demanded, ignoring his expression. A vast range of totally unnecessary products from which to select what you used to wipe or wear on your bum?

Angelica felt herself moving further and further away from the ways of the world, yet where was she moving to?

The Chef always eyed his mother nervously when she started talking like that. He and his brother continued to allege well into their adulthood that Angelica’s politicisation (caused by her return to university they claimed), had coloured their childhoods and, among other things, had caused them to be forced to ride on buses, when, had she stayed at home like a proper mother, they would have been driven places instead. She no longer attempted to defend herself against these charges. One has to draw the line somewhere on parental guilt, she thought. Speaking with her friends she discovered that many of their children had also revealed long-standing grievances about being made to ride on buses: a generational complaint? The mothers were puzzled. They thought they’d committed much more serious offences. However, for many of them the bus complaints turned out to be just the start. They’d raised a generation that felt entitled to complain in ways they’d never have considered doing themselves, they decided. Having been denied their own feelings they’d determined to spare their offspring the same fate and now they were paying the price of their children’s unbridled self expression.

‘Have you ever thought,’ she once asked her two sons, ‘that having to ride on buses from an early age made you confident enough as adults to fly anywhere in the world without a minute’s hesitation?’
But they were not of an age yet to give their parents credit for much.

These capitalist temples were decorated with portraits stories high of Uma Thurman and Nicole Kidman sporting Tag Heuer watches on their frail white wrists, spraying Chanel perfume on their fragile, milky necks, wearing Prada and vintage Yves St Laurent on their stick-like figures. The blonde-ness, the whiteness, the anorexic thinness of these two Western movie goddesses could have little resonance for Mexican women, Angelica thought. They were imported from another cultural cosmos, a twenty-first century colonisation, another Western invasion of the Yucatan landscape along with the pyramid-shaped hotels with their infinity pools, their manicured lawns and their beachside *cabanas* with wet bars and white-coated Mexican waiters serving exotic drinks in hollowed-out green coconuts decorated with gaudy miniature umbrellas and slices of fresh tropical fruit. It was just the kind of place she imagined the Indolence spending its holidays, she realised one day.

Inside the temples, water fountains high as the sun-proofed and subtly tinted glass ceilings played and tinkled, while tropical fish swam in the backlit pools. Shoppers roamed from store to store across cool marble floors. Lush green tropical atriums provided relief for eyes stretched and wearied by endless displays of diamonds, Colombian emeralds, pearls, turquoise and silver, sequined evening clothes, Manolo Blahnik shoes, Fendi Ferragamo bags, and tooled Mexican leather cowboy boots. Such palaces are commonplace in all the world’s cities: Angelica now was sickened and exhausted by their excessive displays: one could spend a lifetime selecting and buying but what did it mean in the end? What does it mean when Aladdin’s treasure-filled cave is replicated in every city of the world and every dusty old bottle contains a genie?

When she returned to Australia she did regret not having bought a pair of those Mexican boots. But at the time it was too hot to think of boots. She would have had to cart them around Mexico in her backpack and she wasn’t thinking of returning to Australia or living long enough to get her money’s worth out of Mexican leather boots.

It was in these shopping malls that Angelica first began to seriously think; ‘I won’t live long enough to get my money’s worth.’ The notion didn’t alarm her, she felt a kind of resignation that had the seeds of acceptance in it, the potential for acceptance; the hope that she’d have enough time to get past the dark emotions and into a more peaceful state before she died. That was her intention, at any rate, to what degree she’d achieve it was unknown to her. At times it seemed highly unlikely, if not impossible
and at those times she didn’t care anyway, the rage she felt at losing her life too soon consumed everything. She had no clear idea of what ‘too soon’ meant: before her grandchildren had children? Before she’d done all the work she wanted to do? Before she’d fallen in love again, this time without the agony? Before she’d learnt to dance the salsa, lost a bit of weight, grown her hair, finished reading Proust, been back to London, swum in the South China Sea?

Angelica spent days searching for a bookshop. There were none to be found. It seemed that visitors to Cancun and the expatriate residents generally weren’t great readers. In the afternoons when the children were sleeping and her daughter-in-law Josephine was enjoying some time to herself Angelica took buses into the downtown where she discovered local markets, and families crowded into tarpaper shacks with colourful sarongs strung across the openings instead of windows and doors.

These downtown bus rides were always interesting. For six pesos she could ride several miles down the coast through the ramshackle suburbs to the ferry terminal for Isla Mujeres and back again to Wal-Mart. She always sat next to a window (downtown buses have no air-conditioning) and lost herself in that delicious state that is reminiscent of being a child in a pram, when you are taken everywhere and have no responsibility at all for watching where you’re going. The temporary absence of this responsibility was particularly enjoyable in Cancun where you were likely to fall into holes full of all kinds of unpleasant substances whenever you walked down the street.

Not many gringos take downtown buses in Cancun, Angelica discovered. It’s dangerous, they think. It’s full of Mexicans. This conflation of ordinary Mexicans with danger seemed to be American conventional wisdom around the Caribbean coast. Rather like the Australian conflation of refugees with terrorists, she thought.

As Angelica rode a bus downtown one afternoon the vehicle was hit by a small red car whose driver decided it was in his best interests not to stop. The bus driver went after him, ignoring the outcry from his passengers. They followed the little red car into narrow downtown streets that weren’t built to accommodate large vehicles. They scraped the sides of the bus on lampposts and low stone walls. They knocked down temporary sheds made from cardboard and corrugated iron. Apparently dead and dying dogs lying in the middle of dusty roads came to life and leapt out of the way, howling, their tails between their legs. Innocent bystanders shrieked and cheered. Finally they cornered the car. The bus driver leapt down from his bus. The driver emerged from his
car. Terrible Mexican insults were exchanged with more than the usual dramatic
gesticulations and fist shaking and alarming facial expressions. The passengers joined
in. It was bedlam. It was like something out of a movie. Nobody would believe it if
they weren’t in it. Mexican road rage. Angelica was wearing a white cotton sundress
that was stuck to the backs of her thighs with sweat. She clutched her hat in her hands.
She sat fixed in her blue plastic seat, nervous, and uncertain as to how it would all turn
out. Anything seemed possible: people have died for less. Some arrangement was
eventually agreed upon because the driver got back in the bus and took everyone back
to town. The Mexican passengers were outraged, at the driver of the red car, or at being
taken so far out of their way Angelica couldn’t tell. The driver didn’t stop to let anyone
off on the way back in spite of all the passengers yelling as they flew past the bus stops.
Everyone had to start their entire journey afresh at the bus station.

Oh, Mexico! What a country! What a people! Angelica thought on the way back. She
was very glad when they reached the bus terminal. When she got home she told The
Chef who was watching CNN and drinking a beer while children swung shrieking from
his arms and legs. Josephine was enjoying a solitary swim in the apartment pool.

‘It was wild,’ Angelica told him. ‘It was amazing! That bus driver didn’t care about
anything or anybody, just getting after the car, he was totally single-minded. I don’t
know why. It wasn’t as if that ding stood out from all the other dings on his bus, and
anyway the bus was covered in lairy paintings of pirates and fish, you couldn’t even see
where it had been hit.’

‘Take taxis, please, Mum,’ groaned The Chef, and ran his free hand through his short
blond hair as the children latched onto his ankles. He was wearing his glasses and they
made him look serious. Her heart expanded at the sight of him all over with children.
To see your child at play with his own children. One could die happy after that.

‘But the buses are so interesting!’ she insisted. ‘I love those buskers who get on and
sing Mexican love songs very badly and play their guitars for everybody’s spare pesos.
Somebody should do that on the 380 bus to Bondi Beach.’

‘You have to Be Careful in the downtown, Mum. *Gringos* get in trouble down there
and you can’t count on the police. Don’t do anything stupid.’

There’s an interesting turnaround, she thought. *He*’s telling *me* not to do anything
stupid? When did he become so conservative, this boy who used to think he’d had a
good day if he and his mates managed to aggravate the long-suffering bus driver till they were finally thrown off the 380 while all the grown-ups cheered?

He’s got a lot on his plate, she thought. Big job, long hours, classy hotel with perfectionist standards; two little children and Josephine’s pregnant. Is he happy, she wondered? And what’s there to be done about it if he isn’t?

In the downtown she found public schools that were nothing more than a collection of broken-down buildings set in playgrounds littered with uprooted trees and shattered windows. Hurricane relief hasn’t found its way down here, she thought, it must have been hijacked at the Zona Hoteleria. On their shopping trips she’d watched as Mexican children bagged groceries at Wal-Mart for tips, to pay for their schoolbooks Josephine told her. Parents volunteered to teach many of the classes because there weren’t enough trained teachers, she said. Anybody who can manage it sends their kids to church schools, or private institutions because the public schools are terrible. Angelica has seen those private school children, in smart, clean uniforms and polished black shoes, being dropped off by fashionably dressed and gym-toned mothers in four-wheel drives. The young middle-class apparently shares a similar aesthetic worldwide, she reflected at the time.

‘For the traveller, Mexico is filled with extremes, Angelica read in a guide book that night before she fell asleep. Too right, she thought, and turned out the light.

* * *

When Angelica first received her diagnosis she felt very little emotion. She told no one. This was her second encounter with cancer: the first had located itself in an organ that was surgically removed and she didn’t miss it at all. But this was a different kettle of fish. There would be no surgical removal of this invader.

Angelica continued to carry out her daily tasks mechanically, because they had to be done. She cooked food and served it to herself, sat with it on a tray in front of the television and ate nothing. Living alone was a relief: it reduced the number of people she had to dissemble for.

She’d left Sydney a couple of years earlier and moved into a house on the edge of the World Heritage listed rainforest far up the sub-tropical north coast of New South Wales. She went back to her partially written book on ethics and determined that she
would finish it. She had plenty of time, or so she thought. How little we know about what’s round the corner! How many times had she heard that familiar warning, from older people, from the sick, that cliched admonishment: Don’t take anything for granted! And how frequently she’d smiled and ignored it. Even that first encounter with cancer hadn’t made her to sit up and take sufficient notice. She’d clearly needed a beating about the head with a piece of two-by-four. And now she’d got one.

She knew a few people in the village, including Julia Bennington, retired fisherwoman, environmentalist, librarian and widow of a trawler-man. They’d become close friends. Angelica found it was difficult to keep things from Julia because while she didn’t pry, Julia was sensitive and suspected something was up. She didn’t ask questions, but there was in her manner something solicitous that Angelica forced herself to ignore.

‘Are you all right?’ Julia would ask out of nowhere.

Her look was direct, questioning.

‘Yes, of course I am,’ Angelica would answer a beat too late, guilty, angry at having been asked. Not recognising the offer or not willing to, at any rate.

Angelica realised she could get away with this for some time if she wanted. Until the illness became more evident she didn’t have to tell anybody. She didn’t want anybody’s pity, but more than that, it seemed to her that in the telling, the speaking of it out loud to another, she would make her illness truly real. As long as only she knew about it was just one of the many sets of circumstances that floated about in her head, most of which she never discussed with anybody else either. Both her sons were grown and living overseas. She had no husband or lover with her. Watchful Waiting, her oncologist suggested when she made it clear she wasn’t willing to launch into chemotherapy. Like Indolent Lymphoma, Watchful Waiting had its charms as an expression. It sounded like a calm, benevolent and trustworthy activity. Regular checkups, wait and see, no violent interventions unless, no it wasn’t unless it was until, things took a turn for the worst.

Her decision to keep quiet had much to do with this being her second encounter. The first had been so dramatic and had involved everyone: there was no hiding it. Out of necessity things had been addressed with a most unseemly haste. To put everyone through it all again seemed like attention seeking. As if she’d enjoyed all their loving care and the luxury of finally having to abrogate responsibility for herself to others so
much the first time round she’d decided to do it all again. How many times does one person have the right to ask of others that they give these things?

Keeping her secret caused Angelica to feel a deep sense of strain. It reminded her of other secrets, or rather of other times she’d lived in the isolating condition of keeping profoundly significant events deeply hidden from everyone around her. Which had been most of her life. She’d existed, she often thought, like a spy with one life everybody knew about and another that was concealed from them. Like the serial killer who lived next door of whom everybody said when he was finally revealed for what he really was:

‘But he seemed so ordinary! So quiet and nice!’

She wasn’t a serial killer, but she knew darkness and did her best to be ordinary in spite of that knowledge. They had something in common. They all knew how to construct a life for appearances alone, while something altogether other went on inside. The difference was that Angelica would rather not have had to do it. She didn’t thrive on it. She thirsted for clarity, and the light, and to be able to tell her truth. The latter yearning a possible curse, in itself quite likely to bring about no end of trouble for everyone. *The Truth shall make you free* a graffiti artist had painted on the sea wall at North Bondi Beach, but anybody who’s set out to find truth and freedom knows the journey is perilous and the outcome uncertain. The graffiti has since been obscured by a blue mosaic of turtles and fish.

She slept at night with her teeth clenched and woke each morning with an aching jaw. Sometimes she chewed the inside of her lips and in the morning they were torn and bloodied. She couldn’t be bothered talking to anyone on even the most trivial level. In fact the more trivial the level the harder the conversation became. The more the distance between the trivial chat and the secret she was keeping the more the effort tired her, left her with a racing heart, dry eyes, and a low-grade fever.

She dreamed she was swimming in a turbulent sea and when she sank to the bottom her skirt became trapped under an encrusted rock. She was unable to free herself and woke terrified, believing she was drowning. Still she told no one. The dreams became worse. Apocalyptic, with tidal waves, ravenous wolves, soldiers and smoking, desolate theatres of war littered with the limbless dead. She became afraid to go to sleep. She sat up at night, watching infomercials on television and drinking red wine. Desperately, in the early hours of the morning, she’d swallow over-the-counter calmatives. She never
consciously considered suicide at that time, though she had it in mind as a reasonable option if things became too bad, if pain became too bad further down the track.

A frightening aridity then took hold of her. Her fevers were dry and wouldn’t break. Her skin burned and shrivelled. Her eyes felt full of grit, her saliva glands reduced their output and her tongue, deprived of normal lubrication, became unwieldy and attached itself to the roof of her mouth as if both were lined with Velcro. She craved fluids and drank frequently and in large quantities. But the liquids brought no relief to her parched being. She couldn’t absorb as much as she craved and often immediately regurgitated the water. Her spirit was burning itself out, she thought. She hadn’t anticipated this deathly dryness, this burning up, this slow progression towards grey ash.

* * *

Angelica left Cancun on election day with Julia, who’d joined her in Mexico as they’d arranged, after Angelica had had a couple of months alone with her family. The women were bound for San Cristobal de Las Casas in the mountains of Chiapas.

Polling booths were set up at the bus terminal downtown. Lines of voters stretched as far as they could see, down the Avenue Tulum and into the Avenue Uxmal and past the Instituto Nacional de Migracion, with only the shade of narrow shop overhangs to protect them from the broiling afternoon sun. Steam rose from puddles on the sidewalks after a brief but intense rain shower. Mangy dogs lapped up the muddy water and tore open black plastic rubbish bags, scavenging through their stinking contents in search of food. Angelica was in love with Mexico. Deeply, irrevocably in love.

Merchants had set up their stalls under tarpaulins in the flowing gutters, from which they sold backpacks, cheap watches, colourful lengths of cloth, gaudy plastic tablecloths, sandals made from old tyres, all manner of designer knock-offs, handbags, cheap jewellery, ponchos, and cut-price tickets to the eco-parks, Xcaret and Xel-Ha. Pots and pans and an endless variety of bright plasticware were on offer. Angelica was never able to buy anything at these markets: she entered a state of confusion and over-stimulation from which she could make no choices or decisions. She once spent the best part of an hour looking at umbrellas and left empty-handed, something she later regretted as nowhere in the world has she seen umbrellas as gaudy and desirable as those in the markets of downtown Cancun.
Food vendors under the shelter of red and white Coca-Cola umbrellas sold iced drinks and sliced fruit. Mayan women from the surrounding villages built smoking barbecues from half oil drums, on which they char-grilled pieces of chicken and fish, and yellow corn to feed the crowds who’d been waiting since early morning to cast their vote.

There were very few booths in the downtown. In the Zona Hotelera, home to voters most likely to support the incumbent government, there were dozens. They were witnessing Mexican democracy in action, a complex democracy they were later to learn. After the elections the results were vehemently disputed for months throughout the country, to a degree unimaginable in Australia, and for much of the time, surprisingly, without any damaging intervention from the very government that had attempted to control the voting in the first place. Angelica was glad to find herself observing these things: recovering her curiosity about the world was a sign of a return to mental health, she thought. Goodbye to the agitated depression and miserable self-absorption, though the Indolent Lymphoma wasn’t going anywhere fast.

Merchants yelled orders in rapid Spanish at passers-by: buy this, Senora, eat here, and try this, smell that. Dark sleek heads bobbed against one another like a bevy of industrious otters, engaged in the collective labour of building a neighbourhood economy, a dam against a greater fiscal system that threatened to sweep them all away. Untroubled by the cacophony of car horns, hawkers, shrieking cockerels and Mexican pop played through tinny radios, everyone simply shouted louder.

Julia and Angelica breathed in the competing aromas of food and livestock as they pushed their way through the crowds to the bus station. Their backpacks were cumbersome; the passageways narrow and crowded and Julia feared knocking over someone’s makeshift kitchen arrangements. They stopped to watch a woman with blue-black hair roll out indigo tortillas and throw them onto a flat dish balanced over a gas bottle and covered with powdered limestone; the limestone cooked into the tortillas and gave these lactose intolerant people a reliable source of calcium. Three village women in embroidered blouses showed brilliant metal teeth when they laughed at Julia’s obvious confusion. A sign of prosperity these teeth, Angelica later discovered. It was conspicuous consumption Mexican style that supported dentists with offices on every street corner.
Fresh milk was almost impossible to find in Cancun: only Wal-Mart carried it, Wal-Mart serving *gringo* tastes and pockets, Oreo cookies, Hershey Bars and Kisses, Californian wine, oranges and grapes, Cheerios and hot dogs. Wal-Mart was the last outlet Angelica had expected to find in Cancun: that only proved how ignorant she was. There was a Cost Co as well where you could buy Speedo knockoffs and flat screen televisions, as well as a year’s supply of cosmetics and toothpaste and razors. She shopped in both outlets with Josephine, the children jammed into shopping carts just like at home, except the aisles were filled with Mexicans and announcements were made in Spanish and there were bins of prickly pear in the vegetable aisle.

She had to admit that there were times when she was grateful for Wal-Mart, times when the cultural strangeness became temporarily overwhelming and she wanted a cup of milky cocoa. Or the day Australia did well in the World Cup and she and Julia ran into a compatriot in the confectionery aisle, draped in an Australian flag, with brown felt kangaroo’s ears on her head. The compatriot was from Brisbane, she said. All three of them danced up and down the aisles singing Waltzing Matilda and waving a football scarf round their heads while the Mexicans laughed at them. Just as well The Chef couldn’t see them, Angelica thought. Surrounded by fallen piles of Moon Pies and Babe Ruth’s that their newfound friend had accidentally swiped off the shelves with her scarf, Angelica had the sudden understanding that only when she was so far away from home did she care a hoot about football and national pride, or even Waltzing Matilda. Only when she’s away from a place does she have any sense at all of belonging to it? What is this perversity? She’s known people, usually men, who loved intensely from a distance but when they got close up spent a lot of energy trying to extricate themselves from the intimacy. It was a love based on nostalgia and fantasy, too fragile or uninteresting to maintain itself in reality, and she was mildly shocked to find the capacity for the same thing in herself.

At the Cancun bus station they sat on the same blue plastic seats that they’d found on the downtown buses, beside machines dispensing Coca-Cola and potato chips to over-excited Mexican children waiting to start their journeys. The air conditioning was broken. Angelica was now used to being covered in sweat, to feeling it run down her thighs and pool under her breasts. It was not unlike the drenching night sweats of Non-Hodgkin’s, though less debilitating. It was interesting she thought, that a woman such as her who so disliked heat should find herself with an illness that subjected her to
endless experiences of it, and in a part of the country, at home and abroad, that for much of the year had the humidity of a Finnish sauna. Perhaps when this trip was over, if she was still alive, she’d move herself to Sweden and continue her search for her unknown father whom she’d long suspected (with no evidence at all to back up her suspicions) had travelled from that elegant chilly country across the grey expanses of the North Sea, and met up with her mother-to-be in Yorkshire. The good father. The father of her dreams. The blonde one from whom she inherited the colouring that is so opposite to that of her dark-haired mother and sisters.

Angelica was as thrilled as the Mexican children to be embarking on a long road trip to new places in an exotic country. It was the realisation of a dream she’d had for many years: not that she would visit a foreign country, she’d done that many times, but that she would do so free of fear and anxiety, that she would do so feeling confident and secure. These feelings of confidence and security had been unfamiliar to her for most of her life, and she was gratefully astonished at the newfound determination with which she’d set out on this journey. Desperation can do this: it can have these useful side effects, she decided. When you have to think about your death, when it’s right there in your face, the experience can make you fearless about a lot of other things that might previously have had you in paralysis.

This Mexican journey was a rehearsal, she thought, a rehearsal for entering that entirely unknown country she was thinking about more and more. She was curious, frightened, at times stricken with terrible grief, but she always came back to curiosity as her fundamental feeling about dying. Hell, she’d always thought, was here on earth: human beings more than capable of everything monstrous without needing any assistance from the supernatural. She’d come to this conclusion from experience, not from merely abstract contemplation. It was, she thought, a question of the individual’s capacity and willingness to consider the humanity of others that governed his or her actions in the world, and everyone was on a steep learning curve.

The great thing about travelling as they were on this Mexican trip, that is, making up your mind day by day where’ll you’ll go, where you’ll stay, what you’ll do, she thought, is the state of consciousness it puts you into. You become firmly embedded in the present because there’s so much going on in the present that there’s no time or inclination to go either backwards or forwards into future or past. Angelica didn’t want the future or the past, they were both too complicated. It’s the present that liberates the
organism. If death is anything like this, it will be all right, she thought. Not without its challenges, but all right.

When Julia and Angelica finally got on the bus they found it was air-conditioned as promised, and they felt physically comfortable for the first time that day. Outside the humidity was at lethal levels. Before they boarded Angelica had run across the road to the Comercial Mexicana to stock up on tortillas, bananas, nuts, and bottled water to keep them going till they arrived in San Cristobal. Who knew when they’d stop for refreshments and what form those refreshments might take? They’d escaped intestinal troubles thus far, and wanted to keep it that way. It had been decided by fate that she was to be carried off by cancer, in the fullness of time. Angelica had no desire to be cheated out of that fate, to which she was only beginning to adjust herself, by some opportunistic infection that might precipitate an even more premature ending of her remaining allotted days, all because she’d been a careless eater. She’d been granted some time by the indolent nature of the disease: she wanted that time. She had much to do. The doctor warned her before she set out that with a compromised immune system she really shouldn’t be in Mexico at all. Failing that, if she was determined to put herself at risk in a filthy country with a backward health system and bad sewage arrangements, he said, sounding irritated that she was willing to take such risks when he was bending over backwards to keep her safe, then she should be very careful about what she ate and drank while she was there. To this end she deprived herself of street food, which was a considerable deprivation, and she had to watch Julia enjoy it and stay well.

Angelica wasn’t missing home. And much of the time she forgot about the Lymphoma. She didn’t even know where they were going to sleep after they got off the bus in San Cristobal but she knew something would turn up. She’d unexpectedly found a kind of floating faith, a trust in life, or herself, that made her feel alive in ways she’d never felt alive before.

Julia busied herself arranging her backpack and headphones; Angelica had the window seat for the first leg of the trip. Julia’s belongings flowed out into the aisle and the Mexican passengers waited politely for her to get them out of the way. There was a different sense of time here from the one the women were used to: a lack of urgency, the bus would go when everything was ready, not when it’s departure time advertised.
The Chef told them this time sense took some getting used to when you were working in the country but if you didn’t adapt the stress was unbearable.

‘How long have you been in Mexico?’ his German boss asked him one day when The Chef was getting frustrated with the difficulties of trying to organise the importation of crates of lobsters from the USA into Cancun for a politicians’ banquet, before the lobsters went bad.

‘Long enough to know better than to get upset,’ The Chef replied, ‘but I get upset anyway. It’s expected of me, it’s what Westerners do in Mexico and do you know how much those lobsters are going to cost you if they go off before they get here? Enough to keep the kitchen hands in tortillas for years.’

The Chef had some of his mother’s social attitudes, though he’d never admit it. Josephine told her that he’d shared his Christmas bonus with his immediate staff. Angelica was profoundly moved by this information, grateful to the benevolent spirits who’d seen fit to bless him at birth with an open heart. As she felt her life drawing closer to its ending she understood that the ability to be kind and generous was indeed a blessing, and that those who escaped the tyranny of the cold and exacting demands of greed and rampant self-interest were fortunate indeed.

In the election queue small children played in the gutters, and crawled over the imposing statue of Benito Juarez, el Presidente during the reform of 1861 that among other things forced the Catholic church to sell off much of its property. Every town had its street named after el Presidente, and its statue and frequently a town square as well. This made navigation difficult.

Young babies, rosy with heat, wailed in their mothers’ arms and on their fathers’ shoulders. The adults engaged in vociferous conversations over the children’s clamour: Mexicans aren’t apathetic about politics, as Julia observed, everybody has a robust opinion. In Mexico, conversation is always an opportunity for dramatic self-expression, even if it’s only about the price of tortilla flour. At first Angelica mistook the customary body language for aggression, but came to understand it as another outlet for the vibrant energy of Mexican people. After a month or so, she automatically began to use this body language when she spoke English, or tried out her appalling Spanish. She could speak a little Spanish (Julia steadfastly refused to learn any and said it was Angelica’s job); the problem was she couldn’t understand the responses she got. It was liberating to involve her body when she spoke: physical movement bridged the
traditional Anglo-Saxon divide between spoken language and the body that speaks it, allowing a satisfyingly holistic engagement of body and mind.

The younger women in the queues wore short, tight fitting clothes that accentuated their breasts and bottoms, their dark hair was oiled and curled, and fell down their backs as if still wet from their morning bath. Their clothes were lime green, neon pink, Mexican red, peacock blue, and they wore high heeled shoes that they somehow managed to keep out of the cracks in the pavement left by tree roots, and the lingering after effects of last year’s hurricane. Angelica longed to wear such shoes. She looked at her feet in their comfortable sandals and thought how sensible they looked. She didn’t want to be sensible she wanted to totter recklessly on stilettos, red-painted toenails peeping out in front. She longed to wear those garish colours as well. Beside these women she felt drab and repressed. Impulsively she left the bus:

‘Don’t let them go without me!’ she yelled back at Julia, ‘I’ll only be a minute!’

And ran back across the road to the Comercial Mexicana where they sold clothes as well as food. She found a lime green skirt in the racks of cheap clothing, with frills and beads around the waist. She paid and stuffed it into her backpack and dodged the traffic back to the bus station.

‘How was I going to stop them leaving you?’ an irritated Julia wanted to know. ‘I don’t speak a word of Spanish.’

‘De nada,’ Angelica told her. ‘Don’t stress it. I’m here.’

Julia stared, mildly affronted at this unexpected change in their dynamics. Angelica telling her to not ‘stress it?’ But she, Julia, is always the calm one, isn’t she always telling Angelica to settle? What is this turnabout?

The abuelas in the election queue wore black, or large floral print frocks that came down to their plump ankles.

‘I’m an abuela too,’ Angelica reminded herself, ‘I actually bought the wrong kind of clothing. I’m trying to forget I’m getting old and dying. Stilettos, indeed.’

She didn’t mention any of this to Julia. Julia had no time for dressing up and would only warn of the dangers of stilettos, dangers that everybody knows about but ignores, and generally resents being reminded of.

The abuelas fussed around their grandchildren, hauling them out of the rubbish-filled gutters and safely away from the thin snapping dogs missing chunks of flank fur from fights and malnutrition. The abuelas planted the grandchildren on their fat little legs on
the uneven pavement, where they staggered and swayed while they ate the sticky Mexican sweets made with chocolate and chili. When Josephine discovered she was pregnant shortly after Angelica arrived in Cancun, she decided she wanted them to do what Mexican families do at such times: everybody accompanies the mother-to-be on her first visit to the obstetrician. So they dressed Jean-Paul and Lila in their best clothes, The Chef came home early from his kitchens and they trooped off to the American Hospital where they sat in the waiting room with Mexican families, complete with their abuelas, waiting their turn for the doctor. When it came they all went in, just like the Mexicans, and sat in a row against the wall while The Chef translated for everybody. Jean-Paul and Lila investigated every inch of the doctor’s office, crawled under his desk, untied his shoelaces, made a lot of noise, and generally did everything that in an Australian hospital would cause annoyance and worse. The Mexican obstetrician took it all in his stride, and gave the children sweets that they spat out on his floor (they never took to chili in their sweets). It was a glorious moment when they crowded round the monitor and for the first time, saw, or said they could see, the new infant forming itself in Josephine’s womb. Angelica understood then what it could really mean to be an abuela, to feel the sense of generation after generation, and to be an elder with a role to play in a growing young family. There wasn’t a lot of time to enjoy this feeling. Lila and Jean-Paul were at the end of their tolerance for adult concerns.

‘Give them to me,’ Angelica said to The Chef. He handed them over and the three of them went for American ice cream at Johnny Rocket’s at La Isla Mall, while the parents continued their obstetric interview in peace. Johnny Rocket’s was busy with tourists and up-town Mexicans from the Zona Hoteleria with children dressed in cool Gap clothes in New York colours.

Back in the downtown election queues, little girls wore lace dresses in pink and lemon and pale blue, white socks with frills and shiny black Mary Jane shoes, as if they were going to church. The little boys raced round in denim shorts and T-shirts, their black hair cut in a severe fringe that grazed their eyebrows. Angelica’s grandchildren have white blond curls and aqua eyes that change with the light like the changing colours of the Caribbean Sea, and they had to be watched every second they were out and about because such children are regularly kidnapped in Mexico. It took Angelica some time to fully grasp this danger. It required a degree of watchfulness she was
unfamiliar with in the public world, though she’d come to know it well in the family of her own childhood.

Music was now being piped through loudspeakers hooked up to electricity poles. The Tijuana Brass, or something remarkably like it, blared discordantly through the bus station. There was, as always, a pervasive smell of sewage. Later, when Angelica and Julia returned to Australia and drove past the sewage works just outside of Lismore, Angelica was gripped each time she made the journey by a most powerful nostalgia, a bone-deep longing for Mexico. I will go back, she promised herself at those times. I will go back and find a little apartment in Mexico City, from which I will emerge each day to visit the Diego Rivera murals in the Palacio Nacional, and light my candles at the shrine of the Virgin of Guadeloupe. I will sit with my lunchtime tortillas observing the political activity in the main Zocalo. I will go back and listen to the twelve thrilling drummers, young men busking in the Plaza de la Republica in the after-dinner hours.

The city is sinking: the Catedral Metropolitana has taken on quite a tilt; the pollution is fierce, but I will go back, Angelica promised herself in Australia.

_in Cancun, she watched the carnival through the window as they pulled out of the bus station. Contentment settles over her and with pleasurable anticipation she thought:_

_‘I don’t know what I’m doing or why I’m doing it and I don’t care. It’s all right. All shall be well and all shall be well. The world can be good, a fine place to be. And if by chance it isn’t, I’ll know what to do.’_

She liked the existential nature of that conclusion. It was in keeping with the fiesta-like atmosphere of the Cancun day. At Playa del Carmen, a couple of hours down the coast towards the Belize border where they stopped to pick up more passengers, things were different. Troop carriers were parked round the bus depot. Soldiers stood on the sidewalk, leaning casually on their guns, smoking cigarettes and whistling at the blonde gringo girls who sashayed by on their way to the beach, dressed in tiny bikinis and kitten heels. Armed men made Angelica nervous. She stared furtively at their guns through the bus window. The barrels were long and slender. A gun is an object of fascination. She thought about just what it is they can do when their power is unleashed. She wanted to understand that irrevocable movement from inertia to destruction. The moment in which the die is cast, the decision is made to release the energies that are necessary to end a human life. She remembered her husband taking
their small boys to see an American warship docked in Sydney Harbour. She refused to go on the outing.

‘Don’t forget to tell them that ship is built to kill people,’ she instructed him on their way out the door. ‘Don’t forget to tell them that.’

Angelica didn’t let her boys have toy guns. Instead they shot at each other with sticks. ‘It’s all good fun till someone loses an eye,’ she told them, taking the sticks away. But she couldn’t stop them. What use was one mother’s voice raised against the voices of an entire culture?

Two soldiers boarded the bus and walked slowly down the aisle scrutinising the passengers. Their guns swung from their shoulders on wide leather straps. As soon as they disembarked, the bus pulled out. There was an explosion of rapid Spanish from the Mexican passengers. The bus driver yelled his reply to the passengers’ questions but the Spanish was way over Julia and Angelica’s heads. They were on their way.

* * *

When Angelica and Julia were sitting in the rainforest behind the North Coast village one day, before Mexico, watching an undulating python haul itself up to the top of a tree where it thought it might find birds eggs, Angelica finally told Julia about her situation. She hadn’t planned to do this: she just blurted it out. Julia was distressed at having been kept in the dark for so long. The birds made a dreadful racket above their heads, panicked by the snake.

‘I thought we were friends,’ Julia said and then dropped it, remembering how secretive Angelica could be, how she like to keep a barrier around her calling it ‘maintaining her boundaries’, as if she were a sovereign state defending itself from threatened invasion by a foreign power. It could become irritating.

Angelica was, in Julia’s opinion, far too sensitive about what she called being intruded on. Julia called it the expression of ordinary human interest and concern. But Angelica seemed to lack trust in what other people took for granted as ordinary.

Julia dropped her grievance, seeing the strain and exhaustion in her friend’s pale face. ‘Come and live at my place,’ she suggested. ‘It’s so big, you can have your own space downstairs and you won’t have to worry about being alone. I won’t have to worry about you being alone,’ she added.
Somewhat apprehensively, Angelica agreed it would be a good idea. She didn’t need nursing but she did fear being alone. At the same time she was terrified of relinquishing her independence, of being in the same house as another human being every day. She doubted if she could keep up her end of the social demands.

‘What the hell,’ she thought eventually. ‘I’ll give it a whirl. If it doesn’t work I can always move out.’

It then occurred to her that she’d never embarked on any serious venture in her entire adult life without first reassuring herself that there was a way out of it. As she walked down the aisle on her first wedding day she clearly remembered that she thought: ‘If it doesn’t work out I can get a divorce.’ Which in fact was the outcome. Did she curse their nuptials with her unseemly obsession with escape plans?

On the other hand, she’d never really planned her life: stuff happened, seemingly without much awareness on her part. She fell into things and then wondered how on earth she’d got there. Her escape plans were useful to the degree that having used them to reassure herself that the situation was not irrevocable, she felt it was safe to make a decision. She usually forgot about them completely after the die had been cast and if she had to get out, found something in the moment to aid her flight. The first serious challenge she faced to this haphazard philosophy was giving birth: that was certainly irrevocable. The next didn’t come till she knew she was terminally ill. There are surprisingly few circumstances in life that one absolutely cannot escape, even though we tell ourselves we’re stuck in any number of inescapable situations, she thought.

When she told her doctor she’d taken the step of moving in with Julia, he was delighted.

‘People in your situation do much better when they interact regularly with others,’ he told her. ‘Loneliness is no good for you.’

‘Neither is selfishness,’ she thought.

When Angelica was due to make her next hospital visit, Julia asked if she could come with her. But this was asking too much, too soon, it turned out. Angelica couldn’t bear the thought of company. There was something shameful in her plight, the vulnerability she felt, the sense of defeat, the dull, red rage, and she wanted no witnesses. As it turned out she was wrong and stupid. As soon as she stepped into the hospital she knew she wanted Julia there. She wanted Julia holding her hand and passing her the tissues. She wanted Julia there to laugh at her black jokes. (A trifle reluctantly, and also
somewhat furtively, Julia does this, at the times Angelica’s allowed her to accompany her since, glancing behind them to see if anyone else is listening who might be appalled by their lack of reverence for this grim situation. Though it is Angelica’s grim situation and she was determined to regard it with as little or as much reverence as seemed suitable to her at any given moment. She would retain at least that much control over matters that threatened, by the minute, to spiral quite out of reach of her limited sphere of influence.)

So Angelica yelled at Julia the first time she asked. She raised all her prickles like an enraged echidna protecting itself against attack and Julia backed away, sensibly, though Angelica saw the hurt in her eyes, and felt desperate about her own inability to either understand or overcome what she had identified as her episodic compulsion to shut everybody out. She was also ashamed. Julia wanted only to help.

Angelica had no idea what benevolent angel might have crossed her path with Julia’s, but in truth she counted herself among the luckiest of women to have fetched up on Julia’s calm shores. When they met, Angelica thought her life was over. They were introduced by mutual friends in the village: Julia took her in and nursed her back, and Angelica felt she’d got the chance to become a better person than she’d ever been before. Though there is still a way to go with this project, she has to admit when she thinks about it today.

For Angelica’s part she’s persuaded Julia to dye her hair bright red, and chosen for her skirts of purple satin, and green silk shirts, and necklaces of lapis lazuli and pink pearls and silver. None of which Julia ever wears. Julia says that her friend has enriched her life, and makes her laugh. She reminds Julia of her husband, long dead. He was lost and seeking asylum, and so is Angelica, Julia says. Angelica can see why he loved her: she took him in as she has taken in Angelica, and gave them both solid ground on which to plant their feet, the first such solid ground either of them had ever known.

Somebody once told Angelica that the frame of mind you are in when you die is of the utmost significance. For example, if you have been quite a pleasant person for most of your life and then die in the middle of an uncharacteristic rage, it’s the rage that will determine where you end up, and not your previous mildness. Angelica thinks they attributed this notion to the Tibetans. She’s never checked, but it’s stayed in her mind.
It’s harsh, she thinks, for an afterlife to be so unforgiving. These days she attempts to control her anger as soon as she can, just in case, with deep breaths and mental images of Moreton Bay fig trees.

An American woman from Texas they’d met in the cemetery on Isla Mujeres had said in that instructive manner many American women seem to acquire from birth:

‘You must go to San Cristobal de Las Casas. It’s wonderfully cool in the mountains there, and the churches are stunning. It’s our favourite place in all Mexico.’

The Isla Mujeres cemetery was exquisitely kitsch, Angelica thought, with plaster statues of angelic beings and saints, and Jesus, Mary and Joseph, all painted in white, cream and pastels. The cemetery was built on sand: tombs and crypts of the wealthy dead sitting on the same unreliable foundations as the common folk, and all overhung with the low-slung branches of flowering hibiscus and sea grape. Never in her life had she seen such a variety and quantity of showy plastic flowers, jammed into tin cans, plastic bowls and crystal vases. There seemed to be an excessive number of infants and young people buried there, the reasons for which they were never able to establish.

On the morning of their first visit, wilted from the heat like two bunches of neglected leafy greens, they draped themselves over a tomb decorated with a lurid painting of Jesus’ bleeding heart, under the spreading shade of a sea grape tree. No amount of liquid could replace what they were losing in perspiration, it seemed. Julia was starting to worry about their electrolyte balances. Angelica said she didn’t care and she was sick of drinking warm water. But cold beer, while immediately gratifying didn’t have any lasting effect on her thirst and she didn’t want to see Mexico through a hop haze. She had little tolerance for alcohol and quickly became tipsy. She wasn’t an interesting drunk: she was only sleepy. Julia’s eyes ached from the adamantine brilliance of sun on white surfaces. She was sick of Angelica’s pointless complaints. Little things were beginning to take on big proportions. They were sniping at each other just because they could. Their stomachs were unstable, unaccustomed to the amount of chilli they’d been eating and the humid heat. They weren’t ill but they were off their game. Summer in the Caribbean, what had they been thinking?

A naval brass band began to play stridently in the street outside the cemetery walls. The women got up and dragged themselves over to watch as a ceremony took place under the lighthouse in honour of several men dressed in whites with substantial gold
braiding. Chubby, glamorously made-up consorts in high heels and gloves accompanied them. Naval officers and seamen stood at attention, the latter with rifles by their sides, the Caribbean at its turquoise best in the background. The band was painfully discordant and the scene straight out of a Latin American novel: one fully expected the dead to rise up out of their resting place and make ribald commentary. Instead Bonnie appeared and told them about San Cristobal. Sudden rapid gunfire sent the three of them looking urgently for cover in the centre of the cemetery. All the crypts, they found, were padlocked so they flung themselves on the sand, imagining a military coup as a consequence of everybody being disappointed in the election results. The seamen were merely firing blanks at the hot sky it turned out, celebrating the end of the ceremony and what it had achieved. A battered naval helicopter flew low over their heads to the landing strip at the base, ready to take the dignitaries back to the mainland.

Cool was good, the women thought, listening to the American as they all dusted themselves off, feeling like foolish tourists. You never know, Bonnie cautioned. You have to assume the worst till you find out otherwise in this country, she instructed them. How smart would it be to stand around and get shot? Not at all smart, they agreed.

They wanted cool, they yearned for cool, they had begun to think despairingly that they would never again know how it felt to be cool. July in the Caribbean was like living daily life in a humidifier. All manner of fungi and mould flourished in every orifice. Bonnie went on to tell them, out of nowhere, that the Caribbean beach sand never gets hot, unlike other sand on other beaches in other places. It has certain properties that always keep it cool, no matter how fierce the sun. She was some kind of scientist.

‘Have you ever see anyone hopping across the beaches here?’ she asked them.

‘No,’ they replied, ‘now you mention it.’

Bonnie was married to Hank. She had a mass of grey curls that sprang out uncontrollably from her scalp, and she wore granny glasses and tie-dyed sarongs. Her voice entranced Angelica: she could sit for a long time gazing at Bonnie’s lips, hypnotised by that voice, if not by the content of her conversation. What she said hardly mattered given the mellifluous tone in which she said it. This is a quality politicians need to cultivate, Angelica reflected. It hardly matters what you say if your
tone is hypnotic enough. By the time everyone’s worked out you’re talking nonsense you’ve been elected.

They never met Hank who was stuck inside his hotel room with a bad case of the runs. Street food, Bonnie said. He ought to know better, she went on, but he couldn’t help himself when it came to street food. They came to Mexico from Texas every year, she told them. They were in love with the country as well. Every visit they seriously considered packing up their American lives and moving to San Cristobal, but something always seemed to stop them, generally something of a parasitic nature. Everybody knows how difficult those intestinal parasites are to get rid of, she told the women, and they really lower your quality of life once they get hold of you.

Isla Mujeres, Bonnie told Julia one afternoon when Angelica had pleaded a headache and escaped for some solitude, means island of women (Julia had worked that out, despite her resistance to the foreign tongue) and is so-called because Caribbean pirates used the island for rest and recreation in between their bouts of piracy. They kept their women marooned on the tiny atoll, on the lee side, the balmy coast that faces the Yucatan mainland, where the coconut palms grow right on the beach. That way they didn’t have to share their women, or worry about them running away.

‘Men,’ sighed Bonnie. ‘So insecure.’

Her Texan accent made several extra syllables out every word she spoke. Julia thought for a while about the life of an insecure pirate’s woman, imprisoned on a Caribbean island until he didn’t want her anymore.

‘Did they get cancer?’ Angelica wondered when Julia told her what she learned later that day.

‘Depression? Die in childbirth? Did they sit on the sea front at dusk, done up with stolen jewels; earrings, bracelets, amethysts and diamonds, combs made from the shells of giant sea turtles holding up their luxurious dark hair, watching for the sails of his pirate ship as the Caribbean sun sank into the evening sea? Did they yearn for the mainland, for their mothers, for a husband who came home every night and didn’t have a cutlass beside the bed when he made love to them? Or were they glad to see the back of him every time he set sail; did they resume their ordinary lives, their lives among women and children, fishing, cooking rice, mending their stockings?’

‘I have no idea,’ Julia replied, ’but you’re making up a great movie. Wives of the Pirates of the Caribbean: The Untold Story? perhaps?’
There are so many untold stories about wives, Angelica thought. All that lost history. Today young boys help themselves to the ripe coconuts and sell them to tourists for a few pesos. At your peril, you seek shade under those palms. Julia, hot and thirsty, bought a coconut from a young vendor and settled down in the shade to drink it.

‘Hello?’ Angelica sang, waving her fingers in the air to attract Julia’s attention. ‘You’re under a coconut tree. What’s happened to Mrs. Think of Every Eventuality?’ Julia got up and moved out of range of any falling nuts. ‘You can be such a bitch sometimes,’ she remarked, and refused to share the watery grey milk.

The far side of the island faces the open sea and has quite different vegetation: low scrubland and jagged rocks, wild winds that whip up white caps in a dark blue ocean. In this inhospitable place they one day came across a village with houses made from cardboard boxes and tarpaper shacks, a collectivo for the poor, hastily assembled beside the island’s stinking rubbish dump. Two mangy dogs stood side by side on the headland, gazing out across the water as if sniffing out the possibility of a better life somewhere across the stormy water. The women were soaked through, having been caught in a fierce tropical downpour. The road was deserted; it was a long hike back to a bus stop and no taxis came by. Beside the collectivo, a few blocks away from the rubbish dump, luxurious beach houses faced the ocean: the island is small, only a few miles around; rich and poor are thrust together and have to make the best of it. The magnificent houses looked empty except for their gardeners and the occasional well cared for dog, watchful sentinel at his post on the flat roof or by the impressive wrought iron gates.

After the pirates took their leave, the island evolved into the fishing community it still is. With its little white lighthouse and its shore-front shuttered hotels and its town square where a band played in the evenings, and where a constant traffic of worshippers and penitents flowed through the doors of the white painted church that opened onto the north end of the square, while the local youths played basketball on the court alongside. A large, blue-robed Virgin Mary sat atop this church, her arms open wide in welcome, her halo seriously askew from last year’s hurricane. One evening Angelica went into the church alone, and sat in the back row listening to the late mass. She cried, hard, into her hands, thinking about loss, thinking about dying. It was one of
those shuddering attacks of weeping in which the tears seem to strain to squeeze themselves out of all the hidden places of the body and make a tortuous path up to the eyes, and she tried to hide her distress from those around her. She had no handkerchief or tissues, and had to surreptitiously wipe her face and nose on the sleeves of her shirt. As in most Mexican churches, the statues were carefully dressed in real clothes, Jesus in snow-white linen robes, various saints in rough brown cloth, the Virgin of Guadeloupe in red and green velvet, surrounded by golden candle light. Sometimes this Virgin has a brown face, in contrast to the fair features of Mary; they call her the Mexican Virgin, and a tiny child always peeps out from the folds of her gown, between her feet. The priest sang sonorously in Spanish, the smell of incense hung heavy on the evening air and mingled with the scents of hundreds of flowers arranged on and around the altar. Every day was a festival of some kind in Mexican churches. One couldn’t fail to be impressed. At the end of the mass Angelica slipped out the church door and walked over to the sea wall. She leaned her elbows on its rough surface and gazed out across the ocean. The light from a half moon cast a silvery yellow path that ended at the horizon. She could walk on that path, she thought. In her bare feet, lightly, she could walk that silvery yellow path. She could sail on that silver water in a small boat with a blue sail, only herself at the tiller, a dog in the bow, looking out towards the future.

‘I am in Mexico,’ Angelica whispered.

It had taken on the power of a mantra. A secret incantation that brought her back to herself, grounded her firmly in the present.

‘I am in Mexico.’

Their hotel on Isla Mujeres was Spanish colonial, painted in several shades of pink, its balconied rooms organised around a central courtyard where a fountain played among the ferns and palm trees, and ceramic swans and frogs were placed on low pink brick walls. The inside walls, however, were thin. In the still of the night, the moon wreathed in a gauze shawl of light lifting cloud, Angelica woke to hear the English couple next door begin to fight.

‘For the last twenty years,’ the woman sobbed, ‘I’ve protected you. Twenty years of my life wasted, protecting you. And what have I got to show for it? What? What?’

There was a long silence broken only by the dreadful weeping. Then the man said, slowly, defensively:
‘But we only lived there because you wanted to. I could have done a lot more with my career if we’d lived somewhere else, a bigger city. We only lived in that backwater because you chose it, you said you wanted it so I agreed. It wasn’t my first choice. It wasn’t good for my career.’

‘Oh!’ screamed the woman. ‘Oh! How can you say such a thing! My God, my God, my God!’

Her lamentations sounded as if they were set to go on for some time. Angelica crept out of bed and rummaged in her backpack till she found her earplugs.

‘Everybody thinks you’re too full-on, you know,’ the woman was now informing her partner. ‘I have to make excuses for you and nobody wants to come to dinner anymore because you hog all the conversation and never let anybody else have an opinion.’

She blew her nose.

‘Wait a minute,’ the man snapped to attention, on full alert.

‘Who is everybody?’ he demanded. ‘Who is nobody? Tell me. You tell me right now the names of these people who won’t come to dinner anymore.’

‘Thank God,’ Angelica thought, settling herself back in her bed with plugged ears, ‘thank God I’m not with somebody. That awful intimate entanglement of mutual blame. Is it ever worth it?’

Julia snored gently in the other bed. She never heard anything once she’d gone to sleep.

It probably was worth it, Angelica thought, thumping her pillows. Mexican pillows were lumpy and hard. Depending on what day you dragged it all out to have another look at it you might think it was worth it. That couple next door might be very happy most of the time. Though their difficulties sounded rather entrenched. Angelica saw them in a café the next morning where she’d gone to take coffee alone while Julia did her email. Both were reading newspapers and they resolutely ignored each other. What despair must you feel after travelling half way round the world only to find the same old arguments and resentments travelling with you? And how could you enjoy anything when you had to intimately face someone every day and night who carried all those long-standing grievances against you, without any of the familiar buffers to protect you?

It was the time of the World Cup. In every hotel foyer, every café, every restaurant, a television played and replayed the matches. Julia and Angelica sat in a small bar hung
with Mexican flags and watched the Italians steal victory from the Australian team. The Mexicans were sympathetic, and gave them beer and coffee for free. It wasn’t fair, they said, or at least, Julia thought that’s what they said.

In the evenings they walked to the sea front where they found restaurants with thatched roofs roughly constructed in the sand. These were temporary shelters: nobody bothered much because the tropical storms and hurricanes took them out every season and they had to be rebuilt. It was a life lived in the moment. The women sat at plastic tables in plastic chairs under the ubiquitous Coca-Cola umbrellas; their feet in the cool sand, eating fish caught that morning in the glassy waters. The fishing boats were pulled up in front of the restaurants; long wooden boats painted in primary colours weathered to pastels, named after significant women in the fishermen’s’ lives. Sometimes the men still sat around their boats, going over the events of their day, cooking their own fish suppers on makeshift barbecues and drinking beer. One night Julia got into a conversation of sorts with one who spoke a little English and her knowledge of the sea and fishing kept them engaged for a long time. It was hot all through the night; their fish came with rice and chopped cabbage, the cervezas were cold and dripping from the ice chests, with slivers of lime lodged halfway down their long necks.

* * *

It took nineteen hours to travel from the Caribbean coast to San Cristóbal de las Casas. Angelica had been in Cancun for three months. It was a visit she’d never expected to make so soon, but she had grandchildren to meet, as well as another world to visit on this planet, before she left it for the next.

* * *

The nature of the Indolent Lymphoma is as one would expect. It can lie low for some years apparently doing nothing at all, then something will show up, a lump in the groin, a strange mutation in the blood and it’ll be on the move. The worst part is by the time it shows up it might have done anything, gone anywhere, into soft organs causing tiny but insidious damages. It’s secretive, as well as indolent.
It’s not an aggressive lymphoma, one that will carry you off in a matter of months. From that perspective Angelica was lucky, but she didn’t feel lucky in that dark time before the relief of the stuff everything phase. She was feeling something, though, at long last. She was feeling almost unrelenting fear.

Angelica realised that she had no real control over her body. It could and would do as it pleased. She had no idea what symptom would show up next or what that symptom would signify. This is a terrifying situation to adapt to. Being unable to continue avoiding a reality you’ve ignored or denied is a disturbing experience, granting a glimpse into an abyss that most of us would prefer to do without. The body that up till now had done everything Angelica had expected it would do, even winning one battle with cancer and returning to normality afterwards, had suddenly become completely anarchic. Angelica has still to learn to adapt to such anarchy. It’s like living her life permanently on a Cancun bus, she thinks. It won’t go where she expects it to go, where she paid to go, it’ll go where it likes and there’s nothing she can do about it. This is deeply unacceptable. Who can make a life in these circumstances?

This interesting linking of life with order. It isn’t as if Angelica has ever had what could be considered an orderly life. It hasn’t followed usual or predictable patterns. It’s not as if she’s suddenly been tossed out of a calm and orderly existence into chaos. But when she considers these things she realises that she has always made herself the promise of order. One day, next year, next month she will have everything under control and her life will become orderly, and then it will be real. This has been an unexamined and unrecognised confluence: order and real-ness. Until she achieves order she can only consider herself as playing at life, not seriously living it.

Well, forget that ambition, Angelica. Order has never been so far away. But life certainly feels more real than it has ever felt before, in spite of the sudden descent into chaos.

* * *

On the road to San Cristobal, the bus driver played Japanese martial arts videos dubbed in Spanish throughout much of the night. There was no way of escaping this alarming cultural collision. Earplugs just didn’t cut it. The man across the aisle snored and farted. Angelica was already missing the family in Cancun. From the videos she picked up a
little more Spanish to add to her paltry store. ‘Por amor de Dios!’ seemed useful in the circumstances.

In the middle of the night they stopped at a small village where a couple of streetlights partially illuminated the parking area round the roadhouse. Wisps of humid fog wavered round the lights; the women peeled off the sweaters they’d worn on the bus and breathed in the clammy air. Skinny and defeated Mexican dogs hung about the café doors. Dogs in Mexico tugged at Angelica’s Western heartstrings. They were lethargic, covered in sores and scabs, scavenging for scraps around the market stalls where stallholders who hated them kicked them hard. That was their life. Dependent on humans who didn’t want them. Angelica caught her breath at this phrase.

Angelica used to talk to the dogs. She missed the hound she’d left behind at home. ‘Hola, Mexican dogs,’ she’d greet them. ‘Buenos Dias, Mexican dog,’ she’d say.

Then one afternoon a pack of them, unused to being addressed with anything other than Spanish oaths, fell in love with her gentle voice and followed her through the streets of San Cristobal de Las Casas.

‘Go home,’ she ordered them but they took no notice.

‘Vaya con Dios, Mexican dogs!’ she urged them. They stared at her with their runny yellow eyes.

‘Adios, Mexican dogs!’ she tried.

‘Vamoos! Mexican dogs!’ she roared.

They scratched their fleas and considered their options. They decided to follow her. Angelica arrived at the posada with six dogs trailing behind, enough to pull a sled if they were in Alaska, she thought, and all the dogs clearly nurturing some hope of beginning a new life.

‘For God’s sake!’ Julia exclaimed when she spotted the entourage straggling up the cobbled street from where she sat on the verandah, peacefully, writing up her journal and drinking coffee.

‘Por amor de Dios!’ shrieked Omar, the hostel manager, who was weeding the rose garden beside the front door.

Angelica understood his cry from what she’d learnt on the bus trip, but he continued in such rapid Spanish that she had no hope of understanding anything more.
'Senora, these dogs!' he switched to English and flung his arms in the air. ‘What am I to do with them? You must not bring dogs home to the posada!’

‘I didn’t bring them, Omar, they followed me.’

The distinction left him unimpressed. He rolled his coffee-coloured eyes at her. He closed and barred the thick wooden doors against the miserable animals with a dramatic flourish.

‘Australians!’ he muttered, as if cursing.

Neither Angelica nor Julia had any idea what he meant by that.

When she looked out later, the dogs were gone. After that she stopped talking to the Mexican dogs and confined herself to silent observation of them. Omar came from Chihuahua he told them. Dogs knew their place in Chihuahua, he said.

‘In ladies handbags?’ Julia laughed.

Omar was young and very beautiful, his eyes liquid with unspoken sorrows, and short black hair already thinning on top. He often gazed into the middle distance as if his heart’s desire was out there somewhere and would always be unreachable. He wore woolly, dark-coloured sweaters that looked handmade. Angelica imagined a mother in a village in Chihuahua knitting them for him in the cold winters, then trekking to the little post office to send them to her beloved son in far away Chiapas. The sweaters clung to his round belly and were generally too short for him, as if they’d shrunk in the wash. When he raised his arms they rode up and revealed a belly button pierced with a thin gold ring. He taught Angelica to make proper guacamole and huevos rancheros, and thoughtfully moved them into a more comfortable room.

The posada had a central courtyard with handbasins and mirrors on one of its whitewashed walls for travellers who stayed in dormitories rather than rooms with their own facilities. Omar washed and shaved and brushed his teeth at the courtyard basins every morning. He then fed the resident cat. Loneliness hung around him like a nimbus.

‘Life in Mexico is not easy for a gay man,’ he said, as they all took coffee together on the verandah one afternoon. ‘I am very lonely, senoras. Maybe I come to Australia? Maybe it is easier there for gay men?’

Julia wrote out her e-mail address, and promised to do what she could to help, but he never got in touch.
They limped down the steps of the overnight bus one by one like reprieved hostages, and staggered into the neon-lit restaurant. They were only a few gringos. Most of the passengers were Mexican men. There was a long queue for the toilets. The food in its heated containers looked old. Mexican passengers bought it; the gringos ate chocolate and chips. Julia and Angelica made up their tortillas and bananas. This was one of their staples while on the road in Mexico. Bananas are renowned for their bowel-binding qualities. Julia tried to work out which state they were in. Campeche? Tabasco? They’d been stopped several times by federales who boarded their bus and looked them over, searching for ‘illegals’ escaping Guatemala and Honduras and passing through Mexico to a new life in the US. But these checkpoints seemed random, having little to do with state borders.

They were relieved to have escaped Cancun, they agreed as they ate their snacks, sitting on a narrow bench under a high light as if they were on exercise release in a prison yard. Dogs nosed the earth round their feet for crumbs. The heat and humidity, the overweight tourists whose sun-seared flesh was barely contained by short shorts and halter-tops: all behind them. McDonalds and Hungry Jacks, Senor Frog and the Outback Steakhouse that had kangaroos and possums and koalas stencilled on its walls, and advertised ‘Ayers Rock Specials’ with Fosters for lunch. They’d happily bid Adios to the Cancun Cantina that offered dinner patrons a free photograph with the resident jaguar, and warned potential intruders not to climb over the walls as the animal was let loose at night. In their shared opinion, the world was becoming altogether too much of a global village dominated by Western demands.

* * *

Back in Cancun, The Chef and his family lived in an apartment in the Zona Hoteleria that backed onto a saltwater lagoon rich with life. Alligators lurked under the dock and glorious fishes swam through the mangroves. Every morning a Mexican soldier from the army barracks next door swam in the lagoon for twenty minutes. Every morning the alligators ignored him. Shortly after dawn most days Lila slipped into bed with Angelica and whispered:

‘Grandma, can we go to the fagoon and feed the fishes?’
They sat on the dock and cast their breadcrumbs out across the water and watched as the blue and pink iridescent princess fish fought with the black and gold striped angels for their crumbs. The alligators cruised over to mangroves that were largely bereft of foliage since the hurricane. This created an agent-orange-like desolation and caused an unfortunate absence of birds. The lagoon life had otherwise made a quick recovery, even the alligators that at one point found themselves swimming in the centre of the city as the lagoon broke its banks under pressure from the sea’s great storm surges. Angelica held her grandchildren firmly by the hand as they walked barefoot along the sun-faded wooden dock. This grandmother role was new to her. She had not anticipated the grip they would immediately exert on her heart. Love in yet another form. Is there no end to love’s manifestations?

They ate dinner on Sundays, The Chef’s day off, on the edge of the emerald lagoon under the thatched roof of the palapa. There was always a breeze in the late afternoon. The Chef prepared arachera steaks on the barbecue while they ate cerviche with tiny shrimp, and drank Coronas with slices of lime. Lila and Jean-Paul raced one another on their little bikes round the swimming pool while Josephine and Angelica kept an anxious eye out for them. After dinner they’d all sit on the dock and watch the flaming pink and orange Caribbean sun sink behind the mangroves on its way back to the other side of the world. That lurid sunset never looked real. Its colour was like the electric pink of the neon signs that hang outside strip clubs in Sydney’s Kings Cross. It was the colour of the sunsets that came with the Gulf War when oilfields burned and the fires’ aftermath manifested half a world away each evening, reminding everyone of bloodshed and conflict in the desert.

Jean-Paul would squirm in her lap, too tired to make himself comfortable, and soaking wet from the pool. That little body, his soft skin, his fingers poking at her cheeks, her eyes.

‘Ganga,’ he’d say, as if in wonderment. ‘Ganga.’

Lila would fling herself into her father’s arms and Josephine stretched herself out in the striped hammock that was hung between two coconut palms on the tiny silver beach between the palapa and the lagoon, for a bit of peace and quiet. A woman in one of the upstairs apartments often played Andrea Bocelli in the evenings, singing Spanish love songs in a voice that melted all resistance as it flowed out of the window into the dusky Caribbean evening. It was perfect.
'Besame, besame mucho…’ he sang, and ‘Somos Novios’, and ‘Cuando her Enamoro’, and the lonely heart fully knew its loneliness, and longed for love.

The woman, Alexandria, was the star of a long-running Mexican soap opera, of the kind Angelica often heard blaring from miniature televisions tucked behind the counter in cramped local shops downtown, or on a shelf at the moneychanger’s. Alexandria had earned considerable fame in this role. Her hair was long and dyed blonde; she was slim and shapely in her bikini and looked more Norte Americano than Mexican. The Cancun apartment was her weekender and holiday place, her escape from Mexico City, two hours away by plane. Her boyfriend was Argentinean with shoulder-length black hair that he arrogantly tossed back from his brow, and an outrageously flirtatious manner. He kissed Angelica and Josephine’s hands when he greeted them, and told them how beautiful they looked, even when they were bedraggled from the pool and red-eyed with chlorine. Such was his charm, and the romantic atmosphere of the Caribbean, that they believed him and were flattered. Very early one morning he was forcibly removed from the apartment by a group of federales. The Chef and his family watched from their windows, woken by his shouts and Alexandria’s screams and the barked commands of the police as they marched him past the swimming pool and through the high wrought-iron gates that provided security for the apartments.

For several days Alexandria was seen pacing the gardens in the company of friends, sobbing and chain-smoking, her hair awry, and wearing track pants. Gossip alleged drugs, but nobody knew for sure. He had been seen, it was rumoured, leaving a luxurious yacht tied up to the dock in the middle of the night in the company of gold-draped Colombian ruffians in Armani shirts, carrying large, soft parcels. After that incident, Alexandria stopped playing Andrea Bocelli at dusk, and eventually disappeared permanently to Mexico City where her soapie was filmed.

* * *

Early in June Angelica’s estranged mother unexpectedly died. Julia had not yet arrived in Mexico and Angelica was still with The Chef. To her surprise, and if truth be told, alarm, she immediately wanted Julia’s presence. Angelica was unused to this sensation: depending on people?
Angelica’s younger sister Celeste rang her in Cancun and told her of their mother’s death. The news threw Angelica into unwelcome emotional turmoil: perhaps it’s true that the death of a mother we’ve had fraught relations with is always highly problematic and harder, like a bone-deep infection, to excise and cleanse. They hadn’t even agreed to differ, Angelica thought, at least that would have been a peace move of sorts though whether either of them were capable of the acceptance required to genuinely agree to differ was contestable.

You are, she had once written to her mother, only biologically my mother. You have never cared for me or about me. When I was small you did nothing to protect me. I would rather die than let my children suffer as you allowed me to. What is wrong with you? What is wrong with you? Your own childhood was safer than the one you gave me. Surely that can’t be the proper progression. Surely we are all meant to do better, even a little bit better, than our own parents? Surely we can’t get away with doing worse? How do you get away with doing worse? Tell me that. Tell me that if you can, Mother.’

Of the three daughters Celeste was closest to their mother. Edwina, the youngest, had also been disowned from time to time, but had been reinstated before their mother’s death. Celeste was the only daughter who’d managed to completely escape being disenfranchised, because, the others claimed, she was a crawler. Both Edwina and Angelica were far too old to use such language, but they did so nevertheless. In families, Angelica observed, there was often a time warp that fully grown adults unconsciously entered each time they met, and in which they automatically reactivated the attitudes, grievances and language of their younger selves. An alternative to this was tight-lipped repression in which nobody made any real connection with anybody else and went home feeling headachy and sick and possibly drunk. Somewhere in between were families who just got on with it, whatever their ‘it’ was.

Celeste had everything invested in being the family’s good child, Edwina theorised, and gave up the chance of a life of her own to secure the role. It was true that she devoted herself extensively to her mother’s needs and demands. The story was that when one of Celeste’s partners had tired of always being second or third on her list of priorities a challenge had been issued.

‘It’s me or your mother.’

‘It’s my mother then,’ Celeste allegedly replied.
It was Celeste who had managed to avoid their mother’s fearful rages. These tirades would go on for hours, litanies of accusation and wrongdoing and neglect that left Edwina and Angelica trembling as if they’d been psychically battered and as a consequence, were now uncertain of who they were and where they stood in the world. Their onset remained unpredictable, making them shocking. Like random violence from a stranger in the street can make us forever fearful of what lies in wait for us in the public world, their mother’s rages rendered their domestic environment permanently unstable and thoroughly unsafe. When in their mother’s company the girls maintained a state of heightened alert, ready to defend themselves in any way they could. They fought back, while Celeste, though witness to such outbursts, was rarely their target. This was because she was placatory, the others decided, she cajoled and mollified while they challenged and defended themselves. Celeste must have always been at the ready to play her role just as much as we were, Angelica thought. Being a crawler didn’t make things any easier for her and we despised her for it into the bargain. All the girls felt themselves to be entirely un-mothered, called upon to act as mother to one another and to their mother, well before their due time.

Edwina claimed these maternal rages had left her self-esteem in such tatters that for many years she’d barely managed to function. She thought herself unworthy of life, she said, let alone of things like a home and a good job and people to love her. Angelica knew exactly what she meant. After all, she said to Edwina when they were grown, if your mother despises you why would you expect anybody else to think you’re worth caring about? It’s your mother who sets the tone.

Edwina had a fierce innate pride that somehow managed to survive her childhood; a shining sense of herself as real that always reasserted itself after blows that would flatten forever a less hardy soul. Outwardly, she really appeared to be fearless, Angelica thought, powerful, even though she says she’s terrified inside.

‘You really don’t give a stuff what anybody thinks about you, do you?’ Angelica asked her one day after their mother died and they were talking on the phone.

‘Why would I? After what she did to me what can anybody else do? It’s all small fry compared to her.’

Celeste did not escape maternal criticism. But their mother’s need for Celeste as comforter and ally was so great that she curbed her raging, proving to Angelica and
Edwina that their mother did have a choice in the matter. She wasn’t insane, or at the mercy of uncontrollable furies, as Celeste would have them believe.

From Celeste’s point of view their mother was the victim of their violent father, and Angelica had no argument with that. But it seemed to both her and Edwina that Celeste allowed their mother freedom from responsibility of all kinds because of her victim status, despite the fact that their father died when they were both very small, releasing everybody from his tyranny. Neither Edwina nor Celeste had any memory of their father’s nature, though Angelica, in her teenage years when he died, remembered far too much. Could this be why their mother hated her the most? Thirty years later Celeste was still excusing their mother’s behaviour on the grounds of her dead husband’s brutality.

‘She’s got battered wife syndrome,’ Celeste indignantly reminded them. ‘She had a terrible time. Poor Mum, why can’t you understand that and make things easier for her?’

This was usually said to Edwina, less frequently to Angelica who wouldn’t stand for it. These two saw instead a manipulative cunning in their mother as she played them off against each other, and an infantile insistence that she be considered before anybody else. Their mother, Angelica considered, demonstrated the characteristics typical of the tyrant, domestic or political: she had the compulsion to possessive domination and totalitarian control of her household that was not entirely dissimilar from those of her dead husband. How many times, Angelica wondered, had her mother gone through Angelica’s drawers and private things because, she claimed, she had the right to know what her daughter was up to? When she was twenty-one, Angelica recalled, her mother found a shoebox of letters from Angelica’s first love that she’d hidden under her bed in her own apartment. Her mother stole them away and burned them all, saying when she was confronted that they were disgusting, and she didn’t approve of the writer, who clearly wasn’t good enough for Angelica.

‘I’m only doing what’s best for you,’ she’d said.

The younger girls learned from this event to become even more duplicitous than they already were in the interests of their psychic survival. Power always breeds resistance. To this day, as Angelica untangles herself from her mother (a process that seems to be unending) and gains a broader perspective on family behaviours, she becomes more, not less, shocked by the things her mother did. As if for much of her life these things
had seemed normal for lack of any measuring stick. She welcomes this sense of shock and disbelief as a sign of health: the fact that she can be shocked seems to confirm that she has left these things well behind her and grown into the person who now knows them to be utterly unacceptable. This growth puts a necessary distance between her and her childhood: the introjected parents finally spat out, her life becomes at last her very own.

Celeste’s attitude to their mother was particularly galling for Angelica, for she too had suffered unspeakably at her stepfather’s hands when her sisters were too small to know about these things. So why, Angelica wondered but never asked, didn’t Celeste grant her victim status as well? What was Celeste’s game? In the hierarchy of family suffering (always a slippery and dangerous thing to determine but Angelica felt driven to measurements from time to time), their mother’s suffering came nowhere near Angelica’s. Mother was an adult, Angelica a little child at everyone’s mercy who somebody was supposed to protect.

On the rare occasions the adult Angelica attempted to say these things to Celeste, she had the clear impression that Celeste literally switched off. Her eyes glazed over, she didn’t respond, she wouldn’t hear. Celeste would not have her version of their family story contested. Angelica eventually hardened and turned her face away. It isn’t uncommon for siblings to have wildly differing experiences of parents, she accepted that, but it was surely incumbent on them to be open to everyone’s subjective account.

‘It was different for me,’ she wanted to be able to say to Celeste. ‘You weren’t even born when these things were going on. I want you to acknowledge that it was different for me. Just acknowledge it, Celeste. That’s all you have to do.’

Instead of this she told her sister to fuck off.

Celeste and Edwina had inherited their mother’s dark hair and blue-black eyes. They were both very thin. Edwina usually wore ripped jeans and old T-shirts and wound her heavy hair in an untidy chignon low on the back of her head. Both Celeste and Edwina moved with a natural grace, comfortable in their bodies. Edwina was the tallest. Celeste liked to dress in their mother’s designer cast-offs. She looked very striking in these late 1960s and 70s classic frocks and jackets; her shoulder-length hair brushed back off her forehead. It occurred to Angelica that the 1970s was their mother’s best decade. She’d made a moneyed marriage and could have just about anything; she travelled the world and lived in a mansion, but this was also the period towards the middle of which she
seriously took to drink. Celeste looked a lot like their mother as she was through those years; it was as if she was reproducing them for her, and their mother kept giving Celeste the old designer clothes and shoes and hats and urging her to wear them.

‘When’s she supposed to wear them?’ Edwina darkly sneered behind their backs. ‘When she takes Mum to get her feet done?’

For as long as anyone could remember, Celeste and Edwina had fought with each other, stolen one another’s clothes and boyfriends, and bad-mouthed one another throughout their communities. In the small country town in Victoria where they’d lived for more than twenty years, their hostilities were legendary. Anyone would tell you about the time Celeste ran for the local council and Edwina handed out leaflets at the polling booth telling everybody why they shouldn’t vote for her. She’d earlier distributed pamphlets to all the letterboxes in town that listed her sister’s personal and familial failings, and the reasons why she would be hopeless and untrustworthy in local government. Celeste somehow overcame this mortification by an act of will, and by assuring everyone that Edwina was mentally ill, but she was not elected. These onslaughts seemed to Angelica to be excessive even for intense sibling rivalry, but in the context of their family history they made perfect sense. Nobody ever held back any ugly feeling or missed an opportunity to act it out.

Other warring sisters might have chosen to live in different parts of the country, or even the world, but Edwina and Celeste remained committed to their pursuit of one another and of their mutual grievances. Only Angelica got away. Perhaps her unknown father’s genes gifted her with the determination to separate herself that the others seemed to lack. Perhaps the others could imagine no life other than the one they’d always known. Perhaps they were bound together by what passed for love in that family. It was for them, as for Angelica, the only family they had.

Celeste rang Angelica in Cancun again and said:

‘I’m ringing to invite you to Mum’s funeral.’

‘Invite me?’ Angelica said. There was a threat in her voice that Celeste initially failed to pick up on.

‘You mean invite me like I’m some kind of guest?’ Angelica went on. ‘I’m her daughter, just as much as you are. You don’t invite me to my own mother’s funeral.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that,’ Celeste said hurriedly.
‘Then what did you mean? *Invite is invite.* Like you’re hosting something. Like I don’t actually *belong* in the situation as much as you do.’

‘Why do you always have to pick everything everybody says apart?’ Celeste demanded, sounding pained and affronted, as a result of having decided very quickly that attack really is the best form of defence.

‘Because I’m a trained deconstructionist,’ Angelica retorted, and hung up the phone.

Angelica didn’t go to the funeral. She didn’t have the money to return to Australia for a few days then go back to Mexico, though Julia would have lent it to her. It wasn’t a question of money: she wasn’t anywhere near done in Mexico. She knew if she went back she’d become embroiled with her sisters, and whatever else came up in Australia, or get sick again, and she’d probably never get back to Mexico, or at least, not for a long time. Her mother hadn’t wanted her in life, she thought, so she was hardly likely to have wanted her in death.

‘Stay with us,’ The Chef told his mother, ‘we want you,’ and he gave her a big hug.

Since marrying and becoming a father The Chef had become much more physically affectionate towards her, and they’d patched up some differences they’d had about his childhood. She’d been emotionally removed from her children in important ways, while being simultaneously volatile and passionately loving. Partly, she thought, as a consequence of knowing too well her own neediness and wanting at all costs to protect them from it, the messages she’d conveyed were confused and confusing. She’d felt compelled to protect them from the secrets of her own childhood: this meant her private self stayed heavily veiled as if in perpetual mourning: her children’s gaze could not penetrate her concealments. They rightly sensed exclusion, hidden danger, the dark aura of unspeakable events whether past, present, or still to come they could not know for certain.

‘You are a loner!’ The Chef had shouted at her once in his youth, ‘you don’t need anybody!’

This bitter accusation had told her at once, shockingly, how she’d excluded him, how badly she’d done by him because her truth was that she would die for them, and somehow she had utterly failed to convey this.

The teeth of children, Angelica thought bitterly, are always set on edge by their parents’ consumption of sour grapes.
’Grandma never cared about any of us, never a birthday card, nothing,’ The Chef was saying. ‘Why would you bother going all that way for her, Mum?’

That was what Angelica wanted to hear. She rang Celeste and told her she wouldn’t be coming home.

‘I thought you’d decide that,’ Celeste said.

Angelica thought she detected relief in her sister’s voice, but decided not to pursue it. Phone calls from Mexico were unreliable and disastrously expensive. The man who owned Mexico’s telecommunications system was richer than the man who owned Microsoft.

So Angelica went to the Catholic Church near the apartment in Cancun one Friday evening. Although they hadn’t been on speaking terms, she felt she couldn’t let the feud with her mother perpetuate itself beyond the grave. There was something very wrong in that, she felt. It was time to be big enough to transcend human differences, to let the past go in peace.

Angelica lit a candle that she added to the hundreds already burning romantically in the blue dusk. The church was new. Cancun is definitely post-colonial in its architecture. Post hurricane, actually. The church had no walls and the balmy evening breezes from the lagoon stirred the candle flames. The Chef went with her. He spoke perfect Spanish and explained their circumstances to the white-robed priest. Rich red and gold embroidery decorated the front of the priest’s white robe. It shone impressively in the candlelight. Banks of yellow and white chrysanthemums, trucked in from cooler regions, filled the altar and lined its approaches in large brass urns. A statue of the Blessed Virgin was dressed in a real blue robe that shone like silk. They were in good hands, Angelica thought. The priest offered sympathy and a spot on the list of Prayers for the Dead. They weren’t Christians, let alone Catholics, but Angelica was grateful for the opportunity to formalise things. If she’d been in Thailand, she thought, she might have gone to a wat, burned incense, bought a lotus flower, paid for a white dove to be released from its bamboo cage…

Perhaps not.

Later Angelica heard that Edwina had their mother cremated against Celeste’s wishes. Celeste rang up Julia in Northern New South Wales and told her all about it and Julia told Angelica when she met her later in Cancun. Celeste was distraught, Julia said. Somehow Edwina got hold of all the papers she needed and just went ahead and
organised everything without consulting anyone. Celeste was blind with rage and grief, and humiliation at having everything taken out of her hands. Who could blame her? Mother’s right-hand girl for all those years and at the end, she’s trumped by her baby sister. Angelica was both appalled and filled with guilty amusement when she heard the story. Edwina had finally taken over. They had a service for their mother at the local Anglican Church and they all sang:

There is a green hill far away
Without a city wall
Where the dear Lord was crucified
He died to save us all.

Oh dearly, dearly has he loved,
And they must love him too
And trust in his redeeming love
And try his work to do. Amen.

Which was their mother’s favourite hymn. Celeste said to Julia that she and Edwina had done their best to ignore each other throughout the service, which can’t have been easy. All in all Angelica felt she’d made the right decision going with the Cancun option.

* * *

On the bus journey from Cancun to San Cristobal with Julia, Angelica discovered that Mexican highway traffic control is conducted almost entirely by the extravagant use of *topes*. Every few miles one of these speed humps jolted you out of whatever sleep you might have snatched in between videos. Julia and she always tried to get a seat near the driver. This meant they weren’t disturbed by the flow of foot traffic to the toilets. It also meant they were less likely to be robbed while they slept. Several people had warned them about this possibility that led to tedious and unplanned stays in Mexico City without any money while new passports were issued and relatives wired cash from home. Nothing like that ever happened to them. They never expected it would. The
only bother Angelica ever had was once on the metro in Mexico City, travelling from Bellas Artes to Hildalgo which is a very short trip. She had been unable to get into any of the carriages reserved for Mujeres et Ninos and had to travel with the men. Halfway to Hildalgo her breasts were fondled by a small man with bad breath. She tried to turn her back but the carriage was too crowded so she covered her breasts with her free arm, (the other was hanging from a strap), and the man turned away.

Such a thing can happen anywhere. During her pre-trip research she read:

Many people are injured having fun in Mexico
Air pollution in Mexico City is severe.

And

Failure to pay hotel bills or pay for other services rendered is considered fraud under Mexican Law.

She took regard of all this, though it didn’t seem like advice that was necessarily Mexico specific, or particularly useful.

The bus ride to San Cristobal seemed interminable. Angelica woke at dawn from a light doze, her mouth full of moss, her eyes raw and red with tiredness. For the next five hours they lurched from side to side as the bus navigated its way round tight curve after tight curve, lurching over the topes, climbing ever higher through dark green jungle, passing the occasional Zapatista village where the corn crop was laid out in orderly rows and the goats looked clean and well fed and the children wore school uniforms and stared unsmiling, as the bus passed them by the side of the road on their way to school.

* * *

Angelica had gone to visit her mother at her home in country Victoria before she left for Mexico. Julia went with her. When they arrived, Celeste, who lived with her partner Alan near the same town as their mother, and whom Angelica and Julia visited first, told her that their mother didn't want to see her. Celeste lived on a piece of lush partly cleared woodland through which flowed a healthy creek. Shady casuarinas and eucalypts rose towards the sky from the dense beds of bracken fern bordering the creek. Clear water sang over grey and brown rocks. There were large boulders spotted with lichen where lizards warmed themselves at midday. The scene reminded Angelica of
pictures of fairy bowers in childhood books. She fancied pixies and elves might be hiding in the thick tendrils of newly uncurling green ferns. There was a pool deep enough for swimming on hot days. Blue and red dragonflies hovered. Water bugs skimmed the pool’s tree-shadowed surfaces. Celeste’s property was bounded on one side by thickly forested mountains that cast deep shadows in the valleys during the heat of the afternoons and around whose peaks grey mists and bruised summer storm clouds congregated. It was not the kind of place where one would expect bad things to happen. The snakes stayed in the compost and minded their own business, tempting nobody to knowledge.

One of Celeste’s familial roles was as the bearer of bad news from their mother to Angelica. She conveyed this news in a cloyingly sympathetic manner, a specific tone reserved for the purpose that made Angelica angry and mistrustful.

*You poor thing, I don’t know why Mum’s being so horrible to you, I’ve tried to talk to her about it, but it’s no use. I’m so sorry, it must be awful for you.*

Was something like what Celeste would say while putting her arms round Angelica and looking deeply into her eyes in a manner that demanded a response. Angelica hated this contact: she experienced it as importunate. It was even worse when Celeste, in the grip of some extravagant sentiment, sometimes kissed Angelica on her lips. Celeste had never learned about boundaries, Angelica thought as she wriggled out of her sister’s embrace and wiped her lips with the back of her hand. She never bothered to hide this action: Celeste would only put it down to Angelica’s phobia about letting people into her space. It was, Angelica reflected, quite difficult to offend Celeste: by default she assumed problems always belonged to someone other than herself. She never gave offence: you took it, for mysterious reasons of your own that you ought to address.

For many years Angelica had been unable to decide whether Celeste was being disingenuous or if she really was upset about their mother’s implacable stance. Finally she decided it was both. She’d never had this out with Celeste. For some reason that she couldn’t fathom she’d just gone along with it and kept her aggrieved feelings to herself. After many family visits Angelica was felled by a poisonous headache that kept her in bed, petrified by the roiling dreams that overwhelmed her whenever she closed her eyes. When she finally emerged from these episodes she was as weak and bereft as a sick and motherless kitten.
Angelica was ten when Celeste was born and fourteen when baby Edwina made her appearance in the world. Their father wasn’t hers: they are half sisters. Angelica was more like a mother to the girls than a sister because of their age differences: the real sibling rivalry took place between the two of them, or so it seemed until they were all grown up.

Their mother succumbed to drink when the girls were still young and after Angelica had left home and married. Celeste took on maternal responsibility for Edwina, keeping her quiet so she wouldn’t annoy their mother, dressing her, tying her shoes, feeding her, getting them both to school. She told Angelica one dreadful story of how mother and daughters had flown to New York when she was twelve and Edwina eight. Their mother was drunk by the time they arrived and Celeste had to get them all through passport control and immigration at JFK and find a taxi to their hotel in New York City. Once there she checked them in, put their mother to bed and placated a bawling Edwina with room service hot dogs, coke and the television remote. Two little girls alone in a New York hotel room with their drunken mother. Angelica could hardly bear to think about it. Because of this early excessive conditioning in adult responsibilities, Celeste’s role as head of the family, peacemaker and diplomatic liaison between whoever was fighting had become set. It had become a role she fulfilled long after there was any need for it and, while it irritated everybody else, the one most harmed by it was Celeste herself as it continued to consume her life and freedom. The others found it difficult to bear in mind that their sister suffered as a result of her hopeless compulsion to force the family into some kind of order.

Angelica frequently wanted to smack Celeste hard when she delivered their mother’s rejections. She suspected her sister enjoyed the power of her role as a dark Hermes, that it further consolidated her position as their mother’s chosen one. The messenger sometimes deserves to be shot, Angelica thought. Celeste may have suffered the loss of her freedom, but she certainly gained some satisfactions, sad as Edwina claimed they were. You didn’t think like that when you were on the receiving end, Angelica knew from bitter experience. You didn’t think of your perpetrator’s position though it would be better all round if you could. Angelica always obligingly wept and railed, giving Celeste further opportunity to exercise the insidious power of her pity.

Oh don’t cry! Oh, I’m so sorry darling! I’ll talk to her again but I don’t think she’s going to change her mind. I don’t know why, Angelica. Honestly I don’t!
Angelica never did smack Celeste, or even confront her about what she might be doing. Why not? she wonders now. Why haven’t I ever told her what I really think? Because I’m silenced by the way she suffered? Because I keep thinking that it’s not her fault she’s like she is?

Edwina said Celeste did the same thing to her as well, but she took no notice, she said. Edwina’s revenge was to write quirky fables in which Celeste was always depicted as a sinister animal or an inanimate object that came to a bad end in a cruel trap or as landfill. She was currently compiling a book of these stories that were, Angelica thought, well-written and very funny.

Three lost and hostile daughters of a wrathful, embittered mother. Fatherless Angelica had up to this point in her adult life told nobody the full extent of her family’s grim history. She’d revealed much in her private psychological sessions with the one she called the Woman, but that was different from telling your friends. Would Julia abandon her if she found out what morally deficient stock Angelica came from? The Woman encouraged her to come out of the closet. But she’d put so much of her life’s energy into trying to be normal. What that meant was being as different from her family as possible, with ordinary events and ordinary encounters and no malevolent drama. Would her efforts prove to have been useless? You can take the girl out of the family but you can’t take the family out of the girl? In the end, does blood, like truth, win out? Surely everything at Celeste’s place would be reasonably normal. If there’d been any difficulties Celeste would have said so, wouldn’t she?

So Julia and Angelica travelled several thousand kilometres down the eastern seaboard to Victoria in their white Ford Courier truck, loaded with camping equipment and Fletcher, the black and white dog they’d rescued from Lismore pound, taking up the entire back seat. He’d grown far more than they’d expected when they’d taken home a cute forlorn puppy that liked to ride around the house draped on Angelica’s neck.

After they’d arrived and set up camp down the bottom of Celeste’s home paddock, drunk a cup of tea and heard a brief outline of the cataclysmic changes in Celeste’s personal circumstances (Angelica nearly died of horror: in front of Julia! Dear God, her worst fears could not have prepared her for this), Celeste took Angelica out for a walk and said, brusquely, Angelica thought:
‘I’m sorry to have to tell you this but Mum’s really sick and she doesn’t want to see you.’

Angelica’s heart did one of those sickening lurches, an involuntary reaction from her primitive brain. She began to scroll rapidly through her short-term memory for what she might have most recently done to cause offence. The offence might be very old and forgotten by her and cherished by her mother. She really had no hope of uncovering it. Angelica was middle-aged. It was tragic that she should react in such a way, she knew it, and it didn’t help her to know it. Angelica knew so much intellectually that was of no help to her at all when she was faced with the emotional reality of things.

‘Why?’ she asked finally, ‘Why doesn’t she want to see me?’

‘I don’t know,’ Celeste claimed and immediately lost interest. It was most unlike her to lose interest in this topic, Angelica thought. Celeste chewed at her fingernails. The ends of her fingers were torn and raw. Angelica had a sudden vivid memory of Celeste’s father. She felt sick.

Celeste was less forthcoming than usual about their mother because of being in the midst of a trying time, the details of which had been revealed in a torrent as soon as the women arrived. Angelica had hoped to initiate Julia slowly into her family’s ways of being in the world but given the circumstances, she could see that Celeste had had to make immediate explanations.

Now the two sisters were sitting miserably, each for their own separate reasons, on a hillock behind Celeste’s house in the late afternoon sun. It was January. They’d gone up there for a bit of privacy away from Alan who was going through something and, Celeste claimed, being excessively demanding as a result. He wouldn’t let her out of his sight, she complained. Alan had stood mournfully at the back door when they left, and watched as they climbed the hill: like a dog who’d expected to accompany people on a walk and been told to stay at home.

What Celeste had told them as soon as they arrived (her words cannoning into one another with the force of stampeding animals so that Angelica and Julia had to keep saying, ‘What? What? Slow down, I can’t understand you. What!’), was this:

Alan had recently returned from Bangkok where he’d gone without Celeste’s knowledge. He’d gone there specifically to have sexual reassignment surgery and had come home to Celeste with a female body.

‘What!’ Angelica had shouted. ‘What!’
‘Listen, Angelica, please!’ Celeste had begged. ‘Stop yelling what at me!’

‘What do you mean, he’s got a female body? Why? What are you talking about?’

All Celeste had known, she said, was that Alan enjoyed wearing her clothes (their mother’s clothes in fact) and was growing breasts as a consequence of taking oestrogen he’d bought off the net from a company in Brazil. Celeste thought that was all there was to it and that she could probably adjust herself to the situation. She loved Alan. She didn’t want to lose him over women’s clothes and breasts, she said. Angelica was immediately awed at the depth of her sister’s capacity for acceptance.

‘You mean you love him enough to live with this?’

‘I think so,’ Celeste told her. ‘But I haven’t had very long to think about it since he did the whole reassignment thing and it’s been full on since he came back. I don’t know, Angelica!’

‘But he didn’t tell you about it!’

‘I know,’ she said miserably, ‘that’s the worst part, the deceit and everything. Him shutting me out of something so important that has all these repercussions for me!’

The last time Angelica had visited with Celeste and Alan everything seemed heterosexually ordinary. Her sister seemed happy and in love. Alan had shown no sign of his true desires and was living out his usual gender role. His outward appearance gave no indication of his inner turmoil. Celeste (having chosen her mother over her last partner) had been alone for a long time before Alan. Angelica was glad she’d at last found someone to love. Got herself a life that didn’t revolve around their mother. Alan she found a little dogmatic politically, and he did talk an awful lot without listening much, but plenty of people do that. He was smart and had done lots of things in his fifty-five years. He’d left behind him a marriage, and teenage children who came to stay in the school holidays. An ordinary story it seemed on the surface of it.

‘I had to confront him about his breasts because he didn’t tell me about the oestrogen thing,’ Celeste had confided to her and Julia as they put up the tent together. Angelica wanted them to stop working: she couldn’t concentrate on putting up a tent when this fantastical story was being told to her. It was a story worthy of their total attention. She got them to sit down on campstools in the shade while Celeste continued with her account of things. They sat in a pretty grove of young wattles: they could hear the creek bubbling and the dog nosing about in the undergrowth hunting animal tracks. From the mud brick house on the top of the incline they heard the melodic sound of
someone playing a flute. The afternoon air was still and blue. They hadn’t yet visited
the house. Celeste had met them at the top of the drive and directed them straight to the
campsite. Angelica had thought that odd at the time.

‘He was shooting the oestrogen up round the back of the shed where I couldn’t see
him. I noticed he was changing shape one day in the shower. I asked him what was
happening.’

Celeste spoke urgently in a high loud voice as if she was on speed. Strung out,
Angelica thought. Hardly surprising.

‘Didn’t you have any idea?’ Julia wanted to know. ‘There must have been some
clue?’

‘I knew he liked wearing my clothes,’ she said, ‘but that’s nothing. I can deal with
that. But the oestrogen, I felt so deceived about that. I had no idea how far he wanted to
go. He never let on. I had no idea he wanted sexual reassignment. I thought it was just
clothes, you know?’

‘God,’ Angelica whispered. ‘It isn’t so much that he wanted the surgery, it’s that he
never told you, or talked to you about what he wanted. You’re his partner!’

‘Well, he did at one point. And I told him I wouldn’t stay with him because I didn’t
want to be partnered with a transgender woman. I fell in love with him because he was
a man, among other things, and now he said he wanted us to have a lesbian
relationship!’

Angelica and Julia stared at her, paralysed. Celeste glared back, hot-eyed, imploring
the two of them to validate her bewilderment and outrage. Her eyes were stained dark
with weariness as if she hadn’t slept for nights. As she spoke her hands flew about
wildly, tugging at her hair, pulling at her ears. When she wasn’t talking she chewed
savagely at her fingernails. She was thinner than Angelica had ever seen her.

‘Christ,’ Julia exhaled. She shook her head slowly. She’d never met Celeste before,
Angelica remembered, startled. It felt as if all three of them had years of intimate
knowledge of one another, so intense was the conversation.

‘It’s unbelievable, Celeste,’ Julia managed. ‘Unbelievable.’

Angelica hoped Julia wasn’t going to start asking questions. Julia was a great asker of
questions. Sometimes she drove Angelica mad with her curiosity and she’d yell at her
to stop bloody asking so many bloody questions will you? Angelica found that
underneath her shock she was selfishly worrying about Julia’s reaction to the situation.
She’d anticipated Julia being a bit taken aback when she met the family, and had done what she could to prepare both of them for it, but dear God, whoever could have anticipated this? You take your best friend home to meet your folks and before you’ve even pitched your tent there’s this?

‘So then he went to the city and saw psychiatrists and stayed with some trannies for a while,’ Celeste was saying. ‘Then he came back and said he’d decided not to have the surgery. So I took him back. Then he started to talk about it all again and I couldn’t stand it so I told him we needed some time apart and he went back to the city. Then the next thing I knew, he was ringing me from Bangkok and telling me he’d done it! He didn’t want to wait and have it done here because the psychiatrists told him he had to have a cooling-off period of two years or something. So he spent all his money and went to Bangkok and did it without saying anything to me!’

She glared at them some more. Her cheeks were scarlet with distress while the rest of her face was sickly pale. She looked consumptive, as if she was devouring herself from the inside with inflamed emotions while tearing with her teeth at her external flesh as well. This was how grief and shock had taken her, and fury at having such limited control over her own circumstances, Angelica thought.

‘You need some water,’ she said, getting up to find some. ‘You need to drink water, you’re too hot, do you have a temperature?’

She went to put her hand on Celeste’s forehead, but Celeste batted her away.

‘Don’t,’ she yelled. ‘I’m all right.’

Angelica sat down again. The situation seemed increasingly surreal, even comedic. The babbling brook, the dappled shade of the young wattles; the bloody mellifluous flute drifting down the hill on the tranquil afternoon air. It must be Alan playing the flute she realised. Nobody else was here. Celeste’s sense of righteous outrage and bafflement had caused her to tell her story with great expression and a few times during the telling Angelica had seen Julia almost laugh. There is a certain kind of high indignation that is endearingly funny and Celeste was in that state. Angelica had had to stifle barks of what threatened to be hysterical mirth. They could not laugh. They must not laugh. They only wanted to laugh because they didn’t know what else to do.

‘God, Celeste, I’m so sorry, love. How awful for you this all is, I’m so sorry.’ Angelica stood up again and put her arms round Celeste’s scrawny shoulders while Celeste clung to her and cried.
‘I don’t know what to say to you, love, I can’t believe he would have done this without telling you and then come back and want to live with you again. It’s incredible.’

She stroked her sister’s dark hair and noticed it had grey streaks that hadn’t been there the last time they’d met.

‘I know,’ Celeste howled, ‘and I can’t send him away because he hasn’t even healed yet, he has to stay somewhere until he’s recovered, nobody else wants him but I feel so used!’

‘Well, why wouldn’t you feel used, love. He should have talked to you, he shouldn’t have kept it secret like that then just sprung it on you when it was done. Oh, lovie.’

Angelica rocked the weeping Celeste. Julia dug in her pocket for tissues. They were silent for some time while Celeste sobbed and keened. There was no sign of the transmogrified Alan and the flute had fallen silent. The dog came over and nosed at Celeste, sensitive as always to human misery. She absently patted his head.

While Angelica felt great distress on her sister’s behalf and fully shared her outraged indignation against Alan, she also wanted to know more about her mother’s illness and the latest rejection Celeste had referred to only in passing. She didn’t feel she could ask under the circumstances, however. Celeste’s tragedy seemed to far outweigh her own, in every possible way, including its degree of remarkability. How did she get into this family, she wondered briefly. What mischievous and malevolent minor god saw to it that she, Angelica, Nanna’s little angel, would end up with this crowd? A mother who couldn’t just have a disagreement, but had to sever all connections. Two sisters who did everything they could to sabotage one another and now a boyfriend for Celeste who without proper warning announces himself as a girlfriend and expects things to go on with everybody as they always have. Except now they all had to treat him like a her. Whatever that meant. Whatever Alan thought that meant. Maybe he wouldn’t like the way women treat each other. Maybe it would be completely different from what he imagined it would be. Angelica looked up at the house. A figure appeared on the verandah, tall, slim with shoulder length hair, wearing a frilled brown skirt and a brown singlet top.

‘Is that…?’ She whispered to Celeste.
‘Yes. That’s him. Her. Don’t you hate those frilled skirts? They are so five minutes ago. His idea of femininity is weird. He looks like his mother, he dresses like a nineteen-fifties school teacher.’

Angelica made no reply. She didn’t point out that Celeste chose to dress like a nineteen-sixties rich girl, or that there was a bitchy competitive tone to her comments on Alan’s sartorial tastes that revealed yet another aspect of this complex situation. Clearly Celeste was no longer lending Alan their mother’s designer cast-offs.

‘You have to call him Amalie,’ Celeste said. ‘And don’t use the masculine pronouns.’

‘Okay,’ both women agreed. ‘We’ll try to remember.’

They didn’t dare look at each other. Julia got up and started searching for tent poles.

‘I put a note under my pillow every night before I met Alan,’ Celeste revealed, pulling herself out of Angelica’s arms and getting to her feet. ‘I was asking the universe to send me a man who could cook and who would love me back. And then I met him, he was here visiting somebody else I know, and I thought, Wow! You really do get what you want, you only have to believe you will! And it turned out we’d met before, years ago at university. But I wasn’t into men then. I didn’t even really remember him.’

Angelica’s eyes filled with tears as she listened to her sister’s recital of her gentle ambitions. How sad it sounded! How young and vulnerable Celeste seemed! How could these radical things have happened to her as a consequence of such a meek, girlish request? Why do the gods play such cruel tricks on gullible, vulnerable humans?

‘Who could have seen what was coming,’ Celeste wanted to know. ‘Who?’

‘Nobody,’ Angelica reassured her.

‘Nobody would think to factor sexual reassignment into the myriad possibilities of a new relationship,’ Julia said, dropping the tent poles and putting her arms round Celeste.

But after Celeste’s experience maybe we’ve all become too complacent, Angelica thought.

‘Do you know what else?’ Celeste gasped through her tears. ‘Do you know what else?’

‘No,’ Julia said anxiously, ‘what, what else?’

What else could there be, for God’s sake?
‘He’s taking all the femininity in our relationship. When we went to buy shoes he chose these blocky ugly things for me and strappy glamorous ones for him. He wants to be more of a girl than me!’ Celeste howled and shook.

Julia could think of nothing to say that might comfort Celeste for this loss. She could hardly get her head around it as a loss in the first place. It was the most extraordinary loss she’d ever heard of, but loss is loss, she thought. She held Celeste close and tried to comfort her, while it slowly became obvious to all of them that Alan’s seismic identity glitch had become Celeste’s as well: Celeste’s gender role was now also under siege. Julia wanted to say that there was probably enough femininity to go round, but that didn’t seem to be entirely the point.


Angelica had never given a great deal of thought to the matter of sexual reassignment or anything to do with it. It had fleetingly occurred to her once that it could be seen as an heroic action. After all, what an ordeal, even if you only considered it on the physical level. One that served a hugely important social function perhaps: that of throwing up to the rest of us the cultural rather than inherent nature of the gender categories that are generally so fiercely defended, restricting everybody’s freedom. Perhaps the trannies were like outriders, she mused, those lonely souls who lead the way in bringing a change for the better to society and pay a heavy price for radical acts that eventually will come to seem normal. The increasing acceptance of difference couldn’t do society any harm, she thought. But that big-picture position was not necessarily easily adapted to the personal, she conceded.

It appeared that their sister Edwina was steadfastly refusing to call Alan Amalie, or to use the female pronoun with regard to her. Celeste was furious with Edwina about this. She’d also discovered that after she’d rejected Alan all those years ago, he’d fallen in love with Edwina and nobody had told her. Edwina revealed this rather unkindly and quite unnecessarily when Celeste recently turned to her for comfort.

‘I always knew he was weird,’ Edwina had said. ‘That’s why I gave him the flick. I couldn’t believe it when he appeared again with you. I wasn’t going to say anything but you might as well know. He should have told you himself but that’s what I mean. Secretive. Well, you know that better than me now don’t you?’
Celeste couldn’t take any more blows, she said. She’d told Edwina to go away and leave her alone. But she was coming to dinner tonight, Celeste said because it was important that everybody deal with this situation and that they have everything out in the open. God, thought Angelica. This will be interesting.

‘It’s not the first time this has happened,’ Angelica told Julia in a quiet moment in the tent as they prepared themselves for the dinner at which they were to meet Amalie. Julia misunderstood and thought Angelica was referring to her family’s experience with sexual reassignment.

‘No, no I don’t mean that, I mean it isn’t the first time one of them’s got together with the other’s ex-partner.’

Angelica was aware of testing Julia with these bits of information. How would she react? How much more could she take before she decided Angelica wasn’t the kind of person she wanted for a friend?

‘Yeeew,’ Julia observed. ‘Nasty.’

‘Yeah. And that’s not all.’ Every revelation was a risk. Angelica decided to go for broke. The feeling as she did this was intense: skydiving for the first time.

‘Once our mother had an affair with somebody more around Celeste’s age than hers.’ Angelica spoke fast. Julia could hardly keep up.

‘She persuaded Celeste to pretend the man was her boyfriend so that he could come to family Sunday lunch with our mother’s husband every weekend. Can you believe that?’

Angelica looked into Julia’s eyes, searching for disbelief or disapproval, facing down her own shame and trepidation. But it wasn’t me who did these things, she reminded herself. I wasn’t even there. This reassurance did little to ease the shame. It’s her family she’s talking about. Your family reflects on you. People expect you to be the same, or at the very least, tainted. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree?

In Julia’s eyes she found only confusion.

‘Celeste and Edwina’s father, you mean?’

‘No, no,’ Angelica said urgently. ‘Our mother’s third husband, not one of our fathers.’

Julia stared at her. Angelica revealed these things as if she was telling a straightforward story about a regular insult or a period of estrangement for real or imagined offences, as is unhappily common in many families. It was all front, Julia
suspected. Angelica wasn’t as light-hearted about it as she made out. There was a third husband? To whom the mother had been unfaithful with her daughter’s acquiescence? Did anything go in that household?

‘I didn’t know there was a third husband,’ she said finally.

‘sorry, i thought i’d told you.’ angelica took a breath and launched into a staccato account of things, the quicker to get it over with.

‘It was a marriage of convenience. My mother married him for money. She told the girls she’d done it for them, for their future. I was married by then. His name was Mathias. He was very old. She met him when she went to work in his business. Poor Celeste thought the boyfriend was interested in her at first. She must have been devastated to lose out to our mother. I’ve never asked her about it. If I did, she’d deny it. I did the right thing getting away, didn’t I?’

Her gaze pleaded: have I gone too far? What she’d give for a family that created a respectable history, one that you could talk about easily over dinner. Instead, she either had to keep quiet or invent something. And she was sick of both kinds of lying. She wanted to say to Julia: these are the circumstances from which I come. They aren’t pretty, but they’re mine. That’d be a barbeque stopper. And she hadn’t even started, there was far more to tell.

‘Not much doubt about that,’ julia observed. ‘The only mystery is, why do you keep coming back?’

Angelica thought for a while. She wanted to be considered in her reply.

‘There’s probably many complex explanations,’ she told julia, ‘but the rock-bottom explanation, crazy as it is, unlikely as it is, is that I never stop hoping they’ll love me. And if I do stop hoping then there’ll be a great big empty place where the hope was and what am I going to fill it up with?’

‘Oh, Angelica,’ julia said, and put her arms around her.

‘And anyway, I didn’t know anything else,’ she said, pulling away in irritation. At times physical affection felt more intrusive than she could manage.

‘I was normalised to this stuff, julia. That’s what happens. You don’t realise how bizarre it is when you’re living in it, it’s only if you’re lucky enough to get out that you can see it’s really very odd that a daughter should make sacrifice for her mother like that and that a mother would expect her to. Celeste still doesn’t see that because she’s never got far enough out of it.’
As she observed her family through Julia’s eyes Angelica felt detached. They seemed to have very little to do with her. She could make them funny; she could laugh at them. She could even make Julia seem unsophisticated, with her blasé manner of speaking about them.

But the stories are also frighteningly bizarre, and so unpleasant when you look deeply into them that you don’t really want to let them in, because you don’t know how to let them in. As jokes? As tragedies? Angelica is unnervingly confused about the nature of her stories. She can place neither them nor herself.

You can’t stay silent about them either because they happened and nobody can live indefinitely in silence about their life. The worse it is, the greater the need to speak it. They are the bulk of Angelica’s family history, these stories, the sorry history of the only family Angelica’s got. And as history it’s as valid as anybody else’s. Angelica doesn’t come from nice people with nice problems. That’s the first cold fact she’s had to accept.

So now Julia’s in on some of it and the relief is enormous, though guilt and shame will surely follow, as is usual when the immediate confessional relief has worn off. If Angelica wants to be close to anyone she has to tell them at least some of these ugly things. Otherwise she’s back in the serial killer/spy state.

The first time Angelica told anyone other than the Woman some details of her history the man just stared at her.

‘I don’t understand people who do things like that,’ he said, and picked up a newspaper.

Telling the wrong people. It’s better not to tell anyone at all.

‘What are you,’ Edwina finally shouted at Celeste on the first night of their visit, as they sat round the table eating a gourmet dinner cooked, of course, by Amalie. Prior to dining, they’d all downed several whisky sours, which she created with a deft hand. Fat joints had been produced to stimulate their appetites. Amalie wore a green cotton skirt with frills, a sleeveless green top with lace around the neckline, dangling silver earrings and a matching necklace. Her feet were bare. Her breasts were small and shapely and the soft material of her top clung to their contours. She’d dyed her hair red. Angelica knew that for the rest of the evening she’d be hauling herself back from prurient speculations about what things might look like underneath Amalie’s green skirt.
‘Hi, Amalie,’ Angelica had said faintly when she walked into the kitchen. ‘How are you? I really like your name.’

Amalie looked at her. She had amber eyes, round and guileless as a doe’s. But tonight they were clouded with suspicion and wariness.

‘I’m tired,’ she said.

She looked as if she’d been weeping. She moved cautiously like a woman after childbirth and when she sat down to dinner she positioned herself gently on a rubber ring. She’d lost a great deal of weight since her surgical ordeal. Thin-faced and huge-eyed, she gazed at the others, a changeling in their midst carrying all the uncertainty and ambiguity of one who’d left behind a known order and started life afresh in a new one where she hadn’t been invited and her welcome was far from assured. She was the same and she was startlingly different. Nobody knew how to address this difference but how peculiar to behave as if it wasn’t worthy of comment!

Celeste had gone to a great deal of trouble. A silver candelabrum in the centre of the table held three lighted beeswax candles. Ivory and crimson rose petals floated in a shallow crystal bowl. More candles burned in the windows where they glowed against the red and blue stained glassed panels. She had moved the round table with its matching chairs into the middle of the room where it stood on a pale pink and green Chinese rug that Angelica had never seen before. Alan’s? The table was laid with a linen cloth and napkins. She’d set out the crystal wine and water glasses. The music stand had been moved into a corner and the flute lay on an armchair beside it. Soft country music played in the background, though as they’d walked up the hill to the house they’d heard Tristan and Isolde, the Leibestraum, colouring the softly shadowed valley with its vivid emotion. Somebody turned it off as they reached the kitchen door.

What must it feel like for Alan, no, Amalie, Angelica corrected herself, to be sitting down to dinner with four biological women? Was she hoping for their acceptance of her as one of their own? Angelica felt there was something important to be understood in this situation, but she couldn’t figure out what it was.

The energy and confidence formerly characteristic of Alan were nowhere evident in Amalie and a wraith-like being, watchful and grave, stared at them through her doe eyes like an injured and mistrustful child. The strain of not mentioning Alan’s change revealed itself in everybody’s uncomfortable silences and their furtive glances at her
and at one another. They drank down their whisky sours recklessly, hoping alcohol
would take the edge off the situation.

Red wine accompanied their meal. Celeste had rung Edwina earlier in the day and
warned her not to use the name Alan and not to use masculine pronouns or she
wouldn’t be welcome at dinner. Amalie was feeling particularly sensitive and
uncertain, Celeste told her, because this was the first time she’d seen them all since the
surgery. Celeste wanted Edwina to bear that in mind. Now at dinner Edwina was
clearly fed up with being told what she should do and how she should address people,
but Celeste wouldn’t let the matter go, correcting her officiously every time she said
‘Alan’, which she did a lot. Celeste was wearing a Pucci jacket of their mother’s in
pink, yellow and chocolate geometric swirls. Angelica wondered if this was an
additional irritation for Edwina, who, like herself, received no gifts of expensive
vintage garments.

‘What are you?’ Edwina shouted again, as Celeste continued to correct her about her
pronouns. She waved her fork for emphasis and leaned across the table, the better to
stick her face right in Celeste’s. ‘You think you’re the fucking language police?’

‘Shut up!’ yelled Celeste. ‘I’m just trying to make it work for everybody!’

And she glared at Edwina with an intensity that would have fried anybody else’s
bacon. But Edwina was used to it. Bad looks meant nothing to her. Angelica clasped
her hands anxiously in her lap. How would Julia take a fight, she wondered.

‘Yeah,’ Edwina drawled, relaxing back into her chair and gazing at Celeste with the
triumphtant expression of one who has watched her adversary play right into her hands.
A large loop of raven hair fell out of its chignon and down the back of her neck. She
had worn her usual torn jeans and a sweatshirt covered in dope burns, clearly not
considering the occasion worthy of any effort on her part. Wisps of damp hair lay
across her brow. Her navy eyes protruded, possibly due to the weed, of which she’d
smoked a great deal. As the evening wore on, Angelica observed, Edwina began to take
on the appearance of a dishevelled night-hag whose occult powers had taken off down
a decidedly negative path. A mad Cassandra about to spill out ghastly prophecies that
no decent person could sit still and listen to.

‘That’s your main problem,’ Edwina informed Celeste as she swung her chair
backwards and forwards on two legs.
‘Don’t do that to my chairs!’ Celeste shouted at her. ‘And don’t you tell me what my problems are! You’ve got enough of your own you don’t deal with!’

Edwina ignored her sister and kept rocking.

‘Always trying to make it work for everybody, fucking goodie-two-shoes,’ she continued as she lit the last of the joints and inhaled deeply. They all stared at her. What the hell was she going to say next? Angelica leaned forward, anticipatory.

‘Who made you god?’ she gasped as she finally exhaled. ‘You don’t know how much trouble you’ve caused trying to make it work for everybody like you’re some demented social worker on a divine mission. You should just butt out and leave everybody alone for once, you’re a control freak and you won’t admit it.’

She crashed her chair back onto all its legs. Ash from her joint fell on the damask tablecloth, there was a smell of burning and a small brown hole appeared in the snowy fabric.

‘Shut up, Edwina,’ Amalie told her, and threw a glass of water over the scorch mark.

‘You shut up,’ said Edwina and Celeste simultaneously.

Amalie looked shocked for a second, then burst into tears.

Julia was rapidly switching her gaze from one person to another, trying to keep track: you could tell this never happened at her family’s dinner table. But these hostile exchanges had long been normalised in Angelica’s family. And they were worse when their mother was present. Nobody with any sense took sides. Angelica sat back, waiting to see what would happen next. There was a thrumming of insect life being energetically conducted outside in the warm night air, a cicadian orchestra, and Fletcher stirred uncomfortably on his mat on the verandah. Celeste didn’t let dogs in her house. He wasn’t used to being excluded.

Celeste, it turned out, felt they should make the effort to acknowledge the sex change without rancour, and with complete acceptance, even though she herself had wept loudly and frequently throughout the evening, and railed at her partner in front of them all about the sacrifice of his maleness. It wasn’t just his sacrifice, she wailed. It was hers as well, and he should have talked to her before he did it, she insisted, quite reasonably, Angelica thought, if anything could be said to be reasonable about the situation. That was the contract she’d entered into, Celeste insisted. There were rules of engagement and Alan had shown neither them nor Celeste the slightest respect. Even if you did have serious doubts about your identity, Celeste went on, you still had a moral
obligation to be honest with your partner, who loved you. If you weren’t willing to acknowledge these basic things, like trust, what kind of an individual were you?

Angelica realised she was feeling personally affronted by Alan’s change of sex. It was like an imposition: Alan thrusting himself in among the women in a way that was impossible to ignore, as if he hadn’t got enough of their attention as a man. Wanting to be one of them and he hadn’t done the hard yards. She didn’t trust him. She felt a little afraid of him, in fact. There was something menacing about him: an air of potential violence that she’d only ever associated with men. Female violence was quite different in its energies, equally frightening but in a more familiar way. Something about Alan reminded her of her stepfather and she didn’t like it. She remembered she’d felt this the last time she’d seen him, before she knew anything about his wish to be a woman. A certain attitude of brooding that she’d known in her stepfather, always before a violent eruption. Like the aura of someone who’s withdrawn entirely into themselves and is stewing, working up to an explosion. It was interesting, she thought, that although he’d had his body changed that energy was still very present in him.

Amalie now sat silently weeping and drinking, and didn’t attempt to defend herself. Edwina watched and waited.

Angelica moved the wine bottle so Celeste couldn’t refill her glass.

Amalie had failed to re-negotiate the terms of their relationship with her, Celeste went on, grabbing back the bottle, and he’d just gone ahead and changed everything. And it was forever. It was final. There was nothing to be done about it. It was final! And she howled afresh as the finality of Alan’s actions hit her with full force.

Fate had been cruel to her, indeed.

Julia was struck dumb. That wasn’t a state Angelica had ever before associated with her. She’d stopped eating, Angelica noticed, as they all had, except for Edwina who continued to tuck in between puffs of her joint. Julia couldn’t believe Celeste was saying these private things, in front of everybody. She stared at Celeste and raised her hand as if she intended to try and stop her with signals and flurries from revealing anything more that she might well regret in the morning. Julia had as yet failed to realise that morning regrets over night-time spillages were not typical of this family.

Angelica nudged her with her elbow. Julia started, and turned in her chair to look at her friend, who winked at her. Julia’s eyebrows shot up her forehead and her blue eyes went wide behind her glasses. They stared at one another for a moment. Then they both
looked back down at their plates. Angelica thought Julia was shaking, with apprehension, or laughter or anger she couldn’t tell.

It was as if Celeste had needed an audience before she could fully express her anguish, Angelica thought, and who better than all of us? Julia was probably wondering if all their family dinners ended up like this. This one was pretty bad on the scale of things, but they’d had worse. Some tricky Christmases. A particularly nasty Easter. Though listening to Celeste berating her partner and grieving her intimate losses was a first. Her grief was real: the situation lurched from tragedy to comedy and back again, seeking a plateau. It was like riding the pirate ship at Dreamworld, Angelica thought. Whoosh went your stomach as the ship swung back and forth in gigantic arcs. Whoosh. Whoosh.

Don’t laugh, she told herself sternly. Do not laugh. Now is not the time for laughter. It is not funny when people are so distraught, no matter how bizarre and unexpected the reasons. We’re all drunk and none of us knows how to behave. The thing is for everybody to shut up. Whoosh.

Suddenly she thought of something.

‘Hey, Celeste, do you remember when you went through that radical lesbian feminist separatist thing back in the early eighties, you used to write on walls Castrate all men?’ She asked.

This is what I have to live with, as well as everything else, she thought, suddenly enraged. A sister who did things like that. Who pitied me for giving birth to sons instead of daughters. Who called me a traitor because I loved a man. There were women who did that to other women in the eighties, she thought, and bloody Celeste was one of them. She drank down her wine and leaned back in her seat.

‘Yeah. So? That was years ago. I grew out of it.’

‘I was just thinking about how things turn out,’ Angelica said, leaning forward now, with her elbows on the table and her chin at rest on the backs of her hands.

‘I mean, look at your current situation,’ she continued. ‘There’s levels here. Depths. It’s like, be careful what you ask for and then some.’

‘Oh!’ Celeste gasped as if Angelica had punched in the solar plexus. She rose halfway out of her seat.

‘Oh! How could you be so cruel!’ she cried and collapsed immediately as if her legs wouldn’t hold her.
Angelica was wondering that herself. At least, her better self was wondering that, way out on the edge of her consciousness, to where she’d banished it since she’d arrived at her sister’s house. Whenever she got near Celeste for any length of time everything she knew about goodness and love just flew out the window and she became an avenging bitch. What’s more, she enjoyed it. Julia kicked her under the table.

‘Hey!’ Angelica exclaimed.

Julia frowned and shook her head. Angelica lifted her top lip and bared her teeth in a dog-like snarl. Julia looked at her, stunned. She’s snarling at me? Julia thought. Snarling?

Edwina had started up again. She didn’t see how anybody could become a woman just because of a physical rearrangement, she proclaimed. If she altered her physical appearance could she claim to be Aboriginal, or Inuit, or Aztec, she demanded. Wouldn’t she need something else, some genetic, cultural and social history, some collective memory that gave her the inherent knowledge and deep experience of the state of being Aboriginal in the dominant white world, or of a woman oppressed by sexism in a male-dominated universe? Something, that is, beyond the purely physical? Wouldn’t she have to know first-hand what it felt like to be badly treated just because of her race or her gender, or her sexual preference?

‘That’s different,’ Celeste argued.

‘How?’ Edwina wanted to know.

‘If you don’t know I can’t tell you,’ Celeste shouted back at her, and refused to continue the discussion.

‘It’s not as if you even look anything like a woman,’ Edwina turned next to Amalie and spoke confidentially now, as if revealing to Amalie an important secret. Edwina’s voice was thickened by drugs and alcohol; her head nodded precariously like a wilting black tulip on the stalk that was her neck.

‘You look like a man with tits who’s dressed himself to look like he’s a woman. You’ve got hair plugs like Shane Warne, and a five o’clock shadow,’ she continued her merciless assessment while Amalie sat frozen like a nocturnal mammal caught in headlights.

‘You look like a trannie, and a pretty unkempt one at that.’ Edwina ploughed on.

‘Now, if you told me you did this so you could be a trannie, I could understand that easily enough. That’s a powerful statement about gender that I can respect, I can see the
reasoning behind that kind of radical move. But you keep saying you’re a woman. You get off on having everybody stare at you in the street, and let me tell you,’ and here her voice began to rise, and she leaned across the table into Amalie’s horrified face, ‘let me tell you, they’re staring at you ‘cos you’re an unkempt trannie, not ‘cos you’re a woman, and anyway, most actual women don’t enjoy being stared at in the street too bloody much but you wouldn’t know that cos you’re a fucking man!’

And she leaned back and slapped both hands down on the table in triumph. Then she let out a hideous cackle.

Edwina had presence, you had to give her that, Angelica thought. In full cry she was a woman to be reckoned with.

‘Edwina! Stop it! Stop it!’

Celeste banged both her hands on the table as well so the plates and crystal glasses jumped and rattled and the bread rolls fell onto the floor.

‘Just shut up! I told you not to do this! I told you Amalie was fragile!’

And she started to cry again.

‘Fragile spragile,’ Edwina mocked.

There was a long silence except for Celeste and Amalie’s weeping. Several black moths as big as small bats flew in the open windows and hurled themselves at the candle flames. Edwina’s familiars, Angelica thought. How could she have imagined Amalie was frightening, she wondered, watching her sob. It must have been the second-hand dope smoke. Julia got up and tried to sweep the moths away with her hands. Fletcher the dog, she noticed as she chased the winged insects out the door, had edged his way across the threshold so that half of him rested on the Chinese carpet. His large ears were up on full alert.

‘I just want Alan to be honest about it!’ Edwina broke the silence with this claim, leaning across the table again, the better to hold Celeste’s attention. As if it was going anywhere else at that moment.

‘Nobody’s ever honest about anything in this bloody family. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with trannies. It’s the bloody phony pretence about being a woman that pisses me off. Is Alan ashamed of being a trannie? He’s still no more being what she really is than he ever was,’ she finished up. Confused by the pronouns.
‘It’s a political statement!’ Celeste screamed back. A very brave, courageous and out there political statement! And he didn’t feel right being in a male body! He feels like he’s really a woman and always has been so why shouldn’t he change?’

‘Now you’re defending him!’ Edwina shrieked in delight and threw up her hands. ‘Defending him after everything you’ve been saying about him! Oh, you really are fucked up!’

Celeste was speechless.

‘But there’s no reason at all why he shouldn’t be whatever he wants to be,’ Edwina continued, suddenly calming down and pretending to be reasonable. ‘I don’t care anyway. I didn’t like him when he was a man and I don’t like him any better now he’s reorganised himself. That’s the point, isn’t it? He’s not that likeable either way so why go to all the trouble?’

She lit a cigarette.

‘How dare you all talk about me as if I’m not here?’ Amalie suddenly shouted.

An assertive quality they associated with Alan had returned to her tone. Everybody but Julia ignored her. She was not a central player in this game. Julia tried to apologise for this ignorance but something else was already underway. Angelica was having another go at the hapless Celeste. This was a rare opportunity: nobody had ever seen Celeste so broken and vulnerable and they were moving in for the kill.

‘And what about the politics of you carrying horrible messages to me from our mother, then, Celeste, like you’ve done for the last twenty five years? What about those politics, Miss crash hot fucking feminist vanguard of the sisterhood!’ she yelled.

‘Let’s go,’ ordered Julia and grabbed Angelica’s arm.

Her legs were wound round her chair. She couldn’t undo them.

‘Wait, Julia!’ she protested. ‘I’m stuck!’

Amalie had by now stood up and thrown her dinner plate at the mud brick wall. She howled as she did this, like a coyote brought down by a wolf. Celeste’s cheek rested on the table: her arms hung limply by her sides in an attitude of utter capitulation to forces greater than her own. As if she was at last offering up her neck for the axe and felt only relief, Julia thought wildly. She had to get herself and Angelica out of here: she’d never seen her friend so enraged. Julia was unpractised at dealing with scenes of familial disintegration, but she knew instinctively that it was time for them to leave. She tugged
at Angelica who was drunkenly attempting to extricate her legs from Celeste’s good chair. A torrent of foul language accompanied her efforts.

Celeste’s tears formed a large damp stain on the cloth. She lifted her head with difficulty, as if it bore an iron helmet and said in a voice thickened with grief:

‘My whole life I’ve had to take care of everybody. My whole life for as long as I can remember. My whole life … Mum, Edwina, Alan, Angelica, my whole life…’

The enormity of the insight overwhelmed her; her head sank back to the table and she sobbed.

‘You’ve never looked after me!’ Angelica yelled at her, ‘so you can stop telling yourself that part of the story!’

The crystal decanter into which red wine had been poured at the beginning of the evening had fallen over, and was slowly leaking the last of its contents onto a white linen napkin. Fletcher had leapt up from his mat at the sound of breaking plates and angry voices, his neck fur on end, and was growling a deep growl as he advanced slowly into the living room in a hostile crouch. Julia grabbed the dog by his collar and Angelica by her arm, and dragged them both towards the kitchen door. Angelica heard Edwina cackling as they took off through the dark garden. Julia let go of the dog and from her shirt pocket produced a pencil torch.

‘I just came down here to see my mother, and then that bitch said my mother didn’t want to see me!’ Angelica shouted at Julia as they hurried back down the paddock to the tent. She was shaking with distress and whisky.

‘Angelica, calm down. It’s all right, calm down.’

They heard loud music start up at the house.

‘Wait!’ Angelica gasped, ‘stop! ‘Listen! Listen!’

Alice Cooper sang into the night: ‘Only women bleeeeeeed…’

‘That’s Edwina!’ Angelica screeched. ‘It has to be Edwina! Julia, she’s put that song on deliberately!’

Angelica ran backwards and forwards in short agitated bursts. Julia reached out to grab her but she hopped and skipped, eluding Julia’s frantic hands. She’s out of control, Julia thought, what the hell am I going to do with her?

‘How did she think to do that so quickly?’ Angelica slowed down the better to speak.

‘She must have been planning to play it all night. She must have brought it with her. My God, she’s a fiend, Julia!’
‘Come on!’ Julia urged, managing to take hold of her arm again. Angelica, having frightened herself, was ready to co-operate. ‘You’re getting hysterical, you need to lie down, come on!’

‘I didn’t know all this was going on,’ Angelica moaned as they stumbled through the paddock, the dog leaping ahead of them, apparently even more anxious than they were to get to the safety of their camp. It was a clear night: a swathe of rhinestone stars draped the country heavens. Owls hooted. Julia fleetingly recalled a story she’d heard of a woman who was attacked by an owl. There was blood, a torn forehead.

‘Anyway I’m not hysterical, I’m just upset! There’s a difference you know!’

‘Whatever. Come on!’

Julia had set a cracking pace and was again dragging her by the arm.

‘How could I have known what we were walking into?’ Angelica moaned. ‘I didn’t know about the bloody sex change. Let go of me I’m going to be sick.’

She veered off to the right and threw up the entire gourmet dinner into a clump of blackberry bushes. It felt good to be rid of it.

‘It’s all right,’ Julia said, rubbing her back, ‘nobody’s blaming you, let’s just get back to the tent and settle down a bit.’

‘All those bloody whisky sours! You know I never usually drink whisky but everything was so tense, and the contact high from all that bloody dope, and Edwina couldn’t shut up, could she, as usual. I’m really sorry I dragged you into all this, Julia,’ she wept, wiping off her face with the back of her hand as she stumbled over tussocks.

‘Shit! It’s terrible, terrible. If I’d known what was going on we’d never have come, never. You won’t tell anybody at home will you?’ she added anxiously.

‘Stop apologising, it’s okay. I’d already got the impression that your family was pretty weird. It is worse than I’d thought, I have to admit that.’

All Julia could think of was getting them back to the tent. There were too many dangers out here in the open. And Edwina might take it into her head to follow them. Julia didn’t want that. She’d had enough for one evening. She thought she’d just deal very firmly with Edwina if she turned up. Many people had tried that and been utterly thwarted, but Julia didn’t know that. Edwina was a force.

‘Watch out for that black snake that lives in the compost,’ Angelica reminded her as they negotiated the thick grass. ‘This is just the kind of situation in which somebody
would get bitten by a snake. I don’t know what Edwina’s doing here anyway, last I heard they weren’t talking to each other.’

‘Don’t worry about it, Angelica. It’s okay. Settle.’

‘I can’t bloody settle, stop telling me to settle!’ Angelica turned her hysteria on Julia. ‘Could you settle if it was your family? They’re demented! Why can’t we have ordinary problems, why does everything have to be so bloody operatic! I told you it was like that, didn’t I, even before I knew about Alan’s new and exciting venture. It’s the bloody end of the world as we know it out here! They’ve reverted to a wild state, listen to that bloody howling! I can’t stand this family anymore! This is why I live thousands of miles away from them and still it isn’t far enough! Bloody Jupiter wouldn’t be far enough! I mean who does these things, for Christ’s sake? Who lives like this? And why doesn’t my mother want to see me? No wonder I can’t relate properly to anybody! Look where I learned my skills, Not!’

‘We’ll leave tomorrow,’ Julia was thoroughly rattled. ‘Calm down, will you? You’ll be sick again.’

‘Why doesn’t my mother want to see me?’ Angelica wailed, stopping to turn her head up to the night sky as if she was directing her question to the star gods or a pale lunar goddess or any of the elemental spirits that come out to play after dark, she wasn’t fussed.

‘What have I done this time? And what gives Celeste the right to tell me that anyway, what kind of a sister does her mother’s dirty work for her like that on another sister? And no, I’m not going tomorrow. I’m not going to be run out of the family again!’

‘I don’t know,’ Julia sighed, fishing a tissue out of her sleeve and giving it to Angelica. ‘I don’t know, but I don’t think any of them are any good for you. And I’m tired and I want to lie down. It’s a madhouse. I’ve never seen anything like it. Really!’

She was close to tears.

‘I’m so sorry, Julia. I am so sorry I dragged you into this.’ Angelica put her arms round her distressed friend. Angelica was used to uproar but Julia wasn’t. She’d forgotten that.

‘Just let’s get back to the tent and calm down a bit, all right?’

When they reached the tent, Julia put the kettle on the gas stove and made tea. Angelica sat with her arms round the dog. He wasn’t fond of being hugged, but he was long-suffering and knew when his presence was needed for comfort.
‘I will never,’ said Angelica, ‘never never as long as I live, get my head around this family and everything that happens in it. Nothing is ordinary. It’s too much, Julia. Too much.’

‘I know what you mean,’ Julia told her. ‘If I hadn’t seen it I’d never have believed it. I never want to go through that again. There’s no holds barred, nobody holds back when they get started. Including you. It’s florid,’ she said, ‘that’s what it is. I’ve always liked that word and this is the first time for ages I’ve felt it was absolutely spot-on-accurate. Florid. In the psychiatric sense of the term. Your family is florid.’

‘Thanks,’ Angelica said, releasing the dog and standing up to stretch. ‘It’s all in perspective now.’

Julia took Angelica by the shoulders and made her look at her.

‘Listen,’ she said, ’my father always told us that some people have ordinary challenges and some people have extreme challenges. He never called them problems. He said if you’re lucky enough to get away with ordinary challenges you have to cut some slack for the people who got the harder ones. He said there but for fortune. He said don’t judge and don’t look down on anyone, it’s all an accident of birth and it’s what you make of what you’re given that counts, not what you’re given. All right?’ She shook gently Angelica for emphasis. ‘All right?’

Julia was near tears again with the urgency of conveying these things to Angelica. Her father’s kindness. She missed him. She’d brought his old Drizabone on their camping trip: it smelled of him. He’d loved Angelica for the short time he’d known her. There’s a photograph on Angelica’s corkboard, taken in her parent’s driveway of Angelica and Julia’s father facing one another. Richard is holding Angelica’s wrists. Her eyes are fixed on his. He seems to be speaking very earnestly, and Angelica is listening. Julia has no idea what the conversation was about. Neither of them ever told her.

‘Okay,’ Angelica whispered as Julia dropped her arms, ‘Okay.’

What Julia had really wanted to do, she told Angelica later that night as they lay in their sleeping bags enjoying the silence and looking at the moon through the flyscreens, was to sit on the verandah alone with Amalie, drink a drop of red and watch the Milky Way, and ask her what had happened to make her decide to have the surgery. It would be easier for both of them in the dark, without eye contact, Julia thought. Julia wanted the history without which she couldn’t fully understand Amalie’s position, she said.
‘I don’t know what it must be like to feel you’re in the wrong body,’ Julia said thoughtfully, ‘but I imagine it’s like knowing you’ve been made to wear the wrong clothes for who you know you really are, only a thousand times worse. But what did they do before there was surgery?’

‘What does the wrong body mean anyway? Wrong how, who says? It’s a culturally induced condition, isn’t it? Oh, God, can we talk about something else, can we just go to sleep, I am so bloody tired, Julia. And I have to sort out all this stuff about my mother yet. This is no holiday.’

‘I never really thought it would be,’ Julia said tartly. ‘Given the company. Goodnight.’

Sitting on the hillock a few days after the dinner party, still trying to understand the latest bombshell about their mother’s feelings towards her, Angelica felt devastated. It was a familiar feeling, perhaps that was a clue. Devastation was her comfort zone and she wasn’t brave enough to venture outside of it? She heard music from the house, the slow movement of a cello sonata, Brahms she thought. In the soft passages she could hear Amalie howling. Celeste said it was the effects of the hormone treatments. Angelica had woken at four in the morning to the sound of this howling. Celeste called these episodes Amalie’s conniptions. Maybe her hormone dosage needed adjusting, Angelica told Celeste.

‘I know you aren’t well,’ Celeste said to Angelica as they sat on the grass, and then she put her arm round her sister’s shoulder.

‘I’m doing all right,’ Angelica said sharply. ‘I’m not going to drop dead tomorrow.’

‘I’m so sorry, you don’t deserve it, you poor thing.’

‘Get off me!’ Angelica threw off Celeste’s arm and got up. ‘I don’t need your sympathy, Celeste. I’ve had more than enough if it in my life.’

‘What do you mean? I’m only trying to be helpful.’

Angelica forced herself not to start a fight. They sat on in silence till it was time to go back to the house, Celeste leading the way.

‘I’m so sorry about Mum rejecting you again,’ she tried as they reached the back door. ‘She’s just sick, poor thing, she’s having all these tests.’

‘Celeste,’ Angelica warned. ‘Leave it. Bloody leave it, all right? Everything you say only makes me feel worse because you say it as if you’re on the inside and I’m on the
outs, and I don’t believe you don’t know that somewhere inside you, because you’re not stupid. So just bloody shut up and leave it.’

For years of her adult life Angelica had wept when the family excluded her and she felt they frequently excluded her. That was her role in their family drama: to be the excluded one and to weep and fight against it. She never gave up hoping they’d let her be included and that hope was part of her role as well. However, it would have had to be a completely different family for her to ever be admitted to its inner sanctum in the way she dreamed of, and she would have to be an entirely other person. You play the hand you get. You can’t go back and change your cards. It’s better, Angelica thought, to accept that fact as fast as you can and get on with the game. Whining achieves nothing and only slows your progress. But she whined all the same.

There is a certain kind of highly significant knowledge that is not always consistently retained by the human mind, she thought. Perhaps it’s the most useful information there is about managing an incarnation on Planet Earth. It’s deceptively simple knowledge that’s very hard to enact. It makes a lot of sense but she forgets it over and over, then remembers it again when reeling back from extreme times. (Doh! And the palm strikes the forehead). If she could just hold onto it, if she could just meaningfully recall it every single day, she’d avoid many of the extremes and save herself time, energy and most of all, misery. You get what you get, the raw material of your life, and your task is to do the best you can with whatever that is because it’s all you have to work with. How can I turn this muck into gold, asked Nietzsche? There. Simple.

And there’s always somebody with a harder job than you, and there’s always somebody with an easier one, so comparisons are a waste of valuable time during which you could be living your very own life, muck and all. You can’t change your raw material. You work with it. Why can’t she keep this at the front of her mind?

Perhaps her exclusion was to do with their age differences, and the fact that she had a different father and so was biologically incomplete in the system, she thinks again for the millionth time. She can’t resist seeking reasons. She can’t say, it simply is, and, released from the futile labour of seeking answers to the unanswerable, get on with something else. Just do it.

It was probably more to do with the fact that she frequently said things they didn’t want to hear, in Julia’s opinion. Such as telling them the truth about what had really happened to her in that family. Nobody was very keen to hear about that.
Angelica is too blinded by emotion and indignation to see the big picture and too determined to fight. Her life story with her family is entirely one of the triumph of hope over experience. It is an example of the power of magical thinking and how it can fuck you up and make you your own worst enemy. Angelica has never learned to accept her allotted familial place, and she hasn’t yet found the courage to walk away and not look back and leave them to their own fate. You only get one family. Give them up and you’ve got nothing; that’s what worried her. Millions of people stay in families that destroy them for this very reason. It’s a hard world in which to have no people at all of your own, no matter how unsatisfactory they are.

‘Amalie told me my hair looked awful when I went out to the kitchen to help her get the soup,’ Julia confided the next morning.

Angelica looked at her. The red dye had faded to pink, and there was a wide white stripe down the centre of her head where her true colour had grown through. Her head looked like a wedge of coconut ice.

‘She’s right,’ Angelica told her.

‘I’m growing it out. I’m sick of all the artifice. It’s too much hard work. Why Amalie would want to take it all on in her fifties is beyond me.’

‘We can go and get it dyed more like your own colour if you want,’ Angelica offered.

‘Maybe. I’ll think about it. It’s not too bad, is it?’


‘You see, this is what I don’t understand about Amalie and what I wanted to ask her about.’ Julia was ignoring the feedback. This was one of the things Angelica deeply admired about her: she didn’t care how she looked. She was without vanity. I am what I am, she said with every presentation of her scrubbed, shining face.

‘Amalie thinks being a woman means waxing and dyeing and lipstick and certain kinds of underwear and plucking eyebrows and curling lashes,’ she continued, ‘but I’m a woman and I don’t do any of those things because I can’t be bothered and you don’t do all that many but you do more than me. It’s all about appearance. Surfaces. A certain kind of body and looks but that’s only some women, it isn’t *Women*. And it’s usually a woman who’s supposed to be appealing to a man which Amalie says she doesn’t want, she wants Celeste.’

‘I have no idea what Amalie thinks being a woman is,’ Angelica replied. ‘Edwina says *Alan* thinks it means screaming and crying and being emotional. All the things
actual women get pilloried for. But what would Edwina know, she’s the last person Amalie’s going to talk to.’

Angelica was disinclined to open up a discussion about how notions of how women are constructed by patriarchy for its own purposes and whatever followed on from that. The day was fine, a hyacinth sky with cotton-ball clouds, a soft breeze rippling through the long grass. A black snake dozing in the sun by the compost. They’d planned an excursion to the mountains and she wanted to avoid Celeste and Amalie for a while. They made a picnic and packed themselves and the dog into the truck. As they went slowly down the rutted driveway Angelica looked back and saw a tall figure in a grey silk kimono standing on the verandah, waving. Amalie. She leaned out of the window and waved back.

Why did Celeste always feel sorry for her about something? Angelica dug hard to understand. Because, Edwina said when consulted about this after their mother died, Celeste could only feel good about herself if she put down somebody else and sympathy, especially if it was not entirely authentic, could be one of the biggest put downs of all. Edwina really put her finger on things sometimes, Angelica had to admit.

Does anyone ever manage to go back to their family of origin for longer than twenty-four hours and not regress into childish behaviours? Probably not, said Julia, but it’s all a matter of degrees. Angelica’s regression, Julia said, was spectacular. What was with the snarling thing, the bared teeth at dinner? The whole visit so far was beyond the powers of anybody’s imagination to invent, Julia said. There was a way in which she felt extremely privileged to have witnessed it, she said. That’s my life you’re talking about, Angelica objected.

‘Not anymore,’ said Julia decisively. ‘Not anymore.’

‘How weird we must all look to Martians,’ Angelica mused as they drove down the highway.

‘Wouldn’t even take Martians,’ Julia observed. ‘Anybody walking into this from Darfur would find us pretty out there.’

* * *

In the early days of her illness, after the initial aridity left her, Angelica overcompensated for the dry spell and cried too much. She had a favourite spot in the
kitchen in the corner by the cupboards, on the floor. There she howled and thrashed, or sat crumpled and silent on her haunches. She was losing her life, that is what she knew. 

Her work required her to read the philosophers. In Seneca she found: 

Anyway, here’s what I do ... Without anxiety, then, I’m making ready for the day when the tricks and disguises will be put away and I shall come to a verdict on myself.

Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph.

When Angelica was a child she wanted to be as good as an angel. Her grandmother named her for those glorious beings. But she fell from the starry heavens and lost her snow-white wings, and her heart’s sense of its true direction. It was too big a burden, that name. Who could ever live up to it?

The Lymphoma was an entity to Angelica, an invader, a separate being with whom she was going to have to develop a relationship of some kind. Yet it had not come to her from the outside: she had nurtured it herself. So why consider it an invader? And how did it seed?

Influenced by her doctors, she saw it as an enemy that had to be defeated through the combined efforts of oncologists, haematologists, chemicals and her own determination. She spoke to it again.

‘Look,’ she said. ‘If I die, you die. How about that?’

The creature had another cocktail in its reptilian claws, blue this time. It looked at her from beneath its hood-like eyelids.

‘So?’ it whispered.

‘Fuck this!’ she shrieked, enraged. ’And fuck you too!’

But something shifted. She began to cry. While this was surely a relief to her system she didn’t feel any better. She was now choking on the liquids of despair, sunk in a boggy wetland of tears and snot. At the same time her fevers broke and she woke each night soaked with sweat, her bedclothes, her T-shirt drenched and sweat pooling in her armpits, running down her thighs. This was as exhausting as the aridity. She would burn or she would drown, it seemed, like the country she lived in. But in the deserts of her country, what beauty flowered after the drenching downpours for just a brief, intense time?

* * *
When he was mastering his craft, The Chef went to pastry school in Stockholm and culinary school in Paris. In Paris he learned how to spin boiling sugar with his bare hands into the shape of peacocks and dragons. To the peacock he added blue dye and a tail of many colours. The dragon, however, he left the transparent caramel of burnt sugar. Light shone through the dragon, it glowed and seemed to tremble. For these marvels The Chef was rewarded with gold and silver medals in international competitions. The medals were hung around his neck on thick ribbons of blue and red and white stripes. Nobody knew where his extraordinary talent had come from. But Angelica remembers the blonde-haired little boy she discovered early in the morning when he thought everyone was sleeping, mixing flour and salt and vegemite and butter in a plastic bowl on the kitchen floor of their terrace house in Newtown and saying, as she knelt down beside him, ‘Look, Mum, I made a cake.’

It was bedtime for Lila in Cancun.

‘Tell me a story, Grandma.’

‘Okay. Just one short story because Mum says you should have been asleep ages ago. Are you comfortable?’

‘Yes Grandma.’

Once upon a time there was a little girl who wanted to be an angel. She didn’t mean that she wanted to be dead and in heaven, because that’s not where she thought angels always were. She thought they might be like human beings you couldn’t see, who came and sat by you when you were feeling sad and a little lonely, and even if you couldn’t see them you somehow knew they were there, and your heart got lighter and you felt better. The little girl couldn’t really explain this to her Grandma because she was too little to have all the words, so it all stayed as pictures in her mind that she thought about before she went to sleep every night.

One day when the little girl was a grown-up she went to the movies. The movie was about angels and they were all like the angels she dreamed about all those years ago when she was little. They were human beings that nobody could see, and they touched your shoulder or sat by you when you felt sad, and they helped you feel better and get ready to take on the world again.’

‘Grandma, did they have great big white wings and shining things round their heads?’
‘No, lovie, they just looked like everybody else.’
‘Why, Grandma? Why did they look just like everybody else?’
‘Well, I suppose so that they could do their work without everybody seeing them. If they had great shining wings it would have been hard to be invisible and help people, don’t you think?’
‘Grandma, I don’t want to be an angel. I want to be a princess. I want to wear my princess dress and glass slippers and have a magic wand.’
‘Well that’s okay, lovie. You can do that tomorrow if you want. Ready to go to sleep now?’
‘Grandma, you know my little brother?’
‘Yes, I think so!’
‘Well, actually, Grandma I know I’m lucky to have a little brother but I didn’t really want him.’
‘What did you really want then?’
‘I just wanted my Mum and Dad.’
‘I know that’s what you really wanted. But do you have fun with your brother sometimes?’
‘Yes, when he plays with me and he’ll be the handsome prince, but Grandma, he just every time takes my glass slippers and wears them and he puts on all my jewels and he shouldn’t do that if he’s the prince!’
‘I think your Mum said she’d get him a Spiderman suit. Then maybe he’ll wear that instead of your glass slippers. Or maybe he’ll wear the suit and the glass slippers. Okay now? Ready for sleep? There’s lovely dreams waiting but they can’t come if you don’t go to sleep.’
‘Okay. Will I dream about angels?’
‘Maybe. I love you, Lila.’
‘I love you too Grandma. Sing me a lulbye, just one little lulbye Grandma please!’
‘Okay. Just one little verse then sleep. Promise?’
Angelica is quite tuneless, but that didn’t seem to bother Lila. Angelica whispered:

_May God bless and keep you always_
_May your wishes all come true_
_May you always do for others_
And let others do for you,

May you build a ladder to the stars
And climb on every rung
May you stay
Forever young…

Angelica took one last, lingering look at Lila before she turned out the light. The child’s white blonde hair had curled in the Caribbean humidity. She sucked the middle fingers of her right hand and her eyelids, with their long blonde lashes, drooped over her celadon eyes. Angelica covered her in a light cotton sheet. In the heat she needed no covering, but she liked the comfort of something over her as she slept. As Angelica looked at Lila that hot blue night, it occurred to her that she’d been holding something back. She’d been keeping a tier of her heart unavailable, cordoned off. Why, she wondered, as Lila turned over on her side and threw her five-year-old legs out from under the sheet. Her feet were filthy. Angelica had missed them when she supervised her bath. And her neck, Angelica saw as she craned her head to look at the sleeping face, the curls, the sweat gathered in the slight creases of her grubby neck. Clearly she had forgotten how to properly bathe children. Angelica remembered her own grandmother, how she scoured her young face and ears and knees, washing her in the deep porcelain kitchen sink in the kitchen made cosy by the old wood stove that heated their water, their house and on which they cooked their food. That was in another country, a cold country. In that country her grandmother heated a brick in the old wood stove, then wrapped it in flannel and put it in Angelica’s bed to warm the sheets before she crawled between them. So why was she holding back, keeping herself closed off from Lila and her little brother Jean-Paul? Because she couldn’t bear to think of leaving them. Already she didn’t know how she would leave them and if she opened up all of her heart it would be even harder to leave them.

Coward. That’s a sorry way to live, not fully feeling anything in order to save yourself some later pain. Pull yourself together, Angelica. Let them in. Then at least when you cry you’ll really have something to cry about, not what you didn’t do, but what you did with your whole heart.
Tomorrow, she told herself, when the children come into my room in the morning and perch themselves on my bed, both sleepily sucking the fingers of their right hands, Lila with her woolly lamb and Jean-Paul dragging his blanket behind him, collecting dust bunnies from the tiled floors, tomorrow I won’t hold back anymore.

During the night Angelica woke to the sound of drenching rain. She looked out of the window and saw the street below was awash and heavy curtains of rain dimmed the streetlights. The night wind was almost cool and there were no stars in the Caribbean sky.

* * *

The day Celeste rang her about her mother’s death she said:
‘Mum died of a heart attack, I’m sorry to tell you, Angelica.’
‘When?’
‘A few days ago.’
‘So why are you just telling me now? Why didn’t you tell me straight away? How long has my mother been dead?’
‘I couldn’t work out the time difference and I didn’t want to ring you in the middle of the night. Anyway I thought you’d be in the depths of Mexico and I wouldn’t be able to find you. And I wasn’t there. I was in the city with Amalie. Edwina was there and she didn’t tell me straight away.’
‘Bullshit! What’s wrong with you two? You always ring people in the middle of the night if their mother’s died! Why did she die? She wasn’t expected to die. What happened?’
‘She had a heart attack. Stop shouting at me, Angelica. It’s Edwina’s fault nobody told you.’

Out of the corner of her eye she saw Lila take Jean-Paul by the hand and lead him into their bedroom.
‘Come on, Buddy,’ she said reassuringly, ‘Grandma’s cross. Let’s go play.’
The two tiny blonde heads bobbed out of her sight. She was ashamed of her raised voice.

‘I’m minding the children,’ she told Celeste. ’I can’t talk now. Ring me later. But you should have bloody told me straight away!’
* * *

Angelica and Julia arrived in San Cristobal de Las Casas at noon on July 3, sleep-deprived and off their heads from the unrelenting video assault. As they stumbled out into the bus station forecourt they were accosted by a number of taxi drivers, each touting the advantages of different hostels. One shouted louder than the rest and they followed him meekly. The hostel was unspeakable but they were too tired to care.

‘Tomorrow we’ll find another place to stay,’ Julia said.
‘Okay,’ Angelica agreed.

* * *

Julia and Angelica arrived on the planet six days apart. They’re both Pisces, though you’d never know it because they’re very different. One evening spent in their company and you’d never again believe anything you read in the stars.

Their personal histories couldn’t be more different. Julia was born to parents who have no trouble loving their offspring: a mother who to this day rings up and calls her ‘Darling’ and means it: you can hear the tenderness in her voice. Julia and her family have a sense of responsibility towards others, that attitude often derided as ‘noblesse oblige’ though they weren’t ‘noblesse’ by any means. It was the old-fashioned liberal attitude: if you were better off than others then you had a duty to do your bit to make the world easier for the less advantaged. No, it’s more than that. They actually care. It isn’t simply duty, to call it that does them and those like them an injustice. They care. They are what’s thought of as decent people, like many Australians, decent people who don’t want to see anybody else come to harm and will do what they can to prevent that. Who know that trouble is indiscriminate and can befall anyone at anytime, and does not necessarily have any moral component.

There’s no doubt they’re at the other end of the scale from Angelica’s family. Who, it seems, were set on making as much dark trouble for themselves and everybody else as was humanly possible.

Julia’s father, Richard, a slight, frail old man when Angelica met him, had a reputation in his neighbourhood for bailing up strangers, in the nicest way, and getting
into conversations with them about the circumstances of their lives. He was deeply curious about how other people managed in the world. Generally the subjects of his interest were delighted to be offered the opportunity to simply yap on about themselves without the usual social responsibilities of mutual encounter. Richard had a nose for who’d be likely to talk. On park benches, sitting on the sea wall, under trees in public gardens, he listened to the stories behind the unknown faces and claimed that he was rarely if ever bored by what he heard. Richard’s walks were lengthy affairs: everybody knew not to expect him back in a hurry.

‘Everybody’s interesting,’ he’d tell Julia. ‘Everybody’s got something odd going on in their lives.’

If there was sorrow and difficulty, as there frequently was, he’d offer something: the name of an appropriate agency, a book he knew of that dealt with such things, his own gift for deep and patient listening. Richard was a hospitable man, an aptitude he passed on to his only daughter. Julia has the same quality of attention when she listens to another’s story, a quality of compassionate curiosity. Whatever you say to Julia, you know she really hears you, and that you’re welcome to say it and it will be seriously considered.

When Angelica left the city to live in paradise, reeling from the combined traumas of marital collapse and cancer, and she first met Julia, the whole family took her in, metaphorically speaking. The women’s lives at home are lives of easy, happy domesticity in which neither one impinges on the other emotionally or physically and Angelica has never had a more stable, comforting life. There are times when she feels that Julia is overly directive, and times when she feels herself being overly managed, however she doesn’t suffer this in silence, and they work it out. Her only other significant complaint is that Julia tends to talk too much, by Angelica’s standards anyway, which probably means very little as Angelica has been known to go for many days without finding it necessary to speak or listen to anybody.

Perverse as she is, this pleasant domesticity doesn’t always mean Angelica’s happy. Old habits of discontent die hard. Angelica doesn’t trust any situation on the surface of it, she learned that the hard way, and in digging deep to discover whether or not a situation is reliable she frequently encounters things that would have been better left alone. Nothing in this life, she’s concluded, can withstand too much scrutiny;
everything becomes its opposite if you go too far with it. The trick is to know when to stop looking, and be truly grateful for what you’ve got.

Observing Julia’s relatives Angelica saw close up the reason for families, the way they’re supposed to work, the good they can bring to the world by first loving one another and then spreading that love about a bit. Angelica soaked up this new knowledge like a dried out sponge. They have their personal troubles. Nobody is idealising them. But they have a kind of fundamental love for each other that extends itself unselfishly out into the world and you know they are people who’d say, *Oh no, that’s just not right!* about a situation. They have a moral compass, people like that. You can trust them. That’s where Julia comes from.

Julia’s real hair colour is white, she has pale blue eyes and olive skin that tans easily. She has an air of gravitas: she listens carefully, and thinks before she speaks and in that, is very like her father. She’s short, rotund and physically strong. Her hands are large and competent, her well-muscled legs and broad feet hold her firmly to the earth. She has absolutely no sense of dressing herself up. Angelica has given up trying to change this. Julia’s happy as she is, in ragged shorts and T-shirts and Blundstone boots. When she goes to her work at the library she wears linen pants and ironed shirts and looks well enough turned out, if conservative, Angelica tells her. Most of Julia’s clothes belonged to a dead friend. She hasn’t had to buy anything for years. This pleases her, as she deeply loathes shopping for clothes, though if you put her in a supermarket she’s got a keen eye for value. She also reads labels. This habit infuriates Angelica. She will not shop with Julia, unless she’s been trapped into it. Angelica’s idea of grocery shopping is to bolt up and down the aisles and grab everything they might some day need or want as quickly as possible, no matter where it comes from, hurl it in the cart, fly through the checkout, and then go look at clothes.

Julia likes to venture into uncharted bush with Fletcher the dog and a machete, and hack out corridors for the wildlife, whose usual tracks have become more and more overgrown by lantana and various garden weeds since the village they live in more than doubled its population almost overnight with an influx of sea changers. Julia has taught Fletcher to spot koalas. He stands at the bottom of the tree, his head raised, his whole body quivering, and points with his paw like a retriever on full alert. There is no other evidence of that breed in him, though he displays the genes of cattle dogs, border collies, great danes, staffies and possibly greyhounds. Julia has also trained him to
leave all living things alone, and while he trembles with excitement at the sight of kangaroos, wallabies, goannas and pythons, he never barks at them, or chases them. Julia has carried out this training quietly, her soft, intense murmur rewarded with instant obedience from the dog, her calm congratulations when he does well. Only when he digs up her plants does she yell at him, and so unused is he to the sound of her raised voice that when it happens, he flees to find Angelica and nuzzle up for comfort.

‘Don’t you dare hug that dog!’ Julia yells at Angelica. ‘He’s dug up my best saplings!’

Angelica’s own manner of being with Fletcher is very different: she is extravagant with her love, hugging him, kissing his head, and allowing him to sleep on her bed. Fletcher accepts both women and shows no confusion; on the occasions that Angelica reprimands him he flees to Julia. Julia has it that Angelica is too quick to defend him, but he is a poor dog, Angelica protests, without language, and allowances must be made for this.

‘He’s got language, all right,’ Julia mutters darkly as she fills in another hole or plants another tree.

He only does these destructive things when he’s left home alone, Angelica argues. There was a trying period when he dug a large hole just inside the gate every time they went out, so whoever came home first fell in it. This practice ceased one day, as inexplicably as it began.

Loving a dog is a joyful experience, Angelica feels, for dog is wholly other, and a constant source of wonder and amazement because of that. Dog is responsive: his dog feelings are at the ready and vibrantly expressed, he uses his voice as best he can to communicate. His emotions are straightforward: one emotion doesn’t disguise or stand in for another: you know where you are with dog. Dog won’t dissemble and throw you into confusion with words that do not seem to mean what they say. Angelica doesn’t know why she was blessed enough to fetch up on Julia’s balmy shores, ragged survivor of more than one catastrophic shipwreck that she is, but thank god Julia didn’t demand her papers before she let her land, is all Angelica can say.
Angelica leaves Mexico prematurely, and goes back to her North Coast home. The death of her mother has brought untold problems that cannot be addressed from the other side of the world. And she can no longer avoid the insistent pull of her childhood.

One day she colours her shoulder length grey hair blonde, to match the hank of childhood hair she keeps in an embroidered linen bag in the back of her cupboard. That hair is soft and sleeps in a long coil: a silky serpent of memory. Occasionally she takes the hair out of its bag and looks at it. She strokes it gently. Fine strands rear up, attach themselves to her fingers and seek to fly off in the slightest breeze. If she touches too much, too often, she will fritter the hair away, strand by strand and there will be nothing left.

She buries her nose in its silkiness, searching for scents that will help her remember the circumstances of the child Angelica’s life. There’s no scent left after all these years. She wants to know the child who wore this hair in braids that fell the length of her back, but far from helping her to this knowledge the sight of the hair frustrates her. It seems to increase, not bridge the distance between then and now. It could belong to someone else altogether.

Every morning she drags an old cardboard box from its place in the cupboard under the stairs and lays out the photographs it contains on the cream carpet in the cool, silent room that is her workplace. The photographs will, she hopes, evoke the memory of what lives hidden in her heart and the pores of her skin, concealed in the pads of her fingers and the flesh on her face, in her belly and her daily breath.

This room is the place in which she will reconstruct her life. It is the safe place at the bottom of the house. Its windows look out into a dense tropical garden, deep pink bougainvillea tumble down the outside walls and hang in loops across the glass doors that lead to the terrace; mauve hibiscus with black hearts bloom for a few short hours on their bushes in the January heat; fuchs in pots shade the patio where staghorns cling to low walls, and scarlet geraniums tumble over the sides of their terracotta containers. It is always cool down here. The light is always soft, filtered through the foliage and the bamboo blinds that cover the windows. Inside her room the walls are cream brick on which collages of contemporary photographs hang on corkboards. Bookshelves line two walls and cardboard files overflow with notes for her work. There is a bamboo
couch with a white cover and purple and blue cushions and a matching chair covered in an old silk lilac shawl. An ancient and tatty Persian rug lies across the middle of the room. It was given to her by her mother during Angelica’s first marriage. CDs, jars of pencils, an African drum made from the root of a grass tree, a couple of large pot plants that bring the garden inside, a collection of birds’ nests arranged on a dead tree branch nailed into the wall. This is the room from which she will dare to look back and risk transmogrification into a pillar of salt.

She will have to rely on a rigorous trawling of memory, thought and feeling to assist her recall, there is nobody living left to ask, though there are some photographs to reassure her that her memories are not entirely the products of a lonely imagination seeking to design itself a life of substance.

There is, she is discovering against her will, a universal imperative to forgive.

The house in the photographs (it was white, with blue-trimmed shutters and eaves) that woman (she had pale skin and thick black hair, eyes like the North Sea on a bitter day) really did exist, in stone and wood, in flesh and blood. There existed too a man of that particular stature, well built and solid who walked with heavy tread down the hallways of his house. There did exist a fair-haired child with the smile Angelica recognises today when she looks in her mirror, though time has done its work on her features. She did live out that life in that landscape, at that particular moment in time. She did.

The camera lies by omission and almost any narrative can be constructed around its images. Of necessity the lens captures only the moment, the pose assumed for the purposes of the photograph. In this case the visual record of a family that is to all appearances happy, a sleeping dog at peace with the world. Who can know that each family member carries a burden of fear, and a trembling heart, or that the dog awakened is savage? Is that what they were really like? She wonders as she stares at these images, unable to penetrate them with her inadequate gaze. Fixed as it is in the present. She can never return to that moment in time, gone out of everybody’s reach at the very instant in which it is experienced. Hungry as she is for immediacy, she can only take the gnawed bones her memory offers and flesh them out with speculation. The irony of it! The past, that leaves its indelible marks on us, that has the power to determine our future, can never be fully re-experienced, all we poor humans can have is the moment, and after that our uncertain memories of it!
Only in extremity is experience recorded unmediated, and then it imprints itself with such intensity that one can unexpectedly, unwillingly, relive it almost to the heartbeat years later, but even then only in the feeling of it. The actual events become blurred, who took part, what they said, the physical landscapes, all these memory softens round the edges, but the feelings stay sharp and vivid.

These re-livings can’t be sought out or summoned up. They come of their own free will, fragmented, at inconvenient moments and from mysterious inspirations: the dank reek of a river in winter; a pewter tankard used for drinking beer, imbued with meaning from its long-dead owner; a mother’s dress, a piece of soap on the bathroom sink. Then there are the less tangible reminders: the equilibrium disturbed by a fleeting sense of something unhappy, and dense with emotion, passing by the corner of one’s eye like a sorrowful and unsettled young shade.

The photographs from the cardboard box under the stairs prove disappointing. They tell Angelica nothing compared to what there is to know. A smiling face, a garden of pink and red roses, a mother nursing a child on a tartan rug laid out on a well-kept lawn. The mother wears a grey cotton dress spotted with white and Angelica, kneeling at her shoulder, is dressed in pink, full-skirted, and though she can’t see them, she knows white socks and sandals are on her feet. She knows too that they have just come home from her sister, Celeste’s, christening in the local church where her mother’s husband is a lay preacher. The baby is dressed in a long white robe with broderie anglaise round the neck and hem, and a matching bonnet. Her mother must have taken off her own hat for this photograph; she surely would have been wearing one. See, Angelica is already making story. Imagining what she can’t recall, basing it on her knowledge of the customs of the time. Behind them, a blue front door is set into the white porch with blue eaves. The door opens into the long, narrow hallway of their house. She remembers the sound of his key in that blue front door.

There are other images, uncaptured by the lens, recorded only by her mind’s eye. These, unlike the happy family photos shot in summer sunlight, are dark. These dark images hold her in their thrall. This enthrallment is like a voluntary imprisonment, as one might be willingly bound in the thrilling intensity of new love, quite unable to turn the heart and spirit to any other concern. There’s a price to pay for entering this thralldom she discovers, a relinquishing of her familiar self, no less, an abandonment of everything that anchors her to the safety of everyday life.
And always the Indolence, taking its time, finding its niches, secret lodger, reptilian-eyed, breathing down her neck, reminding her again of endings that aren’t of her choosing. It has bad breath. Nothing so ugly could smell clean or sweet.

While Angelica was closeted away with her photographs, obsessed with her questing, plenty was happening in the wider world. From time to time she forced herself to read the papers, listen to the news so that she would not become entirely lost in her past. It was the time of the Middle Eastern asylum seekers, of their mandatory detention in desert prisons, a time of impersonal rejection, not hospitality.

The United Nations has expressed its disgust at Australia’s mandatory detention system, she read in the Sydney Morning Herald, describing the Howard government’s policy of locking up asylum seekers for long periods as a gross abuse of human rights. And:

Prime Minister John Howard today rejected claims that mandatory detention of refugees was immoral or illegal. Mr. Howard told Melbourne’s ABC radio that mandatory detention would not happen if people entered the country legally.

But they were asking for help, she thought to herself. Is this what we do to people asking for help? The asylum seekers had asked the wrong people, that much was clear. But in desperate times you’ll ask anybody, and then you’ll suffer the consequences.

A doctor who’d worked at the Woomera Detention Centre described the scars from beatings on the bodies of imprisoned asylum seekers from Afghanistan. The whips of the Taliban, he said. Angelica felt sick. There was a time when her young girl’s body bore scars from beatings. With fists. With lengths of green garden hose. With nylon rods. Carefully administered to avoid the face, except for one occasion when the rage became too great. Angelica was not the child of the man her mother had married. Her position in the new family was unsecured. She was the beggar at his gate. All things were his.

Angelica watched the Prime Minister on television as he declared:

‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come!’

His party faithful cheered him. His passionate declaration of ownership became their election slogan. The majority voted for sovereign rights over human needs, and the beaten asylum seekers languished in their desert camps.
Woomera: *I see hundreds and hundreds of people begging and crying, and I see people dehydrating in the sun. I see people with sewn lips and buried in the ground ‘cause that’s what they did. I see people slash up and cut their throats and arms.*

The pictorial background to the Prime Ministerial declaration seemed unfortunate: Mr. Howard, a small man, posed side-on to an outsized Australian flag, his chin jutted out, his mouth a tightly closed, thin line of determination (Oh, those thin, tightly closed and determined mouths of certain men! Let nothing in, let nothing out! Let nothing escape, let nothing enter!) his thin chest thrust out, his clenched hands firmly by his sides. Not the first time in modern history a country’s leader had posed for such an image for such a purpose, she feared. Or was this merely the product of her fevered and pessimistic imagination?

Angelica tried to imagine the shock the asylum seekers felt when they first understood that nobody was going to help them. Quite the opposite: they were to be locked up indefinitely. What would they make of the events of their lives, these refugees who’d escaped from circumstances Westerners can barely imagine?

Angelica moved between her inner turmoil, and the turmoil of the wider world. There were times when the two seemed partnered in a ghastly dance. Terrorism ruled, domestic and political. There are everywhere strong men with sticks with which to beat off those who beg *help us.* And then there are the blind eyes, the ones who turn away, who ultimately make every dark thing possible through passive acquiescence. All of us, she thought. All of us.

Kneeling on the floor, images spread around her, Angelica wants to crawl into the family photographs so that she can feel what it was like there on that particular day. Giving up on that futile desire, she wants to pull her family out into her present world, like a midwife assisting the breech birth of an overdue child, and breathe life into them, and have them speak to her, so she can hear their voices and feel the touch of their hands on her arm. All these unrealisable desires! Reason tells her that if by some miracle she were transported back in time it would be as the Angelica of today. The child in the pink dress has gone.

The finality of this outrages her each time she’s confronted with it: is there nothing to hold on to? Is there nothing that will never let her go?
Her life breathes down her neck like death and she knows she has to turn and face it. Her life. Angelica No Name. Or one name too many. She wakes every morning with a heartbeat made ragged by anxiety to enter ever more deeply into this mission of recovery. She discovers other selves whose task it has been to witness and record, like minor angels. Now, faced with the ending of their lives, these selves demand their turn at story. This subject fleshed and named Angelica has been presenting herself to the world with a physical singularity that belies the complexities contained within, the silenced voices, the stories never told. And the Indolence is another voice, mocking and irresponsible. It eyes her with scorn. As if it is mightily offended to discover itself forced to inhabit such a miserable, whining being. She can’t blame it. The wringing of her hands and the gnashing of her teeth at times offend even her. There are outbursts of rage and anguish when she throws the photographs across the room, knowing them as symbols only of loss, of transience, of the impossibility of holding on to life in part or whole because of every imaginable variation on death that runs concurrent with it. One must reach an accommodation with these facts, she understands in saner moments. One cannot go much further until one has accepted these paradoxes.

Can one go nowhere at all, until the unforgivable is forgiven? Must it be forgiven? Angelica tries to distract herself from this extreme emotional discomfort by attempting to rationally solve the mystery of why this or that particular fragment of experience has impressed itself so indelibly on her memory. She doesn’t know how the choice was made to remember this, to forget that … such ignorance is the very nature of fascination, … and what she shall say about each image will never be anything but … imaginary. She is still reading the philosophers. An unexpected and eerie merging of her personal and scholarly lives is taking place. She takes heed of Roland Barthe’s warning alerting her as it does to the dangers of truth claims and the pitfalls of self-accounting. It’s a different and infinitely contestable veracity she encounters here. This task she’s set herself can only be at best a fiction born of fiction, and how can she ever know the significance of what she has unwittingly, or knowingly left out?

Yet there is an inner determiner of truth, dwelling in the pit of the belly, from where one may breathe out the deep, relieved sigh that acknowledges yes, yes that is right. The body holds its secret truths; there are tears stored in the shoulders, and pain between the thighs, and laughter in the soles of the feet. These are the feeling memories that come bereft of images, pure sensation and swollen with truth. She has offered these
up to her imagination for interpretation and expression. Making herself ready is all that there is left for her to do.

* * *

She visits the city hospital for her check up. The air is cold and dries out the membranes in her nose. Her sinuses ache. The smells of sickness and medicine bring on an abject nausea, and she feels as if she’s tilting in her chair in the opposite way to which the world is turning. The clinical staff wears bright purple gloves. Purple is the colour of passion, suffering, feminism, bishops, and now, cancer.

David, her specialist, is in his early forties she guesses, with lank brown hair that falls to his eyebrows, making him look more like an artist of some kind than a clean-cut fellow steeped in science. He wears beige pants and a light blue open-necked shirt under his doctor’s coat. He has a wife who used to be Angelica’s general practitioner in the city, an enormously efficient willowy blonde in her thirties called Beth. It was Beth she first consulted about the lump in her armpit and her inexplicable fevers, drenching night sweats and the frightening lethargy that had her falling back into bed only an hour or so after she’d got out of it in the mornings. They have four small children.

Photographs of the family are lined up on David’s desk. Angelica wonders fleetingly if those photos hide as much as hers do, then chastises herself for cynicism and mistrust.

David is talking to her about her future, advising treatments, but she’s unable to listen. He leaves the room to find some more of her test results. She stares through the open blinds of his office window into the chemotherapy unit beyond. She counts fifteen patients receiving treatment, some into the veins in their arms, others into ports on their chests. Everyone is in some stage of baldness. Several people are yellow with jaundice. One is eating sandwiches and listening to her CD player. She wears a T-shirt that reads *Tomorrow is another day.* The youngest looks about twenty, the oldest seventy or more. There are teddy bears in red waistcoats perched on beds beside those people too ill to sit up. Some people have brought their favourite pillows, day patients who’ll go home after treatment with buckets in the car in case the nausea sets in before the end of their journey. In a cupboard at the end of the ward there’s a selection of wigs on foam stands. There are pamphlets written by beauticians that tell them how to make the best of themselves in spite of their cancer. Famous cosmetic houses have donated show bags.
of goodies to cheer them up. She sees her future. Will she be able to behave with any grace at all? A woman smiles at her through the glass. Angelica feels as if she’s going to cry and becomes aggressive instead. David returns with sheaves of paper in his hands. He sits down and starts to rifle through them. The days of Watchful Waiting are coming to a close; she can see that much from his beetled brow.

‘Fuck this,’ she says. She hadn’t intended to. It bursts from her unexpectedly like projectile vomit and splatters on the wall behind David’s head. He stares at her.

‘Fuck this, I’m not helpless, I’ll make up my own mind!’

Her voice is too loud. She feels far too hot. She’s glaring at the doctor, like the character in the Pink Floyd song: *I’ve got wild, staring eyes, I’ve got a big urge to fly, but I’ve got, nowhere to fly to, fly to…*

‘Angelica, you must listen to me. You must try to understand the seriousness of your situation. The reality is that there’s nothing to be done if you refuse chemotherapy. Radiotherapy isn’t an option as there’s no specific site to radiate at the moment. We’re going to have to look at bone marrow replacement down the track, but if you won’t agree to chemo we have no way of preventing you from moving into the next stage of your illness. It’s a question of when the cancer progresses, not if. With chemo we might have a chance of a remission. It doesn’t always work, I have to tell you that, and it can have its own side effects.’

‘What side effects?’

He’s reluctant to answer. She raises her eyebrows at him.

‘Well, we’ve found that after some time there might be a chance of leukaemia developing.’

He looks at the papers on his desk. There is a long silence. She clasps her hands in her lap and looks down at them. They don’t look as if they belong to her. They aren’t hands she knows. She should chop them off.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he says eventually, ‘but I think you are looking at a rather shortened life expectancy. Shorter than we originally thought.’

She has absolutely nothing to say. She’d leave if she thought her legs would carry her out the door.

‘Angelica,’ he says after a few minutes of deathly silence, deathly was certainly the nature of that silence, ‘Angelica, we only want to help you but you really do make us
feel as if you're doing us a favour every time you come to see us. We can’t help you if you won’t let us.’

She’s not sure if the ‘us’ refers to ‘the Team’, or if he is using the royal form of self-reference. Either way she doesn’t want to hear about any ‘us.’

‘David, is that so?’ she replies, her voice loaded with sarcasm because he isn’t sick. Because he’s in charge here. Because she’s lost all her power in the world and he’s gaining from that loss and she hates him just for that alone. And she’s not ‘refusing’ anything, she just doesn’t know her arse from her elbow at this particular moment, and none of her body parts seem to belong to her anymore, anyway. She hasn’t floated away from herself like this since she was ten-years old and sitting in a corner of the ceiling, transformed into the recording angel, keeping watch over what transpired so she could tell Angelica, or somebody, about it later.

She doesn’t like this new attitude that seems to have taken her over. She doesn’t like the hot resentment that stains her cheeks a dull, feverish red and breaks out in cold sweats under her arms and round her hairline. She doesn’t like this dark dislike of anyone who isn’t ill. She doesn’t seem to be able to do anything about it. It smoulders in her and takes up far too much of her energy. It escapes her lips in bitter commentary. Its wastes poison her atmosphere and keep at bay those who would otherwise care for her. She’s supposed to be grateful, good patients are, and she doesn’t have a skerrick of gratitude anywhere in her dark heart.

‘Well,’ she says. She hears the nastiness approaching at full speed and is unable to prevent it. These days she seems to be capable of controlling less and less about herself. As an adult she has less strength than the child of twelve possessed: at least she was better at containing herself then. These days she seems to be spilling out all over the place, messy emotions, tantrums, behaviours she would never have dared engage in when that long fair hair hung down her back in two fat braids tied at the ends with a tartan ribbon.

‘Well,’ she says again, ‘I think that’s terrific.’

The sight through his window of a pair of purple gloves holding up a long syringe stirs up her fear even more, setting her on a one-way track she doesn’t know how to jump. Why does he leave the bloody blinds open? Bit thoughtless, isn’t it?

‘I’m modelling a new perspective on doctor-patient relations, aren’t I? I’m doing you a favour and paying you for it as well,’ she snarls at him. ‘Have you ever thought about
it like that? You should. Let’s get some equality going round here. It’s better for my morale.’

She stops, running out of steam, breathless in the harsh chemical air and in full-on panic. David says nothing. He tilts back his chair and gazes at her. He’s thinking that she’s difficult, isn’t he? He’s used to people who willingly, gratefully give over their lives to him and his expertise, to his knowledge and judgement, abandoning all responsibility for themselves, or so it seems to her at this point. Does he think she’s given up? She hasn’t. She’s just on a different tack and she hasn’t absorbed this latest news. How can he expect her to decide about anything when he’s just told her she’ll be dying sooner than anyone could have imagined? How can she hear anything else after she’s heard that? She takes a deep breath and tries to calm herself.

‘I’m sorry, David,’ she tells him. She’s holding up both hands, palms towards him, as if to keep him and everything he’s saying away from her person.

‘I can’t do this now, I really can’t’ (she’s pleading with him). ‘You’re making me feel like I’m dying any minute and I don’t want to feel like that, it drags me down into some awful dark place, your white coat, this hospital, this unit, the atmosphere, they all drag me down into that awful dark place. I’d rather be home on the kitchen floor, the molecules are nicer.’

He stares at her. This is not what she’s supposed to be saying. She is not being a good girl. Angelica puts her head in her hands and weeps because she knows she’s not being a good girl and he might just hold her life in his hands. He is completely the wrong person to offend, anybody with a scrap of sense would know that. But it’s a relief to feel the warm salty tears on her cheeks, the voluptuous yielding to childlike, heaving sobs is a wonderful release, the free flow of snot eases her aching sinuses. She lifts her slimy face out of her hands and wails at him again (Shut up you daft cow! Shut up!):

‘My spirit withers here David! Don’t you understand? That matters, it isn’t just my body, there’s my mind and heart and soul and spirit to think about, not just my body.’

Oh. That’s good, Angelica. That’s really good. Introduce the metaphysical to oncology, why don’t you.

David pushes a box of tissues across the desk. She ignores them.

‘I’ve been through this before, you know that. Three years ago I had that cervical cancer and I did everything everybody told me I should do and it was awful and now
here I am again and I haven’t even properly got over that, yet, and David, I’m not sure I can do it all again, I just don’t know if I can go through it another time and it might not work anyway, and then what, and Jesus, how can I think straight about all this? Why has this happened to me again? It’s not fair, David! It’s not fucking fair!’

She’s forgotten all about her theory of playing the hand you’re dealt and not wasting precious time whining. Gone. Clean gone.

David pushes the tissues closer. He says:

‘I’m so sorry, Angelica. I’m so sorry,’ and after a bit she takes a handful of Kleenex and blows her nose, scrubs at her face till it shines.

‘I’ll come back another day when I’ve had time to think and I’ll be better prepared, I’m really, really sorry,’ she tells him.

Why the hell is she apologising? Because she doesn’t want to burn all her bridges? Because she’s scared he won’t see her again if she needs him? Because apologising to the specialist when you get emotional is a tradition in the discourse of Western medicine? She’s had little to do with Western medicine outside the experience of cancer, but it seems she’s garnered quite a lot of knowledge of its codes and expectations. Most of which she’s chosen to ignore today. She rears up her head like a spooked horse and stares at him wild-eyed, waiting for a response.

‘Okay, Angelica,’ he sighs, pushing himself up from behind his desk. ‘But you haven’t a lot of time to make up your mind. Don’t leave it too long before you come back.’

She gathers herself up as best she can and goes to the ladies’ where she looks in the mirror for a long time, talking herself down from the ceiling and back into her body. Who am I? she wonders as she stares at the pale woman in the mirror with the big hollow eyes. Where am I going? The front of her hair grew in white after the cervical cancer. Because of this latest health scare she’s neglected to keep up the blonde dye jobs so she’s streaked with grey over the rest of her head and white like a badger at the front. She doesn’t recognise herself. This loss of her sense of self spooks her. There’s bits of her scattered every which way. Get a grip, she advises herself, and manages to call in some of her parts. She washes her face, puts some Chap Stick on her dry lips, and leaves the hospital. Her legs are still shaking. She’s wearing jeans and brown boots, a white shirt, an emerald green silk scarf that was a present from her youngest son thrown loosely round her neck, her old brown leather pack on her back. The scarf is
stiff with tears and snot. She walks carefully down the familiar Newtown streets, leaking vital energies like a dying alien. God. Christ. *And the wheels on the bus go round and round, round and round, round and round* … the song from her boys’ childhoods mercifully obliterates all thinking.

To return to King Street after a long absence is to invite serious assault on her senses, she dimly realises, senses coaxed open by the salty perfume of the sea and the secret scents of the cool, dark rainforest. Senses tuned to the distant chug of trawlers as they cross the bar, heading out for their night’s work. Senses stirred by the whistling kites nesting at the bottom of the garden of her North Coast home, and the mournful cries of black-capped terns on a winter beach. Senses nourished by the sight of a burnt-orange sun as it sinks into the river at the end of another long summer day, and soothed by the frangipani touch of an early evening breeze. Senses calmed by the sight of the blue heron, absorbed in picking its delicate way across the mud flats in the wispy grey of an early morning river mist. These senses are ill-prepared for traffic fumes and the roar of trucks; the hot sun glaring off shop windows and dog shit in steaming piles around her feet.

She wonders how she might speak with anyone, that woman in the dress shop, that man buying cheese, how could she speak in a language they would understand? Once she was one of them, but now there is nothing in common left between them.

 Everywhere she looks she sees frivolity, and a defiant ignorance that she recognises as an aspect of her younger self. To see this provokes in her an envy she can hardly bear. Doesn’t anybody think about dying? she wonders. In the desolate early hours of one of her numbered mornings she’d read:

> *When he had retired for the night, Sextius would question his soul: What bad habit have you cured today? What fault have you resisted? In what respect are you better?*

> Her courage fails her at the thought of the thousands of her days and nights yet to be accounted for. She imagines conducting a survey of the people she sees strolling these inner city streets.

> ‘Excuse me, do you wonder in the night where you will go when you are done with this good earth?’

> ‘In what respect do you feel you are better for your stay in it?’

> ‘What contribution do you consider you have made to the well-being of the planet and everyone on it?’
They’d turn away from her, sniggering and pointing, and quite rightly too. She’s not right in the head, she has to acknowledge this. She’s way off balance. She’s tilted right out of alignment. She’s out of her tree. She’s off the planet, she’s scared shitless. How could this have happened to her again? What didn’t she do right the last time?

She wanders aimlessly into shops. She looks at startling clothes, green satin dresses trimmed with pink lace, midnight blue taffeta evening skirts with net petticoats dyed burgundy and gold peeping from beneath their hemlines. She fondles crinkled grey silk trousers, and velvet jackets embroidered with sequins and pearls. She gazes at yellow slippers decorated with tiny blue flowers, like forget-me-nots. Forget. Me. Not. If ever she were to spend hundreds of dollars on extravagant clothes, now would be the time. All the shops smell sweet, like incense. The heels of her boots echo on their wooden floors. She feels quite mad, as if there is a dense membrane between her and the rest of the world. She gathers an armful of clothes to try on. In the dressing room she feels sick again, as if all her energy has suddenly departed, leaving her with legs like jelly and arms that hang uselessly at her sides. She looks at her face in the long mirror. She sees her mother. She walks out leaving the exquisite garments in a pile on the dressing room floor. She moves on up the filthy hot street. She lived here once, years ago, with her husband and their two small sons. She remembers how it felt then. There was an exciting sense of the bohemian with Indonesian restaurants and second-hand clothes shops. Young women in black with cherry-stained lips sat in European cafes drinking coffee, and there was plenty of cultural diversity. Bookshops and poetry readings in the pub on Friday night. A pawn shop, its barred windows crammed with watches, cameras, necklaces, earrings: other people’s lost or relinquished lives. They bought an aquamarine ring there once that she still wears, but no longer on her wedding finger.

In those days she didn’t mind the dirt and the choking traffic fumes. She was young. She settled her sons in the back of their red mini and they darted between petrol tankers and long-distance lorries to playgroup, the library, the supermarket with its poky aisles, and to Woollies where they bought play clothes and cheap, colourful toys. The doctor’s surgery was above the Spanish Deli; they lined up there with their coughs and colds and earaches. Traffic noise was a constant background to their daily lives, as familiar then as the roar of the sea is to her now on the still, moonless tropical nights when the trawlers go out hunting prawns, and the bats swoop down into the Panama fruit tree and between feasting, conduct furious, noisy quarrels with each other.
The graffiti then read *Arms for Afghanistan! Legs for Tito!* On the side of a terrace house anarchic artists had painted an ironic prescription that symbolised the spirit of the times:

*Do not frolic!* it thundered. *Show me some discipline!*

In their house they had slate floors in the kitchen and pine cupboards and a nursery with buttercup yellow walls. They had carpets and a good stereo and they drank wine with friends under the peach tree in the back yard on sunny Sunday afternoons while the children splashed in their paddling pool or played in the sandbox their father had built in the shade of the old backyard gum tree. They were young and had plenty of money. They imagined themselves to be happy, and to have some influence in the world.

Rounding the corner into their old street, she can almost see the three of them coming towards her on their way to the park, two fair-haired boys on bikes with training wheels, their dark-haired father shepherding them safely across the busy street. Suddenly, she cannot bear to be in this place, at this time.

Last time she visited the city, that place of dirt and savage inequalities, she saw along the wall of a hospice, children offering themselves for sale to moneyed predators for the price of a fix or a bed for the night. How can we let these things go on, she keened to herself on the 389 bus back to Bondi Beach? What kind of people are we? But she can’t be trusted to have accurate perceptions anymore. Show her a newborn babe and she’ll see it sick and ageing.

The next morning, she catches the first train back to the silent room in the house by the sea, to her photographs, to the pictures in her mind, to her quest for the answers to the mysteries of her life. Dr David will have to wait. The Lymphoma will have to wait. Last time she didn’t take the cancer seriously enough, that’s where she went wrong. Too shocked to think through the emotions, she couldn’t make any sense of anything. She didn’t start the accounting of her life that everybody has to start in such circumstances. So now she’s not wasting any more time. How many salutary reminders does one person need?

* * *

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Mothering. As a student Angelica did an interview with a famous writer. They spoke of the ingratitude of children.

‘Tell them,’ the writer advised, ‘I gave you life. What else do you want from me?’

They laughed loud and long. Some years later Angelica read the line in the writer’s new book.

She never entirely agreed with the writer. As well, the line sounded a little too much like what her mother might have said. Except her mother might have added, I gave you life and now you have to repay me in kind.

But why, Angelica wondered, did her mother entirely fail to love her, and worse? She’s looked into her mother’s history and found nothing to explain this, and even if she missed something, some very large something, could two people who were such thoroughly loving grandparents have also been thoroughly abusive parents, damaging their own daughter so that she could not love? It made no sense.

Angelica never reflects on her own mothering without referring back to her early experiences and always with the same baffled wonderment. How? Why? Her mother’s complaints were mild though deeply felt: she wasn’t allowed to go on to further education because it was thought to be wasted on girls. Her brother got everything. Her older sister stole her clothes. They were poor. No mention of depravity of any kind that would explain her mother’s complete inability to nurture her three daughters. She wouldn’t have hidden it, Angelica and Edwina were sure of that. Their mother made such a song and dance out of all her real and imagined sufferings there was no way she’d hide anything serious from them. She’d be ramming it down their necks every day, Edwina said, telling them how lucky they were compared to her. To make sure, Angelica asked her mother one day. They were in Angelica’s marital home, and the baby was still sleeping in the afternoons. Her mother always tried to time her visits when the child would be asleep; that way she had Angelica’s undivided attention and she didn’t have to bother being loving to her grandchild.

‘Did awful things happen to you when you were a child?’ she asked mother.

‘No,’ her mother replied. ‘Nothing really awful happened to me. Only what I’ve told you all. Until I got pregnant with you. Everything changed then.’

‘So you had a reasonable sort of childhood, ordinary stuff? Compared to mine, I mean.’ Angelica pressed on, ignoring the last part of her mother’s answer because she felt she simply couldn’t take it one more time, hearing how her conception had totally
ruined her mother’s life. Angelica had wanted her baby; loved him into being, having known what it meant to be not wanted from birth and earlier. She talked to him while he grew in her womb, separated from her gaze by thin layers of epidermis; whispered, I love you, little baby, I love you. Anything to be different from her mother in these matters.

‘Yes,’ her mother acknowledged in a rare moment of honesty. ‘I had a pretty ordinary childhood.

Then said she had to go to the bathroom and ducked out the back door and didn’t come back. When Angelica realised her mother wasn’t coming back, she’d thrown a bottle of wine at the kitchen wall.

A couple of years later Angelica told her mother she was expecting a second child.

‘Oh my god!’ her mother shouted. ‘What for? Why have another when you don’t have to?’

To which there was no possible answer, it being entirely the wrong question.

Angelica has no memories of her mother in her earliest years, only of her grandparents and uncle and aunt. They all lived in the same house: her mother was present, but apparently disengaged from all their lives.

Angelica doesn’t want to duck out the back door on Harry and Samuel. There are things she would like to say to The Chef and the Adventurer before she dies. Protocols silence her. There are things that are too intimate for young men to hear from their mother.

‘When you were an infant,’ she’d like to say, telling each of them the same story because shame on her, she sometimes can’t remember which events belonged to which child.

‘When you were an infant,’ she’d say, ‘I used to hear you cry through the open window of your bedroom. I’d sit in the autumn sun under the peach tree in the courtyard your father and I laid brick by brick during the hot summer before you were born.’

(Ah! That was the Adventurer! So-called because of his penchant for becoming embroiled in tricky situations in foreign countries, not least of which was a stint working in the refugee camps of Tanzania where he taught child soldiers how to play football. ‘Their eyes are dead, Mum,’ he emailed. ‘They are so scary, this is the hardest thing I’ve ever done.’ He came home months later, thoroughly shaken in body and soul,
and riddled with intestinal worms from eating goat. ‘There were dead babies lying on the side of the road,’ he told her after weeks of traumatised silence. ‘Nobody did anything. They just left them there covered in flies lying there like road kill. They were babies. Mum. Mum…’).

‘I’d hear your cry from the yellow nursery through the white window frames and the floating cotton curtains. When I heard you, milk flooded my breasts. They swelled and stung, my nipples rose up hard and spurted fountains; the front of my shirt grew dark and soaked. All this at the sound of your waking cry!’

‘I gave you life,’ she’d like to tell them, ‘but like love, that isn’t always enough. It was in the small daily events that I let you down. It wasn’t in the grand passionate loving of you. I never wavered in that. I’ll tell you about it. I’ll tell you every bit of our story as it presents itself to me. I’ll write it down and you can peruse it at your leisure and while I’m still around. You can take me up on various points and air your grievances and disagreements. It will go something like this:

Angelica and her children Samuel and Harry lived an ordinary life. They had a terrace house in a leafy suburb that they shared with their cat, Gypsy, a couple of bicycles and several hundred books. They had a small backyard with a big gum tree at the bottom of it in which the boys had built a cubby house. The boys shared a bedroom. Samuel, the eldest, divided the room in half by sticking masking tape on the carpet between their beds. Many of their fights concerned various real and imagined transgressions of this border by one or the other. Angelica cooked and shopped. She transported the children to and from school, football, swimming. She went to her work at the university. Sometimes, provoked beyond endurance by his recalcitrance, she whacked a child on his legs or backside. It was an ordinary life.

Stephen, the children’s father, made another household with a new wife and a brand new baby. Harry came home from the new household and said, ‘When I hold her she feels really proud of herself.’

A few days after the birth of this child Angelica made a decision. She emptied the bottom drawer of her dresser and searched through the tissue and linen bags until she found what she wanted. In the early morning sunlight Angelica held up the Swiss cotton christening robe Samuel and Harry had worn. Around the neck
of the gown she found tender, milky stains. Carefully she washed it. She ironed the tiny matching bonnet. When she’d finished it smelled of rosewater and lavender. Angelica wrote a card to the new parents from herself and her children, in which she wished them and their new daughter well.

With each fold of the dress, with each fold of the paper, Angelica farewelled the part of her life during which she had made use of infant garments. She sent the gift to the new child in Samuel’s backpack. When Sam returned from delivering the gift he said to his brother,

‘She's done her first big shit. Dad had to clean it up. Sucked in.’

For some time Harry and Samuel discussed this phenomenon.

‘Did we do that?’ they asked their mother. ‘Which one of us? When?’

Angelica was digging in the garden in front of their bedroom window. They hung out over the sill, elbowing one another and jostling for space. Excited by this oral history. The afternoon was hot and still. That night friends would come for dinner bringing mangoes and wine. Angelica tried to recall the children’s infancies. She suspected she had them confused. What she couldn’t remember she invented. But she didn’t mention the time she shook one till his teeth rattled. She didn’t mention the time she left a perfect red handprint on someone’s leg.

The new child, as yet unnamed, slept quietly on in Stephen’s household. A beginning and an ending.

In their ordinary life Angelica and her children made a home of sorts. Every day they constructed their memories. They spent long summer afternoons at the beach. Harry and Samuel swam far out beyond the waves on their boogie boards. Their mother watched them for a long time until she couldn’t tell which of the black specks out there were hers. She sat on her towel, sunning her body. The tide went out leaving the rocks exposed. Seagulls perched on them, pecking at the green sea plants, grooming and fussing. The surf flattened to almost nothing, gentle frills like the lace on the edge of an old petticoat. Small children built important structures in the margins between the sand and the sea. Samuel and Harry came in, cold and starved. They all ran up the beach for fish and chips then ate them, sitting on the grass, feeding the gulls their leftovers. When they got home it was dark and the children collapsed on their beds.

‘Top day,’ they sighed. ‘Can they do it again next weekend?’
Sometimes they made these good memories. Sometimes they were not so good. It was an ordinary life.

In this ordinary life, before the first marriage came to its end, Angelica picked her small son up in her arms and he thrust his hand down the front of her shirt and fondled her nipple, smiling at her, his whole face engaged in that smile. His older brother watched from an amused, slightly embarrassed distance, being past the time of his childhood when he too could do such a thing. Stephen, observing, laughed and then they all walked down to the park.

In the dark and lonely hours of an early morning, a child felt his sleep-sodden way to her bed. Angelica didn’t sleep any more. Holding the strong little body she lay awake, thinking of loss, thinking of the ending of things. The child’s easy breathing against her face, and the warmth of his father against her back, made her safe enough to permit these thoughts, secure as she felt in all that life. Through the un-curtained windows she could see the beginnings of daylight, bringing with it the ordinary routines during which there was little time for such thoughts, during which there was anger and exasperation and tears and misunderstandings.

Angelica slid quietly out from between the sleepers and went downstairs to the kitchen. Familiar objects were just distinguishable in the grey light. The bare brown bones of the peach tree outside the window were beginning to bud, spring coming early that year. Soon it would be covered in pink blossoms, then green shoots, then the peaches. She never quite managed to save them from the flies. They’d fall again, just like last year, a pulpy brown mass on the bricks under the tree and just like last year the children would skid in them, and throw them at one another. The smell of rotting fruit would be heavy on the summer air, just like last year. Angelica thought about these things. In her ordinary life she had plenty of time.

But that is only her interpretation of the past, she acknowledges reading it over, and one weighted with doubt, and conflict and nostalgia. It might not satisfy them. It might not be how they’d tell the story. It leaves out too much. She knows better than to do that. Once Harry asked her to tell him everything about her young life. So she wrote it all in a letter that she never sent. Ever since she’s been
waiting for the opportunity to sit down and tell him. She’ll know it when it comes. She knows too, that traumas can be generational. She knows the parents’ secrets seep through into the child’s days and nights. But how to tell such secrets to a child? It can’t be done, or she never worked out how. And when they’re grown and can listen to such things, it’s too late. She always felt that she was lying to them, lies of omission like she lied to everybody. You don’t know who I am. You don’t know where I’ve come from. You don’t know anything about the central story of my life. What is a child to make of such a mother?

He’s eleven years old. He has light blue eyes circled with darker blue and blonde hair he washes every day. He’s starting to take an interest in his good looks. He’s got a brother, a father, a mother, a stepmother and a new baby sister. He’s got a racing bike and a new pair of gym boots he bought himself from the proceeds of a garage sale. He likes jumpers knitted by his Mum, model cars he makes himself and lollies. He wishes his Mum had more money. He wishes he had his own room. He thinks he’s catching puberty. He gets into trouble at school, hates his brother, and he’s known grief.

He spends seven days at his Mum’s, then seven days at his Dad’s. It’s a hassle, but he wants to see both of them and anyway nobody ever asked him what arrangements he’d like and if they did he’d want the impossible, he’d want them back together, so he just does as he’s told.

On Saturday morning he combs his hair with water, puts on his new gym boots and the striped jumper his mother just finished, gets on his bike and goes visiting. His first stop is the lolly factory where he buys a bag full of rejects: misshapen jellies, badly wrapped toffees, snakes with lumps in the wrong places, ripe raspberries, milk bottles and caramels with their vanilla stripes out of line. He ties the bag on his handlebars and speeds over to Ollie’s place. He’s got a lot on his mind, his Mum and Dad, his stepmother, his mangy brother, but he and Ollie go roller skating and he forgets about everything for a while. At the skating rink he stays upright longer than any of the others and then he plays the machines with what’s left of his pocket money. He feels a little sick from skating and all the lollies he’s eaten. There’s quite a lot left so he gives them away. Maybe he’ll give up lollies for a while, he thinks, for couple of days, a week; maybe he won’t after
They catch the bus back to Ollie’s place where he’s left his bike. It’s getting dark now; he’d better get home. His brother will be there, what a turd, he causes all the trouble, it’s all down to him that suddenly there’s two houses when he only wanted one, and preferably one without his brother in it.

The dickhead is watching TV and hogging the fire. There’s roast chicken for dinner. His favourite.

‘Remind me to eat with my mouth closed, Mum,’ he says, ‘I always forget and Dad hates it.’

His mother watches him while she thinks he isn’t looking. His teeth are as yet too big for his mouth, his nose frequently blocked, it’s no mean feat eating with your mouth closed under those conditions but she reminds him anyway.

‘Do you think Sally and Dad will split up?’ asks his brother, out of nowhere, offering his plate for more roast potatoes.

‘She can’t leave, dickflop,’ he tells his brother, ‘they’ve got a new baby.’

‘They took their pants off,’ says his brother.

‘Shut up, moron, what would you know?’

‘I know how people have babies,’ says his brother and pours the last of the gravy over his potatoes.

He’s asleep in his bed, snoring a little through his blocked nose. At three am his brother crawls into their mother’s bed.

‘We should have bars all over this house,’ says his brother, ‘over the roof, the windows over the doors so nobody can get in.’

‘We’re safe,’ says his mother, half-asleep. ‘Nobody can get in.’

‘No, they could with a gun.’

‘Bars would look ugly,’ says his sleepy mother.

‘No, Mum we could paint them bright colours and grow stuff round them, they’d look nice,’

‘Draw up plans in the morning,’ says his mother.

‘I wanna get up at five-thirty,’ says his brother, ‘my favourite show’s on TV then.’

‘No,’ says his mother, ‘that’s much too early for TV. Go back to sleep.’
Now he’s got himself his first job. After school every Tuesday he runs through the park to the Lighting Factory. He paints boxes, cleans up around the place and talks to the guys about shows they’ve lighted. At six-forty-five they drop him home. He’s starved and tired and he’s got twenty dollars in his pocket, the first he’s ever earned.

‘Mind it for me,’ he says to his mother. ‘Tomorrow I wanna open a bank account.’

‘Mind my bankbook,’ he tells his mother, and she puts it in the top drawer of her dresser under scarves and woollen socks. After some time it begins to smell like the lavender sachets she keeps in there.

‘Yuk,’ he says sniffing the pages and sneezing.

He hears his Mum and Dad arguing on the phone. His mother shouts and cries. Then she collapses onto the sofa and grabs a cushion between her teeth and shakes it to death like a dog trained to kill rats.

That night he goes into his room and smashes every single model car he’s made, smashes them into tiny pieces though he’s worked on them for hours and painted them with a tiny brush.

‘I don’t want them anymore!’ he shouts at his mother. ‘I don’t want them anymore!’

He smashes and sobs and smashes. She tries to stop him, to hold him close in her arms but he struggles to get away from her.

‘Leave me alone!’ he cries. ‘Leave me alone! I hate you! I hate Dad! I hate Sally!’

His mother wants to pick him up like she did when he was small and hide him in her jacket, shield him with her body. He throws himself on his bed and eventually falls fast asleep. Next day his mother says:

‘It’s a hard time, a very hard time but it won’t last forever, lovie, it will get better.’

He doesn’t answer her.

‘I wanna see Dad,’ he tells her after a while.

‘Okay,’ she says. Give me a minute and I’ll drive you over.’

His Mum goes into the toilet where she seems to go a lot these days. She sits on the lid and puts her head in her hands and cries, because she can’t shield him
with her body, because he isn’t little anymore, because he loves his Dad and wants to be with both of them, and look what they’ve done to him and there’s no way he can ever have back what he’s lost, what they’ve taken away from him.

His Mum gets up and goes into the bathroom where she washes her face in cold water. When she returns to the sitting room he’s sprawled on the floor watching TV with the cat on his back, kneading her paws into the soft wool of his striped, hand-knitted jumper.

He comes home from school one rainy afternoon to find his mother playing that stupid Paul Simon tape again, it’s all she ever listens to these days, except that soppy classical stuff that makes her cry. He’s never seen anybody cry so much. It sucks.

He’s had a disagreement with the bus driver who objected to carrying him only one stop, and he’s forgotten to meet up with his brother and he’s been in trouble at school for something he didn’t do, as usual.

…These are the days of miracle and wonder
So don’t cry, baby, don’t cry. Don’t cry…

‘Yeah, right,’ he thinks.

He’s fed up with his mother and father not talking to each other. He wishes Sally would disappear off the face of the earth and they’d all live together again, preferably without his brother, in the big house where he had his own room with the peach tree outside the window and the yellow walls his mother painted and the courtyard his parents made together, when they were together, like everybody’s supposed to be except for his stupid family.

Losing love is like a window in your heart,
Everybody sees you’re blown apart…

Once they lived in London, there was snow; there’s photos of them in snowsuits throwing snowballs at each other, his Dad making a snowman with a carrot for a nose. In London he fell on broken glass in the street. They took him to hospital
and had to hold him down while the doctor stitched up his palm. He looks at it now, the scar still visible, so deep, there was blood everywhere, all over his mother’s clothes and on the footpath. His Dad went to Canada for work and when he came back he brought photos of himself on a snowmobile, they lived in that house in St John’s Wood, and they rode on the underground to see the Christmas lights.

This is the story of how we begin to remember,
This is the powerful pulsing of love in their veins…

Paul Simon babbling on, why can’t she listen to something else?
Then they all went to Holland and he crapped in his pants on that barge trip down a canal in Amsterdam. Well, he was only three or something.

‘I’m going for a ride,’ he shouts to his mother, but she doesn’t hear him over Paul moron Simon.

He heads for the lolly factory where he buys a bag full of comfort, then gets into more trouble when he comes home late and can’t eat his dinner.

Don’t want no more of this crazy love,
Don’t want no more of this love…

He can’t believe it. She’s still playing it.

He watches the proceedings from a distance and from the point of view of both households. None of it seems to have much to do with him, though he suspects it might be his fault, or his dickhead brother’s. His mother tells him all the time that its grown-up stuff and they’ll take care of it and he’s definitely not to worry and none of it is his fault. His mother still has a fierceness coming off her whenever his Dad calls round to pick them up or drop off their football gear. She stands in the doorway and just looks at his father, doesn’t speak a word. Dad shuffles his feet on the step and won’t look at anyone and gets away as fast as he can. He doesn’t really want to play football anymore, he doesn’t like it, but his father
bought him new boots at the beginning of the season and says he’s got to keep playing till they’re worn out.

‘Give them to me,’ says his mother in a hard voice. ‘I’ll throw them in the canal.’

But he doesn’t give them to her and he continues to play on the Saturdays he’s with his Dad, and he hopes his feet get a move on before next season.

The grown-ups go to court and his mother gets Sole Custody with Liberal Access. That means he can go back and forth between the households as he wants and that’s okay, he likes that. It takes some getting used to as he’s used to waiting to be told where he can be; it isn’t that easy deciding for himself. He tries to swing it so that he’s in one house and dickhead’s in the other. But dickhead gets upset and says he can’t sleep properly without him. The nightmares scare him too much. He’s quite flattered and gets into doing his brother a favour by hanging round sometimes. Next year it’s high school and he’s noticed he’s getting hairy in private places. Sally tells dickflop not to touch his penis or he’ll grow up strange and people won’t like him. Dickflop tells their mother.

‘Shit,’ she says.

‘Don’t swear, Mum,’ he says.

His mother gets on the phone.

‘Now look here, Sally,’ she says, ‘Don’t tell the boys this nonsense about masturbation. It’s perfectly healthy, you obviously never did it enough yourself, and why are you watching him when he thinks he’s being private in the first place?’

His Dad gets on the phone and tells his mother not to upset Sally. The baby keeps her up all night, he says.

‘Tough,’ says his mother. ‘Why don’t you get up and help her?’

‘That’s none of your business,’ says his Dad, ‘and I’m not going to talk to you anymore.’

‘Suits me,’ says his mother. ‘May you stay forever young,’ she says, and then she hangs up the phone.
‘Listen,’ she says to her boys, ‘it’s your body, touch it all you like, just do it in private. There’s nothing wrong with it but it is a solitary pleasure, nobody else wants to watch you, like picking your nose.’

There’s no reply. They’re engrossed in a television program in which two fortunate teenagers have been deserted by their parents and are making it very well on their own.

Months later he’s talking to his friends when the subject of divorce comes up. He tells his story, they tell theirs. Mothers screaming, fathers getting tough. Boyfriends making mothers cry. Girlfriends and new babies holding hands with dads.

‘There’s no hand left for me,’ keens his brother, who has somehow managed to wangle his way into the conversation.

After-school-care and everybody’s working, everybody’s tired. Yeah, Mum yells at us, Dad shouts all the time. They don’t care about us, they went to court, they’re talking to their lawyers. I wish her and Dad would stop fighting. Do you wanna go play Double Dragon? Yeah.

‘Can I come?’ begs his brother and they all groan but take him anyway and even give him an extra forty cents for another game when his money runs out.

Then they look at somebody’s watch and swear, shit, they’re gonna be late home, more trouble. They hop on their bikes and do the finger whistles they’ve all just mastered, except for his brother who can’t do it for the life of him though he goes purple and black trying. Off they go, riding home to their blended families, lumps and all. This is their life and they manage it all right, except that somewhere there’s a memory of a time when everybody they love lived together and they really, really liked it that way.

If only she could have done it, Angelica thought. If only she could have kept them all together. How much of her own damage was to blame? The famous writer while amusing, was wrong. It isn’t enough just to give life. Having given it, one assumes responsibility for it, in the same way that some traditions insist that if you should happen to save a life, you are beholden to watch over its duration.
Now The Chef is in Mexico and the Adventurer in Montreal. They’ve travelled the world. They’ve opened bank accounts in foreign places, with foreign currency, in foreign tongues. They’ve skated on frozen lakes made postcard pretty by trees whose branches, heavy with snow, arch gracefully towards the icy earth. They’ve branded cattle on ranches far out in the middle of the vast Canadian plains. They’ve swabbed the decks of fabulous yachts, moored in legendary ports in France and Spain. They’ve sent photographs of themselves lounging in Trafalgar Square, and rambling beside muddy canals in Amsterdam. They’ve fallen in love with northern women with high cheekbones and long hair, whose languages they must learn. She has bred nomads. Restless and curious. Undaunted by obstacles of distance, culture and language. The emails:

‘I love you, Mum, and I always miss you. Going to New Orleans for Mardi Gras. Spent the weekend in Estonia, went there on the ferry didn’t sink ha ha. I love you Mum and I always miss you.’

‘I love you, my darlings, Angelica replies, ‘and I always miss you. Are you remembering to brush your teeth?’

When you were an infant, she would say in the story she wrote for them, I took you in our bed, you slept between your father and me and in the mornings when we woke my breasts were full and aching. I offered them to you and when you had finished, and fallen back into your infant dreams, I gave them to your father. These acts of love I count as some of the most generous I have ever performed. Your gratitude and your contentment, your small sighs, your unforgettable gaze, all these let me know the best of everything, at least for a while.

As an adult, thinking back over her life with her children, Angelica comes finally to feel pity for her mother. To not have known these things, to have been unable or unwilling to love like this! To not have wept and laughed and argued in that way that is so peculiar to mothers and children! To have had it all there waiting for you, and not recognise it. To have a child who wants only to love you, and have you love her, and not know it. That, Angelica thinks, is what hell must be.
Everyone’s dying. It’s just that when you discover you’ve got a terminal illness, the notion of dying gets right in your face. What will Angelica care about on the day that she dies? How much she has learned? How much she has loved, or failed to love? Is there any end to all her questions?

* * *

Angelica is back with the photographs. Searching, as she has through the winter and into the wet heat of summer, and still she hasn’t found what she’s looking for.

She wants to remember him. She has only one image and she can hardly bear to look at it. It’s of him and her mother on their wedding day. When she thinks of taking the photograph out of its envelope or even approaching the box in the cupboard under the stairs where it is stored, she feels an unpleasant churning in her belly. A vertiginous sensation overtakes her as if she’s not turning in time with world and could easily fall right off it, out into space into nothingness.

She takes the brown envelope from where it lies separated from the other pictures. Then the photograph is before her. She’s removed it from its cover without any real awareness of what she’s doing and she’s placed it on the cream carpet in her cool, safe room where she sits in the lotus position, planning first to know, and then to tell the story of her life. Before she dies.

She gazes at the ceiling. She can feel the beating of her heart. She doesn’t want to enter this image as she does with other photographs. Instead she feels as she felt the day she found a snake on its way out of the upstairs bathroom. The snake and she froze in place. Then she crept backwards down to the kitchen where she found the metal dish cover they used to keep flies off food. She tiptoed back to where the snake had held its position, halfway across the threshold between the bathroom and the hallway. Slowly she lowered the cover over the reptile, then, when it was in place, she leapt away as the snake understood it had been confined and began to thrash and spit.

She fetched her glasses, the better to observe and identify the reptile. She stared at it with that fearful fascination typical of the enthralled. It was a long thin snake, its brown scales flecked with blue, and as it raised itself to strike at her she saw it had a pale yellow belly.
When finally she looks at the photograph she can’t see him. Instead she sees her mother. She wears shoes with high thin heels, a wool coat that comes to the middle of her calves. There’s a small, smart hat perched on the top of her head, over hair Angelica knows is very dark. She’s smiling, though it looks like a forced smile. Her handbag is over her arm and in the same hand she holds a pair of gloves. Her other arm is linked through her husband’s. She doesn’t know where her blonde hair came from, is what Angelica thinks about next. She thinks that thought for a long time.

Still Angelica doesn’t look deeply, instead skimming over the surface of the image like a dragonfly hovering over a still pool on tremulous wings. As if some murderous fish might leap out at any moment and take her small life, regardless of her future plans. She has no desire to draw the man out into her present world but she does feel compelled to describe him, as if description is the first step towards making him real to her. This is a paradox: she knows she’s holding off the reality of him every day and every night. It isn’t lost to her, far from it. She’s simply become adept at shutting it out.

If she can let him be real will she become real? Is this the price she has to pay to uncover her own authenticity? Can they still be so linked, after death and time and memory and forgetting have done their work?

She’s dizzy from shallow breathing. She looks towards the door that she’s left open in case she has to run. The dog has draped himself across this threshold like a guardian at the gate. The sight of him reminds her of where and who she is. She whispers his name. His tail thumps against the floor but his gaze remains fixed beyond this room. A small growl escapes his throat. Who is he warning? It’s very hot and still this January morning and she’s sweating in her light sarong and cotton blouse. She untangles her legs and lies flat on her back. She watches the daddy-long-legs drop from their threads in the corner of the ceiling and hang suspended in midair. There’s not the slightest breeze to disturb them. The photograph lies beside her and she’s careful not to look at it, or to let her hand touch its flat shiny surface.

After she’d trapped the snake, she was at a loss as to what to do next. Alone in the house, she thought she’d better wait till Julia came home, as Julia is much more knowledgeable in these matters than she is. Nevertheless, Angelica felt compelled to go back to the scene every few minutes. Once there, she’d get down on her knees and put her face close to the spitting snake, and gaze hungrily at its small head and forked black
tongue. Perhaps the power of her gaze might help her to incorporate the animal into the familiar, might rob it of its fearsome alterity, its disturbing aura of the utterly other, out of reach of any human appeal. She knew though, that what they had in common was life, and a blind impulse to live it, and she felt bad for imprisoning it, even though to let it roam the house would be an act of sheer recklessness.

She sits up and put on her glasses. She leans over the photograph. She sees the man beside her mother is in his early thirties, tall and substantial, with thin, brown hair that falls across his forehead. She knows that when he is anxious or needs to connect himself again with his body, he runs his fingers through these strands of hair that lie across his forehead close to his eyebrows, and sweeps them away with a slight backward movement of his head. He has grey eyes. His face is well fleshed and broad, and pleasant for those who look without knowledge. His teeth are discoloured from the Senior Service unfiltered cigarettes he smokes continually. This habit has left his fingers stained with tobacco. His nails are bitten to the quick. They are thick, stubby fingers stained brown. They are big fingers on big hands. He is a doctor and well-liked in the small community in which he lives with his wife and the child of his wife and another man. The child is ten. Her name is Angelica, named by her grandmother after the angels. Her mother and this man call her by another name, but Angelica is the name given to her by the grandmother the child loves most out of all the grown-up people in her world. When she is most lost, and most afraid, she whispers Angelica to herself and finds a little comfort.

Angelica accepts the fiction that the fair man is her father though she is aware of some mystery surrounding her origins. She calls him her father to herself and everybody else until she is thirteen and he tells her otherwise.

Angelica hears things in the night. The unforgettable sound of desperate feet running down the hallway of the house, pursued by a heavier tread.

You lie in your bed, in your bed and your heart beats so loud you’re certain he’ll hear it. Your breath is so noisy you try not to breathe it. You slow down your heart and your breathing like a hibernating creature in a long dark winter. That, you believe, is the only way to stay alive in the circumstances in which you currently find yourself.

But will you ever learn to open up again? To let the heart beat to its own desires and the breath whistle carelessly through your body?
The day comes when he decides to do something he’s been contemplating for some time. The child is pretty, though not exceptionally so. More than that she is full of life, bright and intelligent with a wide smile and the skin that is the privilege of all young children, the skin that one longs to stroke, to feel like satin under the tips of one’s fingers. He likes the idea of having two females in his house available to him. He masturbates, thinking about his secret plans. He cleans himself up with his handkerchief. He leaves his trousers open. He chews on his fingernails as he sits in his chair drinking beer out of a pewter tankard and looking at his roses through the sitting room window, deep in his fantasy. He brushes the hair out of his eyes and tosses his head. Then he chews his nails again till he draws blood. He isn’t contemplating doing anything wrong, he decides, giving fleeting attention to the morality of the situation. It has to be secret because other people will put their own interpretation on it. He gets angry just thinking about other people’s opinions on the matter. He gets defensive just thinking about someone else’s disapproval of him.

If he knows in his heart that he shouldn’t carry out this plan he stifles that knowledge. This is easy to do as his desire is great and outweighs every consideration his better nature might put forward. He has a better nature. He is a doctor, well liked in the town, he has healing hands. He has a better nature.

But his dark desire puts him beyond the reach of the ameliorating qualities of tender human love that would have him first consider the child. He pours another drink out of the bottle on the small table at the side of his chair, and lights another cigarette. He is not a man to deny himself his desires. He is a man with a sense of entitlement.

The phone rings. His wife calls him. He grinds out his cigarette and stands up, pushing the fair hair off his brow, pulling up his trousers, fastening his leather belt. As he strides down the hall to the surgery at the side of the house, he puts his fantasies aside. By the time he’s reached the phone on his desk he’s become the doctor. He listens quietly to a patient’s concerns. He reassures, and says he will be there in ten minutes. He hangs up the phone. He gathers his bag, his stethoscope, the miniature torch he uses to look down sore throats. He strides out to the garage, gets into his car and takes out the packet of mints he keeps in the glove box. He puts two in his mouth and sucks on them. He’s thinking of the patient, what might be the cause of the sudden
onset of high fever. He enjoys the regard in which his patients hold him. He won’t allow anybody to spoil that.

Sometimes while she was observing the snake, she imagined fetching the shovel and decapitating it once and for all. But she was confounded by the logistics. How was she to keep the snake in place while she lifted the cage, put it down again on the floor, picked up the shovel and made ready to hit it? How could she be sure it wouldn’t leap at her and sink its fangs into her cheek as she bent over and lifted off the metal cover? She paced the kitchen, thinking things through. She couldn’t settle to anything, knowing that snake was in the house. She even thought she could let it bite her. She could take that irrevocable step into the unknown. She could alter the course of her life forever, in one instant. She could give in to the un-nameable lust. She could. The decision was hers.

There’s a barrier between those who’ve known violence and those who haven’t. With this barrier she is, she fears, forever an outsider.

Her secret sets her apart. Dark knowledge taints her. She’s sullied, dirtied, spoiled. How will she ever make herself clean again? Once she sought to bridge this distance by confiding her experiences, only to see reflected back in her listener’s eyes her own fear, dismay and confusion. Confessing something can sometimes make you feel worse than keeping it to yourself. Whatever is most difficult to tell.

If Angelica reveals to you what she knows will she taint you in some way? Will she force into your life knowledge that can’t help but change the way you look at the world? Against your will, angering you, causing you to avoid her next time you pass in the street? Will she make you afraid of her because of what she knows? Angelica experiences this barrier as a dense membrane, impenetrable, a thick sac in which she is enclosed from which she attempts to look out at the world. The world seen through these membranous layers is always distorted, as if Angelica is looking through thick wet plastic, material that ought to be tangible, that she ought to be able to grasp in her hands, but she can’t. If she could, it would be slick, like a foetal sac she must break through, kicking and tearing, in order to get out into the earth’s atmosphere and breathe for herself.
Angelica sees the world coloured by her own experiences, as does everyone, but she doesn’t know that. For example, she looks at her friends and thinks that their fathers must do the same things. All girls must know what she knows, and part of what they know is that the knowledge must never be shared. They are all enclosed in their separate, thick worlds from which they gaze at one another with dull eyes. They will stay this way as long as they are in their fathers’ houses.

There is no clarity of vision from inside a membranous sac. The edges of things are always blurred, and boundaries are uncertain. You can’t touch anyone and nobody can touch you. Only the father can tear through and the layers separate for him and he enters and when he withdraws, the layers close over again, skin growing back, leaving no visible scar.

In referring to herself in the third person Angelica not only puts a distance between herself and her experiences, she creates herself as well. She brings herself into being. When she’s accomplished this, when she’s managed to construct Angelica, she’ll step into this figure, much as the hermit crab crawls into an empty shell and makes it her own by virtue of occupancy. Much as a bird settles into an elaborately woven nest and is then identified by the type of home she’s built, the materials she’s chosen, the way she’s arranged them.

When Angelica speaks of herself in the third person she does it to ward off a certain pain that is always threatening to overtake her. Only in the third person can she find the courage to finally allow the fearful truths that snap at her heels like a savage dog, or sit on her shoulder like a rabid monkey, chattering and salivating like cast-out demons wanting back in.

Angelica has no desire to think of herself as victim for the rest of her life. There must be a way she can stand with dignity in the midst of the sum total of her life’s experiences, denying none of them their due, resisting to the last any attempt at domination by a single horror, granting equal value to all.

She has no wish either to enter into a pornographic litany of abuses, and yet she mustn’t continue to deny the presence of them in her life. They played their part in the forming of her.
Though the hot January day is dripping with humidity, she feels cold on the carpet in her room. Chilled to her very bones. She puts the photograph back in its envelope. She doesn’t know what she’s achieved by this exercise. She doesn’t feel any closer to having a real past than she did before, her head is aching and she feels sick. She whistles the dog, he comes to her and rests his head in her lap. She buries her face in the thick white fur around his neck and inhales his dog smell.

After a while she thinks perhaps she might have put a tiny piece of her heart back where it belongs. That’s what it is, this painstaking process of singing in all the voices languishing on the outer edges, it’s the delicate job of putting a heart back together so it can die whole. She dare not die as she’s lived, bits of her scattered all over the place, forgotten, repressed, and denied.

Angelica hears Julia’s footsteps as she enters through the upstairs door and sets her parcels down in the kitchen. The dog sits up and makes ready to go to her, angling for a treat. If Angelica follows him Julia will hold her, and they will drink tea under the mango tree and watch the sun fall into the river, and pray for a thunderstorm to clear this stifling air.

Eventually, on the day of the snake, she realised she couldn’t stay in the house any longer. Carefully, she printed on a piece of cardboard: *Beware of the Snake*. She propped this warning on the top of the stairs. Then she went down town to buy chocolate. When she got back, Julia was home, pulling on her gumboots and gardening gloves. She’d found a large sack as well. They went upstairs. Angelica slowly lifted the wire cage and the snake wriggled out into the bag Julia held in front of it. She tied up the bag and they transported the thrashing snake to the bush at the end of the street. There they let it go.

‘Did you want me to kill it?’ Julia asked later as they drank their tea and ate the chocolate, their reward for bravery and endurance.

‘Nope. I just didn’t want it in the house. That bloody dog was useless you know. Didn’t even notice it.’

As a child Angelica’s nature was ebullient. It was hard for her to learn to disappear herself. It was hard for her to learn to think of herself in the third person.
Every time she sits down to write she’s stricken with panic. In the mornings waking with the birds before dawn, she feels calm for a few moments until her mind kicks in and reminds her that today she has to write. She has to correct what she’s already written. She has to think a little more deeply, dig for the truer truth, trawl through uncomfortable emotions, identify them, find words for them, put them on the page. If only it was possible to do this without feeling.

Each time the experience is different, as if there is no end to the possible permutations of these feelings. As if each new work day uncovers hitherto unseen and unforeseen layers of dark matter laid down long ago by intense energies, mutated now by time into infinite variations, bent again by the light she’s struggling to cast on them. Dark matter, she reads in a magazine, is everywhere in the universe but we cannot see it with the naked eye. She suspects there will be no getting to the bottom of it: like terror, dark matter is infinite. Grief can be allowed to settle, rage can be released, over and over again if necessary, its potency lessening with every catharsis. But terror, Angelica’s terror, seems limitless. This, then, must be the ultimate legacy of horror: an unrelenting state of fear that has one reacting to quite ordinary situations as if they held the potential to annihilate. A heightened startle-response. A hyper-vigilance. An intense anxiety provoked by an unrecognisable trigger, a referent one has no hope of identifying, the event to which it points being lost to articulate consciousness, buried in speechless emotional chaos. Dark energy fills the universe; surrounds the luminous stars, the busy spinning planets; rings of it suspended, invisible, in every shimmering galaxy. Dark matter. Everywhere.

She gets up; makes tea, takes the dog for his walk. Anxiety makes her angry. Why is she doing this? Why can’t she go to the beach, lie in the sun, swim in the sea, tire herself out physically, eat a good lunch with a glass of wine and let it all go? Forget it. It’s over. Why this compulsion to recover what’s lost and then to write it all down? You work with the cards you’re dealt? You make the best of what you’re given?
God damn it. God damn it all. She’s sick of it. She’s dying. Isn’t that enough?

She imagines the day that she finishes. The day when she’ll know, that’s it. There may still be more to be said, but she’ll have drawn the line. Enough, she’ll say. She’s done enough.

She won’t consider dying until it’s written. It’s her last big job. On days when she’s in pain, she thinks, not yet. I’m not finished, and she pushes the discomfort aside so she can hurry up with her work. Writing it down is all that matters and when that’s done, she’ll worry about the rest. She is absolutely certain that she will live long enough to complete her self-imposed task, but only if she doesn’t waste her time. There can be no duplicitous procrastination in the hope of spinning out her days. A bargain has been struck, with what or whom she does not know. She feels the potency of the agreement throughout her being, beating fierce and vital as life itself: she is not alone. She is losing her life and she is not alone. That is what she knows.

And there has to be a record. How many children have lived through this? If we all of us made records. If we all of us took our records to the steps of Parliament House. If we all of us marched through the city streets waving our records like flags in the spring sunshine. If we all of us said: these horrors took our lives from us and now we are taking them back. If we all of us said, this must not be allowed to continue even into the next generation and the next and the next… if we all of us did this. If we all…

* * *

Angelica has to remind herself that she really is inventing the Lymphoma’s personality, and that everything it says comes from her, otherwise things might get out of hand. There’s a fine line: imagining this thing, giving it a voice can both help and hinder. She’s created for it a nasty personality: it says things to her she’d never say to anybody, but it is her saying this contemptuous stuff, not some exterior voice, she has to remember that.

She’s horrified to discover these depths of malice towards herself. She sounds like her mother. She doesn’t know if this voice is growing more like her mother’s or if she’s only just noticed the resemblances. Not physical of course, her mother was a beautiful woman and this scaly old fiend of her imagination looks nothing like her.
But what manner of fiend is it that she’s conjuring up? Angelica can’t get anywhere with it. It has all the power. It won’t give an inch to her attempts at reason and every time she encounters it she loses control.

At least she still retains control over when it will make an appearance.

* * *

Yesterday when she dragged out the cardboard box from the cupboard under the stairs, she found a photograph of a child, aged about five, standing in an English forest. The photograph is taken in spring and the child stands in a mass of bluebells, like a soft, scented blanket on which she might lie to rest or dream. The child is wearing a pale blue wool coat, double breasted and flared at the waist, with a dark blue velvet collar and cuffs. It’s a black and white photograph, but she knows the colours well. Her long fair hair is in two plaits that hang down her back, tied at the ends with blue velvet ribbons. She can’t see these plaits but she knows them. Her face is round and smooth. Her expression is wary, her head slightly tilted as if she is listening out for someone. Her eyes are large, slightly oval and match the ribbons in her hair.

In a recurring dream of Angelica’s, this child in her blue coat sits in a small coracle. Her little hands clutch the sides of the fragile vessel. The coracle presently rides a quiet sea. A pod of dolphins provides an escort while ahead, swordfish leap, sunlight flashing on their bellies as they twist and turn in that foreign element, the clear blue air.

The coracle carries the child across the seven seas to the people who love her most. She wears her best coat for the journey. There is food in the pockets. Like the owl and the pussycat, her favourite poem, she’ll sail away for a year and a day until she reaches home. In the dream this doesn’t happen. She sails on and on. But Angelica knows that the purpose of the journey is to reach her one true home. She has to believe that one day she will dream her arrival.

She finds a second photograph in the box from under the stairs. In this the child is younger, perhaps one year old. She is clutching a toy white rabbit that is dressed in a flowered cotton smock. The child holds onto the rabbit by its long ears. On her chubby arm she wears a fine silver bracelet engraved with a pattern of entwined leaves. Her
eyes are big and slightly oval. Their gaze is at once direct and full of fear. Her eyes plead, but they don’t demand, they aren’t importunate.

The photograph is sepia so she can’t see the blueness of her eyes or the fairness of her hair. The fear and the pleading do not require colour to be recognisable. She has a photographic record of stages of this child’s life. She has the long fair sweep of hair wrapped in tissue paper and kept in the white embroidered linen bag in her bedroom drawer. She has her first writing book, in which she tells the story of her first year at school. She has two pieces of sewing: a handkerchief bag and a bag in which a woman might keep her stockings. Her name is roughly embroidered in bright red cotton thread on the front of these bags. Not Angelica but JENNIFER ELIZABETH ANNE.

Her mother, on a carpet of bluebells in a northern forest at midsummer in soft, dappled light made love, and subsequently found herself with child. Her first sexual encounter, a stroke of bad luck if ever there was one. Family shame ensued. A short-lived marriage. A humiliating return to her father’s house with a tiny infant. Angelica’s soft, fat arms, and her ten curled toes wrapped up tight in the blanket of disgrace.

That was only the beginning of the repercussions of the unplanned act, that reckless moment in the bluebells. Her mother’s white dress stained bluebell blue and red with her blood. Her father’s reassurances that came to nothing.

In fairytales it is never the mother who hovers, heavy with bad intentions, around the growing girl. In fairytales it is always the stepmother, as if the notion of a mother consumed by dark passions towards her daughter is too abhorrent for fairytales to bear. But someone has to bear it.

Children. Love blindly and suffer, and always look out from their being with hope.

Grown-up, she lies in her bedroom, alone. This bedroom is her sanctuary. Its large, uncurtained windows look out into the native garden planted with banksia, hibiscus and eucalypts. The floor is pale polished wood, and two brightly patterned oriental carpets lie across it, adding warmth and comfort. On the low table beside her bed there’s a small pile of books, a pair of reading glasses, a blue vase holding several stems of iris she bought at the Sunday markets, and a reading lamp with an engraved glass shade.
It’s late afternoon, and staring out of her window at the darkening sky she sees the wicked witch of the west with her pointed hat and her black hair and her long black cloak. She watches her fly across clouds made bleeding and orange by the setting sun. It seems to her that the witch is snarling at her, sending out rays of malevolence towards her where she lies on her white bed.

‘I did not take your life!’ Angelica tells her. ‘I did not take your life!’

When finally she sleeps, she dreams, not of the bad fairy but of sex. It’s a long time since she’s been with a man. Her nighttime lover is a stranger. The love they make is sweet with greed. It trembles tender and dangerous between them, with a lucidity too brilliant to be contained in fairytales. She wakes at dawn in the midst of orgasm. The encounter has about it a perfection that she’s never known in waking life.

She stays alone now, in another kind of love.

Angelica didn’t know her mother’s breasts, but she remember to this day how her hair hung smooth, like black silk, like black satin, like midnight velvet, across her shoulders and down the length of her back. She didn’t know her mother’s breasts, but to this day she imagines them as white, as cream, as milk, as soft, as perfumed, as tender, as giving. She imagines them as rosy globes within which love might dwell, waiting for her to suckle, waiting for her to drink from them the secret lessons they contain, the lessons that will set her right in life.

What does it mean when you have stolen your mother’s life, Angelica wonders, as she prepares herself for the day. Is it a crime for which one may never atone?

‘You are not my child,’ her mother observed, ‘you are the child of the devil.’

Sometimes she lies in this calm room, on her white bed, and through the window she watches the wicked witch in her long black garments that are like midnight velvet, like black satin, that flow out behind her, smooth as silk. She watches her as she flies back and forth across the darkening sky.

There are nights when she wakes screaming from the dream of the large black bird that sits in the branches of a tree outside her bedroom window, waiting for an opportunity to get into the house. It sharp beak is red like painted fingernails filed to a lethal point. It will drill into her head with this beak, it will gouge its way in through her eye. When she dreams this bird she wakes soaked with sweat, yet trembling with cold. It’s a dream
she’s had for years and always it brings with it the headache, a pain so strong it’s almost pure. In the midst of this pain she doesn’t know or care who she is. She is the pain; she is the bright, white glittering crystalline pain. Nothing stops it. It has a course to run. She knows this.

She has other dreams. In one she is standing in some disagreeable viscous matter that keeps the soles of her shoes stuck to the ground. She can never lift her feet high enough to get out of it. It’s thick, like molasses or freshly laid tar and has a burnt, metallic smell. She feels as if she’s trapped like a feeding fly in a puddle of coagulating blood. It is the spilled and thickening blood of her life. Who can pull her free of this? Who can be her witness?

She remembers her mother’s pale skin and dark hair, so unlike her own. Her mother’s eyes that were so darkly blue they looked black. Her long red fingernails manicured to a sharp point.

That tall figure bent over her like a vulture waiting to pick the flesh from the bones of her life. There must be other ways to think of her mother, she tells herself as she searches her memory for kinder images. She finds crayons and paper in her workroom and takes them back to bed. She draws the great black bird with its red beak and its yellow eyes and its hunched back. She draws a tree around this bird. She draws a blue sky with drifting white clouds and grass dotted with buttercups. Then she draws another tree with a swing hung from its lower branches. A small, fair-haired girl sits on this swing. After a long time and with much hesitation she adds something to the bird. Nestled in the coal black feathers of its left breast she draws a tiny red and shrivelled, yet faintly beating heart.

In fairytales the child is always rescued. The intervention of loveable forest animals. The kiss of a passing prince. The power of the good fairy that ultimately overcomes the malevolent spells cast by the dark and evil presence.

Redemption comes in many guises. A life is stolen, a life is given back. How can such things be? The heart, shrivelled and broken, beats faintly on. The child shows her everything if she will but look.

But fairytales are morality tales, and the simple opposition of good and evil is not always helpful to understanding.
Angelica understands that she’s entered into some kind of crisis. She can only lie on her bed, under the white mosquito net. Her fever is high, her breathing difficult because of a chest infection. Infections are problematic for a compromised immune system. She wants her children. She understands now, as she never has before, that she’s leaving them behind.

Out of nowhere and without warning a dull misery has settled on her spirit. This misery, though largely self-directed, occasionally threatens to turn outward and erupt in rage and even physical violence. A part of her is still able to observe this process. That’s reassuring. It means she’s not yet wholly consumed by it.

She curls her arms round herself and crouches like a foetus in her bed. What she would like to be able do is tear out her hair, rip great tufts of it out of her scalp and fling them across the room. She would like to be able to tear at the skin of her face, claw at her eyes, bang her head against the wall until it bleeds. She would like to be able to do anything and everything that might distract her, even for a few minutes, from her breaking heart. But she can only lie in her bed with no more agency over herself than an unborn child.

She imagines her children arriving unexpectedly from foreign places. ‘Surprise!’ they’ll shout as they walk in the door. From time to time she lapses into a feverish doze filled with images of them ill and needing her. Why, when it’s the other way round, does she dream of their sicknesses?

In lucid moments she understands that she must find some way of containing this grief, otherwise it will kill her. But she wants to destroy everything, to tear at her clothes, the bed sheets, the white cotton pillow covers. She wants to throw the white china cup and saucer and the herbal tea it contains at the wall but although she wants to do these things, in reality she has no strength for that kind of destruction. She wishes she didn’t have the strength to imagine it either. She’s in mother grief. It’s like no other. It is the hardest, the deepest, the longest. She’s reached the heart of things. This grief will hollow her out as no other grief has or could. There is no love like mother love and there is no grief to match it either. She is leaving them.
Her eyelids are thick with grieving. Her skin takes on another quality, pasty, waterlogged as if she’s been drowned. Her hair is lank and greasy. She forces herself to shower, to brush her teeth and then she falls back into bed exhausted, as if she’s climbed a mountain. She can’t speak. She attempts to maintain some calm because the more distressed she becomes, the more difficult it is to breathe. She thinks about mothering, her own in particular. It didn’t come naturally to her. It didn’t come easily, this mothering business. She never knew what she should do and there wasn’t a mother of her own who it was possible to ask. It was as if she had to cease to exist as anything other than their mother. How can you do that? Especially if you’re someone who never felt they really existed in the first place except as the image of what somebody else wanted.

Outside the temperature reaches 42 degrees Celsius. The village is ringed with bushfires. The earth around is burning up. There has been no rain for weeks. Julia fetches cold cloths for Angelica’s head, and ice for her to suck. Angelica can’t distinguish between her own fever and the heat of the world. Julia calls Louis, their local doctor.

‘Get her out of this heat,’ he orders. ‘Get her to a cooler part of the house. Now.’

He strides through all the rooms of the house turning on fans, drawing curtains. They help her upstairs and onto the couch that is under a ceiling fan. Fletcher gazes at her with worried, miserable eyes then licks her hot hand. He flops hard on the floor beside her. Louis frowns and listens to her chest. Julia sets up other fans and directs them at Angelica’s body. Angelica drifts off, not caring what they do to her or for her. It was a mistake to let those boys grow up seeing her only as a mother. She doesn’t know how she could have done anything else though, it seems to be what happens to everyone. A mistake in their child-rearing practices. We should teach them all that we’re human beings first and mothers second. Then they wouldn’t have such high expectations of us that we’re bound to disappoint. Why is she thinking these things? She can hardly breathe and she’s thinking these things?

A hot, cruel wind has blown up fanning the fires and blowing smoke and ash over the village. The highway is closed, she can’t go to hospital, Louis tells Julia. Good, Angelica thinks. I’m better off here. Do they hate her sometimes, the children she means? Was she awful? What if she dies too soon, without them by her side? What if
she dies without all this stuff sorted out? She can hear helicopters flying over the fires, dumping loads of water in an effort to bring them under control. It’s hellish, she’s burning up, and the world is burning up. The air is thick with smoke and cinders. Louis puts a mask over her face and breath comes a little easier. The poor animals fleeing all that fire, where on earth will they go? She searches for cool thoughts.

She was once in Helsinborg, Sweden. She went to Sweden because as long as she could remember she’d had this notion that her father was a Swede, and that she really belonged in that country. It was one of those notions children hold dear, inexplicable to others but frequently, surprisingly, containing some veracity. Now she remembers it, that time in Sweden, not because she found her father or a home where she belonged, but because it was cold, cold and more than anything, in this time of heat and fever, she wants the cold. Julia and Louis see her prostrate on the couch but as far as Angelica’s concerned she’s in a house in Helsinborg, it’s Christmas, and there are candelabra alight in every window and a fir tree that must surely collapse from the weight of its decorations. They’re drinking wine she brought from Australia. Her hosts are friends of friends. Outside there’s a wild gale blowing off the strait that separates this country from Denmark. On a fine day she can see the castle of Elsinore across this strait. To take arms against a sea of troubles, says the Prince of Denmark, And by opposing, end them.

Earlier she’d been in Stockholm. She’d stayed in a miniscule apartment with a balcony where birds perched on the snowy rails and waited patiently to be fed. The apartment belonged to friends of her English uncle who were travelling in Thailand. She was alone in the flat. The days were short. She watched Swedish television. She was afflicted by that peculiar sense of being foreign that only comes from watching television advertisements in an unknown language. She wandered aimlessly through snowy streets. She had no idea how bad a state she was actually in: she felt as if she knew what she was doing: looking for her father, but she had no plan, no ideas. Her remaining family had denied all knowledge of her father’s whereabouts and nationality. Did she think she’d bump into some man in the street and she’d know him and he’d know her and from then on life would be a bed of Swedish roses? Probably. There is much to be said for being open to all possibilities, but not, she reflected some years
later when trying to make sense of her snowy sojourn, having a mind so open everything in it fell out.

The heat in the Stockholm flat was stifling: she hadn’t worked out how to adjust it. She opened the balcony doors to let in the fresh air, and flurries of snowflakes settled on the parquet floor. In the courtyard below, mothers and fathers dragged little children round on sleds. The children were dressed in snowsuits and mittens and they shrieked with joy.

When she left the apartment, she found that the city was a fairyland with rose pink palaces and gold spires, copper steeples and green domes, glittering, gorgeous beyond anything she dreamed it might be. Snow lay over all things, giving them the gift of beauty: even the most unsightly were transformed. The river had turned to ice. There were boats held temporarily captive in the ice fields. Angelica was frozen to the core, walking across the bridges that connect the islands that make Stockholm. The wind came off the floes under the bridges where the ice was thin, and seared her mucus membranes. She was dressed in a long, black wool coat, and black furry hat like a Russian princess. She had a lilac scarf around her mouth and on her feet black fur-lined lace-up boots that she bought when she arrived in the wonderful wintry place. She was on her way to Gamla Stan, the Old City, to the cobbled stones and iron street lamps and the warm, softly-lit cafes where she could drink hot chocolate and thaw her chilled body.

In the Gamla Stan she saw elegant women with high cheekbones and clear skin wrapped up in real furs. Swedish women wore clothes that were the muted greys and greens of the lichen that grew on the branches of silver birches stripped bare in winter. Clothes that were the steely colours of the icy sea; the black and brown of the treacherous rocks that line the shores of the country. Swedish women were stylish, composed, with expensive haircuts. They carried a more muted plumage than do women from tropical climes, Angelica thought, yet they were far from drab: they were intriguing in their cool reserve, their enviable containment.

Someone, she thought in her fever that his name was Herje, another of her uncle’s friends, took her out into the countryside to walk in a Swedish forest. How did her uncle come to have so many friends in Sweden, she wondered? Business, he’d said when she asked him, but he seemed disinclined to go into it. Or was she reading
everything through eyes filled with hope? If she doesn’t find out anything about her father while she’s in Sweden, can she finally lay it to rest? Walk away, accept she’s fatherless? She’s tentatively asked Herje, do you know my mother? Herje said no he’d never met her, and that nobody he knew had met her.

Herje drove a black Mercedes. Why don’t you drive a Saab? she’d wanted to know. You like Saabs? he’d asked her. Indeed I do, she’d told him. The Mercedes was too warm, her cheeks flushed in the heat, she was inhaling only warm air: it was nauseating. He was worried, her companion, he’d turned the heat up too high because she wasn’t used to the cold. Turn it down a little, she begged. She wasn’t cold. She was too hot. Please turn it down!

She wanted to see a real winter forest, where the foliage died for many months and then renewed itself, bursting forth gloriously in spring. Where she lived, the seasons were barely distinguishable. In this forest of silver birch he took her to, her companion pointed out a herd of moose standing in a shaft of insipid winter sunlight, their antlered heads raised, alerted to human scent, ready to bolt.

Herje told her that in Sweden everyone knew that each snowflake was different from every other. How can that be so? She’d asked him. And if it is so, how can everybody know it? Is the snowflake like a human life, each one different, unique and lost forever when it’s gone? He’d laughed at her questions. He took her back to his house where his wife, Gudrun, was preparing a Christmas Eve feast: herring, red cabbage, a vast selection of bread and crispbread that she made herself. An enormous salmon from a Norwegian fjord that she’d poached in white wine lay on a china platter, its dead eye turned towards the kitchen ceiling. Gudrun planned to serve the fish in a cream and caper sauce, she said. There will be Swedish meatballs, of course, said Herje. Gudrun wore a frilled, floral apron with ruffled straps and hem, a proper pinafore tied at the back in a bow. She was dark-haired and slightly resembled Greta Garbo though she clearly didn’t share that famous need for solitude.

After Christmas Angelica travelled back to Stockholm’s watery landscape on the night train. There were two other people in her sleeper and she had the bottom bunk. The sleeper was too hot. In the night she needed to pee. She couldn’t figure out how to open the door at the end of the carriage that would let her through to the toilets. A woman in uniform came by and yelled at her in Swedish. Angelica had no idea what
she was saying. Then the woman showed Angelica how to open the door and she passed through and relieved her aching bladder. She felt as if she was in a film about espionage during the Cold War, illegally crossing borders, trained for violent death. What was she thinking, wandering about in the snow without a plan? How blind and desperate was that? This was a rhetorical question Angelica frequently asked herself about her actions. There was never an answer, or the answer was that thinking wasn’t what she was doing at all.

In Stockholm it was minus 20 degrees Celsius. Angelica ached with loneliness. Every little snowflake drifted down outside the apartment window. The unique little snowflake, one of a kind that in its brief intense life can make even the ugliest object beautiful for a while.

She was no closer to knowing anything about her father. And she was sick, into the bargain. The body must work hard in cold climates to maintain its core temperature: too hard for her immune system. She lay in the flat, felled by a flu. But she was much taken with the cold, snowy country, as if she might very well have history there, as if she might very well have roots.

* * *

Angelica roams through these past events as she lies in the fiery North Coast heat. Her memory, cut loose from ordinary constraints by fever, leaps all over the place without her consent. On summer evenings, when she was at boarding school, Angelica slipped out of the school gates at the time she was supposed to be doing homework. She was nervous, and excited. She made her way along the streets behind the school, streets lined with plane trees and elms, European trees whose leafy branches draped themselves gracefully over the white fences and low brick walls that marked the boundaries of family homes. She had no home now, her family having returned to England while she stayed behind at school. (Why did they leave me behind? Angelica’s muddled mind wonders yet again. That wasn’t right, was it?). They didn’t go forever, they would be back in eighteen months, but Angelica didn’t know that and neither did they. And anyway, when they did come back she couldn’t go and live with them. (Why was it me left behind, she wondered? For her own safety, the nuns told her. There was never any question of him going? How extraordinary that seems now!).
Angelica ached for the cosy containment promised by the white fences and the low brick walls. She imagined being on the other side of these boundaries, where everything within them was spoken of as ‘ours.’ There was no ‘ours’ in her life. There was no longer any family group to which she could claim to belong. How could a young girl make a life from such lack?

Dusk fell. Householders turned on their lamps and set their tables for the evening meal. Children sprawled on bright rugs with games or schoolbooks set out before them. Mothers moved around shining kitchens, expertly manipulating pots, dishes, roasting pans. Angelica could smell the food through windows opened wide enough to catch the evening breeze. She could smell meat, and various vegetables, sometimes fish. She inhaled deeply, breathing in the bread and butter of the strangers’ lives.

Some houses had lace curtains that made it difficult for her to see in. She moved further along the street until she found a window that afforded her clear vision into the life she wanted. When she found the perfect mise-en-scène, the one that would satisfy her most urgent needs, she settled against a tree trunk, or sometimes she climbed a low-slung branch and stretched out along it, like a curious monkey, the better to watch unobserved for as long as she felt like it.

The voyeurism is something she continues to escape into in her adult life. Looking in from the outside has the same compelling quality as it did when she was a child of twelve, thirteen, fifteen. She partakes of these psychic banquets less frequently than she once did. She’s particular, selecting this, rejecting that, nourishing herself with fantasy so that she can continue to live her life without collapsing from emotional starvation. Her imagination eases her insatiable craving to belong. Her craving to be safe in one of these ordinary homes, where ordinary sorrows happen. Where a missing button will not be the cause of the overturned dinner table and the sound of slaps and punches on a soft body.

In her child’s imagination she had a place that was hers, however temporary. In this way she could ward off the reality that there was no place, no shelter with parents in it that she could claim as ‘ours’ or ‘mine’, had not been for a long time, and would never be again.

As she got older, the craving for domestic security alternated with contempt. The contempt was, she understood, born of despair, born of yearning and frustration for what it was forever too late to have. She had known it once. She’d had it once, with her
grandparents, and then it was gone. In a breathtaking, unanticipated alteration in circumstances when she was seven years old, her mother and stepfather, without warning, took her from her grandparents who’d raised her to that point, and set sail for Australia. There one day, gone the next. A literally overnight transition from contentment to terror that nobody said was coming. Angelica has no memory of these events. They have been told to her by others.

What is this grief?

The child Angelica knew that the man she was made to call ‘father’ after she was seven years old, was not her father in the biological sense, or any other. When she heard other girls talk about ‘my father’ she felt a complicated pain. She had no idea who or where her father was: this genealogical confusion added to her sense of being adrift in the planet’s oxygen depleted atmospheres, rather than firmly placed on its earthly surfaces, as everyone else seemed to be.

When she stared through windows at the family lives lived behind them, she stared with the eyes of her heart as well as her head. She desired and lusted; she hungered and starved. She devoured the scenes. She stayed hidden, watching greedily until she felt satiated by this psychic consumption of someone else’s everyday life. She imagined the kind of life she’d live in that house, surrounded by bright rugs and comfy chairs, one of which would certainly contain a father who smoked a pipe and read a newspaper and had nothing at all about him that inspired fear.

In the city, adult Angelica strolls through suburban streets at dusk and loses herself in an imaginary life behind attractive front doors, just as she did as a child. Soft lighting on homely scenes framed by pretty windows doesn’t necessarily mean contentment, but Angelica doesn’t think about that. She knows enough about the dark side; reality isn’t what she seeks in these twilight forays into suburbia.

Angelica feels little sadness on these voyeuristic excursions. Rather she feels emptiness, a vast hollow space behind her rib cage where the heart should by rights be in full occupancy. She feels an urgent need to fill up this space. She wants a heart that is filled to the brim with love and affection for people and animals and things that are ‘ours’ and ‘mine’, leaving no room for hollowness. This desire for attachment, this desire to say This is my tree in my backyard with my dog sleeping under it, forms a motif for her entire way of being in the world. Her longing to belong emanates from her
like an aura, a low vibration of dark brown, magenta, and no-account beige, colours of emptiness, lack, need. She understands completely when she hears an asylum seeker plead:

‘We must have a home somewhere, somewhere on this earth!’

She’d have her own bedroom in that house, she’d thought as a child, gazing from her tree. With her own cupboard, and a desk with a small lamp. There’d be a dressing table with a frilled skirt in a floral design (she was a 1950s child). There’d be a mirror on the dressing table and a stool covered in matching fabric. There’d be a silver hairbrush, pretty pots and a cut glass dish, and a music box with a ballerina in it that rose in a graceful arabesque to greet her when she lifted the lid, to music from Swan Lake. She’d dream sweet dreams in such a room, in a small bed with plump pillows and a pink cover. Her cotton nightdress would spend its days in a blue linen bag with her name embroidered on it, Angelica. It would lie neatly on the bedspread, waiting for her to finish her leisurely bath, from which she would emerge rosy and glowing and smelling of lilacs. A mother would read her to sleep.

The child drew strength from these imaginings. She left the strangers’ windows with the hollowness assuaged for the time being. The people in the houses never saw her face. They never knew they’d fed a stranger at their gate, and given her the means to continue living her life.

The girl she envied, whose hair she wished to copy, had a father, a mother, two brothers and a sister who all lived on the farm that has been in their family for generations. They knew who they came from. They knew their people. The girl had an interesting name, Antonia, or Tamara, Victoria, or Fleur. She didn’t like her own name. Jennifer. It was too plain. She would rather be French, Italian, Spanish. On the cover of her schoolbooks she wrote ‘Angelica’ instead of Jennifer but nobody noticed. She could have told them that’s what her grandmother called her, that it meant little angel, but she didn’t. Angelica was her secret. One of the many she kept. These secrets built a firewall between her and everybody else. She was always lying because of them. She was never really her, whoever that might have been. There’s nothing like bad secrets to separate you from everybody else on the planet.

The girl she envied had lots of friends, and everybody loved her. She had no bad secrets. Angelica wanted to be like her in every possible way, in the hope of being
loved by somebody. She’d already understood somewhere in her young soul, that to be loveable one must be free of bad secrets.

In the landscape of the dream, all things are possible. On the steps of a church in a Roman square, a snake coiled itself round her legs and she felt no fear, only the understanding that she must allow this and the prescience that later it wouldn’t matter to her and that the poison would be ineffective.

How is it that so many people have found it so easy to relinquish her?

This is a strange hot world she’s living in now, here in the north of New South Wales, memories surging vivid as yesterday, then moving without warning into an entirely different time frame. Memory has its own sense of time and logic: things fit together out of emotion, not chronology. She’s bereft, without a voice in her present, silenced, circled not by snow and frosty landscapes, but by blazing fires and red-hot cinders carried on the wind. It’s a relief to be voiceless. She’s finally escaped all social responsibilities. Language has failed her, as has the easy breath. She can only whisper to herself. Grief comes in waves like the heat of fever. Sensations distract her from her roaming thoughts. The dog’s cold nose nudges her arm. Children yell in the garden next door. Why doesn’t their mother take them inside? In her mind, her Grandfather, long dead, sings out of tune an old song:

I can’t stop myself from loving you,
If only you could learn to love me too
You don’t know how much it hurts just loving you,
I’m not the laughing child I used to be.

Angelica can see her Grandfather as he was so often years ago, seated in his armchair with the pink racing guide open on his lap, watching the Saturday afternoon horse races on television and humming his favourite song. Outside, there was snow covering the fields, icicles hung delicately from tree branches. The frosty landscapes where in imagination Angelica now roams sick, breathless and feverish, searching for the lost
father who was better, who must have been better than his substitute, mustn’t he? But her mother wouldn’t have any of that.

‘Your father sold you,’ her mother told her when she was thirteen. ‘Sold you. He knew when your stepfather adopted you he’d not have to pay for you any more. So he sold you.’

Angelica had stood in silence. You’re a liar, Mother, she’d thought. He must have had his reasons. She had to think the best of him. She couldn’t take on any more depraved parents.

Who does Granddad sing the song for? His old voice slid full of yearning through the sentimental notes. It was snowing hard outside, the days were short, already in the early afternoon the light was fading. Grand father. He had been to her, in the first seven years of her life, a grand father in the absence of the real thing.

Towards the end of their days, her grandparents lived in a small retirement bungalow with central heating: the old wood stove was gone from all their lives. The heat was up too high for Angelica’s comfort. She went out into the snow, swaddled in a coat and scarf and mittens and hat. Every little snowflake settled on her upraised face, she opened her mouth and caught the cold, melting never-to-be-repeated moment on the end of her parched tongue.

Angelica knows the waves of heat and grief will sweep over her and take away the little breath she has. Then they will subside, as in birth contractions there will be a space during which she can gather herself and get ready for the next onslaught. Will she die? Of course not, not now. Get me breathing better, Louis, she want to say but nothing comes out. She’s asleep. She is so fucking hot. She will spontaneously combust all over the couch. She’s sorting it all out in her sleep, everything that has to be sorted before she can die, there’s so much! She needs a lot more time and a lot less heat. She needs to see her children. Louis! Louis! You aren’t fucking listening to what I need!

Harry. Samuel. Don’t leave me. Don’t let me leave you. Not yet. Not now. Not this way. Hold on to me! I can say goodbye to everyone but not to you, my darlings, in your absence.

Are you remembering to clean your teeth?

_There is always a little mother’s milk left in her. She writes in white ink._
There is who you are, then there is something that happens to you, and then there is who you are. Angelica thought she’d keep silent about this. But it’s so central to the forming of her that to avoid it would leave a gaping hole in her account of herself. She’ll write it in the third person. She’ll write it in Italics to rush everyone through it. Don’t Italics always make you feel as if you’re in a hurry?

* * *

The man she knew as her father held her down, all the while whispering,

‘There, that’s nice, isn’t it? Don’t you like that? Mmmm, keep still, don’t make a sound, shhhhh.’

His breathing frightened her. She’d never heard him, or any other grown-up, breathe in that laboured, gasping way. It showed a side of him, of other people, she hadn’t known so far. A side that left her feeling profoundly abandoned while simultaneously central to his experience though she couldn’t have told you that at the time.

Absorbed in his own sensations, she is present for him only to the degree he requires. Her own feelings are of no consequence in this place and she knows at once that to protest, or give voice to fear and pain would anger him like an interruption when one is closely focused. She does as she is told, awkwardly. Like a child pushed into position by an impatient teacher, she stumbles and temporarily loses her connection to the earth. Her innocent awkwardness. Not knowing at all what is expected of her. Obedient all the same and silent. Being good. Doing as she’s told. Stoic Angelica. Shocked into dumbness.

He took long, sighing breaths interspersed with groans as if he was in pain, but it was her in pain, wasn’t it? Somewhere underneath him, below her waist, between her legs, there was pain, but why was he groaning, telling her to keep quiet? She cried, keeping it silent. Everything he did, everything he said was completely out of her experience. She knew, though, that it was bad.

Still he struggled on her, pushing into her, into a place she never knew before today, a place where another could apparently go inside her, without her will or consent, down there, between her skinny legs.

(‘Stop having such hot baths,’ her mother remonstrated. ‘Look how thin you are already. Hot baths will only make you worse.’)
Her thinness was not a physical circumstance she could comprehend. When she looked in the mirror she saw a face and a body, she saw a female child with long fair hair in two plaits trailing over her shoulders and tied at the ends with red checked ribbon. But the image had no resonance for her. She didn’t know it as herself. As his breath came faster and he moaned and clutched at her, she wondered how she had lived for ten years and not discovered this, this hole between her legs? Or perhaps she had, but under his attentions it had taken on another aspect, distorted, painful, filled with fear.

Immobilised as much by fear as by the weight of his grown man’s body, she lay staring over his heaving shoulders at a grey winter sky streaked with high white clouds, and an eagle that circled there, watchful and predatory. Her eyes are wild, showing the whites in that sideways stare of terror as she is taken over another threshold of experience, the deepest penetration so far into the country of violence. He is absent, yet horribly present, as when he’s drunk. The physical being is there but some part of its nature has fled, the part that connects it to other human beings, the part that knows it lives in amongst others and not for its own desires. In this man, that part has shriveled, or perhaps it never grew. To be in the presence of such an absence is chilling. One knows there is no hope of reprieve or assistance until the desires are played out, gratified, and only then will some modicum of interest in other return.

She thought of her Grandmother’s grey hair and floury old cheeks. She thought of her handsome uncle 13,000 miles away with his lovely blonde wife in their cosy house with their two Siamese cats and their winter fire. She thought of her mother and knew immediately that she must never tell her of this afternoon beside the slow-moving river, on the grassy bank in her bloodstained singlet and the pants that he rinsed (after wiping her down there between the skinny thighs her mother hated) pants that he rinsed in the slow brown waters and handed back to her to put on.

‘Never mind that they’re wet, they’ll dry soon enough next to your hot little body,’ he whispered.

But they didn’t. It was winter. It was cold. He fastened his trousers. They were brown and baggy and he wore a white shirt with them. He fastened his trousers and then he looked at her.

‘If you tell your mother I’ll kill you both,’ he told her, in a matter-of-fact way.

She did not doubt him for a moment. She never said a word.
Yet somehow her mother knew. Had there been signs, omens, warnings?
Later that night she took the child into her bedroom and sat her on the padded stool in front of her dressing table. There were floral curtains in her mother’s bedroom with a bedspread to match. Her mother slept there with her husband. With him. Her mother explained what had taken place but the child just stared at her. He had plugged the hole with cotton wool and every time she moved it hurt her.

‘He won’t do it again,’ said her mother, but the child already feared his next attack. She wanted her mother to take them away, her and her little sister. The three of them, without him. But she didn’t say this.

The next morning she went to school as if nothing had happened. At recess her mother turned up to see her with a bag of mixed lollies.

‘Are you all right?’ she wanted to know. The child nodded, although it hurt to walk, and to sit. It seemed to her that she better not tell her mother anything more. It seemed there was little point. It was clear they weren’t going anywhere. It was clear they were staying. Jennifer was somebody else now and often referred to herself in the third person.

In the orchard next to their house they grew apple, pear and plum trees. Her father made a swing in one of the old apple trees: a wooden plank suspended by rope knotted securely at the ends. She flew high on this swing, her hands rubbed red from holding tight. The ropes smelled of foreign places. The scent lingered on her hands like a promise. At the back of the house was a vegetable garden. Peas and beans were staked in neat rows. The back gate led to a paddock and the creek where she played by herself, pretending to be a cowboy, galloping through the pine needles till she reached the stream and the moss-covered logs she used as a bridge. Sometimes she’d pick watercress to take home for her mother.

Nobody could know. Nobody could guess. What did this silence cost her?

In the garage of their house was a sleek grey car with red upholstery. He often picked her up from school in this car. He drove her to quiet spots. He took off her clothes. He said he wanted her to enjoy this too. She saw gum trees through the windscreen and smelled the scent of their crushed leaves through the open window. She smelled the leather. The grey car purred. Its doors made a soft, heavy thud when she closed them.
He drove very fast. Afterwards he took her into town to buy her a milkshake. Vanilla and malt, that was her favourite. Sometimes he bought her a present as well. He was calm after these visits, and good-natured. Nobody would ever guess.

Their house was very neat and well-furnished. In the sitting room there was a piano with a matching stool. She could lift up the lid of this stool. Inside it they kept their music books. The books had pale blue and yellow covers with their contents inscribed in black. Family photos in silver frames sat on top of the piano. Fat, jolly babies and the child’s sweet-faced grandmother. Her handsome uncle with his glamorous blonde wife. The armchairs and sofa were covered in blue chintz that matched the curtains.

In the hall were the tall cupboards where her father, who was a doctor, kept the medicines he used in the surgery that was attached to the house. She was not allowed to go into these cupboards, or the surgery, unless he took her there. Every night they put the tin billy out on the front fence for their morning milk.

One night when her mother was out, she lay awake in her bed. Her father injected some substance into the vein in the crook of her arm. It would make her sleep, he said.

‘It’s nice,’ he said, ‘it’s nice.’

‘Why can’t you sleep?’ her mother demanded. ‘What’s wrong with you?’

In summer her father wore sandals. She looked at his feet, encased in the footwear of children. They looked strangely vulnerable, marked as they were with red welts from the buckles and straps. In winter he wore leather shoes, laced up tight. In these shoes he walked heavily through the house.

At the convent, the boarding school where they sent her, she sat at her desk by an open window and gazed at the garden. Flowers and shrubs grew strong and straight in their beds. An aged wisteria dropped purple blossom onto the steps of the Sisters’ House on the other side of the lawn. A breeze drifted in, weighty with the fragrances of spring flowers. She was in a French lesson but it meant nothing to her. The night before, sleepwalking, she’d tumbled down two flights of wooden stairs into the front hall. She woke up to find a bevy of nuns staring at her in disbelief. She was unhurt. She couldn’t concentrate on the French lesson. She cared only for her music. She played whenever she could, rolling up the sleeves of her white school shirt and tackling Beethoven,
Schubert, Albeniz. *It was the man she called her father who first taught her to play the piano.*

But I was someone else then. And I often referred to myself in the third person.

* * *

Angelica’s mother says:

‘When people find out what you’re *really* like they won’t be so impressed by you.’

*I am someone who sleeps.*

Angelica’s mother demanded that her daughter present herself to the world as bright, happy and accomplished. In fact Angelica was frightened, miserable and unable to accomplish anything other than to keep up the pretences she required of her. She did that very well. She laughed when she didn’t feel like it. She told funny stories when she didn’t feel like it. She struggled hard to contain the threatened spillage, dangerously constant, the overflow of all the things she never said and wanted so desperately to say. She was always lying. She was always afraid someone would be able to tell. To see the real her. What she was really like.

*Who am I and where do I belong?*

There was the Angelica her mother said nobody would like. And there was the one who laughed when she didn’t feel like it and whose throat closed up every time she thought about telling anybody what *really* happened in her stepfather’s house. They weren’t the same people. Then there was the recording angel who witnessed everything and remembered it all.

*I, of whom I know nothing.*

Now. Angelica has to get this clear. Her mother said nobody would like her once they got to know her and saw her for what she really was. But what she really was, was the keeper of the family secrets. She keeps the secrets at her mother’s insistence. So if people won’t like her isn’t that because of the secrets she keeps?

*I will fight you for my life, Mother.*

She doesn’t know. How can she tell you when she doesn’t know what to tell?

*So many times my voice sounds untrue.*
This is the beginning of her shame. This is when she began referring to herself in the third person.

*Be false, and always dress well in a coat of many colours.*

As an adult her bed is the only place where Angelica feels safe. Safe from everybody’s gaze, that is. In her bed she can sink into herself. As a child, her bed was never safe. He would creep into it at any opportunity, waking her from her anxious unsatisfying sleep.

‘Smile,’ her mother ordered as she prepared to take a photograph in the rose garden in front of the white house with its blue trim.

‘We don’t want any photos of you looking miserable.’

The camera never lies. Its subjects do.

*My loneliness amazes me.*

Is she walking on the beach now? The light is tender. The sky wears gentle garments in soothing shades of grey. The sea today is sage green. These colours are a blessed relief from the usual hectic blue that makes Angelica’s eyes ache, and the incandescence of the unrelenting tropical sun.

She is strolling along the edge of a quiet ocean, on the mutable border whose position is hourly determined by the moon-governed tides. On the borders one is always in transit, there is no final destination there is no limit to possibility. Borders are the places where her heart longs to be. Home? She would rather have a border than a centre any day, if anyone’s offering.

*Dear Mother,*

*When I was a child I wanted to love you more than anything, except wanting you to love me too. But now I have put away childish things. Yours, Angelica*  

Take a breath.  
You are here.  
You exist.  
You are real.  
Angelica.  
Come back.  
*Dear Mother,*
If I stole your life I hereby give it back. It’s of no use to me. I didn’t want it in the first place. If only I’d understood this years ago I might be in one piece now. With best wishes, Angelica.

PS: I am someone who dreams.

It’s the totality of the loss that Angelica finds impossible to comprehend. Leaving her children and everyone else she loves. Taking leave of this great and good earth, the anticipation of all these leavings is too hard to bear. And leaving her very self! Who could contemplate that with any equilibrium? Not this little snowflake.

‘Jesus,’ Julia says. ‘We thought you were toast there for a while.’

‘Very funny,’ she whispers.

‘You have to go to hospital.’

‘No. My Granddad said if you go into one of those places you’ll be lucky to get out alive and last time I went I nearly didn’t. They gave me too much morphine. Then they had to resuscitate me. He was right. I’m not going again.’

‘Is that your last word on the subject?’ Julia asks, arms akimbo.

‘Yes, I believe it is.’

‘Christ,’ says Julia.

* * *

Angelica visits the Indolent Lymphoma again. She finds it lying in a purple Mexican hammock suspended between two coconut trees on the edge of an azure sea. Somewhere out of sight she can hear maracas, and guitars playing soulful tunes.

‘You certainly know how to select your locations,’ she observes.

The Lymphoma is stretched full length with its legs crossed at the ankles, its arms behind its head. A large cigar protrudes from the side of its mouth. Up close, its skin resembles that of a crocodile and its heavily lidded eyes are yellow with a dark centre. It leers at her, just as it did at their previous meetings.

‘I've come to try and sort things out between us,’ she begins. ‘It may not have occurred to you, but we are dependent on one another. For example, if I decide to end my life tonight, I'll take you with me. Ever thought about that?’

The creature gazes at her. It rolls the cigar around its mouth to the other side, giving her a glimpse of brilliant white and even teeth, obviously false or reconstructed like the
teeth of some Hollywood mogul. Had the reptile been wearing shoes, they would have been Gucci loafers, without socks.

‘Honey,’ it drawls, ‘you know you won’t do that.’

Its accent is southern, maybe Louisiana, heavy with the humid languor of the bayous. It is a voice designed to bewitch, to entice the innocent into the enchanted wood where lichen-spotted trees, their branches swathed in Spanish moss, stand half submerged in murky waters. Time enters an altered state, so that an hour in these misty glades is years outside in the real world.

It is a voice made for seduction, in spite of the creature’s unattractive exterior. It is a voice that might lull one into abandoning all sense and reason; a voice that might lead one into deathly lethargy, a low, mellifluous, honey-sweetened voice that makes everything it says seem portentous and filled with delectable promise, and above all, deeply true. She has had previous experiences with such voices, that infinitely deceptive secondary sexual characteristic, though she has never encountered one as potent as the voice possessed by the Lymphoma.

‘Don’t call me honey,’ she advises. ‘And don’t make any assumptions about what I will or won’t do. I’m a desperate woman. Anything’s possible.’

The Lymphoma observes her. It is perhaps becoming a little suggestive with its cigar, but she makes no comment.

‘Okay’, the Indolence agrees, turning lazily in its hammock. ‘I won’t call you honey. And I recognise that we have a situation of mutual dependence here. Nobody needs to do anything desperate, just chill, sweetheart, relax, smoke some dope, be cool.’

She’s infuriated by the attitude the creature is adopting, while simultaneously feeling herself falling victim to its seductive power. How easy it would be. How easy it would be to fall into its world, to relinquish all responsibility, to relinquish her very self. The prospect of such abandonment floods her with a warmth that is almost sexual in its intensity, its promise of release. Only with enormous effort can she pull herself back from imagining a languorous death in a warm lagoon, slipping down, down, down so gracefully beneath the waterlilies, between the ancient, moss-covered tree stumps, down into the soft mud, gently submerging, permitting this enfolding, this aimless drift into deep eternal sleep. Oh yes. She could do that. And the creature knows it.

She stares intently at its face.
‘You wouldn’t mind, would you?’ she asks, something truly awful finally dawning on her. ‘It’s what you really want, isn’t it? You don’t want to live off me. You want to die, don’t you? Soon?’

The Lymphoma is silent. Beyond its hammock she can see a pod of dolphins frolicking and feeding on small fish. The maracas too are silenced, only the guitar plays on, mournful tunes of loss and desolation. She’s afraid of what she’s just understood. She’s imagined into being a creature that cares nothing for her, except as a means to its own ends. Its mysteries are unfathomable, its origins obscure, its desires and intentions quite unholy. She has the devil on board, just like her mother told her. Everything her mother predicted will come to pass.

The Lymphoma raises its head. She sees malice flare in the hooded yellow eyes, fleeting and unexpected, like the sudden surge of flame in a grate of dying coals. She has goaded the creature, pierced it in some soft place beneath its armour. It looks at her, as if summing her up, factoring in a new development in its relationship with her.

‘Careful, honey,’ is all it says.

In this tense moment she is very afraid. What she sees is a situation even more complex than she had previously thought it to be. This is an entity capable of many manifestations, none of which will be revealed to her until it is too late.

The moment passes. The Lymphoma returns to its cigar and its azure ocean views.

‘Well, sugar,’ it sighs, ‘thanks for coming by. We’ll work something out. Bye, honey.’

On the rebound from fear, she’s infuriated. Lost for adequate responses, she takes her leave as she always has before.

‘Well fuck you and fuck you again!’ she yells over her departing shoulder, pretending an attitude that is far from what she feels.

‘This isn’t over yet!’

But even in her flight she’s forced to recognise that this is only bluster on her part, and in truth, she is much troubled, and lost in all her ways.

* * *

All she can find in the most hidden part of her self, hidden behind all facades past, present and future, is the unsayable longing to love and be loved. Unsayable because
she can find no way to express this yearning that doesn’t diminish it in the saying with
fatuous simplicity, and the hollow sounds of the sentimental. But at bottom, that’s all
and everything there is and ever can be. All else is but a poor substitute. And without it,
what good is anything?

Angelica sits in the sun. She thinks about these serious matters, and gazes at her
fingernails. She’s struggling to understand that she will be parting company from these
fingernails. Not to mention parting from her heart, which she can’t think about because
that brings her utterly undone, carrying as it does far more emotional weight than any
fingernail. If she tries to perform this act of separation from all her body parts, and she
takes this long over each one, she’ll never get through them, not in the time that’s left
to her.

As well, this activity can’t be sustained for lengthy periods. Serious as it is, one loses
interest and casts about for some other amusement. Life reasserts itself in the afternoon
sea breeze, in a glass of wine before dinner, in the smell of jasmine growing over the
back fence. In idle gossip with a girlfriend, in shopping for some glittery thing for a
little girl’s hair. In laughing at a friend’s awful jokes. In answering the phone to find a
son calling from the other side of the world:

‘Hey Mum! What’s happening? What’s new?’

What indeed.

She’s not exactly fighting for her life, otherwise she’d be in that other reality, with
cannula and intravenous feeds. As it is she’s at home, using the bare minimum of
medication, and living as peacefully as she can in circumstances she’d hardly describe
as a fight.

Yesterday, for example, she and Julia made sandwiches and a thermos of black tea
flavoured with a little raw sugar and the juice of fresh limes, and took themselves to the
beach for the afternoon. The weather was unseasonably warm. They drowsed and
daydreamed in the afternoon sun. When it grew cool they roused themselves to climb
over the rocks, investigating sea pools that teemed with life. Crimson-fleshed anemones
clung to the rocks, their black concealing fringes idly fanned by the gentle currents.
Blue and orange starfish affixed themselves to the sides of shallow pools. There were
fleshy sea cucumbers spread bloated on the sandy floor, and crabs waving hostile claws
at perceived threats, like the women’s shadows darkening the surface of the water.
They watched as an eel, quick as a blink, slid under a ledge occupied by a large army of periwinkles and emerged, sleek and sharp-toothed, on the other side. Angelica had never explored rock pools as a child. They were an unknown aspect of the world, found only in storybooks. She’d heard that children who go straight to walking without learning to crawl at some stage regress, and teach themselves the missed step, so vital is it to human beings that they experience all the possible stages of their development. So many things in her life with Julia, exploring rock pools, learning to swim, putting up tents, owning a dog, were filling the gaps left by a childhood in which adult demands and perversities completely subsumed the child’s need to learn and play. Angelica had no choice but to walk too soon, and had to skip the hands and knees thing altogether. She was she thought, giving herself another better childhood with Julia’s co-operation, for Julia’s experiences hadn’t included children and she was fortuitously (for Angelica) inclined to nurturing. Angelica often has a profound sense of completeness, of fullness after these catching-up experiences, gratified that she has done this thing that to most of the people she knows is entirely unremarkable. Julia is mothering her. Angelica permits this. Up to a point.

To Julia, Angelica is in dire need of some serious fixing up. It’s incomprehensible to her that her friend has survived so well given the many large holes in her practical knowledge of the world. She knows, for example, nothing, absolutely nothing, about how to manage money. There are times when Julia can’t stop herself exclaiming at some ignorance that Angelica unwittingly reveals, to which exclamation Angelica responds with a shrug of her shoulders and her hands held palm up, the gestural equivalent of ‘Hellooo?’ and usually she says something like:

‘Well? How would I know? Who do you think ever bothered to show me? You know I was raised by barbarians.’

She’s like one of those roadside jacarandas, Julia thinks, planted too near power lines, whose limbs have been hacked off down one side. Their limbed side blossoms in all its purple glory while the other side is to all appearances dead, owing to brutal human interference. Angelica isn’t fond of this analogy. She won’t give up on the idea that it’s never too late for her to make up for what she’s missed, and anyway, if she’s going to be a tree she’d rather be a magnolia with blushing pink and ivory flowers erupting from apparently dead, brown boughs. Too extravagant to be real.
Julia, tiring of the rocks, takes off like a goat up the steep hillside to investigate an invasion of bitou bush and Angelica stands where the ocean, a translucent body that day, flows in and out over the rocks at the edges of the earth. She concentrates on its rhythms. She breathes with its gentle surges. Its soothing sounds fill her ears. She feels herself to be one with the salty waters. Their pulses beat in time. Sunlight bounces off the ocean’s surfaces and spins into the air like a million tiny spirits. She can see the air, minute, brilliant particles engaged in a vigorous and unceasing dance around one another. She knows she is in the midst of exquisite life, teeming life, life without end, life that could never end, glowing, glittering, leaping, shining, spinning, flinging and flying in the eternal movement of the eternal dance. For a moment or two she gets it. She understands.

Such moments are hardly bearable. They aren’t sustainable; their intensity is more than the human heart can contain. Her human heart, anyway. She’s unused to bliss. That night the philosopher tells her: *The soul stands on unassailable grounds, if it has abandoned external things…*

* * *

She takes the fold of soft belly skin in her left hand and with her right she injects the colourless liquid. At first her squeamishness was hard to overcome and she asked others to do this. But she quickly understood the indignity and dependency of that. Dependence will come about all too soon, she thought. Better resist it as long as I can. She learned to self-medicate. She likes that phrase. It sounds as if she’s in charge. With so much out of her control, a little needle in the belly counts as independence.

The liquid is an attempt to rouse her immune system and persuade it to take some action of its own against the Lymphoma’s colonisation. She imagines her immune system has been too benign for its own good, welcoming incomers without stopping to consider whether they were friendly or not. Now it’s found out to its cost that it should have been more selective. But it’s too late: the invading cells have pitched their tents, brought in their supplies, hunkered down for the long haul, set up outposts in the form of micrometastases, the better to further their colonising impulses.

She had intended to give up these metaphors of war. The only war, she understands, is that within herself: her body has cultivated its own enemy. None of this has come to
her from the outside. She hasn’t caught it from air or water or somebody else. As in her childhood, the life-threatening danger has come to her entirely from the inside: the violence is domestic, the terror familial, no strangers are involved.

Disease is just disease, she knows this. It has no meaning outside of that which she imposes. Nevertheless, she returns to this metaphor. The persona she’s created for the Lymphoma is belligerent: evil? She feels powerless to divert it from its bad intentions. What she ought to be doing, she remonstrates with herself, is considering why she’s choosing these violent interpretations instead of others that are less aggressive and more compassionate. The cancer as wayward, needing gentle correction. The cancer as ignorant, needing wise counsel. The cancer as lost, needing her redemptive love. The cancer as disease, with no needs at all, only her need to practically address it so that she can live the life she wants.

David explained, when he persuaded her to try this treatment, that it might do nothing. It isn’t chemotherapy, quite the opposite in fact as it seeks to encourage the immune system rather than destroy it. It’s worth a try, she thinks. The colourless liquid makes her ill with flu-like symptoms that are unpleasant and debilitating. She will adjust, he says. Their relationship has improved considerably since she accepted something he offered.

In her increasingly desperate desire to understand what she’s been doing during her stay on this planet, the nature and purpose of the ‘I’ who has been experiencing this particular life, Angelica has turned to many and varied sources. She’s learned a great deal and kept herself distracted and amused. But none of her learning, while sustaining her through this difficult part of her life, has touched the emotional magnitude of the mystery of her approaching death.

At first she could barely contemplate this death. She stared at her hands and imagined them still and without purpose. She saw them folded one over the other on her chest by someone else, in a pose she was unable to alter. She imagined her feet, without her in them to direct their daily course, walking them, dancing them, dipping them in a sea pool at low tide on a summer afternoon. It occurred to her that without her in it, whoever ‘she’ is, her body is unable to fulfil any of its destined functions. At the same time she is utterly without control over its vagaries. It decided to breed intolerable cell colonies, without any input from her, and she has to bear the consequences. This is an
unsettling dichotomy. Angelica and her body have irreconcilable differences. In any other relationship of such obvious inequality, divorce would be advocated. She is indeed a miserably divided subject. She turns to her books

...the ills of the body and those of the soul can communicate with one another and exchange their distresses...

Oh no! She can imagine nothing worse! A battleground of recriminations and self-pity, a soured marriage seething with failed expectations. She dare not embark on such a dialogue without the mediating presence of a third party. A priest? An analyst? A guru? a healer? Or somebody she meets on a train?

On her desk there is a photograph of a painting by Quint Buchholz. It portrays a tightrope-walker in the moonlight. He has strolled off the steep gables of a house on his rope and is caught in the act of taking his next step out into clear space. He holds his rope above his head and steps confidently towards the full moon with one foot, the other only momentarily at rest on his rope. There is no doubt in her mind that he will walk on air.

The lemon moonlight shivers, silvery, on the underside of the rope and the soles of his feet. The night sky is grey and green, with traces of creamy cloud behind the houses. The moon’s face is softened and diffused, as if we are seeing it through a vaselined lens. She looks at this photograph and she thinks, I will do that. I will let go of my tightrope and I will step off the gables of the construction that is my life and in blind trust, in full faith, walk towards the moon.

If she falls she will not care. It will be the act of faith alone that is her salvation, not its outcome. This is her body. This is her soul. They will not yet be divided.

Although she’s recovered physically from the myriad infections that brought her down lower than she’s ever been before, she hasn’t managed to improve her temper. She wants less and less of human company. She seems to be unable to protect herself from the games that people play. She’s happiest with the black and white dog, who sits at her feet, loving her and asking only that she walk him, feed him and give him some affection from time to time. ‘Hell is other people,’ Sartre famously complained, and who is she to argue with such an authority?

She’s come nowhere near fulfilling her stated aim of making some sense of this life she’s soon to leave. Her confession (for that is what in reality this is: an appeal to a
benevolent imagined reader for the understanding and acceptance that will allow her to forgive herself all the real and imagined failures of body and spirit that weigh so heavily on her) her confession is far from complete.

She’s obsessed by the presence of illness in her body. It makes itself at home, circulates at will, takes free rides to all destinations up and down the river of her blood, polluted as the Mekong. Disease is spatial: a rapacious explorer of the body’s geography. It’s inside her, in places where no one has been, where the human eye alone can’t seek it out. It has an abject power: the horror of that which is unseen and only darkly imagined. Or else repressed, denied yet present, like the shade of a killer stalking the bloodstained rooms of his old lair, seeking to relive events of such intensity that their energies may never dissipate, and are fully known only to him and those whose lives he so violently ended. Secrets. Monstrous secrets. Her life has been ruled by secrets. Will her death be governed by them as well?

So far the disease is contained within her, her boundaries are intact. To anybody else she looks quite ordinary, except for the days after the nights of fevered sweating, when in the morning her skin is pale and underneath her eyes are large, bruised circles. And she can gaze into her mirror as many hours as are in the day and she won’t see what lurks there.

She cuts her finger. She observes the swell of blood. She exercises her right to temporarily renegotiate and open up the borders of her physical being and admit that threat, the infection-laden air. She can’t see the small cleaved cells that voyage within her blood and are the hallmark of the disease. The cells may enlarge; the white blood cell count become unacceptably high; the platelet count may drop below what is reasonable. This is an entity running its own race, a life form doing whatever it needs to do to survive. This disease has agency. It’s a third party in the relationship between David and her, and one that will act on its own behalf without regard to either of them. It brought them together and set them on this course of affection and exasperation, disagreement and co-operation, concern and abandonment. Angelica recognises the intensities that bind them one to the other. She recognises that his is a complex desire, made up of his wish to see her well, and his wish to be the one who brings about her wellbeing through his expertise and knowledge. When she refuses him, she casts doubt on his life’s work. He isn’t used to this. He doesn’t like it.
But the disease has no capacity for thought, it acts instinctively, it does not decide where it will go, what it will do. It hasn’t the ability to single her or anybody else out for punishment. It isn’t a moral force.

The over-arching metaphor for life on earth is, she decides, the metaphor of war.

Sometimes she wonders why David bothers with her, considering her almost total lack of interest in complying with his prescriptions. And then she knows. He is a man who is good enough in his heart to accept that she has the right to do as she chooses, to act, or refrain from action, as she sees fit. However unwillingly, he does accept this and so remains in this triangle. This acceptance allows her to stay as well, even if it is only to engage with him in this watchful waiting, this conscientious observation. The cool light of David’s gaze, silent and comforting, even as it turns her, albeit temporarily, into an object of his scientific observation. His clinical gaze that is more than seeing. For it touches and it hears, it listens and it feels, it senses the invisible. In the clear light of this cool gaze she may rest for a while, knowing that David is listening, knowing he is guarding the gates. For this, she can love him, even in the midst of their most dire disagreements.

She decides to dissociate herself from David’s metaphors. She can’t live as a battleground for the forces of good and evil. Illness as an agent of retribution, a satanic presence, evidence of moral failure to care properly for herself or others. It seems to her that she must change her entire way of thinking about these matters. But how, and to what, is not yet clear. Wannabe gurus of all persuasions rush in with advice (how and when did she come to know all these people, or has everyone suddenly become an expert?) but she’s not interested. There’s a cancer type, someone tells her. People who don’t deal with their emotions. People who don’t deal with anger or sex or grief or frustration. Repressed people. The characterology of cancer.

‘Get fucked,’ Angelica tells a one-time friend over coffee in a Bondi café. ‘Let’s see how you feel when you get it. Let’s see how you feel when you’re sick as a dog and thinking you’re going to die any moment and somebody tells you it’s because you don’t know how to deal with your emotions. You’ve brought it on yourself and you have to suffer even though you had no fucking idea you might be bringing the sky down on your head at any given moment in time. Your attitude’s a little Old Testament, don’t you think? Get fucked. Leave me alone.’
Was it her fault her stepfather raped her as well? The characterology of rape? What is this vile inclination in our human nature that would have us crucify the victim?

The way to change her thinking will be found inside her, not in any external source, she knows this. It already travels the unseen highways of her arteries and veins, visiting every organ, every muscle, every cell and piece of tissue, side by side with her cancer. They are not adversaries. They dwell harmoniously in their shared environment. They are at peace because they know that life does not require that it be prolonged at all costs. That is a human imposition. They know that quality brings more satisfaction than mere quantity. That why you got the disease is less important than how you live with it now you’ve got it. Leave the whys to the researchers.

‘There are no problems,’ Julia’s father said, ‘there are only challenges.’

You play the hand you draw, with all the grace and dignity you can muster.

If only she could hold those understandings for longer than sixty seconds, Angelica thinks.

Sometimes she imagines slicing open the veins in her arms and watching while her diseased blood flows out.

‘Go,’ she would say. ‘You aren’t trapped in this body anymore. And neither am I.’

Her mother, on a carpet of bluebells in a northern forest at midsummer in soft, dappled light, with birdsong, and forest animals as her witnesses, made love, and subsequently found herself with child. Did she feel as Angelica has been feeling towards the life she unwittingly found herself hosting? Colonised, angry, helpless, invaded? At the mercy of an unwanted creative force with a certain independent existence, a force that would determine the course of her life?

If her entry into the world was so unplanned and fraught with moral difficulties, she will not allow her exit to be that ambivalent, Angelica decides. She doesn’t remember her arrival but she’s carried all her life the stigma of the socially untimely nature of her earthly embodiment. Her disembodiment will be handled with far more grace. Perhaps she wasn’t wanted, but she came and she has lived here on earth, and she will leave with dignity and with thanks to life for everything it gave her. David knows this, she recognises that now, even though she’s told him none of the details. His ability to know this is, to her, worth more than any chemical compound, any surgical procedure and has in the end allowed her to take his advice.
After a ferocious summer, the winter has been remarkably mild. Even in August she sits in the midday sun wearing only a light shirt and shorts, the black and white dog at her feet. There are decisions to be made, action to be taken, crying to be done, children to bring home from the far side of the planet. When the chips are down, the buck stops here. The ghastly thing about cliches is that they are usually right. What she wants is a loving heavenly father who knows what’s best for her, won’t let her suffer, and will understand everything she has ever done and failed to do. She wants somebody, human or divine, to take all these burdens away and give her peace.
After the combination of David’s treatment and six months of acupuncture, meditation and medicine from the Chinese doctor, the Lymphoma has gone into ‘spontaneous’ remission.

‘We don’t know how long you’ll stay in remission,’ David cautions her. ‘There’s no guarantees about anything. You still have to continue with the watchful waiting.’

‘I don’t care,’ Angelica tells him. ‘You have no idea how happy I am. I’ll take whatever comes along, it’s all icing on the cake.’

‘You’ve changed since I last saw you,’ he observes.

‘Yeah. Well I’m letting go of all my negativity,’ she confides. ‘It’s a long-term project. You’ve no idea how much you’ve got until you start watching out for it. I want to get rid of as much as possible before I die because I want to die happy.’

‘That sounds like a pretty good objective,’ he says.

‘I can’t think of a better one in this situation. It’s not like I can escape, is it? I mean remission is only remission, it isn’t a cure, is it? Last time I was supposedly cured, so I’ve had to adjust to the change in circumstances this time.’

‘There isn’t a cure for this cancer, Angelica. And yes, remission is only remission, but that doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it.’ He’s fiddling around with things on his desk, either because he’s ready to move on to the next patient, or because the conversation is getting a little too deep.

‘So I can do the things I want to do? Travel? Work?’

‘As long as you’re feeling well you can get on with your life,’ he says, looking at her warily. Perhaps he looks at all his patients like this. In the time Angelica’s been seeing him his dark hair has become liberally sprinkled with grey. He’s looking a lot older. It must be the strain of conveying so much bad news and having to watch people crumple right in front of your eyes every working day.

She hasn’t told David about the Chinese doctor.

The relationship with one’s specialist has a certain uncomfortable intimacy that Angelica still hasn’t learned to negotiate. While she’s in his office she’s a patient and that’s all she is. She has to recognise his knowledge and expertise, but he doesn’t have a clue about hers and isn’t interested. She’s reduced to a diseased body.
They don’t trust each other. She’s been too argumentative and she’s rejected chemo, his first line of attack. The second time around with cancer you can become troublesome. The first time fear is in control and you usually do what you’re told.

‘We’ll keep up the watchful waiting. I want you to come back every couple of months and we’ll check your bloods. Apart from that, just live your life. Be sensible. Don’t get tired and run down, your immune system still isn’t great but you are in remission. Congratulations. Enjoy it.’

She thanks him and says goodbye.

‘Take care,’ he says as she leaves his office, and he smiles at her, a quizzical smile that reveals a degree of interest in her outside of her disease, but not enough to make him ask her anything. She knows he can’t be expected to waste time on every patient’s personal life. The process is so insultingly reductionist. She doesn’t feel reduced when she visits the Chinese doctor, even though he speaks little English and draws pictures on a whiteboard to explain his intentions. He doesn’t know any more personal details about her than does David, that isn’t what it is, she realises. It’s the attention he’s paying to the parts of her that aren’t physical, there’s a balance, a sense that nothing important is being left out. The first time she saw him he said:

‘In Western medicine the doctor heals the patient. In Chinese medicine the patient heals the patient and the doctor assists. Healing does not always mean there are no more physical symptoms. Healing is more complicated than that.’

He didn’t express it as clearly as that, and she felt he could have appropriately ended his sentence with ‘grasshopper.’ But she’s quite sure she’s captured the essence of it. At any rate, her relief was so great at hearing his philosophy that she laid her head down on his desk and wept. She felt a brief disloyalty to David. Then she knew she didn’t care, she’d get help from anywhere and everywhere.

It’s taken Angelica a long time to grasp that the most she can hope for is remission. That she’s not going to get rid of this thing. It can’t be removed by surgery or radiotherapy like the last time. The best she can hope for is periods like these, when the Indolence slumbers. Regrouping its forces? There, that’s a negative thought.

So what is she going to do with this reprieve? She’s going to finish the book on ethics. As part of this process, she’s going to the Woomera Detention Centre to visit some detainees with whom she and Julia have become pen pals. Asylum seekers and victims of people smugglers, now living behind the razor wire in a desert stronghold,
imprisoned for an indefinite period of time. For complex reasons that she hopes to unravel, at least in part, she’s made a close identification with their plight, and is daily outraged at the government that has incarcerated them. She feels impelled to see for herself what’s going on there.

‘How do you feel about coming to Woomera with me?’ she asks Julia.

‘Fine,’ Julia says. ‘When do we leave?’

Angelica knew she’d say that. Nothing fazes Julia. She’s a woman who knows which way is up.

Domestic life. Julia has written on the shopping list ‘Hormones’ and ‘WH Ant’.

‘What the fuck does that mean,’ Angelica snarls, aggravated by what seems to her to be Julia’s deliberate obscurity, and hurrying as she is to get to Bi-Lo before she loses what little interest she ever had in grocery shopping. Julia stares at her. And explains nothing.

‘Fuck it,’ Angelica snarls and throws the paper in the veggie bin.

Julia extracts it and spreads it out on the pink kitchen counter, lovingly smoothing its wrinkles with her strong hands as if it is a piece of watered silk, or an ancient papyrus filled with significant hieroglyphics. Which it might as well be for all the sense Angelica can make of it. Julia casts her a dark and reproachful look.

‘I intend,’ she states with dignity, ‘to make cuttings of the tibouchina so I will need some hormone powder. The WH Ant,’ she continues, glaring balefully, ‘is for the white ant in the garden furniture.’

A short silence ensues, during which Julia observes Angelica, intently, but from a distance. Angelica bares her teeth.

‘Okay,’ she says. ‘I understand.’

Julia clasps her hands behind her back and rocks slightly on her broad feet.

‘Sometimes,’ she notes, ‘you can be really horrible.’

Angelica has no answer to this because it’s incontestably true. Whenever Julia says this Angelica knows she’s gone too far. She knows it’s time for her to take herself off to some quiet place and think seriously about the ways in which she conducts herself in her relationships.

Julia is the calm and imperturbable queen of the house. She moves on silent feet through all its corridors, upstairs and downstairs, which is Angelica’s domain, her den,
her cool, green cavern wherein she labours, making lemon tea and dandelion coffee on breaks from her unending affair with her book, and the story of her life. Julia will appear when Angelica is mid-sentence, with some observation or request that infuriates the writer, and then she will smile with such sweetness that Angelica feels monstrous and unkind when she hurls closed the door to let Julia know that she wants to be left alone. Julia slips notes under it. Angelica tears them up, gnashing her teeth. She sends text messages and Angelica throws her phone at the wall.

‘You could have just turned it off,’ Julia tells her mildly. ‘Now you’ll have to get a new handset.’

‘Fuck off!’ Angelica roars.

Angelica suspects that Julia is deliberately provoking her at these times, getting her own back for being shut out, like the dog digging holes beside the gate that they fall into when they come home. Angelica always feels bested in these situations, if only because Julia keeps her cool while Angelica totally loses hers. Julia, she concludes, certainly has her dark side.

‘How do you think people write books?’ she asks her one day, deceptively pleasant. ‘Do you think they do it sitting round the table having a chat about the price of fish and how many eggs that soufflé needs? Or being interrupted every five minutes for no good reason, just because they’re at home to be interrupted and not off in some office somewhere, inaccessible?’

She knows she could go on in this vein for some time, articulate, and probably even witty, a great riff, she can feel it coming on. But she shuts up. She decides not to give in to this particular creative impulse. Julia gazes at her. She has a calm gaze, and one that is without guile. Nevertheless she can, when she chooses, knock Angelica for six with a sharp retort. Julia’s blue eyes rest on Angelica’s face and she tilts her head slightly to one side, like a dog intently listening. She was a dog in a previous life, as is evidenced by her penchant for carrying things round in her mouth. To keep her hands free, she says. She also has a liking for bones, a liking that brings her into frequent conflict with Fletcher.

‘Don’t start,’ Julia advises. ‘If you don’t want to be disturbed just say so before you start work and then I’ll know, won’t I?’
‘One would hope so,’ Angelica mutters, not yet willing to be done out of her tantrum, which in truth has more to do with her frustration at being stuck in a rough passage in her work, than any interference by Julia.

Angelica knows too much. She paces the cream carpets in her green-shadowed cavern, poking about in ancient obscurities like a cabalistic hag seeking explanations for things that never can or should be explained. Angelica believes she has lost her innocence, but she still asks why. Later she will rethink this belief: is the real loss of innocence perhaps when one no longer cares why?

Julia, with her shopping lists, her kitchen miracles, her strong hands smoothing clean sheets, the sweetness of her smile; her love of everything in the natural world, her piles of specimens all over the dining room table, her reference books on scats, and crawling things; Julia, this agricultural economist turned environmentalist and librarian, hunting out those who poison mangroves, those who damage the rainforest with deadly garden wastes, and those who cast plastic bags into the sea that might ultimately end up round the neck of their favourite turtle, Julia, while knowing everything, has managed to stay as good and as whole in her heart as anyone you could want to meet. You’d think she’d turn in horror from Angelica’s revelatory meddlings that conjure up armies of ghouls from her past. There are few people who can truly accept the grim details of someone else’s difficult life. Julia is one of them.

They usually take their meals on trays on their knees. Tables in their house are for work and for the black and white dog to sleep under.

‘Why do you want a dog?’ Julia had asked Angelica before they started their search. Angelica thought carefully before answering.

‘Because I’ve never had a dog of my own. Because I want to look after another sentient being. And one that isn’t human and therefore is undemanding and without artifice.’

‘Is that an oblique reference to me?’ Julia inquired.

‘Not at all,’ Angelica reassured her. ‘You’re neither demanding nor artificial. Quite the contrary, I have never known a person as real as you. Plus, I don’t have to look after you, in the sense of feeding and walking you, though I do have considerable concern and responsibility for your overall wellbeing and happiness. No, I was actually making a comparison with children.’
‘It’s almost always interesting to ask you questions,’ Julia said after a while. ‘Except when you’re irritable and monosyllabic. Which you sometimes are, by the way. Maybe even often.’

‘Shut up,’ Angelica advised, but nicely, with a smile.

‘Don’t talk to me like that,’ Julia said sternly, and walked off to look up a scat.

* * *

The camera lies by omission. Almost any narrative can be constructed around the images it produces. Digital manipulation can so alter these images that the end product need have no bearing at all on what was initially captured by the camera lens (the laughing family with fear-filled hearts; the peaceful sleeping dog that when awakened, is savage. The mother who says smile for the camera or she’ll slap you). This technological advance means that we cannot legitimately privilege sight as a means of revealing the truth of a situation. For example, a photograph appears in the newspaper of half-a-dozen people thrashing around in the deep, blue sea, children among them. The first story accompanying these pictures, a story released to the press by the government of Prime Minister Howard, is a story of children being thrown overboard by crazed, immoral parents who are desperate beyond the point of sanity to be granted asylum in Australia. They believe, we’re told, that if they threaten to drown their children, the authorities will have no choice but to grant them what they demand. They are, we’re told, revealed for what they really are in these images: a boatload of importunate rag heads bent on infanticide. Look, says the government, look at that man holding his infant under its arms and swinging it wildly over the side! Who can believe this behaviour! How can we possibly let people of this kind into our country and dignify them with the title of refugee! Look at their unkempt beards, the government continues, their filthy clothes; look at their women whose heads and bodies are completely concealed behind long, black rags!

There is no place in the government narrative for the consideration of mitigating circumstances, such as the extreme desperation that fuelled the foreigners’ pleading. The narrative stands contextually incomplete, the characters shallow, their motivations unexplored and so, by anybody’s measure of a good story, this one is a failure.
The government’s narrative failure offends Angelica to her bones. She has felt that desperation, that absolute despair when no one will listen to your story of circumstances that have brought you to your knees. When another story has been created about you by people with a much louder voice. The world has only got worse in this respect: complex stories shrunk to sound bites delivered by a chosen few.

Later the public will hear accounts of how the asylum seekers sewed their lips together in the wilderness to which they were indefinitely banished. How they cut themselves, poisoned themselves, starved themselves, exposed themselves to the miseries of desert heat. Self harm. When the human voice is utterly silenced what is there left for us to speak with but our human bodies?

Angelica watches these events unfold, the Lymphoma forgotten, her urgent need to understand them fuelled by the forays she’s been making into her own history. Her desire to place her own history in a wider story of human suffering. We are commonly bound by vulnerability, she believes, the vulnerability that inescapably accompanies every human life. We aren’t isolated, precious, unique in our sufferings, though we live as if we are, she thinks, and we live as if foreigners don’t feel their pain as keenly as do we. On such assumptions governments base their inadequate narratives.

On the television news Angelica watches the weary, bewildered asylum seekers as they are transferred from their battered craft to the naval patrol boat.

‘These people have attempted to invade our sovereign territory,’ drones the Minister for Immigration when interviewed on the ABC’s 7.30 Report. He’s a pale, flaccid fellow who looks as if he dwells in a cave and sees little sunlight. He is unanimated but not robotic: he is too fleshly for that. Angelica does not like his repressed and repressive manner. Politic man ordained imagination as the fateful sin, the poet observed. Another casualty in this political battle for the electorate’s support, she thinks wryly: imagination, the mother of compassion.

‘They have jumped the queue of legitimate refugees legally attempting to achieve asylum in this country,’ he continues.

Am I supposed to feel outraged at this shameful display of bad manners, this blatant contravention of our rules, Angelica wonders? It’s un-Australian to jump queues, is it? Hoons and other disruptive elements jump queues, do they? People with no regard for authority jump queues? All kinds of intemperate emotions are aroused when people
jump queues, on both sides. It is anarchic. It oughtn’t to be encouraged. Far better not to arouse these emotions.

The minister has recast the asylum seekers as socially offensive queue jumpers in the hope of undermining any potentially subversive sympathy for them. It’s all right to ask for help, the minister seems to be inferring, but there are ways and means of asking and there’s no excuse for not abiding by them. First and foremost people must learn to ask politely.

There are those who demand that their code of behaviour be observed no matter what the circumstances and it appears the minister is one of them. To such people, transgressing the code is the direst offence that supercedes all other considerations. Such people should inspire terror in all our hearts, Angelica considers.

The minister’s lips smack wetly together at the end of his sentences in a self-satisfied manner. He’s tied everything up neatly, he’s pleased with himself, he’s decided there’s no grounds for anybody querying his conclusions and now he’s ready to move on. Why aren’t you? he asks silently, with a raised eyebrow and a slight tilt of his head. This complacency enrages her. What does he know of the extremities of abuse and fear and suffering? By what authority does he dismiss the asylum seekers’ claims and rewrite a story he has not even heard and has no interest in hearing? For surely, were he to show the slightest interest, it would be the easiest thing in the world for him to be fully informed.

The Minister with No Ears, is what the Indonesians call him because he doesn’t listen, he lectures, they allege. He’s like Celeste in that, Angelica thinks indignantly. And my mother. Silencing everybody in the interests of their own versions of reality that they swear is Reality. Colonising everybody else’s narratives. Fuck them.

Anybody who doesn’t fulfil the requirements as outlined by the Minister is attempting to invade our sovereign territory, he claims, which means they’re not asylum seekers, they’re a hostile invading force advancing on us in boats which means we can lock them up and deport them. Another hostile, invading force advancing on this country in boats? How many is that since the First Fleet set the tone? Angelica is dying to say all this to Julia, but she’s had to keep quiet so as not to miss anything. She jots down notes in the book she keeps with her for these occasions.

At this point, the electricity fails and there’s a blackout. The television dies. Who knows what the pale minister went on to say? The most common cause of blackouts in
their village, she’s been told, is fruit bats drunk on nectar colliding with power lines, or
lightening strikes. As there’s no storm activity, it must be the bats. There has lately
been an immense effort by some people in the village to get rid of the bats, and it’s true
that they do stink when they set up a colony near your back yard. On the other hand,
their own habitat has been severely encroached upon by human development and
there’s not many places left for them to go. But she can’t be distracted by the plight of
the fruit bats. People can live in a constant state of triage these days: local and global
injustices demand compassion and intervention, but who can take on everything? A few
decades ago their knowledge of planetary disasters was limited by technological
capabilities. Now there’s practically no upheaval of any kind they don’t know about
almost as soon as it’s occurred. You have to pick your causes.

‘Bugger,’ Angelica complains when the television dies. ‘I really wanted to know
what he came up with next.’

The power could be out for hours which means no computer either. Angelica goes
into the garden. Soon they’ll have to find the candles. There’s little twilight here in the
north. The guilty bats are flying out from their roosts for the night’s feasting. Without
any electrical noise in the background, it’s so quiet that it’s possible to hear the soft
whoosh of the bats’ wings as they make their way in groups of hundreds across the
blood-red evening sky. A tawny frogmouth has settled itself on the verandah post
where it slowly turns its head back and forth at unlikely angles as it surveys its
surroundings, unperturbed by humans. It has sleepy golden eyes, shielded by thick,
fawn lids that open and close in slow motion. Angelica moves up close to the
frogmouth. It stares her down. Anybody who arrives in a leaky boat is unlikely to fulfil
all Minister Ruddock’s requirements and in many cases they won’t fulfil any. If their
papers have been destroyed by storms at sea, if they’ve left their country in a big hurry
with the Taliban breathing down their necks, if to queue at a foreign embassy in their
country of origin is likely to bring about their imprisonment or death and the
imprisonment and deaths of those close to them, then they aren’t likely to fetch up on
our shores with anything the Minister for Immigration considers legitimate. This is
common sense, she insists to Julia, who has now joined her on the verandah and
brought a bottle of red with her. The tawny frogmouth blinks at her. She is so close to
the bird she could stroke its thick brown and cream feathers, but she doesn’t, not
wanting it to clear off. It’s young, she thinks, and doesn’t yet know to be afraid.
The Minister for Immigration is primarily interested in upholding systems, they agree, not human beings. His portfolio has become entirely to do with legalities, not ethics. Is this why he is so pale? He wears the badge of Amnesty International on his lapel. Is he conflicted?

After a few weeks it emerged that the initial *children overboard* theory might have been too hastily arrived at. It seems their miserable craft was sinking, that parents threw their children into the sea and jumped in after them in an effort to escape the disintegrating hulk. Several naval personnel were in the ocean with them, helping them to safety. The two stories are hotly contested in Parliament, in the press and on the airwaves for many months. But the damage has been done. Mud sticks, especially when it comes in pictures.

Julia and Angelica are sitting on the back porch reading the papers, drinking coffee and eating toast, an ordinary August Saturday morning. A butcherbird perched in the lower branches of the mango tree imitates the round, full sounds of an adult magpie’s call. An infant magpie stands on the grass, its young head tilted in an attitude of utter confusion as it struggles to match the familiar sounds with the completely unfamiliar bird that is making them. A stolen voice, Angelica thinks, feeling sorry for the baby. When they steal your voice you’re done for, the world no longer has any firm point of reference in it. The young magpie wanders off. The butcherbird becomes a lorikeet. The smell of coffee. Fletcher hanging round hoping somebody will take him for a walk. Just another Australian Saturday. Some of the asylum seekers were being sent to an off-shore detention camp, she reads, to prevent them landing on Australian soil and thereby being entitled to request refugee status.

‘Fucking *fuck* this government!’ she finally manages to shout as she read the details of this crafty political manoeuvre. ‘Just fucking *fuck* them!’

Angelica knows this abusive reaction is hardly likely to be helpful to anybody. But there is something in the implacably authoritarian stance the Government has taken against the few hundred asylum seekers that resonates deeply in her psyche. She struggles to uncover it. What is it that causes someone to take pride in his or her ability to stand fast and unbending in the face of another’s suffering? Isn’t it some kind of perversity that says, no matter how you beg, or plead, or suffer, we will never relent. In fact, you’re begging and pleading and suffering only make us more determined to
refuse you. This is how we prove our strength and our resistance and our enviable implacability! The rivers may run red with blood, but we have stood our ground.

Is this a form of narcissism? she wonders.

‘How triumphant they are in their power,’ she observes to Julia. ‘They’ve made an art form of never backing down no matter what the outcome. None of this is about human suffering. They’ve appropriated that, and turned it into an opportunity to show how tough they can be.’

‘That Immigration Minister, what’s his name, paleface, he collects stamps, I read about it somewhere,’ Julia says. ‘He takes the stamps off the letters he gets requesting asylum from people all over the world. He stores them in one of those Chinese cabinets with lots of drawers. His wife bought him one for Christmas. Sorting them is his retirement job. He says it’s one of the good things about getting so many letters from Amnesty International.’

‘You’re kidding, right?’

‘No, it’s for real. He really said that.’

‘I can’t believe it. It’s diabolical under the circumstances. The arrogance!’

‘Don’t get all exercised and start railing again,’ Julia advises. ‘It doesn’t do any good. You don’t get peace by hating war.’

‘Oh, give over with the hippy shit!’ Angelica retorts.

‘The Dalai Lama said that actually, and it was you who read it out to me. I’m taking the dog down the river,’ Julia says. ‘I need a walk.’

Fletcher rushes out from under the table on hearing that word, and barks to let her know he was ready when she was.

‘Good dog,’ Angelica says. ‘Good, lovely, beautiful, not-human-being dog.’

Angelica goes to her workroom and tries to unpack the situation as if she’s reading a dense theoretical text. She can hear the two little girls next door in the garden with their father. They are sturdy little girls, with dark hair cut in straight fringes and deep, loud voices. They sing children’s songs the eldest learns at pre-school and teaches to her younger sister. They sing them at the tops of their lusty voices while riding round their garden on little plastic bikes. When their father comes home from work he’s greeted by yells of ‘Dad! Daddy! Dad! What you doing, Dad? Where you going, Dad? Can I come, Dad? Can I come with you, Dad?’
Angelica thinks about that magical word, *Dad*. There has never been a time in her life when she could safely use it. Dad. Her father. Daddy. For her the words hold the key to everything she doesn’t know and will never know. They are her *open sesame*, the words that will cause the massive oak doors of the treasure-filled cave to mysteriously roll back and let her enter and safely revel in the bounty, under the magnanimous and munificent gaze of her father. If she could only have said the words, as these little girls are saying them now, she would know so much more.

*Father*, word of mysterious beauty, power and presence, a word that promises entry to a rich world for a girl child. The little girls next door use it trustingly and unquestioningly, as all little girls should. Julia uses it with a carelessness that takes Angelica’s breath away: does she have no idea how privileged, how blessed she is to be able to say it whenever she likes and have it refer to a particular person, her very own father?

As she listens to the little girls, and to their father’s murmured responses, Angelica feels a gentle but profound regret spread through her body. It does her good to hear it said, that word, even if it isn’t her saying it. All she needs to remember is that it *can* be safely said by some little girls, somewhere. All is not completely lost. They have no idea, the family next door, how much her eavesdropping on their daily lives soothes her heart. The loneliness of the father-starved child is never completely outgrown. One learns to live with it. One learns to hide it, even from oneself. One learns to stand alone in the world without the presence and influence of a father, because what else is there to do? But when the chips are down, and you are grateful to those who love you and whom you love, there is still that emptiness that when it speaks says,* father unknown.*

Angelica has been told she’s lucky, some fathers being more trouble than they are worth. And she can see that point of view. Some mothers are more trouble than they are worth as well, but it’s a futile argument. You miss what you miss, it doesn’t matter how many other people tell you you’re lucky to have missed it. Is she to imagine a terrible father, and thank her lucky stars she escaped him?

For a while there was a substitute, when her grandparents raised her. ‘Our Angel,’ Granddad called her.

‘Where’s our Angel, Ellen?’ he’d ask, as soon as he came home from work. By the time Angelica was born he’d retired from his life-long work as a coalminer, and was a nightwatchman at the gasworks. He’d arrive home on his bike as the household was
getting ready for the day, and sit her on his knee to share his breakfast bacon. When he rolled up his shirtsleeves for his morning wash at the kitchen sink, she could see the blue black coal dust that traced wavering patterns beneath the skin of his forearms. He always wore braces to hold up his trousers, and a flat cloth cap to cover his balding head. After breakfast, and many cups of strong, sugary tea, he’d go upstairs to bed while the domestic day unfolded downstairs, washing, baking, ironing, getting dressed up for a bus ride to the shops.

Never mind that he frequently left her in the garden of his favourite pub on Saturdays and Sundays, in her pram, being fed crisps and lemonade by his mates. Granddad saw child rearing as a communal activity rather than a personal responsibility.

‘For God’s sake, Ted,’ her Grandmother would shout at him when he rolled home for his midday dinner without the child ‘What the bloody hell have you done with our Angel? What’s wrong with you? That’s it! I've had enough! You’re not bloody taking her again!'

And Granddad, three sheets to the wind, would have to trot back down the hill to the Rose and Crown and fetch Angelica home, covered in grease and salt, sticky with lemonade and unable to eat her dinner.

Granddad was frequently forbidden to take her on outings in her pram because he always ended the outings at the pub, and couldn’t be trusted to remember her after a couple of pints. Nevertheless, he managed to smuggle her out from time to time.

‘He was a terrible father to me,’ her mother told her when she was grown up. ‘But he couldn’t do enough for you. He spoiled you rotten.’

Angelica could tell her mother didn’t like this. He hadn’t redeemed himself in her mother’s eyes by doing better at loving his granddaughter than he did with loving her. Angelica couldn’t imagine Granddad as a terrible father, but she took her mother at her word, and factored it into her family history. Now she can see that her own children might say something similar.

‘She was a selfish mother to us,’ they might tell their children, ‘but she spoils you rotten.’

Angelica can only hope that, unlike her mother, they find it in their hearts to allow her to redeem herself through her love for their children, but who knows? One does the best one can at the time, and that is often sadly inadequate by another’s lights.
‘You silly old bugger!’ Grandmother scolded. ‘And she’s getting all that rubbish from those buggers down there so she can’t eat her dinner when she does get home!’

Of course, she only has Grandmother’s account of these events. Granddad wouldn’t talk about it, feeling shamed, Angelica guessed. To him she would have said, ‘What you doing, Granddad? Where you going, Granddad? Can I come with you, Granddad?’

The metaphor is too easy, when Angelica thinks about it down in her cool, dim room. When she pulls herself back from the memories and focuses again on the present and Julia’s story of the Minister’s hobby. Stamp collecting as yet another form of colonial appropriation, of taking the exotic from desperate lives whose stories would break your heart if you let them into it. There is something chilling in this story about the Minister for Immigration. Something made even more chilling by the fact that he has himself provided this coy glimpse into his personal entertainments. What is most unnerving is the image it invokes of a powerful man benefiting in any way at all from the misery of people throwing themselves on his mercy. With what hopes were those stamps bought, licked, stuck on the envelopes, and posted to Canberra from countries all around the world!

At seven that Saturday night, they watched the ABC news. The Minister was up first, continuing the process of writing into history the narrative that would transform asylum seekers into criminals and terrorists.

‘They have broken our laws,’ he claimed with an attempt at indignation that she didn’t find entirely convincing. His features were pallid.

‘He doesn’t say anything about where they’ve come from or why, their circumstances, the context,’ growled Julia.

‘Of course he doesn’t,’ Angelica told her. ‘He can’t let them have stories, like human beings. That would ruin his plan.’

They had eaten dinner early on the recently completed deck Julia had built outside the sitting room. From this deck they could look at the treetops and gaze down the garden at the considerable bird life that gathered in the early evening to compare notes about the day, and fight. Now they were finishing off dessert in front of the TV, lemon cake with sliced fresh peaches and plenty of dolloping cream.
‘His project is to make them out to be criminals, he can’t afford to reveal anything about them that might make us have a bit of sympathy. Look at his eyes,’ Angelica pointed at the screen with her spoon, ‘how frightened they are, that awful grin. I wouldn’t like to be living in his skin, what must it do to you to lie about people like this?’

‘He doesn’t have to. Nobody’s holding a gun to his head.’

‘I know, but what must it be like to choose to live in that kind of suspicion and hostility, or even worse, to pretend you do for the sake of political gain. He’s so closed and pale and miserable looking.’

‘You’re going to make me feel sorry for him in a minute,’ Julia warned.

‘Shit, I wouldn’t want to do that. He should take off that Amnesty badge he’s wearing. It’s very interesting that he won’t. Defiant.’

‘He’s reassuring himself that he’s not a bad man, that he cares about refugees, just not the ones who come here in boats.’

‘Well, are we going to Woomera?’ Angelica asked her.

‘I’m guessing you mean the Detention Centre, that you aren’t just interested in the town’s history as a rocket-launching pad?’

‘Yeah, well everything really, but I mean the Detention Centre.’

‘Okay. You have to get permission from the Immigration Department, we can’t just turn up.’

‘I know. I rang the refugee action group and they told me what we have to do. I’ll get onto it all in the morning.’

‘What about the dog?’

‘He can come too.’ Angelica leaned down to stroke his chin and give him a scrap of cake with cream. Fletcher loved cream.

‘We don’t feed the dog at the table, I thought,’ Julia said.

‘I’m not at the table. I’m on the couch. We don’t eat at the bloody table because it’s covered in scats and leaves and reference books.’

‘You always have to have the last word, don’t you,’ Julia said, getting up and taking their dishes into the kitchen.

Outside, the early evening breeze dropped and the air took on a quality of stillness in preparation for the rising of the moon and the coming of the night.
‘That’s rich, coming from you,’ Angelica snorted and turned the sound up on the television.

There are intervals when Angelica craves solitude so she can sort through the intense emotions that are the legacy of her younger life. It’s hard work, learning to accept the unacceptable. But nothing can be undone, and it’s usually the victim’s task to lay things to rest. You don’t find many perpetrators too worried about doing that. Unfair as that might seem, it’s become clear to Angelica that it’s one of life’s hard facts.

Julia has no personal experience of the aftermath of violence and horror, though she accepts it is considerable and gives Angelica plenty of room. There are times, though, when things are so dark for Angelica that she has to completely withdraw herself until the darkness passes. If prevented by circumstances from withdrawing, she struggles to keep herself from lashing out in rage and despair at whomever is closest to her, a struggle she frequently loses. The confluence of ancient emotions, and frustration at not having the privacy in which to sort them out, boils in her like a hot fury.

‘Isn’t it enough that I had to endure such things?’ she wants to bellow. ‘And now I can’t be allowed the peace I need to overcome their legacy! After everything else, I’m now expected to be nice?’

Living with the damaged is never easy.

Angelica doesn’t want her disturbances to spill out into the world and reproduce themselves in another’s life: it’s much better to secrete herself somewhere until the difficult emotions have passed. She doesn’t want her dark things multiplied and sent out in her own bad behaviour. This family darkness has to stop with her, as much as is possible.

Sometimes Julia thinks Angelica’s being too precious about what she calls her boundaries, and sometimes Angelica thinks Julia’s being disrespectful of them. She knows, however that these moments pass, that Julia is infinitely forgiving and when she retires hurt, Angelica is ashamed. Dark deeds do spread out into the world: it’s hardly possible to contain them, their aftermath is a sullied tide that sweeps through the decades leaving baffled survivors in its wake, spouses, children, friends, acquaintances. One can only hope to reduce the impact, one can only hope that the damage will get less and less.

But how to forgive the unforgivable?
Angelica’s hair had been cut into a straight bob with a fringe that touched her eyebrows. It won’t suit you, her mother warned her beforehand. But Angelica wanted that haircut more than she wanted her mother’s approval. That was a rebellion. If you asked Angelica what her favourite colour was, she wouldn’t be able to tell you without first consulting the mother in her mind to find out what colour she would want her to like best.

While Angelica fought constantly against her mother, she also lived in terror of her disapproval and dismissal especially in matters of Angelica’s appearance. So the stand the girl took on her haircut was of great significance.

She wanted to look like another girl at her boarding school, a girl with white blonde hair cut in the same style. Angelica’s hair was dark blonde and dull. She envied the white blonde hair, how exotic it seemed. Angelica knew she was different from everyone else at school, but her difference was shameful, not exotic. She was made different by having no family: they all went to live in England, her mother, the doctor, her half sisters, Edwina and Celeste, while she was left behind in Australia at boarding school. This state of affairs came about because Angelica revealed to her favourite nun the nature of events in her father’s household.

When Angelica got to the convent she learned that we must forgive those who harm us seventy-times-seven. She tried many times to add up how many times her stepfather was with her in those ways, to see if she’d reached the prescribed limits of forgiveness and could finally protest. She asked Sister Elizabeth (rosy cheeks, direct brown eyes, tufts of grey hair escaping from her wimple):

‘What can you do if someone is making you do something you don’t want to do and you know it’s wrong?’

She asked this question in a practice room, sitting at the piano, her hands at rest on the keys. She asked it with a contrived and unconvincing air of nonchalance, as if she was more interested in the abstract than the actual. Sister Elizabeth sat with her knitting, having popped in to listen to her play. She was an accomplished little pianist; apart from lying about her life, playing the piano was her only accomplishment at that time.
‘Tell someone older,’ replied Sister, not fooled for a minute, Angelica can see in retrospect.

They’d had their eye on her, she learned from the good sister many years later, because though she was obviously very smart, she consistently failed everything except music. Neither would she learn to swim (someone might see something when her body was revealed by a bathing suit) or play any kind of sport, as if she was afraid her fragile body would break if subjected to any further stresses. Far in the future, Julia will teach her to swim and Angelica will take enormous pride in this simple accomplishment and so will Julia, having expended a great deal of energy in persuading her that she can do it.

‘Tell me if you like,’ Sister Elizabeth continued that portentous afternoon. ‘Don’t try to fix everything yourself.’

Suddenly the whole miserable story spilled out of her. Five whole years of it. When she was done, she laid her forehead on the piano keys with a great discordant crash. Sister Elizabeth stroked her back.

‘You’ll be all right,’ she whispered, though she had no grounds for giving such assurances, and was shaken to her very core by what Angelica had revealed. Nevertheless she knew already that the girl must immediately be separated from that father.

‘You’ll be all right now,’ she said. ‘We’ll take care of you, we’ll work it all out.’

‘What about my mother? He said he’d kill her if I told anybody.’

‘Shhhhh,’ soothed the nun. ‘We’ll do everything we can. We’ll work it out.’

She gathered Angelica up in her arms. At that moment the Sister had no idea what they could do, but there was no doubt in her mind that Angelica had spoken the truth. Sister Elizabeth did what she knew best. She prayed.

Some weeks later Angelica’s family left the country and she stayed behind with the nuns. True to her word, Sister Elizabeth, with the help of her Sisters in Christ and a couple of lawyers, confronted Angelica’s mother and stepfather. Angelica was hidden for the day, sent off the school grounds with her English teacher just in case there was violence. Her mother and stepfather both admitted that Angelica had spoken the truth. They must have known the game was up. The combined forces of nuns and lawyers proved formidable. The parents were offered a choice: either they agreed to relinquish
Angelica into the care of the nuns until she finished school, or the lawyers would go to the police. They relinquished her, of course. She became an orphan, as the family returned to England.

Later in her life she understood that in the telling, in that desperate exercise of insubordination and the principles of freedom, she reclaimed herself and took back the power that was hers by right. In her resistance she brought them both undone and rescued herself from their attentions. But it was many years before these understandings were of any comfort to her, and the price she paid for revelation was higher than rubies.

England was where her Grandmother and Grandfather were. Her aunt and uncle. Everyone is there, except her. That doesn’t seem anything like fair, or reasonable, or just. How could she make sense of it? How could she live her daily life with the bald reality of this absolute abandonment, brought about, in her child’s understanding, by her telling the secrets she had been forbidden, on pain of death to reveal. How could she make sense of this turn of events?

In her fantasy, Angelica had believed that the doctor would be banished and she and her mother and two little sisters would live together, happy and safe at last. What other dream could a child allow?

The adult Angelica cannot remember that time. She knows it only from the accounts of others. She remembers no feelings. She was shocked insensible by events and never recovered their memory. She rolled up the sleeves of her white school shirt and she played the piano. Beethoven, Albeniz, Schumann. It was the doctor who first taught her to play the piano. Then a pretty, kindly young woman at school took over her musical education and talked to her about a musical future. But that was beyond Angelica. The very idea of a future was beyond her. They took everything, those people she knew as parents. Everything.

Question: Why didn’t her mother and the doctor send Angelica back to England, to people who love her, and themselves stay behind?

Answer: Because her mother and the doctor didn’t want their English family to know what has happened.

But something hadn’t just happened all by itself.

Didn’t they mean they don’t want their English family to know what they have done?
Angelica now had no home other than the boarding school, and nowhere of her own to go during the holidays. Girls invited her home with them. Sometimes she accepted the invitations, sometimes she refused, and hid in the garden until everyone left and it was too late to talk her into accepting anybody’s charity. The school was now empty except for her and the nuns, who spent hours searching for her. The nuns were extremely good to her, but she was embarrassed and ashamed and humiliated and furious that she didn’t have a home to which she could invite girls back. Not that she was ever allowed to do that anyway, even when there was a home with family in it. Families such as Angelica’s don’t open their doors to others. Others might see something.

Angelica was laid waste at having been abandoned like that, as a direct consequence of trying to save herself from evil. She couldn’t admit the depths of this devastation, to herself or anybody else. It didn’t begin to make itself felt for years, till she was an adult negotiating adult relations, as ill-prepared for this as anyone ever could be. Only in adulthood do the tremendous feelings of abandonment begin to make themselves known, and always in situations quite out of proportion to her reactions. The more she loves, the more she fears. She doesn’t know where these feelings, that seem so deceptively to belong in the present, come from, descending like a category five hurricane, leaving ruin in their wake. The wages of trauma. Nobody told her to expect them.

Even though the family was altogether unsafe for her, it was the only one she had and she wanted it back. This was a conundrum that was way over her head: she wanted her family but her family was too dangerous for her. What she wanted was her safe family, but that didn’t exist except in her dreams. And what about her Swedish father? Did he exist, and if he did why doesn’t he come and get her out of this?

How was she going to make sense of her fate? She was fifteen in the 1960s, in a convent, and apart from what she’d experienced in her family for the previous seven years she knew nothing at all about adult life and there was nobody to teach her but nuns. They didn’t have television at school. Their Sunday night treat was being read to from C.S.Lewis while they drank their cocoa, having spent the day out hiking after morning mass in the cathedral. They still lined up for pocket money for lollies. They knelt on the floorboards for their skirts to be measured to ensure they weren’t too short, and they had to show their house-mistress that their underpants were regulation brown.
knickers, and when they went out, in an orderly crocodile to church or on an excursion downtown, they wore their hats and gloves and tied back their hair. She knew nothing.

When she discussed this with Julia years later (they are the same age and had similar educational experiences) Julia told her that there were girls at her boarding school who snuck out at night to be with boys. So that was probably the case at Angelica’s school. But she never knew those girls or knew such things happened. How, Julia asked her, did she manage to protect herself from this kind of knowledge when she already knew so much else? I have no idea, Angelica told her. No idea. Separate worlds. Angelica looked back at that innocent young girl who also knew so much. How did she bear this dichotomy? She made categories. There was what happened at home. And there was everything else. Somehow, and this may be what saved her, she believed that what happened at home belonged there, the terror was contained there, and life outside of intimate circles was safe and the people non-violent. (This conclusion won’t be seriously tested until she goes to the Woomera Detention Centre.)

After her family left her behind, Angelica gave up sleeping. The nuns took it in turns to bring her hot milk and sit by her bed so she wasn’t left alone in the dark. Eventually they took her to a psychiatrist.

‘I am falling down,’ Angelica told him.

‘Falling down? On the ground you mean?’

‘No. I’m falling down a big black hole and it doesn’t have any bottom and I can’t stop and I can’t get out.’

‘Do you miss your mother?’ he asked her.

This seemed to Angelica to be a question fraught with so many difficulties and pitfalls, that there wasn’t an answer that wouldn’t take her the rest of her life to find.

‘No,’ she told him finally.

That was as much as she ever revealed, and she’d like to have taken that back, on later reflection. Still, she didn’t mind going to his warm study once a week and having him pay her some attention, as if what she thought about the world was important. He prescribed something to help her sleep. The nuns sat by her bed, and sometimes read to her until she fell asleep, then tiptoed out, away to their own rooms.
Angelica told the other girls that her parents were overseas and would send for her at Christmas. This story had cachet: it suggested a diplomatic posting, expatriate employment, success. That they fled in disgrace, abandoning her because she was the easiest member of the family to abandon, she never mentioned that. She started sleepwalking. More than one night she woke up at the bottom of the stairs with nothing broken, but bruises came out all over her the next day. She never knew if she’d fallen, or if she jumped. She was fifteen.

She had too much to hide. All that was hidden was factored into every encounter as an absence, a gap, a lack. Secrets formed a castle wall around her, with vertical slits through which she could shoot arrows at trespassers. There was no drawbridge across the moat. She couldn’t get out and nobody else could get in. There were hungry alligators swimming in the water.

One day, an adult at home in her workroom, with Julia upstairs cooking and Fletcher asleep on the carpet by her feet, Angelica finds a cardboard box under the stairs that she hasn’t looked at for a long time. It’s full of drawings she made when she began seeing a therapist shortly after her second child was born. Feelings and memories overwhelmed her at then. She thought that she would go mad and die and take the baby with her. This was the beginning of a long relationship with the Woman, who taught her how to take back her life. When Angelica looks round the room in which she currently does her work, she sees that it bears a strong resemblance to the room in which she met with the Woman every week in the early years of their therapeutic relationship. She has recreated for herself that same sense of comfort and ease, of eclectic beauty, and primarily, safety, that she first came to know in the Woman’s house.

Each time Angelica entered the Woman’s room she felt immediately relieved, as if in the Woman’s presence an impossible burden was temporarily lifted from her body and mind. This burden was not only her past, but worse, her terror of her past. With the Woman, in that protected space, Angelica could face her fears. It was as if she entered the room each time feeling broken, fraught, ruined and bloodstained. It was as if each time the Woman laid her gently on plush white cushions, drew the red velvet curtains against the daylight and the life of the street, then left her for a few moments. When the Woman returned, she carried a blue bowl of warm, slightly salted water and a bundle of soft white cloths. Carefully, murmuring and soothing, she placed the warm wet cloths
between Angelica’s legs, on the place that carried so much hurt of every kind, and the salty water and the Woman’s gentle incantations over time drew out the stubborn pain, and Angelica’s secret places began to heal.

Sometimes Angelica took her newborn son with her to the sessions. This wasn’t because there was nobody to look after him for that hour, but because she couldn’t bear to be without him. At these times the Woman and Angelica would whisper so as not to wake him, or talk of easy things while he suckled from her breast.

‘I didn’t know,’ the Woman told her many years later when they were friends together, ‘I had no idea how to work with you, when you brought the baby, without alarming him. They are so sensitive to atmosphere, but we found a way, didn’t we?’

It was a wordless way. It was the Woman’s attentive presence, her lovely room, the baby suckling, the safety Angelica knew there. All these combined to make a balmy climate. Few words were necessary at those times but much was accomplished.

To see your children being ordinary, living without fear of ordinary things like taking baths, sitting down to dinner, getting in cars because they have no terrifying associations with any of these banal activities, is to heal yourself. The vicarious delight Angelica took in the ordinariness of her children’s lives, their unquestioned ownership of their bodies, their license to give cheek to their father and her without fear of terrible retaliation. The glorious freedom of a school-grimed child to casually fling himself on the sofa. To light-heartedly insult his brother, to live his boy’s life without any fear that anyone might prevent him from doing this, these things never failed to cause her to catch her breath in gratitude. It was different for them. She was witness to this difference, had done her part, with their father, to make this difference. Their troubles were many and serious: broken families unsatisfactorily reblended and all the anguish that creates. Those troubles had a certain manageability: they were open troubles openly discussed, and at the time, happening everywhere around them. But perhaps the most significant difference was that the boys were loved.

‘You were volatile, Mum,’ the young man tells Angelica on a visit with his partner, Sophie.

‘And Dad never expressed any emotion! You couldn’t have been more different. But you were both selfish, you thought about yourselves before you thought about us.’

He’s silent. Sophie puts her hand on his knee to comfort him. Angelica wants to take him in her arms, but that’s Sophie’s privilege at this moment. And anyway, she can’t
ever hold him again like she used to when he was little, and belonged to her. Nobody tells you what it will feel like to let them go.

‘We always knew you both loved us, though,’ he adds thoughtfully. ‘We always knew, there wasn’t ever any doubt about that. You were just selfish. You made decisions for yourselves, not us.’

She has no argument with his assessment, and feels as if she’s got off lightly, though it isn’t easy to listen to these things, especially in front of Sophie. He sounds as if he’s forgiven his parents, or at least come to terms with some of their failings.

‘Sophie and me went to see our old house in Newtown where I was born,’ he tells Angelica next. ‘The house with the blue door where you had me in a beanbag. Remember?’

‘As if I could ever forget!’

But what she has forgotten is that there were two houses with blue doors. She’s lost to the present moment by the pull of her memories of that other blue door, the one from her childhood. How could she have painted her grown-up door blue, because she did, she can remember choosing the colour. How could she have done that?

These encounters with people like the Woman, people who will help, are the difference between living and dying, and they frequently come at times when you are so desperate that everything in you is broken wide open, and you don’t have the strength to resist anymore. Asking for help was something Angelica had to learn how to do. She had her pride.

So much emotion rises in Angelica when she finds these drawings that she can barely breathe. Her fingers are clumsy as she unfolds the pictures and spreads them across the carpet. It is perhaps twenty years since she drew them and she hasn’t looked at them since.

She sees that she’s drawn a series with a fiery apocalyptic background, red and orange flames and plumes of black smoke. Across the page she’s scrawled in black letters, written with such force that in places they’ve torn the paper:

MOTHER!!!!
YOU DID NOT DO RIGHT BY ME!!!!
YOU DID NOT DO RIGHT BY ME!!!!
AND NOW I COME OUT OF THE FLAMES AND THE FIRE TO SAY TO YOU AGAIN:

YOU DID NOT DO RIGHT BY YOUR DAUGHTER, MOTHER!!!!

And then there’s a calmer note:

*Dear Mother,*

*I do not hold you responsible for what HE did.*

*I only hold you responsible FOR WHAT YOU DID.*

*I do not want any misunderstanding on this score.*

*Angelica.*

And then, drawings she can hardly bear to look at. A small girl with blood flowing down her thin thighs from far inside her belly. Tears in black crayon, but the child has no eyes. Her arms flung wide and a deep blue sky above her streaked with high white winter cloud.

And then a big-bellied man with a distorted face. He wears a coat of many colours, with great importance. Angelica has drawn the coat in pencil with tiny squares and has coloured each square differently. The drawings have taken her a long time to complete: they are meticulous. Like a good child she has kept her crayons within the lines.

Angelica will not interpret this image. She baulks at any attempt to know its meaning. There are still some places to which she cannot go. When she encounters these places, her body sets up the alarm with dizziness and nausea and a racing heart. And she knows it’s too much, at this time; that her being is saying no. The Woman taught her how to recognise this vital warning that there are times to go to these places and there are times to stay away. The Woman taught her how to listen to the part of her that knows these things. The wise part. The part of her that loves the child, Angelica.

Angelica has kept these drawings as testament to the little child. It was the child who lives within her still who drew them. They are not the work of an adult.

For weeks after re-discovering the drawings, Angelica puts them under her pillow when she goes to bed for the night. She lays her hand on them as she falls asleep. She weeps with sorrow for what the child knew, and what she can’t ever un-know.

‘My darling,’ Angelica whispers to the child, for the child who lives in her still is now as real to her as her own dear sons, ‘my darling, darling girl.’
We are expected to feel compassion for those we identify as our own kind, but not for the different ones, Angelica thought as she read the increasingly distressing accounts of life in detention for the asylum seekers. We are prevented from seeing the suffering faces of the women, children and men who pleaded to be refugees in our country. The weariness from weeks of arduous travel, the dislocation as a result of having left behind everything and everyone familiar and comforting to come to a country peopled by aliens who are nothing like what you imagined they would be in their attitudes towards you. Surely, we’d think, if we could see them and hear their stories (because we are decent people, we believe in ourselves as decent people) surely we would protest, there must be something we can do to help these strangers who do not have a place anywhere on God’s good earth where they can make a home?

Eight little girls in brown tunics and white blouses clapped their hands and knees in the playground under the pear tree. The bell called the nuns to Evensong. The nuns taught the little girls to live in each moment as if they were in the presence of God. God is love, they taught. The little girls didn’t understand or even care. They knew they were treated kindly and with fairness most of the time. They absorbed an atmosphere of reverence for what they couldn’t see and what was beyond the rational. The prayers were tiresome. Their knees hurt from the rough mats, and they wanted their breakfasts. Nevertheless something of significance was passed onto them, to their spirits their souls, their beings. Big words, heady and inadequate. Like love.

Someone she loved told Angelica a story.

In New York there was a shoe shop run by a philosopher. He sold only sandals. Angelica’s lover visited the shop.

‘Think,’ whispered the philosopher in his gravelly voice, staring into her friend’s eyes with his own mad orbs, ‘think of the kind of people who chose to wear boots! Hitler! Mussolini! The police and the army! Then think,’ he went on, his voice dropping to a whisper, ‘of those who chose to wear sandals. Jesus! Ghandi! Mother Theresa.

Her lover bought sandals. He wore them in the bath to soften the leather, and then for the rest of the day so they’d dry in the shape of his feet.

‘Hey,’ she said to him one day at the beach, ‘perfect love casteth out fear.’

‘Yeah,’ he replied out of sorts that day, ‘and perfect fear casteth out love.’
In the summer her father wore sandals.
What did that mean?
All of this is true.

* * *

From a refugee organisation, Angelica and Julia receive a list of detainees held in the Woomera and Baxter Detention Centres who are anxious for visitors. They’ve already been writing to people in both places, but they would like to visit with as many as they can. The list is made up of numbers, names, country of origin and a brief description of their circumstances:


They read the list and feel thoroughly dismayed. Unskilled in the triage of suffering, how are they going to choose who to visit from these dozens of sorrowful summations of lives lived behind the razor wire? But they must choose, and write to the chosen ones, enclosing a stamped, self-addressed envelope so the asylum seekers can write back and request a visit. Angelica and Julia must then present these correspondences to the Department of Immigration to prove that they have been invited.

An equal number of women and men, they decide. Children aren’t included as they can only be visited with parents or guardians. Everyone is depressed, according to the list, and almost everyone wants visitors. Not all have attempted escape: too many have self-harmed. Choosing people to receive their sympathetic attention. Nobody should have that kind of power.

A woman in the village, with whom Angelica has a passing acquaintance, says to her when she encounters her with the dog one morning:

‘Julia says you’re going to Woomera. Woomera! Why would anyone go to Woomera in November! It’s a furnace there! It’s like hell!’

The woman is amused and puzzled by what they’re doing, and Angelica feels momentarily patronised. She smiles at the woman. There’s nothing she wants to say. She’s not embarking on some consciousness-raising sermon that will be a waste of everybody’s time.

‘Well, it will be interesting, won’t it?’ Angelica laughs, and goes on her way.
Who are you, Nasrim, Hamid, Parvin, Jasmine, Zahra, Ali, Mustafa? What do you dream? What do you desire?

Angelica dreams she’s swimming in a dark body of water. Swimming by her side is a white alligator. The alligator seems to smirk. She fears she’s in great danger from this white animal and yet its whiteness marks it as a magical creature, redemptive, pure, a saviour.

It appears from the literature sent to her by the refugee organisation that when women and girls menstruate in Woomera they are obliged to line up each day of their menses to be given a daily supply of sanitary products from a male guard. Julia and Angelica try to work out just what kind of weaponry might be assembled from a cache of sanitary products. Failing to come up with anything sensible, they then try to imagine how these products might be accumulated as instruments of self-harm. Failing again to come up with anything rational they conclude that this daily distribution is a sexist and racist exercise in humiliation and control. To punish them for daring to hope they would be allowed to live here; for not having taken their rightful place in that mythical queue; for being of Middle Eastern appearance; for being too different from Australian women in too many ways.

Angelica dreams she’s walking in a ditch filled with snakes. On one side of her is a road, on another a field. The ditch is lined with thick oleander bush. The snakes, adult and infant, are dark brown and difficult to see in the muddy ditch. Her feet are bare. She manages to avoid being bitten and to eventually find her way out of the ditch. Julia is with her, but the snakes ignore her and pursue only Angelica.

The same village woman says to her on another day: ‘Why do you care so much about those Muslims, anyway? There’s plenty of our own kind to care about if you want to do good works.’

Angelica looks at her for a long time. Finally she says, ‘Why don’t you mind your own fucking business?’ and walks off down the street. She knows this for the inadequate and hostile reaction it is, and as soon as it’s out of her mouth, she wishes she hadn’t said it. But she’s sick of taking flak about her interest in the asylum seekers. She’s sick of explaining herself and being pleasant. What if she’d said:
‘I know what it is to be without a home. I know what it is to be abandoned. I know what it is to yearn with every cell in my body for safety, security, an ordinary life. I know what it is to be a stranger at the gate. I know what it is to have your life entirely governed by the manipulations of others, as if you were nothing more than an instrument for the gratification of their desires and ambitions. Why should I turn my back on people enduring that and worse?’

The acquaintance would look at her, appalled. She doesn’t really want an answer to her question. It isn’t a real question. It’s a judgement.

They receive another letter from the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre.

_I want to go back to Afghanistan. At least there they are honest and will kill me with a gun. In Australia they kill me with a pen._

On a television current affairs programme, three women who worked at Woomera tell of the circumstances there:

‘Hardly a day goes by in Woomera without some serious attempt at self-harm; burning themselves with cigarettes, trying to cut themselves, drinking shampoo…’

One woman says, tearfully, that she had become involved in four cases where children had tried to commit suicide. Children?

On the ABC news they hear that Newspoll has asked Australians how they responded to reports of hunger strikes or self-mutilation by the asylum seekers. The newsreader reveals that seventy per cent of interviewees reported that they were even less sympathetic to the asylum seekers than they were before. There must be some of those decent Australians amongst that seventy per cent. What is going on here?

A profound misunderstanding of the dynamics of self-harm, it would appear is what’s going on here, Angelica decides. The view that self-harm is a manipulative behaviour that should be ignored, is overriding the view that it is a desperate plea for help that should be attended to. The country is divided by two opposing concepts of strength: on the one hand it is strong to resist immoderate pleading, on the other it is strong to unbend and listen. The former wins hands down over the latter. Nobody wants to be seen as a bleeding heart, but hearts do bleed, it’s only human. Angelica wants a T-shirt that says *Bleeding Heart and Proud of it!*
In a radio interview the Minister for Immigration, hell-bent on denying his own humanity and everybody else’s through his mastery of spin, speaks of the adverse impact of indefinite mandatory detention, when referring to a six-year-old boy imprisoned with his family, who no longer eats, drinks or speaks.

Sewing lips together is an example, the minister goes on to say, of inappropriate behaviours.

Angelica can’t see his pale flesh but she can hear the satisfied smacking of his lips at the end of his precise sentences.

Julia is currently digging a deep trench to deal with kitchen waste. She hurls sand from the bottom of the trench onto a rapidly growing mountain. There is a sour odour from the dank sand, the dog keeps his distance from her flying shovelfuls. Angelica carts the debris from a felled tree, whose roots are responsible for this situation, down the garden to the front gate to be loaded onto the truck and taken to the dump at some later stage. They are living their ordinary life while they listen to and watch these outrages.

We have concentration camps in the deserts of our country, claims a pamphlet from a refugee organisation that somebody left in the letterbox. The woman who told her to look after their own, tears up her copy as she walk past their gate, deliberately, so Angelica can see her do it. Angelica gives her the finger. We’re settling into a real enmity, Angelica thinks. We have come to represent for each other what each of us most dislikes and fears in the wider world. I ought to go over there and apologise for my hostility Angelica ponders, and suggest that we agree to differ. Dimly she recalls Julia’s reminder of the Dalai Lama’s attitude to such situations. But she doesn’t go over and apologise.

They read the papers, watch the television, and download daily reports from various agencies involved with the Detention Centres and their inmates as preparation for their visits. Angelica arranges a meeting with Tony, who works for an organisation that is lobbying for the end of indefinite mandatory detention, and for the asylum seekers’ rights to be respected and observed. She’s invited to meet him at his home in the hinterland behind Byron Bay. The country is fertile with emerald hills and valleys, chocolate brown volcanic soil, macadamia and dairy farms interspersed with stands of tropical rainforest. Tony is a tall man in his fifties with light blue eyes, short silver hair and a neat beard. He wears muddy canvas trousers, a torn Metallica T-shirt under a
patchwork waistcoat, and has bare, calloused feet. His house is a medieval castle built of mud brick. There are long stained-glass windows in its great hall that depict bush scenes in primary colours, with centrepieces of rainbow lorikeets, and tropical estuaries with blue herons and dolphins. The hall has high ceilings from which canopies of red and gold and royal blue silk balloon gently in the afternoon breeze. There’s a fireplace big enough to pitch a tent and camp in. The great hall is furnished with wooden pews salvaged from a de-consecrated church. In one corner there’s a pulpit complete with steps, and in the centre of the hall there’s a massive jarrah wood table that sits twenty or more, and is so heavy, Tony tells her, that it had to be assembled piece by piece in the hall and can’t be moved. There’s a turret that he shows her later, his studio from which he can look out across countryside and all the way down to the glittering coast. In the turret he makes stained glass. He’s renowned for his abilities in the medium and has supplied the rich and famous who’ve bought in the surrounding countryside and down at the Bay, with decorative glass for their windows and doors.

They sit outside on benches at a wooden table under a verandah overhung by a prolific passionfruit vine. Swollen purple fruit hang like the embodiments of lust from the dense vine that filters out the afternoon sun. Margaret, Tony’s wife, brings lemongrass tea in a flowered china pot, and freshly made biscuits with dates and almonds. Angelica can smell citrus oil, burned to discourage mosquitoes. Several plump geese wander back and forth across the clearing round the house, picking at the grass. Two dogs lie panting in the shade of an old poinciana that is thick with light green, feathered foliage. On various parts of the property people have set up small camps using tents, tarpaulins, old Kombi vans, and in some cases, building humpies. Tony and Margaret have offered respite to a group of tree sitters from down south who’ve recently lost a long battle with the logging companies over old growth forest. Now and then some of them wander by and call out hello. There are little children in the group dressed in rainbow colours with tiny knitted caps. Their young mothers have new babies they carry in slings tied around their necks, African style. Two of the children come over for cookies. This is like a pastoral, a romantic play about idyllic country life, set in northern NSW. There is no shepherd that Angelica can see, or sheep, but the ambience is evocative of the simplicity and charm of the bucolic idyll. Chickens, geese and merry children stroll and dance about on the cleared grassy area in front of the house. Long rainbow flags fly from flexible poles set in brilliant
flowerbeds. Women are cooking an evening stew in the kitchen from homegrown vegetables and herbs. There is everywhere in the atmosphere a sense of purpose – even those in respite are there purposefully, their goal being to replenish themselves in body, mind and spirit so they might do battle with the giants another day.

‘Does it ever get difficult here with all these people? Do you ever fight?’ she asks Tony, because it all looks too good to be true.

‘Yeah, frequently.’ He laughs. ‘But we have community meetings where everybody gets a chance to sort out their stuff. It works pretty well. If people get too pissed off they generally leave. We don’t usually have this many people here, but the tree sitters needed a place for a while.’

Tony supplies the children with cookies, and sends them back to their parents. He opens his file and launches right into the information he wants her to have.

‘The Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre accommodates seventeen hundred people. Each room contains eighteen people with only enough room for them to sit on their beds. The rooms have no fans or air conditioners in the desert climate, which at times in summer reaches fifty-five degrees Celsius,’ he says.

‘At lunchtime detainees queue for three hours or more in the sun, but lunch is only served for two hours. If you haven’t reached the end of the queue before the two hours is up tough titty. Go hungry,’ he says.

‘Asylum seekers are told by some of their guards that they are hated by Australians. Asylum seekers are told by some of their guards that Australians believe they are all fundamentalist Muslims and don’t want them here,’ he says.

‘Some groups of refugees became so desperate that they sewed their lips together with cotton thread,’ he says.

‘Asylum seekers were kept locked up for twenty-three hours a day in Port Hedland. Crowded conditions and poor sanitation caused frequent diarrhoea outbreaks in Villawood Detention Centre,’ he says.

‘“He said to me: You are an animal. We will deal with you like an animal”’. Guard to detainee in Villawood,’ Tony says.

He’s reading these things from papers stored in a large, old-fashioned cardboard file.

‘Can I have copies of this material?’ Angelica asks him.

‘I’ll have to send them to you. There’s a photocopier at the office in the Bay, or I can fax them from here.’
‘Don’t have a fax at home. Send them from the Bay.’

‘Ten-year-old child attempts suicide in Woomera, along with his mother. These two are put in the punishment compound, no TV, no phone or toys allowed,’ he continues.

‘Woomera parlance for extreme depression: too sick.’

He says this while stretching out his mouth in a grim smile that he holds for a long moment, as if he’s swallowed bitter aloe.

‘The Minister with No Ears appears on TV,’ he continues, ‘interviewed under a gum tree, sunlight and leaf patterns dappling his countenance,’ Tony lowers his voice and leans towards her as if imparting confidential information, ‘and he says to the cameras:

“I’m not sure that everybody would regard depression as a mental illness.”

And: “there were perceptions in the Centres themselves that, by the action of self-harm, people had achieved outcomes … And it led to a belief amongst a proportion of the Afghan population that the only way in which they were going to obtain visas was to be involved in the same sort of conduct.”

Tony stops and looks at Angelica. She stares back at him. Finally she says:

‘I don’t know what to say. I don’t know. This is terrible, I haven’t read this stuff.’

Angelica is feeling scared to death of actually encountering these circumstances rather than reading about them and watching them on television.

‘I don’t know if we should go, what’s the point, how can Julia and I do anything, we don’t have any powerful friends, we can’t change any of this.’

‘That’s not true,’ Tony says emphatically. ‘There have to be witnesses. This kind of thing has to be witnessed. There can’t be too many witnesses to this stuff, you and Julia go and witness, Angelica. Bear witness, be the recording angels, this cannot go un-witnessed. Do you know what I mean?’

She does know what he means. How many times has she been her own recording angel, her own witness to the things that befell the child Angelica when no one else was there to see? How well she understands the concept of witnessing, of there being some record abroad in the world of the events that no one wants to remember or acknowledge. She did it for herself. She can do it again for somebody else.

They find a short history of one family in a publication put out by The Greens party. The family has been in Woomera for two years. During this time the children (aged seventeen, fourteen and three) have been caught up in four riots, one in which the guards used water cannon to control the rioters. (Oh, those water cannon, how they can
knock you down and flay your skin!). The children don’t sleep properly. The three-year-old knows nothing but Woomera. The family fled Iran after being threatened with death for participating in anti-government activities. The father is a civil engineer. The full Federal Court accepted their story and declared them refugees. The Minister for Immigration has rejected their application for asylum in spite of the court's acceptance. He is not required to explain this rejection. Immigration law overrules the court system. The family will be held in indefinite detention until the Iranian government takes them back (God help them) or Australia grants them amnesty in some rosy future so far on the horizon as to be beyond everybody’s life expectancy.

*How many ears must one man have, before he can hear people cry?*

‘Why does nobody stop this?’ Angelica demands. ‘Why does nobody help? What’s happened to the Opposition; why aren’t they protesting from the rooftops?’

‘They’re playing it safe,’ Tony answers. ‘They don’t want to risk unpopularity.’

‘What is it that allows human beings to believe that it’s acceptable to stay silent while in full knowledge that other human beings are suffering right under their noses?’

‘How long have you got?’ Tony asked.

How did her own mother deny Angelica’s anguish for all those years?

In detention centres, Tony explains, it seems that much revolves around whether or not the detainees can gain favour with the guards. If they disobey a rule they are punished. Rules change indiscriminately. Every guard has their own rules.

*We are not animals! We have eyes like you! We have hands like you! We are not criminals! We want freedom! We want freedom!*

These are the screams of a thirteen-year-old boy at Woomera, filmed by protesters who include Tony and his tribe. The boy is shown clinging to the compound wire on Easter Sunday morning. The government’s attempts at dehumanisation are keenly felt in the camps, as is evidenced by the boy’s impassioned declarations.

*We have eyes like you!*

The very thing the government does not want acknowledged is that the people in detention are in any way like us, Angelica knows this. There is a common humanity that, if recognised, would make this treatment of the asylum seekers intolerable. The government seeks to repress this humanity, not only in its representations of the
detainees, but in its own people. One should be very afraid in times such as these, Angelica thinks. Very afraid.

This boy (We have hands like you!) is detained with his mother, while his father is given a temporary protection visa and released into the Australian community. Up to fifty families are in this situation in Woomera, say the Greens, who are arguing the asylum seekers’ cause in the Senate. The released husbands are resettled in cities and towns far from the desert camps, making visits to their detained families difficult, if not impossible. Sometimes the women and children are settled in the Woomera township while the husband remains in detention. Whoever is imprisoned is the hostage: the freed ones won’t disappear as long as someone they love remains behind bars. Who thinks up these deterrents? Australians with families of their own?

One family with five children hasn’t seen its ‘liberated’ husband and father for three years, say The Greens. The brother-in-law climbed the fence at Woomera and threw himself on to the razor wire to attract the attention of the authorities to the plight of his sister and her children. Angelica saw this action on the evening news a couple of weeks earlier. Journalists may not be allowed inside the prison, but they can film outside the wire, through the windscreens of their cars, pretending they aren’t journalists.

The Prime Minister, confronted about his government holding children behind the razor wire, contrary to all international agreements to which Australia is a willing and consistent signatory, says on commercial radio:

*I believe that the action of parents who bring children into dangerous situations should be the subject of criticism rather than the Government.‘

‘Tony, this statement would seem to acknowledge the dangerous situations that the Detention Centres are,’ Angelica says.

‘Yeah,’ he chuckles, ‘but I don’t think that’s what Howard intended.’

‘Would they commend the parents for leaving the children behind in dangerous situations?’ she wonders. ‘What does this ludicrous statement mean, and why doesn’t somebody take him up on it in Parliament?’

‘There’s too much going on. He’s snowing everybody with the amount of material he’s producing and the speed of it. He’s trying to get new border-protection legislation through, and he’s clever, he’s spinning it so anybody who objects looks unpatriotic, un-Australian.’
‘It would seem that there’s a significant correlation between lack of emotional intelligence, and political ambition,’ she says.

He grins at her again, another ghastly aloed smile.

Margaret appears with more tea. She’s considerably younger than Tony and pregnant. Angelica notices, with bright fair hair that is crimped, as if it’s been in plaits overnight and let loose at the break of day. It hangs to her waist, a shining cape around her shoulders. Her face is pale and calm. She strokes her husband’s hair as if to soothe him and he reaches up, smiling a real smile, and touches her cheek. Angelica is suddenly, savagely envious.

‘Fifteen-year-old slashes her arms on her first birthday in detention,’ Tony resumes reading as Margaret walks back into the house, followed by a white cat with a litter of kittens. The cat is belled, the soft tinkle merges with the sound of wind chimes hung from an upstairs window out of sight.

‘One child is so badly beaten by the guards for hunger striking that he is unable to walk for three days. The Minister with No Ears says:

“Technically the boy was a child but it would be better to call him a youth. Sometimes this sort of action is needed to maintain order.”

‘The child is placed in isolation cell as punishment,’ Tony continues.

‘We have secret information from an undisclosed source that the family is from Pakistan,’ says the Minister about the family of the six-year-old boy who will not eat, drink or speak.

‘”We have secret information from an undisclosed source…” Now what the fuck does that mean, Tony?”

But he’s not stopping for questions.

‘The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission reports on the treatment of a seven-year-old boy who was assaulted with a baton by an officer during an incident at Woomera. Both he and his mother, among others, were also tear-gassed. Neither was found to have been involved in any violence, escapes or damage to property that ensued during the course of the riots…

In Port Hedland a young man facing deportation to the country he’d fled attempts suicide. He is taken to a psychiatric hospital where he attempts to hang himself. He is returned, shackled like the Australian in Guantanamo Bay, to the detention Centre. In a
small room on a mattress on the floor he spends his days burning his own flesh with cigarettes…

In Port Hedland a detainee climbs onto the roof, naked in the summer heat of forty-seven degrees in the shade. Talking to himself, seriously disturbed, barking like a dog when anyone approaches. He’s served time in isolation as punishment for his peculiar habits.

In Port Hedland another man climbs onto the roof and slashes his chest. Stands there bleeding and howling until his friends manage to talk him down….

These men have been in indefinite mandatory detention for five long years….’

‘Are you sure you want to go?’ Julia asks Angelica after they’d both read through the papers Tony sent a few days later.

‘No, I’m not sure,’ Angelica tells her. ‘I actually feel scared shitless about seeing all this suffering and fear and rage. I don’t feel brave or useful, what can we do, we’re not anybody influential, we don’t even know anybody influential.’

‘We don’t have to do this, you know.’

‘But Tony said this stuff about bearing witness to events, so they’re recorded in the hearts and minds of somebody other than the participants. I know what he means. I think we should go, for that reason alone, or I should anyway, you don’t have to come, you know. I’ll be Okay, it’s up to you.’

‘I’m coming with you,’ says Julia. ‘Don’t argue with me about it.’

The trench has been put on hold. There’s a very large hole now inside the back gate. Bigger than anything Fletcher ever excavated. They don’t use the back gate but Russell the dog next door does, it’s his route out from his own yard into the wider world.

‘Russell’s going to fall right in that ditch next time he tries to sneak out,’ Angelica tells Julia.

‘Yeah, I know but there’s nothing I can do. He won’t hurt himself, it’s all soft sand.’

Sure enough there’s a terrible howling in the middle of the night. Russell has fallen in the pit in his efforts to escape the confines of home and connect with a bitch across town that he knows is on heat. He can’t get enough purchase from his short little legs to scramble out. Fletcher races back and forth along the edge of the trench barking at Russell. It’s pissing down rain. Lights go on up and down the street.
‘Shut the fuck up!’ Angelica yells at the dogs.

They take no notice. Julia hauls Russell out of the pit and deposits him on the side of the trench. He shows no gratitude and snaps at her. Fletcher snaps at Russell, their relationship has always been tenuous. Russell heads back at a fast trot for the hole in the fence that will let him into the safety of his own back yard. Fletcher pursues him, nipping at his heels. Julia is stuck in the trench, her rubber boots have sunk as if into quicksand. Angelica hauls her out with both hands. They are filthy. They are rain-soaked. They reek of ancient kitchen wastes. It is two am. They are fifty-something years old and on a fast downward trajectory into the demographic of eccentric older women living in coastal communities with daft dogs. It’s not where Angelica wants to be.

Fletcher has seen Russell off and now wants a reward.

‘Piss off,’ Julia tells him. ‘In your dreams.’

In truth, Angelica can’t help but delight in this whimsical nonsense. These innocent dilemmas are bestowed on her like gift-wrapped treasures left in the letterbox for her to come upon unexpectedly by a passing beneficent angel. She imagines the angel wears a white satin robe with a knotted rope of carmine silk tied around her waist, and she sports a pair of snowy wings, bare feet, and a luminescent halo on a stick that bobs over her long, dark hair like the nodding heads of the toy dogs you used to see lined up in the back windows of cars. The moments the angel bestows are cherished moments in a life too long occupied with the consuming aftermath of dark, serious, ill-intentioned deeds. The interpolation of the whimsical into these grim legacies soothes her, as if she’s being anointed head-to-toe with a heavenly-scented balm before being tucked into a bed and granted sleep.

Accepting the unacceptable, when it’s too late to refuse it, is a demanding and bruising business. Forgiving the unforgivable, what a responsibility that is, if it means that through her acts of forgiveness the unforgivable is transformed, and released from its dank prison into fresh air and light. Angelica is liberated by this transformation. The tasks allotted to the victim are enormous, taxing, and to be got on with. Forgiveness is for the release of the victim, not the perpetrator. Take comfort where you can find it for the duration, Angelica, in whimsy, in small pleasures and amusements, in the crimson
velvet petals of a rose, and the newly-born peach blossoms that emerge like pink and white miracles from the tree’s barren winter branches.

Apart from all that, these occasional glimpses into the busy lives of dogs feed Angelica’s voyeuristic impulses: the animals have their likes and dislikes, their passions, their needs, their bad habits, their compulsions, all of which are fully in the present. A dog can be completely what it is, a privilege that never ceases to astonish her, having spent much of her life being what she’s not, as a consequence of the demands and desires of other, more powerful, human beings. Dogs don’t do that to themselves or one another. It’s a satisfying exercise to step into their daily lives and absorb the dog-ness of them.

Unknown to Julia she gives Fletcher a treat and lets him spend the rest of the night on her bed.

* * *

The letters keep coming from Woomera, and then a trickle arrives from the Baxter Detention Centre, also in South Australia. The letters express such longing for human contact, for information about the women’s families, and life outside the razor wire. Most writers apologise for their humble English. Always there are good wishes for the women’s happiness. From these appeals Julia and Angelica construct a story of desperation, loneliness and exclusion from everything that makes life rich, or even possible in the long term.

More information arrives in the mail from Tony. The detainees have nothing to do all day. There are English classes at Baxter that run for two hours, but by the time the bus has collected people from various parts of the compound, the two hours is up, the teacher has left.

No child over the age of twelve is allowed any schooling.

A younger child on day release to school in the Woomera township is offered a bike ride by one of her free-world classmates. A guard witnesses this, orders the child off the bike, tells her bikes are not for detainees like her, she is not allowed to ride the bikes of town kids, and punishes her by keeping her from school for an indefinite period.
A man, detained in various centres for over four years, describes the experience as *dying every day*.

‘We will decide who comes to this country and the manner in which they come!’ trumpets Prime Minister Howard, giving voice to his party’s battle cry for the coming election. The faithful roar and cheer.

We get the governments we deserve, Angelica’s heard said.

And the silence is louder than the applause.

* * *

The Lymphoma staged an uprising prior to their departure for Woomera. Silent for some time, it seemed to fear Angelica had forgotten about it. The Lymphoma doesn’t like neglect, even of the benign variety. It brought her down with fever and a lethargy that made her incapable of thought and movement. She sat it out. When she felt better she tried to talk to it again.

‘Why?’ she asked it, ‘why now? What happened to my remission?’

It has a way of looking at her that seems to imply that she already knows the answers to her questions and is pretending that she doesn’t. Rather like the Minister with No Ears.

‘You’re not going to say anything, then?’ she asked.

It occurs to Angelica that these conversations with her cancer are eccentric. They aren’t something she’d want everyone to know about. She finds comfort in naming the thing, in creating a personality for it in which it is contained, rather than being fluid, so nebulous and intrusive that it can enter every nook and cranny of her. Naming it gives her power. She can write the story if she invents the characters, and she can decide on its ending. The problem is, she didn’t anticipate so hostile a character. And having created it she feels stuck with it, as if she has to take it where it wants to go.

The Lymphoma sighed. There are no sighs quite like the Lymphoma’s. They are world-weary and full of exasperation at her stupidity. They are an offensive claim to intimacy with her. They remind her of her mother in their privileged assumption that they know better than Angelica can, everything about her. Her mother likewise observed no borders:

‘I know you better than you know yourself,’ she said, frequently, and:
‘I know what you’re thinking before you do, so don’t think you can fool me,’ and ‘People like you, before they get to know you.’

Angelica didn’t entirely believe her mother but it was unnerving all the same. Even the inside of her head where her private thoughts dwelled, and even the secret desires of her youthful heart, were permeable it seemed. Mother was omniscient. In fact this was so in Angelica’s psychology. She absorbed her mother fully into her being, as children do absorb the powerful adults in their lives, giving her a controlling voice for the next forty years, long after Angelica was physically out from under her thumb.

‘All right then,’ she said to the Lymphoma as it stubbornly maintained its silence. ‘Fuck off, then. See if I care.’

* * *

Finally, as prepared as they can ever expect to be, they set off on a road journey of several thousand kilometres from their home to the Woomera and Baxter Detention Centres in South Australia. They have the dog, and are towing a small caravan, and they’ve a truckload of gifts for the detainees, collected from people who care about them.

They travel through country stricken by drought, worn out by destructive farming practices and filled with the reek of dead animals. Julia grieves and keens the whole way over the tragic state of the country she loves.

‘Oh, my God! Will you look at that!’ she wails as they pass through yet another drought-stricken landscape. Paddocks as far as the eye can see without a blade of grass, gaunt cattle trembling on their dying legs, their bones clearly visible through their flesh, their eyes dulled by exhaustion and hunger. The women are coastal dwellers, though Julia wasn’t always, having lived her young life in the high country. Her connection to the land is powerful and visceral. She is not brought easily to tears, but she cries a good deal throughout this journey.

They know little of these parched interior landscapes, the feel of them, their arid, fevered sorrow. Angelica imagines how it must be to live on this land. To wake up every morning for months and years to that cloudless, azure sky with its incandescent sun; to live every day in these rainless, wind-dried places, watching your animals die of hunger and thirst, or shooting them to save them from their misery.
Julia reminisces about the poddy calves she raised, Daisy, Gertrude and Cyril, who hung round the kitchen door, curious, as cattle are, she assures Angelica, always wanting to know what everybody’s doing. Angelica knows nothing about cattle.

‘Not really,’ Angelica laughs, ‘you didn’t really call your poddies Daisy, Gertrude and Cyril, did you?’

‘Yeah. Why not?’

‘No reason, it’s just so lovely.’

‘And I had a horse called Billy Boy and a dog called Toby.’

‘Stop!’ Angelica begs ‘it’s too good to be true! And your mum and dad loved you!’

Though in truth she loves to listen to Julia’s stories of her young life, when she and her brothers helped their Mum and Dad run the farm, and were home-schooled by their mother until they were twelve. As a consequence of that childhood there’s nothing Julia won’t turn her hand to: castrating sheep, running a fishing trawler, making bread, mending fences, replacing the elastic in her knickers.

‘Nobody does that anymore,’ Angelica tells her when she finds Julia at this task, ‘nobody replaces their knicker elastic, you just get new knickers.’

‘I don’t see why I should,’ Julia says holding them up, ‘they’re perfectly good where it matters.’

Fletcher travels in the back seat of the air-conditioned cabin: at forty-three degrees Celsius: it’s too hot to leave him on the back of the truck. He’s restless, constantly changing his position, lifting his head to sniff, alert to the stink of rotting carcasses that permeates the truck in spite of the air-conditioning. The air they breathe is full of the malodorous stink of death. The heat is impossible. They watch the brown dust gradually turn to red as the highway takes them deeper into the desert. Kilometres of road stretch ahead of them straight as an arrow as far as they can see; meeting at the horizon with a sky so blue it trembles with the purity of its gaze. A wedge-tailed eagle circles a feed of dead cow flesh on the side of the road. Others join in.

‘There’s a buzzard,’ Julia says.

Angelica catches a glimpse of a richly plumed bird as it slowly swoops over the carrion and then soars with powerful wing beats back up into the sky. That sky is terrifying in its implacability. It’s a blue too fierce, too uncompromising for a human being to find comfort in. They shrink from the glare through the windscreen, but there is no escape from it, no filter strong enough to hold it off.
'Make straight in the desert a highway for your God,' Angelica says out of nowhere, her feet up on the dashboard, the CD player in her hand.

‘What?’

‘I don’t know, it just came into my head. It’s a poem, I think. I don’t know any other lines. This dead straight road brought it to mind.’

‘Sounds Biblical,’ says Julia. ‘Oh my God, will you look at this country!’

Just now Angelica could clock Julia, she realises. She knows this trip is breaking Julia’s heart. But if she says ‘Oh my God, will you look at that, it’s terrible!’ one more time Angelica thinks she might clock her.

She’s being totally unfair. The problem is she doesn’t know how to comfort Julia, there is no comfort to be had in this situation. Angelica can’t think of anything new to say in response to Julia’s exclamations, and she can hardly bear to look at the country either. The feelings the desolate countryside evokes are of such anguished helplessness. It’s like travelling through old-growth forest that’s just been clear-felled; the feelings are almost unbearable in their intensity because once it’s gone, it’s gone, what the hell can anybody do?

And that smell. Christ. Angelica leans over and pats Julia’s shoulder.

‘It’s okay, you know. Think about the big picture, there’s always droughts, there’s always fires, there’s always floods, that’s our country, isn’t it?’

‘I know,’ Julia sighs, ‘but it looks so terrible, I had no idea how bad it would be. Undo the water bottle for me will you please?’

Angelica puts on the headphones while Julia drives and keens. She’s been listening to Yothu Yindi for much of the trip: the didge and the clapping sticks are exciting to hear while travelling this landscape. In spite of the drought and the tragedy it brings, the country is breathtakingly beautiful, alien to a coastal dweller used to rainforests and rich river estuaries. The warrior vocals of ‘Treaty’ stir defiance and rebellion in the heart:

This land was never given up, this land was never bought and sold,

The planting of the Union Jack never changed our law at all...
Angelica feels drowsy. The sensuous combination of heat, sounds, odours and images works to help her imagine that she’s slipped out of regular time, and is now travelling in eternity. The endless, shimmering highway is not of this world. Is this what the desert always does to white strangers, she wonders? Is this the beginning of a mystical experience, this sharpening of the senses, this hypersensitivity to colour and light, this strange sense of dislocation? What phantasmagoria might she witness? What will-o’-the-wisp might suddenly flash in front of their speeding vehicle and cause Julia to wrench at the wheel till they find themselves deep in a red ditch with a steaming radiator and no mobile phone that works out here?

Angelica used to have a dream about the red desert, the grey saltbush and the midnight sky, a dream in which she had to cross a barren plain whose borders were guarded by three cold, stone figures. Their granite faces demanded: by what right was she in that place? What had she done to earn her passage? She lifted her skirt and showed them. They nodded, gravely, and let her pass. That trinity was female and was always present in that red place with the high winds that swept sand into her face and covered her footsteps, leaving no sign she’d ever walked there.

In the wind she heard her unknown father calling her name.

The emptiness of this dream plain was broken by an occasional outcrop of rock. Now and then she thought she saw the glittering eyes of some animal in its shadows. There was a freezing wind. She could feel the stone figures staring at her. She walked on through the sand. She rested in the inadequate shelter of a gathering of boulders. The animals were there. She could see their eyes. Then her father’s voice faded and the wind dropped. She walked on towards the mountain.

At that point she always woke up. The meaning of the dream hovered in the dark at the back of her mind, waiting for her to enter with her light and set it free. But she’d never done that. There are vast areas at the back of her mind she rarely ventures into. They aren’t repressed, she is too aware of them for that, but pushed back as one might push to the back of a cupboard clothes one no longer wants to wear. They need to be examined and decisions made as to what to keep and what to throw away. But the energy required for the task isn’t available. One thinks of it from time to time and sighs, overcome by great weariness out of proportion to the requirements of the job.

This is how the desert dream languished, along with several others, as unexamined clutter. It’s interesting to imagine the mind as something that extends itself infinitely
out the back of the head. She can see it streaming horizontally behind her as she walks: a series of interconnecting shacks full of *stuff*. An invisible appendage that occasionally smacks some other person around the mouth or the back of the head, or makes a thrust into their unsuspecting hearts, leaving them wondering what happened.

Sometimes she dreams she’s discovering new rooms in her home, rooms she never knew existed. She opens a familiar door and bingo! There’s an entirely other room behind it that leads on to another and another. Like connecting cabinets of wonders, full of strange furniture, rugs she’s never seen before, china and glassware that seems to belong to her, though she has no idea how she came by any of it. This dream delights her, and she wakes up from it enriched and glowing.

She wakes abruptly from a short, uncomfortable doze, parched, her mouth full of the grit that manages to get in through the nooks and crannies of the cabin. She takes a long drink of tepid water from the bottle by her side.

‘Wanna break?’ she asks Julia.

‘Yeah’, she says, ‘I’m stuffed.’

Julia pulls over. A road train roars past, shaking their truck as if it’s a matchbox car. They hop out and Julia releases Fletcher for a pee. He finds a bit of scabby saltbush on which to lift his leg. They crouch down in the red sand. It is hot. She doesn’t recall ever knowing such heat except for a few brief minutes deplaning from a broken-down Pan American jet at New Delhi airport in 1973. She feels as if she’s drying up, desiccating like shredded fresh coconut in a hot oven. High in the sky she can see streaks of white cloud, tossing across the upper atmosphere like thoroughbred mares’ tails. She knows without asking that the clouds don’t mean anything in terms of the probability of rain. Rain has already become unimaginable here.

*In the deserts of the heart*

*Let the healing fountains start…*

She knows who that is, that’s W.H. Auden.

As they enter more deeply into the arid land there are fewer farm animals visible, dead or alive, though the death stench stays in their nostrils. Fences are almost invisible under hills of red topsoil blown from the arid paddocks. Grey saltbush is all that holds the country together. The vast expanses are broken by towering electricity pylons that
seem, in their bizarrely human shapes, to stalk across the countryside like dark guardians. Now and then, as the afternoon deepens, a rufous kangaroo appears atop a sand dune, barely discernible against the sand; it sniffs the wind, its mule-like head attentively raised, alert, reading the landscape.

Suddenly there are pearl saltpans in front of them, disguised as vast, shimmering lakes. They stop to assure themselves that these are indeed mirages, and not bodies of water in which they might swim and cool their over-heated bodies. They climb out of the truck, release the dog, and venture out onto the albescent plains. The weight of their feet makes long, crazed cracks on the iridescent surfaces; they run with the dog backwards and forwards, stopping to take with their fingernails a scraping of salt that they taste with the tips of their tongues. The wind screams round their ears, crowded with pleading, disembodied voices and eerie howlings. The women howl back, their wildness infecting the dog that barks joyously. Then they slow down, return to the truck, breathless and staggering, their pent-up energies released for the moment, exclaiming at the beauty of the landscape, its inhospitable nature, for it’s impossible for two white strangers to imagine surviving out here.

Julia takes the wheel again. Fletcher, exercised, sleeps in his back-seat bed. Using a sarong Angelica rigs up a curtain across her window to filter out the worst of the afternoon sun. The truck cab is cozy. Fletcher’s soft snores and dog smell, Julia singing to herself as she drives, the scattered pillows and cushions brought to ease the discomfort of a long journey all combine to create the homely: they’ve made a temporary place of safety and shelter against the harsh environment. Angelica opens a packet of chips and shares them with Julia and the dog. They all crave the salt.

At five in the afternoon they see the first signpost to Woomera and shortly thereafter the Detention Centre. They stop the truck and stare. It is a sight so unfamiliar to them that they can only sit and gape. Never in her life has Angelica seen such buildings in such a setting, or even imagined their existence. What group of human beings could be so bad, so mad, so dangerous, as to require that this kind of prison be constructed in such a place as this, to keep them away from the rest of the country?

They continue to stare in disbelief. Angelica realises that while she knows a great deal about the systems of domestic terror she knows nothing at all about public and political violence, discipline and punishment. Somehow she’s managed to prevent the experiences of her childhood from spilling out and contaminating her experience of the
wider world. It has always been very clear to her that the violence in her family was of
that family, and while she’s discovered that similar things occur in other families, that’s
the extent of her knowledge. She doesn’t expect to personally encounter these things
anywhere else. Strangers are not dangerous to her: relatives are. Terror is familial. The
only perpetrators of brutality and violence she’s ever known roamed free, conducted
professional lives, bought clothes, went to movies, owned cars and houses. As far as
she knows the people incarcerated in Woomera haven’t done anything like what her
own parents did, but her parents did it in private. In the moral order of her culture,
attempting to cross borders without papers is a crime deserving of greater punishment
than raping your children, it seems. She prepares herself for another confronting loss of
innocence. She pulls out her notebook and writes desperately, as if she’ll never have
another chance to make a record. Later that night she knocks the notes into shape:

The Woomera Detention Centre stands with harshly delineated presence beneath a
relentless sun, in the midst of unbroken aridity. Australia’s dark heart is a crucible of
brilliant light. It is a desert place associated, as deserts are in the white imagination,
with mystics and saints, visionaries and disciples, enlightenment and renewal.
Associated as well with hardship and suffering, banishment and starved, aimless
wandering that may well end in death. In that place that is both darkness and light are
held captive those who have withstood a journey unimaginable to the majority of us.
The fortress invokes fear and despair, and not only in those who are incarcerated.
Fear sits heavy and silencing in our bellies as we look at the prison. We aren’t afraid
of the people imprisoned there. We’re afraid of the dark imaginations that construct
and maintain places like this. We’re afraid of the shrivelled hearts that know only
vilification and exclusion as a means of addressing human suffering.
Words that cannot be heard – a desert.

Angelica marvels at how adequately this last line (which is not hers but another
fragment brought to mind by what she’s seeing) encapsulates both the place, and what
goes on in it. The silenced voices in the landscape of the gibber desert. What better
place to incarcerate those whose stories you want to silence? Words that cannot be
heard as they fall from the other’s lips, lips that are sewn up, finally, in bloody
acknowledgement of the power of denial.
There is a high steel fence surrounding the whole area. Inside that, there is another fence topped with razor wire. In between these two fences Angelica can make out rolls of razor wire laid like traps for anyone reckless enough to climb over the inner fence. They will fall, it’s inevitable, onto the lacerating wire. Late afternoon sunlight glints off the outer steel fence. She can make out dongas of varying sizes inside the compound.

‘Christ,’ she breathes.

Suddenly she understands the seriousness of all this. Not that she didn’t have some insight into its nature before they arrived, but like an unwelcome epiphany, she’s overcome with deeper understanding of the nature of this place, and of what happens within it, and why. It’s the experiential knowledge that can only come with physical encounter. The prison has a presence, palpable, like something living, though none of its materials are lifelike. The building emanates a grim life-force that is largely absent in the photographs and film they’ve seen, an energy that cannot be reproduced, an aura that is present only in the original.

She recalls incongruously a visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. (It was her honeymoon.) She remembers rounding a corner into a room with a parquet floor. They’d seen many wonders, and now unexpectedly came face-to-face with the triptych of _The Waterlilies_. A million times she’s seen this reproduced in books, postcards, on tea towels; it is much too familiar and she wouldn’t have sought it out. Yet standing before this work, in the unaccountable power of its original presence, she burst into tears. Amazingly, it is unguarded, she can walk right up to it, she can peer at the brush strokes, at the colours, she can gaze into its depths, she can drink it in thirstily, she can allow it to do its work on her spirit. This was the last picture of the day; they left the museum exhausted but replete, nourished.

She doesn’t imagine any similar nourishment will be found within this steel citadel.

‘Seen enough for now?’ Julia asks.

‘Yeah. It’s getting dark. We need to get the van set up. Jesus, Julia, I’ve never seen anything like this, have you?’

‘Only in South Africa,’ Julia says.

* * *
The next day they present themselves at the prison gates, as instructed at nine o’clock and are admitted after the anticipated hassle about the right papers and the proper permissions. They are two middle-aged ladies, in the eyes of the guards. On the strength of that, and their apparently endearing oddness in carting a large dog to Woomera with them, some errors in their paperwork are overlooked. Fletcher is allowed to lie on a mat in the air-conditioned outer office while they go through the formal searches, leave their backpacks in lockers, and are escorted through the final portals into the depths of the prison. Angelica thinks that this journey wouldn’t have been possible without the dog. This is rationally inexplicable. She looks back at Fletcher. He’s watching them go, on full alert, ears up, head raised, sniffing the air. Then they pass through security and are gone, out of his sight to the other side.

From where they sit in the Visitor’s Centre, silenced by their miserable surroundings, Angelica can see through the open door another compound fenced in with barbed wire. Inside this compound are several dongas in which the detainees live. The windows of the donga are barred with steel; plastic chairs and tables are spread haphazardly round; there is no air-conditioning. Ceiling fans barely stir the air. There is no insulation in the tin roof; they sit in an oven.

Julia and Angelica haven’t spoken to each other since the guards left them. Angelica’s busy trying to assimilate everything she’s seeing: her notebook has been taken off her and she can’t write anything down. She’s also extremely frightened, not because she fears anything untoward happening to them, but because the ambience here is tense and edgy; the physical outlook is unrelentingly grim. Angelica’s known much in her life, but not institutional violence, state approved violence, publicly sanctioned violence against other human beings. She knows enough about the nature of terror to recognise its presence outside the familial setting, however she’s now struggling to grasp that the darkness she’d imagined was confined to the family is abroad in the wider world, different and yet the same. Institutions, in her case the school, were places of safety in her worldview, places of protection from the private practices of monstrous adults who were not to be trusted for a minute. Those adults were the ones you knew best, in your own home, not strangers behind a razor wire fence. She was prepared for the conditions here in the abstract: the reality is something else altogether. There are ways in which Angelica has lived a charmed and sheltered life.
There is no grass for the children to play on, or for the babies to practice their walking. Angelica watches three small children scuffing aimlessly about in the red dust at the steps of their donga; a Muslim girl of about twelve in her headscarf that is lifted from her shoulders by the hot wind; a boy of about eight in shorts and bare feet. The sand is hot, doesn’t it burn him? Between them they help the smallest child, who is still tottering on his uncertain baby legs. A woman in a black burqa sits on the top step of the donga with her head in her hands. Outside the administration block Angelica noticed when they arrived there is a garden of emerald green grass, young trees, and beds of brilliantly coloured flowers. The garden isn’t visible from these dongas. Later they’re told it’s tended by some of the inmates.

As Angelica watches, a man emerges from another donga in the compound. He runs down the steps and across the red dust, screaming in a language that is unintelligible to her, but his despair needs no translation. He flings himself repeatedly at the wire that keeps him contained, like an animal in a zoo maddened by its confinement. He shakes the wire back and forth while the children watch in frightened silence. The eldest girl puts her arms round the younger ones. The man’s screams rouse the woman in the burqa: she raises her head and briefly stares at him, then returns to her own private despair.

‘Oh, Christ,’ says one of the guards standing outside the door of the Visitor’s Centre, ‘what’s wrong with bloody Mustafa now?’

Angelica is sitting very still. She’s been holding her breath, and now she’s feeling dizzy and sick. Her body is warning her that this is not a sight for her to see but she’s here now, there’s nothing she can do. Angelica once saw her stepfather in a similar state to Mustafa’s, it comes back to her in a disturbing rush, but his was induced by drugs and alcohol, and it was Angelica he was trying to attack. Till now, she has witnessed no violent adult behaviour since her childhood.

Mustafa isn’t trying to attack anyone other than himself: it’s the sight of an adult man completely out of control of himself, a woman watching from a distance and returning to her self-absorbed despair; three children silently witnessing this scene. All of these images violently trigger Angelica’s childhood memories. They are inchoate, feeling memories: she has never articulated the details of those scenes. The feelings are a combination of emotional and physical sensations that have her both freezing and
sweating. Whenever these feeling memories come she can’t get warm, even if she climbs into bed under doonas and blankets: nothing warms her until they pass.

Are these scenes here in the detention centre, these scenes and many more like them and worse, are they making intolerable memories for these children? Will these children, in their middle age, freeze and sweat when their minds and bodies recall these events?

It’s getting hotter as the day moves on towards noon. The dongas shimmer like mirages. Angelica has been afraid ever since they crossed the threshold into the prison, ever since they drove down the bitumen road from the caravan park in the Woomera township towards this high security internment camp surrounded by gibber desert and saltbush. She’s been afraid of the detention officers, and the blue water cannon positioned at the gate and the high, intimidating security lights that promise to illuminate everything, without mercy, no crevice left untouched, no places left to hide. She’s way out of her comfort zone, and anyway, fear is her Achilles heel.

Everybody’s got their personal weakness: greed, grief, free-floating anxiety, lust, anger, despair. Angelica’s is fear. It can bring her undone in a nanosecond. This is a new kind of fear, she’s only dreamed this kind of fear, in nightmares when she’s been pursued by soldiers, unable to find a hiding place in a napalmed landscape. All their journey so far, through the drought and the death stench and the tormented landscapes, past the sun-bleached bones of animals dead from starvation and picked clean by buzzards and eagles, all this has finally brought them to this steel prison. The journey has been a fitting preparation.

The women saw the interrogatory lights cutting through the dark sky when they made a furtive reconnoitre before bedtime the night before. Having arrived too late in the day to expect to be allowed to make their visits, they set up camp, tied up the dog in the back of the truck and crawled without headlights as close to the prison parameters as they dared.

‘Shit,’ Julia whispered.

‘What?’

‘It’s just like bloody South Africa. I can’t believe it. What country am I in?’

‘God’s own,’ Angelica told her.

They saw headlights approaching. The perimeter was patrolled day and night. Julia was driving.
‘Get going!’ Angelica yelled.
‘Shut up!’ Julia hissed and threw the truck into reverse.

In retrospect Angelica’s hard-pressed to explain their panic. She was worried that if they were caught hanging round, their visits the next day would be jeopardised and this was a realistic apprehension. Oppression works swiftly. The guards were completely in control. If the women offended them, they’d find some way of refusing them entry. Driving round the perimeters of the detention centre at night could be construed by the guards as suspicious. This is how the people inside have to think every day, Angelica realised. If I do this I won’t be allowed to do that. About the smallest, most insignificant things. She remembered what Tony had told her: they have to get along with the guards. That’s how it works.

‘We aren’t doing anything wrong,’ she whispered to Julia. ‘We’re on a public road.’
‘We’re hanging round. We’re looking. That’s wrong enough for these people.’
‘Christ,’ Angelica said disgustedly, ‘we’re still in Australia.’
‘And this is what Australia is these days,’ Julia said softly and they fell silent, contemplating the state of their country. God’s own be buggered.

‘Why are we whispering?’ Angelica asked finally.
‘Dunno. We’re out of our depth aren’t we? Two white ladies from the far north coast. We’re out of our depth every which way, the landscape, the Detention Centre, Woomera, which I think is a very strange town, by the way. Did you notice those parks full of planes and bombs and rockets? And how green the grass is, where do they get the bloody water from? And those empty, smashed-up apartment blocks with the doors hanging off their hinges and banging in the wind and all their windows broken? Creepy.’

Julia drove them back to the park. A high wind had sprung up, rocking their caravan. It was cold. Large spots of rain fell on them as they moved from the truck to the van. The park was almost empty. No one came here anymore the manager told them, owing to that fucking Detention Centre. Everyone’s afraid there’ll be a break out and they’ll get caught up in it.

‘Used to be a busy, thriving park,’ he said. ‘Now look at it.’

They didn’t tell him the reason for their visit. Just passing through, they said. Grey nomads on their way to somewhere else. Angelica had no wish to get into a fight with him about the detainees. She was scared of the manager as well. She was closing down,
husbanding all her strength and resources, hiding herself, being someone else, someone she thought he’d like her to be, obedient, compliant.

There was only one other van parked for the night. The park was asphalt with squares cut out of it in which frail saplings tried to grub a life for themselves out of the red dirt. They could see the lights of the Detention Centre. They made tea and climbed into their beds. Fletcher settled down on the floor in between them. All night the wind howled and rocked them. The rain was short-lived and the sky cleared.

A full moon hung above the fortified steel compound into which the stateless petitioners had been so summarily herded, its pale countenance a cratered O! of luniferous dismay. Stars, like dazzling exclamation points pulsing with alarm, were haphazardly strewn across the night’s blank pages. Other heavenly bodies expressed their distress at the turn taken by human events in all corners of the world since the beginning of time by letting off comets and meteors, expelling geysers of poisonous gases into their atmospheres. Behind the scenes inexperienced gods, clumsy architects of life on earth, babbled in infinite conference, and argued about how their plans could have gone so awry and who was to blame. A star fell leaving behind it a trail of sparks. Another star was shot down well before its time. Small planets skirted rapacious black holes. The fledging creators watched the earth turn. This is what comes of bestowing free will, one said darkly. They will destroy themselves, a young goddess predicted with satisfaction. Angelica woke, feverish. She sat up and looked around the caravan. She felt herself to be adrift, ungrounded, and was frightened by the sensation. We live in innocence in this country, she thought, lying down again and pulling her sleeping bag round her shoulders. Safe from the turmoil known by much of the world. How much longer can that, should that, hiatus last? Not our innocence, she corrected herself, but our denial of the turmoil others endure. Our turning away. Innocence, as I know from Julia, can survive knowledge as long as one still cares.

Our blind eyes. That’s what has to stop. Those of us who are safe must attend to those who are not safe. At home and abroad. Surely this must be so?

Julia snored softly in her bed. Fletcher thumped his tail but kept his eyes closed. Angelica lay afraid to sleep for fear of dreaming the end of the world.

In the morning they made breakfast, though neither of them could eat it, and set off for the prison.
Though the guards complain to each other about Mustafa’s on-going expressions of despair, nobody goes to help him, or even to tell him to shut up, or whatever they do with people in there in extremis. Which seems to be very little. Mustafa’s frantic screaming subsides into sobs. He wraps his arms round himself and rocks back and forth in that movement typical of human beings, adults and children, who have given up on any hope of comfort other than what they can provide for themselves. Then he leaps up again and grabs at the wire.

Earlier the guards had spoken to Julia and Angelica about their feelings towards the detainees.

‘They’ve got everything,’ two guards, a man and a woman, told them as they deposited their bags in the lockers and waited to be searched.

‘They’ve got TVs, clothes, videos, everything.’

‘We have not got our freedom!’ shouted an inmate, overhearing the guards’ account of things as he swept and mopped the office floors.

‘That’s relative, mate!’ the male guard shouted back. ‘Freedom’s relative. I’m not free either, you know. I’ve got to show up for work here every day, can’t sit around on my arse watching TV like you. Can’t even afford a bloody TV like they’ve got,’ he told the women. ‘Working my butt off and I can’t afford what they’ve got for nothing. Then they trash it! Bloody trash TVs, DVDs, computers! You wouldn’t believe it.’

He shook his head and swore softly under his breath.

Angelica reflects on this exchange as they sit in the Visitors’ Centre waiting for the asylum seekers they’ve arranged to meet with. The irony of the situation doesn’t escape her. The guards, poorly paid and in one of the worst work places in the country, measure their success in life by the things they can buy with their wages. This is a widespread marker of success in Western culture, the guards are no different from most other people in their material ambitions. All the things they see the detainees getting ‘for nothing’ and then ‘trashing’ when there’s a riot, are things they’re busting their guts in this god-awful place to earn the means to obtain. The guard doesn’t feel free, because of this, and he’s in no frame of mind to start measuring his degree of freedom against that of the detainees. He’s not about to argue degrees of freedom and personal choice. He feels powerless, except in his right to exercise power over the detainees. It’s
easy enough to say the guards don’t have to be there. And they don’t, nobody’s forcing them. But as violent as they reputedly are, as racist and resentful as they clearly are, to tell them that they don’t have to do this doesn’t seem to be the answer. They think they do.

The noon temperature is forty-two degrees Celsius. There’s a hot wind roaring across the plain that feels straight from the maw of hell. Mustafa has stopped crying and sits quietly in the dust, his head resting against the wire. The children walk towards him. The girl’s scarf whips round her head in the wind. She holds the baby’s hand. They all stare at the visitors. Julia and Angelica smile. Nobody smiles back. They aren’t allowed to approach the children or talk to them. Angelica knows she will remember this scene for the rest of her life, the three solemn children, the damaged, broken man; what nightmares will trouble their sleep in the years ahead of them? It’s as if they’ve reproduced, in the middle of their democratic country, conditions that bear an eerie similarity to those that caused the people to flee their homelands in the first place.

‘If they’ll bother to get up,’ the guard is saying to Julia.

‘What?’ Angelica asks.

‘It’s Ramadan. Your detainees might be late. They pray all night and sleep all day. Weird, eh?’

The guard is wired for every kind of sound. He’s got technical aids every which way. He looks at Julia as if he wants her to form an alliance with him against this ‘weirdness’ he has to endure on a daily basis. Julia thinks she might have pretended to something of the kind before she actually got into the place. Getting in was tricky, touch and go, they knew they had to play things very straight. But once in, the guards could go to buggery as far as Julia was concerned. Like the bloody country.

‘So why are they lazy, lying in bed all day if they’ve been praying all night?’ Angelica’s saying. She sounds hostile. ‘It’s an important thing, Ramadan, like Christians have important things. Isn’t it? Anyway, it’s not as if they’ve anything to get up for, you don’t let them do anything.’

The guard looks truculent.

‘I guess this is a pretty awful job,’ Julia intervenes, deciding on diplomacy. He softens.
‘Mate, it’s the bloody pits. Nobody knows. Nobody hears our side of the story. We’re just the bastards. You know,’ he went on, settling in for a rare opportunity to whinge to a member of the public, ‘I daren’t tell anyone I work here. You imagine that? Having to lie about where you work?’

‘Why’s that?’ Julia asks.

‘Because the place’s got such a bad name nobody else’ll employ me after I’ve been working here.’

He leans back in his chair. They can see the tension bristling through his body. His face is congested, his beer gut large, his uniform too tight. He’s on the edge, as are many other guards they meet on their way through the system.

‘I don’t even tell me mates what I do. I tell ‘em I work in Woomera for the Government and it’s secret, what I do. Never mention the Detention Centre. No way.’

Julia reflects on the difficulties and stresses such daily deceits must bring to a life.

‘That’s bad,’ she tells him. ‘That’s a hard thing to do.’

‘My oath. Then you get these bastards in here smashing everything up they get given. Bloody mad. Don’t make no sense.’

His radio squawks. He listens and then speaks into it rapidly.

‘Well there’s three of the ones you asked to visit on their way,’ he tells Julia.

‘Three? We arranged to meet with twelve,’ she says, surprised.

‘Th’other nine aren’t allowed visitors. They’ve being playin’ up, lost their privileges.’

‘What? All nine of them?’ Julia protests.

‘Well, except Parvin, she’s too sick.’

‘She was fine a couple of days ago.’

‘Yeah, well now she’s too sick. So do you want to see these blokes or not?’

‘Yes, yes of course we do.’

He speaks into his radio.

The three young men follow the guards into the Visitors’ Centre. They introduce themselves, awkwardly. The women have corresponded with the young men, so they know something of each other’s lives, but in the face-to-face encounter they are all shy, hesitant. Nasrim, Ali and Mohammed sit across the table from Julia and Angelica and they look at one another in silence. The young men all have olive-skin, with bloodshot mahogany eyes under full brows, and black hair cut short as if there is only one style
permitted inside the prison. Ali, who looks to be the youngest, has a round face with soft features. His expression is open though baffled, permanently so, Julia thinks. His eyes are huge, like dark, full moons and they glisten, with sorrow, with loss? He is plump, the soft plumpness of a young man who hasn’t yet grown into his adult body.

Nasrim has an athletic build, lean and supple. His cheekbones are well-defined, his eyes shift rapidly, checking out the women, his surroundings, his friends, noting where the guards have settled. He drums his fingertips on the table, waiting for someone to speak.

The third man, Mohammed, wears an untidy beard, beginning to show premature flecks of grey and when he smiles his lips are rosy and his teeth white, framed by the dark hair. He is heavy and muscular. He drops heavily into an orange plastic chair and drops his hands on his thighs.

‘Welcome,’ he says to the women. ‘Welcome to our palace in the desert!’

Nasrim has a packet of biscuits in his hand and Ali and Mohammed carry water, orange cordial and paper cups.

‘There is a good guard, a kind man,’ Nasrim says, ‘he gives us these things for us to give to our visitors. He understands that at home, in our country, it is very wrong to greet the visitor with an empty hand and so he lets us have these things for you.’

‘Thank you,’ Julia says. ‘I’m hot and thirsty, I’d like a drink.’

‘Yes, thank you, I will,’ Angelica says as Ali offers her a cup of cordial.

Mohammed breaks open the biscuits. Julia and Angelica take one. It crumbles in Angelica’s dry mouth and she thinks she’s going to choke. Conversation is difficult.

‘You all speak good English,’ she offers, ‘did you learn that here?’

‘We have been in detention for ten months in Port Hedland, nineteen months in the Woomera,’ Mohammed tells us. ‘We are Hazara from Afghanistan but the Immigration, they say we are from Pakistan and are not refugees. This is not the truth.’

‘How old are you?’ Julia asks.

‘I am twenty-four, he is twenty-two and he is nineteen,’ Nasrim points to Mohammed and Ali as he speaks. ‘We learn the English here but we learned some in our country. We have left our country because the Taliban they kill Hazara, they have fatwah on Hazara. My father, my mother they are killed in our village, the Taliban destroy our village, I see my family, my sisters they are killed.’
Nasrim’s eyes fill with tears and he looks away, out of the door and into the compound where the three children still stand at the fence, staring. He yells at them in their shared language. The children stay where they are and stare at him.

‘I told them: ‘Go to your mother!’ he says to the women. ‘These little children, they see a crazy man, made crazy here, they watch him cut himself with razor all over, blood splash out on children.’

‘The little ones saw this? They were splashed with his blood?’

‘Yes, yes, they see everything. Children here see everything, very bad thing I think.’

‘Is that their mother, sitting on the steps?’ Julia asks him.

‘Yes, that is their mother. She is sick, very sick, they give her no medicine, she does not look after them because she is sick.’

‘Where is their father?’

‘He is gone. He is given temporary visa, he is gone.’

‘His wife and children left behind here?’ Julia asks, incredulous. She’s forgotten Tony’s briefing. There’s been too much to remember.

‘Missus,’ says Mohammed, ‘this is happening very often here. Many families. Maybe thirty, fifty, in this place. The father, brothers, on temporary visas, the women children kept in the Woomera.’

‘The women gets sick,’ Nasrim tells them, ‘without the husbands, the men the womens get sick and nobody cares for the children. This is bad place,’ he continues and looks at the ground. ‘Very bad place, much bad things happen.’

‘You mean the Immigration gives the men the visas and keeps the rest of the family in detention?’ Julia now remembers now that Tony has said this happens.

‘Yes, that is so.’

‘Why do they think you’re from Pakistan?’

‘One day, we have interviews with officer from DIMIA, she say our language is from Pakistan, she say she is expert at knowing this,’ Nasrim says. He throws his hands up in disgust. ‘She know nothing of our language!’

The young men wear an assortment of trainers, T-shirts, shorts and track pants. Nasrim is edgy, he fidgets, picks at his fingers, runs his hands through his short hair. Ali in contrast is still: he sits calmly, gazing out the door. Mohammed rests his elbows on the table and puts his head in his hands. These young men are close in age to Angelica’s own sons. She imagines Harry and Samuel living this life. It is an
intolerable imagining. She looks out of the door into the compound. A wedge-tailed eagle rises from the roof of a donga and moves upwards in slow circles out of her line of sight.

‘Ali makes the garden,’ says Mohammed.

‘The garden at the administration building?’ Julia asks.

‘Yes, I like it, I like it to do the garden,’ Ali tells them. ‘I keep garden clean, plant things, empty rubbish, I have life here, job, it is not so bad.’ He has a slow, wide smile. He eats another biscuit.

‘Idiot!’ scoffs Nasrim. ‘You should dream of leaving here.’

Ali smiles again. He seems institutionalised, Julia thinks, he doesn’t have the fierce dreams of leaving detention that clearly fuel Nasrim. And what of the events they suffered before fetching up in detention centres, she wonders. What is the aftermath of those traumas?

They all met, it turns out, on the boat from Indonesia sailed by people smugglers, a journey that landed them at Ashmore Reef. None of them has any other family in Australia. All of them have come to the end of their appeals for visas to stay. What will happen to them now? Julia asks. Ali shrugs and doesn’t answer.

‘The Australian Government they give us money to go back to Afghanistan, everybody says so,’ Nasrim tells us. ‘I will go, I think.’

‘But what will happen to you? Will you be safe? Have you any family left there?’

‘I have uncle. Our village is destroyed. The Taliban is not so big anymore. Maybe I work for the Americans. It cannot be worse than this.’

He waves his hand at their surroundings.

‘I would rather die man than animal. If I die let it be for being Hazara in Taliban fatwah, not here in black hole of hell in Australia like pig.’

He stands abruptly, then paces the small room with his hands in his pockets. Ali shakes his head at us.

‘Would you go back, Ali?’ Julia asks.

‘I don’t know, Missus. I am afraid of soldiers. They try to make me killed. I don’t know if I will go back. Maybe I stay here, grow garden.’

Mohammed has his head in his hands and doesn’t speak. Outside Mustafa has begun screaming again. Nasrim flings himself back into his plastic chair and bites at his fingers.
Angelica thinks to herself that there was a long and venerable democratic tradition that once existed in the world, a tradition that recognised the right of the stranger to seek sanctuary and to ask for help. There was a corresponding duty to oblige and offer assistance. What has happened to this tradition? Or was it just a dream?

‘Why is Mustafa crying like that?’ Julia asks.

Ali and Nasrim shrug.

‘He’s crazy, his wife, his children they died in his country and he is made crazy.’

Nasrim makes the motions of putting a needle through his lips.

‘Very bad,’ he says, ‘the children, some of them too do this.’

The guards are not in the room but they are by the door in the next room, keeping an eye on things, talking among themselves, laughing, their radios squawking intermittently. Angelica gets up and goes over to them, leaving Julia talking to the three men.

‘We were invited to visit some of the women here,’ she says. ‘Are we going to able to do that?’

‘There’s nobody else on your list,’ the guard tells her, checking his clipboard.

‘I have the letters here that the women sent, asking us to visit them.’

She takes them out of her shirt pocket and shows him. He gives them a cursory glance and looks away. He’s in his thirties, clean-shaven, medium build with a crew cut. He works out: she can see the muscles under his tight blue shirt. He is like a rock. Nothing she says will persuade him to let them see anybody else, Angelica knows that.

‘Well, I don’t know, they’re not on your list, except Parvin and she’s too sick.’

‘Parvin had Federal Court a couple of weeks ago. Did she get a visa?’

‘Can’t tell you that I’m afraid. Confidential.’

‘So we won’t be able to visit with the women?’

‘Nope, they’re not on your list. Anyway a whole bunch of them have lost privileges for playing up.’

‘The women?’

‘Not just the women but some of them are women.’

‘What did they do?’

‘Can’t tell you. Confidential.’

‘What if we come back tomorrow?’

‘You’ve only got this one list, that won’t change tomorrow.’
‘Who made up our list?’
‘We have officers who do that.’
‘Can I see one of them?’
‘They’re not here at the moment.’
‘Thanks.’
Angelica returns to her plastic chair. Nasrim pushes the biscuit packet across. Vanilla creams.
‘Thanks, Nasrim. What happened here, why have so many of you lost your privileges?’
‘There was fighting, somebody broke computers, people screaming, women throw chair, very bad.’
‘One month ago a big fire light in our detention centre,’ Mohammed suddenly speaks without lifting his head from his hands. ‘I working in kitchen with Ali. Everybody lose privilege. No visitors.’
‘How long do they lose privileges for?’
‘I do not kn...’
‘I do not know. Maybe days, maybe longer.’
Nasrim casts furtive looks at the guards in the next room. Julia looks over at Angelica. Angelica feels as if great weights are tied to her ankles and wrists, preventing her from movement, a sense of overwhelming oppression and helplessness. Julia’s eyes are glazed behind her glasses, her features dulled with heat, shock, Angelica doesn’t know.
‘We do not have mothers,’ Mohammed lifts his head from his hands and says this quietly but with feeling.
‘We do not have mothers, his is killed, mine is lost, Ali, nobody knows of Ali’s mother. You have sons, missus?’ he directs his question to Angelica.
‘Yes, two sons, both in their twenties,’ she tells him.
He takes a drink of orange cordial. Cottee’s Cordial?

*My dad picks the fruit
that makes the cordial that I like best.*

‘They are free, they work, have girls, go out, they are in city?’
‘Yes, they do all those things. My son Harry works for the United Nations in a refugee camp in Tanzania. He teaches the children how to play football. Samuel is a chef, a cook.’

‘Ah!’ Ali cries. ‘I too am cook! I cook here sometimes, in kitchens.’

‘Do you like cooking?’ Julia asks him.

‘Oh yes, very much. Good job. Plenty to eat!’ he chuckles.

‘In our country,’ Nasrim, glowering, says, ‘when visitor come we make feast, much food, goat, chicken, rice, here we have only these biscuits and this drink!’ He sweeps the pile of plastic cups off the table.

‘Even when little food always we share with visitor! This,’ he gestures at the biscuits and the cordial, ‘this is…’

His English leaves him and he flings his hands in the air. He says something in his own tongue. The others look at him. A guard enters, curious about the noise.

‘Not playing up, are we, Nasrim?’ he asks.

Nasrim replies again in his own language.

‘Time’s over, anyway,’ says the guard.

‘Can we have a bit longer,’ Julia asks, ‘we promised to take a list of things the men need with us so we can send them.’

‘They’ve got everything they need. But okay.’

They have to ask the guards for pencils and paper as all their things are in their backpacks in the lockers. She can’t believe those children are still out there in the broiling sun. The little baby is sitting down now in the red dust with the older children. Mustafa has vanished, as has the children’s mother. She can’t see any other adults. How long the days must seem in here.

‘Angelica,’ Julia says as they drive back along the bitumen road to the caravan park, ‘how is it that they’re denied visas because the immigration people don’t believe they come from Afghanistan, yet they’re offered money to go back there?’

‘I don’t know, I don’t understand that. I don’t understand why they release the men and keep women and kids in there either.’

Angelica saw some film footage on the news before they left, of an Afghanian who’d returned to his bombed-out village. He was scraping blindly at the earth where his
home used to be with a teaspoon. It was one of the saddest images she’d ever seen. Is that what’s awaiting Nasrim, she wonders.

As they leave the three men, Mohammed thrusts a piece of paper into Julia’s hand.
‘Read this,’ he tells her. ‘My friend he is at Baxter now, he write this, is good, good writing. Maybe you put in paper in book for him but you not use his name, he is afraid of people knowing.’

They look at the poem as they sit in the truck in the Detention Centre car park.

They’ve retrieved the dog and their personal belongings, thanked the guards, polite to the end, walked out to the truck on trembling legs, absolutely exhausted. Angelica’s now trying to take photos of the centre through the windscreen without drawing the attention of the guards. She wants a picture of the water cannon at the gates. The guards are in their towers with binoculars, and patrol cars pass by every few minutes. Nevertheless, she manages a few badly-focussed images. What kind of stupid incompetent terrorists would try to infiltrate the country via people smugglers and end up imprisoned here for years, Angelica wonders, recalling a politician’s claims about the asylum seekers true purposes. Julia reads the poem out loud:

**One Silent Night**

*The wind is blowing to one side*

*Here it touches my body*

*I feel like just in heaven*

*Suddenly I open my eyes and look around*

*Oh God I am behind the fences*

*Still filled with unhappiness*

*I would like to fly just like a bird*

*But I know I can not*

*God created this world for everyone*

*But some people try to destroy it*

*And some people try to keep it for their own way*

*Why do they keep on behaving like that*
I need a new world to live
I want different skies every day
Can I live with out fear of war and terror
Could my dreams come true one day

In my childhood I thought
I was the luckiest person in the world
Because my life was secure
Now I think I am the unluckiest person in the world
Surrounded by peoples with no love.

By.........
Baxter IDF.

Down the road a bit, they stop and look back at the steel compound topped with razor wire. It has a beauty that comes from its simple proportions, the satisfying alignments of all its angles, the sun glinting off its shadowless surfaces. It is simultaneously incongruous and perfectly placed in the wilderness that surrounds it; a savage stronghold, impossible to ignore. Its designers have succeeded in eclipsing the drama of the arid landscape: the eye is drawn in awful fascination: one cannot look away.

‘Christ,’ says Julia.

It isn’t until a week later, camped by a flowing Victorian river in a field knee-deep with poplar seeds like balls of ripe cotton and a herd of roaming Jersey cows rubbing up against their caravan, that they both break down. It was awful, they agree, to have to leave the men behind in that place (Surrounded by peoples with no love) to have to say goodbye and walk away. And those children.

Angelica is still struggling with memories triggered by the visit, of all the years she lived behind that blue door in daily fear of her life: their house, though surrounded by neighbours, stood alone. It wasn’t possible that those neighbours didn’t hear the shouts and screams that came from their house in the night and yet nobody ever did anything
to help them. Angelica remembers the desolation she would feel when, on the rare occasions that they had visitors, those visitors would say goodbye and leave her behind in that house.

Angelica knows bad things happened in that desert place; they’re in its atmosphere and later she will discover just how bad when the conditions are gradually revealed to the public by people who’ve worked there and refuse to keep silent. There are raped children behind the razor wire, beaten women and crazed men. A common suffering. A common humanity. Angelica is full of admiration for the visitors who live closer than do she and Julia, who go there every couple of weeks, month after month, offering support and companionship. Peoples with ears. Peoples with love. Peoples who bring hope. The recording angels.

Their journey home is long and much of it passes in silence. What has confounded them both is that these things are happening in their own democratic country. They are ashamed and very angry.

‘Not in my name,’ growls Julia. ‘Not in my bloody name.’
IV.

One day in San Cristobal des las Casas, back when they were in Mexico, Julia and Angelica left the cathedral on the north side of the main zocalo, where they’d been watching the rituals of an opulent Mexican wedding. They picked their way round musicians playing flutes and drums on the Cathedral steps, and past the many ambulantes who strolled the plaza selling everything from chewing gum to the handwoven wrist ties made by the Maya women in the villages around San Cristobal. Small children sold soft drinks, loose cigarettes and chilli chocolate sweets for a couple of pesos. It rained while they were in the church: the cathedral steps were wet and slippery. They had been in San Cristobal for two weeks, and were in no hurry to move on.

At the wedding a young boy sang ‘Ave Maria’ in a high, sweet voice while the bride and groom knelt on crimson velvet cushions in front of the officiating priest and his company of altar boys. The plump mothers, squeezed into shiny blue and pink summer suits and white high heels, wept into their lace handkerchiefs. Behind the priest, the columns of the sixteenth-century church were decorated in thick gold leaf: hundreds of flickering candles were reflected in their surfaces. Bouquets of vermilion roses and white carnations were tied with satin ribbon to the ends of every pew. Chandeliers lit the cathedral, each with fifty or more tulip-shaped bulbs with crystal threads looped around them like a royal tiara.

As well as the usual display of saints, statues of conquistadors in full battledress stood formally posed in alcoves set into the stone walls. In front of each image stood a brass vase of yellow gladioli. The wedding ceremony was moving, redolent with incense, with hopes, expectations and promises. Australia seemed very remote. Angelica wished the bride and groom a rich life together, and reflected sadly on her own failures.

In these churches, she thought, there was a reverent atmosphere that she found compelling, though she’d long ago left religion behind. She always emerged from time spent there feeling strengthened and calmed. Julia said she felt the same: renewed in spirit just from sitting in a pew for ten minutes and letting her mind quieten down.

Angelica noticed a statue of a male saint, dressed in brown and with a gold-painted halo, holding a spray of Madonna lilies in one hand and a tiny doll, dressed in lolly
pink taffeta embroidered with gold thread, in the other. The doll wore a matching cap from which dark curls escaped onto her forehead. A small table had been placed at the Saint’s feet; votive candles sputtered and flared in the breeze from the open doors. The saint stood, benevolently gazing, his feet cushioned on an embroidered white pillow. It was extraordinary, Angelica thought, the trouble people took to elaborately dress these images, keep flowers fresh at their feet, light candles for their intercession. They had performed similar rituals at her convent. She recalled the life-sized image of Mary in the school chapel, the pale blue of her painted robe, the candles that burned at her feet. Holy Mary, Mother of God, Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. At the hour of our death.

In the weeks after the news of her mother’s death, Angelica experienced a gradual lightening of her spirit, a sense of liberation. She wrote to the Woman:

...It’s a most extraordinary thing: I have a sense that’s physical as well as emotional of letting go, of returning to my mother everything awful she ever said or did to me, for her to take with her out of this world. It’s as if all that horrible stuff belongs to her, not to me or anybody else, and it’s left the planet with her. ‘Here you are, mother,’ I’m saying, without either rancour or triumph, ‘you must take this back now, it belongs to you, not me. It can’t stay in the world without your presence to sustain it.’

I feel as if I’m starting a new life, or living free for the first time.

On the news in internet cafes they caught up with events at home, but they meant little. Another political stoush. Football. Life wasn’t over there, it was here in the mountains round San Cristobal, their low peaks covered in silvery morning mists. San Cristobal was cool, the sky pearl pink, dove grey as Bonnie had promised, back on Isla Mujeres. Their room at the posada stood alone in the garden under an avocado tree. Three of its four walls were made almost entirely of glass set into adobe, and it had a tiled roof. When it rained heavily the roof leaked onto the end of Julia’s bed. All the tree trunks were painted white from the ground up to their first branches. This was the case throughout Mexico, to prevent a particularly destructive ant from damaging the trees, they were told. Whenever Angelica pictures Mexican towns, she sees first these painted trees that so speak to her of Latin American life, the zocalos, the evening stroll and the outdoor café, the truly awful brass bands on Sunday afternoons in the public parks.
The room at the posada contained two beds and a row of wooden pegs on the wall behind the door on which they could hang their clothes. The bathroom was across the garden and like a lot of places in Mexico rarely had hot water. This was of little concern: notions of cleanliness are mutable. Angelica missed her grandchildren in Cancun.

As they rounded the corner from the zocalo to the busy street one morning, they saw a small group of Maya clustered round a cage on wheels on the back of a pick-up truck. The bars were painted bright red, like cages you find in illustrations in children’s picture books about old-fashioned circuses. They approached the group; the Maya were chattering with excitement and every few moments somebody yelled and sprang backwards as if they’d been struck. Curious, Julia and Angelica made their way to the front of the crowd and found themselves staring at two tigers. The tigers paced back and forth across the confines of their small cage; when one stood on its hind legs to thrash at the roof above it, the Maya screamed and jumped away. When the animals growled and roared, the Maya panicked and fled across the plaza then returned for another look, cautious, fascinated. Angelica looked over her shoulder at Julia, who’d turned her back on the scene. Angelica walked right up to the cage and looked into the unfathomable eyes of the great cat. It had, as well as its awesome fierceness, something of the ordinary moggie about it. It would have been easy enough to try to stroke its nose.

‘I can’t look at those poor animals caged like that,’ Julia said when Angelica caught up with her.

‘I know, I just couldn’t stop looking, I’ve never seen a tiger before.’

‘Didn’t anyone ever take you to a zoo?’

‘Once, I think but I didn’t see any tigers.’

‘I’m sorry I said that,’ Julia stopped and turned to look at her friend. ‘It isn’t your fault they never did ordinary things with you.’

‘It’s okay,’ Angelica said. ‘I’m over it. I never took Harry and Samuel either: I thought zoos were cruel.’

She hurried on ahead of Julia, discomfort starting to churn in her belly. She didn’t want to think about it.

It was awful for the animals. Julia was quite right. The tigers had no room to move, and were practically sitting on top of one another, biting and snarling in their
frustration. Their keeper sat on the kerb smoking and selling tickets to his circus outside of town. Every day the tigers were in the zocalo, every night they performed in the circus. One day another cage appeared beside them, this one containing llamas that stuck their heads through the bars and spat at everyone.

The day before they’d visited the markets on the steps of the Templo de Santo Domingo at the north end of town. A crowd had gathered round a shaman who was milking a rattlesnake into a plastic beaker. Another rattlesnake lay at his feet half covered by a pillowcase. The reptiles were so compliant Julia whispered to Angelica that she thought they must be drugged. A dead armadillo, its entrails beginning to stink in the midday sun, lay beside the shaman’s canvas bag. The shaman added water to the rattlesnake venom, along with other liquids. A chart lay spread out on the pavement in front of him, showing various human organs and information about them in Spanish. He referred to this chart as he held the snake by its head. Its rattle shook in a dispirited way. With a flourish the shaman finished with the rattlesnake and threw it back into the pillowcase. Vigorously, he shook the beaker and its contents before offering them to his audience to sample. Nobody came forward. The pillowcase undulated as the rattlesnakes got comfortable. The shaman berated the crowd, who must have seemed disappointedly indifferent to him after all his efforts to engage them. Then a young Western man, with long blonde hair in tight ringlets that hovered about his head like a saintly aura, took the beaker and drank. A cry went up from the mostly indigenous watchers.

‘He’ll die, or get sick,’ Julia whispered, horrified.

The shaman applauded the young man, then harangued the rest of his audience for their lack of faith. A snake nosed its way out of confinement. The people closest jumped back, shrieking, and knocked into everyone behind them. The shaman threw another rag over the snake. The crowd moved closer again. The blonde man finished the mixture, returned the beaker with a bow and walked off down the street. He wore canvas shoes with no socks and his ankles were filthy. Angelica thought of how his mother would worry if she knew what he’d just done. She wanted to go after him, ask him if he had enough money, somewhere safe to stay. Every couple of hours Julia and she said to one another:

‘I wonder if he’s all right? I wonder if he’s got sick yet? I hope someone looks after him.’
The next day they saw him dancing on the cathedral steps when they walked down to visit the tigers, and were mightily relieved to find him looking so well. From then on they saw him everywhere in San Cristobal, like a jester strolling through the old town in a rainbow-coloured velvet jacket he’d found in the markets and ragged jeans, playing a tune of his own invention on a wooden flute, his white blonde hair flying about his head. He acknowledged them with nods, but they never spoke. Sometimes a girl was with him, beating a small drum that hung on a ribbon round her neck, her dark hair in dreadlocks, wearing a long brown dress with a yellow shawl. Dogs and children followed them and settled at their feet when they stopped to rest in the zocalos. Only once did Angelica hear them talking to each other; she thought their language was Swedish, but she couldn’t be sure.

* * *

Before the women left Cancun for San Cristobal, Celeste had phoned Angelica again. ‘Edwina’s taking everything!’ she shouted down the phone. ‘I’ve been to Mum’s house and she’s been there taking everything! We haven’t even made an inventory yet and she’s just helping herself!’

Their mother had left a will that excluded Angelica, and named Celeste and Edwina as co-executors. While this was not unexpected, Angelica found herself stunned and hurt.

‘Well, get a lawyer, Celeste,’ she told her sister. ‘I don’t know anything about this stuff and I’m not even in the fucking will, and I’m in Mexico. Go see a lawyer.’

‘I tried!’ Celeste yelled, frantic, ‘but the lawyer who did the will won’t have anything to do with us. He says he refuses to be used as a weapon of vengeance.’

Angelica was silent for a minute, contemplating how bad things must be for a lawyer to say that.

‘What’s happened? Why would he say that?’

‘I don’t know,’ Celeste bawled, but Angelica didn’t believe her for a minute.

‘Oh, for God’s sake, Celeste!’ she yelled, ‘You aren’t going to tell me the truth about anything so why bloody bother telling me little bits and expecting me to help you out? Mum knew this would happen, she always knew how you two fight.’
‘Well, she didn’t leave anything specifically to me or Edwina, she just said in the will that we have to decide between ourselves who gets what. And Edwina says she deserves more than me because she got less while Mum was alive. And that’s just not true, Angelica!’

‘Oh, that’s nice,’ Angelica said sarcastically. ‘She’s tormenting you from beyond the grave. That’s malicious that is, she knew you’d never be able to agree on anything. She’s done that on purpose. You both have to agree on a schedule of assets and stuff for probate, you know, if you can’t even get that far the estate can’t be settled. And she’s set you at one another’s throats just like she did when she was alive. Wow.’

Celeste was silent, digesting Angelica’s take on things while Angelica quietly marvelled at their mother’s capacity even in death, for the Machiavellian flourish.

‘She wouldn’t do that,’ Celeste said finally.

‘Oh for fuck’s sake, Celeste, grow up. Stop bloody sticking up for her. What does Amalie say?’

Celeste was silent for so long that Angelica thought they’d been cut off. Finally she whispered:

‘Amalie’s in Sweden.’

‘What?’

‘She met somebody on-line, some man. He paid her fare to Sweden to see if they could have a relationship.’

‘Celeste, that is unspeakable. Don’t you have any sense of self-preservation? She said she wanted to be with you and you’ve been looking after her and giving her a home and money. And now she’s gone off with some sugar daddy in Sweden?’

‘I know!’ Celeste sobbed. ‘But she said she had to try things at least once with a man. I think she’ll come back.’

‘For Christ’s sake, you aren’t going to have her back again!’

While Angelica was listening to Celeste’s latest romantic misery, it was slowly dawning on her that she really had been left out of the will. She hadn’t taken it in, she realised, what with the suddenness of their mother’s death and being in Mexico, which was something like being on another galaxy, far, far away from these concerns. Not only had she been left out, her children and grandchildren had been excluded as well. That really hurt. The final rejection. The one from beyond the grave. Fuck.
‘Celeste,’ Angelica said carefully, ‘shut up for a minute and listen. First of all, lose Amalie. That is the last piece of big sister advice I’m ever going to give you. Second, I’m contesting the will. I’m not going to take this anymore. I’ve had enough of the bloody rejection, and the abandonment and the demands and everything else I’ve had from this family ever since I was bloody born. I’m done with all this shit. I deserve the same as you and Edwina and I’m fucking contesting the will.’

‘Oh, no, don’t!’ Celeste wailed. ‘Don’t get lawyers involved, let’s settle it between us!’

‘Yeah, right. You and Edwina can’t even get it together to make an inventory, and you say Edwina’s nicking everything anyway.’

‘She’ll give it back, I know she will, if I ask her to!’

‘Celeste, you’re even more self-destructively hopeful than I am and that’s saying something. I have to go. We’re leaving Cancun tomorrow and we’ll be on the road for a while. Lose Amalie. Get a lawyer.’

‘Angelica, I tried to persuade Mum to include you in the will, I really did. I’m so sorry you were left out. But I think Mum forgave you before she died.’

This last remark gave Angelica considerable pause. She was silent for a long time.

‘Are you there?’ Celeste bleated down the phone. ‘Mum said she thought you were in the room with her at the hospital and you wouldn’t talk to her. She was on a lot of morphine. She said she forgave you for everything before she died. Edwina heard her too.’

‘What did you say?’ She forgave me? Did you say she forgave me? For what, exactly? What did she forgive me for? Are you out of your mind, Celeste? For all of these years have you been thinking I did her the harm? You know the story. She got me to tell you. She couldn’t tell you herself, she said, so she asked me to. And I did, God help me, another abuse of me, I got to be the one who told you all the awful things your father did instead of her. It was her job to do that, not mine! So you know what happened, don’t pretend you don’t. What’s wrong with you?’

‘I don’t want to talk about it, Angelica.’

‘Well, you bloody brought it up. And I’m sick of nobody wanting to talk about it! Nobody ever fucking wants to talk about it! Well I’m talking about it, Celeste! Are you listening, ‘cos I’m fucking-well talking about it! It was our mother who let her husband
rape me for five years from the age of ten! There! I’m talking about it! I’ve said it! Did you get that?’

‘Angelica, Mum had a hard time too…’

‘Jesus, did you hear what I just said? What the fuck did she have to forgive me for? Because I didn’t like being raped? I was ten years old, Celeste! You were two months old the first time he did it to me. Mum had a hard time? Mum forgave me on her deathbed? Like I was some kind of rival with her for her fucking husband’s attentions? And now she leaves me out of the will?’

‘Angelica, look, I’m not going to talk to you anymore about this. We just have different points of view.’

‘Really! I wonder why that is? You don’t have any right to a point of view about it because you’ve never discussed it with me! You aren’t fully informed! Look, just sod off, Celeste. You have no idea about my life with our mother and her husband, you’ve never discussed it with me, only with our mother, you’ve never had the courage to ask me about what happened to me, you act like our family only began with you and Edwina and I’m over your attitude, Celeste. Over it!’

‘Angelica…’

Fury, outrage, grief, memory, anguish, incredulity all simultaneously exploded inside Angelica. Celeste had fired one of those bullets that disintegrates inside the human body and lodges bits of itself everywhere. Her vision blurred. It was true you could go blind with rage.

‘You think our mother’s version of events was more authentic than mine?’ she shouted at Celeste. ‘It was me it happened to. Me who’s tried to have some kind of normal fucking life after what they did to me when they were my parents and supposed to be looking after me! You don’t know jack shit about anything to do with me, Celeste, and you’ve never bothered to find out! That’s the bit that sucks. You’ve never even bothered to ask me about it!’

‘Mum was a victim too, Angelica, it wasn’t only you!’

‘I never argued with that! I know she had a hard time. But she treated me forever after like it was my fault, and I was ten! She was the fucking adult! Not me! What’s wrong with you? Why haven’t you ever talked to me about what happened? Cos you don’t bloody well want to know anything that might disturb your one-eyed view of the
situation, do you? Sod off, Celeste. I’m serious. Don’t bother me anymore with your romantic problems. In fact don’t even ring me anymore. Sod off!"

Angelica hung up the phone. She was trembling and covered in sweat. No one else was home. On uncertain legs, she walked down the steps of the apartment building to the swimming pool. She stood looking at the water for a long time. It was midday and nobody was swimming. Everyone had retreated to their cool apartments for lunch and a nap. The sun was burning the back of her head; she’d left without a hat. She walked over to the palapa and sat down in a white plastic chair under the shade of the thatched roof, and looked out at the lagoon. She hadn’t smoked a cigarette for over twenty years but she would have killed for one at that moment. She went back upstairs and got two sweating Coronas from the fridge. She took them back to the palapa and drank them off one after the other. What the hell had she been doing in that family for all these years? Nobody gave a flying fuck about her, never had, and never would. Was she insane? How dumb was she to never have taken that reality on board and adjusted her hopes and expectations accordingly? How different would her life had been if she’d given up hope?

Hope’s a tricky thing. There’s a time to hold onto it and a time let it go, and clearly she never knew which was which. As long as her mother was alive she held on to hope, and now that she was dead, it was over. She was released from hope. She was liberated from that terrible burden. Angelica put her head on the white plastic table in front of her and sobbed. She was finally free. So why did she feel so sad?

* * *

Finally Julia and Angelica dragged themselves away from San Cristobal and headed for the Pacific Coast. In Mazunte, a small village on a wild surf beach, they visited a turtle farm. Baby turtles cruised around in glass tanks. They went on the Spanish tour as they’d missed the English. Angelica enjoyed it far more, she said, when she couldn’t understand it and didn’t have to listen. Turtle eggs, they read in the brochure, were regarded as nature’s Viagra by many Mexican men. Consequently turtles had become a threatened species. The Mexican army guarded the beaches where the mother turtles laid their eggs so they couldn’t be stolen for aphrodisiacs. Life is precarious enough for
baby turtles. Julia took a photograph of a poster featuring a glamorous young Mexican woman in her underwear, pouting the words:

*Mi hombre, no necesitas huevos de tortuga!*

Which translated means: My man, you have no need of the eggs of the turtle!

It was in Mazunte that Julia, normally a cautious and thoughtful traveller, experienced an outbreak of reckless behaviour and ventured into the treacherous surf. She was dumped on her neck for her pains. White and shaking, she stumbled back to their room where Angelica was reading a book and wondering what to do about preventing her sisters pilfering everything from their mother’s estate. She’d emailed the lawyer who’d written back:

*I do not, and will not, and neither will any member of this firm, now or in the future, act for any member of your family in the matter of your mother’s estate or any other matter.*

Angelica was beginning to conclude that she could do nothing from Mexico and that things at home must be far worse than she’d imagined.

‘For God’s sake, what’s wrong?’ she asked as Julia staggered through the door.

‘Got dumped,’ Julia whispered. ‘Hurt neck.’

They ascertained that she hadn’t broken her neck, on the grounds that she probably wouldn’t have been able to get home if she had.

‘What got into you?’ Angelica wanted to know. ‘You are so cautious and we’ve talked about how dangerous that surf is. What possessed you?’

‘I don’t know,’ Julia grumbled, ‘aren’t I allowed to make a mistake? Why do I always have to be the sensible one?’

Pain made her cranky. Angelica found the Panadol.

‘You don’t,’ Angelica told her. ‘Just relax and be as daft as you like and I’ll organise everything.’

They argued the merits of looking for a local doctor or travelling on to Oaxaca City. Julia wanted to go on, she said. Something was strained or twisted but it was getting a little bit better. She could travel. So in her awful Spanish Angelica negotiated with the bus driver to give Julia the front seat where she’d have a little more comfort, and they went to Oaxaca City.

‘I have to go home,’ she told Julia after they’d settled the matter of her neck. At least, Julia decided her neck was improving and needed no Mexican medical intervention.
‘I can’t sort out all this stuff about the estate from here and I can’t get it off my mind.’

They caught the bus to Mexico City. Angelica flew to Cancun for a day to say goodbye to her grandchildren. Jean-Paul wound himself round her knees and told her he loved her. The Chef drove her to the airport.

‘Take care, Mum,’ he told her. ‘I never understood why Grandma didn’t like us.’

‘It wasn’t personal, love,’ she told him. ‘She didn’t like anybody.’

Julia was staying on in Mexico City for a while, then going to Japan.

I’m not free yet, Angelica realised on the long trip home. It was August, and cold in Australia. She unpacked her winter clothes from their boxes under the stairs. They stank of mothballs. She took note of the piles of research for her book. She gazed for a long time at the boxes of photographs, evidence of her early life and she felt Mexico slipping further and further away. Adios, Senors, Senoritas, she whispered. Vaya con Dios.

*  *  *

In Angelica’s life as a young mother, the doors and windows of her house are open to summer. The children swear at one another in the backyard as they work on repairing an old dinghy. She watches them. They have beautiful bodies that they fling carelessly into her arms when they need her affection. In Angelica’s house, unlike her father’s, children are free to close the bathroom door without a second thought. They loll in chairs, mouths full of bubble gum, removing the wads only to exchange articulate insults with one another. She watches their freedom, a freedom she has never known, and her heart swells. She didn’t have it, she thinks, but they do! They do! She has turned something around.

She sits at the kitchen table and discusses love and politics with friends. Everything so ordinary and yet inside her nothing is ordinary. How many levels are there on which we dwell, she wonders? And is any one level more important than another?

*  *  *

Angelica is in session with the Woman. She is enraged, consumed with desire for revenge for what her mother’s husband did to her. She can’t rest. Her sleep has been
broken now for weeks. She’s trapped, stuck in her fury, she can’t get past it, can’t let it go. It’s taken over her life.

‘What would you like to be able to do?’ the Woman asks her. ‘You can imagine doing anything you want, here with me, and see what happens.’

Angelica is initially resistant. What good will it do, she wants to know? It’s too late. Just try it, the Woman gently persists. If it’s no good, you can stop.

Angelica has done work such as this on other occasions and has felt considerable relief afterwards. But she’s never gone this far into it. She’s scared. What if she can’t get back from the feelings? What if they make her crazy? She already feels crazy, as if she might completely lose control of herself and never regain it.

‘Just try it,’ the Woman softly insists.

Angelica trusts her, more than anyone else on earth. More than anyone in the universe. She will take her advice. She lies down on the floor and closes her eyes.

In Angelica’s imagination the doctor’s house had a cellar. Angelica never went there but she imagined it as dark and damp, with mildewed suitcases dropped carelessly about and old furniture, perhaps a cupboard or a wardrobe. There was a dead man in the cellar, she told The Woman, chained by his neck to the wall. In the house upstairs there were rugs and pictures and roses cut by the doctor for his wife to arrange in bowls on small tables in the hallway and rooms of his house. These were his roses.

Underneath her feet, underneath the carpets and floorboards of her father’s house was the cellar with the dead man. The cellar where Angelica has never been, though she knows it as if it were her own room. Angelica knows she must go there. But not on her own.

‘Who do you want to go with you?’ The Woman asks.

The Woman sits in her chair opposite Angelica: this is one of the times Angelica will not allow anyone to touch her or come near her. There are times when even a loving touch feels like a threat of invasion. The Woman recognises these times and keeps her distance.

Angelica wants a child, she thinks, a child will come with her and the child will bring a light. They’ll need a lantern or a gas lamp. The child who joins her has a light. He takes Angelica’s hand. He is seven, he tells her. He is curious. They enter the cellar, Angelica and the child, she with her fear wild around her. It is dark in the cellar, and
full of shapes. The child doesn’t seem to be afraid, or it could be that his curiosity is greater than any fear?

In the cellar the dead man hangs by his neck from the wall. The child hands Angelica the light. He crosses to the dead man and releases him from his chains. The child says:

‘We must take him with us, we can’t leave him here. He isn’t dead.’

‘No!’ Angelica shouts. ‘No, that’s too much to ask of me, no!’

The cellar becomes a tunnel cut through cold grey stone. Its floor is made from chips of the same stone. The chips are sharp and cut their feet. Angelica can hear running water somewhere out of sight. There are rocks that are too high for the child’s short legs. Angelica picks him up and carries him on her back. The child clutches the lantern. It swings wildly, casting frightening shadows on the stone wall. But the child is not afraid. The child laughs, exhilarated, excited. Angelica stands him safely on a flat rock at the far end of the tunnel.

‘I’m going back,’ she tells him. ‘For the dead man.’

‘There are creatures down here,’ the child tells her. ‘Dragons, and snakes with wings. I’ll speak to them,’ he says gravely. ‘They’ll let us pass.’

Angelica knows everything the child says is true and must be taken seriously.

‘I’m going back,’ she tells him. ‘I have to, don’t I?’

The child looks at her, straight and steady.

‘You have to,’ he tells her.

The man is chained to a post in the cellar. The chains have rubbed him raw and bloody. There are weeping sores on his ankles. He isn’t dead at all. He screams at Angelica:

‘Take off these chains! Do as I tell you!’

‘But the child,’ she protests. ‘He released you.’

‘No!’ roars the man. ‘He didn’t. He can’t! It has to be you!’

Angelica closes her eyes. What is it like to be this man? Her eyes are red and dry. The cement post is rough against her back. The chains rub and sting her broken skin. Everything inside her is dark. She cannot see the child or recognise the Angelica who came into the cellar with him.

The child has followed her. He crosses to the chained man and lays his hand on the bruised knees.
‘You must take these off,’ he tells Angelica. ‘Look at what they’re doing. You must take them off.’

‘I won’t,’ says Angelica. ‘Not now, not ever.’

For the first time the child looks afraid. He puts his thumb in his mouth and walks backwards, all the while watching her. Then he settles warily on his haunches in the corner.

The man in chains is silent. He stares at her. Angelica can feel the abrasive surface on her back. She can feel the weight of the manacle around her neck. She kicks the man hard on the leg with her boot, once, twice. She watches the red marks appear. Angelica remembers the sandals and the straps that left red marks across his feet. She kicks him again, hard as she can. He raises his chained arms in an effort to protect himself.

Angelica calls to the child. The child will not come near her. He has taken his light and gone. She is alone in the darkness. She can’t release the man. She can’t kill him. And the child is gone with his light.

Angelica approaches the man. She thrusts her breasts into his face. He tries to pull back but his head cracks against the concrete post.

‘Don’t,’ he begs her, ‘please don’t.’

‘Why not?’ she snarls. ‘It’s what you wanted, isn’t it?’

She laughs at him. She’s feeling very strong. Then out of the corner of her eye she catches a glimpse of the child crouching in the corner. Tears flow down his cheeks. Suddenly, she’s ashamed.

‘I have a right!’ she yells at the child. ‘I have a right to do anything I want after what he did to me!’

She runs past the child, up through the stairways of the house and out into the street.

Angelica wanders the city for a very long time. When she returns she sees that the child has curled up beside the chained man and they are both asleep, the child’s hand resting on the man’s bruised knee. The man wakes. He shudders, and sobs.

‘I want to die,’ he whispers.

The child lets out a noisy breath.

‘Stop it!’ the child begs Angelica. ‘Please stop it! Let him go!’

The man is pale and breathes rapidly. His head rests on his chest. The child crouches beside him and holds his hand. They stay like this throughout the night. Angelica walks to the grimy window. Outside the sky is streaked with red cloud. She stares at the stars.
She watches the moon come up. When light comes, she crosses to the man. She unlocks his chains. She helps him lie down. The child brings water. The man sips. He closes his eyes. He says thank you, thank you for unlocking the chains. Then he closes his eyes. His breath rattles and stops. The child looks at her. The man has gone where no one can reach him. The man has gone.

Angelica sits up and reaches out her arms to the Woman. The Woman leaves her seat, kneels down and holds her.

‘That’s what I dreamed,’ Angelica tells her. ‘But it wasn’t a dream, I wasn’t asleep, it was like being in a trance, imagining something very vividly. I don’t understand.’

The Woman says nothing for quite some time. Then she says:

‘Angelica, you don’t have to understand it immediately. Feel it. Feel what it says to you. Don’t force yourself into understanding.’

When she was sixteen the doctor, her stepfather, murdered himself. He injected a poisonous substance into a vein in the crook of his arm. Angelica went with her mother to the funeral place. The doctor was pale, and dressed in a white garment. She looked at his body for a long time and was unable to remember it alive, and dangerous.

* * *

Though she’s contesting the will, the real battle is not between her and her sisters, it is between Edwina and Celeste who cannot agree on anything, and both of whom accuse the other of stealing valuable assets from their mother’s estate. There is nothing to be done about this: the court will sort them out eventually. Angelica pulls out the boxes containing her manuscript and gets back to work. The black and white dog has been retrieved from his second home with friends, and once again lies across the threshold of her room, on guard. She has to do something while she’s waiting for these events to play themselves out.

She’s still in remission and is waiting for another more congenial aspect of the Lymphoma’s character to emerge. This will be a good sign she feels. A sign she’s thinking better of herself.
She’ll go back to Mexico when things are settled. Another grandchild has come into the world since she returned to Australia, and she wants to make his acquaintance. Her Swedish father remains a fantasy though she is less and less concerned about her fatherless status. One must reach an accommodation with these things, she knows. Angelica and Julia keep up their correspondence with the incarcerated asylum seekers. The Woomera Detention Centre has been closed down and they’ve all been moved to Baxter Detention Centre, which is new and technologically advanced, and they’re segregated so they can’t see each other.

* * *

I write this as a dying woman, and I haven’t yet discovered my real name. In the new country that is my final destination, perhaps there is no need for proper names. I can only hope that this is so, otherwise I’ll be as lost there as I have been here, lost in the way that only those with too many names, or none at all, can be. I still belong to no one, and there are two sides to that freedom.

I’ve found no answer to my question why, but perhaps the point has been the asking.

* * *

Angelica and her lover once took a midnight walk round Sydney Harbour. A white ocean liner had recently docked. Lit brilliantly from stem to stern, the liner’s reflection quivered in watery radiance. The yellow crescent moon, a diamond star cradled in its curve, hung like a woman’s jewel on obsidian taffeta. Passengers in their cruising finery lined the decks. On shore, a brass band played songs of welcome. It was like a scene from a movie by Fellini she’d once seen, Angelica thought.

‘I wish I was one of those passengers,’ Angelica told her lover. ‘I wish I was seeing this city for the first time.’

‘Do it anyway,’ he suggested. ‘Imagine you’re seeing it for the first time.’

And so she did. The world as she’d known it underwent an immediate transformation. It became her own creation, to love or despise, to understand or disregard. There is a pleasure, she read one night, that arises out of ourselves and within ourselves … given as a woven fabric and once given, no event can rend it.
As Angelica gazed at the harbour with her newly-opened eyes, she felt this pleasure gently rise in her and settle itself around the chewed and ragged edges of her heart, as if it had been waiting like a patient animal for admittance and shelter from the night’s rains.

‘Hey,’ she whispered, taking her lover’s hand, ‘I think my ship’s come in.’

* * *

I don’t know what forgiveness is, though I’ve spent many hours thinking about it. Some say that it’s a state of grace that comes without announcement. Some say it’s a calm, in which there’s no ill will, and perhaps no thought at all. Some say it’s when you know something has ended and move on, without even really noticing.

I write this as a dying woman. But I am happy on days like these, and endings, even in the midst of their planning, seem very far away.
The Practice of Goodness: A Theoretical Perspective
Introduction

_The Practice of Goodness_ is a work of creative non-fiction, a memoir of some of the significant events in the protagonist’s life, written in reaction to a diagnosis of terminal illness. In the theoretical perspective offered here I discuss the central themes of the memoir. These are those of violence, both domestic and political; the role of language in cultural constructions of death and dying; and the possibility of a secular ethics centred round responsibility, forgiveness and respect for our common vulnerability.

The overarching argument of the thesis is for the embodiment of theory in practice, an argument that is symbolised both by its composite form and the decision to theoretically interrogate the themes of the creative piece. In the creative piece, these themes are explored experientially. The actual effects of violence, of cultural representations of death and dying through the use of figurative language, and of acts of forgiveness on human life, are noted in their practice. In the exegesis, I engage with various theoretical perspectives on these practices with the goal of demonstrating that extraordinary events may be more fully understood, and finally come to terms with, if the experiential is supported and informed by a theory that lends itself to practical application in human life.

The exegesis contributes to an ongoing international discussion of the nature and purpose of human rights discourse. As well, it contests various concepts of forgiveness and suggests a broadening of traditional Western philosophical prescriptives for, and definitions of, the nature and purpose of forgiveness. In this, the thesis attempts to reclaim forgiveness from religious and philosophical discourses and resituate it in a secular human rights discourse. The exegesis also questions the representation of death and dying through the language of critical theory and popular culture, contributing to the scholarly discussion of how our understandings of death are both created and manipulated by the use of figurative language.
Although *The Practice of Goodness* is my memoir, I have written it almost entirely in the third person. It is, as discussed by Cooke (1992, p.164) ‘...an autobiography composed by a fictional protagonist which draws attention to its own problematic status as a fictive construct.’ In other words, the memoir draws attention to the troubled border between fact and fiction through the use of the writer’s childhood other self, as the protagonist. The story of this other self is then recounted by a narrator and is thus twice removed from the ‘I’ who writes. This narrative structure exemplifies ‘...the radical split between the self that writes and the self that is written, and the crucial role of language in the constitution of the subject’ (Marcus, 1994, p.183). This structure and the movements between time and space employed in the memoir allow the entire text to be used as an overarching metaphor for the fragmented subject, in this case, a subject fragmented by traumatic events. The text reflects not a journey to the imagined centre of the subject, but movements sideways, out to the edges where the silenced voices languish. It is not a shedding that takes place in the narrative, a peeling back to find the heart of the matter, but a re-covering, a reclaiming of those voices that have been abandoned and neglected. ‘Who speaks and acts?’ asks Deleuze. ‘It is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts’ (in Ferguson, 1992, p.3). There is no search for the essential self, and the narrative contests notions of coherency of the subject.

To offer an autobiographical account is to enter into a contract with the reader in which the writer agrees to present the facts of a life. However the nature of memory is enigmatic: ‘...memories of the past... are not memories of facts but memories of your imagining of the facts’ (Roth, 1989, p.8). That is, my memories are affected by time and subsequent experiences: while I insist on the truth of the bare bones of my narrative, the flesh on the bones, the creative non-fiction, grows from my imagining of my memories of the circumstances surrounding the facts. These circumstances are frequently obscure, forgotten or repressed because of their traumatic nature, and because of the movements of time. However, ‘Memory...rarely invents, as do the inventors of stories. Personal memory is not a professional author’ (Cavarero, 1997, p.36). In this sense, memory and imagination collude to produce the work of creative non-fiction that is, I would argue, the meta-genre of all memoir and autobiography, whether written in the first person or the third. ‘The autobiographer,’ notes Elbaz, ‘always writes a novel, a fiction, about a third person’ (1987, p.12).
The theoretical perspective offered here consists of two parts. The first, titled *On Death*, makes two arguments. The first argument is that the use of death as a metaphor is highly problematic, if not impossible, and that the prevalent usage of death as a metaphor indicates a deeply ingrained denial of the finality of death in Western culture. Following the work of Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Helene Cixous, Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud and others, I argue that there is a viable alternative to the metaphor of death, which, if employed, offers a whole other vision of the relationship between language and the construction of the subject’s attitude towards death, and therefore, life.

The second argument is that the process of dying, which is the central theme of the creative piece, does lend itself to metaphoric use. To demonstrate this argument I use an example from popular culture, the American television series *The Sopranos* (Chase, 1999), in which the dying of the central character is starkly portrayed. Following the work of Julia Kristeva, Sigmund Freud, Harold Brodkey, Laura Tanner, and others, I argue that the experience of dying and the state of near-death both take place in the site of the abject and the uncanny. The experience of dying, while highlighted at times of extremity, is also a daily life circumstance and therefore the abject is constantly with us and is the site from which language, faced with the limit of death, surges forth.

The second part of the thesis is titled *How, then, are we to live?* This also consists of two arguments. Following the work of Emmanuel Levinas, Bryan Turner, Jacques Derrida, Judith Lewis Herman, and others, I argue for a broadened concept of human rights abuse that includes domestic violence and intimate terrorism. I argue that this broadened vision might be based on the acknowledgment of a common vulnerability that is inherent by virtue of our embodiment. Within this argument I address terrorism as a personal as well as a public event and suggest that the consequences of experiencing terror, either in the domestic setting and or the public arena, have more in common than is usually acknowledged.

In the second argument I discuss the nature and purpose of forgiveness. Following the work of Hannah Arendt, Jacques Derrida, Charles Griswold, Judith Butler, and others, I suggest that forgiveness is for the benefit of the victim, and is always and only the
victim’s privilege. I discuss the difficulties of forgiving the unforgivable, and how the unforgivable might be determined. Finally, I argue that forgiveness is in part the answer to the question, how, then, are we to live? As such, it is a concept that belongs in the secular discourse of human rights, rather than in any discourse of radical exteriority.

*The Practice of Goodness* consistently raises these four themes in the account of Angelica’s living and dying. While the creative piece is reflective, the exegesis seeks to analytically enter into the complexities it raises, an endeavour that does not necessarily find satisfactory expression in the genre of storytelling. The themes of the story are universal, though addressed differently within cultures. The position from which I theoretically explore these themes is that of a white, middle class, Anglo Celtic woman without religious affiliation.
On Death

Part One

Writing and Death

One does not know when death will come. What will come? With what does death threaten me? With nothingness or recommencement? I do not know.

Emmanuel Levinas

Death has a special influence upon literary manners.

Frederick J. Hoffman

The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author.

Roland Barthes

In this section I discuss the relationships between writing and death. I suggest that these relations both produce and perpetuate a particular cultural attitude to death in Western society, through the use of figurative language that serves to assuage fears and encourage denial of death’s radical finality. I argue that the use of death as a metaphor is problematic in terms of what the task of metaphor is. I use the Foucauldian concept of ‘…the relations between the subject, the truth and the constitution of experience’ (Foucault, 1989, p.310) as the basis of my argument. On the matter of how death and dying are popularly represented I ask ‘…what are these norms to which my very being is given over…’ (Butler, 2003, p.19). That is, the use of death as a metaphor has profound implications for my very being. In both senses of the word ‘being’, I am ‘given over’ to the truth regime the metaphor works to uphold. This regime proves itself to be entirely unsatisfactory when I am faced with the actuality of my death, when my death is a foreseeable, rather than a distant event.

After I’d been diagnosed with terminal cancer, I discovered that an unexpected side effect of this diagnosis was an intense sensitivity to the use of death in figurative language. As I began my work of coming to terms with the absolute finality of my death, a finality that has no adequate signifier, I began to wonder how anything could be likened to death. ‘All transcendental illusions have at their source a wish to deny the corporeal nature of man’ Hoffman (1964, p. 3) writes, and the figurative language of death is the medium for these transcendental illusions, and furthers their work of...
denial, or so it can appear to a non-believer. While I found many people who were willing to share their beliefs about death and an after-life, that is, their ‘transcendental illusions’, it was far more difficult to find someone who was willing to enter the realm of I do not know, and its attendant possibility of annihilation. The notion of the utter cessation of our existence is not an easy one for human beings to bear. Uncertainty has attached to it the implication that it ought to be a temporary state, bereft as it is of the reassuring authority of knowledge.

Throughout the rest of the thesis I return to the question of embodiment as a site of experiential truth that is often at odds with discourses such as human rights, and in this instance, received notions of death. So great is the human fear of death, so difficult is it for us to imagine the state that possibly awaits us, that ‘…the idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else…’ (Becker, 1973, p.ix). This fear may provoke compensatory action in the form of the construction of belief systems that hold out the promise that life will continue after death. I intend no disrespect towards these belief systems. My position on these matters is the same as that of Levinas: I do not know, and as there is as yet no way of gaining that knowledge, the transcendental remains illusionary. It is a matter of faith, and as such, outside of the parameters of this argument, which seeks to strip death of imposed meaning, rather than confer it.

Foucault frequently states that his objectives are to discover how and why societies find themselves holding particular attitudes and beliefs at a particular point in time: ‘My problem is essentially the definition of the implicit systems in which we find ourselves prisoners,’ (1989, p.71), he writes. In this instance, the implicit system of interest is the system of language dominant in Western culture, from within which is defined a prevailing understanding of the nature and experience of death, and therefore about life. The use of figurative language, specifically the use of death as a metaphor, is, I argue, a significant factor in the construction of implicit and explicit beliefs about death. These beliefs serve to disguise and ameliorate the reality of death’s finality, thus imprisoning us in an illusion that denies the legitimacy of radical absence.

If we are to accept the observations of Becker, Hoffman, and Freud these beliefs are primarily imposed on death in order to hold off the horror of the end of our existence.
Religions, Freud claims: ‘…succeeded in representing this after-life as the more desirable, the truly valid one, and in reducing the life which is ended by death to a mere preparation…all with the purpose of depriving death of its meaning as the termination of life’ (1985, p.83) (my emphasis). While Freud specifically refers to religions, I suggest that metaphors of death used in secular literary criticism are also an integral part of this reduction of life, acting as they do to deprive death of meaning, or to minimise its finality, as I attempt to demonstrate. As Hoffman puts it, quoting the poet Wallace Stevens: ‘The “phantoms” are the metaphors that assuage death and connect it with eternity’ (1964, p.vii). The death metaphor cannot exist outside of a belief in an afterlife that assuages the terror of possible annihilation. The death metaphor is an attempted taming of death’s untamable exteriority, an attempt that is always and forever doomed to failure. I demonstrate ‘…the role of language in perpetuating the illusion of presence…’ (Tanner, 2006, p.231) to support my argument, and discuss the manner in which denying death’s finality through language results in a ‘…recasting of absence as presence’ (Tanner, 2006, p.214), a recasting that is, in fact, a denial of the fullness of embodied loss.

‘In a metaphor, a word or expression which in literal usage denotes one kind of thing or action is applied to a distinctly different kind of thing or action…’ (Abrams, 1999, p.97). Thus Shakespeare writes: ‘…and Juliet is the sun,’ (Shakespeare, c. 1593, Act II, sc. ii, l. 3) and ‘All the world’s a stage…’ (Shakespeare, c. 1600, Act II, sc. vii, l. 139). In both these examples the expressions are used to denote the qualities of that which is unrelated, however the metaphor works only because the qualities of the sun and of the stage are knowable and known. The metaphors make sense and enrich our imaginings, as is their purpose. The importance of metaphor is great: ‘…metaphor is anything but peripheral to the life of the mind. It is central to our understanding of ourselves, our culture, and the world at large’ (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p.214). The use of the metaphor of death is therefore highly significant because of the ways in which it constructs both life and death. Initially it appears to be a viable metaphor, until one looks more deeply into the associations it claims to make. Unlike any other metaphorical associations, those made with death are entirely incapable of substantiation: we have no idea at all of death’s composition and qualities. Death denotes radical absence, both of the sentient being and of knowledge: it signifies
radical ignorance, and the utter impossibility of knowing. There is nothing in life, it can be argued, for which death can be asked metaphorically to stand.

‘Because metaphor is a primary tool for understanding our world and our selves, entering into an engagement with powerful poetic metaphors is grappling in an important way with what it means to have a human life’ (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p.xii).

If we accept that ‘…the fear of death is indeed a universal in the human condition’ (Becker, 1973, p.ix) then understanding ‘what it means to have a human life’ is inseparable from the contemplation of our death, and our attitude towards that death.

Metaphor, I argue, distracts us from the materiality of death, and ultimately interrupts, or ruptures, the process of grieving for those who have died, and for our own deaths, by creating and maintaining ‘…a gap between cultural articulations of mourning and its experiential dynamic’ (Tanner, 2006, p.215). That is, metaphors of death imply a representational presence that denies the totality of embodied absence, thus preventing or inhibiting the labour of mourning for either self or other, by denying the irrevocable nature of radical loss. Thus the use of death as metaphor serves to perpetuate ‘…the fiction of invulnerability…’ (Tanner, 2006, p.4), a fiction that disguises the real fragility of embodied existence.

In the Introduction to The Practice of Goodness the narrator reveals that her protagonist, Angelica, has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. After the initial shock of this diagnosis subsided, Angelica: ‘…decided it was time to make some kind of accounting, to make sense of the experience she called her life while she still had the chance’ (Wilson, 2007, p.4). Angelica’s method of accomplishing her goal is through writing. Language is the cornerstone of her accounting. ‘Before the imminence of death, language rushes forth…’ observes Foucault. (1977, p.54), and Angelica calls up language like a dark art, invites its ‘rushing forth’, as if it might postpone the advance of death’s incomprehensible mysteries by providing a living framework, an elaborate construct within which she might find protection. She thinks, magically, that she will not die before her task is completed:

She won’t consider dying until it’s written. It’s her last big job… A bargain has been struck; with what or whom she does not know. She feels the potency of the agreement throughout her being, beating fierce and vital as life itself. (Wilson, 2007, p.120).
Like ‘…the condemned writer to whom God grants, at the precise instant of his execution, another year of life to complete the work he had begun’ (Foucault, 1977, p.56), Angelica writes both to finish her autobiographical confession and to magically stave off her death. She does this as if death, like God, is an entity that can be charmed by language and persuaded by her conscientious industry into sparing her life. She has come to hopefully believe, (along with Scheherazade, who kept her life by amusing a murderous sultan with her fabulous tales), that ‘Writing so as not to die…is a task undoubtedly as old as the world. The most fateful decisions are inevitably suspended during the course of a story’ (Foucault, 1977, p.53). Storytelling might well postpone death for as long as the executioner remains absorbed in the narrative. In this concrete sense, language may temporarily hold sway over death that comes to us through human agency. However, this is a concrete, rather than a metaphorical, circumstance.

The fact of Angelica’s impending death, the impossibility of knowing its form and substance, is reflected back at her as she writes. Writing will bring her no closer to knowing death’s unknowable nature: the most that can be said is: ‘Behold my death which I will never see’ (Cixous, 1998, p.65). As Furman (2007) observes: ‘The writer of thanatography is constantly confronted with ‘…language’s inability, even in the metonymic elongation, to account for a time beyond the limited temporality of its own presence.’

However, a literary metaphor conflates the actual death she faces with a death that she allegedly experiences each time she sits down to write: ‘As soon as a fact is narrated…disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his [sic] own death, writing begins’ (Barthes, 1977, p.142). That is, another voice (or voices) is created with which to compose the text: the person of the author is necessarily silenced. This necessary silencing is described as lethal: ‘…the author enters into his own death…’ as the voice of the narrator is born. Barthes employs the metaphor for dramatic effect in his argument for the death of the author. In non-metaphorical terms, this is an argument for the cult of the god-like authority of the author to be abandoned, and to be replaced with the understanding that: ‘The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture’ (ibid, p.146). That is,
texts are never solely the work of one individual thinking and writing in isolation from everything that has gone before.

However, the argument fails to acknowledge that while a text is inevitably created from innumerable other texts, each gathering together of texts is enacted by an individual voice, and given unique form by the choices and perceptions of that voice. That is, the author re-arranges the ‘tissue of quotations’ in her own narrative voice, producing an individual work from the cultural materials available to her. In using the metaphor of death, Barthes equates both the temporary silencing of the authorial voice, and the constant exchange of multiple voices engaged in the production of a text with the finality of death. The insistence on the death of the author indicates a denial of alterity within the self: a violence is enacted that is contemptuous of ‘…the intrinsic alterity of the human self…’ (Zylinska, 2005, p.10). ‘Who is speaking thus?’ Barthes asks, and answers ‘We shall never know, for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin’ (1977, p.142). The word destruction is an alarming choice and makes a nonsense of the argument, for if every voice, every point of origin was in fact destroyed, there would be no surviving tissue of quotations in the world comprehensible enough to enable the ongoing construction and production of texts.

In fact, it would seem that what is required to produce a text has nothing to do with death and the destruction of voice, from which finalities nothing more is available or accessible, but is rather a process of re-incarnation, of giving new life, of re-assembling that which is never entirely lost to life in the first place.

Foucault also engages with this metaphorical equation: ‘If [writing] has anything to do with an author, it is according to a mode of death, silence, and the very disappearance of one who writes’ (1989, p.115), he claims. The state of death may be a silent one, however silence is not inevitably death, and silence can be broken. Likewise, the disappearance of the author need not be terminal, and disappearance from the text is not disappearance from life. To use the metaphor in such a way is to imply that our knowledge of death can inform our understanding of the process of writing. The immediate difficulty with this implication is that we have no knowledge of death, other
than that it is a state from which no one has been known to return, unlike the silent or disappeared author who, as long as she is mortal, may keep her options open.

In Barthes’s use of the metaphor, ‘…the voice loses its origin…’ (1977, p.142) implies, along with the author’s entry into death, a finality from which there can be no return. However, while Barthes may be correct in claiming that the author is not the same ‘I’ as the narrator, and is indeed silenced when writing begins, where his metaphor again fails is in the association of that exchange of voice and movement away from its origins with the radical finality that is death. The metaphor that is intended to widen our understanding of the process of writing in fact brings us to a complete linguistic standstill. The metaphor successfully ‘…replaces the articulation of death with the spatial deferral of absence’ (Tanner, 2006, p.214). That is, though the author is merely absent, the metaphor denotes her as dead; this metaphoric claim serves to occlude the finality of death, and re-present it as merely absence. Absence does not imply the finality of death; absence implies the possibility of presence in some other time and place. What is denied articulation in this use of the metaphor is the radical absence that is death.

Death is the limit of language. There is nothing in life that corresponds to its radical entirety: ‘How can a state that exceeds language and cognition reach beyond itself? In fact, death may be the terminal point on metaphor’s chain of associations’ (Gilbert, 2007). Common usage of the metaphor both assumes and implies common knowledge of the state of death, of what death is. The metaphor articulates the pretence, the illusion, that death is contained and containable within our range of knowledge.

The metaphor initially appears to function because it is thoroughly familiar, to the point where we do not look deeply into the associations it pretends, or their influence on our understandings of death. Language pretends to make death accessible. The implication concealed in the metaphor is that death is available for understanding. This metaphor, in conferring false meaning through its implication that death is, or, as in a simile, is like something other than itself, denies the embodied truth of total loss, loss of the beloved or of the self. Language is therefore employed in the construction of “truth,” the “truth” in this instance being that we can and do know what we can’t and don’t.
Barthes infers the knowability of death in his use of the metaphor, denying that its nature is closed to us, and so conferring false meaning on that state. Metaphor is an imaginative projection of the truth, however if the truth cannot be known, if the truth is beyond human knowledge, there can be no metaphor.

Barthes’s metaphor would therefore seem untenable: ‘Can death ever serve as a metaphor?’ Gilbert (2007) asks. Death is not an interruption in the production of a manuscript. One does not return from death to speak again in the authorial voice when the narrative voice is laid aside. When faced with its inevitability, one comes to understand that nothing is like death, nothing can be said to be death. As Cixous observes: ‘We can’t believe in death in advance, it remains inadmissible’ (1998, p.71). That is, we cannot imagine our non-existence: the act of imagining in itself is a living act: we are unable to imagine ourselves unable to imagine. For example, in The Practice of Goodness there is a scene in which Angelica attempts to imagine the death of her body: ‘She stared at her hands and imagined them still and without purpose. She imagined her feet without her in them to direct their daily course…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.48). The only way she is able to imagine this death is to disassociate herself from her body parts and view them as distinct from her. Angelica, the imaginer, must remain alive and present in order to achieve this: ‘Our own death is indeed quite unimaginable, and whenever we make the attempt to imagine it we…really survive as spectators…’ (Freud, 1952, p.304). In the same way that the mind baulks at the imagining of infinity, it baulks as well at the imagining of our death: death remains inadmissible.

Dwelling as we do in the midst of the inadmissibility of death, which is dwelling in life, we cannot know our death. We cannot experience what it is to be dead as we can experience what it is to be afraid, joyful, cold, contented, sick, young: in short, alive. We cannot know ourselves dead: ‘…behold my death which I will never see. Our death, ours, the instant of our life which we cannot appropriate. Our death which strips us of our death’ (Cixous, 1998, p.65).

Metaphor is powerful and has power over us: ‘Anything that we rely on constantly, unconsciously and automatically is so much a part of us that it cannot be easily resisted, in large measure because it is barely even noticed’ (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p.63). The vernacular use of death as metaphor and simile is so prevalent as to be hardly
noticeable, for example: I feel like death warmed up; That show is dead in the water; If I tell you, you’ll die or I’ll have to kill you; Showing him that means instant death; You’re dead when I catch you; I’m scared to death; Death is a journey; Death is the Big Sleep and so on. These ways of remarking on death are conventional if inaccurate: one may awaken from a big sleep, one ends a journey, returns home, starts a new life at one’s destination. I argue that it is the very pervasiveness of this metaphoric inaccuracy that indicates the degree to which Western culture denies the reality of our helpless ignorance of that state, and its finality.

‘Would it not be better to give death the place in reality and in our thoughts which is its due…’ asks Freud (1985, p.89). Giving death its due would, it can be argued, dramatically alter our language: death could no longer be employed as a metaphor, alternatives would have to be sought, alternatives that might introduce a vision of an entirely different nature. For example, Barthes might have used a metaphor of change or birth, both of which, it could be argued, would make a more viable association with the exchange of voices he seeks to describe than does death. The author need not die in order to disrupt the cult of stardom. The author might assume anonymity instead, relinquishing all status, acknowledging multiplicity. “‘What matter who’s speaking, someone said, what matters who’s speaking?’” (Beckett, cited in Foucault, 1977, p.115).

The death metaphor is an integral part of our conventional communication with ourselves and with each other and is employed to confer meaning on various life events. ‘Metaphor is an integral part of our ordinary thought and language’ Lakoff & Turner (1989, p.11) observe. However, the reality is that whether or not death has meaning, and what that meaning is, remains a mystery that cannot be definitively solved. Butler observes that ‘…the regime of truth offers a framework for the scene of recognition…offering available norms for the act of recognition itself’ (Butler, 2003, p.18). ‘…[I]t is in relation to this framework that recognition takes place…’ she continues. That is, recognition of the nature and qualities of death in Western culture generally takes place within a framework or frameworks wherein death’s finality is normalised by the prevalent use of the metaphor that casts death as merely absence, or the threshold to another life. The metaphor is created from an imagination that cannot
contain death, that is defeated by the impossibility of conceiving annihilation: ‘…for all the distance individuals and entire cultures endeavour to put between themselves and death, its power over the imagination never weakens’ Gilbert (2007) observes. In order to assist us in denying death’s magnitude and inevitability we refer, or are referred to, a manageable caricature of it in the everyday course of our lives through metaphor, simile and personification. Denied yet ever-present: ‘its power never weakens,’ it is a component of the ordinary and as such, is an integral part of the regimes of truth within which we are obliged to determine our beliefs and understandings. Contesting these regimes may be fraught with danger: ‘To call into question a regime of truth, where that regime of truth governs subjectification, is to call into question the truth of myself, indeed my ability to tell the truth about myself, to give an account of myself’ (Butler, 2003, p.19).

In The Practice of Goodness, for example, Angelica attempts to deal with the mysteries of illness and death initially without help. ‘There was something shameful in her plight, the vulnerability she felt, the sense of defeat, the dull, red rage, and she wanted no witnesses’ (Wilson, 2007, p.27). It is common in Western culture for the sick, dying and dead to be regarded with pity, as if they have succumbed to a fate that the rest of us have thus far avoided and might continue to avoid if we are responsible and respectable enough to take good care of ourselves. To die, then, is to fail in some way, particularly if one should die prematurely. We speak, for example, of losing our battle with illness, relinquishing our hold on life, or hanging on like grim death. Death is frequently characterised as the Grim Reaper, an unnerving, faceless figure in sooty robes, towards whom one would never willingly move. The vulnerability that brings us face to face with death is interpreted as a form of weakness, rather than as an inevitable outcome for all sentient beings, and one about which nobody ought to feel shame.

There is also the question of how one dies:

Somebody once told Angelica that the frame of mind you are in when you die is of utmost significance. For example [if you] die in the middle of an uncharacteristic rage, it’s the rage that will determine where you end up, and not your previous mildness. It’s harsh, she thinks, for an afterlife to be so unforgiving. (Wilson, 2007, p.28)
These negative popular concepts of mortal illness and death cannot help but influence how Angelica approaches it. She must work her way through the various cultural beliefs about death that are available to a woman in the twenty-first century in order to inform herself about all the possibilities, bearing in mind that these are, from the perspective of a non-believer, culturally constructed regimes of truth and in many cases highly metaphorical, or so one would hope.

As well, Angelica has set about the task of making an account of her life, inspired by her second encounter with terminal illness: ‘Finally she managed to pull herself together. She decided it was time to make some kind of accounting, to make sense of the experience she called her life while she still had the chance’ (Wilson, 2007, p.4). Whatever sense Angelica is able to make of her life will be done within the various regimes of truth in which she has developed her subjectivity. ‘But it also turns out that self-questioning of this sort involves putting oneself at risk, and indeed, imperiling the very possibility of being recognised by others…’ Butler (2003, p.19) observes.

Stepping outside the regimes of truth in which one has conducted one’s life may cause others to look askance: we may no longer find reassuring recognition in the eyes that look back at us. The very fact of impending death can render one unrecognisable to others as one withdraws from previously shared preoccupations into the solitary world of preparation for departure: ‘One of the consequences of her diagnosis was to make everything else in Angelica’s life seem insignificant… Discovering you’ve got a terminal disease can make anybody self-absorbed in the worst possible way…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.3). However, were death more realistically portrayed, I argue, the delineation between life and death might not be so extraordinary, and therefore the distance and alienation between the living and the dying not quite so great.

The use of death as a metaphor can also be understood as an integral part of a construct of denial that is identified as ‘…a spoken or written narrative as a protection against death’ (Foucault, 1977, p.56), which includes the bargain the storyteller strikes in order to save her life. In other words, the metaphor can be seen as part of a linguistic truth game whose purpose is aligned with a more general cultural purpose: to control anxieties about death and mediate the effects such anxieties have on life. Truth games are discourses: ‘related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves’ (Foucault, 1988(a), p.18). That is, the metaphor is involved in creating an
of what death might be, and therefore illusions about life through which we attempt to understand our human condition. By truth game: ‘I mean an ensemble of rules for the production of the truth. There are some games of truth in which truth is a construct… You can have, for example, a game of truth which consists in describing things in such a way…’ (Foucault, 1988, p.16). The construction of truth in this instance, the ‘describing of things in such a way’, is the received wisdom conveyed by the powerful and pervasive metaphor and other figures of speech, that death is not exceptional because it can be likened to something other than itself. The linguistic charm is effective in holding off the reality of death because of its reassuring if untruthful implication, made familiar through constant repetition, that by the metaphor’s very existence the qualities of death can be known. That is, ‘Metaphorical understanding is not a matter of mere word play; it is endemically conceptual in nature. It is indispensable to comprehending and reasoning about concepts like life, death, and time’ (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p.50). For Angelica, the metaphor fails to satisfy her urgent questing for knowledge of her fate. What I must accept, if I am to face my death with any equilibrium, is that I cannot know, because I have abandoned the truth games that have reassured me with their metaphors. I am going to die. And I do not know what that will mean, except perhaps the radical absence of meaning, a circumstance that is unimaginable to me.

It has been suggested by Becker that death anxiety is our most profound source of concern, and that much of our daily behaviour consists of attempts to deny death anxiety: ‘No function of society is more crucial than its strengthening of individual defenses against death anxiety’ (Becker, 1973, p.ix). The metaphor is an integral part of the process of the co-option of language into the task of producing “truths” about death from which a system of belief is disseminated that serves to strengthen our defenses against it. That is, metaphor is used to disseminate the belief that death can be made familiar and our anxiety can be contained. In fact there is no means of alleviating anxiety about death: anxiety is provoked in us by death’s utter mystery and our utter inability to solve it or escape it. This alarming reality is generally viewed by Western culture as unfaceable, and those who dwell on it, morbid. ‘At bottom nobody believes in his [sic] own death…in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own mortality’ (Freud, 1952, p.305). Angelica confirms this Freudian assertion in her
identification with the Quint Buchholz painting in which a tightrope walker steps off a roof while his rope unwinds and leaves him stepping into space, apparently unharmed: ‘She looks at this photograph and she thinks, I will do that. I will let go of my tightrope and I will step off the gables of the construction that is my life and in blind trust, in full faith, walk towards the moon. If she falls she will not care… This is her body. This is her soul. They will not yet be divided’ (Wilson, 2007, p.149).

Metaphor, however, demands truth, otherwise it is meaningless, or worse, misleading and complicit in the disguising rather than the revealing of the nature of things. Metaphor’s task is to enhance and expand our imaginative comprehension, not to obfuscate and deny. ‘…[m]etaphor allows us to understand ourselves and our world in ways that no other mode of thought can’ (Lakoff & Turner, 1989, p.xi), then the unwelcome implications for understanding if the metaphor is based on denial and illusion are many.

Freud points out that in general, attitudes to death are ‘…most contradictory… On the one hand he took death seriously, recognising it as the termination of life…on the other hand he also denied death and reduced it to nothing’ (1985, p.80). The false promise of mastery of death through language reveals a significant Western attitude: life is conducted in the shadow of a false and ambiguous construction of death. Because of a pervasive metaphor that bears no resemblance to the reality, this promise of mastery is part of a truth game in which the literary theories are complicit. The use of death as a metaphor makes banal the immense gravity that necessarily accompanies the radically unfathomable. Language cannot accommodate the radically unfathomable, therefore it seeks to deny it by reducing it to manageable proportions.

The space where language cannot go, the border language may not cross, is profoundly solemn, if it is permitted to be, simply by virtue of its incontestable infinite silence: it is beyond human grasp. It utterly confounds us. In the use of death as a metaphor that solemnity and profundity is denied and the enormity of what awaits us is trivialised, as we collectively conspire to believe we might comprehend the incomprehensible through language. We do not allow the silence beyond words a secular space in which it might dwell in its mysteries, free from the imposition of human meaning, and where
we might sit and dwell there in its presence. The unrelenting intrusion of language into these silent spaces signifies the prevalent Western denial of death’s most serious implications, what Kubler-Ross describes as ‘…our desperate attempt to deny the impending end…’ (1970, p.8). The impending end is entirely absence. There is no longer the slightest possibility of our presence. It is ended.

The metaphorical connections between writing and death are further explored by Foucault, who claims: ‘…we find the link between writing and death manifested in the total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer…’ (1977, p.117). This observation is based on Foucault’s belief that death is a ‘total effacement of individual characteristics,’ which it may well be, though there are many belief systems that would argue otherwise. The point is, we do not know. We cannot know, and it is a statement that can only be made by an individual who holds that particular set of beliefs, who subscribes to that particular game of truth.

In speaking of herself in the third person, the narrator of The Practice of Goodness seeks to distance herself from the events of her life so that she can better understand them. This distancing is familiar to her: as a child enduring rape and brutality she learned to disassociate herself from the events and become a watcher. She replicates this process of watching and recording when she uses the third person in the character of Angelica through whom the author Jennifer may speak. The ‘I’ allows the character to speak for her so that the ‘I’ may be protected from intense feeling. In not feeling, it can be, temporarily, as if these things might not have happened. This is the illusion. In the same way as we deny the finality of death, the author in this instance attempts to deny the reality of her pain. Angelica is Jennifer’s shield both from the experience of the raw impact of intolerable memory and from the experience of revisiting that pain so that she might recount it to her imagined reader. Jennifer’s individual characteristics become Angelica’s and change in the transfer. Some are kept back others are embellished as Angelica becomes a character in her own right. Foucault’s position would suggest that Jennifer ‘dies’ in the writing of this text, in the ‘total effacement of the individual characteristics of the writer.’ However, the same metaphoric failure occurs as in Barthes’s death of the author. It is not self-effacement that takes place, which would be the finality of suicide. The true metaphor is of birth and change,
creation and movement, a multiplicity of voices that allow one another to speak: this is a description of life, not death. ‘I am spacious singing Flesh: onto which is grafted no one knows which I…’ Cixous (1992, p.152) exclaims, in triumphant contrast to the murderous and suicidal metaphors of Foucault and Barthes. The individual characteristics of the writer are far from effaced, rather they act as inspiration. ‘The link between writing and death’(Foucault, 1977, p.117) does not exist as claimed, it can be argued: it is a literary conceit: there is only one link, and it is the link between writing and life, to be found in the ‘spacious, singing Flesh ‘which produces voice after voice after voice. To write is to create: to create is to affirm life. Death is where language as we as living beings know it, ends. In fact, it can be argued that far from a death of any kind, ‘…literature is an endless circulation that opens up and disseminates, defying a totalising closure…an interruption or mediation that endlessly proliferates the story, the work or the text’ (Secomb, 2002, p.158).

The literary metaphor of death speaks to us most strongly not of the connection of death with writing, but rather is revelatory about how we have learned to live with death. In contemporary Western life, death is generally ‘…viewed as taboo, discussion of it regarded as morbid’ (Kubler Ross, 1970, p.6). The very existence of the obfuscating comparison of literary death to actual death, which I have argued is in no way a viable metaphor, reveals this repression and obsession. Our knowledge of our death is shrouded in mystery and this mystery is veiled thick with denial. Life is lived in the daily denial of the enormity of our endings, and this is reflected in our language with the use of death as metaphor, particularly as a metaphor for change. While death certainly is change, change is not death. It is difficult to imagine any human change that does not have the potential to be reversed, however difficult or improbable: such is not the case for death. This cultural inclination to deny the magnitude of death is expressed by Walter Benjamin thus: ‘Today people live in rooms that have never been touched by death, dry dwellers of eternity…’ (1973, p.93). That is, in Benjamin’s view denial of death gives rise to aridity in life. The phrase: ‘dry dwellers of eternity’ is evocative of a feeling-less, death-denying, therefore eternal life. A false immortality: ‘Our immortality is: not-believing-in-death. This doesn’t stop us from trembling,’ Cixous (1998, p.71) observes. Eternal life is not the avoidance of death, she seems to be saying, it is the refusal to believe in it.
Feelings are the water of life, without their lakes and rivers and streams and oceans we dwell in a dry and therefore barren land. What we desire to escape in our denial of death are the overwhelming feelings that accompany its acknowledgement. ‘We don’t believe in death,’ Cixous continues. ‘We never stop thinking about death’ (1998, p.71).

This awe-full conflict cannot be maintained without severe repression of feeling: we are obsessed with what we strive to deny: there must eventually be rupture, terrible spillage, the upheavals of death denied erupting in who-knows-what variations of bloodshed, literal and metaphorical. As Cixous points out, that which we repress necessarily becomes our obsession, though we struggle to maintain control over it and to keep it hidden even from ourselves. The energies required to hold this aporia in place suck the liquid of life from us, leaving us dried up, ‘the dry dwellers’, ready for combustion. Life, Benjamin seems to be asserting, never attains the fullness of which it is capable when we deny its ending and our feelings about this ending.

In refusing heartfelt knowledge of death’s absolute finality, in dwelling in our lonely rooms untouched by death, we are condemned to the incompleteness of a sentimental life, for it is sentimentality (in the sense of the mawkish, the shallow) that allows us to convince ourselves that death is at all manageable through language. Tanner describes the sympathy cards she received on the death of her father as the: ‘…sentimental articulations of loss in American culture…’ (2006, p.214), comprised as they were of assurances that she and her father would meet again in heaven, that he would be always watching over her, that death is only a ‘going away.’ Language can only grant us a glimpse of the totality of our loss, I argue. The depth of loss we can know only in our bodies, and the experience of the loss of the body of the beloved. Death, I argue, is most honestly regarded without the embrocation of metaphor.

The tears that are wept as one confronts the finality of one’s death bring welcome relief from the harsh pain of aridity. In The Practice of Goodness, Angelica writes of the ‘…frightening aridity...’ that took her over soon after learning of her terminal illness. ‘She hadn’t anticipated this deathly dryness, this burning up, this slow progression towards grey ash’ (Wilson, 2007, p.16). However, as Angelica slowly begins to accept her situation, her body undergoes a change:
Something shifted. She began to cry. At the same time her fevers broke and she woke each night soaked with sweat... She would burn or she would drown, it seemed, like the country she lived in. But in the deserts of her country, what beauty flowered after the drenching downpours, for just a brief, intense time? (ibid, p.78)

The body and mind relinquish their terrible discipline of denial, and surrender to the relief of realistic and watery grief: the dry spell is over, death is no longer denied. The emotion evoked by the full truth of our incomparable mortality, (as opposed to the sentimental that would have us see it only in part, and capable of metaphoric appropriation), is accompanied by the healing balm of tears. ‘Who would have believed that we have so many tears?’ Cixous asks, (1998, p.42). ‘In the deserts of the heart, let the healing fountains start,’ Angelica quotes from W.H. Auden (2008), as she travels through a drought stricken landscape, a comment on her struggle to weep for her own death as much as on the deathly state of her country and its animals (Wilson, 2007, p.197). ‘...[W]e need to almost die. We need to mourn for ourselves. And yet to stay alive.’ Cixous continues, (ibid, p.42), implying, along with Benjamin, that a richly lived life demands a truthful confrontation with the implacable finality of our death.

The idea of coming to terms with all the implications of our death during our living is present in Western history from antiquity. The Stoic Seneca taught his followers the importance of ‘making ready’ for death. ‘Without anxiety, then, I’m making ready for the day when the tricks and disguises will be put away, and I shall come to a verdict on myself...’ (1985, p.71). This making ready involved a nightly assessment of one’s actions throughout the past day, as if one might die unexpectedly in the night: a continual awareness of the precariousness of life so that one might not leave it unprepared, or with unsettled matters left behind one. A sense of fullness, of accomplishment was the recommended state of mind, without discriminating between good or difficult events: the goal was to live fully everything life presented: ‘Whoever has said: “I have lived,” receives a windfall every day he gets up in the morning’ (ibid, p.59). That is, to fall to sleep with these words is to take leave of one’s life every night as if one may not wake again, for ‘These are the conditions of our existence that we cannot change’ (ibid, p.199). The unchangeable condition of existence is that we may leave it at any moment and what we encounter every moment is always uncertain.
Death is the place where a transformation of such magnitude occurs that there can be no words with which to adequately describe it. Death has no language that the living can know. It is the ‘Ultima latet’ – contrary to all the instants of my life, which are spread out between my birth and my death and which can be recalled and anticipated’ (Levinas, 1969, p.234). There is no recall of death, and there is no anticipation of it based on knowledge. Language is circumscribed by death. This becomes starkly apparent as one faces one’s own death: it is a vain conceit to imagine that we have the knowledge to say of anything, *it is like death*. In the sense that no knowledge can be had of it, death has the nothingness of the entirely unknown. Everything alive has the potential to be discovered, uncovered, revealed: to become known. Which is not the same as to say death *is* nothingness, for this we cannot know.

‘…[P]eople accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history…this so-called evidence can be criticised and destroyed’ (Foucault, cited in Martin et al 1988, p.10). On the strength of this statement I dare to suggest that if the metaphors of birth and change are used to explore the processes of language and writing instead of those of death, quite another vision is revealed to us, our imaginations are stimulated to envisage a cornucopia rather than a coffin. That is, instead of the vision of limitation, which death inevitably must bring as none of us return from it to this world, the vision is of boundless abundance. To accept the finality of death is a necessary task if we are to fully live. Such dire acceptance of mortality is perhaps not required of the author as she temporarily relinquishes her voice to that of her narrator. It is not necessary to imagine that one must die in order for the other to live: an imagined binary capitulation is unnecessary. Were these metaphors to remain within the confines of literary theory there may not be significant consequences, however the concepts of sovereignty, the truth games that such metaphors both create and nurture, extend themselves into every cranny of our existence.

‘…[O]ur infinite sadness must shy away from everything in mourning that would turn towards nothingness…’ Derrida writes, (1999, p.6). Life cannot easily tolerate the concept of nothingness. Infinite sadness is a property of life, known by the living. One cannot know death through witnessing the death of another. One can only know loss and the labour of mourning, both of which belong to life. There is nothing in life with which to make comparison with the nothingness that is implied by death’s supreme and
silent mystery. The living must finally turn away and let the dead bury the dead. To abandon metaphors of death is to strip death of all imposed meaning and to leave it purified, and stark. ‘The end is so immense, it is its own poetry. It requires little rhetoric. Just state it plainly’ (Roth, 2007, p.152). That is, we must say with absolute honesty the only thing we can ever say, which is: ‘I do not know’.

The use of death as a metaphor has not been helpful to me in my struggle to understand what my death will be. Perhaps its purpose is to ameliorate the grief of those who are still living, rather than to ease the fears and apprehensions of the dying. The meaning of death, I argue, is uncertainty and mystery; death is the unimaginable: if, that is, uncertainty and mystery can be understood as meanings, and perhaps this is the question.

In conclusion: ‘I write this as a dying woman, and I haven’t yet discovered my real name… I’ve found no answer to my question why, but perhaps the point has been the asking’ (Wilson, 2007, p.231).
On Death

Part Two

The Dying of Tony Soprano: Das Unheimliche and the Abject in the Bardo of Becoming

Death is a menace that approaches me as a mystery; its secrecy determines it – it approaches without being able to be assumed, such that the time that separates me from my death dwindles and dwindles without end, involves a sort of last interval which my consciousness cannot traverse, and where a leap will somehow be produced from death to me.

Emmanuel Levinas

In this section I discuss a popular television series representation not of death, but of the process of dying, in contrast to the previous argument on literary metaphors of death. I have chosen an example from popular culture so as not to confine the discussion to the exclusive realms of literary theory. In keeping with the overall objectives of the thesis, I continue to theorise the themes of a story, in this instance, a narrative centred around a fictional account of the process of dying that incorporates image and music, as well as language. I suggest that the Freudian concept of Das Unheimliche (The Uncanny), and Julia Kristeva’s theories of the Abject, serve to describe and define some aspects of the experience of dying, aspects that are powerfully portrayed by the character of Tony, in The Sopranos (Chase, 2006). The abject is in this sense: ‘The place…where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject…[must be] deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self’ (Creed, cited in Pentony, 1996). While the abject most confrontingly manifests itself in the processes of death and dying, it is also present in the many other border transgressions that threaten the self in life, both psychologically and physically, as will become apparent throughout this section. I suggest as well that the abject corresponds to ‘…the void toward which and from which we speak…’ (Foucault, 1977, p.53) that is, it is the cradle of language and narrative, and finally, authenticity.

The abject and the uncanny contest the ameliorating portrayals of death constructed by figurative language in that they are sites of discomfort, transgression, disturbance, chaos and the unknown, sites that figurative language seeks to conceal. Even when
death is portrayed negatively, what is still absent in the portrayal is its essential and uncontrollable unknowability. In this sense, that is, in the recognition of the impossibility of imposing category and order in the matter of dying and death, the abject and the uncanny present more truthful, or more fully explored possibilities than do the metaphors that serve to deny death’s radical unknowability. In this denial, the metaphors imply that death is containable in belief, or faith, through language. The experience of dying is universal while simultaneously singular: this in itself is an abject and uncanny condition, as one undergoes an unavoidable common process in one’s own unique and singularly subjective manner. Figurative language seeks to deny this mysterious paradox by attempting to remove its mystery. The paradox is echoed in the lived life, as the singular subject uniquely experiences life events that are universal. In this sense, we constantly inhabit the space of the abject and the uncanny, inevitably positioned there by our individuality in the midst of our commonality. My dying cannot be experienced by another, though another might recognise my descriptions of the event with varying degrees of empathy.

The example of The Sopranos is particularly relevant as one in which the writers have not attempted to deny or repress the disturbing presence of both the abject and the uncanny in their representation of Tony’s dying. Repression is inevitable in the appropriation of death as a consoling metaphor that perpetuates the abject-free ‘…fiction of invulnerability…’ (Tanner, 2006, p.4). The disturbing aspects of dying and death that make this fiction all too clear are generally occluded by the use of figurative language, in what Tanner identifies as ‘…a cultural injunction to rename and recast embodied loss within forms of language that render it symbolic’ (2006, p.138). Two of the central themes of the memoir The Practice of Goodness are those of dying and death. The abject is also present in the relationship between Angelica and her terrifying mother; in the rape and mistreatment of Angelica by her stepfather, and it is a constant in Tony Soprano’s life through his own actions, and the actions of those around him.

Tony Soprano is the godfather of a fictional crime family, the Di Meos from New Jersey, in the American television series, The Sopranos. He is a complex character, capable of chilling emotional detachment and intense love: a confident braggart riddled
with deeply embedded insecurities that drive him to weekly consultations with a psychiatrist in an effort to cure his panic attacks and make sense of his turbulent childhood. Like Coriolanus, he is: ‘Notoriously the victim of his dominating and devouring mother…an overgrown child’ (Bloom, 1998, p. 578). Tony had problematic and disturbed relations with his now dead mother, Livia, the “Medea of Bloomfield Street,” who, together with his Uncle Junior, once took out a contract on Tony’s life. Tony is unable to accept that these emotionally significant figures actively sought his death and holds himself responsible for disappointing and provoking them. The rage that this psychological aporia produces in him is generally vented on luckless business associates and members of his mob family who cross him. Uncle Junior finally does shoot Tony, but it is accidental, when Junior is of unsound mind and takes Tony for an ancient enemy.

Death and dying are separated by the finality of death itself, dying is the province of the living. Angelica is able to consider the experience of dying because of the nature of her illness. While it is terminal it is also in a stage of indolence that offers her time to prepare herself for her death; a sort of gestatory period: preparation for the birth of the entirely unknown. In ‘…recording life from the point of view of death…’ (Hillman, 1989, p.77), the narrator describes Angelica experiencing her dying, the experience of living after being told she has a terminal illness: ‘After receiving this dismal news, Angelica went home to consider her future…It was a bad time. She felt overwhelmed by circumstances of such magnitude that her mind rebelled against admitting them’ (Wilson, 2007, p.2). During this period Angelica searches for information about death and dying in scholarly, medical, religious and culturally popular genres. She has, the narrator reveals, ‘…turned to many and varied sources. She’s learnt a great deal and kept herself amused. But none of her learning, while sustaining her through this difficult part of her life, has touched the emotional magnitude of the mystery of her approaching death’ (Wilson, 2007, p.148).

In the intense experience of considering my own death from cancer as an approaching reality, as well as death as the inevitable but distant outcome of embodiment, I avidly pursued all manner of representations of death and dying. The portrayal of the dying of Tony Soprano spoke to me as no other contemporary television representation has, not
least because of its unflinching journey into the abject and uncanny aspects of the near-death experience that will be noted in more detail later in this section. Metaphor serves to conceal the generally unpalatable aspects of dying and death, as Laura Tanner points out in her essay on the television series Six Feet Under, a series built around the fictional lives of funeral directors and their clients. Unlike The Sopranos, Tanner argues that this series works to conceal the untidy aspects of dying and death:

…images of the dead in contemporary American mass culture often direct our attention to death by engaging representational processes that obscure the embodied dynamics of loss in the very process of depicting the lost body (2006, p. 211).

That is, corpses are beautified to create the impression of life; the physical abjection of decay, dying, and death is professionally cleaned up so as to be more easily denied by the living; the lost body is altered to resemble the living body as closely as possible. The corpse is tidied, because: ‘Its untidiness violates not only biological but also normative boundaries’ (Waskul, van der Riet, 2002). Dying and death, while the inevitable outcome of every life, are not considered ‘normal’ in the sense that the non-professional is generally unfamiliar with the process of material degeneration that so profoundly violates cultural expectations of ‘normal’ bodies and physical beauty. A dying cancer patient poignantly expressed the experience thus:

…it’s not the pain.  
It’s more the rotting.  
It sounds revolting.  
Rotting,  
Ulceration,  
Suppuration.  
Being aware of your body failing in these ways.  
Having an awareness  
While I am dying  
And dying in a state  
Where my body is absolutely revolting.  
I mean, the ultimate bad death.  
(Waskul, van de Riet, 2002).

Dying is an experience from which we may return if the process is aborted and is therefore amenable to our powers of observation, description and the use of metaphor in a way that I have argued death is not. It is a process that can be recorded by those
who experience it: ‘This is how my life ended,’ wrote Harold Brodkey after being diagnosed with AIDS, ‘And my dying began’ (1996, p.4). The Practice of Goodness is also an example of this genre of thanatography in which the memoir is both an account of the lived life and a record of the experience of dying.

While death is language’s limit, as I have argued in the previous section, dying is its medium: ‘…it is quite likely that the approach of death – its sovereign gesture, its prominence within human memory – hollows out in the present and in existence the void toward which and from which we speak’ (Foucault, 1977, p.53). That is, it is from within the constant and inescapably abject presence of death, whether it is in our consciousness or not, that we construct the narratives of our lives. We are all, and always, engaged in the process of dying: “‘The moment I’m born I’m old enough to die,” she quoted’ (Wilson, 2007, p.2), and this daily reality is merely highlighted at times of grave illness and accident. ‘Everyone’s dying. It’s just that when you discover you’ve got a terminal illness, the notion of dying gets right in your face’ (ibid, p.113).

Yet in spite of the commonality of the experience and its inevitability: ‘…no instinct we possess is ready for a belief in death,’ Freud claims (1952, p.765). It can be argued that it is not a question of our lack of instinct, but rather that fear and denial powerfully repress our instinctive understanding that we are dying as soon as we are born. While we are eased into many other rites of passage through information, advice and folk wisdom, dying and death are generally conspicuously absent from serious common acknowledgement in Western society.

As Angelica discovered, there is little in popular culture that offers genuine insight into, or preparation for, our dying. This is in keeping with Freud’s observation that while ‘…death was natural, undeniable and unavoidable… In reality… we were accustomed to behave as if it were otherwise. We displayed an unmistakable tendency to “shelve” death’ (1952, p.761). What we “shelve” is necessarily absent from popular cultural representation in any meaningful way. That is, while dramatic death is ever present in our cultural images, it is frequently trivialised by its constant occurrence (in itself an indication of cultural confusion and obsession), and the manner in which the viewer is distanced from the event by the unreality of the depictions of the dead or dying body. Death is also represented as having little deep emotional impact on witnesses and survivors, who recover remarkably swiftly from their traumatic
encounters with radical loss. Images of fallen bodies in television and film generally bear little relation to the actual experiences of death and dying most of us can expect to undergo. Metaphors of death, such as going on a journey, having a long sleep or rest, imply, as discussed in the earlier section, a lack of finality and a possibility of return that is the antithesis of death, thus eliding the radical distinction between the living and the dead. Death, and the profound grief that it provokes, are rarely satisfactorily culturally articulated, instead its representations are engaged in the process of ‘…extending a dynamic of compensation circulating throughout the culture…’ (Tanner, 2006, p.214). When face-to-face with my own mortality, I became dissatisfied with these cultural trivialisations and their spiritual counterparts: various religious prescriptives for life after death. I searched for something that felt more authentic. Attending the funeral of a close friend, I struggled with the profound confusion aroused in me by the sight of his sanitised body dressed in his favourite Hawaiian shirt: he was not there, but everything contrived to convince me that he was. I touched his hand: it was cold and waxy. Is this what will happen to me? I wondered. Someone will put lipstick on my cold dead lips, and dress me in my best frock?

While “shelving” death as if it is too distant or too difficult to contemplate, we might also go to great and conscious lengths to actively postpone and avoid it, for ourselves and those we cannot bear to imagine losing. This indicates that our shelving attempts are largely unsuccessful. Thus, in its denial, death exerts tremendous influence over life: ‘…the repressed…is certainly not sexuality, not criminality, not brutality…the repressed is death’ (Hillman, 1989, p.262). That which is denied and repressed exerts a control that is beyond our measure; by virtue of its secret nature it becomes: ‘The dread of death, which dominates us oftener than we know…’ (Freud, 1952, p.765).

Freud goes on to observe that ‘…at bottom no one believes in his own death…’ (p.761), and that this position of disbelief inevitably detracts from the quality of our lives and our ability to fully experience them: ‘Life is impoverished, it loses interest, when the highest stake in the game of living, life itself, may not be risked’ (p.762). This observation can be understood as referring to: a general reluctance to engage in action that might risk life; a denial of the inevitable risks involved in almost everything we do because of our vulnerability as embodied beings; and conversely, as a high degree of
risk-taking undertaken in denial of the possible deathly consequences. It is a rare event when a human being in full consciousness of what she is doing, chooses an action that may result in the loss of her life. In refusing chemotherapy Angelica may be doing just this: certainly that is the opinion of her oncologist who regards her decision as reckless rather than heroic. For Angelica, it is a question of quality rather than quantity of life: having experienced the ravages of treatment for an earlier cancer, she is disinclined to attain longevity through chemically induced suffering that makes the life she has seem utterly miserable.

However, Freud’s observation would imply that it is only in such consciousness of the risk of death that life can be fully lived. It is reasonable to infer that life is full of deadly risks that we encounter every day: Freud’s point being that we do not admit this precarious reality, considering ourselves safe and our death unimaginable, and so we partake of the sedation of denial that results in the impoverishment of our lives. Angelica’s shock upon hearing the diagnosis of her terminal illness is in no way reduced by the fact that she’d already been through the same process when diagnosed with an earlier bout of cancer: ‘How often had she heard…that clichéd admonishment: Don’t take anything for granted! And how frequently she’d smiled and ignored it. Even that first encounter with cancer hadn’t made her sit up and take sufficient notice. She’d needed a beating about the head with a piece of two-by-four ’ (Wilson, 2007, p.14). Having fully recovered from her first brush with death, she proceeded to “shelve” the subject until it was forced upon her again, demonstrating how difficult it can be to admit the precarious nature of life, even when one has come face-to-face with proof.

What is most conspicuously absent from popular cultural representations of our dying and death is a sense of authenticity, a sense that a particular enactment by writers and actors might be close to the mark. What causes this absence of the authentic is generally the manner in which the emotions surrounding the event are written and portrayed: whether they are believable or unbelievable, profound or shallow. In The New Yorker magazine, critic David Remnick described The Sopranos as ‘…the richest achievement in the history of television’ (2007) because, in part, of the depth of characterisation of both major and minor players that is at the heart of the series. In an article titled: The Sopranos: every inch a Shakespearean drama, Ben Macintyre of The
London Times describes Tony Soprano as ‘…impossible to like but also hard not to love, conflicted and elemental and awe-inspiring: Coriolanus with a knuckle-duster and a paunch’ (2007) In keeping with their acknowledged talents, the writers of The Sopranos created an emotionally resonant scenario of the state we might imagine ourselves entering if we were to linger comatose, as does Tony after being shot by his uncle. That is, in the state between life and death which is: ‘…a sort of last interval which my consciousness cannot transverse, and where a leap will somehow be produced from death to me’ (Levinas, 1969, p.235).

While we can know nothing of how our death will be: ‘…its secrecy determines it…’ (ibid, p.235), we can imagine our emotions should we find ourselves unexpectedly alone in a place that is at once alien and familiar, with none of the usual anchors and buffers that protect us from strangeness, and no clear idea of how we got there or why. Such an experience can be described as Unheimliche, uncanny. ‘The uncanny,’ Freud writes, ‘is undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror…’ (Freud, 2007). However, the distinguishing feature of the Unheimliche is that it is always to do with the familiar that is in some way distorted, so that it appears simultaneously known and unknown, thus provoking deep anxiety. ‘…[T]he uncanny,’ Freud continues, ‘is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is old and long familiar’ (ibid). ‘I was illogical, fevered, but my mind still moved as if it was a logical mind...’ wrote Brodkey (1996, p.7), of his experience of critical illness, and Wilson’s narrator notes similar sensations when the protagonist is in the grip of fever: ‘Angelica roams through these events as she lies in the fiery North Coast heat: her memory, cut loose from ordinary constraints by fever, leaps all over the place without her consent’ (2007, p.152). Brodkey and Angelica are enduring the uncanny sensations of both fever and their knowledge of their dying: the ‘logical mind’ presenting them with images of their lives, distorted but ‘old and long familiar.’ Thus Angelica relives her experiences in Sweden as vividly as if she were there: ‘Julia and Louis see her prostrate on the couch but as far as Angelica’s concerned she’s in a house in Helsingborg, it’s Christmas, and there are candelabra alight in every window and a fir tree that must surely collapse from the weight of its decorations’ (Wilson, 2007, p.165). However Angelica is not there, she is bedridden at the other side of the world. Fevered memory confuses her: like the intense experience of flashbacks when the memory of events is so powerful as to temporarily erase all connection with the present. Angelica
is experiencing how ‘…the fevered cresting memory pulls me back in…’ (Brodkey, 1996, p.10). The images are re-enactments: ‘There is something uncanny about re-enactments…they have a feeling of involuntariness…they are encoded in the form of vivid sensations and images…’ (Herman, 1992, p.39). One is simultaneously present and absent in such states; the images they present are familiar and unfamiliar, that is, they are unheimliche.

A similarly disturbing encounter between the known and the unknown occurs in the complex realm of the abject. Everything to do with dying and death is necessarily relegated to the abject: it is the place where meaning as understood in life is revealed as untenable; where all familiar borders cease to have significance: ‘The abject is that which is not knowable by the subject …an encroachment and defiler of borders, barriers…’ (MacCormack, 2007). In the living and dying of Tony Soprano, the abject appears in its various guises from his childhood, throughout his blood-soaked working life, and perhaps most intensely, in his experience of dying. Death is not knowable by the subject: in our progress towards it we are separated from who we know ourselves to be, and how we know ourselves to be. The space of dying is the space where the self is threatened with irreversible loss and total abandonment. In our dying we stand ‘[o]n the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it annihilates me’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.2). This reality is in fact our daily reality; we live daily life poised on the edge of non-existence, a concept so overwhelming that it is generally unacknowledged. However, when dying becomes starkly inevitable, as it does for Brodkey and Angelica, the unimaginable becomes the inescapable, inscribed on the body, perhaps before the mind believes it. The abject offers the site wherein the concept of annihilation, at least in the sense of the ending of the living body, which is the one certainty, can be admitted.

‘It is necessary to sail the seas, it is not necessary to live’ (1952, p.762). Here Freud quotes the motto of the Hanseatic League as an example of an attitude we might cultivate towards life and death: we are advised not to die having spent our lives turning away from risk and the knowledge it brings, because of our fear of death. The abject is the living terrain upon which these risks can be undertaken, a terrain we enter in our experience of dying-while-we-live. The abject is the place where the borders
between the falsely polarised states of life and death cease to seem clear cut: ‘The abject is above all ambiguity because abjection itself is a composite of judgement and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.10). If our dying begins at the moment of birth, then the abject is always with us; Kristeva’s description of abjection is in this instance also, paradoxically, a description of the complexities of life, underscoring the ambiguous nature of both.

This space of the uncanny and the abject, this space of dying, is, according to Foucault, also the space of story: ‘…this space, which borders death but is also poised against it, where the story locates its natural domain’ (1977, p.54). Freud agrees: ‘It is an inevitable result…that we should seek in the world of fiction…compensation for the impoverishment of life. There we still find people who know how to die, indeed, who are even capable of killing someone else’ (1952, p.762). Angelica abandons all other considerations when she learns of her illness: ‘Making order out of her private chaos became her most urgent responsibility…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.5). For Angelica this meant writing her story, and finding, in the midst of the abject state wherein the grim news had firmly located her, the inspiration she needed to tell her life, firstly to herself.

In this abject space we also find those who do not know how to die, and do not wish to die, those who turn back from death and, like Scheherezade, attempt to ‘…exclude death from the circle of existence’ (Foucault, 1977, p.117) by telling stories. Angelica follows this tradition: ‘She is absolutely certain that she will live long enough to complete her self-imposed task…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.121). The narrator here reveals the protagonist’s belief that telling her story will magically hold her death at bay. In her abject state, confronted with her death far sooner than she might have expected, Angelica turns to language and finds urgent inspiration from both the knowledge that she is dying, and the desperate desire to hold that death off. In this liminal space of knowledge and the magical thinking that is denial, this abject space in which all boundaries are broken, language emerges as a tool and a comfort.

The writers of The Sopranos create a linguistic and visual narrative of the uncanny and abject state of near-death, but in pulling their central character back into life, acknowledge that ‘…the limit of death opens before language, or rather within
language, an infinite space’ (Foucault, 1977, p.54). That is, they hold death at bay for their central character, acknowledging that death cannot be portrayed through story as can the experience of dying, acknowledging that death opens up the ‘infinite space’ in language, the infinite silence that resists narrative intrusion. The character’s life has been spared so he might live another story and another, and the story is created in the abject space that is always present in life lived in the constant company of inevitable death. ‘Just where death is expecting you is something we cannot know,’ the Stoic Seneca wrote to his pupil, Lucius, ‘so for your part, expect him everywhere’ (1985, p.71). To ‘expect him everywhere’ is to dwell daily in the abject. That is, it is as if the abject is our natural if unacknowledged state.

During his time of dying, Tony Soprano is shown as only inarticulately and dimly aware of the seriousness of his situation. He shies away repeatedly from acknowledging it to himself, as if acknowledgement will lead to acceptance, and acceptance is all that stands between him and his extinction. In this, Tony represents the general denial of death that Freud argues afflicts us all, whether we are in immediate danger or not. This primal fear is signified particularly well in Tony’s shifty glances at a beacon that moves across the night horizon, visible through his hotel room window. The idea of a light, of going towards the light, of a bright light awaiting our arrival at the brink of death, is documented in accounts of so-called near death experiences (van Lommell et al, 2001). Foucault ‘…perceived death as the constant companion of life, its “white brightness” always lurking in the “black coffer of the body”’ (cited in Miller, 1994, p.20). Angelica also records a mystical experience with light: ‘Sunlight bounces off the ocean’s surfaces and spun into the air like a million tiny spirits. She could see the air, minute, brilliant particles engage in a vigorous and unceasing dance around one another…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.147). Tony, however, will not allow himself to fully gaze at this occasional light: his extreme discomfort is shown in his rapid, furtive glances towards it and away again; in his shoulders that hunch against the beacon as if to protect himself, and that shrug off any inclination to deep consideration.

‘What is that beacon, anyway?’ he mutters and turns away from his impending annihilation.
Tony hovers between life and death while he is in an induced coma in intensive care, the borders of his body broken and torn by Junior’s bullet. His has become ‘…a body rendered so abject by the process of dying that it transformed the familiar subject into an unfamiliar object’ (Tanner, 2006, p.1). There is little to connect this dying body with the familiar images of the living Tony. He can neither speak nor breathe for himself: he lies helpless, bereft of agency. The viewer gazes, appalled and disbelieving, at this graphic evidence of what can befall the apparently invulnerable Tony, and therefore any self, demonstrating Tanner’s claim of ‘…the dying body’s threat to the illusion of agency…’ (2006, p.3). Tony is a huge figure, both in physical appearance and metaphysical presence: he carries the lives and deaths of others in his hands and in this, mimics the gods. Few would risk taking the life of a crime boss. Yet he is shown to be as vulnerable to others as they are to him, thus upsetting the order of things in his world.

Angelica has also experienced the violation of her body’s borders: ‘There is who you are, then there is something that happens to you, and then there is who you are… [S]till he struggled on her, pushing into her, into a place she never knew before today, a place where another could apparently go inside her, without her will or consent, down there…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.136). The process of rape, like that of dying, renders the violated body abject, transformed from familiar subject into unfamiliar object. Rape changes forever the self’s beliefs about its own integrity and inviolability. Vulnerability to other bodies makes common cause between disparate human beings.

Throughout this comatose period Tony conducts a parallel life in another consciousness. In this life he is portrayed as a gentler character, who, after attending a convention goes to a bar and loses his briefcase. ‘My whole life is in that briefcase,’ he tells the sympathetic barman. He then accidentally picks up the briefcase of a Mr. Kevin Finnerty, a salesman of solar heating systems, a sun king. The wordplay on infinity (Kev Infinity), is explained by a reference to a Lexus car model: ‘You know, Lexus, the Infiniti?’

Tony has nothing left of his documented identity, and is forced to adopt whatever he finds in Mr. Finnerty’s briefcase: ‘For the Eskimos, when one falls ill, one takes on a new name, a new diseased personality’ (Hillman, 1989, p.77). Tony’s new personality
is subdued, weary, unwell, and as he will discover later, unexpectedly diseased. Angelica’s story begins with her revealing that she has no last name; that her given name is Jennifer but she has chosen to be known as Angelica ‘…the name she chooses for herself because it came from the woman she loves most in the world’ (Wilson, 2007, p.1). Throughout the memoir she is referred to by this name, and at the end, reverting to the first person, who has been identified as Jennifer, she writes: ‘…I haven’t yet discovered my real name’ (ibid, p.270). The name Angelica, while being her favourite, is also the name of the ‘diseased’ woman in the memoir. We do not know her surname. The statement ‘I haven’t yet discovered my real name,’ is in keeping with the on-going nature of her illness: in Angelica’s case, the ‘diseased personality’ is only ever in remission, never entirely absent, and her real name remains uncertain.

In the new country that is my destination perhaps there is no need for proper names. I can only hope that this is so, otherwise I’ll be as lost there as I have been here, lost in the way that only those with too many names, or none at all, can be (Wilson, 2007 p.270).

Angelica, meaning ‘little angel’, is, like Kev Infinity, a signifier of something other than this material world and their embodiment in it, a symbol, that is, of death. ‘Is it a Bally?’ asks Tony’s wife of Finnerty’s briefcase, when her husband rings to tell her of his misfortune. Carmela gave Tony the lost Bally for Christmas.

‘No,’ he says, ‘but it looks like one.’

The ambience of this parallel life is immediately identified by the viewer as uncanny. The bar, the hotels, the briefcase, other people going about their business all have the outward appearance of the known, the heimliche, (the homely, amicable, the familiar). However, a nebulous something, a certain detachment in the characters, a sense of the world in which they move being not quite our world, in other words: ‘…those properties of persons, things, sense-impressions, experiences and situations which arouse in us the feeling of uncanniness…’ (Freud, 2007), is powerfully present, and disturbs and confuses the viewer. Tony does not seem quite himself either: while going through the ordinary motions of living, he is at the same time disconcertingly unanchored and the viewer is also unable to anchor herself to the slightly askew nature.
of his character. There are subtle changes in attitudes that reveal a side of Tony we have not previously encountered, and yet he is thoroughly recognisable.

In his essay on the uncanny in literature, Freud observes that ‘...the writer creates a kind of uncertainty in us in the beginning by not letting us know, no doubt purposely, whether he is taking us into the real world or into a purely fantastic one of his creation’ (2007). The viewer is plunged into just this state of uncertainty: the previous episode left us with Tony bleeding to death on the kitchen floor in an all-too-real world of explicable events; the next opens with him waking up on a hotel bed in perfect health. The writers employ no bridging device. There is a violent sense of discombobulation caused by the unexplained severing of the immediate past from the present. Through this assault on continuity, the viewer’s experience of the episode necessarily mirrors Tony’s bewilderment at finding himself where he is: ambivalence and ambiguity disconcert both character and audience. ‘Is he alive?’ we ask each other, giving voice to Tony’s silent confusion on this matter. ‘I thought he was dead!’ As an example Freud cites Jentsch, his precursor into investigations of the uncanny, as suggesting that our sense of Das Unheimliche is aroused when there are ‘...doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate’ (2007). Something of great moment is in progress, to do with life and death: neither character nor viewer as yet knows what it is. We are in an uncomfortable state of cognitive dissonance, brought on by what is familiar to us suddenly being cast in a vaguely foreign light. A characteristic of the uncanny is that the difference can be vague, difficult to articulate, but deeply felt or sensed.

The uncanny presents itself in Angelica’s story largely in her periods of disassociation. For example, when sitting in her doctor’s office listening to bad news: ‘She clasps her hands in her lap and looks down on them. They don’t look as if they belong to her. They aren’t hands she knows. She should chop them off’ (Wilson, 2007, p.94). Under the extreme stress of hearing life-threatening news, Angelica disassociates from her body. The hands that were familiar to her take on an aspect rendered uncanny by the sudden and unexpected shift in the point of view of her familiar self. Instead of looking out from within, the usual perspective of an embodied being, she now looks down at her body from a position above and outside of it. Similarly, at the time of the first
sexual attack on her by her stepfather she describes how during the attack ‘He is absent, yet horribly present, as when he’s drunk. The physical being is there but some part of its nature has fled, the part that connects it to other human beings…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.137). In this circumstance the man has become uncanny through his intense sexual focus, a focus that excludes completely all his other aspects as everything in him becomes increasingly dedicated to achieving sexual gratification: he is and is not a familiar man, he is strange, terrifyingly so, and yet known.

However, the abject is ‘…essentially different from “uncanniness”, more violent too…it disturbs identity, system and order…does not respect borders, positions, rules…’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.5). There is no mistaking the abject; it lacks the subtler dissonance of the uncanny, and yet they are essentially related to one another through their ambiguity: ‘The abject is above all ambiguity…’ (ibid, p.10). Both sensations come into play as Tony awakens in confusion, fully dressed as if he’s only taken a postprandial nap. The character and the viewer are positioned in the space of the abject by the writers’ violent transgression of filmic conventions of continuity. In so placing us, they have ensured that the viewer can make a sincere identification with the character’s bewilderment. So great was this viewer’s initial sense of confusion that she stopped the DVD, quite certain that she’d missed an interim episode, as, no doubt, Tony had cause to wonder if he’d missed an episode of his life. In this way our consciousness and our expectations are sufficiently disturbed for us to identify with Tony’s sense of something extremely important being not quite right. We join him in the uneasy realms of the abject and the uncanny. That is, we are forced to recognise these realms through our participation in the narrative. Our recognition is accompanied by the disturbance of equilibrium that heralds the forces of the abject and the uncanny that dwell in our own being, that move through our own living and dying, and arouse our own deep fear that perhaps: ‘…life is given only to a cruel, reductive and already infernal knowledge that only wishes it dead’ (Foucault, cited in Miller, 1994, p.16).

Angelica has considerable experience of abjection in its many forms: through the actions of her parents which are both criminal, and morally bereft, and in the mutable borders of illness:
She cuts her finger. She observes the swell of blood. She exercises her right to temporarily renegotiate and open up the borders of her physical being and admit that threat, the infection-laden air. She can’t see the small cleaved cells that voyage within her blood…(Wilson, 2007, p.150).

In this scene, Angelica strives to see the illness that is threatening her life: however this vision is granted only to medical technologists: it requires more than the human eye to detect its passage. Her blood is polluted, invaded by a disease that is as yet invisible to her, and over which she is powerless. She is in a state of ‘abject embodiment’, that is, a state in which “…selves that once mastered the body became enslaved by it. Cancer broke through normative boundaries, making the body unclean and unruly’ (Waskul, van der Riet, 2002).

This state of ‘abject embodiment’ is not exclusive to cancer patients: all illness and injury results in this state to some degree as what is generally regarded as normal, that is, health, is challenged by ill-health, accident, violence or disability. None of these lived experiences are considered to be our normal embodied state, and all work to collapse the fragile distinctions between the culturally determined normal and abnormal. This entry into the abject is experienced as threatening by the healthy: ‘The terminally ill body assaults the healthy gaze by threatening to unveil…the viewing subject’s vulnerability, a vulnerability that stems from mortality itself’ (Tanner, 2006, p.23). The ‘viewing subject’ can be both the exterior observer, or the sufferer, who, like Angelica, attempts to regard her own situation as a detached observer. In this latter situation a double abjection results as the self attempts to disconnect from its self, in order to gain another point of view. In all cases a glimpse into the abyss of mortal vulnerability is afforded the viewing subject, an abyss over which we are powerless.

In his parallel life Tony encounters a series of misadventures that lead him more and more deeply into confusion, the circumstances belonging as they do to Kevin Finnerty and not to Tony Soprano. ‘Defining abjection as “a desire for separation”, Kristeva describes it as a reaction to menace both external and internal, a threat to autonomy heightened by the subject’s failure to locate it clearly outside the boundaries of the self’ (Tanner, 2006, p.24). Tony does not know if his sense of dislocation originates within him, or in the outer world, a world the viewer now knows as supernatural, though this knowledge is not available to Tony.
‘Who am I?’ he asks himself as he sits on the edge of his hotel bed staring at his socks, a particularly poignant wiggle of his fat toes meltingly reaffirming for us his baffled, but as yet still human condition. Do shades wiggle their toes? Angelica also considers her feet: ‘She imagined her feet without her in them to direct their daily course, walking them, dancing them, dipping them in a sea pool at low tide on a summer afternoon’ (Wilson, 2007, p.148). Our feet anchor and ground us, connect us with the earth, and with our earthliness. Perhaps it is no accident that at times of great confusion and discomfort, humans frequently gaze down at their feet. Tony, however, is unable to locate the source of his existential discomfort. He is externally represented by his unsought and accidental change of identity, nevertheless there is the question of which came first. Is the new identity merely the outward and visible sign of an already present internal upheaval? One’s sense of autonomy is overtaken by confusion if everyone you encounter believes you to be someone other than you think you know you are, doing other than what you think you are doing. ‘Where am I going?’ he wonders, thoroughly rattled.

As he roams from hotel to hotel, having assumed Kevin Finnerty’s identity and doing his best to conduct this odd life that seems to have mysteriously become his, Tony has become: ‘An exile who asks “where?”…He is on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.8). In this he is not unlike Angelica, who, the narrator states at the beginning of the memoir, has: ‘[I]n the course of her life …used several last names…she now belongs to no one and has not yet decided how best to name herself’ (Wilson, 2007, p.1). Tony here experiences the abject in the form of a post-modern fluidity of identity that has him, like Angelica, disturbingly lacking a sense of belonging, that is, ‘an exile who asks “where?”’. Tony’s sense of being ejected from his ordinary life without warning or explanation bewilders and angers him. He is unused to such loss of control and consequently is full of fear. He experiences ‘…gusts of unpleasant sensation’ (Brodkey, 1996, p.3) as he struggles with these feelings. He cannot articulate his emotions: they churn and boil in him, revealed by an aggrieved expression in his eyes, a truculent misery in the movements of his mouth, or in the characteristic Italian shrug of frustrated resignation: ‘Whaddya gonna do?’
Anger is a common response to profound confusion. As the terminally ill Angelica scours old photographs for information about who she is: ‘There are outbursts of rage and anguish when she throws the photographs across the room, knowing them as symbols only of loss, of transience, of the impossibility of holding on to life in part or whole…’ (Wilson, 2007, p.92). Likewise, Tony can make no sense of his situation but is compelled to doggedly keep going, drawn onwards to that which both fascinates and repels, though he knows not what it may be. He is like Angelica when she discovers a snake in the house: ‘…Angelica felt compelled to go back to the scene every few minutes. Once there, she’d get down on her knees and put her face close to the spitting snake, and gaze hungrily at its small head and forked black tongue’ (Wilson, 2007, p.114).

There looms within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable…it beseeches, worries and fascinates desire... (Kristeva, 1982, p.1).

In the liminal space between life and death he currently inhabits, Tony Soprano knows that he is not himself and he is not where he belongs. He cannot imagine who or what has done this to him, and why, or even what it is that has been done. It is the impossible, intolerable, unthinkable abject. ‘The presence of a body usually implies a self…’ (Waskul, van der Riet, 2002), and the presence of a self usually implies basic knowledge of that self, such as one’s real name and home. However, when this self-knowledge appears to have been lost, or, as in the case of Angelica, never satisfactorily found, the ensuing absence of boundaries signifies the inhospitable country of the abject and the uncanny, in which the exiled and uncertainly wandering subject reluctantly makes its uneasy home. ‘Her life breathes down her neck like death and she knows she has to turn and face it. Her life. Angelica No Name. Or one name too many’ (Wilson, 2007, p.91).

That threat is present there can be no doubt, though its origins are obscure. Tony lives with the generous measure of paranoia necessary to maintain his lifestyle, therefore he assumes the threat is external. He resists the deeper knowledge that he is in the unthinkable position of losing himself and everything familiar to him to venture forth he knows not where. ‘…[B]ecause we’re alive, we inhabit the country of the living;
that which is beyond, outside, we don’t have the heart to believe’ (Cixous, 1998, p.71). In this ambiguous state between life and death, Tony struggles to believe himself fully alive: anything else is impossible. There can be no more exorbitant outside or inside than that of the dead and the living. His fate as yet undecided, Tony stumbles unbelieving in the treacherous and unpredictable borderlands between the two. This is the abject as ‘the eternal present’: ‘To die is even smaller than the moment it takes to think it and yet dying is indefinitely repeated on either side of this width-less crack. The eternal present?’ (Foucault, 1977, p.172).

Tony’s experience is, the writers suggest, how it might feel to be in the throes of dying. *Unheimliche* and abject. Knowing only intermittently who one is, where one has been, what one has done and who one belongs to, as life is left further and further behind, ‘…the time that separates me from my death dwindles and dwindles…’ (Levinas, 1969, p.235), and one moves closer to the ultimate separation.

The loneliness of this experience of abjection, ‘whose intimate side is suffering and horror its public feature’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.140), is powerfully signified by Tony’s aimless and solitary habitation of impersonal hotel rooms. The rooms have beds, chairs, television sets, phones, much as does one’s bedroom at home. They are familiar, yet achingly strange: in them the heart can feel utterly bereft of comfort. Tony sits on his rented bed and looks around his room. A great, lonely sigh escapes him. He has entered ‘The Bardo of Becoming’, the state between life and death in which the subject is described by Tibetan Buddhism as having ‘…the outer existence of the mental body and the inner existence of the mind’ (Rinpoche, 1992, p.288). In this Bardo ‘…the mind is endowed with immense clarity and unlimited mobility, yet the direction in which it moves is determined solely by the habitual tendencies of our past karma’ (ibid, p.288). Tony is wandering the uncanny and abject anterooms of death, lost between earth and sky. His experience in the Bardo is determined by his attitudes when he was living his life, and however many previous lives the Tibetan theory of reincarnation would allot him. While the opportunity is present in the Bardo (as it is in his ordinary life), for unlimited mobility and expansion, Tony is wedded to familiar patterns of behaviour, bound by unexamined and unresolved attachments and he cannot take advantage of the possibilities on offer. In life, his weekly sessions with Dr. Melfi reveal
this same inability, as he repeatedly baulks at the insights and changes that would free him from his emotional and mental prisons. In years of therapy he has not managed to significantly change his ways of being in the world, though his panic attacks have been brought under control. ‘Coriolanus is in chains, because of his nature and his situation, yet he is anything but a great spirit’ (Bloom, 1998, p.579).

Tony’s ‘intimate sufferings’ cluster round him in this parallel life, preventing forward movement; the ‘public horror’, that is, the threat of the public abject, is evident on the faces of his family and friends who gather round to view his damaged and comatose body in intensive care. The family and friends enter as well the space of the uncanny, as their beloved ‘…takes on a new identity…which is eerily familiar; not simply faceless, the beloved wears the face of death’ (Tanner, 2006, p.23). In his time of dying, Tony is almost entirely without agency: he is unable to even breathe for himself. Yet he still lives, as he ‘…exhibits the bodily signs of impending death while yet resisting the inanimate coldness that helps us to classify the corpse as Other’ (ibid, p.23). His visitors are instructed to talk to him by his doctors, monologues ensue, to which he is of necessity entirely unresponsive. Liberated by his comatose silence, released from their usual apprehensions of his reactions, his wife Carmela and the kids reveal much they might otherwise have kept from him.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this abject state as portrayed in the television drama, is the poignant sense of aloneness and desolate bewilderment it provokes in this powerful crime boss, now brought to his knees. ‘That elsewhere that I imagined beyond the present…it is now here, jetted, abjected, into “my” world’ (Kristeva, 1982 p.4). Tony might well make such an observation if he were capable. ‘What will happen to us?’ he might ask, ‘Is death other than silence and nothingness?’ (Brodkey, 1996, p.23). Nothing in his life has prepared him for the experience of being set down in the twilight landscape of the dying. He is as adrift as he has ever been, cast off from his life, in the throes of the disintegration of his personality and identity: ‘Not me. Not that. But nothing else either. a “something” that I do not recognise as a thing… There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being…’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.3). Tony cannot connive, wound, manipulate, slaughter or buy his way out of this condition. He is stripped bare of everything that signified to him the nature of his living being. He is
‘…literally beside himself’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.1), unable to grasp ‘…the immensity at
the end of individuality, towards one's absorption into the dance of particles and
inaudibility,’ (Brodkey, 1996, p.24). He is and is not Tony Soprano, at the very borders
of his individuality. ‘Who am I?’ he groans. ‘Where am I going?’ The uncanniness of
this situation, the fear and horror of being oneself and yet not oneself in a place that one
knows and does not know, signifies the gradual departing from life, a departure that is
unlike any other because its destination is final: ‘…we can have no second game, no
return match’ (Freud, 1952, p.762),

Viewing these episodes, I experienced powerfully disturbing sensations as a sense of
the unmitigated confusion and loneliness we may possibly endure when our time comes
was convincingly portrayed by this unflinching representation of dying. I am ill-
equipped to deal with an event of this magnitude, as Freud has suggested. Nothing in
my life has prepared me for such momentous solitude, which is, I imagine, akin to the
particular solitude experienced during severe pain; that separation from those who are
not suffering, though far more final. Although – and here I stop myself. I have known
something of this alienation: ‘There’s a barrier between those who’ve known violence
and those who haven’t. With this barrier she is, she fears, forever an outsider. Her
secret sets her apart. Dark knowledge taints her’ (Wilson, 2007, p.117). Life offers
some precursors.

I am leaving, I whisper, in an attempt to grasp these realities by saying them out loud to
myself, over and over again. I have to go by myself. I won’t ever come back.

She imagines conducting a survey of the people she sees strolling these inner city
streets. ‘Excuse me, do you wonder in the night where you will go when you are done
with this good earth? In what respect do you feel you are better for your stay in it?’
(Wilson, 2007, p.98).

‘I behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting
away…Abject,’ Kristeva grieves (1982, p.4). While alive I am life: death is utterly
other. My heart starts up with wails of protest as I watch Tony, lost and alone, on his
uncertain journey. Is this how it will be? I can find nobody willing to talk to me about
this. The world, I discover, appears to be full of people only too ready to tell me their
convictions about death, but I can’t find anyone to stand hand-in-hand with me in
mutual uncertainty. Popular representations of death, I reflect, rarely propose uncertainty as a legitimate site: rather, answers must be produced, informed or not. ‘What she wants is a loving heavenly father who knows what’s best for her... she wants somebody, human or divine, to take all these burdens away and give her peace’ (Wilson, 2007, p.152).

The abject destabilises the border between subject and object and defiles it: in dying one is neither self nor other. ‘The border has become an object. How can I be without border?’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.4). In my dying, I am losing the certainties that have thus far constructed my borders, and given me the sense of containment necessary to conduct my life. The Sopranos writers steadfastly refuse the ‘…frame of literary or visual representation that protects us, shields us, from reality, creating distance, separation, from our vulnerability, our mortality’ (Tanner, 2006, p.23). Instead their depiction of Tony’s dying is merciless in its refusal to sentimentalise and its portrayal of the breakdown of familiar borders. There are no comforting ethereal visions of the supernatural in Tony’s parallel life. There are no benevolent helpers waiting to guide him through his confusion. Tony is offered no reassurance, no possibility of a long rest or sleep in any kind of heaven. There is no suggestion either that ‘…death is an act of transcendence’ (Hoffman, 1964, p.3). Rather, it is implied that ‘Death is either annihilation, or it is “the mother of beauty”, the ultimate challenge to the imagination, that it make as much as it can of the threat of impermanence’ (Hoffman, 1964, p.321). This ‘ultimate challenge to the imagination’ is posed by the abject, as the impermanent is the abject, therefore it can be argued that the abject is the source of creativity, life in the daily shadow of death, and in this, the abject is shown to be as ambiguous as Kristeva claims. Tony is required to deal imaginatively with his circumstances, as their nature and purpose continue to elude him.

On The Sopranos soundtrack a sweet, childlike female voice sings a song that is Celtic in its references and has a trembling, sustained base note like the trembling, yet sustained note that is our fragile life:

I don’t wanna swim the ocean  
I don’t wanna fight the tide…  
I don’t wanna swim forever  
When it’s cold I’d like to die…
This simple verse seems to plead for respite from the process of dying, from the insistent demands of coping with pain and confusion, and apprehension about one’s ending. In this it beautifully represents Tony’s ambivalent wanderings, as he is twice brought back from death by medical intervention. It echoes as well, my own decision to refuse rounds of chemotherapy that may keep me alive for longer, but in what parlous state? I don’t want to swim forever. When it’s cold I’d like to die.

Tony is set upon, on his dying path, by outraged Buddhist monks, for whom Kevin Finnerty has apparently installed a faulty solar heating system. The encounter with the monks again plays to the unexpected, the subversion of the assumed, resulting in a sense of the uncanny. Viewer and character anticipate gentleness and humility from the monks, however they verbally abuse Kevin Finnerty and then beat him about the head, cruelly repudiating his protests that he is not responsible for their miserably cold winter as it was not him who sold them a faulty system.

‘Everybody’s got a story!’ one of them scoffs.

‘Do I really look so much like Finnerty?’ Tony asks them, pleading.

‘All Caucasians can look alike to us,’ remarks another.

‘You’re going home,’ says the receptionist at the Omni hotel, where Tony has taken a bed for the night.

In his hospital room Tony jerks back into violent consciousness as he fiercely resists death, refusing to ‘go home’, tearing his breathing tubes from his mouth and gasping:

‘Who am I? Where am I going?’

He croaks these terrible questions a number of heart-stopping times, transfixing his grieving family with horror, before he lapses back into unconsciousness. Before their eyes, Tony’s ‘…cherished body loses its familiar form to take on a new and horrible aspect…’ (Tanner, 2006, p.23), as he thrashes, ripping lines from his arms until enough staff arrive to hold him down. A violent and unexpected surge of the mobster’s remaining strength reveals a brutality generally concealed from his wife and family. Paralysed by her inability to give him answers to questions too powerful for mere reassurance, too awesome to be ignored, Carmela collapses onto her daughter Meadow’s shoulder.
Visiting mobsters, inured to the sights and smells of injury and death in their daily work, generally unmoved by the sight of human detritus, shudder and turn away, nauseated, from the alarming sight of their skipper’s blood, his catheters, his urine, his wound, evidence that life persists in fighting for itself in the face of almost certain death: ‘A wound with blood and pus, or the sickly, acrid smell of sweat, of decay…show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.3). The mobsters cannot stomach this much reality: they do not understand it as a sign of the body’s determination to live, but rather as evidence of Tony’s dying and their own mortality. Tony’s is now ‘…a body no longer bounded by propriety, a body that leaks and eliminates, that does the body’s private work, its business, out in the open’ (Miller, 2007, p.111). The mobsters can’t ignore this colourful example of human frailty inscribed on their skipper’s omnipotent being, as they ignore the same inscriptions on the bodies they damage in the course of their work. We have a brief insight into the rationalisations that govern the minds of these killers: their victims are not them, they are Other, and therefore cannot suffer in the same way. Tony shows his captains the effort every body is required to expend in order to keep on living, and, as well: ‘…the threatened dissolution of boundaries between the living and the dying…’ (Tanner, 2006, p.2). This is not a sight they wish to be confronted with: ‘The terminally ill body assaults the healthy gaze by threatening to unveil…the viewing subject’s vulnerability…’ (ibid, p.23). These ‘viewing subjects’ have no wish to consider their vulnerability, or that of any one else: in this they are representative of a wider culture that needs to keep its distance from the ill and dying.

This distancing adds to the loneliness of the ill. There is little I’ve found more alarming than losing control over bodily functions while ill. I recall being unable to control my bowels while recovering from surgery for cancer, and soiling myself and my bed. This was a profound experience of the abject during which all that is supposed to remain hidden and internal is suddenly, explosively, revealed. To lose control over one’s bodily functions, to become ‘a body that leaks and eliminates…out in the open’ is initially a terrifying experience. I was dealt with kindly, nobody showed distaste or disapproval. Even so, life as I had known it was breaking down rapidly. My body was having its way and I could not restrain it. Everything that was hidden and secret inside
I had now been observed and touched by the surgeon, and my most private substances were on public display. Too ill to get out of bed, I had no hiding place. Later, returned to health, I read Kristeva and found that theory both explicates and validates embodied experience. The mind brought together with the frightened heart can create from the abject a fullness of understanding and a healing relief, that allow life to be taken up once again.

Though Tony is not yet a corpse, the machinations of his secret internal life are made publicly visible through his massive abdominal wound; the sight fills the mobsters with disgust and horror as they inadvertently witness the changing of his dressings. We do not expect to see deeply into the living body of another. There are fleshly borders that separate us from this corporeal manifestation of the abject, borders we do not expect to be required to cross. The mobsters cringe as they watch a nurse removing a jug of body fluids that have drained from the hole in the centre of Tony’s being; how can he continue to live and sustain such massive outflows? ‘...from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – cadere, cadaver’ (Kristeva, 1982 p.3). Cadere, to fall. Surely his life must be falling away from him, and he will fall into that most abject of all the possible manifestations of the abject: a corpse? ‘I’ll never get used to this,’ groans Paulie Walnuts, Tony’s second-in-command, murderer and dark messenger of retribution.

On the wall someone has pinned up a card that reads:

Sometimes I go about in pity for myself
And all the time a great wind carries me across the sky.
(Ojibwa saying).

‘I’m lost,’ Tony mourns as he sits in another hospital room in his parallel life, where he has fallen down some stairs and knocked himself unconscious. ‘Lost.’
The X-rays of his head reveal he is suffering from Alzheimer’s.
‘I’m not myself,’ he tells the angry monks, ‘I’ve been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s’
But they only laugh.
Maybe I really am Kevin Finnerty, he thinks.
He’s tried to phone his wife from the Omni Hotel and has given up the attempt, as if he knows he is moving away from her and hasn’t the energy he’ll need to stay in touch. The facts of his situation are beginning to become apparent to him. He moves ever more deeply into the abject:

The question remains as to the ordeal…that abjection can constitute for someone who…presents himself with his own body and ego as the most precious non-objects; they are no longer seen in their own right but forfeited, abject (Kristeva, 1982, p.5).

Kristeva writes of these matters in relation to castration and masochistic practices: however the commentary is equally applicable to the dissociation and separation from our body and ego that is necessary before we can enter the ordeal of abjection that is the state of dying and then of death. Tony has already partially relinquished his ego to that of Kevin Finnerty: now he dimly contemplates the relinquishing and forfeiting of his material being, as if he has finally grasped that he can no longer continue to be at one with it. His decision not to ring Carmela is symbolic of his growing understanding that he is removing himself from all material concerns: it dawns on him that she will not be travelling with him, that he must let her go. We see this in the puzzlement, the baffled sorrow and regret in his deeply uneasy face. He hangs up the phone, the number only partially dialed.

In the New Jersey hospital Tony’s daughter Meadow reads out loud to her unconscious parent:

Our Father which art in Heaven
Stay there
And we shall stay on Earth
Which is sometimes so pretty.
(Prevert, 1946).

These wistful lines convulse the heart. The ‘prettiness’ of the earth is well known to Angelica. After a day at the beach during which she engages intensely with the natural world, the narrator describes Angelica’s experience of bliss, inspired by the world’s prettiness: ‘Such moments are hardly bearable. They aren’t sustainable; their intensity is more than the human heart can contain. Her human heart, anyway. She’s unused to bliss’ (Wilson, 2007, p.147). The thought of leaving this earth, ‘which is sometimes so pretty,’ is a source of deep grief to me as I think about my dying, in its way almost as
strong as the grief I feel at the prospect of leaving my children, who ‘will stay on earth’ when I leave. ‘It’s the totality of loss that Angelica finds impossible to comprehend…’ (Wilson, 2007, p. 145). It’s the loss of everything that leaves the heart reeling. How can this be?

However, what is sometimes so pretty is also sometimes filled with ugliness, an ugliness Tony knows well. Tony is himself abject in his living conduct: ‘Abjection…is immoral, sinister, scheming and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles…’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.4), all of which describe aspects of Tony’s behaviour that contribute to the ‘sometimes’ of the fragile prettiness of life on earth. In life, Tony dwells in the abject by virtue of his profession: ‘…Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility,’ (ibid, p.4). Tony’s crimes rank among the unspeakable and he remains unaccountable for all of them, in spite of the efforts of the FBI. He inhabits a space in the world where anything can and does happen, with no regard for the laws of man or God, an abject space, a space of utter abjection. It is unclear whether in reading the poem Meadow is encouraging her father to continue on his journey towards death, or simply reciting the line that is usually associated with a prayer addressed to the Christian god. The family is staunchly Catholic. However the lines serve to make stark the distinction between life and death, the totality of the separation between beloved father and his loving family as she so poignantly tells him, her voice breaking with grief: ‘And we shall stay on earth…’

‘I don’t want to!’ Tony protests when he’s ushered towards the doorway of the last hotel: an establishment called the Oaks. This hotel looks much more like a house, heimliche in nature, a home rather than a hotel. But: ‘…we are reminded that the word heimliche is not unambiguous…on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight’ (Freud, 2007). There is much activity going on in the house but it is concealed from the viewer and Tony. Out of sight, a party seems to be in progress: the house is decorated with fairy lights. An unremarkable man stands at the gate greeting newcomers and relieving them of their possessions.
‘You can’t take your briefcase in there,’ he tells Tony.
‘It’s not mine, it’s Kevin Finnerty’s,’ Tony replies.
‘You can’t take it in. We don’t allow briefcases in there. You need to let go,’ the man tells him.
‘I’m scared,’ Tony says.
‘Nothing to be scared of. Everyone’s waiting for you. All the Finnerty family.’
Like a dog picking up on a subsonic whistle, Tony faintly hears Meadow crying,
‘Daddy! Daddy! Don’t go, Daddy!’ A leakage from the material world that seeps into his abject twilight, further unsettling him.
‘What is that?’ he asks the doorman. ‘Who’s calling out?’
Then, already more than hesitant about where this is all going, he catches a fleeting glimpse of a shade in the Oaks’ doorway that looks unnervingly like his dead mother.
He cannot be sure: ‘…abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognise its kin, nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.5). Tony’s mother has been a terrifying figure in his life, symbol of all that is abject in the emotional and spiritual turmoil she arouses in him: desire and revulsion, shame and fear, anticipation, hope and the dark tides of bitter rejection. ‘Out of the daze that has petrified him before the untouchable, impossible, absent body of the mother…out of such a daze he causes, along with loathing, one word to crop up – fear,’ (ibid, p.6). His engagements with her have been entirely mysterious, fearful, complex and brutal, and he does not understand them. In her turn, Livia has loathed and tormented her son.
Tony has little desire to be reunited with her:

What he has swallowed up instead of maternal love is emptiness, or rather maternal hatred…that is what he tries to cleanse himself of, tirelessly. What solace does he come upon within such loathing? (Kristeva, 1982, p.6).

Solace has been largely absent in Tony’s life in the sense of maternal comfort: what little he knows of it he has gleaned from his wife and from the fleeting delights of early fatherhood, before they started talking back to him. The material world has up till now provided him with most of his gratification. His mother’s hatred, made evident in her desire to see him dead, permeates his being and his opinion of himself. He is dimly, and sometimes terrifyingly, aware of the lack of solace and maternal love in his life, a lack that is revealed in his sessions with Dr Melfi. His unrecognised desire to ease the pain of this mysterious lack is what has held him in tormented relationship with his
mother for all of her life. Like Coriolanus, Tony is marked by: ‘…his ferocious mother…she delights in blood…’ (Bloom, 1998, p.584). As well, he is the son of a traditional Italian family: it is unthinkable that he will not love, respect and provide for Livia. This tortured desire for his mother’s love has outlived her death: his relationship with her has changed little in her final departure. To glimpse her shade at the brink of his own death is catastrophic: in Tony’s death, it appears that Medea will live again.

The theme of the terrifying and hostile mother runs throughout *The Practice of Goodness*. “‘You are not my child,” her mother observed, “you are the child of the devil.” The tall figure bent over her like a vulture waiting to pick the flesh from the bones of her life’ (Wilson, 2007, p.125). Like Tony, Angelica never loses the desire for her mother’s love and returns again and again to a situation that can only be disappointing and destructive. Like Tony, I have recoiled in fear from the notion that in death we are reunited with our earthly family, a notion based on the assumption that this is what we most long for. The identifications I make with Tony and his relationship with his mother are strong; his lack of maternal love and solace echoes my own experience. My mother’s hatred of me formed my own opinion of myself for which, like Tony, I sought therapy. What I have ‘swallowed up instead of maternal love is emptiness, or rather maternal hatred…’ and like Tony, I have little desire to be reunited with that mother.

The terror inspired in Tony by this fleeting glimpse of his dead mother’s shade in the doorway of the homely Oaks, catapults Tony back into life in intensive care. ‘…some languages in use today can only render the German expression “an unheimliche house” by “a haunted house”’ (Freud, 2007), and the Oaks has revealed itself as highly suspect in this regard, in spite of its comfortable and hospitable appearance. Tony’s earthly being is already a haunted dwelling wherein his mother stalks the rooms and hallways, but at least she is no longer physically present. Tony has made his decision. He is not ready to take on his mother in the afterlife. Going home is problematic for him, a fact overlooked by the gatekeeper at the Oaks, who seems to assume homecoming to be everything the dying most deeply desire. Homecoming as inevitable, no matter if you never wanted to go back there again for very good reasons.

‘I’m dead, right?’ Tony asks his tearful wife back in the ICU.
‘No, Tone,’ she tells him, ‘you’re here with us, everybody, all your family, Tony, you’re fine.’
‘I don’t want to go there again, Carm,’ he tells her. ‘I don’t ever want to go there again.’

The representation of Tony’s dying is metaphorically credible because it is a state from which return is possible. While Tony recalls nothing of his near death experience, there are many people who do claim memories of this event and a considerable body of anecdotal evidence exists as to widespread experiences of this nature (Atwater, 2000; Bailey, 1996) Whether or not they are explicable is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, it is possible to argue that no matter how variable and unverified such near-death experiences are, because of its nature, dying, and our imaginings of dying, must always be a site of the uncanny and the abject. A place where borders are initially crossed only in part, a place in which we are suddenly ‘…ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable…’ (Kristeva, 1982, p.1) into the unknown. ‘It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated…’ (ibid, p.1), she continues. Death and dying occupy this close and unassimilable space in human affairs, and in spite of all cultural and societal denial, continue to ‘…beseech, worry and fascinate desire…’ (ibid, p.1).

The writers of The Sopranos, in bringing Tony back from the brink of death, fulfil their traditional role: ‘Storytellers continued their narratives late into the night to forestall death and to delay the inevitable moment when everyone must fall silent…’ (Foucault, 1977, p.117). We need not be confronted with Tony’s death, with our own deaths, just yet. We are granted a fictional reprieve from what Brodkey describes as ‘…my own final silence’ (1996, p.23). Instead of Tony Soprano, Kevin Finnerty dies: ‘The only hope for cure lies in the death of the ill personality. Health requires death’ (Hillman, 1989, p.77). Again, the indivisible and paradoxical nature of the two states, life and death, is presented in the abject.

In the acts of birth, feeding and motherhood, both in her own infancy, and as a mother:

The abject confronts us…and this time within our personal archeology with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away… (Kristeva, 1982, p.13).
In her reading and writing Angelica invokes the ‘autonomy of language’ to assist her to tear herself away psychologically and emotionally from the abject and dead mother before Angelica dies herself: ‘…it is quite likely that the approach of death – its sovereign gesture, its prominence within human memory – hollows out in the present and in existence the void towards which and from which we speak,’ (Foucault, 1977, p.53). This void, it is argued, is the abject. Language, which comes from the abject, grants autonomy: I speak therefore I am. I am. I am. Angelica does not want to die her mother’s captive, as she has lived for so long: ‘The child can serve its mother as a token of her own authentication: there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn ‘(Kristeva, 1982, p.13). In our dying, then, our authenticity and autonomy reach their apex: the process is a stripping of all ties and associations till we are left with the bare bones of self: no one can finally hold us back: death is the ultimate act of autonomy, there can be no go-betweens. Dying is the preparation for this final act of solitary authenticity: through the experiencing of the abject we become finally real. The use of figurative language to conceal or deny the abject and uncanny state of dying and the finality of death prevents entry into these profound spaces of human experience, both in life and dying. In a rare example of a popular cultural foray into the uncertainties of the abject and the uncanny, the writers of The Sopranos strip away the concealing metaphors and offer a complex and confronting perspective on dying that is paradoxically comforting in its bewildered authenticity.
Having considered death, how, then, are we to live?

Part One
A Common Mortality
Humanity is therefore a graded and ranked status with many shades and tiers between the “superhuman” Western, white, heterosexual male at the one end and the non-human, the concentration camp inmates or the fleeing refugee, at the other.
Costas Douzinas.

In this section I discuss issues raised in The Practice of Goodness on the question of how human beings behave towards one another in public and private circumstances. Using primarily the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, the problematic thesis of Bryan S. Turner on vulnerability and human rights, and the work of Costas Douzinas on a postmodern re-visioning of human rights, I argue that the consequences of disregarding our common vulnerability are destructive for us as individuals and collectively, and for the productive conduct of life. I argue for an alternative manner of interaction based on ‘…embodiment as a foundation for defending universal human rights’ (Turner, 2006, p.25), and the ethics of radical alterity in the form of the face-to-face encounter that is fundamental to Levinas’s concepts of hospitality. I also argue that from these positions of embodiment and hospitality there is little discernable difference between the consequences of domestic terror, and political and institutional terror. I argue that human rights discourse in 2006, as represented in Turner’s book of lectures for undergraduates, is in fact the imposition of a hierarchy of phallocentric rights onto Levinas’s and Douzinas’s ethics of universal rights which are based on a vision of horizontal equality and postmodern utopianism. This latter vision is absent from Turner’s book, as he does not adequately consider the situation of women and children who suffer human rights abuses in the domestic arena. I argue that it is from the vision of Levinas and Douzinas, informed by an expansion of Turner’s understanding of vulnerability to include the intra-familial, that Socrates’ question: ‘How, then, are we to live?’ might most usefully be addressed.

Human rights abuse ‘…is characteristically a product of state tyranny, dictatorship and state failure, as illustrated by civil war and anarchy’ (Turner, 2006, p.4). This statement
does not admit the configuration of human rights abuse as intra-familial, specifically in
the form of global violence towards women within the private domestic setting.
Turner’s stated intention towards the furtherment of the human rights discourse is a
universal one, that is, it is:

…to promote a sociological approach that starts with the idea of embodiment and
vulnerability,’ and ‘…to make a contribution towards the development of the study of
rights from the perspective of the sociology of the human body (2006, p.5).

In its omission of the issues of global intra-familial violence towards women, and the
particular consequences of our female embodiment and vulnerability in the private
sphere, Turner’s book, written in 2006, confirms that intimate abuses against women
and children are still not generally regarded as an abuse of human rights, despite the
fact that: ‘family violence conflicts with numerous fundamental human rights
principles’ (Levesque, 2002 p.8). Although three United Nations Conventions: the
Declarations of the Rights of the Child (1989); on the Elimination of Violence Against
Women (1994), and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of 1995, all
specifically address these matters, Levesque observes that ‘Commentators and analysts
of international law pervasively ignore the manner in which international human rights
now deals with maltreatment within families’ (ibid, 2002, p.9). Turner’s recent book,
while written from the sociological perspective, would seem to confirm lawyer
Levesque’s observation.

Intra-familial violence is conventionally perceived as doubly domestic: firstly in the
sense that it is perpetrated in the province of the domestic law of the sovereign state by
non-state actors, and therefore outside the jurisdiction of international law, and
secondly, because it is perpetrated in the traditionally sacrosanct privacy of the
individual home. Intimate violence is therefore qualified violence. That is, the
qualification ‘domestic’ serves to make a privileging distinction between the gravity of
public and state violence, and the notion of a lesser, somehow more deserved private
violence, perpetrated by powerful family members upon less powerful family members.
In other words: ‘…family violence still pervasively remains viewed as a domestic,
private matter outside of the governmental control of individual Nation States’
(Levesque, 2002, p.10). This privatisation of family violence results in a perception of
mitigating causes that is beneficial to the perpetrator, rather than a focus on the unmitigatable unacceptability of violence inflicted in the bosom of the family.

One of the dominant themes of *The Practice of Goodness* is that of intra-familial violence, and its long-term effects on the life of the child who experienced it. This violence would be judged to be totally unacceptable by the authorities, if it were inflicted on a non-family member. When Angelica finally reveals her situation to Sister Elizabeth, the solution is that the child is put in the care of the school and no charges are laid against her stepfather, on the proviso that he never attempt to contact her again (Wilson, 2007, p.170). While this course of action certainly saved Angelica from violence, her stepfather and mother escaped any accounting of, or punishment for, their crimes against the child. As well, the solution was highly problematic for Angelica, as she felt herself to be abandoned and punished by the loss of her family, such as it was, as a consequence of speaking out.

How could she make sense of it? How could she live her daily life with the bald reality of this absolute abandonment, brought about, in her child’s understanding, by her telling secrets she had been forbidden, on pain of death, to reveal (Wilson, 2007, p.171).

Other violences such as war and civil uprisings, other rights such as sexual, cultural, reproductive, the rights of the impaired and disabled, the rights of asylum seekers and refugees are all addressed by Turner. However, on the question of the human rights of women and children in intimate relationships, his book is resoundingly silent. When the rape of women in war is addressed, it is couched in terms of its effects on men: ‘Rape signifies to local communities that their men have been defeated, that they cannot protect their own women. In symbolic terms, they are no longer men’ (Turner, 2006, p.78). What, one wonders, does rape signify to the community about their women and children, and why isn’t this signification equally deserving of note in a sophisticated contemporary discourse on universal human rights? ‘We need arguments that flesh out the commonalities of the human, especially social, experience’ Turner (2006, p.63) insists, however the author does not query the status of the reductive cultural norms of the ‘local communities’ that serve, among other things, to deny commonality and thus, humanity. Indeed, it could be argued that in the context of his stated universal goal, Turner’s omission might serve to endorse an unacceptable silence on the vulnerability
and suffering of women and children, excluding them as it does from his stated ‘universal’ aims. I would argue that it is no longer acceptable that the specific abuses faced by women and children, including the ‘domestic’, should be excluded from the notion of the ‘universal’, if indeed such a de-humanising exclusion was ever acceptable.

This silence and exclusion indicates to the reader that the question is considered either too difficult to be addressed in the current human rights discourse, or irrelevant in the sense that it is too normalised to be seen as contestable. As Douzinas observes ‘…the rights of absolute desire have been confirmed time and time again’ (2002, p.374), perhaps to the degree that they have become reified. That could certainly be seen to be the case in intra-familial violence where: ‘The Sovereign, built on the principle of unlimited individual desire…can turn its desire into murderous rage and the denial of all right’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.374). While the Sovereign in the form of the nation-state erupts into murderous rage and perpetrates its atrocities in the irregular upheavals of warfare, the familial manifestation of the Sovereign is shown by organisations such as Amnesty International, the Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights, and researchers such as MacKinnon, Marcus, and Wallace, all of whom will be referred to later in this section, to be in an unremitting state of eruption around the globe, denying rights to any other than itself within the home, across race and class.

In the instance of rape, whether in peacetime or in war, by a family member or a stranger, the sovereign right claimed by perpetrators to fulfil their desire (whatever form that desire may take: power, sexual release, retribution) always over-rules, and therefore renders less than human the victims of that desire, by violating their coherency. That is, by reducing its victims to a means to a narcissistic end through sexual violence (frequently accompanied by physical and psychological violence), the victims’ vulnerable embodiment is exploited, their basic human rights thoroughly transgressed. How can it be, one wonders, that such widespread abuses can be omitted from any contemporary text on human rights and vulnerability? In an attempt to answer this question, Levesque suggests that the ‘…basic obstacles to protection from [family] violence deal more with the cultural saliency of the practices and the contributing
forces that remain culturally condoned’ (2002, p.241). The omission of the practices from global human rights discourses serves to condone them, across cultures.

That the family is built on the love and concern of human beings for one another is a reasonable assumption, and currently a widespread global belief as Western cultural norms become increasingly dominant in societies where once marriage might have been seen primarily in economic terms. When violence occurs within the family, it ruptures these powerful cultural fantasies of family love as a private and safe haven to which one may escape from the trials of the wider world. These fantasies are consistently and hopefully maintained, despite the reality that: ‘Most human suffering around the globe tends to occur by family members or because of family members’ (Levesque, 2002, p.17). It is apparent that there is a deep cognitive dissonance between what human beings believe families to be, and what they are in reality: ‘The reasonableness of those beliefs ensures the failure to recognise the extent of family violence…’ (ibid, p.3).

As Isabel Marcus reminds us: ‘Naming and categorizing is not a neutral activity: it is a deeply political one’ (1994, p.25) therefore the absence of an entire ‘category’ of human rights abuses from Turner’s study, abuses that are perpetrated on a ‘category’ that in fact consists of some 53% of the planet’s population, serves to validate feminist allegations that ‘human’ rights are, in reality, little more than ‘men’s’ rights, as claimed by Mackinnon: ‘Male reality has become human rights principle, or at least the principle governing human rights practice’ (2006, p.147). I note at this point that Mackinnon’s assertion assumes a universal ‘male’, an assumption that is as offensive as that of the universal ‘female’. This writer wishes to acknowledge that there are men who are wrongfully excluded in practice, and subjected to abuse by the orthodox masculinities, as well as the men who dominate the human rights debate. That being said, Amnesty International notes:

In the United States a woman is raped every six minutes, a woman is battered every fifteen seconds. Violence against women is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men and which legitimises the appropriation of women’s bodies for individual gratification or political ends (2001).
Closer to home, in New South Wales in 1996 (the most comprehensive figures available to date, perhaps in itself a comment on the attention of authorities to this matter) Wallace reports that:

More than one in three women reported experiencing violence at some point in their lives. Some 45% of sexual violence and some 55% of physical violence [against women] was committed by a current partner, a previous partner, or a boyfriend/girlfriend or date. Between 1989 and 1996, [Australia wide] 77% of spouse killings…were committed by men on their current or former partners (cited in Graycar, 2002, p.304)

In view of statistics such as these, it is even more remarkable that intra-familial violence is not considered in Turner’s book.

In support of my proposition that in the human rights sense there is little difference between public and private abuses, I turn to Judith Lewis Herman’s groundbreaking book on trauma. In the Introduction she writes:

This is a book about restoring connections…It is a book about commonalities: between rape survivors and combat veterans, between battered women and political prisoners, between the survivors of vast concentration camps created by tyrants who rule nations and the survivors of small, hidden concentration camps created by tyrants who rule their homes (1992, p.3)

Following Herman’s work, I explore the similarities between private and public human rights abuses, using examples from public and private personal experience. I argue that human rights, whilst usually associated with the actions of states and nations as evidenced in the quote from Bryan Turner, are equally as destructively transgressed in the intimate sphere of life in the abusive family; that is: ‘…there are no essential properties for the public/private dyad. Rather, the dyad provides justification for particular political and economic practices and the legal doctrines which buttress them’ (Marcus, 1994, p.26). That is, there is no inherent need for the distinction between public and private life in the matter of violence. Such a distinction can and does profit only the perpetrators. As Mackinnon puts it: ‘The private [is] a space inside which power is left alone by public authorities’ (2006, p.4). That is, the global prevalence of domestic violence against women would indicate that the nation-state refrains from intervening to varying degrees, in some cultures, entirely, due in the main to the perception that domestic violence is less significant: ‘We must recognise that
characterising some violence as both “domestic” and “private” explicitly diminishes its seriousness for women both in theory and practice’ (Marcus, 1994, p.26).

While these observations refer to sociological and legal perspectives on the public/private dyad, Herman draws attention to the psychological similarities that argue for the abandonment of categories of violence in favour of the recognition of the commonality of its effects on human beings. Violence suffered by men in war, for example, can cause the same psychological effects as violence suffered by women in private, however men’s suffering is far more likely to be perceived as ‘heroic’ than is the suffering caused by domestic violence. A concept of “…the ubiquity of human misery and suffering…” (Turner, 2006, p.43) would instead be recognised in a human rights discourse based on our common vulnerability, a vulnerability that is argued for across disciplines. Suffering would not be subjected to a hierarchy determined by how the suffering was brought about, or by which gender it was primarily experienced, in a triage of trauma in which domestically violated women and children are situated at the lowest level.

For example, an interesting differential between domestic violence and violence perpetrated upon children in institutions, is that in the latter case the adult survivors may claim financial compensation as some redress for their suffering. While it is possible for sexually abused children to take legal action against family perpetrators, financial compensation may be much less, or non-existent, depending on the circumstances of the accused. As well, I suggest that it is perhaps less frightening to take action against an institution than against one’s relations or close family friends. Daunting complexities emerge as a consequence of being harmed by those one loves and trusts. These complexities colour complaint. In the case of intra-familial violence, the victims are again disadvantaged by having little opportunity to redress their suffering. In my own case, I have been unable to seek any redress against my mother and stepfather, the latter because he is dead, the former because I was unable to bring myself to make any formal complaint against my mother.

Intra-familial violences are not generally named as abuses of human rights in practice, and are given shelter under the umbrella of private domestic matters from the strength
of opprobrium associated with public and state human rights abuses, for example: ‘Traditionally, intimate partnerships have been viewed as exempt from considerations of justice because they were believed to emanate from higher virtues like romantic love, affection or natural unity of interest’ (Jory, Anderson & Greer, 1997, p.1). I argue that it is ethically impossible to contend that romantic love, affection and natural unity of interest can exist without the just observation of the human rights of the individuals involved, that is, personal respect for a family member’s rights, supported by enacted legislation. ‘In a rising number of relationships premised on love, trust, and respect, death by hammering, strangling or stabbing, as well as many serious injuries, are frequent occurrences’ (Marcus, 1994, p.12). Given the figures quoted earlier in this section, it is reasonable to assume that the situation described by Marcus is largely unchanged since this time. The family can thus be seen as possibly one of the most dangerous places in which a human being can find herself situated. At the same time, certainly for the child, who is subject to the arrangements of power dictated by the adults in her life, the family is often an environment from which she has little hope of escape. There is little as bleak as the experience of a child whose home is the most dangerous place in her life.

The ideals of family life would seem to fall far short of its realities in many cases. The ‘…home is the most unsafe place for women’ (Marcus, 1994, p.5). There is thus the horrifying contradiction of violence within our most intimate setting that globally we consistently fail to address. ‘The house protects the dreamer,’ Bachelard claims, ‘the house allows one to dream in peace…the house is a large cradle…it maintains him through the storms of the heavens and those of life’ (1994, p.6). The house certainly does not serve these purposes for many women and children, though the fantasy persists. Indeed, so strong is the dream that it appears to overrule the reality.

Taking from Turner’s concept of an ethics based on our common human vulnerability inherent in our embodiment, (bearing in mind the noted omissions), together with the concepts of our responsibility for others put forward by Levinas, I offer a framework within which to explore the argument for naming intra-familial violence as terrorism and an abuse of human rights. I argue for ‘…removing the analysis of violence from the realm of the private, from the defining reach of the culturally specific, and from the
arbitrary and limiting boundaries of the nation-state’ (Marcus, 1994, p.17), and for the understanding that the damage done to human beings who are victims of violence and terror inflicted on them by tyrants both public and private, is universal. Intra-familial abuse and political terror are inextricably linked: ‘Acts of violence against women are mass atrocities, mass human rights violations…crimes against humanity pervasively unaddressed’ claims Mackinnon (2006, p.271).

The Personal is…

I elect to ground my analysis in the category of ‘terrorism’, which I maintain has the greatest potential for accurately identifying the psychological, sociological, and political situation of women who are the targets of ‘naturalised’ violence against them in the one place where they are most likely to be situated: their homes (Marcus, 1994, p.19).

‘…[I]ssues of recognition – how to get human beings to recognise other human beings as creatures worthy of their respect, concern and care…’ (Turner, 2006, p.41), are crucial issues in the ethics of the family, that is, the primary care-givers of the child however constituted, from whose example we take our place in the adult world. While most discussions on human rights revolve around the rights that are betrayed by public institutions, governments and their servants, military regimes and so on, the rights betrayed within the abusive family are, in fact, the same rights, to which we are entitled for the same purpose, that is: ‘…human beings have rights that are designed to protect them from their vulnerability…’ (ibid, p.36). It must be assumed that we are entitled to these rights in all the circumstances of our lives: there can be no qualification of the situations in which that vulnerability is entitled to respect, and protection from abuse.

The family is a site in which human beings are at their most vulnerable and least protected, by virtue of the traditionally private nature of domestic life and the power relations within it. In my childhood, what took place behind the blue door of our white house was never spoken of outside that structure, or within it. Even when each was witness to the other’s suffering, the two of us never spoke to one another about it. Such a conversation could never be initiated by me: I was ruled by adults, as is every child. Thus there was never any sense of solidarity in suffering with my mother: indeed, I developed the distinct impression that my presence added to that suffering, as her husband’s attacks on me only served to complicate the difficult circumstances she was
already enduring. The victim causes trouble for those around her, by virtue of her vulnerability.

The sufferings endured by victims of familial abuse and political abuse have in common the exploitation of that vulnerability by others. Vulnerability is an inescapable fact of embodiment, and is, as well, ‘...the underlying foundation of respect for others’ (Turner, 2006, p.36). That is, vulnerability can be respected or abusively exploited within the family and in the wider world, and we are always dependent on the ability of the other to respect that vulnerability, whether the other is known or unknown: ‘If right derives its force from ethics, postmodern human rights are linked with an individual and collective sense of vulnerability – my being hostage to the other…’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.354). A societal refusal or unwillingness to acknowledge domestic terrorism as human rights abuse suggests an ambiguous attitude towards those victims, and the absence of a ‘collective sense of vulnerability’. Intra-familial violence is sovereign domination and repression at the micro level, and denies the universal concept of beings-in-common. Herman observes that in the case of political prisoners: ‘…pair bonding may occur between victim and perpetrator, and this relationship may come to feel like the “basic unit of survival”…The same traumatic bonding may occur between a battered woman and her abuser’ (1992, p.92). And as one famous survivor of childhood abuse noted: ‘…the public and private worlds are inseparably connected…the tyrannies and servilities of one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other…’ (Woolf, 1938, p.147).

Herman points out the commonalities in the psychological repercussions experienced by both sexually abused women and people kept in political captivity, that is, between all those who experience extreme situations in which their vulnerability is exploited, either by governments or a family member. A Vietnam veteran describes his trauma: ‘“...it was like this deep, dark secret I’d never told anybody...”, an incest survivor uses almost the same language’ (1992, p.215). Turner expresses it thus: ‘...misery is common and uniform...there is a unity of human misery’ (2006, pp. 9, 22). Victims of trauma of all kinds ‘...suffer predictable psychological harm. There is a spectrum of traumatic disorders, ranging from the effects of a single overwhelming event to the more complicated effects of prolonged and repeated abuse’ (Herman, 1992, p.3). If we
replace the word *trauma* with the phrase *human rights abuses* then the connection between public and private suffering becomes apparent. If we share a common vulnerability then we must also share common reactions to the exploitations of our vulnerability.

While there are frequent eruptions of accounts of intimate human rights abuses into public consciousness, they are soon forgotten: ‘Denial, repression and dissociation operate on a social as well as an individual level’ (Herman, 1992, p.2). People caught up in domestic turmoil are cast as other by the media: their stories are told as scandals from which the reader is invited to distance herself. In an outstanding example of such distancing strategies, the Australian Coalition government, in 2007, initiated an intervention into child sexual assault and familial neglect in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. (Scrymgour, 2007). No mention was made of the occurrence of child sexual assault and familial neglect in the white community across Australia, and no intervention was launched to address it. The message conveyed by this action was the racialisation of child sexual assault and familial neglect, a denial that the problem exists in white Australia and needs to be equally addressed. Denial, that is, of these matters as issues of human rights, undetermined by race or class.

Denial operates on a deep cultural level, woven into the very fabric of our narratives, as Angelica observes:

> In fairy tales, it is never the mother who hovers, heavy with bad intentions, around the growing girl. In fairy tales it is always the stepmother, as if the notion of a mother consumed by dark passions towards her daughter is too abhorrent for fairy tales to bear. But someone has to bear it. (Wilson, 2007, p.123)

And when Angelica first tells a lover of her life as a child: ‘…the man just stared at her. “I don’t understand people who do things like that,” he said, and picked up a newspaper’ (Wilson, 2007, p.61). In Angelica’s case, her family was a middle-class professional family: her stepfather was a doctor. Denial, it can be argued, is likely to be even more entrenched in this social class, members of whom are highly unlikely to be known to the New South Wales Department of Community Services, which is responsible for the removal of children from families considered to be dangerous for them. Middle-class families have the means to conceal violence as less financially and
socially secure families do not. Middle-class families, I suggest, are not subjected to the amount of official surveillance that poor families must endure: as if the very fact of poverty renders an individual highly suspect in all areas of their lives. Child sexual abuse becomes a matter, then, of class as well as race, allowing families such as Angelica’s to keep their secrets hidden.

Child sexual abuse, as conceptualised in Western countries, provides a powerful example of a form of maltreatment subjected to numerous legal and policy responses fuelled by intense public concern. Yet the sexual abuse of children continues essentially unabated (my emphasis) in every Western country studied by researchers (Levesque, 2002, p. 239).

Such expert observation serves to indicate the prevalence of child sexual abuse in Western culture as well as in indigenous societies, and the continuing reluctance of Western communities to seriously address its prevention within its own milieu.

In *The Practice of Goodness* the questions of familial abuse and political and institutional abuse are dominant themes. The protagonist, Angelica, has suffered sexual, physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her mother and stepfather, causing her development to be retarded as she is deprived of the safe environment she needs to mature. ‘For our house is our corner of the world,’ Bachelard writes, ‘…it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word’ (1994, p.4). What then, of the child whose cosmos consists of abuse and exploitation? What, then, of the child whose topoanalysis reveals primarily sites of torment and terror, domestic or political, in the doctor’s house, or the Woomera Detention Centre in South Australia where asylum seekers and their children were indefinitely imprisoned? (This political issue will be examined below.) On what grounds is the child excluded from the practice of human rights that would, in theory, see her protected from the radical objectification that situates her below the human: ‘If they are objects, they are not human beings, therefore they are not entitled even to the minimum requirements of life, such as food, shelter, clothes or refuge’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.362). In any act of violence the victim is de-humanised and left unentitled, her physical and psychological integrity ruptured.

Turner discusses a process he names ‘enselfment’:
…a social process that is always constructed in terms of a particular experience of embodiment…our experience of the everyday world involves a particular place…within which experiences of the body and of our dependency on other humans unfold (2006, p.7).

The particular place Angelica is given (after she is removed from her grandparents), her ‘universe’, is a place of excessive violence and unspeakable abuses. Her sense of enselfment is severely disrupted by the abuses she experiences, abuses enacted on her body as well as her mind and emotions, that render her dependence on her parents a perilous, life-threatening event rather than an ordinary circumstance of human development. Apart from feeding and clothing her, and sending her to school (basic privileges of her Western cultural heritage not available to many of the world’s abused children), the parents transgress the rest of her human rights. It is as if they keep her alive and acting normally because they would be subject to official attention if they didn’t, and because they need her for their own purposes. Perpetrators of all kinds have in common the fact that they are ‘…people whose imaginations are blunted, who simply refuse the acknowledgement of humanity’ (Nussbaum, 2001, p.396). The parents’ imaginations do not *house* the child, in the sense of providing her with a protected dwelling place wherein she might flourish; this failure of imagination allows them to abuse her: ‘If one cannot house the other person in one’s imagination, one has much less reluctance to do something terrible,’ (Nussbaum, 2001, p.396). The child is placed by her parents, both literally and metaphorically, outside their circle of responsibilities except of the most basic kind, and this allows them ‘to do something terrible’ to her. In their imaginations she is less than human, that is, they do not recognise her vulnerability. As Gaita (1999, p.72), observes, it is the loving gaze of another that makes our humanity visible, both to ourselves and others. One of the methods of dehumanisation is to deprive the prisoner of the opportunity of receiving another’s loving, or concerned and compassionate gaze: the abused child receives no such attention in the very place where every human being has the right to expect it, her home.

Because she is a child she is the prisoner of her parents: she is a child in captivity. She is let out for school, and then she must return to her prison. She cannot object to or resist their attacks on her. She has no idea of when these attacks will occur. She is utterly unable to defend herself against them. She suffers, as does the political prisoner,
‘…the alienation of will by the Other, (Levinas, 1969, p.234) that is, the negation of self-determination and agency by others more powerful, who hold her fate in their hands.

Angelica finds echoes of this early life when she visits the Woomera Detention Centre and sees the conditions in which the asylum seekers are held behind the razor wire in the inhospitable heat and roaring winds. ‘Angelica’s known much in her life, but not institutional violence, state approved violence…she’s now struggling to grasp that the darkness she’d imagined was confined to the family is abroad in the wider world, different, and yet the same’ (Wilson, 2007, p.201). She observes the children in the camp:

Are these scenes here in the detention centre…making intolerable memories for these children? The girl’s scarf whips around her head in the wind. She holds the baby’s hand. They all stare at the visitors. Angelica knows she will remember this scene for the rest of her life, the three solemn children…(Wilson, 2007, p.202).

Suffering, Levinas continues, is worse than death: ‘The supreme ordeal of the will is not death, but suffering, (ibid, p.239). Levinas does not suggest there are any categories of suffering, such as public or private, either directly or by omission. He addresses only the suffering human. Angelica is threatened with death, and with bringing about the deaths of others, if she speaks out. Her daily life is a tremendous ordeal. ‘Suffering, then, is the negation of the person, the negation of their experience and the meaning attached to that person’s life’ (Tascon, 2003). The child is subjected to ‘coercive control’, as is the political prisoner, and: ‘Long after their liberation, people who have been subjected to coercive control bear the psychological scars of captivity’ (Herman, 1992, p.95). The abuses of human rights may be many and varied: their effects on the human spirit are sufferings in common. The accounts of life in detention told to Angelica by Tony are horrific, consisting of major and minor humiliations, failures of protection, twenty-three-hour lockdowns. “He said to me: You are an animal. We will deal with you like an animal.” Guard to detainee in Villawood, he [Tony] says’ (Wilson, 2007, p.185).

Turner goes on to discuss the experience of ‘emplacement’, the sense of there-being, of being anchored safely in a particular space, which he writes is ‘…crucial to our sense of identity, security and continuity’ (Turner, 2007, p.27). For the child, this sense
comes from home and family, and ideally offers the security required for development. The experiences of enselfment and emplacement are the basic human rights of every child, without which the individual suffers indignity and pain. For the political prisoner, deprivation of a sense of identity, security and continuity is used to control and break down resistance, to bend the will to the will of the other: ‘Human rights abuses disconnect and destroy the conditions that make embodiment, enselfment, and emplacement possible…’ (ibid, p.27). In the home, it might well be added, as well as in the wider world.

...the Political

...the first intelligibility, the first meaning of all speech is the face. You could not speak without a face. One speaks to someone. That is even a first truth (Levinas, 1988, p.174).

In *The Practice of Goodness*, the protagonist, Angelica, visits the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC), in South Australia, where several hundred asylum seekers were being held in detention by the Australian Coalition government re-elected in 2001. These asylum seekers endured human rights abuses at the hands of their guards, (Lawrence, 2007; Hughes, 2003; *Sydney Morning Herald*, May, 2003, McKay, 2002; HREOC Report, 2004;), the Department of Immigration, and one another, and in a broader sense, the Australian citizens who were supportive of the government’s actions. Angelica and her friend, Julia, visit this centre and find that:

There is no grass for the children to play on, or for the babies to practice their walking. Angelica watches three small children scuffing aimlessly about in the red dust at the steps of their donga…As Angelica watches a man emerges from another donga…screaming in a language that is unintelligible to her, but his despair needs no translation. He flings himself repeatedly at the wire that keeps him contained, like an animal in a zoo maddened by confinement…The noon temperature is 42 degrees Celsius… (Wilson, 2007, p.201).

The United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, Mrs. Mary Robinson, requested Justice P.N. Bhagwati, Regional Advisor for Asia and the Pacific, to visit and report on the treatment of asylum seekers in detention in Australia in 2002, specifically focussing on the Woomera IRPC in South Australia. This report focused on ‘…the human rights issues related to the conditions of detention and the treatment of persons in the
immigration facilities…” (Bhagwati, 2008). Under ‘General Impression’ the first paragraph of the report reads as follows:

Justice Bhagwati was considerably distressed by what he saw and heard in Woomera. He met men, women and children who had been in detention for several months, some of them even for one or two years. They were prisoners without having committed any offence. Their only fault was that they had left their native home and sought to find refuge or a better life on the Australian soil. In virtual prison-like conditions in the detention centre, they lived initially in the hope that soon their incarceration will come to an end, but with the passage of time, the hope gave way to despair…He felt that he was in front of a great human tragedy. He saw young boys and girls, who instead of breathing the fresh air of freedom, were confined behind spiked iron bars…these children were growing up in an environment which affected their physical and mental growth and many of them were traumatised and led to harm themselves in utter despair.

The treatment of the asylum seekers imprisoned in the Woomera Detention Centre was regarded by Justice Bhagwati as well as authors cited in the previous paragraph, and across media (The Herald Sun, 2002; The Age, 2002; Lateline, ABC Television, 2002), as abusive of their human rights, particularly with regard to children held in detention. The last of these children were finally released from detention in June, 2005. (Hollinsworth, 2006, p.3). In a rights discourse that is founded on our common vulnerability: ‘…human rights are not based on the a priori free will of the subject, but on her a priori pain and suffering which marks subjectivity not as fearful and antagonistic but as ethical’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.354). That is, the recognition of our common vulnerability to suffering is an ethical recognition that enables us to encounter the other non-defensively and openly, recognising her human needs and accepting responsibility for providing for them to the best of our ability. The detention of asylum seekers, while necessary for a limited period, must, if we are to act ethically, be undertaken in a humane manner in full recognition of their vulnerability and suffering, and our responsibility to alleviate that, based on the humanity we share with them. Instead the asylum seekers, by virtue of their indefinite imprisonment alone, were cast as criminals without the right to proper process given to those of us who transgress domestic law. The implication of such treatment is that the asylum seekers are sub-human and that seeking asylum is a criminal offence. These implications deny any recognition of a priori human pain and suffering, and are instead focussed on maintaining an abstract construct of national sovereignty.
Levinas’s thought on our common humanity and vulnerability ‘…seeks to be understood from within a recourse to experience itself,’ (Derrida, 1978, p.83). It is constructed around the ethical experiencing of self and other, rather than being attributed to a unitary mind or consciousness such as god, or divine or mystical rule, or any law of human rights. That is: ‘…preexisting the plane of ontology is the ethical plane’ (Levinas, 1969, p.20). What is experienced in the encounter with the face of the other is our recognition of the vulnerability we share by virtue of our embodiment: we are united in our universal potential for suffering. Without this ethical experience, this recognition of our vulnerable commonality, institutional ethics are hollow and unapplied constructs, as is evidenced by the United Nations Declarations on the human rights of women and children referred to earlier, that in practice have little effect on their real circumstances. I argue that the ineffectiveness of the U.N. Declarations, and the domestic laws of many Western democracies that do address domestic violence, are likely due to the stubborn failure of institutions to recognise the victims’ suffering, in part because of culturally entrenched ideals of family life: ‘Much violence remains hidden and justified in families viewed as precious’ (Levesque, 2002, p.5). That is, there is an overwhelming failure to recognise our shared humanity, because the utopian ideals of family life are served before, and at the expense of, the reality of human suffering within those families. A similar observation might be made in the political world on the question of warfare.

However, Levinas would have it that the concern before all other concerns, the connection before all other connections, the similarity before all other similarities is our common experience of life itself, our shared experiential knowledge of the fragile and vulnerable state of embodiment, and from this all ethics must flow. It can be argued that human rights discourse is dominated by those who are among the world’s least vulnerable: the shaping of laws, international and national, being an activity from which the earth’s most vulnerable are first excluded, and then obliged to depend on more powerful others to act in their interests. Those of us whose vulnerability has been exploited struggle to repair and survive the ruptures: as Herman noted, this can be a struggle that continues long after the violent events. Those engaged in such personally demanding struggles are less likely to reach the heights of international and national law making.
‘…[T]he thought of Emmanuel Levinas can make us tremble,’ writes Derrida, ‘by remaining faithful to the immediate, but buried nudity of experience itself’ (1978, p.82). That is, Levinas’s ethics precede every institutional category such as race, religion, nationality and gender, and locate the original ethical act in the naked moment of the experiential encounter of one human face with the face of the singular other. Stripped of expectations and cultural impositions, the moment of experiential encounter knows only our shared humanity. Therefore: ‘Ethical responsibility precedes rights, gives them their force and legitimacy…Human rights are the instruments of ethics’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.353). If a postmodern human rights discourse was to be situated in a site of ethical responsibility to our common vulnerability, there could be no question but that the human rights of women and children both domestically and politically would be equal with all other claims. Ethical responsibility resists categorisation, referring only to embodiment, and it requires only a ‘…radical sensitivity and responsibility…’ to ‘…the singular demands of the suffering other’ (ibid, p.355) in order to be enacted.

Levinas’s ethics thus contest notions of the self as sovereign, and place us instead ‘…in a constant response to the Other…’ (Tascon, 2003). The response is constant because the other is constant in her vulnerability: this is the condition of embodiment. Sovereignty declares borders that require permission for the other to cross. Levinas’s theories of radical hospitality require a constant opening to the other, implying that the closures demanded by sovereignty can only dehumanise her, and, as well, limit the possibilities for the expansion of the self. Sovereignty is a vertical position, rather than a hospitable and welcoming position of equality between embodied, vulnerable beings. Sovereignty is acted out in Angelica’s family where there is no opening to the other, rather only the exploitation of the other for the gratification of the self. The family is like a sovereign nation: it maintains borders that cannot be crossed by non-members without permission, unless those borders are violated by a state institution. Foucault explains this mirroring thus: ‘For the State to function the way it does, there must be, between male and female or adult and child, quite specific relations of dominion which have their own configuration and relative autonomy’ (1980, p.188). As the narrator of The Practice of Goodness puts it:
...their house, though surrounded by neighbours, stood alone. It wasn’t possible that those neighbours didn’t hear the shouts and screams that came from their house in the night and yet nobody ever did anything to help them (Wilson, 2007, p.216).

Rarely will an outsider intrude on family matters, perhaps for very good reasons, such as fear of repercussion or injury. However, in Angelica’s case, no one alerted the police either. In this the neighbours demonstrated an indifference to the fate of the woman and child that is the antithesis of responsibility.

This response to other also demands the recognition that the other is singular, and can never be incorporated by the self in any way: ‘The face resists possession, resists my powers…’ (Levinas, 1969, p.197). That is, while ethically bound to our responsibility for the other, (awakened by the recognition of our common humanity), we simultaneously respect our difference as ‘…something that can never be assimilated or integrated…’ (Tascon, 2003). We are at once the same in our vulnerability, and differentiated in our singularity: ‘The other is incomparably unique; she is external to categories, norms, principles and rules, in her face humanity is annulled to leave her the only one of her kind…’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.350), while at the same time: ‘…the epiphany of the face…attests the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity, in the eyes that look at me’ (Levinas, 1969, p.213). It is this paradox of absolute alterity and common vulnerability that arouses both the fear of assimilation by the other, and the desire to ourselves assimilate the other, that is at the core of defensive sovereignty, and is the root of colonisation.

This is particularly evident in attitudes to the totally alien, the foreigner, embodied in the refugee:

The refugee is the representative of total otherness…This is the reason why the refugee is seen as such a threat…the terrifying absolute, total Other, the symbol of contamination that otherness may bring upon community and identity. (Douzinas, 2002, p.358)

It is by denying our common humanity with the asylum seekers that we can reassure ourselves of our own safety. To make any identification with them and their circumstances is to allow the possibility into our consciousness that we too, because we
are human and our world highly unstable, might, one day, face a similar situation of homelessness, fear and despair. If the asylum seekers are perceived as absolutely other, then their fate is never likely to befall people like us. ‘The foreigner is the political pre-condition of the nation state…’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.358), and the asylum seeker, the ultimate foreign other, is employed as scapegoat to strengthen the boundaries of that nation state by uniting its citizens not in recognition of our shared humanity, but rather in a common rejection of the foreigners’ human rights and needs in favour of maintaining our ideology of sovereignty.

‘It is my responsibility before a face looking at me as absolutely foreign…that constitutes the original fact of fraternity,’ (Levinas, 1969, p.214). That is, responsibility to other is awakened by the ‘face looking at me as absolutely foreign.’ The responsibility is to accept this absolute foreignness and resist any impulse to incorporate it into same-ness, but rather to offer hospitality and welcome. This respectful acknowledgement of the right to be different is the first ethical act towards the other, inspired by encounter with the other’s face. Foreign in this sense can mean both the stranger and the one who is familiar and intimate: in the sense of being inassimilable, of being unpossessable, every other is always and forever foreign: ‘My neighbour and proximate is, at the same time, the most strange and foreign’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.350). And as Freud observes: ‘…there adheres to the tenderest and most intimate of our love-relations a small portion of hostility which can excite an unconscious death-wish’ (1991, p.88). That is, the most intimate other remains other, and therefore subject to the hostility aroused in the sovereign being by the very fact of their challenging, unknowable otherness. This is amply demonstrated in the reality that the home, that most intimate of settings, can be as well the most dangerous place for women and children, who are the constant other to the domestic sovereign, frustratingly resistant to the sovereign’s unlimited desires for possession and assimilation, objects who can eventually only reclaim their subjectivity by their escape into that most radical alterity, death.

Levinas does not suggest any categories of experience, or construction of institutions for the pursuit of ethics, but encompasses all human engagements in all their complexity, in his primary ethics of the face-to-face encounter and responsibility, from
which all else will flow. His thought ‘…challenges the ideals of instrumental reason and autonomy that sustain male domination…locates radical generosity outside of ontology and therefore of politics’ (Diprose, 2002, p.127). In contrast, by excluding domestic terrorism from his dissertation on human rights, Turner implies a less than universal position, sustaining both ontology and politics although he states that:

The vulnerability thesis is intended to demonstrate that we have regard for human beings because we share a common ontological openness…Care and respect for other people and their cultures cannot take place without a prior recognition of them as human beings (Turner, 2006, p.54).

In this statement he is apparently in agreement with Levinas, however in excluding the domestic, I would argue that Turner ethically disqualifies himself from his stated ideals of ‘care and respect for other people and their cultures.’ The domestic culture that contains women and children around the world, and has as perhaps its most common cross-cultural factor violence against them (at least as perceived by Amnesty International), is not acknowledged in Turner’s catalogue of the sites of human rights abuses, and is entirely excluded from his vulnerability thesis. Turner is not alone in this exclusion: ‘Leading texts and reviews of human rights law…do not even mention family violence’ (Levesque, 2002, p.9). I would argue that the world-wide collusion that permits the continuing exclusion of domestic violence from ideals of ‘care and respect for other people’, undermines accepted concepts of human rights: ‘International human rights naturally inhere in the human person and are inalienable; they are neither granted by the state, nor are they the result of one’s actions in the performance of duties or obligations’ (Marcus, 1994, p. 28). Women are human persons: the global and ongoing failure to address our vulnerability and suffering, which is both personal and political, debases all the narratives of human rights.

The experience of encounter is, according to Levinas, universal. It precedes all cultural rights. It is the moment when the opportunity exists for mutual acknowledgement of our shared humanity and vulnerability. That acknowledgement in turn gives birth to a mutual respect that will not allow us to do the other harm: ‘…the inter-human lies in a non-indifference to one another, in a responsibility of one for another’ (Levinas, 1988, p.165). Angelica and Julia experience a form of such encounter when they finally meet the asylum seekers in the Woomera Detention Centre. ‘These young men are close in
age to Angelica’s own sons. She imagines Harry and Samuel living this life. It is an intolerable imagining’ (Wilson, 2007, p.210). For his part Nasrim, one of the detainees, does his best to fulfill the expectations of his culture by offering hospitality to the visitors in the form of cordial and biscuits: “There is a good guard, a kind man,” Nasrim says, “he gives us these things for us to give to our visitors. He understands that at home, in our country, it is very wrong to greet the visitor with an empty hand and so he lets us have these things for you” (Wilson, 2007, p.209). Through Julia and Angelica’s imaginative and empathic engagement with the men as vulnerable human beings, and the asylum seekers’ proud adherence to symbols of hospitality, the conditions for mutual encounter freed of indifference are established. This is a remarkable event given the cultural differences, not least of which is the position of women in Nasrim’s society, and that which is enjoyed by Julia and Angelica in Australia 2003.

In the vernacular, this acknowledgement of our common humanity is expressed in the popular adage: ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ Levinas expresses it thus: ‘Equality is produced where the Other commands the same and reveals himself to be the same in responsibility…it cannot be detached from the welcoming of the face, of which it is a moment’ (Levinas, 1969, p.214). That is, when an encounter takes place between self and other which is a welcoming of other, rather than oppositional or hostile, an opportunity is created for the expression of mutual equality, which is friendship. If one hospitably welcomes the other as an equal on the basis of our common humanity, an hospitable ground will be established from which all other interactions will flow. This welcome of the face of other is the first act of hospitality. The hospitable aspect of the face-to-face encounter is ethically significant: ‘For hospitality is not simply some region of ethics…it is ethicity itself, the whole principle of ethics’ (Derrida, 1999, p.50). That is, all ethical actions flow from, or fail to flow from, the nature of the first encounter that is established between self and other. From this point of view, any encounter that does not recognise and acknowledge our common humanity is an unethical encounter and all that flows from it will be unethical. ‘Violence can aim only at a face’ Levinas observes (1969, p.225), that is, the face is the primary symbol of vulnerability and humanity; it is the face that welcomes or rejects, even before speech. The concealing of the face from the loving or concerned gaze, and
the withholding of the loving gaze by the face, are both acts of violence that dehumanise the other.

The face-to-face encounter must take place in an ambience of good intention: intentionality is the experiential state that precedes and invites the welcome of the face. ‘…[W]e have reserved the term intentionality, consciousness of…it is attention to speech, or welcome of the face, hospitality…’ (Levinas, cited in Derrida, 1999, p.22). That is, the meeting with other is an affirmation of both self and other through the creation of the space of welcome in which the encounter takes place. As self we desire to offer, as other we desire to receive. This complementary desire is based on acknowledgement of our shared humanity and the common vulnerabilities of embodiment. Our intention is mutual recognition and acknowledgement. The welcome is an invitation to share our common ground and from this basis, to proceed with communication. It is the fundamental stance from which to conduct all relationships: a stance of respect for and acknowledgment of the other’s status as an embodied being, subject to the same vicissitudes of embodiment as is the self.

Levinas argues that this position of mutual acknowledgement and the respect that must inevitably accompany it is the first expression of hospitality human beings make towards one another: ‘The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation…’ (Levinas, 1969, p.201). That is, both parties own the ground on which they stand and each offers it to the other as a host and accepts as a guest, incurring a mutual responsibility to behave respectfully. Hospitality implies borders, whether state or personal. The guest requests entry, and is invited to make the crossing. Every encounter is an opening of borders or a refusal to open. To behave badly towards the other is unethical and inhospitable: ‘The manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, ethics is hospitality…’ (Derrida, 2001, p.17). Inhospitable behaviour is not determined by the category in which it takes place: Angelica’s parents behaved inhospitably towards their child: the Australian government behaved inhospitably towards the strangers seeking asylum. In both situations human rights were abused; behaviours were unethical, disturbing consequences ensued.
In a very real sense, governments which imprison asylum seekers are both turning their own faces from the suffering of other, and denying the other the opportunity to present their faces to citizens of the country. In this way governments deny the asylum seekers the humanising balm of a sympathetic public gaze, and as well deny their citizens the opportunity to hear the strangers’ voices. The question then arises, can any democratic government assume a mandate to take such actions on behalf of, in the name of, its people? In Levinas’s ethical framework, the answer would be no. The mandate would be to behave in a hospitable, that is, ethical, that is, humane, manner: ‘To shelter the other in one’s own land or home, to tolerate the presence of the land-less and homeless on the “ancestral soil” so jealously, so meanly loved – is that a criteria of humanness? Unquestionably so’ (Levinas, cited in Derrida, 1999, p.73).

In a resounding, symbolic expression of the significance of the face, some asylum seekers in Woomera sewed up their lips in protest at not only their prolonged detention, but at the fact that they were held in the desert where they were rendered inaccessible to most Australians (ABC *Four Corners*, 2003, Bhagwati Report, 2002). They were allowed no opportunity to publicly put their case; they were thoroughly silenced through the concealment of their faces. Their banishment, and the banishment from the Immigration Centre of journalists who would have conveyed their stories to the wider world, served to ensure the asylum seekers would not be heard. The sewing together of their lips expressed the useless nature of the voice when no one is there to listen to what it wants to say.

“Words that cannot be heard – a desert.” The silenced voices in the landscape of the gibber desert. What better place to incarcerate those whose stories you wish to silence? Words that cannot be heard…lips that are sewn up, finally, in bloody acknowledgement of the power of denial (Wilson, 2007, p.199).

Denial in this instance was at least twofold: denial of the asylum seekers’ plight in a psychological sense by government, and denial of the public’s right to be fully informed of that plight, leaving it to come to its own conclusions.

While planning to visit Woomera, Angelica is accosted by a woman in her village who says: ‘Why do you care so much about those Muslims, anyway? There’s plenty of our own kind to care about if you want to do good works’ (Wilson, 2007, p.181). The
village woman is expressing an inhospitable attitude to ‘those Muslims’ based on their race and religious practices: they are foreigners to whom we are not seen to have the same obligations as we do to ‘our own kind.’ There is no further explanation from the village woman as to what ‘our own kind’ might mean, however according to Levinas ‘our own kind’ is the whole of humanity, and race and religious practices are secondary to that fact. Because the other is my equal in our embodiment: ‘I am responsible for the Other insofar as he [sic] is mortal,’ (Levinas, cited in Derrida, 1999, p.7). On these grounds alone I am responsible for the other in the same ethical manner that I am responsible for my self, and those who might seem more ‘my kind’ by virtue of race, language, and cultural practices. Levinas does not imply categories of other: anyone who is not self is other. The argument for ‘our own kind’ is also resoundingly hollow when it comes to Angelica’s familial experience: who is more ‘our own kind’ than immediate relations, and yet the most horrific experiences of her life are those she experiences at the hands of her mother and stepfather.

The ethics of hospitality require that consideration of sovereignty, borders and nationalities be considered after human needs. The first right, then, becomes the right of other to seek asylum and be granted safe haven, regardless of his or her origins, and/or whether she is fleeing from domestic or political terrorism. Levinas observed that ‘…a person is more holy than a land…next to a person who has been affronted, this land…is but nakedness and a desert, a heap of wood and stones’ (cited in Derrida, 1999, p.4). Sovereignty would have us consider otherwise, as the rights of a nation to protect its borders are given precedence over the need of the asylum seekers for sanctuary. The Coalition government enacted legislation that through the excision of certain of our islands, prohibited asylum seekers from landing on Australian shores (Border Protection Act, 2001). This legislation freed the Coalition government from any responsibility for the asylum seekers’ predicament, as the excised islands were no longer regarded as being in Australian waters. These seem extraordinary measures to take against the possibility of a few hundred refugees being granted asylum in our country, and for the protection of the nation’s sovereign rights.

Tascon argues that there are ‘…no borders of excision where responsibility disappears’ (2003). Responsibility is without borders: it is based on our shared humanity. Only
death excises us from that. Asylum seekers who arrive by boat, uninvited by the
government, are, through the enactment of this legislation, denied ‘…the most
fundamental of rights, namely, the right to rights…’ (Vetlesen, 1994, p.71), this most
fundamental right being inherent in the state of embodiment. Borders reject the human
encounter and human needs in favour of the protection of the nation state. However,
‘We need to remember that sovereignty is a constructed knowledge, and so are the
exclusionary borders’ (Tascon, 2003). From the perspective of both Levinas and
Turner, the right to have rights is inseparable from embodiment and continues for as
long as we are mortal.

The other has the right to ask for protection: the ethics of hospitality require us to
extend it. Derrida describes this exchange as ‘…the great and generous principles of the
right to asylum inherited from the Enlightenment thinkers,’ (2001, p.11), and as “‘The
Great Law of Hospitality’ – an unconditional law both singular and universal…” (ibid,
p.18), all of which recognised the need to provide sanctuary for those fleeing their
homes. However in the modern world, ‘The stranger becomes an anonymous and
placeless person without citizenship or rights, a member of an underclass that is seen
by the state to form a recruiting ground for criminals and terrorists’ (Turner, 2006,
p.132). It would seem that to the state and its supporters, the stranger seeking asylum is
assumed to be morally corrupted (criminal and terrorist), by her very circumstances,
regardless of how far out of her control those circumstances have been. Decent people
don’t find themselves stateless and needing asylum. The attitude that the victim has
only herself to blame is entrenched across-the-board in Western culture: she is morally
defiled by what has been done to her, whether that is incestuous rape, or having been
dispossessed of everything by bloody civil war. As Herman astutely observes:
‘Observers who have never experienced prolonged terror and who have no
understanding of coercive methods of control presume that they would show greater
courage and resistance than the victim in similar circumstances’ (1992, p.114). This
lack of imagination accounts in part for the phenomenon of blaming the victim. ‘I don’t
understand people who do things like that,’ Angelica’s lover dismissively remarks, and
turns his attention back to his newspaper. (Wilson, 2007, p.61). However,
understanding isn’t the point when dealing with extremities we do not know from
experience and have difficulty imagining. The point is an honest admission that we do
not and cannot possibly know, or even understand, but we can accept without question that the violent events have brought the sufferer to her knees, and she is deserving of our compassionate attention. In the blaming of the victim, the other’s suffering is violently reduced to merely an opportunity for grabbing an exceedingly treacherous high moral ground in which our common vulnerability is resoundingly denied, and where the victim is further abused.

‘…[I]n this sphere hospitality signifies the claim of the stranger entering foreign territory to be treated by its owner without hostility…so long as he conducts himself peaceably, he must not be treated as an enemy’ (Kant, cited in Derrida, 2001, p.21). While a period of detention is initially necessary when people arrive unconventionally on foreign shores, the nature of the detention is an ethical consideration: imprisonment is punitive and hostile and treats asylum seekers as enemies without regard for their circumstances, simply because they are asylum seekers, sans papiers. As Hannah Arendt remarked, without papers one becomes stateless and the condition of statelessness means one has no rights: ‘Human rights without the support of a sovereign state, she argued, are merely abstract claims that cannot be enforced’ (cited in Turner, 2006, p. 3). The asylum seekers imprisoned in Woomera had no consul, ambassador, or state representative to argue their cause or demand they be protected, therefore they were easily regarded as without human rights, or, in some cases, as not human at all: ‘He said to me: “You are an animal. We will deal with you like an animal.” Guard to detainee in Villawood [Detention Centre]’ (Wilson, 2007, p.185).

The concept of a human right to ask for help and protection when necessary seems barely to exist in the modern world: such requests are viewed as impositions, and those who make them as importunate. If we consider these requests from within the frameworks advocated by both Turner and Levinas, that is, if we consider them from the position of respect for our common humanity and our common vulnerability, the outcome will be quite different. To consider these requests in these contexts would create an opportunity for compassionate outcomes that does not exist within a legalistic framework based primarily on the defense of sovereign rights, and the assumed criminality of asylum seekers.
In the same way, if familial suffering came to be understood as a contravention of the human rights of the sufferer, community indignation might be greater and more consistent than it is when these events are shrouded in the cloak of privacy and revealed from time to time as scandals. A just society must demand justice for all its members, whether the abuses they suffer are public or private. Turner’s theories of vulnerability, and Levinas’s theories of respect and responsibility for other, no matter who that other is, are possible frameworks within which to build a more humane, just and safe domestic as well as public world. ‘The postmodern … human rights utopia promises to shelter human relations from reification, from being turned into the non-relation of subjection, dependence and mastery of one over others’ (Douzinas, 2002, p.342). This is applicable personally and politically; there can be no qualification of what ‘human relations’ means, no expedient separation into public and private. Romantic love and the overwhelming feelings of desire and attachment associated with it have proved to be no protection against the abuse of human rights in our most intimate relations. The grounds for exempting intimate relationships from the discourse of human rights are rationally and humanely, inexplicable.

The template for this view has long been in existence: it is the adage ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,’ and is attributed to many of the world’s great religions, Plato, and Swedenborg, among others. (Golden Rule, 2008). Familiarity has rendered the sentiment un-noteworthy; its apparent simplicity is equated with naïveté: it seems to lack sophistication. While it is a simple prescriptive, when fully considered it becomes apparent that it is not easy to put into practice. It demands an attitude, a daily way of being in the world that is learned, and learned over again in its transgression. However, it is worthy of consideration as an answer to Socrates’ famous question: ‘How, then, are we to live?’ This is a question that at first also seems to lack sophistication, and to have become as well, far too familiar to be of note.

However, if the questions are engaged with from Levinas’s experiential position (a position that informs both Turner and Douzinas), that is, if one enters into feeling, embodied relationship with both the adage and Socrates’ question, they are renewed and revitalised, and full of possibility for a better human world. ‘…never,’ Derrida claims, ‘have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine and thus economic oppression
affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and humanity…’ (cited in Douzinas, 2002, p.339), implying that a human rights based on the rights of the individual do not seem to have been effective, and that an alternative practice, founded in acknowledgement of the common vulnerability to suffering shared by all sentient beings, may be timely.
Having considered death, how, then, are we to live?

Part Two
Forgiveness

Must we not accept that, in heart or in reason, above all when it is a question of ‘forgiveness’, something arrives which exceeds all institution, all power, all juridico-political authority?
Jacques Derrida

So let us speak of the mystery of forgiveness. Forgiving is imperative…it is extremely difficult to forgive. I don’t even know if forgiveness exists.
Helene Cixous

In this section I discuss the nature and purpose of forgiveness from a secular perspective, that is, from a horizontal, inter-human position, rather than the vertical, theological position of divine forgiveness and grace. I argue against the appropriation of forgiveness to the service of a philosophical discourse that is ‘…devoted to the building of concepts…’ (Hand, 1988, p.ix) and for ‘…the abandonment of categories and the move to an acategorical thought’ (ibid, p.ix) that allows for multiple understandings and practices of forgiveness. This multiplicity is, I contend, silenced by prescribed concepts, and the ‘…inaccessible Idea…’ (ibid, p.ix). I suggest that the more appropriate context for discussions of forgiveness is within an embodied discourse of human rights. I also discuss the ‘…moral predicament that emerges as a consequence of being injured’ (Butler, 2003, p. 59), and argue that forgiveness is both a practical and an ethical necessity, and that it is the victim’s privilege, task and responsibility. As well, I argue that the perpetrator’s remorse is not necessary for forgiveness, and that the attitude of perpetrators to their victims can be, and frequently must be, irrelevant to the victim’s decisions about forgiveness. I further discuss the need for a paradigm of forgiveness that is based in the embodied experiences of the injured, rather than defined as an abstract ideal to which the injured must aspire. While drawing on the literature to substantiate my arguments, as a survivor of prolonged childhood rape and intra-familial abuse, I claim the authority of profound personal experience of the journey from victimisation to survival and forgiveness, experience that I contend authenticates my observations.
In *The Practice of Goodness*, the narrator concludes:

I don’t know what forgiveness is, though I’ve spent many hours thinking about it. Some say that it’s a state of grace that comes without announcement. Some say it’s a calm, in which there’s no ill will, and perhaps no thought at all. Some say it’s when you know something has ended and move on, without even really noticing (Wilson, 2007, p.232).

None of these propositions comply with the requirements of a concept of ideal forgiveness, whether that is theological or secular. They are, however, a consequence of the embodied experience of injury, and the subsequent profound moral dilemma of the injured party. Simply put, this dilemma is centred on the quite natural desire for rebuttal and redress, and the possibility of the injured party becoming the perpetrator if this desire is acted upon.

In his current (2007) philosophical exploration of forgiveness, Charles Griswold, Professor of Philosophy at Boston University, states that forgiveness should be understood as

…a moral relation between two individuals, one of whom has wronged the other, and who (at least in the ideal), are capable of communication with each other. In this ideal context, forgiveness requires reciprocity between injurer and injured. I shall reserve the term *forgiveness* for this moral relation. All parties to the discussion about forgiveness agree, so far as I can tell, that this is a legitimate context for the use of the term; and most take it as its paradigm sense, as shall I (Griswold, 2007, p.xvi).

A further definition of forgiveness states that it is ‘…first and foremost the foreswearing of revenge…and of the other abuses of resentment’ (ibid, p.33). This definition will be implicit throughout my argument, but not, however, in the context of the validity of its application being restricted to the closed paradigm of ideal conditions proposed by Griswold, a proposition more fully explored throughout this section.

Griswold also states that his inquiry is secular, however within that stated secularity he has, I contend, constructed a dogma, that is, ‘a system of principles and tenets authoritatively laid down, as by a church’ (Macquarie, 1981, p.538). Failure to attain the requirements of these principles and tenets results, Griswold claims, in exclusion from the possibility of forgiveness: ‘Where none of the conditions is met, the threshold of what will count as forgiveness is not crossed; sadly, and painfully, in such cases we
are either unforgiven, or unable to forgive’ (2007, p.212). I discuss the ramifications of this prohibition primarily from the perspective of the injured, and suggest as well that it is an extremely serious matter to cast either the injured or the injurer as beyond the ameliorating possibilities of forgiving and forgiveness, whether this is done under the umbrella of secularism or religion.

While Griswold’s definition is a legitimate context for the use of the term forgiveness, I argue that to declare this context the ‘paradigm sense’ taken by ‘most’, is to exclude from the experience of forgiveness millions upon millions of the injured who, for various reasons, are denied or legitimately shy away from the possibility of communication with their injurer. I argue instead for a much broader understanding of forgiveness, one in which unilateral forgiveness, that is, forgiveness that does not require the co-operation of the perpetrator, is included in the forgiveness paradigm. Injuries after which there is a possibility of reciprocity are likely to be less common than those in which the perpetrator is unavailable or unrepentant. Such latter injuries can range in nature from the offended householder whose freshly painted wall is vandalised by unknown graffiti artists, to the victim of sexual assault whose rapist cannot be found, to the survivors of genocide whose tormentors are dead or unidentified. That is, circumstances which Griswold casts as ‘non-paradigmatic’, for example ‘…forgiving the dead or unrepentant…’ (p.xvi), are likely to be more frequent than instances in which the injured and injurer are capable of communication and resolution.

As well, Griswold situates his argument ‘…in the ideal…’ (2007, p.xvi), and circumstances extraneous to this ideal are described as ‘…lacking or imperfect relative to the paradigm’ (2007, p.xvi). That is, if the circumstances do not fit the ideal paradigm of dyadic forgiveness due to their failure to comply with the necessary ‘…baseline conditions…’ (2007, p.115), then, he claims: ‘…you are not engaged in forgiving, but doing something else’ (2007, p.114). The construction of an ‘ideal’ that is necessarily exterior to the embodied and imperfect human condition, complete with prescriptives and prohibitions for its attainment, is not entirely dissimilar to constructing a theology, not least in that both demand an original act of faith and belief in the existence of a fixed transcendental, from which all subsequent thinking ensues.
That is, while the secular as proposed by Griswold is firmly disassociated by him from the religious, their prescriptive, exclusionary, and monolithic discourses are remarkably similar. For example: ‘…we count the capacity to forgive – in the right way and under the right circumstances – as part and parcel of a praiseworthy character’ (Griswold, 2007, p.xiv) [my emphasis]. Who are the ‘we’ represented by this text, and by what authority and process do they determine the ‘right way and circumstances’ for forgiveness, and how is the ‘praiseworthy character’ to be determined? The phrase ‘right way and circumstances’ inevitably makes reference to a metaphysical authority that ultimately determines what is ‘right’, unless Griswold is assuming this authority for himself.

In a paper entitled ‘Derrida, Death and Forgiveness,’ Andrew McKenna observes that Derrida

…claims to find in Western Philosophy a crypto-theology. His analyses regularly uncover presuppositions about foundations and primacies, points of origin and authoritative presences that correspond to nothing other than a Supreme Being, however veiled or unapproachable. (1997).

I contend that it is just such a crypto-theology that Griswold has constructed in his philosophy of forgiveness, in which forgiveness is perceived first and foremost as an ideal concept located in the authority of an unidentified exteriority, and one which the imperfect human being must struggle to attain.

In claiming the necessity for a sovereign ideal that logically creates notions of lack, imperfection, exclusion and failure, Griswold is describing a vertical concept of forgiveness that can be seen as largely irrelevant to the temporal and inter-human experience of suffering and forgiveness, as viewed through the secular lens, and through the horizontal discourse of human rights. Human beings are most usefully served, I would argue, by considering forgiveness not as an ideal whose conditions one may fail to meet, and perhaps through no fault of one’s own, but rather as a universally accessible, cosmopolitan practice.

Below ideal baseline conditions for legitimate entry into Griswold’s country of forgiveness: ‘…may lie excuse, or condonation, or explanation, or any number of
psychological strategies from rationalisation to amnesia…’ (Griswold, 2007, p.116). That is, if I assert that I have forgiven my perpetrator without having entered into communication with him, and without the benefit of his expressed remorse, then I am deluding myself. ‘…just being in the psychic state of no longer feeling resentment…whether that state is induced by medication, therapy, an astonishing act of will, an ostensibly religious revelation, or what have you,’ (2007, p.116), is not, Griswold continues, sufficient to qualify as forgiveness. However, as any survivor will attest, there is no such thing as ‘just being’ free of resentment: the struggle to overcome that feeling and everything associated with it, is enormous, frequently ongoing and often demands more than one ‘astonishing act of will.’ There is also a considerable difference between being medicated, and exercising one’s will. This argument for what forgiveness is not and why it is not, is unconvincing, as is any argument that concludes an extensive list of unrelated generalisations with the phrase ‘what have you’.

To present an injured party with an ‘ideal paradigm’ for forgiveness that insists, as an absolute necessity, on encounter and communication with the perpetrator might be little more than a further abuse of that injured party in two ways, at least. The victim of a violent crime may not wish to physically encounter the perpetrator. To declare her beyond the healing experience of forgiving because of this reluctance is, I contend, a further and compounding offense against her humanity. Our ability to forgive, or to enter the process of forgiveness, is one of the attributes that defines us as fully human, and releases us from the destructive pain of resentment and desire for revenge. Are we then to say to Holocaust survivors, for example, who cannot or will not meet with their perpetrators, that they are forever denied the experience of forgiving them? Or, in the case of survivors who have forgiven perpetrators, unmet and unreconciled-with, that these survivors are deluding themselves, that what they imagine themselves to be experiencing is not forgiveness at all, rather it is some psychological or religious ‘what have you?’ Is it necessary then, that for forgiveness to be real, the injured party will be required to suffer more than he has already suffered, through an unwanted or unsuccessful encounter with his perpetrator? Griswold’s ideal paradigm would appear to have it so.
For example, a meeting might take place in which the perpetrator reveals that she is entirely unrepentant. According to the ideal paradigm, the victim is now denied the relief of forgiveness because the perpetrator does not consider she has done anything wrong. This, I argue, yields all power to the perpetrator, further disempowering the victim, and demanding that he wait upon his injurer’s change of heart, however unlikely that might be, before forgiveness can ensue. Reciprocity between injurer and injured is undoubtedly desirable and necessary in circumstances where both seek to continue their relationship, however for untold numbers of victims this is not the situation, and broader concepts of forgiveness must be applied: the injured cannot simply be disqualified from the possibility of experiencing forgiveness. (In passing, I suggest that a paradigm that is so exclusionary in its nature, can hardly be qualified by the descriptor ‘ideal.’)

The abstract concept of an ‘ideal’ circumstance for forgiveness, compared to which reality is frequently and perhaps inevitably ‘…lacking or imperfect…’ denies the authenticity of any individual injured party’s embodied experience of forgiveness that does not comply, without any legitimate grounds on which to base that denial. In my own case, for example, the injurer died before I was old enough to have maturely considered the question of forgiveness. However, decades later I have forgiven my stepfather, that is, I have foresworn all desire for revenge, and any of the other abuses of resentment. I have done this in the absence of the perpetrator’s co-operation. I have not, however, fulfilled the requirements of ideal forgiveness. My experience of forgiveness is therefore cast as ‘non-ideal’ (Griswold, 2007, p.114) and I have no hope of ever attaining the ideal, through no fault of my own. I am thus further victimised, I contend, in the following ways.

A class system has apparently emerged in the demography of forgiveness: on the one hand we have the fortunate injured whose perpetrators are decent enough to confess and express remorse. For this class of sufferer, ideal forgiveness is realisable. On the other hand, there are the injured such as myself, whose perpetrators are either dead or unwilling to express remorse, or even incapable for any number of reasons. ‘…if the victim is alive and the offender deceased…the ideal conditions cannot, under such conditions, all be met, or met perfectly…’ (Griswold, 2007, p.66).
Griswold has argued as well that the capacity to forgive (under the right conditions), indicates a ‘praiseworthy’ character. Am I therefore to assume that as my perpetrator’s lack of co-operation denies me the expression of my capacity to forgive, that this is an indicator of the unpraiseworthiness of my character? How does the perpetrator’s refusal of reciprocity in any way reflect upon my capacity to forgive? Am I not even more noble, perhaps, in finding it in myself to forgive in spite of the perpetrator’s lack of repentance? But the conditions of ideal forgiveness will not allow me to do that. Forgiving the unrepentant ‘…collapses into condonation’ (Griswold, 2007, p.49) claims. The concept of ideal forgiveness, therefore, serves only to further undermine the victim’s autonomy and render her assessment and feelings irrelevant to the process, which is centred on the perpetrator’s willingness or unwillingness to express responsibility and remorse.

There is also the question of trust. It is perhaps unreasonable to insist as a condition of forgiveness, on an encounter with a perpetrator who has profoundly betrayed the victim’s trust. Forgiveness, this paradigm is insisting, requires that the victim trust the proven untrustworthy perpetrator both sufficiently to be again in his presence, and to believe in his remorse. There are situations in which, for the wellbeing of the victim, this is, or ought to be declared an unacceptable and intolerable requirement. For example, as the child victim of a rapist who regularly threatened my life, and who perpetrated upon me violent physical abuses, as well as sexual and emotional, there is nothing I would desire less than to be in the same room as this individual, were he still alive. Not because I cannot forgive him, but because I can never trust him, and to be again in his physical presence would cause me more terror than I can begin to imagine. Forgiveness, I argue, does not require me to either trust, or overcome my very real apprehensions about this person, apprehensions that are healthy, self-protective, entirely to do with my recovered self-esteem, and thoroughly grounded in the dreadful reality of his actions.

While I have forsworn revenge and its attendant abuses, I am not obliged to trust the offender, or to put myself at physical and or emotional risk by personally encountering him again in order that forgiveness may be fully enacted. What might well be enacted in such circumstances is frightening to contemplate, and need bear no relation at all to
forgiveness. What the victim is obliged to do under Griswold’s paradigm is take unacceptable risks with her wellbeing, after she has already suffered intolerable abuse. Forgiveness, I argue, by its very nature, cannot entail further exposure and suffering as a condition of its full realisation and expression. And yet, Griswold would have it, there can be no forgiveness unless such conditions are fulfilled. ‘…forgiveness is fundamentally an interpersonal process whose success requires actions from both parties. Anything an individual can accomplish on his or her own regarding forgiveness is less than fully adequate’ (2007, p.212) [my emphasis]. This demand for reciprocity, I argue, places the victim in an absolutely untenable position that might be, quite frankly, horrible.

While Griswold clearly states that his is a ‘philosophical exploration of forgiveness,’ I contend that in his claims of what forgiveness is not, he is transgressing the stated parameters of his inquiry, and providing no evidence of any kind for his claim that ‘psychological’ strategies are, in certain circumstances, masquerading as forgiveness and are not the real thing, but are instead induced by some ‘…what have you…’ (2007, p.116). At the outset he states that ‘…forgiveness is a concept that comes with conditions attached. It is governed by norms’ (Griswold, 2007, p.xv). As McKenna observes:

...all philosophical reflection on language strives to stabilise meaning and anchor it in principles that are immune to critique: nature, ideas, and history are simply passwords for an effort – called ‘logocentrism’ by post-modernists – that Derrida claims is as relentless as it is futile (McKenna, 1997).

The question of forgiveness is, I suggest, an urgent one in today’s world. As such it is worthy of an exploration that inquires widely and deeply into all its possible embodied practices, and we are ill served, I contend, by limited and exclusionary philosophical ideals of what it is or is not.

In her book on trauma and recovery, Judith Lewis Herman acknowledges the very common fantasy of revenge to which trauma survivors can resort, in order that they might reclaim a sense of control and empowerment. In The Practice of Goodness, Angelica imagines confronting her stepfather when he is bound in chains and at her mercy: ‘Angelica approaches the man. “Don’t,” he begs her, “Please don’t.” “Why
not?” she snarls, “it’s what you wanted isn’t it?” She laughs at him. She’s feeling very strong’ (Wilson, 2007, p.229). ‘The revenge fantasy is often a mirror image to the traumatic memory, in which the roles of perpetrator and victim are reversed,’ Herman observes, (1992, p.189). However, as Angelica discovers, the fantasy does not bring relief. The only way she can do to him what he has done to her is to become equally depraved: ‘To satisfy our desire for revenge, we must be agents in bringing harm to others who have harmed us, and we must act with the intention to cause this harm…’ (Govier, 2002, p.3).

That Angelica has justification for her revenge fantasies doesn’t alter the fact that she must find it in herself to act, with deliberation and awareness, as the perpetrator has acted towards her. This proves to be a stumbling block: ‘Suddenly, she’s ashamed. When light comes she crosses to the man. She unlocks his chains. She helps him lie down…He says Thank you, thank you for unlocking the chains. Then he closes his eyes… The man has gone’ (Wilson, 2007, p.230). Angelica is deprived of her revenge, or rather, has deprived herself, because she is sickened at the prospect of becoming like him, that is, of joining the ranks of perpetrators, no matter how strong the justification may seem. ‘…[U]sing the suffering of a person or persons to satisfy oneself is morally objectionable, because it amounts to the treatment of wrongdoers as a means only, failing to respect their human worth’ (Govier, 2002, p.11). Using an other as a means of personal gratification is precisely what her stepfather has done to Angelica: there is no way of her exacting revenge without herself committing the same offense. This places Angelica, the victim, at the very heart of a very moral predicament.

Butler suggests that ‘…it may be that the very way in which we respond to injury offers the chance we have to become human’ (2003, p.58). That is, commensurate punishment, or revenge, dehumanises the victim, however, what humanises her is the opportunity she now has to develop a ‘…model of ethical capaciousness that understands the pull of the claim, and resists that pull at the same time, providing a certain ambivalent gesture as the action of ethics itself’ (Butler, 2003, p.60). What I understand Butler to be suggesting here is that in the space of uncomfortable tension created by opposing claims (to punish or to abstain from punishing), the injured party can realise her humanity. To be human, then, is among other things, to be able to live
with powerful and irreconcilable desires with regard to those who have injured us. There is no suggestion that the victim minimise or condone her injuries, rather that she fully recognise the wrong that has been done to her, acknowledge her desire to make the perpetrator suffer in kind, and consciously refrain from acting on that desire. ‘That we are impinged upon primarily and against our will is the sign of a vulnerability and a beholdeness that we cannot will away,’ Butler observes (2007, p.57). This vulnerability is the inevitable state of both victim and perpetrator, as it is an inescapable condition of embodiment and relationship. We are always in a state of ‘beholdeness’ to others, if that word is understood to mean that we live in hope, conscious or unconscious, that we will not be harmed by them. We are always dependent on their goodwill, and their decision to refrain from harming us. This is an unwilled beholdeness, that is, it is a necessary result of embodiment.

‘What might it mean,’ Butler continues, ‘to make an ethics from the region of the unwilled?’ (2003, p.58). In order to achieve this, one takes one’s vulnerability, exploited by the perpetrator, as the sign and reminder of our common vulnerability: our injury, then, alerts us to our responsibility for other. ‘It is only from the point of view of the injured that a certain conception of responsibility can be understood’ Butler claims (2003, p.59). That is, the responsibility of the injured, Butler seems to be arguing, is to develop the capacity to refrain from harmful action against her perpetrator, and it is only in circumstances of injury that this responsibility can be enacted. In this Butler seems to be referring to responsibility for other as defined by the ethics of Levinas, and discussed in the previous section. This is what I have described as forgiveness being the privilege, task and responsibility of the victim. ‘There is, she is discovering against her will, a universal imperative to forgive’ (Wilson, 2007, p.88).

While the victim may not consider the matter in terms of the perpetrator’s ‘human worth’, she must, if she is to be released from the aftermath of traumatic events, consider the effects of exacting revenge on her own wellbeing. The desire for revenge fixes the victim in her trauma: forgiveness brings release:

Forgiving…is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven (Arendt, 1998, p.241).
While in agreement with most of this observation, whether or not ‘the one who is forgiven’ is freed from the consequences of his or her act is at times difficult, if not impossible to determine. Arendt’s observation would seem, like Griswold’s, to be founded on the assumption of reconciliation, in which the wrongdoer makes acknowledgment, and expresses remorse.

I have argued that the wrongdoer can be wholly absent from the process of forgiveness and the victim may still be freed from the consequences of the wrongdoing, to the degree that he or she can pursue a satisfactory life. Indeed, to suggest otherwise is to condemn the victim yet again to the whims and desires of the perpetrator: to have the victim wait upon the perpetrator’s pleasure, and to situate the act of forgiveness within the perpetrator’s sphere of control. The decision to exact or forgo revenge and the desire to forgive are, I would argue, entirely individual matters. ‘I grant that the act of forgiveness properly belongs to the injured party to offer…’ Griswold states (2007, p.91), though within, one presumes, his stated dyadic ideal. These are not decisions that can be legitimately approved or disapproved of by another agent: ‘Whether she says “I forgive” or “I do not forgive,” in either case I am not sure of understanding…This zone of experience remains inaccessible, and I must respect its secret’ (Derrida, 2001, p.55).

The ‘secret’ Derrida refers to I understand to be the experiential relationship between victim and perpetrator, a relationship established by virtue of being joined in the same act, albeit in polarised roles. An event takes place: the actors are both involved in this event; a relationship is created. This is a relationship of horrible and unwanted intimacy, at least on the part of the victim, (abuse is always intimate: even when inflicted en masse it is always experienced as personal by its victims), and as such, is as secret and complex as any intimate relationship, particularly when the abuse is conducted over a prolonged period by the same agent. The notion of forgiveness as reconciliatory might well be inappropriate in circumstances such as these: the victim may not wish to continue any relationship with the perpetrator and it may not be in her best interests to do so. Forgiveness as ‘…a restoration of inter-subjective ties, a re-creation of a “we” where two “I”s had sprung apart’ (Scruton, 2007), is but one of its aspects: I argue that whether or not this aspect is relevant to a particular situation can only be finally determined by the victim.
I have experienced disbelief when I’ve observed to others that I’ve forgiven my stepfather; the inference being that I have been so irreparably damaged and brainwashed by the perpetrator that I am incapable of rational thought on the topic. This is highly offensive to a survivor, and adds to her sense of disempowerment. Eva Kor (2008), a survivor of the infamous Dr Mengele’s experiments on twins in Auschwitz, has been subjected to considerable attack by some of her fellow survivors, for her public decision to forgive the Nazis. ‘Forgiveness is really nothing more than an act of self-healing and self-empowerment,’ she observes, a strikingly opposing position to the views of Griswold and Scruton. I have come to understand this disbelieving, and at times angry reaction against those who forgive their abusers, as a misunderstanding of the nature and purpose of forgiveness; a mistaken belief that forgiveness necessarily implies reconciliation with the perpetrators, and/or a forgetting, or minimisation of their crimes, all of which devalues the survivor’s experiences. Forgiveness, then, becomes associated with self-abasement and self-delusion. However, ‘…what is forgiven will be remembered; the issue is whether it will be remembered with or without accompanying feelings of hatred and vindictiveness’ (Govier, 2002, p.108). This is the secret that may be incomprehensible to those who have not suffered extreme abuse; that one will never forget, but if one is to fully live one’s own life, one must forgive. Derrida recognises that this ‘secret’, this ‘zone of inaccessible experience’ must be respected, if not understood, if one is to avoid further abusing the survivor by questioning her capacity for judgement and action on her own behalf. Eva Kor emphasises that she speaks only for herself in the matter of forgiving the Nazis, and she indignantly refutes any attempts made by others to speak on her behalf, or to tell her what her position should be. That she is empowered by her acts of forgiveness is undeniable. No longer enslaved by bitterness, misery, hatred, and desire for revenge, she has established a museum to the Holocaust in her American hometown, (for she will never forget, and does not wish to), and lectures around the world. Hatred, I argue, is as powerful a bonding agent as is love, without any of the compensations, and along with Eva Kor, I attest to the glorious and hard-won liberation of forgiveness.

While justice may sometimes prevail in the form of juridico-political action, this is not the same thing as forgiveness, which can never be granted by an institution, but
originates in the individual human heart. In many cases, such as my own, there is no formal punishment of the crimes; this is the case for many victims of intra-familial violence, as has been established in the previous section. Forgiveness, however, is the ‘…something that exceeds…’ institutions, ‘…forgiveness must engage two singularities: the guilty…and the victim’ (Derrida, 2001, p. 42). In this sense, much literature and theory on forgiveness lacks the humility Derrida expresses: it lacks the acknowledgement that there is a serious distance between thought and opinion on these matters, and experience, particularly of extreme abuse, both intra-familial and political. Thus: ‘…many victims of human rights violations criticised the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the grounds …that it had been too forgiving, had pre-empted what should have been their exclusive right to forgive, and had wrongly put pressure on victims to forgive’ (Govier, 2002, p.93). To the degree that one victim heartbreakingly claimed: ‘The oppression was bad, but what is much worse, what makes me even more angry, is that they are trying to dictate my forgiveness,’ and: ‘Tutu knows very well that he is not the person to forgive on behalf of victims’ (Govier, 2002, p.93). From the victim’s perspective, for another agent to ‘forgive’ one’s perpetrator is an act of breathtaking arrogance and insensitivity that further effaces the suffering and traumatised human being. As well, the pressuring of victims to ‘forgive’ can result in little more than lip service, and further abuse: ‘Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (thought not necessarily individual or private) affair…’ (Arendt, 1998, p.241). Again, Arendt presumes relationship: again I argue relationship is not necessary to forgiveness, or, in certain circumstances, desirable.

What much of the literature on forgiveness has in common is the suggestion that the wrongful act be separated from the actor who perpetrates it. ‘There is a logical and ethical distinction between the acts and the agent who committed them,’ Govier claims, (2002, p.110). This distinction is that the perpetrator is a human being and therefore: ‘…should never be regarded as entirely lacking in potential for moral change’ (ibid, p.110), while the act is irrevocable. The perpetrator, as long as he is mortal, is assumed to have the potential for repentance and reformation.

This is a distinction that can be extremely difficult for victims to concern themselves with. In my own situation, my childhood sexual abuse was prolonged over several
years: the perpetrator frequently expressed remorse, but repeated the offence over and over again. A profound betrayal of trust took place, which, it can be argued, in some circumstances can never be reinstated, even if the perpetrator undertakes reform.

While one is being raped, one does not concern oneself with the distinction between the rapist and the act of rape. There is no such distinction. Even when safe, one is disinclined to make such distinctions: the act and the actor may be separate, however the actor commits the act, thus bridging any separation between the two by his or her willing and deliberate engagement. The actor brings the act to life, without him or her that act would have no existence. ‘…the act is the work of the agent…the thought of the action is inseparable from that of the actor whose action it is’ (Griswold, 2007, p.56). There is no rape without a rapist. It is an inter-human event. The perpetrator forever remains the actor who has done these things, even when these things are forgiven, for forgiveness does not require forgetting on the part of the victim or the perpetrator. The perpetrator must incorporate into his or her personal narrative the inescapable fact that he or she has acted in these ways against another human being. The perpetrator has proved herself capable of abusive acts: in her action she has made the act a part of who she is. In the case of the rapist, he must forever be aware that under certain circumstances he is capable of this act: he cannot claim, I would argue, a moral distance between himself and the act he perpetrates. It is written in his body, as much as it is written in the body of his victim. Indeed, it is only by accepting full responsibility for the act, that there can be any possibility of moral change.

He can, however, claim that a rapist is not all and everything that he is, or is capable of, and to deny him that claim is inhumane, and unjust. This position, I argue, is not the same thing as separating the act from the actor, though it may well be what is intended by proposing such a separation.

It is difficult, therefore, to understand the purpose of the common distinction between the actor and the act: more truthful, perhaps, to acknowledge there can be no such distinction, and grant the possibility of moral change in spite of that. That is, our notions of what it is to be human might expand to accept that the act and the actor are not separable, and to forgive in spite of that, in other words to agree that: ‘Forgiveness accepts that the past is unchangeable, but asserts that our responses to it are not’ (Griswold, 2007, p.29). What we do and what is done to us contributes to the sum total
of who we are: the perpetrator must live with this reality just as much as the victim must live with the reality of her suffering. However, the perpetrator is no more in entirety a perpetrator, than the victim is in entirety a victim.

A further difficulty with separating the act from the actor is that it can seem to imply that the actor is in some way less responsible for his or her act because of that separation. Separation can seem like denial. However, an integral part of accepting responsibility is ownership of the action: ‘This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine,’ Prospero admits, accepting responsibility for either the slave Caliban, whom he has formed, or his own dark nature, or both. (Shakespeare, c. 1611). That is, I am not separate from this act and it is not separate from me: the difference is not that we are separate, but that I cannot undo what I have done, even if I do not remain the person who was capable of doing it. This does not imply separation: it implies irrevocability. Neither does the lack of separation from the act condemn me to being eternally characterised by it: just as the victim is more than his victimhood, the perpetrator is also more than her crime. The victim is not encouraged to separate from the injury, rather to incorporate it into his life experience and history, to forgive but not necessarily forget. Neither should the perpetrator be encouraged to forget, or distance herself from her actions, but to take responsibility, make amends and forgive herself.

It is perfectly possible, therefore, as part of forgiveness, to leave the offender to his or her fate, with the gift of liberation from the victim’s ill will. That is, in her forgiveness the victim has granted the perpetrator: ‘…freedom from vengeance, which incloses both doer and sufferer in the relentless automatism of the action process, which by itself need never come to an end’ (Arendt, 1998, p.241). This is not, and does not have to be, any kind of reconciliation between victim and perpetrator. Rather the reconciliation takes place within the victim, in the sense that she reconciles herself to the inescapable realities of her experiences, the undesirable effects of pursuing revenge, and the irreversible nature of the wrongs that have been done to her.

Certain acts, then, do not definitively characterize a human being, whether those acts are good or bad. Ethically, it must be assumed that every human being has some capacity for reflection, and it is a denial of human rights to declare otherwise. It is a denial of human rights to declare any human being to be lacking in potential for change. Every human being is entitled to the opportunity for reflection, remorse and
atonement. No one can assume the power of declaring a human being to be beyond redemption. The act itself, however, as Arendt points out, is irredeemable and she calls this ‘…action and action’s predicaments…the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done…’ (1998, p.237). No matter how much remorse a perpetrator feels the act remains done and will not be undone. That is, the act is no more erased from the perpetrator’s life history, or the history of the world in which it took place, than it is from the victim’s life. The perpetrator remains a human being who has done this grievous thing, and while he or she may be forgiven, the fact that they have acted in these ways ought not to be forgotten or repressed; it must be incorporated into our notions of what human beings can do. It is as much a part of our being as are heroic actions. Monstrous acts are only committed by human beings though they are frequently described as animal. To be human is to carry the potential for “monstrous” behaviour, as much as it is to carry the potential for any other kind of behaviour. ‘The language of monstrosity occludes this distressing and perplexing thought, and is therefore misleading’ (Griswold, 2007, p.75) observes, and: ‘They were not monsters,’ writes Primo Levi of his concentration camp guards, ‘I didn’t see a single monster in my time in the camp. Instead I saw people like you and I…’ (cited in Griswold, 2007, p.75).

This is not to advocate eternal blame and punishment: ‘…radical evil-doers still belong to the constituency in which considerations of fairness are relevant,’ argues Gaita, (1999, p.10). If, as suggested in the previous section, we are to base a system of human rights on the fact that we share a common vulnerability by virtue of embodiment, there can be no exceptions to that commonality: crimes and abuses are perpetrated by embodied, vulnerable human beings. This is what I understand Gaita to mean by the phrase ‘considerations of fairness’; that even the most depraved of us, as long as he or she is alive, is entitled to considerations of fairness by virtue of his or her mortality. We cannot deny this mortality and the human rights to which it is entitled, without ourselves becoming abusive. However, because the capacity, the potential exists for remorse and change, this is no guarantee that it will be exercised: perpetrators, by their very nature, are frequently disinclined to acknowledge their offenses and express remorse: ‘Genuine contrition in a perpetrator is a rare miracle,’ Herman observes (1992, p.190). It would seem that the very ability to perpetrate gross abuses on human
beings requires a corresponding lack of interest in, or sorrow for, the suffering they endure.

How, then, are we to address human rights abuses, public and private? In particular, those abuses that seem to be beyond the scope of forgiveness: ‘…these crimes, at once cruel and massive, [that] seem to escape…in their very excess, from the measure of any human justice…’ (Derrida, 1997, p.33). A mechanism must exist for humanity to deal with the irreversibility of such massive actions, and Arendt suggests that: ‘The alternative to forgiveness, but by no means its opposite, is punishment, and both have in common that they attempt to put an end to something that without intervention could continue indefinitely,’ (1998, p.241). Punishment, however, comes from a cultural system of law, and in itself need bear little relation to forgiveness. Arendt continues: ‘It is therefore quite significant, a structural element in the realm of human affairs, that men are unable to forgive what they cannot punish and that they are unable to punish what has turned out to be unforgivable’ (ibid, p.241). I would argue the first part of this statement is incorrect: people can be capable, and at times must be capable, of forgiving what they cannot punish, because for any number of reasons the perpetrator is absent and cannot be held to account. Punishment does not necessarily put an end to anything, on the contrary, forgiveness does. Punishment is determined by the rule of law, but this rule has little jurisdiction in the human heart. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is entirely to do with the human heart and it is, in the end, only the human heart that can determine a situation to be ended. Punishment may bring some gratification to the aggrieved, a sense of fair and decent retribution, however these feelings do not guarantee forgiveness, and if they are grounded in desire for revenge, they will never be appeased by punishment.

The rest of Arendt’s observation is also contestable: punishment of some kind may be possible, to the extent of life-long deprivation of liberty, however whether or not the punishment fits the ‘unforgivable’ crime is almost impossible to determine. How, in the first place, is a transgression determined ‘unforgivable’, and by whom? ‘…the injured party must decide what forgiveness is, and thus must decide the question under discussion here,’ writes Griswold, on the matter of the unforgivable (2007, p.91). (I note in passing that the first part of this observation: ‘…the injured party must decide
what forgiveness is…’ would seem to render pointless his entire construction of the paradigm of ideal forgiveness, and imply that we have, after all, been engaged in an intellectual game of “what if”). The unforgivable he defines as both ‘…beyond one’s ability to forgive…’ and ‘…not to be forgiven in principle’ (ibid, p.90), both of which are to be determined primarily by the injured party.

Arendt makes a distinction between ‘trespassing’, and ‘the extremity of crime and willed evil’ (1998, p.239), the latter being described by Jesus as beyond inter-human forgiveness and subject to the judgement of God. ‘Crime and willed evil are rare…according to Jesus they will be taken care of by God in the Last Judgement, which plays no role whatsoever in life on earth, and the Last Judgement is not characterised by forgiveness but by just retribution’ (ibid, p.240). The unforgivable might thus correspond to the ‘crime and willed evil’ that is in Christian terms, beyond inter-human forgiveness. However, I would argue that crime and willed evil are far from rare, and its victims are entitled to the possibility of a secular redress.

The tone of Arendt’s short thesis on forgiveness seems to indicate that it is predicated on the forgiving of what she terms ‘trespass’, that is, ‘…an everyday occurrence…and it needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly’ (ibid, p.240). In the same way, Griswold’s exploration of forgiveness is predicated on the possibility of both communication between the parties and reconciliation, possibilities that must be acknowledged as quite likely unrealistic in many cases of injury, particularly those consequential to ‘willed evil.’ However, the challenge of forgiveness is undoubtedly most deeply felt by the victim in the space of the ‘unforgivable’, that is, those offences that exceed the notion of trespass, and instead are located in the terrain of radical evil, or willed evil. It is, I argue, very difficult for anyone other than the victim to determine the degree of will that is involved in offences perpetrated upon her. My personal experience was that every act of rape I endured was carefully plotted in time and space: the question of the perpetrator not knowing what he was doing is ludicrous. Many of the victims who gave evidence of their suffering at the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission may have felt the same way: only they could determine the
degree of severity of the offences against them, and only they could judge the perpetrator’s awareness of his intentions in the moment of his actions.

I would suggest, as well, that there may be a correlation between a transgression that is widely perceived as being beyond the reach of lawful punishment, that is, too immense to be commensurably punished, and the transgression that is perceived as unforgivable. This conflation is untenable, however, because of the subjective nature of forgiveness. At the same time, there is the question of whether or not the punishment fits the crime in the victim’s opinion, as well as that of the legal system. At all times, however, determination of forgivability is the privilege of the victim, while punishment is rightly determined by an uninvolved third party.

There is little in the sources cited in this section to indicate how the unforgivability of an act is to be determined. What is clear, however, is that what reveals itself as ‘unforgivable’, in whatever manner that is determined, cannot be commensurately punished without the perpetration of another unforgivable act: human beings are restrained in the prosecution of commensurate justice by the need to remain fully human. As well, to determine something unforgivable is to declare that ‘…bitterness, resentment, and hatred should not be overcome under any circumstances’ (Govier, 2002, p.106). Clearly this is a painful position for the victim to maintain. However, Griswold argues that the victim’s need to release herself from such emotions is not the right reason ‘…to claim that no one should be unforgivable’ (2007, p.93). That is, we would (wrongly) be refusing the determination of ‘unforgivable’ because of the repercussions of that determination on the victim, rather than (rightly) making such a determination based on the gravity of the offence or the attitude of the offender.

‘…[S]ome offenders,’ he continues, ‘turn out to be incapable of remorse, choice, and moral transformation…’ However, while some offenders may well turn out to be so in the matter of their specific offences, it is perhaps impossible to characterize anyone as absolutely bereft of these qualities in every possible aspect of their lives. The offender who is utterly without care or concern for any other sentient being is a rare offender, and perhaps unhinged, and therefore in a category to which such matters as moral choice and transformation might be utterly inapplicable. The victim, as I continue to argue, is the only one who can determine whether or not an act committed against her
is, for her, unforgivable. Nobody can do this on her behalf. For example, if my child is harmed I cannot forgive or withhold forgiveness on her behalf. I can only do that in respect to the injuries I have suffered as a consequence of my child being harmed.

Should the victim decide the offence against her is unforgivable, then she is inevitably doomed to ‘bitterness, resentment and hatred,’ by virtue of the very definition of forgiveness Griswold employs (2007, p.33). Therefore the victim’s need to release such emotions, is, I argue, absolutely one of the right reasons to ‘…claim that no one should be unforgivable…’ The recognition of our common humanity is not, I would further argue, the reason we forgive, rather it is a necessary component of the process of forgiving. The reasons we forgive are to be found in the desire to live our lives free of ‘bitterness, resentment and hatred,’ free, that is, of the perpetrator’s ongoing control of our lives after the offence is ended.

While commensurate punishment then, may be impossible, forgiveness ‘…becomes possible from the moment it appears impossible. Its history would begin…with the unforgivable’ (Derrida, 2001, p.37). ‘What would be a forgiveness that forgave only the forgivable?’ he asks, (ibid, p.36).

The concept of forgiving the unforgivable can seem rather obscure. Arendt’s conflation of punishment and forgiveness may be misleading. A leap is required into the experiential: forgiveness exists only in action and as such cannot be, in itself, subject to legislation. Punishment, on the other hand, is legislated and administered accordingly: the two are entirely separate matters. I can be ordered to punish. I cannot be ordered to forgive.

Forgiveness then, is not a concept housed in a place of radical exteriority, external to the world of action, and the immediate. While from time to time philosophers and belief systems may come up with various prescriptives, forgiveness must be socially articulated. It is not a culturally permanent given. ‘Forgiveness must rest on a human possibility – I insist on these two words…’ (Derrida, 2001, p.37). There can be, I contend, no universal meaning of forgiveness. Rather it is a constellation of embodied practices that occurs over a period of time, as the victim masters the emotions aroused
in her by her situation. Punishment is determined by the state, and the victim is
discouraged from taking matters into her own hands. However, forgiveness is a private
matter, outside of the reaches of legislation. The punishers in Western society are rarely
the same people as the forgivers. Forgiveness is the victim’s privilege, as punishment is
not.

As has been argued, no act in itself is either forgivable or unforgivable: the act can take
place only through the agency of a human being, the taking of the action, the putting
into play, is what is to be judged forgivable or unforgivable. Christianity recommends
hating the sin and loving the sinner, but the sin cannot exist without the sinner’s
agency, and how does one sanely hate a sin that, in itself, has no existence? At the same
time, can any human being, given that we share a common vulnerability, ever be
judged to be ‘unforgivable’ without simultaneously being cast out of the human race,
that is, executed? By virtue of our common humanity, our shared vulnerability, no one
can be determined to be ‘unforgivable’, as has been argued earlier, and I would argue
further that it is precisely at the moment that the victim becomes aware that her
perpetrator is a human being, that the processes of forgiveness begin. ‘…recognition of
shared humanity by the injured party is a necessary step on the way to forgiveness’
(Griswold, 2007, p.79). That is, the point at which a victim might be approaching the
possibility of forgiving the perpetrator is, I would argue, the point at which she is
willing and able to acknowledge that her perpetrator shares with her the common
vulnerability of embodiment. That the perpetrator is in fact a human being, not a
monster of any kind, but a human being who has behaved in a manner, the like of
which only human beings are capable. Having brought the perpetrator into the human
species, she has then reached a stage from which she can release the abuser, for her
own sake, through the recognition of his or her common humanity. This is an act of
great courage. We do not want to recognise that our persecutors are human like us: ‘We
very often tell ourselves that the doers of heinous wrongs are monsters, in no way like
ourselves,’ (Nussbaum, 2001, p.450). While we do not want to belong to the same
species of life as the perpetrators, we do, and it is this acknowledgement that prevents
us from taking revenge in kind and becoming perpetrators ourselves.
Arendt speaks of acts that ‘…transcend the realm of human affairs and the potentialities of human power, both of which they radically destroy wherever they make their appearance’ (1998, p.241). However, while there are acts that certainly transcend the potential of human power to commensurately punish, I would argue that no act transcends the realm of human affairs, because an act in itself is a human attribute, an act is embodied, no matter what its nature, and therefore no human act can logically transcend the realm of human affairs. Neither do they transcend human power, because the ultimate human power is, I argue, the power of forgiveness.

The rape of the child takes place in the realm of human affairs, as did the Holocaust, and as does every genocide that follows it. The notion of an evil that transcends human affairs permeates discussions of forgiveness, as does the notion of a forgiving transcendental being. However it is my contention that ‘…it is not true that only God has the power to forgive…this power does not derive from God – as though God, not men, would forgive through the medium of human beings – but on the contrary must be mobilised by men toward each other…’ (Arendt, 1998, p.239). Arendt locates forgiveness firmly in the human. By the same token, the power to perpetrate evil acts cannot be attributed to an anti-god, or satanic being, as though Satan, not men, would perpetrate evil, but on the contrary, evil is, and must be: ‘mobilised by men towards each other’ (ibid).

Finally, Herman warns of the pitfalls of a fantasy of forgiveness: ‘The survivor imagines that she can transcend her rage and erase the impact of the trauma through a willed, defiant act of love. But it is not possible to exorcise the trauma, either through hatred or love’ (1992, p.190). Instead, ‘Her healing depends on the discovery of restorative love in her own life; it does not require that this love be extended to the perpetrator,’ (1992, p.190). ‘Restorative love’ is compassion for the self, the compassion that was not shown by the perpetrator, as when Angelica crawls into bed with her childlike drawings of her trauma. ““My darling,” Angelica whispers to the child, for the child who lives in her still is now as real to her as her own dear sons, “my darling, darling girl”’ (Wilson, 2007, p.178).
One of the effects of trauma is to provoke anger against the self, for having failed to protect oneself, for having been seen to be inadequate in this regard, for having been so thoroughly disempowered. ‘I was thinking,’ mourns Cixous, ‘about the tragic truth that the victim is guilty of being a victim’ (1998, p.38). And Angelica asks: ‘What is this vile inclination in our human nature that would have us crucify the victim?’ (Wilson, 2007, p.151). Restorative love restores positive self-regard, relieves the sense of guilt the victim carries, without which the trauma cannot be left in the past. Restorative love allows the victim to regain her own humanity, to acknowledge her vulnerability, not as a weakness, but as a condition of life, and to live again in spite of the perpetrator.

While coming to restorative love may be made easier by seeing the perpetrator punished, and by having the support and recognition of one’s suffering that other people can give, essentially the return of self-regard is a private endeavour, and there are victims of trauma who do not come to this point, even though their perpetrator is punished. Punishment, then, does not necessarily bring relief to a victim in the same way as, I would argue, forgiveness does.

It is this ‘restorative love’ that creates the conditions for forgiveness. Forgiveness, I propose, can occur when the victim enters into a state in which the traumatic events have ceased to control his or her life. It is an absence of either love or hate for the perpetrator. It is entirely to do with living in productive peace with oneself: ‘Once the survivor has mourned the traumatic event, she may be surprised to discover how uninteresting the perpetrator has become to her and how little concern she feels for his fate’ (Herman, 1992, p190). It is, therefore, never in the victim’s interests to determine a traumatic event ‘unforgivable.’ It may be unforgettable and, it could be argued, ought to be unforgettable, as one does not forget, eradicate from memory, any aspect of one’s history without creating a lack, an absence that by its very existence, speaks to trauma too disturbing to be recalled and as such, still powerful. The survival of trauma is an act of courage that should never be forgotten. However, if forgiveness advantages the victim, there is nothing to be gained by determining an event unforgivable. Such a determination chains the victim even more securely in the prison of the aftermath of the ‘unforgivable’ trauma.

As Derrida points out, it is difficult to conceive of the term ‘forgiveness’ without reference to religion: ‘…it is the case that the scene, the figure, the language which one
tries to adapt to it belong to a religious heritage…’ (2001, p.28). However, if forgiveness is placed in the discourse of human rights, it is immediately secularised. It becomes a question not of religious belief but of common sense and practicality. It is in the recognition of our common humanity that the act of forgiveness begins, and therefore the concept of forgiveness belongs firmly in the discourse of human rights, rather than in any religious discourse. Forgiveness is not the act of supra human agency, any more than the crimes are committed by monsters. The fact of our ontological vulnerability is not determined by religion or law. It is existential: it is a condition of being. Part of that vulnerability is our capacity for experiencing love, hatred and, I argue, forgiveness. In themselves these qualities are utterly anarchic and frequently entirely outside of any system of explanation. They are also ‘…conditions of our existence which we cannot change’ (Seneca, 1969, p.199). So let us speak then, not of an ideal, but ‘…of the mystery of forgiveness…’ (Cixous, 1998, p.39), and the power and the glory of the human heart from which it springs.
Conclusion

In the two sections of the exegesis I have attempted to address firstly, the use of death as a metaphor, and a popular cultural representation of the process of dying. In the second section, I explore how, in the face of death’s inevitability, we might best conduct our lives. Everything I have written is based on personal experience; however, one of the delights of the task has been the discovery of theoretical correspondences for that experiential knowledge. In this, the entire thesis is an overarching metaphor for the marriage of the heart and the mind, of theory and embodied practice.

In the reflection on popular cultural representations of dying, I have used my obsession with the character of Tony Soprano from the American television series, *The Sopranos* as an example of how the process of dying is portrayed in television drama. This menacing central character spectacularly embodies the mysterious human ability to behave both wonderfully well and unspeakably (unforgivably?) badly. Through his conflicted nature, Tony Soprano confronts us with the complexity of life itself, and with the impossibility of coming to any definitive understanding of it, as it presents fortune and misfortune, havoc and joy, haphazardly and randomly, in individual lives and the lives of a community. It is particularly interesting to find such a powerful and complex representation of the process of dying in popular culture. Once again, the opportunity to bring together this genre with the genre of critical theory was an intellectually and emotionally satisfying endeavour.

The creative piece, *The Practice of Goodness*, attempts in part to explore the darker side of human behaviour, and the perplexing and frustrating conundrum one is faced with when a parent, or parents, display dark behaviours in private while in public they are respected and liked. These confounding issues also present themselves in the section on domestic violence, and in the account of Angelica and Julia’s visits to the Woomera and Baxter Detention Centres.

I have challenged the appropriation of death as a metaphor by literary theorists because from the point of view of one who has on several occasions been forced to seriously consider her death as a foreseeable event, such an appropriation is both deeply
misleading and lacking in imagination. It presents itself to me as a kind of literary conceit that in fact subverts the purpose of metaphor, not in any useful way, but in a manner that distracts us from death’s radical finality. This strikes me as a kind of dishonesty, and a deprivation of a truth we badly need to face, if we are to avoid going to our deaths in fear and shock. It may be impossible to avoid this, however, a climate in which death is acknowledged as a terminal state from which there is no known return, seems to me to be a far better way to live, than the climate in which death is minimised and appropriated as suitable for metaphorical use.

The question of the rights of women and children as human rights is one that seems to be so obvious as to require no discussion. However, the fact that a significant human rights text by a significant scholar was published in 2006, titled ‘Vulnerability and Human Rights’, with no interrogation of the abuse of women and children in the ‘domestic’ domain, proves, if proof were needed, that our intimate sufferings remain a neglected global issue, in spite of their prevalence across race and class. As Catharine MacKinnon observes ‘Comprehensive international strategies for world peace and security have never included sustained inquiry into violence itself as a gendered phenomenon’ (2006, p.271). Until such strategies are in place, the tragic implication that women and children are globally excluded from entitlement to human rights must prevail. This is an utterly unacceptable circumstance that reveals a bifurcation in the human rights discourse, a cognitive dissonance that apparently resists all attempts at resolution in the practice. There can be no doubt that in a general sense women are hated, feared and reviled in the world to the degree that our suffering is normalised, and it will take another upheaval of consciousness raising, and perhaps another and another, before the depths of misogyny required to globally deny us the status of human in our relationship rights, is overcome.

Finally, there is the question of forgiveness. In my research on this topic I came across endless mawkish representations of this most profoundly significant process. Forgiveness is, I have concluded, perhaps the most misunderstood of human attitudes. I would like to write, forgiveness is peace, which I believe to be as near to the truth of the matter as I have been able to get, however I am absolutely certain this definition will be found on thousands of internet sites with pastel pictures of doves and hearts
with wings. Not that there’s anything wrong with it. My understanding of forgiveness would also dismally fail the baseline tests of Griswold’s ideal paradigm. My challenge to Griswold is a challenge to all those who would attempt to appropriate vast concepts for their own exclusionary cause, and thus reduce them to a list of rules and regulations.

When I write, forgiveness is peace, I am writing about the peace that comes to the heart that is finally free of hatred and desire for vengeance, a heart that does not forget its true life story, but that is able to recall the story without rage, disquiet and fantasies of revenge. That is, a heart at peace. As Levinas says: ‘Peace must be my peace, in a relation that starts from an I and goes to the other, in desire and goodness, where the I both maintains itself and exists without egoism’ (1969, p.306). From this I understand that world peace begins in the individual human heart, and as such it is perhaps the responsibility of each and every one of us to settle our grievances within ourselves, and from that position of inner peace, go forth into the global battles in desire and goodness.

The thesis perhaps raises more questions than it can answer. It is an account of a deeply personal journey that I have attempted to extend into the concerns of the wider world, in the profound belief that the personal is and always will be political. What use can be made of personal suffering if it does not, at the very least, awaken our hearts to the suffering of the rest of humanity?
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