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TAINTED FRUIT

A creative work and exegesis submitted
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award
of the degree of

DOCTOR OF CREATIVE ARTS

From

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

Name: Pearlie McNeill MA (University of Wollongong)

Faculty of Creative Arts 2008

CERTIFICATION

I, Pearlie McNeill, declare this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Creative Arts, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work, unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualification at any other academic institution.

Pearlie McNeill

21st February, 2008

ABSTRACT

I have written two earlier books about my family. *Tainted Fruit* is the third and continues the thread of dialogue I have been weaving into my consciousness about the impact of family violence on my life.

One of the Family is a first person, autobiographical account of my growing up years, related along a chronological time-line. *Counting the Rivers*, is also chronological, but the story is written as a novel, using a fragmentary style rather than chapters. This structure includes pages of my patient file, and italicised paragraphs written from the point of view of the main character. This novel documents my experience as a psychiatric patient in Sydney, in the era of the 1960s and 70s.

Tainted Fruit, a reflective book, is then, the third book of this trilogy and is not circumscribed by the defines or conventions of any one genre but instead, borrows from many genres: fiction, memoir, journals (etc) in order to create its own experimental, imaginative form. I have sought to explore a broader range of options for my own narrating voice.

I have sought to examine the implications of violence within my own family, the far-reaching implications of growing up with domestic violence as a backdrop to daily life and reverberations of awareness and shame. I am concerned too, about how that experience of childhood can continue a cycle of violence that for some is hard to resist.

My research for both the book and the exegesis has involved a wide range of sources: books, newspapers, journals, magazines, maps, oral history recordings and transcripts, rent-book records, genealogical documents, interviews with members of my family, visits to relevant settings and website material: detailing information from writers' panels as well as interviews with individual writers.

The exegesis chapters are organised around the narrating voice. My particular interest has been point of view. What power is invested in the narrator and where do they stand in relation to the events, the people, they are writing about?

My aim has been to closely examine the complex negotiation between narrative and perspective, illuminating the emphasis narrators give to certain aspects of a story, and broadening that aim to explore the question *how do we writers write about violence?*

PUBLICATIONS

One of the Family was Highly Recommended in the Human Rights Awards (Australia 1990)

Counting the Rivers won the Wirra Wirra/Wakefield Press Award for Unpublished Non-fiction 1998.

This prize of \$10,000 also included publication of the book by Wakefield Press.

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Finally, I want to thank my sister Lizzie (not her real name) for journeying with me into that long distant past. It was not an easy trip to make but not once did we lose our sense of humour.

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PART I

Doorway to the Past

Chapter One

How long is a piece of string?

The children in my family were familiar with knock- knock jokes.

Who's there?

Isabel.

Isabel who?

Is a bell necessary on a bike?

But we never did understand the point of my father's trick question. His aim was not to make us laugh, but to relish the look of puzzlement on our faces when he asked *so how long is a piece of string?* He'd ask this question repeatedly, as though telling the first line of a humdinger joke. The answer, *because trams run up Oxford Street*, was a conundrum I puzzled over but never solved.

Stories about family life can be like that too - a mystery to insiders and outsiders alike.

Even relatives with a good memory can stumble over details. Was Johnny there when we heard from the police that his Dad died at the accident scene? Was it before the baby was born she told him or much later? How important are these details? How relevant is the time line? How can we adequately condense a background that encompasses years of daily life to convey meaning in a story? That is the challenge for an autobiographical writer, that is my challenge in this book.

I think of my father as a one joke man but I am going to take his piece of twine, and position it in my narrative as a time-line – a meandering thread. Perhaps it is thick enough to be looped in sections through a number of posts like a railing, intended to provide a series of precarious handholds, linking each chapter to a bigger picture that may not be immediately obvious.

Of course everyone knows that trams no longer run up Oxford Street, so it is necessary to remember that my length of string is strong but imaginary. Now you see it. Now you don't.

Chapter Two

Vietnam, September, 2005

Hi Chi Minh City. Ten of us are travelling in a group on an organised tour. I think of us as Noah's Ark. We've stepped aboard, two by two, arriving from four Australian states but that's not quite right, the two couples from Western Australia have holidayed together before.

Our first group challenge comes the night we arrive and attend a meeting with our guide Dao, about what lies ahead for the next eighteen days. Dao has a map of the country pinned to the wall. I cannot yet comprehend how much ground we will cover. In preparing for this adventure, I have not done much in the way of advance reading, I want my responses to come from what I see in front of me, not from some information-driven understanding of what happened when and in what location.

I have a sense too, that I might touch on Tim's experience, not that he was ever here, and his war was over long before America sent combat troops in 1965, but I suspect comparisons could be made between Vietnam and Malaya.

The discussion around the table has turned to tipping. Should we each allocate the sum of thirty US dollars, paid up front to Dao immediately and let him, on behalf of the group, use his discretion about tipping or should we adopt an ad hoc approach and act independently? I am surprised to hear someone say that we don't actually tip in

Australia. The discussion goes back and forth. Finally, we decide on the first option. The vote was not unanimous 6 to 4, but perhaps I have picked up a clue about those in the group I like immediately and those I am not yet sure about. Dao folds up the map and we head for our booked table in the restaurant downstairs, self-consciously polite as we settle into our chairs.

Next day we make our first important stop at the Cu Chi tunnels. We've all heard about them and know how important they were to the guerrilla fighters and the outcome of the war but now, looking down on those small, irregular shaped holes, makes one or two of us exclaim with shock. We are suddenly aware of the size of our bodies as compared to the men, women and children who used these tunnels – like comparing the size of a wombat to that of an agile rabbit.

We are shown the entrance to a tunnel that I later learn is about one hundred yards long, one of the originals from the war. This tunnel has been enlarged so that foreigners can have a more genuine understanding of what conditions underground were really like. Four women from the five in our group are willing to give it a go. Frank considers himself too tall to make the effort but he loans me his head-lamp and agrees to hang onto my backpack. The entrance is deceptive, a series of narrow steps. This doesn't look too bad at all. Down we go.

Cool air is what I expected but it is so hot my glasses quickly mist over and I can barely see. The walls close in on either side and I need both hands to keep myself steady. Charles is in front of me. We are bent over in a crouch and can only move a few inches at a time. We head around a narrow corner and the tunnel dips lower into what I think of as the bowels of the earth. Even enlarged this tunnel is still small. It is also dark, claustrophobic and scary.

I almost panic when a woman ahead says she can't get her leg over. No one laughs at the sexual innuendo, this is no theme park or thrill-seeking ride, it's serious business. I try to turn around and mumble that I can't go any further but now I realise there's a long stream of people behind me and we are packed in like the humped ridges on a squirming centipede. I tell myself to take a few deep breaths. The familiar image from childhood years of the little train puffing up a hill, comes to mind. I'm sure you remember what he said - I think I can, I think I can.

Someone has helped the woman get her leg free. A moment later I come to the same spot. It's a step that is also a rounded corner and it is surprisingly steep. Manoeuvring my backside against one side of the tunnel, I lean back as far as I can and then ease one leg down at a time. Bloody hell, now we are turning another corner, descending even deeper. I have no idea of direction or how much further we have to go. Charles is wearing light-coloured, trousers. Focusing the head-lamp on a point just below his waistband, I follow his every move. I must remember to tell him later how grateful I am he chose to wear those trousers today. I can do this. I *can* do this.

There is a glimmer of daylight, at last we are moving upwards. There are sighs of relief rippling along the line as we stand upright and walk out of the tunnel. At a picnic table nearby women serve us green tea in tiny cups. I could drink gallons of the stuff.

A few days later we are in the Mekong Delta area. The river is wide, the current strong, the rain comes and goes. It is too hot to wear my plastic poncho. I drape it over my shoulder. Sitting down the back of the long passenger boat, I am in charge of

this end of the canvas blind that must be dropped off its hook promptly when the rain begins in earnest. Here comes the downpour.

Unable to see anything much for the moment my thoughts turn to the era of the war. I'm here at the start of the rainy season, what must it be like in summer? How did Australian troops (as well as the Americans and all the others) cope with the hot and humid conditions?

The sun has appeared. I am instructed to lift the blind again. Our boat turns onto a narrow waterway. Mangroves form an edge both sides and I can see a meandering path of sorts some distance away. Fish traps made of wire and held up by bamboo sticks to form a square, are placed here and there. The greenery is dense. I hesitate to use the word jungle but it hovers above me, a word I've noted, any number of times when reading of a soldier's experiences in a hot, foreign country. The word seems to suggest that the people who live in these countries are akin to animals, monkeys for example, and Vietnamese fighters were sometimes described as such in Western accounts of the war in Vietnam.

My attention is drawn to the right. I thought I saw something move, a snuffling pig perhaps. There is nothing to see but I imagine men in camouflage, rifles held in front of them, bayonets in place. They are running but making no sound. Spatters of mud stain their uniforms and so blackened are their faces it would be hard to recognise any facial features. It's like visiting the location of a movie, and there have been a number of those. But was it really like that in Vietnam? Was it like that for Tim in Malaysia?

Prior to the end of the 1960s, Malaya was referred to as Malaysia. The British and Commonwealth forces were involved in a war there that lasted from 1948 -1960.

Australia first sent troops in 1955. The conflict was referred to as *The Emergency*, a term used mainly for economic reasons. Business losses in that war would not have been covered by Lloyds of London, so to protect British industries in Malaya, the term war was avoided for those thirteen long years.

Tim was sent first to Korea then to Malaya around 1958. I was twelve years old when he left Australia. We'd been close all our lives and he wrote to me often during the time he was away. In Malaya he wrote about the fear of leeches – soldiers wore shorts, boots and heavy socks most of the time and were so worried about these blood-sucking creatures that many of them wore condoms when going out on patrol. Hammocks had to be slung between palm trees when they stayed out overnight, and even when they were exhausted sleep eluded them. What might crawl or fall on them if they dared to close their eyes?

Sitting next to me in the boat is Paul. He was conscripted for service in Vietnam but failed the medical exam. He smiles when he mentions that. He cannot escape the thoughts of what-might-have-been. As we talk, I have the impression that he too, can see those soldier shapes making their way through the undergrowth.

We talk a little about Australia's role in Vietnam - another dirty war, just like Iraq. I am reluctant to talk about Tim. Perhaps it is the familiar, deeply embedded concern I have that opening up may put distance between me and anyone I tell. I remind myself that writing is my way of building a bridge, a means of moving beyond my fear and shame, to someplace new, more enlightened, where my footfalls are lighter, freer.

During WWII, the British had welcomed the support of a group known as the Malayan People's Anti-Japanese Army and had contributed to their fight against the Japanese occupation, with both training and financial backing. This group, under the all-embracing umbrella of the Malayan Communist Party, was given legal recognition by the British immediately after the war but by then the Party's aims no longer coincided with that of the British parliament. It can't have helped matters much either when the British decided to impose sterling as the local currency, making Malaysian notes and coins worthless overnight.

I was so young when all this was happening I didn't think to ask questions but I have wondered many times over the years if the British and the Commonwealth forces treated the local people well? I have learned that an investigation into possible war crimes by Western soldiers was started in the UK but not a single man was charged and the process was brought to an abrupt end when the newly elected government of Prime Minister Edward Heath came into power. Perhaps if we'd had TVs in every home earlier than 1956 we might have been better informed about Korea and Malaya.

Taking prisoners presents challenges for either side in any conflict. Cameron Forbes, in his book *Hellfire*, writes about the experience of a number of the 61,000 Allied soldiers who were taken prisoner by the Japanese during WWII:

Prisoners are a problem for a modern, mobile army, particularly when the soldiers are strangers in a strange land, and lines of supply are extended. Away from textbooks and drills, war is fast-moving confusion, death an instant away and the Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners an interesting theory even for those armies bound by it.

(Forbes Page 8)

It isn't hard to imagine the dilemma involved in Malaya. The very real danger of others coming to the rescue, what to do with the prisoners once they'd been captured, how to restrain them, get them back to camp, care for them, hold them captive and for how long, are important considerations. Making sure there is no one to tell the story obviously lessens the threat and solves all those other problems too.

Tim's family background might have been seen by some as suitable to the development of a soldier, an angry young man willing to confront the enemy, stone faced and determined. But the Tim I knew in my childhood was anything but fierce and his temperament was sensitive rather than savage.

It was almost a year after he landed in Malaya that he actually came face to face with communist guerrillas. Mostly, he described fruitless patrols to find an invisible enemy, boredom back at camp relieved only when the beer arrived. But on this one particular day, just before dusk, an Australian sergeant and his small group of soldiers had five men cornered. The sergeant promised them that if they gave themselves up right now, this minute, they would be taken prisoner and fed as soon as they made it back to camp. Two of them turned and fled, one was shot down, the other got away but he might have been hurt. The remaining three threw down their weapons.

It was then that the sergeant ordered his men to use their bayonets.

My brother's letter spoke of how he had not been able to move at that moment. He had seen fear on the prisoners' faces. They could have been me, he wrote, they could have come from families like ours, how could I run them through?

Tim made no mention of the other Australian soldiers and how they reacted to the command or how they responded to an apparent coward in their midst but his next letter brought good news. He had been thinking he might be sent back to Australia in disgrace and dishonourably discharged but instead, he'd been given the job of driving a minister of religion around, a man he referred to only as *the padre*.

If only the story had ended there. But of course it didn't. This same brother of mine who could not use his bayonet against an unarmed guerrilla fighter returned to Australia in 1962 and the following year, used that same bayonet as a weapon against his former girlfriend. Why he did that, why it was even possible for him to do that, is a question that has haunted me for so many years.

Overhearing Paul and I talking about war, Dao joins us and tells us about his father. Their family is from the north and when the Vietnam war was over, veterans like Dao's father were each given a free bike. Dao has fond memories of that bike, his father took him everywhere on it. It was a bit wobbly and constantly needed attention but as a means of transport and for carrying essential items, it was invaluable. Dao was conceived after the war and points out that his generation, though acknowledging always the debt they owe to their parents, have a different outlook. They see themselves living in a modern country open to fresh ideas.

Serious now, he tells us how he toured around Australia. He's seen Alice Springs, Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef and even the Opera House and the Sydney Harbour Bridge. Noting my look of astonishment, he laughs delightedly. He's been to all these places on the Discovery Channel.

A number of small rowboats, big enough to carry one or two people, are pulling alongside our bigger boat. There is a woman in charge of each boat. They all wear conical hats. Barefoot, they stand on a flat section at the back, manipulating two long poles in an easy flowing motion that is something to behold. Dao has arranged for us to be taken further downstream where the water is too shallow for our boat. I note a few nervous looks as my companions lower themselves awkwardly onto the rowboats.

Meg and I are the last to leave and the last to come back. I am keen to have a go at rowing and ask Dao if it would be polite to ask. He translates my request. The oarswoman readily agrees. Slipping off my sandals I ease myself into position and take the poles in my hands.

Ignoring the possibility that I might embarrass myself, I move as I've watched the women move, and the boat glides easily in the water. I even manage to turn it around and head back but I'm aware that I couldn't do this for long, it is quite strenuous.

Back on board our boat, I wave as the woman eases her rowboat into position to head downstream. It is sobering to hear that these women earn very little money and have to work twelve or more hours a day, ferrying local people and delivering goods, up and down and across this long waterway.

Now we are heading for an island. The rain makes the path slippery. One minute we are carrying our ponchos, the next minute we have to put the damned things on. The day is still hot and steamy but this is no sun shower, the rain falls as though someone has upended several full buckets on our heads. We are welcomed in to see the sort of work people do - making pop-corn, tofu, fish sauce and rice paper for spring rolls. In a wooden shed close to the river a man shows us how he makes floor and wall tiles, another man in another shed shows us how coffins are made. On the other side of the

narrow path is a big covered space. We stand around and watch a man sewing a palm leaf onto a thick bamboo stick. Each leaf has to be turned and held in just the right position. The needle is big and the thread looks like string. Alongside him, the growing pile of finished pieces are much the same length. He points upwards and we can see that the roof we are standing under is made of these palm leaves. Dao tells us that the average life of these roofs is three years.

Walking around the island, I realize there is no answer for me in Vietnam, no matter how closely I seek comparisons between wars. I can understand my brother up to the point he returned to Australia, beyond that I cannot recognise a single facial feature. Odd then, to feel he is close by, walking along with me. I have tried to follow in his footsteps but I simply can't climb over the obstacles that lie between us.

He was and still is my brother but I wish I could find someone or something to blame. My list of questions are familiar, I can repeat them like I was reciting a poem, emphasising various words for greater effect. Was it the war? Did that experience turn his mind? Should we make excuses for our soldiers and the things some of them do once they are back on home soil? I wish I knew. I really wish I knew.

It's raining again. Dao is trailing the group, waiting for me to catch up. I realise how much I like this courteous young man. He puts an arm around my shoulders and asks if I am okay. Yes, I tell him, I am okay. I smile at him and repeat my words. *I am okay.*

Chapter Three

Siblings

May 1994. Back in Australia after thirteen years away, I'm registering my details with a local doctor's surgery. The receptionist has a clipboard in one hand, a pen in the other. She has already taken down my name, age and address and my previous health history. She looks up from her notepad.

"Now I want to ask you a few questions about your background. What was your position in the family?"

"Um ..."

She looks at me as though I might be less intelligent than she first thought.

"Were you the eldest?"

"No. Actually, I'm trying to decide which parent to choose ..."

"I'm sorry?"

"Uh, you see, I'm my mother's seventh child but my father's first ..."

"Okay seventh."

"But," I protest, "it's not that simple. Four of us were reared together so really, it's more like I was the third child of four ..."

She looks perplexed. For many years I was too. We four children carried in our minds skewed understandings about where we each fitted in.

Tim was five years older than me, three years older than Lizzie. I was born two years after Lizzie and then Edward came along five years after that, in 1945.

Hurrying away from the surgery, I find a café and I'm sitting at an outside table looking through my backpack. Where's my notebook? I must have left it in the car. Talking about my family has caused my mind to buzz with half-formed sentences that I want to capture before they disappear. Ahh, the waitress is the sympathetic type, she responds to my story of woe by handing over a wad of serviettes.

In a higgledy-piggledy fashion, I write down the names – Lizzie, Tim and Eddie. Under those headings I jot down words and phrases. It's a regurgitating process. Memories surface in a fragmentary fashion, nothing solid, just bits and more bits. I hope when I get home I can decipher what I have written.

Now, it's late in the afternoon and I'm sitting at my desk. Ten serviettes are laid out before me. I have scribbled in the four corners of each and the writing is smaller the closer I got to the pointed edge. But, as I turn the serviettes this way and that, I can see that what I put down on paper in the café is a form of scaffolding, allowing me to clamber over it for a far-seeing point of view.

There was a much closer bond between we three older children than there ever was between any one of us and Eddie. Blonde, blue-eyed and dimpled cheeked, he was the apple of his father's eye, the long awaited son and we all knew it. He wasn't expected to do chores or take responsibility for anything, not even for himself, and the message conveyed, right from the start, was that he was somehow special. The attention lavished on him caused me to see Eddie as the cause of all my problems.

A lot has been written about *blended families* in recent years but back then children

were supposed to be seen and not heard. I doubt that there was much consideration given to children and how *we* felt. In our family Edward may have been an exception but my father looked upon this son as an extension of himself rather than seeing Edward as a person in his own right.

It didn't matter too much whilst Edward was still a baby. All the babies we knew were somehow special, well at least for the first year anyway. We just did our best to squeeze him into whatever game we were playing. We were also good at making up games that fitted the circumstances. Like Sunday afternoons for example. Mum would give Edward his lunch, change his nappy and sit him in the old cane pram with his harness on. The straps fitted into metal clips on each side of the pram and kept him upright.

If he fell asleep we unclipped the harness and let him lie down. We had his bottle and two clean nappies tucked behind his pillow and our instructions were that we were to walk him around the streets for at least two hours. Mum would wind up an old alarm clock and put it beneath the mattress at the foot of the pram so we would know what time it was, she didn't want us to come back too early.

One Sunday I had this bright idea. Why didn't we race down Birrell Street and take turns pushing the pram in front of us? I could tell just by looking at Lizzie's jutting bottom lip that she wasn't impressed. So, hands on hips, I dared her to come up with something better. As usual, she did.

We assembled at the top of the hill, near the hospital. Lizzie explained that she would give the pram a push then see who could run the fastest. The one who grabbed the pram handle first at the bottom of the hill, won the race. There wasn't much traffic

so our starting point was on the road but close to the gutter. I do vividly remember that first time, how Eddie looked at each of us in turn, while we discussed if I could have a few yards start. He had this big, happy smile on his face, he probably thought we were doing our best to please *him*.

We called this game *the pram handle derby*. Lizzie was the fastest runner but Tim had the longest reach. I didn't care where I grabbed the pram as long as I got a grip somehow. Ready. Steady. Go. I shot away fast, legs pumping, making the most of the head start but the pram soon overtook me. I was startled and jumped up onto the pavement to avoid a collision. I could see Edward gripping the sides as though trying to pull himself forward against the tug of the pram's speed. His mouth was like a line drawn with a pencil, straight and tight, just like the long horizontal line I had drawn in my homework book early that morning, to separate sky from sea.

Lizzie won easily. She grabbed the handle and the pram stopped so quickly the front wheels lifted off the ground. It was a good thing Eddie had his harness on or he would've been tipped out but he didn't cry so that was alright then. I don't know how many times we raced down the hill that day but Eddie was sound asleep when we headed home. He slept so long and so hard Mum had to wake him up the next morning.

There was one Sunday when the pram mounted the pavement and tipped to one side, smashing sideways into a low brick fence. For a change I was the one in front and instead of grabbing the handle I'd accidentally pushed against it with my arm.

I looked around to see Eddie's head wedged tight in a privet hedge that grew behind a low fence. He was screaming and thrashing at the air with his hands. We managed to free him and the three of us stared at the scratches on his face. How were we going to explain things to Mum? Lizzie undid the harness and took Eddie on her hip, soothing him with kisses and then tickling him till he laughed with glee. On the way back up the hill Tim and I found a few good-sized twigs and put them in the pram. We'd tell Mum that Eddie had reached over and grabbed these when we were passing someone's front garden and scratched himself before we could stop him. Once home, our luck held. Mum took one look at Eddie's big smile and all was well.

Years later when Eddie started school Mum had a job in a laundry. I was left at home to get his breakfast and then walk him to the school gate. I'd begin by tipping his corn flakes into a bowl, putting the milk and sugar on the table in easy reach then hurry off to get dressed.

Twenty minutes later I would rush back into the kitchen only to find him grinning defiance at me as he played with his spoon, his breakfast untouched. No matter how much I pleaded or yelled he would not move until he was good and ready. One morning I was so angry I dragged him by the collar across Birrell Street, then had to run off and leave him. His classes began half an hour later than mine so he was never in a hurry. Talking to Mum got me nowhere, she fobbed me off with a dismissive wave of her hand.

That routine lasted until Mum gave up her job and began taking in boarders. By that time the daily hassles with Eddie had soured any positive feelings I had for him and made us enemies for a long, long time.

Eddie drove me nuts but Tim was my best friend. We often sat on the floor together, reading or cracking jokes. He seemed so wise, like a man grown old before his time. His face seemed to crumple when he was in trouble as though he had no inner core of strength to draw upon. I thought this meant he was sensitive but nowadays, I wonder if he lived in an overwhelmed state, unable to distract himself from the enormity of his painful life.

In the early hours of his fourteenth birthday he got up, got dressed and ran away, his third attempt in three years. He walked and walked for two whole days, till the soles of his shoes were worn through. Perhaps he'd hoped that somehow he could change things but he had no money and nowhere to go so was forced to come home again.

When I came in from school that afternoon there he was, sitting on a chair in the dining room. My parents were home too. They said nothing to any of us but the atmosphere seemed charged with their smug satisfaction. Tim was crying, soft tears of exhaustion and defeat. He stared ahead of him as though he were blind. It could have been a scene of Olde England in the days of Yore, and Tim a poor boy held in the stocks because he stole something to eat, his humiliation on display for all to see. I knew even then that Lizzie and I were the intended audience - if they broke the back of one child then they could subdue the rest.

I wanted to touch Tim, to place a hand on his arm or his shoulder just to let him know I was there but I didn't dare. We never spoke about that day, not any of us. Lizzie and I had seen our brother stripped bare, his spirit exposed and flinching. Words, any words at all, would only have added to his distress.

I was about ten when Lizzie told me that her and Tim's father had committed suicide a few weeks before she was born. She grew up with the impression, passed on by our mother, that she was somehow responsible for her father's death. Lizzie was born in 1937 at a time when life was tough for many people. The question lingered in Lizzie's mind. Did her father kill himself because he would soon have another mouth to feed? Was it as simple as that or something more complex?

Not so long ago we applied for his death certificate. The document showed his first name as Arthur and his surname as Robertson. Next to this surname there were three additional words - *Known as Colman*. Lizzie had been quite young when she was shown a copy of this death certificate by our mother. Mum used this odd detail as proof that Lizzie and Tim's father was a low-down criminal type, a man who'd used a variety of names to cover up his misdeeds. Lizzie assumed that her father must have had a sordid past.

Checking back further through the NSW birth, death and marriage records for details about Lizzie's paternal grandmother, we discovered a very simple story.

Arthur's mother, Wilhelmina Robertson, gave birth to a son and, because she wasn't married, the child carried her surname. A few years later, she did marry and took her husband's surname. She became Mrs Wilhelmina Colman. A second son was born but it appears that this man Colman never did adopt Wilhelmina's older boy. Possibly, to avoid confusion, Arthur would have used his stepfather's surname and so became Arthur Colman. He used that surname for the rest of his life. During the time of his marriage to our mother, she was known as Jessie Colman. But there must have been times when Arthur had to reveal the surname that was on his birth certificate. Not surprisingly then, his death certificate shows both surnames – Arthur Robertson,

known as Colman.

Like other, similar truths in our family, Mum just had to add a dash of intrigue to the facts. There was a measure of shame too, her shame, in the stories she told us. Usually, she treated facts like hot potatoes that had landed in her lap, she simply had to get rid of them in whatever way she could. I think though, that she did feel bad about this second husband of hers. Maybe she needed to paint him as a disreputable man in order to dispel any notion in her own mind, that she may have contributed to his death.

It was easy for a woman to stray from societal expectations in that era. Divorce, having an affair, giving birth to a baby outside of marriage, marrying a man considered by some to be unworthy, or just thinking and acting in a different way to the mob, might be alright if no one knew what was going on, but once the cat was out of the bag, the spotlight of public attention could be described as a merciless glare. Shame could linger for years and years and years, an easily identifiable tinge, reminding the so called wrong-doer that they had crossed the line of respectability and would forever more be marked, their future actions scrutinised constantly for signs of further ruin.

Children, especially female children born around that time, grew up with an acute sense of what was acceptable and what was not. Not that anyone used the word unacceptable, no, our mothers (and it was mainly mothers who dictated the rules) preferred the word 'common'. We learned that it was *common* to wear red shoes. According to our mother, only prostitutes advertising their wares wore red shoes. Wedged heeled shoes were common too, so was nail polish and bright red lipstick or

too much lipstick. The list seemed endless, the way you wore your hair, the length of your skirt hem, and often the only way to learn about yet another rule, was when you broke it.

But sometimes, on hot summer evenings, mothers and fathers were too tired, too hot, to bother much with rules and while they fanned themselves with a folded up newspaper or hosed down the backyard, spraying cool water on their bare feet, we children, sensing how things were, headed out the front door.

Our broad street was divided into three long blocks. At the bottom end nearer the shops, the houses seemed huddled together, like passengers standing shoulder to shoulder in a crowded train. Some of these houses had been subdivided and it was hard to know, from the front, how they were separated. I would often count the long rows of letterboxes.

The next block up was dotted with date palms that had short stocky trunks and long, waving fronds. Here, the houses were larger, semi-detached with spacious front gardens and big, ugly dogs. Not the kind of dogs to stop and pat either. They'd snarl and run at the front fence as though they had flesh and blood on their minds, my flesh and blood. I'd run up that hill as fast as I could, fearing that at any moment one of these crazy animals would master the high jump and attack me.

It felt much safer up our end of the street. We were close to the reservoir, with a long row of two-storey, terrace houses on one side and blocks of flats on the other. Seventeen children lived in the long row of terrace houses but we were drawn, like bees to honey, to the flats on the other side.

Garages had been built in front and underneath one set of eight flats, all made of liver red brick. The flat roofed space above the garages had been cemented to create an area almost as big as a tennis court. To prevent anyone from falling over the edge a wrought iron railing had been fitted and it continued down two sets of stairs, one at each end of the flats, providing access to the street. From dusk onwards, the middle part of each set of stairs was mysteriously dark and the flats themselves cast a huge shadow across the street.

Hidings was our favourite game, *come out come out, wherever you are, the monkey's on the lookout*. One of us would stand against a terraced house fence, our head resting on folded arms while we counted to twenty out loud. The rest would dive for cover, and there'd be cries of "no, not here, I grabbed it first" or "go find your own place."

We played seriously and loudly, yelling at the tops of our voices but there were no complaints from any of the neighbours, most of them refugees who'd escaped from Hungary and Poland before or during the Second World War. Perhaps they enjoyed the sound of children's laughter or thought it was natural that we should play in the street after dark.

Sometimes, a woman would come out of one the flats to where we were playing and offer us an array of things to eat that she had carefully displayed on a plate or a tray. Oh, but we were a suspicious lot. Seventeen kids would stand around this very dignified lady and wait for the one who'd be brave enough to sample the goods and assure the rest that we weren't being poisoned.

Over time, our games became more sophisticated and we began daring each other to do this or that. I dare you to walk on the outside of that garage railing, and make a whooping sound when you get to the end, no hanging on either. There was a small gap between the edge of the cement and the railing and if you weren't too big or too awkward, you could balance like you were walking a tightrope, but in the dark, it was risky, even dangerous. Still, to refuse was out of the question. If you did you'd have to accept the Double Dare and that was always, always, worse.

My most challenging dare was having to climb the metal staircase that led to the top of the reservoir. There was coiled wire two thirds of the way up to prevent further access but that wasn't the problem. There was a story that went around that the wire had been put there some years before, because a young girl had gone up to the top, jumped in and was drowned. Jimmy, from four doors up, reckoned he'd seen her ghost and so had his Mum, and he said the girl wanted someone else to drown so she could slip into their body and become real again. Lizzie scoffed at this idea but I wasn't so sure.

Jimmy probably knew I was scared out of my wits but I could not back away from his dare. Tim lifted me onto the first step. The higher I climbed the more I worried that I'd let go of the hand rail and plunge to my death, or even worse, have to spend the rest of my life in an iron lung.

I'd wet my pants by the time I'd reached the halfway point. Another step and I was convinced I could see her. She was wearing a white dress that did up at the back. I had one exactly like it. Her hair was caught in two pigtails that reached to her shoulders and I just knew they were held in place with white bows. Looking up at the smooth

surface of the reservoir wall I was unable to move up or down. Jimmy's voice cut through the air like a knife. "G'wan, you're a chicken ..."

Anger hit me like a blast of icy water. Suddenly, I wanted to smash Jimmy's head against the wall. I ran up the last five steps like I'd just made it to the top of Mount Everest. I tied the length of bright red knitting wool I'd brought with me onto the nearest coil of wire. Thoughts of the little girl were forgotten as I made my descent.

I doubt that any child ever did drown in that reservoir, it was just a scary rumour but the important lesson I'd learned from Jimmy's dare that day was about confronting my worst fears. Many times since I have egged myself on with those three simple words, *Go on, I dare you*.

There was another childhood game I played that was also influential on my thinking. It was a game that only Lizzie and I knew about, called Betts and Jeans. Whenever we took on the mantle of Betty or Jean, two friends who both had a number of children, usually two or three each, we entered a different world. The names Betty and Jean were interchangeable and once we'd decided who was who that day, we acted out the friendship of these two women and the age difference between us dropped away.

If Betty had to see a specialist about her little boy's eyes, then Jean took care of all the other children and later, when Betty returned home, these two friends would discuss, over a pretend cup of tea, what the doctor said and what it would mean for the child and the family's finances.

There was a sense of comfy familiarity about our play and there was so much that Betty and Jean had to do. Apart from washing and cleaning, changing nappies, wiping

runny noses, bandaging sore knees, there was the shopping and the cooking and much to be said about the *cost of living*.

Our conversations ranged over the practicalities of life, the problems of trying to feed a family in the post-war years, coping with ration cards, shortages of food items in the shops, plus the kids always needing things that just couldn't be bought for *love nor money*. What we said was what we'd overheard adults say but over time we began forming opinions that were more our own.

This game was in part, a distraction from all that was happening around us. Yet it also gave me a sense of potential, an understanding that talking with friends could produce something useful, a problem could be solved, something different could be glimpsed.

There were months and months when Tim and Lizzie were in orphanage-style institutions, known euphemistically at the time as Homes. My father was always saying that we three older ones were in his house *on sufferance* but Tim and Lizzie, were constantly reminded that they were not *his* children, and this must have undermined further their precarious sense of security.

They were sent away a number of times, Tim to Boys' Town, out along the Princes Highway, at Engadine, and Lizzie to an orphanage near Brooklyn, on the Hawkesbury River. I didn't see them often but each time I did, the visit was memorable and the wish to be around them longer made my belly churn.

Boys' Town was a rambling array of buildings with large play areas in between. On one occasion a boxing ring had been set up and the boys wore red boxing gloves and sparred with one another. I think it must have been a competition to see who was the champ but I was too young to grasp the finer details. Tim had a go but he only lasted

one round then the bell went. He climbed down and someone helped him take off the gloves. He was smiling so much I think it was probably relief.

Lizzie hated the orphanage at Brooklyn and later told me stories about visits from celebrity figures, like Bobby Limb and Dawn Lake. They'd brought boxes of chocolates that they handed over to the nuns for the children but these were only distributed, one by one, months later, Lizzie explained, when someone had done something especially good. By then the chocolates were melted or stale and didn't taste too good.

I remember a long verandah overlooking the water, behind the main building of that orphanage and a tall, wooden cupboard with many shelves inside. Each shelf was stacked with rows of second hand shoes, donated by some local charity, arranged according to shoe size. The smell was almost overpowering.

One day, Mum and I watched as Lizzie tried on a pair of brown lace-ups. They were scuffed at the front and the new laces weren't long enough for Lizzie to thread the last two holes. The imperious manner of that nun, as though she was handing out gems instead of cast off shoes, stayed with me, a reminder of how many children were treated in similar fashion in the name of Christian Charity.

I learned, with the passing of time, to understand and accept that Tim, Lizzie and I responded to the violence in our home in very different ways. Their experience in orphanages may have taught them to walk away, to absent themselves, when things got messy. Or perhaps they understood more clearly than I did that we children were powerless and could not change anything about this violent relationship between Jessie and Albert.

With my straight down the line view of life, I could not, would not, distance myself from the injustice of my father's superior physical strength pitted against that of my mother. There were times when I thought she was goading him to do his worst, insisting he'd never get the better of her. I knew that but it didn't alter my reasoning. She could cut him down to size with well chosen words but he smashed his way through life with his fists. In the end it was her life that was threatened, not his.

In my late teens, I was living in a converted garage at Campsie, down a gravel driveway from the main house. I'd long since made peace with Eddie, and though I hadn't seen much of him in the years since I'd left home, that was okay. We were never going to be close but at least he didn't irritate me in the same way anymore. Late one night he came to see me. Talking all the while, he led the way out to the street and proudly showed me his new car.

I don't remember the make but it was old and black and cumbersome. The gear stick was huge, bulb-handled on a firm, curved stem, and seemed to grow out of the floor like some monstrous, alien plant. I'd had my driving licence for a few years then and was pleased when Eddie suggested I drive around the block. My impressions about the car were strengthened when I drove it, that gear stick seemed to be struggling against me every time I set about changing gear.

I was concerned about Eddie that night. He was only fourteen years old, much too young to own or drive a car. What would happen to him if he was stopped by the police? I sat in the front passenger seat, listening to him talk. I noted, in the glow of a street light, his likeness to our father. The frowning creases above the eyebrows were exactly the same but his expressions seemed softer, gentler.

He told me how he'd been putting money aside for ages, washing cars, mowing lawns, and had bought the car at a good price from a friend of a friend. His plan was to do it up and sell it for a profit so that when he was older, old enough to apply for a driving licence, he'd have enough money saved to buy something snazzy. But, I asked a second time, in that unmistakable, older sister tone of voice, where are you going to keep it?

He turned those dimpled cheeks on like a flashing neon sign. What if I looked after the car for him? Before I could utter a word of protest, he hurried on to explain how he felt. He was worried Mum would find out he had the car, or worse that Dad would, and besides, after a few months when he had earned some more money, he could buy the parts he needed to do it up. Did I think that was a good idea?

I was so busy being a good, older sister and so delighted that Edward had appealed to me for help, I didn't ask any more questions. We got out of the car and he unclipped and lifted up the driver's side of the bonnet and showed me how to remove the rotor button. Eddie explained that without the rotor button the car couldn't be moved so no one could steal it. I stood there silent for a moment. Despite my good intentions, I was still reluctant to get involved but I couldn't get my thinking to move beyond the idea that I was saving Edward from getting into any serious trouble. How could I refuse him?

I drove to our parent's house, stopping at the next corner to let him off, so no one would see him, me or the car.

It was two weeks before I smelled a rat, a very big rat. For those two weeks I was blithely unaware that I had been driving around in a stolen car. Two men at work had an interest in classic cars, Gerald had long ago pooh-poohed the idea of driving a Holden, preferring instead his A39 Austin. Bill was always messing around with his MG. Talking to these two over lunch one day the truth dawned on me, Eddie couldn't have afforded to buy this car, no matter how hard he saved. Bloody hell, I had been taken for a ride by my own brother.

I went to see my mother as soon as I'd finished work that day. Eddie was in his room, supposedly doing his homework. Mum confronted him then and there. He pushed past me and headed for the front door, muttering that if I was silly enough to believe him, then it was my own stupid fault if the cops caught me. Humiliated, angry and fearful of getting into trouble with the police, I drove the car to a quiet street not far from Canterbury railway station, and walked back to the main road to wait for a bus.

Although I was furious with Eddie I was even more furious with myself, I vowed that he'd never, ever, make a fool of me again, the little creep.

And so we grew.

Chapter Four

Introducing Charlotte

In a parallel universe, where fiction reigns supreme, Charlotte is a character acting out my story, treading a path from my imagination into another possible version of my experience. On a cold February day, in the north of England, she is involved in a car accident.

1994

The sky was heavy with the threat of more snow. Charlotte stopped at the lights and pulled her coat more tightly around her legs. There was a hole in one of her gloves and the car heater was playing up, thank God she was nearly home. Turning into a narrow street, her attention was on a car parked too close to the corner.

She heard a loud bang and something heavy landed on the bonnet. It took her a split second to realise it was a man. He was wearing a helmet but she could see his eyes clearly. He looked straight at her as he bounced and came hurtling towards the windscreen. Then everything went black. Hours later, she woke up in a hospital bed. Her head was heavily bandaged. She was told that the gash over her right eyebrow had needed fifteen stitches.

Two policemen came to see her. They said there had been a witness, a woman. She'd made a statement. A boy and a dog had rushed onto the road from behind a parked van. The motorcyclist had swerved sharply and his back wheel had spun out

of control on a patch of black ice. The witness had seen the bike side-swipe the van then mount the gutter. The motorcyclist had then been thrown onto Charlotte's car with such force the top half of his body had gone through the windscreen.

One of the policemen had leaned forward and patted her arm. "You just came round the corner at the wrong moment." They made it seem so simple, so uncomplicated. For her it is not simple and remains very complicated.

oooOooo

Many good stories begin with a big event. For example, births, marriages, funerals, and moving house. Such beginnings indicate change or upheaval, something momentous is happening, how will the characters cope?

The accident I created for Charlotte was intended to unhitch her from her day to day moorings and set her adrift. But that scene did not come out of the mist, ideas and emotions had been swirling about in my mind months before I wrote anything down.

One December night in London, after a meeting, I was driving home slowly. Snow had been forecast and I could see patches of ice on the road. The traffic lights were green but I pulled up as quickly as I could. There, lying on the road to my right, were two people, partly obscured by an overturned motorbike but there was enough light to see their helmets.

I felt nervous and wary as I got out of my car. Was this a trick? I looked around in vain for a telephone box. I turned off the engine and removed the key from the ignition. Hesitating still as I closed the car door, I looked this way and that, then crossed the road. The back wheel of the motorbike was still turning.

I pulled off the biker's gloves. His skin felt rough and I could see what looked like grease under his nails. Probably a mechanic, I thought. I didn't expect to find a pulse, I was already half-convinced he was dead.

The woman's hands were tightly clasped around the biker's waist. Gently, I freed her left hand then eased off her glove, one finger at a time. The stone in her ring glinted for a brief moment as the traffic lights changed. I was leaning over her, one ear against her open mouth, when I heard the wailing of sirens. Oh thankyou, thankyou, someone somewhere must have phoned for an ambulance.

The police arrived first. One of them hurried over and crouched down near the biker's head. A moment later she turned towards me. "This one's gone," she whispered, "how about her?" I eased my weight onto my heels. "I think she's dying," I replied.

Moments later there was no evidence left to suggest there'd ever been an accident, except for a bit of damage to a traffic light post. The ambulance had gone and the police had moved the bike - half-pushing, half-dragging it into someone's garage. I drove home feeling dazed and distressed that no one in the local vicinity had come out to see what had happened. Even the man who'd provided garage space had to be persuaded to do so.

The next morning I phoned the police and was informed that both accident victims had been pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital. I asked if I could contact their relatives, I just wanted to say I'd been there, to explain that death had come quickly. If it had been my son or daughter I would have welcomed that assurance but the policeman spoke dismissively, refusing to even discuss the possibility, he acted as though I was trying to interfere.

A few days later I received sad news from Australia. A good friend of mine had died. It was suicide. For many months this friend had been coping with cancer. It occurred to me as I read the letter from his wife, that my friend may have decided to take his own life rather than feel diminished by what was to come.

I worked out the dates later on. At about the same time I was kneeling in the road, hoping against hope that those two people were not dead, my friend back in Sydney was busy around the back of his house, connecting a length of rubber hose from the exhaust pipe of his car into the back seat area. He'd wound up the window as far as he could then stuffed the gap with rags. Funny thing, he'd been a mechanic and was always very interested in cars and motorbikes.

Over the next few weeks I felt as though I was in a pool surrounded by so much emotion it was hard to swim against it. I made a decision. Charlotte had to go back to Australia.

August 1994

It was 7am and Janet was waiting at the airport. She rushed forward when she saw her friend come through the doors.

"Hey Charlotte, over here."

Charlotte waved awkwardly. She was struggling to navigate her trolley down the ramp.

"Jee-suz."

Janet was staring at the scar. It began above Charlotte's right eyebrow, a jagged horizontal line, then curved sharply just below her temple.

“They reckon it will fade ...

“Of course it will.”

Janet reached up and with two fingers traced the length of the scar.

“I’m so glad we’ve still got you.”

Embarrassed, Charlotte laughed. “Yes, they keep telling me I was lucky ...”

“So where first? Back to my place?”

“Do you have to be anywhere? What about work?”

“Don’t worry, I’ve taken the day off. Where do you want to go?”

“For the last six hours at least, I’ve been fantasising about you and me sitting in a cafe, sipping coffee ...”

“Glebe Point road?”

“Perfect.”

Janet finds a parking space in a back lane. They walk half a block to the café.

“It’s like knowing something deep down in your gut, you know what I mean?”

Janet sipped the last of her coffee before attempting a reply. “Yes, I think so, but no, not really. Can you give me a bit more to go on?”

“Look, I’ll give you an example instead. You remember the Azaria Chamberlain case, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“But did you know about David James Brett?”

“I don’t think so. Was he a lawyer or something?”

“No, he was an English tourist. He came from Kent and he was here in the early 80s.

He had his palm read or maybe it was a Tarot reading, I’m not sure, but he was so freaked out he left quick smart ...”

The waitress came to clear their table.

“You two finished?”

“Um no, how about another coffee?”

Charlotte nodded.

Janet ordered for them both. The waitress had a wet cloth in her hand. She took her time wiping down the table, rubbing vigorously at a smudgy spot in the middle.

Charlotte and Janet leaned back in their chairs watching. At last the waitress left them.

“Go on,” said Janet, “I’m all ears.”

“Well, he wanted to pooh-pooh the idea he’d been spooked and came back to Australia in 1985, but oddly enough, he had begun to think he might die soon. He mentioned this to a few people, then in January the following year, he did a really stupid thing ...”

“What? What did he do?”

“He went to the Northern Territory intending to climb Uluru. You can imagine how hot it must have been at that time of year.”

“Yeah but he was a tourist, tourists do stupid things, especially if they’re after some kind of thrill or adventure.”

“It’s not clear what he was after but he fell off.”

“He climbed the rock and then fell off?” Janet giggled. “Did he fall or was he pushed?”

Charlotte took a moment to answer.

“It was probably an accident. He was on his own. Several people saw him climbing the rock late that afternoon, and then a week later his body was found...”

The waitress returned with their coffees.

Charlotte continued, ignoring the waitress.

“...they reckon dingoes and goannas got to him. One arm was missing and other bits of him were eaten away ...”

The waitress thumped down the coffee cups and hurried away.

Janet winked at Charlotte.

“So what happened next?”

“When he didn’t show up that night they mounted a search to look for him. Close to where his body lay a searcher found a matinee jacket.”

Charlotte was amused at the expression on Janet’s face.

“Do I have to tell you whose matinee jacket it was?”

“Azaria Chamberlain’s?”

“That’s right. Lindy was released from prison a few days later.”

“But that’s incredible. What if they’d never found him? ”

“Life is full of what ifs, you know that.”

Janet spooned sugar into her cup. Thoughtfully, she stirred her coffee.

“So let me see if I’ve got this right. This fellow’s death helped Lindy Chamberlain and you think your dead motorcyclist will help you?”

“No, what I’m saying is that we, all of us, are not just people but a story. There’s my story and your story and everyone else’s story, and they don’t just float around in the same space, they interact. Any of us can have an impact, a knock on effect, on anyone else, even someone we’ve never even met. Or maybe they’ll have an effect on us.

There is nothing new or profound about the idea but I do feel a connection between me and this man, Mal Murray. His real name was Malcolm by the way, but everyone

called him Mal.”

Charlotte was leaning forward, elbows on the table. From time to time she would raise her index finger and stroke the scar. Janet wondered what it must feel like to survive an accident like that.

“Do you feel like you knew him?”

“No, but he has passed on to me a sense of urgency.”

“Does that mean you intend to visit your mother?”

“No, I don’t think so, I’ve worked out the dates, she’s eighty-four now and, well, let’s face it, she might even be dead.”

“So what do you intend to do?”

“I’m going to do some family research first. I need to know things. My mother will have to wait until I feel brave enough.”

oooOooo

I *am* Charlotte and then again, I’m not. I don’t have a scar, I wasn’t involved in a car accident, but I did come back to Australia in 1994 knowing I’d run away in the early 1980s from people and issues I could do nothing about. Sometimes, running away is the only thing we *can* do. My friend’s death was a shock to me, and even more so because he chose exactly the same means to commit suicide as my older brother had. I felt his death switched on a light that enabled me to see something important.

I realised I had two options. I could follow the familiar path and leave things as they were, living either in England or back in Australia. Or, I could return home willing to face what lay behind me and also what lay ahead of me. This book is about making that choice

Chapter Five

Prison Visit

January, 1983

It is a warm summer's day. I'm back in Australia for a flying visit. I wind the window down to let in some fresh air. Today is the first time I've seen my mother in years. We are driving to Cessnock jail, to visit my brother. I ask questions and my mother answers them at length; about her health, her flat, her neighbours, her battle to make ends meet. I am determined to keep things light, to float on the surface, to avoid any topic that might disturb the notion that we are getting along just fine.

There is a car park a short walk away from the perimeter fence. Already I can tell that this is a low security prison. Through the mesh fence we can see prisoners wandering around, talking to visitors, laughing and joking. At the gate a guard checks the contents of my backpack and my mother's handbag but it's no big deal.

Eddie is waiting for us. Mum hugs him and over her shoulder he looks at me, his gaze uncertain, I imagine mine is too. He leads the way to a wooden table and bench, the sort you see on the grassy areas near beaches, up and down the east coast. Mum is already saying hullo to some of Eddie's prison friends and their wives. I hold back, I need to talk to him alone.

"Do you mind walking around a bit?" I ask him.

"Sure." He replies with an accommodating grin.

“I’ll be right here,” Mum says, turning back to say something to one of the women at the table.

There are other people, in twos and threes, walking in a large circle, following the line of the mesh fence.

My question bursts out of me like a jack-in-a-box.

“Did you do it?”

He does not reply right away and when he does I have to strain towards him to hear.

“Yes.”

“Just yes, is that all you have to say?”

“Frankly, if you want to know, I could kill the bitch. She found out I was working in the veggie plot...”

He points to an area beyond the fence. I can see what I think might be tomato stakes.

“... and complained, so now I’m not allowed beyond the gate.”

I clamp my lips tightly, biting back a hasty reply. We continue walking.

“Is it okay in here?”

“What do you think?”

“I don’t think anything, I’m asking you.”

He thrusts his hands deeper into his pockets.

“It’s okay ...”

“What do you do with yourself each day?”

“I will tell you but not till we come back after lunch. You and Mum will have to go out and come back in again ...”

“Yeah, Mum said something about it, I packed us some sandwiches.”

He stops and turns towards me.

“When we were kids, did we have a swing in the backyard?”

“No.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“Look Eddie I know, I don’t have to think about it. From the back door we stepped down into the side passage, then behind the house there was a toilet and the shed, remember?”

He nods.

“... and beyond that was a bit of scrappy ground and the back fence. There was no swing.”

“That’s what I thought but Mum was so insistent. She reckons I used to climb on it all the time and nearly broke my neck when I fell one time.”

I couldn’t help grinning.

“You don’t still believe her stories, do you?”

“She is so convincing ...”

“I know.”

She is like that, our mother. When I was very young I used to think she had this uncanny ability to read my thoughts. In my early teens I schooled myself not to reveal too much. Whenever I felt she’d been meddling with my perceptions, I had to go for a walk, be by myself for awhile, and try to sort things out. I was never completely successful, even as an adult but I learned to cope.

Fairy stories helped. I hung onto this idea that I was in an attic, sitting in front of a sewing-machine, not unlike my mother’s old Singer, turning straw into gold. Like Rumpelstiltskin I was working to a deadline. Somehow, that vision helped put some distance between the things my mother said and my willingness to believe her. I never

did underestimate her though - she was good, very very good.

We return to the table. My mother is in full swing, she has good pace and timing. I can tell she's going down well by the laughter around her, she's the life of the party. When it's time for us to go back to the car for lunch my brother stands and waits till I am about to walk past him.

"I've got a thermos in my cell and I could make you some tea. Do you like Chamm-o-mile?"

I hesitate a moment before I answer him.

"Yes, please ... eh ... I don't know if it matters to you but it is pronounced cam, you know, a silent aitch ..."

He looks at me blankly.

"... it doesn't matter how you say it," I add hastily, "it tastes the same either way."

He pronounces the word again, correctly this time. I smile and turn to follow my mother through the gate. An hour later we are inside again. We three are the only people at the table. Eddie sets down a thermos, two plastic mugs and a book. He pours the tea and hands me one of the mugs.

"Mum doesn't like this stuff so it's just you and me. Chin chin."

I point at the book.

"What's that?"

He places it on the table between us. On the front cover, in tooled leather, is the raised outline of two hands, clasped as in prayer. Eddie strokes the leather fondly.

"This is my bible."

"I see ..."

Before he can say another word, Mum gets up and leans over to kiss the top of his head.

“I haven’t spoken to Jean yet, I’ll be back in a minute.”

Eddie seems not to notice she has gone. His eyes are fixed on the bible.

“It was a few months ago that God came to me in the shower one morning.”

“Really.”

He continues as though he hasn’t noticed my sarcasm.

“Yes, one of the men in the next cell gave it to me. I had nothing else to read so I thought what the heck ...”

He leans forward and says in a conspiratorial whisper,

“That day I began to understand what God expects of me.”

“And?”

“Well, He came and I saw Him. I know it sounds crazy but that’s what happened.”

I sip my tea and wait for him to go on.

“I’m going to start a small business when I get out of here.”

“Doing what?”

“I’m going to sell sandwiches near factories during the lunch hour.”

“And will this cost money?”

“Yeah, a bit, till I get started. I’ll need a van for a start. The church is going to help me out.”

“What church?”

“The Mormon church of course, didn’t I tell you that? The bloke who gave me the bible is a Mormon, they’re very good people you know.”

“Are they?”

His tone of voice changes and he seems to swell in size, like a man on a soapbox making a point.

“Yes they are, and I’ll tell you this. If you repent and give up your lesbian lifestyle God will forgive you too, just like He’s forgiven me.”

The plastic mug is still in my hands. I have finished the tea but I lift the empty mug to my lips and clamp my teeth tightly around the rim. I pretend to be drinking the last few drops. I have no desire to continue this conversation or even reply. This man sitting across the table may be my brother but really, he is a stranger. I don’t know him, I don’t want to know him. I cannot, will not, speak to him about my life.

On the way home my mother goes on and on about poor Eddie. She thinks it’s just bad luck he’s wound up in prison, nothing more. I feel my temperature rise a few notches.

“You mean because the woman went to the police or because the judge found him guilty?”

“Sex happens between men and women all the time. She just called it rape afterwards.”

The injustice of this reasoning is making me feel physically sick. I am shamed and disgusted by my mother’s unwillingness to even consider for a moment the woman my brother raped. But there’s no point in arguing with her.

“So what are you planning to have for tea tonight, Mum?”

It is strange to know that that conversation was the last I ever had with my mother.

I had assumed back then that Eddie had raped a woman he knew. Not till 1994, when I began talking to my sister at length about our family, did I learn from her that Eddie had accosted a woman on a busy highway and forced her into his car. He held the woman captive for more than ten hours.

Lizzie was certain there'd been an account of Eddie's crime in the newspapers so I began researching major and local newspapers at the Mitchell Library and keeping a journal of the work as it progressed. What follows is my last journal entry about that research.

Journal
4th October, 2004
Mitchell Library

No record of Eddie's trial reported nor any mention of the rape in any context, in fact, reading the Daily Telegraph for example, you might assume rape doesn't happen in Sydney. I've now covered 1979, 1980 and 1981.

My visit to see Eddie in Cessnock jail was during January, 1981. That same month he was told he would shortly be transferred to Silverwater jail and put on a Day Release program. I've worked out that he spent approximately twelve months in Long Bay jail on remand before his trial then another three years at most, in Cessnock so when exactly did he commit the rape and when was his trial?

It is unlikely that I will ever know.

If my brother had died I would have been able to access his prison records from

Cessnock. I did apply for a death certificate just in case, but ten days later, the letter arrived stating there was no record of his death. I photocopied the certificate for Lizzie and wrote *Sadly, he lives* across the bottom before putting it into an envelope to post to her.

Living persons have to give permission to the family member before any research can be allowed. The only other alternative is for that family researcher to wait seventy years. By law that is the length of time that must pass from the date of the crime/s committed before access can be allowed.

Lizzie had supported Eddie from the time he was arrested until long after he was convicted and transferred to Cessnock. He wrote to her regularly. These letters cover a period of years and indicate, especially in the early stages of his prison life, that Eddie was an agitated man struggling to maintain control over his possessions out there in the world, and attempting to beg, harass and order Lizzie to do a number of things for him with that aim in mind.

Two newly released prisoners arrived unannounced at her house one morning insisting Eddie had promised she would help them. Alarmed, she warned them that if they didn't leave right away she would phone the police. They did leave but not before yelling out a number of threats about coming to get her one dark night. Lizzie had tried for years to live with the idea that families must stick together, no matter what happened.

It was this incident that finally changed her mind about the implication of such a notion in our family.

PART II

Childhood

Chapter Six

The brown leather coat

1945

Three houses up in our terrace row lived the Burton family. Mr Burton, a silent and dignified man, died of TB. A few days after his funeral, on a Saturday morning, Mrs Burton came out of her front door and, with a sense of ceremonial solemnity, hung her husband's suit by its wooden coat hanger over the wrought iron rail of her front fence. Back and forth she came with a coat and three freshly laundered white shirts, all on coat hangers. On a kitchen chair she put two small piles of underwear and a carefully folded pair of striped pyjamas. His brown lace-up shoes and an old pair of slippers were displayed on the front step.

Mrs Burton was not the first widowed woman to offer her dead husband's clothes to the neighbours, this was what people did now that there was a war on.

The shoes were too big for my father but the leather coat fitted him well, adding height to his stocky frame. Mr Burton had worn that coat to an office block in the city every day during the winter months. It was a long, brown coat with a big wide belt, smooth to the touch except for one spot on one of the lapels where the nap was inclined to rub itself the wrong way.

The memory of Mr Burton faded quickly in my mind as the leather coat became part of my father's personality. It spoke to me of his strength, the heavy substance of his presence.

Everything about my father made me feel small and unprotected. I imagined he could break my leg or my spirit, with a firm flick of his wrist. Seeing him walk home from work, sometimes late in the afternoon or early in the morning, I would try to fathom what kind of mood he was in. If he was swinging his bag was that a good sign? If his coat was unbuttoned and the belt dangled free as he walked did that mean he was happy? It was so hard to know, to be prepared for what might happen.

In his gladstone bag he carried the newspaper, the remains of his lunch and a baling hook. The hook was made of forged steel and shaped like an upside down question mark. A rounded wooden handle extended both sides of the straight edge where the dot should have been. I hated the sight of that baling hook. It was more like a murder weapon than a tool of trade.

It's hard to explain how certain garments my father wore or everyday items he used, took on a life of their own, even when he wasn't there. It was as if each piece had somehow been imbued with his power, his domination, plus an innate ability to keep a watchful eye on things. His armchair in the loungeroom is an obvious example. It was the most comfortable chair in the house but marked out as territory intended for his use alone. No one, under any circumstances, would have dreamed of sitting in it, or propping themselves on the armrest, even for a moment. He had, in effect, created an edge of menace that sharpened the shape of everything around him, and around us.

Mrs Burton continued to live three doors up for a good many years after her husband died. She was a very kind woman. If any of us kids were playing out the front, she'd often call out to us and offer around Arnott's biscuits, straight from the tin.

Sometimes, on hot days, she gave us glasses of cordial. One day she asked me about my father and that leather coat. Did he know that you could put a bit of this special polish on it to keep the leather supple? Even as I was telling Mrs Burton that my father was always buffing and polishing his coat, and his gladstone bag, I was remembering that the coat had once belonged to Mr Burton.

Funny how things stay with you. Walking back home later I relished the thought of what if. *What if* Mr Burton was still alive, still wearing his leather coat and my father had been the one to die. What if? Wouldn't that be good?

That was the first time I had ever wished for my father's death but the wishing became a kind of mantra. I wanted to believe that if I said the words fervently enough my wish would come true. He would drop down dead.

Chapter Seven

At Fifteen

1955

It is Friday morning, the day after my fifteenth birthday and I am sitting up in bed. I have been home sick for a week, a mild dose of German Measles. The spots have cleared up and I am no longer infectious. I can hear my mother in the bathroom next door. She has just got back from work, her early shift, cleaning at the local public school. I can tell she is having trouble with the chip heater. The roaring sound flares up the chimney for a moment then with a shaky splutter dies away. It does that if you try to light it in a hurry.

I check over the composition I have been working on. Sister Angela wants me to enter it into a competition. The subject is dental health. The people who set up the competition have provided the first line. It reads: *Into each life some rain must fall.*

For days I puzzled over that first sentence. How to link rain and teeth? Did rain suggest cavities? Could you really protect yourself from the weather? Was there a hidden meaning? In the end I'd decided that *before* the rain fell you needed lots of milk and apples, and when the clouds burst open, you had to look for a good dentist as well as a raincoat.

Sister Angela suggested I work on the last three paragraphs to make my ending stronger. The deadline is next week.

I have written the whole four pages in my neatest handwriting and now it's finished.

I get up and open the wardrobe. My school uniform is hanging on a wire coat hanger.

I am walking towards the stairs with the uniform over my arm when my mother comes out of the bathroom.

"You can put that bloody thing away, you won't be needing it anymore."

I hold it out towards her.

"It's my uniform Mum."

She crosses her arms and stares at me.

"I've found you a job, you start next week."

"What? But ...but, I'm in the school play Mum and what about my exams?"

"There'll be no more exams for you, I can tell you that. The rest of us have gotta' work for a living and so do you."

I hadn't realised my father was home but there he is at the bottom of the staircase. His head is partly in shadow but I can imagine there is a sneer on his face. He is waiting for me to say something. They both are. I look from him to her and back again.

They've worked this out between them while I've been ill in bed.

Pride will not allow me to ask even one question but my mind is full of them. Has my mother rung the school? Do the nuns already know I'm not going back? What will Sister Angela say? And what sort of a job has my mother set up for me? I sneak a glance at her. Her lips are set in a tight line.

I turn and walk back into my room. My mother makes her way down the stairs.

I wait, out of sight, wanting to hear if anything more will be said. She speaks softly but my hearing is sharp. "I told you she'd do as she was told," I hear her say.

Even before I pick up the first book from the makeshift shelf near my bed, I am adjusting to my new situation. There's no point trying to talk to them about what I want for my future. Long ago we three older kids learned that we had no rights, we have never had any choice but to go along with whatever decisions Him and Her make. That's how I think about them all the time. HIM and HER - more like gaolers than parents.

I throw the book onto my bed. It bounces then lands near the bottom end. I can't afford to make a noise so my aim has to be accurate I grab another book and another. I throw text-books at the pillow, library books at the thrown back blankets. What use are books to me now?

My briefcase is under the bed. Undoing the two clips I upend the contents onto the floor: exercise books, pens and pencils, my geometry set, a rubber and a crumpled paper bag. The bag gives off a whiff of overripe banana, a reminder of the lunch I'd eaten two weeks ago. That had been my last day at school and I hadn't even known.

I start pacing. I'm a tiger in a circus cage, forced to pad up and down in a small space, with feelings inside me so big they can't be let loose. We know you can't let a dangerous animal loose, don't we? Back and forth. Back and forth.

My bare feet on the lino make a sucking sound. It reminds me of the sound made when licking an ice block. I concentrate on the sound, trying to think beyond this

room, this situation, to a future time when I won't be a fifteen year old kid with dashed hopes but a grown up person with a life I can call my own, my very own.

I want to remember what it feels like right at this moment, to know that I never want to do this to anyone else, to crush them so hard they can hardly breathe. But they won't crush me, they won't, they won't, I won't let them.

I can't pace anymore, it's making me feel dizzy. I grab the hairbrush, the one with the shaped wooden end. Lizzie gave it to me for my birthday. Pushing aside the piles of books, I crawl into bed, pull up the blankets and lie on my side. I will not cry, I will not cry.

My pyjamas have elastic around the waist. It's easy to pull the band out a bit, making room to position the hairbrush down there, right between my legs. Already I am moving, pressing the shaped end of the hairbrush up tight, yes there. My backside picks up the familiar rocking rhythm. In my mind I can hear the words of the Irish song Lizzie and I used to sing when we were doing the washing up, *I will take you home Kathleen, to where the fields are fresh and green, to where your heart has never been ...*

Chapter Eight

The problems of being a girl

I can't remember when I began masturbating but I do know the practice was well established by the time I was five or six. I cannot dredge up recollections of exploring my body nor can I point to any person and say they initiated or encouraged me in the habit. It is simply there, a part of me, something that I did at frequent intervals from early childhood onwards.

My mother caught me twice when I was small. There I was sitting at the kitchen table, elbows dug firmly into the wooden top, while underneath, my legs were moving in a rotating fashion. I had no idea what I was doing, I had never even touched myself *down there* but my mother responded angrily.

She had intended to convey disgust but somehow this message hovered above me rather than taking up residence inside and, with a need that was already strong, I responded to that and not to my mother. I'm still amazed I wasn't caught in later years, for the manner in which I chose to masturbate would certainly have provoked a strong reaction from my parents.

You see, I had a particular hankering towards a series of smoker stands my father owned. Every few years he'd oust the old one and replace it with a more up-to-date model. The style and shape of these stands was ideal for my purpose. The first one I

ever took to was made of carved wood, thicker at the bottom end, with a table like a circular skirt around the elaborately carved central column. The thick end provided a good basis for necessary friction of movement when I placed the stand between my legs.

Later, I fancied an aluminium version, 1950s styling, with two swinging tables that rotated around a slim length of tubing on top of which was an ashtray and matchbox holder. At the bottom of this slim tube a raised section, fashioned in a series of circular ridges, flattened out down to the floor. Sitting astride this ridged base and with both arms extended up to grasp the swinging tables, I was set for a jolly good time.

There was a risk of discovery in this practice. Some might think that this added excitement to my pleasure but I know that I was much too scared of my father to feel anything like that. It may have been an act of rebellion, but if that is true it wasn't conscious and I always chose my moments carefully.

After school, Eddie played outside in the street. Tim was at work and Lizzie had to travel home from her school some distance away. Mum had a job as a school cleaner which meant she arrived home just in time to start tea.

In other years my mother ran a boarding house so although opportunity could not be counted on as a daily occurrence, it was still possible to find the odd half hour here and there. I think the strongest pull towards using these smoker stands rather than say, my fingers, was the negative messages I had learned from my mother and her sisters about the female body.

My mother had a habit, when talking to other adults, of acting as though it was still war time and she was passing on a vital piece of information, using a secret code. Holding one hand to the side of her mouth, fingers pointing upwards, she would turn her head away from us children in the room and whisper what she wanted to say while we strained in vain to hear.

I learned to interpret gestures and facial movements. If there was some juicy scandal unfolding there was lots of hand waving, and often loud bursts of laughter. But if the secret was hush-hush serious and closer to home, the hand movements were likely to be restricted to a patting of the chest to express shock, horror or a *what's to become of us?* kind of response.

It was possible to draw further clues from the way my mother and the other adults pursed their lips in disapproval or flattened them out in moments of malicious glee. I could ponder my clues for hours, trying to grasp what was going on. Who had done exactly what and to whom? What trouble was afoot for someone in our street or down the road? From all that I could glean, the trouble was inevitably something to do with sex and the person being whispered about was most likely young and female.

In that era it was considered unhealthy for a girl to know anything much about the facts of life. Such knowledge was considered an open invitation for the worst of disasters to fall. Instead, mothers passed on on the barest of information, or misinformation or even downright lies. Avoiding discussion on any ticklish subject a child might want to talk about was the order of the day.

One morning I asked what was wrong with Lizzie and my mother told me the bones in my sister's legs were stretching. This, my mother added, was an important part of

getting taller. I could see my sister was in pain and immediately began to feel a mixture of dread and worry. I'd seen at least one film about torture chambers in the dungeons of English kings and particularly remembered one poor devil stretched out on a rack to get him to talk. I imagined Lizzie's arms and legs being held in place by leather straps while this big wheel turned and stretched her bones to breaking point.

The truth was that Lizzie was menstruating and she obviously had cramps and other uncomfortable symptoms. It was another eighteen months before I fully understood and I just couldn't grasp my mother's reasoning at all. What I had been thinking about was far worse than anything associated with period pain.

Although we can assume this widespread tactic of spreading confusion rather than helpful information was intended to protect and curb, such exclusion from real information could, by its very nature, generate a hungry, possibly even dangerous, curiosity. At school we talked a lot about what sex might be like and I distinctly recall a discussion among my fifth class friends about what happened when a woman gave birth. The navel was the most popular guess but a radical few insisted that the back passage was the baby's exit point. It was a distasteful thought. None of us would have thought of, much less uttered aloud, the word *vagina*. To do so would have been worse than swearing, we just didn't go there.

At home, the atmosphere was charged with hostility and we children were caught in the crossfire of our parent's marital conflicts that could flare into violence as quickly as a struck match could produce flame. My skill for reading cues in facial expressions and tone of voice became a means of protecting myself.

My father's frown was a strong suggestion of impatience or frustration. Quick, get out of his way. That high-pitched strident tone my mother used when she was cranky could rarely be softened with soothing words or the offer to make her a cup of tea. This was not then the moment to say 'I dunno' when she asked a question. All the time I was watching and worrying, there was this private place I knew I could go, look forward to, if I picked my moments carefully.

Years later, I could see there had been distinct advantages for me in the practise of masturbation. For a start, it was a means of giving myself something I needed. Comfort? Love? It doesn't matter what I call it, the important thing is that it was intuitive. I couldn't afford to think too much about what I was doing and so avoided any internal wrangling. Perhaps for this reason, continuity was assured.

Masturbation also made it possible for me to circumvent some of the destruction that threatened to make inroads onto my sexual identity via the physical and sexual abuse I received from my father. His hands on my body made me shudder with nauseous revulsion. I had a history of masturbation long before the rape that took place the year I was twelve. That small history proved surprisingly resistant to feelings of shame and blame, though I would not wish to deny the complexity, confusion, anger and pain I had to work through in coming to terms with his power over me. What I'm saying is that there was less damage done to my sexuality than might be expected.

My father died at the end of 1981 but I didn't hear about his death for another nine months. I was unprepared for the fury I felt on hearing that news. Now I would never know whether or not I'd have chosen to attend his funeral. I'd wished for his death so often during my childhood, willing it on him as I was forced to submit to the latest

punishment he'd dreamed up for me. Behind those eyes that dropped before his gaze, I lived with a passion and verve he never saw.

But if I describe my sexuality as an area protected intuitively by masturbation, the same cannot be said for how I felt about intimacy and being physically touched by others. That challenge, to allow someone to get close, has involved learning about risk and how to work with it.

Growing up with the daily threat of violence caused me to turn inwards. I regarded touch as an assault and avoided any gesture that might be considered warm. Instead, I put my faith in words. This process began when I was ten years old. In my spelling book I came across two words that were to haunt me for months and months.

Those two words were *awry* and *colonel*. I took some time to grasp the idea of how it was possible to spell them one way and pronounce them another. I read everything in sight - the labels on jars and tins, advertisements, and even the notices on the Sydney ferries, and I could spend ages devouring new words from my dictionary.

I loved to roll words around my mouth, tasting them, savouring them, trying them on for size. It was fun experimenting with pronunciation and thinking up sentences to use more obscure words. Strange then, that I was thirty-five years old before I learned there was a word to describe that private activity so familiar to me – *masturbation*.

Hearing it used for the very first time in the 1970s, by a woman giving a talk about women's health, made me realise in an instant that if there was a word for that activity, then that must mean that other people, other women, must have ...

Chapter Nine

Catholics, catholics

1949

He is a big boy, much bigger than me. His face is so close to mine I can only stare at that gap between his teeth. I feel his spittle on my cheek but dare not wipe it away.

He is yelling and screaming at me, calling me names, *bitch, bastard, shithead, ratshit, catholic, mongrel, rubbish*. My father uses words like that too but I've never heard him use the word catholic. Are catholics bad people? Am I a bad person? I have only been a catholic since the new school year began.

My mother had brought the subject up one morning late in January, just before the new school year was about to begin. She had probably been planning things for weeks.

"Would you like to go to the catholic school this year?"

"Me? What about Lizzie and Tim?"

"Mind your business Miss and just listen. If I thought that school was any good for either of them, I'd be telling them to go there, wouldn't I?"

"But ..."

"Don't interrupt when I'm speaking, anyway I found out all about it today, and do you know ... " she paused, making sure she had my full attention, " ... during the

winter months the nuns make chocolate milk for the kiddies, now that would be nice, wouldn't it?"

I nod my head.

"So that's decided then. All we have to do now is go round to the church on Monday afternoon so Father Patrick can baptise you ..."

The boy steps back and pushes me hard. I stumble but manage to stay upright. He leans forward and yanks my hat off. He grabs the elastic chin strap and pulls on it as though my hat is a slingshot.

"Give me back my hat. I'll get into trouble. Please. Pleeeeeease."

"Get down on your knees and I will. Get down there in the dirt, you stupid, catholic bitch."

I want my hat back but know better than to play things his way.

"Did you hear what I said, you slut, get down there now and ... "

Spinning on my heel, I run, afraid to look back. I half expect him to jump on me from behind. Across the road is a row of houses. I head for the nearest one and open the gate. I try to act as though I know this house, know the people waiting for me inside.

Near the front door I pause and turn back to look. My tormentor is nowhere in sight.

I wait several minutes, unsure what to do. I don't own a watch but I stand there for what seems like a long time. At last, I close the gate behind me and cross the road again. There is a private hospital on this side and a stone wall with lots of bushy plants hanging over it. I keep searching for my hat but where is it?

A movement above me, two currawongs in the nearest tree, direct my attention to the right spot. There it is, stuck on a branch, well out of my reach. I try shaking the branches but the hat won't budge. There is no other choice but to somehow clamber up there and get it. I have never been good at climbing but I don't dare think about that now. My mother has warned me I must look after my uniform, and that includes not just my tunic, but also my hat, my gloves and my new schoolbag.

Throwing my bag in front of me, I hoist myself up onto the wall and jump down the other side. I hide my bag in the undergrowth and begin to climb. Refusing to look down, I keep looking for places where I can get a hand hold and then somewhere to put my feet. I lose my grip on the way down and have to jump clear to avoid landing on my back. My ankle is sore so I walk around a bit to make sure it's okay. It doesn't matter that it hurts, I would rather fall to my death than go home without that hat.

I brush leaves and dust off my tunic and head up the hill, schoolbag in one hand, hat held triumphantly in the other. I puzzle over what has happened even as I wonder how I'm going to explain why I'm so late.

Probably for the first time though, I am aware that trouble can be found not only in our house, but out on the streets as well.

Later, much later, I am able to put together the various pieces of my mother's plan. I'd often listened as she told me about that day, soon after I was born, when my father had taken me for a walk, and returned home after dark, and, according to her, threw a piece of paper onto the kitchen table.

"Here, your kid's christened," he's reported to have said. My mother tells me that my

father's mother, my much loved grandmother, is Church of England, so presumably I was baptised in that religion. According to my mother, she had long cherished the idea that I'd be brought up a catholic, like her.

She warned me, even before my first day at the new school, that I would have to come straight home and change my uniform immediately. Lizzie and I had been taught early on the importance of keeping our clothes pressed and clean ourselves but I had failed to grasp my mother's ulterior motive. Years later, remembering how my catholic school education began, I realised my mother simply wanted to make sure the settling in process was well and truly over before my father found out.

If he had insisted I change schools again that would have ensured I'd have yet another thing to hate him for. Either way my mother couldn't lose but she would have preferred to keep the secret longer, I'm sure. I was then seven years old. She had waited that long for this victory and everything was falling into place, according to her plan.

I have never seen any document to prove I was ever baptised in the Church of England and neither my father nor my grandmother ever told me I had been. That story might have been a tissue of lies. My mother certainly didn't worry about lying to me, her main aim was to win the next round in her daily battle with my father, and part of that strategy was to make sure we kids, especially me, were on her side.

Mum would remind us repeatedly as we grew older that Tim and Lizzie were her children from a previous marriage. I was my father's child, so turning me against him was very important to her. Edward was my father's child too but he had staked a

claim early on as *his father's son* just by being a boy. I was five years older and that age difference set us apart, Edward was in many ways so much younger than we older three.

My mother's attitude was that of a high stakes gambler and her intent was narrowly focussed around her own concerns, I cannot imagine she was ever truly honest with anyone.

A few weeks after that incident the day that boy who grabbed my hat, I'm in the change room at the local baths. Our class is getting ready for our weekly swimming lesson. A group of girls from the nearby public school walk in.

Hands on hips, a few of us swagger towards them, our voices echoing in the warm summer air.

"Catholics, catholics ring the bell,
Protestants, protestants go to hell! "

This was post-war Australia and though we hadn't the faintest idea what the issues were, we knew which side we were on.

Chapter Ten

That Night in the Kitchen

1952

The swirling tensions in our household worsened the year following my twelfth birthday. My father had been working as a wharf-labourer for some time. Defined as casual employees, wharfies had to look in the paper each day to see if their number was listed and to find out what dock they had been assigned. The waterside workers' union was struggling to bring about a more secure employment situation but there were frequent strikes which meant Albert was home more often.

One hot summer's night he had beaten my mother so badly he broke her wrist but the next afternoon he was bashing her again. Afraid for her life, I had run to the nearest police station and begged someone to come and stop my father from killing my mother. When I got back Lizzie told me that Albert had stormed out of the house only moments before. Lizzie and I helped Mum into the lounge room and set about clearing up the mess.

A policeman came by some time later. When I opened the door he asked to see my mother. She came towards him and with every step had to hang onto the wall for support. He asked if she was okay. I stared at him then looked back at my mother. There she stood, one wrist in plaster, eyes black and swollen, blood congealing on her lips, bruises visible on her upper arms and she looked ready to faint. And he was asking if she was okay?

Mum wanted to know who'd called him. Was it a neighbour? Who? The policeman pointed at me. She assured him she could handle things. He looked relieved. Touching his hat by way of a jaunty farewell, he hurried out the gate and disappeared around the corner. I stared at my mother, too stunned to say a word. Didn't she want someone to stop what was happening?

It must have been late when Albert got home. He hauled me out of bed. Dazed and shivering with fear, I couldn't think what I had done wrong. Using his left arm to hold me in a vice-like grip, he thumped me repeatedly with his right fist. My pyjama pants were wet with my own urine when he finally threw me back on the bed but I could do nothing to help myself other than lie there and wait for morning. The physical beating was not near as bad as the confusion in my head.

I'd never wagged school before but I woke up knowing I couldn't sit at a desk and do any school work. I packed my lunch and was wearing my uniform when I went out the front door but I have little idea of how I passed the time. I know I sat in Centennial park feeling like a rabbit caught in the glare of headlights on a country road. I went home that afternoon longing for the day when I'd be old enough to escape.

Then came a night that changed things for each of us and represents for me a marking point, a line that would forever divide my thinking between *before* and *after*. Nothing that had happened previously scarred my emotions as much as Albert's brutality that night.

It began when he suddenly jumped up from the table and threw his chair back against the wall. Yelling to my mother about the way his lamb cutlets had been cooked, he

strode into the kitchen and threw his plate of untouched food into the sink. The familiar sick feeling started up in my belly. I watched as Tim got up and walked towards the stairs with Lizzie close on his heels. Eddie was already heading out the front door to play in the street. He was seven years old then but no one wanted him around when there was a fight on.

Mum and I stayed put. I stared at a lump of mashed potato. I moved it around the plate with my fork but my attention was on my father, following the sounds of his movements in the kitchen, trying to figure out what he might do next.

Our toilet was outside the kitchen door and around the corner. When I heard him walk down the side passage I thought we might just be lucky. Perhaps he would sit there for a bit, come back inside, get his hat and jacket and take himself off for a few hours. I probably knew, even then, that I was kidding myself. Sometimes my father went to the pictures, sometimes he went to the pub, but seldom did he walk away from a row, especially one he'd started.

I waited and waited but still he did not come in. At last I got up and cleared the dirty plates away. Distracting myself with thoughts about my homework, I thought I could go upstairs and begin. I was still at the kitchen sink when my father rushed in through the door. He must have dragged Mum out of her chair. When I looked he had both his hands around her throat.

Dropping the cutlery in my hand, I flew at him and managed to stamp my foot down on his instep. He let go, swore at me and hopped a few paces. Mum slid into a heap on the floor. My father seemed to be looking for something to hit me with. I stood facing

him, trying to prepare myself for whatever was about to happen. He pulled the toaster cord from the plug with such force the wires were wrenched free.

Stretching its length between his hands he came at me. He must have spun me round, I don't remember anything but the tightening of that cord around my neck. His intention was clear. It may seem odd but I was beyond panic. I could hardly move and any attempt would only have made things worse. From a long way off I could hear my mother yelling at him.

I was facing away from the front of the house, my father was behind me. I didn't realise for a moment or two that Tim had jumped the banister and caught my father in a stranglehold. Thrown forward, I hit the wall but managed to get myself out of the way just as Tim and Albert came crashing to the floor.

Astride Albert's body, pinning him down with his legs, Tim squeezed his fingers tight around Albert's neck. There was a murderous look on Tim's face. I screamed "Kill him! Kill him!" over and over again despite the raw soreness in my throat.

How strange and surreal that scene was. Three of us could have been throttled to death that night but how laughable it was that Albert was most at risk. Mum pulled at Tim's arms shouting "Don't son, he not worth it. Don't son, please." Tim didn't respond right away, it was like he was just had to kill this man but then I saw him relax his grip on Albert's neck.

He brought his head down close to Albert's face.

"Listen you mug," he said, "if you touch any one of us again I'll finish the job, d'you hear me?"

Albert's eyes were bulging, he could hardly move his head but we all saw him nod.

Years later, Tim told me how sick with disgust he felt that night, disgusted with Albert, with the life we were forced to live in his house. Perhaps it was the disgust that made him get up, turn on his heel and walk away.

Albert was on his feet in an instant. There was no time to shout a warning. The first thumping whack on Tim's shoulder sent him slamming into the wood of the staircase. He never got the chance to even raise his fists. The crunching sound of Albert's punches and the grunts that accompanied those punches went on and on.

We tried to interfere, to pull Albert off him but my father was like a tornado, demolishing everything in his wake, Mum and I couldn't get near enough to make a difference. I don't know when Lizzie came downstairs but I can remember seeing her standing in the hallway, her face a frozen mask. Once Tim was down, Albert began kicking him. And then, finally, it was over. Tim lay on his side, at the bottom of the stairs, covered in blood. Albert glared at each of us in turn, then he was gone.

Mum and Lizzie helped Tim to sit up, I rushed to get a bowl of water and a towel but my head was buzzing. Tim had saved my life but at what cost?

Albert stayed away for three days. By the time he came back Tim was gone. He'd enlisted in the Army. He was seventeen years old.

Despite a slight limp due to polio contracted when he was a small boy, Tim had grown up straight and tall like a narrow-trunked tree. I had curled myself, like ivy, around that trunk, hanging on tightly, winding my way nearer to the light, drawing strength from him along the way. I had no idea that there would come a time when he

would wrench that tightly held relationship apart. I had complicated his life. He had also complicated mine. The closeness we two had established as children was to trap me in a number of ways, for years and years.

Chapter Eleven

Soft Blue love

My aunt's face is etched firmly in my mind. She had a high forehead and wide-set eyes that held a sadness way back in their depths. Her hair was tumble-wash grey, brushed back in a loosely held knot. Older Australians would immediately recognise her as a battler but I think of her as a high wire act. She had no safety net but throughout the 1940s and 50s, she balanced the weight of five kids and the stigma of single parenting, and walked a tightrope of daily drudge, relying mainly on fierce pride and her lioness love.

Her real name was Doris but even before she could talk, her siblings had nicknamed her Dolly. There was nothing dolly-bird or dolly-passive about her.

Throughout the years of my childhood I saw my aunt often. She and her sister, my mother, were as close as lovers though their relationship was as stormy as life on the open seas. It was in my aunt's kitchen that my mother betrayed me. This time I could not pretend it hadn't happened.

I stared at the aluminium teapot. The bakelite knob was a reddish colour and charred on one side since the time my cousin Louie accidentally dropped it in the fire. On the table, near the teapot, I could see the remains of a bread and cheese lunch.

Back then my aunt lived in crowded accommodation. She'd been told it would only be for a matter of weeks but the weeks turned into months and three years later, my aunt and her children were still living at Herne Bay, in what had once been army barracks. (Perhaps, because of this history, the suburb was later renamed Riverwood.) Each row of huts was connected to the next by a series of wooden walkways. The walls were thin, so too was the casing around my heart.

"Please Mum, let me stay here with you ..."

"You're his daughter, he has to keep you till you're sixteen."

"But Mum, I'm frightened of him. He's drinking ... every night since you left. Please don't make me go back."

My aunt walked over and touched my mother's shoulder.

"It's alright Jess," she said soothingly, "we can manage. I'll put young Tommy in with me and you two can ..."

My mother stood up quickly, brushing away my aunt's hand. Her face when she looked at me was pinched tight.

"No Doll," she said, looking directly at me, "I can't be dragging her around wherever I go. She's gotta' learn we don't get everything we want in life."

I couldn't bear to stay another minute and I was too choked up to eat the chocolate biscuit my aunt thrust into my hand as I rushed past her and out the door, my heart already racing along those narrow, wooden walkways.

Time passed. I grew older. I learned that mothers were not to be trusted or depended upon but oh, the joy of an auntie, no mother knot to strangle us. 'Twixt Aunt and

niece rests a gentler bow. Perhaps it's satin and can be worn in the hair? I would choose blue to remind me of soft blue sky, china plates with willow patterns and blue jugs with little throwover covers, decorated around the edge with tiny blue beads.

My aunt grew older. "Got any cast-offs for your poor old aunt?" she'd ask, eyes twinkling as though it was all a big joke but I knew the stark reality of her need. I learned to anticipate but I had to be careful. Any suggestion that the items I handed over might be new could make it difficult for her to ask the next time. I could tell her pride was eroding but mine wasn't, I had enough now for both of us.

She held my childhood in the palm of her memory and often she would nourish me with little bits. "When you were so high," she'd begin or "Did I ever tell you about the time when ... let's see you must have been seven or eight, I think ..."

She knew how much I loved those moments. I was starved for any small pieces of my own history and she was the only person who detected that hunger.

She accepted my friends into her life, making room on the sofa, brewing up potfuls of tea in the same old aluminium teapot with the charred bakelite knob.

"Pull up a chair," she'd urge, "come on Love, we don't stand on ceremony in this bloody house."

Then came her death. I rushed to her bedside. Amidst the paraphernalia of an intensive care ward she was lying marooned on a high bed, her face strained with fatigue, her eyes glazed over with pain. "Promise you'll take me home to your place Darling," she pleaded. "Of course Aunt," I whispered, stroking her arm.

“Just a mild heart attack, nothing to worry about,” the doctor assured me, rocking back and forth on his well polished shoes.

“I’ll be back at the end of the week Aunt,” I said, my mind already distracted by work and kids and all I’d need to do in the next few days to get the house ready for her.

“I’ll be waiting with bells on,” she replied, making an effort to smile as I walked away.

She died the next day. How I hated that doctor for his cruel arrogance and how I raged at myself for accepting his words so easily, so conveniently. My grief was tinged with the knowledge that I’d not only lost an aunt but my childhood too.

It was years before I could bring myself to put words on paper, to probe the feelings of loss. But writing simply wasn’t enough so I began collecting odd bits of china, mostly plates, all of them blue. It’s my way of remembering the woman who gave me soft blue love.

Chapter Twelve

Jessie

My perceptions about my father have changed little with the years. I never did feel a need to talk to him, to know him, he was simply there – a brutal man I had to accept was my father. But I doubt I can ever fully understand my mother or the extent of my complex feelings towards her. Compassion was the glue that held my confusion and frustration in place most of the time but it is sadness that remains uppermost in my mind when I think about her these days.

Jessie was sixteen years old when she gave birth to her first child. It is likely that the man she married in the early stage of pregnancy was not the father, even though he'd been told he was. Nineteen years and two more husbands later, she gave birth for the eighth and last time. The first three, all girls, were handed over by the court into their father's custody. With husband number two Jessie had a boy and then two girls. The older daughter caught a cold that developed into pneumonia. Her name was Wilhelmina and she died at the age of ten months.

Financial independence was an unknown concept for most women, especially working-class women of my mother's generation and marriage was, apart from love and all that stuff, a means of surviving. Husbands then, were often an essential part of

a woman's life. It was considered a great compliment if one woman could say to another that her man was *a good provider*.

Armed with a husband's name and a wedding ring, no matter how modest or unadorned it might be, my mother could buy something big on time payment, like a fridge or a bedroom suite. If she had been a woman living on her own, she would have needed a male member of her family (usually with property or money in the bank) to act as guarantor and even then, it would have been a matter of discretion for the bank manager.

Nowadays, I think of my mother's five husbands as a set of Russian dolls, a decorative group, with painted on personalities and hollowed out centres, incapable of looking back at the mess they had made of their lives. The first and the third (my father) were small of stature, hard men who had notions of grandeur about their male pride, the second, I perceived as taller, softer, but no match for my mother. The fourth and fifth loomed large if you glanced too often at their bulky apple shapes and ever-expanding waistlines.

Never a stay-at-home wife, Jessie's moments of leisure were few. I never knew how much she earned but the way she spoke about wages, narrowing her lips as though sucking on a lemon, indicated that it was never very much. The work ethic was a driving force in my mother but she hated the fact that her income would never be enough for her to manage on her own.

Deprived of education beyond primary school years, Jessie lived as though she was destined for life in a boxing ring. Alert, waiting for the bell, she could detect insult in the smallest incident, and like a flash out of a pan, be ready to confront her latest opponent.

It didn't matter whether it was the butcher, the baker, or a child of five, facing her with trembling lips and a quaking heart, Jessie's ferocity once switched on, made no fine distinctions about age or that opponent's ability to defend themselves.

I suspect this fighting determination must date back to the time when Jessie was six years old. That was when her own mother died, giving birth to her tenth child. That birth was never registered but the other nine are all there in the official records, including Minnie, child number seven, who died before her tenth birthday.

Jessie was described as rebellious by all her sisters. Hemmed in by their father's harsh discipline, she ran away many times. The older she got, the more resistant she became. At the age of sixteen she was a law unto herself. Perhaps it was about then that the dye was cast. That was the year she became pregnant for the first time. Jessie had to survive, and if that involved lies and deceit, so be it.

Four years into her marriage with Fred Mulray, he sued for divorce, naming one Tom Gorman as co-respondent. Although Fred was granted custody of the three children, he did fail to mention in court that he'd been unfaithful too, and that his mistress was even then carrying his baby. Ironically, his only son was born the day after the court case ended.

It didn't take me long to find the newspaper account of that divorce case. The year was 1932. Domestic scandal of any kind was big news in the 1930s and editors used alliteration to attract attention – aiming for moral outrage perhaps, like this headline from the same year as my mother's case: *Blonde Bombshell From Bondi Gets The Boot*.

Jessie had three character witnesses to speak on her behalf. The newspaper reported that one of these witnesses, her sister Dolly, threatened to pull the judge's nose and had to be forcibly removed from the court by the bailiff.

Never one to give in easily, Jessie tried to break into Fred's house several times and even threw a brick through the bedroom window on one occasion but Fred had the support of the local police and managed to keep her locked out.

Jessie had the good sense to know, after several warnings from the police, that this fight was over. She was not cut out to be a wife and mother but she hated losing any fight, ever. I think she also resented what she saw as the inevitability of pregnancy for women, as a result of sex.

Resentment probably dogged her heels all her married life. Begrudging any effort to make food appetising, she would plonk vegetables and meat onto our plates with a faintly disgusted air, in a manner that suggested she'd rather be cleaning the toilet. We were not allowed to talk at mealtimes but Mum kept up a tireless monologue, about table manners.

I won't tell you again, get those elbows off the table. Straighten those backs, they should be as straight as the wooden paling on next door's new fence. How many times have I told you kids, soup is meant to be sipped not slurped. Listen, that spoon and your hand have to do the work, you'll have that chin of yours in the bowl if you bring it any lower. Did you hear me? Don't you dare touch that glass of water until you have finished eating. For pity's sake, do I have to tell you again? Knives and forks have to lie alongside each other, look, from the top of the clock to the bottom, to let

others know that you have finished eating.

The moment Jessie had swallowed the last mouthful of her evening meal, she was on her feet, anxious to clear away every last scrap of evidence that might suggest we had eaten anything at all. We learned to eat fast, very fast, anything to get the whole messy business over and done with.

If cleaning had been a religion my mother would be described as a fanatic. Her fervent methods of indoctrinating us, her evangelical attempts at making us see the light, would have at least, earned her a place near the throne of God Almighty, but I doubt she would have been happy. Someone so attuned to conflict and drama as she was would have raised the prospect of hell at the slightest provocation.

Once, when I was eleven years old, I walked to school behind my older step-sister. She was on her way to work. Shirley had come in search of her mother some months before and was now living with us.

I watched her throw her lunch into the gutter. The thought of my mother packing that sandwich minutes earlier made me cry. I glimpsed for the first time something about Jessie's life and how hard it was. She had always worked at a variety of cleaning jobs, I thought of it as menial work, I wanted something better, not just for me but for her too. Maybe I could get a good job when I left school and earn enough money one day to buy a house and make it possible for her to leave Albert Dawson once and for all.

I promised myself right there and then that I would try not to make demands on my mother. I would learn to do more things for myself and I'd be one child who didn't

go to her with my problems.

But I was so wrong about what pleased or motivated her, and the older I got the more confused I became. I think that the girl who had been born to grapple with life like a boxer became an adult with an idea of herself as a Joan of Arc figure, a woman with a purposeful glint in her eye, arriving at the scene of battle on a big war-horse, ready to fight the good fight.

In times of trouble Jessie related well to her children but without these troubles to provide a focus, she seemed lost. Closeness never worked for her unless it arose out of calamity, strife or friction. As the person who rushed to confront the police, a clerk in a government department, an employer, or something more trivial, my mother had a role, something to respond to that was clear-cut and defined. There were the battles she won and the few that she lost but her thirst was never quenched. There might have been a few dents on her shield but only a few flecks of blood.

She achieved for my brothers and sisters what they could not achieve for themselves but choosing as I had, to work with my problems myself, I had no crisis to attract her attention.

So many times I searched her face, seeking some sign recorded there to indicate she'd heard what I'd said, could see something of my efforts.

Sadly though, the years passed between us like a burgeoning flood, leaving her on one side of an ever-widening river and me on the other. The struggle to reach her just seemed

harder with each new attempt.

When we did meet the space between us was filled chock-a-block with the latest family drama, spread out like a crime scene or a roadside smash, for me to lament upon with a passion and interest I could no longer pretend to feel.

That visit to the prison, Jessie full of euphemisms about a son's mistakes, his bad luck, me lacking in compassion and wanting him to tell me to my face that he had committed this crime, him explaining that he'd turned to God at last, adding that I could be forgiven too, if I turned away from my lesbian lifestyle.

Did my mother really think I'd agree with her?

I saw the contradiction so clearly that day. And like a powerful torch it cast a bright light on the past, allowing me to see that I *had* to walk away. Yes, I had retreated before, many times, but now I had that special thing we call clarity. I realised suddenly that I had been living with an illusion. It wasn't Jessie who had deceived me. I had, in my longing for her, created an idea of this woman that just wasn't real. I couldn't change things with my mother, I could only change me.

I applied for a death certificate for Jessie in the mid 1990s, not knowing if she was alive or dead. Two weeks later the document arrived. In this way I learned that she died on 10th February, 1991.

PART III

Her Story

Chapter Thirteen

Beatrice

1994

The man behind the counter hands me a green slip of paper. I read the typed words.

No trace can be found of the registration of birth of Beatrice Cooper, issue of William Cooper and Idalia Cooper (nee Wilson) said to have been born at Uralla (NSW) between 1880-1889.

“It’s not that unusual you know.”

“Really?”

“Oh yes...”

“Can you explain why?”

The man tapped the edge of the paper with one finger, as though the explanation was there, if only I could decipher the code.

“Well, for a start it was a country area, and if people lived some distance from a major town, they probably didn’t attach much importance to registering their children’s births. Of course it might also mean ...”

He pauses as though hesitant to continue.

“Please,” I say, “anything you can tell me would be helpful.”

“Well, it might mean that she was of Aboriginal descent.”

For a brief second I am dumbstruck. Wow, I never thought of that. What if?

There is a discreet cough from behind me. I am holding up the queue.

“I see...well thank you, anyway.”

I walk out of the door and down the steps. On the train home I stare out the window thinking about my grandmother.

The smell of her perfume is there whenever I remember her. That distinctive navy blue perfume bottle had a crescent moon on the front and, at the point where the bottom arc of the moon curved upwards, there was a cat. It had always seemed to me when I held that bottle in my hands, that I was looking at a happy cat. Nanna would up-end the bottle onto her outstretched fingers and dab a little perfume under her chin, behind her ears and on her wrists. She never bothered much about make-up but she liked to use a little rouge and what she called a smudge of lipstick.

In the top drawer of her dressing table she kept a big box of talcum powder that came with a soft fluffy muff. Tiny particles of powder formed a pink cloud whenever the muff was used. Next to the box of powder was a packet of special mitts to eliminate any hair that dared to appear on her upper lip. I loved to watch my grandmother getting ready to go out, *titivating* she called it.

I was sixteen the year she died. We had been close but I have often wondered how I could have loved her so intensely yet have known so little about her life. Why hadn't I asked questions, begged her to tell me things about her childhood?

She was married in 1902 and, according to the marriage certificate which I have carried around with me for years, Beatrice was seventeen at the time. Henry, my

grandfather, was twenty-eight that year but on that wedding day, he gave his age as twenty-three.

Lying about anything but especially dates, requires a good memory. I doubt that Henry's was ever that good. He and Beatrice had three sons but one died. Henry registered all three births, and on the last one, in 1908, he gave his age as twenty-five. A grandfather who got younger and younger with the birth of each child was to present some problems for me in the early 1980s when I applied for permission to reside in Britain on the basis of having a British grandfather.

To verify the application I'd needed copies of relevant marriage and birth certificates. But when and where had my grandfather been born? Why couldn't I find him in the records? I had already been surprised to find on my grandparent's marriage certificate, a typed notation stating there'd been a dissolution to this marriage in 1926.

I'd known Henry as my grandfather in the 1940s and 50s and no one had ever mentioned anything about a divorce. Fortunately, I have a good head for significant or even trivial dates, so knowing that his birthday was the 26th December, Boxing Day, proved helpful in my search.

I had sat down in a London coffee shop with all of the documents I had to hand, making note of various bits of information and checking, one document against another, and adding details of what I could remember from earlier years. Only then did I realise that it was something about his age that didn't add up. I went back to the Records Office realising Frank might be as much as fifteen years older than he'd said he was. This would mean he'd been born in 1869. I worked forward from that year and there, in the records for 1874, I found him. Frank Henry had been born in

Leytonstone, formerly a part of London, but these days located in Essex.

Gradually I have pieced the fragments together, and that's all they are, scraps of information. Henry arrived from England before the turn of the century and had probably seen a lot of NSW before arriving in Uralla where he met my grandmother. They moved to Sydney after their marriage. Some time after WWI he disappeared. Left with two sons to support, my grandmother would have needed to be resourceful to make ends meet.

Searching through Paddington rent books for that era, and with the assistance of an historian with a lot of local knowledge about Paddington, I learned that it was an acceptable practise (but not established right across Sydney) to rent houses from absent landlords and then to sublet rooms (legally) to any number of tenants.

A gas ring had to be provided in each room and if not a tap then access to a bathroom, for water. A reasonable living could be made providing there were enough rooms in the house. Even before I started school, I had been in three houses around Paddington, where my grandmother had run such a household. I believed then that she had owned these houses and moved on to a better one when she could afford it.

For taxation purposes, Beatrice kept note of her purchases in little notebooks and pinned receipts to each page. These items were usually small: sandsoap or light bulbs or whatever a landlady might be expected to have on hand for her tenants.

Beatrice lived most of her adult life in and around Paddington, Darlinghurst and Glebe, all of them at that time, down-at-heel suburbs. I don't know how she got started in the rent-a-room business but she would have known that Paddington was

on a major tram route to the city and that these prospective tenants, especially those newly arrived from the bush, sought accommodation that was conveniently close to their place of work. She moved back to Paddington from Glebe in the 1920s, and stayed in that suburb for the rest of her life.

I imagine walking close behind her the day she set out to look at her first house to rent:

It's a week before Christmas. Her sister Ida has loaned her elegant, strappy-styled black shoes that show off to advantage Beatrice's racehorse ankles. She applies lipstick with a shaky hand.

In Australia, the old-age pension dates back to 1909. Jack Lang, Premier of NSW, introduced a widow's pension in 1926, but there was no government support for deserted wives. Beatrice has learned the hard way that abandoned families have to struggle on the best way they can.

Arriving at the corner of Norfolk Street and Glenmore Road, she sees Mr Martin hurrying along the street towards her. He is a chubby man in a three-piece, navy suit. He does not smile but touches the brim of his hat to acknowledge her. The house Beatrice has come to look at is just a few short steps up the hill.

She stops at the gate. Further up the street, is a splendid row of terrace houses, probably three storeys high, with a flight of sandstone steps in front of each one. These houses appear to block off the top end of street, their imposing facades standing shoulder to shoulder, forming a stately dead end. Beatrice can see what must be an alleyway, running alongside the last house on the right, that probably provides access to the next street over.

Turning back to look at number fifteen, her attention is caught by the leaning slope of the roof, the hooded windows and the overgrown hydrangea bush on the tiled veranda. The impression she has is of a big animal crouching forward, resting on its haunches. Mr Martin pulls a tagged key from his pocket and inserts it into the front door lock.

“We’ve had the place fumigated,” he explains.

Following him into a long hallway, Beatrice resists an urge to cover her nose. A musty smell lingers in the air. She feels a buzz of excitement and turns away from the estate agent to stroke the patterned wallpaper with a gloved finger.

“Where did it happen?”

“Here, in this first bedroom.”

He leads the way into a large room, a little on the dark side for her taste but she’s just decided she’ll never sleep in this room anyway. The fireplace is in good condition and so is the marble mantelpiece. Mr Martin points to the ceiling.

“Now, isn’t that beautiful?”

The design consists of a large bowl of fruit with bunches of grapes strung out to connect with smaller bowls of fruit in each of the four corners. The apple shapes are full and round, Beatrice wonders if it’s just her imagination or can she really see tiny spots of blood?

“He was stabbed, wasn’t he?”

Mr Martin gives a little cough and clears his throat.

“Mmm, yes. Awful business, awful.”

He rubs his hands together, a Pontius Pilate gesture, that awful business has nothing to do with him. Beatrice remembers reading about the murder. The papers had hinted that this was an underworld killing by one of the local gangs.

“It’s a nice room, don’t you think?”

“Bit overdone I’d say.”

“But your friends will envy you, my dear.”

She laughs. “Maybe I could run tours?”

Mr Martin allows his lips to flatten into a smile but it’s gone in a flash. Walking briskly from the room he makes his way down the hall. Upstairs there’s a bathroom, with a claw foot bath and a marble wash-stand. The three bedrooms are all big, too big really, for what Beatrice has in mind. Four or five smaller bedrooms would have suited her better.

Downstairs again, Mr Martin takes out another key and unlocks the back door.

Beatrice is already wondering how soon she can move in. The toilet is down near the fence, hidden under a choko vine. Whoever cleaned the house must have decided the job did not include the dunny. The brick walls are covered with mould and the dusty cement floor is littered with leaves and rubbish.

“A bit of elbow grease will soon take care of that,” Mr Martin says with a dismissive wave of his hand. Beatrice looks behind the door, pleased to see that someone has fitted a good clasp. At least a person can do their business in private.

“Has the house been vacant long?” She asks.

“No, there’s a big demand for accommodation in Paddington Mrs Dawson, nothing around here is left vacant for long.”

Beatrice knows he's lying. A friend of Ida's passed on the information that the owner has been after a tenant for at least two months. Ida reckons that a lot of superstitious people live in Paddington. Or maybe, Beatrice is thinking, they're just squeamish.

Mr Martin is on the bottom step when he turns back to face her.

"It's a very quiet area you know, if it wasn't for this ... this unfortunate business the house would be up for sale and a for a pretty penny too, I can tell you."

Beatrice wants the house, wants it badly, but letting Mr Martin know that would be a stupid thing to do. A few years ago, even a few months ago, she might have made that mistake, might even have confided in the man, but not now.

Back in his office, her tone is brisk. She signs the necessary papers and counts out the notes onto Mr Martin's desk. She's pawned anything of value that she still possessed and Ida and Jimmy have loaned her the rest.

Her brother-in-law is not a charitable man, she understands he sees the loan as the lesser of two evils. He's made it clear he doesn't want her and the boys living with them any longer and his recent drinking bouts have made both sisters feel tense.

Mr Martin opens a drawer in his desk and tucks the cash somewhere out of sight. He stands up to shake her hand and is probably gleeful with satisfaction as he says goodbye.

Beatrice walks to the tram stop, busy making calculations in her head. Now that she's gone and done the deed can she make things work? Well, there's no point in worrying, she'll just have to get on with it. In her handbag she has made a list of what

she'll need to get started. Ida said she'd help and the boys will have to do their bit too. Thank God, Glenmore Road school is just around the corner. There'll be no money for shoes for a while but she'll be able to put a roof over their heads. How soon can she hope to get those bedrooms ready for lodgers? It better be soon.

Beatrice became a landlady out of necessity. I don't know the date she applied for a divorce, only that it was granted in 1926. Six years later she married again but I knew nothing about this second husband until quite recently when, applying for a copy of my parent's marriage certificate, I noticed the name of one of the witnesses shown on the certificate was Beatrice Cameron. A quick check of the marriage records proved that she had married a man by the name of Milton Cameron in February 1932. When I applied for a copy of that marriage certificate, there was a printed notation on the left hand side. This notation made mention of a divorce that was granted in February, 1945.

That second marriage certificate is interesting to me for a few reasons. On all the other documents concerning my grandmother, the information was provided by someone else. On her marriage certificate it was her mother, on the birth certificates for each of her three sons it was her husband, and, understandably, on her death certificate it was her older son who provided the details as he knew them.

I like to think that in 1932, aged forty-seven years old, Beatrice was at last able to speak for herself. In the space marked occupation, she described herself as a traveller, an interesting category of work to elicit meaning from today.

My grandmother's marriage to Milton Cameron according to the records, lasted thirteen years but I believe they had separated years before. Somehow she and Henry

wound up together again, although there is no record of them marrying a second time.

My father's older brother Frank, told me about a day in the 1940s, just after the war had ended, when a young woman came knocking on my grandparent's door. She was searching for her long-lost father and had found a Sydney address among the few belongings he'd left behind. A woman at that house, Beatrice's sister Ida, had given the young woman this address, and well, here she was. Beatrice had invited the young woman inside for a cup of tea. These two soon learned that the same man was husband to one and father to the other.

Henry had, it seems, travelled north to Brisbane after leaving Beatrice and the boys behind in Sydney, and had married this young woman's mother in a small town in Queensland, the following year. According to my uncle, Beatrice was polite and even gracious to her visitor but afterwards, he described her as bloody furious.

She had believed Frank's story that he had gone on the road in search of work and couldn't send money back or even afford to write. Now she knew he'd bigamously married another woman. When Henry returned home later that afternoon he found three tea chests, containing his clothes and other personal things, stacked up on the front veranda.

Frank eventually found a way back into Beatrice's life and remained with her until his death in 1950. He must have been surprised at the changes he found in Beatrice. In the intervening years she'd changed considerably. This Beatrice was feisty and fiercely independent and often described herself *beholden to no one*. She would often tell Lizzie and me, that to love someone was one thing but to trust them, well, that was a different ball game.

How far back though, did my grandfather's marital adventures go? If I'd looked further in the records, that day in London, would I have found another, earlier marriage for him? Is that why he came to Australia, to get away? And what about my grandmother? Why is there no birth certificate for her? Or for her sister Ida and her brother Billy. Is the explanation simple or complex? Obviously, my grandfather had a secret life, at least for a few years anyway, and maybe, just maybe, my grandmother did too?

Chapter Fourteen

What if?

Achronism is not the inconsequential juxtaposition of epochs, but rather their interpenetration, like the telescoping legs of a tripod, a series of tapering structures. Since it's quite far from one end to the other, they can be opened out like an accordion; but they can also be stacked inside one another like Russian dolls, for the walls around time-periods are extremely close to one another. The people of other centuries hear our phonographs blaring, and through the walls of time we see them raising their hands towards the deliciously prepared meal.

Elisabeth Lenk

Those of us who knew our grandparents often have vivid memories of them and their way of life. We could describe those memories as mental snapshots, we might even be able to add a notation like 'June and Peter, Our backyard, 1945' but the image is one dimensional and we may lack understanding of the substance behind what we remember. And yet, those people, those events, are so close, we can almost touch them.

On my many visits to the State Library, during periods when I was conducting research on my own family, I shared the delight of other amateur researchers when they found a crucial document or a relevant name in the obscure records. But it's true to say that these finds shed little light on the way people lived two or three generations ago.

I would really like to have known what life was like for my grandmother in the years before I knew her. But *what if?* What if I could go back in time and, like a fly on the wall, witness cameo scenes of my grandmother's life?

Snake River, NSW, 1898

On Monday evenings George Judd would arrive home with the latest issue of the newspaper tucked under his arm. Placing it on top of the sideboard, he'd pat the newspaper once or twice then wash his hands and take his seat at the head of the table. During the meal George would feel little thrills of excitement. About to raise a forkful of food to his mouth, he'd pause and look across the room. He couldn't see the title banner or the date but everything about the paper was so familiar he saw it clearly in his mind's eye.

George thought of himself as a caring man, a family man, a man who practised gentlemanly restraint. If anyone needed proof he only had to point out how he willingly postponed one of his greatest pleasures every Monday night. You see, only when the washing up was finished, and his wife Thelma, and her ailing sister Idalia, were seated with their sewing ready on their laps, would he allow himself to pick up the paper, sit back in his chair and prepare himself to read. When George cleared his throat it was a signal. Beatrice usually sat on the floor, leaning against her mother's legs. Billy and Ida were almost grown up so they sat on low stools, either side of the fireplace.

There were stories about highway robberies, news from Mother England, advertisements for tweed suits and bags of flour, even information about train times. George read column after column of tiny print, enunciating each word carefully. He was proud of his well-modulated voice. He wanted the children to take heed, to follow his good example.

Tonight he began with an item about a steamer ship. The Abergeldie had arrived in Sydney a week ago, carrying 644 emigrants. Scarlet fever had broken out during the voyage so the ship and all those aboard had had to be placed in quarantine.

Beatrice was about to ask what quarantine was when her uncle began reading about a murder, right here in town. Paddy Riley, a miner working for the Long Tunnel Company, had found the body of a Chinaman last Tuesday morning, close to Carlyle Gully.

George made a show of shaking his head, an indication of his concern at such goings on, then harummphed low in his throat a couple of times before continuing:

The dead man was identified as Mr Sun Ning, Mr Ning had left Bendigo a few months ago and had taken over a long abandoned Snake River claim. A few of the prospectors left in the area believed he had struck it rich but it seems these rumours are unfounded.

No money or gold was found on the body nor among his possessions. The police want to question anyone who may have seen Mr Nung recently. They think it likely that Mr Ning's abundant food supplies may have been the reason he was killed. He was known to have two bags of flour that are now missing as well as some salted fish. Police did find an elaborately decorated urn full of eggs that were stored in some briny mixture, known to be a delicacy in the Oriental diet but unlikely to appeal to anyone who wasn't Chinese.

Billy was staring at Beatrice.

“Mum, she looks all funny,” he said, pointing. Idalia reached down to place a cool hand against her daughter’s forehead.

“Beatrice?”

But Beatrice wasn’t listening.

George’s expression was stern.

“Answer your mother right this minute.”

Beatrice turned an anxious face towards her mother.

“I was thinking about the poor Chinaman. How will his family back in China know he’s dead?”

George fixed his attention on the newspaper.

“I wouldn’t worry, we’ve got too many of his sort around here already.”

A few months later

Idalia’s face was grey with fatigue. The skin across her cheekbones was stretched so tight the bones protruded sharply. She lay, a shrunken figure in the huge, double bed. Her lips moved but Beatrice couldn’t hear what she was saying.

“It’s alright Mum, it’s alright.”

“No dear, let me speak, I must.”

A bony hand reached up to stroke Beatrice’s face.

“You’ve always been a good girl dear...I’m sorry things haven’t worked out better,

I ... your aunt and me have always had your best interests at heart...”

Idalia stopped then. Beatrice could see she was struggling to breathe. Like a clock that had just been rewound, Idalia started up again.

“Uncle George has arranged for you to work as a housekeeper ...”

“But Mum ... what about...”

Idalia squeezed Beatrice’s hand tightly.

“Please, you must do as I say. I won’t be around much longer and I need to know you have a job and somewhere to stay, especially now Billy has gone and Ida’s got herself married ...”

Her words were again interrupted, this time by a coughing fit. Beatrice let go of her mother’s hand and moved away from the bed to pour water from the jug on the bedside cupboard into a small bowl. When the coughing had eased a little she held the bowl against her mother’s lips. Idalia raised her head, took a few sips then pushed the bowl away. Tears glistened on her cheeks. Beatrice thought it was because of the coughing.

“You’re almost fifteen now and ... and Aunt Thelma has been kind enough to look after us since your father was sent ...since your father ...

Beatrice seized on the opportunity to ask about her father.

“You never talk about him Mum, did you love him? Was he a good man?”

“Yes, of course he was, the best. You have to remember I said that. He was sent away, that’s all I can tell you ...”

Idalia clutched her daughter's hand again. Her voice dropped suddenly and Beatrice had to lean closer to hear.

"I want you out of this house when I'm gone. I don't trust George, I know he's my dear sister's husband but ... but...he's not a nice man, Beatrice. I shouldn't be telling you this but ..." Tears were streaming down Idalia's face. "Do you hear? You must promise me you'll do as you're told and get away from here."

Exhausted, she closed her eyes. Beatrice waited a moment, looking down at the wasted body. How strange it was to see those hands lying there, so still. When she was little she'd often asked if she could count the freckles on her mother's arms. Beginning at the wrist, she'd count upwards and around, tracing the skin with one finger. 189, 190, 191 but she could never finish the job because Idalia would suddenly remember something she had to do. *I can't sit here child, doing nothing*, she'd say.

Beatrice tip-toed out of the room and went in search of her aunt. What sort of a job had they arranged for her? And how could they expect her to leave her mother at a time like this?

*

Idalia had been dead five weeks when, in 1899, Beatrice went to work for Lou Turton. Aunt Thelma had been busy with needle and thread and today Beatrice was wearing a dress that had hung, untouched, in her mother's wardrobe for years. Aunt Thelma had taken up the hem and put a few tucks around the waistband. Beatrice had pleaded to be allowed to stay in Snake River but Uncle George was adamant, it was time she began

earning a living. Aunt Thelma waited until her husband wasn't around to reassure Beatrice that Lou Turton had so ruined himself with the devil drink he was unlikely to live much longer anyway.

Lou arrived to collect her on a golden autumn morning. Aunt Thelma served tea and some of her hot biscuits but it wasn't long before Lou said he wanted to get home well before dark, so he could show Beatrice around. Uncle George helped carry out the trunk that had once belonged to Idalia and was now packed with Beatrice's things. She climbed up to sit alongside Lou and off they went. Aunt Thelma stood outside the house waving her hankie long after the cart was out of sight.

Lou's house was a large, one-roomed slab and bark hut, with two front windows and a lean-to verandah. Beatrice stood in the doorway adjusting her eyes to the gloom. A bed dominated the back wall and nearer to the door was a makeshift cupboard. Lou had already told her that he intended to sleep on the verandah. Under the nearest window there was a long bench. An enamel jug and bowl had been placed on top. Beatrice would soon learn that the jug was for collecting water from the river and the bowl was used for washing just about everything.

Lou was keen to show off the fireplace. He'd lined the bark with clay. It was a difficult business he explained, because each layer of clay had to be fully dry before the next could be applied. On the mantelpiece above the fireplace there was a book, the only

reading matter in the house. Beatrice picked it up and read the title. *The Taming Of The Horse And How To Use And Manage It*. The author's name was James Fryer. Lou had eight horses and told her this book was his bible.

He patted the mantelpiece fondly.

"I've been working on this for months, you're the first person to see it." He laughed and scratched his belly. "Actchilly, you're the first visitor I've ever had. Do you like these chairs? I got them off a bloke last week, they're better than this other rubbish."

He pointed first at four rickety chairs grouped around a makeshift table then at an assortment of packing crates stacked against one wall.

"Very nice."

Beatrice stepped back through the doorway and onto the verandah. She was unwilling to let Lou see how nervous she was. How would she survive out here? Scrubby bushland surround her on all sides. If her aunt ever saw this place, she'd be horrified. It was miles away from Snake River. She could never hope to walk back. What was she to do out here alone with this man? She didn't want to hurt his feelings but she would have to persuade him somehow, to take her back to town. Surely, he'd soon realise how unsuitable a job this was for any girl on her own. She sighed and walked inside. She'd just have to make the best of it for a day or two.

Lou was sitting on the bed unlacing his boots. Beatrice directed her attention to a fly that was buzzing noisily around the enamel jug.

“You promised once we were here you’d tell me when you and Uncle George decided I should work for you.”

“It was when I got back from that big trip up north. I made a lot of money.” Lou wiggled his outstretched toes then he got up and walked over to the table. “Yes, girl, your Uncle George was very impressed.”

She wants to hit back at his sneering tone but decides it’s best to be cautious. She doesn’t want to upset him.

“You’d better tell me what needs to be done.”

“Oh, there’s no hurry. Get yourself something to eat while I go check on the horses.

“What about you? Won’t you want to eat too?”

“Nah, I fixed up something for myself before I left, I’ll eat later. Make yourself at home.”

Next morning, Lou showed Beatrice how to tend the fire.

“You’ll be on your own next week, Girl, so make sure you pay attention.”

He got the fire started and showed her where things were kept. There was a good supply of oatmeal and flour. Sugar was stored in a big tin and they had a plenty of eggs, thanks to the chooks Lou had bought the previous year. There was a camp oven and one or two frying pans and a handle thingy for lifting the pots away from the fire. Lou said he’d show her how he liked his oatmeal.

“Me’ gums have toughened up of course, but I can’t bite down too hard.”

He scooped up a good sized handful of oatmeal and put it in a bowl with some milk, then broke up bits of damper to add to the bowl.

“See? You can then throw in a few eggs, a bit of cheese when we’ve got some, or even stewed meat,” He stirred the mix a few times with a spoon, “it depends whether you’re cooking breakfast, lunch or tea.” He smiled at her then. “Don’t worry, you’ll soon get used to it, and you’ll probably like the taste yourself.”

*

Beatrice’s sixteenth birthday was in September, and she’d been up for hours cleaning everything in sight. The boards on the verandah had been washed down and she’d scrubbed the kitchen table so hard the wood looked furry and rough. Today was special because Lou had promised he’d take her to see Aunt Thelma. It had been five months since she’d seen anyone or been anywhere.

She doused the fire and set twigs and paper twists in place ready for lighting when Lou got home. She hadn’t said anything to him but she was determined that she was never coming back here again. Lou’s freshly ironed clothes had been laid out on the bed and she’d saved some hot water so he could have a wash.

Carrying the bowl outside she put it on the verandah bench and called out. Lou didn’t answer so she called him again. When he still didn’t answer she went back inside to pack the box of food for Aunt Thelma. He’d come soon enough. There was a dozen eggs she’d collected this morning and a plucked chook. She’d even made a cake. Beatrice thought of her aunt fondly. Wouldn’t she be thrilled about the chook? After all, chicken dinners were few and far between. She could just imagine the conversation they’d have. She’d tell Aunt Thelma how much she’d learned about looking after horses and keeping

chickens, and how she'd managed all alone through the winter during two of Lou's long distance trips.

"Hey, this bloody water's cold."

She hurried onto the verandah.

"It *was* hot Lou, I called you." He sent the bowl of water flying into the dirt and pushed past her. "We're not leaving here till I've had a hot wash and a cup of tea."

"But I'll have to light the fire again, it'll be ages before we can leave."

She couldn't remember later how she got back through the door, everything happened so fast. Her cheek stung from his slap and then he was pulling at her dress, ripping the front of it and making a grab for her breasts. When she struggled he retaliated by thumping her in the stomach with his closed fist. Then she was on the floor and he had hold of one of her arms, dragging her across the room. He half-lifted, half-carried her towards the bed then shoved her forward, face down.

"Lou, Lou please ..."

He was making grunting sounds and his body smelled strongly of sweat. These things she remembered later, like a story someone tells you again and again, embellishing the telling each time with more descriptive detail. While it was happening, she was caught tight in a trap, her legs pinned down while her mind skitted about like a wild bird in a cage.

He was rubbing himself against her, pushing his thing in down there, no, she begged silently, not there, please not there. It was like he had a knife and was ripping her open.

*

February, 1900

It was almost noon. Beatrice was hanging out the washing. She heard the sound of horse's hoofs along the track. Thick trails of dust followed the rider. The man pulled up fast and jumped down from his horse. Taking off his hat, he nodded briefly in her direction then turned his attention towards Lou.

"I'm looking for work Mistah, got any work you need done?"

Lou took his time answering. He'd been skinning rabbits all morning and the pile of pelts on the verandah was attracting more and more flies. The day was hot and still. At last Lou put down the knife.

"What's your name?"

"Jimmy."

Lou's bottom lip curled into a sneer.

"Jimmy what?"

"Jimmy Yarraah."

"What kinda' name is that?"

Jimmy didn't answer. He stood there, absent-mindedly patting his horse's neck. Beatrice was waiting too. She could hear the twittering of birds and something rustled in the bush behind the washing line. She cocked her head to one side. Another bloody snake.

There was an old blanket on the verandah. Lou picked it up, shooed the flies away and covered the pelts. Picking up the knife he pointed it in the direction of Jimmy's chest.

“So why should I give you a job? Tell me that. You look like you’re more trouble than you’re worth to me.”

Jimmy kept his eyes down. He showed no sign that he was offended. Lou twirled the knife in his bloodied fingers.

“Um, well, I’ve done some fencing, I’m a good handyman and my last boss, Mistah Graham, he showed me how to plant potatoes and ...”

“So why didn’t ya’ stay there?”

“Mistah Graham hurt his back, he had to sell up and go live with his sister down south.”

“...and you had enough to buy yourself a bloody good horse?”

“No. I been with Mistah Graham since I was a young’un, he couldn’t pay me so he gave me the horse and a bit of food to keep me going.”

Lou stopped the twirling and commenced wiping the blade back and forth on the leg of his trousers. Beatrice watched him carefully. He’d been complaining about all the work he had to do, would he give this Jimmy a go?

“Well, c’mon then,” he said at last, “you can tie your horse up around here.”

Beatrice leaned down to lift a dripping wet sheet from the tub. Her heart was fluttering madly. Maybe she could steal Jimmy’s horse and get away? She was about to drape the sheet over the line when she heard the rustling sound again, much closer this time.

Letting the sheet drop back into the tub, she looked around for the shovel. Yes, there it was, leaning against the side of the hut, about four feet away.

Careful not to make a noise, she took a step backwards, then another, until she could reach down and grab the rough wooden handle. Readyng herself for battle, she gripped the shovel with both hands, raised it over her right shoulder and, stepping cautiously, she circled the clothesline area.

The snake was making a hollow in a small clearing of sun baked earth. Beatrice brought the weight of the shovel down hard, again and again. Grim-faced, she turned away. That made three so far this week and there was still two days to go.

*

Three months later.

Beatrice had already dished up Jimmy's breakfast. She turned back to the stove, the frying pan in her hand still spitting hot. She cracked three eggs, then watched the big yellow yolks slide into the fat. Lou came inside just as she was making a fresh pot of tea.

Pushing his chair back from the table, Jimmy got up. Hat in hand, he stood there waiting for Lou's permission to speak. Beatrice turned back from the stove and reached over to pick up Jimmy's plate. She could almost taste the tension in the room.

"Well ..." Lou drawled, "what do you want now?"

"Ah, Mistah Turton, I was wondering about my pay?"

Lou's face took on that mean look that Beatrice had come to know so well.

"What are you complaining about? I feed your bloody horse, don't I? And you get three meals a day, don'tcha?"

“Yes, but...”

Jimmy hesitated. His fingers stroked the back of a chair where the wood had worn smooth.

“... but we agreed ...”

Lou stood up, arms crossed above his massive belly.

“We agreed nothin’. You’ve got bloody work to do and I’m gonna’ have me breakfast, now is that all?”

Beatrice tipped the pan sideways using a knife to slide the eggs onto Lou’s plate. She heard Jimmy walk away and knew the precise moment he’d stepped off the veranda. Carrying the pan over to the sink, she picked up the teapot, brought it over to the table, then poured two cups of tea. She placed one cup close to Lou’s right hand.

“You can’t expect him to stay if you don’t pay him something Lou,” she said, keeping her voice soft, almost a whisper.

He pointed his fork at her menacingly.

“Don’t you start ...”

Beatrice sat down and sipped her tea, trying not to listen to the unpleasant smacking sounds Lou made with his mouth when he ate.

“Could ...”

It was like an explosion or maybe a volcano. Lou had erupted. Beatrice didn’t know how she wound up on the floor. Dazed, she looked down at the hot, slimy mess near her feet. It was the contents of the teapot. The table had been up-ended and broken crockery was

scattered about. Lou grabbed her by the elbow and pulled her towards him. She saw the punch coming and turned away. The blow caught her head on the right side. She could feel a loud ringing in her ears. Then she was on the floor again and he was kicking her. Dear God, she prayed, let it be over soon.

*

Late the next afternoon, Lou lay fast asleep on a pile of cleaned rabbit skins. He was snoring heavily. One arm was flung away from his body, the palm facing upwards. The other arm was across his forehead, shading his face. Beatrice stepped onto the veranda looking down at him. She whispered his name but he didn't stir.

Her teeth were chattering and her legs felt weak but she managed to raise the shovel easily enough and held it for a moment, over her right shoulder, like a soldier with a rifle. Then, with her feet well apart, preparing herself for a hefty swing, she brought the shovel down on Lou's head. He made no sound but there was a sickening crunch. Undeterred, Beatrice raised the shovel again and then a third time until she was satisfied he was dead. Jimmy found her an hour or so later, walking around aimlessly, her face streaked with dirt and tears.

The sun was setting when, together, they hauled the body off the veranda. Jimmy had washed away most of the blood but couldn't do much about the flies, they were everywhere. He positioned himself behind Lou's head, while Beatrice grabbed his legs. They grunted and heaved and made it down to the dray cart, then, with a series of awkward manoeuvres, stood Lou upright, propping him against the back edge.

Beatrice had to push herself hard up against Lou's body, supporting his weight until Jimmy had hopped up onto the cart ready to pull the body onto the cart. She helped him then ran back to get the shovel. They covered the body and the shovel with piles of empty sacks.

"I won't be long Missus," Jimmy said, gathering up the reins.

"Are you sure you want to do this on your own?"

"She be right Missus, don't you worry."

Beatrice turned away, feeling ashamed she'd had to involve him in this way. She walked back to the veranda to inspect the rabbit skins. The top three were badly stained with blood, if she couldn't clean them she'd have to get rid of them but the rest were okay and could be sold. She began sorting them into piles.

Her movements were frantic, her energy almost boundless. Soon she was scrubbing down the outside walls and then the floor boards. All the time though, she was making plans. Lou hadn't spent much since the last trip so she'd have some money and they could take the dray cart and the horses a fair distance and then sell the lot. But then she had another thought. Where would Jimmy want to go?

*

June, 1900

Behind wrought iron gates and along a narrow road, the sombre brick building was discreetly hidden by dense foliage. There was no painted sign or even a brass plaque to let you know you'd found The Barlow Institute for Unwed Mothers. Walking past, you

might have thought this was just another block of flats, built to ensure privacy from the rows and rows of terrace houses that lined the surrounding streets.

Beatrice had been here for three months. Her only visitor was Reg Walters, the man who saved her life the night she jumped off the Iron Cove Bridge. Reg was allowed to visit every second Sunday, bringing freshly baked scones that his wife had made that very morning. Between 2pm and half past, he and Beatrice would sit in the foyer, looking embarrassed and uncomfortable in the tapestry-upholstered chairs, trying to make polite conversation.

Reg would ask the same questions each time, about her health and what she'd been doing that week. Beatrice would remind herself to smile, holding the scones on her lap, and stroking the crisply ironed tea-towel with one finger, and wondering sometimes what her aunt was cooking that day. And what about the woman who had made these scones and laundered this tea-towel. What did she think of her husband's interest in a wayward girl from out west?

At least Reg's visits gave her the chance to sit down for a while. The rest of her time was planned to the very last minute, with an endless list of household chores. Even her evenings were full. When tea was over and the dining room made shipshape again, the residents were instructed to knit or sew. On cooler nights they learned to knit socks, using bulk supplies of wool that had been donated by a generous benefactor. Brown and grey were the only available colours. The finished items were packed in boxes and collected at regular intervals.

On weekends they did needlework, using newly acquired skills to embroider roses and pansies on aprons and tablecloths, using designs that had first been worked out on tracing paper.

Every activity was a means to one end. They must become useful members of society. It was the least they could do Matron said, after all that had been done for them. Whenever Matron used the phrase *useful members of society* she made it sound like a prayer. *Useful members of society* knew how to get down on their hands and knees and clean a dirty toilet, scrub stains off clothing till their hands were raw, make beds with all the sheet corners tucked in, cook a meal, write a grocery list, help an old lady cross the road.

Beatrice and the others were in no doubt who exactly were the *useless* members of society – girls like themselves who made trouble and got themselves pregnant, girls who were too stupid for their own good.

But when it came Beatrice's turn to help out in the kitchen, she felt light-hearted, like she was getting a good whiff of country air. In the kitchen she could pretend she was just the same as normal people, doing the everyday normal things that normal people did.

Beryl Richardson and Rita Carter had been in the job for years. Neither of them was the type to look down on you, and they were always ready for a good laugh. Beryl did most of the cooking but it was Rita who ran things. You only had to look at Rita to see she knew her way around. Beatrice wanted to ask Rita's opinion about Reg but she didn't want to spoil things by bringing his name into their conversations. Rita would probably think that Reg had an ulterior motive, that she was being naive not to see this for herself.

But maybe, just maybe, Reg was simply a very nice man. Trouble was, how could she tell?

The last two visits Reg had repeated his offer to write to her aunt and tell her that Beatrice was working in Sydney and doing just fine. Why not give him the address? Think how relieved your aunt will feel, he pointed out. She had promised to think about it but there was no way of telling Reg that she could never contact her aunt ever again. She had told him today it was still too soon.

The tea-towel in her lap was white with pale blue stripes. Soft peaks of material outlined the shape of the six scones, making them look like pillowed breasts. Beatrice knew their tops would be lightly dusted with flour. A stranger had cooked these scones.

Life in the city was all about strangers. You brushed shoulders with them every day. She couldn't tell Reg any of this nor did she mention that Rita had a friend who was going to let Beatrice stay with her once the baby was born, there was even the promise of a job if she wanted it, something domestic Beatrice guessed. Once she was earning money perhaps she'd feel differently about a lot of things.

Reg's broad forehead was creased into a row of horizontal lines. Slowly, he twirled his hat between his knees. God knows, he had been patient but this girl had him beat. Unwilling to press the point any further just then, he sighed and stood up. Beatrice stood up too. She walked him to the door and watched him walk down the steps.

At home that night Reg's wife, Nancy, threw in her two bobs' worth like she was lobbing a hand grenade.

"Those people have a right to know where she is Reg ..." she began, noisily stacking dirty dishes on the side of the sink, "and what if it was our daughter?"

She turned to point an accusing finger. "What if it was your sister?"

"But what can I do Nance? I can't make her tell me where she's from, can I? And what if I drive her further into her shell? Ay, what about that? I got to think about these things Love, give me credit for that at least."

"You should have done *something*, that's all I know. Mark my words Reg Walters, I've got a bad feeling about all this so don't say I didn't warn you."

*

Matron whisked the baby away as soon as the cord had been cut. As was usual with births at the Institute, a screen had been erected around the bottom of the bed to ensure that the mother could not see what was happening between her legs. An elderly doctor and a nurse were in attendance but they paid scant attention to the baby's mother. There was no one to wipe Beatrice's brow or hold her hand. Most of the women bore this humiliation with soft whimpers or gritted teeth.

Later that night, Beatrice was told that she'd had a son and that he weighed 6lb 8oz. She kept repeating his birth weight and the date. If she could hold onto this tiny but crucial bit of information then some day, somehow, she would see him again.

Meanwhile, Matron was giving instructions to the senior nurse on her staff. The child was

to be circumcised and given expressed milk from the mother for the next two days then moved onto formula by the end of the week.

“Shall I notify the parents about when they can come and get him?”

Matron consulted the calendar on her desk.

“Yes, tell them either Sunday or Monday, whatever suits them, and Jean, if they do ask about his skin colour, tell them the father was an Italian.”

*

We could assume for the moment that Beatrice was persuaded by Reg and indirectly, his wife Nancy, to write to her aunt and having done so, received a warm reply. Perhaps Lou Turton had been forgotten about in Snake River, after all many men came and went and, if there was no one to miss them or raise the alarm, who would really know why a man upped and left the district?

Beatrice could easily have been back in Uralla before her seventeenth birthday and able to meet and marry Frank in 1902. As far as I know she did not kill anyone but domestic violence is nothing new and maybe, just maybe, there were women back then who acted in self defence, in the only way they could. This account of my grandmother's early life is of course, fictional, but I want to stress the point that too many women have been beaten and bashed and killed by men close to them, either as husbands, brothers, sons, boyfriends, lovers, neighbours, friends, employers and so on. In books and films we see these attacks served up as literature, as entertainment. In our writings, women can show something different, tell the story from the other side.

My grandmother's story, both the fictional account and the real story, serve as reminders too, that white Australia has a Black history.

PART IV

His Story

Chapter Fifteen

Dreaming About Tim

1995

I wake up, startled. Where am I? What are those strange shadows I can see through the bedroom window? And where is that ghostly light coming from? The only sound is the whistle of the wind. Raising my head a little, I can just make out a collection of framed photographs on the opposite wall. Alongside the bed, my clothes are neatly folded on a stool. I am alone at my friend Barbara's house, down the south coast. The veranda light has come on, probably because of the wind, and those moving shadows are the tossed about fronds of a huge palm tree.

I've been dreaming about Tim and that is odd. Not once, in the years since his death have I done that. And he was here, in this very house. I phoned the Coroner's Court a few days back, asking about access to Tim's inquest records, so perhaps he's been on my mind.

In the dream, Tim had been standing in the hallway beyond the bedroom, dressed in that greenish coloured suit that he'd bought the week he arrived back from Malaya. No more khaki for him, he'd announced, what he wanted was something snazzy, preferably with a lurex thread, a suit to attract the girls.

The dream lingers like a half-remembered song. I close my eyes, trying to make sense of the look on his face. Behind him, in the living room, there was another man, pacing

up and down, and nearby I had seen a woman sitting on a chair. I had detected an aura of menace about the man but his face was a blur. The woman had shoulder length hair and tapped the floor with one foot. The way she was smiling at Tim's back reminded me of a movie star from the 1950s, posing for a grateful audience, all teeth and red lips.

Switching on the light, I lean across to the bedside table, picking up my glasses, notebook and pen. I look over my notes. I have deliberately written each item as though compiling a list. My intention is to have this information handy when I'm researching whatever public records are available to me.

Timothy Lesley Dawson.

Born 1st June, 1934

Soldier in the Australian army, from around 1953.

Trained at Puckapunyal, in Victoria

Sent to Korea for a time and then Malaya.

Returned to Australia in 1962.

Employed as a fireman that same year.

Sometime between December 1963 and June 1964, he attacked his ex-partner, Ruth Stevens, with his bayonet.

Ruth's daughter (aged about ten at the time) tried to help her mother pull free. She was stabbed along one arm.

I pause to reposition the light so that I can read my own writing better.

Intending to kill himself, Tim drove his car in the direction of a deserted beach, his loaded rifle on the back seat. He careered back

and forth across the road, hitting cars on both sides before he lost control and collided with another car head-on.

Freed from the front seat, he was lifted out of the car and taken to Sutherland hospital under police guard. There, he underwent an operation on his throat, a direct result of the car crash.

Charged with Attempted Murder and committed for trial in 1964.

Trial commenced sometime in 1965.

Certain details about that fateful day in the mid 1960s are held in my memory like the moving colours and shapes of a kaleidoscope, nothing was substantial, I couldn't grab hold of the scrappy pieces of information that were thrown at me. And they kept coming.

I got a call at work from a policeman. My brother Tim had been involved in a serious car accident. I couldn't grasp what the policeman was saying and kept asking him could he repeat that please. I did manage to write down the ward number and the policeman's name.

An hour later, I had parked my car and walked through the main doors of the hospital. I can recall the moment I first caught sight of Tim, over by a window, some distance away from other patients in the ward. His throat was covered up by a leathery piece of medical equipment attached by a thin cord. I thought at first it was some kind of necklace he was wearing.

Drawing closer, I noticed that his right wrist was handcuffed to a high metal rail on the side of his bed. A policeman was sitting in a chair nearby. The policeman nodded, indicating it was okay for me to move nearer.

Tim's voice was raspy, little more than a whisper. "Tell her ... tell her I'm sorry," he managed to say, his eyes pleading with me. "Why, what are you saying? Tim, what have you done? What is this policeman doing here?"

He didn't reply but kept looking at me. His eyes looked large and sorrowful, the eyes of a dog begging to be forgiven. Later, I had cause to reflect on my brother's sorrow. How much of it was about Ruth, his ex-partner, and how much of it was about him? I never did find out.

The policeman stood up, took me gently by the elbow and directed me to his chair but first he pulled it further away from the bed. I waited for him to tell me what had happened.

Shock does funny things to people and we can't always know in advance how we will react. I don't think I'd ever thought before what it meant when we say someone is in shock, or suffering from shock.

There was a kidney bowl on the cupboard alongside Tim's bed. The policeman shoved it under my chin just in time. It is embarrassing to remember the noises I made that day in that hospital ward, as disbelief and something best described as horror mixed up with shame, came out of my mouth as vomit-filled screams.

My immediate concern was Ruth. How badly hurt was she? I must have driven from Sutherland to Randwick, but I don't remember the drive yet there I was in another hospital, running along another corridor, hardly able to take in what was said when I stopped to ask directions.

Ruth was propped up by pillows but unable to sit upright. I could see the bandages, despite the nightdress she was wearing, and they seemed to cover most of her upper body. I spoke her name and, as she slowly turned her head in my direction, she looked as though she'd seen a ghost. I tried to soothe her but she kept saying over and over, her voice rising with each word. "Get out, get out, get out, don't come near me, I never want to see you ever again."

A nurse came rushing down the ward, her starched uniform bristling with authority. Again, I was taken by the elbow, only this time I was frog-marched down the ward, along the corridor, and out the entrance to the hospital forecourt. I didn't argue or protest but my mind was in turmoil.

Nothing prepares you for this kind of crime, you can't really know if there *is* a correct way to act, to behave, to respond. I began to feel faint. My brother, the boy who'd once saved my life, the brother I'd looked up to and loved all my life, had committed a serious violent crime. I was part of his family, part of this whole ghastly mess.

I didn't attend the court hearing but I heard from my sister Lizzie that Ruth was spoken about as though she was a disreputable woman, a tramp, the sort of woman who threw herself at men. Forget the fact that she had been cut open with a bayonet, from above her left breast, then down diagonally across her stomach. The wound ended about hip level on her right hand side.

In stark contrast to his victim, Tim was looked upon favourably by the court, mostly due to his army service record. His declining health was another factor. He was declared temporarily insane and acquitted of all charges but his most pressing

problem centred not around Ruth but property damage - the insurance claims for the cars he'd hit that day.

Although he was forced to declare himself bankrupt, Tim was cushioned from the financial implications. My father's brother Frank, and his wife Beryl, had taken Tim in as a boarder not long after Tim left the army. Beryl had always wanted children but couldn't have them, Uncle Frank had a racehorse or two so he wasn't bothered either way, so there was Beryl with a grown up, proxy son upon whom she could lavish all her maternal attention. Undeterred in her loyalty by the trial, she bought a car for Tim and so as not to contravene the law, arranged for all the relevant documents to be put in her own name.

I went to see Ruth that day because I thought that was what you did in moments of crisis - hurry to someone's bedside to check they are alright, to ask if there is anything you can do. Mind the kids, run messages, wash nightdresses, or collect items from home that might be needed, that sort of thing.

In the weeks that followed, I reminded myself almost hourly, that this was nothing to do with me, I was *not* responsible. I had long ago, broken away from my family. Each break was like a rehearsal. I would jokingly tell myself, how long could I manage to stay away? But I would always be wondering. Was there some unforeseen epic drama that would haul me back one more time?

I know that my struggle from my early teens on, was for respectability. I wanted to be the child born under a cabbage patch, placed near the earth but not of it, I didn't want any mud sticking to my flesh. I was forging a new path, swept clean of complicated feelings, paved step by step with order and rewards for living a good, clean life.

But I was too needy, too unknowing, to discern what was cause and effect in my family and what might have been a wider, more common picture beyond our front door. I believed then that ours was the only family that was scarred by so much violence.

I've respected Ruth's wishes and have made no attempt to contact her since that day in the hospital, but I have thought about her often, and there's always this question in my mind. Who looked after *her* and her daughters during and beyond that awful time?

I check my watch, 3am. I lie in bed a while longer then decide to get up and make a cup of tea. Waiting for the kettle to boil, I think again about my dream. That woman was obviously a romantic figure but perhaps that was what my brother was looking for, a relationship with a woman that had more to do with the movies than real life. I was warming to my theme now. The man with the blurred face, something about him had made me feel uneasy, threatened even. Could that man have represented the dark side of Tim?

Back in bed I read back through my notes again and add two last items to my list.

Sacked from his job and declared bankrupt previous to the trial.

Death by suicide: 19th October, 1973.

Chapter Sixteen

Searching the records

1995

Walking across the foyer of the Coroner's Court building, I enter a room on the right. Alongside the high wooden counter is a tiny office, partitioned off with glass. It looks like a cage. I can see a man inside, talking on the phone. A woman is standing behind the wooden counter.

"Can I help you?"

I introduce myself and explain that I've come to see the records relating to my brother's inquest.

"Oh yes," the woman says, "you rang yesterday, didn't you?"

"That's right."

The woman bends down out of sight. When she stands up again, she has a manila folder in her hand.

"It's all here, just tell me if you want anything photocopied. We're not busy so I could do it for you straightaway."

"And do you charge a fee for that?"

"Yes, it's \$2 a page."

I smile my thanks and take the file. There is a long bench seat near the door. I sit down and open the folder.

There are several two-page statements, neatly typed and double-spaced. Reading through them, I guess they have been dictated to someone, question and answer style, then typed up on an old-fashioned typewriter, probably in a police station.

One statement has been signed by Tim's wife, Marion, another by a fireman, and a third by a policeman. Lizzie has already told me that Tim married this woman Marion, sometime in the late 1980s.

Reading through the statements, it isn't difficult to imagine the sequence of events that day, back in October, 1973. Marion had described a husband laid low by depression. That long history of depression may have started in early adulthood or even before but it was clearly a problem for Tim after he'd attacked Ruth.

Marion explains in her statement that they'd been married five years. There were no children but she did have a daughter, Judy, by a former husband. When she'd left for work that day Tim had still been in bed. He'd said he was going to throw in his job and look for something else. They'd arranged that he would meet her at the shopping centre after she finished work.

He didn't show up and she'd rung the flat and spoken to her daughter. Judy said there was no sign of Tim. Marion had hung around a bit longer before catching a cab home. She estimated her arrival at around 6.15pm.

Assuming Tim had gone off somewhere, Marion described herself as more annoyed than worried. Around 7.30pm she'd walked into their bedroom and noticed her husband's wallet on the bedside table. Back in the kitchen she could smell something strong, and later realised the smell was from their car's exhaust. Judy had mentioned

the smell earlier, Marion pointed out, but she'd been too preoccupied to take much notice. She went downstairs to investigate.

The garage door was locked but she could see faint trails of smoke coming through the crack between the door and the cement drive. Racing upstairs again, she had phoned 000. The switchboard operator had put her in contact with the local fire brigade.

Ten minutes later, a fireman forced the driver's door of the car open and, noting the body positioned upright on the front seat, he'd led Marion away. The fireman then returned to the car door and checked the dead man's neck for a pulse. Finding none, he had turned off the engine, carefully pushed the car out of the garage and then eased the body onto the cement drive.

The fireman noted in his statement that he'd seen a good sized length of white, rubber tubing that had been pushed into the car's exhaust pipe, wedged in with a piece of rag. The other end of the tubing had been placed in the window behind the driving seat. The window had been wound up tight but not quite tight enough to flatten the tube.

The policeman's statement continued with details about Tim's practical preparations. As well as the rag, putty had been packed around the exhaust to make an effective seal. Another rag, a long thin strip, had been wrapped with a series of knots around the exhaust as an extra precaution.

I read these details a second time and then again. Tim had definitely wanted to die. Had he felt like this for a long time or was it a spontaneous decision, made that morning?

He had been taken by ambulance to the local hospital and then to the City Morgue. Marion had been asked to identify the body. Among the inquest papers was a medical report stating that Timothy Arnold Dawson's death had been caused by *carbon monoxide poisoning* and that the body had a cherry red appearance. There were further notes about the weight of Tim's liver and kidneys.

Brain – 1463 grams,

Heart - 416 grams.

Left kidney – 167 grams,

Right kidney – 172 grams.

Liver – 1839 grams.

How many people could boast that they knew how much their heart weighed?

I almost laugh out loud. Well, only dead people who had died unnatural deaths.

But could clues really be found in such information?

I consider the last page in the file the most interesting. This document is a photocopy of an original hospital form, a discharge summary, typed up on hospital stationery and signed by a psychiatrist. At the top of the page, directly below Tim's name, age and address details, is the date of admission - 19th May, 1973. The discharge date was 21st June that same year. A diagnosis has been recorded in capital letters on the next two lines

PASSIVE-AGGRESSIVE PERSONALITY DISORDER.
NEUROTIC DEPRESSION.

The summary notes make clear that Tim had gone to Casualty seeking help. He'd explained that his local doctor had sent the police after him, determined to have him admitted to a psychiatric centre again. There is no mention of anyone checking

Tim's story and, as I read, I feel bothered by the psychiatrist's use of the word *assumption*. The psychiatrist has written that Tim "... had presented at Casualty department at this hospital on the assumption that his local doctor had sent the police after him ..."

The psychiatrist notes the patient's "paranoid feelings, low self esteem and strong denial of his feelings."

During that month in hospital Tim's sleeping pattern had apparently improved although the report shows that the psychiatrist prescribed Amitriptyline 50mg, to be taken at night.

I gather up my small pile of papers. At the high wooden counter, the receptionist and I sort out the twelve pages I want photocopied.

"Right, that will be \$24 and you'll have to pay by cash, we don't have any credit card facilities here."

I hand over the money and then sit down again to wait.

When the woman comes back with the photocopies I get up quickly and then have to sit down again. I stand up again, only this time I do it slowly. Outside the building moments later, I feel shaky and have to prop myself against the wall. I am shocked to realise tears are rolling down my face as though someone has turned on a tap.

PART V

My Story

Chapter Seventeen

Disintegration

Mornings are the worst. Eyelids snapping open at the first hint of daylight.

Another day begun. What? So soon? But I've just got to sleep. Oh God, how long before I can close my eyes again? Now the churning starts. A million tiny monsters gnaw at my gut, my heart thumps crazily and the chill of my own dampness spreads across my backside and up my spine. Welcome to the morning Girl. Welcome to this mess called your life.

I will myself to act normal, knowing all the time I am not. Currents of power push against me as I struggle to get to the kitchen. I tell myself repeatedly that it's only my imagination. There's nothing there really, just me. Maybe I've been hexed? Could that be the explanation? My hands shuffle about, attempting to do the things that other people do at breakfast time. Meanwhile, my thoughts scurry back and forth across the floor of my mind with piles of questions and theories, intent on presenting me (no matter how long it takes) with some logical reason for why this is happening to me.

Why doesn't someone help me? What about you, God? No. I suppose you're too busy elsewhere as usual. You've never been there anyway so why should I start thinking you care now? If only I could simply fall down and die. I'd much rather be dead than live like this.

Should I ring the doctor again? What's the use? He'll ask me if I'm taking enough of those blasted tablets. Look why don't you get the kids up? C'mon you'll be all right. It's all going on inside you. You could get on top of it if only you'd try. What do you mean try? I'll try anything. You name it. Go on. Well, all you have to do is live with the feelings. Accept, accept and don't think about it all too much. Live with them? Accept them? How am I supposed to live with something that wants to take me over, won't let me have peace for a solitary minute? And what good are you, always going on about how I should do this and that? Well, you're such a shit-scared, blubbery mess, you don't expect me to stand by and say nothing, do you? I want you to help me, damn you.

Like I said, mornings were the worst. By mid-afternoon I could manage better, the symptoms would have subsided somewhat, and I'd have managed to pummel the substance of the day into some shape that could be called familiarity. By evening the panic would be gone. For a brief time, a hard-won peace would stay with me. Then would come the need for escape again. Minutes after I'd tucked my two sons into bed, I'd be undressing and slipping between the sheets with all the delight one might expect when greeting a much cherished lover. Only in those seconds before sleep did I experience anything akin to pleasure or joy. Yet I always woke feeling I'd had very little rest.

My daily struggle with depression, irrationality, fear, anxiety and dread of more of the same, lasted eight long years. I lived through that period as though I were crouched over, attempting to ward off the blows of the world. My husband was a stranger who stared at me across the kitchen table. He asked the same question night after night.

“What's up?”

“Nothing.” I'd reply dully. (How the heck did I know what was wrong?)

“Can't you buck up?”

“Buck up? What do you mean buck up? I'm not a bloody horse.”

“Why is nothing I ever say right?”

“Cos' you're not ever saying anything.”

The doctors labelled me Paranoid Schizophrenic. Well, yes, there were two polarized aspects of me. The first was all in me that was timid, wary, unable to grasp a sense of identity. Whilst this conscious part of me knew that I was in some way paralysed by childhood experiences, there was no way I could remember exactly what it was that had affected me so.

Above me, suspended from a great height, precariously positioned and quite unpredictable, was the second aspect; a huge thundercloud of accumulated rage and frustration that threatened havoc down below, unless anaesthetised into a state of all-consuming depression.

When the inevitable did happen, which became more often and impromptu, the release of energy was fierce, pushing through tiny cracks, widening, forcing, demanding. So many people walked or ran away from me, making it clear that they were scared of me. I was too intense, too threatening, in short I was mad, insane. I used to think they were lucky. They could walk away. I could not leave, could not escape the thundercloud, though I longed to and tried to many, many times. No. I was stuck with whatever and whoever I was and I didn't like that knowledge one little bit.

At times I yelled at neighbours, shopkeepers, tradesmen, loud-mouthed men in garages, men on building sites who whistled at women and girls walking by.

Repeatedly, I was carted off to psychiatric centres, learning in the process that I was a *threat to the community*. Not surprisingly, I became more and more afraid of myself.

I began to think of myself as some sort of Jekyll and Hyde monster, or even a time bomb. It made sense to me that people needed to be protected from the likes of me.

Is this though, a description of schizophrenia? I still don't know. Post-natal depression had yet to be defined and certainly, my depressed state began after the birth of my first child, could that have been the problem? I have found it wiser to face down the worst possible diagnosis but I have never been totally convinced – but of course, I did have a problem, a very real problem.

I was afraid to feel. Afraid to live. Afraid to die. I attempted suicide regularly. There are scars on my arms and wrists. There were long periods when even the effort to wash my hair, prepare a meal, dress my children, was nothing less than a major exercise in willpower. I had a scarf that covered my hair, year in and year out and though I did manage to shampoo my hair I seldom combed it.

The doctors treated me with mind-numbing drugs, hospitalised me frequently (usually for a month or six weeks), ordered six ECT (shock treatments) but then forgot about me and I'd had eleven before I managed to get my then husband to intervene. Despite all this, nothing worked. (Was it meant to?)

I met so many women in those hospital wards: neurotic, psychotic, worn-down, ill, homeless, drunkards, drug addicts. Black women, Immigrant women, white women,

all of us, without exception, working class, though that was not a term in my vocabulary in those days. I was one of them. I feel I still am. We were subjected to an endless array of drugs with names that sounded like some mystical chant: Librium, Valium, Tryptanol, Serepax, Anitensal, Largactil, Lithium. No one ever asked us how we felt. No one was interested in finding out why we were as we were, they only understood about symptoms and having us blank out feelings, especially angry, distressing feelings.

Two of these women were to have a profound effect on my life and upon my hard-won, personal struggle away from breakdown. The first was Claire. She had run from the dayroom after learning that her daughter had been admitted to the drug addiction ward of the same hospital. I saw her slip away and knew immediately where she was heading. It took me some time to find her and by then she was already dead.

The second woman I did not know. We'd both been admitted that same evening, given our nightly drugs and put to bed. The door had been locked and, behind the glass panel nearby, I could see the night staff setting things up for a game of cards. Their laughter was a faint sound as though coming from a long way off. The woman at the other end of the ward was agitated. So was I. Being forced into hospital, often at an hour's notice, possibly after a regular visit with the psychiatrist, leaving children and family responsibilities behind, with little preparation and hastily-made arrangements for child care (once it was my childrens' school teachers who took each of my sons, avoiding them being taken into care), was not a situation to encourage sleep or peace of mind, no matter what drugs we'd been given.

I lay in my bed watching the woman pace up and down. Suddenly she stopped as though making up her mind about something. Quickly she began pulling the covers off her bed, ripping long sections of sheeting into strips, using her teeth to weaken the fabric at one end. Having made several strips, she knotted them and twisted the sheeting several times until it resembled rope. Her movements were frantic but determined. Next, she ran from bed to bed, collecting other women's possessions to stow in the wardrobe alongside her bed. I looked around. There was no one else awake. Tension was mounting inside me and felt I was bound to this woman in some strange tug of war, she to take her life and me to prevent her.

I'd been sitting up watching all this time. Now I pushed back the bedcovers, stood up and walked up the ward to the glass panel, tapping my fingers urgently near the bottom, my pantomime a mixture of gestures and words. One of the male nurses lifted his head, his attention still on the cards he held in his hand. He smiled at me with a patronising nod, his lips stretching outwards into his cheeks, then tapped his watch, indicating that the ward would not be unlocked till morning. He turned back to the game and made a remark which was greeted with laughter from the others. I moved back from the glass panel, unsure what to do next.

The woman was getting on with her preparations. Her strength was greater than mine and she pushed me away, not unkindly but without concern for anything but her grim task. I ran back to the glass panel, shaking my fist and pointing down the ward. The nurses ignored me and went on with their game.

Back and forth I ran, back and forth, back and forth. Please someone help, this woman is going to die, someone help her, please. Back and forth, back and forth, and then the rage in me ignited. The time bomb went off. I picked up the chair the woman had

used to stand on. Her body dangled awkwardly between the floor and the bed, she wasn't yet dead but her tongue was hanging out and there was a strong smell of shit. I rushed up the ward with the chair high above my head and threw it with all my strength in the direction of that glass panel. The sound of shattering glass seemed to go on for hours.

That was the night that I began to realise that it wasn't all my fault that I was mad. It wasn't a miraculous moment, nothing dramatic happened, but some invisible ladder had shifted into position, in what had been the bottomless pit of my despair. I had put first one foot then the other on the bottom rung.

Eighteen months later I was admitted to hospital again, only this time I fought to keep myself out of a state-run institution. The new hospital was smaller and run by catholic nuns. I had a different doctor and he had a *new* diagnosis. He announced that I wasn't schizophrenic at all, no, I was suffering from Manic-Depression

A new diagnosis meant new medication and getting used to that medication could take some time. One night, after midnight, a nun woke me from my drugged sleep, then stood alongside my bed, dressing gown at the ready, while I managed to struggle awake. I followed her down the hallway and into the common room. My doctor had made a special trip to the hospital to see me. He asked me to sit down and then sat in a chair beside me. He took my hand.

"Your brother is dead."

"Which one?" I asked, even though I knew it must be Tim.

He looked surprised.

"You have two brothers?"

“Yes.”

He got up and left the room. I sat there until he returned some time later.

“It is your older brother, Tim.”

I've not been in a psychiatric centre since that last time and my brother can never know the part his suicide played in my recovery. Tim's death, though painful and shocking, was also like a parting gift. I imagine the two of us on a crowded bus. He is ahead of me and quickly grabs a seat when someone nearby gets up. He steps aside so that I can sit down. Then, without warning, I see him push his way through the throng of bodies and, as soon as the bus comes to a halt at the next stop, he steps off and hurries away. He does not wave goodbye or even look back but disappears along a crowded street.

I understand that my task is to create a narrative to explain what informs that view. My brother never did father a child but I had two sons. Tim and my sister Lizzie grew up knowing that their father committed suicide. Tim was a small boy then and Lizzie but a few weeks old. This knowledge must have felt like a heavy weight at times, pressing down on them. How could I knowingly, pass that kind of legacy onto my children? I decided to live on, to stay on the bus.

That decision though made, was not easy to accept, at least not right away. I had to adjust my troubled thinking and emotions on a daily, almost hourly, basis. For many people who are ill, mentally or physically, suicide can be looked upon as an option, a fallback position to be counted on if all else fails. Suicide might also be a reference point, a way of saying silently to self, I'm not that bad yet.

For many people the idea alone is enough, but for others suicide is a living, breathing, pulsating reality that refuses to go away. A strong determination might need to be employed just to hold it off.

When I was at my lowest ebb, I had this image of myself as an octopus, tentacles moving this way, that way, reaching out hungrily, greedily. But, as each effort turned into disappointment or disillusionment, the tentacles dropped off, one by one.

Glassy-eyed with sorrow and distress, the octopus dropped down to the ocean floor and scrunched along, hoping for, longing for, waiting for, oblivion. That was what suicide offered me – oblivion. If I could just slip past the bellowing man on sideshow alley, through the hustle and bustle of actually carrying out the dastardly deed, I'd be through the door, off and away to the other side. Nothing or no one could ever touch me again.

In some breakdowns there are trigger events that spark something off in a person, making the presence of an unresolved issue from the past known, even though it may only be perceived dimly and with much distress and confusion. For me, that trigger event was the birth of my first child. As I see it now, this birth made an uneasy connection with the time my father raped me. I felt assaulted by strong feelings but could neither name or define them. So, like bookends enclosing the period of my breakdown, what began with the birth of my first son, ended, in effect, with the death of my brother. More often than not, those of us who recover from a major breakdown have been sorely tested and forced to learn about who we are.

Over the years, when asked about my experience of breaking down, I joke and say with a wry grin that I thought of myself as a pile of shit. Recovering meant turning that pile of shit into a person. Joking aside, I still think that's true.

Chapter Eighteen

September

Autobiographical writers may use fiction and fictional methods to tell stories about things that have happened to them. I wanted to work with the Parramatta Psychiatric hospital setting as a means of dealing with the threat that the experience of being a patient there had held over me for so long. My writing is often influenced by a particular setting and I wanted to use what I knew as a basis for a story, rather than my story. Imagine then, that I have looked through a different lens to tell this tale.

September. Sharp windy breaths that stabbed with cruel accuracy upon exposed flesh. Bitter nights that numbed the feet with aching cold. Spring had not yet heard her cue and Winter lingered, hugging the stage. You remember *that* September.

The hospital looked both faded and grim, despite the green lawns and trees. Anyone could tell immediately that it was one of *those* hospitals. They used to be called asylums but nowadays, they are referred to as *Psychiatric Centres*. The name doesn't matter, the meaning remains exactly the same.

The entrance gates shrank behind you, as though deflated by an unseen hand. You looked at the faces of the people inside, recognizing them as patients. Slack mouths. Vacant eyes. Drably clothed bodies. Cheerless faces. A feeling of finality gripped you. This was a place without hope.

The nurses wore grey or blue. The walls were yellow and grimy, but mostly you remember the bars at the windows. Clinging to the walls you became aware of

seeing other faces, hearing other voices. No one looked your way, no one even noticed you.

Nurses walked past, back and forth, back and forth, brisk movements indicating how important were their tasks. Your eyes ached already for the sight of grass and trees. Not that the grass was green in winter, kind of yellow or brown, really, but it always remained green in your head, where it counted.

When you were younger you used to lie on your back in the park and stare up at the slow swaying foliage. Those trees looked so strong, so sturdy, you knew their roots were firmly planted in rich black earth, and you imagined their leafy heads breathing the freshest air. Sometimes you would stay all day, waiting until darkness came, noting how the colours of fading daylight would flutter briefly and then drop out of sight.

You loved watching the silvery twinkling stars bulge forward, poking their eyes through the velvety blackness of the sky. But it wasn't safe for you to hang around too long in the dark, you were always anxious about the dangers you couldn't see, the monsters that might take you by surprise.

Years had drifted by you like raucous pounding on an out-of-tune piano. Everyone seemed to have an opinion about your problem. You'd hear them whispering about you behind their hands, or you'd stand there listening to your mother insist that you must pull up your socks and stop thinking so much.

You'd heard it said once that the brain is fifty times larger than the skull and falls into folds: that tumours could nestle inside the folds escaping detection. That was what they said. Perhaps you had a tumour? Would that make you mad? Could tumours send

people mad? Of course, you wanted to know what was wrong, to find an answer but where, oh where, does anyone look for answers?

A nurse grabbed hold of your arm. Half-dragging, half-pushing, she took you into a large tiled room. You had to undress and place your folded clothes in a pile on a stool. A bath was prepared. You stepped into it and washed yourself quickly. She handed you a towel and then a gown so short it barely covered your thighs.

Gathering up your clothes in her arms, the nurse led the way into the Observation Ward. Locked doors and more barred windows. Two rows of beds ran down the length of the long narrow room. At one end the door to the outside world. Staff signalled with a sharp tap on the door to someone outside when they wanted to go out. You would soon learn that the key to this ward was never brought inside.

You remember the sight of crisp white linen. On each bed was a woman. You were directed to a space down the end, farthest from the door. A girl opposite was painting. Her hair sprang out from her scalp, a shock of bright colour. Harsh angry strokes covered her canvas. The other women lay with the weight of their minds heavy on their pillows, as though there was nothing else they could do.

The artist suddenly threw down her brush and began to scream. Nurses came. The fine brilliance of steel glinted for just a second before sinking deep into her arm. Strong unrelenting hands held her body firm as she thrashed and fought, but it was all over in a matter of seconds. Her head fell back against the pillow, damp curls framing her face. Pain filled screams and wild colours upon canvas followed you towards sleep.

Another September morning. Voices drifted through the crisp air, begging cigarettes

from the nurses. The requests hung limp. Why ask, you wondered aloud. A bitter laugh answered from the next bed. Breakfast arrived. The sad lumpiness of cereal marooned in milky fluid - a prisoner's breakfast.

The artist attempted to sit up but like a flower on a fragile stalk, her head drooped to one side. No use fighting Red, we are mad. We are all mad ... MAD ... MAD. Maybe painting was something to be avoided? Did that mean thinking was bad too? Your mother hated you to think. Once, she had been pleased but that was before ... before ... before ...

Breakfast traces were soon cleared away. Nurses armed with private stores of cigarettes lit one after another, amidst cries of impatience. Greedy puffs of smoke as each cigarette was lit. Sighs of satisfaction.

Then the mood would change abruptly. *Quick now, get those beds made Ladies. Mind the corners, haven't I shown you a hundred times already? Come on, come on, move lazybones, get into the showers, where's your hairbrush? No, you can't have lipstick, didn't I tell you that yesterday?*

Ordered monotony clicked its heels. You imagined you could see the wheels turning, grinding forward with orderly precision. All had to be in readiness for doctors' morning rounds that might happen any time between breakfast and lunchtime. Once the final inspection was over and each patient was sitting trim and prim in her bed, the nurse with the medicine trolley came along, moving from bed to bed, handing out medication in tiny plastic cups. The light shifted upwards. Hours passed or was it days?

Tears prickled your eyes. The past is the present is the future. So tired. Flowers. You could see flowers. They were beckoning to you. Pretty flowers. Swaying gently on fragile stalks. Animals too. Newly born foals struggling to test their strength. You could see children. Helpless children. What about the flowers? What about the animals? What about the children? Oh yes, please, what about *the children*? Don't they think about them, ever?

Chattering voices. Manicured masks. Sculptured heads that looked like works of art. They were flowers too. Artificial flowers. No fragile stalks here. Instead they wore their bodies stiff like coats of armour. Mushy vegetation caught in a sink. You laughed. What did garbage have to do with cocktail parties? The memory of their voices exploded in your face. You looked around, expecting to see those people again. They were mouths. Words had popped in and out. You had grown smaller and smaller, shrinking quietly into the folds of your body, staring all around you, helpless in their midst. You asked yourself who were these people, all coated with varnish, puffing and prancing, eating elegant little biscuits topped with paste and sipping frothy liquid.

You had walked around the art gallery, hoping for escape. Faces had stared down at you from weighty portraits. They knew you did not belong. Being odd hurts so much.

Someone had shaken you. You wanted to plead and beg. The nurse's expression was stern, *Come on Madam, we're moving you to another ward, get up, you can't sleep all day, what do you think this is, bush week?*

More barred windows. Fractured light glimmered weakly through the grimy glass. In this ward doors were locked only at night. Here you were allowed to wear your own

clothes. You looked at the bed. It was not inviting but at least it demanded nothing.

That night the wind seemed to tear at the tiles on the roof, trying to find a way in. You were awake, remembering another windy day. That deserted beach down the coast so gaping and bare, straining away from the outgoing tide. You were standing on a cliff watching the waves rushing against those rocks, bursting their strength in angry wasted violence. You had wanted to smash yourself against those rocks but lacked the bravery to jump. You'd yelled and yelled until your throat was sore, and the only reply was the echo of your own voice. You were screaming at yourself.

Another thought hovered, not a memory this time but a childhood rhyme. Come out, come out wherever you are, the monkey's on the lookout, come out, come out ... and play the game. Obey the rules. Don't make waves. How to obey what you could not begin to understand? Words had always ebbed and flowed in your brain but out there in the world those words got stuck between tongue and lips, unable to find a smooth passage out.

Green eyes stared at you across the space of the day room. They did not go away. Her name was Anna. She pushed up the sleeves of your jumper, first one then the other, lingering along the scars. You tried to speak but she placed her hand against your mouth, hushing your distress.

You wondered how long it had been since someone had touched you, really touched you? Something was moving. Way down deep. Something. It was your parent's bed. You could hear your father's voice. He was demanding his rights. You had been startled awake to hear them fighting again. They were always fighting. You often had to stuff a bit of scrunched up sheet in your mouth to stop yourself from weeping

hysterically. Would Anna know? What were my father's rights? A bell sounded loudly. Anna stood up, dragging you with her. It was meal-time. Another rule.

The crocodile edged forward. Shuffling feet. Body smells. Shuffling feet. Pale faces. Shuffling feet. The crocodile. Food the reward for waiting and the shuffling. A plate was handed to you. Congealed gravy and something that resembled meat. The crocodile overtaken now by meal-time noises. Tables and chairs, groups of four, watch the knives. Flat sounding clash of cutlery on plates. Remember what your mother said, you should not think so much.

Anna smiled at you. After lunch she was going to show you her special place. You ate your lunch hurriedly, eager to be gone. Outside, the sun touched your face, a lukewarm caress. Behind a low building at the far end of the hospital grounds you saw a track. Anna held two strands of fence wire apart so you could climb through. You heard the sound of water moving over rocks before you came in sight of the river. Then you were there. Anna threw off her shoes and socks. Skirting a few big rocks she waded in. You slipped your shoes and socks off too. Mushiness oozed between your toes. Disturbed, the mud swirled around your legs. But it was so cold. Anna laughed as you lifted first one foot and then the other. She talked then about the river, told you how much she loved it. She loved rivers, she said, because they were free to go their own way.

You forgot to be cold. Hesitantly, you began to talk. Your words hit the air like little puffs of smoke, wispy and vague. In breathy gasps you told her you wanted to come back in your next life as a tree. You decided it was best not to mention pollution, not yet anyway. Instead, you asked her a question. Anna, are we really mad?

Sadness clouded her face. Oh, how sorry you felt, hadn't your mother always said you think too much. You looked around for a distraction. Mud pies, shall we make mud pies? Far away a bell sounded. The moment was broken.

She walked in front, leading the way. Branches bouncing this way and that stung your damp legs. Anna stopped abruptly and turned to look back at you. She smiled. You promised yourself then that you would ask no more questions.

That same afternoon, you watched his fingers, his well-kept hands. They lay together on his desk, sure of their place. Always two. Why not three? Why not one hand Doctor? Why not one parent? He was very tall. You wondered why his shoulders hung down in such a droopy way, like a suit left too long on a hanger. Coat Hanger Doctor, was he wise? His hands were so white, like chips of marble on a grave.

You stared at his tie while he talked. Was that really a girl painted on it or were you seeing things again? She was crawling up and around his neck. She could have choked him but then again, she was only a tie, a noose around his neck. Your mother said that about you. You were a noose around her neck.

“Did you love your father?”

Quick, somebody stop the panic. Coat Hanger had asked you a question. Searching. Searching. Find an answer to the question. But, but, why didn't he ask the right one. *Why didn't your father love you?*

“You hated your father then?”

Oh, how you wanted to jump up from your seat and pace back and forth in front of his

desk, you wanted to tell him you are the miller's daughter in the Rumpelstiltskin story. You can't turn straw into gold. How could you begin to answer his questions?

A visitor.

"Hello Mum, how are you? Oh, you've been ill."

Of course, you were always ill, weren't you?

"Me? I'm well enough, thank you."

Still mad of course but then you know that.

"The other patients? They're alright. Over there, did you say? That's Mary.

She thinks she is *the* Mary, you know. She's worried about radiation and stuff, sometimes in the middle of the night she turns the overhead fans on."

"Sorry? What did you say? No they don't lock her up."

We're all locked up or didn't you know that?

"I am trying to co-operate, really I am."

I would answer his questions if I knew how.

"Yes. I want to be well Mother."

Do I really? Is my mother well?

"Yes. Thank you for the chocolates."

You know I hate chocolates.

"Yes Mum, thank you for coming."

Coat Hanger sent for you that afternoon. It was a long session and at the end, when you still hadn't answered his questions, he told you that he was far from pleased with your progress. You remember how he held his hands, fingers meeting under his chin as though he was praying. He'd pointed his fingers in your direction. Those hands were pointing at your heart. How could you tell him about the nasty things that

haunted you day after day?

That night you woke up with a start. It was still dark. You had been dreaming about a wedding. There was your sister Shirley in a borrowed gown. She looked nervous. Arnie, the groom, was wearing a dinner suit. He didn't look like husband material. You remember that Shirley had had serious doubts. There were fights, night after night, once everyone knew Shirley was pregnant. Your mother had been worried about the neighbours. She kept asking the same question over and over. How could she hold up her head up when she walked down the street?

Your friend Jill didn't get married. It cost £300 for the operation. Operation? They almost tore her insides away. You were sure she was going to die. You made her sing songs from the Hit Parade to help her forget the pain. Had Shirley thought about an abortion. Was that why she looked so scared?

Cold hands. Warm heart. Does your mother have a warm heart? Cold hands. Warm heart. You often wonder if she wanted you or any children at all. Would she have preferred an abortion? £300 would have been a lot of money back then, was lack of money the problem? You remember her last visit, how annoyed she was. She'd thumped the table between you and waved her fist in your face. She'd accused you of being out of your mind. How odd her words had sounded. If only you *could* get out of your mind. You giggle, where would you go?

She had a peculiar mark on her chin. It looked like a pimple. She introduced herself and then shyly rubbed her hand across her face. The mark disappeared. It wasn't a pimple after all. She looked like one of those Kewpie dolls, all fat cheeks and dimples. She said to call her Sarah and explained that she was a social worker.

You asked what social workers did. Did they work socially? Did they explain the rules?

Why black is black.
And white is white.
And nothing lies between ...
Why Jack is Jack
And Jill is Jill
And once you're dead, you've been.

She laughed as though you'd said something really funny. Suspicious now, you stared at her face. Her expression was friendly and her hands moved like playful puppies, eager for attention. She walked alongside you on the path to the canteen. You were amazed to realise you were warming to her. Her sentences were like balloons held on string, you could pull them in close or simply let them fly away.

"Hullo Mother, sorry what did you say?"

She must be joking.

"No, no, I don't care if he's waiting outside. I don't want to see him."

Your heart pounded and sweat broke out on your brow. You stood up and were already walking away.

"I don't care if he is my father. I don't want to see him, not ever."

Another dream, only this time you wake up screaming. A nurse comes but you are alert now and tell her that you banged your foot on the iron rail at the end of the bed. You don't mention that you'd been dreaming about your father. You'd seen him walking towards you, your attention fixed on the razor strop in his hand. You must have begun screaming when he raised his arm, the one with the strop in it, because that's where the dream ended.

Something was obviously wrong. Coathanger's hands were tightly clenched. He fired off his questions like he was throwing jumping jack fireworks into the air. A photograph of your father lay face up on the desk between you. Something that might have been irritation stirred in your gut. You raised your voice, as though he were deaf. "I know you think it would help my recovery to see him Doctor but I don't think so." The fingers of his right hand were roaming over the desk, like mice scurrying here and there, looking for somewhere to hide. You felt strangely elated.

Heading back to the ward, you turned away at the last moment and walked past the track that skirted the river. There were trees and bushes all around you. Reaching out you placed one hand against the trunk of a sturdy tree. Was there a correct number of leaves a tree must have? How many branches in a bush?

You stroked another tree and thought about all the questions a person needed to deal with in order to be considered normal. Trees were not asked to think though, they just had to sustain themselves and endure as best they could. Patting the trunk one last time, you laughed, you weren't expecting an answer from a tree, no, you weren't that crazy.

Sarah found you in the day room. She had a stack of files in her arms. You were bursting at the seams with excitement, you told her you'd been writing a lot the last few days, you'd even written a sort of ballad. It even had a title. *A ballad for poor Martha.*

She put her files on a table and sat down in the chair next to you. You pulled the exercise book out of your bag, opened it at the right page and passed it to her. "Why don't you read it yourself?" she asked. You hesitated a moment, you'd never

done anything like that before. Sarah smiled encouragement. You put the book on your lap and began to read aloud.

Oh poor Martha had a simple brain
It is true she was far from bright
As dusk gathered up her fading dress
Martha roamed the night.

Patiently they waited for Martha's step
Their boyish grins stretched wide
Heads or tails, the coins spun fast,
Who'd be the first to ride?

But Martha knew nothing of her rights,
Their wrongs, she thought them friends so good
With legs apart, plunging cock inside
She obliged and politely stood.

You may never know poor Martha
Indeed, you may not care
But Martha's friends are grown men now
I see them everywhere.

Was that surprise you saw on Sarah's face? You would have run away if she hadn't put her hand on your arm. Yes, you told her, you used to write a lot when you were at school but that was some time ago. Had anything in particular prompted the writing, she wanted to know. You were about to say no but then you stopped. Maybe it was anger you replied, you had realised for a while that you were feeling angry.

That night, after the ward door was locked and the lights had been turned off, you lay there in the dark, with tears streaming down your face. You'd heard at lunchtime that day that Judy, the red haired artist, had finally managed to take her own life. Her body had been found in the toilet block. She'd used a blade to slash both her wrists. What was it about Judy's past that had made living so hard? Was she different to the rest of the women in this place or just another one with a problem too big for her to handle? Could any of us really know what was going on in the mind of someone else? Your

head ached with questions and you sobbed harder until at last your eyes were sore and you fell asleep.

This time when you woke from the bad dream about your father and the razor strop, you were able to stop yourself before a scream could form in your throat. Nausea hit your belly like a solid blow. You'd held the secret inside you for so long you'd thought you would never have to deal with it again, but here it was pushing at you, prodding you to remember what your father had done to you. You were twisting and turning in your bed, your attention focussed on the unfolding scenes in your head. Come out, come out wherever you are, the monkey's on the lookout.

It was dark. Night shadows filled the room. You were twelve years old. The door opened. In the light from the outside passage you saw the figure of a man. He closed the door and without a sound, walked closer to you. You'd hoped he'd think you were asleep. You felt as though a gag had been shoved down your throat cutting off your ability to breathe.

You remembered the ripping sound as he pulled at the front of your nightdress. His weight had pressed down on you. He cannot ... he cannot ... he would not, would not ... *he is*. Those hands were rough and sweaty, warm with heat. Frenzied. Urgent.

For years you've had dreams of running and not being able to make your legs move. That is what it was like then. Paralysis. *This is my body and this is my blood*. But where was Jesus? Where was your mother? You imagine you hear her voice pounding in your head, like rain on an old tin roof.

Between your legs there was sharp, searing pain. Rights. Did he have rights? He had

grunted and pushed harder like he was riding a rocking horse. You tried to pretend you were somewhere else. At last, his weight shifted. He stood up. You were able to see him adjust his clothing. This time you heard his footsteps as he walked towards the door. His rights. What were his rights? In the open doorway, he stopped and said goodnight. “Get to sleep now, you’ve got to be up early for school tomorrow.”

It was like having a fever, your body was on fire. And then you began to heave. The dry-retching continued in a series of ebbing waves. Exhausted, you lay there unable to move.

How smug your father’s hands had looked next morning. He’d buttered his toast and spooned jam onto each piece. He had looked at you with a certain knowing expression in his eyes. How you had wished you could kill him right then and there. On the way to school you’d stopped to look at a row of ants making their way along the kerb. There was this one ant travelling alone a small distance away from the others. This ant was carrying a crumb of something whitish. You’d brought your foot down hard and hey presto, the ant was dead.

Someone in a bed nearby was coughing. You sat up and looked around. Women were beginning to stir. You threw back the bed clothes and felt the cold floor beneath your feet. You knew then, at that precise moment that somehow, sometime soon, you were going to get out of this place and never come back.

Chapter Nineteen

Recovery

1973

Once a woman has given birth there is a period of time, usually a few days, when she may feel more sensitive to things said and done around her. Re-covering from a mental and emotional breaking-down process could be described in a similar way. Of course, it's a different kind of hyper-sensitivity and you can only *try* to keep it hidden from public view. I could cope with the big things but it was the little things that troubled me most, I had to learn how to harness my responses.

That hyper-sensitivity can also have a positive impact, allowing a kind of perceptive vibe to emerge that makes empathy a more pronounced experience.

The day after Tim's death I walked around the small garden at the back of the hospital. I remember noticing how quickly the petals of a gardenia turned brown. My feelings were like that back then, as easily bruised as gardenia petals.

Most of us use retrospective insight, a kind of knowing what we could or should have done, after the event. Then there's present sight, when we are able to process what we are feeling while dramatic events occur around us. But foresight, that is, being able to anticipate events or imagining how we might feel in situations, is harder to attain.

How much foresight we can lay claim to will surely depend on our understanding of ourselves and our experience. But perhaps, with a heightened awareness, even a touch

of paranoia overlaying that awareness, that hypersensitivity can make foresight a possibility. It can become a trusted companion, a guide, a way of listening to our inner voice.

It was only after I had got over the physical symptoms and the lingering effects of drugs and ECT, that I could begin to process all that had happened to me, after all, not everyone finishes up in a psych centre, so why me?

I once said to another patient that it wasn't the people locked up inside those hospitals that bothered me, it was the ones who weren't. We patients had been given a diagnostic label. Privately, and sometimes publicly, we were forced to admit, that there was something wrong with us. We might have wanted to resist such knowledge but it was hard to push against the notes written in our files by the staff. Those files were supposedly confidential and meant to be treated as such, but the way some of the nursing staff spoke to us or about us in our presence, provided hints as to what the doctors had written in those files. No matter how timid we were, how well we behaved, we were treated as a problem until some of us began to see ourselves that way too.

Unlike medical procedures conducted on patients in other branches of medicine where say, an x-ray can reveal a broken bone, or a urine test can point to diabetes, mental illness can all too often be a one-diagnosis-fits-all kind of thing. Could I have been a little paranoid, a little schizophrenic, a little manic? Might you be? Might anyone be? I was certainly depressed and that depression sat on me like an enormous weight, making even the simplest of tasks such an effort.

Outside those hospital walls though, I knew people who behaved badly and who appeared to me as sick and as dangerous as anyone I had met inside. But I was the one with the label.

My recovery stretched over a period of years yet it was probably the most energetic period of my life. Some days I thought I must be at least six inches off the ground, able to move faster than a speeding bullet, leap tall buildings in a single bound, well, that's how it seemed at the time. I was high on anger and I used it as a force, not to impede my progress but to speed me along my way.

But even as I embraced a new way of thinking, a new way of being in the world, I had to adapt to change, indeed I had to make change happen.

Five days after Tim's suicide, on a late October morning, I left that hospital, not knowing then that it would be the last time I would ever be a patient in such a hospital. I drove home, changed my clothes and then went for a job interview.

My older son's schoolteacher had told me there was a vacancy at the local RSL club, and she gave me good advice. *No matter what you think or feel, tell yourself you're as good as anyone else and you need that bloody job.* I thought I must be hearing things when the manager said I could start the following day.

Standing behind the front desk, I was protected from public view. No one could see the antics of my jerky left leg that shook and twitched due to the drugs I was taking. The first time I used the paging system my throat was dry and I didn't seem to have enough breath to finish the message but it didn't take me long to get the hang of things. Soon, I was working every week-end.

The changes in me were inconvenient, uncomfortable. I can see now that I was fighting for my life, a different life, and I was trying to do that honestly and openly. I think my husband thought that now I was well, things could return to normal but I was redefining normal day by day.

Eight months later, with a broken marriage behind me, I needed a different kind of job, something I could do during school hours. I was willing to do almost anything but part-time work was hard to find. Desperate to earn some money I tried market research work.

My first assignment seemed simple enough. I had to position myself outside the main entrance of a suburban department store, and count the number of people who walked past me, and in what direction. A package had arrived the previous day to help me with this task. I had a left and right clicker, one for each hand, attached via a metal ring that looped over each index finger.

The clicker gadgets had been programmed in such a way that each movement recorded added to the total but none could be cancelled. For this reason I had not yet heard the noise they made. I stood between the bus stop and the entrance, telling myself I was reporting for duty. A woman walked past me, left to right, I pressed the top of the clicker with my thumb. The tinny sound was much louder than I would have expected. I couldn't stop myself from grinning, what if someone called the police? Excuse me Officer, there's a crazy woman up the street and she's ...

Humour is a great antidote to stress and in my situation it was hard to avoid seeing the absurdities of daily life.

Two women walked across my path from right to left, click, click. Another woman and a little boy came the other way, click, click. I could see a jogger running behind them, click, and the second man behind him, click, but the second man turned back. He had probably forgotten something but what about that click? I couldn't erase it, could I? I had a notebook in my shoulder bag but it would take me too long to get to it. I would just have to remember that I was one left click ahead. A woman came hurrying towards me and from the right direction, no that's the left direction actually, come on, come on, I pleaded silently. She stopped in front of me, oh please, go to the right, just a few more steps would help me stay honest. Do it, woman. Instead, she turned on her heel and crossed the road.

An hour later I was feeling quite irritated. What was wrong with these people? How could so many of them change their minds about where they were walking? By then I had five left clicks not yet authenticated and the number kept fluctuating as well as the direction, sometimes it was the right and sometimes it was the left.

I checked the totals. 290 clicks on the right but the left was winning with 335, but no, there was that odd five. Still, I had another two hours to go. I looked at the bus seat. Maybe if I sat down for a while I might feel less bothered. A woman in a pale grey cardigan moved along so there was room for me to sit beside her. Click, click, both from the right. Suddenly, I was aware that the woman had turned herself right around to face me. She looked at my hands and then she stared into my eyes. I dropped my head to hide a smile. Maybe she'd be the one to ring the police? No point in explaining, besides, I needed to concentrate on my job.

Much later, walking back to the car, I had the urge to jump and shout for joy. I'd been able to concentrate on what I was doing for four hours and without worrying myself

into a fretful state.

That afternoon I rang the office with my results. I was tempted to ask what merit might be given to my findings, what had been learned? The coordinator's tone was brusque, obviously this was not the moment to ask questions.

My next assignment took me into people's homes. Turning left off the Hume Highway at a set of traffic lights, I drove along a residential street in Auburn. Checking my notes and the street directory I pulled over. I had been given specific instructions about which streets I was to work in.

I'd knocked on several houses before I found someone at home, or at least willing to open their door. I guessed by the housecoat and slippers that it was an elderly woman, though not much else was visible as she peeped out at me from behind her front door.

"Yes?" she asked.

"Good morning, sorry to bother you, but would you like to try some ice-cream and give us your opinion about the taste?"

"I don't have a freezer," she stammered, opening the door a little wider.

"But you do have a fridge?" I persisted gently

"Yes, you can come in and look if you like ..."

Once past the front door we two were destined to become firm friends. The old, round-shouldered fridge stood in a dark corner. There was an array of ornamental objects on top. I opened the door slowly, careful not to let anything fall. The iceblock section was tiny, there was just room for two metal trays, both of them empty.

“These will do nicely,” I said with a big smile.

In the back of my car, in two big canvas bags, protected by dry ice, were twenty-four tubs of ice-cream, labelled either A or B. My instructions were to give each client a tub of either A or B and then on my next visit a week later, I was to distribute the next twenty-six tubs, making sure that no one finished up with two As or two Bs. I had not not been told anything about fridges with small freezer compartments.

Minutes later I was spooning as much as I could of a tub labelled A into two metal ice-trays. The elderly woman was overjoyed. While I busied myself with the spoon, she made us a cup of tea.

“I haven’t been able to afford ice-cream for years, you know,” she confided minutes later as she sipped her tea.

“Really?”

“It’s so expensive and I’m just a pensioner. It wasn’t so bad before my husband died.”

“Do you have any children?”

She sniffed once or twice before answering.

“Oh, they come and go but they’ve got their own lives ...”

I *was* listening but I was also thinking about that tub of ice-cream already beginning to melt. How soon could I get away? And then I had an idea.

“Do you know if there are any other pensioners living around here?”

“Oh yes, lots, can you see those units across the road?”

She’d moved to the window and was holding back the curtain so I could see.

“I only know one or two of them to say hullo, sometimes I wish we knew each other better ...” Her voice trailed off but I had noted the wistful tone.

Feeling guilty, I collected up my things and headed for the door. Before I left the woman hugged me.

“Thank you so much my dear, I haven’t had such a good chat in ages.”

I became acquainted with several round-shouldered fridges that day, and by 2 o’clock I had drunk so much tea I felt my bladder was ready to burst. But I still had eighteen full tubs of ice-cream in the back of my car, and I could not afford to dally in Auburn a moment longer.

My two boys were playing in my neighbour Judy’s back yard with her kids. She and I took up our familiar position on her back steps. I told her about my day. We were both laughing so hard I could hardly speak.

“What am I going to do about all that ice cream?” I asked her, “those canvas bags look like two dead bodies propped up ready for the morgue.”

Doubled over with laughter, tears streaming down her face, Judy got up and beckoned me to follow her into the laundry. She lifted the lid of her freezer chest.

“I’ve got room for an A and a B and what about Barbara next door, she might take some.”

Thirty minutes later I had distributed the eighteen tubs of ice-cream up and down our street. All I had to do then was attend to the paperwork so that next week I’d know exactly who got A and who got B and who got both at once. That night, the boys and I ate ice-cream from two separate tubs but I couldn’t have said which was creamier, slightly creamier, richer, slightly richer, or even which one I’d definitely buy again.

Market research was never the same for me after that experience and so weeks later, I found another job, in a high school, as a Teachers' Aide. These positions had been newly created around that time and I wondered if the head teachers at my school were still working out exactly what to do with this new member of staff. One day I could be found in a state of chaos, cleaning out the History Department's store room, the next travelling on a city-bound train with a teacher and a large group of teenagers, heading for an afternoon matinee of Macbeth at the newly opened, Opera House.

I was handling my feelings better by then but my mind was still trapped in circular patterns of thinking, like I was caught on a Ferris Wheel, forced to stay there for hours on end. I could see a changing scene, close up and far away, but I couldn't leave this confining contraption and actively participate in all that was happening around me.

Night after night I would lie in bed and imagine I was out in the bush. Animals, rocks and other obstacles were all around. I had no torch, no candle, nothing to help me see the narrow track ahead. I imagined I was sensing my way forward. I alone was responsible for every step I took. I had to be prepared to move quickly and I might have to take risks.

When someone, I can't remember who, mentioned there was an encounter group starting up at the local community centre, I added my name to the list but felt nervous about what exactly might happen in such a group. I arranged a babysitter for the boys and off I went, one Wednesday evening, ready for the first meeting.

About forty people were milling around when I got there and we were asked to arrange ourselves in small groups of six or eight. I took a chair from the stack near the door and walked with it to join a group over by the far wall. A woman who called

herself a facilitator suggested we talk about our reasons for coming and we went around the circle, introducing ourselves and talking a little about our lives.

One woman told us she had just become a grandmother for the first time. Before she could continue to tell us anything more, the facilitator woman was on her feet, arms waving about in the air above her head, singing out “Praise the Lord” over and over again, till one by one, the rest of us, reluctantly it seemed to me, got to our feet and stuck our arms in the air too. I mouthed the words but I couldn’t make myself say them. Hell, if I’d known this was a religious revival meeting I’d have stayed at home, and to think I was paying a baby sitter for this. How soon could I hope to get away?

Despite the ecstatic fervour of our facilitator, our group got on with the task of getting to know each other and I quickly realised that I had been right to come. The stories I was hearing were about ordinary people like me, coping the best they could with what life threw at them. None of us was there to be embraced by any form of Christianity but we soon understood the value of talking and listening and learning about ourselves and how our own experience fitted into the general scheme of things.

At one meeting we were asked to think of an animal to describe each person in our group. I remember, like it was yesterday, what two women said about me that night. The first one saw me as an ant, industrious and determined. The second woman described me as a small bird, perched on a windowsill, getting ready to fly a long distance.

That small group of people, oddly positioned as we were within a framework of religiosity, provided me over the next few months, with a view of myself as others

saw me. This was a new experience and proved to be a turning point in my acceptance, that, yes, I would recover. And those two images of me still hold true today. I can be industrious and determined and I might be that bird perched on a windowsill somewhere, contemplating an onward journey.

Chapter Twenty

Counting the Rivers

Let's pretend for the moment that we can take a memory and lay it out in a straight line, from beginning to end. Perhaps we could measure its tightly packed length at about three metres, and perhaps too, there is a heading placed directly above – something like the day So and So died or that Day when I almost drowned, fell in love, saw a shark swim by in the shallows, whatever.

Years later, we can be prompted by something or someone to recall that particular memory. We may not, in that recalling process, cover the full three metre length of the memory but instead, touch upon a small section, perhaps the smile we noted on the face of someone who was there, or the unnerving sight of that grey fin moving through the water.

We have an ability to play that memory like it was a musical instrument, sometimes loud, sometimes soft, maybe it's a guitar and we only want to pluck the strings a little. Over time we might fashion the memory with greater meaning, adding insights that come with age, filling in the gaps as to what was happening back then that we could not fully grasp or appreciate at the time.

And when someone we love or know well dies, it can seem like a continuous reel of film is playing in our head non-stop, we remember with surprising detail so many events, outings, activities, we shared with that person.

But, if some of our memories are attached to painful feelings about injury done to us, one time or many times, what then? Do we deal with the recall differently? Perhaps we banish the memory and warn it never to darken our thinking again? There is no right or wrong answer to this question, so varied will the experience be for each of us. We might remember every little detail or be left with only wispy threads that have a ghostly quality, a frightening sense of atmosphere, suggesting an essence, an inner knowing, but nothing beyond that. The intricate details may be hidden or lost, never to be claimed in a lifetime. Many of us will probably have developed strategies for forgetting, even in early childhood. We may have done this without making any conscious decision to forget.

The word forget contains within it another word - forge. The origins of this word forge are uncertain according to the Macquarie Dictionary but to see this word so contained inside the larger word forget is indeed, interesting. How often have we heard the words *forge ahead*? The impression conveyed is full steam ahead. So could forgetting be described as an action borne along by a determined but contained force that can move a particular memory, or a collection of memories, around in our head? Where it ends up, nobody knows.

Ah, but what if we decide, after all that forgetting, that we now want to remember? We may not know what exactly it is that we want to remember but we have some idea of a particular theme or subject matter. How do we go about recalling that one memory or a cluster of memories?

For some of us it might mean returning to a place that is somehow connected with the theme or subject matter, and maybe with a tape recorder or notebook in hand.

In effect, we will be asking these settings to speak to us. We may not be able to

control what comes forth but we can decide we are willing, aye *willing*, to remember. We forge ahead in a contained manner.

Back in the mid-1990s, I wanted to write a book about being a psychiatric patient, to document my experience in a meaningful way. Some incidents from that time were very clear, sharp even, but I knew there was more to uncover. I had sensations of dread and nausea the moment I tried to bring specific details into focus. My first step, I decided, was to visit Parramatta Psychiatric Centre on my own, equipped with a notebook and my small tape recorder.

It was a sunny winter's day. I was surprised to see that the high thick walls had almost gone. Some stonework remained, cut down close to ground level, with aluminium fencing along each side. I got out of the car and noticed a sign. The words Cumberland Hospital jumped out at me. The name had been changed too.

I passed through the gates and walked towards the Administration building. There was a map fixed to the front wall showing the location of all the wards but they were no longer numbered. Instead, they had names like *Banksia Cottage*, *Jarrah Cottage*, *Waratah Cottage* and *Wisteria House*.

Ward 12 was a little way past the next bend in the road. The nausea started up in earnest when I saw the trees. I tried not to look at the thick strands of ivy wrapped around ancient trunks or those gnarled, twisted roots creeping along the ground like giant, menacing fingers. This vegetation is the stuff of nightmares, morbid, rank and reeking. There it was, Ward 12. I remembered a place of cowering men and women, now it was called *The Institute of Psychiatry*. I wanted to shake my fist in protest.

Standing in the foyer I could look down the length of that room once known as the Day Room. At the far end a doorway led to what used to be a locked ward. That earlier history had been diluted, transformed with paint and expensive looking linoleum. Heading for the veranda out the back I wondered if the Annexe would still be there. This Annexe space was about the size of a large garage and in my time here, it had accommodated a small number of patients. The Annexe was also used on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays for ECT, commonly known as *shock treatment*. I looked at the sign that now read Lecture Room 4.

Retracing my steps, I thought of various monuments I'd seen in Europe, dedicated to people who had suffered unjustly. I would like to see a big, brass plaque on this building, on all the buildings, in memory of the countless numbers of men and women who suffered in this institution and others like it.

The first psychiatrist I saw was a persistent man. I had been referred to him by my local GP. I'd gone to the surgery to ask what I could do about lower back pain after the birth of my second child, then three months old. When I explained to the psychiatrist that I couldn't afford his fees, he wrote a letter to a former colleague and then informed me I had been passed on to Parramatta Psychiatric Centre and would now be treated there as an outpatient.

I went along with this arrangement, never for a moment suspecting I might not have any choice in the matter. Unwittingly, I had set in motion a conveyer belt process that would carry me through a number of medical treatments under the care of a range of psychiatrists for almost eight years.

I was soon being handed on from one doctor to another, according to the hospital

roster on a particular day. It all seemed a waste of time and I decided to stop the weekly visits. I was promptly advised that this wasn't possible. In no time at all it seemed, I was considered difficult and uncooperative. Months later, diagnosed as *paranoid schizophrenic*, I was admitted to Ward 12.

Walking through the grounds all those years later, I kept asking myself if I really could write about this place. I'd been at my lowest ebb as a patient. Were my observations reliable? Would I see things differently now?

Outside Ward 12 again, I fell into step behind a man I guessed might be a patient. His head was bent and he seemed to be looking at the grass. A little way along the path, another man was lying across the quarry tiles outside the canteen entrance. This man too was looking down, as though fascinated by something he could see there on the tiles. Why did we always keep our heads bowed? Was it shame or did we feel beaten by what was happening to us?

Men in small vans came and went, making deliveries, collecting empty containers, stacking them on board then driving away. These things serve as reminders. Yes, there is another world out there, a world of cars and traffic lights, washing machines and toasters, beaches and bush, fun and laughter, houses where people sleep and eat and make love. It is another life.

I sat down on the grass and used the tape recorder to capture something of what I was feeling. For the next hour or so I was oblivious to everything. I changed the tape in the recorder twice and then I'd had enough.

Rydalmere is a ten minute drive away. I parked the car in a cul-de-sac, close to Victoria Road. The psychiatric hospital exists no longer and I'd heard there were

plans to hand over space in the remaining buildings and grounds to the University of Western Sydney, to use as part of their campus. A short distance from where I'd parked the car I saw a big sign. It read:

FORMER FEMALE ORPHANAGE SCHOOL

Programme of work is commencing for the initial conservation of some buildings in the old orphan school precinct. The oldest buildings date from 1813 and the site operated as an orphan school until 1888 and as a health facility until the mid 1980s.

There's something polite and pleasant about the term *health facility*. No need to mention that this was a mental hospital. How quickly history can be expunged. What is it about Australian history that we can only ever manage one strand at a time? And the more distant that strand is the better we seem to like it.

Parramatta and Rydalmere Psychiatric Centres served mostly the population of the western suburbs. Incoming patients were usually allocated to a ward according to where they lived. In Parramatta I was always admitted to Ward 12, and Ward 17 in Rydalmere. First it was always Parramatta and then the rules changed and I was sent to Rydalmere, staying in each of these hospitals for weeks at a time.

From where I stood that day I could see roofs with lots of missing tiles, broken windows, and loose hanging boards, there was nothing left to trigger any clear memories. The grassy areas were as I remembered them, vast, open and friendly. These grounds did not give the impression of a closed fist. Light filtered through the trees. I imagined a woman shaking out a lacy, green tablecloth, placing it on the ground for an elegant picnic. But the tablecloth remained in the air, suspended. It had become a tree, symbolic of a moment yet to come, a moment full of elegant optimism.

Hopeful now, I walked away. Yes, I could write this story.

That story became a book, a novel, and the title was drawn from an understanding among patients as to the reasons why psychiatric hospitals in the early colonial era had been built on rivers. Many of the men and women I met in Parramatta and Rydalmere believed there was a law that stated no lunatic was allowed to walk on the King's highways, and it was argued that patients had probably been transported by boat in the early days, soon after the hospitals were opened.

I could find no documentation of any law to substantiate that well circulated rumour nor could I find any record to suggest patients had been transported to hospital via Sydney's waterways. A friend pointed out to me that the existence of such a rumour over a long period of time might indicate that the information had been passed down word-of-mouth, and have some bearing in truth, even if no proof could be found. She pointed out that this might be similar to the passed down stories, of Aboriginal Australians, from generation to generation, about significant events that had happened to their ancestors following the arrival of the British.

In keeping with that notion of passing information along, I have used the idea of *counting the rivers* as a means whereby my main character Madeleine could count the number of psychiatric hospitals where she had been a patient. History they say, is the story of the victors, the triumphant. In a small way, I like to think I'm contributing to another equally valid history, that of the victims.

Chapter Twenty One

Strange Charlotte from two doors down

The narrator of this story was once my closest friend. I've called her Judy.

When Bill and I moved into the new Harrison and Harrison housing estate, we only had the two older children. Cheryl was four years old and Sammy, well, let me think, he must've been just over twelve months. I met Charlotte shortly after we'd moved in. Mind you, ours was a more expensive house than theirs and that didn't go down too well with Charlie at all. I used to tell her that she should accept what she had within her own four walls and not worry about what other people had. But Charlotte wasn't the type to listen to anyone's good advice.

She was always a bit strange. Trouble was, it took me too bloody long to work out just how strange. She'd had a good job in an office and kept on working after they moved in because they were struggling to pay off a second mortgage. I can't remember if she had one miscarriage or two before their first son was born but I know she insisted on working right up to just a few weeks before the birth.

It was after their second son came along that she and Matt started to have problems. The baby had been born with some sort of tumour in his stomach. He used to vomit all the time. Charlie raised quite a ruckus in the local doctor's surgery, insisting that she be sent to see some specialist with the child. Seems the doctor thought it was just gastric trouble. Anyway, Charlie got what she wanted in the end and when she saw

this specialist fellow, he told her that the baby needed to be operated on right away.

Poor Matt couldn't get away from work to drive her to the hospital, so I sat in the front with the baby while Charlie drove the car. I remember we had to leave the hospital almost straightaway, you see I had to get back to pick young Cheryl up from school. It was Matt who had to sit in the waiting-room and chew his nails.

Charlie used to go on and on about this incident. She complained to me that she had expected more from Matt. I never could figure out why she was so upset. I put it down to worry about the baby and her not fully recovered from the birth sort of thing. Still, it did seem unfair her not trying to look at things from Matt's point of view. Funny thing was, though, that when the baby began to get well, Charlie started to go downhill, it was impossible to know how to help her really. One minute she'd be crying and carrying on and the next she'd be dashing around wild-eyed and crazy-looking.

But I did stick by her, by God I did. When the doctors said she'd have to have a spell in that hospital I made it my business to get there at least once a week, sometimes I was visiting three and even four times. I used to tell her that I'd rather we talked outside on the grass instead of indoors. Some of them people looked pretty peculiar and I didn't want little Sammy getting any nightmares with things he might've seen in those wards. I used to sort of joke about it with Charlie and tell her she had some funny friends.

She'd been in and out of hospital several times before they suggested shock treatment. Neither Matt nor I were very happy with the doctors about that whole business. He'd been told that she needed just one or two treatments but she must've had a dozen or

more before Matt was able to get hold of one of the doctors in charge and find out what was going on. Charlotte looked dreadful for quite some time afterwards. Her memory was none too good either. Poor Matt, it was so hard on him, you could tell how worried he was.

It was several months before she managed to pull herself together. Personally, I have no wish to go through that sort of thing ever again. The things that woman said to me are over and done with but, believe you me, it's not a pretty story and I guess these things are probably best forgotten. I'd begun to think she was settling down at last, when one night, she ups and tells Matt she wants a separation. And I can tell you, that man, that poor man, was doubled over like he'd been kicked in the guts.

Charlie had a part-time job by this time and her younger boy had just started school. It didn't seem too clear to me at the time but I can see now that it was probably things happening for the best.

They were separated for a year. Then, just about the time of one of the kid's birthdays, Matt came up for a bit of a family tea. That started them talking again and they decided to give their marriage another try. I remember I told her straight she was kidding herself. Not for a moment did I believe that she loved Matt. She didn't listen, of course, just gave me one of those eyeball-to-eyeball looks of hers and humphed her way out the door.

We didn't see too much of each other for quite a while. I'd finally got a job working the late shift at the chicken freezing plant and that left Bill looking after our four. With my job, the house and four kids, two of them under five, I had more to do with my time than think about Charlotte and her problems. I kept that lousy job for

almost two years. Meanwhile, she and Matt sold their house and bought something bigger a few miles away, over near the football ground. I still saw them occasionally, birthdays, that sort of thing. Then, lo and behold, not eighteen months after buying the new house, they split up again, only this time it was Charlie who moved out, taking both kids with her.

Matt put the house on the market almost immediately but it was quite a long time before he found a buyer. Not that Charlotte bothered to help him in any way. I heard she'd started to go to one of those women's libber groups and then she told me herself, that she'd moved into a communal household. So, I wasn't all that surprised when Matt phoned me in tears one night to tell me she'd become a ho-mo-sexual.

Charlotte reckons the correct word is lesbian but it's all the same to me - they're all weird.

It's funny though, how things work out. I was so busy looking at what was going on with her and Matt and their marriage, I hadn't noticed what was happening in mine. I had a suspicion that Bill wasn't telling me something, like, one day when we were out with his workmates and their wives, I had this strange feeling they knew things about Bill that I didn't.

It took weeks to drag the truth out of him. His affair with that stuck-up receptionist had apparently been going on for three years. Finally, after much prodding he confessed the whole sordid mess to me one night after I'd got in from work. I can still see him sitting across from me in the lounge room, his head in his hands, and me thinking that he'd somehow changed from the man I'd married into a stranger you read about in sensational articles in the Sunday papers.

He left the house that same night. I had to give up my job because there was no one to look after the kids. It was a long time before I felt I could leave the house with my chin in the air. I couldn't tell the kids about it. The very idea made me feel ill. I told them he'd gone on a trip to do with his job.

In time, Cheryl picked up the drift of things. When I look back I just don't know what I would have done without that girl of mine. The next time Charlie came over I made her promise to keep it a secret or I'd never talk to her again and she seemed to understand. But when she started to ask me questions about the future I just clammed up. After all, it wasn't her husband who'd gone off with another woman, was it? We had quite a to-do about it there and then.

We did manage to patch things up before she left but I never felt quite the same about our friendship. Still, that was a long time ago now, and, as I say, these things are best forgotten.

I did get my life back into some order. I put the two little ones into a nursery, insisted Bill pay the fees, and got myself an office job. Cheryl helped with the house quite a bit and even Sammy was persuaded to mow the lawn and generally make himself useful. Bill married his shady lady and I got on with the task of picking up the pieces of my life.

Mind you, I still can't understand why Charlotte was so upset when Matt and I got married. After all, she didn't want him, so why was she so worked up, is what I'd like to know. But Charlotte didn't really want to talk. She kept carrying on about me and my double standards, whatever that is, and the way she threw herself around my lounge room, like a child in a tantrum, I could tell there was no use whatever in trying

to reason with her.

I've not seen her since, which is just as well really. Matt and I certainly don't want any more trouble in our lives, and that's all Charlie seems to be about when you really think about it. I guess some people are just like that, aren't they?

Chapter Twenty Two

Soft Shoe Shuffle

1975

Charlotte had the Darlington address on a scrap of paper. The music was so loud she could feel the vibration pulsating through every step as she climbed the stairs. The entrance was on the left and she paused there a moment, willing herself to go inside. She was thirty five years old and yet she felt like an awkward teenager. When was the last time her palms had felt so sweaty?

Through the smoky haze she could see flashing lights beneath the glassy surface of a dance floor. It was early still and only a few couples were dancing. Beyond the flashing lights, a number of women were crowded around an area that she assumed must be the bar.

Charlotte moved her right leg and then her left, forcing herself forward even though her knees were trembling. She had this horrible thought she might fall in a heap, right there in the passageway.

Wooden cubicles lined both walls between the bar and the dance floor. Every one of them was jam-packed. There was just enough room around the edge to get past. Everyone seemed to be with somebody, or to know somebody, she couldn't see anyone on their lonesome.

Well, there was this one woman at the bar. She had her back to the room. She was wearing a corduroy jacket and it had a leather patch on each elbow. As Charlotte watched, the woman leaned back and rested one arm on the back of a bar stool. Charlotte admired the woman's raffish style. Could she approach this woman? How terrifying. She looked back towards the dance floor. Heck, if she doesn't do something soon she will chide herself all the way home for being such an idiot.

"Would you like to dance?"

Was that *her* voice? It sounded so high and strained, like a squawking lorikeet. The woman turned her head and slowly looked Charlotte up and down.

"Forget it Kid, I'm butch too."

Butch? Whatever did she mean?

Had you seen Charlotte flee down the stairs that night you might have thought the police were in hot pursuit. A whole month passed before she felt brave enough to venture out again.

Her next attempt was at a women's club. When she rang to enquire, she was told she didn't need an application form to join, you just had to show up. Carefully, Charlotte had written down the directions and the time to be there.

It was a warm summer's night when she parked the car somewhere along the city end of Parramatta Road and, with a deep sigh, crossed the car park, heading for a door she could see across the way. She hoped she wasn't *too* early.

A woman sat at a table inside. Charlotte watched her take money and stamp each woman's wrist as they came in. Counting out the correct admission charge, Charlotte

held her hand out to be stamped then stood there asking questions. How long had this place been open? Did many women come to each event? Were there regular meetings as well as these social 'dos'? The woman answered each question with a harried smile then finally patted Charlotte's hand. "I think you'd better go on in, don't you?"

The DJ was setting up. Groups of women were clustered around the edge of what was a large space. Charlotte's attention was caught by a woman with streaks of pink in her blonde hair but the expanse of floor between them seemed huge.

This time her voice sounded like a rooster warming up.

"Would you like to dance?"

The woman made no reply but an odd noise made Charlotte glance at another woman who had moved quickly to stand alongside her friend. This woman was frowning severely. She had a big chain around her neck, the type some people used as a lock for a motorbike. She didn't say anything to Charlotte either, she just kept frowning and rattling that chain with a slow flowing movement of the wrist.

Charlotte's face was burning, like it might ignite into flames at any moment. She turned and made a dash for the door, pushing past a group of laughing women who were coming in. Back in her car, she imagined the laughter had been at her expense. Looking in the rear vision mirror she could see her lip was bleeding where she'd bit it. She stared back at herself, determined not to cry. Struth, she had no idea getting to know other lesbians could be so hard, so bewildering.

Then came a night when a woman smiled at her and said yes, she'd love to dance. Cheek to cheek, they sashayed around the dance floor. Charlotte was anxious

not to hold her new friend too tight in case she gave out a message that she was too intense or even desperate.

Secretly thrilled with the spectacle of the flashing lights beneath their feet, she began to think her success might be linked to the clothes she was wearing. She did feel good in her new white shirt with the collar that stuck up just so, and she had the bottom end of her jeans tucked into brown, knee high boots. Threaded through the loops of those jeans was a wide leather belt. Charlotte really liked the big silver buckle. Yes, that night she felt she really *was* a lesbian. What a great feeling.

She was over the moon right up to the moment when they reached the woman's front gate. "I have a husband," the woman explained hesitantly, "he doesn't know I go with women."

The happy grin on Charlotte's face suddenly stiffened, like setting concrete. She couldn't wait to get away.

Another night, same dance floor. This woman's eyes are bright and her grin is broad. Charlotte is hopeful, *again*. She offers to drive the woman home. Outside a house in Paddington, they sit in the car. Charlotte negotiates a space for her left leg around the gear stick and even manages to put her arm around the back of the seat, her fingers creeping closer and closer to the woman's shoulder. She wants to give the impression she has done this many times before but can her companion sense that she might swoon with desire at any moment?

The woman turns her head as though for a kiss and then reaches forward to rest a hand on Charlotte's knee.

“I go with men for money,” she says, “but I always keep myself clean for women, I want you to know you can trust me, do you understand?”

Charlotte felt a shiver go through her body. Had someone thrown a bucket of cold water through the open car window? She withdrew her arm and muttered something about needing to get up early in the morning.

The sight of that woman standing on the kerb, a lone figure cast in shadow, would haunt Charlotte for many years to come. What should she have done? What could she have said?

Overwhelmed and sad those next few days, she would catch herself wondering if there were *any* women out there feeling like she did. But, determined to stay positive, she would shrug her shoulders and reassure herself that there just had to be someone, somewhere, she simply *had* to keep trying.

Then, a few weeks later, Charlotte met Mary Poppins. There she was in a long skirt and carrying that sort of umbrella but those lace-ups appeared more suitable for a hiker than a nanny. Mary had come over from Perth and here she was at this meeting but honestly, she didn't know a single soul in Sydney. These two agreed to have a drink together afterwards. It was about ten o'clock when they walked the short distance to a local pub.

Moments later, to Charlotte's amazement, Mary asked, in a moment of frank intimacy, if Charlotte would show her the ropes. Exactly what she meant by those words Charlotte never did find out but these two women were narrating a good story together and it ended happily enough.

Driving to Mary's hotel, chatting about this and that, Charlotte realised, as she braked at a set of lights, that her knees weren't trembling, in fact, wow, she was just soooooo relaxed.

"Would you like to come and stay at my place?"

Even as the words tripped off her tongue, each one a bubble floating into space, she noticed that her voice hadn't changed at all, no lorikeets or roosters within cooe. She could feel a big soppy grin, widening in delight across her face, when Mary's voice became a rising crescendo as she yelled yes, yes, YES.

In the months that followed Mary Poppins sent Charlotte pieces of dried apricot, each one parcelled up in a plain brown envelope. Charlotte posted back prunes and walnut halves. Soon she was finding imagery depicting female erotica everywhere she looked.

PART VI

The Bigger Picture

Chapter Twenty Three

Slovenian Diary

September 20th, 1993.

The war in Bosnia has brought us to Ljubljana. As arranged we two writers, Meg Coulson and myself, meet our translator, Liza, at the Hotel Slon, a popular meeting place in this city of Ljubljana. Slon is the Slovene word for elephant and indeed, there are handsome elephants, carved in metal, fitted onto the glass doors that mark the various entrances to the hotel.

Many refugees fled here when the conflict started. Meg has a number of Bosnian friends who have been directly affected, and she has been distressed ever since the fighting began, worried sick about what has happened to them and if they've managed to get away.

Ljilja and Misha, a couple Meg has known for many years, live in Ljubljana and are delighted to have us stay. I have no connection to anyone in the former Yugoslavia but my desire to look beyond the news broadcasts, the hypothesis of why and how, to hear what the people caught up in this war have to say, prompted me to suggest compiling a book about their experiences.

Liza, our translator, speaks English with a faint American accent, picked up, she jokes, when she worked with a group of Americans over a period of some months.

She tells us about a recent experience when she acted as a translator for some visiting Italian women. She does not speak Italian well and sometimes interpreted quite opposite meanings to what was being said. There was no one else to do it, she added.

Marija joins us and we adjourn to a nearby café. As we enter Liza confides that her mother used to warn her about this place. It used to have a reputation as a ‘pick-up’ joint. I look around but there are no visible signs of notoriety. The walls are lined in vertical strips of wood from floor to ceiling and stained a warm mid-brown colour. A glass counter displays tempting cakes and pastries. The tables all around us are crowded with people, sipping coffee, eating cake. I sigh and look away. I have seen so many similar displays since arriving in this city, I keep thinking of that quote *let them eat cake*. It would be a relief to see something that looks like bread for a change.

We order coffee and try to talk above the noise. Marija is a doctor and a teacher. In Sarajevo, she tells us, students of high school age planning certain categories of career in medicine, such as nurses and physiotherapists, could attend vocational schools. Marija has taught in one such school for the past five years.

She wants to take us to a refugee centre to meet three women she knows from Sarajevo. One of the women is married to a former student of Marija’s. Two of the three are married to two brothers, the third is the sister of the two men. This sister’s husband was killed in the war just recently. Marija warns us that the woman will not want to speak about her experience. “You will know her because she wears the mourning scarf.”

Marija met the three women when she went to work in the centre as a refugee volunteer. They all draw comfort from the link that connects their past lives to Sarajevo.

An hour or so later we step off the number six bus in the outskirts of the city. Beyond the bus terminus the refugee centre is situated in an industrial area, in what were once workers' hostels. There are three lines of huts in two sections, known as Vic 1 and Vic 2, (pronounced Veech) and they are divided by a wire fence.

We walk along the perimeter road to pass from one camp to the next. The atmosphere is subdued. Old men sweep up rubbish from the gutters, a few children ride ancient looking bikes up and down the unsealed roads. .

Through an open window we can see a group of women using sewing machines. Marija tells us the machines were donated by an Italian church group. Walking past the end of a long, low building we can hear a maths lesson in progress. Looking in we can see that the room is small. We learn that classes are conducted in three shifts every day, soon a fourth shift is to be introduced.

We are given permission by the Centre's director to meet with Marija's friends. They are located in Vic 2. Each building is divided by a corridor that runs lengthwise, end to end. On both sides there are several doors, all painted the same dull brown. There is one lockable bathroom with basins and toilets in each block and incoming residents are issued with a key. There are no kitchens. These hostels were designed for working men who were fed in canteens situated close by.

Outside each door shoes are stacked tidily. Adding ours to one pile, we are invited to follow Marija through a doorway. It's hard to believe nine people can live in this one

room. The window is opposite the door. Directly beneath, a neatly made bed serves as a daytime couch. Two other beds enclose the kitchen table and the fourth side of the square is taken up by two chairs. I count eight beds in all. Those not used for seating are pushed against the walls, side by side, top blankets tucked in well so the children can use them to play on during the day.

With gestures and smiles Dzenana and Halima direct us to sit around the table. Liza interprets the message that Mejra will be here soon. A completed jigsaw puzzle with one piece missing dominates the table surface just as the children's stuffed toys and drawings fill the wall space above the beds. We ask the ages of the children. The youngest is three years old, the eldest fifteen.

Set upon a narrow cupboard, one side of the doorway, is a portable TV set and a cassette player. These are precious possessions as far as the children are concerned. An equally prized possession is the stove that fits into the corner on the other side of the doorway. Owning a stove means the women can warm up the doled out portions of food the centre supplies. We are told that the servings shrink in size and weight from one week to another.

We admire the stove and note how the hinged lid rests against the wall, a large embroidered doyley draped over it, a touch of home. Dzenana makes coffee, black and strong. It is served in tiny cups. A bowl of sugar lumps is placed on the table. Bosnians usually like their coffee black, strong and sweet.

The two women have been in Vic 2 for three months, transferred from another centre where they had lived for fifteen months. Halima speaks first.

“The worst time was arriving alone in Slovenia with the children, not knowing anyone else, assigned to a room already overcrowded with people because there were not enough rooms to go around. I was so confused and still in shock. Those days were definitely the worst.”

Dzenana, Mejra and their children arrived later at the first camp and after a time, they were all allowed to move into one bigger room as a family group. The three women have been able to support each other, sharing the workload of looking after the children, keeping them entertained, talking incessantly about day to day problems. Things like getting enough food, their fears about the children’s health and worrying about what lies ahead. Dzenana leans forward to speak.

“I cannot imagine getting back even one third of my life as it was before. We had a big house in Sarajevo, three floors high with a large garage underneath. Each of our three families lived on one floor. Our two husbands had a small business, a pastry shop. Halima and I baked pies and sweet pastries to sell. Mejra worked in a factory.”

They have phone calls with their husbands from time to time.

“The men constantly reassure us that the house still stands, only the roof partly damaged, they insist. We don’t believe this (here they all smile ruefully at each other). We know our husbands want to protect us from the truth. We protect them too. We say that everything is fine here, plenty to eat, the children doing well. We don’t mention that we watch hourly news broadcasts on television and can see for ourselves the destruction of Sarajevo. We worry about their safety all the time.”

Marija gives us more information about the centre’s rules. No one can leave Vic 1 or 2 without a pass, issued for one day only. The refugees have little money but are not

allowed to work. She and the women laugh heartily when Marija relates the story of a Belgian group who offered to escort a few women to a café in town, in order to make a film. The film crew bought bus tokens for ten but when they arrived, thirty women were waiting, dressed in the best clothes they could find, eager for an outing.

I hold my coffee cup in my hand. I'm not used to drinking it so strong. I decide I'll drink it down quick, like medicine, and try not to grimace as I swallow. I put the cup down. Ah, that is a mistake. Dzenana is on her feet immediately and refills my cup. I smile my thanks but inwardly I'm groaning, I'll have cystitis if I drink much more.

Mejra comes into the room with her son. He's eleven years old and shares a joke with Marija. He seems self-conscious about his new haircut and ducks his head with a shy grin. Mejra joins us at the table and shakes hands as we are each introduced. Dzenana makes more coffee. The discussion moves now to the everyday things that make life difficult. Mejra talks about the things they *didn't* pack.

"Underwear is a problem. How long can three pairs of knickers (our word) last? Eighteen months is already too long."

There's more laughter as Marija raises the question of what you take with you when war begins? The women nod their heads, agreeing that each of them expected to be away from their homes for just a short time.

"We were so naïve," they exclaim.

"Is it a curse upon the Balkans?" Marija asks.

Her question hangs in the air. Halima sighs and shrugs her shoulders. What is there to say? We ask if there is anything we can do to help, thinking of practical items we

could send when we return to England. Halima answers promptly.

“Hope is what we need, just hope.”

That night, back at Ljilja and Misha’s house, Meg and I are close to tears as we listen to the tapes we’ve made, making notes of words or phrases that could be misinterpreted once we are back home in Manchester. In bed that night, I ask myself if violence in war is somehow connected to domestic violence? Does one lead easily to the other? Does brutality become a kind of shorthand, a means of avoiding any form of negotiation? Or is my thinking too simplistic?

* * *

September 21st

The Ljubljanica River runs through Ljubljana, crossed at a central city point by the three way bridge (Tromostovje it is called). On one side, in the direction of the Hotel Slon, there are shops, boutiques and, overlooking the water, café tables on the pavement topped by brightly coloured umbrellas. Facing the bridge, the highly decorated Franciscan church blocks out the sky, its pink-toned grandeur partly hidden by a number of closely planted Indian Bean trees.

Between the cathedral and the bridge, cobblestones mark out a circular area with inlaid marble further defining the shape. Here you will find a monument dedicated to the long dead poet, Preseren, on a pedestal at the top of a number of wide steps. On sunny days young people claim the steps as their territory.

Cyclists whiz across the thoroughfare with alarming confidence. Other traffic is controlled by a one-way system resulting in unpredictable jerky stops and starts as motorists turn right to cross the river. Pedestrians tread carefully here, mindful that

their next step might be their last. If you cross the bridge, turn left and walk along the river for a hundred metres or so you'll come to the market. Fish, vegetables, fruit, fresh herbs, flowers and bric-a-brac are sold here six days a week.

A ten minute walk beyond this city scene brings you to Rozka (pronounced Roshka), the largest of the three refugee centres in Ljubljana, at present accommodating eight hundred people. Originally built as army barracks, the centre covers a considerable area. There are lots of trees, open space and substantial buildings that appear to be in a good state of repair. A six-foot high, wrought iron fence, its rails embedded in stone, encircles the centre. There are many foothold places formed by the horizontal design, making it easy to climb over. On our first visit we watched a woman and two boys passing bags of groceries across to friends on the inside, before hoisting themselves up and over in a matter of seconds.

We have come to meet Vida. She teaches Social Work at Ljubljana University and has been working with some of the women, recording stories about their lives. We are invited to join the group as they take turns with the tape recorder, prompted and encouraged by the others.

We drink coffee with them and answer their questions about our support group back in Manchester. "There are a number of us," I say, "all women. We are committed to writing a book about what has happened to you." I struggle to find the right words to express what I am feeling. "We want you to know that we care about you," I look around, "...all of you."

There is silence for a moment then one woman, Dzemila, tells us she has a brother

living in Melbourne, perhaps I might know him? He emigrated to Australia in 1956, is married to a Hungarian girl, but she lost his address when she fled from Bosnia.

Nela and Zihla, with a mixture of humour and anguish, tell stories of how they escaped. Both of them came from an area in the north of Bosnia, around Bosanski Brod, where fighting started in the early stages of the war. Nela described her panic when information went around her village that people who wanted to leave had to be ready to go in ten minutes.

“How can you pack up your life in ten minutes? Should I take my new clothes? But what if they got ruined? But surely I must not leave them behind. The ten minutes went by while I was still arguing with myself. Luckily, I have always kept spare underwear in a bag – in case I ever have to go to hospital, so at least I could grab that.”

Zihla has been a widow for ten years. She sighs and wonders aloud what it might have been like if her husband was still alive. “We could at least have run away together. It was very hard alone. When the fighting began around my house I grabbed my bag and ran. I must have run for about seven kilometres. Others were running too. Some fell by the wayside. In my bag I had medicines and underwear, that’s all. I was held in a prison camp for twenty-six days. When they let me out I went with the others, from village to village, looking for a safe place to stay. We slept in the burned out shells of houses.

At one point we were driven between two frontlines. Some people died, including those shot by their own side. Fortunately, some Croatian soldiers helped us to get away from the war zone. Eventually, I came here.”

Zihla's daughter arrived in Slovenia before her, escaping by truck with her baby boy who was then only three days old. "He was the youngest Rozka resident for quite a while. I'm amazed and relieved we're all together."

She talks about the value of her writing. Since she's been in Rozka she has contributed to "IZI" a refugee magazine. She wants us to know she is still optimistic. "This war has to stop. No war can go on forever."

That night exhaustion drags at my limbs like a nagging ache. I'm not sure I can listen to another story, see another anguished face. I remember something Marija said to us *we don't want the world to forget us ...*

Meg and I discuss the day's work. Our conversation shifts to the bigger picture. How horrible this war is, how great the suffering of the Bosnian people and all those others who are trying to help. What is this war really about? How are any of us supposed to make sense of what is happening?

Misha senses our mood and makes Irish coffee, warming the brandy balloon glasses over a candle flame. He hands around each glass with a beguiling grin. I feel guilty even as I relish the first taste, lovely, just the right strength too, but is it right to be enjoying this wonderful treat while other people are ...

* * *

September 27th.

Our third visit to Rozka is on a damp, drizzly day. Previously, we have been allowed to come through the front gate with little fuss beyond a polite request to enter but today is different. Since Wednesday 22nd, the three refugee centres have been closed,

no one allowed to enter and only refugees who can prove they have urgent business to attend to are permitted to leave. This restriction is to be imposed for one week so that *all* refugees, whether living in the centres or not, can be registered. They have been instructed to present passport-sized photographs to the authorities as part of the registration process, so that an identification pass can be issued.

News spreads quickly in the centres, most people get to know what's going on, what's expected of them. It's a different story for those refugees living with relatives or on their own in rented accommodation. For them the grapevine is a random, chancy affair. The week could elapse without news of this registration requirement reaching many of those most affected by its implications.

(Slovenia's population in 1993 was three million. Some wily politicians led a scare campaign as the country became more aware of Bosnians coming over the border. The politicians claimed that Slovenia was being over-run, that Slovenes would not be able to keep their jobs, that crime was on the increase, and so on and so on. As a result of this registration/census, the official estimate of refugee numbers in Slovenia, was revised downwards from 100,000 to 30,000.)

We wait in the rain with Davorka. Her friend Fedja, makes it clear to the Centre Director that we have already been given permission to enter today. Fedja is a nineteen year old university student, a refugee from Mostar. He's a Rozka resident and works as a volunteer when he isn't attending lectures. Confusion marks many of the faces we see around us. Visitors and relatives can't decide whether to hang around or come back next week-end when all the fuss is over. Standing with us is a man who has arrived from Italy. He lives and works in Trieste and has come from there this morning to visit his wife and son. He'd been working in Italy when the war began. He

wanted to take his son shopping today to buy him some clothes. No one told him anything about the Centre being closed. He's not even sure if his wife will know he's here. The man is still waiting when Fedja comes to tell us we can come in. He strides ahead muttering non-stop about the unfairness of the whole business.

The first floor corridor is dark. There are light switches at both ends and we can see that there are electric lights but obviously no light bulbs. Two women are leaning over a stove set low on the floor. One uses a wooden spoon to stir two large saucepans on the front jets, full of boiling water and clothing items. The second woman is kneeling, crouched over a plastic baby bath, scrubbing. When she has finished with each item she places it on a towel near her feet.

The women nod as we walk past and into Fedja's room, which he shares with a woman and her teen-aged son. There is only enough space in this room for three beds and two small cupboards, one either side of the door. Fedja's spare jeans and his two long-sleeved shirts hang on a hook above his bed. He and Davorka joke about their visit to the centre's *boutique* where she helped him select those shirts, courtesy of some international charity. Davorka sighs, if only they had better quality shoes at the boutique. Fedja laughs with her as they lift first one foot then another, to show us their worn shoes.

Fedja tells us he and his room-mate are mostly on their own. The boy's mother has found a job (illegally of course) as a live-in housekeeper, earning money to feed herself and her son. Fedja expresses his relief that the woman has a job *and* somewhere to sleep. It makes things easier all round.

We ask about his meals. Does he cook for himself? Yes, when he can but mostly he uses luncheon vouchers for meals at the university. He still has some savings left, and, as a university student, he's allowed to buy so many vouchers a week. It's rare to be a vegetarian in Bosnia he says, rarer still to be a Bosnian that does not drink coffee. I laugh louder than the others, I'm glad to know there's at least one Bosnian who doesn't drink *that* coffee.

Davorka encourages Fedja to show us his certificates for prizes won in Maths exams. Fedja handles the certificates carefully. He is studying Maths and Physics. Although he feels he is lucky to have been accepted at Ljubljana university, he knows that it was his persistence that got him enrolled.

He makes a point of bringing Slovenian friends from the uni back to Rozka, so they can see for themselves what it's really like. There are rumours about the centres, about how they are smelly, evil places full of prostitutes and crooks, that sort of thing. Fedja wants his friends to make up their own minds. He is often asked to their places too for meals and that is good. He laughs then, "Why do I always seem to be thinking about food?"

We head back down the stairs and out the door. Some distance from the entrance gate we turn into a tall building and up a staircase enclosed by cement walls. The steps are made of chipped grey marble. We follow Davorka down a poorly lit corridor and into a large space, a thoroughfare leading to other rooms on this floor. Our footsteps echo on the floorboards.

Over in the far corner, Zorica and Zlatko live with their three children. The two boys, Nenad and Vedran, sleep in bunk beds, the height of which serves to enclose the

family area like a wall or a protective arm, the bent elbow provided by a wooden cupboard. An opening between the cupboard and the kitchen table allows twelve-year old Asja to get to her bed positioned under the tall window. The foot of Asja's bed almost touches the side of her parent's double bed, which fits between the kitchen table and the window wall.

A fridge has been tucked beneath the second window, alongside a steel cupboard, (the sort used as school lockers) and a stove. Another low cupboard encompasses the space down this end, providing a second protective elbow.

The comings and goings of people passing through add to an impression of camping out – you know the sort of thing, holidays in youth hostels where a few days rough and ready sleeping and eating, in countryside surroundings, is great fun. But this is no camping expedition. Privacy is non-existent and the cosy safety an illusion rather than reality.

Asja is making her bed as we arrive. Zorica greets us then turns to the stove to make coffee. Zlatko gestures towards the table inviting us to sit down. He's a big man but effortlessly, makes himself comfortable, sitting cross-legged at the bottom end of the double bed. Fedja joins him leaving room for we four women to occupy the chairs around the table. Davorka makes the introductions with humorous remarks about the accommodation. Have we ever seen such a palace, she asks, pointing out the dirt-veined walls, the dusty gloom that hangs over everything like a threatening cloud.

She assumes the role of tour guide with expressive, hand sweeping gestures. Her voice drops as she turns back to us. "Can you imagine what it must be like to live here?"

We are served coffee and wait for Zorica to join us. With an arm around her daughter, Zorica first apologises for her halting English. We brush away her concerns, of course we can understand her story. The tape begins to whirr.

“We come from Nevesinje, a town in Eastern Herzegovina, about thirty-five kilometres to the east of Mostar. About a year before the war erupted, life in our area deteriorated. We and other families around us were exposed to all sorts of human rights violations. Our home was searched and we were given warnings about areas of the town we were no longer permitted to use. We had no illusions about it all blowing over with time, it was obvious even then, that things could only get worse.

I'm from a Serb background and Zlatko is Muslim. It made no difference to how they treated us. Zlatko was beaten up three or four times, it was horrible, really horrible. Then, about five months before the war started, Serbian Chetnik soldiers came to the house with five families, Serbian refugees from Mostar, and told us to accommodate them in our home.

I'd worked in a shop and Zlatko had trained as an auto mechanic. We had opened a shop which became a café after the war started. It was soon taken over by the Chetniks. We were reeling with all these shocks when one day, they (Chetniks) came to the house for Zlatko. They were taking him hostage they said, but we knew what that really meant, they were taking him to be shot.

I can't describe how I felt. We were greatly distressed and in a state of shock. But Zlatko's life was saved by one of the Serbian women staying in our house. This woman had a job as a telephone operator in the local headquarters of the Serbian army

and was having an affair with an army major. She managed to persuade the major to act on Zlatko's behalf.

Before that dreadful day I suppose we thought we would just have to cope, get through the war as best we could. But we had come so close to death, we were all extremely upset. Asja would cry whenever one of us had to leave the house. We'd jump nervously at the slightest noise, fearful of what we'd have to face next. We couldn't sleep or eat, it was such a dangerous situation.

Zlatko had a long argument one night, with the woman who had saved his life. She insisted we were all safe in Bosnia and refused to believe our lives were in danger. She preferred to think that whenever something bad happened it was either a mistake or someone else's fault, that the Chetniks were only doing what they had to and meant no one any harm. Zlatko told her our family would be dead soon enough and if he could, he'd get us all out. 'Why don't you go then?' this woman asked, 'if people want to leave they should just go.'

We already knew that women and children could leave at any time, but I had no intention of abandoning Zlatko. What would have been worse? To know, to have my children know, that Zlatko would almost certainly be killed once we left? That we could be safe at his expense? I don't know if Zlatko managed to persuade the woman of the threat or, if she thought we should go anyway, but suddenly, the argument was over and she was offering to help us escape."

Zorica pauses for a moment and sips her coffee. I can see she is trying to stop herself from crying. I switch off the tape. The silence is companionable, there is no rush. Meg asks if this is too much for her, would she rather we stopped. "No, no, I want

people to know.” I turn the tape recorder on. Zorica continues her story.

“Everything we'd worked so hard for had to be left behind, but none of that mattered, getting out was our only thought. It was 26th June, 1992. We left on a bus with special passes supplied through this woman's lover and his contacts. Zlatko had been given a document issued by the Yugoslav army that stated he was mentally ill. Without this bit of paper he would not have been allowed to leave.

We packed clothes and food into what bags we could carry. We'd been using some of our savings to live on after we lost our café and we were hoping that what we had left would be enough to get by for a few weeks at our new, unknown destination.

We travelled first to Montenegro and stayed with a friend but now that we were away from Bosnia, the pent-up fear and tension Zlatko had been holding on to proved too much. He broke down, was crying all the time, and walked around as though in a daze. He described himself as one of the living dead. We realised he must be having some kind of nervous breakdown.

We moved on to Northern Serbia. We were hoping to pass through but were told we needed special documents. They sent us to a refugee camp whilst we waited for these documents to come through. In the camp we heard a rumour that all the men were to be returned to Bosnia. If Zlatko was to avoid being rounded up, he'd have to get out quickly and without drawing attention to himself. We had to think fast. We made it look like he was going to the shops. He caught a cab and once away from the camp headed for my cousin's house here in Ljubljana.

No one was allowed to stay in that camp for longer than three days. At the end of that

time, with the new documents in hand, the children and I left for Sweden. The authorities there wouldn't allow us entry because our journey from Bosnia had taken us through Poland. We'd only been in Poland for a 24 hour period but the border officials insisted that it should therefore be Poland that gave us refuge.

I had very little money left and used it all on bus fares to the Hungarian - Slovene border. Meanwhile Zlatko had arrived earlier at the same border and had not been allowed to enter. The border guards relented when Zlatko showed them the document stating he was mentally ill. We finally met up at my cousin's place."

Zorica pauses again. This time Zlatko reaches over to stroke her arm. She puts her hand over his.

"We were there for five months. When my cousin could no longer afford to feed five extra mouths we came here, to Rozka centre, it was 25th December, 1992. It had been hard for my cousin, no one expected the war to last this long. We were already registered in Slovenia as refugees. We had no money, nowhere else to go, so we had to ask for accommodation.

The food rations provided in the centre are not enough to live on. We would not have managed without the support from friends and relatives. Zlatko manages to get casual work sometimes but if an employer decides to pay less than has been agreed or, not pay at all, Zlatko cannot complain because it is illegal for refugees to work and it would be him who got into trouble. Still, what he earns helps us to survive."

Asja has been standing alongside her mother all this time. She agrees to have her photo taken with her parents. I click the tape recorder off but leave it on the table. Meg takes the photo and we promise to send back copies soon. Very few refugees

have cameras or family photos. Zlatko shows us three snaps he took on a camping trip a couple of years ago. These photos are all that is left of their life in Bosnia but are now the beginning of a precious new family album.

Zorica spreads the fingers of each hand around the edge of the table, a gesture of surrender to whatever fate has in store. “We’ve been applying to emigrate,” she says, “Canada, Australia, England, New Zealand. We don’t think about returning to Bosnia, that life is behind us now.”

Zlatko laughs as though to lighten his wife’s mood and talks about a future somewhere else, as though he and Zorica had the pick of all the countries in the world. We join in a crazy selection process, exclaiming over the advantages of life in a country of choice. We can tell that Zorica is grateful for the chance to laugh rather than cry.

We leave Rozka and walk back to the city centre, mindful of the stories that have been given to us for safe-keeping. I want to tell these women how much I admire their strength, their courage, their determination to hang onto their sense of humour.

Halima had said what they needed was hope, but I realise then, at that very moment, that hope is what these women have given me.

Chapter 24

Brenda

I met the woman I will call Brenda, in the mid 1980s. I had been asked to conduct a number of interviews with her, in the hope that we could turn that material into a book. Brenda wanted me to write about her time in prison, about notorious people she'd shared a cell with, the infamous child-murderer, Myra Hindley, for example. My interests lay more with lesbian history and an examination of Brenda's life. What had led this woman to attack and kill the woman she loved?

Our first interview took place at her home in London, on a dark, wintry, February afternoon. We began with questions about her family and her childhood.

Brenda was born in Cornwall, in 1931. Her sister came along two years later. Known as a tomboy, Brenda loved being outdoors, messing around in boats, trapping rabbits and spending time on her own. The year she turned fourteen her father died. Brenda was sent to stay with an aunt in Devon. A while later she took ill. The diagnosis was Tuberculosis.

During the 1930s, 40s and 50s, almost every family in countries like the UK, the USA and Australia, was affected. Two of my aunts had been ill for a number of years as a result of contracting this contagious disease, often referred to as consumption, TB or wasting disease.

It was wrongly assumed that poorer people were most at risk, making it a shameful secret that only kept the assumption alive. Once the TB sufferer had been sent away, it was like that person had died. Fear was rife. I remember my mother warning me to stay away from people who looked a bit thin and coughed a lot. One day, I asked her what actually caused TB and she replied that it was an illness women got when they stayed out late at night.

The most common symptom is persistent coughing, often associated with the expulsion of blood droplets but there is also chest pain, fever, shortness of breath, and, over time, a dramatic loss of weight. In children, particularly those small in stature as Brenda was, there was the additional danger that the lymph nodes might become swollen and press against the bronchial tubes, causing a lung to collapse. Brenda was sent to a sanatorium. An operation to cut away a part of her lung was considered necessary but in 1944, (prior to the introduction of the British National Health System set up in 1948) the waiting list was very long. An operation right then was not possible. Brenda's health remained precarious.

Sanatoria were designed so that patients got plenty of fresh air no matter what the weather, no matter what the season. Beds were placed in rows on wide verandas, the head of each bed against an interior wall. The other end, though sheltered by an awning or an overhanging roof, was less protected. Those who could, shuffled about in slippers and dressing gowns, the rest lay there probably waiting to die. It was here, in a sanatorium in Cornwall, that Brenda became lovers with a patient from another ward. Brenda had been in the sanatorium a few years before Linda arrived, and Linda had been hospitalised more as a matter of caution than because she suffered severe ill health.

My next three interviews with Brenda centred on the circumstances of these two women living together and what happened between them. Linda was six years older than Brenda and married.

This was Brenda's first sexual relationship and it was to last until 1952. They lived at Brenda's mother's house. Linda was never seriously ill herself but soon after moving in, had become a full time nurse to a very ill and demanding patient.

How isolated they must have been, trying to stay emotionally close, in that era and that place, and without any real understanding or access to a wider notion of lesbianism. The invisibility and lack of societal acknowledgement for their relationship may well have undermined any future they could have had together, even before adding a complication such as Brenda's daunting ill health.

According to Brenda, they had a blazing row one morning. Linda hurriedly packed her things and left the house. Brenda struggled to get out of bed for the first time in four months. Her agitation only increased when her mother locked her in her bedroom.

Later, she kicked at the door till the lock till gave way. Out in the street, she hailed a taxi. Her sister scrambled into the back seat and closed the door before Brenda could object.

Their destination was the nearby town where Linda's mother lived. The taxi driver was instructed to wait. Brenda's sister got out before Brenda and walked across to sit on the garden wall. Linda and her mother came to the door together. Brenda was visibly upset, please, couldn't they start all over again? Linda was firm, she didn't want to come back and she didn't ever want to see Brenda again.

It would appear that Brenda's sister didn't realise for a while what had happened. She saw Linda stagger and gasp for breath. Brenda described feeling cold all over. She had shoved that knife hard into Connie's chest but then, immediately afterwards, had turned away and headed for the taxi, telling her sister to hurry. Back home again, Brenda went to bed and waited for the police to arrive. It was 1am when they came. She was later charged with *Attempted Murder* and taken to Exeter prison.

Linda's wound required surgery and her family were warned by the surgeon that she may not pull through. In a vacant hospital room, police and nurses brought Brenda in on a stretcher and placed her on a bed. Linda was then wheeled in on a trolley. Asked if this was the woman who had attacked her Linda could only nod her head. She died the next day. The charge against Brenda was changed to *Murder*.

Knife wounds are treated differently these days – for example, when a sharp weapon is used it is not removed from the victim's body immediately, due to the harmful effects of shock. It is almost certain that the prompt removal of the knife from Linda's chest hastened or caused her death.

Brenda's trial was held the following month. Her aunt from Devon offered to pay for a defence lawyer but was told by the police there was no point wasting money; the outcome was a foregone conclusion. A lawyer from the duty roster was appointed by the court to act for Brenda. Her trial lasted a day and a half. The jury needed just one hour to return their verdict. Guilty as charged.

In the UK at that time it was mandatory for convicted murderers to be executed. A date was set for Brenda to hang. Arrangements were made to transport her by ambulance to Holloway prison in London, prior to the execution date but because of

her declining health, Brenda was not transferred to London for some time.

It seemed unlikely that she would live long enough to be hung. Then, three days before the due date, she had two visitors. A typed statement was read out to her, the gist of it being that she was considered too ill for execution and her sentence was to be commuted to life imprisonment.

I was puzzled by this set of circumstances until I checked the dates. Queen Elizabeth II became queen following her father's death 6th February, 1952 but her coronation did not take place until 2nd June, 1953, that same year Brenda was due to be hung. There was no public announcement to suggest that the new monarch had anything to do with this decision but the timing suggests otherwise. Had she been executed Brenda would have been the first person to face such a death in the new queen's reign. How might such an execution have been perceived given the age and poor health of the convicted woman?

A perpetrator who has a close relationship with their victim, can, in a court of law, plead that their violent act was a crime of passion. Historically, it is more likely that in such cases the victim is a woman and the perpetrator a man. Gay men and lesbians were classified as mad or bad in that era, so despite the domestic nature of the relationship between these two women, Brenda was denied this type of defence.

How can we know what bearing, if any, Brenda's lesbianism had, on the stay of execution? Supposing for the moment that she had been executed, would that have given lesbianism some degree of public visibility, the very kind of visibility that the Conservative government and the Royals might have been keen to avoid?

I was curious to know how Brenda's experience before the law compared with that of any other woman convicted of a similar murder. Was lesbiaphobia an issue here? Or was it simply the way the law treated women? I looked for other cases from around that time.

Ruth Ellis was tried in 1955 for the murder of her lover, David Blakely. The trial opened on 20th June and concluded the following day. The court heard that on 10th April that year, Ellis had fired four shots at her lover, at least one of them at close range, killing Blakely instantly.

Ellis had recently suffered a miscarriage after Blakely punched her several times in the stomach during a row. On another occasion he had broken her ankle and had frequently bashed her black and blue. But the jury took just fourteen minutes to return a verdict. Guilty as charged. Ellis's lawyer had wanted to plead provocation but the judge would not allow it. Had such a defence been accepted, Ruth would have been found guilty of manslaughter, and spared the gallows.

Ruth Ellis was the last woman to be executed in England, and what a hasty hanging it was too, carried out at 9am on the morning of 13th July, 1955, just twenty two days after her trial ended.

These two cases do reflect the inequality women faced in a law and order system run mostly by men. It seems Brenda was indeed lucky to escape death.

She explained to me that she was not prepared for years and years in prison, she had been psyching herself for fifteen seconds of bravery, once the noose was put around her neck.

The minute her visitors left that day, Brenda sprang to her feet in a raging fever and destroyed her prison cell. Meanwhile, the prison doctor, concerned about her deteriorating health, made contact with a number of surgeons and found one willing to operate. Although the operation was a complete success, it was another two years before Brenda could be moved out of the hospital wing and into the main part of the prison.

Over the next two decades she spent time in six English prisons. Released four times on licence, that licence was revoked on each occasion.

Brenda's first taste of freedom came in 1959. Soon after her release, a woman accused her of making obscene phone calls to her and assaulting her sexually. Questioned by police, Brenda was cleared of all allegations but was by now convinced people were talking about her and watching her every move. Weeks later, she had a row with a woman she worked with – she claimed the woman had stolen a ring from her. Brenda even went to the local police station to report the matter. The woman made counter accusations and as a result, Brenda was arrested. In the station cell a policeman returned her ring but announced that she would be going back to prison anyway.

Brenda became more suspicious and mistrustful. There were a few good people who tried to help, a social worker, a politician, a group of people who ran a charity in London, they all did their best but it was as though Brenda was caught in a vicious cycle that just kept repeating itself.

Take what happened in 1975, for example. Out of prison for the fourth time, she rented a room in a boarding house. The landlady was friendly and introduced Brenda to her eighteen-year old daughter. An unnamed someone from a tabloid newspaper

told an appreciative audience in a Cornish pub about how Brenda had made advances to both the landlady and her daughter and, when those advances were rejected, had brandished a vegetable knife.

None of this was true but when the Chief Probation Officer heard wind of it, he didn't bother to check the facts but instead, alerted the Home Office. No one thought to ask the landlady what had happened.

Five years later, a Sunday Times journalist was in Cornwall researching material for an article to be written about Brenda. When he questioned the landlady she was indignant at the treatment Brenda had received – she told him that *nothing* about Brenda's behaviour towards her or her daughter had ever given her the slightest cause for complaint.

Imprisoned at twenty-one, Brenda was finally released in 1980, aged forty-nine. She had been behind bars twenty-eight years, and was then the longest serving woman prisoner in England. Feminists in London organised accommodation and after-prison support, doing what they could to help Brenda adjust to living outside prison walls.

Some of my questions annoyed her, especially when I asked about her mother. I was convinced there would be a story behind the story.

Brenda's mother, let's call her Elsie, was born around the turn of the century and was still only four years old when her mother died. There were a number of older children, most of them boys, and they were passed around to different aunts and uncles, all of them big enough to be of some help in making ends meet.

Despite her tender age, Elsie was sent to Bath, a big town closer to London, to work in her aunt's boarding house. She stayed there until she was fifteen, working almost every day and getting very little schooling. When an elderly female relative in Cornwall became too weak to manage on her own, Elsie was brought back to act as a live-in housekeeper. That relative died soon after. Elsie then found a job and moved into a boarding house not far from where she worked. A young man, another boarder, asked her out one day. Soon, they were engaged. But another man in that same boarding house took a shine to Elsie too, only his tactics for getting her attention were not at all gentlemanlike. He accosted her in the hallway one night, pushed her back into her room and raped her. A virgin until the rape, Elsie was too ashamed to tell her fiancé.

Weeks later when she realised she was pregnant, she felt she had no choice but to tell the father. He was delighted and suggested marriage right away. Elsie told this story to both her daughters shortly after her husband's death. I think it is likely that Elsie viewed her older daughter as the cause of all her problems..

Elsie had been a victim of violent crime but in her marriage, she continually abused her older daughter. Case notes Brenda showed me from around the time of her trial, documented how she had been repeatedly beaten by her mother. On one occasion, Brenda's mother wielded a cane walking stick and beat Brenda so harshly a doctor reported it was a miracle both her legs hadn't been broken. Brenda was six years old at the time.

Like her mother, Brenda *was* a victim but she too had become an abuser

Our most difficult interview centred on the knife that had been used to attack Linda. Brenda insisted she had needed a weapon to protect them both in case Linda's husband came round. I assumed the knife had been bought around the time Brenda and Linda moved in together but, according to that newspaper article I mentioned earlier, printed in the Sunday Times in 1980, (that resulted from at least one interview with Brenda), she may have had the knife in her possession from her childhood rabbit-hunting days.

It seems that Brenda did have some cause for concern about Linda's husband. During the time she was still in the sanatorium, Linda went back to her husband's house to collect her belongings. She was surprised to find him at home. He forced her to have sex with him. No court of law would have thought this man's actions that day amounted to rape, not back then in the early 1950s, at a time when married women were expected to allow a husband his conjugal rights.

Listening to Brenda talk about this painful incident more than thirty years on, I was surprised to note how little compassion or understanding she had even then for Linda's situation. Perhaps it was her debilitating illness, or her lack of experience about life and matters of the heart, but she still, adamantly believed that Linda was in some way responsible for what had happened, and condemned her for being unfaithful to *their* relationship.

Brenda longed to be told that Linda had fought like a wild thing, successfully holding off her husband, as Brenda imagined she would have done in similar circumstances. I felt that Linda had, in effect, traded one kind of abuser for another. She had offered her honesty to Brenda. That honesty had not been recognised as the gift it was, but instead, was turned into a weapon to be used against her.

From the moment Brenda knew what had happened between Linda and her husband, suspicion and an unfounded jealousy would appear to have formed a canker in her mind, eating away at her trust and hope. She explained to me how, at the slightest hint of trouble between them, she would accuse and insult Linda, subjecting her to verbal and emotional abuse, picking at what lay between them, as though it was a pus-filled wound she could somehow lance once and for all time. Linda may well have felt powerless, worn down by these accusations.

How incredibly sad it is to grasp the far-reaching implications of a violent act. Rape lay at the core of Elsie's troubled heart and, a generation later, another rape was there as a challenge to be faced by her daughter. Unable to meet that challenge, Brenda's chance at happiness was lost, and so too, was her lover's life.

Again and again, during that interview period with Brenda, I felt I was coming face to face with a brick wall. She had, over time, constructed a defensive structure that kept her in a preserved state of denial. Holding painful insight at arm's length, Brenda was unable, or unwilling, to take responsibility for what she had done to Linda.

She had indeed, been treated harshly by the UK legal and penal systems and she was, understandably, bitter about that, but the fact remains that on that day in 1952, she did plunge a knife into her lover's chest.

Brenda's experience as a victim and a perpetrator, and her mother's before her, illustrate to me how a person's perception of themselves as a victim can impinge upon their sense of adult responsibility and thereby allow them to excuse and overlook their violent actions. It is as if they are convinced that nothing that they do can ever be as bad as what was done to them.

Chapter 25

Later, she would remember.

I woke one morning with those four words in my head. My usual method when planning to write something is to have a few lines already created before writing anything down, a line or two or an idea that slowly develops. I can be driving or walking or shopping or doing the washing and a flow of words will accompany me. I can revise an opening line until I have the words just so and can trust that other words will fall into place once I start writing in earnest.

Later, she would remember.

Treating those four words as a gift, I wrote them down on a piece of paper and carried them around with me for days. I deliberately try to be disciplined about my thinking but that doesn't mean I focus directly on what I'm planning to write, my aim is to come at the challenge from a sideways or indirect angle. For example, I used those words like a mantra, murmuring them over and over again, tasting them on my lips, waiting for something fresh to spring out at me from something I read or heard on the radio or a scrap of conversation, a throwaway comment, anything.

Later, she would remember.

I had decided to draw on what I knew about writing fiction to write about the rape my younger brother had committed against a woman he didn't know, based on what my sister and I knew about the case.

Despite persistent efforts over a three-year period, I have not been able to source any useful documents about his arrest, his trial, or his imprisonment for this crime, a period of approximately seven years. Such documents cannot be accessed for public scrutiny unless the perpetrator dies or a minimum period of seventy years has passed since the relevant dates.

Later, she would remember.

Surfacing in me during this period, while I was seeking inspiration, was a nameless grief that somehow, provided an impetus for me to stay with this process. I realised I didn't want to give this woman a name. I hoped by doing this, I could convey that this woman might have been *any* woman, from *any* kind of background. For that reason I would only refer to her as *she* or *her*.

Walking along the beach one winter's day, I noticed something different about the horizon. It was no longer straight, but a series of bumpy curves. The woman in my story was like that, she was coming towards me but her shape was out of focus, wobbly-like, or was she trembling?

I stopped walking and stared, allowing my eyes to play tricks on me, and imagined this woman walking towards me. Then a question popped into my head. What if she was looking, not at me, but at herself in a mirror?

Later, she would remember how she'd stopped to look at herself in the hall mirror that morning.

*

Later, she would remember how she'd stopped to look at herself in the hall mirror that

morning. Blast, her lipstick was smudged. Putting down her bag and car keys she'd hurried into the bathroom, pulled a few sheets of toilet paper off the roll and dabbed at her upper lip.

If only she hadn't caught sight of her reflection that day, if only she'd taken longer in the bathroom – a few minutes either way would have made all the difference.

It was 8.30am. She had just crossed the Alford's Point Bridge, and was heading towards Bankstown when she heard a car behind hooting at her. The driver was signalling, pointing left. She could see the blue flashing light. Puzzled, she slowed down but not before she'd checked the speedo. What did he want? The dark blue car overtook hers and pulled onto the shoulder, leaving little room for her to pull in behind.

She sat there waiting. Once out of his car, the policeman acted as though he had all the time in the world. He wasn't in uniform so she realised he must be a detective. He lifted the blue light away from the roof and then tossed it into his car through the front window. When he straightened up, it was like he'd only just become aware of her. She watched him walk towards her. Was there something wrong with her car?

He came alongside her and ordered her to get out. She didn't move but instead asked what was the matter. Was there an accident up ahead? He repeated his request. Still she hesitated. Her driving licence was in her bag, she thought he'd want to see that. She was fumbling around for it when he opened the car door. Again, he ordered her to get out.

She did as she was told. He looked at her closely. Where had she come from that

morning? She explained she had just driven from Sutherland and was on her way to work. In a curt tone, he told her she fitted the description of a woman they wanted to question. He insisted she would have to accompany him to the police station.

“About what? What did this woman do?”

“You’ll find out soon enough Miss.”

It was difficult not to be annoyed. Whoever they were after it wasn’t her. He stepped around her, leaned inside the open window, turned off the motor and removed her keys. He told her to collect her bag and anything else she might need.

She didn’t like the idea of leaving her car where it was and was about to protest but the impatient look on his face stopped her, she decided to hold her complaint until she got to the police station.

Later, she would remember.

She checked to make sure there was nothing left in the car to tempt a would-be car thief, then reached over to the passenger seat and picked up her bag and her jacket. She couldn’t stop herself from slamming the door.

The detective made a show of checking that the car was correctly parked and used her key to lock it. She held out her hand.

“Will you bring me back here?”

He handed over her keys.

“Of course.”

The next exit was but a short distance away. He drove up the ramp, turned right at the first set of lights, went through the next set then turned right again at the third set,

onto Henry Lawson Drive. She noticed how he kept looking in the rear vision mirror as the car sped down the hill. They passed a sign that read Salt Pan Creek. She hadn't been up this road before. It was then that she thought to ask him what police station they were going to. He didn't answer straight away then mumbled something that she couldn't hear. She was feeling annoyed now because he was behaving as though he couldn't be bothered with her.

Minutes later he stopped the car. She looked around. There was no sign of a police station, not even a building, they seemed to be in a picnic area and it was deserted. He got out of the car, went round the back then came up behind her and opened the back door on her side.

Before she knew what was happening, he had reached over and put a rope around her throat, tying the ends in a knot at the back of her seat. She couldn't move without injuring herself. He used another, shorter length of rope to bind her hands, telling her that if she remained still, he'd free her from the noose soon enough but only if she was good.

Taking a pair of scissors and some tape from the glove box, he cut a length of silvery-coloured tape. It was sticky-backed and so wide that when he stuck it across her mouth, her nose was partly covered. Alarmed, she began to struggle which only made the rope pull tight across her throat. She could not breathe and began to feel as though her eyes might pop out of their sockets at any moment.

He must have noticed what was happening because he quickly tugged at the tape. The burning sensation around her mouth brought tears to her eyes. She gasped and then gulped in mouthfuls of air. He laughed as though she'd said something funny

and applied the tape again, this time taking more care how he positioned it.

Undoing the rope around her neck, he bundled her out of the car. She would have fallen if he hadn't grabbed her. He positioned her upright against the bonnet and then threaded rope in the gap between her body and her bound hands, gathering up the slack and holding it tightly in his grasp. She immediately understood his intention was to drag her along like an animal.

Yanking on the rope and seeing that she moved easily enough, he led the way onto a scrappy piece of ground. She could see they were heading for a distant corner along to the right, protected from view by bushes and a few trees. She had been frightened before but now she began to shake uncontrollably.

Letting out more of the of the rope's length, he held the two ends in one hand and moved away from her, walking under a low lying bush. He was out of sight for a brief second or two then she saw him drag a plastic box towards her. It was about the same size as a milk crate. Despite the warmth of the day she suddenly felt chilled to the bone. It was then that she thought she must be going to die.

He lifted a rug from on top of the box and spread it as best he could with his free hand. She balked, afraid to move at all. He put his face close to her ear. "Lie down or I'll throw you down myself."

Stiffly, like a twitching robot, she inched forward. She tried to sit but with her hands held so firmly, she landed awkwardly, on her back. Instinctively, turning onto her side she curled herself into a ball and didn't see him move to lie on top of her, forcing her legs down and rolling her onto her back.

For a moment she didn't know what had happened. His weight shifted, he was getting up. Then he must have moved behind her and pulled on the rope. Her arms were dragged upwards, away from her body, over her head. He eased out the rope a little then fastened it to a branch a short distance away.

The man raped her repeatedly during the next eight hours and though she fainted at least five times, he seemed determined to pretend she was enjoying every minute of his remorseless savagery.

She had no idea what time it was when he began helping her to put on her under clothes and then her skirt and blouse. The sun was still shining but she guessed it must be sometime in the late afternoon. She thought she'd heard voices when she came to and reasoned that he must have heard them too, that's why he wanted to get her away from there. Using the rope again, he dragged her back to his car.

What stopped you from screaming at that point?

This was the one question she was asked many times during the next few days. How could she explain to anyone how she'd felt. It was like her life was reduced to nothing more than a tiny glimmer of awareness. She fully expected he would kill her, she would tell them, hoping to make someone understand her thinking during that most dreadful ordeal, but ... but ... if there was even the smallest chance she could stay alive, she had to try not to upset him.

Back in the car, he was in no hurry. Perhaps he liked knowing there were others close by who had no notion of what he was doing. He pushed her down onto the floor, dragged her head across the gearstick and shoved his penis into her mouth.

“Suck this and you better do it well or you and I are going to be here all night, do you hear me?”

Later, she would remember how the car had swerved sharply when he stamped down hard on the brakes. He’d reached an arm past her so he could open the door on her side, then slowed down and pushed her out onto the road. Her hands were still bound but somehow, she’d managed to stay upright but had collapsed a few feet away from the road.

A woman in a small green van, later interviewed by police, told how she had seen a young woman, her hands tied in front of her, staggering in a dazed fashion along the highway.

“I’ve got a grand-daughter the same age,” the woman later explained to the police officer, shaking her head a few times in an attempt to rid herself of the memory of that poor girl in such a state.

Shock had set in by the time the small green van arrived at Bankstown hospital. She couldn’t bear for them to touch her and couldn’t stop screaming either. The nurses were kind but kept insisting there were standard operating procedures for such crimes and physical evidence was crucial. Then the police came. Her ordeal continued for several more hours.

Three days later two detectives visited her at home.

“Things could have been worse, you know, much worse, in fact I’d say you are one of the lucky ones.”

Stunned, she waited for him to continue.

“Yes,” the detective went on, counting off each point off, finger by finger, “1, your car has been found, exactly where you said it was, 2, there is plenty of forensic evidence and 3, we already have a lead on the perpetrator.”

“How does that make me lucky?”

The detective sought to reassure her.

“Well, some of these cases are hard to prove Love, but we’ll get this bastard, and don’t you worry, you’ll get your day in court.”

He’d been suspected of rape at least once before, her attacker, and had got off due to a lack of evidence, but his details had been kept on file. His pattern was familiar to the detectives. Same area, same pre-planned arrangement of items at the scene of the crime, same habit of using rope, but he had not posed as a member of the police force before. That probably meant he’d been feeling cocky, someone told her.

Working from a list of possible offenders the police had arrived at his house before dawn one morning, dragged him out of bed, and frog-marched him barefoot to his car. When he’d opened the boot they saw the rope and some sticky-backed tape, silvery in colour and ten centimetres wide.

Later, she would remember, how he had stared at her from the court dock, grinning that ghastly grin, as though he was remembering every little physical detail about her and could bend her to his will any time he wanted. Standing in the witness box, it was anger not fear that made her feel shaky this time, and she kept reminding herself that he was just a man, this Eddie Dawson, just a man, and she would fight to keep him from haunting her dreams or her waking hours.

She promised herself that one day soon she'd wake up and *not* see him bending over her, his face close to hers, his hands mauling her body. One day soon.

Chapter Twenty Six

A Piece of string

September, 1949.

My father knew a man who knew a man who had a fibro cottage at Berowra Waters. We were allowed to stay rent free, for two whole weeks, in this house that was so close to the water all you had to do was walk down the front veranda steps, then down the steeply sloping ramp and onto the pontoon, and there was the river, known as Berowra creek, laid out before you.

The colour of that water was a translucent green and I half expected to find a miniature city nestling in the sand below.

There was no road, not even a track; the only way in and out was by boat. We had the use of a large, wooden, rowboat that came with the cottage. My father shouted instructions at us every time we had to get in or out of the damned thing so instead of it becoming easier, each occasion was fraught with tension.

A short rowing distance from the cottage was the ferry that transported people and their vehicles back and forth across the creek. I'd slipped and fallen on the ramp the day we arrived, breaking my fall against the cable, just as it was being pulled tight by the approaching ferry. The bruise faded after a few days but the welt remained, reduced in size over time to a small scar.

The Aboriginal meaning for the word Berowra is place of winds and oh, how windy it was. I would lie in bed at night and try to imagine how it must feel to be one of those trees out there, caught in the eye of a hurricane. The sound was like a roar, loud and threatening. I didn't think I could sleep. What if it was a dire warning of chaos to come? I pulled the blankets tight around me, fearing the worst and woke each morning, glad to have survived another night.

To ease my fears I made up a story about a big mother wind who raged at night and in the daylight hours allowed her wilful daughter to play while she got some much needed rest. The sun shone and the wind did indeed act like a spoilt child – when she was good, she was very, very good, and when she was bad, she threw a tantrum.

Out on the water we sat in that boat, day after day, while my father and mother fished. We had cushions to sit on and the curve of the boat's shape to lean against and we sat, two on either side, facing each other like stunned mullet. The wind rocked the boat gently on the best of days but made us feel chilled to the bone when the blustering became fierce.

We weren't allowed to talk, it might have disturbed the fish, and we didn't dare glance in each other's direction, in case that brought on a fit of the giggles. I sat huddled in a blanket most of the time telling myself stories about a girl about my own age who went on a holiday and ... *who stripped off every morning in a cold, dank place, risking icy conditions and the danger of catching flu', just so she could be considered clean.*

Keeping clean was quite a business. There was no bathroom so we washed ourselves in a lean-to shed my mother referred to as the outhouse. This small draughty room

was also used as a laundry. The shower itself was an ingenious contraption - a canvas bag similar in shape to a bucket but not as big, with a strip handle stitched on top and an on/off twisting rose underneath. The bag was filled with hot water from the kettle then topped up with cold from the tap. A big, bent nail in the outhouse ceiling served as a hook to hold the shower in place. It was important always to remember how quickly the bag emptied. Exactly how much water was there in that canvas bag? How long is a piece of string? It was a tricky manoeuvre getting all the soap off our bodies before the water ran out. We soon learned to lather ourselves first with a cupful of water from the laundry sink before turning the rose on.

I could never quite understand how the water cooled down so quickly. Some days I was a bit slow getting the stool positioned so I could stand on it to operate the shower, and the shock of tepid water was enough to make me let out a protesting yell.

It wasn't much of a holiday for we three older kids. Under the watchful eye of our parents, it seemed there was nothing we could do that was right. If Albert caught a fish or two, even little ones, he'd be in a good mood for a while but, if he'd wasted his bait and caught nothing at all, then we had to be very careful indeed.

One afternoon during the first week we arrived back at the pontoon as the sun was beginning to set. Tim jumped out and hitched the mooring rope exactly as he'd been instructed. I was close behind and held out my hand for him to grab. Something went wrong and I fell sideways into the water. I remember I had a wheatmeal biscuit in my other hand. The biscuit drifted away from me. I didn't feel anything at that moment.

Many times since I've thought that if my number had really been up that day and I'd drowned, it wouldn't have been a bad death, what I remember most about it is that I

was quite calm.

I guess my father must have leaned over and grabbed for the first thing he could get hold of - my hair, shoulder-length and loose. He pulled hard and up I came, yelling with pain. Dragging me onto the pontoon he started hitting me and I went on screaming till I think he felt forced to let go. Other people were on the water in boats that day.

No one moved. It was a freeze-framed moment. I saw my mother still sitting in the boat, stiff like a statue. In front of her Lizzie stood with her hand on Eddie's shoulder, holding him close to her body. Tim's face was pale and I noticed he was biting his bottom lip.

I had dropped like a sodden wet sack to the bottom edge of the ramp, unable for the moment to move. Then, my father turned and started swinging punches at Tim. What had happened was an accident, the sort of thing that could have happened to anybody. But my father wasn't like other people - he always had to have someone to blame. Tim was getting into trouble now, because of me.

That evening, when we sat down to tea, I was so mad I felt I could have thrown off sparks. Tim was sitting opposite me. He couldn't open his left eye and his cheek was covered in a large swollen bruise. I wasn't hurt but I could not stop shivering. If only hate could have warmed me, I would have been red hot.

Early next morning Tim slipped away. He tried to bash his way through the bush but without ropes to climb the sheer rock face behind us, he could never have made it to the road. That's how we kids learned there was no way out along this side of the creek. Fortunately, Tim hadn't been away all that long and Lizzie and I covered for

him. We pretended we were playing a game and Tim had scouted ahead of us to see if there was anywhere we could play.

One morning during the following week I woke early. I could hear the currawongs cackling away, such a happy sound, and I could also hear my father laughing. His laughter had a familiar sneering quality that made me wary. I sat up in bed. He must be in the kitchen, I decided, probably looking out towards the pontoon area.

Above my couch on the closed-in veranda was a row of louvers. I got to my knees and looked out. There was Tim in the boat, rowing hard, his lips set in a tight line. Even from that distance I could see he was sweating. The details about his clothing are as clear to me now as they were then – he was wearing a grey sleeveless pullover with a cable design down the front. Beneath that he wore a checked flannelette shirt. His trousers were made of grey serge. I knew if he stood up the bottom of those trousers would come just below his knee. But this morning they'd been hoiked up by his efforts, exposing his knees to the cold. As usual, those old navy socks he loved so much, were bunched around his ankles like a series of woollen bracelets. He looked tired and defeated and he was going nowhere.

EXEGESIS

INTRODUCTION

How do we (writers) write about violence?

My grandmother used to tell me stories. Many of them were intentionally moral and I did not understand them very well, but there is one that made a deep impression on me. It was about a child who was greatly bothered by a large tapeworm.

The child's mother had taken her to see a healer. Taking the child by the hand, the healer led her to the kitchen table and told her to sit on a chair at one end. The mother was asked to call back later but begged to be able to stay.

The healer relented but sternly instructed the mother not to say a single word or respond in any visible way no matter what she felt or saw. The mother agreed. The healer then placed a bowl of hot food in front of the child, bidding her to kneel over it and open her mouth.

Soon the head of a tapeworm could clearly be seen emerging from between the child's lips, supposedly drawn forth by the tantalising smell of the food. Shocked, the mother forgot her instructions and screamed loudly. The tapeworm recoiled, killing the child, probably by choking her.

It is a grim tale but I was never frightened by it. I have worked with that story knowing that I am the child, the mother and the healer of my own hurt. As the child, I wanted to

bring forth this narrative. The mother represents that reasoning part of me that wants what is best but cannot always deal with the distress that is triggered when those stories and all that is attached to them, begin to emerge.

The woman healer supports my capacity to experience and transform the pain of the past. She is the driving force that motivates me to prod memory, to coax forth more than I might want to, knowing how important the process is.

The hot food might be therapy for many women and therapy here is simply a term to describe the form each of us might choose to heal ourselves.

My therapy is writing – my talking cure.

Knowing this, my first question for this exegesis came easily:

Is there a consciousness-raising aspect or therapeutic value in the narrative?

My grandmother's gift, so rich in meaning, helped me to deal with the emotional process of writing, but finding the confidence to match the intellectual rigour that was required to satisfy examiners was something else.

When, in September 2006, I began shaping notes to form these exegesis chapters, I had to work with dogged persistence, devoid of any sparks of inspiration, trusting that the investment of time, thought and commitment would achieve results. But I was never confident.

I have been challenged on many fronts to complete this degree. I can point to a number of struggles that took place in the real world, yet each one was like a mirror reflecting an internal struggle. Externally, internally, they were *all* somehow linked to doubt.

Externally, it was doubt about my perceptions. Had I misunderstood, or been overly sensitive, at what point should I take action? The internal dialogue too, centred around gnawing concerns about my ability. Was I up to the task? In particular, could I write an exegesis that would stand up to scrutiny?

My second question was borne out of this dilemma:

Can I detect strength of purpose in the narrating voice?

In the final months of revising and rethinking, a change occurred. At first it was a tentative observation but as I sought to create a shaped structure from what had seemed to me to be a flat surface, my focus became sharper. More importantly, I grasped hold of an unexpected insight. I was no longer writing this exegesis to pass some sort of test, I was simply working, finally, to understand what I really thought about the overall question, *how do we (writers) write about violence?*

I have paired books in each chapter that may, from the point of view of a lifelong scholar, seem unlikely companions. I have chosen not only texts that include high literary merit but other books that could be categorised as *life-writing*.

It has been a conscious choice, a creative risk perhaps, to include less writerly books. My priority has been to look at class relationships, as part of my work, and to explore how they are represented in different expressions of writing and different class readerships. My reading patterns indicate not only where I am in my thinking and tastes but also the tussle between the here and now and where I might have been had my life not been influenced first by breakdown, then feminism, and then a developing interest that became a passion, to write. I read widely, liberally but am drawn again and again to the commonalities of life experience. I suspect I am still looking for ways to interpret my family and the background we sprang from.

Thinking about these issues inevitably gave me my third question:

Could the narrative be described as literature?

Another integral part of this exegesis has been to look at the intersection between my own history and to understand more about how that informs my motivation as a writer – how craft and experience speak to each other.

What about motivation? Is it possible to understand why the writer wrote this book?

A time-line has been important. I wanted to note how other writers structured their narratives around time. This became my fourth question:

How does the writer work with time?

I reversed the order of these two questions, placing time as number four and motivation as question five. There was no special reason for this decision.

My sixth question appears as the last question in chapters 1 – 5 and is an obvious question about comparison between the works being discussed and my own writings:

How does the writer's narrative compare with my own work? I am not limiting any comparison to my DCA project but also including autobiographical work I have written previously.

My last question, used only in chapters six and seven, has to do with the distanced narrator's point of view. The following sentence is quoted here exactly as it appears in chapter six:

A reader might easily assume that the distanced narrator works with a more objective point of view but is that really so?

I have approached the work of this exegesis as though writing for a broad audience and with an emphasis on being the writer I am and not aiming for a style or a stance that did not feel comfortable or right. I still find it hard to believe that I have written an exegesis that is well in excess of 40,000 words.

Chapter One

The Thread of Memory

(The Victim's point of view)

In the nineteenth-century three men - Pierre Janet, Sigmund Freud and his collaborator, Joseph Breuer - were working independently, investigating possible causes of hysteria in women. A major part of their investigation involved talking at length with their hysteria-diagnosed, female patients. Previously, the French neurologist, Jean-Martin Charcot had documented characteristic symptoms of hysteria that resembled neurological damage: symptoms he defined as motor paralyses, sensory loss, convulsions and amnesia but he showed no interest in the inner lives of these female patients. Joseph Breuer, referring to one of his patients as Anna O, talked about *following back the thread of memory*. Anna O herself described her dialogue with Breuer as the *talking cure*.

These men arrived at similar understandings, defining hysteria as a condition caused by psychological trauma.

Judith Herman M.D. discusses this work on hysteria in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, (1992), noting that in the 1890s each man stepped back and away from his findings, all unable to contemplate what they might have to confront within themselves if they continued this work. She writes: “ ... there was no awareness that violence is a routine part of women's sexual and domestic lives.” (Herman 10-13)

Herman makes the point that in the era of the Vietnam War, American veterans formed a group known as *Vietnam Veterans Against The War*. Many of these men served in Vietnam and had medals to prove it, and were so disillusioned they returned those medals. In public meetings they spoke about war crimes committed by Americans in Vietnam, including regrettable acts they had done themselves.

The veterans organised *rap groups*, with a dual purpose; to enable returning soldiers experiencing psychological trauma to gain solace, and also to raise awareness about the effects of war.

(Herman 26/27).

Carrying this strand further, Herman writes that it was no accident then, that in the resurgent American feminist movement, the initial method of the movement was called *consciousness-raising*.

Consciousness-raising took place in groups that shared many characteristics of the veterans' rap groups and of psychotherapy: they had the same intimacy, the same confidentiality, and the same imperative of truth-telling. The creation of a privileged space made it possible for women to overcome the barriers of denial, secrecy and shame that prevented them from naming their injuries.

(Herman 29)

It is within this context of privileged space, truth-telling and consciousness-raising that I write this chapter. I am looking at point of view of a *victim narrator* in non-fiction prose.

Lucky

American writer, Alice Sebold, was eighteen years old the night she was accosted by a man with a knife. Although she tells her story as a first person account, her focus is wider than a simple telling of her own experience. She has empathy and a kind of kinship with other victims. She gives her readers glimpses of an ongoing dialogue in her head, a dialogue that keeps her in touch with the world around her.

When Sebold went to the police after her horrific rape, she was told that another girl had been attacked in the same place - and killed. A policeman commented that she had been lucky. Lucky? Sebold didn't think so but by giving her book that one word title, she was obviously aiming for ironic comment.

Concluding her account of the rape and the aftermath of hospital treatment and police questioning, she writes: "My life was over; my life had just begun."
(Sebold 41)

Sebold's memoir can be described in two ways – as a book with a strong feminist message, and as an example of writing that has therapeutic value, for both writer and reader, in dealing with the issues of violence and rape.

Alice Sebold has, I think, achieved that combination of *talking cure* and 'literature'. The writing is both accessible and compelling and reads more like a novel than a personal account of trauma and triumph. She has a novelist's gifts, as she later demonstrates in her best-selling book, *The Lovely Bones*. Her characters are vividly drawn and she encompasses a broad range of issues. Her imagery and haunting prose stayed with me long after I'd finished the book.

It was said of Miss Marple, Agatha Christie's elderly woman character, who proved to be such an able amateur detective, that by knowing the people in the village where she lived, she could use that understanding of human nature to great advantage.

Similarly, it is the suburbs of America that provide the meat and drink of Sebald's understanding about people, her empathy and compassion, that informs her writing.

Perhaps her observations began when she was a child. In a website article for bookreporter.com, Sebald related a dramatic scene from an earlier time, that literally unfolded on her parents' front lawn.

My family was watching television when a couple - the mother and father to a woman who lived one street over with her family - were hit by a car and landed on our front lawn. The man who hit them, leapt out of his car and shouted to two boys playing basketball in the driveway of the house across from ours. He yelled: "These people need an ambulance." He then proceeded to jump back in his car and drive three houses down, where he calmly parked in his own driveway and went inside his house. The daughter of the couple who had been hit had been walking behind her parents and, having lapped them once, now came up upon the scene. We heard the screaming and ran out. Both of her parents were killed. One died on our lawn, the other died later, in a hospital. And the man who struck them? He was one of our neighbors and, by profession, a paramedic.

As I grew up and left home, living in Manhattan and just outside L.A., I began to realize more and more that within the suburban world of my upbringing there were as many strange stories as there were in the more romanticized parts of the world.

(Sebold, screen 1- <http://www.bookreporter.com/library/>)

There are many scenes in *Lucky* that illustrate Sebold's deep understanding of human nature but here I will mention two. In the first, Alice leaves university with her mother and returns home to recover from her ordeal. Mr Sebold has been waiting for them to arrive. How difficult it must have been for this father, (other fathers too) who may have felt that because he was a man, and a man had done this dreadful thing to his daughter, it would not be appropriate for him to go to the university to bring her home. He tells Alice that he has downed five shots of whisky while waiting but has never felt more sober in his life. She lies down on the couch and her father asks if she would like something to eat. Readers might well be shocked by her reply: "That would be nice," I said, "considering the only thing I've had in my mouth in the last twenty-four hours is a cracker and a cock." (Sebold 59)

This ribald comment comes from a woman who was a virgin at the time of the rape. But this victim has a two-fold purpose. Her parents are already familiar with her irreverent, oddball brand of humour and she wants to convey to them that she is still the same person they know and love and expects to be treated as *their* Alice. Sebold is also defying any notion of prescribed behaviour for herself as a rape victim:

"Jesus, Alice," my father responded. He was waiting there on the precipice for my directions. "I'm still me, Dad," I said. (Sebold 59)

The second example follows almost immediately. Mrs Sebold has food on the table for what she calls a 'seek and ye shall find' meal. Mary, Alice's younger sister, doesn't come when called. She has locked herself in the bathroom. It is Alice who

pleads with her to come out. Alice understands that Mary is having trouble coping, not knowing how to relate to a sister who has been raped. Finally, reluctantly, Mary unlocks the door.

Returning to the table Alice tells her parents that Mary will be down soon:

"Well, Alice," my father said, "if it had to happen to one of you, I'm glad it was you and not your sister. "Christ, Bud," my mother said.

"I only meant that of the two of them ..."

"I know what you meant, Dad," I said, and touched my hand to his forearm.

"See, Jane," he said.

(Sebold 66)

The dialogue is economic in style and deceptively simple. The meaning is clear, dreadful things can happen and the way each family member responds is a reflection of them, their personalities and traits, rather than what has happened.

Months later, Sebold is talking to her friend Tom. This is his second visit. They sit on the porch. He speaks softly about how his mother responded to hearing Alice's devastating news. The following day she had called Tom and his sister into the kitchen, explaining that she had something to tell them. Standing at the sink, her back to her children, she'd told them about something that had happened to her when she was eighteen years old. She'd been at the train station, on the way to visit her brother. She had been wearing her new coat. When two men grabbed her, she had slipped out of the coat and started running but they got her anyway.

Tears roll down Tom's face as he speaks. Alice remembers how her rapist had grabbed her long hair "I don't know what to do or say," Tom said. "You can't do anything," I said to him.

(Sebold 81)

Sebold wishes she could erase her last words to Tom. She wishes she'd told him that he *was* doing something - he was listening. And then she writes: "I wondered how his mother had gone on to have a husband and a family and never tell anyone."

(Sebold 81)

Here, Sebold exposes the secrecy that is often part of the trauma for rape victims.

Tom's mother is one woman among so many, who are never able, for whatever reason, to confront their attackers, are never able or willing to report what has happened, but live silently with the consequences, and struggle the best way they can to get on with their lives.

Unlike the outcome for many rape victims assaulted by unknown perpetrators, Alice Sebold was directly involved with bringing the man who had raped her to trial. Soon after she returned to continue her studies at university, she spotted the rapist in a street not far from the campus. As a result she was able to bring about his arrest.

In this next extract, towards the end of the book, Sebold's room-mate, Lila, is raped. The attacker had got into the apartment through a back window. Lila was home on her own. The rapist had blindfolded her with the tie-belt from Sebold's dressing gown, and strapped her wrists with bungee cords and a cat leash he had found in the bedroom closet. Whilst raping Lila on Alice's bed, the attacker had asked about Alice, indicating he knew her name and some details about her.

When it was over and the man had fled, Lila screamed but no one came. She had to get herself out of the apartment she shared with Sebold and up a flight of stairs to bang on a neighbour's door. The young men were playing loud music, they took a while to come to the door. She had to ask them to untie her and call the police. To be seen by these men in such a state must have been just one in a series of humiliations meted out to Lila that awful night.

Sebold walked into this crime scene. Policemen who worked with her when she was *the victim* recognised her.

Lila remained against the wall. Two other policemen came forward. "Wow," one said. It's great to meet you. We don't get the opportunity to see many victims after a conviction. Do you feel good about your case?

I wanted to give these men a response. They deserved it. They usually saw only the side of a rape case that Lila, forgotten against the wall, represented: fresh or weary victims.

"Yes," I said, aware that what was happening was all wrong, stunned by my sudden celebrity. "You guys were great. I couldn't have asked for better. But I'm here for Lila."

They realized the strangeness of it too. But what wasn't strange?

(Sebold 227)

At this point in the narrative, Sebold risks being judged by Lila and by readers. Lila is hurt and suffering. She may be thinking that her attacker's motivation comes from a copycat mentality to do with Alice's rape and now, even her experience with the police is sidelined by Sebold's fame as the *known victim with a positive outcome*.

Sebold's account of this harrowing scene involves risk – how will she be perceived? It is to her credit that she does not spare herself. Sebold and Lila are in a friend's bedroom at another address much later that night, Lila worries about her safety.

“What about the windows?” she asked.

“Marc has bolts on them. He grew up in the city, remember?”

Did you ever ask Craig to fix that back window?” Her back was to me when she asked this.

I felt the question, and its attendant accusation, like a knife at the base of my spine. Craig was our landlord. I had gone upstairs to his apartment two weeks before to ask him to fix the lock on my window.

“Yes,” I said. “He never did.”

(Sebold 230)

Another writer might have provided themselves with more protection but Sebold has, quite consciously, given a soul-searing account of that night. Throughout the narrative she has, as a rape victim, as a rape survivor, as a writer, worked with her vulnerability in order to tell the story fairly, honestly, bravely.

In the last two paragraphs Sebold writes about sex – after a year long, self-imposed celibacy, she sleeps with a male friend. Later, in a phone call, they tell each other there was a special quality about that love-making. Her friend comments that it was like Alice had been a virgin, like she was having sex for the first time. Sebold writes: “In some sense I was, in another this was impossible. But it is later now, and I live in a world where the two truths coexist; where both hell and hope lie in the palm of my hand.” (Sebold 251)

Alice Sebold's second book is a novel, entitled *The Lovely Bones*. This story, too, is a first person account of rape but we soon learn that the narrator was killed following the rape and has written her story some time *after* her death.

I suspect Sebold could not get that other victim, that woman who had lain in that same tunnel, who had been raped and murdered, possibly by the same man, out of her mind. I think she had to write that second book, with almost the same urgency as she wrote the first.

Lucky is told as though revealing a series of cameos with strong chronological threads. Sebold deftly weaves in other related incidents or information where and when appropriate. These cameo passages may wander away from the main time-line but Sebold does not use them as a distraction but as another layer of insight or information, to broaden understanding, to move the story along. Structurally, to handle such passages well, an author needs to stay in charge of the narrative and this Sebold does well, her focus clear, her context always in mind.

In the first two chapters, forty-one pages of her story, she deals with her experience of rape and the immediate aftermath. Chapter three switches to her home town in Pennsylvania, her growing up years, how her parents met, her father's inability to show affection, his advancement as an academic, her mother's awkward fit with her role of wife and mother, the linked drinking problem that lasted almost a decade, the panic attacks that became a feature of her mother's life once she stopped drinking. These fourteen and a half pages illuminate the background the student Alice Sebold stepped from and, with the opening of the next chapter, she pulls the thread taut: "On the day of the rape, I lay across the backseat of the car and tried to sleep while my mother drove." (Sebold 58)

I would describe *Lucky* as a book that uses a short sentence structure but the one above is twenty-two words long. I think that Sebold is building a bridge with this sentence, moving readers from the relaxed, conversational style of the previous chapter back to the drama of the ongoing story following the rape.

Sebold's motivation for writing *Lucky* came directly from her own experience, but it was still some fifteen years after the rape and subsequent trial, that she began to write about it, choosing the first person, non-fictional voice rather than a fictional account of her experience.

Her first person voice is not strident or didactic. I imagine it as a whisper. Sebold leans forward, across the pages of her book, and takes her readers into her confidence, sharing with us her most intimate moments. But I do not see her as timid, rather I would describe Sebold as a bold writer, willing and able to paint herself onto the canvas of her narrative, to utilise every bit of her experience. A slogan much-used by feminists in the 1970s was the *personal is political*. I view Sebold's writing as a political act of defiance. Perhaps in her mind, she is confronting her attacker and those who would prefer not to know too much about the impact of sexual violence on women's lives.

I write about sexual violence, and include subject matter, such as my experience of masturbation, not simply to expose my vulnerability, but also, like Sebold, to move away from it. I have been encouraged and emboldened by her work to be more open about these personal details of my life.

In an interview with David Weich at Powell's Bookstore in Portland, USA, Sebold talked about seeing her book in a Barnes and Noble bookstore, shelved under

Addiction and Recovery: "... the way in which that book was filed in a number of bookstores is mind-numbingly, endlessly alienating to the very audience that wanted to read it." (Sebold, screen 12)

On another occasion in another bookstore, she tells Weich, she found her book in the Women's Studies section. Sebold compared these two category classifications of her book with another: *Drinking, a Love Story* by Caroline Knapp. Knapp's book was shelved in two different categories too, as Memoir but also as Literary Non-Fiction. "... why wasn't that under Recovery and Addiction? So even with the filing system of how people gain access to books I think it got marginalized." (Sebold, screen 12)

How books are classified in a bookshop or a library significantly effects whether potential readers can find them. Similarly, with promotion and subsequent reviews and interviews. Such books can indeed, be easily marginalised.

My book, *One of the Family*, was reviewed in a number of newspapers and magazines. One headline of that time read *Author Confronts Dark Past*. Although this headline is the most memorable, all of them had a similar tone. I'm not just referring to male reviewers, either.

Dale Spender reviewed *One of the Family* for a Sydney newspaper. In that review she described my book as 'compelling and convincing'. Despite that glowing phrase she also wrote: "I certainly wouldn't have finished the book if it hadn't been for the fact that I was reviewing it." (Spender, Sydney Morning Herald, 14/4/1990)

What Spender objected to was what could be called a 'tough read'. Her stance begs the question of what kind of true-life stories are acceptable to a reading public.

Black writers documenting experiences of slavery and ill treatment and Holocaust survivors writing about their experience before, during and after WWII, have written first person accounts that could be described as grim. I doubt that any reviewer would make a statement such as Spender makes in the quote above, in relation to any of these narratives.

The writer who is a victim of sexual violence and writes from that first person point of view, is attempting to engage the consciousness of the reader. A reader's response, a reviewer's response, is likely then to be positioned along a spectrum of conscious awareness.

Alice Sebold's book *Lucky* tells an adult story of rape and recovery but also of going through the experience of court and facing the perpetrator. Her book relates to an episode in her life. The attack made on her in the tunnel that night, back when she was eighteen, came at her out of the blue. The perpetrator was a stranger, he had a huge impact on her life but was not an intrinsic part of it. This man is an outsider and Sebold does not attempt to know his circumstances or examine his point of view. Hers is, understandably, a single-minded, first person, victim's point of view.

By contrast, I write as an insider – born into a violent family and therefore a part of it. I wrestle constantly with insider/outsider point of view and write across a spectrum of many years, encompassing a broad range of strategies to tell not just one story but many stories.

I am inspired and encouraged by Sebold's work.

Shot

In April, 1968, the seventeen year old Gail Bell was working as a clerk during the day and attending a part-time course at a Technical College in Sydney after work. Classes for Chemistry were held on Tuesday nights. Another student would always give her a lift to Broadway afterwards but on this particular night that student didn't attend the class and, without a lift, Bell couldn't get to Central in time to catch her usual train to Toongabbie.

The Liverpool train was the next one along. She *could* catch that but it meant changing at Granville. She hopped on anyway, and at Granville made the switch with seconds to spare, catching an all stations train to Penrith.

Bell arrived at Toongabbie at 10.10 and remembers that it was a dry, moonless night. There was no sign of her father's car. They didn't have a telephone at home so she knew he'd have no way of knowing that she'd arrived ahead of the next scheduled train. It was only a ten minute walk so she set out for home.

Bell had taken her first step when she heard a car motor start up. Not daring to turn around, she pulled the weight of her tote bag off her shoulder and clutched it in front of her with both hands, telling herself all the while that if she walked fast she'd soon be protected by the light that shone onto the road from the fire station. What Gail Bell couldn't know was that by moving from a low-vision field to a lighted area, she was presenting herself as an easy target for a man with a gun.

The bullet caught her in the back. She staggered forward. Through the open slats of a venetian blind, a man could be seen inside the fire station. He was talking on the phone. Bell could see he was perched on the edge of a desk and swinging one leg.

She banged her fist on the locked door. When that didn't grab the man's attention she went back to the window and did a sort of pantomime, trying to show him that she needed help.

His response was to hold the phone a little away from his ear and look at her with raised eyebrows, as though asking a question. She beat her hand against the glass repeatedly until at last he put down the phone and cautiously opened the door.

There is a powerful suggestion of danger, even menace, in some of Bell's descriptions of that night. She could be writing the opening passages of a thriller:

With that first step onto the road I heard an ignition key turn and a car engine fire quietly into life. I could place the sound exactly, it was behind me and to the left, somewhere in the bank of darkness behind the hardware shop. A car must have been parked in the private access lane leading to the back entrance. In the pin-drop quietness the acoustics expanded and separated into components. I clearly heard the note of a gear box shifting from idle to first gear.

My ear tracked the sound, a sound like a dog waking up, shaking itself, giving a growl; then the slow roll of rubber on blue metal the stealthy crunching undergrowth of something prowling.

(Bell 10)

In the first thirty five pages of this book we learn a great deal. The story moves from the night in question to Bell's fifth day in hospital and concludes with her expressing her observations about the investigating officer in charge of her case. In hindsight, she feels that he probably regarded her as 'western suburbs trash walking alone at night asking for trouble.' (Bell 34).

alone at night asking for trouble.’ (Bell 34).

It is at times, the older, Gail Bell who guides us through the experience of her younger self:

The bullet that whacked into my back went almost through to the other side. The entry point was an inch to the left of my spine. All my life since that night (and maybe before, but I wasn’t paying attention then), if some part of me is injured it happens on the left side. If that speaks of a pattern I’m curious to know its meaning.

The body sensation was blunt. There was no perception of sharpness, nothing seemed to tear open.

(Bell 11)

At this point Bell rearranges her priorities, shifting her attention from the moment in order to impart information about bullets: “A low-velocity solid lead bullet tends to bore straight through whatever’s in its path, losing energy as it moves along the wound track.” (Bell 12)

This passage continues for twenty more lines and takes readers further and further away from the girl who has just been shot. I felt an urge to wrap a comforting arm around the younger Gail Bell, whilst encouraging the writer Bell to stick with that girl and let her tell *her* story as fully as possible and without distractions, time enough to deal with information later, separately.

She is at her desk, this woman, this writer, sorting through a weighty mix of painful and scattered memories, unresolved feelings and truncated outcomes, striving for a formula that she can trust will be relevant to both her readers and herself. Such a

struggle can produce a divided self, particularly if we have used our intellect to help us through painful life experiences. It can then become harder to stay with the impact of feelings and to explore how they are linked to memory.

These thirty five pages form Part 1. The rest of the book - Parts II, III and IV - could be described as a collection of articles, with autobiographical notes woven in here and there, seemingly like footnotes. The strong narrative thread is broken after page thirty-five and whilst that is not a problem, in and of itself, it does place greater emphasis on the need for a structure that will carry readers' interest beyond the personal and along a questing path as Bell seeks to discover more about what happened to her.

The investigating officer's attitude was an important point to explore. In the second last paragraph of Part 1, she makes this observation about him. "His prejudice coloured all of his dealings with me, and led, I believe, to many of the misunderstandings and obstacles to progress that were to follow." (Bell 35)

This is Bell, writing with an acute grasp of gender and class issues. The 1960s may have been an era of student activism, galvanised by opposition to the Vietnam War, but for many working class girls, living on the far flung fringes of all this political upheaval, the era is better remembered perhaps, for the mini skirts we wore, the bleached or maybe tomato-coloured, beehive hairdos we fashioned above our foreheads with back-combing and hairspray, as well as the heavy make up we plastered on faces each morning, almost as soon as we were out of bed.

And we were often judged harshly by people in authority. I remember a boss I had at the time, when I was working in a chemist shop, staring at my Max Factor, pan-caked face and my Mary Quant plastic raincoat, telling me one day as I arrived for work,

that I was a “disgrace to my sex.”

Bell describes the eye-liner she wore: “It was peel-off eye-liner: I don’t think it exists any more. At the end of the day you picked at a corner, lifted it and peeled it away like plastic paint, sometimes plucking out an eyelash or two if you weren’t careful.” (Bell 34)

Hamer, that investigating officer, kept insisting she must have known her assailant and made it clear when he continued with this line of questioning, time and time again, that he didn’t believe her answers. I wish Bell had expanded on this aspect. It might have been interesting too, if she had been able to seek out other instances where rape victims have been treated in a similar manner.

Overall though, this book illustrates the challenge a writer faces when seeking to construct a narrative, with a respectable word count, from a story that can only ever be partly told. There was no suspect and no one was ever held accountable for this crime. The doctors considered it too dangerous to remove the bullet so no ballistic tests could be done. The bullet was removed five years later but by then, it was too late.

So what does a writer do faced with this kind of challenge?

These are the difficulties I have noted in *Shot*.

1. There can be no resolution to the questions that must have haunted Bell since she was shot. Who did this to her and why?
2. Still, she feels the need, she just *has* to write this book, perhaps to claim back some control over events, to make sense of what happened to her.
3. How is she to write a narrative which can only end in unanswered questions?

Bell's options were limited. Perhaps she made the best choice she could. It is obvious that a lack of information or a reliable path to follow meant she could only travel down a series of dead ends. Her strategy required looking elsewhere, seeking interviews with other victims, police officers and the like, and exploring what she saw as relevant issues. She visited a rifle range where she handled and fired a gun. On another occasion, she went to a gun fair. She also interviewed Vietnam veterans who had been shot during that conflict. At the back of her mind though, there was always the hope that she might somehow, somewhere, track down her attacker.

In Part IV Bell writes about listening to the radio and hearing mention of a court case; a man was at that time on trial for a murder that happened six weeks before Bell was shot and ten miles further west from Toongabbie railway station.

The victim, also a young woman at the time, had been found not long after she was killed, lying face down in a shallow grave. The post mortem was unable to establish cause of death but did reveal that the woman had been dead for seven days. There was no evidence of a shooting and the accused man was released when the jury failed to reach a verdict.

Hoping to find a link between the two crimes and not yet knowing how the victim died, Bell followed the trail to the Supreme Court building in Sydney. Here she was able to read the court transcripts. She lists the possessions found near the victim, among them items of clothing: an address book, three unused sanitary napkins and a packet of Lemon Delicious Sponge Pudding Mix. Bell used to make that pudding herself. The memory was so strong she could almost taste it.

It is interesting to note the identification Bell makes with this murder victim, a kind of that-might-have-been-me response. Gail Bell and Alice Sebold are both survivors, and they are each aware that they could have finished up as a dead victim.

Following that research period at the Supreme Court, Bell meets up with Bob, one of the investigating officers on that murder case, explaining that she felt drawn to him by what she had read in the case notes, had grasped how sensitively, how respectfully, he had worked with the girl's family. She asks if he thinks there could be a connection between the two crimes. Could this man have been her attacker?

Bob thinks for a minute and then says no, this perpetrator preferred to stalk his victims with charm. He had, on at least six occasions, approached the girl, believing he could cast some sort of magnetic spell on her by his very presence. Bob points out that there would be no mileage for this man to wound his victim and then allow her to run away. Bob may have sensed her disappointment: "He seemed a little sad to be the bearer of bad news." (Bell 214)

I think Bell set out to work on a manuscript that would be both her talking cure *and* a form of consciousness-raising but was not able to rise above the challenges the project imposed. I find it difficult to presume I might have an answer for another writer but for the purpose of this exegesis, I will try.

With such disparate chapters so loosely linked to the intensity and relative brevity of Part 1, structure was always going to be a crucial factor. Perhaps what was needed was a series of dated diary entries or notes or something similar, interspersed between chapters and/or even serving as part of a chapter, that could speak about her process, as a victim, as a writer, documenting the frustration she obviously felt, compelled as

she was to follow trails that might have led somewhere but usually put her on a path to another person's story. These passages could have appeared in the book as fragments, typed in italics. Such a strategy could have held the time line in place, allowing the seemingly unrelated chapters to move and even dangle, like branches springing out from a strong tree trunk.

The time-line Bell works with is important only in the beginning, when she relates the unfolding events that night she was shot and the weeks afterwards. The other chapters are nearer to journalism than memoir, Bell prefers to ride above the waves of emotion and memory, unwilling to dive, though occasionally she does put her head under the foaming surf but never for very long.

Shot is about an episode in Bell's life and what it is like to think about that experience, as a writer, many years later, but Bell fails to make any meaningful connection between these two very separate aspects. There is a real problem in the flow of this narrative.

The challenge Bell faced is not unlike my own. The structure of my book has to be strong enough to hold the disparate aspects in place.

Bell wrote an earlier book *The Poison Principle*, combining personal family history, that of her grandfather and his knowledge of chemistry and poisons, with stories that stem from her own pharmaceutical knowledge, as well as fascinating details about poisons and poisoners through the ages. There is a quality evident in this first narrative that I could not find in the second book. Had she been able to maintain that same narrative focus the outcome would almost certainly have been a more satisfying read.

Like Alice Sebold, Bell was attacked by a stranger, but her assailant remains a lurking figure in the shadows, a malevolent presence. Consequently, she is denied the resolution that Sebold was able to find and that lack is reflected throughout her book. The impact of those first thirty five pages is dissipated with every subsequent chapter. Bell is forced to write a story without a satisfactory resolution and that remains, her dilemma, long after the book is finished.

Structure could be defined simply as the way we organise our chapters for best effect. Many writers today work with structure in creative ways, playing with time lines for example, to jump a story forwards or push it backwards to an earlier era. Maintaining a free-flowing flexibility is the key and anything is possible, but no matter how we organise our chapters, we have to remember that whatever the strategy *it has to work*. As writers we have to stand back from our creation and view it with a critical eye.

Bell approaches her subject matter like a fisherman trawling in uncharted waters, expecting a good haul but finding instead, an odd collection of sea-bed creatures, none of them big enough to eat.

She wanted to find out something about the gunman who shot her, to revisit people and places, to unpick the damage that had been done to her, but the mystery of who and why cannot now ever be solved and nothing she learned was big enough to satisfy, though the process itself was probably therapeutic.

She writes:

Put simply, I have coped by creating a safe, distanced narrative about what happened, one that avoids the emotional sinkholes, and a repertoire of tricks to fool my excitable brain into purposeful activity, a sort of mental picture-clearing

by adjusting the fine control knobs.

(Bell 247)

Bell is telling her readers that she has, consciously chosen to avoid emotional troughs 'the sinkholes' and has probably kept at bay anything that would have disturbed her hard won peace of mind. I think with these words Bell has aptly described her book.

She concludes her story with a haunting image: "A gunshot wound is like a branding mark; for a brief and painful time you are singled out, your flesh is sizzled, and then you return to the herd. (Bell 249)

Chapter Two

Kith and Kin

(Victim's Point of View – one place removed)

When a stone is thrown into a large pond, the resulting ripples spread outwards, creating ever-widening circles. Crime creates ripples too but there is no easy way of calculating how many circles, how many people, are hurt or adversely affected by one violent act.

The narrators in this chapter may not have thought of themselves as victims as they coped with their anger, pain and loss, but their motivation to write is a clear indication that they have been affected by what they knew or saw. I understand that the motivation to do *something* is a priority for these narrators.

just another little murder A Brother's Pursuit of Justice

Perhaps the motivation for Phil Cleary's book about came at 6.02 on the evening of the 14th February, 1989. It was then, he tells us on page 208, that he heard the foreman of the jury, in the Supreme Court, announce, after seven days of evidence and six hours of deliberation, that the jury had reached a unanimous decision – that the Crown had not proved beyond reasonable doubt that an ordinary man like Peter Raymond Keogh, would not have lost control and done what he did when he attacked Vicki Cleary outside the kindergarten where she worked on the morning of 26th August, 1987.

The charge was reduced from murder to manslaughter and Keogh served three years and eleven months for this crime. Cleary, the dead woman's brother, continues his account of the court scene and describes what happened on the day of sentencing. Vicki's family was chastised by the judge because Phil Cleary had screamed words of what was considered abuse, at the jury and at Keogh. As a result, the family was directed by a security officer, to sit in the Public Gallery. It is clear from Cleary's account that this added greatly to their bitterness and feelings of injustice.

(Cleary 209)

Cleary explains in the Acknowledgements page of his book that he did not write because he was driven by the irrationality of revenge, but as "a political and personal tale that attempts to right the wrongs of dispassionate justice."

The chronological thread of this narrative is not linear. Instead, Cleary has chosen a complex time line, moving back and forth, introducing characters out of their time sequence and then going back to pick up another thread for closer inspection or to add another layer of detail. There is much to commend this structural device, it is daring and original but also at times, chaotic. Chopping and changing, especially when it comes to the use of interview material, left me with the feeling that too many strands had been left hanging.

Cleary has included a time line of Keogh's life, from his birth in 1948 until his death in 2001. Along that time-line Keogh's violent crimes are listed, the first dating back to when he was twelve years old and charged with the sexual assault of an eight year old girl.

There is also a collection of photographs, showing Vicki Cleary as the lively woman she once was, and various photographs of the adult Keogh.

Drawing on the detail of these photographs it is easy to see that Keogh was small in stature, heavily bearded, and covered in a number of garish tattoos. On the front of each leg, stretching almost from groin to knee, a bonneted but sparsely clad Victorian lady, her size matching exactly her counterpart on the other leg, stares out at the world, her face an expressionless mask. You might expect to find similar images on saucy postcards from an earlier era. In one photo, Keogh has his bare arms crossed in front of him. Both elbows are adorned with large spider web tattoos that resemble the inside view of opened umbrellas.

Cleary does not mince words in his descriptions of Keogh's behavior and attitude, nor does he set out to be even-handed with this perpetrator. Words like *spoilt, callous, nasty, obsessive, pathetic, grubby, brazen, rat-running, belligerent, savage, merciless, arsehole, mollycoddled little prick, incorrigibly violent*, and other such terms pepper the narrative, as though Cleary were transforming his outrage into words, spraying Keogh with them, like bullets from a machine gun.

Noting all the information Cleary provides, I share his concern about how often Peter Keogh, brought to trial on a number of occasions for various violent crimes against women and girls, was given a remarkably light sentence.

Cleary struggles with two major themes in this book. Firstly, he strives to understand why so many women befriended and defended Peter Keogh. Secondly, he rails against

the courts, the legal system and various named individuals who he holds accountable for Keogh's reign of terror.

1. Dangerous Compassion

Pat Cole appeared as a key witness for Keogh when he was tried for Vicky Cleary's murder. She had been in a thirteen year relationship with an associate of Keogh's, Kevin Chamberlain, and had played a crucial role in protecting Keogh from police on the day of the murder. Instructed by Chamberlain, she had driven close to the murder scene that day, to pick up Keogh and drive him to his solicitor's office.

Cleary is at a loss to explain this woman's thinking or why, knowing what she did, she had lied in court to protect Keogh. In her evidence she said that Keogh was like a three year old zombie that day and kept repeating "What have I done? I love you Vicki?" (Cleary 144)

Was she, Cleary writes: "Another good woman conned or a stupid working class woman mesmerised by men of violence? I wasn't sure." (Cleary 54)

Keogh's sisters were staunchly loyal to their brother and did not question his violent behaviour. Dulcie Keogh told the court that her 'kind and decent brother' was abjectly remorseful about killing Vicki. Long before this, in 1974, the other sister Jenny had been there in the police station, ready to bail Keogh out when he was charged with raping a young girl. (Cleary 10)

2. Professional compassion of a dangerous kind.

Cleary learns from a series of interviews that some of the professional people who knew

Keogh believed he had a domineering mother. One male Parole Officer wrote a damning court report in relation to an early case involving Keogh, in which he clearly blamed Keogh's mother for her son's violence. (Cleary 85)

Cleary is unwilling to blame mothers for the actions of their sons and offers insight into Mrs Keogh's circumstances. He describes a mother of six children (with another four belonging to her husband from his earlier marriage), who in the space of twelve months lost both her husband and her mother. Two of her sons were getting into trouble with the law, and at the time the report was written, Keogh, her youngest son, was facing an attempted murder charge. To make matters worse, his victim was a policeman. (Cleary 85)

Cleary shifts his attention to the men in the family. Could Keogh's father and grandfather, both men who'd married women twenty years younger than themselves, have taught Keogh to look down on women, to see them as objects, he wonders. "Were they rakish, sexual predators who taught the Keogh boys that a woman was nothing but an object to be taken by force?" (Cleary 53)

A few lines embedded in a paragraph on the same page encapsulate Cleary's outrage towards men in the legal profession. He writes: "Eight days in the Supreme Court in 1989 had offered me a profound insight into how the boys from the other side of town colluded with the bourgeois state to protect violent, cruel, working-class men such as Peter Keogh." (Cleary 53)

George Hampel was the judge who presided at Keogh's murder trial. Cleary aims various criticisms at this judge and sums up his comments about what he felt was the nub of this trial. "Keogh would not take 'no' from a woman. Vicki said 'no'. This, not alcohol or depression, was why she died. Hatred of women, not addiction, was Keogh's cross. I believed that, as a wise man of the bench, George Hampel had a responsibility to comment on this social malaise." (Cleary 213)

Apart from the sympathy that Keogh was able to elicit from various quarters, he was, as Cleary points out, also successful in keeping his prior criminal history out of the courtroom, and on the face of it, it would appear that the legal system was complicit in this endeavour.

These two themes would appear to serve as goalposts and Cleary, keen footballer that he once was, is aiming to get between them to score his points. He knows the game, the state of play, and rarely does he take his eye away from those goalposts.

If Vicki Cleary had been murdered by a stranger her death might have been reported in the newspapers as an outrage. But, as Cleary tells us, domestic murder usually carries with it a stigma *for the victim*. In a society where a woman killed by a man in her life is seldom seen as innocent, it seemed to Cleary that it was his sister on trial rather than Peter Keogh. (Cleary 200)

Commenting on male bias in the courts, Cleary documents cases similar to that of Keogh's where the judge, the jury and others involved, have given the benefit of doubt to a male defendant, in the face of mounting evidence of rape, stalking, and/or other

violent acts towards his victim.

To take just one of these examples, Cleary cites the murder of Christine Crowe. She was killed in front of her two daughters on 19th November, 1987. Her husband shot her, rang the emergency services, then hurried off to the pub. In court, the jury were persuaded to believe the dead woman was somehow responsible for her own murder. The jury was instructed by the judge to treat Crowe as an ordinary man, advising that it was not inconceivable that an ordinary man might act in the way that Crowe had. (Cleary 35/36)

The court heard how Christine had been forced into prostitution and poverty to escape this man's violence but the defence team, used this evidence to their own advantage, to show that this victim was far from respectable. Cleary makes clear his views on this case. He writes: "Crowe killed his estranged wife because she refused to live by his barbaric rules." (Cleary 40)

Pushing his point further, Cleary explains that Crowe's solicitor who had been about to represent him in the Family Court, appeared as a witness for Crowe at the murder trial. The solicitor spoke about how he had met Crowe in a liquor store and listened as this distraught husband talked about his intention to shoot his wife and possibly disfigure her. Damning evidence though this might seem, the solicitor's testimony was offered by the defence as further proof of provocation. (Cleary 40)

What Cleary wants his readers to know is that defending lawyers especially, as well as judges, magistrates and the like, are intent on keeping the full impact of the perpetrator's actions and his previous history with one or other victims, out of the courtroom and that

this can prove to be a grave injustice to victims, their families, and the rest of us.

Keogh was released from prison in 1992, after serving time for Vicki Cleary's murder. He got friendly with the woman behind a hotel bar and asked her out. Her name was Julie McAllister and she became Keogh's next victim. (Cleary 26)

Cleary weaves a dialogue with Julie throughout the book, creating the impression of a number of conversations between them as the story continues:

Julie wasn't cut from the feminist cloth. Men were not the enemy, and glass ceilings weren't part of the vocabulary. Terms like verbal abuse and patriarchy don't roll off her tongue. A survivor who gave as much as she took, Julie McAllister had no idea of the danger Keogh posed to her and her two boys when she fell for his advances at the Junction Hotel.

(Cleary 26)

Cleary notes the similarities between Julie and his sister. Both strong-willed and vivacious, but he understands that Vicki had been more forgiving towards Keogh than Julie, even though Julie and Keogh's relationship lasted seven years.

On 24th June, 2001, Keogh committed suicide. It is interesting to contemplate to what extent Phil Cleary's campaign may have prompted Keogh's decision to take his own life. Cleary had written an exposé type article about Keogh that was about to be published in a Melbourne newspaper.. (It appeared in the *Sunday Age* 29th August, 2001).

Cleary later learned from a homicide detective that Keogh had known the article was due to appear soon, had even told his sister about it. It seemed to Cleary that he had been set up to take the blame for this violent man's death, at least as far as Keogh's sisters were concerned. (Cleary 2)

Cleary had had Keogh in his sights from the moment he heard about Vicki's death and would not have relented in his overwhelming desire to bring this man to justice. I think Cleary's experience points to the need for good, workable laws and a workable system to address crimes such as rape and domestic violence. In a sense, Cleary was acting as a vigilante, stalking this man with the written word, and it was a personal and bitter vendetta. I can picture Cleary at his desk writing that article, and muttering under his breath to Keogh *now pick on someone your own size* or words to that effect.

Cleary's book was published in 2002. Keogh's death the previous year made it possible for him to name names and write openly about his interviews with Keogh's other victims. But the timing of Keogh's suicide does suggest that he was out to deprive Cleary any feelings of satisfaction. He had that one last stunt to pull out of his bag of tricks - to end his life on his own terms.

The pages of Cleary's book almost crackle with his anger, his sense of injustice. The language he uses is *Australian larrikinism*, unrelenting and sometimes coarse, but his points are as sharp as his vocabulary. His keenly felt emotions carry the story along. There's never any doubt that he stands on the side of Keogh's victims (as well as all the other women damaged by brutal men) and against a legal system that all too often adds to that brutality.

His point of view is, of course, that of a brother but it would be a mistake to describe this point of view as limited. The narrative depicts a number of other perpetrators who fit a similar profile to Keogh and unpicks some of the myths about violent men and the women who are attracted to them. Cleary understands that though such men are vicious, they are able to present many sides to their personality.

I don't think any discerning reader would describe Cleary as a literary writer. He is more town crier than poet, more a champion for basic human rights thumping a drum to attract attention, than a diplomat seeking to find the right words or phrase to ensure effective communication. There are passages where I can almost see the spit flying from his lips and imagine him banging his fist to make a point. From start to finish it is Cleary's emotions that lead the way.

He wanted to pin Keogh to the page and in so doing, point out the injustice to victims that he sees being perpetuated, time and again, in the ways perpetrators are defended.

So strong, so apparent, is his motivation, I doubt that Cleary could have stopped himself from writing this book. Although he has written many articles about domestic violence, rape and murder, since his sister's death, I cannot imagine he would describe the process as his *talking cure*. He wants change but seems unable to find any kind of personal resolution. Cleary makes it evident that though time may blunt the edge of his pain, he can never hope to shake off feelings of responsibility. As the oldest sibling, the first to go to university and to bring the family name into public life (as an Independent Member of the Federal Parliament), he should have been able to protect his sister.

I would argue that this sense of responsibility, and guilt, powerful as it is, is the key to Cleary's awakened consciousness. He is not ever going to forget what Keogh did to his sister. He is not ever going to ignore the reality of violent men and what they are capable of doing to their victims. He is not going to forgive, forget, or ignore the role of the court and how the legal fraternity assists perpetrators to avoid responsibility and due punishment for their crimes.

Phil Cleary's anger and anguish is wrought on the page – in one paragraph he can be wrestling with his feelings about Peter Keogh and in the next, conducting a stand up, taunting oration, directed at a judge or a barrister. Passionate emotions galvanise Cleary and carry the momentum of his narrative.

Is this book a form of consciousness raising? I'd say yes, especially for male readers and more specifically, for men and women whose work is related in any way to law and order.

And Cleary is well equipped to write about violent men. He admits that he was, for one year of his life as a young man, attracted to a violent way of life but even back then he had, consciously or unconsciously, set limits on what he could or would do to act out that behavior:

I couldn't stick a glass in a bloke's face or line-up for a fuck, but the need to flex my muscles was very real. For me, football became the theatre of war... there were some bad men. Crammed into domestic chicken pens, many blokes looked for creative ways to escape the drudgery of factory labour and overcome the alienation.

(Cleary 57)

This is an honest admission but I think Cleary missed an opportunity here to tell us more about young, working-class men and their ways of thinking around violence, about himself as one such young man and *his* way of thinking. I can only wish that he had unpacked that aspect of his past more. We cannot know what exactly he meant when he wrote that he had ‘the need to flex my muscles’ but I suspect he is unwilling to dwell in that part of himself long enough to provide greater clarification. I kept wondering, as I read his book, how far removed was he now, from the young man he had once been?

His brother Paul took matters into his own hands on one occasion, at a time when Keogh was stalking Vicki, following the break-up of their relationship.

Paul and his friend Tony knocked on Keogh’s door and were greeted by a man who showed no sign of bravado and hurriedly explained that what had recently passed between him and Vicki was simply a misunderstanding. Paul walked away thinking that was that. Phil Cleary concludes this passage with the following comment: “In hindsight, we all know that counter-terror was the only effective weapon against him.” (Cleary 53)

This then, is the position Cleary has arrived at. He would have preferred to confront Keogh face to face down some back alley at a time before Vicki’s death, and let his fists do the talking. There must have been many nights when he agonised over what he could have done to save his sister if he’d acted in time, a helpless, hopeless kind of *what if* torment. All the more remarkable then, that he has written such an insightful book.

I have complex responses to Cleary's writing. Take the following sentences from his book:

Cast as a victim of the cultural poverty of the little house above the Merri creek and the violence of inner suburban working-class life, Keogh was an enticing prize to those who made a quid from his lumpen proletarian violence.

(Cleary 8)

If the mollycoddled little prick was in his full-moon phase, we needed to act.

(Cleary 59)

As he eyed his long-time drinking hole, he must have remembered his great sexual conquest of twenty years earlier in the autumn of 1980. When he was on a rampage, Keogh always remembered the conquests.

(Cleary 60)

Rarely a day would have gone by without him thinking about where I was and what I might have in store for him.

(Cleary 65)

'That'll teach the bitch,' he would have thought.

(Cleary 108)

Imagine fronting up to Remand to visit a bloke who stabbed a girl you regard as a friend. Could you do that? Seriously, you need to have the hide of a rhino to do that.

(Cleary 228)

In some instances, Cleary claims to know what Keogh was thinking but overall, these examples raise for me an important question. When is a writer making a valid point and when are they coercing a reader to share their point of view?

If asked to contrast my writing with Cleary's narrative style, I would point out that I aim for more light and shade in what I write. I keep in my mind the idea of a reader nestling down somewhere for a good read. I may take that reader to dark places, grim moments, and engage in intense argument, but I will keep my attention on the time span of those scenes, those paragraphs, and remind myself of the value of understatement. I do not want to harangue the reader nor interfere with their own process of forming an opinion. I want to engage their interest, inform their understanding, but not insist they think about the subject matter of my book, the issues raised, the same way I do.

Paradoxically though, I cannot escape one other question that hovered as I was reading Cleary's book. What place, what expression, is there for this brother's unrelenting fury? Is it not better that he expresses his rage on the page?

Cleary's confrontational stance may be uncomfortable but it is also compelling. I would not like his to be the only point of view expressed in print about domestic violence or violent men, but I cannot but admire his willingness to work with the issues. I may not always like his style but he does at times, make me feel I want to assist him in whatever new campaign he is planning. I have read many, many books about violent crime in the past three years whilst working on this material and I was already well read before that, and I know Phil Cleary's voice is authentic and unique.

Blood Price

John Newman, Labor MP for Cabramatta, had attended a party branch meeting the night of 5th September, 1994. When he arrived home and pulled into the driveway, the security lights came on. His fiancée, Lucy Wang, came out to greet him. She took his briefcase and put it near the front door then came back to help him put a tarpaulin over the car. It was a familiar ritual.

There was a noise. Lucy Wang described the sound as three bangs. She thought the noise might be children playing but no, there at the gate was a man wearing a hooded dark-grey jacket. His hands were outstretched but she didn't see a gun. John Newman turned around and fell to the ground. Minutes later, he was pronounced dead.

Lucy Wang was driven in a police car to the nearest police station and interviewed: "We need to know all about you," one of the officers said and the questions started all over again. "What is your full name? Where are you from? Why and when did you first meet John Newman? What did you do today? We need to know everything." (Wang 9-11)

The scene is set in this first chapter. John Newman, is dead, assassinated, the first such death in Australia. His fiancée is traumatised and subjected to police questioning. Is she a suspect? Could there be racism lurking behind those questions? Do they *really* suspect Lucy Wang? If so, is it because she is Asian?

But we don't get the ongoing story; instead, Wang adds another five words: "Well, it's quite a story ..." (Wang 11) to end the prologue and, then chapter one takes us back to 1968, in China, when Wang was two years old.

There are 227 pages in the book. The prologue, describing Newman's death, is eight and a half pages long. Chapter one begins on page 14 but it is not until page 121, halfway through the story that we learn of the first meeting between John Newman and Lucy Wang. Yet, on the back cover we read that "... in this extraordinary book, Lucy Wang, fiancée of the dead man reveals the emotionally charged story of the tragic circumstances surrounding the assassination ..."

The tensions Newman was coping with in the months before his death are outlined on Page 185. Wang describes a man feeling besieged by opposing forces in the local area. One example involved the Chinese community. Fairfield Council had received a proposal to set up a 'sister city' relationship with a Taiwanese city. Another later suggestion, proposed an alternative 'twinning' relationship be set up with a town in China's Canton Province. Wang tells us that 90% of Fairfield's Chinese community have come from this province.

Despite Newman's work on committees to go ahead with the second option and in accordance with the wishes of the Chinese majority in the area, (Newman had been asked by Chinese leaders in the community to help them resolve this situation), Fairfield Council decided to go with the the original suggestion.

In negotiations to this end, the Taiwanese Government was insisting on the term 'Republic of China' to be used in any documents relating to the arrangement. The Federal Labor government used that same term - Republic of China - in relation to mainland China, and did not recognise Taiwan as a separate country in its own right. Newman sought help and advice from the Minister of Foreign Affairs who confirmed the

diplomatic agreement with China but, at the same time, claimed he was unable to interfere with local government affairs. Concluding this scenario, Lucy Wang asks: “What did the Federal government stand for when any local government could ignore it by recognising two Chinas?” (Wang 187)

It is an important question but Wang does not inform us about the outcome. Curious about this aspect of her story, I phoned Fairfield Council when I was compiling material for this chapter. I had three questions to ask.

1. Did Fairfield Council go ahead with the proposal to ‘twin’ with a city in Taiwan?
2. If so, when did this happen?
3. How did the Council deal with the Taiwanese government’s insistence on using the term Republic of China?

I was passed on to at least three people during two separate phone calls but the only thing I learned was that the city of HsinChu, in the northwest region of Taiwan, had been ‘twinned’ with Fairfield some time ago. No one could tell me anything more than that.

Googling in the city name on my computer, I eventually came to a site hosted by the HsinChu City Government. Nicknamed the Windy City, HsinChu, has nine sister cities – the fourth one shown on the website is Fairfield, NSW, Australia, and included in the brief details is the date for this twinning - 8th September, 1994. John Newman was killed three days earlier on 5th September, 1994.

In 1996 when Wang’s book was published, it wasn’t clear who was responsible for Newman’s death. Partly, she was writing a loosely structured autobiography and partly,

she was attempting to provide a background picture about the tensions and challenges she and Newman were dealing with in the months before he was killed. Wang may have been caught up in the political sensitivities of the twinning situation and this may have prompted her decision to include it.

It is an intriguing story and was, I think, worthy of further comment. As it is, there is an unfinished, unsatisfactory feel about this account.

In June, 2001, Phuong Ngo was found guilty of masterminding the assassination of John Newman. Ngo was a Fairfield Councillor at the time of Newman's death.

Speaking in harsh terms for a moment, it appears that this book is, among other things, a grab for territory, over the body and mind of John Newman. Wang is staking her claim as the only person who knew the dead man well enough to speak for him. Newspaper articles appearing in the weeks that followed Newman's death reported conflict between Wang's perceptions about Newman's life and those of his parents, especially his mother. Journalists seemed to be trying to answer questions about who knew the real person, John Newman.

Wang's motivation may have come from a desperate need to tell her story. She did not place John Newman at the heart of her narrative. Unintentionally perhaps, she positions him at the outer edge.

But what if Wang had written a different book? What if she had deliberately chosen to intersperse the chronology of her story - from childhood years to the present - China to Australia, with a parallel story about Newman?

She may have had to draw on anecdotes he'd told her about his life, and to consult members of his family and various friends and colleagues in the Labor Party, but it is possible that the resulting narrative would have been more rounded, more insightful, more likely to raise people's consciousness about cultural issues in Cabramatta. It is evident that John Newman struggled to do a good job as the local State Member of Parliament and that job cost him his life.

Noting the sentimental tone of the writing, I suspect this author was in a state of grief during the process of writing the manuscript and may have felt a need to justify herself, especially to Newman's immediate family, and against stinging criticisms directed at her through the media in the months following Newman's death.

She describes an attempt at suicide and how she finished up in a private psychiatric hospital afterwards. Perhaps she intended the writing as some form of talking cure but unfortunately, it reads more like a retelling of history in the face of pain and loss.

(Wang 213/214)

Wang's book, in my opinion, is ill-conceived and fails because it has no real focus. It was as though she could never quite grasp why she was writing the book or what exactly she wanted to emphasise. This is probably due to her lack of experience as a writer but she does write well about the local political scene and probably had many discussions with Newman and others, not only developing her ideas, but also learning how to get them across to other, less informed people.

Perhaps if she had written the book some time later, the emotional distance gained might have made a difference. This would appear to have been true for Alice Sebold and Gail Bell (see Chapter 1). They both wrote fifteen years or more after the events they described. Allowing time to pass has also been important to my own writing. It was not a deliberate strategy, but I am aware that I have had years to learn my craft, to think carefully about what I want to say.

Wang's perspective is by necessity, subjective in approach. It is this point of view, that can make such a narrative important - a way of looking at story and then working out where that story fits in any broad-based understanding of the bigger picture. But Wang is a shadowy narrator, painfully wistful, seeking refuge on the page, caught at times by a tendency to wring her hands. When she is sure of her ground, she writes with cool-headed clarity but seems unable to maintain this stance for very long.

Like Gail Bell (Chapter 1), Lucy Wang was in need of a story to tell. This reminds me of students I have taught who come to creative writing classes with the wide-eyed intention of writing a book but admit right off, that they don't read much and can't grasp why that should matter.

Perhaps Wang is not a reader either. Had she though, looked to find a book she could have used as a model, she might have been able to use that as a guide to help her develop focus and a workable structure. Instead, she wrote fragments of two or more stories, including her own early years in China, coming to live in Australia, something of Newman's life once they had met, details about their time together, the local setting, the political climate, his death and what happened to her afterwards.

Analysis and avid reading of other people's writings is a necessary part of my writing process. It has taken me years to uncover the strands of a narrative for this third book that I think of as the last in a trilogy about my family, but I have, these past four years been alert to the varied aspects of craft and steeped in my learning process. It has been an all-encompassing experience, and my mind has been open and alert to anything that could take me further, whether it be something I could learn from a book, a play, a film or simply something I was watching on television.

I cannot make any easy connection between Lucy Wang's narrative and my own but I share with her the need to speak out, to plumb the depths of experience, in whatever way we can and with whatever degree of ability we can each muster, to uncover and explore the meaning of what has happened to us and/or to those we care about.

Chapter Three

Mercy

(Perpetrators' Point of View)

First person accounts written by perpetrators of violent crime are likely to prove more challenging for the authors in the writing process than narratives written by those who have been victims (or somehow related to victims) of violent criminals.

Much will depend on the individual perpetrator's motivation. Is this author writing to justify their violent act/s? Are they seeking celebrity status along with financial gain? Or, are they genuinely aiming to give some background history of their earlier lives, and from within that context, move forward in time to explain what led to the crimes/s they committed? The question is - how honest and open are they willing to be? And to what extent is a perpetrator writer capable of expressing uncomfortable feelings of guilt, responsibility, compassion, remorse?

These feelings are likely to be bound up, like the roots of a tree, with the perpetrator's knowledge of their victim/s experience and suffering. How deep, how misshapen might those roots be? Emotional responses to a known victim may involve lengthy explanation, but writing about a stranger victim will be an even bigger challenge, particularly if there was no act of provocation on the part of that victim.

Unlike the books I have discussed in the first two chapters, the perpetrator writer cannot easily avoid confronting the *other side of the story* when planning their

narrative. For a reader, the victim will be an ever-present reality.

Stranger In Two Worlds

Jean Harris was forty-two years old, a woman with impressive credentials as a teacher when, in 1966, she met Dr Herman Tarnower, internist and cardiologist, at the home of mutual friends in New York. These two newly introduced people talked and talked at their friends' party until, at 11pm sharp, Tarnower's chauffeur and valet Henri, knocked on the front door, ready to whisk Dr Tarnower away.

Perplexed, accepting that she would probably never see him again, Jean Harris was to learn that Cinderella type departures from various social occasions were this man's custom. He joked to her in the months to come that he moved slowly in developing relationships, with what he called his *cardiac shuffle* and he claimed also to have the patience of Job. Weeks later he sent her a book, then a dozen roses, then more and more roses. They were falling in love and she was affectionately calling him Hy. (Harris 58)

Tarnower was fifty-six years old and seemed caught by the idea of marriage yet unable to actually make that kind of commitment. Over the years, Harris learned that her lover was seeing other women but viewed each of these episodes as a passing phase. In retrospect, she describes him in her book: "He was a moral man as far as his medical practise was concerned. He was an amoral man where women were concerned." (Harris 78)

Harris' style has a conversational quality. She could be sitting at a table in her kitchen, cup of tea in hand talking to her reader. She exhibits a willingness to delve unsparingly into her own thoughts and feelings and it is evident that she strives to

be measured and fair. What is written may not be *the* truth, but it is *her* truth. Some sentences might well have been weighed on a set of scales, to make sure they carried the right weight, the exact amount of veracity to convey the intricacies of her reasoning. Here's how she begins chapter three:

It began to rain an hour after I had left Madeira. The last thing I saw as I drove out the lovely drive was the bright smiling face of Kathleen Kavanagh out walking her little dog, 'Killer'. How ugly innocent things sound now. 'I could kill that boy for leaving his room like this!' I must have said it many many times. 'People who dump their beer and liquor bottles around this beautiful pond should be shot.' I said it one day months after Hy died and then froze. 'My God - what if Jim Ferron - heard me. He walks by the same pond and writes for *The New York Times*. Proof positive - I heard it. She's a killer!'

(Harris 157)

Her remorse is in keeping with her view of events as they happened. This is her talking-cure but I don't think Harris intended to raise anyone's conscience, what she wanted most was to *set the record straight*. This then is *her* motivation. Her stance is that of a person who has experienced a miscarriage of justice. Denied the opportunity of a fair trial, she is determined to have her day, her say, on the page.

In 1978 Dr Tarnower created a diet for some of his patients. It was so successful that he and another doctor, Sinclair Baker, a more experienced author, compiled *The Complete Scarsdale Medical Diet*. Harris describes how disappointed Tarnower was with draft versions of the book. She could see the manuscript needed a lot of work and felt she had to help:

I sat down at the table just outside the kitchen and started crossing out and rewriting. I sat there working for two entire weeks, day and night. It was my summer vacation. One of those nights Hy took Lynne Tryforos to a dinner party that their dentist gave. I was served a quick hamburger by Henri and went back to writing the book.

(Harris 101)

Here, Harris conveys a sense of herself as a victim. It's quite possible she did feel victimised but were those feelings obvious then or later, when she was working on her own book? I suspect this is a writer who is connecting with her feelings in retrospect. Things were falling into place for her as she wrote her experience onto the page.

The diet book was an immediate success, earning both men a great deal of money. Dr Herman Tarnower soon became known as the Scarsdale Diet Doctor. The ripples of fame spread. People knew Harris and Tarnower were linked emotionally and this was to have a detrimental effect on Harris and her career.

(Harris 100)

Asked to accept a position as headmistress of an élite private boarding school for girls in Virginia in 1977, she learned, soon after accepting the appointment, that the board of directors were still arguing over her appointment. Harris tells us she protested vehemently in board meetings but no board member apologised or gave her any real assurance that her job was secure. The implication was clear. Her de-facto type relationship with the famous doctor had made her appointment a cause for some concern but nothing was said outright.

(Harris 126)

In the first three months of 1980, she began to worry that she no longer had the strength or the resilience to do her job properly. Depression hovered. She had been depressed before and had considered suicide too, but this time she bought a gun.

Despite the cheap paperback look there is much to commend in Harris's narrative. The book is divided into two parts marked simply as Part I and Part II but six strands of narrative are woven into the story.

1. In the early chapters, about her childhood, Harris creates an impression of a naïve and trusting country girl. The paragraphs are dense with detail, suggesting the effort is sincere but overdone. I thought these chapters may have been written towards the end of her writing process, perhaps in response to an editor's feedback? The writing is stilted, especially when compared with the flow of later chapters.

2. Tarnower is present throughout the book, not as a ghostly apparition but as an ongoing presence in her thinking and attitude. She loves him but she probably doesn't like him. "I believe the sad truth is that Hy was incapable of loving a woman, though he wanted desperately to be able to." (Harris 147)

Following a chronological thread like an invisible time-line, Harris traces the highs and lows of their love affair. She is laying down the bones so she can flesh out her version of events that fatal night of 10th March, 1980, when Tarnower died as a result of a shot gun wound.

3. Harris, the headmistress, was knowledgeable and involved in a progressive way with educational issues, practically, ethically and also philosophically. From her descriptions, it is evident that her working life as a boarding school headmistress was fraught with issues of responsibility: " ... 215 teenagers you care very much about.,

every one of whom has some kind of problem, from a mother dying of cancer, to a playboy father, to a dad out of work or a beau who never called or a D- on a paper she worked her heart out for, and tell me where you begin. I know where you end.”

(Harris 129)

4. The fourth strand details Harris’s experience with lawyers and the media. The trial chapter, *Westchester, The People of New York vs. Jean Harris* features courtroom testimony. Most of the excerpts in this chapter are dialogue scenarios involving either the prosecuting attorney, George Bolen, or Harris’ own lawyer, Joel Aurnou, asking questions of individual witnesses. Harris has wisely used layout as part of her writing technique. The speaker’s name is shown in italics and the dialogue is kept to a minimum, suggesting careful editing. This enables an easy understanding of the points she is making. In the following example it is Aurnou who is asking the questions:

Aurnou: Did you tell Sergeant Holt in Virginia that ‘It seems that this apparently was premeditated?’

Carney: Yes.

Aurnou: And you had never been told that by Detective Siciliano?

Bolen: Objection. Told what?

The Court: Sustained ...

(Harris 192)

5. The fifth strand deals with the comments Harris makes about the media and these are dispersed throughout the book. At no time did Jean Harris confess to murder. She viewed Tarnower’s death as accidental yet reader-grabbing headlines repeatedly insisted she had made one line statements to a policeman or a friend or almost anyone

at all, saying she had killed Tarnower.

Even to the most casual observer, it is obvious that the newspaper accounts were openly hostile towards Jean Harris. Of course, this would have had more to do with selling newspapers than informing the public about this woman's guilt or innocence. In her Introduction she writes: "*True Detective* magazine carried a lurid twenty-page monstrosity about 'The Scarsdale Diet Doc and the Socialite Headmistress.' *New York* magazine repeated the same headline, and *Hustler* magazine reduced me to a lewd cartoon, side by side with Charles Manson." (Harris 16)

Long before the trial began many people had decided that Harris was guilty. So widespread and damning had the publicity been, it was a challenge for the lawyers to find prospective jurors. "I've read about it. I really don't know if I could be impartial about it. She shot him in a rage." (Harris 188)

Almost four hundred people went through the screening process, less than ten were able to say that they had not read up on the story in the media.

Harris would have had access to a transcript of her trial. Painstaking as it would have been to read through that transcript with an eye for detail, Harris would have had the necessary time and patience to do the job well.

Four books about her case appeared soon after the trial ended and in the years to come there'd be more, even a film. From the detailed information she was able to provide about her notoriety, and about who said what and in which publication, she must have had some means of procuring relevant news items and other resource material that she could draw on when she was writing her book.

6. Most of Part II documents the time Harris spent in prison. She details her observations about the prison system, her own experience as a prisoner and her continuing thoughts about Tarnower and others.

Included in this sixth strand too, are the letters, many, many letters, written to Harris whilst she was in prison, by women who had their own stories to add to hers, women who had known Herman Tarnower and had not liked his attitude towards women, women who had suffered in relationships and were keen for Harris to know she was not alone. Harris comments and quotes from some of these letters. She also quotes from a small blue notebook someone gave her soon after she went to prison: “First I wrote only anger and hurts there, where they were safely buried. Then, after Mother died and I wrote less to the family, the blue book became less a whipping boy and more a diary.” (Harris 339)

Harris first appeared in court in October 1980 and on 20th March, 1981, she was sentenced to a maximum security prison for life with a minimum of fifteen years to be served. (Harris 231)

Her account of Tarnower’s death differs from the court’s findings. She wrote that she intended to kill herself. Her visit to her lover was simply to say goodbye but he sought to dissuade her from using the gun and tried to wrestle it out of her hands. To describe that scene Harris included extracts from the public records of her trial in a separate chapter that is not about the trial.

The teasing quality of the telling adds dramatic tension:

Arnou: Wait a minute. You got to the top of the stairs.

Harris: The first floor.

Arnou: Now, you got to the top of the stairs at some point on the second floor, did you not?

Harris: Yes.

Arnou: What did you have in your hands?

Harris: I had the flowers and my pocketbook.

Arnou: What did you do?

Harris: I heard Hy just stirring and I walked over and sat on the edge of my bed and reached over and turned on the light, and the light over his bed went on.

Arnou: First of all Mrs Harris, is that a dimmer switch?

(Harris 161)

The title of the book *A Stranger in Two Worlds*, conveys an implicit understanding that Jean Harris was a stranger in Tarnower's world and also a stranger to prison life.

She writes graphically about living among some of society's most deprived women. In her blue book on February 11th, 1985, she wrote: "While about .003 per cent of the citizens of New York have had felony arrests, 40% of the homeless people in New York have had felony arrests. Yet our President insists that crime and economics don't go together." (Harris 390)

Harris also comments on behavioural problems among young people. She perceives no difference in the what children and teenagers get up to, but rather in the way society responds to that child, depending on their class position. Her point is that as a society we don't respond to them in the same way.

Harris tells us that courts often choose to send the *young poor* to jail whilst the *young well off* are sent instead to the principal's office or to see a psychiatrist. Harris

remembers standing alongside a member of the hockey team as this girl handed over her baby for adoption, and pleading some kind of deal with shop-keepers following a spate of shoplifting incidents by well-heeled girls at her school.

She had, she wrote, talked with bistro managers about the dangers of serving alcohol to minors, even though she knew those minors had gone to these places with fake IDs. She had made arrangements for a student to be taken to AA meetings five nights a week, and on another occasion, had to negotiate with a phone company about a bill for thousands of dollars run up by a student using a stranger's credit card. None of the women in prison with Harris had been helped by such interventions in their earlier lives. (Harris 398/399)

Passages such as this illustrate a consciousness-raising intent. Harris wants her reader to know of the class bias that exists in the way the legal system works. Her narrative adds to our understanding of women's experience of law and order issues and also brings to light, through the telling of her own experience and that of others she meets in prison, the treatment meted out to women who have turned on the men they loved.

I first read her book in the 1980s, soon after it was published. The analysis Harris provided was a revelation to me and also an inspiration. I could see, through her example, how wide-ranging a memoir type narrative could be. This knowledge added to the practical understanding I was gaining as a feminist activist.

In the 1970s I participated in a number of campaigns to do with domestic violence. One case in particular haunts me still. Violet Roberts and her son Bruce had endured years of brutality from a husband and father who became, as the years passed, more and more dangerous. The family lived in a coastal town in northern NSW. There was

a refuge at Lismore, a few hundred kilometres away, but for Violet, that distance was like travelling to another state. She could find no one in the area where she lived to help or advise her.

One night, her drunken husband Eric came home in an especially bad mood and belted her and her son. Violet really believed that she and Bruce could be beaten to death, if not that night, then some time soon. When at last Eric fell asleep they took the law into their own hands and killed him. Tried for murder, they were each sentenced to fourteen years. Bruce was then seventeen years old. The prosecution claimed that there was a financial motive and seemingly ignored the documented history of Eric Robert's abuse.

Strong feminist action, including petitions and demonstrations became frequent once the situation became known to women working in and around NSW prisons. On one demonstration we hired a small plane to trail a long, colourful banner that read FREE VIOLET AND BRUCE ROBERTS.

Mother and son served five years of their sentence before the then Shadow Attorney General, Paul Whelan, appealed to the NSW Chief Justice to urgently hear an appeal which was ultimately successful.

I am acutely aware of the parallels between Violet's family and my own. That could have been father, my mother, my brother. I remember how often I wished him dead when his fists struck flesh and bone without any restraint, as though we were all his property to do with as he pleased. I wanted the violence to stop. Violet and Bruce wanted the violence to stop too.

Jean Harris, by all accounts, lived with a different, more subtle kind of abuse, not the physical blacken-your-eye-and-break-your-arm violence but the sort that manipulates emotions and can torture a person's thinking. When I read her account of how she struggled with Tarnower that fateful night, I saw that struggle as a plea. Even when Jean Harris came armed with a hand gun, she still seemed to me to be trying to have a dialogue with Tarnower, as she said she had so many times before. She wanted this man to value what they'd had together, to support her in her crisis at work, to engage with her in an honest way.

(Pages 166/167/168)

Many women, victims of domestic violence, wrestle metaphorically with their abuser, often going to great lengths to appease them, to please them, to coax them out of bad moods and despicable behaviour, and once engaged in that life-threatening dance, the participants cannot know what the final outcome will be. Who will be left standing?

Uppermost in my mind, as I seek to put the context of this narrative alongside my own work, are the lessons I long ago learned from *Stranger in Two Worlds*. I can identify with what Harris makes of her experience - she writes beyond *woman as victim* to encompass the hardships in other people's lives. Hers is a humane politics of personal experience.

Although I cannot easily relate to the life Harris led either before meeting Tarnower or afterwards, I can appreciate what she learned and feel some delight too, that her insights have resonance with what I have learned, from my life experience.

There is for me a sense of recognition in Harris' narrative - I know what this woman is writing about. I think she might understand why I have explored my own life, the

lives of my siblings, my parents, myself, in an attempt to draw forth meaning, as much for myself as for other people.

Chopper 1. From The Inside

Chopper 2. Hits and Memories

Chopper 3. How to Shoot Friends and Influence People

Mark Brandon Read, aka *the Chopper*, has now written several books. I will focus my attention on the first three. Early in 1991, whilst Read was a prisoner in Pentridge jail, John Silvester, an investigative journalist, interviewed him for a series of newspaper reports later published in the *Herald-Sun*. Over the next three years Read wrote to Silvester almost every day.

These letters, plus another seven hundred or so that Read had written to other people, became the source material for all three books published by John Silvester and his colleague, Andrew Rule. The first was launched December 1991. The same source material became the basis for the film *Chopper*, released in Australia in August, 2000. To date, *Chopper 1* has been reprinted thirty-two times, *Chopper 2* eighteen times, and *Chopper 3* four times. Read owes his celebrity status to these two men.

Although the books lack the distinctive cover design of the Victorian paperbacks that first appeared on railway bookstalls in the 1840s, commonly known as *yellowbacks*, I detect in them a similar purpose.

Due to the increase in literacy during Queen Victoria's reign, *yellowbacks* were a response by publishers to the demand for cheap reading matter. Silvester and Rule probably understood well the profile of their intended reader and sought to produce cheap reading matter with popular appeal. I doubt they had any intention of engaging

the reader in any deeper understanding of Read's life and crimes. It is more likely that they wanted to present Read as some kind of folk hero.

Comparisons have been made between Read and another Australian folk hero - Ned Kelly. I will mention here just one example. The State Library of Victoria purchased a self portrait of Read and the purchase was criticised among others, by the Crime Victims Support Association.

President of the association, Noel McNamara, thought it was *disgraceful* that government money was being paid to a convicted criminal. The library's director of collections, and services, Shane Carmody, defended the purchase: "The painting is important to the collection because it represents a contemporary interpretation of the Ned Kelly legend and the state library has a very important collection of Ned Kelly material."

(<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/08/26/1061663794478.html>)

Ned Kelly dictated a statement to his friend Joe Byrne in 1879. The subsequent letter, written with what knowledge of punctuation and grammar the two men possessed, has become known as the Jerilderie letter. I would not describe this document as Kelly's talking-cure but he was intent on consciousness-raising and was anxious to have the letter published in a newspaper. His gang, already wanted by the police and with a price on their heads, raided the Victorian town of Jerilderie in February 1879. Kelly's attempts to get someone to take the letter, whilst during the same period, robbing the local bank, were resisted by the townspeople.

He seeks to justify his crimes in this letter but also reveals his perceptions on law and order, the lowly position of the Irish working class in Australia at that time, and his

disrespect for the Victorian police. He believed the police had consistently wronged his family and that their actions unnecessarily precipitated the killing of the three policemen in 1878 and the subsequent outlawing of himself and his brother, Dan:

Superintendent Smith used to say to my sisters, see all the men I have out today I will have as many more tomorrow and we will blow him into pieces as small as paper that is in our guns Detective Ward and Constable Hayes took out their revolvers and threatened to shoot the girls and children in Mrs Skillions (sic) absence the greatest ruffians and murderers no matter how deprived would not be guilty of such a cowardly action, and this sort of cruelty and disgraceful and cowardly conduct to my brothers and sisters who had no protection coupled with the conviction of my mother and those men certainly made my blood boil as I dont think there is a man born could have the patience to suffer it as long as I did or ever allow his blood to get cold while such insults as these were unavenged and yet in every paper that is printed I am called the blackest and coldest blooded murderer ever on record

The letter was donated to the Victorian State Library in November, 2000 and can be read in full on their website.

(<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/collections/treasures/jerilderielletter/index.html>)

There is nothing in Read's narratives that could be referred to as consciousness-raising nor do I think he was seeking a talking-cure. Unlike Ned Kelly, Read's violent crimes are, in essence, his achievements, and he writes openly about them, claiming all the while that he is the enemy of drug-dealers and the like and that he never set out to hurt an ordinary citizen.

Such self-serving statements suggest Read thought of himself as society's appointed vacuum cleaner, cleaning up the streets to ensure we could all sleep safely in our beds at night.

In Chopper 1 there is a chronological time line to the story but in books 2 and 3, the format reads more like a magazine columnist writing a journal. Some of Read's opening lines are delivered like a stand-up comic: "I'm not a great one for tattooed ladies, although Karen's tattoo of me on her back isn't bad."

(Read 120, Chopper 3)

Or, "I met Billie in a country pub in Tasmania, on the coast. She was a big chick, well built and with a top suntan. In Tassie, they don't worry about skin cancer – they think UV is a new Space Invader game." (Read 33, Chopper 3)

Or these lines:

When I look back on the jelly beans I have shot, stabbed, bashed, iron-barred, axed, knee-capped, toe-cut, blow-torched, killed and generally up-ended, I look at it like this: If I hadn't done it then somebody else would have. I am not the only lion in the jungle, but I am the only one with no ears and a smiling face.

(Read 76, Chopper 3)

Read has names for his associates, names like Solly the Jew, Reggie the Rat, Cowboy Johnny Harris, Johnny the Wog, Terry the Tank, Old Taffy, Double Bunker Freddie and Tough Tony Franzone and this list is drawn from just eight pages of Chopper 3.

He writes poems about these men:

Reggie the Rat ran away

But we knew we'd catch him another day,

Solly the Jew did the same,
So we taught him it was no game.
When we got Reggie, he wasn't alone,
He had his fox terrier guarding his home,
The Cowboy gave the dog a kicking,
Then the Jew told the Rat to give it a licking,
I fixed up the barbie, but the food tasted poxy,
'Cos we made the Rat eat his own foxy.

(Read 12, Chopper 3)

In all three books the print is large, the length of pieces short. The text looks dense and cramped, and chapter headings like *Puppy Love*, *Murder*, *Mayhem* and *Mad Men*, *Life in the Pink Palace*, *White Slaves*, *Skinheads* and *Pinheads*, and *Toe-cutting*, suggest that lurid sensationalism is this author's method of attracting his reader's attention.

Photographs are an important feature. Several are of scantily dressed women or dead bodies at crime scenes and candid snaps of his prison associates. The text beneath a photograph of Chris Liapis reads: "... when I graduated from streetfighter to standover man, I shot him. He lived and fled overseas. He was no great loss."

(Read 1, Page 36)

Read's writing style and vocabulary is that of the Australian larrikin. There is a similarity to Phil Cleary (see chapter 1) but Cleary's language is fuelled by rage whereas Read aims to land a shocked jab on his readers' sensibilities.

The dictionary definition of the word larrikin reads:

A lout, a hoodlum. A mischievous young person.

(Macquarie Dictionary 1074)

Information about the origins of the term *larrikin* are detailed in Geoffrey Manning's book, *A Colonial Experience*. He explains that the first reference appeared in the Adelaide newspaper, *The Register*, 19th May, 1886. A policeman with a rich, thick Irish brogue transformed the word *larking* into *laraking*. His intention was to describe the bad behaviour of young men. This may or may not be true and there could be other theories but previously, in the 1800s, Tom and Jerryism had been used to describe wayward youth, as shown in an earlier report in *The Register*, 12th April 1854. I have not found any references to female larrikins.

<http://www.slsa.sa.gov.au/manning/adelaide/larrikin/larrikin.htm>

Fuelled perhaps by mateship, booze and contempt for the law, the actions of a larrikin today can range from petty crime such as vandalism, running off with someone's wallet or handbag to more serious crime, including robbery or even murder. Class position plays a part too. Politics and big business can be playgrounds for larrikins as much as pubs, clubs and sporting events. Despite the invisibility of women many Australians, male and female, are fondly, firmly, attached to the idea of the *larrikin* and all that the term conveys, as a means of acknowledging white Australia's convict past.

I include here two examples of men who have been frequently described as larrikins. Matt Price, journalist for the on-line version of *The Australian* newspaper, included a speech given by South Australian premier, Mike Rann, at the time of Shane Warne's retirement from one day cricket, on his blog 22nd December, 2006. What follows is a brief extract:

... Warne was and is unmistakeably Australian. No other nation or national type has his combination of larrikin, cheek, athletic endurance, high art, mischief, mateship, sunburn-cream and bloody minded courage - or the ability both to admit and often laugh at his own failings. Whatever we are, he is, writ large. What you see is what you get - the flaws and the genius.

(http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/mattprice/index.php/theaustralian/comments/mighty_words_for_warnie)

In the Introduction to his latest book and quoted in The Age in September, 2006, Mark Latham claimed that larrikinism, “once the essence of the Australian male” was being squeezed out by political correctness and what he called a “revenge of the nerds John Howard style.” Some of Latham’s fruitier remarks made in parliament or even the title of this latest book, *A Conga Line Of Suckholes*, would rest comfortably in Read’s pages.

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20471769-2,00.html>

We can understand from these examples that the word *larrikin* has different but similar meanings for different people, but the general agreement would be that a larrikin is Australian, and definitely male.

To describe Read as a modern day larrikin though, is not enough, there is much more to him than derring-do. I doubt that his motivation came from a sense of responsibility or remorse but I do think he genuinely wanted to communicate. I imagine Read thought of himself as witty, a bit of alright when it came to telling a story. He came from an under-privileged background but he wasn’t going to allow a lack of education or writing expertise to stand in his way. He would write as he talked.

Reading these three books, noting the vernacular style, I kept thinking about a man I was fortunate enough to meet many years ago, a man who taught me as much as I ever taught him.

I began teaching Creative Writing classes in 1982. I was living in Devon, England, close to the county border with Cornwall, and was asked to run a series of workshops in Barnstaple, a nearby market town. I had eighteen students that first term and one of them was a local farmer. He told me before our first class that he had come to learn how to write better letters to the local council. He then insisted on explaining to me his problem. Not once, despite many dealings with them, had the council agreed to any of the proposals he put forward for changes he wanted to make on his property.

Offended by rejection after rejection, he had written numerous letters to protest and when that didn't work, he wrote more letters. He had, he said, advised various aldermen of what he knew about their wives' activities on a certain day and in a certain place, or what he'd witnessed of their children's behaviour. This farmer simply couldn't understand why he never received a single reply. What, he asked me with a pleading look, was he doing wrong?

Before I could say anything, he shoved a hefty bundle of papers into my hands, copies of some of the letters he had written. Later, I read them and noted the length of each one. Most were typed in a size 10 font, and covered six pages of A4 paper. Some were ten pages long and at least three ran on and on for fifteen pages or more. I did admire this man's courage in coming along to a Creative Writing class but felt daunted at the thought of working with him.

I taught that group of eighteen students for the next two years and throughout that time, I encouraged this farmer to write in a more succinct style. My strategy was simple enough. I suggested he write a series of complaint letters, meant as practice only, none of them to be sent, and each letter had to be just five paragraphs long, and able to fit on one A4 page. If you can't say what you want to say on that one page, I kept telling him, then you are wasting your time. I didn't ever speak about tact or being wise about what *not* to write in a letter, but concentrated instead on getting this man to focus more on exactly what he wanted to say.

I showed him how to use a thesaurus and introduced the use of alliteration and imagery. A few months before I wound up the class, he wrote a fairy story, I think we were both surprised and pleased. It was evident that his confidence with the written word had developed and he now relished the challenge to use his imagination. The important change in his writing though, was his developed understanding of using good sentence structure to convey clarity of thought.

Read does use sentences to best effect, particularly when beginning a new chapter, but I noted an urge to rant or rave, to be heard or read, rather than to pin down exactly what it is that he wanted to say.

In prison, Read asked to be moved out of H Division. The classification board did not want this prisoner in the mainstream of the jail, they said no. Read vowed he would be moved the next day. Later, in the showers he asked his mate Kevin, to cut off both his ears. Using a razor blade for the job Kevin obliged. Blood began bubbling into the holes in Read's head. When he looked down he saw his ears on the ground, "I

was sure they were dancing an Irish jig.” (Read, 54, Chopper 1)

An operation had to be performed to patch up the jagged wounds but afterwards, when Read was well enough to leave the hospital, he got his way. He did not return to H Division. He took to describing himself as President of the Van Gogh club until another prisoner cut off his own penis. Read wrote this prisoner a note ‘you can take over’. “When the dicky birds start hitting the pavement I thought it was time to resign.” (Read 55 Chopper 1)

Read uses humour and bravado to move his narrative along but that raises for me a question about authenticity. What is real and what is not? Is he telling it like it was or taking the piss? I have seen the film about him, read each of these three books twice, looked at his web page several times and I still do not know.

In one chapter he writes about the first time he was beaten up, he was twelve years old. (Read 125, Chopper 3). In another he is offering a warning about prostitutes, never fall in love with one. (Read 109, Chopper 3). The first story is credible, the second suggests he is writing for an audience just like him; big boofy blokes with meat axe fists, tattooed arms and a shrewd grasp of what’s what, especially where women are concerned. Oddly enough though, a great number of Read’s fans are women. I’ve heard stories of women visiting Read in jail, his latest book in hand, eager to get their copy autographed and to meet the man himself.

Read is a working class writer and I can appreciate his motivation to tell his story, but at no stage does he accept responsibility for his crimes in any meaningful way. I doubt that he would be in print if it were not for John Silvester and Andrew Rule. It does not

matter to me whether or not they saw some gain for themselves in that endeavour. They have made it possible for Read to focus his attention on ways other than crime to earn a living. And it is here, thinking about that, I understand why, finally, I chose to include this writer in my exegesis.

Physically, Read is nothing like my two brothers, not in looks or style. Tim and Edward loathed tattoos, long hair or jewellery worn by men, and favoured sharply creased trousers and starched shirts, usually worn with a tie. To coin one of my older brother's sayings *he would not have been seen dead* in the sort of clothing Read liked to wear.

But *both* my brothers felt bitter about their lack of education, their poor job prospects and their limited chances to earn a lot of money. And, like Read, they too were unwilling to accept responsibility for their violent acts though Tim tried but could not allow himself to fully grasp the reality of what he had done.

Despite all that is different in the circumstances, Read exists in my thinking then, as a violent man who could have been my brother. My response to him is complicated, containing in its mix, shame and disgust, in much the same way I feel about the terrible things my brothers have done. Knowing that, accepting that, I am pleased, even delighted, that he has been given a chance to exchange a life of crime and brutality for that of a much celebrated author.

Chapter Four

A Poisoned Family Tree

(The Perpetrator's Family Point of view)

If we are to write honestly about our own lives, especially lives informed by violence, we autobiographical writers must deal with the implications of that exposure, including our own vulnerability. Fortunately, there is an upside to this process – to write out that moment, that scene, that horror, provides a means of leaving that discomfort behind us on the page. But first we have to challenge our emotional processes. One word best describes my challenge working on these next two chapters and that word is *dread*.

I have struggled with a debilitating heaviness, a fear of being that helpless child – small in size, inadequate in strength, to stand against a dark force. The Macquarie Dictionary in defining dread uses the term 'shrinking apprehension'. I know what that means.

I am looking in depth at two books, the first written by a perpetrator's son, the second by a perpetrator's brother. As this point of view is close to my own, I am using one chapter for each book.

Gatton Man

Australian writer Merv Lilley is the youngest of four children. His older brother Osborne was ready to leave home when Lilley was about to start school. Their father had a truly brutal streak and presented himself as a model to his first born son. As can easily

happen in such families, Osborne was soon to develop that streak too, terrorising his sister and his mother, making use of his tongue and fists, in the same way he had seen his father behave.

(Lilley 5 - 7)

Lilley believed his father, Bill Lilley, was capable of murder, three specific murders - that of Norah, Ellen and Michael Murphy. The bodies of the three siblings were found less than two miles from their home on Boxing Day 1898, in the Queensland district of Gatton. The two women had been raped and all three had head wounds. Ellen and Michael were lying close to one another in a back to back position but Norah's body was a little further away, on a neatly spread out rug.

The Murphys had left Tent Hill, riding in their horse and buggy to attend a dance in Gatton, but did not return that night. Their brother in law, William McNeil, went looking for them next morning and found the bodies.

(Lilley 65 - 67)

Today a crime scene would be preserved until the investigation team had combed the area intensively but back in 1898, it was the distressed family members and curious locals who scoured the area that Boxing day morning. When the Sergeant of Police arrived with McNeil, he saw about forty people gathered around. He asked them to leave the paddock. The crowd obeyed but soon they were creeping forward again. Mrs Murphy must have been distraught, he said later, she kept insisting that the bodies be moved out of the sun and away from ants.

That Sergeant of Police, William Arrel, noted in his statement that the victims' heads had been so violently bashed they had been driven into the ground. He examined the buggy and saw the horse on its side close by, shot in the forehead. He later reported that no local person, either official or ordinary citizen, had in any way helped him to do his job more effectively.

(Lilley 72-78)

Lilley writes about growing up with his father:

We the family knew him as a man possessed, if we had been able to put it into words at that time of growing. We knew of a terrible force within him, driving him forever, it seemed, to a point of climax – but we didn't know what it was, beyond devil, beyond his control, that made up his complete being, around which he pivoted, as one who was not responsible for what might happen in the next moment.

(Lilley 3)

This description portrays a man who in Lilley's mind, got away with murder and lived with the resounding echoes, propelled to perpetuate a pattern of brutality in a domestic sphere.

Greatly respected in Australia as an accomplished writer and a poet, Lilley has a keen understanding of human nature. He writes of an earlier era and about the men who made for themselves a life on the land in Queensland. Lilley is not a romanticist, his writing does not perpetuate a sentimental image of the bush, rather he aims to puncture holes in that myth.

He reconstructs a time line of the murders, includes and assesses the documentation that arose from the investigation, and places along that time line what was known of his father's movements in that crucial period and beyond.

Making careful use of his research concerning those closely involved with the investigation, either as witnesses or in some official capacity, Lilley tells the story simply and clearly. The reader is given the opportunity of playing a part in his journey, given access to some of the material Lilley has been sifting through.

Anyone googling the words *Gatton Murders* to search the internet will learn as they follow the various links that there are any number of documents listed from police archives, available to be accessed on application. Transforming such research material into a narrative is a challenge. Lilley does this with crafted simplicity.

His points are well made and convincing. This was a good story, he believed in it, he knew he just had to write it, but I think his chief aim was literary, not consciousness-raising, though I would argue strongly that for Lilley, this narrative is his talking cure. He is a writer first and foremost, and approaches this subject matter in his seventies, a writer in his prime.

He steps back from his father at times, speaking not as a son writing about a violent father but with a larger picture in mind, providing a context for the unfolding story:

Where did he come from? Where do Englishmen come from? The old country. The old history. Old ways. They came from labouring literacy, they came for land. In many cases unable to write their own name or to spell it the same way twice. They

were moving away from the industrial revolution as it displaced them, as land was being swallowed up by cartels and jobs as they'd known them had disappeared. With never a chance to own land there, what could be more attractive than an offer of land in the new land. Coal burners, or was it sail, loaded up or down to the waterline, women and scant possessions, they came to Australia.

(Lilley 139)

Lilley's descriptions of his father, referred to as 'He' with a capitalised H, throughout the book, could be a portrait of the ways in which any number of violent fathers, my own included, have terrorised their wives and children. Like a playwright imagining a stage set, these men have thought meticulously about what they intended to do to their victims, how to do it and exactly where and when to do it.

Lilley learns, years after the event, what his father did to one of his grand-daughters, Lilley's niece:

... day by day taking the child down into the far paddock to a ritual place, ordering her to get from the back of the horse onto a high stump, telling her to stay there until He returned perhaps an hour later, not to try and get down or the wild dogs would get her, whilst she screamed cried and begged Him not to leave her there alone, Grandfather, her hours of terror on the stump until one day He came back, got her down from the stump and began the rape, unable to get into her, hoarsely urging himself to *kill kill kill*, repeating the message to Himself as He rasped at her, bruising, tearing, discharging all over her body front as she lay in a stupor. Then the wild mad gallop home with her behind Him, hanging on for the last

of her life in her terrible condition on His great black stallion of a horse, as it seemed to her, galloping home in the dusk; the women washing her, she trying to talk, to tell them what happened to her, they hushing her in case He killed them all.

(Lilley 159)

Reading passages like this, we can understand that Merv Lilley's father had no inner boundaries to restrain his misogynistic anger. His attitude to women was about power rather than negotiation. Men like Bill Lilley, past and present, can use their masculine strength to exert power, treating their wives and children as property to be used and abused. Sex can easily become bound up with sadomasochistic ideas of humiliation and rough discipline. Making a child fearful of what might happen to her if she jumped down from a high stump then galloping off and leaving her for an hour or more to reinforce the knowledge of how vulnerable she is, is likely to have been exciting foreplay for this man.

Interference of any kind could often make things worse. Lilley writes about a day when his father began threatening his mother. They were in the bedroom. She managed to get away from him and out into the yard. The two family dogs came to help her, jumping up and biting him on the shoulder and around the neck and head. Distracted, 'He' grabbed a lump of wood and began making vicious swings at the dogs, intending to hurt or kill them. They were forced back and watched him warily from a distance: "Then He drove Lucy back into the bedroom ordered her to strip off and raped her." (Lilley 42)

He continues the story in the next paragraph: "My arrival on the scene at the end of the raping would probably have saved the dogs from being shot on the spot and probably her from being executed." (Lilley 42)

These episodes of grim daily life in the Lilley household are sobering reminders of what can happen behind the closed doors of a family home, and how the pattern of violence can continue through the years.

I feel a strong empathy with Lilley, particularly in the way he confronts his father's actions and behaviour on the page, resisting any effort to soften this man's character, to explain away his ruthless cruelty. I have a similar approach when writing about my own father. For Lilley, for me, it is an unblinking confrontation.

Another commendable aspect of the narrative is the way Lilley keeps the victims - both his female relatives and the Murphy family in the front of his mind - *his* compassion and sorrow are evident.

Lilley writes with a strong 'I' voice that is candid and unswerving in purpose. He will not let this man, his father, slip away unnoticed. I imagine the writer wrestling with the ghostly demon that was Bill Lilley, pulling himself free from the violent macho straightjacket his father would have wanted him to wear. This struggle may have taken place some time ago but Lilley understands the importance of documenting the process.

There are three sections in the book. The first covers Merv Lilley's childhood and early adult life, up to the point where he learns about the Gatton murders and later saw the monument erected in memory of the three victims. He finishes the section with the following few lines:

I'm past seventy. I was, in a sense, born with a task. I was born twenty-one years after the event. I am the only person left on earth who could write about the tragedy

that held Australia in thrall and say that I know the Gatton killer, that I have known for fifty years who killed Michael, Norah and Ellen Murphy - and the sulky horse - on Boxing Day night of 1898.

(Lilley 62)

The second section outlines the crime scene and the investigation that followed, including Lilley's research process as he follows the trail of the police and adds what he knows to the story.

In the third section, Lilley revisits aspects of the two earlier sections, to further illuminate his father's way of thinking as well as inconsistencies and limitations in the police investigation.

Motivation, is I believe, the hidden scaffolding that supports the structure of this narrative. Once Lilley had been told by his mother about the connection between his father and these murders, he could not help but carry the idea forward. Over a period of years the story was building in his mind. He might well have written his father's name and that of the victims on a large piece of paper and then surrounded those names with cluster after cluster of related phrases, notes, ideas and headings for subject areas to be explored. The harnessing of that material into a complex whole might have appeared messy and incoherent on the page in the hands of a less skilled writer, but this writer is sure of his craft and holds the focus of his motivation in the palm of his hand. The story is well told, the theory credible. I readily believed that Bill Lilley was capable of murder, but did he commit *these* murders?

Stephanie Bennett is not a well known writer. Interviewed on Radio National in May 2004, at the time of her book launch, she was introduced as a retired dentist and grandmother. Her book, published by Pan Macmillan (2004) is entitled *The Gatton Murders*, A true story of lust, vengeance and Vile Retribution. Bennett dismissed the idea of Bill Lilley as the perpetrator, suggesting instead that a group of young men were responsible for the killings.

In the 2004 June issue of the magazine, *Eureka Street*, lawyer Celia Conlan, reviewed Bennett's book. She was particularly interested in what the author had to say about the role of the police:

Her analysis of the deficiencies of the police investigation and the internal bickering and conflict which undermined any potential for competence, invites comparisons with frustrations voiced about the Victorian police twenty years earlier around Glenrowan. It portends the propensity for such flaws to plague our police force well into the 21st century.

(Conlan 36)

Perhaps more would have been learned about the perpetrator/s of these murders if the initial investigation had not been hampered by so many problems.

One theory in print can become an accepted truth but a choice of theories is likely to weaken each individual argument. It's hard *not* to compare Lilley's narrative with say, the growing number of books about who killed and butchered a number of women in East London in 1888, by a still unknown murderer, known all around the world as Jack, the Ripper. We will never know the identity of this perpetrator or his motivation.

But does the existence of another theory about who committed the Gatton murders lessen the validity of Lilley's narrative? I don't think so. Lilley has no need to justify his narrative to anyone. He has covered all the relevant points; the time frame, information gleaned from his research, crucial conversations he had with his mother, as well as his own memories, added to those of various other family members.

But more importantly, Lilley has, in searing detail, exposed his father's perverted nature, his brutality and the impact of this dangerous man on the rest of the family. He knows that he, as this man's son, has no taste for violence and quite early on, distanced himself from his father's attitude to women. As a grown man Lilley has forged for himself a different kind of life. He conveys in his narrative a strong sense of hope and solidarity with the women in his family. I draw strength from that. This son understands himself as separate and different from his father.

I have struggled over many years to confront the issues raised by my own upbringing, not only as a person who broke away from that family, but also as a writer. It has been important for me to establish that same separation, that differentiation, in what I write about my parents and my siblings. There is no doubt that good writing, good stories, can empower us as both writer and reader. Lilley's story has empowered me.

At the beginning of his book there is a poem. The poet's name is not shown so I assume that means Lilley wrote it himself with his father in mind:

I shot a wren

in its full flight.

The memory haunted me

one dead night

So I shot another

to put that right.

Chapter Five

Relative Contamination

(Perpetrator's Family Member's Point of View)

Shot In The Heart

Mikal Gilmore writes from a sibling's point of view. Among the books I have chosen to include in this exegesis, his narrative is the closest to my own, a model of writing from the inside, about a violent family, about violent siblings. Many of his issues too, are similar to my own.

I have read and re-read Gilmore's book a number of times and though my style and structure are different, I know that his work has informed and influenced me. At times I was nodding my head in agreement, reading passages about growing up with a mean, brutal father, and the many ways the trickle down effect of that father's power dictated how his children behaved. At other times, I wanted to debate issues with Gilmore, especially about the lenient approach he adopted towards his older brother, often making what I can only describe as excuses for Gary in the telling of his story. I will elaborate further on these points in this chapter.

Mikal Gilmore had previously worked as a journalist for the magazine *Rolling Stone*. He had written about music, culture and related issues, plus profiles of a number of

music greats. *Shot in the Heart* was published seventeen years after Gary had been executed.

Born and bred in Utah, the four Gilmore boys, Frank Junior, Gary, Gaylen and Mikal, grew up in a family with strong connections to the Mormons, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.

Mikal describes Gary as sensitive and intelligent yet seemingly unable to develop any real potential for good in himself. He began behaving violently quite early on. Gary dropped out of school when he was fourteen years old and a year later was running a car theft ring.

(Gilmore 122 – 126)

In and out of prison for various crimes over a period of years, Gary committed a robbery one night and killed two men. He was found guilty of both murders. He refused all appeals to which he was legally entitled. His is an historical case. Gary Gilmore was the first man to be executed after the U. S. Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty. Previously in Utah, there had not been an execution in sixteen years. The Mormon teaching about *Blood Atonement* has, according to Gilmore, “proved complex and controversial.” (Gilmore 17)

Gilmore explains that the church’s martyred founder, Joseph Smith Jr. was a man with remarkable vision. His original concept to his followers emphasised the spilling of blood to show that vengeance had been wreaked on the wrongdoer. The form of execution chosen in that state at that time was by firing squad. (Gilmore 10/11)

Many people in Utah and around the nation sought to stop Gilmore's death but he was, after a number of delays, including an overdose of drugs taken as part of a suicide pact with his girlfriend, finally executed on 17th January, 1977.

(Gilmore 329)

Gilmore's death opened up the option of the death penalty for other crimes and other criminals in the United States. Since 1977 over 1,000 people have been executed and there are, currently, around 3,500 men and women on death row across the country.

According to tradition there are five men on a firing squad but only four rifles are loaded with bullets. The fifth is loaded with a blank so that the riflemen can't know for sure who fired the bullet or the blank.

Mikal Gilmore's uncle had been given the clothes Gary was wearing when he was executed. They had been washed clean of blood and Mikal noted that the black sweatshirt felt soft. His Uncle Vernon pointed out four neat holes to Mikal, holes big enough to fit a finger. Then he showed a fifth hole, set a little apart from the other four. It was obvious that no blank had been used, Mikal concluded that the State of Utah had taken no chances that January morning in 1977. (Gilmore 390)

Gary Gilmore's life and death so interested Norman Mailer that, with the aid of researcher, Larry Schiller, he gathered interview material from various family members, including Gary, plus other documentation, such as trial transcripts, and published a book entitled *The Executioner's Song*, in 1979. This book won for Mailer his second Pulitzer Prize, in 1980.

Gilmore writes about his responses when Schiller asked for an interview, not once but several times:

I always declined those requests - and not always politely ... The simple truth is, I chose to hold a grudge. Also, I questioned the merits of an exhaustive look at my brother's pathology (in fact, I wasn't yet ready to face examining the sources of all that tragedy).

Later, when I read the finished book, I was greatly impressed.

(Gilmore 400)

Mikal Gilmore's compassion for his brother Gary permeates his narrative. His focus remains on the family and the influences of violence on each member of that family. There is no examination of what Gary's crimes meant to the victims' families or what Mikal Gilmore himself thought about these crimes. I think this is a significant oversight or was it a deliberate evasion? It is, as I see it, a responsibility for any author writing from this point of view to keep those victims in mind.

I wanted Gilmore to contemplate the thought that if the reader is to have compassion and understanding for his brother, that compassion and understanding must also extend to the other people who, through no fault of their own, were caught up in this viciously violent web.

Gilmore explains in some detail the long-lasting effects of domestic violence on Gary. He became a target for his father Frank, quite early on in his childhood. Mikal Gilmore's narrative illustrates the inability some children have to move away from those effects:

My brother Frank remembers well Gary's misbehaviour. It was something he lived with daily. "Gary was always in fights," Frank said. "He wouldn't study. He'd come to school dressed in his leather boots and leather jacket, wearing his hair like Marlon Brando. He'd sit down and go to sleep in class. He didn't care about anything. He would get the worst grades he could get. He thought it was cute. And there was no need for it, because Gary was a bright guy. He humiliated the hell out of me at Joseph Lane. By then I had reached an age where I wasn't really interested in being a complete fool, and he was."

(Gilmore 132)

Following this boy's path of self-destruction we can understand that traumatised children like Gary, can live their adult lives, still responding, in ways that aren't always clear, either to themselves or others, to a society that has allowed brutality to happen to them on a continual basis throughout their childhood:

This aspect of Gilmore's narrative is like a bell tolling loudly over my own childhood. Shame about violence in the family will keep children quiet, but at the same time, they are probably longing for someone to step in and resolve the situation, magically if possible, like the stories they read or watch on television, where right is right and wrong is wrong and good always surfaces in the end. I know I often felt that way.

In *Tainted Fruit* I write about hurrying down to the police station one day to get someone to stop my father from beating up my mother. My anger at that policeman, perceiving him as a representative of what I saw as an uncaring society, stayed with me for the next three decades, an unsorted knot of feelings waiting to be unpacked. I came to understand,

finally, that people weren't against me, they were simply living for themselves.

After Gary's execution, Lawrence Schiller made a generous offer. He suggested Mikal borrow the original interview tapes. Schiller thought that hearing the tapes might broaden Gilmore's 'emotional sense of the story'. (Gilmore 401)

This listening process helped Gilmore move beyond his sense of detachment and elicited a response in him to know more about his family's history, including the Mormon history and his brother's crimes. Gilmore is mindful of how his detachment shaped him:

I am going to make a confession. I never knew anything about how my parents met, or much about the early life of my family, until after my brother Gary died. I suppose it says something about my detachment, but all I really knew much about were the family's legends of mystery and death. (Gilmore 53)

Mikal turned to his brother Frank to help him remember and fill in gaps about events that had happened before he was born. There can be no doubt that the writing of this book, and the lengthy process that entailed, was a talking-cure for Frank and Mikal, especially Mikal. He must have dragged himself through emotional muck and mire to write in such an honest way. Like Merv Lilley, he addresses the brutality of his father with a powerful clarity that spares no family member, including himself, as he examines cause and effect. Consciousness-raising this book is, in its aim to tear down the widely held belief that the family by its very existence is a place of safety and sanctity for *all* children.

Gilmore's story is pitched somewhere between an intimate knowledge of characters and events and a teasing out of the perplexities that could make two boys from this same family (Gary and Gaylen) follow a violent, self-destructive path and the other two (Frank and Mikal) choose something different, even though they too, carried a legacy of childhood pain and anguish.

On a visit to see Gary in prison in the period when Gary was conducting a campaign to get himself executed, he offered Mikal a t-shirt, emblazoned with the words *Gilmore – Death Wish*, explaining that Mikal might even wear it on the morning of Gary's execution and later auction it off to the highest bidder. Mikal told Gary he wasn't sure the t-shirt would be of any use to him. Gary's reply, older brother to younger sibling, has a nasty ring to it "Well," he drawled, smiling, "it's a little big for you, but I think you could grow into it." (Gilmore 335)

Again, like Merv Lilley, Mikal Gilmore shows that his attitude and thinking is different. He may have grown up in this family but his outlook is not shaped by his father or his brother Gary.

The older family members are larger than life characters and there are issues wrapped around them that compel me to strip away some of the trappings. Mikal Gilmore's father Frank, for example, grew up believing he was the illegitimate son of a Hungarian Jewish immigrant, Ehrich Weiss, better known worldwide as escapologist and magician, Harry Houdini.

Houdini married Beatrice Rahner in 1894. They had no children. Frank never questioned this story about his father and though he used the surname Gilmore, he did not think of it as his. His mother, Fay Gilmore, was a singer and dancer. She and her sisters performed in many venues around the same period Houdini was entertaining audiences and gathering a following of admirers. It is possible that through her work she might have met Harry Houdini.

Fay was the aggrieved party in a divorce case against Frank's father, Harry Gilmore, and her story made it into the Nebraska State Journal in February 1893. She stated that she'd married Harry in July, 1886 and ever since that time he had neglected to provide any support for her. Their first son Clarence had been born in 1887 and died in 1890. Frank, was born a few weeks after Clarence's death. (Gilmore 71)

Gilmore describes his grandmother's fictions as troubling:

Why would she have invented the legend of an illegitimate birth for her son, and why would she have kept the myth alive for the rest of her life? Obviously the cost to Frank Gilmore was immense, and the cost did not end with him. I've thought at times that Fay might have devised the story to redeem her own disappointments.

(Gilmore 72)

Fay Gilmore sent her son off to one boarding school after another and had him living with her for brief periods only. It may be that she feared losing him as she'd lost Clarence. Gilmore writes: "Better to keep a child distant than to love and bury him. Frank Gilmore was denied all right - by everybody. He grew up without a father and a mother."

(Gilmore 73)

Mikal's mother Bessie, told her sons impassioned stories about Mormonism's early struggle for survival in the United States and in particular the story of Joseph Smith Jr. Gilmore provides an historical perspective:

Smith would build his entire complex theology on what was essentially a dilemma of bloodline: how one might redeem the dreams and debts of one's heritage, or else perish as the result of unfinished curses. By the time this question reached my own family, it had become a matter of fatal consequence.

(Gilmore 12)

Mormonism is a ghostly presence in this story and it is Bessie and later, her sons who are haunted by the history, the myths, the superstitions and the Mormons' attitude towards the death penalty. Bessie relates often an account of a morning when she was about six years old. Her father had loaded his nine children into the family wagon and taken them to a meadow not far from the state prison. They had been brought to watch an execution. A few months before her death, and after her own son's execution, Bessie told her youngest son more about that day:

... right before the trapdoor was pulled, her father had grabbed her by the hair and yanked hard, forcing her to watch the man as he dropped into death. She said that on the ride back, she decided that she would never forgive her father and that she would live a life to spite his hard virtue. As she told me this, she wore a look of pure hatred on her face - her eyes were wide with the inflamed stare of one who has had to see things that one should never have to see.

(Gilmore 47)

He concludes this same paragraph with a sense of worrying wonderment: “Had some horrific fate been born in that moment, and had it found its final, awful consequences some fifty-odd years later in the murders that my brother would commit, and in his own blood being spilled on the land that raised my mother?” (Gilmore 47)

And yet, as Mikal continues his research, he learns that his mother’s story cannot be true. There were no semi-public executions in the state of Utah after about 1919, and no hangings at all during his mother’s childhood. Although there had been twelve executions, in each case a firing squad had been the means of death and each was carried out away from public view, in Utah’s Sugarloaf prison. Lies, lies and more damning lies. (Gilmore 47)

Remembering the sweatshirt Gary Gilmore wore the day of his execution, my story and my history too, is riddled with holes, left by lies, and, like Mikal Gilmore, I have had to sift through the powdery residue to detect meaning and motivation for those lies. I have always seen them as a symptom of something deeper, something that is, at times, unfathomable.

Gilmore understands that his mother’s execution story is a myth but also a horrible kind of prediction: “What had really happened to her that gave her such an overpowering fear of *Blood Atonement*, and how did it happen that her fear would be transformed into a near prophecy of how her favourite son would die?” (Gilmore 48)

Gilmore felt that he and Gary had to find a place for themselves in the story - to be either the condemned man or the witness. Unwittingly, consciously or unconsciously, they

made their choice - Gary the condemned man, Mikal the unwilling witness. Perhaps in this apocryphal tale the executioner represents the pain and destruction passed on via our parents, generation after generation?

In the process of writing this book, Mikal Gilmore realises that his mother wanted to punish her kin and her homeland and that she may have looked to her son Gary with that in mind:

Perhaps he was the one who might act out her rage for her, and avenge all the years of abuse and exclusion she had suffered during life in Utah. If ever a mother had a son who might pay back the legacies of her past, then that alliance was Bessie and Gary Gilmore. I remember my mother once telling me: "Gary was the criminal. I'd like you to be the lawyer. Your brothers will need a good and caring mind."

(Gilmore 9)

So vivid is Gilmore's portrayal of these three people, you could easily imagine them striding through the pages of a great novel, tattered fragments of their history trailing behind them. But there is one person in this story that is indeed, a tragic figure. Frank, the eldest son, disappears, it seems, beneath the noisy drama created by his brothers Gary and Gaylen, a man so weighted down with hopelessness, so lacking in substance he could easily slip between the cracks of a concrete path as his brothers go thundering past.

Frank was drafted into the army in 1965, during the build up to the Vietnam war. He had immediately applied for the status of a conscientious objector because of his religion but

this had been refused. Other soldiers made him the butt of jokes and senior officers did nothing to halt the bullying behaviour. Frank tried to become a medic but the prejudice of his superiors made that impossible. When he attempted to argue his case, he was sent to the stockade to await a court martial. Three months later, he was sentenced to three years at Fort Leavenworth.

There was no money to fight this injustice. His mother had spent whatever she had on Gary's latest court battle. Frank was released after nineteen months, the reduced term an indication that he had been treated unfairly. He was given a small amount of money and a ride into town and from there made his own way home by bus. (Gilmore 260-269)

The dynamics in a violent family are often manipulative, father to son, mother to son, brother to brother. The aim is to keep anyone who might stray hog-tied to the family's dilemmas and crises. Gilmore illustrates this point well with the following story.

One day Frank brought a girlfriend home to meet his mother. He was already feeling beaten and betrayed. Gaylen had stolen a sum of money from Frank's room. It was all Frank had, but there he was, still hoping for the best. He introduced this woman he had met at church, to his mother. Her response was to scream abuse at him, to tell him to get that whore out of her house, right now.

Later, Frank tells Mikal that the look on his girlfriend's face as his mother spoke those words, had lain between them, an obstacle too huge to climb over. Frank's mother ruined his one chance for happiness that day, for love, for having a family. He tells Mikal that he was never close to a woman after that. (Gilmore 270/271)

Frank reminds me of my brother Tim. I think in his early years Tim was already a defeated boy. I suspect he remained that way beyond childhood and even throughout the period he served as a soldier, first in Korea and then Malaysia, (as it was known back then). A single man, away from Australia for the best part of ten years, Tim's recreation time was spent mostly in Japan. The man who returned home in 1962, twenty-seven years old, was understandably, a different person but it took me a while to realise how damaged he was. The passages written about Frank are, for me, the most poignant in the book.

Gilmore has divided the story into seven sections:

Part 1 Mormon Ghosts

Part 2 The Black Sheep and the Denied Son

Part 3 Brothers

Part 4 The Way Some People Die

Part 5 Blood History

Part 6 The Valley of Tears

Part 7 Epilogue

There is no uniform length for each section. The first is only forty pages and the longest covers 104 pages and nine chapters. Whilst each section has a focus, Gilmore weaves the multiple strands of his narrative in and out of the chapters. Context and relevance are uppermost in his mind as he moves backwards and forwards in time.

Sometimes, in my writing process for *Tainted Fruit* I have felt as though I was in some kind of horse buggy with nine horses pulling me along. The horses are not lined up two by two, in the conventional way, instead they are in one long row of nine spreading out

like a fan and it's a struggle to hold the reins, each a different length. There's a narrow bridge ahead and all I can hear is the sound of thundering hooves as I struggle to keep control.

It is the sheer volume of material and how to contain it that informs that image. I wonder if Gilmore had a similar kind of image in his mind while he was writing this book. The text on the page is dense, tightly packed, but the writing is always accessible, and he establishes a no-holds-barred connection between writer and reader.

Gilmore talks *to* his reader not *at* them. I think his narrative could be a boat, not too grand, about the size of a sturdy fishing launch. In this vessel Gilmore carries the reader along with him, down a fast-moving river. It would be wrong though, to think he writes simplistically, it is more that he was aiming for a wide audience.

Gilmore could be one of the three witches in Shakespeare's play, Macbeth, stirring the cauldron, muttering all the while:

Eye of newt, and toe of frog,

Wool of bat, and tongue of dog.

Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,

Lizard's leg, and howlet's wing

For a charm of powerful trouble,

Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

(Act IV, Scene I)

The witches used these ingredients in their cauldron. They were, in essence, symbolic representations of flawed human traits in the play's characters. The witches saw trouble brewing. In Gilmore's family, he, the fourth son, is denied the advantage of foresight. His insights must inevitably be retrospective but no less powerful, as he clearly identifies those ingredients and stirs them into his narrative.

Some commentators have described his book as harrowing. For this reader, with a similar history, it holds up a mirror on my own life. I see in Gilmore's narrative a reflection of the shame and embarrassment I have felt about my family, the efforts at trying, somehow, any way possible, to keep the taint of these violent people at bay. People like me need stories like this.

Chapter Six

A view from over the fence

(Distanced Narrator's point of view)

Usually, it is journalists who write books as distanced narrators, about a specific case or criminal matter. These authors may meet a particular individual - either victim or perpetrator in the course of their work, and can quickly see the elements of a story just begging to be written. John Silvester, for example, had written a newspaper article about Mark Brandon Read and, when Read wrote in response to that article, Silvester would have recognised the opportunity of corresponding with this man, and the possibility of a book. (See chapter three).

Narrators in this category may bring forth a new slant on an old, forgotten murder or be chasing down details of a case that has captured headlines around the world. And if that story is set in outback Australia and features a winsome looking female victim who managed to outwit the perpetrator, then the motivation to be the first to get their book published, can be very strong indeed.

In Darwin, during November 2005, five writers, four of them journalists, attended a much publicised trial. These writers were 1) Robin Bowles, celebrated Australian author of three true crime books, 2) Roger Maynard, Sydney correspondent for *The Times* in the

UK, 3) Sue Williams, free lance journalist writing for various newspapers in Australia, 4) Richard Shears, stringer for the London *Daily Mail* newspaper, and 5) Paul Toohey, a journalist working for *The Australian*.

The man in the dock was Bradley John Murdoch, a truck driver, charged with murdering English backpacker, Peter Falconio, and also attempting to abduct his girlfriend, Joanna Lees. Each of these five writers launched a book about what became known as *the Falconio case* soon after the trial ended. This example alone suggests there is a growing market for such books.

I believe there is an additional question that needs to be raised in this chapter, about this particular point of view. A reader might easily assume that the distanced narrator works with a more objective point of view but is that really so? To explore this question I want to first look at another book to illustrate how this aspect is crucial to my analysis.

In the first chapter of his book *Mercy*, Australian journalist Mick O'Donnell, describes how he received two, significant, middle-of-the-night phone calls, during a period in 1997, when he was in the planning stage of a book. The first was from the father of one of two British nurses in Saudi Arabia, charged with the murder of a colleague, Australian nurse, Yvonne Gilford. This father wanted O'Donnell to intervene with the dead nurse's brother in South Australia, and ask him not to push for the death penalty, as was the family's right under Saudi law. This father was pleading for his daughter's life.

The second phone call came from another nurse in Saudi Arabia. She had worked with the victim and the two accused. Distressed by the death of her friend, she believed in the

guilt of the two British women and wanted nothing short of the death penalty for them, suitable punishment she insisted, for such a gruesome murder.

Although it was reported that these two British nurses had used the dead woman's credit cards the day after her death, it was never clear that they had killed her. The evidence was at best, circumstantial. There were other lines of investigation that were written about in various newspapers at the time, that suggested local people may have been involved. The Saudi police seemed reluctant, some reports claimed, to follow any investigative trail that might involve Saudi nationals. Instead, the Saudi government and the local police made it known in various press statements and interviews, that these two British women were the only suspects. (O'Donnell 1 - 4)

O'Donnell wrote at the end of this first chapter:

Both sides demanded the true story be told; neither conceded any truth in the other's protestation of guilt or innocence. And so, over many months, in pursuing the truth about the death of Yvonne Gilford, I wandered between these two poles, from belief in guilt to belief in innocence - and back again. This is the story of my own pendulum of belief and where it finally came to rest.

(O'Donnell 4)

That *pendulum of belief* is very important in a book such as O'Donnell's. He did not uncover any new evidence, and his interviews and informal conversations with various involved individuals are more opinion than fact, yet O'Donnell concludes, quite forcefully, that the nurses were guilty:

I believe the two women were guilty. This is an opinion based on hearsay. It is untested in court. The opinions and accounts I have heard from others have not been subject to rigorous cross-examination.

My knowledge is not based on pub gossip; it is the gleanings of many interviews with individuals whose claims I have cross-checked with others. Too many of Debbie and Lucy's 'facts' don't stack up. All is never quite what it seems.

(O'Donnell 313)

Interesting and informative as his unfolding story is, in choosing to judge the nurses as he did, I feel that O'Donnell compromised his credibility and seemed to have overlooked the importance of allowing the reader to decide on the matter of innocence or guilt.

If we imagine that pendulum of belief swinging in a wide arc across the pages of the two books I look at in this chapter, a pendulum that stretches from one end marked *Victim* and across to the other end marked *Perpetrator*, I can then discuss where the pendulum has come to rest in each writer's work.

Girls Like You

Four young girls, six brothers and a cultural timebomb

Paul Sheehan is a senior journalist and columnist for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. His work has appeared in various American magazines and Australian newspapers. He had already published two books before writing this one.

His story opens with an incident on the Anzac Bridge in Sydney, Saturday 10th April, 2004. Two brothers, Tom and Marcus Patterson, hail a cab. They have been drinking since 10am that morning. On the bridge, a hotted up Suburu car with an unusual number plate, ONDOLE, pulls alongside. The Pattersons are drunk with bravado. They take exception to the loud music they can hear belting out from the other car's speakers. One of them jerks his thumb upwards in a rude gesture, the other shouts out through the open back window. The Suburu swerves in front of the taxi, forcing the driver to brake hard.

Tom and Marcus close the back windows and shrink down in the seat whilst three of the four men from the other car, one of them armed with a pipe, jump out and accost the driver. He hurriedly grabs a screwdriver from the glove box before getting out of the taxi. Sheehan tells us this driver is a Jordanian immigrant and in the Suburu that night were two teenagers, Yusef K, and Junior K. It is Junior K who wielded the pipe. Their four older brothers are in jail for gang rape. Sheehan's motivation in writing this book is to tell the story behind those rapes.

He does not tell us who it was that lay dying on the bridge that night, though we learn that the taxi driver had been hit so badly with the pipe it had split in two as it was thumped down on his shoulders. But the scene has been set. Readers know right from the opening pages that these K brothers are the bad men, violent and volatile.

(Sheehan 3 - 10)

Following this first, oddly placed chapter, Sheehan goes on to document the gang rapes, the subsequent court trials and the unfairness of the legal system regarding the treatment of the victims.

The four K brothers, Sami, Amir, Mustapha and Rashid, came from Pakistan. A fifth perpetrator, Ram Shrestha, was born in Nepal. One of the victims was Maori, the others were Anglo-Australian.

Following so soon after an earlier gang rape that was much publicised in the media, the slant taken by the media on the K brothers' trial - Muslims against Anglo-Australian girls, resonated throughout the trial and also in Sheehan's book.

Rashid and Mustapha were schoolboys at the time these crimes were committed and so, in accordance with the law, their identities had to be protected. This meant protection had to be extended to all four brothers. (Sheehan 13)

Clever use has been made of court transcripts. It is reasonable to assume there has been an editing process to transform the dialogue from the courtroom to the page, and this process has worked effectively.

Layout is an important feature of this narrative. In many instances, cross examination of witnesses is shown line by line. On page 112, there is a running list of answers given by one of the defendants. The questions by the Crown have been omitted. This places

emphasis on the answers. The layout adds to that emphasis:

‘No’

‘No’

‘It wasn’t me.’

‘No’

‘No.’

(Sheehan 112)

The list continues in the same vein for another eight answers. Another strategy is to occasionally show the defendant’s answers in capital letters:

‘SHUT UP, YOU BITCH!

‘SHUT UP, YOU FUCKING SLUT!’

‘GIRLS LIKE YOU, I KNOW HOW TO FIX THEM UP.’

(Sheehan 9)

Here again the aim may be to provide emphasis but it also adds a shrill quality to the text:

‘HELP ME!’

She was hysterical.

‘HELP ME!’

(Sheehan 45)

Sheehan adopts a fly-on-the-wall perspective when describing the rapes. One scene comprises five pages in all and reads like pornography. Others are not quite as long but

are written in a similar way. (Sheehan 50)

I can only wonder what Sheehan's purpose was in providing such humiliating detail of the victims' experience. He does not mention that he had interviewed the victims or that he had permission from them to write so freely. The source list at the back of the book shows only court documents, so it is likely that this material was taken from transcripts. Might Sheehan have also elaborated for greater impact? The pace is racy and reads like a novel. Was that his intention? Who was his intended audience?

Was he aware that many readers, especially female readers, might look upon this material as soft porn? I cannot imagine any of the victims would appreciate such explicit accounts in print and even the thought that people they knew might read about the extent of their ordeal could be painfully embarrassing, and continue the sexual abuse. For this reason I decided against quoting from any of these scenes.

Sheehan has been scrupulous though, in his portrayal of the victims' bravery in court. For me, this is the most commendable aspect of his book. One victim, Tegan Wagner, was fourteen years old on the night she was raped by three of the brothers. She had gone to their home on 14th June, 2002, believing she had been invited to a party. The invitation was simply a ruse to get Tegan and her two friends to the house where the brothers lived.

Condensing material from his book for an article that appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald, July 22nd, 2006, Sheehan wrote about Tegan's ordeal in the pre-trial period:

Tegan Wagner was only 14 when it happened. More than three years has passed since then. She was now 17, and trying to do her Higher School Certificate, but the trial had been delayed nine times. Each delay was for a different reason: too much publicity, or was it Ramadam, or the accused needed new legal counsel, or the accused needed a psychiatric evaluation, or the accused has just sacked counsel, and on and on. There were many arguments for delay, but only one real reason - to wear down the victim. (SMH 22nd July, 2006)

Then came the trial: "Tegan Wagner, a seventeen-year old schoolgirl, had not broken down on the stand through three days and 1971 hostile questions and sordid accusations." (Sheehan 256)

Tegan Wagner chose to reveal her identity. She made this decision in the hope that her experience might encourage other women who have been sexually assaulted to speak out. On 10th April, 2006, she was interviewed on ABC Radio, by Richard Glover. I heard that interview and was heartened enormously by all that she had to say, especially these comments:

These boys did try and turn this into a racial issue and tried to say that I was prejudice (sic) against Muslims. But this wasn't about culture, this was about abuse

against women and the fact that they had the nerve to bring in culture to begin with just astounds me. These boys are just a small percentage of bad people that exist within any culture. (Richard Glover Drive program, ABC 702)

Sheehan was also concerned about Deputy Senior Crown Solicitor, Margaret Cunneen. In the 2005 Sir Ninian Stephen lecture, Cunneen gave at the University of Newcastle Law School, Cunneen described herself as a public servant for twenty-eight years, a footsoldier in our legal system. The emphasis Cunneen placed on the legal system in that lecture, concerned the way victims are treated by lawyers acting for the defendants - in these instances, perpetrators of violent gang rapes. She described details where, in two separate cases, evidence was successfully suppressed following arguments made in court by the respective defence lawyers. Sheehan quotes from her speech:

It has often been said by the High Court in decisions disallowing a portion of class evidence in a criminal case, that it is contrary to the public interest to allow public confidence to be eroded by a concern that the court's processes may lend themselves to oppression and injustice.

What must not be lost in the rhetoric of the criminal law and our zeal to afford every possible protection to accused persons is the fact that every time a guilty person is acquitted, the law, in a sense, has failed the community it exists to serve.

(Sheehan 325)

Perhaps it was these next three lines of her lecture that so upset two prominent members of the defence bar, Mr Chris Murphy and Mr John Marsden:

There seems to be a fashion, among some in the criminal justice system, for a kind of misplaced altruism that it is somehow a noble thing to assist a criminal to evade conviction. (Sheehan 325)

Professor Ted Wright, Dean of Law at Newcastle University, described Cunneen's speech, as 'one of the best Sir Ninian Stephen lectures ever' but Murphy and Marsden, immediately lodged formal complaints against Cunneen with the Legal Services Commissioner, and the Bar Association, *and* the Director of Public Prosecutions. Marsden described Cunneen as 'a disgrace to our profession' claiming she had brought the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions into disrepute. (Sheehan 326/327)

In conveying this related information to the reader, Sheehan highlights for us how difficult it can be to speak out about the treatment of rape victims, and the damning evidence that could be presented in court to assist the perpetrators.

Cunneen failed five years in a row to be appointed senior counsel but was finally promoted October 2007. In April that year the Daily Telegraph carried an article by journalist Lisa Davies, about Cunneen being removed as prosecutor from a gang rape trial after the accused man and his lawyer Mr Haesler, objected to her running the case:

The unprecedented decision by the Court of Criminal Appeal last month can only

now be revealed after a juvenile known as MG, who is serving 15 years jail for two other gang rapes, was yesterday acquitted at his retrial of charges of repeatedly assaulting a young woman, Miss C - in August, 2000.

Ms Davies concludes the article with reference to that lecture back in 2005:

Further, he argued her lecture at the University of Newcastle in September, 2005, in which she referenced the rapes of Miss C, had jeopardised an unbiased jury “ The accused can have no confidence in her impartiality,” Mr Haesler argued.

(Daily Telegraph, 21st April, 2007)

Ram Shrestha was a friend of the K brothers and was arrested with them on rape charges. He had come to Australia to go to university. His parents back in Nepal had not heard from him for quite some time. By the time he did phone them he had already been tried, found guilty and was in prison awaiting his sentence.

How painful it would be for any parent to hear news like this over the phone, and Mr and Mrs Shrestha did not know that they would never speak to their son again.

Twenty-four hours later, Ram Shrestha used a bed sheet to hang himself. He was twenty-four years old. Sheehan informs us that this death occurred five days after Yusef K and Junior K assaulted the taxi driver on Anzac Bridge. (Sheehan 153/154)

This young man must have felt bad about bringing disgrace upon his family. It's also possible he had more concern for his parents than his victims but the decision to take

his own life indicates that he could not maintain the same level of arrogance that the K brothers exhibited, not only at the time of the rapes, but after they were arrested and during the court proceedings.

It was surely arrogance that allowed them to believe they could commit these violent acts in their own home, time and time again, and not run the risk of being caught. It was surely arrogance that allowed them to believe that threatening further violence to victim after victim, if they dared to go to the police, could work as a long term strategy.

But male arrogance is not confined to any particular category, and Pakistani men, arrogant or otherwise, are not the only perpetrators of rape. Misogyny can breed arrogance, so too can class position. Sheehan includes many examples that illustrate how these brothers grew up feeling superior to women and how brutal they could be. On 3rd January, 2004, Junior K, then fourteen years old, was charged with assault. The victim was his sister. He was enraged when she refused to cook him dinner:

Junior had slapped her across the face, ripped her shirt off, and bashed her across the back with a large cooking spoon. He had kicked her repeatedly in the stomach.

The police record of interview states that during the assault he shouted:

‘SHUT UP, YOU BITCH!’

‘SHUT UP, YOU FUCKING SLUT!’

‘GIRLS LIKE YOU, I KNOW HOW TO FIX THEM!’

Junior was found guilty of occasioning actual bodily harm. (Sheehan 8)

I wished it had been possible for Sheehan to learn more about this sister. She was very brave to take this action against her brother. It would have been enlightening to know more about her position in the family. Interesting too, to know how her decision to seek legal redress fits with what Sheehan has written about the K brothers and their attitude to women.

Sheehan is unable to tell us what response Junior's father, Dr Hasan K, had to his sons' crimes but his loyalty, as described in Sheehan's book, is skewed in their favour, suggesting he too was arrogant, or maybe, in denial. It is possible that this father was genuinely unable to accept that *his* boys were capable of such violence. He maintained that his sons suffered anti-Muslim racism in Australia and it was because of this racism that they had been charged with rape. (Sheehan 14)

Later in the book, Sheehan explains that it was Yusef K who died on the Anzac Bridge, that night in April, 2004. Yet, despite the provocation of Junior and his brother, it was the taxi driver, Abed Hersh, using a screwdriver to protect himself, who was charged with murder. During the committal hearing the Patterson brothers' testimony did little to help the accused. It was evident that their actions that night had brought about the scene of violence, but their recollection of what happened, once the men got out of the Suburu, was hazy. As a witness for the prosecution, Junior K told a story that cast he and his brother as hapless victims.

Sheehan makes good use of real people in his story. For example, he tells us how a detective involved in the investigation, sat in the court room throughout the proceedings, listening as Junior K lied repeatedly in the witness box. This detective was shocked when the magistrate announced his decision that Hersh was to go to trial for murder. He was even more stunned to hear the magistrate describe Junior K as a credible witness. Perhaps it is through real life characters such as this police officer that Sheehan makes room for his reader's emotions. The detective responds in a way that a member of the public might respond. In effect, he serves as our representative. (Sheehan 174 -185)

Sheehan deftly weaves in the story of Hersh, and how his life became a Kafkaesque nightmare. Brought to trial in July 2005, the case was almost over, and the jury about due to report back their verdict, when one of the jurors wrote a note to the judge querying the instructions given. The gist of this juror's query was that surely the onus should have been on the defence to prove innocence, not the other way around. He now wanted clarification and listed a number of questions. The judge declared a mistrial. Sheehan writes: "One juror was confused, and one entire jury trial collapsed under the weight of this confusion." (Sheehan 284/285)

Hersh's second trial took place in February, 2006. Junior K again appeared as a witness for the Crown but this time his testimony was quickly discredited. And the defence had found other, reliable witnesses, including a woman who had had an earlier road rage incident with Junior K. She testified that he had threatened to have her killed, had used

his fingers to mime her being shot at and had used his vehicle to cut in front of hers when she tried to drive on. She had been very scared, she said.

On the ninth day of the trial, the judge gave his instructions to the jury before the mid-morning break, making it clear that he did not want them to return their verdict before 2pm. Sheehan notes that the judge must have been expecting a prompt result. It was all over by 3pm. Abed Hersh walked away from court a free man, twenty two long months after the affray on the Anzac bridge. He and Paul Sheehan had dinner together that night, celebrating with banana smoothies. (Sheehan 347-351)

I use these references about Abed Hersh to point to a challenge that Sheehan had to resolve. The Anzac bridge incident, occurring when it did, *after* the events Sheehan wanted to write about, was a key element, depicting the short-fused rage responses in Junior K, and including him, though he was not charged as a rapist, as another violent brother in this Pakistani family. Sheehan would also have wanted to show how crime affects many people and can, as happened here, cause a victim to be perceived as a violent criminal.

The first chapter does seem an odd opening. Hersh's story disappears from view for what seems like long periods of narrative time, but I doubt that anyone could have resolved this dilemma easily. Sheehan saw Junior K's crimes and Hersh's experience as

crucial to his story and needed to create a structure to accommodate the time line.

But what are we to think about descriptions such as these?

His boiling eyes and hooked nose terrified Cassie. (Sheehan 33)

... wild-eyed accused rapist. (Sheehan 123)

... street-rat tactics (Sheehan 208)

... foul-mouthed accused (Sheehan 247)

Hook nose and his brother (Sheehan 260)

Do such descriptions create a *Them* and *Us* scenario? Perhaps for Sheehan that was exactly what he perceived. These men were outsiders, *not like us*. I suspect that the rapists themselves provided the motivation for Sheehan to write this book. I think too, that his *pendulum of belief* was always firmly positioned at the Victim end of the spectrum. While this may be a commendable narrative stance exhibiting compassion and outrage for the victims, the above quoted examples suggest Sheehan latched on to cultural stereotypes.

On the front and back covers of the book there is photographic image of a dangerous-looking scorpion. The reference is made clear on page 57 when we become acquainted with Sheridan Goodwin, a solicitor working for the Crown prosecution. Sheehan writes that Goodwin has a tattoo of a scorpion on her right shoulder blade. Almost 200 pages later, we read that Detective Senior Constable Tony Adams, has been the detective in charge of the rape investigations: "He represented the child Protection Agency. He was

the leading scorpion in this long chase. All he saw, as Sami wept in the dock, was a rock spider flushed from its hiding place.” (Sheehan 256)

Sheehan probably thought the image of the tattooed scorpion too good to pass up.

But this image and the earlier noted descriptions raise an obvious question for me. In a narrative such as this, where the rapes committed by these men raised a furore in the press and among politicians, does a writer have a responsibility to be especially careful in the use of imagery, language and description?

And what did Sheehan want to convey to readers when he subtitled his book – “Four young girls, six brothers and a cultural timebomb?” That Islam endorses rape? That Islamic men are a threat to Australian society? That Muslim culture will blow up in the face of multi-cultural Australia? Is Sheehan throwing the argument of this book into what appeared to be (prior to the 2007 Federal election) a rising stream against multi-culturalism? Is he, in the current of *that* political climate, aiming for a reassertion of ideas that have been pinned to an old version of ‘Australian values’? Since the collapse of communism many Western governments, commentators and idealogues have been moving towards a position where the West is defined as against Islam. Might this book be, by implication, a contribution to such a discourse?

I first began to consider complex issues about Islam when I was teaching Asian and Afro-Caribbean students, some of whom were Muslim, at a polytechnic in Lancashire, England, during the period Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa on writer Salman

Rushdie, demanding his assassination. Angry Muslim men, in cities like Leeds and Manchester, organised a series of demonstrations, burning Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*, and threatening violence to him and anyone else they believed might be responsible for the book's insult to their religion.

Those of us on the teaching staff, staunch in our anti-censorship beliefs before this grave situation developed, were forced to question ourselves and each other, sometimes several times a day, as we attempted to listen to and have dialogue with Muslim students who were upset and equally staunch in their belief that an injury had been done to them.

Lisa Appignanesi and Sara Maitland, two writers with strong anti-censorship credentials, promptly compiled and published an anthology of articles in a book entitled *The Rushdie File*. Like many of my colleagues, I read that book hoping for insight and clarification, and though there were points raised that were worthy of consideration, I kept wishing the editors had sought a broader range of views.

Right in the middle of the outcry, I had a birthday and had already organised a Saturday lunch in an Indian restaurant, in Manchester. The famous Oxford Road, begins in the city centre and stretches along past various educational institutions and libraries, on what is known as the *student mile*, the longest student mile in Europe. At a busy intersection, the road takes on a name change and becomes Wilmslow Road. Here, Indian restaurants, crammed shoulder to shoulder on both sides of the street, are

packed with customers of all ages and from a variety of backgrounds, eager to enjoy cheap and plentiful, fine food.

I had invited a few members of staff and students plus friends from London to join me in the Tandoori Kitchen, one of the oldest and finest eating establishments in the whole of the north west of England.

An impromptu demonstration took place that afternoon. We watched from our window seats as the demonstrators marched right past us. The Muslim students did not jump up and join in but their anguish, and the distress of others in the restaurant was clear to see. At our large table, we talked across our cultural divide all afternoon.

I have not forgotten that day or that difficult time. I learned that it is important when confronted with such an issue that politicians, writers, thinkers, teachers et al, not assume the high moral ground. I think it is possible to listen and learn without losing the capacity to recognise the problems.

At the very least, Sheehan has to be held accountable for the inflammatory nature of this book's subtitle, just as we, as writers, must take responsibility for the decisions we make in our writings.

I imagine him as a white knight, one arm spread wide to encircle and protect these tender, young, mostly white, victims, whilst with the other he wields his pen like a

sword, to hold off the invaders, hordes of them, these darker skinned, spider-like, foul-mouthed, hook-nosed rats with boiling eyes, that come here supposedly, with detonators attached to their private parts, ready to blow up at any moment.

I would not have expected Sheehan to express any sympathy for these violent young men, or to swing his pendulum of belief even briefly in their direction, but his own agenda is an issue that can't be ignored. Recently, I talked to two women who had read Sheehan's book. When I asked what they thought about it, both were quick to decry the violence of the rapes and to attribute that violence as being part of Lebanese and Pakistani culture. The book also convinced them that young men from these and other Muslim countries grow up with a contempt for Australian or Western born women.

On another occasion I spoke to a parole officer who read the book, as did many of her work colleagues, because the subject matter was related to their work with offenders. This woman's perceptions were similar to the other two readers. It is obvious to me that Sheehan's book encourages readers to perceive a *them* and *us* situation, and in effect, gives them permission to harbour prejudices and assumptions about Muslim men.

Such books can become best-sellers. I doubt that mine, if published, will be. Sheehan's book does compel me to explore the question about why I write and who I write for. I cannot easily answer these questions but I understand the importance of striving to

write a narrative that gives me the utmost satisfaction, and hopefully, makes a contribution to a more open-ended, wide-ranging discourse.

I think it is appropriate to conclude my comments on Sheehan's book by repeating the last sentence of Tegan Wagner's interview with Richard Glover: "These boys are just a small percentage of bad people that exist within any culture."

Joe Cinque's Consolation

A true Story of Death, Grief And The Law

Before making any comment about this book, I must first explain my reluctance to read anything written by Helen Garner, since 1992, when her earlier book, *The First Stone*, was published.

The subject matter of that book was a sexual harassment incident that occurred at Ormond College, one of the residential colleges attached to the University of Melbourne. Prevented from talking to the women involved in the case, Garner was unable to tell a complete and balanced story. This is a particularly relevant point as the book was promoted as non-fiction, but in reality, was a mixture of fiction and fact.

Garner didn't know the accused perpetrator but felt sympathy for him and wrote him a letter to that effect. The two women who brought the action against this senior member of staff, had heard about that letter, as had many others in and around the campus, and

they refused to be interviewed for her book. Another member of staff, Dr Jenna Mead, also refused to talk to Garner. Dr Mead had given emotional and practical support to the two students and was represented in Garner's book, not as one character, but as many different women, six or seven in total.

Garner's apparent lack of sympathy for the complainants, and the way the Dr Mead characters were used to imply a feminist conspiracy against the perpetrator, brought criticism from many people, including many feminists.

In both *The First Stone* and Joe Cinque's *Consolation*, Garner has placed the emphasis on the storyteller's point of view, in this case herself as *distanced narrator* and used that as a compass to give her bearings and direction. I welcome the intimacy possible with such a narrator, but feel there is an implied ethical responsibility that goes with it.

To employ such a strategy we writers need to make our process clear to our reader. An author's note or a preface in *The First Stone* explaining the challenges *and* the strategies employed to work with those challenges, would have made a big difference.

There are similarities between these two books. 1. Both tell a story about a man and two law students caught up in a legal process. 2. Garner's responses to the women in her two narratives are, at best, ambivalent. 3. Each book challenges Garner to devise ways of covering gaps in her story. 4. Yet another similarity is how she refuses to accept any objective distance for her *distanced narrator* voice, placing herself at the

emotional heart of each story. But this is not a calm voice from within the maelstrom, instead, Garner becomes part of the whirling forces that are spinning around her and inside her.

She heard about Joe Cinque's murder from another journalist in March, 1999 and couldn't understand why the journalist had called her:

'If it's such a great story,' I said, 'how come *you're* not writing it?' 'Look,' said the journalist patiently. 'I can do history. I can do politics. I can even do economics, at a pinch. But I can't do psychology.' He didn't spell it out - you're *interested* in women at the end of their tether - but I saw at once why I was the writer he had called.

Further down the same page Garner continues:

I had recently been forced to acknowledge that *I* was a woman at the end of my tether. I was fifty-five. My third marriage had just collapsed in a welter of desolation.

(Garner 13)

I think it is reasonable to assume that Garner saw a way to write herself out of her miserable emotional state. She begins her narrative with a few lines on an otherwise blank page:

The first time I saw Joe Cinque among his friends and family, the first time I heard his voice, was in the living room of his parents' house in Newcastle, in the winter of 1999. By then, he had already been dead for nearly two years. This is the story of

how I got to know him. (Garner 3)

What follows on the next page is a word for word account of the emergency phone call made to 000 on Sunday 26th October, 1997. Garner has used italics for the dialogue, and establishes an easy method for readers to understand who is talking by noting the dispatcher's words in Bold:

The house he died in, on Sunday 26th October 1997, was not far from Canberra ambulance headquarters. The paramedics would have been able to reach him in a flash, but it took the dispatcher almost twenty minutes to get the right address from the hysterical young woman who placed the 000 call. (Garner 4)

The dispatcher was unflappable and comes across as an experienced person with sound knowledge of first aid. The woman explains right away that a man has taken heroin, and probably overdosed. She seems unable to keep the panic she feels in check, an understandable way to feel given the circumstances, but Garner has already described her to readers as a 'hysterical woman'.

A few years back, my partner and I were minding a friend's house in Darlinghurst, Sydney, and rushed outside one night when we heard screams. In the street were two teenaged girls. One of them was lying on the ground unconscious, the other ran away when I attempted to ask her what had happened. We rang 000 and an ambulance came in a matter of minutes. The ambulance driver told us that the girl would wake up and

probably abuse him for interfering. He gave her an injection and she came around almost immediately, and just like he'd said, she spat venom at him and then hurried away, despite our pleas that she at least stop for a moment and recover.

If anyone had listened to a recording of my phone call to 000 that night they'd have heard panic in my voice but I wasn't hysterical and I don't presume to draw that conclusion about the young woman in Garner's book. She might have been hysterical but that's not apparent in the dialogue. That distinction is, I feel, very important and is an example of how incredibly crucial word choice is in directing readers to perceive what we write in a certain way.

If there is a pendulum above Garner's head as she writes, it is not swinging back and forth along a spectrum between *Perpetrator* and *Victim* but coming to rest in that place where her empathy lies, with the victim and his family. Further along in the book, she explains her position quite openly:

In *The Silent Woman*, her book about the way public opinion has always taken the part of the suicidal poet Sylvia Plath against her husband Ted Hughes, Janet Malcolm makes the Freudian point that we side with the dead 'because of our tie to them, our identification with them. Their helplessness, passivity, vulnerability is our own.' Whatever the reason, I sided with Joe Cinque. I searched for him in all the documents. But every place where he should have been was blank, without scent or colour: a point where nothing resonated. (Garner 178)

In their respective books, Helen Garner and Paul Sheehan do not present the other side of the story nor do they offer any mitigating circumstances. I doubt that the K brothers or their Nepalese friend would have willingly talked to Sheehan, and with so much of their attitude and behaviour on show, he had little need to talk to any of them.

Garner did try but was unable to speak to the female perpetrator of her narrative, that same woman who made the 000 call back in October 1997, but even if she had, I doubt that it would have made much difference. From that opening page on it is clear that Garner had made up her mind, but unlike Sheehan, her means of communicating her stance, given her superior skill as a writer, is so much more subtle.

Twelve months after the publication of her book, Helen Garner and Martha Nussbaum, (philosopher and Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago), appeared together at the Melbourne Writers' Festival, on 27th August, 2005, on a panel, chaired by Hilary McPhee. The session was advertised as Writing, Ethics and Public Engagement.

During that session, Garner explained how in 1999 she had attended the trials of the two women, Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao, both accused of Joe Cinque's murder. Singh was found guilty of manslaughter and received a sentence of ten years with a non-parole period of four years but the charges against Madhavi Rao were dismissed.

She continued her story:

I had high hopes that I'd be able to put together a book this time that was balanced, at least to some degree, that I wouldn't be accused, as I had about my earlier book, *The First Stone*, of having failed to engage with one whole side of the story.

(4, transcript of Festival session)

Garner was inclined to drop the project. She wrote to Joe's parents pointing out that she felt there was a barrier there for her in the women's silence and she was scared to go ahead, fearing 'another public roasting'. But Garner could not have predicted Maria Cinque's response. This woman's pain was great and her confusion even more so, she did not for a moment believe that justice had been done. Garner related what happened when Maria Cinque phoned her:

There was nothing on the line but the sound of her weeping. I was dumb with shame. How could I have thought that when I couldn't bend the story to my will I could just lay it down, apologise for any inconvenience caused, and walk away?

(5, transcript of Festival session)

Motivated in part at least, by a mother's grief, Garner went ahead. Her book offers valuable insights into the anguish of the victim's family, sufficiently so in fact, to be perceived as some form of victim impact statement. Perhaps that is why the University of Wollongong library catalogue shows Garner's book is available in both the general and Law sections of the library. Indeed, when I first went looking for the book in 2005, I found it listed in the Law section only.

Garner's skill as a writer is evident throughout. I would describe her book as literary. I was expecting good use of language but it is not the power of her words that held my attention. I was more aware of the flow. Garner's writing is deceptively simple, linked more to emotional articulation than intellectual persuasion. She has used her writing as though she was creating a suspended walkway flung across a chasm, strong enough to hold her weight as she makes a brave journey into unknown territory.

Despite the qualms she expresses, Garner appears unafraid of the powerful emotions she encounters in others and articulates the lack of knowing how to behave, not just in herself, but in us all when confronted with another person's unbearable pain. Her narrating voice trembles in awe-struck moments, but it is as though she talks sternly to herself at such times, briskly makes a note and then a plan for her next move.

What is missing for me in this narrative is any exploration of Joe Cinque's reasons for staying involved with Anu Singh and I quote again here Garner's words: "... But every place where he should have been was blank, without scent or colour: a point where nothing resonated." (Garner 178)

Joe met Anu at a party in Newcastle in 1995. He was then twenty-four years old. Anu lived in Canberra and Joe began going down there for weekends. He brought her home to meet his parents around the middle of 1996, and announced the news that he and Anu planned to marry the following year. He told his mother Anu had an eating disorder, she was throwing up all the time. He used the word *bulimic*. (Garner 88/89)

I think it is safe to assume that Joe Cinque was aware that his girlfriend had some problems in her life. A former girlfriend, Rebecca, came to see his parents after Joe's death. He had broken off a three year relationship with this young woman, believing then, before he left for a trip overseas, that he was too young to get married. She describes a likable, intelligent fellow who was very anti-drugs and ate a lot of apples. Joe believed that eating apples would keep you healthy. (Garner 321-325)

He may have felt pressure from his parents to act differently in the way he related to Anu, and responded to her phone calls. In one interview with Garner, Mrs Cinque tells of an argument she had with Joe:

““She manipulate. She snap and you go.”” She mimicked her son answering between clenched teeth. ““Don't *say* that Mum! She *doesn't* do that.” I say, “You're your own person. Don't let her control you like this.” “Mum, please - don't make me choose. I love you but she needs me - I have to go there.” (Garner 90)

‘I knew she was no good,’ said Mrs Cinque flatly. Mr Cinque's response at the time had been more philosophical. ‘If she was no good, let *him* find out.’

(Garner 99)

Joe Cinque loved Anu Singh enough to move to Canberra and get a new job, to be with her, to make a life together. He may have been manipulated, he may have been naïve, maybe he needed to be needed, but I don't want to believe that he was a fool. For me, this is such an obvious point to explore. I cannot understand why Garner didn't think so too.

In an effort to gain some understanding of Garner's writing process, I imagined her in a large circular room, furnished only with a desk and a swivel chair. There are many doors and they all look the same. She is no longer sure which door is the exit to the street. Garner has, I tell myself, come here to this room alone, a writer who had recently described herself *at the end of my tether* and her intention is clear. She wants to learn as much as she can about Joe Cinque, his life, his reality, and why he died as he did. She puts down her bag and looks around. Those doors are solid looking and all of them are closed.

Opening one door after another, Garner draws forth scenes. Her writing is vivid and intimate. We are there with her, following her every move. She has written about the people she has met, the victim's family and friends, the opinions and comments of lawyers and policemen, young people who knew both the victim and the perpetrators.

Garner illuminates for us the impact of violent crime on those who have to live with the burden of loss. We cannot turn away, cannot pretend not to have seen the Cinque family writhing in pain. Our consciousness has been pricked. And Garner has so carefully documented her own process. There are times, when she closes one door and prepares herself to open another, and we understand she is reeling under the weight of her own emotions - anger, bewilderment, disbelief and exhaustion, but her purpose, once established, never wanes.

Opening one of the last doors, during February 2003, Garner came upon Justice Crispin. He was the presiding judge in Anu Singh's trial. She had gone to see him in his chambers at the ACT Supreme Court. He greeted her warmly and over tea and biscuits they discussed the case. Justice Crispin explained that in sentencing Anu Singh he had to look at various implications surrounding her *diminished responsibility* defence:

... both her parents were doctors. They were terrified about the way she was behaving. They lugged her to doctors and psychiatrists. And they'd twice tried to have her locked up as an involuntary patient - imagine how frightened you'd have to be about your own child to want to do *that*. (Garner 314)

The judge made it clear to Garner that although *all* versions of opinion agreed that this woman was pretty ill, her degree of mental illness did not bring forth any sympathy. In his opinion, people tended to say, "She's just an awful person, and we'll discount the fact that it may be due to mental illness." (Garner 315)

This is for me a deeply satisfying scene and I applaud Garner for her openness and sensitivity in the way she has reasoned her way through the judge's comments:

Sitting there at the coffee table with this tired, serious, decent man, I felt the self-righteous anger seeping out of me. There was nowhere for me to go with it. All that remained was sorrow, and loss. (Garner 317)

But Garner's questioning goes on, and there are still doors to be opened. What she wants to know is this. When the legal issues are all laid bare and the various documents have been bundled up and tied with red ribbon, where do the victims put the pain, the hatred, the vengeance that is left behind?

Do we just pretend that this anguish doesn't exist? It is a load that can only be shouldered by the sufferer? Is this what tragedy means - that you have to carry it inside you, weighing you down, poisoning you, for the rest of your life?

I remembered what Maria Cinque had said to the judge: 'How am I supposed, your Honour, to go on?' (Garner 319)

How can any of us, faced with the horror of violence, whether it is domestic, random, at the hands of a stranger or friends, cope with such suffering? How are we to go on?

In this narrative, pursuing as she does profound ethical questions, Garner has found a voice, an authentic voice, and has honed a pellucid writing style as she experiments with new forms of perception. Her story exists in a realm that is neither fact nor fiction.

The line between is sometimes so thin as to be invisible, so perhaps it is both. I am learning to understand something about that realm myself but what strikes me most forcefully about Garner's writing is her courage to go where the story takes her. She trembles at times with the enormity of the task, demanding much of herself but all the while challenging the notion of what makes a good story.

Chapter Seven

Shame on me

(My point of view)

Shame, a figment of my imagination, is a crazed, wounded being that has become over time, a stalker shadowing my adult life, sometimes at a discreet distance, or as a ghostly presence, other times as a slobbering, repulsive beast that sticks close to my heels and will not go away.

Shame is an ever-constant reminder that choosing as I have, to be consciously aware, I must live with an internalised reproach that stems from my family and my place in that family. I came to this DCA project with an acute understanding that *shame* was my starting point.

It has always been my intention to write about my grandmother's life. I have tried often, to imagine the challenges she faced. The chapters about her, as Beatrice, were the most enjoyable to write in this book. She lived for many years in the Sydney suburb of Paddington and one of my first research tasks was to find out more about this area in the era of the 1920s, 30s and 40s.

At the Sydney Town Hall Archives I looked at rate assessment books for the years 1933 -1948. This was partly due to my interest in a particular property in Ward 3,

Paddington. In that suburb in that period there were at least two houses in two different streets with a quaint street number. Any observant passer by walking along Stewart Street, near Paddington Town Hall in the 1930s, would have seen number 67 and right next door, number 67½. Today these two numbers are 67A and 67B.

I was tempted to use that Stewart Street example but opted instead for the actual address where I knew my grandmother had lived in the 1940s - 15 Norfolk Street.

In the first half of the last century, houses in many areas of Paddington were known as *residential*s which meant a tenant could rent a house from the owner and then, without any further legal requirements, sublet rooms or parts of the house, earning more than the rental amount paid to the owner. These *residential* areas were linked closely to two tram routes that passed through Paddington and then onto the city.

In the Mitchell and State Libraries I continued reading about the 1930s and learning about the way unemployed people were treated during the Depression years by the Labor Party in general, and Premier Jack Lang in particular. Additional information came from Manly Library. Oral research interviewers had completed more than one hundred interviews with people who had been living in the Manly-Harbord area during the 1920s, 30s and 40s, with particular emphasis on the years of the Great Depression. I was allowed access to the typed up transcripts, and listened to a number of the CD recordings as well. This material proved extremely valuable in fleshing out my knowledge of that period.

My grandmother married when she was seventeen in 1902. I doubt that she ever knew that her husband had lied about his age and maybe his marital status too. In the 1920s he ran away to Queensland but returned to Sydney to live with Beatrice some time in the early 1940s. She found out that he'd been married (bigamously) in Queensland only when the grown up daughter of that marriage came looking for him.

Beatrice was a feisty woman. I could not imagine her as a victim. I kept asking myself what if things were slanted another way? Domestic violence seemed banal as a starting point but I had seen my own mother beaten to a pulp on many occasions and my father had, for sixteen years, made my life a living hell too. If it was lived experience it surely had a place on the page. Drawing on my own memories of domestic violence as a writer, I wondered if a woman from that earlier generation, desperate like Beatrice, might have taken matters into her own hands. I also wanted to go back in history and trace a different story.

Some years ago, during the period when I was living in England, I was appalled to read in the newspapers about a judge in Leeds, who had decided one Friday afternoon, that a man appearing before him on a murder charge could have his guilty plea reduced to manslaughter on the basis that the man's wife had nagged him. The judge handed down a suspended sentence. The following Monday this same judge presided over another murder trial. This time the defendants were two teenaged girls and the victim was their father. Documented proof from police and doctors tabled in court attested that the girls and their mother had been subjected to years and years of sexual and physical abuse by this man. The judge upheld the charge of murder and sentenced each sister to ten

years in prison.

I began to think then about the merits of justice for domestic violence victims in a court of law and how that might compare with vigilante action. How might these issues be written about in a short story or a novel? It seemed relevant and important to me to consider these issues as subject matter for this book.

It has been my intention as a writer, as a feminist, to illuminate these issues but to avoid any approach that might be thought of as didactic.

My grandmother has been, and still is, an inspiration to me. But I know that I write for my mother. In saying this I mean that if, years ago, my mother could have read the sort of material that I strive to write, maybe her life and mine would have been less painful. My mother was an avid reader and she is always there in the back of my mind, one of the women readers I'd like to reach. My mother serves as a reminder, too, that I begin my craft from a background of working class experience.

In the mid 1970s, I became interested and then involved with a number of feminist campaigns to do with refuges and domestic violence. It was an educative process that prompted me to think about women's lives from a wider perspective.

Feminism has, in so many ways, taken me away from my working-class origins. Yet the fact remains that I am shaped and somehow still defined by that background and I have no wish to demolish that shape or cast off that definition. To do so would be to reject who I have been, to deny my experience, and to diminish what I have gained from that background.

In my second and last year at high school, I wrote my first play. It wasn't very good. What *was* important about the experience was that I readily accepted the discipline necessary to write over a lengthy period of time. The story was about a widowed man pretending to be seriously ill in order to keep his teenaged daughters at home, and at his beck and call.

Rather than create a single focus of bad father and one long-suffering child, I created a cast of four daughters with differing feelings of regard for their parents. My teacher was enthusiastic and persuaded a group of us to perform the play at school. Discussing the work in class afterwards, I understood that I had so diffused the points I wanted to make, I had confused rather than enlightened my audience.

I didn't consciously set out to use newspaper stories as a means of thinking about all this but that's what happened when I read a story in a Sydney newspaper about a bus conductress and her son, the child known only as Baby Murphy. Within hours of giving birth, the mother had been advised (and probably pressured - this was the 1950s) to give her child up for adoption. Although she resisted this idea she did agree that the child could be fostered until she could work out how to manage the challenge of holding down a job and looking after her son. In the meantime Baby Murphy was put in the care of a childless married couple, from the Central Coast of NSW.

Six weeks after accepting this foster child into their home, the couple asked for permission to adopt him. There was just one hitch - Miss Murphy still refused to sign the consent form. Before the boy was even six months old, the case had gone to court and made front page headlines.

The night I read that the fostering couple had been granted custody of the baby, I went to bed with a heavy heart, concerned about this mother who had lost her son. I point to that night too, as a moment of consciousness-awakening - I didn't think in class terms back then but I would say that this story alerted me to look at the world differently, with a working-class understanding that I developed with greater clarity over time.

My newspaper cuttings, carefully creased and folded, were kept in a book alongside my bed. I returned to this story many times over, imagining how each of the three adults might tell Baby Murphy their side of the story when he was old enough to ask questions. No matter how much I tried to distance myself from the baby's mother though, I kept coming back to her, my empathy firmly attached to her point of view. Young though I was, I did realise even then that the experiences of ordinary people could have a powerful impact on readers. The origins of my intentions as a writer, to raise issues in my writing, stem from the Baby Murphy story and each of the three books I have written about my family have been, in effect, my *talking cure*.

Throughout my teens I wrote fiction and poetry but that activity was private. I kept my notebooks hidden in a cupboard and never talked about what I was writing to anyone. I think I lacked the vision to think of myself as a writer. Sometime after my twenty-third birthday, I stopped writing altogether, but I could not deny a sense of fun with language, savouring words like *languid* or *autumnal* and enjoying the way they felt between my tongue and lips. The sound of a word has always been important to me and I was, and still am, quick to spot misspellings and odd uses of pronunciation on public transport and various forms of advertising.

I had no idea that mentally, I had been running a marathon since I was thrown out of my parent's house at the age of sixteen. In my mid-twenties, my pace slackened, almost to a standstill. My imagination, always active, went into overdrive. I felt I was trapped inside a large, rubber bag, thrashing around frantically, trying to find a way out, expending energy but going nowhere. Where once I had been cautious I now became suspicious. I didn't have anyone I could talk to and my ability to trust had been undermined very early on.

Another image of myself at that time is of an octopus. I imagined tentacles reaching out, eager to grasp hold of someone or something. But slowly, disappointment and disillusionment cut the tentacles, one by one, and the octopus drifted down to the sea bed, where it hunched along, wishing, waiting, for oblivion. Really, I just wanted to stop hurting.

My older brother's suicide in 1973 brought about a dramatic shift in my thinking. Suddenly, from one moment to the next, I began to consider the impact of suicide on those left behind. My brother had always shunned fatherhood but I had two young sons. Weeks after Tim's death, discharged from a psychiatric hospital for the last time, I sat down at the kitchen table and began to write.

I did not explore my feelings in a journal; instead, I wrote a fictional story about a woman who had been put into one of *those* hospitals. I wrote monologue style, my character talking direct to the reader. This unnamed character served as a vehicle to explore *not what had led her to be hospitalised* but the experience of being in that hospital. I was looking at the system rather than blaming the patient.

Many drafts later that material became a radio play, entitled *Half Past A Life*, and was broadcast on the ABC, 13th January, 1979. The story concluded with the patient finally able to remember that she had been raped by her father. I have returned to that material, bringing it more closely to my own experience, in my chapter entitled *That Hospital*.

Some years ago, on a visit to the National Gallery, I was on my way out of the building when I took a wrong turn. I was walking back the way I'd come and there before me, a little to my left, was a very large canvas by Nicolas Poussin, entitled *The Rape of the Sabine Women*.

I had never seen this picture before though I had heard about it from friends. That painting made me feel like I had been punched in the stomach, so real was the anguish I saw on the women's faces, so stark was the threat posed by the extremely aggressive positions of the men. There is no doubt that Poussin was a fine artist. His painting depicts a scene that is both chaotic and brutal.

In the foreground a baby lies on the ground and a woman we imagine to be the child's mother, holds up one arm to protect the child from a man brandishing a sword. Behind these figures other women are struggling to protect themselves or flee from determinedly violent men.

I identify with the female victims but is that because I have been a victim of sexual assault or because I am a woman? For days afterwards, I wondered about Poussin's motivation. Who did he imagine his audience to be? Was he speaking to men about women's experience, or simply showing the reality of war? How different might the

scene have looked if a woman had chosen to paint a picture of this horrifying event?

What does it mean if we speak of the victim's point of view? The term victim, is described in the Macquarie Dictionary as:

1. A sufferer from any destructive, injurious, or adverse action or agency: *victims of disease or oppression*.
2. A dupe, as of a swindler.
3. A person or animal sacrificed, or regarded as sacrificed.
4. A living creature sacrificed in religious rites. (L *victima* beast for sacrifice).

(Macquarie 2092)

Such definitions intimate that the person who writes as a victim is not in a strong position to tell their story. Unwittingly perhaps, the word *loser* can creep into a person's understanding of this point of view. Against that slippage, support groups such as Rape Crisis, have developed a vocabulary of survival, using terms like *survivor* rather than *victim*, to quote just one example. It takes time for such developments to sift down to a commonplace understanding of the issues involved.

To what extent do I write as a victim and to what extent do I resist that label? I cannot easily answer that question but I do believe that my writing is a means of stepping forward, to wrest my perceptions, my point of view, away from the intimidation engendered by the perpetrators in my family. In essence, I would point to this truth as the underlying motivation for this book.

In the early 1970s, it would not have been possible to fill a specialised bookshop just with women's writings, especially those that spoke directly and personally about women's life

experience, but, by the end of that decade women writers in the UK were finding publishers interested in their work and in the USA, at least two publishing houses were set up by women for the sole purpose of publishing women writers. Soon, a number of these titles were on sale in Australian bookshops. The narrative structure was simple, more about content than style or technique. Many of these women writers were feminist activists learning their craft in the public sphere. Those books and magazines (and pamphlets too), written either as non-fiction, or fiction were understood by writers and readers alike, as consciousness-raising material and as such, they inspired discussions and campaigns around women's issues.

In Australia, few personal stories written by Australian writers, male or female, were being published, but things began to change in the 1980s. For example, in 1981, Fremantle Arts Centre Press published *A Fortunate Life*, a personalised account of Arthur Facey's life. Born in 1894, Facey, a soldier of the Anzac era, lost his younger brother at Gallipoli. He had no formal education but wrote his story in a number of notebooks. This manuscript was carefully edited so as to preserve the authenticity and truth-telling of Facey's style.

I can imagine that his notebooks were a form of *talking cure* for Facey and it must have been gratifying for him to see his book in print. He died the year after the book was launched.

Another book, published in 1981 and written with writer and academic Roberta Sykes, tells the story of Mum Shirl, a Wiradjuri woman born on the Erambie Mission (Cowra

NSW), in 1924. Although Mum Shirl could not read or write she could speak sixteen Aboriginal languages. Her whitefella' name was Colleen Shirley Perry. When one of her brothers was sent to prison, she visited him often. These visits made her aware of the difficulties experienced by Aboriginal prisoners. Questioned by officials about her relationship with any of the men she was visiting, she would reply "I'm his Mum" and so she was nicknamed Mum Shirl.

Mum Shirl's commitment to her people was legendary. She spent considerable time and money finding homes for children whose parents could not look after them, as well as helping displaced children to find their parents again.

It was rare, in the 1980s, to read a book about the life of an Aboriginal woman and Mum Shirl provided a new and welcome perspective for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal readers. This book too, could be described as a form of consciousness-raising.

In the early 1980s, writer Marie McShea and I began work on an anthology of fictional stories. An earlier collection of non-fiction writings, Brian's wife, Jenny's Mum, had been published in 1975 and reviewed widely. We hoped our anthology would receive similar attention. We advertised in the national press and also informally. The plan was to choose eighteen stories from the hundred or so manuscripts received from women all over Australia.

Intending to bring to light the experience of Australian women, and with as broad a definition of that term as was possible, we were not expecting to receive so many stories about purging the past. Some were about revenge and embraced the macabre,

others had a confessional quality about them, most are best described as gritty realism.

We were compelled to assess and reassess. We finally concluded that to underestimate or ignore that link with the past would be to obliterate our history as women. We did scramble around for lighter, more positive stories to give the collection balance, but that shift in perception sharpened our thinking. At the back of the book, we two editors wrote:

We feel that the stories are linked by self-awareness; an awareness that defies complacency about women's experiences and therefore compels us to question the way things have been, and to look for new solutions on both a personal and collective basis.

(McNeill and McShea 131)

That collection, *And So Say All Of Us*, was published by Second Back Row Press, in 1984. I would define these stories as a form of consciousness-raising too, thought-provoking stories about women's lives, but I do not think of them as 'literature' in the strictest sense. It was a time for speaking out, reaching out, individually, collectively, and many of us were identifying important concerns for feminists.

Following the publication of that anthology I worked hard to deepen my understanding about writing as a craft. I did feel compelled to document my story, but more importantly, I wanted to write my narrative with craft uppermost in my mind. It is not for me to say if my writing could be considered as literature but certainly, that has been my intention. As part of that learning process, I co-edited another two anthologies before embarking on my own life story.

I experimented with the idea of writing *One of the Family* as a novel but authenticity about voice came about only when I began writing first person, memoir style. I worked with a chronological structure. To establish a time-line, I used white cardboard, cut into lengths, one section sticky-taped to the next and along each I had drawn a continuous horizontal line, to note headings of various incidents and events.

The structure was chronological but not so my writing process. I wrote up and down that time line, creating scenes from a growing list of significant events and relevant incidents. Those headings allowed me to see at a glance where there might be gaps in any time period that I would need to address. My time line began in 1910, the year my mother was born, and ended in 1962.

I was living in England when this book was launched by a London based publisher, The Women's Press. Within weeks, University of Queensland Press bought the rights for an Australian edition. I marvelled at the irony of such a thing happening to me. For many years before leaving for England I had tried unsuccessfully to get my work published in Australia and had many times applied, again unsuccessfully, for financial help from the Literature Board. Now, finally, a publisher in Australia was actually interested in my writing.

In 1996, I began writing about my experience as a psychiatric patient. This book, *Counting The Rivers*, became my MCA project at the University of Wollongong.

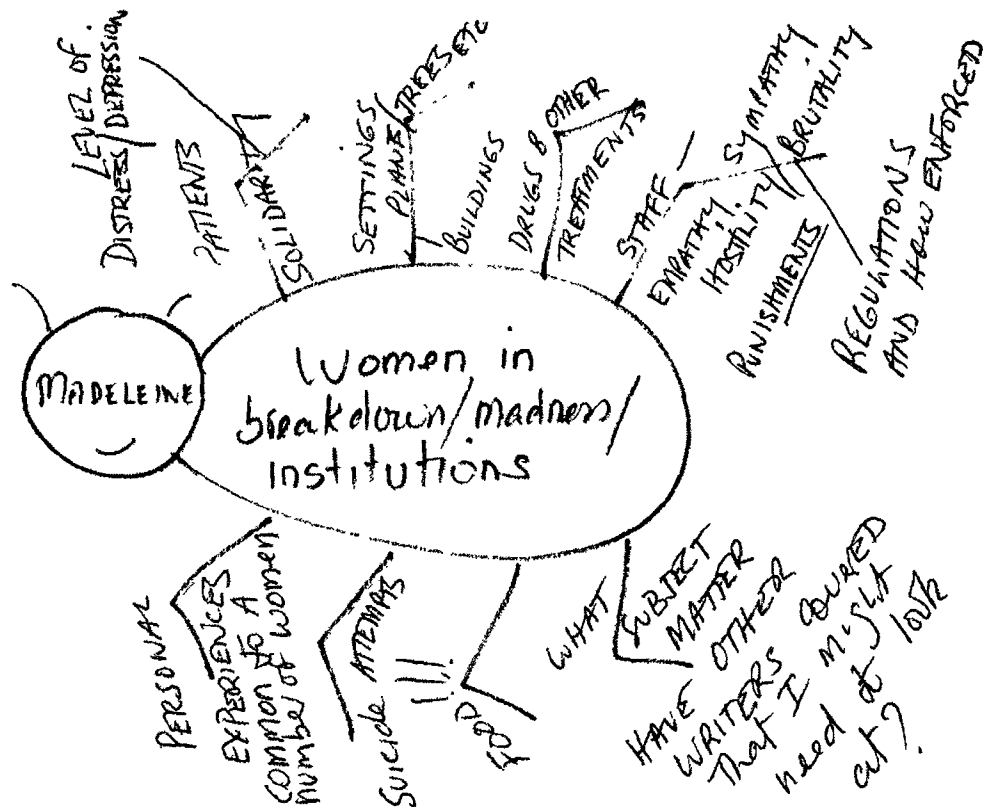
I wrote the narrative as a novel but it continued the story of my family from the previous book. I chose this form primarily to respect the privacy of the living people involved in my real-life story and soon discovered that there was a greater sense of freedom in this

approach.

I wrote using present tense but told the story from a third person point of view. I wanted to convey a does-she-take-sugar style narrative to reinforce the powerlessness of my main character, Madeleine. I also included first person pieces, typed in italics. The first, laid out on a single page, was but one paragraph long. Later in the book, I extended these passages to five or six paragraphs. This strategy allowed my character to speak for herself and offered insights as to how this woman's thinking was shaped. Each of the three books I have written about my family has been, in effect, my *talking-cure*.

The time period for this story stretched from Madeleine's admission as a patient to Parramatta Psychiatric Hospital in December 1967, and ended a decade later when she was moving away from that period of upheaval. I used a spider for my spatial map. Although I refined the diagram many times, the one shown below is the first one I used.

What I wanted to illuminate was the number of subject areas I needed to cover. There are no chapters in this book. I found, whilst writing it, that I could only achieve a word count of about 200-250 words each day. I soon realised that the subject matter itself was constraining me. But that perceived negative, once I accepted the rhythm, soon became the routine practise of the writing process.



These fragments, as I called them, were like stepping stones, laid down in a chronological structure but each one, in an of itself, was intended to be like a poem or a metaphorical egg, something that could be held in the mind as a complete shape in and of itself. Some fragments are quite short, others were 1,000 or so words long but most comprise just a few paragraphs.

For *Tainted Fruit* I have used a wagon wheel as the spatial map. Each spoke represents a chapter and there are many spokes in this wheel. The word count differs greatly so the spokes are not of uniform length. Whilst the hub is the context, violence in the family, the outside line represents point of view. I imagine myself walking around the circumference looking at the wheel from a variety of angles, according to who in the family I am writing

about. Sometimes I see myself spinning the wheel, aiming for narrative movement and greater variation in approach.

I had a bulging folder of documents about my older brother's public life - his birth, marriage and death certificates, army service record and the post mortem report which included a number of statements recorded by his wife, the fire brigade officer who attended the death scene, two psychiatrists he'd talked to in the last months of his life, and the doctor who had performed the post mortem. By contrast, I had few details about my younger brother - I was unable to access any documented information on his police record or his time in prison. I had a few letters he had written to me from jail, several that he had written to my sister Lizzie, and that was about it. Librarians at the State Library were extremely helpful but finally had to admit it was unlikely that any record of his trial still existed.

My sister told me that the rape case had been reported in the newspapers so I began a newspaper search at the Mitchell Library. I have an eye condition that makes looking at microfiche records difficult, so was allowed to work with original bound volumes of newspapers.

In the latter half of 2004 I began this newspaper research. If I caught the early train from Thirroul and arrived there when the doors opened, set to work straightaway, didn't stop for a break all day, not even to go to the toilet, I could get through twelve volumes - one volume for each month - a whole year of newspapers, by 3pm each day. What follows is a journal entry written at the end of that period of research.

Journal
4th October, 2004
Mitchell Library

I've come to the end of this newspaper research. No record of Eddie's trial or any mention of the rape story in any context, in fact, reading the Daily Telegraph, you might assume rape doesn't happen in Sydney. I've now covered the three relevant years - 1979, 1980 and 1981.

My visit to Cessnock jail was during January, 1981. That same month Eddie was told he would shortly be transferred to Silverwater jail and put on a Day Release program. I've worked out that he spent approximately twelve months in jail on remand before his trial then another three years at most in Cessnock so when exactly did he commit the rape and when was his trial? It is unlikely that I will ever know

If my brother was dead I would have been able to access his prison records. I did apply for a death certificate but there was no record of his death. The time lapse for accessing such records is seventy years. My only other option would have been to ask his permission. It was impossible to imagine he would agree or that I would ask him for anything.

It was time to shift my focus. I decided I would write a fictional account of his crime but base what I wrote on fact. My sister Lizzie was willing to meet with me for a series of one hour question and answer sessions. I had a tape recorder with me on each occasion. I also formulated some questions from the bundle of letters Eddie had written to Lizzie from Long Bay prison and later, Cessnock.

I asked the same seven or eight questions each time we met but listed them in a different order each time then sat back and allowed Lizzie to tell the story and add whatever details she wished. Comparing my handwritten notes and taped records after the eight sessions, it was clear my sister had provided me with a consistent account of what she understood had happened. Her memory of her visits to prison, the days of Eddie's trial, and various conversations they'd had at key moments during that period was sharp, probably because of the emotion attached to those events.

Lizzie had supported Eddie almost from the moment he was arrested. His letters to her cover a period of years and reflect, especially in the early stages of his prison life, an agitated man struggling to maintain control over his possessions out there in the world, and attempting to beg, order and harass Lizzie to do a number of things for him, for example, to check on his boat, his car, and to make enquiries for him with the bank about his various accounts.

Two newly released prisoners arrived unannounced at Lizzie's house one morning insisting Eddie had promised she would help them. Alarmed, she warned them that if they didn't leave right away she would phone the police. They did leave but not before yelling out a number of threats about coming to get her one dark night. Lizzie had tried for years to live with the idea that families must stick together, no matter what happened. It was this incident that changed her mind about what the implication of such a notion meant in our family. Lizzie broke off all contact with Eddie after that.

I have no knowledge whatsoever of the woman our brother Eddie accosted on a busy Sydney road, when he posed as a detective just doing his job. Not only did he make this woman get into his car and leave her own vehicle back there on that busy road but he later bound her with rope, took her to a deserted picnic area and raped her repeatedly, keeping her captive for ten hours or more.

Lizzie learned from two police officers who spoke with her during the trial, that there was probably more than the one victim. Eddie had been questioned about two earlier similar rapes and, that was in part why he had been caught on this occasion. Only this time the police were knocking on his door within hours of the rape being reported. Incriminating evidence was found in the boot of his car.

I chose to write about the victim as an unnamed woman. She could be any woman.

I wanted to expose my brother's crime, to make clear how he had chosen his victim but I wasn't interested in his point of view. It was her point of view, distressing as that might be to write, that I wanted to bring to light.

I began this chapter writing about shame as a character and I will end writing about shame as a deeply embedded concept in my life. My first understanding about shame began with bible stories I was taught at school.

Many bible scholars think that Moses wrote the Book of Genesis after leading the Israelites out of Egypt, sometime between 1440 and 1400 BC. Perhaps that explains the bare facts style of the writing, the lack of detail. In Genesis, chapter four, in the King James version, we are told a little about Adam and Eve's two sons. Abel was a keeper of

sheep. Cain was tiller of the ground.

... Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell.

A Bible reader today might wonder about the Lord's pettiness in this quotation and also Cain's motivation for murder. It seems so feeble, so lacking in credibility, but I have always been more interested to imagine what Adam said when Cain came home alone. Or what Eve thought when she was confronted with the shocking news. She has two sons and now learns that one of them is a murderer and the other his victim. In the depths of pain and grief, did they reluctantly prepare themselves to conceive a third child? Did Eve look at Adam and say with a sigh, "Well Love, what other choice do we have? The world has to go on."

According to the Bible it was not Adam or Eve who asked Cain to explain himself but God himself. "Where is Abel thy brother?" He demands to know. True to form, like a criminal scrambling for an alibi, Cain replies "I know not. Am I my brother's keeper?"

We read comparatively little in either fiction or non-fiction, about the families of perpetrators - how they feel about their family member's crime/s, how they feel about the victim/s of those crimes but sometimes, we get the briefest glimpse.

On the 18th February, 2006 in the Victorian town, Mildura, a motorist's car skidded off the road. On the footpath was a group of teenagers waiting for taxis. The car jumped the

kerb and crashed into the group, killing six of the teenagers. Panicked, the driver fled from the scene, leaving two of his children in the back seat. The driver's mother apologised to the victims' families a number of times, in court, on radio and, in a newspaper story by Natasha Robinson, she repeated those apologies:

"I'm very sorry. If I could die right now and bring them back, I would gladly do it."

(The Australian 21st February, 2006)

I so understand that anguished mother and despite the obvious differences in context between Cain's situation and mine, his words worry me still – *am I my brothers' keeper?*

CONCLUSION

An acute tension has long existed between me and the society I grew up in. I can identify that tension as a sense of abandonment. In a childlike way, I had wanted someone - a policeman, a doctor, a social worker, someone in authority, to stop my father in his tracks, to lay down the law, to read him his rights, and in so doing, to make it possible for the rest of my family to live happily ever after.

The isolation, the knowing, the emotional struggle of coping day after day, behind the neat façade of civilised privacy, left me, as an adult, with feelings of fragmentation that have permeated my thinking, my actions, for so long, and have, at times, been overwhelming. One inevitable truth about domestic violence is that those of us who grow up with such a past are often as isolated as adults as we were as children. We cannot easily position our experience in a wider public understanding, shame attaches itself to the victims and this can produce a silence that is difficult to breach.

Reading and later writing, became a way for me to move beyond that silence.

There is, we know, nothing mysterious about writing, anyone literate can take a pen and write on a blank sheet of paper, but for me, in the days and weeks after my older brother's death, it was an activity motivated by desperation. My writing was also a political act, a means of wrestling with invisible ties that might destroy me. Writing has

changed my life, indeed, writing has *saved* my life.

Fiction writers can juggle plot, characters and settings at will. They can take real-life situations and place them on the page in a cleverly camouflaged fashion. By contrast, the autobiographical writer, who may be as creative as the fiction writer in both style and technique, has to remain within the limits of fact, truth and memory. A lie, once told can distort the telling of experience but truth is of course, a subjective matter. Perhaps it is the assembling of facts concerning time and place, around the author's memory and perceptions, that gives integrity to such writing. This authenticity is the aim and there may be personal motives too, that can vary considerably from one author to another.

In their book, *The Penguin Book of Australian Autobiography*, John and Dorothy Colmer write:

The impulse to write the story of one's life is particularly strong in new and rapidly changing countries. 'This story is about myself,' Miles Franklin states at the opening of *My Brilliant Career*. Her ensuing address makes it clear that she has a truth to tell her country as well as herself. (Introduction Page 2)

I too have felt that need to tell a truth, to my country and myself.

Alexandria Kollantai struggled with similar issues. She wrote about her life in a book entitled *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Woman* (published in complete form in 1972). Kollantai's opening sentences illustrate the discomfort a writer can feel when turning the spotlight on self:

Nothing is more difficult than writing an autobiography. What should be

emphasized? Just what is of general interest? It is advisable, after all, to write honestly and dispense with any of the conventional introductory protestations of modesty. For if one is called upon to tell about one's life so as to make the events that made it what it became useful to the general public, it can mean only that one must have already wrought something positive in life, accomplished a task that people recognize. (Kollantai, Page 3)

Writing as a political activist, and in a country where most of the women among the Marxist revolutionaries came from the upper class, Kollantai's autobiography centres around the changes in Russian society. She does talk about her childhood but these passages are few and hasty, as though she was anxious to get it over with quickly in order to get on with the *real* story. This split between the political *out there* self and the personal inner self can obstruct a writer's introspection and the problem can be one that continues to echo down the years.

I understand that problem and this work has, in effect, been a means of resolving that split in myself.

The use of the first person narrative, the 'I' of my own experience, provides a frank clarity, strengthening the communication between author and reader. But in passages of soul-searing intimacy, daring to use 'I' might be seen as a bold, brave adventure but can feel to the author a very assertive act, scary even to contemplate.

It isn't just the writing process either. In one of those ironic twists of fate, it was

strange to be driving to Rydalmere, as a DCA student at UOW, one of many travelling that day, to a series of workshops to be held at the University of Western Sydney, (a joint arrangement with lecturers from University of Wollongong) to a location on the Rydalmere Hospital campus. This setting was familiar to me as a former patient. An eerie feeling haunted me that day but I drove away hoping that I had laid at least one ghost to rest.

Inga Clendinnen in her book *Reading the Holocaust*, comments on a book written by Polish writer and Holocaust survivor, Tadeusz Borowski: "Our knowledge that Borowski has indeed 'been there' supplies an undertext of intimate moral implication never present in 'pure' fiction."

She goes on to make a distinction between History and Fiction:

In my view the largest single difference between History and Fiction (at moments like these they require capitalisation) is that each establishes quite different relationships between writer and subject, and writer and reader.

(Clendinnen Page 190/191)

Further on in this chapter Clendinnen explains more about that reader/writer relationship when reading a story that claims to be true:

I will know very much less about the protagonists. There is no creator to strip away the veils, so they will be somewhat opaque to me. Nonetheless, I engage with them differently because I stand in a moral relationship with these people, because they are my fellow humans, whose blood is real and whose deaths are final and cannot be

cancelled by turning the page. (Clendinnen Page 191)

Reflecting on this point I would say that as a reader, I kept up an internal debate with Helen Garner, and her interpretation of what she tells us about the events and issues she documents. By contrast, reading Alice Sebold, I stood alongside her, more closely identifying with her story as it unfolded.

I have discussed in these chapters different voices with different relationships, not only to the reader, but to the subject matter and issues these authors have written about, and it is that *moral relationship* and all that involves, that I have learned to respect and for which I strive.

The House of Literary Voice has many rooms. Some are grand and opulent as tradition demands, but the *first person* voice that speaks about acts of violence, from the victim's point of view, has yet to earn a dignified place and is therefore, likely to be found in a small room somewhere at the back of the building.

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