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Hitchhiking: the travelling female body

Vivienne Plumb

University of Wollongong

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Hitchhiking: the travelling female body

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree

Doctorate of Creative Arts from

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by

Vivienne Plumb M.A.  B.A. (Victoria University, N.Z.)

School of Creative Arts, Faculty of Law, Humanities & the Arts.

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CERTIFICATION

I, Vivienne Plumb, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Creative Arts, in the Faculty of Creative Arts, School of Journalism and Creative Writing, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Vivienne Plumb
November 30th, 2012.
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ABSTRACT: *Hitchhiking: the travelling female body.*

*Hitchhiking: the travelling female body* is comprised of two parts: a collection of short fiction, *The Glove Box and Other Stories*, and an accompanying exegesis.

*The Glove Box and Other Stories*: is a collection of fifteen stories of various lengths. These fictions are thematically connected via concepts of women and hitchhiking which exist in varied forms throughout the stories. Internal, subtle links of character and relationship have been interwoven into the narratives to create an overall world where the fictions are positioned.

*The exegesis*: examines the role of women hitchhiking within a literary context. The literature review is concerned with representations of women hitchhikers from biblical representations to Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (2000). The methodology explores post-structuralist studies of the female body, and of feminist geography (female bodies in places and spaces), specifically focusing on the hitchhiking (female) body. Of particular interest is the work of Elizabeth Grosz (*Volatile Bodies*, and *Time Travels*) and Robyn Longhurst (*Space, Place, and Sex*, and *Bodies - Exploring fluid boundaries*). Inside this theoretical framework prominent themes emerge, especially the construction of the female body as a site of risk in public (exterior) spaces; the examination of a vehicle or other transport as an enclosed (interior) space with reference to similar enclosures of intimacy and alterity; and the freedom of the female body to peripatetically traverse the (Australian) landscape.

This methodology is applied to three literary case studies. The first is Kylie Tennant’s Australian novel, *The Battlers* (1941). This narrative focuses on hitchhiking in a historical context (the unemployed during the 1930s Depression). The second case study is Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks* (1980). This contains a predominant theme that relates to the female body traversing the cartographical (Australian) landscape ‘on the road’ and ‘hitched’ to camel transport. The third and final case study is that of my own creative fiction, *The Glove Box and Other Stories*. As mentioned above, it explores themes of women hitchhiking that relate specifically to the prominent points used in the theoretical framework.
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The Glove Box and Other Stories

a collection of fifteen pieces of fiction
The Glove Box

If I’m walking and see a button I will pick it up. They seem to me to be friendly, useful things. Buttons aren’t cheap anymore. I don’t mind where it’s come from, I’ll pick it up. I don’t know if a man would ever stoop to pick up a lost button. I’ve seen men pick up nails and screws, but not buttons.

Yesterday I saw a large green one lying on the pavement outside a theatre in the city. The matinee ballet crowd was spilling out onto the street and because of that I have to admit I was too embarrassed to retrieve the green button. Sometimes you discover them in changing rooms. Once I found a large black coat button in the public library. You find them everywhere. Mother of pearl, plastic, wood, metal, white, beige, purple. They used to be made out of bone and glass. They don’t do that any more, and if they do, they are expensive.

My sister took a photo of me with my outstretched palm, presenting some of the buttons I have found. In that photo I am looking down towards my hand and the buttons in my hand. My sister thought it an immense joke to pose this picture, on the other hand she was deadly serious. She was taking a lot of photos at that stage, towards the beginning of the end. She had a small Olympus that her husband, Larry, had given her. My theory is, she was making a kind of archive for herself. In return I took a snapshot of her in the backyard of the semi-detached I lived in at that time. That was in Surrey Crescent. Her head is tilted back a little. She appears thoughtful, sombre.
My father was born in Casino, N.S.W. After leaving that regional town in his late teens he severed all ties with his birthplace. He came from a large family. His brother, the uncle I liked the most, was the one who showed up now and then needing a bed. He was known as Uncle Whitey. I don’t know what that was an abbreviation of. My sister claimed it was abbreviated from the name ‘Whitethorn’. When we were children we didn’t know that Whitey spent a lot of his time on the road, moving around the country areas, hitching lifts and working seasonal jobs, and often ending up in the city during winter, which is when he would come and stay with us for a few weeks. My mother insisted he was never to stay more than that.

Whenever he turned up on our doorstep he would make sure he had presents for everyone. For my mother he always brought two dozen country eggs. She would complain about this present after he left, saying it wasn’t a personal gift but an impersonal one. My sister, Caro, and I roared with laughter, we didn’t understand what she meant, although we loved the sound of the word impersonal. We just loved the way our mother talked.

In a family photograph of us at the dinner table, Whitey’s back and left part of his body have just been caught. My mother, standing to one side of him, is busy serving up the roast vegetables. My aunt, at the opposite end of the table is wearing a blue muumuu-type frock and I am seated next to her, my head bowed over the plate, spoon in hand. I would be about six years old in the photo. Whitey’s mouth is half open. He was always a great talker. Caro, my only sibling, has left the table. Her chair is vacant, her plate is empty and a half-drunk glass of milk stands next to her clean plate.

My father is at the other end of the table carving the meat. I don’t know who took this photograph. Whitey is looking quite suave, he certainly could be charming. He
could talk his way out of a paper bag, even talk his way around my mother. After he left our house he would stay with the other aunts and uncles, working his way through his winter cycle. He never married, never had any children of his own.

When I was older it eventually dawned on me that Whitey had been a bit of an alcoholic. This wasn’t discussed when were children. This was why my mother refused to allow him to stay for very long, she detested the way he drank. I don’t know where he was when he died. He died of cancer. He’d stopped coming to stay with us, maybe he had found a partner. The family preferred not to talk about him, he was viewed as a total failure. A loser, an addict. My father liked him, but my dad was the sort of person who hated to make waves and hated waves being made around him. My mother stood stalwart in front of my father, a buffer taking the full brunt of any untoward events.

There is a photograph of my mother and my sister, walking along a low-lying riverbank. I don’t know where the river is. I found the photograph in Caro’s apartment when I had to pack up her personal belongings. My mother’s hair is shoulder-length and she is wearing tailored white slacks and a black blouse with a low scooped neck similar to the sort on a ballet leotard. She has her arm around Caro, who is wearing pink pedal-pushers and has her hair cut short in what we used to call a coconut cut. They are walking into the distance, my mother pointing ahead towards a finger of land that is pushing out into the water. She has her black canvas shoulderbag and I do remember this bag, it had webbing straps. My mother kept all her drugs inside this bag. She took it with her everywhere in case she might need her tablets. This was later, after Whitey had stopped coming, and after her first ‘little nervous breakdown’, as my aunts were apt to call it. This was before she went into the hospital ward.
It was the onset of her schizophrenia but no one understood that then. They gave my mother a lot of drugs and a lot of instructions about how to take them and then they sent her back home. At first she was kind of dazed, still heavily drugged although conscious and aware of what she was supposed to be doing, which was running the household and looking after us all. This had been her job. Now it became a job for myself and my sister.

It was a slow process, the way she sank further and further away from us. It would begin with her becoming distracted and paranoid. She would accuse everyone of tiny things, cry in the car and then drive off. We didn’t know where she went. When she returned she would have purchased groceries we didn’t need and would commence cooking bizarre dinners such as mashed beetroot and sausages.

My father had always been protected from catastrophes such as this. Protected by my mother. So now the shoe was on the other foot. He didn’t know what to do and so he ate the strange meals she cooked for him. Finally, my father’s sisters took my mother in hand after a marathon three days when she refused to sleep and roamed the house each night preparing and cooking mysterious concoctions in her kitchen.

My aunts took over, they came to my father’s rescue. Two of them escorted my mother to the psychiatric unit, where she was admitted, and then my Aunt Marise took over the running of the household. Her own children were in their early twenties and she said she had nothing to do at home. These were the days when the wives still remained in the home, guarding the house and wiping it free of all germs.

Everyone had a mother at home. The only girl at school I knew whose mother worked fulltime was Faye Cassamento. She had shop-bought biscuits in her school lunches and rainbow-patterned wax wrap around her deli ham sandwiches. Before my mother became sick she had been a Canteen Mother, serving voluntarily on the school
canteen at lunchtime, and she’d been a Library Lady who mended the books in the school library. She had also undertaken reading practise with children who had literacy difficulties, she did oranges at half-time for the school netball team, she drove us everywhere and she taught crafts at the local Girls’ Friendly Society meetings. She showed girls how to weave and plait paper into baskets that you could lacquer, thus transforming them into something stiff and permanent.

We had two of these baskets on the top of the low glass console in the front lounge. Each one sat atop a lace doily, one contained loose change for the milk bottles and the other held my mother’s car keys. My mother never said it out loud but we all knew she loved that car.

It was an old Jag that my father had bought second-hand, a rich maroon, and inside it had pale teddy-bear-coloured leatherette seats with a ‘walnut’ dash. Of course, this wasn’t real walnut, but it looked almost better than real. In the middle of the steering wheel there was a small gold cameo with a gold logo embossed in the centre. I always liked that. There was a secret pouch down by the side of the steering wheel and moleskin grey carpet. The glove box opened when you twisted the knob on the front. There was loads of junk in there, and my mother’s sunglasses.

My father wanted to get seat covers but that never eventuated. He took the train to work and so our mother was left with the vehicle during the day. Every evening she would pick him up from the 5.48 train.

She was a beautiful woman. She had brown eyes that were an arresting almond shape. Her shallow eyelids and pretty forehead gave her long aquiline nose a noble look. Her glossy brown hair was often pinned up on her head with tortoiseshell combs, showing off her ears that were like small shells. Her mouth was the only
mean-looking part of her body as she had thin lips that stretched over teeth verging on the horsy. It was her eyes that got to people.

After she became sick she began to look older, she smoked a lot and her skin took on a sallow pallor, but her eyes remained beautiful. Her best colour was blue, she liked to wear a lot of blue. She was ravishing in a light sky blue or an azure peacock blue. Those colours will always remind me of my mother.

These days I find it hard to sleep. It’s the actual getting to sleep I find the most difficult and in order to achieve that I need to apply many aids. I own a special tri-pillow and I like to change the linen every few days so that the bed feels fresh. I use only cotton duvet covers and have a cream-coloured mohair throw. I make sure I wear one hundred percent cotton pyjamas in bed. I spent a lot of money purchasing a new-fangled ‘natural’ wool-filled mattress.

I use homeopathic drops to alleviate nervous tension and insomnia. You take them before dinner and repeat them during the night. The drops contain tinctures of passionflower and valerian, they promote relaxation and are non-habit forming. I have a night light, and keep the window open but the bed is pulled away from the window as my mother maintained that to lie under an open window was the best way to catch a cold. I lie on my left side with my back facing the wardrobe doors. If I can’t sleep on either my left or my right side, then I sleep on my back. Then I feel the room all around me, breathing, holding me, as if it is an enormous hand and my bed and I are held cupped, in the palm of this hand. If all this doesn’t work I take three Normaline.

An old black and white photo in one of Aunt Marise’s albums shows six people attired in their best clothes, standing beside a water tank. There is a eucalyptus tree
behind the tank, so it is obviously somewhere in the country and I assume it to be
Casino, where my father was born and spent his childhood years.

A woman wearing a big hat, a long skirt and a tailored jacket is holding a baby.
Next to her stands a young girl dressed in white with a veil on her head, her hair
twisted into long ringlets. The girl seems too young to be married. I showed it to Aunt
Marise.

‘That’s me,’ she told me. She pointed to the woman in the suit. ‘That’s our mother.
I’m wearing my confirmation dress. And there’s Whitey, God bless his soul.’

Whitey was a thin streak of hardly nothing in the photograph. The last figure was
another young woman in white and wearing gloves and holding a small Bible in her
right hand.

‘That is your Aunt Flavia. She passed away at age twenty from food poisoning after
she ate tainted ice cream.’

I had never heard of her.

‘The Lord wanted her closer to Him,’ said Marise.

‘Why didn’t anyone ever tell me about her?’

‘Your father was very upset when Flavia died. Don’t tell him I mentioned her to
you.’

The last figure, a young boy in boots and long stockings with a hat in his hand and a
peculiar, feminine-looking jacket with a wide collar, was of course, my father. He was
christened Gottlieb but everyone in the family called him Lenny. He was scowling,
not smiling, and looking quite bad-tempered. Flavia was close enough to him to touch
his hand, a thick silver bracelet clasped on her wrist. She wasn’t as pretty as Marise
but seemed more vivacious.
‘She had something,’ said my aunt, who in the order of things was older than my father but younger than Whitey.

‘That was the house at Casino,’ she said. You could see the side of the house and a large, four-panel window that was propped open with one of those folding metal arms. ‘It was a hell hole. Too small for all of us. Your grandfather made it a hell hole.’

‘Is that why my father left Casino?’

‘Yes,’ answered Marise, ‘we all hated the old bastard. Flavia was the one who stood up to him.’

There was a silence. I thought she would say more. She didn’t, and instead only sighed and moved out of the room. Re-examining the photo, I thought Flavia was physically quite like my mother.

At this time, the time of seeing the photo and of talking with Marise about these things and the time of learning about Flavia, I was boarding with Marise and her husband in Bellini Street. This was before Surrey Crescent. In Bellini I lived in a studio apartment that my aunt and uncle had built under their house, which is on the ridge of a hill.

I remember the studio very well, with its cork-tiled floor laid down by my aunt who is very good at D.I.Y. There were small French doors that led out into an area with a pergola, a wooden garden table with fancy scrolled legs and some slatted wooden chairs that matched. Jasmine and roses ran over the fence and a scarlet bougainvillea had been trained across the pergola, Marise was also a good gardener.
Opposite the studio was a door that led to the laundry which boasted an enormous cupboard big enough to fit a body in. I would often joke about this cupboard to Marise, who would object saying,

‘Please, what bodies are these that you say could fit in there?’

‘I’m only joking,’ I would reply.

‘To me this is no joke,’ she would say.

It became a standard ‘black’ joke between us, as everyone in the family knew that when she was only twelve Marise had shot a man who was trying to break into the house in Casino. She had been the only person home at the time. Marise had been asleep, woken up, and heard the man in her parent’s bedroom, presumably searching for money. Her father had told her that she should have no compunction in using the gun if anything like this ever happened. So, she had shot him, meaning to only maim him but had killed him instead.

‘Pow, pow, right through the heart,’ my father used to say. He would mime being the twelve-year-old Marise creeping up on the home invader. Marise had then had to sit with the dead body until the family had returned late the next afternoon.

In court it was presented as self defence. Being only twelve she could have been sent to a juvenile detention centre, but she got off because the burglar had a history of rape and so the jury accepted Marise’s plea of self defence.

My father told us that Marise was a good shot, she had a great eye for the target and she loved to go hunting. She still goes hunting with my uncle. I have never discussed the shooting with her. In fact, she was the one who made the original comment about the number of bodies you could fit into the laundry cupboard. The shooting of the burglar is a famous, or rather infamous, incident in my father’s family history and Marise is considered by the other members of the family to be some kind of heroine.
Caro always believed our mother was still there, existing underneath everything else, encased and entombed inside her schizophrenia. Caro believed that there would be a drug that would release her eventually and that afterwards the schizophrenia would fall away, like hands falling to the sides of a body. And our mother would be revealed whole and untouched, stepping out of her self-made tomb, wearing peacock blue and smiling at us with her beautiful brown eyes.

But that didn’t happen. After our mother passed away, my sister and I found a wad of about a dozen poems in the glove box of the car, folded and poked down into the very back. They’d been written by our mother and described how she felt about her illness. Those poems upset my sister. We hadn’t known our mother was writing poems, I had never seen her do anything like that. It was then that I thought I knew where she had driven off to all those times after she had argued, when she’d disappeared in the car, and arrived home much later with bags of unnecessary groceries. I imagined her parking the car and sitting in it, writing her poems. I knew she used to sit and cry in the car, now I knew she also wrote in it. I’m not one for reading poetry much, I didn’t know if the poems were that good.

After my aunts took charge, my mother was admitted into the psychiatric ward and sedated with drugs. She was never the same again. We visited every week on Sundays, taking Afghan biscuits, clean clothes and the Sunday newspaper. Most often she would ask about the car: how was it running, did it need cleaning, had our father stopped grinding the gears?

The air in the psychiatric ward smelt tinny. It had a steely flavour to it not unlike the smell you get when you scour a stainless steel sink. Caro and I dreaded going there
every week, though each week we knew it was necessary to go. Driving over there was sad, seeing my mother was sadder, and the departure back to our house was the worst.

In the hospital ward she appeared frail and quite ethereal. She never talked much and strangely, she began to stutter. Her sadness oppressed everyone. My father would drive home in silence, taking the old road through the forest of pines and every week I would wish that he wouldn’t. I would feel those heavy trees pressing their dense, furry bodies towards me. They were The Silencers. Nothing would grow under the dead brown pine needles that fell off them to the forest floor. In a pine forest the needle-blanketed earth acts as soundproofing, smothering and suffocating all usual noise.

Finally, our weekend hospital visits and long drives back home through the pine forest came to an end. Everything is like that, eventually the change comes whether it is large or small. In this case, my mother was sent home and was able to function there for a time. Before she married my father, she had lived for some time in Europe. And now, she even managed a holiday back there before she ended up in the psychiatric ward again.

After Bellini Street came Surrey Crescent. I had completed the first two years of my Bachelor of Arts and wished to live by myself rather than at Aunt Marise’s home. She was a larger-than-life character who held status and importance in the family and my father looked up to her.

In the original family of nine the first child had been Christiane, who had married very young to a man by the name of Duvall. They’d had four children but Duvall had walked out on her and left her to bring up the children by herself. She had seemed old
forever, always tired and crabby although she had a pretty face with a wedge-shaped chin, but very bad teeth. She was forever in a brusque hurry and her main form of conversation was tips about how to save money.

Flavia had come next, my father’s favourite. Then there was Uncle Whitey, quickly followed by Marise and Mamie, who was really baptized Adelaide, and then my Auntie Za, shortened from Elizabeth. My father had been born two years after Za, and after him there had been a baby boy, christened Phineas, who had only lived for three days.

‘We loved him,’ said Marise, ‘but the Lord was ready to love him more.’

Za held somewhat Victorian beliefs on death. She went to church every Sunday and loved to invite the Minister to afternoon tea, where she would ply him with fruit scones and engage him in conversation about the afterlife. She would relate the results of these discussions to my mother and father.

She had constructed an intricate and complex picture of the afterlife that involved sunny miles of carefully tended herbage, lawn and trees, and every now and then a picturesque bridge over a rambling brook or stepping stones across a laughing stream. There was an orange grove, a tall stand of poplars and a serene beech forest that stretched down to a lake where you could collect a little boat and go rowing. It was constantly sunny and everyone was nice to each other and the ‘good Lord’ reigned over all.

Caro asked Za what the ‘good Lord’ looked like and Za replied that he was blonde, handsome, intelligent and a wonderful dancer. We thought he sounded very like Theo Emmanuel. This was a fellow male student who Za had developed a huge crush on when she was at high school. Unfortunately Theo was Jewish, so our Presbyterian
grandfather considered him totally undesirable material for a son-in-law. Marise and Mamie still liked to tease Za about this Theo Emmanuel.

‘He was a Jew,’ said Marise. ‘Imagine, if she’d married him she’d probably be living in a mansion by now.’

Instead, Za never married but chose to devote herself to the church where she spent many hours in volunteer service arranging the flowers, recovering the hymn books, and embroidering the knee cushions. She worked as an unofficial and unpaid secretary to the minister. Occasionally, during the Bellini Street days, she typed up essays for me.

I found a small one-storey semi-detached in Surrey Crescent that was half falling down, which was why it was so cheap to rent. This semi was hot in summer and cold as a morgue in winter. The kitchen floorboards were rotten and soft in some places and the piles were gone, and I suspected there was something wrong inside the bathroom walls as there was a mouldy musty smell when you shut the window.

The previous tenants had painted the lounge and the kitchen a hard, bright yellow and the bedroom a crimson maroon. I have always wondered who these people are, the ones who paint the rooms maroon or bright blue and then leave them and go and live somewhere else. I think of them as The Primary People, wishing to live their lives amidst primary solutions. I am not one of those and I had to paint the primary-coloured walls over with white.

Once I had settled into Surrey Crescent, Caro often came for a visit as it was halfway between the hospital and her own home where she lived with her partner, Larry. They had wanted to have children. She would be dropped off at Surrey Crescent after her blood transfusions, and rest in the kitchen, reclining on the
enormous pink sofa that took up one whole wall of the room. We’d eat lunch and I’d make coffee. I still have that coffee plunger. I still make coffee with it. Sometimes she’d fall asleep after we’d eaten and I’d cover her with a blanket. When she woke up I would drive her home.

The leukemia exhausted her. In Victorian novels they liked to talk about ‘invalid’ people who were recuperating from long illnesses. In those books the heroes or heroines spent a lot of time in bed and occasionally travelled to the seaside to partake of the sea air. In general, people spent more time recuperating in the old days – it was an official pastime. It is not like that now. Everyone is expected to get back to work as soon as possible. There is no time put aside for lengthy convalescence, these days such a convalescence is viewed as an indulgence.

My sister continued to imagine she would be back in no time behind her desk at the Ministry of Economic Development where she had eight people working under her. I never really knew what she did there. Sometimes I met her in the foyer and we would eat lunch together. I still don’t really know what work she did there, although I find myself desiring to know even more now than when she was alive. I do not wish to forget. I want to be able to remember everything about her. I do not want anything to remain invisible, veiled. I wish to be able to understand everything, to understand why she isn’t here and why she, too, was taken away from me.

At Surrey Crescent, more often than not I would take the secret shortcuts rather than the formal street paths. To reach the newsagent’s it was better to cut through a long back lane and come up the side of the shop, appearing from the rear of the building. I knew many of these alternative routes and used them far more than the obvious ones.
Down closer to the water, there were the Dream Houses that boasted multi levels, king-sized garages and swimming pools, and potted palms and balconies with views from here to breakfast. I liked to walk along there and decide which one I would live in, if I could.

I always walked back via the mangrove swamp, which had diminished in size over the years and now had a covered wooden walkway built over it. The walkway wound its way over the mangroves and alongside a channel of glassy murky water which flowed eventually out to sea.

There was always a thick concentrated heat by the swamp. High banks of peaty mud climbed both sides of the channel and these were studded with vegetation that looked like a mop of crazy green hair. A rich stink emanated from this material, and every now and then there was a whiff of briny salt tang.

Birds hid in the reeds and in the trees that bore shiny leaves that appeared lacquered in their glossiness. Winding vines of pink trumpet-shaped flowers with bulbous green stamens wreathed themselves through the reeds, the petals glistened with a fluid sheen that resembled taffeta.

In the heart of the swamp a clan of ducks lived; their ducklings slept in the grass on the bank above the water channel. The adults raised their tails and dipped their beaks below the water searching for food. A duck paddling upstream produced a rippling V across the surface of the water. Further along and closer to the sea, I would spot waterbirds with skinny yellow legs and long hooked bills. They foraged for worms in the smelly mud, placing one leg elegantly before the next, and establishing the depth and weight of each footprint before they moved forward.

One spring there was a pair of gulls who built their messy nest on the corrugated roof of the local boating club. After the chicks were hatched, the parents spent all
their time guarding and maintaining their territory, dive-bombing anyone who came too close. In the morning and in the late afternoon the chicks, which were brown and covered in down, would scuttle across the iron corrugations, always together, grooming each other’s bodies and beaks. Then, someone in the boating club decided the birds were a nuisance. They got a gun and shot the parent gulls. I never found out what became of the chicks.

In my bedroom at Surrey Crescent the bed faced the door, which my sister informed me was bad luck as it meant you were facing the entrance feet first, the way you would leave in your coffin when you died. I didn’t want to talk with her about that.

I never moved the bed as I preferred it the way it was. To turn it would have meant me having my head underneath the window, so the bed remained as it was, with its head pointing towards the exit. The right-hand side looked towards the window and on the left-hand there was a blank wall where I imagined I would one day hang a picture, although I never did.

I was still living in Surrey Crescent when my sister died. Surrey Crescent was the last place I saw Caro before she entered the hospice. On her final visit she had talked about our mother. Caro said that while our mother had still been alive she had prayed each and every day she would become better, and that when this didn’t happen Caro began to feel a distrust in the church, a betrayal.

It was hot. We had eaten squiggly shaped soya bean snacks that she had bought with her in a plastic container. Caro told me that she believed that the poems we had found in the glove box of our mother’s car were bordering on ‘genius’. But had our mother even wanted anyone else to read them?
Over the last three days of my sister’s life I found each visit to the hospice more and more difficult. The bus stopped outside what I might describe as a low-grade mall, the sort that were built in the 1960s and have now become outdated and struggling. This sad, seedy mall tainted the atmosphere of the entire area.

From the mall you crossed a busy main road that was choked with vehicles, trucks and fumes, and walked past a pub that was blessed with a delightful name like The Shakespeare’s Bollocks. Further on, around the corner was the Disability Services Shop, selling bath boards and walking frames, commode chairs and tables on wheels. Everything you could imagine and everything you could not. And once past this Emporium of Needs, you climbed a steeply raked drive to a grand wooden house of faded charms, converted into a small hospice.

Inside, everyone was smiling, which I suppose is better than everyone frowning, but this constant smiling made me feel quite desperate.

The last photograph I have of Caro was taken in the backyard of Surrey Crescent. She has her head tilted, she is drinking pomegranate juice and she has raised the glass a little towards me, or rather, to me behind the camera. She has a piece of chicken on her plate, peas, steamed zucchini, tomatoes and half a baked potato. We meant to do steamed broccoli but we did zucchini instead. Some people know them as courgettes.

Caro is thin in the photo. She had lost so much weight, a ghost of her former self. She is not smiling. Her skin is white, almost translucent, because by that stage she required regular blood transfusions. They call it ‘the other country’ when a person ‘passes over’ or ‘passes on’. Passed on into where, I wonder? They say you pass on into something beautiful, but what if it’s not? What if it’s as hard as being alive?
The lease expired at Surrey Crescent and I decided to move. Something that had always annoyed me there was the way the phone would ring and when I picked it up no one answered. All I would hear would be the live static, the white noise. No one ever said anything, and then the phone would cut off.

Vedic Road is where I live now. There are about eighty apartments with balconies, no garden, just shrubs along one side of the driveway that runs down into the underground car park. The actual apartment is one room with a built-in wardrobe and what the agent referred to as ‘a bed nook’. The larger living space has grey wall-to-wall carpet and the kitchen has all the requisite whiteware, plus there’s a heated towel rail in the bathroom. The tiny balcony looks towards a rise in Vedic Road where the street reaches the top of a hill and then turns sharply to the left. On a map it is the shape of a huge horseshoe.

Every fourth Sunday I have dinner with my father. Which is how I finally discovered what my mother really used to do when she drove off in the car. He said he’d decided to tell me. That tells you a lot about him straight off. He’ll never give you the full story in the first place and then he’ll censor it under his own rules. All you end up with is one half of what was really a whole and he thinks it is his right to do this.

The way he found out is that he was drinking with a friend in the pub and one of the local police was in there, the one who used to teach us the traffic rules at school. And he came and told my dad how he’d seen my mother. He explained what he’d seen her doing. It wasn’t against the law, but he had seen her and felt it wasn’t quite right.

Apparently, she was parking her car down near the reserve and from there she would walk up to the highway and then start hitching. The policeman had seen her standing by the side of the road with her thumb stuck out.
‘Where on earth was she hitchhiking?’ my father had asked the policeman.

‘That’s the bit I don’t know,’ he answered. ‘All I knew was that she parked the car and then she hitched. And she did it regularly.’

I tried to imagine my mother leaving the car behind. I knew she loved that car. I never told my father about the poems in the glove box. In one poem she had written:

*a magnification of what you think
*can never happen reveals
*something that touches nothing
*because the sides are so huge.
*I don’t want to leave this cosmos
*for another one where I’ll be skating
*on thin ice, I don’t want to leave
*this cosmos, my tongue
*tasting of ash.

My mother had a big tin of buttons. It was a tin that she had been given as a gift, it had contained a Christmas cake. There were three prancing reindeer on the lid, each one with a different expression: humble, arrogant and the third could have been described as ‘artistic’. They wore pink and blue saddles and thick leather bell bridles around their necks. There was snow, a red sky and a big white star that glowed.

Orphaned buttons were corralled inside this tin until it was time for them to be sewn back on with their old mates, or maybe they were starting a new life, taking the place of a button that had been lost. I liked to trace around the edge of the reindeer with my finger. They seemed to be guarding the buttons in a good way. I asked Caro once,
what happened to the button tin? She shrugged and made a face at me and made her voice sound high, like a cartoon chipmunk,

‘It was just an old tin of buttons,’ she squeaked.

I remember my sister and me in the psychiatric ward kissing my mother goodbye, her stone-cold cheek, as if she had travelled out of our arms and was already in some other country, a country of her own making. We held hands, touching our fingertips together in the old way, a little performance we used to do when I was small, whenever we had to say goodbye. Here, here and here. Press there and here. Then she was lifted out of our lives. She left us so that she could find out what it was like to skate on her own thin ice. And my tongue tasted of ash.
Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked

As far as I know, my mother never hitchhiked. She was born in 1914 and had always seemed a little Victorian to me, often correcting the way I spoke, and instructing me to keep my legs together when I was sitting down. I don’t remember her ever wearing trousers or jeans. She claimed that owning a ‘good’ coat was important: if you owned a ‘good’ coat then apparently you could wear it over anything cruddy and still look smart. It was also important to keep your shoes clean.

No one cares two hoots about these things in the twenty-first century. Consumers purchase new shoes if their old ones are dirty, women wear pants and trousers of all kinds and people speak the way they want, even mixing two languages together.

My mother had a lot of opinions about damp. When travelling, damp hair could result in influenza. Damp rooms and damp sheets could affect your health. She had grown up through the years of non-insulation. When she was a child they slid hot bricks into their beds to warm up the sheets. They had no clothes dryers and they had to iron the sheets and pillowcases to ‘get the damp out’. My mother knew all about pleurisy, and chest infections.

She was familiar with serge and tweed and embraced the concept of the woollen singlet. She owned a woollen petticoat and assured me these were the best items of clothing to take on your travels. But is it one hundred percent wool? That is what she would ask, and then she would pinch the fabric between her forefinger and thumb. And she could always tell.
There is one photograph I have kept. This is a photograph of my mother wearing a white summer suit and hat and riding an elephant. It was in Aden. Imagine! My mother had ridden elephants! And in Aden! That city seemed so romantic, I immediately wanted to travel and to ride elephants.

She once told me that it was also in Aden that a man had followed her as she walked along the street. She had turned on him, shook her umbrella at him quite fiercely, and then the man had ‘moved on’. She had advised me that this was a good thing to do if you were a single woman and you were being followed. But I never seemed to have an umbrella with me when I found myself in those kind of circumstances.

Her way was the way of the iron glove. For instance, most of the time she kept my father sweet by cooking his favourite meals and desserts. A lot of her control had good intent. Little dictators make their decisions for the benefit of the populace, don’t they?

My father could be controlled as long as he had his meals on time and his Saturdays at the racetrack. He was what they label in literature as the ‘unreliable voice’. There were moments in the family history where he indicated he was in agreement and then suddenly he would turn like a trout in midstream. He purchased his dry white wine in flagons, drank it every night and then went to bed.

I never saw my mother drunk. Her only vice was Nescafé coffee which she drank steadily throughout the day and therefore received only a light sleep. She knew everything, heard everything and took note of every miniscule change in the household.

I was the idiot third daughter who attempted to defy her commands, which is why I was constantly in trouble. If she walked through the door right now I am sure she
would still ground me and remove my pocket money for the next three weeks. Later on, I decided that all that behavior, that anger she held, was because of the withdrawal of her own desires.

She married late because she had been busy travelling around the world. I grew up with my mother’s travel stories. They were family myth. She owned a black cabin trunk and plastered over the outside were the stickers of the places she had visited: *Lucerne, Paris, Munich*. My father said the trunk took up too much room in their bedroom, but throughout the majority of her married life she continued to hang onto it.

When I was a child, she only managed to travel as far as the school canteen where she sold hotdogs and licorice straps at lunchtime. She had told me how much she had loved travelling on the big liners and sneaking up to the first-class deck. The boat stopped at numerous ports. She had black-and-white photos of Stonehenge, the Arc de Triomphe, and the Festival Park in Bayreuth.

There were pictures of a man called ‘Tom Eyre’ up some rigging at sea, and my mother with two bespectacled ladies in the Luxembourg Gardens, squinting against the glare of the sun. In another snapshot of Switzerland, my mother is attired in a long white overcoat, and she stands in the snow clasping a walking stick, on the Jungfraujoch, where she worked as a mountain guide.

Her black trunk was your classic ocean-going suitcase from days of yore. It stood up on one end and when you opened it the door folded out to reveal the interior: a miniature wardrobe full of small drawers and secret pockets, hooks, a rack for clothes, and special envelopes for shoes. The inside was lined with pale-blue satin that was
embossed with an oriental pattern of dragons amid valleys and hills. This was the trunk my mother had purchased in Europe with her carefully saved cash. After that it had gone everywhere with her.

The trunk fascinated me when I was a child. Occasionally, my sister and I had been allowed to play with it, opening the drawers and sliding our hands in and out of the secret pockets. There was a concealed drawer for valuables and jewellery, you pressed a pearl button and it slid out. We squealed with delight when it opened and we thought it the epitome of mystery and sophistication.

We were sometimes given permission to dress ourselves in the ‘old-fashioned’ clothes my mother kept in the trunk. My favourite was a cornflower-blue crepe dress that featured a peplum, a kind of half-skirt, sewn around the hips. There was an actual photograph of my mother wearing this dress, sitting on stairs that led up to a boat deck on one of the liners she had travelled on.

My mother had also hung onto a pocket-sized Shaw Savill brochure entitled The Panama Canal – the ideal route to England. Inside it stated: ...the passenger crossing the Isthmus for the first time repeatedly exclaims that he had no idea that the transit of the canal could be so thrilling.

She had owned a Box Brownie camera and with this she had snapped photos wherever she went. One picture had the name ‘Vera’ scrawled across the back. My mother was in the front seat of an automobile with an unknown woman. She looked happy and relaxed. The vehicle was parked near pine trees, and in the background there was a lake and mountains, it could have been Switzerland. I know my mother spent time working there. I presumed the woman at the wheel was Vera. My mother was in Europe during the 1930s – it was an exciting time to live there, everything was
changing. It was pre-war, except no one realised that. Well, I don’t think my mother
did.

These old photographs of hers would pop up every now and then, and my sisters
and I loved to look at them. Mum would say, *there’s me crossing the Panama Canal*,
and we would bend and crane over the tiny black and white rectangles that had a slim
white border with a fancy wavy edge.

Originally, my mother and her sister, Valma, had left Australia together but my aunt
found she didn’t like travelling. She returned, and, after marrying an economist, she
settled in the suburbs with him and made tomato sauce and jam while her husband
tended a bounteous vegetable garden in his spare time. He won prizes for his
marrows.

Whenever he travelled she stayed behind at home, dusting the furniture. They never
had any children but some time after her husband’s death my aunt met a young
woman who she took under her wing, so to speak. Families are made up of more than
just blood relatives. My aunt may have hitchhiked. Although she stayed at home she
had some gumption. I vaguely recall some story relating to a young hitchhiker who
broke into her kitchen.

In one small photo my mother and sister stand next to each other, decked out in
their European attire. My aunt is wearing a pristine white blouse under a rabbit-fur
coat. The coat boasts the widest of lapels. They look about twenty years of age. My
mother, the eldest, is in a black-belted astrakhan with the frill of some chi-chi blouse
poking out at her throat. They are sporting the most fantastic hats – my aunt’s has a
high, bucket-shaped crown and a small brim with a little net attached around the main
body of the headpiece. My mother’s hat is more outrageous - small but very jaunty
with a pointed high crown, a narrow brim and a feather attached to the crown. She is wearing her hat at a most rakish angle. Everyone wore headpieces in those days. They seem to be standing on a dock, about to either embark or disembark.

I enjoy returning to this photo again and again in order to examine their faces. My aunt is pretty, half-smiling, but subdued. My mother has a glint of something a little more adventurous, as if she could be counted on for some fun. She’s smiling and her torso is animated, energetic. This is what shocked me when I first saw this photograph – it is a testament to one facet of my mother I had never seen. My aunt gave me this photo. She had it copied from her own original.

You can see the determination in my mother’s face. That was something I knew well. We’d had our disagreements. But it was her own retold adventurous exploits that had fuelled my imagination as a child and made me want to get out on the road myself.

She told us that girls could do anything. She told us we could do ‘more’ with our lives if we applied ourselves and then the world would be our oyster. And yet, while she was telling us this, she stayed at home cooking and sewing and cleaning. From the time she married she never worked another job with a pay packet again.

An indication of my mother’s enthusiasm for boat travel was the fact that she had collected some of the dinner menus. This collection was kept in the black trunk. The menus were printed on thick card and each course was described in flourishes of scroll-y wolly writing.

The courses consisted of appetisers, soup, fish or red meat, salad, and then desserts and crackers and cheese, followed by tea or coffee. *We ate like kings on the boat,* my mother would say, smacking her lips.
Twenty years later she could still recall the way the tables had been dressed with heavy white linen tablecloths and the various pieces of sparkling cutlery, such as flat-bladed fish knives. This was part of the romance of travel: hearing her describe these things made me want to hop on a plane bound for somewhere adventurous and exotic. And if you didn’t have the money for a plane fare then it was still possible to thumb it across your own continent.

Soup would be accompanied by hot rolls, egg balls or cheese sticks, my mother explained. The main meat dishes would be surrounded by fantastic displays of parsley and fruit sliced deviously into clever shapes. For dessert the passengers could select from an array of custards, sherbets, ice cream, mousse, parfait or bombes. During dinner everyone would drink toasts, and afterwards there was ballroom dancing to a six-piece band.

Then, my mother would begin to hum one of the old dance tunes. *Arrivederci, Roma, we will never part with words of sorrow*. Travel was about farewells and hellos, it was about leaving old stuff behind. My mother could still move across the floor as light as a feather, waltzing *one-two, one-two*.

During my mother’s youth, before she left Australia, she had been part of one of a gang of friends that hung out together. They went for holidays to places like Lakes Entrance and camped and bush-walked. Back in Sydney they sunbathed and swam at their favourite beach which had been Bondi.

There are quite a few pictures of George Lovey. He had been Mum’s boyfriend at the time – she could have married him. He is standing astride the sand in his black-waisted togs. George was muscly and big. Here he is leaning against something that appears to be a giant barrel. Now he’s wearing a flash suit, waistcoat, and a tie with a
loud swirly-whirly pattern. He is on some kind of podium and he’s got five gold
 trophies on the table in front of him. George was something. Why didn’t my mother
 marry him?

 She wanted to travel, she wanted to get away. In a final snapshot, my mother is
 lounging in the long grass in her jacket and short skirt. She looks mysterious and
dreamy. The gang has had a picnic, and she has taken off her shoes. She has a secret
smile flitting across her face. Was she thinking about George and his five trophies?
For goodness’ sake, I could have had George for my father, although I guess I may
not have been born in that case.

Once, George Lovey came with his entire family for a visit. It was before Christmas.
His two daughters, Connie and Loma, sat and stared at us and drank lemonade.
George was still good-looking. His wife’s name was Carmel, and she was chatty, very
nice, maybe too nice, too chatty. After they left my father made jokes about George’s
surname. George had given my father a Christmas present, a tie. He didn’t know that
my father never wore ties. My father liked to be a little Bohemian, he drank his flagon
wine and wore a beret, and he never wore ties. We thought it was normal. It was the
tie people, the ones who wore them, that we thought weird.

My father made one too many jokes about George Lovey and my mother snapped,
why don’t you just shut up! She’d been quiet and thoughtful while George Lovey had
been in our house. He’d talked of old times. Carmel couldn’t say much during that
part of the conversation as she hadn’t been part of the old crowd. I could see that my
mother and George Lovey still clicked, there was a tiny flame between them. They
were a little over-smiley, they laughed too much, there was a remnant of attraction
there. Carmel stared at her shoes. They were clean and white. She was like a stick,
really thin. Later on, we discovered that she’d been sick then, and after a long illness, she died. I remembered Connie and Loma had sat on the couch, tongue-tied and sucking up their lemonades. My mother had wanted to travel. That was the long and the short of why she hadn’t married George Lovey.

My father had never been on a big ship or a little one. He preferred to keep his feet on dry land. He wasn’t impressed with my mother’s descriptions of shipboard life: her tales of the quoits competitions and the other games organised on the top decks. The evenings had featured quiz nights and fancy dress. My mother spent a lot of her time trying to slip into first class. She claimed there was a ‘better type’ of male there. Economy class was what she could afford - the cabins that were positioned in the bowels of the ship. These were below water level so you couldn’t even open a porthole. The rocking and roiling of the ship could be felt more, the lower you went. Apparently, some economy-class passengers spent the entire trip being seasick but my mother was never sick. She loved being at sea. She got her ‘sea legs’ the first day on board and from then on was ‘as hearty as a mountain goat’.

No doubt there are many reasons why my mother never hitchhiked, but the letters she sent to her own parents indicate she wasn’t past accepting the proffered helping hand of a ‘nice’ boy. At one stage she worked as a mountain guide in Switzerland. My impression was that this was the most enjoyable job my mother ever had. The following letter was written when she was on her way to Lucerne to take up that position:

_I will go right back to the beginning and start from when I hauled myself plus baggage onto the train at Nürnberg and waved goodbye with a very wide grin, you_
know the kind. I was in München for one and half days while I did a spot of shopping and I bought these things with your Christmas money: an awfully nice, soft, brown straw hat, brown shoes with very high heels with openwork toes and sides, four pairs of silk stockings and an umbrella that double-barrels into a one-foot length. When it rains you can produce it from behind your ear, like a fountain pen. On the second day we had a few showers but my New Umbrella kept my New Hat and my New Shoes from being spoilt.

From München I went onto Lindau on Lake Constantine. It is a lovely run through typical Bavarian country, hills covered in flowers and fresh-leafed trees of every imaginable shade of green. I could see snow-packed peaks in the distance and there was a young man playing an accordion at the railway station. I met quite a nice boy on the train who carried my bags to the hotel and as he knew the town he showed me all over it. He also took a photo of me in my New Hat.

The next morning at seven I was on the boat crossing the lake. It was jolly nice at that time of morning and we had a huge crowd on board going to Switzerland for the day to see a soccer match, Switzerland vs Germany (Germany won).

St Gallen, halfway between the Bodensee and Zurich was my next port of call. This is only a tiny place, very typically Swiss, surrounded by the loveliest hills. When I arrived at St Gallen I went to the Post Office to collect my money but found that the jolly old bank had sent me a cheque which could only be cashed at a bank, and as it was Sunday the banks were very tightly closed.

Fortunately, an awfully nice gentleman came to my assistance. My new friend spotted an acquaintance of his and asked him to come along as he could speak excellent English. Well, this second man gave me seventy francs for a seventy-four
I then went for a walk and then I went to the cinema to see Greta Garbo in ‘Camille’, before catching the train to Zurich. I arrived in Zurich at 5 p.m. You know those Swiss postcards you see, well, those colours actually exist here, particularly the marvelous blues and bluey-greens. I had met quite a nice Italian-Swiss boy on the train, who carried my bags to the Hotel Italia for me. Zurich is a darling place, so smart and cosmopolitan. A fourpenny ride from the middle of the city and you are in stunning forest where you can walk around the lake and under the trees for miles.

At one stage my parents separated. This was before I was born. My mother went away to stay with her parents and she took my sister with her. As far as I know she travelled to her parents’ house on public transport. She never hitchhiked, although judging from the letters she wrote in Europe, she did meet strangers but she never accepted lifts with them.

My father followed her and wooed her back. I don’t know what he did. He was capable of conveying a certain Irish charm that came with his natural ‘gift of the gab’, and then there was his beautiful, thick lustrous black hair.

After I was born my mother suffered what my paternal aunts referred to as ‘her little nervous breakdown’. The doctor advised her to lie about my age in order to gain a place for me at the kindergarten. Placing me in kindergarten would give my mother ‘a rest’. She was no longer doing any travelling. She was going nowhere fast. Once again, she never went on the road or did any hitching. Some women do just leave. Walking fast, they get up the momentum and begin to create a new rhythm. But my franc cheque and then we said goodbye with the best wishes on both sides. These two men were Jews.
mother stayed static within the four walls of the house that we often heard her swear about.

It was only many, many years later, she travelled again. This was by plane. My father refused to accompany her, saying that flying made him feel queasy and scared. She stayed in German cities she had lived in before the war, but told me when she returned home that she had found these cities so changed they were almost unrecognisable. Without my father she was lonely and homesick, although she discovered she could still speak the language.

Coming back through customs in Australia, she was caught trying to smuggle in undeclared French cheeses in her carry-on. The cheeses were removed. She never left Australia again. The only trips she made after that were the times she was required to stay in the Clinic at the hospital as, unfortunately, she continued to have problems with her mental health.

After that holiday in Germany, she got rid of her black trunk. My father said she gave it to a second-hand dealer. I have seen trunks like that in antique shops. They have big prices attached to them these days. People do not use them for travel, they make them into an ‘unusual’ lounge accessory, sometimes displaying the standing trunk so as to view the beautiful interior. I have even seen a trunk like that in the museum. But these trunks are no longer part of life as we know it.
Valma hears a noise in the kitchen. She sits up straight and pulls her pink knitted bed cape closer over her shoulders. It is her habit to sit like this, with the cape over her shoulders and the light turned off, ruminating in the dark. She doesn’t want to waste electricity. It is too early for the birds, it is that darkest part of the night. That’s when she often wakes. When it feels as if the day has fallen into the bottom of a deep pocket, and every sound is muffled.

Her bedroom is only three metres square, just big enough to take the queen-sized bed. Once upon a time Arnold would have been in the bed with her, but it is eleven years ago now that he passed over to what Shakespeare called ‘that other country’. She misses him, although after he died she found it quite enjoyable arranging the house the way she wanted it. In Arnold’s time it had to be his way but now it is Valma’s hour.

For instance, she immediately got rid of that desk he had spent so much time sitting at. Arnold had been an economist. The books she didn’t mind keeping, they were of educational value, after all. It was the desk she hated. She replaced it with an Early Settler Lord Byron Ashbourne telephone table. White with an unpainted top, with one drawer and a shelf at the bottom where you can keep the telephone books. She’d been sorely tempted by the console in the Hampshire Series or a television unit from the Coleridge Selection, but had admitted to herself that these had been sheer diversions. The Lord Byron Ashbourne fit the bill nicely, and the desk had gone to the Salvation Army second-hand shop.
Also, since Arnold had passed, there was no more pipe smoke, a welcome relief. She had removed everything to do with pipes and pipe smoking: the pipe rack, the ashtrays and the actual offending pipe. She had purchased a white quilt cover for the bed, the old one had been full of singe marks from Arnold’s pipe. And all her pills and such she could now keep next to her bed.

The district nurse visited three times a week on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to check her swollen legs and to help her wash. She’d left a form on the kitchen table during her last visit, but Valma didn’t want to fill it in. It was headed: The Help You Need With Your Daily Living Activities. What business was this of the district nurse’s? Valma preferred not to be interrogated about such things:

Roughly how many days a week do you need help

Using the toilet?

Using something like a commode, bedpan or bottle instead of a toilet?

Using incontinence aids, pads or nappies?

Have you experienced loss of weight or loss of appetite?

Please tell us as much as you can about the help you need coping with your toilet needs – the more you can tell us the easier it is for us to gain a clear picture of the type of help we can give you.

They were obsessed with incontinence. After her big operation, they had measured the height of her toilet and then come back with a special toilet chair. She hated it. She could no longer move around easily. Sometimes, these days, she was so bored she had to resort to reading the free advertising brochures that came inside the newspaper. She found the descriptions of the goods on offer strangely soothing:

Waffle maker, café style with floating hinge thermostat and four waffle capacity.
Safety kettle, three hundred and sixty degree swivel plus auto-secure cut off with boil dry protector gauge.

The New Millenium two-slice toaster, featuring self-center slots with cancel and reheat functions, twenty-four variable programmes, and cook ‘n’ look windows on both sides.

There it was again. This time a sound like the window going up. That would be the window facing the patio, the window she had left open just a smidgeon. Valma May Green became very still, which she had always been good at doing. Over the years, nurses and hairdressers alike had often commented on her ability to maintain complete soundlessness. When she and Arnold were having their wedding photos done, Arnold had commented on Valma’s innate meditative quality. He had always said of Valma: still waters run deep. Arnold, on the other hand, had been a rather garrulous, untidy man with a habit of leaving things everywhere.

He had meant well, but he had loved the underdog and made it his form to pick up waifs and strays wherever he went. He would bring these people back home and expect Valma to give them a good feed. Some of them were all right, others had proven to be limpets fastening onto Arnold, creating unrealistic expectations about how he could help them.

Valma’s mouth went tight just remembering. There was David, found on a park bench in the city, utterly charming but a little crazy. Although he was thirty-five years old, he had hoped Arnold would officially adopt him. Then there’d been the girl, Susannah Brill, a talented student who’d attended one of Arnold’s seminars. She was
the one who had pushed the envelope as far as possible. In the end, Valma had stepped in and spoken to her, saying, *just leave Arnold alone. You are no longer welcome at this residence.* Susannah Brill’s face had become very sad and she had begun crying hysterically, only stopping after Valma slapped her. Yes, that had done the trick. The little hussy had stopped her offensive behaviour after that and left them alone. And now here was Valma all alone herself.

She’d lost a lot of hair now. In the wedding photos that hung on the bedroom wall you could see how her hair had been gold and glossy, a thick fat sheaf hanging below her shoulders. Her wedding dress was embellished with tiny seed pearls and she held a posy of violets in her left hand.

Valma could still remember a time when no one flew anywhere. They travelled by rail or bus or boat. Only presidents and royalty had gone flying. A time when you used the small Reckitt’s blue bags in the wash to make the clothes white, and a cake recipe might have listed a half a pound of butter and a half a dozen eggs in their ingredients.

The little cotton reels that she had fitted onto her Singer sewing machine had featured delightful names printed on their labels: appellatives such as *Eau-de-Nil, Golden Cinnamon,* and *Pomegranite,* evoking an era of superior imagination and passion. Now they were called *Colour 209.*

As she mused over these things, she heard another sound – someone was definitely in the kitchen. It was someone quite light, either a child or a teenager. She opted for a young female, as she could feel this person was being very careful, very tidy, very neat. Female attributes, thought Valma. Beaten into us. We’re told we’re the ones who are going to have to look after everybody else so we better learn to be tidy and clean.
The person in the kitchen had now opened the fridge. There was almost a whole chicken in there. Valma had only managed to eat one drumstick last night and had left the rest. They would probably sit at the L-shaped island bench with a formica-like surface that mimicked marble, and eat that chicken.

No lights had been turned on. Maybe they had a torch. Valma knew her kitchen off by heart. The pattern on the linoleum was that of pebbles on a beach. On the front of the stove there were two clean tea towels hanging ready for use in the morning. One had a picture of Coober Pedy and the other featured special sites of the Great Barrier Reef. On the side bench was her brown leather photo album with the sixty photos inside. There were three doors that led off from the kitchen, one to the lounge, one out to the backyard and another to the hall. A fourth door was the hot water cupboard.

And it was in the kitchen that Valma kept some of her favourite household ornaments, a mosaic picture of a daffodil, a row of wooden ducks attached to the wall, a pair of white china miniature wooden dogs, a koala made out of wool and pipe cleaners, and a Chinese picture in fake hammered ‘bronze’ of an ‘ancient’ chariot and horses. That had belonged to Arnold. It had been given to him by a visiting eminent Chinese academic who had promised to invite Arnold to Beijing, but the invitation had never arrived. They later discovered the poor man had been sent to a rural northern area of China because of his liberal political beliefs.

The entrance to Valma’s kitchen was from a cement patio and through a sliding glass door that had a slightly dodgy lock. Both the lounge and the kitchen were decorated with mint green thermal curtains. In the kitchen the curtains ran across double ranch sliders, but the small window above the sink featured a green and white roller blind. Outside that window, native shrubs had been planted, and a raised veggie
bed full of seeding parsley and a few lonely feathers of silverbeet. The birds liked to
get on this veggie bed and have a good peck.

Valma tried to remember what had been there before. Rhubarb? Courgettes? Arnold
had once grown beans and it had been a bumper crop, fantastic in size and in flavour.
This was to prove he could do it, as he always maintained he could do anything if he
wanted. But more often than not he hadn’t wanted, as at heart he’d been lazy, more
lax than organised, a generous conversationalist, popular with people from all walks
of life and consequently annoying to actually live with. *He is such a great man, a
truly great man,* they would say of him in their speeches. They never mentioned
Valma, his wife in sickness and in health until death did they part.

By now Valma was sure someone was moving around her kitchen in a sneaky way
and this was more irritating to her than anything else because she loved her kitchen.
She wasn’t afraid. Someone who wanted to burgle money would have been into the
bedroom already and gone by now. No, this was a hungry person and of youthful
years.

Valma could see well in the dark, she liked to sit in the dark. She found it extremely
contemplative to be still and in darkness. Arnold had always indicated it was a
peculiar habit. He would say these things and it would be like a dart going to her
heart. He had never been interested in a further examination of the mechanics of
something, once he had expressed his opinion, then that was that, as if he was Moses
writing down the holy commandments. As if.

Valma squeezed out of bed and slipped on her fluffy dressing gown and her quilted
house slippers and moved into the hall. The kitchen door was shut but there was a thin
sliver of feeble light shining under it. Valma thought the food thief had turned on the
lamp above the kitchen table. She cleared her throat very obviously as she pushed open the door.

‘Hello,’ said Valma.

A young girl with a short pixie haircut was sitting at the table reading Valma’s newspaper and eating her chicken. The girl was dressed in bib-fronted dungarees and a tee shirt. A jumper was slung over the back of the kitchen chair. She was wearing lace-up boots, and a white calico shoulderbag lay on the table.

‘Hello, dear,’ said Valma. ‘Who are you?’ The girl didn’t look remorseful in any way whatsoever.

‘Hi, I’m Soos.’

‘I’m Valma. How do you do?’ Valma held out her hand. Soos wiped her greasy fingers on the side of her dungarees and they shook.

‘What are you doing in my house, dear?’

‘I’m sorry. I was really hungry.’

‘You could have knocked.’

‘People get scared.’

‘Scared?’

‘Too scared to answer a door.’

‘It’s better to try knocking first before you assume they may be too scared to let you into their kitchen. Should I ring the police?’

‘No, don’t do that.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’ve only eaten some food. I’ve done nothing else.’

‘You haven’t taken anything?’

‘No.’
‘What are you doing here? Where are your parents?’

‘They’re separated.’

‘That’s no excuse for this behaviour.’

‘I ran away.’

‘I see. How old are you?’

‘Eighteen.’

Soos has finished the dinner leftovers.

‘You seem to be a resourceful girl.’

‘Yes. How old are you, then?’

Valma stands up straight. ‘Seventy-eight. I don’t think it was intelligent to run away.’

‘My mother is a fruitcake.’

‘And what leads you to that conclusion?’

‘She has to take drugs for her depression. She’s hard to live with.’

Soos is wiping her hands on the Coober Pedy tea towel.

‘What about your father?’

‘He’s overseas. Anyway.’

‘Anyway?’

‘Thanks for the chicken. I’ll be off now.’

Soos picks up her bag and her jumper. It is hand knitted. A nice jumper.

‘I have always been fond of blackberry stitch,’ says Valma.

‘I knitted it.’

‘That’s a difficult pattern.’

‘I know.’

‘Why don’t you stay and have a coffee now you’ve woken me up?’
‘Why would you do that?’

‘Why?’

‘Why would you offer me stuff after I broke into your house?’

‘Because I’m worried about you. And I like drinking coffee early in the morning.’

‘What’s your name again?’

‘Valma.’

‘You live here by yourself, don’t you?’

Valma looks hard at Soos. ‘How would you know that?’

‘I saw you.’ Soos coughs. ‘I watched you.’

‘I see. Is that how you break into houses?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How many houses have you broken into?’

‘Two. You and someone else.’

‘And where were you before this?’

Valma puts the jug on and turns on the electric heater.

‘I was in a car, in the back of a car with two other guys. We met up in Brisbane and began hitching down to Sydney together about four days ago. It took us a while because there were the three of us. The guy who owned the car had a load of stuff in the back. He was moving. When we got to Sydney we helped him carry the stuff into his new place. Then I left the others. Are you making coffee?’

‘Yes.’

‘I have one sugar in mine. Are you making instant?’

‘No.’

Valma fetches her three-cup coffee plunger and fills it with two good spoonfuls of freshly ground coffee.
'What coffee’s that?'

'Colombian.'

'Smells good.'

Valma has an idea of outrageous proportion.

'Will we have scones?’ she asks Soos.

'I love scones!'

'Cheese or date?'

'Cheese.'

The two women are held within the bubble of the night. Valma turns on the oven to pre-heat it. She takes out the high grade flour and baking powder and sifts two cups of flour and two heaped teaspoons of baking powder. With cheese scones she likes to add a good pinch of cayenne pepper. She grates the cheese. Soos watches her. She looks about sixteen, but who can tell. With the oven on, the kitchen is glowing, cosy. Valma cuts a tablespoon of butter into the flour and adds the grated cheese. A cupful of milk is slowly stirred in, and she begins to knead the ingredients into a ball inside the bowl. She flours the table, places the ball in the middle and kneads it out before cutting the dough into eighths. On the top of each scone she brushes a little milk.

'The secret is to get the oven really hot and then slip the scones in.’

'My grandmother used to make them,’ says Soos.

'Where does she live?’

'She’s dead now. Her heart crapped out. What’s wrong with you?’

'Me?’

'Yes.’

'Nothing wrong with me.’

Soos pauses. Valma slides the tray of scones into the oven.
‘I can tell.’

‘Can tell what?’

‘Can tell there’s something wrong. I saw your form.’ From underneath the newspaper Soos takes out the *Personal Care* form that the district nurse left. ‘You haven’t filled it in.’

‘I hate those things.’

‘*Coping with toilet needs.* Is that what it’s like when you get old?’

Valma chooses not to reply.

‘Does anyone come to help you?’ asks Soos.

‘A district nurse. Except it’s never the same one. It could be Ruth or Helen or maybe it will be Sonia. Then suddenly, Sonia’s off somewhere else and she’s been replaced with Raewyn. And once it was Portia. Only once it was Portia. They help me. When you get old, you need some help. When you’re young you might need help, but you don’t have to take it.’

The kitchen fills with the wonderful smell of freshly baked scones. Valma looks through the rectangular glass window on the front of her oven and she can see them rising: it delights her to see them growing so well. She places the butter on the table, the fig jam, the honey, the peanut butter and the cream cheese. You can have anything on scones. They slide out of the oven, golden on top and firm on the bottom, and when the two women slice the scones in half they are fluffy all the way through, steam rising off them.

‘I can’t believe you just made these,’ says Soos. She puts cream cheese and jam on her scone and wolfs it down. ‘God, that’s good.’

There is a silence while they concentrate on eating. The two women continue sitting at the kitchen table, drinking more coffee. A bird cries in the distance. They hear the
sound of car wheels out on the road. The refrigerator begins to hum and make small
gurgling noises in an effort to clear its throat, so to speak.

‘Dawn soon, ‘ says Valma.

‘Anyway,’ says Soos. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘To do?’

‘I mean about me. Will you ring the police?’

‘I don’t think so. Is it very hard to hitchhike?’

Soos shrugs.

‘It’s pretty easy.’

‘I travelled myself when I was young.’

‘Did you? Where to?’

‘Europe. With my sister. We went by boat.’

‘Wow.’

‘I have some photographs.’ The night before, Valma had left her brown leather
photo album in the kitchen.

‘These are the photos,’ explains Valma, indicating the album.

‘Of?’

‘Inside this album there are sixty photos fifty-five of myself and my husband
starting from the year we first met and five that are pre-Arnold. I made this album
after he died. It took me five months.’

‘I’d love to look at it,’ says Soos.

Valma knows which photo she wants to show Soos first: the one with her wearing
the rabbit fur coat and the high bucket-shaped hat dressed with a little piece of net.
Standing in her European clothes next to her sister.

‘Of course. But wash your hands first, you don’t want to get jam on anything.’
‘No, no jam,’ agrees Soos. She runs the kitchen tap over each hand and carefully wipes them, drying over and over again.

‘I’m ready,’ she says.
Efharisto

When he said. When he said he felt sick. When he said he felt sick and then he began shaking and saying, I am cold I am cold I feel so cold. And it was hot, the end of summer, and there we were in Greece. But it was too hot in Greece (in fact we were on the island of Crete) to be cold. But my son said he did feel cold and began shaking uncontrollably. When he said it, it was at about six in the morning. And I bent over him and I kissed him on the forehead and said, what did you eat?

What had we been doing the day before? He and his friend, who was staying in the town, had been drinking wine and eating squid. That’s what you do when you are in Crete. It should be what you do. But we had all been in the sun, and I thought maybe it was heat stroke.

I put a blanket and both our jackets around his shoulders. My twenty-year-old son was shaking so much I could hear his upper teeth banging against his lower ones. We were in the country, out in a countryish area where there were cocks crowing. Every morning starting from about five. We had heard them every morning since we’d arrived, the cocks crowing in the dark, like a warning. Be careful, cock-a-doodle-doo, be careful.

We were in this little farm cottage and I had no idea where the farm family lived. They turned up and offered us lifts into the town or sometimes brought food for us: beautiful olives, or feta cheese and fresh bread. The food was fantastic. That was the sort of thing we had come for – the olives, the delicious seafood, and the sun, the cleansing healing properties of the sun. I could remember having chickenpox many years ago, when I was only about four years of age, and afterwards my mother had
instructed me to lay my toys in the sun. Apparently, the sun could purify everything of the chickenpox germs. The sheets and pillowcases she washed, and they were flapping on the line while I laid all my toys in rows on the grass underneath them. I was busy. It was a lot of hard work. I lay my books out with the spine flat, the way my mother instructed me. And after a couple of hours I turned everything over as if I were cooking toast, which was a job I often did in the kitchen. Cooking the toast on the toast tray, pulling the tray in and out from under a double line of blue gas flames. I cooked the toast, so I knew all about how to turn over and cook my own toys, lying in the sun.

In any case, my son and I had come to Greece for the sun and the olives and the olive oil. Oh, the olive oil on Crete was fantastic. In the cafes and restaurants they drizzled the olive oil over these splendid layered salads built of feta and giant olives, tomato, maybe artichokes. You never knew what might be in there, and always with a drizzle or two of oil over the entire construction. I loved those salads. And so did my son.

My son loved Crete. He had always wanted to go to Crete because he had studied archeology and ancient Greek art and Classics. He could read Ancient Greek. And he could read and speak Latin. He had toyed with the idea of becoming an archeologist. We flew first into the capital of Heraklion, as we had come to the island so we could visit the ancient site of Knossos.

The hill of Knossos was inhabited over a long period of time. The largest ancient town established there was also named Knossos and a great palace was built at its centre. Its god-king was named Minos, and it was said he had a bull as an ancestor. This culture practised bull worship; it was where the famous athletic bull vaulters came from.
After Knossos, we decided to catch a bus to the old Cretan capital of Hania on the
other side of the island, full of beautiful buildings that were built by the Venetians
when they were there. In the Heraklion taxi on the way to the bus station, the driver
was playing Middle Eastern music – nothing sounded very Greek any more. Crete is
different and unusual, specifically between the Middle East and the Mediterranean. A
charm in the shape of an omnipresent eye hung off the taxi driver’s rear-view mirror.
The food was terrific, the people friendly.

They seemed to like the fact we were a mother and son, travelling together. The
grown-up son looking after his mother. In Greece they understand about sons and
their mothers but they didn’t know the whole story, they didn’t know the real reason
we were there. We had a secret. My son didn’t like to talk about it. That was on the
no-no list. This was a list that had grown in length, a list of things that my son did not
wish to discuss. They were ‘no-no’. They were non. They were nien. In Greek they
were ochi. I wasn’t going to tell unless I had to. Unless my arm was twisted. But in
case of emergencies I had a special letter I could produce.

Somehow we had saved the money for this trip because we knew it was important,
we knew we needed to go to Crete. I kept a copy of the brochure that had advertised
the cottage we stayed in. At the time, I had thought we might come back. Later on, I
knew that would never happen and then I threw it away. But we liked the cottage. It
had two rooms downstairs with a bathroom and one small bedroom upstairs under the
roof, which was where my son slept. He adored sleeping up there. He was allowed
first choice on everything, it had always been a little like that, he was my only son,
my only child.

So, he was upstairs, and I was down in the bedroom next to the kitchen, which had a
dining table and chairs and a leather two-seater sofa, and a cupboard with a
chessboard inside it, and a pack of cards, a spare blanket, an extra pillow and some other things I can’t remember. In the kitchen there were three blue mugs and one green. I used the green mug every day, to drink tea and coffee. My son slept a lot, he always slept late, and I let him. That was the sort of thing we were there for, to sleep, to eat, to be under the sun.

The white dust rolled up off the wheels of the cars that came along our road, past our cottage and past the scorched oleanders and hibiscus. It was so dry that the powdery, fine dust seeped in through the closed windows and settled on the old leather sofa. During the day, we walked past a cluster of small shrines. Inside each one there was oil with a floating wick and the offerings that people had placed: coins, flowers, food, clothing, alcohol. And in one there was a pair of dentures.

The usual Western road rules didn’t apply here, looking left and then right could only complicate things, as drivers tended to go in the wrong direction anyway. The road was for cars travelling in every direction, both ways, and all at the same time. At every large intersection they sounded their horns to warn each other they were crossing.

The light was gold, a honey-embalmed sepia. On our walks we sometimes passed a house with a chipped green front door that one day had three pomegranates placed on a table beside it. In the garden of this house there were trees with grey leaves and small, shiny black fruit. More often than not, there would be a few of the locals walking along the road also, possibly carrying a brown paper parcel or two. These parcels always seemed to contain something different: meat, cakes, a bottle of raki. The raki was a kind of one-hundred-percent alcohol that was sold slyly in the cake shops, available from secret backyard stills and clear as water but smelling as strong
as turps. The weather was as hot as Australia. It was still the ‘high’ season in Crete.
The tourists and backpackers arrive in Crete after it has become cold in the northern parts of Europe. In the Mediterranean it is still warm, even at night.

Most days, my son and I walked into the nearest village. The cobbled paths reeking a little of sewage outside the only hotel. Children with dirty noses and dirty hands tried to sell us packets of lollies and bubblegum. The waiters sang as they dressed the small restaurant tables with fresh white cloths, and salt, pepper and cutlery. We heard the church bells at every hour of the day and night. An omelette on a plate, broth in a bowl. The smell of coffee. A nun standing under the baking trees and shrubs. An old man with something wrapped in the ubiquitous brown paper. Bending over to feed one of the mangy dogs.

We had originally flown from Athens to Heraklion. In Athens we had visited the Acropolis and walked to the famous rock where St Paul had preached. The rock had been shiny on its surface, like soap, made smooth by the number of people who had walked and prayed on it. On the way back we had been followed by a pack of those mangy dogs. We saw these wild dogs everywhere in Greece.

We were required to pay in cash for the plane fare to Crete, and for the cottage. The drachma was in the thousands, thirty-four thousand for the plane ticket, so obviously one drachma was worth absolutely nothing at all. I found it difficult to work out the exchange rate in my head, often having to transfer it into American dollars first.

We had a bad night’s sleep with mosquitoes and a party somewhere across the fields with people drunk and singing. Then there was lightning in the sky but no rain, and the sound of cats fighting. I suggested my son shut his wooden shutters, but he loved having them wide open. And then, in the early hours of the morning he began
shaking, shaking all over, his teeth chattering and his face bleached to a parchment white.

I began to dress myself. I put everything we might need in my shoulderbag. I tried to move quickly. I put in the special letter. I said to my son that we had to go to the hospital and that we would take the letter with us. That was my indication to him that I thought the situation was serious, beyond my control.

I dressed him just the way I had dressed him when he was small. In those days he had owned a fluffy yellow jumper that had made him look like a Cheezel, one of those corn snacks in the shape of a ball, dipped in some sort of lurid yellow flavouring. This time though, I was dressing him in his adult clothes, the clothes he had chosen for himself. The shorts had a brand name sewn to them, which I cannot remember now.

Later on, you wish you could remember these tiny details. You really want to know, want to remember every single tiny detail that will tell you just that little bit more about that person you loved so much. And instead, you cannot remember what brand name was on his shorts, and you feel useless. It makes you feel useless that you cannot remember. I just wish I could remember the logo that was on the shorts that I dressed my adult son in.

The tee shirt was one he had purchased in Athens. It said *I love (heart) the Acropolis*, and it was blue. I was wearing my long black skirt that I generally wore when I was travelling, and a black blouse and my black sandals, and already I looked as if I was in mourning.

Before the sun rises, everything in Greece appears to be extremely black and white. That white earth and all those black shadows make you feel as if you are moving inside an old pre-Technicolour movie.
So, we were dressed. We’ll hitch a lift to the hospital, I said. He said very little in reply as he was still shaking. I could tell he was scaring himself, so I took command and pretended I knew what I was doing, and I convinced him of that. I had always been good at pretense.

We walked out onto the road and I sat him down on a large white stone that was immediately handy for that exact purpose. We could still hear the cocks crowing. The dogs barking. Wherever you are in the world, it seems to me that there are dogs barking somewhere in the background. The dogs live with the humans and so wherever the humans are, there are also dogs.

This is stupid, my son said to me. And I replied, no, it will work. As if someone had heard me (and I had convinced them), a small white Fiat appeared around the bend in the road and I stuck out my thumb. I knew what to do as I had hitchhiked a lot in my youth. And the car stopped.

His name was Stefan, and he was so nice. We liked him straight away, me with my thumb stuck out and the important letter in my shoulderbag, and my son shaking on his stone there by the side of the road, wearing his jacket, my jacket, and a blanket over his shoulders because he kept saying how cold he felt.

Stefan could speak good English. We need to go to the hospital, I said. Stefan had been on his way to work but he agreed to take a detour to the hospital. Please, please, he said. He meant ‘get in’. And we did.

In Stefan’s car I put my hand on my son’s forehead and he was burning even though he said he felt cold. He stopped shaking so much. But his face was still a bad colour. I was a mother, and I knew what colour a healthy face should be. There are those few moments in your life when you know you are truly scared, and this was one of them.

The dream I had been having earlier in the night, before the lightning and before the
cats fighting, came back to me in its entirety. In this dream, I had been one of a secret
group of people sworn to save the world from something destructive that was
imminent. We were as innocent in our naïve enthusiasm as the little hobbits in
Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Some of the people I worked with in my job back home
were there, and the leader of our group was a Gandalf-esque elderly man who was
blind. We knew his magic was powerful. We were plotting in a room on the sixth
floor of somewhere, I vaguely thought was a hotel. In dreams you often don’t always
know but accept it for being the sixth floor of somewhere and nothing more, nothing
less. There was a knock at the door and we all froze. It was someone saying they
wanted to change the towels. One of us opened the door very slowly, and the dead
body of the hotel housemaid came rolling down the stairs opposite the door. It was
frightening. That had been the point at which I had woken up. And then I had heard
my son calling me, and I had seen how he was shaking and I had dressed him in
warmer clothes and decided we should go to the hospital, and we had hitched a lift in
this car.

Stefan asked me if I had ever done any hitchhiking previous to this. Oh yes, I said,
when I was younger. We explained we were from Australia, and I told Stefan how,
when I was younger, I had hitched the length and the breadth of the Australian
continent. Desert, rainforest, jungle, beaches. Do you have snow there? Stefan asked.
No, not much snow. Does it snow on Crete? I asked him. Sometimes, he replied. I
found it hard to imagine.

We passed the shrines built by the side of the main road. I had wondered if they
were copies of actual existing churches. They stood about six feet tall so they were
quite noticeable. There was always a light burning inside them and around the outside
people had left coins or scribbled notes about what they had been praying for. Or they
might have left a bottle of ouzo or raki, the idea was that if you wished to stop
drinking, then you would leave alcohol.

Stefan asked us, have you drunk our local raki? Yes, my son said. He had drunk it
with his friend, Nathan, who was staying in Hania. It’s good, he said. Everyone makes
it, said Stefan. It is our tradition. Attached to his dashboard was a small picture of the
eye. It is good luck, he told me, it keeps away the evils. I put my hand on my son’s
forehead again. He was so hot I couldn’t imagine that he could feel cold.

Where are your other children? Stefan asked. This is my only child, I replied, it is
just my son. What’s wrong with him? said Stefan. Maybe heat stroke, I told him. I
wanted it to be ordinary, like some kind of tourist illness.

The hospital was a new one, of which Stefan was very proud. It stood on a great
mound like a modern-day castle, a castle of medicine. Get better, said Stefan. Thank
you, thank you, we said. And then on into the gleaming white structure, where inside
it was a labyrinth of corridors stretching out in every direction from the main central
core of lifts.

We sat waiting and I filled in a form. I was in a country where they liked sons,
where I thought they liked sons more than daughters. I saw the daughters doing all the
work, so they should really like the daughters the best. The sons sat at a table playing
draughts and drinking coffee and in the distance you could see the daughters hoeing
something in a back field, and yet they loved the sons more than the daughters. So,
because this was a sick son, I knew they would act quickly. I was a mother, and here
was my son. I knew they would help, and I was right.

They put him on a gurney and whisked him down to see the doctors. I followed. Then
he began fitting, almost convulsing. And there was a lot of Greek being spoken.
Several nurses who looked very strong put a line into his arm and attached a saline drip, and they took his blood to be tested and they sent him for an x-ray and they injected him with antibiotics, and somewhere around there I showed the doctors our special letter which I had thought we would never have to use.

This letter revealed the truth: that it was not my son who was busy looking after me. When I was a new mother I had imagined that the looking-after would eventually stop. But that doesn’t really ever happen.

The letter was addressed to To Whom It may Concern and at the top of the page it was titled Cancer Centre, and then the history of my son’s illness followed. There were the descriptions of the original diagnosis, the terrible chemotherapy, the radiotherapy, the stem cell transplant, the responses and the relapses. I didn’t like reading the letter myself but it felt better to know that I had it, as it explained pretty well everything. After the doctors read the letter they suddenly became far nicer to us, so then I knew it must be really bad because they are only nice to you in the hospital if it is bad. I thought: they have read this letter and they know my son is going to die, maybe not now, but sometime soon. I didn’t wish to think this thought, but I did. I also thought about the little devotional shrines I had seen on the way to the hospital. What would I place inside? A tiny doll-figure of my son?

They put him in a nice room with a good view. He was sharing the room with an elderly man, I don’t know what was wrong with him, he couldn’t speak any English. We all smiled a lot at each other instead. The old man’s old wife sat on a chair next to his bed, and after dinner, when the quiet night crept down from the surrounding hills, his wife climbed into the bed with him, and they both fell asleep and began to snore.

My son had been given something to help him sleep so he was well out of it. I stayed awake, first on the chair next to his bed, and then I went into the ‘rest’ room
that the nurses had showed me. It was two doors away and this was a room for the
caregivers. There was no one else in there, so I placed two white plastic chairs
together and tried to sleep on those. I could hear the nurses, they were in their own
staff room next door eating a late dinner. There was a lot of talk, a lot of laughter and
much clinking of eating utensils. I was awake half the night but I didn’t want to go
back to the cottage. If anything was going to happen I wanted to be with my son. We
had needed something. Greece had been the thing that we had done to break the
dreadful silence of my son’s illness.

There was a movie I was taken to when I was a child: *Voyage to the Centre of the
Earth* based on a story by Jules Verne. In the movie several scientists and some quite
ordinary people are inextricably caught up together on a journey that takes them to the
central core of the planet. Many awful things happen along the way. You don’t know
if the scientists and the others will ever get out alive. Instead, eventually, they begin
to change. By the end of the story some of the characters are almost unrecognizable
from the way they appeared at that moment when they commenced their journey.

Early in the morning I heard the cocks crowing. It is funny when you travel to the
other end of the earth to visit a place you think will be outstandingly exotic and all
you remember are the cocks crowing. It is always like that. The world is smaller than
you imagine it to be.

I washed my face and hands and walked back to my son’s room. He was still fast
asleep so I decided to go out to the front of the hospital and take a small walk. It was
about the same time we had hitched our lift the day before. I had walked past the main
part of the hospital when Stefan drove up.

*Yassou!*

Yassou, I replied.
Kalimera, said Stefan. I wondered what had happened with you. I am on my way to work. I told him I had been here all day yesterday and all night.

Please, said Stefan, please allow me to buy you a coffee. I know the best place very near here. Come. He opened the car door. Please, said Stefan. Hitch a lift with me again. We both laughed politely and I got in.

He only drove around the corner, but I never would have found this café by myself as it was down a small side street. There were quite a few people already ordering coffees and eating breakfast. Stefan bought two pieces of this cake-like bread. The Greeks often serve it to tourists at breakfast. I prefer a bowl of Greek yogurt with honey drizzled on top which is the other breakfast that gets offered but I said nothing to Stefan about that and I ate the bread because I was hungry. The coffee was so good, thick and strong and almost bitter.

Stefan said, I thought about you both after I took you to the hospital yesterday. How is your son?

My son is sick, I said. He was sick before we came to the island.

I thought he looked pale, said Stefan.

We came to Crete to enjoy the sunshine and the olives and to have a holiday. My son has a terminal illness.

I am very sorry, said Stefan.

We have enjoyed Crete so much, I told him.

I am glad to hear that, he replied.

I looked at his hands. Hands are never covered and you can often glean something about a person from their hands. Stefan’s hands were not so large, and it was obvious that he didn’t work at a manual job. I thought about asking him what kind of work he did. Instead I smiled. For a minute everything was all right.
A woman came and took away the empty coffee cups, the empty bread plate. I have been thinking of you, said Stefan. He put his hand on top of mine. My hand was wedged under his. We were sitting next to each other, not opposite. And he edged closer to me, his mouth was near my hair. I moved my hand away and made as if to smooth my hair.

I am sorry, I said, I must go now. Thank you for breakfast. We walked to his car.

When I was young, said Stefan, I also hitchhiked. I went across Europe, and so now if I see a beautiful woman with her son by the side of the road, I always pick them up.

Thank you. I smiled a smile the size of nothing.

You shouldn’t wear all this black, said Stefan. You don’t want to look like an old yiayia.

I took my last good glance of him. Thick, lustrous hair, a ‘noblesse’ kind of nose, eager, confident. A Greek son, a good straight back. The coffee was excellent, I said. I was full of manners, but crisp. He opened the car door.

Please, can I give you a ride, he said.

Efharisto, I replied, you have done enough. I know the hospital is close, I can find it. I turned and began to walk. I did not wish for an argument about insensitivity. He drove past just as I reached the hospital gate and tooted his horn. On the other side of the gate I burst into tears. I hated the way one thing could appear to be one way and then suddenly morph into something else, something other. I could taste the bitter coffee in my mouth.

I entered the hospital and made myself stop crying. I was in the lift and then I went straight to my son’s room, he was still asleep. The old man was still asleep. The old man’s wife was gone. A nurse entered the room and gestured at me, none of the nurses could speak much English.
I go my home, she said. She was the night nurse going off duty. I shook her hand.

Thank you, I told her, thank you. Later that morning the doctor came on her rounds and told us that they had now hydrated my son and there was ‘nothing else they could find wrong’. If he wished, he was free to fill in a form that would enable him to sign himself out of the hospital. She looked at me. We both knew there was plenty wrong but nothing she could do about it, and that was what she meant. She said she wished us the best of luck. I knew we would need it. My son was very happy to leave. He had stopped shaking and he seemed fine. We caught a taxi back to the cottage.

His friend, Nathan, was waiting there for us, we had forgotten about him. We decided to stay in the cottage out of the sun, and to cook and eat a big happy meal. I made an enormous omelette, the local eggs had golden yolks of such an enormous proportion, we imagined giant hens had laid them. The food in Crete was fantastic, we ate like kings while we were there.

My son began telling his friend funny stories about the Greek hospital. We laughed so hard it felt as though the cups and plates and the polished knives and forks and the big bread knife, and even the kettle, were all laughing along with us, so that the laughter became bigger and bigger, until it ballooned out of that tiny cottage and up into the stratosphere, maybe rising and hitting the rim of that beautiful sapphirine sky.

Is there a roof to the sky? I asked myself that question. Immediately I knew the answer: there is a roof or a lid to everything and that is to ensure that you only have just that much and no more of any one thing in your life. Otherwise you wouldn’t be able to bear it. And I began to ponder and to think about lids.
Spooky Gurl

We sat in our heavy red cotton bloomers and tunics. All girls doing Physical Education had been requested to report to class in the school hall. In the hall we had to sit still and listen to a local police officer who talked to us about accepting lifts with strangers. He told us a story: a girl accepted a lift with a stranger, and her dead body was found in dense scrub two years later. After the talk, when the boys and girls classes had mixed together, Denise Fox asked Michael Cassamento what the police officer had talked to the boys about. *Road rules and that sorta stuff*, he said. You mean if you were driving a car? *Yes*, he answered.

Generally, boys and girls did gym in their separate all-boys’ and all-girls’ classes, but that particular day Mrs Hutton was teaching us how to dance the Pride of Erin. This seemed like an old-fashioned dance we would never be able to use, except maybe working as an actor in a television period costume drama. At the end of the dance class the girls were requested to join together once more and go back over the main points that the police officer had given us:

A. Say no thanks

B. Scream if assaulted and make a lot of noise.

C. If you are in a position to do nothing else, then observe everything around you. Memorise the offender’s face and any identifying marks such as moles, tattoos or scars. Memorise any pertinent facts about the inside of the car.

D. Dial triple zero.
Denise Fox and I rolled our eyes at each other. We were always being told stuff like that because we were girls.

I once accepted a lift with a stranger after I missed the bus to primary school. I was running for the bus but it went right past and didn’t stop. As I stood at the bus stop sobbing, a woman drove up in old Jag and said, *I saw what happened, would you like a lift to the school?* She said, *I just took my daughter, Caroline, to the school and I don’t mind driving back there.* I got into her car, although I had been told not to accept lifts with strangers. I wanted to believe that what she said was true. The inside of the car was knee-deep in fawn upholstery, far up the scale from my father’s old Renault. I stopped crying. I liked her car. She offered me a tissue from a box she had in the glove box. It was one of those travel boxes of tissues. We didn’t use paper tissues in our house, we couldn’t afford such luxuries, as they were in those days. I took the tissue even although I had been told not to accept gifts from strangers. The woman drove me to the school. Thank you, I said. I was in time for the first bell.

I would often endure excruciating toothache. One half of my face would be swollen and sore. It might be the right or the left, it might be upper or lower. We didn’t have much money. My mother wouldn’t send me to the dentist until I was writhing on the bedroom floor in agony, howling and groaning. Most of the time she preferred to dab a brown concoction on my teeth. It came in a dark green bottle with a red screw lid. I don’t know what it was called, we kids called it the Brown Tooth Stuff. It smelt bitter, like bark and old leaves boiled up and left to stand for a while. It was a medicinal smell. It was strong enough to stain the sink and the floor, if spilt. Where did my mother get this liquid? When applied to the teeth it numbed the pain, leaving a strong,
sour taste in your mouth. The name on the label was written in French. My sister told me that, as she was learning French at school. If my father saw my mother applying this liquid to my teeth he would become furious, saying, that’s not dealing with the source of the problem. My mother would look guilty. She might falter, and ring the dentist to make an appointment. We all entertained our own fears. Mine was the fear of pain in my mouth, and ultimately, the fear of the dentist and his drill. My mother feared what my father would say. He was the only one who could influence her.

At school assembly we were told that a man had been offering sweets to children outside Devo’s, which was the shop opposite the entrance to the school. The proprietor’s name was Mr Devon and so we called the shop ‘Devo’s’. Mr Devon was a mean old bastard who sold sweets and pies, candy bars and sticky drinks, licorice straps, ice creams, and sausage rolls and iced finger buns. He delivered pies and sausage rolls on order to the school every day. If you were in the shop trying to decide what sweets to buy, he would tell you to hurry up. He wore a scraggy old cardigan even in the heat of summer and had hair coming out of his nose. We hated Devo but he didn’t care, while he was supplying the goods, he held the power.

At the assembly we were told not to accept sweets from strangers, not to talk to strangers, and to walk straight to school and not to linger. We were never told why these people wandered the streets offering sweeties to children. My friend, Helen Pickleberry, seemed to know more about it. The lollies might be drugged, she told me. That was a revelation. I waited for a drugged lolly to be offered to me so I would be able to blatantly refuse it. Needless to say, that never happened.
My father grew up in the country and remained a country boy at heart. He loved the trees and the animals, insects and birds and flowers. While other neighbours grew roses and chrysanthemums, he was planting native bushes and trees around our house. We had wattle, banksia and waratah. He always said of creepy spiders and other crawling reptiles, and flying fruit bats, *they are probably more scared of you than you are frightened of them*. Then he would coax whatever it was into a container and carefully place it back outside to roam the world and live to terrorise me another day.

Open ‘public’ spaces felt safe to me when I was a child. The bush felt safe if I did as my father told me and made sure I took water and matches and a jacket. My love of walking took me across many terrains, including highways and cities. Inside the house, I enjoyed discovering strange spaces where I could hide and no one could find me. I climbed on top of the big wardrobe and also underneath the bunk bed. I preferred small spaces that I could poke my body into. I sat in my cubby on top of the wardrobe with a drink and some biscuits and read books and drew maps and plans. My mother entered the bedroom, she was looking for me. I held my breath and watched. ‘Where is she?’ my mother said out loud to herself. Her perplexed expression made me want to laugh. ‘Spooky! She has vanished into thin air!’ she said and left.

My mother declined to discuss fear. She preferred to talk about the moments when we had stared fear in the face, dealt with it, and moved on. *Experience is a great educator*, was one of her countless mottos. But I was a cowering sop ready to admit that I was scared right from the beginning. I cried a lot. Sometimes my sister kicked me, pushed me, or placed a sticky hand over my mouth and told me to ‘shut up or
we’ll blow you to smithereens’. My way of coping with anything was to wade naively in. Once I reached the middle and realised what I had got myself into, then I would begin to panic, the panic would generate activity, the activity would attract attention, and then someone would come to my rescue. Or not.

Sometimes the fear can saturate you. You can feel your heart pumping and the adrenalin pouring in, but you can still be frozen, like a ‘roo in front of the headlights.

Because I am a woman, I am often asked if I would like a ride ‘right to the door’. I am asked if I will be ‘all right’ getting home on public transport at night. I am surprised at the number of women who dislike walking the streets at night. I have always been a night walker. In the summer, it is wonderful to walk at night when the air is cool, or even in the early morning. Because I am a woman, I have been told to shut the gate, lock the door, put a pair of men’s gumboots outside the front door, keep the ground floor windows shut, make sure I have an outside light, not to bother answering the door to strangers, never to let anyone in the house I do not know, particularly if it is a male, not to allow people inside to use my telephone, never to offer a cup of tea, and not to wear clothes that look too ‘sexy’. On the other hand, I should not dress ‘like a bag’, or ‘like a Sunday School teacher’. I should not linger in public places. I should make sure I stand in a pool of light at the bus stop or on the railway station, but I should not speak to men, never accept lifts with strangers, and never accept lifts from men, especially if there are more than one male in the car.
My first sexual experience was in a car. It was after the school ball. We didn’t go ‘all the way’, but we went close to it. I have noticed that cars are popular spaces to engage in sex, considering they can also be so uncomfortable.

My father had a second cousin of some sort who used to come and visit. He was related somehow, although I never knew how. He was an older man, single, and he drove a big stationwagon. This was even before my father bought his Renault. And this relative, so-called Uncle Stanley, used to take us for drives and buy us ice creams. He was someone we knew. He gave us lollies and we were allowed to eat them. Years later, my sister confessed to me that Uncle Stanley had felt her up and taken photos of her when she was getting changed out of her swimming togs. We had been told we should like him. We had been told we should like him because he bought us ice cream and took us for drives to places we had no money to go, like the beach. But I realised that I had never much liked him at all.
My mother gave me four keys to carry around with me at all times. The blue one opens the front door, the big silver one is for the back door, the tiny gold one is for the locks on the windows and the final one is for the inside aluminum shutters. I’m permanently locking and unlocking. What the hell is my mum so scared of? We live by the keys and by the rule of the keys.

Here’s what I know: how to boil an egg, how to make tea, how to add up so’s I know they gave me the right change at the shop. I know who’s my friend and who isn’t. How to use credit. How to get into the Chinese zodiac predictions on my mobile. You get a new one each day. It’s always stuff like *as the moon faces the west so you will discover your eastern side*. How to kiss with tongue. I’ve never been further than the Gold Coast and I’ve gotta go, I know I wanna go. What we don’t do is as important as what we actually decide to do.

Every week we do the same thing. Sausages, peas and mashed potatoes on Monday, Mum’s choice on Tuesday, my choice on Wednesday which is generally macaroni cheese, Thursday is takeaways and Fridays is fish and chips. The house is falling down. I know this is true, because Mum says it almost every single day but especially when she opens the bills. *If only Martin would help more.* That’s my Dad. He lives by the water with his new wife, The Limpet, and their new baby, Iddlie Piddlie. That’s what I call him.

Their new baby cries and cries. My mum says: *The Limpet wanted him, so now she has to put up with him.* The doctor told my Dad that the baby has colic. I don’t know
what that is but it doesn’t sound good. Did I have colic, I ask my Mum. *No darling, you were a beautiful baby.*

We have tons of thick photograph albums full of the old photos of the three of us together - at the beach, on a picnic, laughing by a lake. All of us on a car boat ferry. Going somewhere or coming back. Living in the same house under the one roof at 32 Sandilands Street. Mum painting the lounge pink. Birthday parties. Dad mowing the lawn. They built a barbecue area together. The photos are the evidence.

The stupid heater in my bedroom is so old it hardly makes any difference when it’s on. I like to hang out in my room with the door shut and Mum knows she has to knock. I keep my diary hidden in there. I won’t say where. I write in it every day, stuff about what I ate, what I didn’t eat. Yesterday I was at Dad’s. The Limpet offered me a rhubarb and almond tart but I didn’t want it. She’s a crap cook. Of course she hadn’t made the tart, she’d bought it from the trendy Boulangerie down the road where everyone has to queue, it’s so popular.

She asked me if I wanted a glass of wine. No, thank you. She drank the wine. Because Iddlie Pidddlie has colic and he’s always crying. Boo hoo. She’s trying to breastfeed him but it’s been so stressful her milk’s dried up. I held Iddlie and walked around with him until he stopped. I lay him in his crib and he fell asleep. You see, he and I have an understanding between us.

I asked Mum, did your milk dry up? *No darling, the milk spurted out as if sent by the Gods. You were fat and happy.* I’ve seen the photos. Dad with me in a stretch-n-grow, and I’m laughing in my stroller with a big yellow daisy in my hand. Small things amuse small minds.
Mum says that breakfast is the meal that sets you up for the day. *Have some toast or how about an egg?* She’s always shoving eggs at me. I hate them, with that sticky white albumen and the gooey yolk floating around in the middle like an eye. I prefer a mango. And I like the way it’s one unit. I’ve taught myself how to eat them, you have to crosshatch the skin with a knife.

I write down everything I eat in my diary and add the calories up each day using the calorie counter in my mobile. And I write down stuff about Iddlie Piddlie. What he did, what he said, new stuff he is doing. The Limpet had to stop trying to breastfeed him and now she’s using a bottle. I asked her if she had heard about the chemicals in those plastic bottles but of course she hadn’t.

I make an extra strong coffee like what they call a double shot. It’s probably more like a triple shot when I make it. I drink it and then I’m buzzing. I’m supposed to make up the beds, mop the kitchen floor and all that shit. If I drink one of my special coffees I can get that stuff done in next to no time.

I had to shave my legs. Tarryn Bridgeway does hers with wax strips. I don’t want to hurt myself so I do it with the razor. You have to be careful you don’t nick yourself and get blood everywhere. That was the weekend I dyed my hair. I did it almost white-blonde, the colour was called *Saxon*. You mix the powder up and then comb the paste into your hair and wrap up your head with Glad Wrap. You cook it in, kind of thing.

I got hungry and began eating these chocolate biscuits I’d bought. Mum wasn’t home, she often works weekends. I ate the whole packet and then I felt sick, so I made myself, you know…Tarryn Bridgeway showed me how to do it. You put your fingers down your throat.
While I was doing it, the phone rang and it was Dad saying did I want to come for dinner. We had a long talk, which we generally don’t, and I told him Iddlie knew I couldn’t come. And he said, how’s that? Because Iddlie Piddlie and I have a kind of telepathic understanding. Adults can be so thick. I had to explain.

What I didn’t know was that as soon as Dad got off the phone, he told The Limpet what I’d said. She freaked, and one thing led to another and before I knew what was going on an appointment had been made for me to see a shrink.

The Limpet made new rules: I wasn’t allowed to hold Iddlie, and if I thought he was talking to me then I must tell Dad. It was so funny. And stupid. Funny stupid. My Dad said, what? I said, funny stupid. He looked at me weird and he said, fanny what? I thought, is he deaf or whatever. Duuh.

It felt as though I was at one end of a tunnel looking down it, far away. Like that underpass you have to walk through below the railway. I used to go for piano lessons after school and I had to walk through that tunnel. There are always groogly people asking for money down there, wearing coats with these groogly stains on them. Staring at my clean school uniform. You can look right down to the end of the tunnel and it’s as if you’re looking through the barrel of a shotgun.

Whatever, I said to my Dad. He told me he thought I was being rude. I don’t care anymore what he says. He started it all anyway, when he left us.

Around that time I began only eating just fruit. It has all the vitamins you need. If I couldn’t eat a mango it would be a melon. Grapes were okay. I couldn’t touch bananas. Often I puréed up some cooked apple and just ate that. Tarryn Bridgeway
said I was looking sharp. I’d gone down to a size ten. I was on the verge of an eight. It would’ve been great if it hadn’t been for my parents. Blah blah blah.

It was Iddlie’s birthday. I knew there was going to be a party but I hadn’t been invited. I heard my mother discussing it on the phone. Neither of us were invited, although she wouldn’t have gone anyway. I’d made a present. It was a book out of coloured felt, the felt pages sewn together, and they had cut-out felt pictures on each page. It had taken me a while. I hadn’t been allowed to see Iddlie for weeks.

Why do I have to go and see that shrink, I asked my Mum. She shrugged. It makes your father feel happy, she replied.

The psychiatrist they sent me to was a short woman with little piggy eyes and spectacles. She smiled at me a lot but she still managed to make me feel like I was a spot on a slide under her microscope. I was supposed to talk to her about how I felt about my father and all that. She asked me to do drawings and write stuff. I just found it easier to lie.

Soon I began cutting the sessions. My father was paying and so then there were heated words on the phone between my parents. He was saying please make her go, Mum was saying, why should she go if she doesn’t like it. No one asked me what I thought.

I had all the keys. I could do what I liked. I jumped out of the bedroom window with just my jacket and my shoulderbag. I knew what I was going to do.

Last summer, I’d hitchhiked every day when I’d been staying in the country with Tarryn at her aunt’s. It was so easy, just stick out your thumb. Tarryn and I had competed to see who could get the best lifts.
My first lift was with a young guy in a Pajero heading north. As we hit the motorway there was a wooden hoarding by the side of the road, *Come away today, fly forever.* An advertisement for some mouldy old airline. When we drove through the tunnel our words leapt away through the open window and we swallowed updrafts of diesel that bounced off the concrete walls. I like your car, I said. Yeah, it’s got everything. He showed off his coffee holder. He had all the gadgets. A shining dash full of tricks.

I’d decided to hitch to my grandmother’s. It was only a few hours, easy-peasy, and who knew after that? Maybe I’d make it to Brisbane! The Pajero guy dropped me off at a BP service station. Drivers pull in and out of these places so they are the best spots to try for a lift. I’d only waited for fifteen minutes before a big rig pulled over, the driver introduced himself as ‘John’ and invited me to come aboard.

I had a cough. That’s a bad cough you got there, he said. He sounded like my Mum. He told me he lived out west. He had three daughters of his own and he offered me his cough medicine. Thanks.

Pour a little into the lid and throw it back, John said. There’s a lot of coughs and colds going around. Do you use the wipes?

The what?

The antiseptic wipes. John had some. He was really into antisepticism. And after that we had a long talk about fibre and calories. I explained that I thought most people ate a lot of crap.

What kind of food do you like, he asked me. I told him I liked fruit.

That’s good, he said. No adult had ever said that to me. They were always trying to foist their toast and shit onto me. There was a cardboard elephant hanging from his sunshade – it was like something a kid had made, with a funny groogly pattern drawn on it. Not much on the dash, in fact, John’s truck was pretty tidy.
I have to stop for my dinner, he told me. He parked the truck and we went into this truckers’ café in some one-horse town. He had three sausages, two eggs, fried bread and baked beans. I have to eat like this when I’m driving, explained John.

He bought me a mandarin. It looked good on the outside but inside it was dry as if it had been sitting in the freezer for years. But we were friends now, and back in the rig I took off my jacket and I began to tell him my problems. I told him about my mother and my father and about Iddlie Piddlie and how they had sent me to a shrink.

Are you angry, asked John. Are you angry about what they did to you? I can remember myself leaning forward in the truck, watching the painted middle line flick by under the headlights, like small pure explosions.

He pulled the rig over. We were on that bit of wasteland just off the highway before you get to the place that sells eggs. So, I knew where we were.

As soon as he’d stopped the motor he leaned over me and put his hand on my bare arm. Come on, said John. Come on, darling, I know you’re panting for it. He was twice my size. Three times my size. He kissed me. I could taste his greasy fried sausages. The doors were locked.

Just a quick one and I’ll let you out, said John. He was pawing at my top. He wasn’t going to waste any time. God, you’re beautiful, said John. He was very tidy, was John. He laid a towel under me.

Just do what I tell you, he said, and we’ll get on fine. I believed him then. Yeah, that was the only time he was telling the truth. He was heavy on top of me. Then he made a sound like a dog. When he’d finished what he’d wanted to do he passed me his antiseptic wipes.

The cardboard elephant hanging from the mirror was jiggling around in ever-widening circles. And I suddenly realised that its trunk had been drawn all wrong. Its
trunk was too long, like the ever-increasing length of nose in that Pinocchio story.

That stupid, stupid elephant’s trunk was so much longer than it should have been.
The Blouse

The Plantman was showing his new orchid to me. It had a tiny face on it. He told me he got it at the new Piano Commune. He said, 'That’s the place this dude called Joseph has started and he has lots of rules but if you stay he’ll give you free piano lessons because he’s got this dirty big piano there. He’s looking for new members. It’s all the way down the end of Snake Creek Road. Hitch out as if you’re going to Mareeba, and when you get to Snake Creek Main take the turn off, but you have to go all the way down and it’s a long way. No trees along there.

He told me all this because he knew I was looking for a place to stay. He knew I had nowhere to go. In a week or so, the bus I was living in would be gone. It was Bruno’s bus and he was driving it up to Cape York where he shot crocodiles every year. So then I’d have nowhere to live, and I needed something.

The Plantman lived in a little hut with a tarp roof. He was called that because he knew about plants – he could tell you all kinds of things. It was a hobby of his and because of this hobby he got around the district more than some of the rest of us. He was in demand to identify specimens, plus he went plant collecting. And he had a car. Those of us without wheels went by our own two legs or hitched.

‘Are you driving out that way again?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said the Plantman. ‘I don’t go that way too often. It’s mainly all farmland.’

The Plantman was cataloguing rainforest plants only. He stopped talking about the piano commune and went onto one of his favourite topics: staghorn ferns. There were far more people than you could imagine who collected them, even the local railway
stationmaster had made a feature display on the railway platform. They were the Plantman’s favourite subject and once he started, there was no getting him off.

I kept having these stomach cramps. Irene gave me these capsules that she’d taken. They were half white and half beige with a little logo on them and a number. Each tablet had its own number. Irene said that meant you could trace each individual capsule if you wanted. She didn’t say what was in them. You had to take them half an hour before food. The expiry date was a bit old but Irene said they’d be okay.

‘Where’d you get them?’ I asked.

‘Delicious gave them to me.’

Delicious was an ex-swimsuit model originally from Cronulla. She had a gorgeous body and extra-long blonde hair. She took a lot of drugs and she knew a lot of guys who gave her free things. Most days she hung out and about in her bikini. ‘Delicious’ wasn’t her real name, that was the name some guys had given her. Back in the real world she was probably Debbie or Noeline.

‘Did they work for you?’ I asked Irene.

‘Sure.’

She gave me the bottle.

‘Take the lot, Jassi. I don’t need them now.’

*Keep out of reach of children*, it said on the label. Labels always say that. The bottle was plastic, short and squat, with one of those special screw lids that are child-proof. It’s thought that little kids might think these drugs were lollies, but they didn’t look like lollies to me. They weren’t attractive or highly coloured, only the different number on each one was interesting.
I counted them. Eleven left. I decided I’d try them, I could take one at lunchtime. I never ate in the morning – I had personal rules about when to eat and when not to eat. I had nothing in the morning except herbal teas. This flushes you out, so to speak, but in a gentle way. Around midday I would eat the main meal of the day. People say it’s better to have this in the middle of the day rather than in the evening. During the day you need the energy that you get from a meal. If you eat a big meal in the evening, you just lie there in a stupor until you fall asleep, whereas, if you eat a big meal during the day then your general activity works away digesting the food. I believe this is right. I can work out this sort of stuff for myself.

Somebody had scratched the name of the tablets off the label. All I could read was 20 mg. Beggars can’t be choosers. I tried the capsules for my stomach cramps. Irene was right, they were terrific, they did the trick. I just took one the way it said, although I was tempted to take two capsules to make sure they worked. Half an hour before lunch. I make these big salads. That’s what I’m into. Raw food. You gain more vitality from eating raw food.

I like to chop up a lettuce as a base and I put that in my specially oiled wooden bowl and then I look at it, thinking about what I’ll put next. And then the next ingredient will just come to me. Sometimes I use cooked brown rice as a base but generally it’s all raw product. Diced carrot, shredded cabbage, sliced zucchinis, mushrooms, chopped celery stalks, all fresh and raw.

I’m also into seeds: I like sesame seeds, sunflower, pumpkin seeds, and I do sprouts in a large jar with a mesh lid which means you can rinse the sprouts several times a day. It’s easy to sprout any type of seed, but mung beans are the best. It’s a friendly, small, round green seed with one little white mark where it will begin to split and the
white sprout will emerge. It’s a skittery little critter, shiny and brittle, not soft, they
can hurt if you stand on one in your bare feet.

You have to place the seeds in a jarful of warm water first, and you leave that
somewhere warm and dark for a day. That gets the sprouts started, the seeds absorb
all that warmth and moisture and begin to do their thing. Then you just keep rinsing
them until they’re the length you want.

I’ll admit, I’m a nut freak. I worry about the number of nuts that are already old and
rancid when you purchase them. Fresh nuts are wonderful. If you know anyone with
nut trees growing in their garden, then make friends with them. Often, people leave
the fallen nuts to go to waste on the ground as they can’t be bothered opening the hard
shells. But these nuts are raw food, energy-creating. That’s how I do a lot of stuff.
I’ve got a lot of ideas about diet. I’m not one of those university types. What I mean is
that I don’t overly read. I don’t spend my time trying to prove I’m better than others. I
can work out a lot of this crap by myself, and I’m willing to share what I know.

My curiosity had got the better of me. It was hot when I set out for the Piano
Commune. The summer up here in the north can be excruciating. Best to get up and
do what you need to early in the morning. By ten o’clock, the sun has turned into an
instrument of torture beating down over our paltry little human heads as if it has a
will, a stubborn intention to force us to have too much of what is nice in small doses.
Dehydration is what you have to watch out for. Take water, but don’t gulp it, don’t
drink too much at once because that can make you feel bloated or even nauseous.

I hitched out of town and as far as the turn off with the local real estate agent,
Cherie Withers. The entire way she did nothing but talk about herself, her boyfriend
(assistant manager at the local hardware shop), and her job. On and on about the job.
But real estate people always do that. Her car had aircon and it was extremely sleek and clean inside. When I opened the door to get out it was like stepping into an oven. You could have fried a few eggs on the road, you could see the tar starting to melt, going shiny and slick. There was no footpath out there. Looking back towards the highway I could see nothing coming and no hope of another lift.

Out here the land was lower than in town, and sometimes it flooded during the wet season. You needed to put your house on stilts. Newbies who didn’t know much about the wet didn’t understand that. Every day at the same hour the rain will come down, you can time your watch to it. The creeks and rivers swell up, you can even feel your own body swelling with the moisture. Places like Barron Falls turn into frothy, thundering sheets of water.

The bus I was living in was parked in the rainforest and that’s vastly different from the farmland. The trees get very tall and make a canopy. Everything grows bigger. You see butterflies the size of a small hand. There are ticks and leeches, enormous mosquitoes, scary-looking spiders, green ants, and they all bite. The colours are intense. At night it’s really dark because the rainforest blocks out so much light. Then you get fireflies, tree rats, possums, fruit bats and bull frogs.

People live in old cars, in buses, in caravans, in A-frame huts built between tree trunks and covered in tarps. In mud brick houses. I don’t have much money, so I hitch everywhere. I hitch to work at the Presbyterian Children’s Camp where I make up the beds and wash the dishes and mop the floors. That’s one half-day three times a week. With my first pay packet I bought a big old hurricane lamp. Those narrow paths through the rainforest can be treacherous at night, especially during the wet. Plantman slipped on his path last year and ended up miles below.
I sew clothes, write letters. I walk everywhere to look at things – you can walk along the railway tracks and over the railway bridge to a place where you can pick wild bush lemons, good vitamin C. You have to watch out for tropical ulcers. In the wet and humidity any tiny nick can turn ulcerous.

Bruno makes a living by selling crocodile skins. I was sharing the bus with him, cooking and cleaning and knitting little bags which I sold at the local market. Now he’s going off to shoot roos and crocs, that’s why I was thinking about the Piano Commune. It might be all right for a couple of months and then I could move on.

All this time, I was walking along and thinking that I might even die on Snake Creek Rd if no one came and gave me a lift, and then this battered old minivan trumbled up. It had trees painted on the side and on the bonnet and a skinny-looking dude in the driver’s seat, and lo and behold, he’s actually going to the Piano Commune. It turns out he lives there.

I asked him what it was like and he went a bit evasive. He said I’d have to talk to Joseph, I gathered he was the big banana. This skinny dude goes, oh Joseph this, oh Joseph that, ‘til I thought I might barf. But I said nothing, just making some noises like hmm and, you don’t say? Cool man, until I felt like I wanted to hit myself, sickening myself with the just the sound of my own stupid voice.

His name was Ashwar. He said he was originally called Scott but that Joseph renamed him, and now he was Ashwar. I idly wondered what Joseph might call me if I joined. Ashwar really liked the Piano Commune. He’d graduated from ‘Chopsticks’ on the piano and now he was learning to play Chopin. Can you believe it? He thought it was amazing. He asked me how old I was and I told him. He looked happy, informing me that Joseph was mainly interested in healthy young women to join their group.
I asked him what he did before. He was a metal welder called Scott. He worked on construction sites and stuff like that. He thought it was bloody Paradise up here. He was crazy about the place. He looked at me and I could feel him licking his lips. Turned out Joseph’s going to help him find a wife. He kept staring at me. I was wearing my thin voile blouse with shorts.

The blouse has embroidery along the hem that I did myself. This is all part of the beliefs that I have about clothes. Once you get them, I think you need to ‘mark’ them as your own: some embroidery or change the buttons, rip a bit off, like if the sleeves are too long or whatever, just rearrange the structure of the piece. I’m also very good at doing patch jobs. People like Plantman come to me and I patch stuff for them. He pays me back with food.

‘What happened to your last girlfriend?’ I asked Ashwar/Scott. He began to talk about her but he started stuttering.

‘Her name was J-Jinny.’

They’d known each other since high school. He thought they loved each other, then she left him. Bad luck. He claimed he didn’t know why. The tone in his voice told me that he did. I went over the possible reasons in my head, the reasons that Jinny might have left Metal-Head Scott: he was a loser, he had no money, the sex with him was really bad, he was a total shit.

Up here we don’t mind losers because we can envelope them with our all-embracing love. And we don’t care about money because that’s part of the greed of the big city. I could tell this Ashwar had come out of the city, he still felt full of his metal-working city ways. I could smell it on him. He hadn’t become a real freak yet.

Up here we’re proud of our freakiness, our difference. We wear it like a banner, we like to fly it. Ashwar still reeked of the nine-to-five even if he’d been given a new
name. He told me he was giving up the smokes – Joseph won’t allow it on the Commune. And no drinking alcohol, either. I was beginning to get the message – the Piano Commune wasn’t quite Party Central; it wasn’t the sort of place Delicious would hang out. Okay, so we arrived, and it was too late for me to turn back, so onwards into the fray I went.

Ashwar had been doing a spot of shopping in the town. He had about ten tons of raw oats in the back, and various tools and all his welding equipment. I helped carry the oats. We were spotted from a distance. I saw a woman spot us, and then go into the building to report. It was one of those big sheds that the banana farmers or pumpkin guys always had. I knew it’d be like a spit roast oven inside.

As we got to the main door, a wiry guy moved towards us quickly. He was really looking at me. He touched me on the arm and shook my hand. He steered me away from Ashwar. He told Ashwar what to do and then he took me to show me their vegetable garden. I could hear a baby. A woman was watching us from the shed. I could feel her eyes drilling into me.

This guy was the famous Joseph. He was short, an older type of person. He wore spectacles, little wire-rim ones. A beard. He listened and you felt he was really focusing on your story. He was a bit intense. Maybe a control freak? He had a slight accent. Maybe German? He showed me where they grew everything – it looked amazing. Food was hanging everywhere. There was a complex watering system that had been set up and some kind of a greenhouse. It was really impressive.

‘We have achieved a lot,’ said Joseph. He smiled at me and touched me again.

‘Why don’t you stay for dinner, Jassi? Would you like to see the piano?’

‘Yes.’
It was housed in a sweet little place of its own. Joseph had the key. I took note of that – keys are not one of the things I believe in. What’s mine is yours – it’s there for all of us. We all own it, together.

‘Why is the piano locked up?’ I asked.

He sat me down inside. It was all wooden walls, wooden floorboards, with this big black piano. I could smell incense. There were two big comfy armchairs. We sat in these. Joseph held both my hands, he was going to say something very important.

‘We have rules here,’ he said. ‘This is because I founded the Commune for a reason. We are here to do God’s will. We are here to teach, to learn, to grow, to procreate.’

He squeezed my hands. I wanted to remove them.

‘Do not worry,’ said Joseph, ‘I will explain it all to you.’ He lifted the lid of the piano and there were the ivory keys just kind of lying there and looking quite amazing in the semi-dark of the Piano Room. He sat down and began to play.

I closed my eyes and let the music wash over me. Soon I fell asleep, and when I woke up I thought I’d only been asleep for ten minutes or so. The piano lid had been closed. Where was everyone? I got up, stretched, and went outside. I still had my white calico bag slung across my chest. It contains my toothbrush and toothpaste and my empty purse. I don’t own any keys, money cards, cheque books, bank books, passport, driver’s license or any other form of identification. I prefer to spurn those things.

The government keeps every piece of information they can lay their hands on. It lies there in the belly of their databases like undigested pieces of food. Eventually, they gather all this information and sell it to the highest bidder. Or they transfer it to another government department: social welfare, taxation, migration. As much as
possible I try to keep my personal information to myself. I resist becoming a number and a line of statistics within the grid.

Outside the Piano Room it was becoming dark, and I realised I’d slept for several hours. A child was playing with a crooked stick in the dirt. He looked at me and said,

‘Are you my new sister?’

‘No mate, I’m just here for a visit,’ I told him. ‘What’s that stick?’

‘It’s my spade.’

‘What are you digging?’

‘Digging for treasure.’

He took me inside, carefully leaning his stick against the outside wall of the big shed. It was still hot in the shed with every light blazing and there were all these people. About seven women and a stack of children and babies. Ashwar was setting the table, Joseph was reading a newspaper. There were two other men – a young one with fair, curly hair and an older dude with big hairy eyebrows and a bushy beard. They were Marcus and Pashin. Marcus was new and he hadn’t been given a name yet. I couldn’t keep track of the women’s names. They seemed to be everywhere, slicing bread, serving food, with their eyes on me. It was intense.

Dinner was a salad of homegrown avocado, tomato, lettuce and capsicum. Joseph explained some more rules to me. He thought that generally, no one chewed their food enough to make digestion easier for the body, so all commune members were required to ‘masticate’ thirty times or more on each mouthful of food.

‘We watch each other and correct each other at mealtimes,’ he informed me.

What else? They were only allowed to drink before the meal, not after. Women served food to the men first, then the male children, then the female children and
served themselves last. After he had told me these rules we commenced eating.

Around the long table about fourteen pairs of jaws were going up and down and up and down, pulverising one lettuce leaf. I felt as if I’d stumbled into the Feast of the Giant Grasshoppers. Then Joseph turned to me and began to outline the Poo Chart.

This was a big colourful chart on the wall where everyone wrote stuff down about their bowel movements. I had to get my head around this. Joseph was so enthusiastic about the Poo Chart that he took me over right then and there in the middle of the meal and started showing it to me. I nodded and attempted to appear serious. I looked at the chart and read Rachel: Tuesday – very soft in the morning. In the evening firm and dark.

‘By studying our chart we can decide what food works well at cleansing our insides, what is good for energy and what just bulks us up,’ said Joseph. He loved this chart and laughed as he showed me everything on it. But I was getting tired of the Poo Chart. I sighed and went and sat down. The room fell quiet. The women were watching me like hawks. I wondered which one was Rachel. Joseph walked over to me at the table.

‘You find the chart uninteresting?’ You just knew this was the fifty million dollar prize question.

‘It’s hard for me to absorb everything,’ I said. ‘There’s so much to take in.’

He accepted this and patted my hand. In front of everyone he kissed my head. I took another forkful of salad and the avocado squished against my teeth. Green gluey goo.

‘Don’t worry,’ Joseph said to me, ‘I’ll make sure you understand everything about us. And after dinner I have something special to tell you.’

I swallowed hard. The tomatoes had quite a thick skin on them. On the other side of me was the dude with the wiggly eyebrows.
‘What do you believe in?’ he asked me.

‘I believe that raw food is good for you.’

He and Joseph smiled. I decided to go a little further:

‘I don’t believe it’s right, the way the government keeps information on us like we’re little petri dishes and they’re going to add anything they want into the equation. My entire personal history coded onto some database, my birth registry files, my dental information. My complete identity transformed into nothing but numbers in a government statistical operation that requires me to relinquish my own natural differences, and my particular genetic traits and habits, my own own-ness, the exemplary thing that makes me me. Being obliterated, being wiped, being made into some weird template that identifies me as just Type C who does Type B. I believe in objecting to that.’ I put down my fork which I had been waving around. I had decided that ‘Rachel’ was the woman with a bell around her neck, staring so hard I thought her eyeballs would pop out.

‘These things aren’t important here on our commune,’ said Pashin of the Eyebrows, ‘as we do not register our children’s births.’

‘Really?’

‘No. We are not attracted to that old system either. We wish to make something new here. Are you interested?’

Wow. I was all for it. I told him I was up for it if it involved anarchy against the state code. Pashin looked pleased and his eyebrows wiggled up and down furiously. When I finished my piece of wholemeal home-baked bread I surreptitiously took a look around the table. All the men seemed happy, but the women looked bored, tired, furtive.
There was no dessert. The chairs were drawn back. The meal was over. Pashin explained he had prayers and meditation now. He made special prayers on behalf of sick people. Marcus had to water the garden. The children needed to be taken to bed.

‘Let us go somewhere private,’ suggested Joseph. ‘We will go and sit in the vehicle.’

‘Okay.’

‘You are vegetarian, Jassi?’ he asked me.

‘Yeah.’ I don’t eat meat any more, although I think that if you catch it yourself and kill it then it’s okay to eat it. I’ve eaten fresh oysters off the rocks when I was living far north on the beach.

It was pitch black outside, and I tripped over a child’s toy. Joseph held my arm. Step here and here. We walked past several bushes of hibiscus. Joseph steered my arm and invited me to climb into the tree-painted van. The seats were ripped, spitting out their ugly yellow foam innards. I leant forward and touched the dash, it was still warm from the forty-degree heat of the day. An inside pocket on the door was stuffed full of maps. The van smelt of mould. Everything is like this up north. During the wet, the rainforest is saturated with water, the air swarms with abundant spores, and a fecund earthy scent of decaying mushrooms rises from off the ground.

‘Are you comfortable? Did you have a good dinner? Are you ready for conversation?’ asked Joseph.

I shifted in my seat. In the distance a door slammed. I wound the window down. Something was rustling in the hibiscus. The moon was the shape of a nail clipping, so thin, so lonely, so stark. Joseph slid closer.

‘And now, I must talk with you about something quite serious. I can tell you have lived in the city and you know how it is there. The pace, the way people perform their
daily acts of life with no reverence, no love. They make themselves feel better by accumulating material possessions like electrical goods, whiteware, computers, cars, property. You have told us tonight that you no longer believe in a life like this. You appear to be considering entering our little commune. Would I be right in assuming this?’

‘Yes,’ I said. But I said it in a low, crumbly voice. *Ye-mumble-mumble.* I said it like that.

He looked at me as if he could see right through all the shit. I thought it was a look that he had perfected quite well. He took my hand. I noticed he liked to do this.

‘How did you get here?’ he asked.

‘I hitchhiked,’ I said. ‘I always do.’

‘Where do you live at present?’ he asked me.

‘In an old bus.’

‘Are you on a commune?’

‘I’m staying on Mark Wenderby’s land.’

‘I understand.’

Everyone in the district knew who Mark Wenderby was. A drop-out rich-kid who sank a lot of money into rainforest blocks from here to the Daintree. Nobody had even wanted that land before.

‘I have heard about the behaviour on these pieces of land.’ Joseph went very serious.

‘Oh?’

‘The drugs.’

‘Oh.’

‘Do you take drugs?’
‘Sometimes.’

‘No drugs are to be taken on this commune.’

I said I understood.

‘What about the other behaviour?’

‘What?’

‘The free sex.’

*What was he on about?*

‘I have heard about the free sex. One woman with many men, for instance. Casual sex with many partners. Or even two women together.’

*Crikey.* My mouth was glued. What would he say next?

‘And the orgasms. Lots of them.’

*Gawd.*

‘Women having more than one orgasm a night. Coupling with several partners.’

Joseph did his most serious look of all. ‘And even two women together servicing each other to orgasm.’

I made a squeaking sound like I was clearing my throat, but like I was kind of making a comment at the same time.

‘I have to speak to you about this because of our ultimate rule on this commune.’

He continued to hold my hand. With my other hand I hung onto the strap of my shoulderbag. I could feel my throat contracting. I tried to swallow but it was dry. I wished I had some water. I couldn’t hear anything except my own breath coming out of my strangulated throat.

‘Here, it is no orgasm.’

‘No orgasm?’ I repeated what he said as if I was some kind of idiot.

‘No. No orgasm for the woman.’
I coughed. I was sure there would be an explanation. In a minute.

‘No orgasm for the woman as one ordinary orgasm uses up an entire day’s worth of energy, and the women need this energy to help them look after the children and the other important things they do here.

‘How can you have sex but prevent the orgasm?’ I asked him.

He looked at me intently and then he dropped my hand.

‘You have had an orgasm?’

I nodded.

‘But you are so young. You look so innocent. You want to know something? It is this blouse you are wearing.’

He put his hand on the blouse. I had made it myself. It was made from old voile fabric I’d found in a second hand shop. I thought I knew what he was really on about - I never wore any underwear under my clothes.

‘This blouse is very provocative,’ said Joseph. ‘Why do you wear it?’

‘I believe that breasts are beautiful. Bodies are beautiful.’

‘So do I,’ said Joseph. He laughed. His hands ran down the voile and he whispered, ‘If you join the commune, Jassi, I will look after you personally and teach you everything.’

I inched away, and his hands fell off me.

‘What about the men when they have sex?’ I asked.

‘Yes, the men are allowed to orgasm. Of course. They need to do this. The women do not. This is our most important rule.’

I laughed. He asked me, ‘Why are you laughing?’

‘Because you’re funny.’

‘I do not think I said anything that was meant to be amusing.’
The moon had risen higher. It was so thin and fragile but unusually bright.

I told him, ‘I have to go back to town now because I have a job. I work for the Presbyterian Church and I have to be there at the church in the morning.’ The second half was a lie, but I didn’t care.

‘Would you like me to drive you back?’

‘Sure.’

He had the keys in his pocket. We drove back through the dark, velvet oblivion. He wanted to talk about hitchhiking.

‘This hitching is only another way of stating you are available. It is only for vagrants who have no money. You make yourself like a leech on the back of those who give you the lift. They know you have no money but they will demand payment in other ways,’ claimed Joseph.

‘That’s not true,’ I said. ‘Hitchhiking is only ridesharing.’

‘You want to share with these kind of people who stop to give you lifts? You might be an innocent but they are not.’

In reply I told him that I would rather take the risk than never try. Hitchhiking meant I could still get around.

‘I’m taking the lift that you offered me,’ I said.

‘But I have your innocence and safety at heart,’ he told me.

I could tell him that I’d had plenty of rides like that.

‘It’s more than that,’ I said. ‘It’s much bigger. You don’t understand. When you hitch you put yourself in another kind of space.’

He asked me if I would come and join the Piano Commune. I said I needed time to think. I instructed him to drop me on the crest of the hill. That was far away from where I actually lived. He wouldn’t know that there was a shortcut that went over to
the other side, where Mark had more land. I knew the way without any light. It would have been nice to have the hurricane lamp but I could do without.

The minute he dropped me, I was off the road and into the rainforest where I knew I could never be followed. A pursuer would have to have an intimate knowledge of the narrow tracks that had been cut into the side of the hill and an ability to see in the dark. The giant trees surrounded me on every side. It was good to be out of the dry, eucalypt flatness of the Piano Commune. I knew I wasn’t going to live at the Piano Commune. *I believe that men who run their greedy hands over a woman’s voile blouse want more than voile. I believe that the hands are an extension of the soul.*

I took off my blouse and threw it down into the forest below. I wasn’t worried about having a blouse. I walked bare-breasted, and I felt good like that. The cool, dank rainforest closed in on me, and I felt oh so good, so good.
When I was very young I thought that the great mantras that the cicadas sing in summer were the actual sounds of summer. That it was the sound of the hot sun and dry grass. I thought that as it became hot during the day, the earth warmed up and began to make that noise.

I like to get up very gradually, to come out very slowly from the dreams of the night before. When I go to bed at night I can hear the rustle of the sheets and the creaking of the mattress as I toss around searching for the right position. On hot nights I like to have my body covered only up to my waist so I can feel the cool night air on my back and shoulders and neck. I can hear the crickets outside the wide-open window. On hot days my mother comes in and shuts the blinds early. I like to drink coffee almost as soon as I wake up. I eat fruit. By the time I have had a shower and rubbed moisturizer into my face I feel ready, impatient for the day’s arrivals and outcomes. Every now and then I get up and walk around the room and crack my fingers. Even in the heat I can activate myself, I am in control of myself. Absolutely.

I like to travel by public transport and hear what the people on the buses and trains are discussing, the things they look at and how they dress. A lot of people wear the items of clothing that have been advertised to them in the magazines. And they talk about the same things: their jobs, their boyfriends, their cars, their televisions. Yesterday I sat down next to an old man who began telling me in all earnestness what a pity it was that the stupid government had decided to sell Sydney to the Chinese. There are so
many things I like about this world, every colour every sound every smell every touch seems to strike through to my heart, stamping those sensations there for eternity.

The days glide in and out of my life like a weaving snake. I lie on the bed and smoke a cigarette, with just the lamp on. I read a good word today: it was the word scorch. It suits me fine as it is that degree fahrenheit that my emotions can reach. My star sign is Aries and I love the colour red. I do not think enough people wear red with the intensity that is required. The colour I am least fond of is pink. It’s nothing but a watered-down version of red. Last night the moon was so bright and full, they say it’s very close to the earth at present. I only have to stretch my neck a little to see it from where I lie in bed. I have found myself a job that starts in three days. I’m going to save money and then hitch off into the wild blue yonder.

My mother has woken me early so I can go and purchase shoes for my new job. I’ve drunk the first cup of strong sweet coffee and smoked my first cigarette. How many people are eating bacon and eggs for their breakfast at this very moment? It is the wonder of the world, to imagine this. There is nothing more honest, more full of truth than the first few hours of morning light of each and every day.

Tomorrow at seven a.m. sharp I start my new job, the fourth one I’ve ever had. First of all I was a dishwasher, and then I worked in a clothing factory, and then I was a nude model for art classes. The rest of the time I’ve busked for money, lived on a commune, and travelled and performed with the touring show, The Crimson Tent. And now here are my flat-heeled, lace-up brown shoes for working in a hospital. I’ve polished them and I have cut my sandwiches for lunch and put them in a brown paper
bag. My uniform is hanging up, washed and pressed. Plus a headscarf because it has been raining. Everything is wet. The sky has been having a good weep.

Four days straight at my new job and now I have three days off. The job is simple: sweeping, polishing and mopping. I wear a khaki green uniform. I get paid and then I have my days off when I can do what I want. I saw some friends yesterday and I bought a nice pair of sandals at the Haymarket. They are red and they strap around the ankle. After I purchased the shoes I went over to Craig’s place. He’s my best friend. He wants to be a photographer. He loves to analyse. We sat on the back verandah which overlooks Rushcutter’s Bay and Bennelong Point. We sat around this huge table and made salad sandwiches and read newspapers and drank yerba mate tea. We played a lot of records and the sun was beautiful, it poured down over us. I fell asleep on the bench for a while. Next I work two days on, three off, two on.

Today I read in a magazine about a film star who carries something with her at all times in her handbag. She carries a little wooden hand from somewhere in South America. The film star called it a figa and said it absorbed any bad vibrations that were sent out to her. She said that sometimes a figa can break and that means it has absorbed so many bad vibrations that it just breaks. And then you have to get a new one.

When I arrive at the hospital at a quarter to seven in the morning, the floors are dirty again. The children are just waking and the ward has a sloth-like atmosphere to it. The night nurses yawn and prepare to go home as soon as the day nurses arrive. The sisters start at eight o’clock on the dot and by this time the wards need to be running
like well-oiled clockwork. The sisters look smart and clean and walk with sharp, quick hospital steps, rubbing their hands together in anticipation as they gaze around their wards. They are surrounded by hundreds of antiseptically scrubbed patients all being served breakfast by nurses who are acting so sweet, so gentle, so kind, that they’re in the running for air hostess jobs. And in the background, moving quietly and swiftly, with decorum and with only the soft clank of a bucket to their name, is an absolute army of ‘domestics’. We are busy filling our buckets to the brim with steaming soapy, water and wielding our brooms and mops with the lightest of ease.

Oh, what a joy it must be for the sisters to see all this. The patients’ mouths stuffed with ‘good wholesome food’, the nurses gently chattering and laughing as they make up the beds, the steam rising from the beige linoleum as we, the silent domestics with our straight, strong backs, swab the floors.

I woke up this morning and my coffee was cold, the yoghurt tasted sickly sweet and there was no fruit in the house. My first cigarette of the day was revolting. I went back to sleep. By three in the afternoon things still seemed dissatisfying. It’s always this way when I sleep too late. It’s humid, and today I have this ailment that I’ve nicknamed the jerks. It’s when you feel so restless and bored that all kinds of little things begin to bother you. You pace up and down smoking crazily, picking things up and then putting them down. Your body is full of irritations, you feel that cramp in your back, you notice that pimple on your chin, your red nail polish is chipped, you feel hungry. This mood makes me feel as if I have St Vitus’ Dance. I get up to lie on my bed and bump my knee with some savagery on the corner of the desk… it’s the jerks… I’ve got the jerks…
My mother once admitted to me that she likes to stir people up. She enjoys poking around in people’s subconscious and then, after having found what she wished to know, she swoops down on her unsuspecting victims and pulls apart the seven veils of their minds and reveals her little prepared remark, which cuts like a knife in the dark.

This is what Craig said about my relationship with my mother: *I can see a room with a door and a window. Outside the window is a ladder. Sometimes you enter through the door just in time to see your mother’s head outside the window as she makes her way down the ladder.*

When I was tiny I thought that the great mantras that the cicadas sing in summer were the actual sounds of that season. Of course, now I understand what that really is, and I frequently hope that as I learn more and more, it will be my mother who enters through the door in time to see my head disappearing down the ladder.

Take any lift, Jassi used to say. You can always get out if you don’t like it. When I first saw her on the commune up north I thought she must be the local slut or something. That was because of the way she used to get around with her long blonde hair and wearing just a pair of undies with a butterfly embroidered on the front. Once I got to know her, I began to realise that the slut thing was really a kind of sexuality that exuded from her. She was skinny and freckly with tits like buttons stuck onto her chest and a face that made her look as if she’d seen more than she should have. And when she walked along, this *thing* exuded from her. It was also the way she managed to look as if she just didn’t care.
Take any lift, Jassi used to say. Her story was that once all these drunk guys gave her a lift and began to move in on her. She just laughed and said to them, do you think I’m a girl? She reckoned they let her out real quick.

No one’s going to pick you up with a sour look on your face, Jassi said. We hitched everywhere and anywhere, over the Harbour Bridge wearing op-shop picture hats and gloves. Sleeping by the side of the road one night, we woke in the morning and discovered a dead kangaroo lying about two feet away from us. We hitched from one end of the continent to the other. Then I decided I’d join The Crimson Tent. Jassi was talking about trying the Piano Commune. It was Jassi who told me that if you aren’t scared then you don’t attract vibes of fear, the vibes of someone having power over you. She said you should always believe you are the one in charge of any situation. Believe you have the power. Jassi told me that. I think it’s true.

When I am at work I am thinking while I am mopping. I work out how much money I am making and how soon I’ll have enough to get the heck out. I hate having to go to bed early and getting up early and feeling as if my days are punched into a timetable. Sometimes I think about my friend, Craig. He left home when he was fourteen. I met him about two years ago when he began working for The Crimson Tent. He performed acrobatics in the show, backflips and somersaults, and he played the drums. Craig gives me flowers but sometimes he makes fun of me. He likes to show me things, for instance: how to balance your weight when you’re riding a bicycle, or how to re-string a guitar. He likes to give small gifts, but he won’t write letters or even notes. He wants to become a famous photographer.
"Miracle in the Rain" is the name of the old movie I watched on television and it starred Jane Wyman and Van Johnson. It was about a girl who fell in love, but the man she fell in love with had to go away and fight in the war, and then he died. She became sick, and then she went into a church. It was raining, the same as the first day she had met the man she had fallen in love with. I looked across at my mother who was watching also, and she had tears in her eyes. I knew she wanted to tell me about the Second World War; she wanted to tell me that this movie was real and that things like loved ones dying really happened during the war. I didn’t make a noise, hoping that if I kept quiet, she would do so too.

When I worked with the alternative touring company *The Crimson Tent*, I was never paid a cent. Boris drove the bus and managed the money, a difficult job I guess, with us all wanting to purchase greasepaint and violin strings. At one stage, Boris bought me a pair of second-hand boots in some suburban St Vinnie’s opportunity shop and that was it. He liked being Big Daddy with his hand on the wad of notes we received from the Arts Council.

Rangimarie was his girlfriend. She talked to him and kept him awake while he drove the tour bus late into the night. His parents were Estonian immigrants to Australia. One time, we parked the bus outside their house and all piled out for a visit, but I got the impression his parents didn’t like what Boris was doing.

We performed at the Royal Easter Show. I sat on the big, wicker props skip and handed out the musical instruments to be played for the parade at the beginning of each show. That was the audience participation. Craig would start off, playing an enormous drum that he wore slung over his body. I shook the tambourine and danced
a waltz with Gloria the Gorilla, who wore a white tutu and roller skates. We juggled and clowned around, and the clowns played tricks on each other, made the audience laugh, and then danced a wild tango at the end. *Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay.*

The day Picasso died we heard it on the radio. We were on the road speeding to another performance. All of us clowns, singers, acrobats, actors, jugglers and musicians sang and sang inside the bus until we were hoarse. When we reached the town we gave a concert straight away and passed the hat around, and there was so much money in it, I said we should give it all back. People shook our hands and invited us to their houses.

My mother wants to freak me out. We argue and then she tries to make it up to me. I don’t like her touching my things. I don’t want her reading my poems or looking at my ink drawings, her eyes boring holes into them as she attempts to squeeze the last drop of meaning from what I have written down. Craig says I should remember that I hitchhiked for nine months inside my mother before I was born, and I owe her for that at least. I like the idea of me hitchhiking at such an early age. I’ve heard some of my friends discussing the actual births they had. But my mother never told me about that stuff. What was actually going on with her while she was carrying me for the nine months? I think the desires and thoughts of the mother seep into the hitchhiking baby’s little vehicle/womb space. I was her late, last baby. I wonder what she thought about that.

All past, all future, is just so many people all having the same dream. Only the present feels real to me. Today it is raining and I can look out of the window and see the rain
with my own eyes, but if it is sunny tomorrow I will say, how strange to think that yesterday it was pouring with rain, it is almost unbelievable, n'est-ce pas?

Boris had borrowed money from a regional festival in order to buy our *Crimson Tent* touring bus. We painted it white on the exterior and we built bunk beds down the back of the interior. In another life it had been a school bus in a country town. But at the end of the festival, the organisers said they had lost so much money, they told us they had to take the bus and sell it to cover costs. We tried to struggle on for a while longer although we could all tell it was dying. I bawled my eyes out at the end, and then packed my clown costume and hitched back to Sydney.

I have left the hospital cleaning job and am undergoing intense feelings of relief. Now I’m sleeping and sleeping. All I did today was paint my old suitcase dark blue. It’s not really a suitcase, it’s a hatbox that I bought in the second-hand shop for one dollar. After the paint dried I stuck little silver stars on the lid.

I made myself my own *figa* out of twigs I found in the park, and I used red wool to bind them together. It’s an abstract five-fingered hand. I keep it in my shoulderbag for good luck. I showed it to Craig and he said it was a kind of ‘totem’. He knows about everything. I whinge about my mother to him and he never minds.

My mother nibbles away at my soul like I’m a savoury biscuit. Her words and actions wring me out, the same way she wrings out the wet washing until there is absolutely no water left. I want to take a photograph of her just so I can burn it. I want to fly away. To get on a boat and sail away. I will buy a ticket to somewhere, or hitch myself a lift out into the wild blue yonder.
I’ll dress myself totally in blue to calm myself and help to eradicate my mother’s influence from every part of my body, including my mind. I wish I could help her but I can’t, until I manage to throw off the cloak of darkness from my own shoulders. Sail away, sail away, sail away.
A High White Ceiling

It feels like Hong Kong or Cambodia, minus the spices and the red-roasted ducks you see hanging up in the restaurants of Hong Kong, or the baskets of chicken heads at the market in Phnom Penh.

In Brisbane, the flowers are blood red, toothgum pink and larynx purple. All around the cathedral the flowerbeds have been planted with little red furry tongues. And the land feels as if it is breathing double, like the florid-faced portly gent Wendyl observes climbing the steps by the side of the church. So much sunshine should be good for you, alternatively, it can just fry your brain.

Besides the number of flowers, Wendyl takes note of the elderly women of Brisbane. They are a nuggety brown, their skins tanned hard like hides after so many years under the bounteous light of the ‘Sunshine State’. They wear white slacks; Wendyl decides that there must be veritable oceans of super-size white slacks in Queensland. The women attire themselves in the slacks, and in their quasi-sailor outfits and their thonged, cork-heeled sandals that display their horny claw feet.

Pink milky tutti-frutti dessert. Strange birds singing in the early morning pollution. Wendyl remembers that Phnom Penh had been so humid it had felt like soup. The traffic relentless. And the city had reeked of parched earth and pungent, spicy food, the kapok trees by the side of the road spilling out their guts. She had eaten frog with ginger and fried morning glory. There had been women with trays of lotus buds on their heads. Fly-encrusted meat and the smell of dead fish. Dripping bromeliads.
In the market: old currency, pirated CDs, flick knives, thousands of motorcycle parts, a monkey tied to a fence. Stallholders fallen asleep on top of their wares. Walking sticks, bean curd, dried mushrooms. Men mending a bike that had a pig tied to it.

In the supermarket there had been black chicken under sealwrap and loganberries popping out of their husks, glistening like peeled grapes. The white flesh inside the red dragonfruit had been studded with a thousand tiny black seeds. Bouganvillea gushing down.

At the temple around the corner from where Wendyl had lived, there had been a row of Buddhas with their heads guillotined. Sourfish soup. Moto drivers crowding the doorway of the local café. Tiny chillis. Tubs of black and green jellies. Another Australian woman had lived across the passage. One day she had shown Wendyl her brightly coloured tattooed back.

The café owner had always been trying to set Wendyl up on a date with his brother. Dirt roads filled with potholes, and the potholes filled with rubbish. Her rooms had overlooked the intersection. Her favourite student had been Rhadi, who was studying English with her. Geckos on the wall.

Before Wendyl had finally left Phnom Penh she had travelled to Angkor for one last visit. Her sandals *slop slop slop* across the ancient flagstones. Little boys trying to obtain any small change. A monk had told her he had injured his foot and needed two dollars for a taxi. Moss floating down from the trees. The stones of Angkor turned orange in the afternoon heat. Wendyl’s feet were brown with dust. A soldier had asked her the English word for *green*. Geckos on the wall. In the middle of her last night, she had stood at her bedroom window and watched a man walking down the road in the dark, punching the air.
The Brisbane City Hostel has four floors of rooms and is popular with the older female travellers. Wendyl finds herself sharing with the sixty-year-old Dottie in a twin single. Dottie wears a shiny sateen blue nightdress with ornate lace trim around the neck, which sits awkwardly on her wrinkled lizard skin. She tells Wendyl that she prefers to go to bed early and rise early, and when she rises early the next morning she pulls up the blinds, up and up and up, and then up and then down, and then she rustles her plastic bags until Wendyl cannot do anything except wake up.

Dottie collects rainwater back home in her inland New South Wales town. As often as she can she collects rainwater in buckets placed strategically across her garden at home. She believes that the rainwater is better than any water you could drink from the tap, and after she has collected it, she keeps it in super-large plastic Coke and Fanta bottles which she lines up along her hallway where they rest against the skirting board of her fibrolite unit in Mummulgum. She drinks only the rainwater at home and confides to Wendyl that it is ‘good for the skin’.

When she leaves after three days, her bed is taken over by a woman Wendyl nicknames The Battleaxe. Neither Dottie, or The Battleaxe appear to have living husbands. The B.A. uses an old, striped towel with a wavy ribbed pattern on it, like the sort of pattern you get if you run a fork over the top of soft cake icing. She has her own thick yellow tea mug in the shape of a dog with a funny face and owns an enormous pink flowery sponge bag. When she is out of the room busying herself in the communal third floor bathroom with her stripey towel and puffy sponge bag, Wendyl creeps over to the B.A.’s suitcase and reads the label attached to the handle:

_Mrs Lillian Skuggs_

_160 Pratt St, Rockhampton._
‘How long are you staying?’ the B.A. asks Wendyl when she returns.

Wendyl says she’s not sure.

The B.A. examines Wendyl. She sees a thin woman with a plain face and a nose shaped like the round end of one of those old wooden pegs. Wendyl’s face is not what you would call ‘pretty’. She is overly tall, maybe played basketball at school? And she appears to be more gaunt than elegant.

It is true that someone Wendyl once taught with, overseas, described her as Mary Poppins gone a bit Edgar Allan Poe.

‘Where have you come from?’ asks the B.A. It is obvious Wendyl isn’t from Brisbane, for a kick-off she is not wearing white slacks.

‘I’ve been living in Cambodia teaching English,’ explains Wendyl. ‘And in some other parts of Asia. I’ve been away from Australia for about fifteen years.’

‘Goodness me,’ says the B.A. ‘You must be glad to be home.’ She has been panting in the heat. She has already informed Wendyl that she is asthmatic. And then they have the argument about the air conditioning. Wendyl would prefer to have the window open, but the B.A. wants to keep the aircon going.

‘That’s what I’ve paid for and that’s what I would like,’ says the B.A., using a very firm tone of voice. And because she is older, and she looks as if she is dying of heat exhaustion, Wendyl has to agree.

During the night the B.A. coughs in her sleep, and wheezes. Wendyl tosses and turns, and finally decides to go downstairs and sit in the darkened hostel lounge. There are moulded Santa decorations glued to each window. There’s also a Rudolph the Reindeer with a stupid mushy smile spread across his snout, and a sarcastic elf in green hose, winklepicker shoes, a green dress, and a hat. The elf is pointing. Maybe at me, Wendyl thinks. Me, me, me. She has her small bottle of Bundaberg rum, which
she purchased at the Duty Free on entry into Australia. You never know when you might have an emergency. And once she’s had a good swig, the rum makes her feel relaxed and she forgets about the B.A. back in the bedroom.

Some large cockroaches as big as Wendyl’s thumb run across the pillars that lead towards the outer compound. They have tiny stunted wings which help them fly a short way before they revert back to running mode. They run fast, Australian Olympiad athletes, born and bred in the Sunshine State.

Wendyl empties out the contents of her bag onto the glass-top table and she goes through all the stuff until she finds what she remembered might be in there. It’s a phone number. Down south on the Greyhound, and possibly Dougal will still be living in Sydney. She won’t ring until she gets there. She has been planning this trip to see Dougal for some time. Visualising it. It’s about time he understood exactly what he did all those years ago. But if he’s not there, she’ll have to go to her sister’s in Tasmania. And she’ll have to go there for Christmas, anyway.

The planes go overhead every fifteen minutes, some lower than others. Wendyl can stretch her head out of the side window and see what looks like the crossed shape of a giant bird as it moves over Dougal’s roof, obliterating the small gap of light produced by the four-foot wide alley that runs between each house in the row.

Inside, in the spare bedroom, she keeps finding the hairs of Dougal’s Japanese Girlfriend. These hairs are long, thick and black, and very strong. Wendyl thinks you could tie up little parcels with these hairs. The Girlfriend is not here in the house but Wendyl feels as if she knows her now she has met her hairs, braided through the knobbly porridge-coloured carpet. Her own hairs are short and insignificant next to these glossy beauties. Another plane goes over. You get used to them.
In the room Wendyl has these soft cotton sheets which she likes to pull up to her nose while she lies on the futon. The pillow is good but the duvet is too hot. Another plane goes over. At night the planes have all their lights on and every window is twinkling. Dougal says there’s an airport curfew at ten.

The high white ceiling frightens her. It makes her scalp feel stretched just thinking about it, let alone staring at it. The ceiling is so pure, so pristine, it’s a kind of proud, knowing object of precious honesty towering above her. An upright ceiling. Wendyl’s face hardens into a mask that hides her real thoughts.

She can hear everything in the house, every sound and sigh. If someone farts at one end, the sound travels. She can hear Dougal rinsing his breakfast plate, drinking his tea and then clomping into the bathroom. Once in there he pees, takes a shower and brushes his teeth. Another plane goes overhead, and for one grateful minute she can’t hear a thing. Then, Dougal walks in his straight, regular step, wump-wump wumpity, wump-wump wumpity, his right foot always taking off first.

Wendyl’s room is a complete square. She lies on her futon in one corner of the room with the knobbly carpet which is full of the hairs of Dougal’s Japanese Girlfriend. The window frame has been meticulously stripped by Dougal and the walls have been painted ‘foxtail’ yellow.

He seems to be doing okay, he certainly isn’t down on his luck. Dougal always had a knack for coming off first-best. But at night he tells Wendyl that he finds it hard to sleep these days. He prefers to stay up late and talk every evening, giving blow-by-blow accounts of the renovation of every floorboard, every stretch of skirting and corner piece, curtain hook, window latch and doorstop.

The view from the spare bedroom is of the left side of the neighbour’s house. It is built of bricks and through the window Wendyl can see a clay ventilation piece set up
high near the roof. When she wakes in the morning, she studies the ventilation piece and when she’s finished with that she examines the bricks. Some of these are a pale biscuit colour, some a deeper orange, but most of them have a darker ‘eye’ in the middle. Dougal knows about these things and explains that they are ‘heart’ bricks, the darker inner ‘eyes’ have been produced by overbaking.

Many years ago Dougal and Wendyl were best friends, but one night in the middle of summer, he kissed Wendyl. This incident put a tipsy tilt on their friendship. Previously, they had hitched a lot together and flatted together, they had been friends. They had never kissed. After the kissing incident, Dougal never kissed Wendyl again. Wendyl felt angry. Then there was the Gary Situation and after that she had never wanted to talk to Dougal again.

Instead, she’d applied for work with Voluntary Services Abroad and what with one thing and another, she is now fourty-four years old and has been living out of Australia, the country of her birth, for more years than she can think.

When Wendyl had rung Dougal from Sydney Central Station, he had seemed delighted at the prospect of seeing her again. Of course you can come and stay. He had always said that. He hadn’t mentioned the Gary Situation. She had heard that the fifty-six year old Dougal had a Japanese Girlfriend. They hadn’t married. The Japanese Girlfriend isn’t in the house when Wendyl comes to stay but she can feel her presence everywhere: in the Japanese rice crackers, the chopsticks, the futon she sleeps on and the print of Mount Fujiyama hanging on the wall.

‘Where is she?’ Wendyl asks Dougal.
'Momo is in the south of Japan visiting her parents. She goes every year. It’s too expensive for us both to travel.'

‘When is she coming back?’

He shrugs. Has Momo left him? Is he telling the truth? Maybe Momo has left him but she hasn’t told him yet? Wendyl looks, but there are no photos of Momo anywhere.

Dougal never goes out. There are cobwebs on his car to testify to that. Inside the house, everything matches. The sofa matches the fastidiously painted clotted cream walls of the lounge-room and the aesthetic wall print above it adds that extra little touch.

The plates and glasses rest neatly in their selected positions, to which, Dougal explains, they must always be returned. He owns four of everything. There are four wine glasses, four dinner plates and four sets of chopsticks. He is obviously not expecting a crowd.

He continues to complain to Wendyl about the problems he has sleeping. She offers him a Normaline but Dougal declines. He says he has tried drugs, herbs, meditation and acupuncture. His nose looks pinched on the bridge and his hair has lost its youthful blondeness.

After they have eaten, he immediately washes the plates and then rinses them again to slake off the soap. Everything in the cupboard is wrapped and lidded. There are no smears or marks, no ants or cockroaches. He shows Wendyl a lump of tamarind that he and the Japanese Girlfriend have been using for two years, he is proud of its non-decaying talent.
He eats very little. He does not smoke, nor does he drink wine. Most of all, Wendyl hates the way he sighs, very loud and drawn out. She can hear him sighing for a good half hour in the next room before he plods off to his backyard office. He does something on the computer out there. She doesn’t know quite what it is, but she knows it makes him money.

On the third night after Wendyl has arrived he asks, ‘So what’s next for you?’

Wendyl fixes her eyes on the print above the sofa. It is textured like that dreadful Anaglypta wallpaper her mother used to love.

‘Maybe down to my sister’s for Christmas,’ she says.

‘Where is Carmel these days?’ asks Dougal.

‘Living on a pig farm in deepest Tassie.’

‘Hmm.’ Dougal swizzles a biro between his fingers.

‘When will Momo be back?’ Wendyl ventures to ask.

‘She rings when she’s ready,’ answers Dougal.

‘Didn’t she purchase a return ticket?’

‘I suppose so.’

Wendyl doesn’t get it. But Dougal says nothing about her having to leave.

It is so hot. Wendyl falls asleep on her bed on the floor in the middle of the day. She dreams she is riding in a train carriage in the dark in the middle of the night. The train is crawling along the tracks with its lights off, she is travelling secretly during wartime, under the cover of darkness. Someone is trying to negotiate a deal with her. This deal involves the exchange of an abstract for a tangible thing, in other words, something like her integrity in exchange for long-term monetary security. Will she do the deal? She wakes up. She’s been dribbling on the Japanese Girlfriend’s immaculate
white pillowslips. The bedroom door is open and Dougal is standing there. He asks if she would like a cup of tea.

They drink jasmine tea in his tiny brick courtyard. Every ten minutes or so his words are drowned out by the noise of another plane. The jacaranda tree shakes a little in the downwind produced by each take off.

‘Do you remember how we used to hitchhike all over the place together?’ Dougal asks. Wendy sips her tea.

‘Yes.’

‘What about the ride we had with that weird guy on the way to Bendigo?’ Dougal recalls. ‘The guy insisted that the world was about to end. He talked about it the entire time. That’s the sort of stuff you have to put up with when you hitch. You have to listen to people raving on about their pet subjects, their pet hates and obsessions. I can even remember his name. Gary. Those seemingly nice guys who are a little deranged always have names like Gary or Al or Pete. Their parents never call them Archibald or Terence. And they don’t have acne or birthmarks or any other unusual defining features such as a big nose or an ugly chin. They seem to be memorable for what you can’t remember about them.’

Dougal stopped talking. About three planes went over almost one after each other.

‘I remember him,’ said Wendyl.

‘Gary told us the world was going to end next week. He had built himself a bolthole and filled it with cans of baked beans, beer, CDs and a gun. When he started talking about the gun, I noticed how his voice changed; he became excited but with a softer, gentler tone, as if he was speaking about someone he loved. Gary liked his gun. That was the message I received loud and clear.’
‘Yes,’ says Wendyl. ‘It was as if there was another Gary underneath the usual ‘real’ Gary.’

‘One Gary in the world we all share and another in Gary’s Own World,’ agreed Dougal. ‘And Gary’s World was existent in his car, which we were riding in, so we were sharing Gary’s World.’

He snaps open a hexagonal-shaped tin and offers Wendyl a Japanese rice cracker. There are triangles, circles or squares. She chooses a square.

‘Remember what I said to him?’ asks Dougal. ‘Do you remember?’

Wendyl nibbles her square cracker.

‘Have you got the gun with you in the car? I asked him. I guessed, and I guessed right. Then Gary said, no worries, he had the gun under the seat. My god, how did we get away from him? I can’t remember.’

‘We left him when he stopped for gas.’

‘That’s right. And we waited ages for another lift.’

‘Half an hour.’

‘That’s right. With a bank man who travelled around farms negotiating loans.’

‘Memories are like ticks,’ suggests Wendyl. ‘All ticks like to burrow into your flesh and suck your blood. On humans, they are particularly partial to burrowing in on the lower back of the head, under the arms and in the groin area, and once they commence burrowing, they release a toxin into your bloodstream which can affect you, depending on the type of tick and the part of the body the tick has latched onto. Ticks on the head produce the greatest hallucinatory reaction.’

‘Do you mean memories are like hallucinations?’ asks Dougal.

Another plane goes over and the jacaranda trembles.
‘Some people eat ticks or feed them to their dogs to produce an immunity,’ says Wendyl. ‘I figure that memories are like ticks because the memory of the mistakes you have made teaches you to avoid making new mistakes, it’s a kind of immunity. It’s true, that memories can be hallucinatory, slippery, they can deceive you. But they remain, just like the faint swelling of the skin that remains after you tweezer out a tick.’

Dougal’s hat is pulled down so that the brim covers his eyes.

‘Why didn’t you ever ring me before?’ asks Dougal. ‘We seemed to lose contact.’

‘What?’ says Wendyl.

‘That Gary guy really scared the pants off me. It felt so good when we ran away from him.’

‘You kissed me.’

‘Did I?’

‘When we were walking along the highway.’

‘Oh.’

Wendyl’s body goes very still and she admits, ‘Something bad happened.’

‘What happened?’ asks Dougal.

‘You left your fucking birthday card in Gary’s car,’ Wendyl replies. ‘The birthday card I gave you, the one with the fish on it. It had my new address inside. And you left it in Gary’s car.’

‘I left it?’

‘Yeah. Gary told me, that was how he found me. Gary Selwyn Ansley.’

Dougal is sitting up.

‘He was that Gary?’
‘He came after me. He broke into my ground floor apartment and was waiting for me when I came home. He hog-tied me and later he shoved me in the broom cupboard. When the police rescued me they said I was lucky to be alive.’

Dougal looks astonished. ‘I read about that case in the newspapers. It was on the T.V. news. How could that be you?’

‘The police kept my identity secret. Don’t you remember? The victim was only called Woman W.’

Dougal scratches his head underneath his sunhat. ‘Yes, I remember, Woman W. No photo, no name, only the evidence of what happened to Woman W.’

‘Turned out that Gary had some gruesome fantasies about killing a woman and getting back into prison.’

‘Back into prison?’

‘Yeah. The day before Gary picked us up he’d just been released from prison. He had a history of violence. He’d previously raped a woman at knifepoint during a three and a half hour ordeal after she picked him up when he was hitchhiking, and he was jailed for that for eight years. Apparently, in the prison he was always boasting that he’d do it again but that the next time he’d ‘top’ her.’

‘Good grief. I am so sorry. I never knew any of this.’ Dougal bends over, selects a triangular rice cracker and bites nervously into its edge.

His apology sounds official, automatic, empty. Wendyl stares up at the hard blue sky. It must be about thirty-five degrees, she thinks. The birds have stopped singing. The planes are taking a break. There is no movement of air. The sun beats down on their heads like a pure shower of incandescent fall-out.

‘Did he…hurt you?’ asks Dougal. His voice falters, as if the dry biscuit has left a small choke in his throat.
‘Yes,’ answers Wendyl, ‘he hurt me.’
Out West

I had never been further than the Blue Mountains. At twenty years of age, I was the youngest of the group and I had no idea that I might even need a torch. As it turned out, we could have done with a spade, a pick, a screwdriver, a camp stove, fly spray, a tent and several below zero sleeping bags. And a torch. I do remember sticking in a box of matches, a map and water. But we didn’t even take a proper medical kit. We were green townies through and through. As green as the traffic light that says go, as green as the April Fool idiots we really were. So green you could see the fresh sap bleeding out of us.

*  
My partner Dave and I had signed up to perform community theatre around schools in northwestern New South Wales, funded under the Disadvantaged Areas Scheme. Dave said that meant we wouldn’t be playing Broken Hill. Instead we were headed for towns like White Cliffs, Tibbulburra, Bourke and Wilcannia. I didn’t even know where those places were, only that Bourke was where the saying ‘back of Bourke’ had come from, which meant not just the wop-wops but in the total wops. Wops that you and I couldn’t begin to imagine. Yeah, it was a job offering a ticket to the western wops.

‘Let’s go for it,’ I said to Dave. I was up for anything.

*  
We never heard the suitcase go off the roof rack. We’d packed the station wagon on the Sunday afternoon and fueled up. On Monday morning we’d headed off at six, picking up the others on the way. Salvatore Palmigiano was a New York/Italian
dancer who talked fast and sounded convincing, and Mary-Lou Meagher was a good Baptist girl from Georgia, U.S.A. She had long blonde hair that made her look like one of those sixties folk-singers, and she had studied mime in Paris and could ‘moonwalk’ like Michael Jackson. Jimmy was an Aboriginal who’d been brought up by a white Australian farming family. He’d trained as a teacher and had recently toured overseas in a traditional Aboriginal dance troupe.

Dave was employed as tour director. He’d directed stuff before and would be able to keep our performances up to scratch. He was ten years older than me and had a background in political theatre. We’d been together for a year. I was fresh out of drama school. This job was my big chance to do something meaningful out in the ‘real’ Australia. I was worked up about it, talking emotionally to everyone I met.

‘We’re going out into the desert,’ I told my mother. ‘Into the essence of the real burning heartland of Australia.’ It was 1979.

* 

Wilcannia is about nine hundred and sixty-five kilometers northwest of Sydney. In the summer the temperature can hit the forties, in the winter it’s mild during the day but cold at night. It’s semi-arid desert. In the past, gold and opals were discovered in the area, and that had made the place into a thriving town with many buildings constructed out of the honey-coloured locally-quarried sandstone.

Wilcannia had been an important port on the Darling River in the days when the ‘steamers’ had been the main form of transportation out west. In the 1880s, the town had boasted thirteen hotels and even possessed its own newspaper. All the wool from the northwest of New South Wales had been transported through Wilcannia and it had been known as ‘the Queen of the West’. But road and rail replaced the steamboats and Wilcannia had fallen into decline. These days, only the sheer distance on either side
of the town, from Cobar to Wilcannia and from Wilcannia to Broken Hill, made it a necessary stop for cars to refuel.

* 

A brand new Ford Falcon station wagon was handed over to us to be used for the duration of the tour. Dave was the driver, although sometimes it was Mary-Lou. I sat in the front next to Dave, occasionally swapping with the others. Salvatore was mainly in the back, with Mary-Lou in the middle and Jimmy on her other side.

Salvatore was blatantly gay. He was in-your-face and enjoyed stirring Dave, calling him ‘darling’ and acting as if he was about to kiss him. He wore tight jeans and gauzy coloured scarves, and in rehearsals he took any opportunity to strip his top and show off his muscled bod. Mary-Lou was quiet, reliable, but disconcertingly religious, assuring everyone she would ‘pray for them’ and pray for the success of the tour. Dave made sarcastic remarks about her when we were alone. My favourite was Jimmy. I wanted to get to know him more. He had thick black curly hair and a chubby face. He wasn’t what you’d call handsome but he had a fantastic smile. When Jimmy smiled, you wanted to jump. He let questions and enquiries wash over him and yet still, he was articulate, right on the button if he wanted. I told Dave that Jimmy was an enigma.

* 

We rehearsed at the Seymour Centre near Sydney University. Our director was Bob Dove. Community theatre was the Big New Thing. We would develop a theatre piece in Sydney and then drive out west, and basing ourselves at Wilcannia primary school to begin with, we’d move onto the other disadvantaged towns.
At first we talked a lot. Just ideas unearthed from elsewhere to help the mind get moving. At first, it was only an empty space but one can get a running start, tell a story and begin.

* 

It was exciting driving into Wilcannia in the late afternoon. The town was bustling with local Aboriginals. We later discovered we had arrived on ‘dole day’, the day of the week that everyone on government benefits received their payments. The sky was colouring into an enormous fiery red sunset. In Wilcannia the sky was larger than any other I’ve seen before or since. Outside the town the red desert looked extraordinary, mythical. As we drove towards Wilcannia, we could see a line of green trees in the distance that marked the bank of the Darling River – in the midst of a treeless landscape. Many of the colonial buildings were still standing, including the Club Hotel (in use) and the Athenaeum Library (empty). They were built out of sandstone and their colour gave the town a particular sepia, nostalgic appearance. The main street ran slap down the middle and you felt you’d stumbled on an old cowboy town straight out of the cinema.

It wasn’t until we stopped that we discovered that Jimmy’s suitcase was missing. Somewhere on the road between Cobar and Wilcannia we had lost Jimmy’s case which had been secured to the roof-rack on the top of the car. Jimmy said his special dancing gear was in the case, made from organic fibres that included the hair from his grandfather’s beard. Okay. Dave leant over and whispered to me: ‘I thought Jimmy was brought up by white people.’

After we reported the lost case to the Wilcannia police, Jimmy admitted to Dave there had been a stash of marijuana in the bag. Was it for him to smoke or to sell? He never said and we never found out. The next day, the suitcase was handed in by a
local farmer. When it was returned to Jimmy almost everything was intact, and the dancing gear was fine. There was just one thing missing – Jimmy’s bag of dope.

‘These small towns are hot-beds of gossip,’ Dave told me. He was annoyed with Jimmy. ‘We’ll be watched to see if we do anything wrong.’

When Jimmy and I were alone outside the primary school, I asked him,

‘What were you going to do with that dope?’

He smiled and shrugged. He could be superior with me, as if I were a child who just didn’t understand. The only facts I knew about Jimmy had been given to us by Bob Dove. He told us that Jimmy had been taken from his mother by the authorities when he was a baby and given to a childless white farming couple. This had been accepted procedure in Australia’s deep, dark past. I didn’t ask Jimmy anything more about the dope.

* 

Dave had previously worked on a short play about mercury poisoning in Japan, and he put this forward as one possibility for performance. Bob Dove thought it sounded good but he wanted the script to relate more to Wilcannia. We began to devise a piece that would be based around the old steamboats on the Darling River. There would be some history in the script, and there would be races between the boats that would require audience participation. The ‘boats’ would be four enormous puppets that we actors would operate from behind. They would be far larger than the performer and would look humourous and colourful and the kids would love them. It had been explained Jimmy would not be part of our performance. He would do his ‘own thing’ – traditional Aboriginal dance. Some days he came to rehearsal and watched so he knew what we were creating.

*
Everyone stared at us. Newcomers to Wilcannia stuck out. Bob Dove had given us instructions to drive straightaway on arrival to the headmaster’s house, which was next door to the primary school. We had to deliver a special costume that had been rented in Sydney for the headmaster to wear to the Paddlewheelers’ Ball, an annual local event to be held on the following Saturday after we arrived. We had been informed that people came from far and wide for the Ball, it was the biggest shindig of the year and we would be ‘presented’ there and introduced to ‘everyone’. The costume we carried with us was a flashy military uniform that would make the headmaster look a little like Major Thomas Mitchell, the first European settler of that area.

The headmaster’s wife, Karen, showed us over the school. Everything was kept locked up, even the biscuit tin in the staff room was kept in a locked cupboard. Karen advised us that there were ‘many thieves’ around town. We should lock our vehicle at all times.

She took to Jimmy right off. He had a manner about him that people liked. But occasionally I could see something else underneath Jimmy’s ‘bon vivant’ public image.

‘He’s worried about something,’ I confided to Dave.

‘Why should he worry?’ asked Dave. ‘He’s making the same on the payroll as me and all he has to do is swan around like King Muck.’

* 

The teacher’s unit was one of a row of eight. Dave and I were to stay there as we were a couple, and Salvatore, Jimmy and Mary-Lou would be at the Wilcannia Motel. The units smelt of gas. And when it rained the red dust transformed into sticky mud that had its own particular pungent odour. One of the teachers owned a dog and that dog
was often barking. There were packs of dogs that roamed Wilcannia. You’d see them on the main street or down by the old bridge that spanned the river. *Throw a stone at them, Miss*, the local children advised me.

The teachers did all kinds of deals: one teacher who had done five and a half years at Wilcannia was sent to Noosa Heads for his next position. Only a handful of them stayed on, a few genuinely believed they were doing something important. Others just squeezed through one year and then vanished.

There was nothing to do, everyone told us. The white people drank at the Golf Club and the Aboriginals drank at the Club Hotel. To drink at the Golf Club you had to be a member. Before our first week was up, Jimmy had been invited there by some local businessman. The white folk loved Jimmy, they saw him as an Aboriginal who had ‘made it’ – in other words, they felt he had similar aspirations to them. He was invited back again and again as a guest to the Golf Club. Dave eventually accompanied the headmaster for a drink. When he came back, I asked him what it was like. Apparently, Jimmy was the first ‘abo’ to be invited to drink at the Club. He’d become a local celebrity.

‘Jimmy has an intense social calendar,’ said Dave.

* By the end of our rehearsals our two shows passed good muster, the most outstanding element being the giant puppets representing the Darling River steamboats. They were larger than an ordinary human, and from the back an actor could manoeuvre the arms and heads, although the legs didn’t move.

Attired in the garb of the 1880s, each had a distinct character of its own. One was a male dressed in black coat tails and a hat, like a Mayor. Another was a grand lady of high society wearing a veiled hat and pince-nez. The third was a steamboat captain,
ragged and rakish, and the last was a female publican, gaudy in corseted satins and possessing a wide-stitched smile on her face. Even Jimmy laughed at the puppets. He was very funny at working the female publican, nicknamed Mrs Mollie. Unfortunately, it was Mary-Lou who generally operated Mrs Mollie. All of the puppets were white-skinned.

* 

Mary-Lou didn’t go to pubs. She was American and she was Baptist. The Wilcannia children followed her everywhere begging her to *do the moonwalk. Do it, Miss, do it.* They were crazy for her mime moves. She could generally be found holed up in her motel room with the blinds drawn and the television turned on low. She found the red dust hard to cope with and was always trying to clean it out of her room and out of the car. The dust got into everything; even the tiny folds of your skin would collect the fine, miniscule grains. It gave people’s skin a reddish tinge. Sometimes you could taste it, gritty, in the food. You had to go with it or you’d end up like Mary-Lou, cleaning until Doomsday.

As for Salvatore, although he had been installed in a room at the Wilcannia Motel, he wasn’t there for long. His first and only sensational performance was to dance with the headmaster’s wife at the Paddlewheelers’ Ball. Wearing a bright red shirt, he led Karen onto the dance floor where they executed a sharp quasi-tango across the school hall. All night he was laughing and convivial, and the rafters rang with the echo of Salvatore’s full, fat laugh. Then the next day he stated that he felt unwell. Soon, he felt really sick, was directed to the hospital, and it was there that he was diagnosed with hepatitis.

This piece of news went through the town like wildfire. Thankfully, it turned out Salvatore had Hepatitis A, which unlike Hep. B or C, is not contracted through
contaminated needles. The rest of us had to troop down to the hospital to be vaccinated. One minute, the nurse was jabbing a giant needle into my buttock and the next thing I knew I was being revived with a hot cup of tea. I’d had an allergic reaction and fainted. The nurse had to radio the doctor. He was part of the Flying Doctor Service and was cruising over the Flinders Ranges at the time. We cursed Salvatore as we limped back to our various accommodations, our bums sore for several days.

The last time I ever saw him was the morning after our vaccinations. Attired in his usual collection of bright silk scarves, he appeared bewildered.

‘The nurse said I should have broth. But is there anywhere in this goddam town I can get broth? No.’ He didn’t seem to realise he could go back to his motel and make some in the kitchenette. In his broad New York accent he pronounced it ‘braawth’. It became Salvatore’s often-quoted famous last sentence after he returned to Sydney.

With the loss of Salvatore, we were one actor down and had to re-rehearse, dividing his parts between myself and Mary-Lou. With only the three of us left to perform the show, we became closer. Mary-Lou was good at calming Dave down, and we discovered she had an excellent singing voice. We held a Disco Night for the local kids where we sold packets of chippies and played tapes. The feature of the evening was Mary-Lou singing Leader of the Pack, with Dave and I on the extra vocals. It went down a treat. She also moonwalked and all the school kids tried to copy her.

The next evening after the disco, I was returning from buying milk at the Shell Shop when I found two small Aboriginal girls on our back porch. I recognised them as Selina and Crystal, both attending the Wilcannia primary school. Selina explained
they had left it too late to walk home. Now it was dark and the ‘min min’ lights would get them.

‘What are they?’ I asked.

She replied they were lights that appeared at night out in the bush; they beckoned you, encouraging you to wander off the track, and could lure you into trouble. Maybe down a creek bed. Down a hole. You never knew. They were bad. If you were walking or hitching along the highway at night the min min would try to get you. The smaller girl, Crystal, began crying. I told Selina and Crystal we would drive them home.

They lived out of town in an area where the government had built basic shelters, like garages or sheds, for the Aboriginals to live in. But no one was living inside these structures; the families preferred to rip them down and recycle the materials, or to use the shelters for storage while they slept outside next to a campfire. The government felt they were ‘refusing’ to live in the shelters.

There were no street lights out there and without a full moon it was dark as hell. Dave had driven out there during daylight hours with the district nurse who went twice a week to deal with general health issues. We’d seen ‘school sores’ on some of the children – a contagious itchy rash that could fester and become infected if they were scratched. Dave had been very quiet when he’d returned.

‘What was it like out there?’ I’d asked him, meaning the garages and sheds.

‘Shocking,’ said Dave.

* 

The giant puppets were a big success in Wilcannia. I overheard the Aboriginal children talking about the ‘gubba’ puppets.

‘What’s ‘gubba’? I asked Jimmy.

I’d never thought about the way the puppets were all white-skinned.

‘Come to the supermarket with me,’ he asked. It was the first time Jimmy had requested me to do anything with him, and I complied straightaway. We walked across the road. As usual, there were Aboriginals hanging about outside. Once we stepped inside, Jimmy was trapped, locals kept asking him for money. Some of them were already drunk. Jimmy gave money to them all. When I told a few of them to leave him alone, they asked me for money instead.

‘Is this what happens every time you come in here?’ I asked.

‘Yeah.’ He said nothing more. Walking back to the teachers’ units, I was thinking about how we had taken a show that was basically about the white European settlement and colonisation of the area to a place that had been home to the Barkindji people for thousands of years. I felt like an idiot. I felt like a bloody gubba.

* 

The unit next to Dave and I was home to two teachers who had moved in together. The bedrooms in both units backed onto each other. This couple had their bed pushed right up against the wall on their side and they were at it every morning and every night.

‘Like rabbits,’ said Dave.

‘Here we go, again,’ I’d say to Dave. We’d be lying in bed reading and then they’d start. The bed next door would begin to shake and bang against the adjoining wall. Then he’d groan, she’d groan, and they’d both manage to groan together, and then it was finished. She was the Home Economics teacher and he taught Maths. Everyone knew they were at it all the time. Another teacher called Becca, said it was rumoured they’d done it in the Home Economics cupboard.
‘Do you think we could ask them to move the bed a little way from the wall?’ I asked Dave.

‘You can,’ he said.

Neither of us did.

Some of the teachers went a little feral out west, participating in ‘roo hunts and other crazy activities. Others withdrew into themselves, looking quiet and desperate. A large number became ‘pissheads’, drinking full time at the Golf Club. Some matched off with others, like the Maths and Home Ec. teachers. The teacher, Becca, joked to Dave and I that sex helped pass the time of day out west.

Because of the high turnover of staff, there were only ever a few teachers who knew much about the individual children. There were no Aboriginal teachers. The children always had colds, they never seemed to be dressed warmly enough, and they were often physically hungry. Becca told me: *Some of them have a lot of shit going on in their lives.*

She was the only teacher I got to know. Most of them were friendly although it felt like a closed group, we were the visitors but they weren’t going anywhere. Becca had been teaching in Wilcannia for four years, had come straight from Sydney after her completing her teacher training. She lived at the teachers’ units and we went for a few walks together. But at the end of our three weeks I had to say goodbye to her, and although we promised to write we soon lost touch. Our tour schedule was to start with two days in Menindee and then move on to Ivanhoe. Our accommodation in Menindee would be at the Maidens Hotel, the only accommodation available in Menindee.

Run by Mr Maiden, the hotel had been in the same family for years. It was said that Burke and Wills, the explorers, had stayed there around 1860 prior to their last ill-
fated trip. The rooms at the Maidens had no electric points, only electric light and no heating in the individual rooms. This was the true blue heart of the outback. In the lounge and dining rooms, enormous wood fires were burning every night. You could eat breakfast, lunch and dinner there. On Friday evenings and in the weekends, farmers and other residents from the surrounding district came for the magnificent roasts. We gave three performances at the primary school, and Jimmy gave one dance show. Just before we were due to leave it began raining.

*

Driving out of Menindee, the vermilion dirt road had become wet and greasy in the rain. Dave had never driven in conditions like that. I was watching the skyline: squat scrubby trees, wiry grass, a heavy grey sky, flat land and then a mild undulation; and Mary-Lou was reading aloud pertinent facts relating to Ivanhoe from her guide book to New South Wales. Then Dave hit a soft patch of mud in the middle of the road and we went into a slide. It was pure slow motion. When we slipped to the left we hit another boggy area on the other side, we began to slide back too fast, and the impetus of that made the station wagon flip right over. We landed on the roof.

Mary-Lou was screaming, hysterical in the back. It had all happened so fast. If Dave and I hadn’t been wearing our seatbelts we would have shot right out the windscreen. Jimmy had been asleep. He was fine, with only a few small cuts to his face from broken window glass.

‘Turn the engine off, man,’ Jimmy told Dave. The vehicle was still humming. We were upside-down and I could hear something dripping in the back where the props and such were stashed. Once we climbed out the skid marks could be seen clearly where we had veered from left to right across the road and back again. The fine dust had turned to slick mud in the wet.
‘This car might be a write-off,’ said Jimmy. He generally didn’t say that much. That one sentence was the equivalent of a speech for him.

Mary-Lou was still crying. She was in shock and Dave held her and comforted her. I didn’t like him doing that. Jimmy saw me watching them. A kind of a look passed between us.

‘What?’ I asked him.

‘Nothing,’ said Jimmy.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah, how about you?’

‘I was scared when we flipped.’ I could say it now it was over.

‘Yeah. Where’d your old man learn how to drive?’ said Jimmy.

I was glad Dave didn’t hear him. Jimmy had a very soft voice. Dave had stopped hugging Mary-Lou. I was thinking: blonde Yankee mime bimbo.

Dave began unloading the giant puppets. The tin of cooking oil had spilt over them, that was what I’d heard dripping in the back. He was angry.

‘Who packed the oil next to the puppets?’

I’d done it but I wasn’t going to own up. Jimmy sidled up to me and he said really low, ‘So long, gubbas.’

I began laughing hysterically. It was the way he’d said it, and the shock of the circumstances.

‘That’s great you find it so funny,’ shouted Dave. He stood next to the upturned vehicle swearing, although he knew that Mary-Lou disliked it when he did that.

‘Car coming,’ said Jimmy.

We could see an old banger swerving from the left to the right and keeping out of the middle of the road where the surface was the softest. They came to a standstill and
the driver called out a cheery hello. Granville and Dottie Spinks and their two
daughters Maree and Penny, had room to give Dave and Mary-Lou a lift. They lived
on a station past Ivanhoe and could drop them off in town as they went through. I
couldn’t believe Granville was intending to drive the whole way with the road in that
condition.

‘She’ll be right for another twenty-four hours,’ he reckoned. ‘After that she might
become a real bitch.’

That was the way people talked out west. Mary-Lou was already sitting in the back
with Penny, the youngest daughter, on her lap. There was just enough room for Dave.
He kissed me goodbye and climbed into the banger.

‘You leavin’ your Missus with the abo?’ asked Granville. He’d addressed any
remarks to only Dave or I, never even saying hello to Jimmy.

‘Yes,’ said Dave. He turned to me, ‘You stay with the car and the puppets and the
props. We’ll be back.’

‘Too right,’ said Granville, and they set off slowly.

‘See how he lets himself go with the slide?’ said Jimmy. ‘He doesn’t try to fight it.’

The red desert stretched around us, flat as a pancake. There was grass as it had been
a wet winter; the desert only needs a little water to start producing grass and wild
flowers. I kept myself busy rescuing food from the car, most of it was edible. Giant
black ants appeared out of nowhere and were trying to get into the sugar. Jimmy made
a small fire and brewed up a tea for us both.

‘Look at all this winter grass,’ I said, to make conversation.

‘I don’t know anything about grass,’ said Jimmy. ‘Only the old people know how to
use that stuff.’

‘Where did you grow up?’ I tried to get him talking.
‘Southern Victoria.’

‘Bob Dove said you were adopted into a white family.’

‘Yeah.’ He sat sucking his tea.

It began raining again, fine rain like a white veil. I had finished gathering the food. Jimmy and I sat by his fire which was fizzling out. There was no shelter. I felt low. I licked my hand where I had a cut. The blood had dried in a ridge along the cut line.

Jimmy stood up.

‘Car.’

A big black dirty-looking four-wheel drive was coming towards us. When it stopped, we realised the driver was from Wilcannia. He knew Jimmy from the Golf Club. The four-wheel was tanked up with white men, guns and beer. There was Johnno and John and Trevor, Wayne and Alan.

‘Ya got yourself a good flip there,’ said Johnno. ‘I remember a few years back I wrapped me own car around a tree a couple of miles further on. That was the old Holden. Now I got me a four-wheel.’

‘That wasn’t me,’ Jimmy answered. ‘Dave was driving. You headed to Ivanhoe?’

‘You bet.’

‘I’ll come with you,’ said Jimmy.

The driver turned to me, ‘ How about you, darling? I’m sure we’ve got room for you.’

‘I have to wait for Dave to come back,’ I said. ‘We’re a theatre company and I should stay here with the props.’ I didn’t want to hitch a lift with a car full of guys with guns and beer.

‘Suit yourself,’ he said.

Jimmy got into the back seat of the four-wheel and Alan passed him an XXXX beer.
‘See you in Ivanhoe,’ he said. ‘Don’t worry, Dave will come for you soon.’

* 

I didn’t wave. After they left it was really quiet, and I cried a bit. The fire had gone out. I drank the rest of the tea and walked out into the desert and relieved myself. Clumps of tall, spiny grass had flowered into insignificant dusty red heads that held bracts of seeds. Ants were busy moving the seeds that had already fallen. I knew nothing about the desert. I covered the stuff I’d taken out of the car with a tarpaulin we used as a prop in the play. I had the hood up on my jacket. I ate dried apricots and sang to myself. The giant puppets sat next to me in a row. We were waiting for Dave to come back.

I walked into the desert and picked up a stick and began drawing in the dirt. I drew dots, circles, spirals. I made maps. I looked up. Suddenly I’d felt there was someone behind me. No one there, of course. One of the puppets had lurched over to one side. Spooky.

I thought about the breakfast I’d eaten at the Maidens before we’d set out: Corn Flakes, toast and vegemite, and a cup of coffee. That seemed like years ago. My teacher friend, Becca, had told me she went for holidays by the man-made lake outside of Menindee. She stayed in the caravan park which she said smelt of gas because of the gas bottle that was attached to the cooking stove. It often smelt of gas out west. Becca said it was sometimes so cold at night in the park that she’d turn on the oven and sit there huddled around the open oven door.

I straightened the puppets and fixed their hats on properly. A small wind had come up. I was pleased, thinking it might dry out the road a little. I ate more apricots. I saw lizards. It was noon. Our number plate was JTY547. I’d liked the new station wagon and thought the number plate looked as if it said JAUNTY. Dave and I had been proud
of it, and now we might never drive it again. The back lights were broken. I supposed there must be a dent in the roof. Where was Dave? I’d been left here. Maybe he was having a kip after eating a big hot lunch? I wrapped myself up in Jimmy’s grey blanket and lay down. When we were travelling in the car Jimmy put this blanket over his shoulders. It smelt of his hand-rolled cigarettes.

Jimmy had got on with the redneck whites at the Golf Club better than Dave and the rest of us, although many of the drinkers there were openly racist, calling the local Aboriginals ‘boongs’ and other much worse words. But Jimmy had been invited to sit and eat roast beef and chocolate pudding with them. What did that say about Jimmy?

I was thinking so hard I fell asleep. I dreamt my body was in separate pieces that could come apart and then be put back together again, like a jigsaw. I could put myself back with my legs facing the other way or my head screwed back to front. I began taking myself apart. I sent my legs off to walk south. They came to a river and collapsed from exhaustion, as they no longer had a mouth to drink with. My torso went north. A flock of white cockatoos flew overhead. It was sunset. My torso lay under a white ghost gum and fell asleep, and when it woke in the morning it found it impossible to rise up off the ground as it had no legs.

My head went east. It rolled along by itself although the red desert dust clung to its eyes. It became dark, and still my head kept going. Some little white lights appeared ahead, flickering and sparkling. My head rolled towards them. In an instant it fell into a trap. A pit full of slime. A large magpie flew overhead, laughing. My head could feel itself sinking further into the slime, and it shouted for help.

Although my legs heard the calls, they needed water before they could do anything, and my torso couldn’t rise without my legs. My head writhed around in the slime, moaning and sobbing. A disc-shaped min min light appeared and began bobbing
towards my head. It was about three feet off the ground, and as it came closer it was joined by other, similar lights which moved in a small circular motion around my head as if they were examining it, they seemed to be displaying some kind of intelligence. My mouth opened and I shouted: get away! I woke up. Someone was standing over me.

‘What’s the matter?’ they said. ‘You were shouting.’

‘I’ve had a strange dream.’

‘All dreams are strange.’ It was Mary-Lou standing there. ‘Do you want a cookie?’ she asked. She had a packet of cream-centred cookies, and she gave me two. I sat up. I began licking the lemon cream off one of them.

‘Are you okay?’ she asked.

Dave came up behind her. He had a huge filled roll for me, a thermos of coffee and a chocolate bar. Everyone was speaking at once. I was introduced to two policemen who had come with them from Ivanhoe. Everyone knew we had flipped our car.

Al was tall and lanky, with a long, sad face like a dachshund, and Perry was short and rotund. He was real mouthy so he did all the talking. Perry’s face was full of expression and his big nose looked alternatively comic or impressive, depending on what he was saying.

‘We heard the abo left you sittin’ on the road,’ said Perry.

‘Did he get to Ivanhoe?’ I asked. Because he was the local policeman Perry knew everything.

‘He’s asleep in the school staffroom. There’s been so much rain, school’s been cancelled. Where’s that abo from?’

‘Victoria,’ said Dave.

‘They said he was a teacher.’
‘Yes,’ said Dave.

‘How’d an abo do that?’ asked Perry.

‘I guess he applied,’ said Mary-Lou in her broad Georgia accent.

Both the policemen smiled at Mary-Lou. Her accent always attracted attention. Perry had already formulated a plan, and it was this: we three would travel in the back paddy wagon of the police van and at the same time the van would tow our car. First we had to push the station wagon back over onto its wheels. Dave and Al fixed up the towline. The drive to Ivanhoe was perilous. I’d never been in a paddy wagon before. The seats were hard and narrow and I kept slipping off whenever we swerved. At one stage we were forced to ford a channel full of deep flowing water that had appeared with the rain and now cut right across the dirt-track road. It was frightening to see the way the landscape could shift and change. On another stretch, the road was strewn with what the police referred to as ‘gibber’ stones. These were round stones that were very hard.

‘Just one of these can blow yer tyre right out,’ Perry assured us. They stopped the van to show us the stones. ‘Fuckin’ gibbers,’ said Perry, and he kicked at one with his police boot. ‘Hard as an abo’s arse.’

*

When we finally reached the Ivanhoe Hotel we were shouted free drinks and slapped on the back and congratulated. Now we’d flipped our car, everyone loved us. Even the publican came out from behind the bar to talk to us. We ate our dinner there and everyone asked for our story. The waitress gave Dave an extra slice of corned beef, and Mary-Lou actually drank a beer. Now I understood why the outback bars were always full. Life out in the middle of nowhere could be frightening, hard, unforgiving.
Exhausted, I left the bar early and headed to the motel. As I walked past number eight unit, the door opened. It was Jimmy, dressed in a new padded jacket.

‘Gidday.’

‘Gidday.’

‘Heard the cops picked you up.’

‘Yeah.’ I didn’t know if I’d forgiven him for leaving me by myself.

‘Where’s those gubbas, then?’

He was talking about the puppets.

‘They’re sitting in the car, ready to go.’

‘They got sense.’

I wanted to confide something to him. ‘Jimmy, while I was out there in the desert I dreamt about the min min lights. What do you think that means?’

He moved back into the shadow of the door. He hadn’t answered me.

‘Jimmy?’

‘I don’t know about those things. I wish you’d stop asking me stuff like that.’ He came out of the unit and jammed the door shut, turning his back on me. ‘I gotta go.’

His new jacket was made from something shiny and waterproof. It made a puffy, sighing sound, as the different parts of Jimmy’s body moved around inside the foreign material. He pushed past me and went left, and down the street the way I had come.

Why had he said that to me? Of course he knew. Deep inside him, he knew. I could tell.

* 

In Ivanhoe we held a team meeting and agreed that White Cliffs would be the last town where we would perform. The weather was still wet and the station wagon was going to be expensive to fix. Mr Flaws, the headmaster at Ivanhoe would drive us to
White Cliffs and back in the small school mini-van. After that we would return to Sydney on the train. During the meeting we agreed to donate the ‘gubba’ puppets to Ivanhoe Primary as a sign of thanks to Mr Flaws.

The school at White Cliffs consisted of one teacher, Dan, who lived in a converted train carriage. There were sixteen students. The landscape around the town was Martian-esque, pockmarked with holes that the locals had dynamited, as White Cliffs was an opal mining town. Because of the intense heat during the summer, most of the residents had dynamited underground homes for themselves, caves that were like something Fred Flintstone would live in. It was easy to imagine a summer in White Cliffs – forty degrees and relentless weather that would fry your brain and turn you crazy as a chook.

One family who lived underground had dug a secret tunnel between their home and an underground ‘museum’ where they displayed the opalised plesiosaurus they had unearthed while mining. In the event of any danger to the precious plesiosaurus, they could press a special button that would release an alarm in the home, warning other members of the family, who would then come running with the family gun.

At the end of our steamboat show we’d begun to initiate a sing-a-long which had become the part of the performance the children loved the most. We’d come to realise that the script was not the most important thing: what was important was the fact we’d come from Sydney, and that we were there singing and dancing with the schoolchildren. Jimmy played the guitar and we gave out lollies.

On the way back to Ivanhoe, Mr Flaws picked up a lone, elderly Aboriginal man who was walking along the road. I climbed into the back of the van with the costumes and puppets and the old guy sat next to Jimmy and started talking to him in a soft undertone.
‘What’s he saying?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I can’t understand a word the old coot’s saying.’ Jimmy couldn’t speak any Aboriginal languages but this didn’t stop the old guy. He kept it up most of the way back, occasionally directing a remark towards the rest of us. He had introduced himself. Pointing at his own chest he had announced: Gilbert. He had quite a few teeth missing and was dressed in a worn black parka and a hat like those the outback farmers wear. Gilbert kept up a long one-sided conversation with Jimmy until about twenty minutes out of Ivanhoe, when he indicated he wished to be dropped off. It looked as if it was nowhere but Gilbert appeared to know where he was. Before he left, he placed one hand on Jimmy’s forehead and spoke for several minutes, sounding as if he was intoning something specific. No one had a clue what he was saying. Then he shook Jimmy’s hand, waved goodbye to the rest of us and began walking in the opposite direction back out into the desert.

‘Who is he?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘I don’t know,’ he replied. I could tell he was upset. There was dead silence in the van as we drove into town. And then with great force, as if some tsunami had broken down his boundaries, Jimmy began to weep in the back seat. I say ‘weep’ but it was no ordinary crying. He curled up into a ball and made sad grunting noises while his entire body moved in a momentum of cataclysmic sobs. He wouldn’t answer any of our questions but cried like this in the car for the next hour. The others went into the motel. I volunteered to stay with Jimmy. When he stopped, I hugged him.

Yes, Jimmy was finally closer to me. He was holding onto my gubba hand. But he was as far away as he could ever be. I thought I knew where he was travelling: hitching, like Gilbert, out into that spare blood-carmine landscape, a place that
seemed to me like the entrance to a gigantic god mouth. And that was where Jimmy was poised, on the tip of that mouth’s serpentine, all-consuming tongue.
Onkaparinga

Mr Pring was driving north on State Highway One in the wind and the rain, oh, the weather was just too awful. The windshield wipers were scraping across the front windscreen, squeak, squeak, squeak. He wished they wouldn’t make that noise. He was driving to pick up Mrs Pring’s Christmas package. Every year her sister would ring and announce it was ready to be collected.

She’d say, you may as well pick it up when you come and visit, which meant you had better come and visit. When the kiddies had been little it had been nice as Mrs Pring’s sister lived on a farm so the kiddies were able to see the animals and run around outside. Now the kiddies were adults and none of them wanted to visit Mrs Pring’s sister any more, but the thing was, the Christmas parcel was always so good.

Cheeses that the sister made on the farm as a hobby, fresh milk, a wonderful Christmas cake studded with fruit and almonds and ginger (Mrs Pring’s favourite), and real bacon, sometimes a slab of venison or even a duck. Apart from all that gloriousness there’d be fresh eggs, several kilos of winter apples from the orchard and occasionally, a few punnets of strawberries, plus wonderful edibles from the kitchen garden such as radishes, parsley, lettuces, silverbeet, delicious tomatoes and young carrots. The Christmas parcel of Mrs Pring’s sister was a cornucopia of foodarama. But what to do when no one except Mr Pring volunteered to make the journey to receive said gift?

This year, even Mrs Pring herself had said she couldn’t possibly go as her arthritis was playing up something awful and she couldn’t manage the long car trip. In fact, the journey was only a little under two hours and they would have stopped for a hot
drink along the way as they often had in years past. It was obvious Mrs Pring didn’t really have it in her heart to go. Her relationship with her sister was always up and down. Mr Pring could never keep track of whether they were talking or not.

Mr Pring, himself, got on well with his wife’s sister, Audra, who was the youngest and had been given the fanciest name. Mr Pring’s wife, Betty, was the eldest. Between them was Gladys, nicknamed Gaga because she had called herself that as a toddler. She had died several years ago of a heart attack.

No one had seen that coming, although her best friend had noticed that Gladys had shown a slowness of stroke in the public swimming pool several weeks before the attack. Apparently, the upper arms can be affected and this is a small indication of onset. Mr Pring had thought Gaga had looked a little grey under her olive tan but he had kept that observation to himself. Sisters could be a funny equation to deal with – conniptions and concussions from go to whoa in Mr Pring’s experience. He, himself, had been an only child, a little gem loved and cared for by his elderly and affectionate parents who had only despaired when Mr Pring informed them that he was marrying Betty.

They thought Betty wasn’t good enough for their wee boy but she was an excellent cook and tidy homemaker and Mr Pring was well pleased with these talents. It was in the years after the kiddies had flown the coop that Mrs Pring had begun to show more slovenly behavior, eating in bed and leaving apple cores on the edge of the bedside table. The unwashed dishes were often stacked on the sink until Mr Pring was forced to help with the washing up. Betty arrived home late from the university course she had begun to attend. The garden had become overgrown. She never changed the tablecloth. And now this. She couldn’t even get herself to Audra’s to collect the
Christmas package. Mr Pring was at his wit’s end. *At his wit’s end*, he would tell everyone. He would have to go by himself.

Oh, the weather was too awful. He’d passed the halfway mark and was on that deserted bit that he never really liked when he saw a young girl standing by the side of the road. She was soaked, didn’t even have a coat on. He had already driven past so he slowed down and backed up along the highway. There wasn’t a vehicle to be seen nor could he see anyone else. He wound down the window and asked her what she was doing.

‘Waiting for a lift,’ she said. Good grief. Supposedly hitchhiking. But she was drenched to the bone.

‘Get in, dear,’ he said. ‘Where’s your coat?’

‘I haven’t got one.’ She was shivering as she sat down in the front next to him. He always kept a blanket in the back, it was handy for picnics or the beach.

‘Put that blanket around you.’ It was an oldie but a goodie. One hundred percent wool. His mother had given it to Mr Pring and Betty for their first wedding celebration. A blanket and a picnic basket. He didn’t know where the picnic basket was these days but it was a good blanket. *Onkaparinga*, the best.

‘That’s a good blanket,’ he told the girl. ‘See the brand?’ She was only a wee thing, like some Dickensian waif. She had stopped shaking. Mr Pring passed her his thermos.

‘You like coffee? Pour it into the lid, it’s good and hot.’ She nodded.

‘Here, have a mintie.’ He gave her one. He wanted to give her things. There was something about her, something that felt sad. Mr Pring was good at detecting these feelings. A former high school girlfriend had claimed he was telepathic. He’d laughed
at such a suggestion although he generally managed to make a few bob each year
guessing the Melbourne Cup.

‘I’ve been waiting for ages,’ the girl said. ‘Other people drove straight past me.’

‘What’s your name, dear?’ Mr Pring always called young girls dear.

‘My name’s Raisin.’

Raisin? What kind of a name was that? Raisin? Like a sultana?

‘I’m Percy Pring,’ he said and they shook hands. He started the car. ‘Where are you
off to?’ She named the town. It was a small place he had never been through, a
diversion off the State Highway near the turn off to Audra’s farm. He said he could
take her the whole way. He began talking. She didn’t say much but it was nice to have
some company. He told her all about the Christmas Package. He couldn’t help
noticing how cold it had become - that change in the weather the day before had
really dropped the temperature down.

‘I hope it won’t be this cold for Christmas,’ he said. ‘Typical.’ Without warning,
Raisin began crying.

‘I was driving to see my parents for Christmas,’ she explained.

‘Driving? I didn’t see your car. Where is your car, dear?’ Mr Pring felt flummoxed.
She went quiet. He could hear her sniffling.

‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘I was thinking of another time. I was driving another time.’

‘And?’ said Mr Pring, who hated stories without endings.

‘It was weather just like this and I was trying to be careful.’ That was all she would
say. She stopped her tears.

Mr Pring, who knew that a certain degree of nosiness could be important, inspected
her surreptitiously. She was attired in a summery chiffon dress and on her feet she
was wearing sandals – the old fashioned sort they used to sell at Delaney’s – made of
thick leather with a large buckle. When had they stopped selling those? About ten years ago? More? Her sandals looked brand new.

‘Are those sandals from Delaney’s?’ he asked her.

‘Yes,’ she said.

Strange. Maybe she had purchased them on an online trading site. You could get your hands on anything through those sites. You name it, they had it. They were coming up to the little café where Mr Pring always stopped.

‘Would you mind stopping for a cake and another hot drink?’ he asked.

‘Not at all,’ said Raisin. She was a quiet young thing.

‘This is where we stop when I have Mrs Pring with me. They make a nice hot pot of tea and the pikelets are particularly good. Or the Ginger Slice. Not the lamingtons, they can be somewhat dry.’ Raisin nodded. Mr Pring turned off the highway and drove into the car parking area.

‘Ladies on the right as you go in. What would you like? This is my shout.’

‘I think I could drink a cup of tea,’ said Raisin.

‘Okey dokey.’ They both ran for the front door. The rain had become positively biblical in its intensity.

Inside, Raisin veered off to the right to the Ladies. The owners of this café always remembered Mr Pring.

‘Hello, hello. Off to get the Christmas Package? ’

‘Hello, Mrs Bundle. Hello, Mrs Snell.’ Mr Pring prided himself on knowing everyone and on being able to remember their names. It made a difference, he thought. The two ladies ran the place together.

‘Tea for two and one Ginger Slice.’

‘That’s a lot of tea for one,’ said Mrs Bundle.
The ladies liked to joke along with Mr Pring.

‘Oh, the young woman is in the toilet. I picked her up a while back.’

‘Did you come in with someone?’ asked Mrs Snell. She was an unfortunate-looking woman as she had several warts on her face in prominent places. She liked to wear her grimy old track pants to work at the café, but nobody noticed unless she came out from behind the counter, which she generally didn’t. Mrs Bundle preferred to keep Mrs Snell away from the customers. Mrs Bundle was the one who did all of the ‘hello hello’ while Mrs Snell would be over at the back table filling in the sandwich orders and keeping her warty face out of it, so to speak.

Mrs Bundle was fat in a jolly nursery-rhyme kind of way. Her apron enveloped her and it was spotlessly clean, brilliantly white. She had curly blonde hair and rosy cheeks, and she looked as if she had walked out of a B.B.C. television series set last century in somewhere like Yorkshire. *The Secret Garden,* or something like that. (Mr Pring had loved *The Secret Garden.*) She was good at chatting up the customers and making them laugh. But Mr Pring’s wife had heard it rumoured that it was the popularity of Mrs Snell’s Ginger Slice recipe that had established the café.

This Ginger Slice was sweet, spicy, and a little crunchy, but best of all, the ginger was generously applied. The recipe was well balanced and they sold their signature slice by the trayful. When anyone asked, Mrs Snell refused to reveal the secret ingredient. And the eatery was named after this treat, The Ginger Slice Café, although everyone called it ‘The Ginger’ for short - an indication of just how popular it had become.

I didn’t see you come in with anyone,’ said Mrs Bundle.

‘She’s gone to the rest room,’ said Mr Pring, ‘and she only wants tea.’
He sat down and when the tea came he took the liberty of pouring it into the two cups. Rasin had been gone for a while. Ah, here she was. She was smiling, she looked dry and happy.

‘Look at that poor old bastard,’ said Mrs Snell to Mrs Bundle. ‘Now he’s talking to himself.’

‘Where’s his wife, then?’ said Mrs Bundle. He generally has his wife with him.’

Mrs Snell and Mrs Bundle watched Mr Pring attack his piece of Ginger Slice. Mrs Snell was busy with her paninis but she liked to observe the customers to see what they ate and what they left on their plate.

‘Maybe they’ve had a bust up. I’ve seen men go like that after a separation,’ said Mrs Bundle. ‘Sometimes they go a bit loopy. Look, he’s poured two cups of tea.’

As they watched Mr Pring they both grimaced with pity.

‘I wonder who he thinks he’s talking to?’

‘Maybe his wife,’ answered Mrs Snell. ‘Ooh, maybe he’s done away with her.’

‘For goodness sake, Mrs Snell. Where’s that fresh tray of Ginger Slice?’ Mrs Bundle had no time for this carry on. Sometimes Mrs Snell’s robust imagination got on her wick. It had been a Bone of Contention between them since Day One.

Mrs Snell continued filling her paninis. The hungry lunch crowd would be in soon. She kept a watch on Mr Pring. She noted that he only drank his own cup of tea.

Eventually he arose and left, shouting a cheery goodbye as he exited through the glass café door that was heavily bedecked in frilled lace. But what really turned Mrs Snell’s stomach was that when she went to clear the cups the other teacup was empty and there was lipstick on its rim. That was mighty peculiar. She’d never seen a mystery like that before. She kept it to herself feeling unsure as to whether she could trust her
own eyes. Mrs Snell turned the cup in her hand. The lipstick on the rim of the cup was bright pink.

‘Have you ever worn bright pink lipstick?’ she asked Mrs Bundle.

‘I’m a bit long in the tooth for that shade,’ replied Mrs B. ‘That’s more of a young woman’s colour, isn’t it?’

‘Thanks for the tea. I liked that. I think you’ll have a good run for the rest of your drive,’ said Raisin.

They continued on for the turn off for Raisin’s town. Once again, she mentioned how long she’d had to wait for a lift.

‘I wish I could give you something in return,’ she said to Mr Pring.

‘Don’t worry, my dear,’ he said, ‘I’m happy to help. There’s nothing I need.’

‘Isn’t there something you have always really wished for?’ asked Raisin.

Mr Pring laughed.

‘Mrs Pring and I stopped every year at that café and every time we would argue about what Mrs Snell puts in the Ginger Slice. Mrs Pring once said to me that if she knew what the secret ingredient was, then she would package it, sell it, and make herself a millionaire.’

‘I can’t eat Ginger Slice,’ said Raisin.

Mr Ping tut-tutted in sympathy.

‘Is it the ginger? Some people don’t like that.’

‘Sort of,’ replied Raisin. ‘Turn here and stop on the corner.’

Mr Pring did as he was told.

‘Very nice to have met you.’ They shook hands.

‘Happy Christmas,’ said Raisin.
She climbed out. They shook hands once more. Mr Pring knew he could be a little boring with his extended farewells. He turned away, bending over for an instant to rearrange the carpet square on the floor in front of the driver’s seat. Mrs Pring insisted on putting these squares in the car, but he thought them a nuisance as they were always shifting and never stayed where you placed them.

When he straightened up again, Raisin had gone. Just like that. Mr Pring thought that she must be one of those very decisive people who can say goodbye and leave. He looked around again. Nothing, as far as his eye could rove. He wiped the windscreen and stretched his legs. The rain had stopped. A small boy went past him along the pavement, riding a tricycle with a flag stuck to the rear of the seat.

‘Hello!’ shouted the boy.

‘Hello,’ said Mr Pring, because he was that sort of a person, saying hello to small boys if they said hello first.

He got back in his car and drove the rest of the way to Audra’s farm where he was served a hearty late lunch for his trouble, picked up the famous Christmas Package, and drove back home to where Mrs Pring was waiting. It was an excellent parcel this year – there was a fresh chook, a round of shortbread, some rose petal jam and two jars of pineapple and cucumber relish, which sounded awful but were truly lip-smacking good.

Mr Pring never gave his quiet young hitchhiker another thought until some time in the early new year. He and Mrs Pring had driven to the beach and the old Onkaparinga blanket was required once more.
‘What on earth is this?’ asked Betty as she unfolded the blanket. A piece of paper had fluttered out. She retrieved it and as she began to read the handwriting her face lit up.

‘You got it! You got it!’ she yelled.

‘What?’ Mr Pring couldn’t understand what was happening until he examined the paper himself. At the top it was titled: *Mrs Snell’s Ginger Slice*, and the ingredients and quantities followed.

‘Ground walnuts!’ exclaimed Mr Pring.

‘Yes, and treacle,’ said Betty. ‘I should have known. Aren’t you the funny one? Hiding it in the blanket for me to find.’ And she gave Mr Pring a walloping big smoocher of a kiss.

But Mr Pring was an honest man. So he explained that he thought his female passenger had left the recipe behind in the car.

‘What girl?’ asked Betty.

‘She was hitchhiking,’ said Mr Pring. ‘When I drove to pick up the Christmas parcel. Her name was Raisin. I dropped her off up the line from Audra’s.’

‘Raisin McIntosh?’ Mrs Pring seemed to know immediately who he meant.

‘McIntosh?’

‘Long hair? Thin? A bit drippy looking?’

‘A very nice young woman.’

‘Sounds like her but couldn’t be,’ said Mrs Pring, ‘because she died in a dreadful road accident about ten Christmases past. You must have heard Audra mention it?’

She knew her parents.

‘How could she be dead? I gave her a lift.’
‘Maybe some girl was playing a joke on you? What next? Picking up girls in the middle of nowhere. Well, I never. I’ll be making sure I come with you next year.’

Mrs Pring began to uncork a bottle of wine. Now Mr Pring remembered how cold it had been in the vehicle after Raisin had got inside. He recalled Mrs Bundle and Mrs Snell’s faces when they had spoken to him in the café. They had definitely thought he was alone. Prickles ran up and down Mr Pring’s spine. Good grief. He tried to focus on Mrs Pring’s background running dialogue. She was speaking about the Ginger Slice recipe and saying it would ‘make them a bomb’.

She would immediately apply her new business acumen, obtained through her Bachelor of Arts in Business Studies. Ginger this and ginger that. It sounded as if it was going to be a busy year. They clinked their wine glasses and toasted the recipe.

Still, although Mrs Pring could say what she liked, he knew what he had seen out there on the highway. For heaven’s sake. It was enough to make you say your prayers. Twice over. Because it had been the ghostly avatar of Miss Raisin McIntosh.
The Acquisition

*Thwuck, thwuck, thwuck.* Lunde has been walking all through the night in the rain across a landscape of never-ending boggy paddocks. It’s been raining for days, the horizon is obliterated, and all Lunde can hear is the *thwucking* sound of her red boots as she squelches through the thick, pale mud.

For the moment the rain has stopped and in a surprise parting of the clouds the moon has shown its full creamy face. That gives Lunde all the light she needs to keep going, besides, it’s too wet and too cold to stop, so she keeps walking, slipping and sliding in the mud. It cakes itself around her boot soles and when it starts to dry it makes her feet feel twice as big as they are. Sometimes she stops and tries to wipe off the mud. She wants to get to the lake by daylight.

Over her shoulder she carries a calico bag full of food from the last village. The people there liked her and they gave her a large loaf of soft bread, a white square of crumbly cheese wrapped in muslin, a sweet pudding poked with dried fruit as large as eyes and six red apples that are only just starting to go soft. She had already left the village when a young girl with her hair shaved off, in the fashion of that area, had come running with one last gift: a tiny jar of blackberry jam, sweet but with a bite, and in her other hand she had held a pair of red boots.

Lunde’s old shoes were cracked and hopeless so she had taken them off and just left them. Then, she had pulled the red boots on, lacing them up past her ankles and tying the waxed laces in a tight knot. She had thought the boots might be too big, but they fitted her well.
Inside her red boots she is wearing thick stockings. She is dressed in a heavy woollen skirt, a jumper, an oilskin coat, a red woolly hat and leather gloves that have short soft frills that fall around the wrist. The gloves are not what she likes, but Lunde takes what she is given, what is gifted to her. People give her things after she has helped them because she is what they call an *Eye*. These *Eyes* are women who travel, going where they are needed and helping in whatever way they can, whether it is medicine or their specialty: the health of the soul. They can ‘read’ people and give advice about the immediate future.

The job of an Eye is hard work and the constant travel, especially in winter, is difficult, but Lunde has never felt the inclination to settle in one of the many villages she has visited. For the last three days the countryside around her has been completely flat. She keeps heading due north and knows that eventually she will reach a large forest of pines, and then further on, a lake. She hasn’t been this way for some time, but she has always liked the next part of the trip, when she reaches the lake she will need to continue by boat.

She arrives an hour before dawn. The rain has finally stopped and the sky is clear, an inky dark blue. The boat is kept in the one place, hidden under thick green pines with food and water stored inside. When she finds it she drags it down to the water leaving a wide trail through the grass. Then she fits the oars into the rowlocks and throwing her red boots into the boat, she climbs in.

By the time the sun comes up she is rowing towards the middle of the lake and there is no one else except her and the hundreds of birds that inhabit the many tiny islands on the lake. They scream and wheel and swoop right down to the boat one minute and then arc back up to the pink sky the next. The lake is enormous. Lunde has never
rowed across the complete width of it, she has only ever rowed a small way towards the middle and then over to one side, arriving at the township situated there.

Because she is an Eye she instinctively knows where to go next. She does this by clearing her head, concentrating, and then soon she will have an indication. Across the shimmering mirror in her mind she will see a lake, a mountain, or sometimes the coast. Then a little more geography will appear: a ridge or a valley, a bay, or a cluster of houses. And when she arrives, she will find that the people have been needing her and hoping she would come.

Today the lake is calm, almost flat. Lunde pushes her body into the rowing, enjoying the repetitive rhythm of it. The oars dip and flash, flicking droplets of water onto her face. She shuts her mouth, she likes the water, but no one knows how clean it is these days. Near the beginning of a tiny string of islands she stops to rest, and while the boat bobs up and down, she takes the time to clear her mind and interpret the map that should appear.


She has blacked out. Lunde wakes slumped in the bottom of the boat, her right cheek pressed against her empty red boots. Her head aches, nothing has ever happened like this before. She drags out her food, what she had and what was stored in the boat, and she drinks long draughts from the bottle of water and shoves lumps of bread and pieces of the semi-sweet rindless cheese into her mouth. Dried, salted strips of meat
have been left in the boat, so she sucks one rectangle and the salt crystals explode on her tongue.

Now it is mid afternoon, so she takes up the oars again and slowly commences rowing. The tiny bird islands have disappeared and she realises that the boat has drifted while she was unconscious. She doesn’t recognise this part of the lake. First she tries to row back the way she came, keeping an eye on the sun all the time. Before she has always rowed north, then west, and now as the sun moves towards the western horizon she can follow it easily. She decides she will concentrate on rowing west and applies herself to the task, and after some two hours she sights land, a spit stretching like a finger towards her.

Rowing closer, she can see a deep inlet running into the shore, an artery of water. The light is beginning to fade but she keeps rowing, it is cold on the water now and her new boots have become wet in the bottom of the boat. Lunde hopes the leather won’t crack. She reaches the tip of the spit. It is a narrow tongue of sand that the lake washes over and over again. Farewell, she thinks, as she rows up the inlet, and the geography begins to change. The sky no longer stretches above her like a taut tablecloth, instead it has become a blue passage with a hairy fringe of dark trees and bushes on either side. She looks for a low place to land.

Lunde hides the boat. She doesn’t know this coastline and wants to make sure she has the boat to get back across the lake. She falls asleep in a hollow nest that she makes in the middle of a clump of bushes. She doesn’t feel frightened, but the tips of her fingers feel peculiar. She can smell change in the air.

First she hears a morepork as she wakes, and then a man is there. Behind his head an orange dawn is smeared across the sky.
‘Are you the Eye?’

She nods and he helps her up. She follows the man. He is very short and rather ugly, and is dressed in baggy grey pieces of cloth. His legs are bowed, and his body is strange and knobbly, like a piece of root ginger. He carries a long smooth stick, which he uses in all sorts of ways, prodding the grass ahead of them or measuring the height of water. A short wooden knife is strapped to his belt. Lunde prefers to travel without sticks or knives.

She has never come across people as short as this man before. Not now or even when she was very young and travelled as an apprentice to old Mrs Sweet. After a while the man begins to talk in his high squeaky voice.

‘How far ‘zactly can you see?’

‘Far enough,’ says Lunde. He doesn’t not look impressed.

‘They call me Mr Biddle,’ he says. ‘There never bin no Eye here afore, but my wife, Mrs Biddle, she heard of yous.’

Lunde considers herself fit but she finds it is hard to walk and keep up a conversation with Mr Biddle. Although his legs are shorter than hers, they seem to move three times as fast.

‘We got a big problem, you’ll see, you’ll see,’ he says. Lunde focuses on memorising the track, the trees, any landmarks, and their proximity to the inlet where she hid the boat. Every now and then Mr Biddle turns, as if to check that she is still there, then he mutters something more about their problem.

‘We sore in our heads thinkin’ on this problem. But I cain’t tell you yet, I have to leave that to the Mayor. ‘Sides we’re nelly there.’
Lunde has begun to worry again about her new red boots. First the mud, then the water, and now this long hike before they have had a chance to dry out. Inside each boot her feet feel like a lug of wood.

‘Nelly there now,’ the man tells her. ‘Nelly there, Miss Eye.’

‘You’ve told me that six times.’ She is exhausted.

‘Now don’t get mad. Looky there!’

Ahead there is a clearing, and in the clearing there is a church with a high pointed roof like an old fashioned spire soaring above the trees. As they draw closer Lunde notices many small houses. The church and all the houses are built of wood and none of them have any windows. Some houses have miniscule gardens with red geraniums growing around the door, and all the people are small, the same size as Mr Biddle. They come pouring out of their houses like ants. They have pointed faces with miniature mouths and noses but larger foreheads. They wear dingy shapeless clothes that are too large for them, sewn all over with round wooden decorations like buttons, and they have hats with high crowns and wide brims made of grey or brown felt.

Mr Biddle introduces Lunde to the Mayor. This is a man who could be the shortest in the whole village, he only comes up to Lunde’s elbow. He too wears a hat but he takes it off when he and Lunde shake hands. Underneath the hat his head is completely bald. After the introductions Lunde explains how tired she is, and the Mayor and Mr Biddle escort her to a tiny windowless one-roomed hut. Inside it is spotlessly clean with a bed, some blankets, and a yellow towel.

Before he leaves her Mr Biddle points out that no self respectin’ man or woman would be seen outside once the sun had set. God-fearing people stay indoors, fearing the bad night spirits that come out of the woods and lake and roam the village after dark.
She stretches out on the bed, which is of course too short for her, and straight away she falls asleep. Falls over the edge of time and deep into the velvet arms of the subconscious, the factory of our dreams.


It is the middle of the night and Lunde is in this chill, windowless hut three or four hours walk from the edge of the lake, and she knows no one, has nothing, there is all or nothing to lose. Outside it is biting. She stands on the front stoop of the hut and her toes curl in the cold. She is more afraid of the cold than of any night spirits crawling out of the woods. The moon is high and full. By its light Lunde checks the small bags of things she has brought with her. Herbs and other powders – she is ready for anything. Lunde tips back her head and lets the bright light of the moon shine straight onto her face.

In the morning the Mayor accompanies Lunde to the church. He keeps calling it our ‘churt’.

‘We have a very serious problem in our churt,’ he says. The villagers scuttle everywhere, they all have the same mutated humpy lumpy bodies. Lunde asks the Mayor about it and his answer goes like this:
‘Once, a group of seven young women stayed outside after the sun had set. They held hands and danced and sang, and came back proclaiming there was nothing wrong with being out in the night under the moon. They were full of a lot of talk and a lot of hot air, but soon they became quiet. Eventually they all fell pregnant and then one by one they gave birth to small children with different bodies from everyone else. And we have been that way ever since.’

The Mayor shows Lunde his hands. The fingers on one are melted together, not webbed, but just in one lump. Lunde is nervous now, thinking that the village must be near or even built right on, one of the old chemical waste dumps that were never sunk deep enough from the surface.

Inside the church it is like a big hall, with one area for meetings and prayer and another for cooking and dining. It is simply decorated with carvings and a painted ceiling. The kitchen area is organised with a stove, pots, and big canisters of water. The women are cleaning up after breakfast and already starting work on the next meal. The Mayor leads her to a cupboard that is set into the wall.

‘Our problem. Lookit.’ He swings open the cupboard door. Straight away Lunde wants to laugh out loud. She has been anticipating this enormous overwhelming problem, and it turns out it is small, really small, because it is ants. There is a line of them marching in a business like way across the top shelf of the cupboard. Lunde follows them. They come out of the back of the cupboard and continue, keeping close to the skirting.

‘Even if you hang everything up, still they get to it. They can go anywhere,’ says the Mayor. Together they follow the ants’ route. It takes them around the whole kitchen until the trail disappears into a wall at one end.

‘Where do they go after this?’ asks Lunde.
‘Let me show you the worst,’ says the Mayor. ‘When we tried to poison them this is what happened.’ He opens a door only a metre high. Lunde has to stoop to enter the room on the other side, which is only just big enough for one large, deep white bath.

‘What an antique,’ says Lunde.

‘Yes it is our pride and joy. This here is the wash room,’ says the Mayor, breathing heavily, as he no doubt remembers a few good past baths. The old bath has been built into the wall but in the join at the top there is a thumbnail sized crack, and even as they watch the ants pour through this crack and then fall into the bath. There they stumble around before slowly dying, and the white porcelain is littered with their small, sticky black bodies.

‘Yuk,’ says Lunde.

‘Exacterly,’ says the Mayor.

All it takes is one queen, thinks Lunde. The Mayor leads her back outside, he is still talking, but as they leave she notices the shiny brass door knob. It has been kept brilliantly polished, and when the door is shut she imagines it would be the only thing you could see in the dark windowless bathroom.

‘These ants are our greatest problem. We think their nest is in the walls. We have even tried taking one out. Their invasion is driving us to the brink of madness.’ The Mayor raises his voice. ‘We have tried everything to get rid of them. I implore you to help us.’

Several women have crowded around to listen to the Mayor’s speech. Some of them clap at the end.

‘Frankly,’ he whispers to Lunde, ‘I’ll lose my mayorality if something isn’t done.’
Lunde walks out of the village and into the trees. The early spring sunlight breaks through the leafless branches and shimmers as it moves across the grass. The light is still pale but the warmth of the sun feels stronger every day. She sits on a fallen trunk and shuts her eyes and breathes deeply.

*Whoosh. Whoosh. She is back in the dark space with the shining door knob. She has no control. Whoosh. The animal wakes, it has seen her, the fur is moving closer, suffocating. Two arms shoot out and two hands grab both sides of Lunde’s face, wrenching through the time barrier and hanging onto Lunde for dear life.*

‘Please...’ Lunde hears. She takes a proper look, and sees her gender: a woman, crouched in the corner wearing a fur coat with her arms held up, imploring Lunde, ‘Take me, take me with you, take me...’ And the woman starts to speechify.

Then this is me at the arse end of winter, squatting, folded up inside the cupboard, wearing my fur coat. It was the others who put me in here, though I suppose I’ve also got myself to blame. I took a vow of silence, but it doesn’t seem to have worked. Because inside my head the war still rages, one to one, their rules against my freedom.

I don’t always wear the coat, I keep that for winter. And when the golden knob turns and shakes then I know they will have something for me. Food, or maybe paper for defecation. Sometimes I’m sick in here. Once a strange soul gave me coloured pictures and printed words bound together but I cannot read in the dark. Though there are times when it seems light, and other times it is as black as a shaft.
So I stay here crouched in the dark, inhaling. Come to me darling, I say. Absorb my body into your velvet embraces. I want the darkness to seduce me, those others do not understand the subtle flutterings we women require. All the time plunging their desires into our opulent waters, the heart of all and the eternal biblical thing, the orchid, the lotus, the soft mango, the piece that is me. That is when I need water, sweet water, and I pour it on myself in a baptism. My hand gets wet and slippery. I can choose to cry and wipe my eyes with the coloured shiny pages of the printed Nati Geo, a kind thought here in my hour of need. Or I can dream, there are plenty of hours for that.

In my first dream, the city is crumbling and prostitution is a way of life. In the old part of the city it is dangerous, but you can hide there. There are lakes and rivers of sewage and hills of rubbish where you can hide because the rest of the population are scared of infection.

There are gangs of destitute women squatting in the old municipal buildings. I become something of a mouthpiece for them. I know how to make trouble. Sometimes the police run a raid, and if they catch you then you will be sent to the brothels for sure. Men rent apartments in the old district and keep love slaves there and women are used in back street entertainments the way cock fighting was once popular. In the dream I am planning to leave the old district, I see myself hiding in the rubbish with my suitcase. But fear permeates the dream and I wake sweating in my cupboard. The darkness eats me up and I hope I will sweat away completely until all that is left of me is just one teardrop of perspiration.

In the next dream I am a gem, a ruby, emanating my rich red rays out into the world. I am very beautiful, I have been cut and polished, and now I am lying in
the sand at the edge of a sea and the tide is creeping up, like ink seeping into a blotter. I can’t fight it. At the last moment fear leaps up through the wet sand and swallows me whole. I am in the murk and struggling. I put my arms up to save myself, and when I wake this time my fur coat smells and my hands are curled into tight arthritic fists. I am damp, I think I have wet myself.

In the third dream there is a young woman, far younger than myself, walking through the trees. It is the end of winter, and as she walks the pale sunlight falls under the trees in staccato flashes across her face. She raises her head, and in that instant her eyes are illuminated, and I look into their depths and my heart sings a chord. Suddenly I know who she is. When I was only a wee thing my grandma talked about the women who roamed the countryside dispensing help after the first big ‘accident’. In those bad times the Government was desperate to prove its sincerity and they agreed to subsidise these women. They were called ‘Eyes’ because they could see more than the rest of us, they could see into the soul if they chose. And here’s one of them in my dream, I can hardly believe my luck, because I have been plumbing these worm holes in the multiverse for what seemed like eons. I hold out my arms to her.

‘Take me,’ I say. ‘Take me with you, take me...’

I am a shameless woman, snotting and dribbling and pleading with her. Telepathic? Yes, I believe the Eyes were. But prophetic? If they had been then surely they would have run, burrowing into the earth, when they saw the things that were to happen. Sodom and Gomorrah had nothing on us, and anyway all the Bibles were used for loo paper years ago.
Lunde is up off the ground super fast before she is sucked into the multiverse. She scrambles off the damp leaves, slips, lands on her backside and laughs at her own panic. Laughing with her heart beating and fluttering against her ribs she lies back down for a minute, massaging her chest, breathing deeply and thinking what a fool she was. She should have broken contact with this elderly woman the first time. Now it is becoming upsetting. Lunde knows there is a danger of her travelling telepathically and being pulled and caught into another timeverse. It is obvious the woman wants to get out of her own time frame, which seems to be in the future. But Lunde doesn’t think that whole matter, such as a body, could travel through the time worms and reform in another place. Lunde travels in her head, it is easy, she can go anywhere.

Once she found a kidnapped child, another time she detected several dead bodies that had been hidden, and occasionally she has even spoken to those who have departed this life. But when she comes back into herself, she always feels icy, debilitated. Her body is like that now, and she is astonished to discover that the sun is setting and a whole day has sped by without her. She hauls her aching bones back to the hut.

The next dawn is a little warmer, spring will be early this year. Lunde folds her blankets corner to corner. As she moves around the hut she can hear her red boots squeaking and she wishes she had beeswax to rub into them. She dresses, layering one piece of clothing over another until she is wearing every single item. She thinks she could make it to the boat by midday and be out on the lake soon after. She hates sleeping in the windowless hut, she would rather be lying in the bottom of the boat under the stars.
She is inside the dark church building before anyone else. In the dim light she can see the ants marching back and forth along their two-lane highway in the cupboard. Out of her pocket she takes a small muslin bag full of black peppers. They are so useful she would never be without them but these people have never heard of them. The ants dislike black pepper and they will leave any building where it has been crushed along their trail. Lunde uses a pestle from the kitchen to grind the peppers, and scatters the silty grains along the skirting and all the way to the room with the bath. She can hear the Mayor climbing the hollow wooden steps, he is wearing clogs and his heavy felt hat.

‘Have you spoken to them ants?’ he asks.

‘Do you know anything about ants?’ Lunde asks. ‘There are thousands of different species. They can live anywhere, in any climate. Even the series of accidents that have affected the Earth recently have left little impression on the ants. But of all creatures, the ant is the most similar to the human. They live in communities the way we do, and they build nests, breed young, farm other insects, and even enslave their own kind.’ The Mayor’s eyes are like hard black olives.

‘That’s nowt interesting unless you’ve got rid of ‘em.’

‘I’ve laid black pepper on their trail, they don’t like it. Keep all your food in bowls of water and they’ll be gone in three days.’ She pauses. ‘Just remember, it only takes one queen. I am leaving this morning. I need an early start, I can feel other people are waiting for me.’

‘Aren’t you staying until they are all gone?’ The Mayor is agitated. ‘What kind of an Eye are you?’
Lunde looks at her feet, she shifts her weight, hoping he will overcome his attack of fear. Frightened little lumpy man, scared of ants and disliking their sticky black bodies in his clean white porcelain tub.

‘I’ll be writing a report on this matter to the Gubberment.’ He is very angry. ‘I will be putting a stop to this. Young women allowed to roam wherever they like, unescorted, contributing nothing to our community and wasting our time, our food, and our hospitality.’ Lunde sighs. The Mayor hears her and whispers close to her face, ‘Women should be seen and not...’

Before he hits the last word she raises her eyes, amazing deep blue eyes, deep as a caldera, and she looks right into the Mayor. Immediately she can see the tumours, the cells are there doubling and taking over the whole body. But this isn’t a thing she can fix. He knows she can see something.

‘Stop it!’ he cries.

A group of women entering through the main door collect in a huddle. The Mayor sees them and pulls his felt coat closer around his body.

‘I shall ask Mr Biddle to accompany you back to the lake.’ He clatters off in his wooden clogs.

‘You bin mend those ants?’ asks one of the women.

‘Gone in three days,’ says Lunde. She holds up three fingers. She has noticed that the woman cannot read, cannot write, and can probably only count up to the number of plates set out on the breakfast table. One of the older ladies gives her a packet of food.

‘In this here I bin put seed cake.’ She speaks in an undertone. ‘It right good for you but don’t let tharn Mr Biddle know.’ Lunde smiles.

‘Biddle likes seed cake?’
‘Yais,’ says the old lady. ‘He’ll do anythin’ for that tharn seed cake and I should know. I’m Mrs Biddle and I thank thee for comin’ to us.’ Lunde shakes her hand.

The Mayor insists Lunde is escorted by Mr Biddle the entire route back to the lake. Lunde stays behind him, allowing him to lead. The tips of her fingers are numb. Every now and then the heavy seed cake in her jacket pocket bangs against her thigh as she walks. She can’t wait to reach the boat, and in a relaxed state she makes the mistake of opening up her mind.

Lordy, I am in her again. I can feel it. Or she is in me. I never thought I would be with her again. That last time she brushed me off really fast. But here we are together again, me like a worm wriggling into her brain. And I’ve had time to sort it out, and now I know the components that will enable me to hitch a ride in her. My plan is to offer all of my services. What do you think? She’ll never get rid of me.

Gord, I feel like vomiting with all this light on my face. Right this moment we are walking along a track, this time she’s awake, she hasn’t blacked out so I must be getting better. I’ve just slipped in like an eel. I can see the trees, breathe fresh air, it’s hurting my eyes.

And yet here I am at the same time back in my cupboard, the stench strong in my nostrils. She is taking a turning. Whoa! Here’s a man we’re following, a tiny little runty type, I’d have his balls for breakfast. Every now and then he stops and turns, and stares at her. What a little rat, can’t she see the way he’s staring at her? He wants something, the little pint-sized, antediluvian primate. Let me out, I’ll knock him into next week for her.
Meanwhile she is still preoccupied, and so I turn, turn ever so slightly in her mind. But she feels me! Ouch! She stings me. Darling, it’s only me, your dear old friend from the cupboard. You know me, I’m your friend and I’m all yours, I’m on your side. Ouch! Stop it! I keep talking smoothly, ouch. It’s me, you bitch. This is me and I’m old, I’m elderly and you’ve got no right. That’s better, a better tack. Now she’s calming down, responding. And so I turn around, stretch myself, wiggle my toes a little. It’s just old me, I tell her, and she sucks air into her cheeks and makes a noise like ‘sss’ and clicks her tongue, she’s a better old lady than I am. We have reached the edge of the lake. I can feel her, see into all her cells, the workings of her mind, it is totally brilliant. I feel drunk on my success. She has a boat but she hid it, and she doesn’t want Mr Twiddle Legs to find out.

We have stopped. He is finally asking her for something, the thing he wants. He pushes her and says he ‘wants the cakje in her pocket.’ He is going nasty, very nasty indeed, and I cannot stand by and tolerate his actions to my beautiful blue-eyed girl. She has saved me, and I just know she won’t send me back this time.

Together we wrestle Mr Biddle Twiddledum Legs down onto the ground. Her hand moves to her pocket and it is as if it is my hand too, it is incredible. She and I have merged together in some brilliant piece of time travel. Our joint hand moves, skiddering now across her clothes like a crab, pulls out a packet, and together we tear off the wrapper and we bend over Mr Biddle. We have him now, we are straddled across his chest with a leg on either side of his wee yam-shaped body, we’ve got him in a pincer hold. And we squash the cakje in his mouth, rub it in his face like the big school yard bully we have become. And then
we let him go, he runs back off along the track, sobbing and eating cake at the same time.

*Go! Go!* I shout in her/our head, and we fly. She has hidden the boat under low bushes near a shallow part of the lake, a good place to push off. I seize an oar and she another, and we are both rowing, both putting everything into it at the same time. It is late afternoon. We row out to the middle of the lake and I am high on it all - the air, the sunlight, the water, it is all a person needs to stay sane. I have been without it for so long, gord, it’s orgasmic.

I like the way she hasn’t asked me who I am or anything twee like that. I am waiting for her to say I can stay. I’ll pretend that I think it’s impossible for me to hitchhike back to where I came from. When she agrees then I will tell her my stories, the old history stories: male, female. I admire her red boots, they remind me of a pair of shoes I owned before they locked me up. Detained permanently for inciting riots amongst the women. My big mouth.

The sun starts to set. We put down the oars and let the boat rock back and forth on the water. It is that moment at sunset when everything goes quiet, I am glad to discover that the earth still has its old ways. The sky is daubed with colour as if someone had dipped their hand in paint and rubbed their fingers across its great canvas. A flock of birds wheel past screaming, change on a wing sharply to the right, and continue on their path. We stay sitting in the lilting boat and the sun sinks, the earth darkens and the sky does its trick and transforms itself into a dark purple cover like a teacosy over our heads. I turn inside her.

We can dissolve into a new chemical solution. We will be richer I know, I feel it now. I think she has accepted me. As if in agreement she places my/her left hand gently on my/her right. I am a seed inside her soft, moist brain. We will grow
together. We will merge into each other, and finally no one will be able to tell us apart. And together, I think it is a chance to change our history, her future and my past.
Jane doesn’t know what the ‘golden triangle’ means. The advertisement is to share a two-story terrace ‘with your own bathroom’ in the ‘golden triangle’ area of Sydney. Jane always thought that was something to do with triads. She arranges to meet Fenella, the author of the advertisement offering the room, explaining she is a doctoral student in her second year. It turns out ‘golden triangle’ refers to a particular area between the university, Newtown and Surry Hills.

Fenella Baskerville is older than Jane, is short, and has thick blonde-blonde (dyed) shoulder-length hair and freckles. Her eyes are blue and she has a soft, even voice, and often touches her hair as she speaks. She is dressed in gym clothes. Fenella’s dog is small and hairy.

She leads Jane upstairs to examine the room, which is painted what could be described as Hare Krishna-pink. She explains it wasn’t her choice, she rents the house and is seeking a housemate to offset costs. The dog comes upstairs to look at the room too. What Fenella sees is a younger woman, maybe early forties and rather plain, bespectacled, a little weighty. Seems intelligent. She needs someone immediately and decides she’ll do. Jane looks clean, and she has a scholarship so she should be reliable with the rent.

Jane says all right, and they shake hands on a verbal contract, no more, no less. Fenella agrees to no bond. What a godsend, Jane moves in that week as she has been rather desperate to find somewhere, and soon she has ensconced herself in the Krishna-pink bedroom on a rectangular foam squab on the floor. Her last rental was
furnished, and the bed there was part of the deal. Here, she works on her doctorate sitting on the foam mattress on the floor, more often than not in her pyjamas, and with a glazed expression on her face as she passes in and out of the trance-like stupor long-term doctoral research can induce.

It is Jane’s second year of the three-year doctorate and two months ago she began having dreams in which she was already finished. The weight of the amount of work she has yet to do pulls on her body as she walks, a little stooped, head lost in thought. Jane likes to joke: who needs friends when they have a doctorate. It is an anchor that she drags behind her as she walks from the house to the railway station, to the café, to the fruit shop and everywhere all around and about the golden triangle.

floor rug

At first, the two women share a few movie evenings together. They watch some of Fenella’s favourite movies on DVD. The lounge is painted minimalist white with a fireplace at one end. On the mantel there is a small statuette of Romulus and Remus. Fenella loves Italy and has visited there many times, at first attending a cooking school in Tuscany, and later using Rome as a base while she explored the rest of the country. She speaks some Italian and can pronounce Italian words like biscotti, or the more challenging fusilli lunghi.

Jane doesn’t find the lounge so very comfortable. It has a large white sofa that must be kept clean. The dog isn’t allowed on the sofa or armchairs. Jane is scared she will spill her Coke on something white. There is also an enormous Greek white woolen rug that gets vacuumed almost every day. Fenella likes to keep fresh white flowers in an oversized square glass vase that sits on a side table against the wall.
The movie evenings are fun. Fenella makes little Italian snacks and they drink a cheap foreign beer that they found at the local liquor warehouse. They discuss Italy, and Fenella tells some terrific stories about her adventures in Rome and further afield. Then, just as they are beginning to warm to each other, Jane drops a bowl of ice-cream topped with triple chocolate sauce on the Greek floor rug. It has to be scrubbed and laid out to dry on the back lawn. When it is brought back in, there is still a faint brown mark. The atmosphere begins to tilt in another direction. Fenella starts to go out in the evenings with her best friend Agatha, and Jane spends more time in her own room.

découpage

We all need our daily routines and Jane is no exception. She wakes herself early with a small digital alarm. If she moves downstairs like a panther at about six thirty, she can make a cup of tea before Fenella gets up and while the dog is still in Fenella’s room.

She has no money after rent and so she has no desk. The rental of the pink room sucks up everything but Jane said yes yes yes because it’s time-consuming and soul-destroying seeking rental property in Sydney. So many people want to live there whether it’s the golden triangle or not. Besides, they shook hands on no bond so that made Fenella’s place the best option by a long shot.

Jane has no heater so she compensates with using a hot-water bottle positioned in the small of her back. She has told Fenella: if you want to save on heating, this is the best thing to do, a hot-water bottle in the small of the back. But Fenella doesn’t need a hot-water bottle because she has a large electric heater in her bedroom, and for the summer she has an aircon unit.
After she has carried the tea back to her room, Jane sits on the foam mattress with the hot-water bottle placed in the correct position. She likes to work on a rectangular wooden tray. It is one of those old cafeteria things, similar to the trays that were once used in the Coles cafeterias. Someone has stuck pictures on this one. A faded transfer of a girl wearing Edwardian petticoats and a dress. On her head is a little maroon pillbox hat and in her hand she holds a leash that is attached to a King Charles spaniel. Every day, Jane wonders if she should give them both names, and every day she refrains. That’s good. That’s better. She must refrain from bestowing nomenclature on the découpage. Good, better, best.

**moustache**

After writing most of the morning, Jane might finally get dressed and take a walk to the Chinese fruiterer on Botany Road. There she can purchase a bag of carrots for two dollars or a piece of pumpkin. Walking is free and so Jane walks and walks for however long she likes until, finally, she turns around and walks back to the house, sometimes arriving home at dusk. On one morning of each week she frequents a café near the railway station where she orders a cappuccino which she manages to sit on for an hour while she reads the free glossy magazines.

She knows a cappuccino is considered an untrendy, frou-frou kind of drink these days, its popularity exceeded some time back by the ‘flat white’, but when Jane was a teenager she used to sneak into the city on the train with her best friend, Jade Wishart, both of them in their mini-skirts, and they’d drink coffees in a café run by Greeks, situated near the Town Hall railway station. It was decorated inside with quasi-Ancient Greek murals and the waiters liked to pinch the bums of Jade and Jane, and to press themselves against the young ladies as they directed them to a table for two.
Without exception, they always ordered cappuccinos. And the thick white froth would attach itself to their upper lips and make them look as if they had grown luxuriant white moustaches.

_human anthropology_

Jane stays in her room and watches the sky as it becomes bluer and bluer. The Australian sky is a blue like no other, an intense, rich cerulean heaven that you can dive into. A row of pigeons sit on the powerlines every morning. It is the same gang every day, bickering and gossiping. From her window she can see the backyards of other, neighbouring properties. She can see her old Holden station wagon parked inside the gates at the back and Fenella’s dog sniffing around the rubbish bins, and she can see the little side lane that she walks down when she goes to Botany Rd or to the railway station.

A number of Jane’s acquaintances think it is some kind of joke that she is researching women hitchhikers for her doctorate. She has interviewed women who _have_ hitchhiked, and also women who have _never_ hitchhiked. In her interviews she has asked women how they define hitching, and has been surprised by the replies of what it means to these women.

One regarded it as a kind of religion and believed that when she was hitchhiking she was close to being in ‘a God-like state’ and that it held a life force of ‘cosmic energy’ that she ‘allowed’ to take her wherever it went. It was the element of chance that she loved, defining it as a ‘meditative transformative journey of the soul’, and declaring the journey to be more important than the destination. Finally, when comparing the rhythm of the trip to the ‘journey’ of our own lives she went as far as to say that the end of the trip was like the end of our own life: a kind of death.
In her youth, Jane hitched lifts across large expanses of Australia, generally accompanied by other hikers, and occasionally by herself. She hitchhiked because she had no car. Hitchhiking meant she could still be mobile even if it was sometimes risky. Nowadays, if she drives past a hiker she experiences a twinge of recognition. For her thesis, she is interested in the placement and movement of women’s bodies in public places, and in the landscape of what women see, what they absorb, and what they imagine and might dream.

Jane remembers the way you have to ‘sell yourself’ to the oncoming cars. Motorists prefer to see the faces of the people they may be considering picking up, so the art of walking backwards can come in handy. All the interviewees agreed that there was something wonderful about being out on the open road. The body pricked up its ears and opened it pores. Jane thought the feeling the women described could be attributed to being in all that space, or even to movement versus the static quality of ordinary life. One woman said it felt as if you were plugging into something old and intuitive that reached back into human anthropology.

*chippy boo-boo*

Fenella’s dog is called Mr Chips. Jane is ready to leave it at just that, she doesn’t like dogs, and she isn’t about to start. She doesn’t know what kind of dog he is, she has had little to do with dogs. She can see he is an older kind of a dog, and his coat is the colour of a stale biscuit. He barks a lot. He barks at Jane.

Fenella says she hopes that Jane and Mr Chips will bond. Jane has her doubts. When Fenella is at work Mr Chips lies outside in his doghouse. If Jane ventures into the backyard to hang her wet clothes on the washing line, he stares at her from under his long silky fringe, no doubt imagining which part of her would be best to bite.
Fenella speaks to him in goo-goo talk: *Hello diddles, chippy boo-boo, come here*, and so on and so forth.

**please obey**

There is a woman who lives two doors down. In her backyard she says loudly, *no, no, no, no, just don’t*, to her baby. This is how she speaks to her baby all the time, in best foghorn projection. *No, I said, no, no, no, no, Don’t, don’t, no, no.* If Jane has her window open, she is forced to listen. She holds her breath, waiting, and praying that the baby will obey the mother. Everyday the mother speaks to her baby thus, and so Jane thinks that she knows what the baby’s first words will be.

**floorplan**

In Jane’s room there is still no furniture but on the floor there are piles of paper and notes that are more important than furniture. Four mounds along one wall and to the left-hand side of the bed, are all to do with the pages Jane is presently working on for her thesis. Under the window are two more constuctions of marked newspapers, many books, more notes, and a green file box jammed with old notes and previous drafts. Jane keeps everything in order by making these piles across the floor. It is a kind of floorplan that she feels she can overview at any time.

A day’s work will commence with Jane re-organising these mountains. As she shuffles the papers around, she sees the floor as a grid pattern, and likes to fill up the grids with her bundles of information leaving minor pathways for movement between the filled squares. This sorting and filing has become ritualistic for her and if a day starts without her being able to do this, she will feel out of sorts for the next twenty-four hours.
In the area behind the closed door, the piles are smaller and related to the everyday things in her life such as bills and receipts. Next to the bed is her laptop. She writes her first drafts with pen and paper, leaning on the wooden découpage tray, and then, while still sitting in bed, she types those drafts into her computer.

Each mound of paper in the room has a stone placed on top so that when the free-standing pedestal fan is turned on the papers don’t fly everywhere. When she moved in, she brought a bucket of stones with her. And if she sees a good stone while she is out walking, she will bring it back to her room and use it in her floorplan.

The stones are grey, black, tan, white, pale green. Smooth, or acned with tiny holes over their surface, one of them shiny, another dense and extremely heavy. The stones all have their individual character. They ‘talk’ to Jane and she thinks about their different stories. She doesn’t know what materials they are composed of, she only understands their visual surfaces and the inner narratives she bestows on them.

*sweatbox*

The hot weather has begun and Jane’s room is fetid. The pedestal fan needs to be on at all times. The night before, Fenella came home late from some dinner with her friend, Agatha, and Jane heard her being sick in the upstairs bathroom. Fenella is supposed to use the downstairs bathroom. It is a bone of contention with Jane as the original deal was the use of the upstairs bathroom ‘all to herself’. This is what Jane’s rent covers. But Fenella prefers to make her face up every day in the upstairs bathroom as it has good light. She cleans her teeth in there morning and night and washes her face. Jane is sure that when she is not there, Fenella uses the toilet, the shower and the bath as well.
Even after she stuck a note to the bathroom door that stated, *private*, Fenella ignored the notice and continued with her usual routine. Jane knows she needs to discuss it but finds those confrontational things difficult. There are no locks on the doors. Instead, Jane removes the roll of toilet paper and keeps it in her room.

What she hates most of all is having to listen to Fenella clean her teeth in the upstairs bathroom. She brushes for what seems like ten minutes and then gurgles *vigorously* with a special lemon myrtle homeopathic mouthwash. She keeps the mouthwash and all her make up, and other things, in the cupboard under the sink. In her exasperation, Jane has visualized purging the cupboard and placing all Fenella’s crap in a plastic supermarket bag that she will dump in the rubbish bin.

The afternoon glare and heat is intense in Jane’s west-facing bedroom. Fenella has the enormous double-sized front bedroom that faces east, and that room has full-length French windows that open onto the front verandah and catch any breeze. She has built-in storage and a wardrobe that covers the entire length of one end of the room, and she has air-conditioning installed. In Jane’s little pig pen, the humid fug morphs the room into a sweatbox. The fan is integral. Sometimes Jane feels as if the room is closing in on her. She only opens her door after Fenella has left for work.

Sitting propped up on the mattress on the floor, she reads what she has written:

*Hitchhiking and other representations of the female body in public spaces, such as bushwalking, swimming, and walking and running for fitness, are instances of women establishing a reterritorialisation of public areas, a corporeal cartographic reinscription.*

But what about small spaces, thinks Jane. The body within a small space such as the inside of a vehicle you have hitchhiked a ride with (or the sweatbox of Jane’s own room). During her life Jane has found herself enamoured of small spaces and places
that have no room for anyone else, and her sense of belonging has been attached to these small spaces. Because of this, she loves driving in her own car. The feeling of the compact, mobile space is wonderful. She thinks that both the body of the driver and that of the passenger react to accommodate the smaller, interior area of a car.

white noise

It is still early. Jane has been awake for three hours and has drunk three cups of tea. Now she examines the contents of an envelope from the university. Her doctoral supervisor left the envelope to be picked up from the faculty secretary’s office. The supervisor is giving her work back to her, with comments. The pages are awash in red pen marks, and at the bottom of the page he has written:

*Please contact me as soon as you have read this.*

Oh no, no, and no. Jane is finding it hard to swim her way through it all: the daily life, the ordinary things. She can hear Mrs Two-Doors-Down shouting at her young child. *I told you not to touch it!* A roller door winds up in the back lane and a neighbour wheels out a rubbish bin. Underneath all of that, there is a shooshing white noise of sound that goes on and on, into eternity. It would eat Jane up if she let it. Something rips as she wriggles around in bed. She looks, and now there is a big hole in the seat of her pyjama pants.

dog hair

*You are like a little mouse,* says Fenella to Jane. *I never hear you. Come down some time at breakfast and we'll eat together.* But Jane never does. She stays in her room reading about the medieval traveller, Margery Kempe. In *The Book of Margery Kempe*, dated roughly some time in the thirteen hundreds, Margery relates the story of
how she went ‘on the road’ on pilgrimage. She had already given birth to fourteen children and been involved in running several unsuccessful businesses. Jane reads that, after a particularly painful pregnancy and labour, Margery Kempe suffered a mental breakdown where she saw ‘devils opening their mouths’ full of flame and fire, and then Christ appeared to her in her first vision. After that, she became religious. Pilgrimage offered her an opportunity, as a woman, to remove herself from her usual life of drudgery and to see the world.

When is Fenella going to leave for work, wonders Jane. She places the book open, spine facing out, so she doesn’t lose her page. Every morning at this time she finds herself wondering the same thing, although she knows that Fenella will leave around eight thirty. Fenella is fond of fitting in a few chores before she departs. She vacuum-cleans the lounge, complaining that she can see the dog hair on the rug. While she cleans, she locks Mr Chips out in the backyard where he yaps at other dogs he can hear running and skittering along the back lane.

Jane lies back on her bed. She is now reading a random article about English yew trees which has nothing whatsoever to do with her doctoral research, but she is trying to pretend that it might come in handy. There is the noise of Mr Chips barking and of Fenella banging and of the washing machine whizzing and chugging through its cycle. Finally, Fenella calls out goodbye! but Jane still hasn’t heard the front door slam behind her. Is she there or not? There are sounds of sweeping. It is eight thirty-three a.m. so she must go soon.

Click. The sound of the front door being shut is the acoustic Jane wishes to hear. Then she is out onto the landing to ‘her’ bathroom, busting to use the toilet, and downstairs to the kitchen to eat. Thick slabs of walnut-studded bread, sweet mandarins and hot noodles covered with a heavenly spicy sauce the concoction of
which is Jane’s own invention. She opens all the doors, turns on the lights, runs a deep bath and puts two loads of washing through the machine. She lets Mr Chips inside, which she isn’t supposed to do. He gives her a distrustful look although he quickly jumps on the white couch all the same.

_Theory_

Jane believes that repetitious behavior, such as Fenella’s constant cleaning of the white Greek rug, is only a way of trying to keep control. The repetitious aspect of these behaviours encourage people to consider this as a ‘normal’ way of living. Jane has built her thesis around the idea that hitchhiking is an ‘abnormal’ activity. It is not everyday, therefore it is not seen as ‘normal’. *But what if you did hitchhike every day,* Fenella asks Jane, *then it would be normal.* Grr, says Jane.

_Airbags_

Count the number of cars with just one passenger. They claim they are worried about the oil, thinks Jane, but they look pretty happy coming back from the newsagents just around the corner. They’ve popped around there in their Nissan Maximas with double airbags and a hot drink holder. Why didn’t they walk? *Strange people walking on the street. The car needed a spin. The petrol hasn’t run out yet.* So they fill their tanks to the top and drive around the corner in their twenty-foot high four-wheel drive Isuzu Bighorn that is the size of an army tank.

Fenella says, *if there were no cars there’d be no subject for your thesis, Jane.* But Jane has found a passage in the Bible where one of the apostles hitches a lift in a horse-drawn chariot. She corners Fenella and points out: it’s simply ridesharing. It’s always been around.
Jane overhears Fenella talking about her on the telephone, describing Jane as ‘like a little old woman’. Telling her friend that Jane rarely leaves her room and that she even eats up there.

‘She could be making a bloody bomb in there for all I know,’ says Fenella, and pauses, listening to her friend’s reply.

‘No, I couldn’t.’

(pause)

‘I couldn’t. She’s always in there.’

(pause)

‘Studying, I suppose. There’s no way of knowing, unless…’

(pause)

‘Oh no, do I really want to do that?’

(pause)

‘I’ll admit I know very little about her.’

Jane turns away from her listening post and creeps back upstairs. It is true that Fenella knows very little about Jane. She does not know the real reason Jane vacated her last accommodation. Jane told Fenella that the owner decided to sell, and that was true. But long before that, Jane fell out with her other flatting companions. Disliking their loud parties and nasty music, she had risen early one morning while the others were asleep and smashed all the glasses and placed the CDs in the oven on fanbake so they warped. *Vindictive and verging on the manic obsessive*, were the words one of the flatmates had used, and she had been given a date to get out.
Before she had found Fenella’s advertisement she had been living in a room in a seedy inner-city boarding house, paying a ridiculous amount week by week and living off cheese and crackers. It was later on she had heard that everyone had, in fact, lost that old apartment due to the landlady deciding to sell.

*laugh*

The next day is Saturday. Fenella puts Mr Chips outside and rattles around in the kitchen. Jane can hear her going up and down the stairs, and she is aware of the usual Saturday routine: special biometric exercises in Fenella’s bedroom with the radio turned loud. At eight a.m., Fenella’s best friend, Agatha, swings by and they walk for an hour, finishing at the local café for breakfast where they both order the muesli and a coffee.

A lot of Fenella’s conversation is about the people she works with in some sort of government department vaguely linked to education. The awful beating heart of office politics. Benjamin helps her but Anna is against her. Clive refuses to take sides. Rhys rails against everyone and never gets anywhere. Christine supports Fenella but has been ostracised for doing so. Her boss, Brigitte, is generally described as a ‘gunning slavedriver’ or an ‘utter bitch’.

When Fenella is talking to her friends she uses a ‘public’ voice and a ‘public’ laugh. This laugh goes hard *ha-ha-ha-ha* with a pinch of shrill vibration underscoring the back end. Jane has recognised something in Fenella’s laugh, something small and bleak. Something that is *white white white*, like the fizz on the television after it stops broadcasting. And she wonders if Fenella will fizz out, disappear into pixillation. Jane would have to undertake ownership of Mr Chips and move into the large bedroom.
She could walk on Saturdays with Agatha, and ring up work and explain to Brigitte that Fenella had gone AWOL. And then she would advertise for a flatmate.

rubber gloves

This particular Saturday, Jane hauls herself out of bed and attires herself in her maroon paisley dressing-gown from the Erskineville St Vincent de Paul second-hand shop, circa whatever. Fenella is in the kitchen rinsing cutlery and plates quickly under the hot water tap, which is her usual irritating method of washing the dishes. I’ll probably end up with infectious meningitis, thinks Jane. Her mother always used to warn her about meningitis in flatting situations.

‘Hello, you funny little thing,’ says Fenella.

‘I’d like to talk to you about the upstairs bathroom,’ says Jane.

‘Of course.’ Fenella is overly cheery.

‘I’d like you to stop using the bathroom that I pay for. When I moved in you said it was my bathroom as part of the deal.’

‘Oh,’ says Fenella, ‘I just make my face up in there because it has such good light.’

‘I’d rather you made up your face in your own room,’ says Jane. She crosses her arms over her chest, trying to look as if she means what she says.

‘Honestly, I’m hardly ever in there.’

Jane sighs. She’ll have to throw in her last and final card.

‘If you don’t stop using it, I’ll have to find somewhere else to live.’

‘No need for that.’ Fenella rips off her pink rubber gloves and they make a despicable sucky rubbery sound. ‘I wasn’t aware you’d got so worked up about the five minutes I occasionally spend in the upstairs bathroom but now you’ve told me,
I’ll endeavor to make a change. Of course, I’ll need to move that mirror into my room.’

‘Okay,’ says Jane.

transactions

Edwina was the fourth woman Jane interviewed. She explained she had hitchhiked for economical reasons, in order to get from Darwin to Sydney after she arrived in Australia from the U.K. On the plane she had met an American girl called Lark and they had agreed to travel together.

Edwina and Lark had got out of a car somewhere near the bus terminal in Rockhampton and had been approached by a guy in a car asking if they would like a lift. This man drove them to a lookout. When they tried to get out of the car to look at the view, he pulled a knife on them and ordered them back inside. Luckily, there was a van parked on the far side of the lookout and Edwina and Lark had run to the van, shouting, ‘Help! Help!’ The man with the knife had driven off.

The two travellers in the van were what Edwina described as ‘fruit freaks’ – they ate only fruit and macrobiotic rice. The women stayed with the fruit freaks, Jim and Lou, for two days, eating fruit and swapping road stories. The freaks were living in their van which was full of boxes of fruit. Edwina and Lark went with them when they drove back to Bowen where the fruit freaks were planning to find work picking mangoes. For a while, they picked mangoes also, but soon they were back on the road, bound for Sydney.

Edwina stated at the end of the interview that she entertained no romantic notions or political philosophies about hitchhiking. For her it had been an economic necessity, although she admitted to a sense of adventure. Hitchhiking is all about transactions,
Edwina had said. She had eventually arrived in Sydney without Lark and with only five dollars in her pocket.

_baked beans_

Jane is warming up a desultory saucepan of tinned baked beans when Fenella enters the kitchen.

‘Hello, Jane,’ she says, ‘this is my friend, Agatha.’

A woman steps out from behind Fenella and into the light. She has long brown hair that reaches right down to her backside, and a rather noble, aquiline nose. She extends her hand towards Jane. The hand is untanned, very white, and devoid of rings or any other jewelry.

‘Nice to finally meet you,’ she says. She smiles at Jane.

‘Agatha has recently moved to Vedic Rd,’ explains Fenella. ‘Over near the supermarket.’

Jane can’t shake Agatha’s hand immediately because she has gooey orange baked bean sauce on her own hand and she has to wipe it before she can shake. So, this is Agatha. Fenella mentions her regularly and talks to her on the phone several times a week.

‘Jane is originally from Lismore,’ Fenella explains to Agatha.

‘My father’s family came from Casino,’ Agatha tells Jane.

Jane tries to say something intelligent. ‘I’m just making baked beans,’ she says, hoping to make it sound more complicated, like a casserole or a roast. It could be a stew. There is an uncomfortable pause. ‘Do you still have family in Casino?’ asks Jane.

Agatha shakes her head, no. Fenella interrupts,
‘Jane is writing about hitchhiking for her thesis.’ She says it as if it’s a joke. As if
Jane is an entertainment act.

‘My mother used to hitchhike,’ says Agatha, ‘but we never knew where it was she
was hitchhiking to.’

‘Really?’ Fenella is amazed. ‘Your mother?’

The baked beans are boiling. Jane needs to attend to them. She moves the pot to the
bench to serve up her dinner.

‘Nice to meet you,’ says Agatha.
The steam from the saucepan has misted up Jane’s spectacles. She is
hungry, concentrating on the baked beans. Fenella and Agatha move into the lounge and Jane
can hear them talking in low voices and laughing.

deadlock

As the weeks go by, Jane feels herself becoming more and more exhausted, although
people tell her that this is typical when working on a doctorate. They suggest she
‘pace’ herself to prevent fatigue. Instead, Jane works all day bent over the laptop until
dinnertime. She either sits on the bed or on the floor. If Fenella isn’t home she can sit
downstairs at the kitchen table. Sometimes she is dazed, slightly incoherent, and has
trouble focusing after a certain number of hours. She feels as though someone has
whacked her over the head repeatedly. Her supervisor is demanding she rewrite
everything. Someone she knows who has finished their doctorate and is now back in
the workforce, tells her, you can overkill a topic.

Because of all this, Jane starts to spend her evenings splodged on the couch,
watching television with a kingsize bag of crisps. The television belongs to Fenella. If
she is at home, they have to watch what she chooses but she is now often working late as her office has some target deadline they need to achieve.

One weekend when Fenella is away on a team building workshop with her office colleagues, Jane binge-watches all weekend. On the Saturday night there is a police serial drama. The police work on special cases that have gone ‘cold’. This week the ‘cold’ case is the story of a female hitchhiker who was raped and then thrown over a bridge and left to die. There is a re-enactment of the original crime. Jane can’t believe the female victim even got into the car with the two men. In the re-enactment, one looks like the axe murderer of Mummulgum, the other looks like the knife grinder of Nevertire. The police in the drama have their own private problems to bear, for instance, one policeman in the unit is fed up with the boss and wants out, and another member of the unit is upset at being expected to produce results when she has no concrete facts.

The story begins to become even more complex. The victim never died, she was, in fact, rescued, and now she is planning her revenge on the two men who left her for dead. The victim has a thing for lighting fires and her revenge will feature her pyromaniac skills. *Whoosh.* The cottage of one of the men goes up in flames and it’s scary. Jane is sitting up straight on the couch and discovers she has eaten the entire bag of sea-salt and thyme-flavoured chips.

When she hears a noise outside the front door, Jane turns the lights off and stands listening. The door is a heavy, old-style wooden one with four beveled panels and a keyhole the size of Goliath. A deadlock has been attached to it further up. Frightened, Jane pushes a chair under the handle, then a coffee table against the chair. Normally, Mr Chips would bark at any unusual sound but he has been taken to the doggie
daycare while Fenella is away. Jane holds her breath and listens. A car goes past.
There are no other sounds. She keeps listening. Nothing.

appointment
In the city, when she is going through a gate at Town Hall Station, Jane sees that the Transit Police have caught someone who has no ticket. She is a young Japanese girl. The Transit officers keep asking what her name is but she sags, goes limp, and rolls her eyes. Then she collapses. The female Transit officer pulls the girl up and onto a chair. The girl is shaking her head – no, she cannot understand them. She is locked in her Nihon passive-aggressive hysteria.

‘You are going to be fined,’ they tell her. ‘We are issuing you with a fine. What is your name?’ The Japanese girl continues shaking her head. No, she cannot understand. She groans and puts her head between her legs as if she is going to be sick. As Jane walks away she can hear the female Transit officer saying, ‘We are still issuing you with a fine.’

The Transit Police used to wear brown uniforms that made them look like Italian Fascists. There were complaints and the colour was changed to blue. They like to make themselves look tough. It is rumoured they win ‘points’ for nailing people for non-purchase of tickets or bad behavior on the trains. It’s true, they keep the trains tidy. In the old days, the trains were full of drunk men vomiting and pissing in the carriages. They would ask you for money. They might ask you what you were looking at. Jane’s mother always obligingly directed Jane to look away. Then the man might take a swig out of a bottle in a brown paperbag and say, Hello darling, she’s a darling, ain’t she? Come here, darling, and tell me your name. Jesus, she’s a darling, ain’t she, cute as a bloody button, come here, I just wanna say hello. Come over here.
Jane’s mother would look at Jane and shake her head: No! It was only a slight shake but Jane knew what it meant and she would stay seated, watching the man take another swig.

‘What’s he drinking, Mum?’

‘I don’t know, dear.’

It costs too much to park in the city, so when Jane goes in there she takes the train and leaves the car behind at Fenella’s. On the advice of her supervisor she has made an appointment to see a student counselor. This is why she has come into the city. It is extremely hot. After witnessing the scene with the Japanese girl at the station, she begins to feel bad. At the university she heads for the toilets where she dry retches. Afterwards, she goes to the library because it’s always well air-conditioned. She finds a place to lie down in the stacks, falls asleep, and misses her appointment.

tsunami

When Jane reaches home, she staggers up to her room and shuts the door. The first thing she notices is that her floorplan has been tampered with. She is used to looking at her ‘grid’ every day and can see that the stones on most piles have been subtly moved. Someone has been looking through the piles. Snooping. There is only one person who could do that.

Jane runs downstairs. Fenella is standing at the sink wearing a stupid pink apron shaped like a heart. Mr Chips is watching her as she chops up a hunk of meat. They simultaneously turn and stare when Jane enters the kitchen. The radio is playing a catchy tune from the 1930s, lots of brass and a load of nostalgic lyrics.

‘Someone has been in my room,’ says Jane.

‘What?’ asks Fenella.
‘Who has been in my room going through my floorplan?’

‘Your what?’

‘My piles of work. I keep them in a special order. I’ve made a grid pattern using each different pile, ranging from very important to could possibly use. I go through this every day so I know if it’s been touched by anyone else. Have you been in my room?’

‘Of course not. I haven’t touched anything.’ But she won’t look Jane in the eye.

‘Who else would go into my room!’ Jane shouts.

She moves forward across the room and Mr Chips begins to bark.

‘Chippy! He thinks you’re going to attack me!’ Fenella opens the back door and commands the dog to go outside. ‘Where have you been, Jane? You look sick. A woman rang for you. She said you missed your appointment and she left a phone number.’ She lays down the meat cleaver on the chopping board.

‘You’ve been going through my stuff,’ says Jane. Her voice is thin and angry.

‘I haven’t touched anything in your little room,’ Fenella insists in a low, even voice that sounds the way lemon juice tastes.

‘I know,’ says Jane. ‘The stones can tell.’

‘Oh my god,’ says Fenella. She is backed up against the sink. Fenella thinks that Jane seems to have grown taller, scarier.

‘Don’t you dare touch my stuff!’ says Jane. She takes a brief look around the kitchen. Fenella’s wine glass sits on the bench, half full. The meat she is cutting up is beef. A bunch of limp coriander lies to the side. Jane feels all-powerful, she can see everything, she knows. The floorplan gives her the power to assess a situation in two seconds. She has made her point. She takes a second look at the meat cleaver. Fenella watches Jane and then says,
‘I’d rather you didn’t speak to me like that.’

‘I can tell,’ says Jane again. ‘I know what you’re doing.’ She turns, leaves the kitchen, and goes to her room where stands by the window, panting slightly.

cramps

Her stomach pinches, the cramps come and go in great undulating waves. What did she say? She can’t remember. It’s a rush, a rush of white noise. She picks up a stone. This is the white one. It’s shaped like a large jelly-bean and it fits into her hand perfectly. It is white with faint, pale grey marks. Its story? Something to do with the sea, with water. Jane rubs it between her hands as she collapses to the floor. Her body feels distant, distorted. She rolls her forehead against the smooth white stone. Deliciously cold.

*Her left leg sticking out. Her right leg folded. Left pulling up as she leans forward, onto her knees. Crouching. Over the floorplan. A thumb balance. The muscles across her jawbone moving. A degree of caution is required. Left hand to mouth. Water. Tongue pushing the. Water. Swallowing, a lot of swallowing. Her stomach cramping. She curls into a foetus-like position, as she rocks rhythmically back and forth, humming in small comforting hums.*

white stone story

*I was birthed out of the ocean, bald and white, a little heavier than most. At first, I lay on the shore doing nothing except gazing at the sky. After studying the sky in every kind of weather, I now know its intricacies, every single fold and crevice. Yes, I have deduced that the sky is really a large cloth that billows out around us, sometimes*
pulled taut, and occasionally folded back on itself in a devious manner. I have witnessed all the guises of the sky.

Being a stone, I know about weather. Most stones are bald, unless we have moss or lichen growing on us, and so we have had to develop a sturdy outer layer to accommodate changes in weather. And the sky and the weather are the source of these changes. They go hand in hand in producing the bad storms, rain, hail, sleet, the wind, the drops in temperature. Let me tell you, the sky and the weather collude in this outrageous behavior. I saw it all from where I lay on the shore.

But what do I care? I am only a stone. Nothing more, nothing less. The colder it becomes, the less I feel. After she picked me up off the beach Jane took me home, and now I live in her room. She likes the way my shape fits into her hand. For some time now I have been sitting atop a high pile of paper marked ‘contextualisation’. But what is this to me? Nothing. I am only a stone, and I cannot even pronounce this word.

sheep versus goats

Jane is of the opinion that hitchhiking separates the sheep from the goats. There are people who claim to have hitchhiked but when questioned they admit they did it only once. What’s that about? Maybe they just wanted to be interviewed?

Jane had interviewed Ivona, an older woman who said she’d found hitchhiking ‘empowering and addictive’. When Ivona was a university student she had hitched everywhere. Now she works full time as the director of an art gallery and drives her own car to work every day from Summer Hill, where she has purchased a Federation-style house.

Ivona said that hitchhiking had made her feel ‘open to the universe’, and she was sure that if you ‘cast in your lot with the universe’, flowing with it and not fighting it,
then you would be looked after. It was the middle-aged businessmen who picked her up, who had always wanted to confide, said Ivona. She had felt neutral, not really existing in their world, like an empty conduit that they filled with their narratives and conjectures.

Sometimes she had assumed different personas when setting off to hitch. The personas acted as a shield around her and enabled her to be more forthright and vivacious than normal. Ivona had met a lonely surgeon who was waiting for his family to come out from America and join him. After he gave her a lift they had met on dates and she had slept with him. Her feeling was that hitchhiking carried a lot of sexual fantasies for people. The possibility of danger gave her an adrenalin rush.

These days, she enjoyed long-distance cycling, and when she drove along the highway in her small Japanese car, she refused to pick up any hikers.

Interviewing women for the thesis had been a strange job. Some of the ones who wouldn’t say much at first eventually became overly garrulous, confessing bizarre facts and figures. Jane preferred it when they told her something useful and small, a soundbite anyone could easily absorb. Jane had a sympathetic demeanor. The confessional side of an interview could transform itself into an unburdening. She often found herself at the receiving end of a download. She let them say whatever they wished, at the end of the day she had it all on tape.

manifesto

The outline of Jane’s window is bone white in the peaty dark of the night. It is about three in the morning. Jane lies on the bed, still dressed. The dark is blank. She attempts to move her arms away from her sides but can’t, the fear is pervasive,
seeping into her thoughts like black into blotting paper, a roaring white noise fills up her ears.

Don’t let her bother you. If she complains about the dirty dishes again, ignore it. If she yells out from the kitchen, pretend you can’t hear. White confetti and sparkles. She remembers this being thrown outside the registry office after a friend was married. It covered the pavement. Could you wipe out the washing machine after you use it? Wipe it out with disinfectant. As if she has germs.

For a minute, the bride and groom were blanketed in it as if they were deep inside a snowstorm. And afterwards, it lay so thick on the ground, Jane could trace patterns with the point of her shoe. She made a circle with a spiral in the centre. Don’t let her bother you. Breathe deeply. Don’t let her upset you when she brings up the phone bill and knocks on the door. Are you in there, Jane?

The fear breaks in waves across her body, making her want to open the window, fling the door wide, run out into the street, screaming. She has been trying to write a new chapter. Instead, she has written about Fenella:

Who is Fenella after all? Merely a mouth on two legs. But a big mouth, I admit. Masquerading as someone who wants to help me, I think she would rather hinder me. Her stupid white lounge with her stupid white rug and her even more stupid white sofa.

Jane remembers dabbing at the chocolate sauce, full of contrition. The shame, the embarrassment. The tedious washing and scrubbing of the rug which, when it was wet, weighed the weight of ten thousand apologies. It took days to totally dry out. There was still a faint brown stain.

Who is Fenella after all? She is nothing but a big hairy rug. Proposing propositions that never materialise. She is a snoop. Sneaking around my floorplan, touching it,
sniffing it, inhaling it, manipulating meaning out of my own private privatisations that I do in my own room. Jane stabs the point of her pen into the white page. Don’t tell me what to do, bitch! I’ll tell you what I think, instead! And you will listen!

goats

Jane is at her window. She often stands here meditating on the life outside. She can see half of the backyard of Mrs Two Doors Down where she has dropped the spade she is using to dig with. No! she says. Her baby has eaten dirt. No, no, no, no, no. She is disgusted. The dirt is caked around the baby’s mouth. She slaps the baby hard. I told you not to do it! The baby doesn’t know. It thinks dirt looks interesting: crumbly and food-similar. For good measure Mrs Two Doors Down slaps her baby again. It begins to cry and cry and cry. The wailing gets into Jane’s marrow, it sends shivers up her spine, hitting every nerve ending with the strength of a cymbal crash.

Mrs Two Doors Down has gone inside and left her baby to cry itself into oblivion in the backyard. Jane knows what Mrs does because she has seen her. She shuts the front door and goes to sit on the front verandah where she smokes, as if there is nothing wrong. The blossoms are falling off the tree directly outside the window. It is too hot for them. They are wilting quickly. Jane doesn’t know what kind of tree it is, only that it has a peculiar smell.

crab claws

Jane leaves her bedroom and goes to the kitchen. Fenella has left a note on the sink bench: Jane. I think we need to talk. Fenella. The note has been written at the bottom of the new phone bill. Blue paper. A black pen. Printing, not running writing. Jane attempts to wring more information out of this small piece of communication.
Fenella has gone out to dinner. Most Friday and Saturday nights she does this. She has left her diary on the phone table. Jane knows it is her diary because it has My Diary written on the front. It is a black leatherette number.

Jane walks past it several times without touching it. She watches a comedy show on television and drinks four of her own beers. Ha, ha, the comedy show is really funny! She is about to turn off the lights and go to bed, when she finds herself casually opening the diary. The most recent entry reads: *Ring Agatha and confirm for Luigi’s for dinner Saturday*, and then she reads what has been written before that: *My housemate has turned into a Big Fat Downer. When she came home the other night she was accusatory and shouting so loud she made Mr Chips bark. She had a Very Nasty Tone. Agatha suggests I ask her to leave. My stars online said ‘relax and feel safe and secure’. Seems they got it Bloody Totally Wrong.*

Jane flicks back further: *My housemate burrows in her room like a Bloody Wombat. The T.V. is on all the time when I come home and the house stinks of her Strange Food. I have been tolerant. But I deserve better than this. Some friends advise me to get her Out Now. But she pays the rent, she pays the rent, she pays the Bloody Rent.*

Jane can’t read any more. A pair of cold hands have crept up her body like crab’s claws and are closing around her throat. There were the early pre-rug-incident days when they had got on better. She can still remember the night they stayed up late watching a video (of Fenella’s choice), and she had thought they were connecting. But now Jane feels as if she has been poisoned by a gas, subtly seeping into the atmosphere under the door of her room.

She takes one of Fenella’s fancy beers from the fridge and drinks it. Returning to her room, she begins to dismantle the floorplan. The stones go back in the bucket. The different piles of notes and research go into some empty cardboard boxes from the
supermarket. The boxes smell of groceries such as clothes washing powder, and dry pasta, and have brand names painted on the outside: *DELTA for the Best Wash*, *Mud Brick Wines*, and *Triple King Noodles*.

Rolling clothes instead of folding gets more into Jane’s suitcase. Soon the bedroom is almost empty. In the kitchen, she opens the door of the cupboard Fenella originally indicated she must use, the one next to the shelf under the sink where the cleaning fluids are kept. It was never very nice having her food standing next to the poisonous fumes of Jif and Handy Andy.

The back of the car is full. She stands drinking another of Fenella’s beers while she leans against the sink bench. She knows what she wants to do before she leaves. She slaps the house keys down on the kitchen table. Fenella keeps a black cigarette lighter next to the stove in order to light the gas. Jane takes the diary out onto the back lawn. Mr Chips is in her way and she pushes him with her foot, bends down, and quickly lights a page of the open diary. *Whoosh*. It goes up and burns quickly. When it’s over she lets the cinders get cold and then sweeps them into the dustpan. She sprints up the stairs and into her flatmate’s bedroom. Like her minimalist lounge, Fenella’s bed is another shrine, this one dedicated to white linen, with about six dove-grey cushions arranged artistically against the crisp pillows. Jane pulls back the duvet and dumps the cinders in the centre of the bed. After that she tidies the duvet and straightens the pillows and cushions.

*stentorian*

She leaves no excuses, no little notes of explanation, no forwarding address and no payment for the bills. After opening the back gates, she revs the engine of the station wagon and steers out. Through the back lanes and down past the school. It’s late so
there’s hardly any traffic. The rain starts, the humidity might break. The sum of all parts. She has read that human bodies contain fifty-five to seventy-five percent water.

Passing the service station, she sees a young girl with her thumb stuck out, it’s like a quick snapshot as she drives past. Driving on, Jane wonders why the girl was hitching so late. The more she thinks about it, the more she realises it’s a transparency of her younger self, there on the edge of the highway. On the edge of some adventure, good or not so good. She has to keep driving until she can find an off-ramp and then she turns around and makes her way back to the station. When she gets there it’s locked and the lights are out. She looks and looks but the girl has disappeared.

Jane thinks about Fenella’s face when she gets home. How long will it take for her to realise Jane has gone? Maybe she’ll leave another one of her little notes on the kitchen bench: *Jane! We need to talk. You still haven’t paid the phone bill.* Then she’ll climb into bed and *surprise!* Jane laughs. She hasn’t laughed like this for a long time: overdue giant-sized guffaws that fill the car up to its roof. Into her head comes some ancient folksie piece they used to chortle in the school choir. How many years ago? Eons. And as she drives she sings her own version, a little tuneless but extremely stentorian:

*Go tell it on the mountain*

*Tell it to Agatha and everywhere*

*Go tell it on the mountain*

*The phone bill never got paid!*
Chapter i

I was walking across the basement car park when it began. I had been putting my rubbish in the rubbish room - there is one bin for paper recycling, one for bottles, plastics and tins and another for ‘soft’ rubbish. Someone had put a notice on the board near the front door saying they wanted to start a compost bin but no one had written their name down.

I would have liked to, but I felt too scared to put my name up there. You could be ostracised by the Governing Committee of the building for doing something like that. Anything a little too forward that they don’t approve of, and who knows what might happen next? And anyway, who really cares where the rubbish is going? It’s frowned upon to comment too loudly about such topics, let alone put up a notice.

It all began when I was walking across the basement carpark. There was a strange feeling in the air. Earlier in the week there had been news reports involving beached whales and in the half hour before it happened it became very quiet, no dogs barking, no bird noise. When I grew up down south in Godwand, we referred to a still atmosphere like that as ‘earthquake weather’, it was the sort of feeling in the air that heralded earth tremors. Sometimes stuff fell off the mantelpiece, or a fragile hairline crack would appear in the plaster.

They were the days before we had any Governing Committees. Now every apartment block has one. They post the rules up on the board near the front door but they also post them in your letterbox so you have no excuse for not having read them. The rules are reviewed week by week. New ones are added and old ones deleted.
Rules like *No Washing Machines to be Used after 8 p.m.*, or *No Dogs in the Lifts except Seeing Eye*. There are other ones that are less specific and more general:

*Please address your Neighbours in a Generous Manner* or the ubiquitous *Look before you Leap*. Then there’s my favourite: *Room 506, ext. 21 for Neighbour Recommendations*: in other words, we are encouraged to spy on each other.

**Chapter ii**

I try to keep my head above the ‘recommendation’ radar zone. They got me only once, but they still got me. Somebody made a complaint about the way I brought in only my own newspaper every morning. Apparently, I should have made an effort to carry in the other delivered newspapers, but I left them outside in the rain. I don’t know who dobbed me in. I keep my curtains closed most of the time and any friends who come to stay with me have explicit instructions about how to behave in the public areas of the block.

Arnold makes small poetry books which he sells in the street over in the Arts Quarter. He lives out of his ancient Landrover so he sometimes needs a place to park the vehicle and to sleep and take a shower. He comes to stay about once every three weeks. I suspect he has a list of people that he rotates around. He sits on the floor making new books out of old second-hand ones, which he slices up with a Stanley knife. He then pastes his poems inside, folding them into the old hardcovers in an elegant origami-esque way. Long term production of these poetry books has evolved into a template of the cheapest way possible to manufacture the item. Now Arnold can make the books with his eyes shut. And if he’s nervous he makes books, it soothes his jangled psyche.
Each book features just one poem. They are printed using Arnold’s box-set of individual alphabet stamps. He produces one original using the stamps and then photocopies all others, so each copy retains its ‘manual’ look. Each cover has a stamped title printed on the front and an ISBN number on the back, as opposed to the more modern Censor Approved Number that are required these days.

Arnold’s poems hint at a little dissatisfaction, they make some small humour of the Building Committees and the other panels and boards and departments and ministries with names such as the Department for the Examination of Securiate Archives (a so-called place to go if you are worried about security), or The Committee for People Affected by Power Outages (a so-called place that takes complaints regarding power cuts), and The Scientific Sector for New World Food (an entire zone devoted to inventing and producing ‘nutritional’ substitutes).

Arnold likes to read about these departments in my Sunday newspaper and laugh his head off. He doesn’t live in a block, he doesn’t understand how dangerous it can be to laugh like that. Please, just keep the laughing down to a low to mid-noise level, I told him. Loud, boisterous laughing will probably get me reported and I’ll end up with another point against me. Those who accrue more than ten points in one year are asked to leave. It’s not nice. I saw what happened to Peter Worth who lived down the corridor. He ignored all the building platitudes about being generous and polite to your neighbours and was reported again and again, particularly by the three elderly sisters who lived on one side of him. He used to joke about them saying, this building ain’t big enough for all of us.

The sisters launched an intensive campaign against him and succeeded in having him removed. The last time I saw him he was living in some downbeat place over in the Southern Quarter, renting a room in a block that he said was full of ‘crazy redneck
fascist smugglers’ who all worked for Farmco, the biggest farming co-operative. He didn’t look happy.

Arnold is a short man, always neatly dressed. He is balding and generally wears a hat or a beanie. He has a thick beard and a solemn, serious manner about him, especially when he speaks. He comes across as being ‘honest’, ‘salt of the earth’ and ‘true’. Underneath that façade there is a crazy, stubborn anarchist who is determined to get his elbow in against the government for as long as he can breathe. I know it’s dangerous for me to allow him to stay. Please don’t sell your books around here, I told him.

Arnold’s son, Mahogany, often turns up at my apartment. He hates his name which was chosen by his Canadian mother, who gave him ‘Maple’ as a middle name. Everyone who knows him calls him ‘Mannie’ instead. Arnold met Mannie’s mum on one of the early farm communes, in the days when it was still considered a romantic thing to do – bugger off to a farm commune and live off the land. These days, the communes are like factories, with enormous technology and mechanisation involved in the production of food, a lot of which tastes worse than cardboard.

Arnold and his Canadian ‘ex’ met on one of these farms, and they married in the middle of the cornfield. It sounded sweet. For a few years they managed to stay together until the new rules commenced regarding the return of un-citizens to their own countries. When Mannie was six years old, she was forced to go back to Canada. Mannie stayed here with his father. He grew up talking to his mother on the super-skype. Now he is over eighteen, his plan is to save enough money to go and see her in person. But he needs a Department Permit to leave the country. In the old days everyone moved around at whim. Our country was one of the first to install the
Departure Permit procedure, and many others followed. There are six reasons you can leave the country now and if your reason doesn’t match any of these, then forget it.

**Chapter iii**

They are erecting a new sculpture in the main square of our city. It is a sculpture that will portray our strength and kindness to each other. It is a giant teapot with a giant hand on its handle. The hand is enormous, muscled, cartoon-like in its superhuman appearance. Below the teapot and the hand there are to be four cups that will hold a water feature inside each and these will represent the four main zones of our city. In order to make room for this new sculpture they had to take down a previous piece that had been hanging in the square for many years. This was made out of wire and it was a beautiful piece of art, but the fancy way it was lit up at night was considered too frivolous.

An important national holiday is coming up, and the teapot is being installed in time for the celebrations. At the same time, the number of police in the public areas has increased. New signs extoll the virtues of quiet, ordered shopping – no running, shouting, jumping, screaming, and no mingling in large groups.

The main square is looking a little sad. Although it is very clean, all the seats have been removed to discourage people from hanging about. The trees have been either hacked back or cut down. There were few complaints when this happened. This square used to be full of lush foliage that provided terrific green shade in the summer. There were seats and chess tables, and people selling bunches of flowers. I can even remember barrows of fruit here when I was younger. In the eastern corner there is an entrance to the underground metro, and in the centre of the square lies a huge war memorial, an important part of the annual victory commemoration ceremonies. The
memorial is still there but the flower sellers, fruit barrows, seats and chess tables have slowly been removed. The city governor claimed that the trees bore a ‘disease’ and it’s true, there have been cases of sickly plants.

People don’t care. The food shortages mean that many people no longer have any opinions on sculptures or the appearance of the square. Residents are most focused on the collection and storage of food products.

Chapter iv

The national holiday will be a day when we are encouraged to forget ‘negative’ thoughts and to become involved in the celebrations. There will be formation marching from the armed forces and banner waving and flag dancing from a team of young women who apparently have been practicing for months. There will be some brass-band playing and I can predict a violin solo from some six-year-old musical genius. The reason I know this is because it’s what always happens on a national holiday. There will be special fireworks, but the consumption of alcohol in public will not be allowed. People drink at home within the privacy of their own four walls. They keep secret stills or brew beer in their bathtub and sell it on the black market.

Everyone will be expected to wear their uniform on the public holiday. We all own a uniform. And everyone is required to have their Ten Cards pinned in a prominent position on their clothes. This is a badge that shows what place you hold on the Ten Cards Gauge. Are you a Good Citizen or have you consistently broken the Rules? Only children under fourteen years of age are exempt. Workers often have little badges on their coat lapels that show the face of either our leader or someone else important, for instance our leader’s daughter, her brother, or a minister of the department that you work for.
My uniform consists of a grey skirt and jacket with a blouse underneath, either white or pale lemon. This uniform must be worn with plain flat black brogues. On my jacket lapel I wear a badge that shows the pudgy visage of Professor Mata Kapkabona, the Minister of Creative Arts.

The story goes that once upon a time, she was a struggling artist herself. She trained as an actor in the state drama academy and became well-known for her solo presentations of Beckett pieces. After some time she began to direct. She became overweight. But she kept her excellent business acumen which eventually gained her a job in the political sector.

I met her once at a Woffee Party – these are official work events where we are supposed to be enjoying ourselves, being social and drinking woffee. The Professor told me she had enjoyed my story entitled, *Floorplan*, which had been written as part of my doctoral thesis, and had become very popular when it was later published. Professor Kapkabona suggested that *Floorplan* was a good example of the way the populace had been encouraged to perform in the past: selfish, individual, egocentric and neurotic. Full of mind diseases typical of those who were brought up to dwell only on their own destiny.

What could I do except agree with her? I hated what she was implying about *Floorplan* but everyone was watching her talking to me. In fact, I consider the story to be a metaphor pertaining to the paranoid new policies that were being brought in throughout the period I worked on my doctorate. It was the beginning of what has now become a stultifying atmosphere of ultra right-wing ‘politically correct’ behavior.

After I submitted my doctoral thesis, I was approached to teach creative writing in prison to a small class of long-term criminal unemployed. My simple, patient methods
produced some impressive pieces of written work from the nine class members. Several books from a few of the individuals were published, then came an anthology from the entire group which was an overnight success, and finally, my own textbook written about my teaching process.

I was presented with the offer of a permanent situation, where I would continue with this work with the help of four other teacher/writers working under me. That was when I began to understand some of the frightening changes that were taking place under ‘Our Precious Mother’, the name we have been instructed to use to refer to our elected Prime Minister. Although Arthur said the elections were nothing but a sham.

Chapter v

In my position as Director of Narratives in the Department of Long-Term Unemployed, I have been advised that any class members who give us trouble may be disposed of into one of the infamous twenty-five different ‘Bucha’ hospitals for the ‘criminally insane’. These are places where people are ‘treated’ because of their political or religious activities, for instance, or their ‘excessive’ demands for legal rights can attract entry. The sort of crimes for which one can be committed into a ‘Bucha’ can include: shouting political slogans, creating reactionary banners and letters, and making anti-government comments or speeches in public. The misdemeanor ‘disrupting the normal work of government offices’ covers a wide field of behaviour that is annoying to the ruling body.

We’ve been lucky. A lot of detainees now want to attend my Narrative class. I have managed to avoid any Bucha scenario. But keeping it all going consumes most of my time, to the detriment of my own writing. My story, Floorplan, continues to be popular and I was recently approached by a television producer who wishes to turn
the story into a television series that will centre on the main character. The piece acts as a small spotlight on the life of a doctoral student, documenting the type of problems a student may be dealing with while they are trying to research and write their thesis. The news of this possible drama series and the fact that I have been made a ‘director’ of the writing programme, has attracted comments from dissenters. There are always dissenters, you learn to put up with them. But these are precarious times.

Chapter vi
The media used to predict that in the future we would live in ‘a world without waste’. The journalists described a life-style that would support more people using only a fraction of the water and power we had consumed in the past. They prophesised mass transit systems and automated services as the norm, dishwashers that cleaned without soap and clothes that never became dirty. Growing your own vegetables was indicated as being unsustainable and wasteful. Of course, the reality was far away from what people had been led to imagine. It was closer to something you may have dreamt during a bad night’s sleep.

Whoever would have believed there would be such a booming industry in the sale of the old tinned food? These cans are now traded or auctioned. People say they taste better than the ‘nutrient-enhanced’ food that is now on offer – food that has been produced using recycled ingredients. No one wants to know exactly what. Sausages are stuffed with spooky material that some claim to be ninety-eight percent recycled cardboard and cereal husks.

There are also the Baga Marts, ‘Baga’ being a nickname for ‘bargain’. These markets specialise in the sale of expired foodstuffs. It used to be a crime to sell these, but now the government turns a blind eye to the practice. Trafficking in spoiled food
might sound like an evil occupation but it has become an easy way to purchase products that would generally be far more expensive, such as real cheese and other dairy items. One stall holder told me that people would even purchase food that would poison them if it was cheap, and then she laughed.

The lights go out five evenings a week at eight p.m. We must save resources, we are told. Stories abound of small secret sectors where the electricity burns all night. I know a special place where I can buy cheap candles. Others run lamps on alternative fuels. I make sure I cover my windows with blackout curtains before I light the candles, it’s illegal to be using any kind of light at all after eight p.m. The electricity goes back on at six in the morning. In the winter, the lights are cut off during the day so there will be enough power for heating in the evening. The government informs us that turning the lights off at night will discourage anti-government activity. I wouldn’t be so sure.

But the biggest changes that have come about have been in relation to water. We are now subjected to water rationing and anybody can be reported for having too many showers in one week or showers that are longer than three minutes. Baths have become more popular as the water can be kept in the bath and used and re-used. Each sector undergoes staggered water rationing. Our sector is cut off from any water for twenty-four hours every two weeks.

Those who are accused of it and proven to be using too much water are fined. Mrs Heremia in 12/C tried to set up The Committee for People Affected by Power and Water Outages. She was a retired Supervisor and thought she could bring some attention to bear on these problems. Our Precious Mother’s reply was to have her removed to a Bucha hospital. Han Wang from 26/F took over the Committee and let it
slowly die. His family later moved to a nicer sector where there are still a number of green trees.

**Chapter vii**

I was walking across the basement carpark when I happened to look up and out of one of the top windows. There was something strange coming out of the sky. Something dark. I ran up the back basement stairs and outside. Other people were running out of their apartment blocks, too. The air was dead still, the stuff that was coming out of the sky was like snow but it was tiny pieces of black soot. Soot-snow. When it landed on your skin and you wiped it off, it left a black mark.

‘Is it soot?’ I asked another woman. She shrugged. People don’t want to discuss anything, imagining you might report them for any negative comment they make. Maybe there were fires somewhere? We had no way of knowing. We were never told anything on the national television news. An old man heard me and he said,

‘Yes, it’s soot.’

It was coming down like snow, although it was dirty smut.

‘What do you think could have made so much soot?’ I asked the old man.

‘It would have to be an enormous fire,’ he replied.

‘What is there left to burn?’ I asked, and laughed. Then I thought I should be more careful.

‘The Ermington State Forest,’ said the man.

‘The forest in the national park! What a scandal!’

The man was small, shrunken, with a bowed back, a large beard, and wearing a dirty roadworker’s jacket.
‘Hello. It’s you, isn’t it? Mrs…,’ he squinted at me. ‘I used to see you giving readings. Where is your husband these days?’

I was immediately nervous.

‘My husband? I have no husband.’

‘I know it’s you, Essi,’ he said. All this and with this smut coming down. I stared at him. He looked at me properly, raising his old head.

‘Blavatsky.’ My god, it was Blavatsky. I had hardly recognized him. Oh, how he had changed. I’d never seen him with a beard. I thought he had been taken to a Bucha. Before that he had written poetry. Beautiful poetry. I was so astonished to see him I could barely speak.

‘Yes, yes, it’s me,’ he said. ‘You must live around here, Essi? I’ve seen you now and then.’

‘Come into my block,’ I said. ‘Come to my apartment and I’ll give you a cup of woffee.’ This was the name given to the fake coffee now available, made of ground chicory. Only the rich can afford the ‘real’ coffee, although one enterprising woman in my block had begun trying to grow coffee trees in large pots in her bedroom.

Blavatsky had always been fond of a cup of coffee.

‘Have you any food?’ he asked.

He was being very forward, he must be starving. I nodded ever so slightly.

Accumulation of food was not a good thing to advertise. I began to lead him inside. The black stuff was still coming down, settling on the ground in sooty drifts.

‘I thought they put you in a Bucha,’ I said, very quietly.

‘I’ll tell you about that when we get inside,’ said Blavatsky.

Some lines of his poetry suddenly came back into my head:

_We must read the instructions_
we must read the instructions

but there are no instructions

I believe there are no instructions.

The state had claimed that his descriptions of nature were really metaphors relating to the political climate. They had banned his work, burning all copies they could find, and had sent him to a Bucha in the deep south.

As soon as we were inside my apartment I shut the blackout curtains and lit the candles as I knew the electricity rationing would commence soon.

‘Where are you living?’ I asked Blavatsky.

‘Block E,’ he said. ‘I board with a family of Buddhists. They don’t have much but they took me in.’

I put the kettle on for the woffee.

‘Do you have water?’ I asked him. Visitors often brought their own water with them these days, to enable their host to make a hot drink. He shook his head.

‘The family I live with has very little and nothing to spare.’

‘I have rice biscuits,’ I confided. I had stopped eating bread altogether as it didn’t last well. I prepared the woffee and put the rice biscuits on a plate, and we both settled down on the sofa.

‘How did you get out of the Bucha?’ I asked him.

‘They sent me there for writing about the 2018 riots.’ He helped himself to rice biscuits, stuffing them into his mouth with fervor.

‘How did you get out?’

‘That I won’t reveal to anyone. I know we used to be good friends but you work for Our Precious Mother now,’ said Blavatsky, busy eating the food my odious position had paid for.
‘The government offered me the job and I took it. It’s meant I’ve been able to employ other writers.’

‘I’ve heard a lot of other writers don’t like you any more,’ said Blavatsky.

I wished we weren’t having this conversation.

‘I thought I might be able to achieve something by taking this position. Better I do the job than some stifling bureaucrat who knows nothing.’

Blavatsky had rice cracker crumbs in his beard. He was blowing on his woffee and sipping it and holding the cup in both hands as if it were a begging bowl.

‘Blavatsky,’ I said, ‘I can’t believe it’s you. Remember the time you read your poems in the square while you perched on top of the statue of Our Precious Mother?’

We laughed. For a minute it was Old Times. Blavatsky had been a close friend of my husband’s. He had been present at our tiny wedding. Often he would disappear for chunks of time and then show up with a new manuscript of poems. The 2018 riot poems had been circulating between writers, but after Blavatsky was sent to the Bucha I’d heard nothing more of them.

‘I never read the 2018 poems,’ I admitted.

‘I have them all up here,’ he said, tapping his cranium. ‘And something else. Something that might interest you.’

‘What would that be?’

The woffee had left its usual sickly sweet taste in my mouth. Blavatsky took a paper out of his inner overcoat pocket and began to read to me. He no longer possessed his gorgeous baritone voice, instead he read in a croaking whisper:

Armageddon will take place at the end of 2026 when the world comes to an end. Where will you be? I will be in Mullumbimby waiting to hitch a ride to freedom on the spaceships that will fly over the top of Mt Chincogan. They will
land on the mountain and take anyone on board who is able to walk onto the aircraft by themselves. I have been instructed to tell you they will not take any people in wheelchairs or on crutches. Two legs are good, the younger the better. But if you are a fit, older type, the Aliens will still welcome you. I have been in ongoing communication with the Aliens and they assure me they will be there on the special day. Everyone must have faith. They have flown here from a constellation in the Milky Way and they have been keeping us under surveillance until the right moment came to meet with us officially. Which will be the day before Armageddon. The Aliens will take people on board after they land on Mt Chincogan. They do not know how the Armageddon will take place but they have a sophisticated and powerful sense of premonition, and this is the way they have been able to make the prediction.

Blavatsky stopped reading and helped himself to the last two rice biscuits.

‘Where did you get that?’ I asked him.

‘A man I knew in Bucha gave it to me.’

I tried to be open in my mind, not narrow.

‘Can we believe it?’

‘I do,’ said Blavatsky. ‘We have to find this town and go there. It’s going to happen in two weeks.’

The front buzzer went off. I knew this would be Arnold.

‘That’s my friend. You should meet him. He also writes poetry.’

Blavatsky farted loudly. ‘Excuse me, it must be the woffee. I’m not used to it.’ He folded the paper up and hid it back in his pocket before I let Arnold in. As soon as he came through the door he stopped dead in his tracks, staring at Blavastky. The two men looked each other over. Arnold was still fit and good-looking in an outdoorsy
kind of way. But sometimes he was totally unreasonable, insisting he knew more
about the ways of the world than I did.

Blavatsky’s body was like a broken pile of bones. He was old before his time but
maybe his brain was still good. In the past he had been very sharp but his present idea
to hitchhike a ride with the aliens had me floundering a little. I made the
introductions. Arnold began to take out his books.

‘What are these?’ Blavatsky asked.

‘My poems. I sell them.’ Arnold defined himself by these tiny volumes. What
would he be like without them?

‘Is it still snowing outside?’ I enquired.

Blavatsky was reading Arnold’s poetry. Arnold didn’t answer me.

‘Are you writing poetry too?’ Arnold asked Blavatsky.

Poetry had been Blavatsky’s religion. He gave me one of his ‘secret’ looks.

‘No,’ he said. ‘They cured me of that in Bucha.’

‘You’ve been in a Bucha?’ asked Arnold. For a minute he looked scared.

‘A long time ago.’ Blavatsky shifted his weight around from foot to foot.

‘How did you get out?’ Arnold asked.

‘They let me out. They let me out and they said to me: don’t ever come back.’

Blavatsky laughed like a hyena. That’s what he had always liked to do – disturb
people. So, he hadn’t changed.

‘Blavatsky,’ I said, ‘you had better get home to Block E before the curfew.’

Block E was a fair way off. Blavatsky saluted me with a make-believe army salute.

‘Come again another time,’ I told him.

At the door he embraced me and whispered in my ear, ‘How about the
Mullumbimby document?’
‘I have to think about it,’ I whispered back. He obviously didn’t want Arnold to hear.

As soon as we had said our goodbyes and I had shut the door, Arnold began speaking about Blavatsky, cursing him and denigrating the way he looked and spoke.

‘Is he a writer?’

‘He says he doesn’t write anymore.’ I didn’t wish to discuss Blavatsky all night.

‘Who is he?’ Arnold continued asking questions.

‘He was a friend of my husband’s.’

Then Arnold knew he should shut up. If I mentioned my husband, he knew it was time to be quiet. I barely ever talked about Terry. He was no longer alive. Seeing Blavatsky had brought back many memories. I told Arnold I was going to bed.

The apartment only had one bedroom which was just big enough for the double bed and a small table. From the window I could see one lone palm tree on the horizon. That tree was my favourite thing to look at. We have fewer trees than when I was a child growing up in Godwand. People think of Godwand as a backward area but the best memories I have are from there. It was a good place to be a child. I had a storybook existence – with our chooks and my grandmother’s pigs. My favourite pig was an enormous tan spotted one called Miracle. She was a terrific mother who birthed and fed many litters. I left Godwand after gaining a scholarship to the northern university. This was considered better than our small institution one down south which focused largely on veterinary skills and the manufacture of alternative meats.

Every university holiday I would travel back down south to see my grandmother. It was at the northern university that I met Terry and became politicised through my relationship with him. I was a mere undergraduate and he was working on a doctorate of Political Theory. But when I married him, my father disowned me because of
Terry’s far-left political beliefs. After that, I never returned to Godwand although I often dreamed about it. I dreamed about my grandmother and her garden where she grew pumpkins the size of a man’s head. Occasionally, I still dream of her face, which was beautiful, the folds and wrinkles contained a magnificent serenity. When I was a child, I enjoyed looking at her face, examining it almost every day of my young life. Her place was like a paradise, the trees groaning with fruit, the garden a cornucopia. I remember her prize-winning tomatoes: rich, juicy and firm.

Chapter viii
I could still see a light under my bedroom door. Arnold often slept with the light turned on. I recalled how I had originally met him when I used to go each week to the Arts Quarter to visit a friend who was terminally ill. Every Saturday, I would take my friend a tasty food treat. Finally, I made my last visit as my friend was being removed to a hospice the next day. Afterwards, I was drinking woffee in the woffeeshop next door, and Arthur asked if he could share the table. He showed me his poetry books and when he told me he lived in his Landrover, I invited him to visit me some time. When he stayed, he liked to be up late.

Terry had always warned me I should be careful who I became friendly with. In the past I had been seen as part and parcel of my husband’s politics. At the time he was arrested, Terry had been preparing himself to stand in the local body elections. I had watched them from my window. They had taken him away in a small, windowless black van.

‘Don’t come out,’ Terry had advised me. ‘Stay here.’

They had opened the back and I had seen them push him in. They were from the SBS, the Special Bureau Security. When they had shut the back doors, Terry hadn’t
even looked up. Two of them had climbed into the back after him. He had told me to stay in the apartment and I did.

The next morning I was crossing the basement car park to the rubbish room. It had been very cold, that still cold before the weather changes. I can remember the route, it was my usual one down the back stairs. I had been awake all night putting Terry’s paper through the shredder. I was taking out any possibly incriminating evidence in a black rubbish bag. This is what we had always agreed I would need to do. Once it had gone through the shredder it was difficult to prove anything but to make sure I had burnt the shreds and now I had the ash in a rubbish bag.

I came down the back stairs, and let myself in through the EXIT G door. It was maybe five a.m. I was exhausted, but I wanted to be ready. The light outside was very white, very pure, almost painful in its insistent honesty.

‘Yes, and yes,’ I was saying to myself, ticking off the things I had done on the list that Terry and I had always talked about. I had followed his instructions, come such a long way. It felt as if I had travelled the globe five times over. I carried the bag into the rubbish room. Early morning, and the light was smashing itself through the basement window, exploding into my retina. I knew in my heart of hearts that Terry wouldn’t make it back.

I had looked up after depositing the bag in the rubbish. Out of the corner of my eye I was looking at the surveillance camera bolted into the far right corner of the ceiling. I had looked up and then through the window. And I saw it had begun to snow. I knew it was over. I went to the central police station later that day but was refused visiting permission. That moment when the police had pushed Terry into the van had been my last glimpse of him.
At home, I could feel him everywhere in the apartment. His pyjamas, where he had left them. Flannelette, pale blue and grey stripes. The men in the black van had come late in the night. They had told him to get dressed. It had been cold weather, cold enough for flannelette. Terry had been lying in the bed with his back to me and in the dark we had heard the black van drive up, a screeching of tyres and then the knock on the door.

‘Here they are,’ Terry had said. ‘Plan A,’ he told me.

I had done everything we had agreed upon. He drank a half-cup of cold woffee that had been sitting by the side of the bed. They didn’t have a siren but we knew. After he had announced publicly he would be standing for the elections he’d said, now we’ll see. And I hadn’t been scared, until I heard the van that night. Then I had known.

After he was taken away, I’d vomited in the bathroom. I launched into what we had called ‘Plan A’ which was shred everything, purify the apartment of all evidence. And the snow came down so thick that next day, the city was covered in a big white insulating blanket and everyone stayed indoors.

I was the only one walking to the underground. I caught the train and sat in a carriage with a picture of Our Precious Mother stuck above the door. When I entered the carriage a small child sitting with her grandmother stared at me. She was attired in a white fake-fur coat and her hair had been tied into a kind of knot on each side of her head. I heard her grandmother whisper, don’t stare, but she continued in that open, obvious way that children have. The carriage was scrupulously clean except for the wet footprints people had made, entering and exiting from the snow on the street level.

Our Precious Mother demands that all public areas be kept clean. On one wall of the carriage was a painting of the mountains where Our Precious Mother’s road to
leadership began. The mountains are always painted with relentless crags in the background and luscious flowers in the foreground to represent the struggle of Our Precious Mother from her uneducated background to her position as a member of parliament in a hothouse of knowledge and wonder. She was popular then.

By the time Terry had made his announcement to run for the elections, she had become an institution, had reached her old age. Her incredible beauty had faded. These days, she is ancient, wrinkled and wily like an old crocodile, her life extended by the new wonder drugs. We wait for her death, and in the meantime she pulls us all down under the water with her.

When I reached the police station I wasn’t allowed to visit my husband and had to return home. Then we heard the news. Terry had jumped from a bathroom window, committing suicide to prevent the police from ‘discovering the truth’. They described him as a deviant, saying they had proof he was a homosexual. They let me off the hook, announcing that they believed his wife was unaware of this other side of him, a secret, morally corrupt part of his character that he had kept hidden. They claimed he had young male lovers who were prepared to give evidence of his homosexual lifestyle. From the day he was arrested I began my new situation, which was keep my head above water as quietly as possible.

Chapter ix

There is a noise. I have been dreaming about Terry again. We were building a really strong, deep fireplace. We were about to burn some incriminating evidence and then cook real sausages in a pan over the fire. Sometimes in the dream we are in a basement and other times we are outside, on the edge of a forest. Dreams can do that.
I haul myself out of bed. I have a sixth sense that this noise has something to do with Blavatsky and I am right. There he is, down on the ground throwing small things up at my window. It must be about three a.m. When he sees me at the window he raises his finger to his mouth. *Shh*, he is saying. We signal to each other. The fire exit has a lock on it and I open the window, step onto the balcony, and throw down the key. Soon Blavatsky has unlocked the iron gate and crept up the fire stairs. From there he can access my bedroom balcony.

He signals we should go inside. Once we are both in, I pull the black curtains across and pray that no one has witnessed our suspicious behavior. Maybe it would be perceived only as a sexual dalliance? Blavatsky and I hug each other. Our relationship with Terry will always be a bond between us. Blavatsky loved a bit of drama, and I feel there’s an element of that when he whispers, ‘We have to leave now.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s time to go.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Yes. We have to.’

‘But Arthur is in the front room.’

‘Exactly.’

‘You mean don’t tell him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why not?’

‘Only you and me.’

‘What do we need?’

I have stockpiled extra food in my bedroom wardrobe which means we have access to the rations without having to wake Arthur. I move around quietly gathering what we need.

‘I still have Terry’s car,’ I whisper. ‘It’s in the basement car park.’

‘Have you any fuel?’ asks Blavatsky.

‘Only bio.’

This is fuel made out of the silage from the sugar-cane plantations further north. I have a cache of biofuel hidden in a place on the edge of the city. He thinks he hears something and goes stiff. I say I can’t hear a thing. He gestures that we should sit down on the edge of the my bed and we stay still for a moment, listening. Blavatsky leans into me, don’t speak, he signals. We begin to relax. Then he kisses me. This isn’t just a kiss of friendship. His breath stinks, but I let him kiss me. How far back do Blavatsky and I go? I can’t tell, it’s too far back. In the middle of the night I seem like someone else, someone I used to be, instead of the someone I have become. Suddenly, I’m more afraid of not kissing Blavatsky than of kissing him. He squeezes me, pushes his mouth against my ear and says,

‘Thank god I’ve found you.’

Okay, it’s like the old days except now we’re both much older. Anyway, I finish packing and we have everything. I don’t know why I don’t try to say goodbye to Arthur, I just do what Blavatsky suggests.

We move like panthers, even with our creaking bones we’re still good at doing that. We go down the fire escape shutting and locking everything after us as we go. In the basement I take the cover off the car, we stow the food and other stuff inside and I start the engine. It’s Terry’s old Holden Commodore. It looks ancient but it’s utterly reliable. Blavatsky kind of strokes it, no doubt he remembers crazy missions with
Terry in the old Holden. He smiles and smiles. The first thing Blavatsky does inside the car is check for listening devices. I already know it’s free of anything as I have kept Terry’s car up to scratch which includes turning the engine over, keeping it clean and checking throughout for anything untoward. It’s not until we’re out of the main gate of the estate that Blavatsky says,

‘That locked fire escape is a great invention!’

We laugh and laugh together. Glancing at each other, we send ourselves into paroxysms of laughter as if we were kids. What am I doing? Going off with Blavatsky? What about my job that I have taken such pains to create? What am I doing? Putting everything at risk. Why? Part of me refuses to understand. This is so stupid. I know it, but I’m still going. I haven’t felt like this for years. We laugh and laugh, looking at each other, and our eyes crinkle up at the corners. Blavatsky is beaming. We drive to the storage unit where I keep the spare bio fuel and we load it into the Holden and head north, across the Harbour Bridge. At dawn we stop at a twenty-four hour roadside café. I use my credits and we eat vamburgers and drink woffee.

‘What do they put in this meat?’ asks Blavatsky.

‘It’s not real meat,’ I explain. ‘It’s made out of vam - recycled vegetable scraps and seaweed.’

‘I dream of real hamburgers,’ says Blavatsky. ‘But I can’t remember how they taste.’

‘Why not?’ I ask.

‘In the Bucha they gave me memory drugs.’

I am shocked.

‘I thought they were banned,’ I say.
He shrugs.

‘So what? They use them in Bucha.’

‘If you can’t remember how a hamburger tastes then how do you remember your poems?’

‘I can’t. I was lying when I told you I did. I couldn’t even remember anything about you and Terry when I first came out. But then I saw you one day when I was out walking. I felt like I knew you. I followed you. I continued to watch you. Finally I began to remember and I decided I had to show you that letter and give you the chance to come with me. When I first came out of the Bucha, my memory was totally shot but slowly things are coming back.’

‘What did they give you?’ I ask him.

‘Stuff they gave originally to people with post-traumatic stress disorder. Then they realised it would be excellent to use on dissidents like me. I can’t remember a word I wrote, these days. When they released me I was given prescriptions to continue the treatment, but I stopped taking them and sold the tablets on the black market.’

‘Can you recall what happened the day before yesterday?’ I ask him.

‘I can now,’ he says. ‘And if I think I’ll forget, I write notes for myself. The details.’

‘How long before you remembered who I was?’

Blavatsky tried to look relaxed, although I could tell he was nervous.

‘At first I thought maybe I’d seen you on T.V. But I kept hanging around so I could see you again. They released me eighteen months ago.’

‘Why did they finally release you?’ I downed the last dregs of my woffee.

‘The drugs had wiped out my ability to write because I could never remember anything. They told me I was cured.’
The waitress at the café counter turned up the music. It was a cowboy classic that was legal. Some kinds of music were now censored.

I bent closer to Blavatsky and whispered,

‘Someone dobbed Terry in.’

‘They were always watching Terry.’

I felt nauseous talking about Terry. ‘We better get back on the road,’ I suggested.

Chapter x

We kept driving north. I wasn’t sure why I had gone with Blavatsky in the first place but there could be no turning back. There was this unsaid pact between us that we would go on and see what happened.

Blavatsky was obsessed with talking about food. When he was in Bucha he’d thought about food a lot because the food in there had been so bad. Now he was crazy about pancakes and told me he made them as often as he could, and described the various weird fillings he’d invented. He was a tamer, more domestic version of the Blavatsky I had once known. He was now full of many small fears.

He showed me some of the exercises he performed daily. He had executed these in Bucha to keep himself sane. There were lunges, quad and calf stretches, squats, curls, and step-ups and step-downs. He also liked to walk for at least an hour. In the Bucha he had walked around the perimeter of the compound, noting the changes in the trees and sky and the other natural elements of his surroundings. He said that even with the effects of the memory drugs these activities had helped to keep his brain and body active. I was impressed at his discipline and perseverance. We discussed the work I had done with prison inmates, encouraging them to write their narratives.
'I never knew you had done that,' said Blavatsky. ‘It was only when I saw you and began to follow you, then I found out everything you had done since Terry died.’

I became quiet, thinking about Terry and how much I missed him. Blavatsky and I had driven through most of the night and now, the next day, we had hit the semi-tropics. There were banana plantations, many different kinds of palms and I saw pawpaws for sale by the side of the road. In the vast northern countryside you began to feel less aware of Our Precious Mother but there were still checkpoints, soldiers and roadblocks. My Department of Justice identity card got us through them all.

On the other side, in the distance, a lone hitchhiker was standing by the side of the road, a small red pack at his feet. As we got closer, I was stunned to discover this hitchhiker was Arthur. Blavatsky and I recognised him at the same time.

‘What’s he doing here?’ said Blavatsky.

‘I haven’t a clue,’ I told him. ‘We’ll have to pick him up.’

Blavatsky groaned. We slowed and then came to a halt, the gravel on the road verge crunching under our tyres. I wound down my window, shouted out a greeting and told Arthur to get in.

‘You could get arrested for trying to hitch a lift like that,’ I said.

As soon as he was in the car, he admitted he had followed us. ‘I knew about your plan to go to Chincogan.’

‘How do you know about that?’ barked Blavatsky.

‘I overheard you talking. When I first arrived I could hear two voices in Essie’s apartment and that was so unusual that I crouched down and listened at the door.

‘Arthur! You’re incorrigible!’ I exclaimed.

‘Why are you spying on us?’ asked Blavatsky. He sounded really paranoid.
‘I’m not spying,’ said Arthur. He had his pissed-off expression on his face. I knew it so well.

‘Where’s your van?’ asked Blavatsky. ‘I thought you had a van.’

‘It overheated back down the highway. I’ve had to leave it at a garage down there.’

Blavatsky gave Arthur a look full of suspicion.

‘Whatever,’ he said.

We were about ninety minutes drive from Mullumbimby town. I suggested we drive straight through and across to Mt Chincogan and stay together to share a camp for the night on our arrival. Blavatsky and I changed places as we had been doing the entire way up, and I took the wheel. Arthur used the next ninety minutes to completely deride the idea of an alien spaceship coming down onto Mt Chincogan.

‘You are both out of your tree.’

‘Then why worry?’ I asked him. ‘If we are that far gone, then why follow us just to make fun of us?’

Chapter xi

The answer came that night after we made camp together. Terry had always maintained that a really good dinner was the best present you could give yourself. We had beans from a tin, one treasured egg and four sausages, the faux sausages they sold at The Super. They came in a large roll. You could cut off slices and fry them or cook them in many different ways but it was an ongoing joke as to what these rolls were made of.

We were not the only people who had heard about the alien spacecraft. To Arthur’s surprise, the area was full of campers. Many had pitched their tents right across Old Tunnel Road. We had to squeeze ourselves in between a group of nuns from
Godwand and a businessman who had travelled like us, from the capital. Many years back, Mt Chincogan had been a meeting point for the First Harmonic Convergence but the old track had been closed off as that land now belonged to a family who disliked anyone walking across their property to gain access to the mountain top.

Each camper had their own story about how they had heard of the aliens and why they had decided to come. The businessman went bankrupt after the government had taken over all woffee production, and he wanted to begin a new life. The nuns wanted to be sure the aliens knew about God. If they didn’t, then the nuns could instruct them and were prepared to travel with the aliens to act as missionaries in the new world.

Blavatsky and I pitched a small tent and Arthur erected his one-man pup-tent. We were waiting for Arthur so we could eat together, but he spent such a long time inside his shelter that Blavatsky strode over, opened the front flap, and doubling himself over, squeezed inside. Immediately there was shouting and screaming! The nylon tent rocked back and forth and Blavatsky was calling me.

I ran across and wrenched aside the flap to peer in. Blavastky and Arthur were on top of each other, physically fighting. At the back of the tent there was some kind of small wireless set, one of the sort you can put together in a few minutes and then break down into easily transportable pieces when you have finished. Who had Arthur been talking to?

‘He’s a spy!’ shouted Blavatsky. ‘He’s a fucking spy! I caught him making his report.’

All I could do was remain crouching. ‘Is it still on?’ I asked.

Blavatsky stopped punching Arthur, whose nose was bleeding.

‘I’ll hold him while you check,’ he suggested.

‘Of course it’s off,’ said Arthur.
I examined the dials, then turned it upside down and removed the tiny batto-wedge from inside it. Adopting my most strict teacherly voice, I asked,

‘What’s going on, Arthur?’

He began sobbing.

‘Let me punch the living daylights out of him,’ said Blavatsky.

‘Sit up,’ I instructed Arthur. He did so. ‘Stop that blubbering.’

He tried to. He was obviously scared. ‘Who have you been reporting on?’ I asked.

‘You. And Blavatsky.’

‘How long have you been filing reports on me?’

There was a pause.

‘Has this been going on ever since we met?’ I asked Arthur. I felt stiff, shocked.

‘Was it a set up?’

‘Yes.’ He began sobbing again. ‘I’m sorry.’

I had a pain in my chest.

‘What will we do with him? Do you want me to punch him?’ asked Blavatsky. He still had hold of Arthur. I kept my face emotionless.

‘What can I say, Arthur?’ I said. ‘I’m disappointed in you. Please explain why you have been reporting on me.’

‘You’re Terry’s widow.’

It was all the old stuff all over again. I had tried to pretend to myself I’d managed to leave that behind. I should have realised I would never succeed, it was like a tattoo, marking me.

‘And what did you tell them just now?’

‘I told them I had made contact. But I haven’t told them about the aliens and the rescue spaceship. And all the other people here.’
‘He even lies to them!’ hissed Blavatsky.

‘Why don’t you shut up, Blavatsky?’ Arthur sneered. They stared at each other and I witnessed an unexplained look that passed between them.

‘Have you two met before?’

‘No!’ they both said.

‘What’s going on?’

‘Nothing.’

I felt they were both lying. Teacher’s instinct. They were as guilty as hell of something.

‘Will I punch him?’ asked Blavatsky.

‘You better not,’ said Arthur.

Blavatsky took his hands off Arthur.

‘Fuck you, Blavatsky,’ said Arthur. His nose had stopped bleeding.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked again. The atmosphere had changed. ‘So, who are you really?’ I asked Arthur.

‘My name is Arthur,’ he said. ‘I write poetry but I was pressured into spying on you. I’ve been through hell.’

Blavatsky snorted.

‘Did they pay you?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’ He busied himself with dabbing at his nose and looking down at his hands.

‘You fucking capitalist spy worm,’ said Blavatsky.

‘Why don’t you get out of my face?’ said Arthur.

‘Let me beat him up.’

‘Remove yourself from the tent, Blavatsky,’ I ordered. He obeyed. After he had left I asked Arthur once more, ‘What’s going on?’
‘Nothing.’

‘I know there’s more to this, so you had better tell me.’

Before Arthur could answer there were shouts and the sound of people running. We could hear Blavatsky swearing,

‘Fucking hell!’

We scrambled out of the tent quickly. A small way from the communal campfires there was a faint light pouring down from the night sky. It was coming out of the bottom of a medium-sized egg-shaped flying object.

‘It’s the spaceship,’ said Blavatsky.

‘It’s come to check us out,’ said one of the other campers.

There were exclamations, then the nuns moved to stand together in a tight circle and began chanting a hymn in Latin. The flying vehicle fixed its lights on the nuns. Someone shrieked.

‘They’re gonna suck the nuns up!’ shouted a Rasta individual with his hair in dreads. A few campers fell to their knees and began praying.

Nothing happened. The nuns finished their song, which sounded joyous and beautiful. The spacecraft executed one more circular flyover above us and then went off in a northerly direction. The nuns were exultant.

‘We’ve been practicing for just such an occasion,’ one nun named Sister Mary informed me. ‘Tomorrow is the day the mothership is expected to arrive. God bless you, and God bless Our Precious Mother, we are ready to begin our journey.’

‘The song was beautiful, Sister,’ said Blavatsky.

‘Wanker sycophant,’ muttered Arthur in an undertone. He thought I couldn’t hear him.

‘Good luck, sisters,’ I said to the nuns.
Everybody began returning to their vehicles and tents. Blavatsky and I decided to do the same but just before sleep overcame me I asked,

‘Do you think Arthur will still be here tomorrow?’

‘Yes,’ said Blavatsky.

We had removed the radio and were keeping it in our tent.

**Chapter xii**

Blavatsky was correct. In the morning, Arthur was still with us. He hadn’t disappeared into the night. Why hadn’t he taken the opportunity to leave?

‘He likes you,’ said Blavatsky in a gruff voice. ‘The prick. He likes you a lot.’

Then Arthur appeared at our tent opening.

‘You’d better get up,’ he advised. ‘It’s going to get strange. Last night the government heard about the spaceship and apparently they are on their way here in droves.’

When we came out we saw that Arthur had packed up his pup tent.

‘I won’t need it,’ he reckoned. ‘When the mothership arrives, I’m boarding.’

‘Well, get in line,’ said Blavatsky.

I didn’t say anything. I was skeptical but I hadn’t shared my doubts with Blavatsky. I couldn’t quite believe what I had seen last night. I recalled excerpts of an article I had read in the past, entitled *The Alien Abduction Guide*, where it had claimed that ‘millions of people have had encounters with alien beings’ and it had advised readers to watch out for ‘elliptical, fuselage or ovoid-shaped craft’.

Arthur took something out of his pack. Blavatsky and I were astonished. He had two sachets that appeared to be filled with what smelt like real coffee. By dipping and steeping them he managed to prepare three cups of beverage out of two sachets.
Blavatsky’s face broke into a gigantic smile as he sipped, but I refused the mug offered to me. Arthur was obviously trying hard to impress.

He had also garnered some scraps of information from our fellow campers. They claimed this area had always been ‘popular’ with the aliens, it was rumoured that the sound of an alien spacecraft had been heard there before.

Residents who lived near ‘Chinnie’, as they called it affectionately, believed the mountain had a strong magnetic force. There was apparently a ‘special feeling’ about the area. Some of the campers had been living there for months while they waited for the specific day they believed the friendly aliens would land in a mothership and welcome all waiting humans on board. This would be the first sign that the ‘Armageddon’ of Earth was close.

**Chapter xiii**

Wishing to get away from both Arthur and Blavatsky, I decided to take a walk by myself up the mountain. It was an unusual conical shape and its height dominated the local landscape. The area around the base was grassland and loose, rocky scree. The nuns had informed me that the views from the tabletop of Chincogan were glorious, stretching to the coast and across the ranges to the Mt Warning caldera. They had said there was nothing but a trig station on the summit.

I had been walking for twenty minutes when I felt someone was following me. It was a sixth sense rather than anything I could physically see. I stepped off the path and sat down and waited behind a small shrub with a strong medicinal scent. It was covered in flowers of the most intense purple hue, each flower with a ‘mouth’ that held white stamens, and the purple so strong, so bright, I felt the colour stabbing into me. The flower stalks were strong and straight and the leaves soft as velvet, almost
furry. I rubbed a small one against my lip and the rubbing produced an intensity of fragrance that transported me for a minute back to my grandmother’s garden in Godwand. I had loved going there. The garden had been a paradise, with trees laden with fruit, and abundant in vegetables, herbs and glorious scented flowers.

I opened my eyes and there was Arthur. It was Arthur who had been following me. He sat down.

‘I have to tell you something,’ he said.

The incident last night when we had seen the alien spaceship seemed to have effected him deeply. He was now gabbling, raving about aliens, nuns and spaceships, in such a constant flow of words I could hardly understand him.

‘Sister Mary told me you’d come up the mountain. I wanted to follow, to apologise.’ He was out of breath. ‘My life has been stagnant until now,’ he panted, ‘but the whole shebang is about to change. I can taste it in the air.’ He gestured wildly with his hands.

‘Why should I be interested in anything you have to say?’ I asked him. I stood up and brushed grass and twigs off my pants.

‘You must,’ he said. ‘This is very important.’ He paused. ‘Blavatsky is the biggest liar.’

I wasn’t surprised. I had guessed all along this would be about Blavatsky.

‘I’ve known Blavastky for years. He and my husband, Terry, were mates.’

‘You might think you know him.’

‘What are you trying to tell me?’ I asked.

‘Blavatsky was the one who reported on Terry’s activities. He told them everything they wanted to know.’
I began to sweat profusely, my hands went cold and clammy. I was dizzy. Perhaps I was going to faint.

‘How do you know this?’ I managed to ask.

‘I know because I work for them and they told me. You need to know what a liar he is,’ he insisted.

‘I was just remembering my grandmother’s garden in Godwand. She grew tomatoes as big as fists.’ But it was as if I was talking to myself. He wasn’t listening.

‘Forget all that,’ said Arthur. ‘How are you going to get back at Blavatsky?’

I turned to look at him. It seemed I was seeing him for the first time. His face was foreign, unidentifiable.

‘You are the alien,’ I said. And I stood up, swaying a little. ‘How much did they pay you to spy on me? I hope it was worth it.‘

‘I was saving the money to send Mahogany to see his mother.’

I didn’t react. When I said nothing, he asked me,

‘Are you okay?’

It was as if I had withdrawn completely and removed myself to some distant third space that was implanted inside me.

Arthur began denigrating Blavatsky again.

‘Blavatsky is a traitor to you and to the memory of Terry. Would you like me to fix up an ‘accident’ for him? He shames us all.’

‘You disgust me,’ I told him.

‘I know that,’ said Arthur. ‘But I can help you. I can get rid of Blavatsky and no one will be any the wiser.’

‘I can’t believe this,’ I told him. ‘Get away from me!’ I began walking up the mountain. ‘Don’t follow me!’ I headed off. I hardly knew what I was doing. It
became very steep, I needed to concentrate on putting one foot in front of the other. Could I believe what Arthur had said about Blavastky? It added up. This would be the reason for the strange behavior between them the day before, the looks, the antagonism. Blavatsky must have been aware of the fact that Arthur knew what he had done. He may have even originally thought Arthur was spying on him.

On the top of the mountain the path morphed into a flat area where there were stands of grass and eucalypts. I could see the trig station. I was hot but I had no water with me. A large goanna was sitting in one of the trees staring at me. I stopped at a distance. The goanna was enormous, it didn’t move. Only the leaves of the tree shivered a little from a subtle movement of air that was coming across the top of the mountain.

I found myself filled with an innate sadness similar to the sad longing I had felt when Terry had died. And on the top of the mountain, I admitted to myself that I had been lonely ever since. It would never get any better, it was constant, although it could be described as dependable pain, you knew where you were with it. I would always miss him.

Like the trig station, this pain was a survey point that I could use as a gauge against anything else. What did I actually care about Arthur? About Blavatsky? I knelt in the dirt with a stick in my hand. The earth was soft enough for me to gouge the sentence:

*Before the world ends can I hitch a ride on your flying saucer?*

I raised my head. The goanna was no longer in the crevice of the tree.

Someone was walking slowly towards me, holding out their hand.

‘Hello my little Nonya.’ It was my grandmother. She had always called me that.

‘But you’re dead,’ I said.

‘I’ve come for you. They sent me.’
‘Sent by who?’

‘By the mothership,’ she said. ‘It’s time to come with me. We saw your message. You are welcome on board.’

I had to ask again,

‘Sent by who?’

‘By the aliens.’ She was being very patient. ‘Hold my hand.’

I held it. It felt warm and human.

‘Who are the aliens?’ I asked.

‘Come, come. They were with us all the time. Be with me and be at peace.’

I couldn’t see any spacecraft. I couldn’t see any aliens. The only thing I could see was my dead Grandma from Godwand who had grown tomatoes as big as fists and baked plum pies to die for, food that was now only present in our imagination.

‘Come, come, come,’ she told me.
Dangerous and Deep Undertow

Hitchhiking is a way to see the entire continent without spending hardly anything. It’s a transaction. They pick you up and give you a free lift and you keep them entertained for x plus miles. You talk and keep them awake. Or you listen to them ranting and pretend to take them seriously.

I wrote to my mother from Cape Tribulation. I said we’re eating coconuts, sleeping on the beach and learning how to catch fish. Om, om, peace be with you.

I didn’t tell her about the crazy ferry guy who wore a hat made out of banana-plant leaves and appeared to live in a car parked on the bank of the Daintree River. He operated the one-man ferry, the only way to get over to the Cape Trib side.

The road from the river to the Cape Tribulation coast was unsealed and only a few people lived over there. It took us about three days to walk and hitch to the foreshore. Along the way, we slept on the edge of the rainforest, curled up inside our secondhand sheets from the Cairns Red Cross opportunity shop, because as soon as the sun went down the mosquitoes were fierce. I used my shoulderbag as a pillow.

The sand was almost pink. So white-white it was pink, although I don’t know how that could be. The trees were a vivid green hum of activity, and grew right down to
the shore. The reason I mention colours is because the intensity of the rainforest was a kind of *kapow!* to the eyes.

My mother knew I hitchhiked but had begged me not to. What might happen? I’d asked. The list I got back was ten-feet long: rape, murder, theft, torture. *You could just disappear,* she said. *And the people who do this to you could be dirty and smelly, they could have transferrable diseases, or even be totally uneducated.* *You could disappear.*

Once you start hitching it’s hard to stop, especially if you’re dropped in some tiny town in the middle of nowhere. How else do you get out of there? But I didn’t tell my mother I was hitching. I said I took ‘a lift with a friend’.

The B.P. service stations were the places to stop and eat if you were on the road and could afford it: eggs with bacon, sausages and fried tomatoes. That’s the sort of breakfast my mother would have approved of. After you crossed the border into Queensland, the B.P.s served what they called a ‘tropical Hawaiian Burger’. This was a ring of tinned pineapple next to thin beef and shoved in a bun.

Ridesharing is as old as the Bible. In *Acts 8*, an angel tells Philip to travel through the desert on the road south from Jerusalem to Gaza. A eunuch from Ethiopia (the typical sort of driver who will stop for hitchhikers), passing by in a chariot (the typical hitchhiking pick-up vehicle), offers Philip a ride if he can explain the text the eunuch is reading, which is about the prophet Isiah. A typical hitchhiking transaction where
the eunuch was getting more from the hitch than Phillip. But eventually, they stopped
further down the road and Philip baptised the eunuch, so eunuch: nil, Philip: ten.

Hitching around the continent gave me a window into the Australia of that era. Even
if I’d had my own car I probably never would have driven it up those corrugated dirt-
track roads. But when you hitch, you get the lifts with the locals who tell you the
important things (this road floods in the wet, that’s a good beach, there’s water
snakes in that creek). They know the stuff that other people don’t, they know because
they live there.

I had a friend I used to hitch with a lot. She was the one I did my longest hauls with.
At one stage we were going to do Cairns to Darwin. You could work on the prawning
boats up there and make lots of money. Some people think of hitchhikers as road
scum and they think that gives them permission to abuse hitchers. We heard there
were quite a few who thought this way in Mt Isa, which was in the middle of the
Cairns to Darwin route. So, in the end, we never went. The furthest we hitched was
Melbourne to Cape Tribulation. We were both rebelling, escaping our families. What
we didn’t realise is that family, or whanau, never goes away. It loiters behind you in
the distance and comes up and bites you on the bum when you least expect it. That’s
what whanau is for.

Sometimes I rang my mother. Are you brushing your teeth? she’d ask me. Don’t eat
too many sweets. Are you wearing your woolen singlet? A letter came for you from
the Inland Revenue. Be careful with your money. Don’t take notes out in public. Your
father says hello. Whatever you do, don’t hitchhike and don’t accept any lifts with
strangers. For heaven’s sake, remember to brush your teeth. Don’t laugh, listen to what I say.

In the old letters to my mother I wrote about the ‘deformed emptiness’ of people, and asked ‘what has happened to their search for the truth?’ I had read Herman Hesse’s *Journey to the East* and become obsessed with it. *Om om shanti*, I wrote at the bottom of my letters. And my mother wrote back, *No, I’ve never heard of Herman Hesse. Is that someone you were at school with?*

Once, I fell asleep in the back of a car and when I woke up we had stopped at a service station. The driver and my other friend I’d been hitching with were nowhere to be seen. I’d been dreaming that the driver had metamorphosed into a Wolfman. In my dream, he had a thick pelt of hair over his body coming right up to his neck, and even sprouting out of his ears, which were slightly pointed instead of rounded. When he turned to ask me a question I saw he even had hair on his cheeks. He spoke to me once, but I couldn’t hear him. It was as if I was underwater, the fear saturating me, the fear of the Wolfman. The fear of so much hair. In the dream, I focused my eyes on my webbing seat belt, asking him at the same time, *I’m sorry what did you say?* He was turning, staring at me. The silence was so loud it wasn’t a silence any more. *Rrrr*, it was saying. *Whrrrr.* I could hear my asthmatic breathing coming in short, hard puffs, my hand clutching and unclutching. And then I knew that we both knew that I knew, and he knew too, that he was a Wolfman.

I made a new rule number one: never fall asleep in the vehicle.
At the bottom of the pick-up list was hitchhiking with your dog. Drivers thought the dog might attack them. It might smell the car out. It might shed hair. Travelling with a child was considered almost as unpopular as with a dog, but it would get you a certain kind of lift. Travelling with a baby was thought of as strange and desperate. What you got there? You wanna put that in the boot? Oh, it’s a baby...! Travelling by yourself was the one I was never so fond of, it was just you and them. In my book of rules I only hitched by myself for short, city distances. Travelling with a boyfriend was considered standard procedure but travelling with two guys was like, oh, she puts out to both. And who will pick up three, anyway? Travelling with a girlfriend was a good one – you got quite a few lifts. Although you could still be the female Axe Murderers from Mummulgum.

Hitching is like a game of cards: you win some, you lose some. When you hitchhike, it’s like opening yourself out, opening the pages of your own book. You talk to people you might never normally speak to. Some of them are people you hope you won’t ever have to speak to again.

How to start: leave just as the sky is tinged with light, get on that road early. You can always catch a bus or a train further out of the city until you hit the edge of town, and start from there. Just get on the road going north or whichever. You don’t need a map. One of the drivers you get a lift with will have one of those.

When I first began hitchhiking, I believed that what you gave out you received back in good ‘karma’. Later on, I just began praying to the Goddess of Lifts. I want a Good Lift in a Great Car driving Straight Through, I’d mutter in an incantation. A Good
Lift was someone who wasn’t totally weird and might shout my friend and I some breakfast. And a Great Car was one that was comfy and not held together with bits of string. For some reason, the people with the crap cars always offered you a lift and then you were stuck with them, fifty miles an hour over what seemed like weeks. Straight Through was someone who knew how to put their foot down in their aircon white-leatherette-whatever with loads of leg room. It was someone who loved driving, and didn’t like stopping, and understood the concept of being ‘on the road’. They made time, they spliced the time in half, they were veritable time travel machines. These drivers were fairly rare, but were manna from heaven when you got them.

It was Ivan Milat who gave hitchhiking a bad name in Australia. I blame him for the drop in hitching numbers. He brought the numbers down singlehandedly. He worked for many years travelling around rescaling and mending the roads. He loved to get in his car and cruise around and often picked up hitchers. I guess he realised that foreigners, hiking around Australia with few friends and no relatives in the country, would never be missed for some time. The media still love to write about him, and at least twice a year there’ll be something on the television about the ‘Backpacker Murders’, as they were known. He was convicted mainly on this: he had kept some of the backpacks and other possessions belonging to the hikers he had murdered. And then there was the evidence of Paul Onions, the English backpacker who managed to get away.

Paul Onions was picked up off the road by Ivan Milat. Apparently, after a while Milat went very quiet. He said he wanted to stop the car and retrieve some music tapes from the back. And that’s when he took out a gun and pulled it on Onions.
When I used to hitch I was aware there was an element of danger. For instance, it was odd if a driver said they wanted to stop the car. Why stop? Unless it was for coffee or to refuel at a service station. Stopping was something I discouraged.

I had other rules: Do not put a pack in the boot. I preferred to hitch without one - a big pack in the boot can make it hard to get away. I preferred a seat next to the door, in case of emergencies.

Women carry guns as protection. Men have guns for all kinds of other reasons. The Milat family, made up predominantly of many brothers, used guns and knives for hunting. They made their own bullets and went on shooting trips where they practiced target activity.

My mother liked to talk about Ivan Milat. A person like that will get their come-uppance. As if he’d only defrauded someone out of their savings. A woman my mother had once worked with had a husband whose sister had met Milat. They said he looked like a very bad boy. My friend and I tended to laugh at the way my mother spoke. Listen to me, she demanded, her voice crackling over the phone. Laugh now, but keep your wits about you. Your father says hello.

My father had a habit of dising my mother. In front of everyone, he would call her a lousy cook. She was hopeless at budgeting. She brought her daughter up to be a smartmouth. She lived in fantasyland. And on varying occasions, he also called her dumb, stupid, a cow, thick, illiterate, a loser, braindead. He claimed that ‘if a good
idea came and knocked on the door, she wouldn’t recognise it’. He meant his good idea.

When I was a child, I was fond of erecting tent-like structures and building open fires, over which I roasted marshmallows on sticks. I remember spending more time outside than in. Sometimes I stretched a cloth over a tree and made my temporary home under that. As I grew older, I became a great walker, roaming further and further afield on foot, exploring new streets and territories. It amazed me the way two legs could travel so far under their own steam. I was a bit of a nomad. There was always a deep pull, a tug to get out from inside the ‘box’ we lived in, and to go.

When I hitchhiked I never owned a watch. I was prepared to be spontaneous, to take it as it came. Hitchhiking made me more perceptive about entrusting my body to a stranger, entrusting my body to the inside of their vehicle, their territory. Of course, hitchhiking can be dangerous, it forces you to deal with more freedom than you are used to. I preferred to take the risk and be mobile. I preferred to be seeing new things and new places than to have never done any of it at all. Being on the road is addictive. You grow a yearning for that dangerous and deep undertow of itinerancy.

I was of the opinion that my father’s family never liked my mother. It is one of those things you know for sure and is just there, like a smell. I call them fatal unfacts. Family is full of these unfacts: they will never be proven, but they cause fatal tragedy, a miasma seeping in through the cracks.
I never talked to my father and he rarely talked to me. My mother talked to him as if
he was mute. He wasn’t. I’d seen him speaking to people at his workplace – to the
secretary and other employees. This is my daughter. He’d introduce me. Then, when
he got home he’d suddenly forget who I was.

You don’t ever want to be in too much of a hurry when you hitchhike. You’ll get
there eventually. Hitchers have stories about incredible speedy trips or alternatively,
slow, mind-numbing journeys where you walked for miles and no mean bastard
stopped for you and no mean bastard was ever going your way.

In a car up north: the countryside was flat with ridges that were cast into negative. I
closed my eyes for a while, and when I opened them, we were running along parallel
to the edge of a sugar plantation, canes right up to the windows, maybe nine or ten
feet tall, and every now and then I’d spot a thin path hewn through them.

On the road in New South Wales: gums of all sorts, some with white trunks that
resembled smooth, polished bones, and others with creepy grey peeling bark. A
gargantuan gum was covered with perching cockatoos trying to pass themselves off as
exotic cream-coloured flowers. The sun inched below the top of a stand of eucalypts
and bathed everything in a late, last honey light. So precious and so vulnerable.

Dream the dream that winds like a white ribbon, winding white ribbon of a road in my
mind – this is the road that is in all of our minds. When we ask, where does the road
go, we wait, holding our breath for the answer. My cheeks puffing, holding my breath,
my chest still, it’s in my throat, in my chest. Breathe from your groin, they always said
at Drama School, sing from your gut. A ribbon of mucous winding down to the gut like a ribbon of road. That would be your intestines, the teacher once said to me. Your long intestine folded origami-like inside of you, a concertina, a jack-in-the-box waiting to get out. To get out on that wide-open wonderful unraveling road.

When I was sixteen years old, I was bending over the lawnmower trying to get it started, when my father gave me a slap on my backside. It was supposed to be affectionate. Previous to that he had rarely touched me. I never told my mother. I cut the grass until it was a mere green shimmer, crouching low on the hard bald summer backyard.

I dreamt I was standing on the highway waving to another me, who was taking a lift in some old-style Jag. The other me had climbed in, put her belt on and shut the Jag door. I couldn’t see the driver’s face. The other me waved to the first me, and the car pulled out into the flow of traffic. I could smell freshly mown grass, and that scent the Jacaranda trees have at the end of summer. The sun was high, it was midday, not a cloud in the sky. The first me remained stationary on the crust of dark grey bitumen on edge of the highway, waving and smiling.
Exegesis: Hitchhiking: the travelling female body
Introduction

Hitchhiking offers an unusual kind of mobility. It exists as a non-monetary form of travel, and involves a more organic approach than usual forms of transport, incorporating actual ‘on the road’ walking with ridesharing. The very nature of its non-monetary construction means that driver and passenger must develop a more symbiotic relationship, which frequently leads to a certain degree of communication with each other. The original proposal for this thesis grew from these aspects of hitchhiking. It was to be an investigation of hitchhiking, its particular rhythm and itinerant movement. Finally, it would be an examination of women who hitchhiked.

Some way into the thesis, I began to consider the space surrounding the hitchhiking female body. In doing so, there was the realisation that everyone has a personal space, a personal geography, and therefore geography and cartography would be inextricably linked to the hitchhiking female body and would need to be implicated in such a discussion. With the rise of world population and the global movements of that population, space and place is assuming an increased importance (Smith 2011, p32). Longhurst points out in her chapter Gendering Place (1999, p152) that within those larger movements, meaning and identity is being created through each individual’s personal geographies (Le Heron et al. 1999). Hitchhiking and being ‘on the road’ is part of this shaping of societal patterns (Le Heron et al. 1999, p3). At the same time, hitchhiking can be viewed as an experience of place: an activity that is a response to an innate need to change the usual place to one that is beyond the familiar.
I have focused on the topic of women and hitchhiking using a theoretical framework of post-structuralist feminisms, concentrating on the hitchhiking female body and the geography of that body (women’s bodies in places and spaces). Within that focus several critical issues were selected: the construction of the female body as a site of risk in public spaces and in an activity such as hitchhiking; the female body within small spaces of intimacy and confession such as that of the (hitched) vehicle; and the freedom of the female body to be peripatetic, to traverse the (Australian) landscape and to be visible within that landscape.

Hitchhiking and ridesharing as a form of travel will be explored in a literary contextualisation, which details a wide cross-section of representations of hitchhiking in the (western) literary canon, from the Bible to Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (1951). The road story has generally been considered a male domain because of literary (quest) classics such as Homer’s *Odyssey* (1946), and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (2000) which romanticise the masculine ideal of ‘on the road’ wanderings. My research has surveyed examples of women ‘on the road’. These examples include Margery Kempe’s accounts of her spiritual pilgrimages during the 1300s, and Baum’s *The Wizard of Oz* (1982), in which Dorothy sets out on the road accompanied only by her dog, Toto, and the examples selected introduce the connection of the open road to the female body and have been integral in establishing not only the literary importance of the road, but its classic position in literature, in which ‘the road’ often signifies ‘the quest’, as it does in Kerouac’s *On the Road*.

When selecting the texts to discuss in the contextualisation specific works were sought that not only presented women in a positive, meaningful position but also negotiated the concept of them being ‘on the road’ as an acceptable practice. In the introduction of the fiction anthology *Wild Ways* (1998), the editors Daly and Dawson
complain that they felt there were no “great role models” regarding women in the definitive road novel and they posed the question: what of the road story which is not written by a man? This was an invitation to discover potent female ‘road’ role models and to reinvent the road story within the thesis creative fiction. The decision was made to adhere to Western texts thus enabling a discussion that would be within the thirty thousand words the creative arts exegesis allows. Finally, a chronological order was attached to the selection thereby contributing an historical context to the argument. In particular, several Australian texts were used such as Niland’s *The Shiralee* (1980), culminating in Davidson’s *Tracks* (1982) and Tennant’s *The Battlers* (2002) being selected as case studies. Kerouac’s (American) *On the Road* existed from the beginning as a starting point to move from.

A methodology is established that is based on the work of Elizabeth Grosz, and feminist geography, and that will be used to examine the case studies. ‘Space’ is an unknown area but ‘place’ is a space we know – territories and borders are produced by making cartographic lines through space, and those lines determine whether we are ‘inside’ or ‘outside’, ‘in place’ or ‘out of place’ (Cresswell, 1996). This thesis investigates space and the placement of the (female) body within it, but because hitchhiking is an act of betweenedness, going from (public) highway to (private) vehicle, it can also be viewed as a morphing line that can cut through and across places and spaces creating a presence or absence of the (female) body. Other related topics to be discussed in the methodology will include: geographical scale and female reinscription of that scale; nomadism and the desire to wander or to move out of habitual place; and female hitchhiking as a transgressive act that involves the choice to accept a degree of risk. I use Australian texts to explore these issues, applying my methodology to three case studies: *The Battlers, Tracks*, and finally my own
collection of short fiction written as part of the thesis, ‘The Glove Box and Other Stories’.

In the forward to her anthology *The Joy of Travel* (1995), editor Susan Kurosawa asks: what is it that makes us go travelling, leaving the routine and safety of our homes? The answers that she gives range the belief that every journey is a quest to the theory that innate curiosity can lead to a form of trespass that takes us into something other (Kurosawa 1995, p7). Katherine Govier, the editor of a collection of women’s travel adventures (1996) indicates that travel is a release into the unknown (Govier 1996, pxiii), and that travel is also about place and women’s position in place (Govier 1996, pxii). In *An Anthology of Women’s Travel Writing* (2002) Foster and Mills note that women travellers “…have had to challenge the assumption that women within the public sphere are somehow ‘out of place’ ” (2002, p172), and that “…‘place’ becomes a gendered site in which individual female aspiration can be played out” (2002, p172). In her novel *The Battlers* (2002), Kylie Tennant dispels any implication that a female body hitchhiking and travelling on the public road is ‘out of place’, as the narrative is in effect, Tennant’s record of Australia during the Great Depression based on her own experiences of being on the road during nineteen-thirty-two. The novel was selected as a case study for this thesis as it presents hitchhiking in an historical mode, thus illustrating the point that periods of social upheaval can lead to change, for instance, the acceptance of women’s need to travel by means of hitchhiking in public.

In discussing Australian fiction written during the Great Depression, a period when a woman’s place changed from the home to the road, and from the private to the public, Reid (1979) cites four particular writers as acutely assessing the situation of (Australian) women during the Depression: Tennant, Stead, Cusack, and Dark (p100). Tennant’s writing, which always contained a socialist agenda, meant she was defined
as an Australian Dickens or Steinbeck, and her novels were studied early on as part of (Australian) university courses (Spaulding 2008, p463). In an article in *The Canberra Times* Diane Stubbings (2006, p13) concludes that the beginning of *The Battlers* lay in the journey Tennant executed herself, hitching and walking nine-hundred and sixty kilometres from Sydney to Coonabarabran; and Jane Grant’s biography of Tennant (2006) discusses a second journey Tennant made following the N.S.W. fruit-picking routes of the itinerant workers, writing to her husband that the camp was “[f]ull of copy”, stating “[i]f I never moved out of here I’d have that book. I’m staying at least three days” (Grant 2006, p40).

Thus, *The Battlers* archives women of that period travelling in public on the road and on the track, hitching the existing forms of transport such as a horse-drawn cart. In her examination of the novels of Kylie Tennant, Margaret Dick (1966) draws attention to the rhythm and movement of the narrative, observing that a sense of space dominated the novel and its descriptions of the landscape and the characters which are connected to “[t]he rhythms of the great land whose roads they travel” (p50). These particular components of *The Battlers* made it an instructive and articulate choice for the first case study in a thesis that was focusing on (Australian) women travelling and hitchhiking.

Robyn Davidson’s travel narrative *Tracks*, became an iconic Australian story after Davidson ‘hitched’ herself to her camels and walked and rode from Alice Springs across the desert heart to the West Australian coast. Reviewing the text of *Tracks* after its first publication in 1980, Barry Dickins of the Toronto newspaper *The Globe and Mail* (1980) said he liked the book and called Robyn Davidson “a lovely lady” and although Dickins thought it was “not the most spectacular adventure ever recorded” (1980, pE.15) he appreciated the change Davidson experienced as she crossed the
desert: the fact that by losing her physical (public) and mental (private) sense of boundary and of censorship, she arrived at a new starting point in her mind. When researching early reviews for \textit{Tracks} it became apparent that while many enjoyed the text most did not comprehend they were reviewing a travel work that was already morphing into an Australian icon. Richard Snailham’s piece in the \textit{Geographical Journal} (1982) took care to outline Davidson’s stated aim in her own words: “…to be alone, to test, to push, to unclog my brain of all its extraneous debris, not to be protected, to be stripped of all social crutches…” (1982, p116). Although Snailham felt it was “…a staggeringly brave achievement by a self-taught girl”, he was unaware of how deeply \textit{Tracks} would bleed down, embedding itself into the Australian psyche and achieving a cult status. Even now in 2013, thirty-three years after publication, the text has been recently reprinted yet again, this time by Bloomsbury Press (U.K.) and work has begun on the film of the book to be directed by John Curran and starring Mia Wasikowska as Robyn Davidson.

On the surface, \textit{Tracks} is a travel narrative about being ‘on the road’ across the Australian outback but the pertinent observations regarding the female body within that landscape make the story something more: Davidson enters the desert as one person and comes out another, having attained a refreshing freedom of thought and action through the traversal of this unforgiving terrain. Eleanor Porter used Davidson’s story as part of her work \textit{Mother Earth and the Wandering Hero: Mapping Gender in Bruce Chatwin’s ‘The Songlines’ and Robyn Davidson’s ‘Tracks’} (1997) where she states that Davidson “…constructs a narrative for the female wanderer…” (p42) and discusses Davidson’s “…growing sense of her environment as a constituent of her Selfhood…” (p43). It was these particular aspects of \textit{Tracks} that made it a valuable and pertinent selection as a case study for this thesis.
Tracks contains observations that relate to women travelling and taking risks and speaks directly to the female body in the (Australian) landscape and the myth of security. In essays and other texts written since Tracks, such as Desert Places (1996), Davidson has spoken at length on the subject of nomadism and I have drawn on this writing in order to touch on the concept of wandering or nomadism and its close relationship to hitchhiking. In her travel narrative Davidson experiences her journey as a cathartic revelation that breaks through the usual boundaries that fears surrounding security (in particular for a female body) generally create, and she admits that her decision to travel the way she did was risk-taking but explains that she discovered more about herself by taking those risks. She addresses time intermittently throughout the narrative, focusing first on her fears at the beginning of the journey “…I was afraid of something like chaos. It was as if it were waiting for me to let down my guard…” (Davidson 1982, p128). She found herself “watching the clock” in an environment that felt timeless, and it was this juxtaposition she was most aware of during a period when she was traversing continuous sandhills that contained few reference points “[s]ome string somewhere inside me was starting to unravel” (Davidson 1982, p152). After she met the Aboriginal elder Mr Eddie, they travelled together and she felt “…torn by different time concepts…” (Davidson 1982, p173), until she admits that Eddie was “…teaching me something about flow…” (Davidson 1982, p173), and she then allowed her perception of time to change.

‘The Glove Box and Other Stories’ is a collection of fifteen pieces of short fiction that constitute the creative component of the thesis. Within the spaces of daily life conscious meanings are assigned to the everyday visible and invisible surfaces until an individual’s personal geography emerges. The fifteen narratives are reflective of not only the conscious, but the unconscious intuitions that can implicate space and
place, and that create the third spaces of inner life. The fictions predominantly use a first person voice, and in all cases a female voice, which aids in the projection of the thesis theme of hitchhiking female bodies (in public and in private spaces). The first person (female) voices consolidate and emphasise links between the stories, creating similarities in voice that construct a subtle and particular world that the fictions exist within. Other synchronicities act as links between the stories, for instance, the narrator of ‘The Blouse’ is Jassi, who is also the hitchhiking friend in ‘The Sampler’. In ‘Sixty Photos’ it is revealed Valma is the sister of the mother character in ‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’, and the mother of ‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’ is the same mother in ‘The Glove Box’, although each of those fictions interpret that character in an alternate way. She also appears in ‘Spooky Gurl’ driving her old ‘Jag’ car and she offers a lift to a young schoolgirl.

In ‘The Acquisition’ the telepathic Lunde connects with an imprisoned woman from her future, and it could be suggested that this female could be living in the future world that creates the backdrop to the story ‘Forthcoming’, in which the population is portrayed as being under a dictatorship, controlled and manipulated. The main female character of ‘Forthcoming’ mentions her own thesis which included a fiction entitled ‘Floorplan’ which is in fact, a fiction that is also part of this thesis creative collection, the basis of this narrative being the negative accommodation-sharing situation that a woman working on her doctorate (about women and hitchhiking) experiences, which ultimately creates a compromised position for that doctoral student. Agatha, who lives on Vedic Road and visits the household featured in ‘Floorplan’, is the daughter who tells the story of ‘The Glove Box’ thus creating a circuitous thread. Not all the narratives are so connected but the theme of hitchhiking or a particular definition of hitchhiking (such as in ‘The Acquisition’ where one telepathic hitches her mind to the
other in order to escape), constitutes an overall collaboration between the fictions, culminating in a world of hitchhiking where the reasons, the risks, and the consequences of that activity are emphasised, and the female body is constantly engaged in existing within the spaces both public (exterior) and private (interior) that make up this mutating activity.

The unity of the pieces in theme and focus create a strength to the entire manuscript. At the same time, it is possible for the stories to stand alone in publication, which has been the case for three of the fictions: ‘Mortdale’, ‘The Acquisition’, and ‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’. Publication has not resulted in any specific comment from editors or readers, excepting that publication in itself can be viewed as a silent form of positive acceptance, but the publication of the complete collection of the hitchhiking fictions could be expected to result in a stronger reaction. It is hoped they will receive this form of publication.
Contextualisation

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the concept of hitchhiking and being ‘on the road’ through a lens of poststructural feminisms focused on the female body. Through two case studies and my own creative work (which stands as a third case study), I will argue that the mythic road journey is one that exists for women (as well as men) holding an important liminal position in their imagination and representing a freedom to travel in the way they choose. As Longhurst and Johnston state in *Space, Place, and Sex* (2010):

> Certain social setting become available through the car. The mobility a car provides facilitates greater access to more spaces and places…The car allows us to break free from the tyranny of scale, particularly the scale of the home. (p7)

Travelling by means of hitchhiking has always existed as a method of ‘free’ transportation that can include various risks to both the driver and the hitchhiker, and because of this it has gained a transgressive reputation, in particularly in relation to women. Elizabeth Grosz reminds us in her text, *Volatile Bodies* (1994), that “[t]he body is not outside of history, for it is produced through and in history. Relations of force, of power, produce the body…” (p148). At the same time, this reputation has led to hitchhiking being viewed (and written about) as a means of seeking adventure (by men or women) and as giving scope for the possibility of escaping the restrictions and usual habitual perimeters of society. Writers from Chaucer to Jack Kerouac have also used ‘on the road’ travel in their work to present the search for enlightenment. For instance, the character, ‘Sal’ in Kerouac’s novel, *On the Road* (2000), describes his
first hitchhiking trip in Biblical terms “…I would be strange and ragged and like the
Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word…” (p33).

My research, focusing on hitchhiking or ridesharing, took me originally to the
Bible. In Acts 8, verses 26 - 39 (1961), a narrative is given that relates to the apostle
Philip, who was travelling ‘on the road’, preaching the Word of the Bible. God spoke
to him and instructed Philip to go south along the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, which
ran through desert. When he did this, an Ethiopian man, a eunuch of ‘great authority’
passed Philip in his chariot:

And Philip ran hither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias,
and said, ‘Understandest thou what thou readest?’ And he said, ‘How
can I except some man should guide me?’ And he desired Philip that
he would come up and sit with him. (Norton 2005, Acts 8, v29 – 31)

This Bible excerpt establishes hitchhiking as a form of transport and establishes the
convention of hitchhiking as a method of travel that requires a transaction of some
kind, but no ticket nor any material currency.

The research also examined well-known texts from Western literature that depict
‘on the road’ journeys. Homer’s epic story *The Odyssey* (1946), is one of the most
famous ‘road’ narratives in Western literature. Odysseus travels away from his home
on the island of Ithaca to fight the Trojan War. He is absent for many years and
eventually returns home in disguise. His journey has transformed him “…the gods
spoil a man’s looks even though he was born in a palace, when they force him to the
wretched life of the road” (Homer 1946, p309). Odysseus’ wife, Penelope, has stayed
at home waiting for his return. The road is ‘no place’ for a woman: Penelope’s ‘place’
is considered to be within the home. Longhurst and Johnston have written that
“[H]omes are complex spaces…” (2010, p44) and that:

It is not necessarily a haven or a private and secure space in which
one can say and do exactly as one chooses as though the outside public
world does not exist. Even in that most private of spaces within the home, the bedroom, behaviors may be subjected to exterior monitoring and controls. (2010, p44)

The story of Penelope’s forced internment on Ithaca has inspired a number of reactions among modern female writers, including Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005), and a version by the Australian poet, Joanne Burns, who created *penelope’s knees* (2009), a sixteen-page poetic travelogue that concentrates on Penelope’s ‘heroic’ and peripatetic journeys on foot and on the roads through and around Sydney. Penelope is no longer a ‘stay at home’ and Odysseus has morphed into:

...a mere name,  
a blur of face, just a stab of her past, no photos all letters thrown out; as she passed him on george street there’d be little, or nothing to say  
(Burns 2009, p13, italics in original)

Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* (1951) features men and women in the medieval age, on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Thomas Beckitt in Canterbury, and his *Prologue* begins with a reference to Spring, intimating that after the hibernation of Winter we have ‘itchy feet’ and long to be ‘on the road’:

When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all  
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power  
As brings about the engendering of the flower…  
…Then people long to go on pilgrimages  
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands…  
(Chaucer 1951, p19)

There is an erotic, sexual connotation here, with Spring portrayed as not only the season to be travelling but the season of love and procreation, signifying the renewal of nature and the physical world. Pilgrimage enabled men and women to depart from their habitual routines and embark on a journey of the new. It was a spiritual calling and that reason legitimised the actual entertainment of being ‘on the road’ in comradeship with many others from all backgrounds and classes, as *The Canterbury
Tales reflects. In the Prologue, the narrator describes travelling within the company of “nine and twenty”:

By speaking to them all upon the trip
I soon was one of them in fellowship
And promised to rise early and take the way
To Canterbury, as you have heard me say.
(Chaucer 1951, p20)

Pilgrimage was both an aspiration and an adventure. Everyday life in the Middle Ages was insular and feudal (Ure 2006, p9) and these expeditions could be likened to a kind of exciting quest, or even a penance (Ure 2006, p7). The Canterbury Tales is evidence that women travelled ‘on the road’, as several of the tales focus on women pilgrims who are part of the company, including The Prioress’s Tale, The Second Nun’s Tale, and the well-known, The Wife of Bath’s Tale. Jane Robinson writes in her introduction to Wayward Women: A Guide to Women Travellers (1990), that:

A female who travelled abroad was a strange creature in any age – although by the nineteenth century perhaps not quite as shocking as before. Then, if she were a lady, she could go where she pleased, given suitable male protection…”(p8)

More unusual was a female who travelled as a pilgrim and recorded her experiences, such as the medieval woman, Margery Kempe. A religious convert, she journeyed without her husband on pilgrimage to Constantinople and Rome during the 1400s, but Kempe claimed that if she wished to travel without her husband as a chaperone, society expected her to be accompanied by a group of other respectable pilgrims. Kempe’s The Book Of Margery Kempe (1994), strangely related in the third person (and not the first), records Margery’s descriptions of her pilgrimages. The other pilgrims made fun of her religious piousness causing her:

…much shame and reproof…They cut her gown so short that it only came a little below her knee, and made her put on some white canvas in a kind of sacking apron, so that she would be taken as a fool…
(Kempe 1994, p98)
Kempe was ostracised, and after being rejected from the group, she was forced to continue her pilgrimage with a man she hired as a chaperone, although he confided to her “‘I’m afraid you’ll be taken from me, and I’ll be beaten up because of you and lose my coat’” (Kempe 1994, p101). Kempe’s record of her peripatetic travels, first within England and then to holy shrines overseas, is evidence, like Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales, that women did venture forth ‘on the road’. It was Kempe’s particularly localised descriptions of her religious experiences and travels that originally led me to my doctoral topic focusing on hitchhiking and being ‘on the road’ from a female perspective.

Road travel regularly appears in myths and fairytales. The Musicians of Bremen is a story collected by the Grimm Brothers and included in their Grimm’s Fairy Tales (1971), which was first published in 1812. It is a well-known children’s story about being prepared to change your old life and to go ‘on the road’ and take the risk of travelling into the unknown to achieve a change in your life. Nettleton and Watson believe that “…a key feature of contemporary societies is risk…a pervasive feature which permeates into everyday life” (1998, p6). In this story, an ass, a dog, a cat and a rooster, who have all been threatened with death in their usual places of abode, come together when they meet on the road and discover they hold a dream to travel to the city of Bremen and become musicians. Eventually, their (dreadful) music drives a group of robbers from their hideout in the woods, and the house is left for the animals to occupy:

…they consulted together how they should contrive to get the robbers out: and at last they hit upon a plan. The ass placed himself upright on his hind legs…the dog got upon his back: the cat scrambled up to the dog’s shoulders, and the cock flew up and sat upon the cat’s head…. When all was ready, a signal was given, and they began their music. The ass brayed, the dog barked, the cat mewed, and the cock screamed. (Grimm Brothers 1971, p13)
By venturing into the unknown and taking a risk, and working together, the animals achieve a change for the better in their lives. When the road traveller is taken out of their usual environment and moved into an unknown spatiality, that therefore holds a potentially dangerous and challenging aspect, they are in an unconventional terrain.

Blue Highways (1983) is a travel book about America: the author, William Least Heat-Moon, drove across the United States using mainly non-highway roads (the ‘blue’ roads on the map), often picking up hitchhikers. In his text he refers to this aspect of not knowing as ‘the fecundity of the unexpected’, remarking that “[a] traveler who leaves the journey open to the road finds unforeseen things come to shape it. ‘The fecundity of the unexpected,’ Proudhon called it” (Heat-Moon 1983, p108). Jack London’s collection of anecdotes published in 1907 and entitled The Road (1967), relates narratives from London’s time as a hobo, hitchhiking and jumping freight trains during the pre-Depression period in America. These forms of travel are presented as daring and adventurous, and when London is invited to have breakfast in the home of two maiden ladies in Pennsylvania he feels he has brought “…the large airs of the world, freighted with the lusty smells of sweat and strife, and with the tangs and odours of strange lands…” (London 1967, p79) into the confines of the ladies’ life. Throughout The Road, London claims that the best thing about the hobo hitchhiking life is its protean quality:

Perhaps the greatest charm of tramp life is the absence of monotony. In Hobo Land the face of life is protean – and ever-changing phantasmagoria, where the impossible happens and the unexpected jumps out of the bushes at every turn of the road. The hobo never knows what is going to happen the next moment; hence, he lives only in the present moment. He has learnt the futility of endeavor, and knows the delight of drifting along with the whimsicalities of chance. (London 1967, p77)
The terms ‘tramp’ and ‘hobo’ have been used to describe itinerant wanderers. In 1937, the American writer Ben Reitman, a hobo himself and later an agitator, gynecologist and birth control activist, published *Sister of the Road* (2002), which claimed to be the autobiography of a woman hobo named ‘Box Car Bertha’. It professed to be a frank and uncensored confessional of a “wandering woman of the underworld” and publicised itself as “revealing intimate facts of a woman hobo’s methods and habits”. It was later discovered to be a fictitious piece of work written by Reitman, most likely based on his female hobo friend, Retta Toble, and on the conversations Reitman would have had with female hoboes attending his clinic or at the Hobo College he established in Chicago. In the book, a character called ‘Sunshine Nellie’ tells Box Car Bertha about how she “got fed up” with cooking and church-going and “just started out hitchhiking” (Thompson 2002, p166). Bertha reflects that women go ‘on the road’ to escape misery and poverty, or they may be seized with wanderlust “[t]he rich can become globe-trotters, but those who have no money become hoboes” (Thompson 2002, p13).

This sentiment is also reflected in Kylie Tennant’s novel *The Battlers* (2002), which I have used as one of my case studies. In October, 1929, the American stockmarket crashed and this ushered in a new period of economic recession. In Australia, a third of the workforce became unemployed. Eviction and unemployment resulted in thousands of homeless people, including families, on the move or ‘padding the hoof’. Because the ‘susso’ as it was known, or relief scheme, forced recipients to leave each town and travel further on to gain their next payment, hitchhiking became a warranted, and therefore acceptable form of travel, and this mobility is an integral part of the story of *The Battlers*. That aspect is one of the reasons I chose this novel as a case study. A ‘shiralee’ was the term for a ‘swag’ or a burden, something you were
forced to carry, and this word was used as the title of Darcy Niland’s novel, *The Shiralee* (1980), set during the Australian Depression. The four-year-old female Buster is defined by her father, Macauley, as a ‘shiralee’ when he is forced to take her on the road with him while he looks for work. According to Kylie Tennant, there were many families ‘on the road’, although a single man looking after a child was more unusual:

> He had two swags, one of them with legs and a cabbage-tree hat, and that one was the main difference between him and others who take to the road, following the sun for bread and butter. Some have dogs. Some have horses, some have women. And they have them as mates and companions, or for this reason or that, all of some use. But with Macauley it was this way: he had a child and the only reason he had it was because he was stuck with it. (Niland 1980, p1)

The vast distances of Australia and high temperatures can cause medical and vehicular difficulties for travellers. In the outback and in the country areas, it is an unsaid rule that you stop and offer a ride if you sight someone on the road, rather than leave them stranded. This attitude has resulted in hitchhiking or ridesharing being an accepted act in areas that are outside of the built city and urban sprawls. In the Australian children’s classic, *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (Gibbs 1990), a hitchhiking adventure exists as part of the gumnut babies’ narrative. Snugglepot and his friend, Ragged Blossom, are thrust into a sack and thrown over a high cliff into the sea by their enemy, the Big Bad Banksia Man. The babies fall out of the sack and into the water below where they are offered a lift on the back of a hermit crab:

> “Get on the roof and I’ll take you along.”
> “Thank you Mr Hermit,” they both said with delight. They clambered upon the house and away they went. (Gibbs 1990, p98)

Gibbs used the stories of the gumnut babies to make eco-conservational statements on the difference between the exploitative built city (the “big bad city”) and the natural indigenous bush ecology. Laurie Duggan (2001) describes the diminutive world of
Snugglepot and Cuddlepie as an “urban culture of a particular time and place” (2001, p44) that features mobility such as “[h]igh roads and lizard-bridges…” (2001, p44), in other words transportative vectors that can be used for hitchhiking (which is presented in the text as being perfectly acceptable).

In chapter two of John Steinbeck’s iconic Depression novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1975), first published in 1939, a young man hitchs a lift with a truckdriver. Once in the truck, young Tom Joad becomes silent “…looking into the distance ahead, along the road, along the white road that waved gently, like a ground swell” (Steinbeck 1975, p15). In hitchhiking narratives, the road often becomes a character in its own right, its continuous line an indication of a future far ahead. After his truck ride, Tom Joad “…watched the distance and the blue air-shimmer” (p21). Joad’s family is evicted and the grandparents, men, women, children and dogs, are forced to take to the road where they meet the Wilsons. After some days on the road, the Joads and the Wilsons realise that: “…the highway became their home and movement their medium of expression” (Steinbeck 1975, p173). When speaking in *Time Travels* (2005) of the way life is “…a kind of opening up of matter to indeterminancy…” (p41), Grosz also discusses “The impossibility of givenness, of fixity, of the eternal and the unchanging…” (2005, p41). The road journey that the Joads and Wilsons are forced to begin is a reminder of the intangibility of life, and the road trip can present itself as a metaphor for that.

Fellowship between men and women travelling the road is an important aspect of that mode of travel and features in many literary examples that have already been discussed, such as *The Battlers, The Grapes of Wrath, The Canterbury Tales* and *The Musicians of Bremen*. In *The Wizard of Oz* (Baum 1982), the camaraderie between the four road travellers is an important element of the story (also adapted into a famous
Hollywood movie version). *The Wizard of Oz* is a celebration of the road trip, and in it the road is a dream, a liminal desire, and part of a quest. The female protagonist Dorothy, commences her quest accompanied only by her dog, Toto. It is predictable that Dorothy soon meets three male characters: the straw scarecrow, the tin man and the cowardly lion, who must escort her on her quest, for Dorothy is a female travelling by herself in public and therefore at risk. *The Wizard of Oz* shows us the road in its many configurations: as the travellers proceed they travel through dark forest and over rough and uneven terrain, at one point the road is divided by a chasm. Further on, a river cuts across it. The scarecrow offers a piece of philosophical road wisdom “[i]f this road goes in, it must come out” (Baum 1982, p36). Finally, the scenery transforms, and the road is surrounded by Eden-like fields of fresh grass with trees bearing ripe, edible fruits. The ‘Yellow Brick Road’ of *The Wizard of Oz* is an important element of the narrative, and has even evolved into an iconic road symbol that has been adapted into the English language, now referring to a pathway or journey of fantasy, of allure, and of tantalising desire. Popular culture has featured Elton John’s song *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973), and the image and idea of that ‘yellow brick’ road has been used to sell consumer goods such as brick paving. The colour yellow is often used on maps to indicate main roads.

The landscapes that are passed through in these literary hitchhiking itinerancies can range from forest to jungle to desert, and often metaphorically represent something other, a landscape that is outside so-called normality; and to venture into the wilderness, leaving the built environment of civilisation behind, generally indicates a journey of self-discovery. The infamous text *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson 1972), could be described as such, it is a road trip across the desert
to Las Vegas, during which a hitchhiker is picked up who acts as witness to the bizarre drug-fuelled behaviour of the journalist narrator and his attorney:

My attorney saw the hitchhiker long before I did. ‘Let’s give this boy a lift,’ he said, and before I could mount any argument he was stopped and this poor Okie kid was running up to the car with a big grin on his face, saying, ‘Hot damn! I never rode in a convertible before!’

(Thompson 1972, p13)

The journalist informs the hitchhiker they are on their way to Las Vegas “to find the American Dream” (Thompson 1972, p14), but no other writer has romanticised the connection between hitchhiking and the ‘American Dream’ more than Jack Kerouac, whose novel *On the Road* (2000) helped to maintain and mythologise the road and the road trip as male terrain. Much of Kerouac’s body of writing features ‘on the road’ narratives, including *Dharma Bums* (2007) and *Lonesome Traveler* (2000).

First published in 1957, *On the Road* is now interpreted as the metaphorical loss of American innocence. The road and hitchhiking both become symbols of redemption, and ultimately, divine revelation. *On the Road* was the defining novel of the Beat generation (a group of American post-World War II writers who rejected the received standards of that society), and is important as it presents hitchhiking as romantic, politically cool and even spiritual. Kerouac used the novel to convey his politics regarding revolution, ridesharing, consumerism and capitalism, preferring to view life the same way as his character Japhy Ryder in *Dharma Bums*, who sees a world that is:

…full of rucksack wanderers, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn’t really want anyway such as refrigerators, T.V. sets, cars, at least fancy new cars, certain hair oils and general junk you find you always see a week later in the garbage… (Kerouac 2007, p97)

Kerouac’s vision for *On the Road* is derived from the work of the English Romantic poets of the nineteenth century, and from the American cultural romanticism of the
same period. The main character, Sal Paradise, is searching for something special and intangible, that could even be termed holy. In her study of Kerouac’s work (The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac, 1987), Regina Weinreich comments that the structure is that of the quest romance “[a]fter all the quest tradition is the oldest tradition of the novel itself” (1987, p35), and she points out that “Kerouac’s fascination with high-speed cross-country excursions brings quest romance into a distinctly twentieth century mode” (Weinreich 1987, p35). In his essay in The Body – A Reader (2005) Foucault states that power turns the body into a political investment (Fraser & Greco, p100); and Grosz maintains that power “…punishes those resistant to its rules and forms…” (1994, p149). Kerouac was aware of this. In On the Road he used the ideal of hitchhiking as a metaphor for individual freedom, and to shake up or reject established ‘norms’ and conventions, thereby portraying hitchhiking as a transgressive activity tinged with a romantic idealism.

Although Kerouac celebrated the road as a predominant domain for the male soul, the novel does include the female character, Marylou, based on the real-life LuAnne Henderson. She is a gritty, sexy character but does not participate in the deep philosophical road revelations and rants of the two leading males. Instead, her language sometimes arrives at a “speechless standstill” (Kerouac 2000, p134) in what would have been an eloquent moment, if it had been either of the two males, Sal or Dean speaking. Yet, in the iconic New Zealand novel, Stand in the Rain (1965), the female hitchhiking, bushwhacking character that the author Jean Watson, creates, is capable of being totally eloquent on the topic of being ‘on the road’, indicating the existence of the road trip in the female psyche:

There are people who will always look in lighted windows and want to be there behind the safety of drawn blinds, and when they are then they’ll suddenly not want it or something will bugger it for them and they will feel the road beneath their feet again, and when they’re too
old for that they will watch it through the window of a bus or train…
And when we sleep will the road unwind dreamlike before us?
(Watson 1965, p150).

In many of the hitchhiking stories, the road morphs into a particular important element “[t]hen it was a fast walk along a silvery, dusty road beneath inky trees of California – a road like in *The Mark of Zorro* and a road like all the roads you see in Western B movies” (Kerouac 2000, p57). Kerouac presents the road journey as not only a political, spiritual and romantic quest, but sexual as well “[h]e and I suddenly saw the whole country like an oyster for us to open; and the pearl was there, the pearl was there” (Kerouac 2000, p124). In a similar motif to many other road stories such as May Gibbs’ *Snugglepot and Cuddlepie* (1990), Kerouac’s prose indicates the belief that being ‘on the road’ allowed the hitcher to connect with the wilderness of nature, that nature which we inscribe with such memory and meaning:

> Soon it got dusk, a grapy dusk, a purple dusk over tangerine groves and long melon fields, the sun the colour of pressed grapes, slashed with burgundy red, the fields the colour of love and Spanish mysteries. I stuck my head out of the window and took deep breaths of the fragrant air. (Kerouac 2000, p72)

In his book *Metamorphoses of the Body* (1998), José Gil maintains that people prefer to arrange signs in order to make the world comprehensible to them (Gil 1985, p92.5), feeling that without signifiers that act as boundaries or limitations, there would be nothing to separate us from the unknown. Gil proposes that certain behaviour encourages ‘floating signifiers’ that are malleable and transforming and that indicate an area on the fringe of the usual, an area that could be considered taboo or transgressive (Gil 1985, p94.5), and he describes these floating signifiers as being in existence “…on the boundaries of the social order” (Gil 1985, 93.5). As soon as there is a disruption or breakdown of the usual order or structure, Gil states these floating signifiers rise as forces of energy, coming into presence during those
passages of time that transmogrify our lives from one state to another “…birth, marriage, death, initiations or expeditions…” (Gil 1985, p94.5), or any emotional situation that creates conjunctions or disjunctions. The energy produced by these moments of change or trauma denote a setting loose, or a recodification of the usual signifiers that we use to obtain meaning and understanding. Hitchhiking, which crosses boundaries of time and measurement, and takes a hitcher out of a daily structure and routine, could be viewed as a breakdown of the usual order, creating a recodification such as Gil describes.

From the beginning, hitchhiking’s lack of a receipt or a ticket, or of any exchange of currency when it is still a mode of transport serving the passenger, means the general signifiers are broken, transcending the usual. The transaction is instead verbal, and the experience between driver and passenger is shared. Gil indicates that the floating signifiers herald a ‘shamanistic’ state that is an opening, a passageway that allows the chaotic, the unsignified and the abstract to happen (Gil 1985, p97). The expression of non-time and of non-currency that exists within hitchhiking encourages a destabilisation that could be viewed as a vector into the shamanistic state that Gil portrays and certainly this was an aspect of hitchhiking that Kerouac endorsed in his hitchhiking novel, On the Road:

The stars seemed to get brighter the more we climbed the High Plains. We were in Wyoming now. Flat on my back, I stared straight up at the magnificent firmament, glorying in the time I was making… (Kerouac 2000, p29)

In one chapter of On the Road, Sal (modeled on Kerouac) sees what he drives away from as “specks dispersing” (Kerouac 2000, p141), leaning forward instead towards “the next crazy venture beneath the skies” (Kerouac 2000, p141). His descriptions endorse the concept that the coming-and-going rhythm and movement of hitchhiking brings pronounced meaning to leave-taking. When Sal imagines a
character called the ‘Shrouded Traveler’ who follows him and Dean through their travels, he draws a parallel between hitchhiking and the ultimate leave-taking, death:

Something, someone, some spirit was pursuing all of us across the desert of life and was bound to catch us before we reached heaven. Naturally, now that I look back on it, this is only death: death will overtake us before we reach heaven. (Kerouac 2000, p112)

Kerouac presents hitchhiking as a timeless form of travel, and Douglas Adams also uses time in his well-known novel, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), which uses hitchhiking and the element of time as the actual mode of transport for the two main characters. The Earth is blown up by aliens to make way for a hyperspatial express route, but Arthur Dent and Ford Prefect manage to hitch a ride off the planet by using Prefect’s ‘Electric Thumb’. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is a sort of latter-day Kindle, and Ford’s occupation is to write entries for it. The two anti-heroes hitch a lift on a Vogon spacecraft and become involved with a super computer that is working on the answer to ‘everything’. They are eventually picked up by a spaceship that is powered by the synchronistic ‘Infinite Improbability Drive’. The Tao-influenced narrative focuses on time, and on the unusual ‘fecundity of the unexpected’ that Heat-Moon mentions in his travelogue, *Blue Highways* (1983).

Adams’ hitching-themed novel plumbs the sense of unpredictability that is always felt to be present. Normally, comprehensible signifiers indicate a subject’s control of the surrounding environment, leading to a (false) feeling of order as individuals seek to interpret meaning from the events in their daily lives. By using a transgressive activity such as hitchhiking, Adams pokes fun at the fear of unpredictability, an integral element of hitching. The creative potential in ‘not knowing’ that can be perceived within hitchhiking can make things occur, sitting inside unpredictability can be flowing and energetic. Heat-Moon makes a statement in *Blue Highways* (1983), that “time is not” (p343) when travelling on the road and that change is “continuous and
visible” (p343). The relationship, or rather non-relationship, between time and hitchhiking or ridesharing has been mentioned by many writers, including Robyn Davidson, the author of my second case study, *Tracks* (1982).

In conclusion, Bible excerpts and examples of text from classical literature (such as Homer and Chaucer) prove that hitchhiking or ridesharing has been in use well before the invention of the car. Hitchhiking is viewed as an escape from the usual restraints of society, and pilgrimage, a kind of ‘on the road’ journey, has a long history and is still relevant today, for instance in the undertaking of the (Christian) Santiago de Compostela in Europe or the (Muslim) holy hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. The road, and road travel exists in our literary canon, and that is reflected in stories and fairy tales such as the Grimm Brothers’ *The Musicians of Bremen*. Jack London covers some other salient points of hitchhiking – the protean quality of it, which William Least Heat-Moon also writes about using the description: ‘the fecundity of the unexpected’. Ultimately, risk appears to be at the heart of the hitchhiking journey, and I address this more comprehensively in my methodology and case studies. Risk is a theme that connects to hitchhiking in relation to the (female) body in public spaces such as the highway, the (female) body inside the private space of a vehicle, and the (female) body’s freedom to traverse the (Australian) landscape.
Methodology

Introduction

In this exegesis I will examine two case studies: Kylie Tennant’s *The Battlers* (2002) and Robyn Davidson’s *Tracks* (1982) using my chosen methodology of the post-structuralist feminist studies of the female body. My methodology focuses predominantly on the writings of Elizabeth Grosz, an Australian philosopher, feminist theorist, and academic, presently working in the USA. Her work concentrates on the social construct of the body, and on theory relating to corporeal feminism and her text, *Volatile Bodies* (1994), is concerned with articulating a corporeal feminist theory. I have also used the work of Robyn Longhurst, Professor of Geography at University of Waikato, New Zealand, specialising in feminist geography, and Professor Lynda Johnston, also at Waikato. I have focused on Longhurst’s text, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (2001), and on Longhurst and Johnston’s *Space, Place, and Sex* (2010). This methodology will be used in relation to three main themes relevant to women and hitchhiking. These are: the examination of women’s bodies in public places and spaces (such as the highway), and the fact that women’s bodies in such places are considered sites of risk; the examination of women’s bodies in private confined close(t) spaces such as that of a (hitchhiked) vehicle; and the freedom of the peripatetic female body to traverse the landscape. The theorists (Grosz, and Longhurst and Johnston) have been chosen as being most useful in the enterprise of examining these three main themes.

Grosz demands that we develop a new discourse in relation to the body, and she suggests that “…new terms and different conceptual frameworks must also be devised
to be able to talk of the body outside, or in excess of, binary pairs” (Grosz 1994, p24).

In *Volatile Bodies*, Grosz refigures the body and encourages a new discourse relating to the exterior and interior of the body, arguing that corporeal phenomenology is fundamentally linked to spatiality (Grosz 1994, p90). She believes that the expectations and meanings we relate to the objects around us (for instance, the relation of the road, or a vehicle on the road, to a hitchhiking body), are most important to the body’s mobilities and capabilities (Grosz 1994, p89). In discussing space and our relation to it, Grosz suggests that “…we do not grasp space directly or through our senses but through our bodily situation” (1994, p90). Written in 1994, *Volatile Bodies* describes the ‘new’ feminist writers as “…concerned with the lived body, the body insofar as it is represented and used in specific ways in particular cultures” (Grosz 1994, p18). One of the newer methods of defining the female body include ‘feminist geography’: the study of the female body in places and spaces, which often centres around the lived experiences of individuals or local community groups. Feminist geography concentrates on spatial constraints and the movement and mapping of women – a female cartography. Geographers, Longhurst and Johnston, claim that “[s]exual politics permeate all space – private and public, urban and rural, at the macro and at the micro level” (Longhurst & Johnston 2010, p3).

Moira Gatens’ *Imaginary Bodies* (1996) is a collection of essays that examine sexual relations and bodies under political power. Both she and Grosz have explored alternative positions to dualism, and what emerges in Gatens’ book is an ‘imaginary’ concept of consciousness that creates new ways of examining women’s lives. In an essay in the text, *Feminist Theory and the Body* (1999) Gatens states that “[b]y drawing attention to the context in which bodies move and recreate themselves, we
also draw attention to the complex dialectic between bodies and their environments” (Price & Shildrick 1999, p228).

When defining ‘place’ and ‘space’, we can turn to the work of the geographer, Tim Cresswell. He states that “[h]uman geography is the study of places” (Cresswell 2004, p1). and points out that ‘place’ is a word used regularly every day in the English language (in other words, we relate to ‘place’). Creswell defines place as an anonymous space that, once transformed by the relationship of the human body to that space, becomes a space with more meaning: a place. He argues that “[a]ll over the world people are engaged in place-making activities” (2004, p5). Location, locale, and a sense of place are three fundamental aspects that go towards making ‘place’, “…places must have some relationship to humans and the human capacity to produce and consume meaning” (Cresswell 2004, p7). For example, Sally Morgan, the Australian Aboriginal writer, titled her autobiographical work My Place (1987), which indicates not only a sense of territory but also identification with a more abstract, virtual place: a place that exists in the mind, and in memory and the psyche. When absolute space acquires social meaning then it becomes a ‘place’, and Cresswell explains “[p]lace, at a basic level, is space invested with meaning in the context of power” (2004, p12). Alternatively, he defines space as “…a more abstract concept than place” and he states that: “places have space between them” (Cresswell 2004, p8). ‘Space’ connotes more volume, a larger area. Space also makes up landscape, and landscape uses material topography to shape space. Cresswell feels that “[s]pace, landscape and place are clearly highly interrelated terms…” (Cresswell 2004, p12).

Following on from the work of both Gatens and Grosz, Johnston and Longhurst’s Space, Place, and Sex (2010) focuses on the body as a place or site that is both public
and private, concentrating on sexuality and gendered spaces in the home, community and in rural or urban areas. The study of the geography and cartography of the body, or where we live and where we work, has consolidated the importance of the emotional attachments and meanings humans connect to places and spaces. Longhurst and Johnston argue in *Space, Place, and Sex* (2010), that geographical scale is used as a strategy within sociology in order to dominate and control “*[s]pace, place and sex are inextricably linked. It matters that bodies occupy particular positions marked in time and space*” (Longhurst & Johnston 2010, p2). Therefore, it can be argued that hitchhiking and other examples of the female body in public spaces such as bushwalking, swimming, walking and running for fitness, and all kinds of travel both local and global, are instances of women establishing a kind of reterritorialisation, a corporeal cartographic reinscription. Grosz points out that “…what is at stake is the activity and agency, the mobility and social space, accorded to women” (1994, p19).

A corporeal and geographical feminist theory can be an important tool in analysing the hitchhiking female body as it moves across the landscape in public places, or is held within the public/private space of a vehicle. Longhurst’s text, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries* (2001), and her work with Johnston, *Space, Place and Sex* (2010), both concentrate on where and how we live, and the way place and the placement of bodies in their lived space take a role in shaping identity. This is now an influence on many aspects of living: such as architecture, city planning, policing and surveillance, and the home and workplace. Female hitchhiking, viewed through a lens of feminist geographic interpretation, unearths and recategorises such an activity, and we can observe that hitchhiking can be a device that indicates not only a liminal desire to travel and to be out of the place you are expected to socially stay in, but a participation in a risk-taking; a construct that allows both genders to push spatial and
therefore social boundaries. Of course, the mobility that a car provides also facilitates a release from the home and neighbourhood, and gives greater access to places and spaces.

*The hitchhiking body*

The space around the hitchhiking body is subject to change. This spatiality moves predominantly between that of the open road or highway, which is where the female body can appear most at risk, and within the enclosed space of a vehicle, or the cabin of the vehicle. Hitchhiking crosses the boundaries that exist between public and private space and it is this area of ‘betweenedness’ that makes it an activity of such unpredictability. Hitchhiking’s relationship to unpredictability is a metaphor to life in general and its unexpected qualities:

> Life is not different from matter but is a kind of opening up of matter to indeterminacy, a qualitative transformation of matter into the unexpected, the surprising, the never-seen-before and the never-able-to-be-repeated. (Grosz 2005, p41)

The hitchhiking body experiences supreme (public) spatiality in one instant, and then when it removes itself inside a vehicle, it is alternatively held within the intimate (private) territory that belongs to the driver. This can result in a feeling of displacement on the hitchhiker’s part. The hitchhiking body must learn to morph and transform whilst retaining its own inter-embodiment, as it moves into the dichotomy that Longhurst refers to as existing “…between public space (exterior and open) and private space (interior and closed)…” (2001, p130). At the same time, the hitchhiking body is often required to walk as it waits for another ‘lift’. (The importance of walking as a hitchhiker is used in the opening shots of the recent movie of the book
Walking not only creates a (momentary) physical relationship with the surrounding landscape but exists as a mode of movement in its own right:

…a weak shaft of sunlight struck down, as though powerless to bless, but willing. It laid its light across the long curves of wooded hills…and on the figure of the Stray limping along by herself. (Tennant 2002, p240)

For anyone who is capable of walking, and even those in a wheelchair such as Yeend, who relates her experiences in *Travels with my Wheelchair* (1993), walking and movement from one point to another is a link, a connection that we regularly use. In hitchhiking, it connects the walker more organically to the physical road, and the connection between the road and the walker (or hitcher) is similar to that connection we have between ‘things’ (objects), space, belonging, and the body “[t]he thing is what we make of the world rather than simply what we find of the world, the way we are able to manage it and regulate it according to our needs and purposes” (Grosz 2005, p133). Grosz also defines the ‘thing’ (in this case, the road) as a point of intersection in space and time “…a locus of temporal narrowing…that constitutes specificity and singularity” (2005, p132). The road is a vector between the urban and the rural or natural world, which are both inscribed with historical memory and meaning. For instance, the ‘wilderness’, or natural world, can hold a primordial atmosphere, a quality suggestive of a wild, dangerous place outside the law, an antithesis to civilization and the built world.

*Women’s bodies at risk in public spaces*

The freedom of the female body to move when and where it wants has been one of the most important aspects of feminism and has resulted in an enormous field of work written about the (female) body. Why would women be considered at risk when hitchhiking? The media has been responsible for creating an unrealistically high fear
of crime, and in the text, *Discourse, the Body and Identity* (2003), Tulloch and Tulloch suggest in their essay, *Tales of Outrage and the Everyday: Fear of Crime and Bodies at Risk*, that this could even be viewed as a further product of the patriarchal system (Coupland & Gwyn 2003, p108). The media prefers to focus on accounts of violence by unknown assailants in public spaces, although the majority of attacks against women occur in domestic situations, when women are in the place that is supposedly the most ‘secure’ (Coupland & Gwyn 2003, p108).

Tulloch and Tulloch point out that not all bodies are equal and that female bodies, in particular, have been constructed as places of risk (Coupland & Gwyn 2003, p108). Because of this, women are made to feel they should demonstrate different behavior between public and private spaces (Coupland & Gwyn 2003, p109). Tulloch and Tulloch argue that the media emphasis on violence influences women to negotiate their everyday lives between public and private spaces (Coupland & Gwyn 2003, p109). It has been conveyed to women that their bodies are most at risk when they are situated in public spaces, and that in private places, such as the home, they can feel ‘secure’. It is these public areas that translate into ‘dangerous’ spaces for women: parking lots, public lifts, public transport, public footpaths; and these are the places where women police themselves, using safety precautions in their behaviour.

Longhurst and Johnston argue that:

> Fear and danger are associated with public space…Ironically, though, the biggest threat of violence comes not from outside the home from a stranger but from inside the home from someone we are intimate with. (Longhurst & Johnston 2010, p46)

Because I am a woman, I am often asked if I would like a ride ‘right to the door’. I am asked if I will be ‘all right’ travelling home on public transport. Because I am a woman, I have been told to shut the gate, lock the door, keep the ground floor windows closed, and to place a pair of men’s gumboots outside the front door. This is
why, when women participate in hitchhiking, it becomes a transgressive activity. If women are ‘on the road’, they put themselves at risk. When women are not in their ‘proper’ place, they are existing in an ‘improper’ place (Cresswell 1996, p121). Public spaces are viewed as improper, uncontrolled situations for the female body. In this context, hitchhiking is seen as a geographically transgressive activity that creates a space of difference for women to exist in.

What is it that women risk by placing their bodies in ‘dangerous’ spaces? The works of two feminist writers argue that dangers such as rape are inevitable. The French feminist filmmaker and writer, Virginie Despentes (who was raped herself, when hitchhiking, and wrote the book and the film Baise-Moi (2000) based on her experience), argues that rape is “…an inevitable danger, a danger that women need to take into account and run the risk of encountering, if they want to leave their homes and move around freely” (Despentes 2009, p33). Presenting this attitude, Despentes states in her text, King Kong Theory (2009), that she hopes to devalue rape, and instead give a new value to the ability to recover from such a crime. She believes hitchhiking in public is a risk worth taking “…if you want to leave the house…” (Despentes 2009, p34). Of her own rape, Despentes writes:

…we had gone out in the wild because nothing much ever happened in Mummy and Daddy’s house. We had taken the risk, and paid the price, and instead of being ashamed of being alive, we could choose to get back on our feet…” (Despentes 2009, p34)

She describes the risk of her (continued) hitchhiking and other transgressive means of mobility (‘skipping’ train fares), as ‘worth it’, saying it was “…so much more intense than shutting myself up in school learning to be docile, or sitting at home reading magazines” (Despentes 2009, p35).
The Iranian (Muslim) novelist, Shahrnush Parsipur, makes a similar assertion in her novel *Women Without Men* (2011), a mystical allegory that embodies the (on the road) quest myth for women. When the characters Munis and Fa’iza arrive at the door of Mrs Farrokhlaqa, Munis explains why they have been hitchhiking “‘The fact is that we decided to break out of the bondage of familial conventions and travel, to go on pilgrimages, explore the world’ ” (Parsipur 2011, p82). Munis adds that she had decided to “‘…walk the path of enlightenment even if it meant suffering hardships’ ” (Parsipur 2011, p83). While the two women were hitchhiking, they were raped. Munis (like Despentes) discusses the risk of transgressive hitchhiking for women, explaining that “‘Naturally, when you embark on a journey you run risks. You either have the substance to overcome hardships or not…’ ” (Parsipur 2011, p83). Parsipur appears to be saying that despite the risks involved it is worth pushing the boundaries that extend a female geography into a cartography that is less passive and invisible, and instead: visible, motivated, energetic. Parsipur’s allegorical fiction can also be viewed as a metaphor for other kinds of (visible) risk-taking by women – in the workplace, in education and government, and in the political arena.

*The body in the interior of the vehicle.*

I have argued that the relationship between the body and the public space is one important component of hitchhiking. My second methodological theme focuses on the interior spatiality of the (hitchhiked) vehicle. The motorised vehicle has become an important part of our identity – society even celebrating the passing of a test to obtain a driver’s licence and the attainment of a first vehicle. In the ‘DriveLife’ section of the *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Tony Davis asks ‘what do people do in cars?’ (Davis 10 September 2010, p3). His answer is that they smoke, pick their noses, burp,
sing, play the drums on the dashboard or on the wheel, pull faces, talk to themselves, photograph stuff using their mobile phones, eat breakfast, and other “…rude, immoral or distasteful things…” that he will only intimate, rather than mention. A car can be used for many of the bodily and sexual functions generally enacted within the bedroom or bathroom spaces of a private residence. Cars can be used to stalk people, to carry firearms and other dangerous weapons, as a place to make or sell drugs from (a mobile methamphetamine laboratory), and can even be a site of murder. It is a discursively confused space where the point of definition blurs. The inside space of a vehicle can be intimate and personal or communal, and it can be policeable. It is domestic but under state legislation. It is a liminal space that lingers between the public and private worlds.

Private space has been viewed as an area where people conduct family and other intimate relationships but private space (as opposed to public space, a more political arena) can also be a kind of third space or liminal area where humans think, dream, cogitate, plot, plan, or zone out. Examples of these types of spaces can be bathroom areas, the place where a worker will go for a ‘breather’ or a cigarette at their workplace, and favourite nature spots. Cars (and other vehicles of all kinds) can also be included in this list. The private space of a vehicle, which remains under public government legislation, focuses debate on the shifting boundaries of public/private corporeality (Holmes 2009, p62).

Small spaces, such as the space inside a vehicle, illustrate differences in scale: for example, it is possible for these spaces to illustrate a metaphorical difference between the individual and the state. In some of the short fictions that make up the creative component of my thesis, the car is exposed as a close(t) or intimate space. In Longhurst’s text, Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries (2001), she defines the sort of
activities that may take place in what she refers to as ‘close(t)’ spaces as “…socially constructed as too familiar, near, intimate, and threatening to be disclosed publicly” (p213). What goes on inside the spatiality of a close(t) space that cannot be performed in public? It is the particular enclosure of such a space that makes it political in terms of the body. Areas such as bathrooms, shrubbery, storage, and the interior of any kind of vehicle have been used not only as places of privacy and resistance, but can also function as sites of entrapment, abuse, and oppression. The geographical exclusion that a close(t) space creates, denotes boundaries and suggests the shape of something ‘other’ that is an embodiment of privacy and secrecy.

_The freedom of the peripatetic woman to traverse the landscape._

The desire to travel (to follow the road) appears to be an innate yearning that resonates in many of us, a possible vector that reaches back to our original nomadic roots. The existence of expressions such as ‘itchy feet’ and ‘hit the road’ reflect this desire. The road is featured repetitively in popular culture: in movies, in theatre, literature, and in various forms of visual art such as photography. In the well-known Rider/Waite Tarot deck, the card entitled ‘The Moon’, numbered XVIII (Quinn 2009, p123), shows a white track under moonlight meandering from the edge of water and winding its way across land, until it reaches a range of mountains in the distance. Two canines (a dog and wolf) sit howling. These images convey the road as a primeval power, an embodiment of a darker and transgressive, unpredictable side of our souls. The picture evokes a dream-like subliminal world that presents the fears of the mind. The road or track disappears into unknown, possibly unmapped, cartography.

The third and final perspective of my methodology, the freedom of the peripatetic female body to traverse the landscape, relates not just to a liminal desire to travel. As
Spain points out in her text *Gendered Spaces* (1992) “[s]patial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power” (1992, p15). Controlling access to knowledge and resources by the control of space is one way a dominant group can manage to retain and reinforce its position. Cresswell and Uteng (2008) suggest that a desire to belong and to identify can propel mobility “The layers of mobility are not merely a question of movement but of the making of particular identities, relations to the world and effective attachments with which subjects are implicated in the world” (2008, p77). Spain supports the notion of mobility when she maintains that “[f]or women to become more knowledgeable they must change places” (1992, p15).

What these theorists appear to be discussing is not merely a physical mobility (although that is important) but a fluidity of spatiality. Our perceptions of space are shaped by our capacity to move within it, and space shapes our identity whether we refer to the physical space we live and work in, or the ‘third spaces’ we mentally dream and plan inside. Behaviour and space can be viewed as being mutually dependent, symbiotic. I argue that hitchhiking offers one perspective that focuses on the dynamics and political functions of space. Its transgressive reputation could contribute to the facilitation of change, as transgressive behavior is often at the forefront of argument and transformation (Davidson 1982, p231).

Grosz’s theorizing concentrates predominantly on the reassessment of feminist politics, particularly by applying the power of time as a positive natural force, which she claims “…transforms all objects, processes, events, with its relentless passage” (2005, p4). Within the concept of time Grosz situates its unpredictability and impermanence (implicit aspects of hitchhiking) as positive components of a ‘new’ feminist theory, suggesting we welcome “…a concept of the future which we do not
control but which may shape and form us according to its forces” (2005, p2), and commenting that “...the human is both that which is in the process of necessarily transforming itself and that which can never know itself to the point of predictability” (2005, p41).

**Conclusion**

The use of the three themes (women’s bodies in public spaces and places, women’s bodies in private close(t) spaces, and the freedom of the peripatetic female body) will enable deconstruction of the subject of the travelling/ hitchhiking female body. In discussing women’s bodies as sites of risk in public, I initially defined the concept of feminist geography in order to indicate the influence that spatial constraints, gendered spaces, and (female) cartography have on this topic. Geographical scale has always been used as a tool of control and power. Hitchhiking, although sometimes viewed as transgressive, provides an avenue for women to take the risk to ‘leave home’, as Despentes describes it, and risk-taking creates a more visible, motivated energy.

The private interior of a vehicle represents an important aspect of private space which, in certain circumstances, can be defined as ‘third’ space: space which is other, possibly virtual, but alternative in some way. Applying this interpretation of space to my three case studies has resulted in a more comprehensive understanding of (private) close(t) space. Analysing the road and its literary definitions provides important content. Mobility, such as the freedom of the female body to be peripatetic, is connected not just to identity, emotion, and liberty, but to a fluidity of spatiality, space being volume that allows movement. The meaning and implication of spatiality is a subject Grosz delves into in both *Volatile Bodies* (1994) and *Time Travels* (2005),
and is an inherent factor in addressing the freedom of the hitchhiking female body because of its ability to allow movement, which in turn can be controlled.

In conclusion, Grosz speaks about “becoming” – a word that connotes future, not past. She proposes that we need to “…produce a future that is different from the present…” (Grosz 2005, p155), and suggests that the (feminist) future lies not just in academic theory, but in “…the imaginative production of other worlds, fictional, cinematic, or cybernetic, which dramatically change certain elements of our experience and our understanding of our world” (Grosz 2005, p73). Ultimately, this observation is one that connects directly to the making of the creative fiction component of this thesis, in which I view hitchhiking as a vector that textually links the narratives that have been produced.
Case Study: The Battlers – Kylie Tennant

Many Australian novels feature a strong emphasis on landscape. The sheer size of the continent and the extremes of the Australian climate mean that writers are often drawn to concepts of the body existing in, and travelling within this harsh environment. For instance, the Australian novels, Road Story (Van Loon 2005) and Picnic at Hanging Rock (Lindsay, 1987) both explore the idea of the female body within the landscape and therefore the way the body effects the landscape, and in return, how the landscape effects the (female) body. Longhurst and Johnston explain that:

Geographers since the mid-1990s have been examining the body as a space, carrying out research that seeks to explore questions around… the differences between bodies, women’s social subordination to men, and the mutually constitutive relationships that exist between bodies and places. (2010, p21)

The (female) body in the landscape

The (female) hitchhiking body moves through the landscape, a spatiality that is constantly changing, and that body is an organic ‘vehicle’ of its own, constantly in flux. In the introduction to The body in everyday life (1998), editors Nettleton and Watson state that “[t]he world has to be constantly ‘re-made’ as one’s body alters within it” (p13), and Grosz comments in her text, Volatile Bodies (1994), that “[i]t is through the body that the subject can express his or her interiority, and it is through the body that he or she can receive, code, and translate the ‘inputs’ of the external world” (p9). The hitchhiking body, therefore, is not a machine-like shell that trundles through the landscape like a motorised car or truck, instead this organic body melds
and absorbs into the landscape, becoming a signifying medium within its cartographical territory.

The body in the landscape is one of the main themes within Kylie Tennant’s Australian novel, *The Battlers* (2002), my first case study. The basic plot can be described as a love story set within the historical background of the (Australian) Great Depression of the 1930s. Tennant concentrates on portraying unemployed workers living ‘on the road’ during that time frame. The two main characters are Dancy (female) and Snow (male), both forced to take to the road. Dancy, at nineteen years of age, has been abandoned by her husband and Snow has been searching for temporary work. Dancy hitches a ride with Snow in his horse and van, and eventually Snow ‘hitches’ himself to Dancy. The title, *The Battlers*, came from Tennant’s observation that “[t]he women do the Battling and how” (Grant 2006, p40), meaning these unemployed people ‘battled’ to stay alive. Tennant’s story also records the way many unemployed workers became politicised (bodies) during their ‘battling’ process:

Burning Angus, man of action that he was, would not tamely creep away. He called a meeting of the travellers that same night… and they listened in silence while Angus laid before them his plans for a Bagman’s Union.

‘What kind of life is it for men like us? The sergeant can order us off the river and there is no other place for us to camp. They can order us out of town, and we’ve got to go, like slaves, like dogs…For all the police care we can die on the road.’ (Tennant 2002, p137)

Besides chronicling the politicised body, Tennant’s novel emphasises the body within the space of the vast, sometimes unforgiving, Australian landscape. An opening description on the first page gives an indication of the way landscape will feature and be an important catalyst between the spaces that the peripatetic characters move within as they travel back and forth, and in the spaces of thought in their minds and emotions:

He had come over the black-soil plain, the plain that stretches from
Narrabri to Moree in a loneliness where the mirages smoke and the great brown kangaroos leap away from the road, where the enfilades telegraph-poles dwindle to a pinpoint and disappear over the rim of the earth…(Tennant 2002, p1)

Tennant constructs Australia as a continent with a ‘special’ landscape. She had made a journey herself in 1932 (Grant 2006, p2), when she walked and hitchhiked from Sydney to Coonabarabran in northern New South Wales. In a camp near Young, she met travellers who would become the basis of her central characters (Grant 2006, p42). During that trip she kept notes in a journal about her hitchhiking experience, stating that “[t]he human eye records best at the pace at which one walks…In a fast car, the attention is given not to small details but to the larger objects in the landscape” (Tennant 2002, pviii). This observation draws attention to hitchhiking and the difference between that kind of mobility, which creates a slower, more organic presence in the landscape, and other forms. Grosz acknowledges that organic transition when she gives a definition of the body as “…a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, affects)” (1994, p9).

*The Battlers* was chosen as a case study text because of the literary representation of the female character, Dancy, who is hitchhiking, and *The Battlers* also represents hitchhiking as an *historical* mode of free ridesharing travel. As I mention in my methodology, Grosz states that “…what is at stake is the activity and agency, the mobility and social space, accorded to women” (1994, p19). *The Battlers* is an example of historical moments in time (such as the Depression), where previous attitudes regarding transgressive activities are forced to undergo change and the transgressive then becomes accepted as normal. In *The Battlers*, women travelling the road appear frequently; the majority of the novel’s characters are travelling this way.
Dancy is first introduced when Snow finds her dressed in an oversized coat, going through his camp tuckerbox, and he imagines Dancy is a man. Miss Phipps is a more educated female who carries with her what every bush hobo would have “[i]n one hand she carried a small, blackened billy-can, in the other a sugarbag” (Tennant 2002, p12). In the historical situation of the Depression, it is accepted that both types of women are ‘on the road’, and although their bodies are in public sites such as the highway or camped by a river, their mobility is accepted because of the historical context. The novel acknowledges the (nomadic) rhythm of the body in its movement from camp to camp. Nettleton and Watson claim in *The Body in Everyday Life* (1998) that the body is a social entity “[t]he body is not an external entity but is experienced in practical ways when coping with external events and situations” (1998, p11).

During the Depression, women ‘on the road’ adapted to that lifestyle, and they were considered to be more likely (than men) to be given food and other consumables, so the women crafted objects such as potholders and jug-covers which they could sell, and which gave them an excuse to move and beg from door to door. In *The Battlers*, the unemployed Sharkey Wilks maintains “‘…you gotta have a woman to bum fer yer, just as you gotta have a dog to bark for yer’” (Tennant 2002, p91).

Tennant continually addresses aspects of the surrounding landscape. In the first chapter, the countryside at sunset is described as “…a breathless, tranquil silence, as the world turned over on its side for the night, with the sky like a translucent bubble of pale green glass…” (Tennant 2002, p2). She is fond of personifying different objects in the landscape, the riverbank that serves as a camp for the travellers in one portion of the story, is:

…a green pleasance with stretches of grassy swards between great river-gums that towered up, flexing huge muscles, their tattered rags of bark about their feet, and their great white trunks powerful as naked athletes, throwing protective shadow over the littleness of unrooted things.
Tennant uses her descriptions of the surrounding landscape to indicate the spiritual aspect of her characters’ bodily world and to suggest that the characters’ journeys hold a spiritual, pilgrimage-like element, even a liminal ‘third space’ spatiality.

According to the French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty:

> The relation between us and our surroundings is paradoxical. On the one hand, we sometimes feel that we and the things around us are part of a seamless whole. Thus mystics speak of experiences in which they meld into the background. (Diprose & Reynolds 2008, p184)

Grosz states that “…the body may be seen as the crucial term, the site of contestation, in a series of economic, political, sexual and intellectual struggles” (1994, p19).

Tennant makes Dancy’s body a crucial term by using that body within the landscape to suggest an element of spirituality, in a scene where Dancy’s body absorbs into the topography. She is walking on the road by herself when she rounds a bend and discovers a mass of purple flowers covering the hills. It is a moment of alterity where Dancy becomes exhilarated; the flowers hold an intense (almost sexual) beauty for her and the sensation they create within her is described in the text as “overpowering everything” (Tennant 2002, p240). The effect even makes her unsteady on her feet “…as though this beauty were some dangerous red wine.” (Tennant 2002, p241).

Dancy drinks in the colours and swears she will never forget how it looks. The land has become a part of her as if she has washed herself in the colour and has merged into the surrounding colourscape. It is a moment of total liminality, and Dancy even begins to sing to herself as she experiences a harmonic unity within the landscape.

She knows that “[i]f she had never come out on the track, she would never have seen this unknown flower flaunting its colours over miles of hilly ground” (Tennant 2002, p241). Grosz describes the body as “…the very horizon and perspectival point which
places me in the world and makes relations between me, other objects, and other
subjects possible” (1994, p86). Tennant, therefore, makes the (embodied) hitchhiking
journey responsible for ‘opening’ Dancy until she is pushed beyond her previous
limits into a new perception. In The Battlers, being ‘on the road’ becomes a metaphor
for the challenges that humans give themselves that transform them as a consequence.

Grosz makes observations in Volatile Bodies (1994) regarding the body and its
relationship with objects and space (p87), such as the road or the spatiality of the
landscape, and in another of her texts, Time Travels (2005), she writes about ‘things’
which she defines as objects that are ‘other’ than us. These ‘things’, Grosz claims, are
something which help to constitute specificity and singularity. The flowers create
meaning for Dancy within the enormous spaciality of nature, and become “…our way
of dealing with a world in which we are enmeshed rather than over which we have
dominion” (Grosz 2005, p133).

Secure spaces

In The Battlers Tennant’s panorama is often described in terms of its (spiritual) size:

Between two high-rolling masses of purple vapour that menaced the
afternoon with more rain, a weak shaft of sunlight struck down, as
though powerless to bless, but willing. (Tennant 2002, p240)

The small spaces that the travellers find in this landscape are in direct contrast to the
vastness they are moving through. It is the camps the ‘battlers’ make that produce the
alternative (small) spaces, rather than the inside of their vehicles or of the other modes
of transport. At one stage, they use an abandoned church where they have lit a fire
inside the hall on a sheet of corrugated iron. A place is created by the configuration of
a parked mode of transport, the fire, the dog, and the position of the human sleepers,
and this specific arrangement is what makes the camp into a place of security, a place
where Snow can have the intention to “…stay quietly in camp all day and eat
mutton…” (Tennant 2002, p9). The world outside the security and friendly firelight of
the camp is portrayed as something ‘other’ where “[t]he winter darkness closed down
like a boy’s hand over a lame bird…” (Tennant 2002, p73). The darkness is also
“muffled down like a grey blanket” (Tennant 2002, p73), and to walk outside the
firelight is “…to walk through an unseen wall where the light ended and the darkness
began…there were degrees of shadow and the road was a dim greyness” (Tennant
2002, p74).

When the weather becomes bad while Dancy is travelling with Snow’s son,
Jimmy, they leave it too late to find shelter but are rescued by two ‘old cobbers’ in a
tent, and although the storm is ferocious, Dancy feels “…an immeasurable delight and
comfort…” (Tennant 2002, p232) as they sit huddled around the hurricane lamp
within the sanctuary of this structure. Dancy still has moments of craving a house
“…as though it were some desirable food…” (Tennant 2002, p135) and views the
four walls and smaller, enclosed spaces of a house as something potentially more
secure than what she has, and her focus for that kind of security creates a space of
desirability within her mind. When Snow is sick he is trapped within his own ‘dread’
place of unwellness where his nightmares wrap themselves around him. He dreams of
barbed wire fences that sprout up everywhere, preventing him from travelling, and
these fences cage and morph the landscape into a gigantic gaol where the bush has
been slashed into farmland “[h]e saw the wire cobwebbing the country, holding it
down in plotted squares of wheat or pasture or farrow…” (Tennant 2002, p185). The
characters in The Battlers have none of the protections generally erected against
nature, such as fences. Snow’s barbed wire dreams are an echo of a similar sentiment
relating to fences and the possession of land voiced by Robyn Davidson, author of my second case study *Tracks* (1982):

Then there was the kind of thinking that arose when humans became sedentary and began to conceive of land as something that could be possessed, dominated, *transformed*. It was the beginning of a detached perspective: its emblem, the fence. (Davidson 2006, p13)

Snow has been ‘on the road’ longer than Dancy and finds the vast spatiality of the landscape more comfortable and secure than she does, but Dancy’s change of mind arrives in the section of the text already referred to, where she views the flowers covering the hills and her body ‘absorbs’ into that spatiality. The more unpredictable nomadic life of the road can result in a change of thinking (Davidson 2006, p49).

Those who remain living in fixed, static situations are most concerned with accommodation and accumulation; a world that possibly forgets the original nomadic environment that Grosz is referring to when she claims “[w]e have forgotten the nature, the ontology, of the body, the conditions under which bodies are encultured, psychologized, given identity, historical location, and agency” (2004, p2).

*The road as a line of betweenedness*

The road is one of the most specific elements in hitchhiking and Tennant personifies it, describing the road as beast-like or snake-like as it “…wriggled forward uncertainly over rises and down hollows as though it tried to escape into the green fields and was forever driven on like a worn-out drudge…” (Tennant 2002, p238).

The image of the road being driven or whipped like a drudge is a strong metaphor that echoes the possible loneliness and hunger of this form of travel, a hunger that is not necessarily physical but embodied in a yearning and a desire that the road is capable of transforming a traveller into change. The travellers in *The Battlers* have their own opinions about the road, stating that road travel “gets into your blood” (Tennant 2002,
p192), and maintaining “[o]nce you get on the trail, you’re on it for life” (Tennant 2002, p192).

The road portrayed as a human drudge that ‘wriggles’ along like a reptile can hold a negative connotation – the road can lie to you and fool you as you push yourself along it in the expectation of something better around the next bend. Using Australian vernacular, Tennant portrays the road as ‘crooked’, or even as the chosen track of criminals and con-artists “[t]hey had come round yet another bend in the road that could not have gone straight if the whole Salvation Army reformed it” (Tennant 2002, p12). The road is the track that all travellers are taking, and in a metaphor that relates to life as a whole, any hitcher needs to be well-positioned in order to ‘get the good rides’. Tennant anthropomorphises the road in so many ways throughout the text that the road, or track, morphs itself into a major character of the story. It is a continuous geographical line of betweenedness that moves the travellers and connects them from one locale to another. The road stretches ahead, and behind, constituting past and future, and it crosses boundaries and interfaces with borders. For a woman like Dancy, who has never travelled previously, the road (or public space) holds an element of the danger of the unknown and within that, an attraction; a fascination and desire. It also represents a freedom for her to be mobile, even without money. As long as she stays on the road it will carry her somewhere, elsewhere. It represents the freedom that Dancy’s body attains as she moves across the landscape walking and hitching.

‘Third’ spaces

The educated but ‘down-on-her-luck’ Miss Dora Chester-Phipps, understands the concept that “[s]cale…can act as both a form of containment and empowerment”
Attired in a bedraggled fur coat and sandshoes, and in her element whether on the open road or in the enclosed spaces of hitchhiked vehicles, ‘Phippsy’ has initiated a world of her own and conferred a name on this space of alterity: The World of Feminised Rhythm Systems. Aware of the fact that “…the regularized control of the body is a fundamental means whereby a biography of self-identity is maintained” (Nettleton & Watson 1998, p6), Phippsy enjoys sitting by the campfire, plotting her own manifesto with a stub of pencil and a piece of old brown wrapping paper:

‘Regionalised, centracious control,’ she wrote. Then underneath: ‘Zoning for efficacy of metaphysical totality.’ Miss Phipps had just reorganized the government of the world under a powerful committee of women all very like herself. She had wiped out all men, small boys and women who did not fit in with her plans, and she was working out the perfect autocracy. (Tennant 2002, p70)

Miss Phipps understands the body politic “…the body has come to form a central field of political and cultural activity, in that the major concerns for governments revolve around the regulation of bodies” (Nettleton & Watson 1998, p5).

Miss Phipps is more an embodiment of some of Tennant’s political ideas than Dancy and Snow, who serve the overall love story plot. Miss Phipps knows that one day she will reign over everything, fulfilling her destiny in life. Travelling with whoever she thinks may give her the best shelter, she is prepared to transfer allegiances, only adhering at all times to her original agenda of The World Feminised State. When she has rulership of that, Miss Phipps plans to remove all money from the ‘wasteful’ men and distribute it to people like herself, who wish to merely enjoy nature and watch the birds. Grosz gives one definition of the body as being “…a vehicle for the expression of an otherwise sealed and self-contained incommunicable psyche” (1994, p9). No other character in the text is aware of Miss Phipps’ transgressive ideas, but her body and her physical actions often reveal her thoughts,
for example “…the look of Miss Phipps was enough to turn the milk sour…” (Tennant 2002, p175), or “[t]he busker silently indicated another upturned kerosene tin…She sat down as though it had been a throne…” (Tennant 2002, p16), and “[t]he last time Miss Phipps had left home she had signified her dislike by hurling a kettle of hot water over her father…” (Tennant 2002, p173). Miss Phipps believes that in The World Feminised State she will be free to simply lie in the sun.

Tennant ultimately constructs the road as a place of freedom, and even of security, for both men and women, for Dancy and also for Miss Phipps “[s]he had been afraid, but she was afraid no longer…It was springtime and she was free, white and well over twenty-one. She could go cherry-picking. She was not afraid of the road. She was not afraid of anything” (Tennant 2002, p184). Like Davidson, Miss Chester-Phipps believes that “[b]y taking the road we free ourselves of baggage, both physical and psychological. We walk back to our original conditions, to our best selves” (Davidson 2006, p53).
Case Study: *Tracks* – Robyn Davidson

*Tracks* (1982) is a text by Robyn Davidson, an Australian female adventurer and writer who attracted fame and some notoriety for her act of traversing the heart of Australia ‘on the road’ during 1977. *Tracks* was her iconic first book, a positive female narrative that relates the story of her desert journey, adapted from her own journal documentation. In the book, Davidson makes many relevant comments regarding the female body moving across the harsh Australian terrain, and the effect of the journey within that landscape on her own body and mind. In the creative fiction of my thesis, I focus mainly on the car as a mode of transport and a close(t) space of intimacy and confined confessional. In my first case study, Kylie Tennant’s *The Battlers* (2002), the main female character, Darcy, hitchhikes and rides in a horse and cart; in *Tracks* (1982), Davidson ‘hitches’ herself to four camels and takes to the road, walking or riding the camels from Alice Springs to the West Australian coast.

I will examine Davidson’s work under three perspectives that I apply to (female) hitchhiking, which are: the female body in small spaces (such as a vehicle) or even ‘third’ spaces (i.e. spaces that may not be able to be seen with the human eye but can still be identified as a space of a kind); the security and presence of the female body in public spaces (spaces such as that of hitchhiking on the road, or being on the road hitched to camels, as Davidson was); and the free movement of the female body across the Australian landscape. Variations of all three perspectives feature within Davidson’s writing, relating to the female hitchhiking body and the different geographical places that the body can become placed in: the open highway (a public space), the vehicle or ‘lift’ (generally an enclosed space, though in Davidson’s case it
is something ‘other’), and the peripatetic movement of women’s bodies across the Australian landscape. Is there freedom in that movement or not? Davidson addresses that question directly when she states “[t]o be free is to learn, to test yourself constantly, to gamble. It is not safe” (1982, p216). By using Tracks as a case study, I intend to prove that the ‘on the road’ journey can be a transformative experience for women. As outlined in my contextualisation, a particular literary emphasis has been placed on the road journey, and my aim is to include women in that road narrative.

**Hitchhiking and transgression**

Davidson’s story illustrates the fact that transgressive acts, such as women hitchhiking and travelling can initiate change. She was told in no uncertain terms by Alice Springs locals, the police, and various other experts that she should not undertake such a journey (Davidson 1982, p77). Her trip entailed striking out into the wilderness on an adventure that would be challenging for anyone, regardless of gender. The audacity of her desert crossing indicated to women of that time that such an act of (female) adventure was possible. It was proof of the freedom western women have to travel in their chosen landscape; and although it appeared transgressive at the time, it ultimately resulted in a change of public opinion regarding the capability of women. Davidson’s act of traversing the desert demonstrated Merleau-Ponty’s theories emphasising ‘lived experiences’ and the importance of actual experience and “…experiental acquaintance as a touchstone…” (Grosz 1994, p94). Davidson stated that after the trip she received much correspondence, basically telling her “[y]ou have done something I would have liked to do, but never had the courage to try” (p233).
*From Alice to the Ocean* (1992) is a collection of thoughts and photographs from the *National Geographic* photographer, Rick Smolan, who recorded Davidson’s journey in photographs after the *National Geographic* became a sponsor. On page twenty-one, Smolan states that:

Everyone in Alice knew about Robyn’s plan to cross the desert with camels but only a few took her seriously. Most of the local camel trainers dismissed her ‘lunatic idea’… Alice’s self-proclaimed ‘experts’ refused to believe that a woman could succeed where so many (men) had failed. (1992)

The media, the majority of whom were male (this was 1977), harangued and questioned Davidson over and over again as to why she wished to cross the desert. Why would she, a woman, want to place her body out in the landscape of the Australian desert? The media demanded a ‘logical’ reason, such as intimating that she wished to study Aboriginal life, and so portrayed her as either a “mysterious Camel Lady” (Smolan 1991, p186), or as a crazed madwoman. They also referred to her in their articles as a ‘girl’. During the journey, the media would not leave Davidson alone, and when she refused interviews they exaggerated their stories “[t]hey said she was a British model on vacation and that she shot wild camels for pleasure” (Smolan 1992, p189).

Even on the way to Alice Springs on the train, two years before her ‘on the road’ journey began, Davidson was warned by a fellow male passenger that Aboriginals would ‘rape’ her in Alice Springs and that “[…]fuckin’ niggers run wild up there…” (Davidson 1982, p20), and told that because she was a woman she would need someone to ‘look after her’. The local (male) police in Alice Springs tried to dissuade her from the trip, saying “[y]ou haven’t got a chance…even men have died out there, so why should you rely on station people and us to come and rescue you?” (Davidson 1982, p77). Davidson’s own opinion of the journey was that it was an
endeavor, a challenge she had given herself to discover how strong she was. She has stated that she wanted to do something in her life that held ‘meaning’ and she wished to do it alone (Davidson 1989, p53). She felt that “[i]f I could cross the desert then anyone could do anything” (Davidson 1989, p68). On page forty-nine of Tracks, she gives her actual reasons for wanting to undertake such a journey: she felt it was an instinctive decision and at the top of her list she wished to cross the desert to experience that desert geography. Davidson believed that “…one really could act to change and control one’s life…” (Davidson 1982 p50), and she wished to prove that.

Bodies in the landscape

To see is to be visible by others. I draw on the theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as elaborated by Grosz in her text, *Volatile Bodies* (1994). Merleau-Ponty framed the theory that to see is to be visible to others and in her chapter, *Lived Bodies* (Grosz 1994, p86), Grosz discusses this concept, stating that “[t]his is very condition of seeing, the condition of embodiment…” (1994, p101). Could this hypothesis be the basis of the idea that women’s bodies in public spaces are sites of risk?

Anthropologically, to be visible displays the body to any kind of danger and so, being a visible woman (of the ‘weaker’ sex) has been discouraged? At the same time, Grosz interprets Merleau-Ponty’s point as being “…ontological and not interpersonal: the painter sees trees; but the trees also, in some sense, see the painter…” (1994, p101).

This brings us back to considering the female body not only in public space but in the landscape, and to the point that bodies play a significant role in people’s experience of place. Why is this? Because, as Grosz indicates, the body in the landscape is also ‘seen’ by the trees (mountain range, desert, road). One absorbs the other. Traditionally, there has been a history (also literary) of the male body being
present and being ‘seen’ or visible in the landscape; and there have been many
Australian male writers who have narrated this experience of ‘being visible’. In
Patrick White’s *Voss* (1994), for example, the (male) explorers ride on into the desert
“[t]he muscular forms of cool, smooth, flesh-coloured trees rose up before the
advancing horsemen” (1994, p334). In Robert Drewe’s collection of short fiction, *The
Bodysurfers* (1983), the (male) explorer in the fiction, *The Last Explorer*, articulates
the meaning of the desert landscape for him:

Strange tastes came into his mouth. Once it was damper, burnt and
crunchy. Once it was grilled barramundi. Another time sour-grass…
A Fleet Street interviewer asked him in 1933 what the desert meant to
him. The question stopped him in his tracks. ‘Finding your own love,’
he remembers replying…” (1984, p153)

In *Tracks* (1982), Davidson records her own (female) visibility in this immense
landscape. She describes the desert continually “…the continent’s mythological
crucible, the great outback, the never-never, that decrepit desert land of infinite blue
air and limitless power” (Davidson 1982, p37). Her absorption into the landscape
means that her relationship with the desert changes, the more ‘visible’ she becomes,
the more conscious she is of the environment she is travelling in. She writes that
“[s]tars all made sense to me now I lived under them…They told me where I was and
where I was going…” (Davidson 1982, p132). At the commencement of her journey,
when Davidson entered the desert with her four camels, she was, in effect, inserting
her (female) body into that herculean landscape, and she stated that she felt: “…a
feeling of release, a sustained, buoyant confidence…” (Davidson 1982, p115).

Bodies can play a significant role in people’s experience of place. *Tracks* is an
archival record of a woman taking her body into one of the world’s harshest
geographical climates. Davidson crossed the Gibson Desert and the infamously
treacherous Canning Stock Route. Her journey, funded at the last minute by the
entitled *Alone Across the Outback* (1978, p581), made Australian history and archived Davidson’s female body permanently into that landscape. Being ‘on the road’, traversing the desert, became a spiritual pilgrimage for Davidson (as it has done for other ‘on the road’ writers previously mentioned in my contextualisation, for example, Kempe and Kerouac). At first the space seemed “an ungraspable concept” (Davidson 1982, p128), and she treated the journey as if it was a “nine-to-five” job “I did not know why, but I was afraid of something like chaos” (Davidson 1982, p128). But eventually she left her clock on a tree stump in the middle of the desert. The more ‘visible’ she became, the more her perception of that particular geological terrain changed “[t]he land was not wild but tame, bountiful, benign, giving, as long as you knew how to see it, how to be part of it” (Davidson 1982, p174).

Davidson felt she gained an awareness and an understanding of her environment. In the early days, she felt the openness and emptiness as threatening, but as her body which was ‘hitched’ to her own mode of transport via camel or walking on her own two legs became ‘visible’, this visibility allowed her to feel a sense of freedom in the open space she travelled through. She described herself as becoming “utterly deprogrammed” (Davidson 1982, p206). When it was hot she walked wearing no clothes and when menstruating she used no material of any sort to soak up the blood, allowing it to run down her legs (Davidson 1982, p206). Grosz speaks at length in the last chapter of her text, *Volatile Bodies* (1994), on the topic of women’s seepage, an ontological status that threatens all order. She states that women are seen to live in seepage and liquidity, “[t]he metaphorics of uncontrollability…” (Grosz 1994, p203). Menstruation, and any kind of seepage, acts as a ‘mark’ on women, making them visible under the terms of contamination, and therefore inferior to the lesser-seeping,
male bodies; at the same time Longhurst defines these bodily leakages as a ‘fluidity’ (Longhurst 2001, p1) and remarks that the geography of women’s bodies in places and spaces (feminist geography) can be viewed as a form of geographical seepage that crosses into other disciplines (Longhurst 2001, p1).

Davidson’s journey through the heart of the desert made her more aware of her life back in civilization and she felt “…it was such a relief to be free of any disguises and prettiness and attractiveness. Above all, that horrible, false, debilitating attractiveness that many women hide behind” (Davidson 1982, p195). Out in the desert, she came to the conclusion that many women waste a lot of energy seeking to break “those circuits” that have “…effectively kept her imprisoned inside her notions of self-worthlessness” (Davidson 1982, p232).

Security was an issue with Davidson, and she mentions it regularly throughout her text, especially at the beginning of the journey. When she commenced her traverse through this desert landscape, she wrote of it as:

…crinkled, wretched, endless pink tracks leading to the shimmering horizon, and then there was nothing but the dry red parchment of the dead heart, god’s majestic hidey-hole, where men and women are an afterthought. (Davidson 1982, p20)

Davidson often made her night time camp area into a small circle of ‘security’ that held her body and the campfire in the centre. Although she also wrote that:

I kept thinking that I should be wanting to be back there with them where it was safe, and instead I found myself telling them that I wouldn’t swap places with them for anything in the world, that safety was a myth and security a sneaky little devil. (Davidson 1982, p197)

Her security became intensely linked to her survival “… my fear had a different quality now too. It was direct and useful…It was the natural, healthy fear one needs for survival” (Davidson 1982, p192). In her text she states, tongue-in-cheek, the message that women often receive is that the world “…is a dangerous place for little
girls. Besides little girls are more fragile, more delicate, more brittle than little boys” (Davidson 1982, p231). Davidson became less worried about security, which she decided was a ‘myth’, and more conscious of the fact that the trip was not a game “[t]here is nothing so surreal as having to think about survival. It strips you of airy-fairy notions” (Davidson 1982, p128). In such a vast, open physical area, it was her own mind that became her ‘hidey-hole’, the place she retreated to when she needed a space of familiarity. It was her mind that became like a cavern in the desert that she could withdraw into.

Before she acclimatised to the terrain, she found it hostile and alien, describing the desert ranges as having: “…an awesome grandeur that can fill you with exaltation or dread…” (Davidson 1982, p126). The sand was exhausting and the repetition of the dunes “ lulled me into a drowsiness” (Davidson 1982, p130). Davidson felt that “[t]he stillness of the waves of sand seemed to stifle and suffocate me” (Davidson 1982, p130). When she thought she might be lost in the dunes, she relied on her mental fitness to get her through. The trip became cathartic as she dredged up and analysed excerpts of her own life, reterritorialising the terrain of her own mind. Security and survival entailed physical fitness, physical security, and the mental security of her mind.

Sometimes, Davidson found herself unraveling. Intellectual and critical faculties that focused on keeping boundaries of time and measurement warped with her subconscious instinctive mind, and those instincts of survival came to the fore in this nomadic dimensionless environment. Davidson’s subconscious change took the form of dreams and feelings (Davidson 1982, p223). Grosz states that:

When sexuality can be acknowledged as the innermost secret of our being, a secret not only from others but possibly from ourselves, then its analysis and regulation become not only necessary but desirable… (1994, p153)
She is discussing the regulation and control of women’s bodies and her reference to women’s “innermost secret of our being” connects the experience of Davidson in the desert with her subconscious and her dreams. Reading her text, one becomes aware of the liminal quality this recorded journey can hold for women in particular. This is critical because the ‘on the road’ adventure has more often been publicly claimed through the imaginations of men.

In considering the definition of the body by its relationship within the landscape, it is telling that throughout Davidson’s narrative the landscape is described at length, for instance on the Canning Stock Route “[i]t was a magnificent landscape in a fossilised primordial kind of way. A twisted freakish wasteland of sandstone break-aways…” (Davidson 1982, p213). Later “[a]s I came over the crest I saw an infinitely extended bowl of pastel blue haze with writhing hills and crescents floating and shimmering in it…” (Davidson 1982, p214). The distant mountain range appears to ‘roar’ at her “[a] sound meant only for the ears of madmen and deaf mutes” (Davidson 1982, p214). These descriptions prove that this environment triggered Davidson’s creative imagination and began to define her body in the desert.

Transgressive behavior can initiate change

As Weinreich points out in The Spontaneous Poetics of Jack Kerouac: A Study of the Fiction (1987) when discussing Kerouac’s On the Road, the ‘quest’ journey is a mythical part of our oral and written traditions (Weinreich, p35) from the ancient quest of Ulysses to the more modern quest of Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz (1992). Quest often leads to travel and the physical exploration of the unknown as outlined in Terall’s Heroic Narratives of Quest and Discovery (1998), and quest can act as a form
of escape as argued by Duncan in her critical examination of Joan Barfoot’s novel, *Gaining Ground* (1978), entitled *Travels through This Place: Joan Barfoot’s ‘Gaining Ground’ as Quest Narrative* (Duncan, 2007), or of self-discovery (Gelman, 2001). Davidson’s quest was the challenge to succeed in her journey, proving that the mythical road quest is one that can exist for women:

> I was now a feminist symbol. I was now an object of ridicule for small-minded sexists, and I was a crazy, irresponsible adventurer (though not as crazy as I would have been had I failed). But worse than all that, I was now a mythical being who had done something courageous and outside the possibilities that ordinary people could only hope for. (Davidson 1982, p231)

Her success and her visibility were able to act as a vector to (female) imagination and dreaming. This raises my final point, which is that transgressive acts can initiate and bring about change. Davidson’s road journey was in 1977. Since then, many more women have embarked upon and achieved similar adventures, which involved them placing their bodies into a landscape of reality and of imagination. Davidson intimates that something as simple as putting one foot in front of each other can herald the beginning of change:

> The two important things I did learn were that you are as powerful and strong as you allow yourself to be, and that the most difficult part of any endeavor is taking the first step, making the first decision. (Davidson 1982, p247)

Her journey ‘hitched’ to her camels led her to evolve an interest in nomadism and wandering, and she has written several articles and books on the subject, such as *Desert Places* (1996) and *Travelling Light* (1989). She notes in *No Fixed Address* (2006) that “[t]he French translation of wandering is l’errance, the Latin root of which means to make a mistake. By our errors we see deeper into our life. We learn from them” (Davidson 2006, pvi). Davidson’s final observation is that “…to be free one needs constant and unrelenting vigilance over one’s weaknesses…” (1982, p216).
In conclusion, *Tracks* (1982) is an excellent literary example of a woman ‘on the road’ who succeeds in her goal. There is no ‘Thelma and Louise’ scenario here. Davidson succeeded in her quest, travelling from the centre of the continent and over the Gunbarrel Highway on what was then considered extremely rough terrain which runs through the challenging climate and geography of the Gibson Desert to reach her destination on the western coast of Australia. This case study touches on the security of the female body questioning whether that body is a site of risk in public. Davidson came to the conclusion that although ‘risk’ is real, and is part of survival, ‘security’ is a myth (Davidson 1982, p197). Boundaries of time and measurement in relation to being ‘on the road’ are addressed. Davidson cited the lack of these as resulting in a freedom that made her journey feel spiritual, a pilgrimage that was a deprogramming from the ordinary circuits of social restraint. The journey was also a quest, a challenge, an endeavor, and an adventure; sentiments that have been reiterated by others recording similar ‘hitchhiking’ journeys, like Chaucer and Kerouac. This mode of travel appears to be capable of activating the male and female subconscious, resulting in the ‘on the road’ journey attaining a liminal quality, a place of ‘live’ dreaming.

Finally, I have sought to present hitchhiking as a form of ‘wandering’ or nomadism. In the essay for Quarterly (Davidson, 2006) entitled *No fixed address: nomads and the fate of the planet*, Davidson has suggested that “a wrong turning” (2006, pVI) was made and that “something” was lost when we exchanged the seasonal and nomadic culture of movement (like hitchhiking and being ‘on the road’) with the static all-seasons culture of accommodation and accumulation (Davidson 2006, pVI). Grosz follows the philosopher, Merleau-Ponty, when she states “…that we perceive and receive information of and from the world through our bodies…”
(1994, p86), and that the body is therefore defined by its relations with the landscape, and in turn defines the landscape around us. It appears that our bodies and minds react differently when we hitchhike out of the built city environment into nature, into the mountains, desert, plains, and foreshore, and it may therefore be that being ‘on the road’ connects to some deeply embedded nomadic genealogical memory of ours.
Case Study: ‘The Glove Box and other stories’ – Vivienne Plumb

The story-telling of a narrative is a device that regulates spatial formations and changes of language. In the same way that physical hitchhiking offers a transition or pathway to being ‘on the road’, the narratives contained in the creative component of this thesis project alternative articulations around the concept of ‘hitching’. In discussing the spatiality of narrative, Michel de Certeau suggests in his essay, *Spatial Stories*, part of the anthology *Intimus* (Taylor and Preston, 2006), that “[s]tories thus carry out a labor that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places” (p81). Stories lie at the cornerstone of both social conformity and social transformation “…they traverse and organise places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories” (de Certeau 2006, p78).

The short fiction collection, ‘The Glove Box and Other Stories’, revolves around three main themes that relate to the hitchhiking female body: that of the (female) body as a site of risk in public places; the (female) body within private close(t) spaces such as a vehicle; and the freedom of the travelling (female) body within the (Australian) landscape, and its visibility within that landscape. I view the initial narrative, ‘The Glove Box’, as the centrifugal piece, extending intertextual links to the other stories in the collection. For instance, the mother in ‘The Glove Box’ appears in some of the other fictions such as ‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’ and it is a woman driving an old Jaguar (such as the mother’s) who picks up the student in ‘Spooky Gurl’ and gives her a ride to the school. The mother’s sister Valma, features in ‘Sixty Photos’ and the narrator of ‘The Glove Box’, Agatha, appears as Fenella’s friend in
‘Floorplan’. The character of Jassi appears in both ‘The Blouse’ and ‘Sampler’. The texts in the collection contain references to each other in various subtle ways.

‘The Glove Box’, presents the car as a creative ‘safe house’. The story uses mental health, the family, death, and hitchhiking as its predominant themes. The mother, who is eventually committed to a psychiatric institution, likes to escape the family by driving away in the car. She leaves poems she has written secreted in the back of the glove box, and her daughters discover these after her death. The description of the second-hand family ‘Jag’ with its “…pale teddy-bear- coloured leatherette seats…” (Plumb, p6), its gold cameo logo on the steering wheel and secret pouch by the driver’s seat, sets up the car as an other space in which the mother leads her alternative (writing) life. Longhurst and Johnston point out that “…places are bounded settings and…the bodies that occupy them are flesh and blood and experience a range of emotions in relation to these places” (2010, p16). There are other small spaces of safety and security that feature in the story: a genuine place of security for the narrator is her bedroom where she can: “…feel the room all around me, breathing, holding me, as if it is an enormous hand and my bed and I are held cupped, in the palm of this hand” (Plumb, p8). The opening paragraph about finding lost buttons displays the narrator’s desire to hoard these so-called ‘lost’ objects. This obsessionnal hoarding may be linked to the loss of both her sister (to leukemia) and her mother. The narrator exists in a third space of ‘bereftness’, she is lonely and abandoned and collects lost buttons, thereby transforming the lost into the found. In the sentence “[s]ometimes you discover them in changing rooms” (Plumb, p2), the use of the word ‘changing’ could be interpreted as ‘transformative’. In a discussion of Darwin’s work in her text, *Time Travels* (2005), Grosz claims that humans have been
Instability and transformation has been associated with transgressions of boundaries. The narrator’s mother commits transgressive behaviour by driving away by herself (in the family vehicle), and it is later revealed that she was also seen hitchhiking by a member of the local constabulary. She would park the car down near the reserve, and from there she would walk up to the highway and start hitching. The policeman had seen her standing by the side of the road with her thumb stuck out:

And he came and told my dad how he’d seen my mother. He explained what he’d seen her doing. It wasn’t against the law, but he had seen her and felt it wasn’t quite right. (Plumb, p20)

The mother was deserting her family and home and moving her body into the space of the public domain:

When we use the term *space* we refer not to something that is abstract, absolute, static, empty, “just there”, ultimately measureable and able to be mapped, but to something that is complex, changeable, discursively produced, and imbued with power relations. (Longhurst & Johnston 2010, p16)

No one knows where the mother hitchhiked to and her daughter, the narrator, never discovers any further information. Instead, this act of transgression remains a mystery, a vivid interface of betweenedness that mirrors the mother’s destructive (re)positioning between her own schizophrenia and her family’s denial and desire for her to remain ‘normal’. Nettleton and Watson state that “[o]ur body image, how we perceive our body, may in turn effect our ability to relate to others and will influence how others respond to us” (1998, p2). Although ‘The Glove Box’ presents hitchhiking as a transgressive activity (a symptom of the mother’s madness), a strong image remains of the mother hitching as if into her own afterlife, or into a (future) space of liminality:
‘Where on earth was she hitching?’ my father had asked the policeman.
‘That’s the bit I don’t know,” he answered. “All I knew was that she parked the car and then she hitched. And she did it regularly.’
(Plumb 2012, p20)

This description of the mother presents hitchhiking and being ‘on the road’ as adventurous and morphemic. The words of one of her poems are an indication that the mother knows and understands she is undergoing a transformation and that she feels a kind of helplessness:

a magnification of what you think can never happen reveals something that touches nothing because the sides are so huge.
(Plumb 2012, p21)

After each visit to the mother in the psychiatric ward, the father and two daughters drive home by the old road, through a forest of pines the narrator christens ‘The Silencers’. The pine forest is a metaphor for the collapsed family that has been thrown into a place of unreliability “I would feel those heavy trees pressing their dense, furry bodies towards me” (Plumb, p12). Nothing grows under the pines and the needles act as sound-proofing “…smothering and suffocating all usual noise” (Plumb, p12). No one discusses the family situation, all opinion is smothered and a suffocating atmosphere has pervaded the family unit. The mother’s schizophrenia exists as an other space, and while the sister, Caro, sees the mother’s mental illness as a “self-made tomb”, the narrator thinks her mother is sinking “…further and further away from us” (Plumb, p5). While the mother is still mobile, the car acts as a vacuum that transports her into a ‘third space’ of identity where she writes, and also hitchhikes. The mother’s movements, her self-imposed exiles in the car and her hitchhiking, cartographically build to journey her closer to her admittance into the psychiatric hospital, and her eventual death. The narrator comments “[t]hey call it ‘the other
country’ when a person ‘passes over’ or ‘passes on’. Passed on into where, I wonder?“ (Plumb, p19). After posing that question she answers herself “[t]hey say you pass on into something beautiful, but what if it’s not? What if it’s as hard as being alive?” (Plumb, p19).

*The (female) body as a site of risk in public*

The positioning and movement of the (female) body in public spaces (such as walking and hitchhiking on the side of a road) is an important component in most of the individual short fiction works. In ‘Sixty Photos’, the public road is brought into the private domestic space when Soos (a young hitchhiker) breaks into Valma’s (an elderly pensioner) home. The peripatetic female body goes from the exterior landscape of hitchhiking and the hopes and desires of that journey, into the interior urban space that belongs to the elderly Valma. She tells Valma “I was in a car, in the back of a car with two other guys. We met up in Brisbane and began hitching down to Sydney together about four days ago” (Plumb, p45). The quiet but invasory noises of Soos breaking into Valma’s kitchen become something other which causes a faultline to appear in Valma’s boredom and loneliness, and this fissure re-orders Valma’s perimeters and boundaries, heralding a possible metamorphosis for both Valma and Soos. When she first hears the noises in the kitchen Valma thinks:

> It was someone quite light – either a child or a teenager. She opted for a young female as she could feel this person was being very careful, very tidy, very neat. Female attributes, thought Valma. Beaten into us. (Plumb, p40)

Women’s bodies have been defined as disappearing or invisible within history because of the (past) exclusion of women from areas such as entrance into university.
The absence of women from archives and records meant that women had no ‘usable’ past. Grosz comments that:

Women’s bodies and sexualities have been structured and lived in terms that not only differentiate them from men’s but also attempt, not always or even usually entirely successfully, to position them in a relation of passive dependence… (1994, p202)

‘Onkaparinga’ uses the gothic genre of ghosts and other-worldly spirits posited in a hitchhiking background. It deals with a body that is only visible to some, in public, and invisible to most. Mr Pring sees the ghost of the young woman, Raisin, standing on the road in the cold rain, and, believing her to be at risk in her underdressed chiffon attire, he stops to offer her a lift:

He wound down the window and asked her what she was doing. ‘Waiting for a lift,’ she said. Good grief. Supposedly hitchhiking. But she was drenched to the bone. (Plumb, p148)

In the public area of the café where Mr Pring suggests they stop for tea, no one else can see Raisin “‘[l]ook at that poor old bastard,’ said Mrs Snell to Mrs Bundle. ‘Now he’s talking to himself’ ” (Plumb, p152). Raisin’s body is invisible and the only evidence of her existence are the lipstick smears left on her teacup. This puzzles the owners of the café – the large, jolly Mrs Bundle and the more slatternly Mrs Snell. Their bodies are an emphatic reversal of Raisin’s as they are publicly and blatantly visible and larger than life. They act in the story as a kind of two-part Greek chorus, and function as intermediaries between the invisibility and disembodiment of Raisin, and the visible tangible world of the Ginger Slice Café where they work “[b]ut what really turned Mrs Snell’s stomach was that when she went to clear the cups the other teacup was empty and there was lipstick on its rim” (Plumb, p153, italics in the original). Raisin’s invisibility can also be considered representative of the invisibility often required of women’s bodies in public places, such as the covering of the female
body in Catholic churches, or in public areas such as malls in many Muslim countries, and Raisin’s lipstick smears are the small but tangible proof of her body’s actual existence. The story is written in a fabular or fairytale form as a kind of localised version of Little Red Riding Hood. As Little Red Riding Hood’s body is noticed by the wolf in the public space of the wood, so Mr Pring’s attention is drawn to Raisin standing on the edge of the highway. When he helps Raisin she bestows a ‘wish’ on him, and this fabular ending acts as a metaphor regarding acts of kindness ‘on the road’.

‘Mortdale’ is a coming-of-age story about a female teenager who uses hitchhiking as a (transgressive) form of rebellion. The opening paragraph introduces the subject of women’s bodies and security:

My mother gave me four keys to carry around with me at all times. The blue one opens the front door, the big silver one is for the back door, the tiny gold one is for the locks on the windows and the final one is for the inside aluminium shutters. I’m permanently locking and unlocking. What the hell is my mum so sacred of? (Plumb, p70)

The (first person) narrator questions her mother’s fears and discusses her desires to place her body in the everyday landscape and to be visible, although her mother wishes her to be invisible, locked behind secure doors. The narrator states that “[w]hat we don’t do is as important as what we actually decide to do” (Plumb, p70), in other words, each individual is responsible for their own actions and choices. In The Body in Everyday Life (1998), Nettleton and Watson describe risk as being an important part of contemporary society and everyday life (p6); risk helps the individual consider and select choices.

‘The Blouse’ taps into a theme that relates to (public and private) control of the body. This female narrator uses hitchhiking as a way to seek a new life and views it as
part of her identity. She shows few fears about hitchhiking as she uses this mode of travel frequently “I don’t have much money so I hitch everywhere” (Plumb, p83). The narrative commences with the (penniless) narrator hitching to the Piano Commune, where she hopes to be able to stay over winter. On her way she negotiates the road carefully, as it is known to flood during the wet season and in the summer it is dangerous too, “…like stepping into an oven. You could have fried a few eggs on the road, you could see the tar starting to melt, going shiny and slick” (Plumb, p82). The melting bitumen and lack of footpath give an indication of the way her plans could morph.

The road is also an alternative space for her, a lacuna of identity. She sees hitchhiking as accessing another time dimension that contains synchronicities of measurement and chance, claiming that “[w]hen you hitch you put yourself into another kind of space” (Plumb, p95). She tells the leader of the Piano Commune that she would rather take the risk of hitchhiking than give up her means of mobility. She knows that “…geographical scale is one of a number of strategies used by social groups to dominate, control, and even define others…” (Longhurst & Johnston 2010, p7).

The long, almost novella-length story ‘Forthcoming’, is set in a future where the government and other smaller groups of authority, control the body by controlling the production of food, the movement of citizens in and out of the country, and even individual emotion “[p]lease, just keep the laughing down to a low to mid-noise level, I told him. Loud, boisterous laughing will probably get me reported and I’ll end up with another point against me” (Plumb, p211). Power used for light and heating is only legal within certain time periods and there is water rationing. The government encourages spying and reportage of neighbours’ activities. The public body is
controlled “[n]ew signs extoll the virtues of quiet, ordered shopping – no running, shouting, jumping, screaming, and no mingling in large groups” (Plumb, p213).

Citizens are required to wear uniform in public and negative comments are discouraged between acquaintances and friends “[p]eople don’t want to discuss anything, imagining you might report them for any negative comment they make” (Plumb, p219). Essi censors herself in her apartment, locking her doors and drawing the curtains, in a reminder that home:

…is not necessarily a haven haven or a private and secure space in which one can say and do exactly as one chooses as though the outside public world does not exist. Even in that most private of spaces within the home, the bedroom, behaviors may be subjected to exterior monitoring and controls. (Longhurst & Johnston 2012, p44)

A form of mind control, or anti-contact has resulted. Due to curfews, surveillance, and censorship of culture, everyone’s body can be defined as a ‘site of risk’ in public. Hitchhiking has been made illegal (Plumb, p237). When it is rumoured through the underground that aliens will arrive in a spacecraft on a set date and take on board all who wish to hitch a ride out of their present situation, some members of the population are prepared to take a chance. Like the poet, Blavatsky, these others who are prepared to take a risk, view the alien spaceship as a sanctuary. Some, like the nuns, consider it as new territory or even a religious experience. The aliens are due to arrive as Armageddon (the end of the world) commences, and so, in this context Armageddon (and hitchhiking) represents risk-taking, anarchy, rebellion, and the freedom and release from state authority and control.

‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’ uses the premise that the narrator’s mother’s enthusiasm for travel influenced the narrator (the daughter) to desire to journey and to hitchhike “[w]e’d had out disagreements. But it was her own retold adventurous exploits that had fuelled my imagination as a child and made me want to get out on
the road myself” (Plumb, p28). The mother never hitchhiked during her travels in the 1930s although her old letters reveal she often accepted help, ‘hitching’ herself temporarily to young men who carried her suitcase or found her somewhere to change her currency, using these offers the way a hitchhiker would use a lift. Travelling by herself in the 1930s, the mother was sometimes harassed in public, but she dealt with these situations confidently. Her public apparel of the period which is a hat worn “at a most rakish angle” (Plumb, p28) that even sports a cheeky feather, indicates an element of confidence while moving through public spaces.

Finally, when examining the first theme of women’s bodies as sites of risk in public spaces, the story, ‘Spooky Gurl’, must be considered. This piece of fiction invites the reader to observe the ways female bodies are treated within society as sites of risk. Women have been conditioned to consider many public spaces as unsafe. The first paragraph states that at school “[i]n the hall we had to sit still and listen to a local police officer who talked to us about accepting lifts with strangers” (Plumb, p64). The story describes the advice that is given to females in relation to ‘stranger danger’ which is “[m]emorise any pertinent facts about the inside of the car” (Plumb, p64), and do not accept sweets, gifts or lifts from strangers, and the narrator adds “[w]e were always being told stuff like that because we were girls” (Plumb, p65). Because it is thought that the bodies of women and girls attract ‘stranger danger’ they are considered sites of risk. In King Kong Theory (2009) Despentes (who hitchhiked herself and wrote about it), suggests women take risks “if they want to leave their homes and move around freely” (p33), and adds an opinion that rape is far more prevalent than indicated:

In our culture, the testimony of a woman accusing a man of rape has been systematically been called into question from the Bible and the story of Joseph in Egypt onwards. But I ended up accepting that it does happen all the time. (Despentes 2009, p27)
The descriptions of the narrator’s childhood toothaches could be regarded as a symbol of her speechless (dumb) mouth. As a child she does not feel capable of speaking out against the societal warnings she receives. The message given to the girls at school is that they should “…not linger in public places. I should make sure I stand in a pool of light at the bus stop or on the railway station…” (Plumb, p69). If anything happens then the female is at fault for not taking any of the advised precautions. ‘Spooky Gurl’ focuses on fear. Should women allow themselves to be influenced more by fear than by reason? “[s]ometimes the fear can saturate you. You can feel your heart pumping, and the adrenalin pouring in but you can still be frozen, like a ‘roo in front of the headlights” (Plumb, p68). Many fears surround the idea of women accepting lifts in vehicles and their bodies being visible on an open road and in public spaces that are not the private domestic spaces of home:

Because I am a woman I have been told to… keep the ground floor windows shut, make sure I have an outside light…and not to wear clothes that look too ‘sexy’. On the other hand I should not dress ‘like a bag’ or ‘like a Sunday School teacher’. (Plumb, p68)

‘Spooky Gurl’ suggests that it is the act of imagining fear that is most responsible for breeding the greatest concept of danger for women. This relates to Tulloch and Tulloch’s comments regarding media irresponsibility in Discourse, the Body, and Identity (Coupland & Gwynn 2003, p111), where it is stated that “[t]he impact of media representation of crime needs to be set in the context of current debates in media/audience theory” (p111).

The female body in interior places and spaces

‘Spooky Gurl’ also addresses the second major theme used, that of the female body in small interior enclosures and spaces, such as a vehicle. The narrator explains that as a
child she enjoyed “…discovering strange spaces where I could hide and no one could find me” (Plumb, p67), and making herself invisible. These interior places were creative third spaces where the narrator/child felt safe and could concentrate on drawing her maps and reading. Her invisibility in these ‘hidey-holes’ led her mother to exclaim “[s]pooky! She has vanished into thin air!” (Plumb, p67). These spaces fulfilled similar objectives to the mother’s alternative use of the family vehicle in the story, ‘The Glove Box’. What happens within the four walls of a private home or family space can remain undisclosed. Alternatively, although a vehicle may feel as if it is a private space, it comes under public legislation, and so remains an unusual area of inbetweenedness. As indicated in the methodology, enclosed spaces can be abstract. ‘The Glove Box’ features small, enclosed spaces of the mind, for instance, of memory. Flavia, the dead aunt, stood up against her father: and the reproduction of her face and body in the photograph album archives Flavia into history and maintains her memory as a space of rebellion.

‘Efharisto’ represents hitchhiking as a necessity in the case of medical emergency and depicts the ‘Good Samaritan’ aspect of that mode of transport. Small (abstract) spaces also offer security in this story: the little cottage where the mother and son stay in the Greek countryside is a physical space, but when the terminally ill son sleeps a lot, sleep becomes a third space that he withdraws into. The mother keeps her true emotions ‘lidded’ most of the time “…I took command and pretended I knew what I was doing and I convinced him of that. I had always been good at pretense” (Plumb, p55). The pretense the mother has retreated into is her own third space of disappearance and enclosure:

Is there a roof to the sky? I asked myself that question. Immediately I knew the answer – there is a roof or a lid to everything and that is to ensure that you only have just that much and no more of any one thing in your life. Otherwise you wouldn’t be able to bear it. (Plumb, p63)
Telepathic hitchhiking is the theme of ‘The Acquisition’. Set in a fictional future, the main character, Lunde, travels by foot throughout the year working as a healer, using her telepathy to diagnose, and to self-map the cartographic routes that are links of betweenedness correlating one locale to another. Because she is an ‘Eye’, she instinctively knows where to go next by using meditation. The telepathic woman from Lunde’s future, who attempts to contact her and communicate with her, once had freedom:

_Then this is me at the arse end of winter, squatting, folded up inside the cupboard, wearing my fur coat. It was the others who put me in here, though I suppose I’ve also got myself to blame. I took a vow of silence, but it doesn’t seem to have worked. Because inside my head the war still rages, one to one, their rules against my freedom._

(Plumb, p168, original in bold)

Now (in Lunde’s future), this woman is kept locked in a claustrophobic dark space which is the same enclosed room where Lunde is presently working (in the past). Time can be viewed within the narrative as an enclosed space that the two women share, because the telepathic time travel they engage in is not available to everyone “[h]er hand moves to her pocket and it is as if it is my hand too, it is incredible. She and I have merged together in some brilliant piece of time travel” (Plumb, p175). Lunde’s mind can be interpreted as another enclosed vehicular space when the telepathic interloper hitches herself to Lunde’s mind which then becomes a liveable place for the woman from the future to exist within. She decides she will “…pretend that I think it’s impossible for me to hitchhike back to where I came from” (Plumb, p175), and she sees herself as “…a seed inside her soft, moist brain” (Plumb, p176).

Written in the first person, ‘Sampler’ is a small story that can be considered a preface to ‘The Blouse’. Both pieces feature Jassi, a hippie hitchhiker. The narrator of ‘Sampler’ is Jassi’s friend, who is working a cleaning job in a hospital in order to save
money “…and then hitch off into the wild blue yonder” (Plumb, p98). “Wild” indicates the unknown and “blue yonder” could be construed as a distant blue infinity of something probably positive but far ahead and in the future. A ‘sampler’ is defined as an example, or piece of practice work, and this relates to the way the narrator feels she is only practicing at living until she hitches into that “wild blue yonder”, where she will begin to experience life for herself. The one person who could prevent the narrator from leaving is her mother, who often intrudes into her enclosed and private spaces “[o]n hot days my mother comes in and shuts the blinds early” (Plumb, p97), and “[s]he enjoys poking around in people’s subconscious…” (Plumb, p101). The narrator resents her intrusion:

I don’t want her reading my poems or looking at my ink drawings, her eyes boring holes into them as she attempts to squeeze the last drop of meaning from what I have written down. (Plumb, p104)

But her best friend Craig who the narrator visits on her days off from the hospital, points out that she should remember she spent nine months hitchhiking a ride in her mother’s womb before she was born. Viewing the womb as a vehicle of pre-birth hitching, the narrator worries that “…the desires and thoughts of the mother seep into the hitchhiking baby’s little vehicle/womb space” (Plumb, p105). The mother/daughter relationship can be viewed as an enclosed, claustrophobic third space that the women exist inside, relying on each other, hitched to each other, and built out of the deeply embedded fears and frustrations they have with each other. Craig comments on their relationship thus:

*I can see a room with a door and a window. Outside the window is a ladder. Sometimes you enter through the door just in time to see your mother’s head outside the window as she makes her way down the ladder.* (Plumb, p101, original in italics)

In ‘The Blouse’, the commune vehicle, a “battered old minivan” (Plumb, p83), becomes a close space for an intimate night meeting between the commune leader,
Joseph, and the hitchhiker, Jassi. The description of the enclosed space of the minivan echoes Jassi’s discomfort “[t]he seats were ripped, spitting out their ugly yellow foam innards” (Plumb, p91). A sexually charged atmosphere is set with the description of the rainforest as “…saturated with water, the air swarms with abundant spores, and a fecund earthy scent of decaying mushrooms rises from off the ground” (Plumb, p91), and in the private place of the van, Joseph begins to explain the commune’s rule of ‘no orgasm’ for women. Jassi’s blouse is made of patterned transparent voile, and it is this piece of public clothing that is revealing her breasts, a more private body part that attracts Joseph’s attention. He claims the blouse makes her appear innocent but also states “[t]his blouse is very provocative…” (Plumb, p94). Joseph maintains that her habit of hitchhiking is an unconscious way of stating to men that she is “available”, that it makes her “…a leech on the back of those who give you a lift…” (Plumb, p95), and that drivers will demand “payment” of other sorts. In reply, Jassi reiterates the comments made by Despentes in *King Kong Theory* (2009), telling Joseph she would rather take the risk than feel trapped and immobile.

Returning to the story, ‘Mortdale’, we find the narrator preferring to stay in her bedroom, where she writes in her diary, which has become a ‘third’ space of secrecy and intimacy in which she records and archives obsessive information about her body. Her bedroom is the cocoon she exists within before she leaves that cocoon and flies out of the window. When the narrator rebels against her mother, and her separated father, she decides “I had all the keys. I could do what I liked” (Plumb, p75). She jumps out of her bedroom window and runs away, planning to hitchhike to her grandmother’s house. After obtaining a hitch, she drives past a wooden hoarding that advertises air travel “[c]ome away today, fly forever” (Plumb, p75, original in italics). The narrator’s new freedom to travel wherever she likes in public makes her feel as if
she is “flying”. When they drive into a tunnel she describes it thus “…our words leapt away through the open window and we swallowed updrafts of diesel that bounced off the concrete wall” (Plumb, p75). She is high on diesel and the freedom of the open road. The tunnels and white-marked highway are symbols of the built city environment, and act as vectors channeling her emotions out into the landscape.

When she places her body inside the cabin of John’s truck and he commits his sexual act, he locks the doors of the truck and the narrator no longer holds the keys to her liberty. While trapped in the truck, she decides that John is a liar and with the realisation of his deceit, she is no longer innocent. Her hitchhiking excursion has morphed into a horrifying rite of passage and like traditional tribal rituals that inflict pain, and scar and mark the body and identity of young adults who are coming of age, the narrator has undergone her own ritual and now holds the (invisible) marks of (female) adulthood.

The small spaces of ‘A High White Ceiling’ focus on an abstract small space: the moral mindset of citizens. Wendyl (who has been violently raped and assaulted) finds that the spare bedroom she is sleeping in has a high white ceiling that frightens her “[i]t makes her scalp feel stretched just thinking about it…The ceiling is so pure, so pristine, it’s a kind of proud, knowing object of precious honesty towering above her. An upright ceiling” (Plumb, p112). Identity is shaped by the context of a person’s (ongoing) biography, and feelings of emotion and intimacy are “…inscribed not only on to our bodies but also on to landscapes” (Longhurst & Johnston 2010, p147).

Wendyl’s old friend Dougal lives in a house that is adjacent to the airport and when the planes go overhead “every fifteen minutes” their obliterating roar as they make their descent produces a small third space of frozen time. This is similar to the frozen time that exists in Wendyl’s memory after she was assaulted by the driver of a car she
had hitched a lift with, and was “hog-tied” and raped, and left for dead. Before the assault Gary (the rapist) had spent the lift describing to Wendyl how he had built his own secure panic room which he had filled with food, alcohol and a gun.

In ‘Floorplan’, the main character, Jane, is enamoured of small spaces and her sense of belonging and identity has been attached to the small enclosures she has known, her car being her favourite. She tells us that “[t]he feeling of the compact, mobile space is wonderful” (Plumb, p186). Jane, a doctoral student in her second year, is writing about women and hitchhiking. She answers an advertisement to share a Sydney rental with Fenella. The narrative focuses on a permanent situation of enclosure - Jane hitches herself to the small “Hare Krishna-pink” (Plumb, p177) room that soon morphs into a fetid “sweatbox” over summer and is a “little pig pen” (Plumb, p186) where Jane lives and works on her doctorate “twenty-four-seven”. It is in this room that Jane builds what she describes as a ‘floorplan’, consisting of the piles of her notes, drafts and research:

As she shuffles the papers around, she sees the floor as a grid pattern, and likes to fill up the grids with her bundles of information leaving minor pathways for movement between the filled squares. (Plumb, p184)

The floorplan is a spatial situation of Jane’s making that she shuts herself into until finally, her state of mental exhaustion becomes a third space of enclosure “…a shooshing white noise of sound…It would eat Jane up if she let it” (Plumb, p187), and the hole she discovers in the seat of her pyjama pants represents the mental black hole she has fallen into.

*The freedom of the (female) body to traverse the landscape*

In examining the third theme, the freedom of the (female) body to move across the landscape, we return to ‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’. In this story, the
narrator discusses the evidence of her mother’s (past) visibility, when she freely travelled across a global landscape and in public spaces and her mobility was part of her identity. The mother’s old ocean trunk is proof that she actually sailed on these journeys “…plastered over the outside were the stickers of the places she had visited: Lucerne, Paris, Munich” (Plumb, p25, italics in original). Later, after the mother has returned home, married, and begun a family, she “…only managed to travel as far as the school canteen where she sold hotdogs and licorice straps at lunchtime” (Plumb, p25). She has lost her mobility and visibility and has therefore lost her power, although in the past she was visible “…in the snow clasping a walking stick, on the Jungfraujoch, where she worked as a mountain guide” (Plumb, p25). The story follows the demise of the mother’s (travel) spirit. She is now absent from the landscape, and she is “going nowhere fast” (Plumb, p34). The narrator, who is also the daughter, comments on her mother’s married situation “[s]ome women do just leave – walking fast, they get up the momentum and begin to create a new rhythm. But my mother stayed static within the four walls of the house that we often heard her swear about” (Plumb, p34). After the old trunk is sold, the narrator notices that some people like to transform these trunks into a lounge accessory “…displaying the standing trunk so as to view the beautiful interior” (Plumb, p35). The description of the displayed trunk is representative of the mother’s figurative surgical opening or wound, resulting from the loss of her cabin trunk and the loss of her days of freedom ‘on the road’.

After coping with a frightening experience in a Greek hospital, the mother and son in ‘Efharisto’ make fun of what happened and laugh “…so hard it felt as though the cups and the plates and the polished knives and forks and the big bread knife, and even the kettle, were all laughing along with us…” (Plumb, p63). The mother
imagines the laughter has “ballooned out of that tiny cottage” (Plumb, p63), and visualises it rising out into the surrounding landscape, into the stratosphere, and even “hitting the rim” (Plumb, p63) of the sky. She puts forward a suggestion that the landscape may actually have a roof or a lid on it and that we are being held ‘under’ it. This idea is representative of her emotions relating to her own body within the landscape of her life, suggesting that if there was no lid or roof to anything, then a situation would be created where people would feel overwhelmed, overcome by a relentless eternity, and that it would be unbearable.

The narrator of ‘The Blouse’ believes she has an intimate relationship with her rainforest environment. The forest is an important place of liminal dreaming for her, and a space of security “[t]he minute he dropped me off, I was off the road and into the rainforest where I knew I could never be followed…The giant trees surrounded me on every side” (Plumb, p96). The forest is her place, a place where she feels “oh so good” (Plumb, p96), and it is where she removes the contaminated blouse that Joseph, the commune leader, has touched. She throws the blouse away into the rainforest landscape, thereby renouncing Joseph and his colonising desires. His attempts to appropriate her body are symbolic parallels to the metaphoric rape of the virginous rainforest landscape she lives within that is a major part of her identity. When she removes her blouse, she reclaims her own power and becomes visible (again) in the rainforest landscape, an environment that is representative of death and decay transforming into rebirth and life.

The freedom of the (female) body to traverse the landscape is so important to the mother in ‘The Glove Box’ that she uses the family vehicle to escape and is also seen hitchhiking, although it is never discovered where she was hitching to. It could be proposed that she was hitchhiking into the afterlife that is waiting for her, a landscape
that Aunt Za is convinced “…involved sunny miles of carefully tended herbage, lawn
and trees, and every now and then a picturesque bridge over a rambling brook…”
(Plumb, p14). The story concentrates on inbetween places that exist on the margins
and perimeters. The daughter and narrator, Agatha, likes to use “alternative routes”
(Plumb, p16) rather than “obvious ones” (Plumb, p16), preferring to walk along by
the water and through the reserve. These walks hold a parallel to her mother’s
hitchhiking. The ‘dream houses’ that Agatha sees arouse her imagination. She states
that “…a whiff of briny tang…” (Plumb, p17) emanated from the mangrove swamp in
the reserve and there was “…a rich stink …” (Plumb, p17). These observations of her
landscape serve as metaphors regarding the (chemical) power of imagination, and the
importance of landscape in contributing a richness of dreaming to our lives.

The aliens in ‘Forthcoming’ represent freedom to the citizens who are living
within a totalitarian landscape. The nuns are joyous as they chant a Latin hymn to the
hovering spacecraft, uttering the sentiment that they are “…ready to begin our
journey” (Plumb, p242). Essi, who provides the narrative voice to the story, walks up
the mountain, separating herself from the other campers who are awaiting the landing
of the aliens. On the way up the mountain, her thoughts transport her back to her
grandmother and the grandmother’s garden back in Godwand when Essi was a child.
That was a time of freedom for her, and for many others. She sights a goanna (an
Australian Aboriginal totemic reptile) in a tree and is filled with an innate sadness as
she becomes enclosed in an emotional grief for her dead husband, and states that “It
would never get any better, it was constant, although it could be described as
dependable pain, you knew where you were with it. I would always miss him”
(Plumb, p247). More than anything else, Essi requires freedom from her grief, and she
writes in the dirt with a stick “[t]he earth was soft enough for me to gouge the
sentence: *Before the world ends can I hitch a ride on your flying saucer?”* (Plumb, p248, italics in original). When she looks up the goanna has gone from the tree and her (previously dead) grandmother is walking towards her. The grandmother appears to be fit and healthy, and as she takes Essi’s hands she informs her that the aliens have sent her to transport Essi to the mothership:

I couldn’t see any spacecraft. I couldn’t see any aliens. The only thing I could see was my dead Grandma from Godwand who had grown tomatoes as big fists and baked plum pies to die for, food that was now only present in our imagination. (Plumb, p248)

Is Essi suffering a psychotic illusion? Or is she, like her grandmother, also dead? The reader must decide but whatever the answer is, Essi has achieved a (hitchhiking) freedom within her own landscape.
Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to prove that although hitchhiking may be considered a transgressive activity for women, being ‘on the road’ can also represent a liminal area of adventure and imagination. Drawing on feminist post-structuralist theory to argue that the mobility of hitchhiking is an important freedom for women, my research indicates that women are prepared to take the risks involved in hitchhiking if they feel it will afford them more freedom. In *King Kong Theory* (2009), Virginie Despentes concentrates on hitchhiking and the power to “leave home”, stating it to be ultimately more empowering and exciting than remaining in place, at home. She maintains that hitchhiking facilitates adventure that takes the female body out of its normal place, which is often a private controlled environment such as the domestic home or the workplace. Hitchhiking also supports a female visibility: the absence of women’s bodies in public creates a female invisibility or disembodiment, and hitchhiking or ridesharing places the body visibly in both the natural and the urban landscape.

A substantial discourse relating the body to spatiality has emerged. In Grosz’ text *Volatile Bodies* (1994), she uses the work of the French theorist and philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to discuss the (female) body and its relation to objects and space; this is a subject she has continued in further texts such as *Time Travels* (2005), which has an emphasis on time and space. This investigation into female hitchhiking has been supported by the application of Grosz’ philosophical research relating to spatiality combined with Longhurst and Johnston’s treatment of the same subject. The decision to use post-structuralist feminist theories to underpin the creative and academic thesis writing was made first, but the discovery of Longhurst’s work on
pregnant female bodies in public spaces led to the use of the concept of the female body in places and spaces (feminist geography) to the research. In summarising my methodology, I define space and place, and point out that domination of geographical scale can be used as a tool of power. I ask why a corporeal and geographical feminist theory might be a useful tool in analysing the hitchhiking female body and I answer using definitions of the (female) body on the public highway and in private enclosures, such as a vehicle. I discuss security and risk and relate the energetic visibility of the hitchhiking female body to other areas: government, education, and law. Finally, I explore the nomadic flavor of the road, and its artistic visualisation as a protean embodiment of the subconscious that holds a facet of liminality.

The three case studies put into practice arguments made in the methodology and the contextualisation. The two selected Australian texts resonate with road observations made by the female writers, Kylie Tennant and Robyn Davidson; and the final case study, which is the creative short fiction collection written as part of the thesis, supports the three points established in the academic component. It is suggested that the exegesis has produced the beginning of a more academic discourse relating to hitchhiking, a validation of that form of mobility. At the same time, the subject matter: the actual physical act of hitchhiking, and the reasons women may participate in such a mode of travel, has afforded imaginative material for use in the creative fiction. This is evident in a piece such as ‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’, an exploration of mobility within women’s lives and the influence that may have on a daughter (the narrator); or in ‘Sampler’, which defines hitchhiking as a means of escape, a liminal wild blue yonder.

In Imaginary Bodies (1996), Moira Gatens is “…concerned with the (often unconscious) imaginaries…” (pviii) and maintains that the images and symbols, or
signifiers that we use to make meaning and reason, determine “…their value, their status and what will be deemed their appropriate treatment” (pvi). In his essay, Spatial Stories (Intimus, 2006), Michel de Certeau believes that narratives make their own journeys transposing into a spatiality of semantics (Taylor & Preston 2006, p79). These are pertinent opinions surrounding narrative. But Grosz introduces a theory that is closer to the impetus that drives the creative fiction of ‘The Glove Box and Other Stories’ when she describes the “imaginative production of other worlds” (2005, p73) as “utopian”, and indicates that the other worlds that these narratives imagine are capable of projecting a “becoming” or future: for example, George Orwell’s novel Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949) which projected a future image of a world where everyone is identified by government numbers and watched twenty-four hours a day, arguably now the world we now live in.

Grosz views narratives as being an articulation of time and futurity carried within feminist theory. She proposes such narratives to be a form of “temporal unfolding” (2005, p73) or a transforming of the future and suggests that this future domain of imaginative worlds, which exists in a space of virtuality, is capable of expanding future (female) horizons (Grosz 2005, p73). In her essay for Before and After Science (Day & Tutton 2010), Grosz defines the arts in many ways stating that they represent “…not only life as it has been and is: above all, it summons up life to come, a future beyond the present, a transformed future” (2010, p15); and she also views (this) as a portal to “…new becomings, new elaborations, new pathways…” (2010, p15).

She continues by describing the way (artistic) narratives effect bodies “…bringing them in touch with the forces of the past and future, with the forces of the universe, as well as with terrestrial forces” (2010, p15), and she expresses the conclusion that these narratives can touch the living, thinking body in such an intense, unconscious
way that they can act as agents of change “…not to make sense, not to be useful, but to have affects and to be affected…” ((2010, p15). It is within this prophetic motif set by Grosz that the fictions of ‘The Glove Box and Other Stories’ is posited. Storytelling has traditionally been used as a tool in problem solving moral dilemmas, for example in fairy stories and nursery rhymes, and as Grosz maintains, it also represents alternate versions of the future. In Sharnush Parsipur’s *Women Without Men* (2011) the orchard setting, which is not unlike the Garden of Eden, is described in the foreward of the novel by Shirin Neshat as a “utopian island”, and the fabular quality of the novel helps to construct a modern reinvention of the fable or the fairy story.

Grosz states that “…life is always challenged to…continually invent solutions to the problems of survival” (2004, p99), and in *King Kong Theory* (2006) Despentes informs us that words and books exist to “…keep me company, to make things bearable, sayable, shareable” (2006, p32) and continues by indicating that “[p]rison, illness, abuse, drugs, abandonment, deportation; all traumas have their literature” (2006, p32). She presents words as her survival instructions and agrees that although her hitchhiking experience was traumatic, disruptive, radical, the risk she took was also transformative. Women accept risks in the fictions of ‘The Glove Box and Other Stories’, and the hitchhiking negotiates those decisions that relate to the risks. In the centrifugal piece ‘The Glove Box’, the narrator’s mother commits transgressive behaviour that destabilises the family when she drives off by herself to write poems in the family car, and is then observed attempting to hitchhike on the highway by the local policeman. As the story progresses we discover that her audacious behaviour is connected to her initiatives to escape and therefore rescue herself from her failed marriage.
In ‘Sixty Photos’, the elderly Velma performs risk-taking when she discovers a hungry female hitchhiker who has broken into her home, and instead of ringing the police she acts more in the spirit of those who offer lifts to hitchhikers, when she alternatively gives scones and conversation. While focusing on the unaccompanied (female) body in the public domain and the fears surrounding that, ‘Why My Mother Never Hitchhiked’ also presents travel (and hitchhiking) as an adventure: the mother admits possible travel perils but her advice to the daughter is to shake her umbrella vigorously at any man who follows her. Hitchhiking leaves the narrator of ‘Out West’ in the seemingly impenetrable and risky landscape of the Australian desert which results in a transforming dream; and although the young hitchhiking female of ‘Mortdale’ is assaulted, like Virginie Despentes in King Kong Theory (2006) she has still achieved her freedom.

I have already outlined a discussion in my introduction relating to the ‘voice’ of the fictions, the subtle connections between the short fictions and the world these aspects of the work have produced. In order to create the hitchhiking world of the stories I drew on personal hitchhiking experiences apart from stories told by other women. Lists of topics that would provide potential narratives specifically serving the methodology were prepared, although several completed fictions still never reached the final selection. Imaginary maps and hitchhiking routes were created, and a field trip as far north as Cape Tribulation in northern Queensland provided research for several settings as landscape plays a major role in the fictions. This work focuses on women from a broad cultural milieu and the geographical locations chosen have resulted in an intense sense of (present) Australian culture. The corporeal theorism of Grosz’ writing, her interest in Merleau-Ponty, and the geographical expertise of Longhurst’s essays have collaborated to produce a major influence on the creative
fictions, which at all times extenuate to embrace space and place and the (female) position inside the public and private (exterior and interior) notion. The narratives have been created to serve this subject using either obvious or more unexpected angles to accommodate the three contexts used (the female body in public on the highway, the female body within the interior of the car, the freedom of the female body to traverse the Australian landscape).

In the original application to the university, I proposed examining hitchhiking from a women’s perspective “to question whether its concept of a romantic freedom is true”. By the time the proposal was presented to the faculty towards the end of the first year, the core topic had been reinterpreted by the addition of the three key concepts which enabled a particular focus to emerge, connecting (female) corporeality and geographical places and spaces along with an Australian literary emphasis. The shift in focus to the (feminist) geography contributed an academic maturity and helped to establish a strong relationship between the creative work and the exegesis, placing the artistic practice into context.

I would like to imagine that the female hitchhiking fiction in the collection, ‘The Glove Box and Other Stories’, is adding to Grosz’ futuristic vision, expanding and transforming the horizons. Being ‘on the road’ is an act of travelling towards these horizons. In the words of Davidson in her text Travelling Light (1989) “[w]hen you walk you are always ‘there’ and can never get away from ‘there’. It gives you time to ponder and be changed.” (p86).
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