2013

Truth in memoir

Caroline van de Pol

University of Wollongong

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG
COPYRIGHT WARNING

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following.

This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part of this work may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the author.

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

Recommended Citation


Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Truth in Memoir

Caroline van de Pol

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

University of Wollongong
2013
# Contents

Abstract V  
Acknowledgements VI  

**THESIS**  
Introduction 3  
1 Tensions in Truth 13  
   Narrative strategies 16  
   Where’s the line? 19  
   Exploring fiction 24  
2 Turning Life into Art 27  
   Fictionalising real people 30  
   Courage and morality 33  
   Invented or imagined 39  
3 Memory as the Editor 41  
   Truth and facts 42  
   A new framework 45  
   Postmemory 47  
4 About Face 53  
   The somersault 54  
   Relaxing the rules 57  
   Dallas 3047 58  
Conclusion 65  
References 71  

**WAYS TO FLY**  
Prologue 79  
The 1960s 81  
The 1970s 145  
The 1980s 199  
Epilogue 259
Abstract

This creative work and accompanying thesis explores ideas, theory and practice associated with the key themes of truth in fiction and fiction in nonfiction, while asserting the form the writing takes, the geography of genre, may constantly be in motion. There are just as many ways to write a book, as there are ways to fly. You can leap from a high diving board, or you can start at the bottom of the ladder and slowly climb before you soar.

*Truth in Memoir,* the thesis, explores the tensions in truth when turning real life into art. It discusses the challenges I faced in constructing a story from a life, the desire to tell an engaging story that remains loyal to the ‘truth’. The thesis also addresses research questions about how accurately fiction or memoir might capture the truth of a story, the emotional elements that offer insights into real lives. Chapters on memory, trauma and place attempt to build a bridge between truth and the imagined, asserting that both have an essential function in both fiction and nonfiction, which is often difficult to categorise.

*Ways to Fly* is a hybrid memoir as novel. It’s both fiction and nonfiction, blending truth and facts, imagination and invention to create a work that might also be considered creative nonfiction. It’s a true story with real people and real places, a story of a big Catholic family in a fledgling suburb in the north of Melbourne. It’s about the divide of disability and disadvantage in society.

This thesis discusses and illustrates the theoretical frameworks and practice of writing memoir and fiction while closely examining my own writing process as I moved between biography, fiction and memoir, all the while striving for authenticity and artful representation of my story. This writing and rewriting, the thesis suggests, was not only about the aesthetics of the material but the editing process and my desire not only for truth telling but also respect for the narrative and the reader.
Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Catherine Cole, for her constant support and faithful guidance, as well as her intelligence and insights into creative ways to steer both the thesis and the memoir forward. Thank you – and the University of Wollongong – for making the experience so challenging and satisfying.

Without the generosity of my friends Maurice and Nick Gleeson in sharing stories with me, and without the encouragement of my brothers, Paul, Tom, Andrew, Seamus, John and Matthew, I would have struggled. I am grateful to you all.

My colleagues at RMIT University have assisted me in many ways, reading sections of my PhD submission and providing feedback, as well as opportunities to present and discuss my work. I am indebted to contributions and other support from those in the School of Media and Communication, especially Olivia Guntarik, Mandy Oakham, Francesca Rendle-Short, David Carlin, Amy Saunders and Jenny Robinson.

At critical editing and formatting stages I was fortunate to have the guidance of Helen Williams and Vicki Hatton, and right from the earliest drafts of the manuscript, I had unflinching support from close relatives and friends, Patti Green, Evelyn Tsitas, Margaret Simpson, Julie Sullivan, Jo Maxwell and Janine Davis.

There were many others who ran this marathon with me but none more so than my husband Jon who, as always, provided the comic perspective, and my three sons, James, William and Daniel who make all kinds of allowances for their often distracted mother. I am blessed to have you all.
THESIS
Introduction

To tell the truth we have to trap the appearances with quotation marks. We are not what we are said to be.

– Helene Cixous (Cixous 1994)

If writing a life story is fraught with danger, then fictionalising it may be a way forward, especially when that story has elements of trauma, repressed and ignored until the writing begins. How can I know what I will write until I write it? It’s a question I have grappled with throughout the writing of both my creative work and thesis. Australian novelist Eleanor Dark wrote of a similar challenge in knowing and writing: ‘How can you know until you write it down? How can you write it down until you know?’ (Brooks, B & Clark 1998, p. 6) In the creative work that accompanies this thesis, my writing began as biography, however as I began to uncover memories, events and incidental images I found the writing became too difficult. In a sense I avoided the difficult material. ‘Something’s missing’ was a common response to my narrative about the everyday life of ordinary people in a working class suburb of Melbourne.

‘I’ was deliberately missing from the text.

French writer and theorist Helene Cixous argues true autobiography does not exist as there is no such thing as a ‘Pure I, identical to I-self’. In her preface to The Helene Cixous Reader, she claims that ‘I is always in difference’ (Cixous 1994, p. xviii). Cixous is not alone in this view. Gertrude Stein, in discussing her writing and the way in which identity is blurred, suggests: ‘You are of course never yourself’ (Smith & Watson 2001, p. 15). Other theorists argue similarly, suggesting that autobiographical truth can never be fixed. In Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, authors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson propose that ‘how people remember, what they remember and who does the remembering are historically specific’ (Smith &
Watson 2001, p. 17). I would add to this that the remembering is also both culturally specific and ever-changing, so that memories/stories of mine at fifteen, then the oldest girl in a family of ten growing up in a place described as poor and deprived (Lemon 1982), are different from the writing I do as an academic and a middle aged, middle class writer.

This PhD submission offers a creative, as well as a theoretical, exploration of the boundaries between a ‘true’ memoir and a fictionalised one. The research thesis examines narrative, memory and truth. My creative work, *Ways to Fly*, is concerned with growing up in Broadmeadows where, at the outset, I aimed to tell a story of a working class community with a focus beyond my own experiences. However, what emerged in the writing process was a hybrid memoir that blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction and challenged categorisation.

This tension is not new. There are precedents that combine approaches and processes, and mix memoir with novel, novel with memoir. Examples include works such as Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, Kate Grenville’s *The Secret River*, Helen Garner’s *The Spare Room*. Did these writers struggle as I did with the most appropriate form for their stories? Did they move between fiction and nonfiction restlessly until the true voice of the piece was clear?

In answering these questions and others raised in this introduction and discussed throughout the thesis, I have used textual analysis as a methodology, most notably a deconstruction of novels and memoirs closely related to my work and methods, such as those by Australian contemporary authors Helen Garner, Kate Grenville and Tim Winton as well as Irish writer Frank McCourt and American writers of earlier decades including Mary McCarthy and Carson McCullers. Why these authors? In part, my research led me to them for the various ways in which each of them offers a different presentation of ‘the truth’. Garner pushes the boundaries of fact and fiction when she combines journalism and reportage with personal involvement in storytelling in ways that challenge personal intrusion with objective distance. And whilst Grenville strongly argues for the mediating truth of the story to rise above labels, some historians, including Tom Griffiths and Inga Clendinnen, question her approach. Tim Winton, on the other hand, writes fiction while deliberately using place as a marker for truth – something I have incorporated in my own work.
Why look to writers of earlier decades such as McCarthy and McCullers? McCarthy, a controversial writer of memoir and fiction who claims to have trouble differentiating what she thinks to be true and what she is told to be true (McCarthy 1957), captures that blurred space and paves the way for many writers following her. So too did the provocative Carson McCullers, the American fiction writer, whose books both influenced and offered a kind of guide to writing the child, the child on the cusp of adolescence, that privileged zone where you might see and hear the world through new eyes but without the responsibility of adulthood. For me, each of these writers has found a kind of truth, not always easy to define and one that might, at times, fly in the face of the traditional meanings and values of truth that we may try and hold onto, through truisms such as *Truth is a stalwart, a rock. The truth will set you free, Be true to yourself*, and so forth. But what lies beneath? When stripped away, what do these guiding principles really mean?

Different forms of writing not only come from the different people we are at different stages of our lives, they also require different writerly approaches and techniques. Smith and Watson illustrate how these techniques and practices of remembering change, using the observations of leading scholars and theorists. They note that we write from memories that are formed ‘crucially’ by who we were when the memories were first lived, then remembered and re-remembered, each iteration offering something unique to the first lived moment. I argue that autobiographies do not form indisputable authorities, but rather offer one person’s version of truth, a truth that can be distorted by memory and the telling of it. Daniel Schacter suggests we construct our autobiographies from fragments of experience that change over time (Smith & Watson 2001, p. 16). These notions of memory and truth and the changing self lead me to explore my own memories and their meaning. Nancy K Miller in her article, ‘But enough about me, what do you think of my memoir?’ also argues for the concept of relationality, asserting that the shaped self and the boundaries of ‘I’ are, like memory itself, flexible. Miller claims:

... like personal criticism, the genre of the memoir is not about terminal “moi-ism,” as it’s been called, but rather a rendez-vous, as it were, with the other. (Miller 2000, p. 422)

The way in which we remember changes, according to academic Liz Stanley. Autobiographies are works of imagination, of art and artifice. Stanley also believes autobiographies are predicated on what once happened, but in a creative way (Stanley 1994, p. 145). As memory researchers and life narrators such as Stanley argue, the process of remembering is not a passive one and constantly evokes a reinterpretation of the past in the present. To paraphrase Cixous, remembering and writing offers an insight into what it means to be human while asking at the same time, ‘what is it that makes us live so well and so badly, so that after millions of years we still do not know how to die nor what death is’ (Cixous 1994, p. xv).

It is this process of remembering and writing and the search for ‘meaning’, as described by Cixous and others, including writers so supremely identified with memory such as Marcel Proust, that underpins my exploration of memoir, the fact and fiction of remembering, that shapes the themes of my thesis. It is these questions of truth, authenticity and reliability I examine, including questions about individual choices in storytelling and its possible genres. As well as investigating genre and technique, I have researched trauma and memory theories including the views of leading academics and writers, Cathy Caruth, Dorothy Laub and Marianne Hirsch. The social and literary theories of Roland Barthes, Milan Kundera and Mark Augé were also explored as they provided me with opportunities to question, and sometimes resolve, issues to do with writing and loss, longing and belonging, including the importance of identity and place.

*Ways to Fly* began as a biography about two blind brothers, friends of my childhood; became a memoir of a time, place and community; then became autobiographical, including the self but deliberately not self-reflexive, and part fiction. As the creative work took shape, transforming into a hybrid form, it
maintained truth as its source but with imagination as its guide. After all, why should truth exclude imagination? Indeed there are writers and academics alike, such as Patricia Hampl and Jennifer Wallace, who would argue that imagination is a memory aid that may enhance truth. Imagination as part of storytelling, I propose, can help fill the gaps and overcome the silence that is bound to occur in remembering factual events and stories from the past. Others, in contrast, argue that it must be either truth or imagination, as do Carol Bly in her book *The Passionate, Accurate Story* (1998) and Taylor Antrim in his article ‘Why some memoirs are better as fiction’ (Antrim 2010). However, I would propose that society’s notions of truth and imagination can and do change.

Initially I called my memoir *In Whose Eyes*, an attempt to capture a theme around seeing, ways of seeing and *not* seeing. My intention was to tell the story of the two blind brothers who grew up next door to me in Dallas. They both lost their sight as a result of childhood accidents, freakishly and separately, a year apart. However, in my storytelling I began to realise how closely our lives and our stories were intertwined, and the focus soon shifted to the family, the social and the individual. I also discovered our memories were so different from those of the new immigrants I met when I returned to Dallas to teach English in the home tutor program and I felt a new story developing. My first student was the same age as me, but already a grandmother and busy mother of seven children. To Ghazala and her family, Dallas was a paradise, a haven of peace from the brutality of life in Iraq. My generation of baby boomers could not wait to get out of the place, to discover our own version of paradise, our own home, our own place in the world. Paradise was not the Dallas *we* knew.

With *In Whose Eyes* my intention was to draw on our times and how we lived there. It was time to remember, to go back and, as Stanley suggests, to bring together memory, narrative and ‘knowing’. Stanley writes:

> These everyday historiographies of ordinary lives typically take narrative form ... a narrative is a story told by structural and rhetorical means in which there is an unfolding, a development or progression, a denouement and/or conclusion. (Stanley 1994, p. 145)

I needed to know Dallas again in order to see if, as Hartley says in *The Go-Between*, ‘the past is a foreign country’, and to understand whether we really did ‘do things differently there’ (Hartley 1953). I needed to walk the streets and visit the places of my past. After all, this was what shaped us, and this was the
place where we grew up and became who we became. But who would I find as I did this exploring? All of them, I hoped. Some living still. Some dead. My mother at the stove. The smell of cabbage boiling. Under the beds I would find the monsters of my childhood I had always suspected were there. I would sidle up to Dad at the other end of the table and wait until he looked up over his glasses and invited me to talk with him. I saw myself racing out to the backyard to swing and see-saw, my sister at the other end telling me to go faster, higher. Most of all I wanted to play with my blind friends, to build cubby houses and tree huts in a time when they could both see.

I always knew I would write about the blind brothers, Maurice and Nick Gleeson, because of all the people outside my family, they have had the greatest impact on me. When I was very young I was fascinated by them, and also scared, because I did not understand what had happened to them, and I was desperately afraid that a simple knock to the head would send me blind, too. As an adult writer looking back on that young, fearful girl, I realised that their inclusion in my story also offered a metaphor. Their blindness, I realised, would help me to see.

When I was older my fascination turned to admiration. I was inspired by the blind brothers, how they went about their lives, their work, the amazing things they did and achieved, and, perhaps most of all, their attitude to life. They saw things differently and had faith in themselves and the courage to move beyond what they could not see and what they might not ‘know’.

Their story also offers a metaphor for the ways in which writers ‘see’. As Michael McGirr writes on the topic of writing and humility:

I think we should write at the very edge of what we know, pushing from the familiar into the unfamiliar, stumbling into areas where we are unsure if we will find words for what needs to be said. (McGirr 2012, p. 24)

As writers, what are we blind to? What do we feel and touch? How intuitive are we and how needy of ‘truth’? David Rain, discussing writers’ aspirations to truth and truthfulness, in a chapter on literary genre in The Handbook of Creative Writing, claims novelists aim to capture ‘real life’ and to encourage readers to suspend disbelief in such a way that they may come to accept the story as something that could happen to them or their friends. Rain argues:
Realism and romance are the fundamental poles of literature, and the history of literature is of an oscillation between them. Literature wants both to escape and to confront reality. Realism is waking and romance is dream, and we desire both equally. (Earnshaw 2007, p. 60)

By necessity a PhD such as this one requires a clear delineation between the creative and the critical. Thus in its own way it also meets head-on with the tensions between fiction and nonfiction writing. Foremost in my research has been the relationship between fact and fiction, the blurring of lines in both memoir and novel. According to academic Timothy Dow Adams, most scholars have come to agree that the presence of fiction within autobiography is no more problematic than the presence of nonfiction within the novel (Adams 2000). In the article, ‘Telling Stories in Dorothy Allison’s Two or Three Things I Know for Sure’, Adams is also concerned with the ways in which storytelling, and in particular memoir, can both expose and blur truth at an individual and collective level. In searching for that distinction between fact and truth, I come closer to my own definition of truth as authentic and real but shaped and constructed through narrative. Adams also identifies the limits of the autobiographical act, suggesting:

Memoir, like all forms of autobiography, is on the border between fiction and non-fiction, and all autobiographers are unreliable narrators. Memoir differs from autobiography in its emphasis – not inwardly on the constructed story of the author’s life but outwardly on the story of the author’s life as it relates to the lives of others. (Adams 2004, p. 85)

In the writing of Ways to Fly and researching and writing the thesis, I have considered a range of research questions about truth in memoir and fiction, and untruths and imagination in nonfiction. I have attempted to answer, in particular, the following questions:

- **Where are the boundaries between fact and fiction** and how are the blurred lines crossed one way and the other? Why do writers navigate new territories in their storytelling?

- **Does narrating a life fictionalise it?** Does the very act of recording a memory change it? How is a narrated life different from a life lived?
INTRODUCTION

- **Who owns a story** when that story extends beyond the author? Who has the right to tell stories?

- **How can the remembering and writing of traumatic events** (in memoir and novels) **assist in truthfulness** in storytelling?

- **What is the role of place** and memory in constructing stories? How important is non-place in lives touched by illness and misfortune?

This PhD submission comprises two parts. Part One, the thesis, addresses the critical and theoretical ideas that underpinned my creative work. Part Two, the memoir as novel, creatively explores my family story of growing up in Broadmeadows, a working class suburb of Melbourne.

In the four chapters that make up Part One, the thesis, I explore questions of memory and examine, but do not limit myself to, themes surrounding the creation of verisimilitude, the impact of place, and the role of trauma and postmemory in memoir and writing.

**Chapter one** investigates Roland Barthes and his theories of truth in fiction through the use of what he terms ‘the reality effect’, or the effect of the real. This is illustrated in the approach to memoir taken by Frank McCourt in his acclaimed memoir as novel, *Angela’s Ashes* (1996). This chapter considers what can be taken from these theories and texts to enhance the reader experience. At the same time it examines the relationship of the fictive self in autobiography, namely through Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact.

**Chapter two** considers the role of imagination and play in various forms of writing and how these may assist a writer to both reveal and conceal truth. It also poses questions around the reliability of the narrator: Are all memoirists liars and should they all be writing fiction? Conversely, does all fiction contain some autobiographical writing? Where is the line drawn and how far can the boundaries be pushed?

**Chapter three** examines the meaning of facts in storytelling and memoirs in contrast to historical narratives. It explores notions of testimony and memory, trauma and postmemory, drawing on the theories of leading academics Cathy Caruth and Marianne Hirsch.

**Chapter four**, the final chapter, outlines the process of writing *Ways to Fly*, the various forms I tackled in crafting this creative work and the journey
from biography to novel to memoir and finally, its hybrid form in an ‘about face’. This chapter considers the challenges of fictionalising a true story, turning real people into characters and investigates the significance of place in memoir.

Reflecting on my childhood, it seemed that death and illness hovered over Dallas. Through attempting to write the truth as fiction, I found that it was easier to imagine it was happening to someone else. When I fictionalised the little girl who experienced the fear of death and illness that resulted from these traumas I came closer to removing the mask of reality. Ironically, the unmasking of truth then became critical in my decision to blend the memoir with the novel, to blur the boundaries of fiction and nonfiction. Through this process, I determined that I had written this book for two reasons. Firstly, I wanted to offer a voice for the voiceless, the marginalised members of a working class community who suffered illness and disability as they struggled through their lives. Secondly, I wanted to explore what Michel de Certeau calls a ‘haunting of the dead’, to write for the dead, the lost voices of those who have no way of telling. As Stanley says in an extract from a diary entry included in her essay, ‘The Knowing Because Experiencing Subject’:

I’ve thought a great deal about Aunt Flora [one of my mother’s sisters, who had just died] since Saturday. I didn’t know her at all, & now I’ve lost the chance of knowing what Mum made of her over the years & why the breach between them. These histories have been much in my mind recently – things I want to be told about, to listen to tales of people & places, & I never will again. (Stanley 1994, p. 144)

Writing a life, a book that is ‘unflinchingly real’ – and researching the themes around the writing process – enables a writer such as myself to make a contribution to contemporary literature, in particular contemporary working class literature. My thesis attempts to find ways to shape and reveal truth in the geography of genre, and in doing so, to unmask the intersection of fact and fiction in which ‘lies’ truth.
Tensions in Truth

Truth, in all its connotations, can be distorted, mediated or rearranged, thus making it difficult to truly recognize. Is it enough, then, to write ‘truthfully’ so that other, deeper truths may be revealed? In this chapter I examine the approaches I have adopted in writing a memoir as novel, in exploring definitions of truth in storytelling and in selecting genre while also analysing narrative strategies used by other writers. My key aims were to find the form that provided the best way to present the story, ‘my story’ while moving around the ethical considerations of ‘making it up’, inserting the self and giving a voice to ‘the other’. I outline other concerns around authority and authenticity, which, for me, are at the core of truthfulness in writing. In this chapter selected writers of autobiography, memoir and fiction are also discussed as a means of exploring those literary and technical approaches used to create memory, to tell stories, to bring truth to both fiction and nonfiction, or, as Roland Barthes suggests, to bring meaning to text. In *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*, Barthes writes:

What has interested me passionately all my life is the way men make their world intelligible to themselves ... writing creates meaning which the words do not have at the outset. (2009, p. 8)

What Barthes is saying here, I would suggest, is that writing (whether fiction, poetry or autobiography) can give meaning and quality to our lives, and it’s the symbolic in an author’s interpretation of life that draws reality for the reader.
I have struggled with notions of authenticity and interpretation in my own writing, and in my work in progress through its various guises. I have worked hard, over a number of drafts, to avoid the categorisation of autobiography. ‘It’s not about me,’ I have wanted to scream as I avoided putting myself in early versions of the creative work, namely the biography, In Whose Eyes. But it is about me and it is my story as much as it is about ‘the other’, it is my truth and my eyewitness account, or at the very least the way I remember it. Somehow, like a lot of the writing I’m drawn to, I prefer the idea of the narrative being seen as ‘quasi-autobiography’ – a genre that reaches across fiction and nonfiction. I feel I must still honour the pact with my reader, that this is a ‘true’ story; a pact that French theorist Philippe Lejeune suggests exists in autobiographical writing. And yet, in writing some of the material, I found I could only honour truthfulness by moving away from nonfiction and finding freedom in fiction.

While my creative project and research contribute to the continuing investigations of theme and style in creative writing, I am also acutely aware of the need to balance the critical or analytical with experience and process. How many theoretical ideas need to be pursued? If I’m writing ‘truthfully’ – what else is needed? Surely truth in its various guises is enough for any story? What goes in and what stays out? The spaces created by absences are often as eloquent as what is written. Commenting on the writing of The House of Fiction, Susan Swingler says her quest was to understand, not to accuse. Proust referred to this dilemma when he suggested writing theory is like leaving a price tag on a beautiful object. Susan Sontag also discusses this in her collection of essays Against Interpretation (1966). Sontag, ever the pragmatist, suggests art, including literature, is not only about something it is something (my italics): A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world, claims Sontag, suggesting, that the text carries the burden (the truth) of the story. Interpretation, argues Sontag, ‘commits art to being perpetually on the run’, adding:

It also perpetuates the very distinction between form and content which is, ultimately, an illusion. (Sontag 1966, p. 11)

As my reading and research widened I was drawn to these themes of style and technique, across all genres, as they sit alongside the study of
language and linguistics, and in particular the construction of language to achieve a reality effect, a way to infuse stories with a deeper truth. Barthes’ discussion of verisimilitude and the distinction between what historians do and what novelists do provided a framework for my research.

In exploring a range of narrative strategies, such as voice, character, setting, used in both fiction and nonfiction, in order to tell the truth, to achieve what Barthes identifies as ‘the reality effect’ – an illusion of reality rather than reality itself (Barthes 1986), I was able to determine what worked best for my storytelling. In The Rustle of Language, Barthes suggests that literary techniques, such as word selection, signification and sentence construction, are used to produce an effect of the real. He argues that the aesthetic goal of description is necessarily mixed with ‘realistic’ imperatives. The aim of the writer being one of assistance to the reader with representation, ‘to put things before the hearer’s eyes’ (Barthes 1986, p. 145). It was Barthes examination of ‘concrete reality’ and the need to authenticate the ‘real’ that assisted me most in terms of writing my memoir as novel, in finding the aesthetic value of the story. As Barthes notes:

... the reality effect is produced, the basis of that unavowed verisimilitude which forms the aesthetic of all the standard works of modernity. (Barthes 1986, p. 148)

While some scholars and theorists might argue that art reflects life or that literature mirrors the real, Barthes argues it is through language and writerly text (including the superfluous detail or the ‘insignificant’) that meaning and reality are conveyed. In examining the structure of language, and the axis of language from the metaphoric and the syntagmatic point in narrative, I explored those stylistic techniques writers of all genres adopt to give shape to their stories and to evoke a sense of the real, of truth. Of course, truth needs a philosophical understanding and belief to attach a literal meaning, and while this thesis does not propose to examine that in detail, it will outline how truth in writing in all genres might serve a higher purpose, and how memoir, in particular, must be true to the experience. Those novelistic techniques that worked best for me were often focused on point of view, place, dialogue and aesthetics. And in this study of technique I was drawn to the work of Frank McCourt in Angela’s Ashes (1996), a work that has been described as both memoir and novel. I found truthfulness was revealed more in authenticity and
voice rather than a reliance on an accurate representation of what happened historically.

Narrative strategies

In the past two decades, a number of important memoirs have captured the popular imagination in ways previous autobiographies have not. These include McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, a coming-of-age story which travels full circle from its opening pages of a child in a New York playground through the dire poverty of McCourt’s childhood Limerick, to his journey back to the ever optimistic New York as an adult. The popularity of a book such as this undoubtedly rests in the rags to riches mythology, especially in the United States, where the national psyche applauds engaging stories of self-redemption. This is not to say, however, that the memoir does not also work on other levels. As such, McCourt’s book not only has its roots in the great migrant narratives of the 19th and 20th centuries, but also in self-redemption. As well as good fact, this is good fiction that has its origins in novels such as *David Copperfield* and *Tom Jones*. One could argue that the work of McCourt is closer to a novel than a memoir. Novels are fictionalised stories and memoirs are not. Or does the fictionalising of the story for narrative’s purposes meet approval from the reader because of the author’s autobiographical pact? Is this the evidence that McCourt is telling a true story about his life with authority and authenticity?

The American academic, James Mitchell, discusses this idea further in his paper ‘Popular Autobiography as Historiography: The Reality Effect of Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*’ suggesting McCourt uses ‘history-as-memory’ and claims the categorisation of the work as memoir is problematic. One might argue that the book is fiction and indeed it has won some awards as a novel, but Mitchell goes on to acknowledge that ‘studying how and for what purpose memoirs make use of narrative strategies borrowed from other genres can grant us significant insights into the practices of writing’ (2003, p. 608). For me, McCourt’s use of those narrative strategies that might be termed truth-telling devices illustrates the blending of boundaries in memoir and fiction. Using first person, present tense helps in locating the author, selectively choosing local dialect and ‘concrete details’ of place, namely Limerick in Ireland, all work well to bring Barthes’ verisimilitude to the writing.
Angela’s Ashes demonstrates a novelistic approach of make-believe and Mitchell suggests it is this disjunction between self and text that distinguishes McCourt’s approach to memoir. He proposes that McCourt employs a disembodied adult voice to introduce his childhood while, at the same time, drawing on Barthes’ reality effect. Mitchell writes:

... the unproblematic way he relates the family history preceding his own birth does offer insight into McCourt’s methods for constructing a past through narrative ... what is patently missing from the resulting autobiography, however, is any reflection on the process of his assembly. (Mitchell 2003, p. 614)

Through literary studies and textual analysis like that of McCourt’s book, I have addressed problems in my own autobiographical and fictional writing, identifying those lines where fact blurs with fiction, while experimenting within the discipline of what might collectively be called ‘life writing’. In this way I come closer to my proposition: that all forms of autobiography involve a creating and shaping, a process that adds to autobiography’s fictive aspect, as argued in my paper, ‘Blind truth: The reality effect in nonfiction’. A life told is not the same as a life lived, and in the writing of memory or the narrating of story the relationship between fact and fiction becomes fluid (van de Pol 2010). Novelist Jeanette Winterson, whose recent memoir, Why be Happy When You Could be Normal (2011), is described as a ‘twin’ story to her first award-winning novel, Oranges are Not the Only Fruit (1985), suggests there is no such thing as autobiography, recognising the tension between fact and fiction in autobiography and writing generally. Memory, according to Winterson, is unstable:

Truth for anyone is a complex thing. For a writer, what you leave out says as much as those things you include. What lies beyond the margin of the text? The photographer frames the shot; writers frame their world. (2011, p. 8)

Questions about writing, truth and interpretation continued to emerge as I wrote my memoir. Who owns stories? Who tells them best? How can a writer convey hope through despair without it being cloying, or sentimental, or self-indulgent? How does one transform life into something better? As a writer, I have attempted to reveal slices of life, ways of seeing, that my readers may not
otherwise consider. In this thesis and its exploration of truth, I consider a range of memoirs and novels but in particular, those that move from despair to hope, poverty to wealth, obscurity to fame, and anonymity to self-awareness. Some would argue that this transformative power of not only living the life but using it creatively, writing the life, has a therapeutic effect not only for the author but for the reader as well, as witnessed in the success of McCourt and his capturing a child’s misery and his journey to self-discovery and success. It could also be argued that only the most fortunate in life escape some kind of personal mishap, disaster or loss. But I would suggest, like Barthes, that it is the way in which one gives voice and meaning to this that encourages further examination and insight. Sometimes, however, this insight or examination may involve the lives of others and the telling of a personal story may become a story of ‘others’, a memoir.

Lejeune considers autobiography to be a collaborative genre involving several people behind the writing persona; how the reader responds to the experiences of the narrator seems to be what matters. In further examining Lejeune’s theory of the autobiographical pact, and, in particular, the signature of the author and use of first person, I turn to Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957). McCarthy may seem an odd choice among my contemporary study of autobiographies and memoirs. Perhaps no longer fashionable, McCarthy had a significant impact on the way we see ourselves in a postmodern, postfeminine world, and her writing, both fiction and nonfiction, was significant and influential. She was not afraid to speak out and fought against those who tried to silence her. Like McCourt who was criticised roundly by the citizens of Limerick, and Winterson who was seen as overly harsh on her adoptive mother, or more recently Swingler who, due to her stepmother Elizabeth Jolley’s duplicity, was forced to live a life of secrets, McCarthy believed she had a right to speak out against injustice. In her memoir, McCarthy begins with a rather long note to the reader, acknowledging the relationship that exists between writer and reader whenever a book is opened. McCarthy warns her readers that she is taking them into dangerous territory, into the blurring of fact and fiction, memory and imagination. It is up to them if they choose to follow. This, she says, is her writer–reader pact:

> These memories of mine have been collected slowly, over a period of years. Some readers, finding them in a magazine, have taken them
for stories. The assumption that I have ‘made them up’ is surprisingly prevalent, even among people who know me. (1957, p. xi)

Through my creative work-in-progress I explored ways in which I might turn my memories into stories, and in the writing of memory, like McCarthy, I examined the veracity of my own memory and discovered I, too, may come under examination by my readers for the truthfulness of the stories. These stories are a collection of memories; some of them I know to be true, others are what I have been told to be true, and the rest are what I think to be true. Is this enough? And what do I mean when I say I know something to be true? Is this knowledge based on historical documents, registered certificates of birth and death? Aide-memoires such as photos offer additional layers of ‘truth’ but even this proof has been shown to be questionable.

Where’s the line?

Like Winterson et al, I would suggest that all life writing, which may include memoir, autobiography, biography, journal writing, and blogging, is fictionalised in some way. Every story we narrate, from our earliest experiences of language, is ‘fictionalised’. Inga Clendinnen has also written of this fictive nature of memoir. In her memoir, Tiger’s Eye, Clendinnen suggests memories are unreliable: ‘Writing my childhood has made me see that the marshland between memory and invention is treacherous’ (Clendinnen 2000, p. 73). Moreover, much of the communication of the story is dependent upon the listener, the reader or observer. Josie Arnold extends this relationship to include the ‘sub-voice’ of autobiography and describes an ‘unintentional interaction with self, text and reader’ (Arnold 2009, p. 1). Arnold also claims that autobiography provides facts in a fictional as well as nonfictional way and raises the questions of the reliability of the narrator.

Critical discussions around the blurring of fact and fiction are not new. Many writers grapple with the question of reliability and authenticity. In Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives, Smith and Watson suggest life writing is a general term for writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject. ‘Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or an
explicit self-reference to the writer’ (Smith & Watson 2001, p. 3). McCarthy, like Winterson and Clendinnen, also raises the fluidity of fact and fiction:

Many a time in the course of doing these memoirs, I have wished that I were writing fiction. The temptation to invent has been very strong, particularly where recollection is hazy and I remember the substance of an event but not the details – the colour of a dress, the pattern of a carpet, the placing of a picture. (McCarthy 1957, p. xi)

While issues of rights and responsibilities, ethics and writing are explored elsewhere in this thesis, the notion of silence is an important one to include in this chapter on truth. As Andrew Riemer suggests in the Afterword of Susan Swingler’s memoir The House of Fiction:

To argue that Swingler’s book might be hurtful to others, both living and dead, is to ignore how unjust it would be to force silence on her. (Swingler 2012, p. 315)

Swingler is the daughter of Leonard Jolley and stepdaughter of Elizabeth Jolley, and her memoir was attacked by Jolley’s family and supporters, as invading Jolley’s right to privacy. Swingler, they said, stopped Jolley from maintaining her image as she’d wished. The subtext of Reimer’s comment is that people should not be silenced just to keep up appearances. These silences in stories, in particular of the voiceless or marginalised, are discussed further in chapter two of this thesis.

Swingler’s work and Reimer’s comments raise questions about the reliability of the narrator. Who is telling the story and why are they telling it? Philippe Lejeune’s theory of the autobiographical pact which sustains the ‘reliability’ of the narrator is one way of understanding this multi-layered approach to truth, to remembering, and to writing (Lejeune 1989). Lejeune defines the relationship between author and reader in autobiographical writing as a contract which is sealed by the proper name of the author (Lejeune 1989, p. 19). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in their guide for interpreting life narratives, Reading Autobiography, suggest:

With this recognition of the autobiographical pact, Lejeune argues, we read differently and assess the narrative as making truth claims of a sort that are suspended in fictional forms such as the novel. (Smith & Watson 2001, pp. 8, 9)
In reading and writing both memoir and fiction, and through engagement in creative writing workshops and conversations with Australian writers including Catherine Cole, Robert Dessaix, David Carlin, Chloe Hooper and Nam Le, I have been drawn into the wider discussions and contexts of the writing process. These shared personal insights and broader literary discussions have encouraged me to employ a range of techniques in my own writing, all designed to engage with or embrace Barthes’ reality effect. One way into the writing – and into the ‘truth’ – for me, was to move from a first person to a third person point of view, to adopt the focalisation of a child narrator. It seems that in removing the ‘I’ and, perhaps with it, the autobiographical pact, I was seeking, and finding, freedom. In adopting more novelistic techniques to encourage the reader to enter the story with their own expectations and interpretations, I wanted to stay with the truth or what Barthes calls ‘concrete details’. As outlined in the introduction of this chapter, I am interested, not only in the art of storytelling, but also in the role of the reader and those imperatives that drive us to read and to write, and most importantly, to remember.

In her memoir, *The Poet who Forgot* (2008), Cole suggests remembering or reflecting on our past is important in defining ourselves:

... it anchors our identities in some temporal way, defining us, allowing us to chart our progress through life as a series of remembered events, like monuments scratched into the parchment of an old map ... The past must be relived, remembered, mourned, cut adrift, tethered on a long thread. Then we might pull it back at will to interrogate. (Cole 2008, pp. 202-3)

Carlin, on the issue of trust, warns the reader of, *Our Father Who Wasn’t There*, that he is relying on either stories told to him or his imagination. It is a ploy used by a number of writers, memoirists in particular, to ensure the reader has entered a pact with them and is well aware of the unreliability of their memories or indeed, the fictionalising and imagination involved in the telling of them. Carlin writes:

Brian had heavy secrets. He believed there was something wrong with him ... In case you’re wondering how I know all this, of course I don’t. But I am giving Brian everything I know about depression. After all, it’s just returning the favour. His genes have caused me more than enough trouble in this field from time to time. And you’ll
have to trust me here: I know what he’s thinking, I know I just said I didn’t; but I do. (Carlin 2011, p. 121)

As I wrote my creative work, I continued to reshape, create or even ‘make-up’ the reality: What was the weather like in May 1962 when my parents moved into McIvor Street? What did my mother’s face look like when she told me she was pregnant, again, with baby number nine? Turning to fiction, using my imagination to fill in the ‘gaps’, keeps me tethered to the truth of my story. But am I changing the reality? Or am I simply bringing one person’s interpretation of reality to writing, to achieve what Ernest Hemingway describes as truer than true. Is this permissible? Memoirist and author of Writing True: The Art and Craft of Nonfiction, Mimi Schwarz, suggests there sometimes needs to be a crossing of the line between fact and fiction for the greater good of the story. Some call it the power of the imagination, an ability to reveal an emotional truth. In an article entitled ‘Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the Line?’ she states:

If the main plot, characters, and setting are true, if the intent is to make honest sense of ‘how it felt to me’ and tell that true story well (with disclaimer as needed), it’s memoir to me. (Schwartz 2005, p. 404)

When I grappled with stylistic issues like voice and agency, was I attempting to locate my work in a genre, or am I, like many other writers, simply attempting to turn life into fiction? Does remembering something make it true, as author Joan Didion suggests? Can the same truths, I wonder, be incorporated into fiction where a writer attempts to reveal or unravel truth? The experiences of the Gleeson brothers might work well as nonfiction but their stories, with all their tragic implications, also offer a fine fictional flavour to the story.

It is the questioning and search for meaning that Barthes et al. describe that links closely to my own writing of both the thesis and creative components. In the process of writing I realise that what I first thought I would write about is different from what I have actually written. In the memoir, the first draft would have more aptly fitted the biography genre where I wanted to write a story of others. I, as the narrator, was missing from the initial chapters of the story. This resulted in a rather clumsy, journalistic mode of reporting and led to
correspondence from Peter Bishop, Creative Director of Varuna Writers’ Centre, who suggested:

For me, the vital missing element at present is the writer: the narrator is absolutely self-effacing: no one exists but these brothers and their stories, and as a reader I want to know: who is the narrator? What interests her in the story? Why is she telling it to us? (Bishop, personal correspondence, 10 February 2003)

While I could see value in what Bishop was saying, I struggled with writing about the self. In a sense, I was being asked to perform a backflip on all that I had learned and attempted to perfect as a journalist, that is to keep myself out of the story, to deliver the story through other people’s eyes – to be the reporter. As a journalist, there were always decisions to make about what to include, what to leave out, who to quote, where to place the facts. My determination to present both sides of a story, to only deal in the facts before me, and to have no part in the story has been a hard rule to break. But I also knew if the story was to have the vitality and veracity that it deserved I had to dig deeper. I took Bishop’s advice and I began to put myself in the story, to imagine, to invent and to daydream. Robert Dessaix says much of his work begins in gossiping and daydreaming. Memoir is redemptive, he believes. It is a way of rescuing the banal and making it art.

It’s not about you, it’s about the reader; they want you to free them up to find their own voice to speak about themselves. Find words to express the experience you have – what if feels like to be – convey that to the reader. It’s gossip, sharing bits and pieces, rumours, eccentric scraps ... in a rather educated way this is what you are doing. In Night Letters AIDS is never mentioned, it’s about what they care about and coming to terms with their own mortality. (Dessaix, 2 September 2010, RMIT University)

And in many ways it was this ‘gossip’ in the neighbourhood of the blind brothers and their accidents and the speculations around them and subsequent events in their family and my own that led to my interest in telling one version of the story, but how to tell it remained a mystery to me for some time.
Exploring fiction

Fiction and nonfiction writers, I have discovered, are like trees with their roots in truth and their branches reaching up to imaginative heights. As I delved into the past to make sense of the present and to find a way forward, I borrowed from the writers I admired most, played with genre, and explored aspects of agency and voice. In writing the child voice of my own work, I was reminded of the skill of novelist Harper Lee and her character Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). Why is Scout so memorable and why is her childlike voice so impressionable? Is it Harper’s ability to capture the innocence of the child on the verge of adolescence, moving from unknowing to knowing? For me, part of the answer lies in the eloquent episode, the marriage of detail and dialogue, observation and absence; that is, the text is what matters. Lee creates the effect of the real, in voice and place:

‘Are we poor, Atticus?’
Atticus nodded. ‘We are indeed.’
Jem’s nose wrinkled. ‘Are we as poor as the Cunninghams?’
‘Not exactly. The Cunninghams are country folks, farmers, and the crash hit them hardest.’ (Lee 1960, p. 23)

In exploring voice and point of view, I moved from the missing narrator to first person and then to third person, where I remained for a while before rethinking this approach. Because much of my draft of the novel was set in early childhood and around a coming of age, I also examined the books and characters of Carson McCullers, in particular the child on the brink of adolescence. McCullers, who understood the watchful child so well and illustrated the powerful child voice in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), became a guiding force for me. Those young female characters with their boyish names, Frankie and Mick, often sat like a muse on my shoulder just as Lee’s fictitious Scout and Jem wandered in and out of my mind as I wrote of my siblings and the Gleeson brothers:

Finally the bandages are off. Maurice can see. He looks at the pretty get well cards on the table by his bed, the green and yellow balloons, a vase of red carnations. But it’s a false alarm, a terrible trick. The boy in the bed has a few minutes of vision before his world withdraws
again. A second operation is arranged. Be brave, his Mum whispers, squeezing his hand tight.

When he pulls at the heavy cloth over his eyes and the bandages are unwrapped, Maurice can’t see. It’s dark, but not black. The colour he does see is a dirty cloudy grey, like a TV screen with lights flickering on it. Even the holy water from his Grandma didn’t work. (2009, p. 28)

Tim Winton’s *Cloudsteet* (1991) is fictional and his characters are made up, and yet through the details of his character’s lives, through the details of time and place, readers are able to suspend disbelief and enter their worlds. Winton’s larrikin character Sam Pickles would have called the kind of misfortune that hovered over my friend’s house at number eight McIvor Street, Dallas, the ‘shifty shadow of luck’. But Sam and the rest of the Pickles and the Lambs, and their dreams and disasters, are fictional (at least that’s what we as readers believe when we read a novel). The Gleesons at number eight and my family, the Egans, at number four were, and still are, real. Some are dead, most are still living. Perhaps that is why I continued to struggle with the definition of my Dallas story as fiction. Someone tellingly described it as a kind of *Angela’s Ashes* meets *Cloudstreet*.

In conclusion, what all of these authors and theorists show us is that the art of storytelling, the construction of language, the blurring of fact and fiction and the role of the reader are among the most prominent of the imperatives that drive us to write and to read. However, what the contract between writer and reader most seeks, I would argue, is truth, but truth in every sense of the word: truth to detail, to feeling, to setting and story. Fact, or reality, is only one small element of it. Memoirs, a reader believes, are one of the most ‘truthful’ of narratives, however even these are unstable and unreliable.

How I define truth in what I write and what I read has more to do with authenticity and integrity than fact or fiction, the need to reveal concrete details and strive for an emotional truth.
This chapter will investigate the role of imagination, invention and play in creative writing and, in particular, how fiction and imagination may be used to tell an engaging and credible story, whether it is about history, about life or about what happens on the inside, about feelings. In many ways, using imagination and play can help a writer to be experimental, to push boundaries, to make a story pliable. Writers such as Patricia Hampl, Robin Hemley and Lisa Dunham argue that this pliable, flexible nature of truth in storytelling can be both an asset and a liability. Dunham suggests a story’s relationship to truth, especially in memoir, ‘is a little, well, bendy’ (Talbot 2012, p. 138). But is it lying? I would argue not, in terms of the dictionary definition.

In addition, this chapter will explore themes of dishonesty and deception; or, for the purposes of a creative writing thesis, might the term ‘manipulation’ be more accurate? Academic and writer of both fiction and nonfiction, Robin Hemley, suggests all art manipulates. In Meta-writings, he says manipulation is part of the project:

You’re trying to get the reader or viewer to engage with the world you’ve created and in doing so you lead the reader to certain effects, emotions, questions, concerns. (Talbot 2012, p. 133)

In Mary Karr’s acclaimed memoir The Liar’s Club (1995) readers may wonder at the veracity of her memory while at the same time enjoying the exceptional writing that recreates her childhood and her world for the reader. Indeed Stephen King, in the introduction to his book On Writing (2000), suggests Karr remembers things from her childhood ‘in an almost unbroken
2. TURNING LIFE INTO ART

panorama’, and adds, ‘mine is a fogged-out landscape from which occasional memories appear like isolated trees’ (King 2000, p. 3). But Karr, even in her title, acknowledges an experience similar to King’s, which many writers of both fiction and nonfiction admit to: a life remembered or a life borrowed from, is not the same as a life lived. But does this make the telling of the life, the memoir or the novel, a lie?

Karr’s title, The Liar’s Club, grew out of her reflections on her father’s night-time gatherings with his friends where stories, exaggerated and embellished, were sifted and shared. Like my own father and his mates, the men in Karr’s memoir would sit around, drink beer and whisky – and, tell ‘lies’. Like Karr, I was always ready and willing to listen. My father filled his glass, lit his cigarette, winked at me, then began. Somewhere in the background my mother would shout from behind a cloud of boiling cabbage, ‘Don’t listen to him, he’s making it up’. She did not use the word ‘lie’, it being too harsh a word, too strong a judgement, with all the religious connotations of ‘thou shalt not lie’. But in listening to my father’s stories I was not concerned with whether they were true or not, I was more interested in hearing about this ‘other’ world he once inhabited, far away from what I then knew. It is the same for me when I am reading a story, it is the narrative and the writing that interest me most, not the fact or fiction of it. I would suggest this is not true of all readers, that there exists a need to know when a story is a ‘lie’, when it is true and when it is false.

Artistic manipulation, according to Hemley, is not a moral issue but a technical one. In the same way, I would argue that it is a ‘poetic licence’, a clever kind of ‘handling’ of story, that enables artists, writers, filmmakers, painters and photographers to draw a deeper truth, an emotional truth. Silence. Pretending something didn’t happen. I would argue that there is a form of dishonesty in avoidance, in silence.

Susannah Radstone also argues that art can help unlock trauma and reveal what was previously hidden, that it can assist in speaking the unspeakable, writing the unprintable, as will be discussed in chapter three. Sometimes, when trauma is too difficult to recall or to share it may need to be reconsidered, re-presented and even renamed. The hidden does not simply become fact or factual (Radstone 2009), but more importantly it has meaning. It means something to the writer. This search for meaning is what links fact and fiction in my own creative work, and in particular the process of writing. I look
to Hemley’s understanding of why we write to support this notion of revealing the hidden to find meaning:

We write in order to see what we think: our own thoughts are revealed to us as we write. (Talbot 2012, p. 133)

Hampl suggests memoir is a dynamic form today precisely because it is not a formula. Memoir has, according to Hampl, ‘this thing called a story, a narrative … it’s got all this stuff we connect with fiction’ (Hampl et al. 2004, p. 133). What Hampl is saying is that this intersection of ‘show AND tell’ in memoir gives the genre its vitality.

Take a memoirist like Mary Karr, who I love … Not a lot of analysis, very narrative. But the language is so great, so fantastic. The sheer writerly ability is so great that we don’t care. So it isn’t like a formula. (Hampl et al. 2004, p. 134)

Ethical and moral issues related to memoir, Hampl concedes, are insoluble, suggesting the genre is working with consciousness itself, not with fact, and that we are dealing with not what ‘happened’ but with what ‘has happened.’ While acknowledging that she is bothered by the argument of truth versus invention, Hampl, like Hemley, says that a great deal of the writing has to do with style and voice and helping the reader feel and believe.

[Some] are so assured that there is this thing called a “fact” and that it can be found like a lost sock, and that once you’ve found it that’s all you’ve got to do, state a fact. I think that misrepresents entirely the way the faculty of memory works, no matter what you subscribe to. (Hampl et al. 2004, p. 140)

While the research questions of this chapter consider the idea of making things up, that is, fictionalising life, as a way to find truth, it was important for me to discover, in the process of writing both the thesis and the creative work, what fiction is able to deliver that nonfiction cannot. By this I mean fiction can and does provide a way into life, especially where there is an element of the unknown, or unknowable, the unspoken or unspeakable; or, as Radstone refers to it, the ‘cache’ or the hidden. This idea of unlocking painful memories is discussed further in chapter four in relation to trauma theory and postmemory.
Fictionalising real people

Colm Tóibín, in his nonfiction book on writers and their families *New Ways to Kill Your Mother* (2012), reveals ways in which ‘real’ families are fictionalised in novels, and in particular highlights the role of mother figures who may represent, or sometimes replace, the ‘real’ life of the writer. But the novel, argues Tóibín, is not a moral fable and its real value, he believes, is in its patterns, strategies, textures and tone. I would argue that fictionalising real life and real people adds depth and drama to writing. As Tóibín writes:

> ... it is not our job to like or dislike characters in fiction, or make judgements on their worth, or learn from them how to live. We can do that with real people and, if we like, figures from history. (Tóibín 2012, p. 8)

Characters in a novel (and perhaps to some extent the real people portrayed in memoir) give us density, richness and a range of affects, but, as Tóibín insists, the role of a character in a novel must be judged not as we would judge a real person. This is the freedom I have found in writing fiction, in particular when writing about family. The novel, more than any other genre, allows the writer, and in turn the reader, to examine an ‘inner life’. Author and philosopher Milan Kundera, in *The Art of the Novel*, also argues the novel helps discover the undiscovered and, in a small way, what it is to be human. Kundera, supporting Tóibín’s views on fictional characters, warns ‘a character is not a simulation of a living being. It is an imaginary being, an experimental self’ (Kundera 2000, p. 27). Discussing the significance of the inner life, Tóibín draws on the novels of Henry James and his heroines, who are individuals alone in the world, removed from the control and cocoon of family. Tóibín notes:

> James analysed what he had done with Isabel Archer’s ‘inward life’
> ... where by allowing her mind to circle and recircle, he brought Isabel and the reader to a realization of what has been hidden from both up to then. (Tóibín 2012, p. 19)

For me, this process of finding or creating an inner life of the real people in my real story was one of the biggest challenges but perhaps the most rewarding of the entire creative work, to put myself in my mother’s shoes, as it
were. James himself considered the virtues of one particular, crucial, scene portraying the inner life in *Portrait of a Lady* when he wrote:

Reduced to its essence it is but a vigil of searching criticism, but it throws the action further forward than twenty ‘incidents’ might have done. It was designed to have all the vivacity of incident and all the economy of picture. She sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night ... it all goes on without her being approached by another person and without her leaving her chair. It is obviously the best thing in the book ... (Toibin 2012, p. 19)

Imagining the inner life of my developing characters, playing with their identity and personalities, physical and emotional features, allowed me to simulate the ‘living being’. The idea of simulating or conjuring reminds me of some kind of magical experience, as witnessed by many writers. Indeed, the poet WB Yeats, in reflecting on the effects of using a medium to help his writing, suggested it is difficult to control the autonomous power of the unconscious mind; where, I would also add, the imagination and invention take place. Yeats noted:

Because mediumship is dramatization, even host mediums cheat at times either deliberately or because some part of the body has freed itself from control of the waking will, and almost always truth and lies are mixed together. (Toibin 2012, p. 60)

It is the mix of truth and lies, referred to by Yeats, that is at the heart of my research topic, and the hybrid memoir as novel created and shaped by this very mixing. It confirms, for me, what many have argued previously and continue to argue: that conventions of narrative can be challenged and changed over time. Hampl argues that part of the excitement of memoir, as a form, is that ideas around morality and truth are still being questioned.

We are living in the middle of deciding what it’s going to be and learning not only how to write it but how to read it. How do we read this form? We may have made a big mistake when we put memoir into that big, baggy category of nonfiction. (Hampl et al. 2004, p. 135)

It is possible to argue, on the other hand, that there must be a clear-cut and definitive difference between fiction and nonfiction. Author Carol Bly is hard-lined about the distinctions between fact and fiction, discussing these in
2. TURNING LIFE INTO ART

her book, *Beyond the Writers’ Workshop: New Ways to Write Creative Nonfiction*. Bly says bending truth to make a fact denser, more accessible, or prettier, is wrong. ‘Fudging memoir details is like dipping a computer into a river to make it shine’ (Bly 2001, p. 264).

Regardless of how one might view the veracity of memoir and its problematic categorisation as nonfiction, the key aims of this thesis have been to further explore the way writing life as art can heal, the way literature can reveal truth, and how books might provide salvation. Winterson, in *Why be Happy When You Could be Normal*, writes about how stories, fiction in particular, provided sanity and salvation for her darkest moments, firstly as a child locked out of the family house, later as a teenager ‘living’ in her car, and most recently as an adult slipping into madness. In her chapter, ‘Art and Lies’, she writes:

> The more I read the more I fought against the assumption that literature is for the minority – of a particular education and class. Books were my birthright too. (2011, p. 143)

Author and academic Brenda Walker, in *Reading by Moonlight*, explores this further and suggests books and reading saved her life. She articulates how in the darkest moments of her cancer treatment she was able to surrender to reading stories to help with her healing. In managing her treatment, Walker carried books with her to waiting rooms and hospital stays, an experience familiar to my own as articulated in my creative work. How is it possible, Walker asks, to submit to the memory of previous times when awaiting the outcome of the latest chemotherapy treatment. She writes:

> To sit with the other Flemish faces in the oncologist’s waiting room, to settle into a hospital bed with a book, and then lay the book down to push up a sleeve when the nurse arrives with the drugs and the machine and turn calmly aside? You have to have confidence in the medicine, but it’s also possible because the mind turns everything into a story. (Walker, B 2010, p. 60)

The idea of art and manipulation, art and lies, and the way in which truth and lies are mixed together, is explored further by Hemley when suggesting a writer is always trying to get language to meet experience. He describes the challenge in this way:
What I wrote down was not what I experienced. What you write down is not what you experience. It’s always a translation of experience, and in many ways a crude one. Language approaches experience but never arrives at it (Talbot 2012, p. 134)

Courage and morality

Anna Funder describes writing as being ‘an important kind of magic’. In an interview following her receipt of The Miles Franklin Award for her novel, *All That I Am*, Funder said she was inspired by the ‘great moral, and in some cases, physical, courage’ of the characters in her book, who were based on real people. According to Funder the book, which she says is about people wanting to speak up for justice, is labelled fiction but throughout the writing of it she aimed ‘to stay with the original intention of the story and a kind of truth telling’ (Funder 2012). The book grew from a friendship Funder had with one of the main characters, Ruth, who was her German tutor. While promoting her book in Melbourne, Funder commented:

> The story is something that Ruth lived; it collapses history on itself, a kind of concertina effect. All of it is true, and all of it happened but I made an attempt to grapple with it in a humane way, in way that seemed truthful. With nonfiction I couldn’t get inside their heads but with a novel, it was like I could get into a fast red car and get inside anybody’s head. (Funder, Literary Event, 24 July 2012, Melbourne)

There are a myriad of moral and ethical issues around telling real stories about real people. It can feel as if you are marching into their head and helping yourself to their innermost thoughts, stealing them, sharing them with the rest of the world. And the right or wrong of this is not easily answered by ethics, permission or relationships.

Like Funder and other writers, I have aimed for an emotional truth. I had free and open access to family and friends, but how they appear in the story is inevitably different from how they think they should appear. In its original form my biography appeared clipped and ‘respectful’ but without the vitality of feelings or emotional truth. I would argue, along with Milan Kundera, for the inclusion of feelings and emotions in literature and storytelling. Documentary maker John Safran says that in his storytelling he always aims for emotional truth but suggests ‘it’s a woolly thing to define’ (Safran 2012). I could easily
identify with Safran as the journalist, the interviewer, when he spoke with a panel at RMIT University on the topic ‘Digging up the Truth’ (Safran, 24 August 2012, RMIT University). For most of my working life, I had enjoyed writing about the ‘other’, and was excited about finding good stories or, more importantly, ‘good talent’ to tell their stories. I was a good listener and learned ways, both crude and calculated, to elicit the information I needed for a good story. Was I ethical? I believe I was, always keeping in mind that these were real people with real emotions and that I was privileged in my role as a conduit. As Funder, quoting Ruth, articulated: ‘one does not remember one’s own pain. It is the suffering of others that undoes us’ (Funder 2011, p. 295).

If a ‘novel is a meditation on existence, as seen through the medium of imaginary characters’, as Kundera suggests (Kundera 2000), then can memoir be seen as a reflection on life through the eyes of real people? And what happens then if this meditation or reflection on life combines both imagined and real people in imagined and real places? In particular, what happens when point of view in memoir or fiction is not limited to first person but seeks to move beyond writing about the self to include the stories of a ‘silent’ other? As discussed in my conference paper, ‘Fictionalising Real People’, my explorations in shifting forms and stylistic patterns of memoir, novel and creative nonfiction assisted in writing about the other, and ‘the things I, as a writer and reader, care about. Why does this story of Broadmeadows, and its people, matter to me?’ (van de Pol 2011, p. 5).

Through my creative work I have attempted to give voice to a silent ‘other’, a working class community under-represented in contemporary Australian literature. Recognised as one of Australia’s poorest suburbs, Dallas was a community steeped in poverty, illiteracy and unemployment when I was growing up there in the sixties and seventies, and little has changed today. In 2011, close to 16 per cent of its population was unemployed, and more than 50 per cent of its youth population were looking for work (Projects 2011). With its relatively low rents it continues to attract new immigrants from diverse countries.

In reflecting and drawing on the wide ranging views of other writers and academics, I would argue that a writer needs to be concerned with ethical issues connected with ownership of stories and authenticity of voice, but at the same time the writer should seek to represent different world views and
insights into those sometimes unfamiliar worlds, while providing a voice for the silent ‘others’. Arnold Zable calls it playing hide and seek, or revealing ‘little worlds’ (Zable 2011) while Melissa Lucashenko suggests it is not the writer that matters, it is the words (Lucashenko 2011).

Revealing other worlds, other cultures, is the attraction of memoir, according to academic and memoirist Jill Ker Conway. Conway suggests memoir’s popularity, both in the writing and reading of it, lies not in theory but in cultural history:

... it has to do with where we look when we try to understand our own lives, how we read texts and what largely unexamined cultural assumptions we bring to interpreting them’. (1999, p. 4)

But not all writers and academics agree that memoir is the best way to present reality or history, and this argument is explored further in chapter three. As writing and reading help us to understand ourselves, our lives and our past, it also enables us to discover other cultures and other lives, and yet not all ‘others’ and their lives are part of the stories we tell, the stories we read or the stories that are published.

According to Paula Fass in her paper ‘The Memoir Problem’, the memoir as a genre, despite its popularity, needs rescuing as ‘a useful, even essential form of writing’. She goes on to argue that it is because many memoirs ‘show [a] deep commitment to capturing the passage of time that it may be possible to conclude that memoir writing today provides insights into how history is experienced today’ (2006, p. 107). I suggest there will always be questions around how we see storytelling and why some experiences are included in ‘literature’ and other experiences are left out of the conversation entirely, but it is these ‘silent’ voices, and with them the ethical considerations of writing them, that will continue to be investigated as the blurring of genres leads, I believe, to greater opportunities for ordinary people to tell of everyday experiences.

In the process of writing something that I care about, I am exploring form and content and negotiating which genre best fits the storytelling. Is it memoir or is it fiction? I think it is both, but what will the reader think? Perhaps I should take the advice of one of Australia’s leading literary journalists and novelists, Helen Garner, and just call it a ‘book’ (Garner, In Conversation, 17 March 2010, University of Melbourne). But is that a cop-out? Am I leaving my
reader with a bad taste by not confessing it’s all true, yet reliant upon the fluidity of my memory. Or is it more truthful, more ‘ethical’ even, to say ‘it’s a novel based on a true story’. Garner, who eloquently moves between fact and fiction, argues, in an essay for the literary magazine Meanjin, and reprinted in Best Australian Essays 2001, that there can be no writing without the creation, the making up and shaping, of a persona. She writes:

In order to write intimately – in order to write at all – one has to invent an ‘I’ ... The word ‘invent’ here is probably not the right one. It seems to imply something rational, purposeful, clear-headed, conscious. What about ‘choose’, then? How about this: ‘I choose, in the act of writing, aspects of myself that will suit the tale that is wanting me to tell it’? (Garner 2001, p. 150)

As Kundera suggests, the examination of our ‘inner life’ can assist in fiction writing. And I propose this same examination must remain a feature of memoir. In The Art of the Novel, Kundera notes: ‘We need only examine our own lives to see how much this irrational system, far more than reasoned thoughts, directs our attitudes’ (Kundera 2000, p. 59). It is this unexamined life – a life already lived – that comes under scrutiny in memoir in a way that does not happen in fiction. It is this examination and the capturing of time and place that sits on the border of genres. My ‘memoir/novel’ is not so much autobiographical as it is a ‘fragment of a story’; a story about working class Melbourne, and not, as I have previously suggested, the full story, nor the only story, about growing up in Broadmeadows.

As is the feature of memoir, my story is largely about the ‘other’, a silent other. And yet as a hybrid creative nonfiction work it includes the true story of two brothers who are both blind as a result of freak childhood accidents a year apart, intertwined with a coming of age autobiography.

In searching to address difficult issues around authorship and authenticity, I look to an eclectic range of writers and academics, including the works of Janet Frame (Living in the Maniototo), Inga Clendinnen (Tiger’s Eye) and the work of Fernando Pessoa (The Book of Disquiet). Pessoa was, according to critics and scholars alike, a master of multiple voices, each with different styles, idioms and personalities. Along with seventy or so of these created writing characters, he created Bernardo Soares for The Book of Disquiet. With Pessoa, I find some further insight into what Kundera calls the meditation on existence.
Pessoa’s musings about life, with little actually happening, allows the reader to enter his turmoil, fragments of his life littered with introspection and an examination of his self, his characters, his voices – and his life.

Truth is stranger than fiction, which supports the increasing popularity of memoir, but what is the effect when fact and fiction are fused, as those previously mentioned writers, Frame, Clendinnen and Pessoa, have all successfully managed to do. David Lodge observes how this ‘cross fertilization between the novel and historiography’ can result in a more compelling story. He argues:

In the non-fiction novel, new journalism, ‘faction’, or whatever one calls it, the novelistic techniques generate an excitement, intensity and emotive power that orthodox reporting or historiography do not aspire to, while for the reader the guarantee that the story is “true” gives it a compulsion that no fiction can quite equal. (Lodge 1992, p. 42)

Historian Antony Beevor believes the barrier between fact and fiction is eroding fast and suggests we live in an age of ‘entertainment history’, while questioning whether the trend is driven by a need for authenticity or is market-driven. He notes:

A blend of fact and fiction has been used in various forms since the dawn of creative writing, starting with sagas and epic poems. Yet the appeal of faction to writers and readers has recently increased in a dramatic way. (Beevor 2011)

By exploring this erosion, this blurring, I attempted, in earlier drafts, to produce a true story as a biography and then as a novel. Rather than an accurate, chronological reporting of facts, which relate to events now decades old and therefore hard to verify, and to people who are now long dead and who may have had a different point of view, I aimed to tell a ‘compelling’ story of family life, to shape it into a narrative that could be read and understood, adding description, dialogue, setting. Along the way I have found that these memories of mine, and the stories they ‘produce’, can be very different among siblings, relatives and friends. It all depends on who is telling the story, and in whose eyes we are witnessing events, feelings, and responses. Perhaps more importantly, it depends on why we are telling this story.
Inga Clendinnen suggests we always trust our own memories over those of others. She goes on to say: ‘we are notoriously dismissive of other people’s recollections, and ferocious in defence of our own’ (Clendinnen 2000, p. 226). In writing her memoir, *Tiger’s Eye*, she confesses she did not confer with her brother as an alternative source of information and acknowledges his memories and experiences will be ‘quite unlike’ her own.

Most writers endeavour to create characters who are believable, who ring true, but does the author, the creator, have to live in a certain place, have a particular experience or worldview to achieve this? In my case, is it enough that I have entered a long lasting relationship with the silent others, that I have lived with them, walked the streets of Broadmeadows and Dallas with them, listened to their stories at length? I would argue that this level of research does in fact give me permission to write our stories.

Carmel Bird, in her book, *Dear Writer*, a collection of letters to aspiring writers, identifies authenticity of voice as critical for the reader to believe the storyteller. Bird says we feel safe to believe what we are being told because the teller believes, because the writer is in control of the material. In the same way, Bird highlights the importance of not only writing what you know but also caring about what you write. Quoting Nabokov, Bird advises that a writer should ‘take nothing for granted’. She argues:

You have to know what you are writing about, have to believe what you are saying, have control of what you are saying, and care very much about it. The question of care is an important one. If the writer does not care about the story, how can the reader be expected to care? (1988, p. 28)

In my story I have turned the lens on the young mother of eight, living in a housing commission estate, struggling with mental illness and addiction to valium (my mother) alongside my friend, the twelve-year-old boy who loses his sight in a schoolyard collision, (Maurice) and I have zoomed in on his seven-year-old brother (Nicky) when he goes blind, a year later, from a freak accident in a supermarket. Through focalisation I have attempted to show, not tell; to uncover and reveal, not report, preach or patronise. This was a difficult position to maintain. After all, these characters are real people and they belonged to me.

Writer and academic Enza Gandolfo also suggests writers need to take
care in the construction of our own ‘make believe’ worlds.

Good art and good writing challenge our views of ourselves and other people; they present our world to us – past, present and future – so that we might see what we might otherwise not have seen. This work requires imagination, passion and independence, but it also must come with an understanding of the role that art and writing have in the world and their impact on people. (Gandolfo 2011)

**Invented or imagined**

Janet Frame, in her autobiographies and in her novels, teases the reader with a blurring of fact and fiction and cleverly adopts and portrays various personas in her writing. In her prologue to *Living in the Maniototo*, Frame introduces her narrator as a shadow, a replica of the imagined, twice removed (Frame 2008), and the book takes many twists as the reader grapples with the stories ‘lived and told’ and whether they are real or imagined. In the section ‘Naming People and Places’, Frame introduces us to the three narrators, Alice, Violet and Mavis, who take up the story/stories at various intervals in the novel.

If a key difference between memoir and fiction comes down to what really happened, as I would argue, then does the same go for writing about real people. Is that what gives it the nonfiction label? With my own creative work I started out writing biography, using real names, real people and real places, and I stayed with that form for some time. When I came to telling some of the stories, some of the events around illness and loss, I found it hard to confront and then write the emotion it ignited, despite the years in between the events and the telling. It was not until I turned to the devices and techniques of the novelist that I found a way to get closer to the truth and it was then that I crossed the line between fact and fiction. I changed real people into fictional characters.

Francesca Rendle-Short, in the introduction to her memoir/novel, *Bite Your Tongue*, says it was through the invention of a fictional character she was able to tell a difficult story:

Some stories are hard to tell, they bite back. To write this one, I’ve had to come at it obliquely, give myself over to the writing with my face half turned; give my story to someone else to tell. My chosen hero is a girl named Glory. (Rendle-Short 2011, p. 5)
Perhaps in the same way that I care about what I am writing, I also care about my reader. If I say to the reader, ‘This is a true story,’ then I care about committing to that pact with my reader. I am not going to lie to them, but I also care about presenting a compelling story that is a good read, that is more concerned about an emotional truth than reportage or remembering, with accuracy, the weather and time of day my mother went to hospital for shock treatment to alleviate her anxiety and ‘nerves’.

According to Taylor Antrim, some memoirs would be better as fiction; but is the converse the same? Would some ‘true story’ novels work better as memoir? Think of Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, a book he called a nonfiction novel, would it have been acceptable as a memoir? It is interesting to wonder whether, if it had, it would have achieved the same acclaim. Antrim argues:

> Memoir writing is cheating ... too often memoir seems to me an excuse to be fragmentary, incomplete, narratively non-rigorous. Let me put it another way: Why aren’t these guys writing novels? They use a novelist’s tools: dialogue, scene, descriptive detail…(Antrim 2010)

What Antrim provocatively seems to suggest is that there is no place for novelistic techniques in memoir, that memoir cannot be ‘fragmentary’, both contentions I would reject. However, I would argue that when memoir slides so far from the truth in terms of what it exaggerates and what it leaves out, then it would indeed be better categorised as a novel, providing the writer and the reader with a clearer delineation between fiction and nonfiction.

In conclusion, and to return to Kundera, the close examination of the inner life, and the meditation on existence in both the novel and the memoir, helps us understand other cultures, other worlds, and to find ways to write them, to write stories with truth, sometimes with invention and imagination, sometimes fictionalising real people, all to get to the heart of the writing. An ongoing discourse on creative nonfiction and memoir will contribute to greater understanding of ethical considerations to do with a writer’s roles and responsibilities. In other words, further research and knowledge helps us to explore why we should *care* about ‘what’ we write, and perhaps more importantly, ‘who’ we write.
3

Memory as the Editor

The author and memoirist Joan Didion has asserted that if you remember something it’s true, which is not the same thing as making it factual, verified information. Sometimes all a writer may have is memory, which, according to Michael Rabiger, is a natural editor. In this chapter I will explore the significance of memory: its contradictions and restrictions in storytelling, including selective and repressed, flexible and unreliable memory. I will also consider the value of personal stories in historiography, when defined as the writing of history, as well as the role of postmemory in storytelling.

For a long time I attempted to suppress the memory of my sister’s suicide. I pretended some things had never really happened and remembered ‘only the good times’, as my sister had begged of our family in her suicide note: her curvy, incomplete and interrupted script, scribbled grey pencil, crossed-over capitals, smudged tears and rubbed out words. Just occasionally she had clearly articulated, important messages, like ‘please don’t blame yourselves’.

It is these details from my past that have come back to haunt me, incidental images that flicker like scenes from a movie playing in my head, real and alive, the ghosts of my parents, my sister and our neighbours – Aunty Mary, her husband, Uncle Ray, and their son, Russell. All dead now. In my head I can make them alive. Sometimes my memories are so vivid it is as if they are all still here, living side by side as they had once, ‘in each other’s pockets’ as my Dad would say.

Yet I struggle between facts and truth. Facts alone rarely tell the whole story. At times, truth has only revealed itself when I have allowed myself
moments of imaginative play, a kind of improvisation and space where I pretend to be the inquisitive child or a teenager eavesdropping on my parents’ lowered voices. These imaginative games offer new ways to challenge and interrogate the dead, to reinstate my memories or at least vivify them in some way. In *A Year of Writing Dangerously*, Carolyn See suggests that writing like this is a game and ‘the objects are love, fun and truth’ (Abercrombie 2012, p. 32). As in a game, by so recreating the past we take risks, make mistakes and start all over again.

Starting all over again: this is the very idea of memoir, surely. In writing my memoir I wanted to avoid writing the pain of loss, to avoid reliving trauma and grief. I certainly did not want to forget my sister or my parents but I did not want to suffer all that grief again. I wanted to memorialise them and while I could not ignore the impact they – or their deaths – had on my life, I wanted to make art of them. As N. Scott Momoday believed, anything is worth suffering if you can make art of it. In his essay, ‘The Man Made of Words’, Momoday argues ‘the possibilities of storytelling are precisely those of understanding the human experience’. He quotes one of his favourite writers, Isak Dinesen: ‘All sorrow can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them’ (Momaday 1998).

Writing memoir involves a trawling of the past, but the fear associated with going back is often restrictive both to memory and to art. According to writers and psychoanalysts alike, fear can block important parts of a story. To go back to pain, says Abercrombie, is like diving into ‘cold, dangerous water and a swift current’ (Abercrombie 2012, p. 33). Certainly I was always unsure that in so diving I would be able to resurface.

**Truth and facts**

Suicide, family illness, sudden and premature death as recounted in my creative work are all true, verified facts from my life, but the story I’ve made of them relies on my memory, a memory that is both unreliable and constructed. It is well established that memory is inherently subjective, as Smith & Watson (2001), Caruth (1995), and Lejeune (1989) have argued, but increasingly scholars have advocated the virtues of memory and memoir for their value in recording aspects of history that might otherwise be neglected. In her book, *Closer to the*
Truth than any Fact, Jennifer Jensen Wallach also argues for the value of autobiographical literature as a tool for historical understanding. Skilful writers, she says, can venture into the interior experience of people living in the past in ways that historians cannot. The ‘literariness of autobiographies’ that employ devices such as metaphor, irony and allegory communicates truth in a manner that can ‘form lasting impressions and inspire vivid mental imagery’ (Wallach 2008, p. 40).

Wallach is supported in this by the historian Greg Dening, who believed there is nothing wrong with applying the imagination of creativity to the examination of history. He called this approach a way of ‘performing’ the imagination, or using creative imagination to craft expression. Dening saw this creative interrogation of history as offering new insights into the past:

Imagination is seeing what’s absent, hearing the silence as well as the noise ... Imagination is taking the purpose of the rules that confine us and running with it. Imagination is working with the fictions in our non-fiction the better to do what we want to do with our writing. (Dening 2009: 6.4)

Imagination is not something we evoke to escape reality. Rather, I believe, it is a form of provocation, where fantasy slides away and imagination creates space in which truth and lies can coexist. This is part of the magic of writing and imagination. Writing the past creatively has a way of infusing meaning that impels you to think differently about things. A slight turn of phrase and you are in a different time and place; the introduction of dialogue allows you to see a person in their full character. A taboo subject like suicide can be prodded into presenting another memory: a perspective that expresses an alternative truth. This way of shining light onto memory helps us realise the story in the present. It may disturb and confront but it also draws us into the taboo, to destabilise, unmask and understand it (Guntarik, Berry & van de Pol 2012).

The spoken and written accounts, the ‘historiographies’ of our lives, of the past we create and share, are based on a combination of what is known, what is remembered and what is imagined. Academic Liz Stanley suggests stories, historiographies, are accounts and not history itself:
... the process of accounting that autobiographies constitute is an important means of making real and present what we all know is actually memory and past. (Stanley 1994, p. 145)

Historians Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton reflect on the role of personal history and its interaction with memory and the past in their book *History at the Crossroads: Australians and the Past* (Ashton & Hamilton 2010). They argue that the greatest threat to the authority of the traditional historian is the recognition that formal written history is only one mode of understanding the past. History making activities, such as memoir and family genealogy, allow people to structure themselves in time and place, according to Ashton and Hamilton, and to make connections with the past and bring it into the present (Ashton & Hamilton 2010, p. 19).

For scholars and readers alike ‘public history’ has commonly been seen as the presentation of history by professional historians to the ‘public’. Like Hamilton et al., I would argue that oral histories, including the everyday experiences of ordinary people are important and necessary contributions to our understanding of our past, on a personal, local and national level. Memoir is a major contributor to a nation’s narrative. In my memoir as novel I do not pretend to be writing capital ‘H’ history although I do believe my story might provide some insights into a time and place in working class Melbourne in the seventies. By introducing my real family, neighbours and community – an epoch and a class now gone from much of urban Australia – I create not only the personal story but also a collective history of Dallas, Broadmeadows. What I aim to offer in my memoir is a reflection and a record of that time and place.

In *Not Dark Yet*, cultural historian David Walker talks about the connections between memoir and history. Delivering the 2011 Kathleen Fitzpatrick Lecture at the University of Melbourne, Walker argued on behalf of individual stories as part of the larger national narrative. In describing his book as a ‘hybrid form’ of history, Walker said:

I’m not actually sure it’s a memoir. It’s certainly not autobiography and I stayed away from the living … but hybridity is fashionable and publishers look for words to describe it. There are no ordinary lives. Every life can be written about. (Walker, D, 9 May 2011, University of Melbourne)
Walker was diagnosed with macular degeneration in 2004 and his blindness, he says, has caused him to reconsider his relationship with his past and his family. He suggests it also produces mindfulness, it takes him away from the world and encloses him: ‘rather than inhabiting an outside world you go into an interior landscape’. Walker’s themes around blindness and new ways of seeing are not dissimilar to those in my own work, both the thesis and the memoir. Professor Tom Griffiths has described the book as a sustained meditation on memory, dreaming and storytelling.

You can read this book as David Walker illuminating a poorly documented family history with his rich national historical imagination, filling in the enigmatic gaps with well-researched understandings of the Australian experience and you can also read the book the other way around, as an elucidation of national themes through the evocation of particular, personal stories. Whatever way you see it, the two dimensions are always there: personal and national. (Griffiths 2011)

A new framework

Wallach argues that the field of autobiography studies needs a new theoretical framework that will allow historians, too, to benefit from the interpretation of life writing. She claims that through the aesthetic power of literary language, including metaphor and irony, skilled creative writers are uniquely positioned to capture the complexities of other times and other places (Wallach 2008).

As discussed in chapter one of this thesis, I am, like Wallach and others, drawn to the wider context of literary studies and novelistic techniques such as attention to language, symbolism and other literary devices in memoir and the writing of history. I believe these can give readers an empathetic understanding of life during a different era, in my case the working class and an understanding that is personal and below the surface, and not necessarily the same as that remembered by others. I am influenced to some extent by the contemporary debate dubbed ‘history wars’. In this discussion Kate Grenville says she does not claim to be ‘writing history’, as has been suggested. Grenville (2009) says her justification for taking history and making it into story is that it enables readers to consider ideas they might not otherwise want to deal with. One truth, according to Grenville, was distorted but another was revealed (Grenville 2009). As the debate over the role of memoir and fiction in history
continues, it seems there is general agreement that each genre has an important place in telling stories. In my memoir I did include some facts and figures about Broadmeadows, and my childhood there, including the following:

In its first fifteen years as a city, Broadmeadows experienced a population growth of four hundred per cent, which meant an extra 80,000 people who needed baby health centres, medical services, shops and schools. (van de Pol 2013)

I was able to verify these facts from local government statistics but they also stemmed from oral histories, the stories passed on to me by my parents, family and friends. Through this I have come to understand how writing assists in making sense of memory and the ‘factual’, and how this ‘sense making’ assists in moving beyond the factual to truth.

A family history is, by its very nature, personal and can only be told by ‘bearing witness’. But in many ways, as suggested by Ashton and Hamilton, it also forms part of the national narrative, especially when the story moves beyond the family and into the community. While some experiences may be universal – immigration, illness and poverty – others are unique and transmitted, memorialised and translated, only among families. This transfer of history, of the ‘lived’ experiences, influences our understanding of the world and our identity, our sense of belonging, and this is of wider value beyond the confines of family story.

My factual and ‘fictionalised’ hybrid story includes elements of trauma and post trauma presented as a series of stories, events, incidental images like beads on a necklace strung together with a thread of ‘everyday life’, using real people as characters to provide a ‘record’. Like Wallach, Stanley and others, I would argue that autobiographical writing provides historical source material and insight in its own right. As Wallach asserts:

Properly used, autobiographical sources can help historians to “capture the ambivalence and confusion that are often an inherent part of felt experience” and guard against the profession’s “predilection toward certainty”. (Wallach 2008, p. 138)

Likewise, Hampl suggests imagination is critical for storytelling, for the narrative to flow and to make sense to the reader. In times when memory failed
me I turned to imagination and invention to not only make sense for the reader, but for myself. Hampl contends:

… memory is a great falsifier, and that’s why it’s a great fascinator. It’s our most intimate and unbidden narrative power. The other one is dreams. Dreams don’t interest me as much. Memory is fascinating to me partly because it does connect things in a story form. (Hampl et al. 2004, p. 13)

Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch argues the many layers of memory can assist in narrative, and autobiography in particular provides this way into memory, history and actuality. While for Hirsch, ‘postmemory’, the intergenerational act of transfer, is primarily in the context of the holocaust, my interest is more to do with the drive to understand and know our past, to bear witness to aspects of the past (in particular the traumatic). I am interested in the emotional truth in memories and stories told to us and – in turn – shared and told by us, passed on to another generation. Hirsch asks:

How can we best carry their stories forward without appropriating them, without unduly calling attention to ourselves, and without, in turn, having our own stories displaced by them? (Hirsch 2008, p. 104)

Hirsch suggests postmemory is a multi-layered structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. She believes postmemory is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove. This approach to not only ‘remembering’ but also ‘retelling’ interests me because it reminds me of the influence the stories of my own parents had on my knowledge and experience, and that of my siblings. Hirsch’s explanation also encourages me to consider what impact my stories might have on my own children. In ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, Hirsch asks what we owe not only the subjects of our stories, our families and in particular the victims of trauma, but also what we owe future generations, the ‘receivers’ of our memories and stories.

A consideration of how traumatic events such as illness and sudden death affect memory, and the repression of memory, has helped me in my search to find meaning: what it is to be human, to suffer loss, to grieve and to
heal. In a sense, this has provided me with what Barthes, in a collection of his lectures, *The Preparation of the Novel*, describes as ‘salvation’. Barthes believes Proust best exemplifies this idea of writing as salvation. ‘For Proust writing serves, as a means to vanquish Death: not his own, but the death of loved ones; a way of bearing witness for them, perpetuating them by drawing them out of non-memory’ (Barthes 2011, p. 9). I, too, wanted to find some purpose in the early deaths of my family members.

As suggested earlier in this thesis, I am interested in those family or personal histories that are less prevailing in our society, those stories that may lie with the marginalised or the voiceless, or the dead, especially those of the working class. Am I also searching for a grave, a place for my sister’s memories to ‘rest in peace’? And how important are the facts to me as I search through her letters and cards, her writing and her photos for signs of her unravelling mind, her deteriorating health – and her happiness?

We search for truth ‘for noble and ignoble reasons’, according to writer Francis Flaherty (Flaherty 2009, p. 163). As a journalist I was dedicated to writing objectively, telling two sides of every story, striving for truth and justice, committed to accuracy, checking and rechecking the facts. But beyond my commitment to upholding the ethics and professional vows I had undertaken as a member of the Australian Journalists Association, I wanted a good story. I went looking for a great lead paragraph and dramatic front-page headline. The irony, I discovered, is that the good story was most often found in the truth: truth with a human face, with feelings and emotions. As Flaherty notes: ‘Every story, even the driest, has a human face. Draw it well and put it on display, for to readers it is a mirror and a magnet.’ (Flaherty 2009, p. 1) True objectivity does not exist and truth is elusive. The ‘I’ is in everything we think and feel and write.

Writer and academic Marsha Berry discusses this notion of the researcher and the subject being at the intersection of history and remembering in her paper, ‘How the I Sees It’. Berry suggests creative practitioners and researchers make use of a range of artefacts to explore and share what it means to remember. The ‘I’, she says, ‘sits at the juncture of memory and history, witnessing and recording, turning the lived experience of memory into history’ (Schutt & Berry 2012). Schutt and Berry’s portrayal of encounters with the past,
of conversing with our ghosts and making sense of our life from them and their pasts is familiar to me. It is familiar in the way in which I hold a photo and ask it to speak to me, the way in which I play a song to hear my Mum, through Doris Day. As they note:

We live in an era of Derrida’s *hauntology* (1993), when masses of ghosts are being conjured up, unsettling an uncertain present. And it is we who are generating these ghosts, a society under the grip of nostalgia in its literal sense of an amalgam of the Greek words for ‘returning home’ and ‘pain’ or ‘ache’: literally, ‘homesickness’, a grasping for something lost. (Schutt & Berry, p. 108)

Like Berry et al., I am interested in turning memories into stories, using literature to open doors to my childhood. Literature, according to Cathy Caruth, can reveal the hidden, the unspeakable, as it shows us how to see, and to hear, and to feel, in new ways. In the book, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Caruth says she is interested in opening new windows on traumatic experience through interdisciplinary approaches and discussion so that, through listening and speaking, we might discover more of ourselves and others and our ‘traumatic pasts’:

I am interested not so much in further defining trauma, that is, than in attempting to understand its surprising impact: to examine how trauma unsettles and forces us to rethink our notions of experience, and of communication, in therapy, in the classroom and in literature, as well as in psychoanalytic theory. (Caruth 1995, p. 4)

Delivering the keynote address at an international conference at Zurich University, Susannah Radstone explored the theory of trauma and knowing further in her keynote paper, ‘Looking Elsewhere: Trauma and the Hidden’, and suggested the naming, locating and identifying of ‘the hidden’ involved a descent from the abstract to the concrete. Radstone suggests, ‘past experiences of trauma can pass from the unknowable to the knowable, from hidden to light’ (Radstone 2009), while also acknowledging there may still be a blind spot in the narrative, that which continues to remain hidden or unseen. In her address, Radstone suggested, that ‘the translation route is temporal and not just something that’s factual but also something that means something to you’ (Radstone 2009).
Survivors of trauma and those working in postmemory studies argue that repression or avoidance action is a kind of protection (Caruth 1995), while also confirming that experiencing and/or witnessing trauma may in fact be mediated by remembering and testimony. In the chapter, ‘Truth and Testimony: The process and the struggle’, Dori Laub suggests there are three levels of witnessing:

... the level of being a witness to oneself within the experience, the level of being a witness to the testimonies of others, and the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself. (Laub 1995, p. 61)

While Laub is primarily writing about the holocaust, I would argue this hypothesis is also true of most experiences of trauma or post traumatic stress disorder, defined by Caruth as a response to an event outside the range of usual human experience. Certainly, it aids in my own understanding of the trauma experienced by sudden death, and in particular, suicide, and the trauma of witnessing such events on various levels. Our past can be intrusive. Even if we wish to leave it alone, it can surround and overwhelm us. Sometimes we attempt to silence the past, or at least those aspects of it that we wish to suppress. Instead we might employ selective memory and think and write of only ‘the good times’. I attempted to do this with my early writing, but in many ways it never quite felt real, it never really got to the heart of what I wanted to say.

In the essay, ‘The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma’, authors Bessel A Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart suggest that by imagining alternative scenarios to trauma we may be able to ‘soften the intrusive power of the original, unmitigated horror’ (van der Kolk & Van der Hart 1995, p. 178). While some of my memories are not of ‘unmitigated horror’, I do accept that I was ashamed of some aspects of my childhood and I realise I wanted to soften, perhaps to feminise these with fiction. In doing so I suspected I was participating in an act of flexible memory, or editing my memory. According to Van der Kolk and Van der Hart:

The current revival of interest in the role of overwhelming experiences on the development of psychopathology has stimulated a fresh look at how memories are stored in the mind and continue to affect day-to-day perceptions and interpretations of reality. (van der Kolk & Van der Hart 1995, p. 158)
The ‘flexible memory’ they describe may provide a way to remove the engraved or tattooed trauma. But Van der Kolk and Van der Hart acknowledge its usefulness is not always appropriate or obvious, adding some would question whether it is not a sacrilege of the traumatic experience to play with the reality of the past.

Laub suggests this is not the case, and I also would argue that flexible and selective memory is unavoidable when seeking deeper understanding of what it means to suffer and, more importantly, to bring meaning to that suffering and to our survival. As Flaherty states, ‘to write is to choose, which is to exclude’ (Flaherty 2009, p. 33). Laub argues that survivors of trauma not only needed to survive so they could tell their stories; they also needed to tell their stories in order to survive, suggesting:

There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to tell and thus to come to know one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life. (Laub 1995, p. 63)

My experience of remembering, editing memory and writing memory would support this idea that the past has both shaped me and prepared me to move forward, to move beyond the trauma. The writing, for me, is an important process of facing loss. The event[s], according to Laub, must be reclaimed because, even if successfully repressed, ‘it nevertheless invariably plays a decisive formative role in who one comes to be, and in how one comes to live one’s life’ (Laub 1995, p. 70).

These ideas of exploring memory, and noticing the details of what it delivers, are supported by Michael Rabiger in his book Developing Story. Rabiger says how a writer ‘sees’ the detail and the story is the direct outcome of upbringing and family, adding that writers develop storytelling abilities by making themselves hyperconscious. He goes on to suggest that writers should use their memory as an editor, arguing memory effortlessly selects the best elements of any story (Rabiger 2006).

As I work at transforming life into art, I search for those details that have meaning. At times, I imagine I have a camera at the scene where I write, and I think about what pictures are possible, what is happening and what I select to
record. In Rabiger’s view it is useful for a writer to explore the marks left on them by their life:

It is important to recognize and make use of the special authority that your core experience confers. Every time you really explore its meanings, your work is apt to become charged, authentic, and fascinating. (Rabiger 2006, p. 39)

James Wood also uses the camera analogy as a way to bring life to the page, suggesting the artifice lies in the selection of detail and that our memories need to be woven into narrative because, he says, they are ‘aesthetically untalented’ (Wood 2009, p. 47).

Armed with the make-believe camera to capture memory, I also look to reading and writing as an act of memory, of interpretation. Literary theorist, Jonathon Culler, suggests writing, and writing theory, require an unsettling of what might have been taken for granted, a questioning of what is real. According to Culler, signs or representations are but a way to get to reality, truth, or ideas (Culler 2001). It is the writer’s quest for the real and the truth and the selectiveness of details, of ‘things’, that combines art with life, and blurs fact with fiction.

In this chapter I have argued how both remembering and writing of pain and suffering is a critical step toward understanding and acceptance, that bearing witness to suffering can provide an opportunity to record important universal stories for sharing, for ‘passing on’, while at the same time evoking further pain for the writer or storyteller. As Cixous suggests, ‘all I want is to illustrate, depict fragments, events of human life and death, each unique and yet at the same time exchangeable. Not the law, the exception’ (Cixous 1994, p. xxi). In my case ‘the exception’ was at times difficult to write, including suicide and sudden and premature death. Radstone’s and Caruth’s work on trauma and memory and, in particular, finding ways to speak the unspeakable, has, for me, illuminated the need to translate trauma and interpret it while facing the challenges in writing what may have once been considered ‘taboo’ material from my life. As Dening et al argue, memory, charged by imagination can enable a writer to stay true to the intention of both storytelling and writing history.
This chapter outlines and reflects on the process of writing my creative work, a final form that emerged from draft manuscripts, a biography, *In Whose Eyes*, a novel, *Dallas 3047*, and a memoir, *Ways to Fly*. This final chapter focuses on the ‘switch’ from novel to memoir and then back again to combine the two. The significance of place and melancholia in literature are also discussed while unmasking the deeper layers of form that emerged from content.

Throughout the various versions of my creative work I tried hard to avoid writing about sadness. I did not want to seem self-indulgent. I did not want to write a ‘misery memoir’ similar to those that have been so popular in recent years, voyeuristic works where the reader peered mercilessly into the subject’s unhappiness. However, in reality, I believe I was busy being sad for a long time, and reliving my childhood in a fictional way helped manage those feelings, even if it meant eventually writing what I thought I could not and would not write. I have been able to complete an about face, a three hundred and sixty degree turn from fiction to memoir.

As my search for truth in storytelling and my reading of literary and social theory evolved, I found I did have something to say about the world I once inhabited and the people and places that shaped me. Perhaps what I had to say was different from – and yet the same as – what others have considered before me and will continue to do long after. Not only did I believe I had something new to say, but I also discovered a new way of saying it, in a hybrid memoir as novel; a story of childhood and adolescence in a big Irish Catholic family growing up in a poor suburb of Melbourne where tragedy and death seemed to hover above those sun-filled childhood days of riding bikes, catching
tadpoles, and building cubby houses. I wanted to write about a place that I believed had previously been overlooked in stories, both fiction and nonfiction. And I wanted to present this story, my story, in a new form that challenged categorisation and blurred the boundaries of genre.

For a while I flirted with fiction, as discussed in chapter two. I changed the memoir into a novel about my life, my family, friends and community, all in third person, with real people turned into characters complete with made-up names. I adjusted their ages and the dates on when things happened. Initially, it seemed to work for me as it unlocked memories and I wrote some of the things I needed to write but previously could not: my parents’ addictions, the stigma of growing up in Broadmeadows, and my sister’s illness and suicide.

It was not until I felt I could ‘own’ this story that I began to feel free to experiment and imagine. It was here that I turned to the novelist’s toolbox to create character, dialogue and mood. As I struggled to write the death of my mother, attempting to convey the depths of the shock and the sadness I felt when she died suddenly and tragically, I experimented with form. But surely all death is sudden and tragic? I had two weeks’ notice with my dad’s diagnosis of lung cancer, and even as the family gathered by his bedside I believed he might live longer. For my mother, and my sister, there was no preparation. With my sister, Margaret, there was no warning that she would take her life on that day at that time. Ironically, the family had enjoyed twenty-four hours of hope when my mother fought against a critical onset of septicaemia. All was well, we were told, she was ‘out of danger’. Then she died.

I had written a page or two about this, the basic story and the outline of events that led to her hospitalisation on New Year’s Day in 1984 and her death two days later. I felt, then, that was all I had to say about it. In hindsight, I was not really able to write about the experience and the feelings associated with it until I moved to third person, called Valerie ‘Rose’, and I became a fictional ‘Cassie’. Flirting with fiction freed me.

The somersault

Eventually I did a backflip, or more a somersault into new territory, by switching back to memoir, revealing more than I thought possible. Why did I make this shift? I think that after years of reading and writing, talking and drafting, I finally found the courage to write in first person. I knew I had to be
brave to write the things I really wanted to write, to say the things that really mattered, and perhaps even braver to hold back on some. In addition, I had to find another way to write the story in order to give it shape and coherency. In its fictive form it seemed to lack that key component, ‘the organising principle’ of why this person is telling us this story, writing this book, wanting us to read it. Judith Barrington in the chapter, ‘Writing the Memoir’, from the *Handbook of Creative Writing* (2007), suggests writers need courage, adding a memoir will suffer when the writer is not honest with themselves and the reader. Dishonest writing, Barrington says, ‘is very often mediocre writing; it has a faint odour of prevarication about it’ (Barrington 2007, p. 110).

Courage is a helpful concept when applied to writing. I think of the diving board analogy, the idea of being brave enough, in the first instance, to climb the ladder to the diving board and then slowly inch one’s way along it, each time getting closer to the edge before feeling confident to leap anxiety, to push out then plunge into new territory. Courage for writers, according to Anna Funder, is interwoven with speaking the truth while relying on empathy, reason and the right tools. ‘You don’t have to be a writer to speak the truth as you see it,’ Funder argues, ‘but you can’t be a good writer without doing so’ (Funder, Lucashenko & Kremmer 2009, p. 37). Funder explores the notion of empathy further in her essay on courage and again in her novel, *All That I Am*, through the character Ruth. In some ways I too was compelled by the suffering of others, in my own family and beyond, and found it assisted me to write their stories, through my eyes, employing empathy and reason and the ‘sharpened’ tools of the writer.

In memoir, and especially in autobiographical writing, the details of life must be reworked, reshaped, made aesthetic and accessible if we are to turn them into literature that is readable, enjoyable and meaningful. Is this fiction? Or to return to my earlier question: Does narrating a life inherently fictionalise it? I have argued, this reworking and crafting of the story is a form of fictionalising. If I were to simply tell a story of growing up in a poor and disadvantaged suburb, using only cold, hard immutable facts, the story might be dull and not noteworthy; missing, I believe, an important challenge to bring meaning to the story. Truth, rather than facts, carries with it an idea of morality and I would add to that, belief in what you are writing, integrity and authenticity all assist in truth telling.
James Wood, Roland Barthes and others identify Flaubert as the master of the telling and brilliant detail, suggesting the author perfected a technique essential to realist narration with the ‘confusing of habitual detail with dynamic detail’. This truth in detail and its effect, says Wood, is ‘lifelike – in a beautifully artificial way’ (Wood 2009, p. 34). Flaubert himself wrote in a letter of 1852 that ‘an author in his work must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere’ (Wood 2009, p. 34).

The theory that art imitates life and the material of life feeds art offers a way of thinking that I have come to appreciate as I moved through various stages of my PhD, both the creative and exegetical components. To paraphrase French playwright, Jean Anouilh, the object of art is to give life a shape, we write, draw, paint and create to find meaning. Flaubert suggests that it is the detail of the unexplored that can best give life shape and meaning, that even the smallest thing has something in it that is unknown.

As I navigated the territory of biography, memoir and novel, fact and fiction, I also traversed family life and family stories that helped steer me towards self-discovery. In the style of the bildungsroman (coming of age) novel, moving from ignorance to maturity, from blindness to insight, I turned to art, or to borrow from the German again, using art (kunst), through fiction, to say the things that were important to me, using stories about my family and my community, ‘things’ that had not previously been said or shown.

The image of a montage-like structure when pooling together fragments of a life in a book, be it biography, novel or memoir, offers the analogy of a jigsaw puzzle, slowly piecing the material, historical documents, photographs and memories together to make a cohesive fit. David Rain argues that we do not choose what we write ‘as if from a smorgasbord of every available possibility’, suggesting a story will eventually find its own form. I support Rain’s observation:

In the end, we write what we can write – to advance in writing is to become aware of limitations as much as of new horizons. As writers, it is the mission of each of us to find the material, the form and the style that best expresses our particular talents. Inevitably, this involves negotiation with literary history. (Rain 2007, p. 62)
Relaxing the rules

I would add to this view the importance of experimentation, of play, or writing as a game, as discussed in chapter two. Of course, it is not an easy thing to do, to write and rewrite and edit, to draft and redraft and then, when it is almost done and dusted, to perform a complete about face. However, moving away from third person and returning to first person, real names and places, I believe, further enhanced both the story and the telling of it. In first person I was less plagued by the anxiety of faulty memory and felt more comfortable with a novelistic approach, happy to add a healthy and acceptable dose of imagination when I was in doubt, or when I needed to dig deeper for a truth. Indeed, scholars such as Stanley, Fass and Hampl, have argued that the genre of memoir is wide open. Hampl suggests, the rules are being rewritten:

[the] problem is really to decide how much leeway we’re going to allow and what rules we’re going to apply. I think it’s up for grabs right now. I don’t think that we know, and part of the reason we don’t know is that the genre is only now defining itself as a genre.

(Hampl et al. 2004, p. 138)

The rules about memoir may appear to be relaxing and, while I have enjoyed the freedom of playing in these newly navigated waters I also have returned to where I began, in a circular quest, in particular to the theoretical framework provided by Philippe Lejeune and his ‘autobiographical pact’. If I sign my book with my own name and if I claim it is autobiographical then I enter an agreement with the reader that it is true. What I am signing off is my truth, my story.

In an article in the Walrus, 'The Truth about Lying', academic Joseph Kertes says all great authors lie regardless of genre. They have to lie, according to Kertes, who believes ‘there’s no such thing as absolute truth in writing’ (Kertes 2006). In his article Kertes refers to emotional truth, and this was important for me in taking on the point of view of my mother, and, in some sections, the focalisation of the blind brothers, Maurice and Nicholas Gleeson. William Zinsser, in his introduction to Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir, also writes about truth and narrative arguing that:

Memoir writers must manufacture a text, imposing narrative order on a jumble of half-remembered events. With a feat of manipulation
they arrive at a truth that is theirs alone, not quite like that of anybody who was present at the same events. (Zinsser 1998, p. 6)

Dallas 3047

If my quest in my writing (both the fiction and creative nonfiction) was to reveal elements of working class life, it was, therefore, critical for me to rethink what I thought I already knew – about my childhood and just as importantly my neighbourhood, the community of the little known suburb of Dallas with the same 3047 postcode as the infamous Broadmeadows. In doing this I examined the significance of place and space, migration and settlement. I have thought about and attempted to identify other novelists who may have written about Dallas and Broadmeadows but found none who are connected to my place. Journalists and editors have written about Dallas, or more particularly, Broadmeadows, and the newspaper articles of my childhood differ little to contemporary ones in their portrayal of a disadvantaged, working class community of low-skilled migrants and refugees with a high youth unemployment rate. One constant historical source for my research and enquiry was a book by the historian Andrew Lemon, *Broadmeadows: A Forgotten History* (1982). This is an excellent book but with limitations in terms of personal and individual stories. I did, however, find some short pieces of personal history written by school students, as well as interviews with pioneers, when I visited the Broadmeadows Historical Society.

Still, there remained little, if any, memoir or fiction about Dallas and Broadmeadows. In my search, the closest I came to any significant writing about the area and the era was the fiction of Steven Carroll, a trilogy set in nearby Glenroy including *The Art of the Engine Driver, The Gift of Speed* and *The Time We Have Taken*, winner of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize and the Miles Franklin Award 2008. But while there are similarities between Carroll’s setting in time and place there are significant differences, including genre. There are, also close to my home in the northern suburbs of Melbourne, other excellent books and writing of working class communities including Barry Dickins on Reservoir, Enza Gandolfo and Deborah Forster on Footscray, and the poetry of Kevin Brophy about nearby Coburg. But still, none of these are about Broadmeadows and the books differ from my own in a range of ways,
including the choices made in the presentation of the story, the form and style and as well as content.

When writing about place, and especially place in Australia, David Malouf comes to mind and in particular his memoir *12 Edmonstone Street* in which he writes about Brisbane and his childhood home, in a personal way that encourages the reader towards an understanding of how a child makes sense of their limited world. Writing about Brisbane, Malouf says:

> First houses are the grounds of our experience. Crawling about at floor level, room by room, we discover laws that we will apply later to the world at large; and who is to say our notions of space and dimension are not determined for all time by what we encounter there … (Malouf 1987, p. 8)

Like Malouf, I thought a great deal about the house I grew up in, the house I tried to recreate for the reader in my story. As I thought about what kind of shape and size this house had, and as I pored over a few old photos, I remembered some of the rooms and the objects in the house, the piano Dad picked up ‘dirt cheap’ from a mate at the pub so us girls would have one of our own for practice, the brick mantelpiece and briquette heater, the few framed professional photographs with my Nana Joyce and her eyes coloured to a Hollywood blue, and all those religious statues, with heads and arms missing. It helped me recall the mythology those rooms and objects contained and the way culture came through them. Irish Catholic working class culture was alive and well in the sixties and seventies in our cream-grey fibrocement home. In drawing place I wanted to bring to the page a glimpse of life there and to illuminate the spaces we inhabited. Malouf writes, ‘I want to go back to and explore, rediscovering, room by room … what kind of reality I had been born into …’ (Malouf 1987, p. 12).

The dark and sinister places under the house Malouf describes are the kind of ‘spaces’ also captured by academic and writer Francesca Rendle-Short who observes in her book *Bite Your Tongue*:

> The house we call ‘Durham Street’ was on stilts with a big space underneath. Things went on there – under the house. It was where I went to hide and cry as a child. (Rendle-Short 2011, p. 195)
Malouf, Rendle-Short, McCullers et al. also talk about the child listening behind closed doors, watching but not being seen, a familiar experience of childhood for most of us and one pertinent to my own memory and story. In his memoir, Malouf writes: ‘You see what you are meant to see. You hear when you are called’ (Malouf 1987, p. 22).

It has often been said that you’re never really in a place that the place is in you. You can take the girl out of Broadmeadows but you can’t take Broadmeadows out of the girl. When I think of Dallas and the people still there I understand this truth. As Malouf suggests, to know the people you need to understand the place. It has been well established that what you become is influenced by where you come from, and I have often wondered about the influence of the back yards and side streets of Broadmeadows, the concrete jungle bordered not by lush, green ‘broad meadows’ as the misnomer suggests, but dirt paddocks of purple thistles and grey-on-grey buildings. I wonder what that kind of place does for mood and mental wellbeing? Were the people like the landscape, cold and hard, or were we simply struggling to put down our roots like the trees we planted?

In choosing to write the story as a novel, I aimed to write about the place almost as a character. I wanted the neighbourhood to have a personality, the street to have characteristics and the house to take on moods like the weather. Most of all I wanted the reader to know Dallas the way I knew it, with all its idiosyncratic features, but not as a stereotype in the same way many might generalize about the place and its people. Places and spaces are almost always overlaid with association and often suggestive of something more. In his book, Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity, anthropologist Marc Augé asserts that ‘non-places’ and ‘non-spaces’ lead to a profound kind of awareness (Augé 1995). A space, according to Augé, may include temporal, emotional and historical ‘vibes’ and through these sensations of feelings and experiences I came to understand the importance of place and memory as they are linked to home and nostalgia. Augé discusses place as both inside and outside the self, external to and within the physical place, and in the same way that anonymity might be experienced in places like airports and supermarkets, train stations, a refuge for solitude and coping might be experienced in non-spaces. I attempted to illustrate this non-space in the experience of disability and illness through the real people in my story while integrating setting - place
and space - more subtly, so that it might extend the reader’s understanding of the stories and, in particular, the characters. I aimed to use dialogue, and speech habits of the working class, colloquialism and slang to locate the time and place. I also used place to reveal the inner lives of the characters, my parents, my siblings, my friends, my neighbours, and this presented an ongoing challenge.

Instead of relating what a character feels or thinks, with its attendant risks of sentimentality, melodrama and passive speech, I found it helpful to transfer emotion onto external elements such as the place and the weather. An anxious character may be obsessed with a fly buzzing or a bird pecking at the window, or a frustrated character might be obsessed with the weather. Toni Morrison achieves this in works such as *Beloved* and *Paradise*. In *Beloved* (1987) the house at 124 Bluestone Road features heavily, almost as a character in the story, and Carson McCullers in *The Member of the Wedding* artfully creates mood and atmosphere through descriptions of place and weather.

The sidewalks of the town were grey in the early morning and at night, but the noon sun put a glaze on them, so that the cement burned and glittered like glass. (McCullers 2001, p. 7)

It is not difficult to agree with Augé, Malouf et al. when I think of the way my own landscape, my sense of places and spaces, affects the shape and the tone of my work. If the place where I grew up was an untamed, unadorned housing commission estate where fences divided small pockets of territory but children and dogs roamed freely around them, and if the spaces I inhabited – both physically and metaphorically – were confined, would that mean I would limit or confine myself in life, and would the spaces shape the way I viewed the world and my ‘place’ in it?

For the eighteen years of my life in Broadmeadows the suburb was considered ‘working class’ and it *still* is today. Broadmeadows has been overlooked by the gentrification experienced in other similar suburbs, including Footscray and Fitzroy. And while successive Liberal and Labor governments promoted notions of a classless society in the seventies, many, like my father, wondered whether there really was access to free education, or if indeed it was just a political stunt. If it was not a trick, how was I able to escape to take up this ‘freedom’ when others were not? What held us back if it was not money or education? Was it lack of ambition? Some of these questions are raised in the
creative work and through people, like my father and Maurice, who ponder the lack of opportunity and services that compounded the challenges of the poor, the disadvantaged and those living with a disability or illness.

Writing about a working class and place in Australian literature is not new but it is perhaps limited in recent times. In the fifties and sixties local authors like George Johnston (My Brother Jack) and Ruth Park (The Harp in the South) provided authentic insights into the working class, the places and the characters of their own lives fictionalised. These were popular novels with a good dose of history included. Today there appears to be limited, if any, literature that considers a suburb like Broadmeadows. In the early period of my memoir it was immigrants from Ireland and England, Malta, Italy and Greece who flocked to this part of the ‘lucky country’, while in recent years we have seen shifts in migration, from the Lebanese and Turkish immigrants of the seventies, to those refugees now fleeing places like Iraq, Iran and Sudan.

I have a strong memory of wanting to live anywhere but Dallas and Broadmeadows. Even a suburb or two away appeared more attractive, in my mind at least, and from all accounts in the eyes of others too. There was undoubtedly the idea of leaving, of escape, of finding ways to fly, away from the place, and yet the nostalgia in later years of wanting to go back, to return to what had been ‘lost’, was often overwhelming. For a long time there remained my embarrassment and ‘shame’ of where I came from, my self-conscious way of speaking, and knowing I did not speak the same as the other girls at university. I did not use the same words or pronunciations and this was at times crippling. Maurice, too, has said he felt like Alice in Wonderland when he went to boarding school in the eastern suburbs.

And sometimes places might not only make us different but more prone to illness. In the book The Meaning of Illness, authors Marc Augé and Claudine Herzlich, suggest illness has always had a social dimension that is essential to its definition and interpretation. The questions I ask of my sister’s schizophrenia, ‘Why her?’ ‘Why now?’ are not uncommon for the sufferer and those witnessing the suffering. Herzlich contends that illness always demands an interpretation that goes beyond the individual body and specific aetiology. She suggests the need to find real answers is now stronger than ever and the medical information we share in, and the diagnoses offered by the practitioner, are not enough to answer our questions (Herzlich 1995, p. 160).
Illness, Susan Sontag has said, is a ‘metaphor’, and Herzlich rightly argues illness is a ‘signifier’ of the individual’s relationship with society, suggesting the language of health and illness is not a language of the body but a language of society.

This seems true of the experiences of my family members – namely my mother, and my sister – as they struggled with mental illness. In the case of my mother the illness was undiagnosed, and in my sister’s case misdiagnosed, as she moved between labels and medications.

Illness, argues Nicole Sindzingre in a chapter on ‘The Need for Meaning’, can be seen as a subset of ill-fortune, suggesting repeated illness and ill-fortune are often the signs of something else. When ill-fortune recurs and ‘piles up’ on an individual or one of his kin groups it marks a new change of state, she says, ‘not only of the state of health of the victim of the illness but first of a predisposition’ (Sindzingre 1995, p. 74).

Is this the kind of thinking, the notion of ‘bad luck’, whatever its form, that might assist in understanding, in finding meaning for the freak accidents that left two boys from the one family blind? And is this the kind of ‘piling up’ of misfortune that leads to sudden and premature death, mental illness and suicide in families and in communities? Is this the story, I wonder, that I wanted to really write?

Fictionalising real events and real people freed my writing and then enabled me to return to memoir, before completing a further ‘about face’ that blurs boundaries and mixes genre. In writing the memoir as a novel, I have aimed to tell an intimate story of two ‘ordinary’ families facing ‘everyday’ challenges in a working class community. While using this hybrid form to examine relationships, the inner life of the characters, I have explored more universal themes about identity and belonging, illness and loss. Turning to literature to express the inexpressible, it can be argued, is also a way to seek understanding. As I experimented in works without labels to find ways to reveal a deeper truth, and for answers ‘beyond the medical’, I found knowledge and salvation in literature. As Augé suggests in non-places, never before have individual histories been so deeply entangled with general history (Augé 1995, pp. 119-20).
Conclusion

In this thesis I have examined a range of literary theorists, including Roland Barthes and Helene Cixous, to illustrate the role of language and writing to give meaning to our lives. I have argued that there will always be a blurring of fact and fiction in life writing, be that memoir, autobiography or biography, as writers seek to convey truth while working with imagination and the limitations of memory. I have demonstrated how practice-led research can open windows on new approaches to literature, both in the writing and reading of it. In writing my memoir I have illustrated how the traditions of the novel and memoir may be mixed successfully to create a hybrid of fact and fiction. This creative work, I argue, could be labelled in a range of ways, including memoir, novel, creative nonfiction, autobiography and yet, in playing with form, in mixing truth and imagination, I believe I have made an original contribution to knowledge. Ways to Fly tests autobiographical conventions while Truth in Memoir examines the traps of genre, definitions and categorisation. My writing and research has specifically explored the blending and shaping of story and genre, form and content. Questions I have considered and outlined in my introduction include: Where are the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction? How far is too far? Where’s the line and have I crossed it? The answer, I have argued, is always subjective, shifting and, sometimes, superfluous. What matters for the reader is the truthfulness, the believability and the experience of reading, and whether the mix of genres has been rendered to good effect.

Memoir, according to academic and writer, Enza Gandolfo, is an increasingly popular genre that continues to be seen primarily as the individual’s story. However, with Gandolfo, and as shown in my creative work, I argue this view is slowly changing. In her paper ‘Lucia’s Story’, Gandolfo demonstrates how the use of multiple subject positions in the story is ‘a transgressive move that defamiliarizes traditional notions of memoir and interrogates truth and identity’ (Gandolfo 2010). This argument supporting the
fusing of autobiography and biography is not to deny the importance of the
authorial pact as outlined by theorists, including Lejeune, but to remain with
my central contention that all writing is fictive in that it is shaped and worked
on to provide clarity and meaning for the author and the reader. This idea that
a narrated life is different from the lived life forms part of my earlier
discussions and responds to my introductory research question: Does narrating
a life inherently fictionalise it? As Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests, life is what
one lives, story is what one writes or tells.

In this thesis I have examined the tensions in truth in various forms of
storytelling including the novel and memoir, raising questions of what kind of
writing, what form or genre, is best suited to the story being told and in what
kind of writing do facts matter most. In her paper, ‘Problems of Memory and
Factuality in recent Holocaust Memoirs: Wilkomirski/Wiesel’, Suleiman argues
that categorical distinctions between memoir and novel, while not always easy
or even possible to determine, are nonetheless important. I argue, along with
Suleiman et al. that the desire to stay with truth should be the writer’s primary
focus and once a contract of truth is entered into one must commit to that
contract. The difficulty, as I have disc
overed and Suleiman articulates, is that
writing ‘is always one step behind or ahead of or next to facts of the lived
experience’ (Suleiman 2000, p. 543). A life lived in not the same as a life told. As
my thesis demonstrates, the challenge I faced in the creative component was
how I might approach and then label my work. Was the solution to my
concerns about factuality, accuracy and authenticity best served by relabelling
my memoir as a novel? These issues of truthfulness and its variable definitions
of realism, verisimilitude, integrity, morality form the core concerns of my
thesis and final conclusion, that my writing of memoir was indeed fictive
the way I recreated scenes and memories. Given the extent to which I had already
reworked the story, crafting and shaping it, and as I began to flirt further with
fiction, I questioned how I might label my work – as a true story or as a novel?
As the chapter on turning life into art suggests, this shift towards fiction also
provided freedom for me to say the things I really wanted to say about my
childhood and adolescence, about loss and longing. As Suleiman notes:

Contemporary thought is fascinated by borderlines, those areas
where boundaries begin to blur; but boundary blurrings can only
exist because categories do. And of all the categories in our lives,
those of fact and fiction, with their various literary equivalents such as memoir or novel, remain very strong, despite our theoretical sophistication about the constructed nature of representation, even perception. (Suleiman 2000, p. 551)

In offering an original contribution to knowledge and practice in the field of literature and, in particular, memoir, I have examined the limitations of the genre through explorations on the fluidity of memory, the unreliability of the narrator and the role of trauma in remembering. Memory, says Robin Hemley, is a dream machine. ‘The moment you put words on paper, the fiction-making begins’ (Hemley 2006, p. 42). The art of make-believe, I propose, is essential but it must also be ethical.

My PhD submission also includes an innovative creative contribution that combines elements of the traditional features of both the memoir and novel. In mixing genres I wanted to follow the advice of Helen Garner who advocates ‘tell what happened, not what you think about what happened’ (Robinson 2012).

In adopting the theories of Radstone, Caruth et al and applying them to my creative work, I have demonstrated a synthesis between research and practice, revealing how the reading of trauma theory, alongside memory studies, empowered me in writing of my own trauma, both witnessed and experienced. In this process I discovered that the remembering, recording and writing of those memories holds both truth and lies (or invention) in the story that is then told.

In his book Turning Art into Fiction, Hemley suggests the simple difference between memoir and fiction is that one is true and the other is not. As flip as that might sound, says Hemley, ‘it’s a complex distinction, and some writers blur the distinction to good effect’ (Hemley 2006, p. 37).

In applying key principles of literary theory (Barthes, Lejeune, Wood) including, in particular, their contributions to discussions about language and realism, the authorial pact and verisimilitude in signs and details, to a wide range of literary texts, from Angela’s Ashes to The Member of the Wedding, I have articulated how form is important for an author to create an effect of the real. In this I have demonstrated what academic and theorist, Ralph W Rader, like Eco before him (Eco 1996), claims is the power of form to ‘work its effects on readers even if readers are not always able to translate their experience into
conventional literary critical explanations’ (Phelan & Richter 2001, p. x). Textual analysis as a methodology enabled greater insights into the power of literature and art in understanding, in a fresh way, the nature of the world and our place in it. As George Eliot wrote in her essay on German Realism (1856):

The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies ... Art is the nearest thing to life, it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow man beyond the bounds of our personal lot. (Wood 2009, pp. 129,30)

In ensuring my thesis reflected contemporary as well as seminal works in the area of genre blurring and truth in memoir, I have included some of those views presented at the Beddell Nonfiction Now Melbourne 2012, a major international conference bringing together writers, teachers and readers. One of the keynote speakers, David Shields, author of Reality Hunger: A Manifesto, told the conference he believed reality was not straightforward but slippery. Truth, said Shields, depends on who is telling and at the very least it is relative. Conventional fiction and memoir suggest life is coherent and wrapped up, according to Shields, who argued life is more splintered than that. In my thesis and memoir I also have presented this notion of life being fragmented, broken into pieces that require restoration for meaning. As Shields noted in his address: ‘Life ... stands on a street corner, flying at us in splinters’ (Shields 2012). In Reality Hunger, Shields suggests all forms of storytelling be it fiction, nonfiction, poetry or drama exist ‘on a rather wide continuum, at one end fantasy ... and at the other end an extremely literal-minded register of a life’ (Shields 2010, p. 63).

In deconstructing the writing process for my creative component of this PhD submission, I came to the conclusion that truth, which I define not as the factual accuracy or verified information required in journalism or reportage, but as that which is real, genuine or sincere, was what I was striving for most of all. While acknowledging historical and contemporary theory, and in particular the fluidity and unreliability of memory and the blurring of fact and fiction, I concluded that classifications of genre are important but that they can disrupt the writing and reading experience; better to just tell a story, write a book and let the reader take from it what they choose. I have suggested here that memoirists should embrace truth alongside imagination and invention for
‘good effect’, while remaining authentic to their material. Truth, lies, fact, fiction, these were the early chapter titles of this thesis, but throughout the writing and reflection on my concluding arguments I found single words like these to be too restrictive, too loaded with contestable meaning. As chapter headings they didn’t allow me to fully explore those key arguments around definition, interpretation and contradiction. I chose to extend and ‘rethink my thinking’, as Culler suggests, to include those contradictions that might allow further research and engagement with the topic. It is not always desirable, nor possible, to answer all the questions we raise in our research. It is more important to contribute new understanding that will lead to deeper explorations.

Writer Amy Tan calls storytelling the artful arrangement of words and suggests that childhood trauma and near death experience can be good for creativity, encouraging a constant identity crisis, asking ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Why am I here?’ (Tan 2008). As I identified with Tan, her anxiety and uncertainty, I interrogated other questions about rights and responsibilities, as outlined in my introduction and chapter three. For example, if we see suffering and injustice what should we do about it? This question was asked by Anna Funder, in her essay, Courage. Both Tan and Funder, along with Cixous and Winterson, assisted in my answer to that question: the search for truth through empathy and imagining is at the heart of my engagement with writing and storytelling. ‘I like to imagine things physically,’ says Funder in Courage, Survival and Greed (Funder, Lucashenko & Kremmer 2009, p. 22).

In my creative work, I have revealed this personal need to feel the physical, to see and touch and, as Radstone suggests, to know the unknown. Like Tan, I imagined I was Maurice and Nick, the blind boys, walking along the paths of our neighbourhood. Shields calls it taking the raw data of life, making writing material of it, and then editing it into art. Writing, he says, is most alive and dangerous when you use it against yourself, when you pick at your scabs (Shields 2012).

According to Lee Gutkind, author of You Can’t Make This Stuff Up, Australia has a more cavalier approach to blending genres than in the U.S. In the ‘Creative Nonfiction’ journal, Gutkind suggests ‘there seems to be less concern about the line between fiction and nonfiction in Australia than the U.S.’ (Gutkind 2012, p. 2). In his book, The Art of Creative NonFiction: Writing and Selling the Literature of Reality, Gutkind suggests the challenge of creative
CONCLUSION

nonfiction is to write the truth in a style that is as accurate and informative as reportage, yet as personal, provocative, and dramatic as fiction. He writes that ‘to touch and effect readers, fiction must ring true. Nonfiction, conversely, must not only ring true, it must be true’ (Gutkind 1997, p. 10).

Geraldine Brooks, journalist and novelist, also takes a dogmatic view on genre, claiming: ‘It is either true or it’s not true, and if you’ve made it up, then it should be on the fiction shelf.’ (Brooks, G 2012, p. 20). Australian writer Robert Dessaix, who moves effortlessly from fiction to nonfiction in various forms, compares his writing to gossip, calling himself ‘a high class gossip’ and suggests writing is good a way of talking about what’s going on in the world and that ‘gossip is a really important activity’ (Dessaix 2012, p. 14).

My conclusion suggests definitions of truth and lies, fact and fiction, will continue to evolve in art and literature alongside the growing curiosity in, and attention to, the mixing of genres, the blended boundaries in the writing of history, the writing of memory and life and the way in which writers present their stories. Philosopher and writer Alain de Botton in his book How Proust Can Change Your Life, says Proust taught us many things, not only about writing well, but living well.

The way we speak is ultimately linked to the way we feel, because how we describe the world must at some level reflect how we first experience it. (De Botton 1997, p. 97)

In my creative work, I have made up the dialogue that I cannot recall from forty or more years ago. I have imagined feelings I only half remember. I have invented weather and names when I did not know the details. Is that fiction? Yes, and still, my story is a true story, carrying authority and authenticity about a time and place in history. In choosing to mix elements of both the novel and memoir, I chose to enter a contract of truth with my reader. I may have kept real names and real places and I might write disclaimers and change some names and plead for mercy where my memory fails me, but above everything, I have aimed to show a glimpse of my world as remembered and experienced.
References


REFERENCES

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/feb/19/author-author-
antony-beevor>.

Bird, C 1988, Dear Writer, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne.

Bly, C 2001, Beyond the Writers’ Workshop: New ways to write Creative Nonfiction,


Carlin, D 2011, Our Father Who Wasn’t There, Scribe, Melbourne.

Caruth, C 1995, Trauma: Explorations in Memory, The John Hopkins University
Press, Baltimore.

Oxon.


Cole, C 2008, The Poet Who Forgot, University of Western Australia, Western
Australia.


pp. 439-46.


Eakin, PJ 1988, Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention,

York.

Earnshaw, S 2007, The Handbook of Creative Writing, Edinburgh University Press,
Edinburgh.

Eco, U 1996, The Author and His Interpreters, The Modern Word, viewed
February 24 2013,

p. 17.


Funder, A 2011, All That I Am, Penguin, Australia.


---- 2011, ‘It’s all make believe: ethics, fiction and a writer’s responsibilities’, paper presented to The Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds, the 16th conference of the AAWP, Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Byron Bay, New South Wales.


REFERENCES

Lucashenko, M 2011, ‘What’s the Good of Writers? Literature and Story in a Globalised World?’, paper presented to The Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds, the 16th conference of the AAWP, Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Byron Bay, New South Wales.
Phelan, J & Richter, DH 2001, *Fact, Fiction and Form: Selected essays Ralph W Rader*, The Ohio State University, Columbus.

Radstone, S 2009, ‘Looking Elsewhere: Trauma and the Hidden’, paper presented to (Mis-)Representations - Trauma Discourses and Cultural Productions, Zurich.


Schwartz, M 2005, ‘Memoir? Fiction? Where’s the Line?’, 12 September 2012,


REFERENCES


Toibin, C 2012, New Ways to Kill your Mother, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney.


---- 2011, ‘Fictionalising Real People’, paper presented to The Ethical Imaginations: Writing Worlds, the 16th conference of the AAWP, Australasian Association of Writing Programs, Byron Bay, New South Wales.


WAYS TO FLY
Dallas, Broadmeadows, Melbourne, Postcode 3047. This is the suburb where I grew up, where I spent the first eighteen years of my life. It’s not much different today as I return on a cold, wintry morning late in Autumn, when bursts of sunshine attempt to brighten the bleakness of the weather and the place. It’s how I remember it, fun and warm one minute, dark and dreary the next. The Broadmeadows of my childhood was not that much different from the Broadmeadows of today. The housing commission estates built in the 1950s and 60s are still there, tightly packed between industrial zones providing factory work for immigrants, who once came from places like Italy and Ireland, and now refugees from Iran and Iraq. In its first fifteen years as a city, Broadmeadows experienced a population growth of four hundred per cent, which meant an extra 80,000 people who needed baby health centres, medical services, shops and schools. In my own childhood street, not far from the hub of Dallas shopping centre, you would find a different nationality in every home along the rows of copycat concrete boxes. The biggest problem during my teenage years remains today’s biggest problem - youth unemployment. Most recent figures suggest fifty three per cent of young people are without work.

The Dallas of my early years was a place where I could roam the streets, on foot, or on an old bicycle passed down by one of my older brothers. My younger sister and I grew up in the middle of six boys, with their Irish Catholic names sometimes doubling up so we have Paul Seamus and Seamus Patrick, Andrew John and a John Fitzgerald and Thomas Leslie, after his two grandfathers, while the youngest was just called Matthew because we couldn’t agree on a middle name. Even my sister and I share names, I’m Caroline Margaret and she’s Margaret Mary.
I’m on a train to Broadmeadows, a familiar trip I did for many years, but never late at night. I was not allowed to catch the infamous ‘last train to Broady’ such was the stigma associated with the place in my youth. I’m on my way to see my student, Ghazala, an Iraqi refugee who wants to learn English. She’s in her forties, but already a mother of seven and grandmother of two, and my information sheet from the government’s home tutor program tells me she has limited reading and writing skills in her own language.

As the train rolls its way along the track, past Kensington, through Essendon and Glenroy, towards Broadmeadows I’m suddenly travelling back into my memories.
The 1960s
I’m hanging upside down on an iron bar at the end of our front porch while my little sister, Margie, counts how long I can last. It’s her birthday and she’s only three so she stops counting at seven, before I fall. Maurice Gleeson walks by on his way home from school. His brother Nicky runs past me to meet him. Nicky is five like me, and we’re the fastest runners in the street. My real name is Caroline. Caroline Margaret. Caroline Margaret Egan. But everyone just calls me Cally. Nicky’s Dad, Uncle Ray, sings to me, “Cally, Cally, Cally, the girl with the cast iron belly,” but I don’t care, it’s not like when my big brothers, Paul and Tom, tease me. Andy picks on me too, sometimes, calls me Fatso or Buddha, but even though he’s a year older than me I’m already taller and stronger than him so I get him back with a Chinese burn on his skinny arms. “Can’t ya take a joke?” the boys laugh when I run inside sulking. Mum says to stop telling tales, she’s too busy. “Maybe you ask for it,” she says as I lick the icing from the birthday cake Maurice and Nicky’s mum made for Margie.

I live with my Mum and Dad, my three big brothers and Margie, and our new baby, Seamus, at Number Four McIvor Street, Dallas. Not Dallas, Texas. Dallas, Broadmeadows. Melbourne, Australia, The World.

Maurice and Nicky Gleeson live at Number Eight with Uncle Ray and Aunty Mary, their big sister Donna and brother Russell.

The houses where we live are the same, small and square, just like the other twenty-four houses in McIvor Street, tucked in close together, almost holding each other up. Sometimes when I’m walking with my head down, counting the cracks in the concrete path I walk into the wrong driveway. They all look the same to me; all made of the same grey concrete like the footpath, except for a couple of red brick houses where the rich families live.
The front yards are all the same too, each with a low wire fence that I hurdle, sometimes seven or eight in a row, legs strong and arms pushing like I'm flying. I practice whenever I visit the Gleeson's house to take a message from Mum to Aunty Mary or to borrow some sugar or cigarettes.

"Watch me," Nicky calls to Maurice now, as he walks across the fence balancing delicately as if he's on a high wire in a circus.

"Show off," Maurice says, but Nicky is good at everything, even skipping, which is really for girls.

"What took you so long? We've been waiting for you?" I swing back up from the bar to see Maurice properly, his big brown eyes looking out from under his long fringe.

"We thought you got bashed up." Nicky says.

"Whadya mean?"

"Big Bazza, remember, he said he was gunna bash ya if you won the spelling bee."

"He's all talk," Maurice says. "Couldn't belt up his own pants."

He sits with us, by the letterbox as some of the older boys set up the cricket pitch in the street.

"Wanna bowl me a few overs?" Nicky calls and picks up his cricket bat from the yard. It's the one Uncle Ray made from an old piece of fencing and varnished with floor polish. Maurice grabs the leather cricket ball, picks at the ragged stitching.

"Nuh, let's join the others."

I want to play too but they won't let me, they never do, but because the cricket crease is right opposite our house, mapped out in front of the electric light pole, near the Perry's house, I still get to watch all the action. Maurice takes the bat and taps it at the top of his right foot, getting his eye in as he calls 'ready' to the bowler. He loves cricket, but not as much as Nicky. Nicky's a natural. Got a swing like Bradman. Everyone says so and Uncle Ray reckons he'll play for Australia one day. Then they'll get a real cricket bat. Maybe even a Kookaburra.

A howl goes up from the rest of the McIvor Street boys, some gathered at the wicket and others spread out around the makeshift boundary I helped to draw with my white chalk on the hot road.

"Maurice's not out," Paul says. "You can't go out first ball." My brother Paul is Maurice's best mate, he's everyone's best mate and he's always the captain of one of the teams. He's ten now and even though Maurice is older he
lets him be captain, ever since Paul took the blame for the stray ball that smashed the windscreen of the Jones's new station wagon.

At the crease, Maurice has a couple of practice swings, and I watch him squinting into the distance. The ball from Johnny Spiteri, who lives opposite the Gleeson's, moves fast at Maurice who swings and misses. The ball slams straight into the wooden fruitbox, battered from last summer's fast bowling. Out in the field I can see my brother Tom plotting something with Russell Gleeson. He takes out a missile from a bag at his feet, aims and throws, hard and strong like it’s a cricket ball, straight at the girls walking on the protestant side of the street. Tom misses and Russell takes the next shot. There’s a full bag of squashed marshmallow and jam biscuits, the “rejects” our Mum brings home from the factory where she works at night. Dad calls it the graveyard shift and Mum comes home each morning with our Chocolate Royals just in time for breakfast. I peel the flakes of chocolate away first and then squeeze the red jam through the white marshmallow. Tom hands a broken one to Russell now, who hits his target. Then Andrew grabs a handful and starts pelting them at the squealing, giggling girls.

“Get back to the cricket,” Paul calls as Nicky delivers a spinner that hits the wicket. Maurice is well and truly out this time. Tom is in next and whacks one down the street, past the Aqualina’s house.

“Go get the ball,” Paul shouts to me.
“No.”
“Get it.”
“I always have to chase the balls.”
“If you don’t field, you don’t play.”
Maurice looks across at me, and winks.
“Cally can take my bowl,” he says.
“Don’t you want to play?” I ask, hoping he’ll say no.
“Nuh, my head hurts a bit.”
“Where?”
Maurice points to a lump above his eye. “Here,” he says, feeling it. “It’s getting bigger.”
“What happened?”
“Ran into fat George at school. “
“Did you tell the teacher?
“Yeah, she told me to go and lie down.”
“That why you’re late?”
“Yeah, I was in the sick room and fell asleep.”
“How’dya wake up?”
“Macca, the cleaner found me.”

When the daylight has faded and Mum has called me inside more than three times, I finally make my way to her bedroom. I wonder why she lets my brothers stay outside longer than me. I should be a boy. Not stuck inside the house with Mum, bored out of my brain. But now, as she stands in front of the mirror, preparing for the Irish Ball, I think how beautiful she looks. I like the sound of her name Valerie Patricia Egan. I prefer it to just plain Val. My friend’s cat is called Val, an ugly fat ginger thing. I hate cats. Mum does too. Give me a dog any day, she says.

Kneeling on the thin green rug in front of the cluttered dressing table, Mum applies her lipstick, rolls the soft pink to the corners of her mouth and rubs her lips together. She pinches her cheeks hard, makes them turn pink to match her lips.

“Who needs rouge,” she turns, smiling. My little sister, Margie, has wandered into the bedroom. She’s only three and wants to try the lipstick. “How different you are,” Mum says, as if she’s just noticed us for the first time. “You’re the dark one.” She’s really looking at me now, squinting as if she doesn’t like what she sees. I feel my cheeks burn. “And you, my princess are the dreamy one,” she laughs at Margie, stroking her silky ponytail and pulling her in close for a cuddle.

Outside the sky darkens to a deep navy blue, split in half by an orange ribbon, fraying edges stretching across as far as I can see. “Another hot one tomorrow,” Mum says. “Over 100. We’ll go to the Broady Barz. I couldn’t stand another day in this sweatbox.”

In our house, the Irish Ball is the biggest event of the year and Mum has borrowed a long dress from Aunty Val across the road. “Mum, you look like a movie star,” I tell her as she fluffs up her blonde curls. “Will you dance with Dad tonight?”

“Of course. You know, not so long ago, your father and I were the best dancers in all of Fitzroy.”

“Was that where you met Dad?”

She nods. “I used to sneak out the house with my cousin to the dance at St Brigid’s in Nicholson Street, every Saturday. I was only fourteen but she was
eighteen so I had to pretend I was older. I fell in love with your father on the first night, we were the best dancers there.”

Mum lets me brush some blue powder gently onto her eyelids. “Now, give me the mascara,” she says. “Before you poke my eye out.”

“What’s it like at the ball?” Margie jumps down from the bed, runs her hands over the silky material that sways around Mum’s hips and falls long to the ground.

“It’s really lovely. All the ladies in their ball gowns, the men in their suits and ties. There’s lots of dancing and laughing.” She grins as Margie pretends to dance around the room in Mum’s slingback high heels. “There’s some singing. You know what your father and his mates are like when there’s any Irish music. Last year your father ran a book on who could do the most push-ups.

“Who won?
“Who do you think?
“Dad.”
“Sure did. Even after a belly full of beer.”
“Can I come with you?” Margie says.
“Not this time, honey,” Mum says. “But one day you will be the belle of the ball, those lovely curly locks wrapped up on top of your head in a French twist.”

“Show me how to dance properly.”
“Donna Gleeson’s coming to look after you all tonight, ask her to teach you the waltz. Tomorrow I could show you an Irish jig. I was good at that. Your father and I could always do that one well. Ask your Aunty Margaret she’ll tell you.”

“I like Aunty Margaret. Is that where I got my name?”
“Yes, but she’s Margaret Joyce after my Mum, Joyce.”
“Where did I get Caroline from?”
“Not sure.”
“Caroline Chisholm?”
“Maybe. And there was a great, great, grandmother somewhere with that name. I think Cally suits you better.”
“I like Donna too, she’s so pretty and funny.”
“You’re lucky, she’s like a big sister to you both.”
Mum fiddles with the sweetheart neckline of her dress. The cream colour sparkles against her tanned skin.
“Now, how do I look?”
“Beautiful,” I shout and wrap my arms around her legs.
“Are your hands clean?” she laughs, a deep and throaty laugh that sounds like Lucille Ball on *Here’s Lucy*. She loves to watch Lucy on TV at the end of the day. “A cuppa, a cigarette and a little bit of Lucy. That’s all I need,” she always says as she settles into the sofa, an old floral one propped up with bricks at one end where the leg broke off.

“When can I go to a dance?” I ask, taking a turn in my mother’s high heels.

“Don’t be in a hurry to grow up,” Mum says and looks at me as if I’ve said something stupid.

Suddenly, she glares at me. “Where’s my good clutch bag?” She’s frantic now as she throws shoes and bags out from the bottom of the wardrobe. The funny, happy Mum has disappeared.

“Where is it?” She shakes me by the arm as if I’m hiding it from her.

“Ready love?” Dad calls as he walks into the room, moving to the mirror to fix his blue tie, a perfect match for the deep pool of blue in his eyes, his handsome face polished to perfection as he kisses Mum. Dad’s Irish friends all talk with funny accents. “Be Jesus, ye’ve got tall, Carly love,” Uncle Dick says when he comes to McIvor Street with my pretend cousins – all boys, of course. Dad’s Irish friends call him Seamus and sometimes my Mum copies them but mostly around home Dad gets called James or Jim.

Mum fidgets with her borrowed necklace, takes the gold loop earring out and tries instead the pearl drops Aunty Mary has given her for the night.

“What’s up?” Dad says.

“I want my good bag. It’s all I have of my own.”

“Did you take it?” she shouts at me now. “I’m not going,” she says and starts to undo the zip of her dress.

“What are you talking about?” Dad turns from the mirror.

“I don’t feel well,” she refuses to look at him.

“Mum, what’s wrong? I’ll help you find your bag.” The tears are building. Her face changes, I know the storm is coming. Inside her, deep inside, something is shifting. I imagine her thoughts swirling around like our washing machine, churning away in the laundry, throwing her brain around like the dirty washing, back and forth, up and down. Fast and spinning, around and around, until it’s out of control. If only it would stop. If only Mum could stay the same all the time.

“Come on, love,” Dad touches her arm and I pray she feels his warmth under her skin. “We’ve got the tickets, they’ll all be waiting for us.”
“For you, maybe,” Mum glares at him. “But you know I never feel part of it. I'm not Irish and I never will be.”
“Don't be silly, they all love you, just as you are.”
“Can we come home early?”
“Whenever you're ready. I promise.”
“I feel sick I'm so nervous.”
“Do you think you need to take something?”
Mum nods, swallows a tablet from the bottle on the dressing table, and they leave when Donna arrives.

Later, in bed, waiting for the sound of my Dad's car to return, I take a peep outside my window, into the dark, searching for something of the moon, just a slice of it to brighten the scary night. I pray my Dad doesn’t drink too much beer. I wait and say the Our Father in my head over and over and pray that nothing bad will happen. I ask God to make Mum happy again. I imagine her now, sitting on my bed, telling me about the beautiful dresses, the music and the dancing. To make sure, to ward off the uneasy feeling that swims in the bottom of my stomach, I have the Novena Mum gave me. I whisper so I don’t wake Margie. “St Jude, relative of Jesus and Mary, pray for us. St Jude, filled with the Holy Spirit, pray for us.” I say the list of saints, St Paul, St Mark, St Augustus, over and over until finally I fall asleep, promising to be good and holding tight to my rosary beads. I dream, and in my dream I am pulling at Mum, dragging her away from Dad as she pounds her clenched fists into his chest. “You're a lousy bastard,” Mum shouts at him as he stumbles and hits his head on a table. “Leave Dad alone,” I scream. I pull at her arms, flying out at him, pushing at me. I’m screaming but she can't hear me.

I wake up as Margie touches my hand. “Cally, wake up. Cally, are you okay?”
“What's wrong?” I'm sitting up now.
“You were screaming. Throwing your arms around. Do you want me to get Donna?”

The room is dark. I can hear Andrew, his loud breathing, in the top bunk opposite me. And Seamus, fast asleep, in the bottom one below.

“It’s ok,” I tell Margie and put my hand out to feel for her. “I'm sorry. It was just a dream. Hop in with me.”
I cuddle her close as I stare out the open blinds and wait for sleep. I find a big, bright star and pray to my Nana Joyce in heaven.

Margie sits at the pianola in the lounge room of the Gleeson’s house. Pushing her feet up and down on the pedals. Her tiny fingers stretch across the keys as she sings *Do Re Mi* from Sound of Music. The piano is at the end of the living room, that’s what the Gleesons call it, but it’s still the same room as the one that we call the lounge room. At the Gleeson’s I try saying things like sofa and living room and cutlery instead of knives and forks, but I soon forget when I’m back home, but not Margie. She sounds like Aunty Mary, dainty and posh. She’s good at mimicking, Dad says. “Maggie will be on the stage, one day, to be sure,” he says. “With her long dark curls and those emerald eyes of Ireland.”

Inside our house most things are exactly the same as the Gleeson’s – and the Wilson’s next door and the Perry’s and the Walker’s across the road – the same doors and windows, the same spaces in between, bedrooms in the same place with their bare floorboards and the same clothesline in the small backyard. The tiny kitchen, where Aunty Mary is on her knees scrubbing the black and white squares of the linoleum floor, is the same as our kitchen. Beside the gas stove and low oven is a table with its cold steel-frame and shiny yellow laminex top. At the window that looks into the backyard are the kitchen sink and bench top. I can smell cup cakes cooking and can almost taste the tangy lemon of the icing in the bowl, ready for spreading.

Margie’s music rolls on and Aunty Mary hums and dips her rubber-gloved hands into the bucket and squeezes out the hot water. “Clean enough to eat from,” she says.

“Keep Tammy away,” Mary shouts to Nicky as he runs into the kitchen with the growling dog inching closer, fighting over a bit of old rope hanging from its sharp teeth.

“My eye hurts,” Maurice says, as he walks in slowly, behind Nicky. Aunty Mary stands up and stretches on her tiptoes to study her son. He’s only twelve but already he’s taller than his Mum.

“Which one?” she stares into the dark pupils of his eyes.

“The right one. Where I had the lump.”

“From school?”

“Yeah, you remember, last Friday.”

“Have a rest now, and we’ll see how you are when Dad gets home.”
I wake suddenly to Aunty Mary’s voice, outside my window. “Yoo Hoo,” she calls making her way to the back door. “You there, Valerie?” Our dog Suzie sneaks past me as I head outside. Mum is folding clothes into the laundry basket on the back porch. “We took Maurice to the hospital last night,” Mary says, stretching her legs out in the warm sun, sucking on a Craven A, blowing the smoke from the corner of her mouth away from me. “The Eye Hospital.”

It’s already so hot my t-shirt feels sticky so I sit in the shade of the verandah, playing with Suzie. She’s not really our dog, just another stray we all feed.

“What did they say?” Mum drops her voice and turns to Mary.

“Nothing much. First, we had to wait ages for them. And then we only got five minutes with the doctor. Said he couldn’t find anything wrong, told us to take Maurice home.”

“I guess they know what they’re doing.”

“Maybe so,” says Mary. “But Ray was wild. Said they made us feel second-class. Made us line up like we were beggars, and then hardly did a thing.”

“Cally, take Suzie for a walk,” Mum says.

“I don’t want to.”

“Well, go and do something.”

“There’s nothing to do.”

“I’ll give you something to do.”

She’s just trying to get rid of me but I don’t leave. I just pretend to disappear. I’m getting good at finding secret ways of seeing and hearing what they don’t want me to.

“Do you think you should try another doctor?” Mum says.

“I don’t know. Maurice seems okay. He says there’s no pain and the blurring has stopped. He can see as good as you and me.”

“Well, perhaps they’re right.”

“It’s just so hard to know what to do.” Aunty Mary pauses, catches me watching but doesn’t growl at me like Mum. She lights another cigarette. “Have you got a Bex, Valerie? Anything, an Aspirin, something that will help settle my stomach?” She breathes in the comfort of the nicotine as my Mum shakes the last packet of powder from the box.
I shouldn't listen but I do. I call to Suzie, digging up the trees my Dad planted along the side fence. But Mum gets there first and kicks at the dog. I have never seen her kick Suzie before, not even when she peed on the lounge-room rug. Is she angry? I wonder. Is it about Maurice and the doctor? Or is she mad with Dad again?

A week after Maurice's visit to the hospital, he is at our house playing marbles with Paul and Russell in the hard dirt of the front yard. I hover around them, hanging on to some of the more precious marbles I’ve found around the house, hoping I can join in the game by offering a big new Tom Bowler.

"Get lost," Paul says.

The boys play until there are only a few marbles left in the circle and the light in the sky slowly fades. "What are ya waiting for?" Russell says to Maurice. "It's your shot."

"I can't see them properly."

"Yeah, so what, it's dark. Have ya shot while ya still can."

"But I can't see them. It's all blurry."

"Geez," Russell whistles. "I thought you were muckin around."

Maurice walks over to Aunty Mary, standing with my Mum at the letterbox. I draw shapes in the dirt with a small stick, all ears.

"I don't feel so good."

"What's up?" Mary's arm is around her son's shoulders, pushing his thick hair from his eyes. "Is it a headache?"

"Kind of, I can't see properly, and it's making my head feel funny."

"Can you see my face?" she says and turns his head to her with her hand under his chin.

"Not properly."

"Come inside."

As he follows his Mum into the house Maurice turns to me. "They might let you finish my turn."

"It's okay," I tell him. "I'll stay with you."

Mum makes Maurice a chocolate milk drink and we sit together on the couch. He’s really quiet now, and I think maybe it's my turn to make him laugh. He's always the one trying to make me feel better when the boys call me names.

"Knock, knock," I say.

"Who's there?"
“Eileen.”
“Eileen who?”
“I lean, you fall.”
“Maurice, love, do you want something to eat?” Mum says, “We’ll try to get your Dad home early.”
“I’ll call the hotel now,” Aunty Mary jumps up in a hurry. “Have you got some coins Val for the phone. Do you think we should get a doctor?”
Aunty Mary looks like she’s lost something and I try to help find some coins as she paces from the kitchen to the lounge, to the front door and back again. I’m frightened for Maurice. I don’t like doctors and I know he hates needles.
“There’s no doctor for miles, especially not this time of night.” Mum says. “No one would come out. I think the Eye hospital is your best bet.”
“Maybe we should call an ambulance?” Mary mutters.
Now I’m really scared. The last time we saw an ambulance was when our mate Rowdy’s Dad had a heart attack and died. He was building a flat at the back of their house for their grandmother to come and live in.
“An ambulance will cost you an arm and a leg,” Mum says. “We should wait for Jim or Ray to get home.”
“Bloody Ray, he should be home.”
I haven’t heard Aunty Mary swear before. Maurice moves to her now, slowly towards the kitchen, closes his eyes tight, blinking to see if it will help the blurring. He bumps his leg hard against the timber frame of the armchair and trips. Spills his Milo on the floorboards.
Finally we hear Uncle Ray’s car cruising past our house into their driveway and Mary races out to him, “Where have you been?”
“At work.”
“All this time? You’ve been at the pub. I can smell it.”
“Don’t start that.”
“You’re never around when I need you. Your son is sick and you’re at the pub.”
“What’s wrong? Who’s sick?”
“Maurice. It’s his eyes.”
“Please Mum. Stop. I’m okay,” Maurice says, his hand over his eyes. He keeps them closed now and only opens them again when his Dad takes his arm and they walk past me, outside to the car, the familiar smell of oil on Uncle Ray’s overalls.
“You stay with the kids,” he says to Aunty Mary.
“Not on your life. I’m coming with you.” Mary wraps a bright orange scarf over her head. “Valerie will look after the kids,” she says as she takes Maurice’s hand in hers and sits with him in the back seat of the car, holding his head close to her, so close the buttons on her cardigan press into his cheek.

Under the cool cotton sheet with the window open to catch the breeze on this first night of summer, I think of Maurice in his hospital bed. Imagine him trying to sleep, alone, with no one to tuck him in, no one to call if he has a bad dream. I’m too hot to sleep. I climb out of bed, rip some paper from a sketchpad, find my pencils and draw a card for Maurice, then I cut out some flowers from a magazine and glue it all to the cardboard from an old cereal box.

“Can you take my card and these lollies for Maurice,” I ask Aunty Mary the next morning when Mum sends me for some eggs. “When will he be coming home?”

“Soon, we hope.” She puts some of their hen’s eggs into a carton. “Give these to Mum,” she passes me three cigarettes wrapped in a tissue. “Careful not to break them, or the eggs,” she laughs.

I love Aunty Mary; she is the kindest person I know. I sing and skip as I head home. She’s so nice, not like grumpy Mrs Dalgleish from the corner house who said ‘No’ when I asked if Mum could borrow some flour for the tuna patties. “Your mother didn’t return the last lot I gave her.”

When I get back home I see my brothers, Paul and Tom and Andrew climbing into my Dad’s car. “We’re going bush. Want to come?” Dad calls to Margie and me.

“No way,” Mum answers for us. “You won’t get past Kal Kallo pub.”

The Gauchi brothers, Frankie and Luca, who don’t have a Dad, squash into the car beside my brothers as Dad backs it out of the driveway and drives to the end of McIvor Street, out of Dallas, ‘the jewel of the north’, Uncle Ray calls it, and away from Broadmeadows, up the Hume Highway and into the country. I like the Maltese boys and their beautiful vegetable garden in the front yard of their house. My mouth waters when I smell the ripe red tomatoes hanging from the bushes and sometimes I lean over the fence and touch the orange pumpkins and feel the smooth leaves of the bunches of silverbeet. Patches of concrete separate the garden beds. Their Uncle Charlie comes and helps and the kids laugh at him with his funny sun hat, an old hanky tied in corners on top of his bald head. Their Nonna lives in a bungalow out the back
and wears a long black dress even in summer. Respect for her dead son, Mum tells me.

I watch them leave, happy to stay home with Mum and Margie. The last time I went for a Sunday drive with Dad the boys hunted rabbits in the paddocks as our dog chased them from the holes in the ground. Dad watched and waved to us from behind the big window of the hotel bar, sipping his frothy beer. Later he cooked up the rabbits for dinner, but they were so tough that Margie and me couldn’t eat any of it.

The old floor rugs are hanging over the back fence, the crumbs and dirt flying into the air as I bash the green one with a broom. It’s the one Aunty Eileen gave us when she moved to her new house in Reservoir. Margie runs through the yard, squealing and laughing, as her friend Jenny chases her.

"Wanna play dress ups?" Margie calls to me, clunking around in her high heels, lifting the hem of the long bridesmaid’s dress that Donna Gleeson gave her, the soft yellow satin and chiffon material blowing in the breeze, her long thick hair tied back from her face, eyes laughing.

"Maybe later," I mumble. I know I shouldn’t whinge and I know Mum needs my help, but sometimes I wish I could swap places with Margie, the youngest girl, the cute one. I love the way she sings and dances around the house and never cares if anyone’s watching.

"Why don’t I be the witch?" I laugh, waving the broom at them. Sometimes I think Margie is too good, too kind. I know why she’s Mum’s favourite, everyone’s favourite girl, even mine.

I watch her race to the cubby house, behind the garage and I follow; the smell of burnt timber lingers as I remember the flames leaping at the walls when Andrew and Tom made a fire. I watched from the back door while Paul and Russell threw buckets of water at it and we waited for the fire brigade to come. The fire was gone by the time the men in their big blue coats and yellow helmets arrived with long, red hoses. And it was gone before Dad came home from work. But he still shook Tom and Andrew so hard I thought their arms would fall off. The fear kept me awake that night as I heard Dad’s angry words.

“You could have burnt the house down, you could have been killed, or badly burnt. It happens, you know. Want me to show you all the kids in the hospital, burnt so their mothers and fathers don’t even recognise them?”
The yellow dress is swirling in the air now as Margie pushes herself on the swing, calling for me to help her. “Faster,” she laughs. “Higher...More.” My arms are tired now but I push hard and Margie giggles with the rush of speed. Her head thrown back, her feet pointing up to the sky, she flings her arms away from the chain of the swing and opens them up wide in front of her. “Look at me,” Margie calls. “I’m flying.” And then she jumps. Leaps out from the swing, out into the air; jumps as far and as high as she can. She really is flying.
Blair Street is the biggest, busiest street in Dallas and I am only allowed to cross with my big brothers or a grown-up. Soon I will go to the school where my brothers go, Holy Child, which is closer to the place with the funny name, Coolaroo, at the bottom end of Blair Street, near Barry Road. Barry Road is the longest road in the world, and reaches all the way to the Ford car factory where my Mum is trying to get a job. On the corner of Blair Street and Barry Road there’s a small wooden building painted blue. It has a white cross on top. It’s where I go to church and where I will go to school after Christmas, which is in six more sleeps. Inside the hall are statues of Jesus, the Holy Child and Mary and Joseph.

We are late for the late Mass – again. So we sneak into the back row as Mr Wolanski sings at the top of his voice, ‘How Great Thou Art’. I shift along the hard wooden seat to make some room for the rest of the family. “Sit still,” Mum snaps at me. On the other side of her is Margie and then there’s Andrew and Tom. Paul is next to my Dad who is sitting at the far end of the row, closest to the beautiful altar with the purple and white flowers and soft candles. On the other side of the aisle are the Fureys who have eleven kids and take up two rows of seats. We only have six kids but Mum says we will have a new baby, when the Easter bunny comes.

I watch closely as Mum takes a shiny card from her prayer book and stares for a long time at the Virgin Mary in her blue robe and white veil. Mum lowers her head and joins her hands. I copy her.

“Say a prayer for Maurice,” she whispers to me.
“To help him see?”
“Yes, he has his operation tomorrow.”
I pray and then I'm bored. I play with the blue frill around the edge of my pinafore, a soft corduroy material, the same as Margie's, but hers is pink. Her leg is strapped in a white bandage to cover the stitches where the doctor sewed up her leg when she flew off the swing, banging her leg hard on its edge. She bled so much I thought it would never stop. Mum has a lovely new navy skirt and white blouse, and looks much prettier in the clothes she wears for Mass than the dark brown slacks and brown cardigans she always wears at home. Today she has a scarf on her head with roller-tight curls for a fringe. No hat or gloves like the other ladies. "Too old fashioned," she says when I ask why she doesn't wear a hat. "I had enough of that when I was your age." She screws her face up and pokes out her tongue to make me laugh. I imagine what it might be like not to see my Mum. Not to ever see her face again. Or to see my little brother Seamus sitting on her knee, grinning at me, pulling at my hair. What would it be like? I wonder, not watching him as he learns to walk, his slow baby steps all wobbly and his big proud smile. When I clap my hands he waddles into my arms.

I feel sad enough to cry, but the stillness of the church comforts me. I watch the man pass a velvet bag with wooden handles down our row. Dad places a small envelope in the bag and nudges Andrew when he forgets to drop his twenty cents into the collection. In front of me an old man with a long grey beard, small, half-opened eyes and scars on his face like violet crumble, raises his hands to the altar where the priest stands, and then he lifts them into the air like Father Murphy. He looks very holy like that with his hands up and open to God so I copy him, my arms wide out and pointing to heaven.

"What do you think you're doing?" my Mum slaps at my arm. "Don't be so rude."

"What's that for?"

I don't know what I've done wrong. Now I really feel like crying and I grab at Seamus for a cuddle, but he's off and running up the aisle towards the priest and my Mum just laughs at him. People always smile at him and Margie because they're cute. I can't remember the last time Mum smiled at me or the last time I got a cuddle from her. I follow her into the crying room at the back of the church, where the mothers take their noisy babies and naughty toddlers, but my Mum doesn't even notice me there, so I climb under a seat and read my Little Golden Book.
Finally the bandages are off. Maurice can see. Mum tells me that he likes my giant Get Well card and the blue and white balloons his friends from school sent to the hospital, the colours of his football team. Soon he will be home with us, back at school, reading his books, building a new cubby house with Russell and Nicky.

But it’s false hope, a terrible trick. The walls around him begin to blur, the chair by his bed fades in and out. As he walks, one step at a time, towards the bathroom, his sight blurs, dots swirling before him. He closes his eyes, blinks hard and fast, again, and again, as if the blinking will fix his eyes.

“They want to try again,” Aunty Mary tells Mum as they sit together at the kitchen table, Margie helping to brush the dirt from the potatoes, me washing up. “A detached retina, but one eye might still be saved.”

“Let’s hope it works,” Mum says.

“I don’t know, Val, it all seems too hard on him.”

“He’s a brave boy, he’s up to it.”

“You should have seen him, in the hospital after the operation, smiling up at me. Then he just leant against the wall, to steady himself. ‘I can’t see’, he said. A shiver went through me, my legs were frozen on the spot.”

Mum searches for a tissue and I turn from the sink. “You know, he didn’t cry,” Aunty Mary says, dabbing her own eyes with her fingers. “Not once.”

Mum hangs her head low over the layers of vegetable peel, and her tears drop down. She finds a screwed up tissue under her bra strap. "I'm sorry," she says. Margie runs from the room.

“Maurice was so good, Valerie. He was so strong. I just held onto him. There was nothing I could do.”

Aunty Mary takes a white linen handkerchief from her sleeve, blows her nose hard. I turn back to the soapy water and dirty plates. “I can't really believe this is happening," she says. “One minute he could see. Then he couldn’t. Even grandma’s holy water didn’t work.”

The night before Maurice’s second eye operation, I am kneeling by my bed when Dad comes in to say goodnight. He is leaving soon for his night-time job. He kneels beside me. Together we make the sign of the cross. “Dear God, please bless Maurice, and make him better, and my Nana in heaven and my sister and brothers. Amen.” Then I climb into bed and Dad tells me the story of the
leprechaun who lived under the big white rock by the lake outside his house on Lough Corrib, the biggest lake in all of Ireland. He pulls out a photo from his wallet.

"It's beautiful, Dad. Can we go there one day?"

"Sure we can, Carly love," he smiles. I love the way he says Carly, much softer than the way Mum and my brothers say my name. “See, the lake is almost at my front door,” he tells me and points to the photo. “Did I tell you the story about the Christmas leprechaun?”

"Is it like Father Christmas?"

"Sure it is, one of his helpers. One night before Christmas, just when I thought Father Christmas would never make it to our house, through the snow and across the frozen lake outside our house, I woke up and saw him. He had a big bundle of presents on a sleigh. And the little leprechaun was carrying a great big turkey for all the family."

Sleep is easy for me when I hear my Dad’s voice in the background as he tells me about his Mum and Dad and brothers and sisters gathered around the Christmas tree in the little cottage in Ireland. When I wake and he is gone, I sing his song, When Irish eyes are smiling to myself and dream of a Christmas like my Dad’s, real snow in the trees and reindeers like the ones on the cards his brothers Andy and Paddy sent from Galway, Ireland all the way to our letterbox in Dallas, Australia.

Voices, low and deep wake me, but I can't hear who it is and what they are saying. I climb out of bed and tip toe to the hallway outside the lounge-room door. First it’s Uncle Ray’s voice. “He tried to sew it back,” he says. “Told us the retina had detached, first a tear and then a full double detachment.” Uncle Ray is still taking, but I don't understand.

"Is that right?” It's my Dad’s voice now. I peep through the crack in the hallway door and watch Dad pour the beer into their glasses.

“The surgeon, that Professor guy, he was at it for hours. Said it was the hardest operation he’d ever done.”

"So, they can stitch the retina back onto the eye, can they?"

They are talking about Maurice and I wonder what part of his eye the doctor tried to sew. Did they use a needle and cotton? Did it hurt? I want to ask questions, but I know I’m not supposed to be out of bed, listening. Instead I put my hand over my mouth and stay quiet, sit there, behind the door. “They can,
Jim. And Professor Crane, that's his name, I think. He and his team were at it all night. You'd think they'd get it right. All the waiting, and for what? He can't see, Jim. His eyes are open but he can't see a bloody thing."

"It's a tragedy, to be sure," Dad says, flicking out the light of the match as he sucks on his cigarette.

"Know what Maurice told me?"

"What?" says Dad, offering him a cigarette, "Calm the nerves, mate."

"He says it's like a TV screen, dots flickering, sometimes flashing colours, like hundreds and thousands on fairy bread, he says, and sometimes it's just grey."

"Not black then?"

"No. Not black, and yet there's no light either. Day or night, it's the same. Eyes wide open or shut tight, it's all the same, he sees nothing but swirling spots."

I run to my room and slam the door. I bury my head into my pillow. It smells of Vicks vapour rub. Tears spill out, even though I try hard not to cry. I kick my legs hard into the mattress, smash my fists into my arms. Why? I want to scream. Why Maurice? What happened? What happened to his eyes? Why can't they fix him? I want to wake my Mum and ask her. I think about going to her, climbing into bed with her, wrapping my legs around her soft warm body. Instead I go back to bed and I pray. Through my sobs, the words slowly form and I concentrate on the prayer I know off by heart, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. I say it over and over. I make a promise to God to be good. Maybe if I'm good for my Mum, maybe if I'm more like Margie and kinder to everyone, especially my brothers, maybe then God will make Maurice better.

Two more sleeps to Christmas. Dad is leaving for his night job in La Trobe Street in the city where he stacks newspapers onto trucks ready to deliver them across Melbourne. I line up with Margie and Seamus, ready and waiting for our hugs and kisses goodnight. His baggy grey coat smells old and stale, like cigarette smoke. I ask Dad about Maurice and the operation at the hospital.

He takes his time to explain it to me. "When Maurice hit his head at school it seems some fluid built up behind the retina, causing it to come away. The doctors didn't know at first because it was just a small tear and then it got worse and it came right away, it's called a detached retina. They tried to sew it
back on one eye, that was when he could still see, but it was too damaged, and it didn’t work."

“But why can’t he see?” I ask again.

Dad takes a pencil and paper and draws a round circle, one that looks like an eye. He tells me there’s a thin chord that is attached to the eye, the optic nerve that sends messages to our brain to tell us what we can see. “If that is torn or broken off you will be blind, sometimes in one eye, sometimes in both.” I fold the paper away and keep it in my pocket for show and tell. “The retina is like the film in a camera which reflects the images that come to the eye, and when that stops working you can’t see.”

When Dad’s gone to work, Mum pushes a big heavy cupboard towards the back door, next to the laundry sink where the nappies soak.

“It makes me feel safe,” she tells me as I help her drag it into place.

“Why don’t we just lock the door?”

I know the Gleesons lock their doors because Nicky showed me the hiding place for the key, under a rock at the side of the house.

“We don’t have a key,” Mum laughs. “Lost it years ago.”

“Well, why doesn’t Dad just stay home?”

“Because, Cally love, he has to work. You know Dad has to work, like all Dads.”

“Yeah, but not all Dads have lots of jobs like our Dad.”

“Well, we have a big family and lots of bills to pay. Besides, we will soon have another baby in the house.”

“I know, after Christmas and before Easter. I hope it’s a girl,” I smile at the thought of a little sister for Margie and me.

“As long as the baby is healthy,” Mum says, but I think she looks tired and hot in her floral smock. I hold my head against her tummy and listen for the baby inside.

“Do you think she can hear us?”

“Of course. The baby hears and feels lots of things. Here, put your hand out, the baby’s kicking.”

“Do you want me to help get the bassinette ready?”

“Not yet, sweetheart, plenty of time for all that. Go and get yourself an ice-cream in a cone and one for the others.”

“And you?”

“Sure, strawberry and vanilla please.”

Finally it’s Christmas morning and I feel someone shaking my arm.

“Wake up,” Andrew whispers. “He’s been.”
“Father Christmas?” I squeal in my croaky morning voice and rub at the sleep in my eyes.

“Nuh, Jack Frost. Whoddya think?”

I jump out of bed and wake Margie and together we charge to the lounge room. The floor around the Christmas tree is covered in paper, red and green and gold wrapping and empty cardboard boxes. My Christmas stocking, with its red string bursting open with chocolate money and games and a new colouring book, is tucked under my arm as Dad lifts me up to the bench to help him cook breakfast. In the background Margie is playing on her new toy piano, practicing until I recognise some of the nursery rhymes.

“Help me crack the eggs,” Dad says as he lays out the bacon and the dripping sizzles in the frying pan.

“Careful of the hot fat.” He shifts me to the side. “We’ll cook up a feast.”

“If you ever go across the sea to Ireland,” he sings. And Margie joins in because even though she’s only three and a bit she already knows some of the words and together we sing, “And watch the sun go down on Galway Bay.” Dad rubs his nose into my cheek and it makes me giggle when his scratchy beard tickles my neck; his smoky breath warm. “Can we go there?” I ask.

“Where, to Ireland? Of course we will, one day.”

“What’s that?” I ask, pointing to a thick round sausage of black slush with white flecks, sitting on a plate by the tomatoes. In my fingers it feels soft and cold.

“Black pudding.”

“What’s black pudding?”

“A delicacy, my love. Delicious and healthy.”

“Can I have some?”

“Sure, let’s cook it up.”

Andrew laughs at me and whispers to Tom and Paul. “She’s going to eat it.”

“Never mind them,” my Dad says and hands me a piece of the cooked sausage.

Biting into the hard skin, the soft texture inside oozes into my mouth. I try to swallow it but the mush is thick and it tastes horrible, like the soft cabbage Aunty Eileen makes me eat. It sits there, stuck in my throat and I force it down. Swallow it quickly, to please my Dad.

My brothers are roaring now, red faced, pointing and slapping each other on the shoulders. “Have a look at her face” Andrew says and holds his stomach from the laughter. “It’s cow’s blood,” he teases. I cough and hold my
hand to my mouth and as I rush from the room I see my Dad laughing too, like he’s on their side.

After breakfast we climb through the hole in our back fence and cross the Wilson’s yard to see the Gleesons. One after the other we climb through, carting our best presents with us.

The blue plastic walls of the new swimming pool flap in the hot wind and the iron makes a whistling noise like someone’s blowing in my ear. Russell is dragging a garden hose across the backyard to fill the pool with water. He shouts for Nicky to turn on the tap and water gushes out. Slowly it makes a puddle in the pool. I wait with Margie, but Andrew is already in the pool with Nicky and Russell, Tom and Paul. He squirts us with his water pistol, laughing, splashing in his new striped bathers with the tag still on. Flies buzz around my ears as the sun warms my face.

The water rises and the rest of us climb in, even Maurice, holding tight to his new blow up Goofy Dog, feeling the edge of the pool with one hand and the other linked through his Dad’s arm. He stiffens in the cold water lapping at his waist, climbs onto Goofy and paddles his way around the pool, one hand gripping the edge.
Searching for his favourite program on the radio, Maurice lies back on his bed and rests the portable transistor on his stomach. He spends more time in his room now, alone. It's where he feels safe, he tells me. Whenever I visit the Gleesons I watch Maurice closely, curious and frightened because he looks different. I miss him and I know Nicky does too, now that he is away at a boarding school on the other side of the city. We all miss him, my Mum says, but she says St Paul's is a good school for Maurice. When he is home for the weekend, I tell him all about my new school where I go with my big brothers, how Paul sometimes waits and walks with me but Andrew and Tom never do, even though I carry their lunches in my new school case.

"Can we come in?" Nicky calls from the door.

"Who?" Maurice says as he turns down *Blue Hills* on the radio.

"Just Cally and me."

"Okay."

There’s a Mr Whippy van outside, its familiar *Greensleeves* tune drawing the kids to the van window. “Want me to getchya an ice-cream?” I ask.

“No thanks.”

“What’s this?” I pick up a big wheel of dark brown tape and put it in Maurice’s hand to feel, just like I see Nicky do.

“Talking books. I got them from school.”

“How do they work?"

Maurice takes one from me and puts it on a machine like a record player. “They wind from one wheel to the other. You can stop and start or go forward wherever you like.”

“Are they any good?”
“They’re ok, but I still like *Biggles* the best. Nicky likes adventure stories about Scott of the Antarctic, so I got some for him for when I come home.”

When Nicky heads outside for cricket, I stay with Maurice. He changes the radio station until he finds some music. He moves around and starts singing to ‘Groovy Kind of Love’ and wriggles his hips like the dancers do on Bandstand on TV, making me laugh. I join in, take his hands and soon he’s laughing too.

Next it’s the Beach Boys’ ‘Surfing Safari’ and Maurice goes quiet. He stops dancing. “I miss the beach,” he says. “I wouldn't mind doing back to the beach, like we used to, the way it was before.”

Outside Russell is calling for the boys to set up the fallen stumps.

“They never ask me to play now. Do you think I look silly in these glasses?” Maurice says, still all serious. “I don't even know why I have to wear them.”

“They suit you. You look like Roy Orbison. Can I try them?”

The glasses make the room go dark, but still I try to walk to the door. It’s hard to see. I bump into the edge of the bed. I don’t like it and quickly take the glasses off.

“I won’t always be blind,” Maurice says.

“Really?”

“I think it’s just for a little while.”

He stands there, without the glasses, his dark hair smoothed down and cut in a straight line above his brown eyes, the flared jeans and blue shirt with the big white collar make him look older. He plays this game, often, he tells me, mostly when he’s alone. He imagines the blindness will end. He tells me it will soon pass like a bad cold and he will see again. I believe him.

“What’s your new school like?”

“It’s okay, I guess. It costs Mum and Dad a lot of money so I’m trying to work hard for them. I’m getting better at Braille. And Mum says I use the cane really well, she can’t even tell I’m blind. What do you think?”

I don’t know what to say. I’m not used to this new Maurice who looks and talks differently to the old one.

“I don’t think you look very blind.”

Aunty Mary brings us some lemon cup cakes and I lick the sweet icing suck slowly on the cake until it melts in my mouth. I wish Mum made cakes like Aunty Mary.

“What’s this I hear about playing tricks on Mrs MacKenzie?” Mary says. “She’s a lovely lady and I don't want you getting into any mischief at school.”
“Matron doesn’t mind at all Mum. It’s our way of having fun.”
“What else do you play?” I ask.
“Sometimes cards.”
“How?”
“The cards are in braille.”
“I guess you can’t cheat,” Aunty Mary laughs. “Do you do any schoolwork at all?”
Maurice smiles. “Of course I do, I like most of the teachers, and it’s better than primary school. Brother Richards takes us for history and maths and he’s ok. I’m even starting to like Crocodile.”
“What?”
“I mean Brother O’Loughlin. We call him crocodile.”
“Why?”
“Cos he’s so snappy. And he’s as blind as a bat.”
I like hearing Maurice laugh again. We listen to some more music, then Nicky races in calling his brother for lunch.
“Would you like to stay, Cally?” Aunty Mary says.
Would I like to stay? Yes, yes, please. But I just say, “If it’s okay with you.”
I watch Maurice reach for the sliced Tip Top bread. He picks out a knife from the drawer, digs it into the butter and lifts it, holding it up as if weighing it. Then he slides the knife along the edges of the bread, spreading the butter from the outside first and moving inwards. His fingers are like his eyes … touching … feeling … measuring … seeing. His fingers find a jar, he unscrews it and smells it. “Want Vegemite?” he asks.
“Yes please,” I say, jumping from a stool to help. But Aunty Mary shakes her head at me. “Let him do it,” she whispers. The sandwich is perfect, butter and vegemite ooze between the soft bread, and I feel happy at the Gleeson’s house, having Maurice and Nicky to myself again.
“We went swimming last week,” Maurice tells us. “To the City Baths.”
“Wow,” says Nicky. “Was there a diving board?”
“Didn’t see one. The water was heated, nice and warm. We weren’t supposed to bomb anyone but we did.”
“Did you swim?” I ask, talking with a mouthful of bread. “I’m learning to swim.”
“Yeah, so am I.”
“How do you swim if you can’t see?”
“It was a bit hard at first, but you have to listen to the teacher’s voice as he guides you and you can feel the ropes sitting on the top of the water. I had a kickboard to stop me from drowning. It was fun, until I got left behind.”

“What was that?” Aunty Mary turns from the sink and the dishes. “You got left behind?”

“Yeah, cos I was a bit slow. I was in the changing room, looking for my clothes. I got everything mixed up and I was trying to find my socks.”

“How can you find them? You can’t see.” I bite my lip. Oh, god, I’ve done it again. “I didn’t mean it,” I say. I want to run home and bury my head in the pillow.

But Maurice just keeps talking. "I'm learning to find things with my hands. I feel things and measure them with my hands, so I know that what shape and texture things are, like what my jumper feels like. But I'm still really slow."

He tells us how the city streets were busy that Friday afternoon when the Red Cross bus pulled up out the front of the city baths in Swanston Street to take them back to St Paul’s.

“I waited out the front like Miss Kelly told us. I couldn’t hear anything except the traffic. I didn’t hear anyone calling. It was pretty scary.”

He pulls the collar of his shirt up around his neck as if feeling the cold and the drama all over again.

“I kept on waiting but didn’t know where the others had gone.”

I sense something is wrong, that horrible stomach pain is there, the feeling I get when I know something bad is going happen.

“I waited on the steps, but she didn’t come back.”

The tears fill my eyes now as I stare past the others, watching only Maurice. He's pouring milk into his cup. He places his finger just inside the rim and stops when the liquid is almost there. I know I couldn't stand there in the middle of the city, all on my own, in the dark, not seeing anyone or anything.

“What did you do?” Nicky asks, waiting for the rest of the story.

“I waited. I’m used to standing still and waiting. Finally Miss Kelly came back and found me there, right where she told me to stand. She took me back in her nice new car. Better than the bus.”

Later that night, I tell my Mum about Maurice being left behind in the city. I tell her I always feel sad when I think of Maurice, and how he might never see anyone again.

“I’m scared it will happen to me, or to Margie or one of the boys.”

“What will?”
“That we will go blind.”
“Don't be silly,” Mum says. “Of course nothing will happen to any of you. And Maurice wouldn't want to see you crying. You don't see him crying do you?”

Our new baby’s cries wake me and I make my way from the bedroom. I snuggle in close to Mum as she stands at the kitchen sink, her purple quilled dressing gown soft on my cold face. Mum spoons the white powdered milk into the bottle, puts the lid on and shakes it, up and down, her fingertip covering the nipple while the new baby - another boy - screams in her arms, his mouth searching for the milk.

“Shush, shush, little one,” Mum hums to him and rocks him as she waits for the milk to cool. And she whispers his name, John Fitzgerald Egan, and I remembered my Dad telling me he was named after the president of America, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

“Can I give him his bottle? Can I feed him?”
“No, you should be asleep. You have school tomorrow.”
“I don’t want to go.”
“But you love school.”
“I’m scared of the dog. I feel sick and my stomach hurts when I have to walk on my own. I have to go past the house with the dog.”
“The nice lady told you that it doesn’t bite.”
“I know. But I’m still scared. I don’t want to see it again.”

Mum wraps her arms around me, comforts me in the middle of the night when I have the bad dream about the big dog, pulling my school bag, ripping through it for the lunches. “He was just playing,” the lady tells me when she brings a new lunch to my school.

“I will make sure your brothers walk with you from now on,” Mum tells me and it makes me feel good.

Baby Johnny stares up at me, his mouth searching for the rubber teat as Mum gently eases it into his mouth. Big blue eyes move from Mum to me, his big sister, and then his tiny hand clutches at the bottle. Mum wraps him tight in the rug and pats his back as he perches on her right shoulder.

“He’s full as a goop,” I laugh, playing with the fuzzy hair on top of his head.

“Now go back to bed.”
The bedroom is stale with the smell of rotting bananas in school bags and wet towels on the floor. I climb into the top bunk bed, above Margie, sleeping soundly like Andrew and Seamus who are top and bottom in the bunk opposite us. In the next room are the older boys, Paul and Tom, and in the front room – the one closest to the street – Mum and Dad sleep with Johnny’s cot beside their bed.

I can’t sleep and soon I’m back up again snuggled next to my Mum on the couch. Mum brushes her palm across the baby’s forehead, encouraging his eyes to close as she brings his cheek to her lips and kisses him, softly, until he falls asleep.

“Can I have a story?”
“Which one?”
“About when we came to Dallas. How old was I?”
“You were just a baby, like Jonny here. I carried you from the car and Paul wrote the date in the wet concrete out the front, May, 1962.”
“Was Margie born then?”
“No. There were only four of you. Paul, the one I called the Lion Tamer, who could charm anyone with his big blue eyes and sensitive ways, and Tom, only twelve months younger, The Thinker, who could sit for hours in the same spot and once got left behind at church because he was so quiet. And Andrew is our Mister Mischief, the cheeky one racing around the house on that first day, looking for mischief, making us laugh.”

“What did you call me?”
“Princess Caroline, but you soon grew into more of a tomboy than a princess, that’s for sure.”
“And Margie? What’s her nick name?”
“Heaven’s Angel, the first of our babies to arrive in McIvor Street, so she’s a gift from God. And then came Seamus, the Happy Wanderer, so Irish, fair-skinned with thick dark hair, like his father, always in the yard digging up the garden or talking to Blackie.”

As I watch Mum smiling and rocking Johnny I wonder what name she will give to him.

It’s pension day. I’m helping Mum with the shopping at the brand new supermarket at the Dallas Shopping Centre. Nicky’s there too, with his Mum.
“Can I stay with Nicky and Aunty Mary?” I beg Mum until she gives in. “Ok, but make sure you’re home for tea.”

The new supermarket has lots of glass windows and posters stuck on the walls and Nicky and I play games, reading them all. Pictures of Omo washing powder and Tip Top bread and Kellogg’s cornflakes and prices of the specials in big red numbers. Inside there are lots of shelves with cans, jars and boxes of food. The black and white rubber floor makes my sneakers squeak as I chase Nicky up and down the aisles. At the big fruit tables we count some bananas into a brown paper bag. I pick some grapes to share. I love grapes, slowly peeling the green skin from the soft flesh, strip by strip, and then I swallowing the grapes whole, pips and all.

“Not too green?” Nicky asks his Mum, holding a banana up for her to inspect, his bright blue eyes grinning as he darts off to choose some potatoes. It’s hard for me to keep up with him. “Always on the go,” Mary clicks her tongue as he whooshes past her. He makes me laugh. Sometimes I think I love Nicky more than anyone in the whole world, even my Dad. I love how he listens to me and doesn't think I’m dumb like everyone else does. I love being with him in our secret tree house in his backyard. Most of all I like that he doesn’t brag about everything he does, like most boys. Sometimes I even pretend we are married and we live in the mountains or the forest like the Famous Five.

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away,” Aunty Mary says as Nicky puts a bag of red ones in the shopping trolley and climbs on top for a ride. I think maybe if my Mum ate more apples she wouldn’t get sick and go to bed so much.

At the checkout counter Nicky begs his Mum for some footy cards like the ones Paul and Tom collect with photos of their favourite football players. “Can I ppleaseasssse have some?”

“Not today,” she says as she puts the last of the shopping onto the counter, a packet of Craven A, Eno Antacid and some liquorice.

“But, Mum, I’ve still got some of my own seventh birthday money,” Nicky says, digging out some coins from his pockets.

“Please Mum, can I? They’re five cents and I’ve got twenty cents.”

“Look Cally,” Nicky calls, and shows me the Bulldogs’ team captain on the first card he opens.

“And here’s one for you.” He gives me a shiny new card of a footballer in a black and red jumper. I barrack for the Bombers like Margie and Paul and my Uncle Jack. But not all my family loves the Bombers, Mum and Dad and Tom
go for the Fitzroy Lions and my little brothers are Kangaroo supporters. Andrew’s the odd one out in our gang, Mum says, with his Demons jumper and scarf, the same as his friend, Johnny Spiteri.

Nicky is off again. Racing towards the front of the supermarket where the new doors swing open. They’re automatic doors you can trick into opening by jumping on and off the black mat. I walk beside Aunty Mary, daydreaming about the funny things old people say, an apple a day keeps the doctor away ... too many cooks spoil the broth. My Grandad Les is the funniest. He puts ‘dead horse’ on his ‘dead eyes’, and tells me to pull his ‘onka paringa’ when he burps.

Aunty Mary wheels the shopping jeep towards the exit and the doors open as Nicky dashes through, his quick steps hardly register and the door swings back, suddenly. The heavy glass and steel frame whacks him hard on the side of his head.

Blood pours from the wound. Aunty Mary mops it with a tissue.

"It hurts," Nicky says but he doesn’t cry. The shop manager arrives and fusses over Nicky. His footy cards are scattered over the floor.

"There you go, mate," says the manager, handing Nicky the cards and a wet cloth. His Mum dabs at his head, presses the cloth against the spot where the blood is only trickling now. Nicky pushes her hand away.

"It’s okay, Mum," he says and studies the blood on the cloth and his hands.

"You sure?"

"Yep." He sniffs back his running nose. Aunty Mary ruffles his hair, inspects his cut head and hands the bloodied cloth back to the manager.

Out in the street, Nicky hops down from the shopping trolley and walks home, close to his Mum. I trail behind, slowly, feeling sick, thinking about the blood and the time Margie hit her leg on the swing and Paul decided to fly from the top bunk and cut his head open.

"Will you have to go to hospital?" I ask Nicky who climbs on top of the brick fence near the corner of our street, walking and balancing on the wobbly bricks.

"Nuh, not me. I'm tough," he says and pushes in front of me.

Back at the Glasson’s, I help Nicky and Maurice unpack the groceries, the milk and bread, sausages and fruit. Nicky tells Maurice about the swinging door and the blood and the footy cards he got with his birthday money.

"How’s your head?"

"Better than your ugly one," he laughs. “I’m glad you’re home for the holidays.”
“Me too.”
“You comin’ to the footy tomorrow?”
“You bet. The Cats should win this one.”

Just when I think they’ve forgotten all about me and decide to sneak off home, Nicky says, “Wanna come Cally?”

“I’ll ask Mum,” I say, but I know she won’t let me go. She’ll tell me I have to stay home and help her with the little ones. When I leave, Nicky is quietly cuddling his new football, the leather Sherrin he got from his Dad. Nicky reckons he’ll play Aussie Rules one day, at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. I’ve never been there but one day I will go and I will watch Nicky and cheer him on as he takes some big ‘spekkies’ for his beloved Geelong Cats.

A few days after the supermarket accident, I’m watching TV with Maurice and Nicky. The newsreader is talking about the missing Prime Minister, Harold Holt.

“Looks like he’s still missing,” Maurice says. “They haven’t found his body.”

“What happened to him?”

“He went swimming at a surf beach in Portsea last December. He must have drowned.”

“Do you think the sharks got him?”

“Maybe.”

Maurice shares his Twisties with us, and we sit there sucking the cheesy crumbs from our fingers.

“The picture’s a bit blurry,” Nicky says.

“What picture?” Maurice jokes. “I can’t see anything.”

Nicky laughs too and then stops, suddenly he’s serious.

“Maurice the newspaper is blurry as well.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. It’s just this photo. It’s one of that American bloke who was shot in the head. There’s a drawing of how the bullet went into his head, but I can’t really read the words. Is it someone Kennedy?”

“Yeah, that’s the second Kennedy. He was assassinated. Yesterday, like his brother who was the president. You know, Jack Kennedy. It was in Dallas the year you were born.”

“Dallas?”
“Dallas. Texas.”
“I thought we were the only Dallas.”
“Nick, read the story to me.”
“I can’t.”
Maurice is quiet now. What does Nicky mean he can’t read? I wonder. I know he can read better than me.

“Who wants Chinese for dinner?” Uncle Ray calls from the kitchen.
“Dim Sims for me,” Nicky shouts.
“Ok. Chopped up cats for one,” Ray jokes and bangs pots and pans as he searches for a big saucepan to take to the new restaurant in Glenroy. “Good deal,” Maurice remembers the Chinese cook telling them on their first visit. “You bring pots … we fill them with goodies.”

“Coming with us?” Maurice asks Nicky and me, and my mouth is already watering at the thought of the crisp prawn crackers.

“Nuh, I’ll stay home,” Nicky says.

“What’s up mate?” Uncle Ray says from the bedroom door. Nicky is lying on his bed, not talking, studying the posters on the wall. He moves up close to the one of Polly Farmer, the Cats captain.

“Nothing.”

The Gleeson’s light blue Holden races past our house. I’m on the footpath drawing squares for our hopscotch game. I call out and wave to Uncle Ray, but he doesn’t wave back. He doesn’t stop like he usually does. He doesn’t call me to jump in the car to go for a drive with them. Nicky’s in the backseat with his Mum and he doesn’t wave either, he doesn’t even look at me. Something is wrong. I feel it, in my stomach, in my shaking legs. I feel funny inside, like when the doctor comes to the house, when Mum is in bed and doesn’t come out and the doctor gives her a needle and she stays there for days. Sometimes she’s there for so long I think she might never get up again.

I keep my feelings to myself, scared that if I talk about them they will be more real and something bad will happen.

The next day I’m folding the clothes spread all over the couch when Uncle Ray calls to see Dad. He tells him about the car trip the night before. “It was crazy, Jim,” he says. “I was racing to get there, to the hospital, the same one, the same doctor, it was like watching a movie, a replay going over the same things. Bloody weird.”
My Dad pours them a beer from the long neck bottles of VB that take up a whole shelf in the fridge.

“As soon as Nicky muttered those words, ‘I can’t see’, it all came back. Only this time it was worse.”

From over the back of the couch, I see my Dad nodding his head, playing with the box of Redheads, flipping them over between this thumb and finger, eyes moving from Ray to me. I know that look, I know he doesn’t see me, he doesn’t really see anyone.

“I raced all the red lights, raced past every car on the road,” Uncle Ray is talking faster now, his words pouring out like each one is more important, more urgent than the next. “This time I pushed the accelerator flat to the floor. I don’t know mate, maybe I always thought that if we’d got Maurice to the hospital quicker, that maybe it would have been different. Maybe they could have saved his sight. This time, I told myself, it’s going to be different.”

I close my eyes and I see it all again, flashing before me, the Gleeson’s car again, racing up McIvor Street and I imagine Nicky in the backseat, the streetlights flickering as his eyes play tricks on him...the flashes of colour from the city buildings, his eyes going off and on like fairy lights on the Christmas tree. And now I see Maurice too, his slow, steady walk, the white stick with its black rubber tip out in front of him, sliding from side to side across the floor or footpath, sometimes knocking into me if I don’t move fast enough. I always feel so clumsy around him, trying to help but feeling like I’m just getting in the way. Will Nicky be like Maurice?

“You know what, mate,” Uncle Ray says leaning in to almost a whisper and I have to listen hard to hear. “When we got to the hospital everything was the same as last time. Even Mary said it all looked the same, smelt the same; that mix of bleach and disinfectant, the sounds of the lift doors opening and closing, muffled, loudspeakers calling doctors. It was all the same. Even the surgeon was the same. And you know what,” he says, “Even the injury is the same. A double detached retina.”

Dad swallows the rest of his beer in one long gulp. He grabs Uncle Ray on the arm and rests his hand on his shirt.

“It’s hard to believe, sure it is,” Dad says, his accent stronger than ever. “What are the chances?” Uncle Ray whispers. “A million to one?”

“And the surgeon, that Professor, did he do the operation?”

“He did, he tried to sew back the detached retina. This time, he knew though, he knew early on, that both eyes were gone.”

“He won’t be trying again then, like Maurice?”
“No, Jim. It's inoperable. Know what else he told me?”
“What's that?”
“Said it had him baffled. That is was unheard of, that he had travelled the world, studied at universities in America and never had he seen anything like it.”

My Dad is quiet. “There's no reason for it, no reason at all,” he says. “Two brothers. Two freak accidents. Both blind. Who would believe it?”
“It's killing me.”
“It's tough mate, so it is, but you have great kids there, smart and sensible. They'll be okay. Please God.”

Dad blesses himself, the way he does when Mum takes the driver's seat for her driving lesson. “In the name of the Father,” he whispers as he puts his right hand to his forehead, “and of the son,” he continues, taking his hand to his chest, “and of the holy spirit,” he adds and crosses from left to right shoulder before joining his hands together with a quiet, “Amen.”
It's the middle of January and it's hot as hell. I don't really know what hell means but Mum says it a lot and she says she feels the heat more than ever now she is big with another baby inside her. We keep the venetian blinds closed and try to shut the doors but there's always someone coming or going. Nicky's eight today and he's having a cricket party. Mum's helping Aunty Mary with the fairy bread and sausage rolls.

I can't wait until I'm eight. I count down the days until my birthday. The party's just for boys, except for me. I wear Paul's old white cricket pants that Andy passed on to me, and I carry Nicky's present under my arm to his house. It's a pack of Uno, braille on one side and normal numbers on the other. Maybe we will have a game when the others have gone home.

It's Nicky's first summer holidays since the accident. He's spent most of it making cricket and tennis balls with bottle tops inside. Michael, his new friend from St Paul's, stays at the Gleesons on weekends and helps Nicky collect the tops from beer and coke bottles and I save some up for when he's home. They roll the tops inside newspaper, and put layers of sticky tape and masking tape over the top to hold it together.

"Why do you need so many?" I ask when we are in his backyard, practicing for the party games.

"Because they fall apart quickly, especially when I whack 'em for a six."

Nicky throws one against the back wall of his house, listens for the bounce and gets ready to catch. "One, two, three," he counts them off and I pick up the ones he misses.

"Sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight."

Finally he gives me a turn and I shut my eyes and listen for the bell in the ball. I try a few times, miss and then give up.
“Let’s try the obstacle course.”
Nicky and Maurice have set up a course in his back yard with a long piece of string running from the tap at the back door along the fence and around the clothesline to the other side of the yard near the chook shed. Now, as he runs the course, holding onto the string I follow him, eyes closed tight. Nicky runs forever but I open my eyes after one lap.
“Ready?” Russell calls when the others have arrived and he’s finished setting up the cricket pitch for the first innings.
“Birthday boy goes first.”

We all listen to the ball as it bounces along the dry grass, rolling closer towards the stumps. The bat connects with the ball and Nicky takes off, sprinting down the pitch and back as I write the runs down on the score sheet. He makes his way towards me. “Did you get that down? Was it a six?” he asks, bending in towards my face.
“Russell said it was a four.”
“What colour is your shampoo?” Nicky says.
“What?”
“The shampoo. Is it green?”
“I don’t know. Why?”
“Because your hair smells like apples,” he says and rests his face close to my head and I feel my stomach somersault, my hot cheeks burning.

Nicky is watching Get Smart when I arrive at the Gleeson’s with a message from my mother. The house is dark except for light from the TV in the corner of the living room. I can hear Nicky laughing and then I see Maxwell Smart and Laramie on the screen. I forget all about my Mum’s message and I wonder what Nicky can see. Does he picture things in his head? Like how silly Max looks when he talks into his shoe phone. Can he picture the cone of silence as it descends on him and The Chief? I sit on the arm of the black vinyl chair next to Nicky and look over his shoulder into the kitchen with its pretty cream cupboards trimmed with brown that matches the spotted tablecloth. Ours is a pale blue kitchen with paint peeling from the mouldy ceiling. It never smells as good as Aunty Mary’s. I hang around thinking there’ll be some of her Anzac biscuits and raspberry cordial on offer soon.
“In the shed.”
I find Russell at the bench wearing overalls and a blue singlet like his Dad’s. He has taken apart an old radio and is laying out wires and speakers. The bench is crowded with Vegemite jars filled with nails and bolts, and Russell reaches for a bag of screws. When he turns to me I suddenly remember why Mum sent me. “We have a leaking tap and Mum wants to know if you can you come and fix it.”

Russell is out the door before I have time to ask about the radio. Tool bag around his waist, he heads inside, through the back door of his house, to let his Mum know. Russell is quieter than the other kids, gentle like our Margie, and he’s always happy to help Mum fix things. Russell and Tom are best friends, always talking about camping in the bush. Sometimes they light a fire in the backyard and Dad lets them cook sausages on it in.

“Can I go too?” Nicky calls, as we head through the house. He moves toward the door and I watch him closely. I find I’m watching him all the time, now. At weekends when he is home from school I race to his house to be with him, to hear his stories about boarding school. He says he’s glad Maurice is there with him. I’m so jealous. I wish I could go there too. Sometimes when I’m in our front yard, I can hear Maurice and Nicky coming towards me. I hear them before I see them and I have time to run inside and watch from behind the window. Peeping out between the Venetian blinds all sticky with yellow smoke stains and dust, I watch them huddle close to their Dad, holding onto his elbow, one on either side. I know I shouldn’t stare. I can’t help it. I want to know what it’s like to be blind. Sometimes I close my eyes tight, I walk around the room, knock my knee on a table or bang a hand on the back of the couch and I quickly open my eyes. I practice some more, walk to the kitchen, sliding my hands along the wall like I’ve seen Nicky do. How does he do it? I wonder. How does he dress himself, brush his hair or even clean his teeth?

“What if it happens to me?” I ask my Mum when I get her alone.

“What if I get hit on the head? Will I go blind too?”

And then I worry that it might happen to one of my brothers. Maybe Paul when he’s playing footy, or Andrew. But mainly I worry it will be Tom, the one who’s always going to hospital. Sometimes when he’s coughing and the breathing is so noisy he stays in hospital for a few days. Once I called it afsma by mistake and everyone laughed so now I know it’s asthma and if it’s really bad an ambulance comes and takes him to the hospital. I try hard to stop thinking about going blind. I stop climbing trees and swinging on the clothesline because I know it can be dangerous. A bump on the head and bang, you’re blind.
We follow Russell to my house and Mum gives him one of her big grins, so big you can see her lovely new teeth that hurt her gums and give her ulcers. "Mr Fixit is here," she says and sends me for some lemonade, a whole can for Russell and one for Nicky and me to share. While Russell fixes the tap, Mum tells him how clever he is and says her boys are hopeless, 'Can't even change a light globe, like their father'.

"What's your new school like?" I ask Nicky, letting him have the first sip from the can.

"Okay, I guess, a bit more fun now that I've moved into the main dorm with the big kids. It's still cold and creepy in there and smells like our lavender bush but it's great for playing hide and seek. Maurice showed me the best spots in a cupboard under the stairs, in the boiler room where it's warm. It can get scary, lots of strange noises from the roof and high ceilings, like someone's walking on the roof, the creaking floors and the water pipes in the old bathrooms are a bit spooky."

"Do you miss home?"
"Yeah, lots."
"Do you miss me?"
"Course I do. And Mum. I miss Mum most."

Nicky tells me about a scary dream he had the first week he was at St Paul's and I feel the goose bumps prickling my arms and legs.

"I dreamt that this woman came to see me, to take me home because I missed my Mum so bad. She picked me up out of bed and carried me in her arms and it was like I was floating, floating through the air on my way home. It felt nice. Then, suddenly I was falling, like from a bridge or a tree, and I woke up with a fright as if someone had dropped me. I felt sore in my back. I kept thinking it was real. It felt real. And then I could feel the hard floor under me. I was actually out of my bed and on the floor."

"I've had that dream too. First it was like I was flying, then suddenly I'm falling down a hole and there's murky water at the bottom and I keep falling and screaming but nobody can hear me or see me. Your dream sounds horrible."

"Not as bad as the night when I got lost and wet my pants. I was busting for a leak but everywhere I turned was a dead end. It was my first night at St Paul's and I didn't really know my way around. I couldn't find the corridor to the bathroom. Everything was so quiet, except the floorboards were creaking and every step echoed around me like someone was following me. I was so
frightened I was going to get back into bed, but I was desperate to go. Eventually the night matron heard me crying, but by then it was too late."

I sit there on the back steps, feeling dumb, not knowing what to say, feeling sad for Nicky, but he just pushes my arm and laughs. “Promise you won't tell anyone.”

"Promise. Cross my heart. Hope to die if I tell a lie."

My Dad stands at the edge of the bunk beds and tells us that we have a new baby brother. Baby number eight. “He's a grand lad...to be sure. Big blue eyes. Soft fuzzy hair.”

It's a stinking hot night in February even though it's almost the end of summer. I've been back at school for three weeks and I can't wait to tell my new grade two teacher, Mrs Anstanavisos, about our new baby. The window is wide open and the pink curtain blows across my face as I peer over the edge of the top bunk to look at my Dad. I hear his voice change a little as he gives us all the details of our new brother and I think maybe he's tired. He's been at the hospital all night with Mum.

His name is Matthew. Just Matthew, no middle name. I think it's because all the Catholic names for boys have already all been used up on my brothers. Even then my Mum and Dad doubled up a few times. I go through them now in my head, counting on my fingers, in the right order, Paul Seamus, Thomas Leslie, Andrew John, Seamus Patrick, John Fitzgerald and now Matthew. Thomas Leslie is the only one with a name all of his own but that was borrowed from both his grandfathers: grandfather Thomas in Ireland and grandfather Leslie in Kingsbury.

‘Does our baby look like you?’ I shout above my siblings' questions. I'm wide-awake now wiping the sleep from my eyes.

‘Aye, he does that, my love. Spitting image of his brothers, too.”

Watching my Dad as he leans against the frame of my bed I think how handsome he looks in his brown pants and check coat with the woollen collar rolled up high. Mister Hollywood, Aunty Shirley calls him. “Those thick waves of jet black hair, pale skin and those sexy blue eyes. It's a bloody sin it is. And oooohh, that charm. Oh, yes, James Egan didn't just kiss that Blarney stone he swallowed the thing whole.”

“What colour is baby Matthew's hair?” Margie calls out from below me. She stretches her short legs, trying to kick me through the mattress above her.
“Maggie, love, his hair’s as white as snow,” Dad says softly. I notice how everyone speaks gently to my sister. Her real name is Margaret Mary, but Dad says his little girl, with her long dark curls and pretty face, is the image of Maggie O’Hara, an old girlfriend of his. “Our Maggie was at the front of the queue when God was giving out the looks,” Dad tells us, and my brothers reckon I was way down the back.

“When is our new brother coming home?” Margie asks. “Can we visit Mum?”

“We’ll see, love. Mum is very tired.”

It seems like forever before I see the Gleesons, almost a year has passed and it’s summer again. Nick is nine now and I’m catching up quick, half a year behind him. They don’t come home so much anymore and when they do they hardly ever come out and play. But the brothers are home today, walking past my house, laughing and talking like they are fine with everything that’s happened to them, as if everything is normal.

Watching from the window, I jump when Nicky trips on the rough edges of the concrete path and steadies again. I hold my breath when Maurice pushes closer to his Dad as a crazy dog rushes at them. I want to go outside, to talk to them, like I used to. But it seems so long since I’ve really been with Nicky, and I don’t know how to play with him anymore. Instead I stay inside, behind the curtain and watch him moving away from me. I start crying. I cry all the time now. Everything is changing. My Mum is always sick and I don’t know why. Dad says he doesn’t know why either. The doctors don’t even know why she’s sick. I leave the window as Nicky disappears around the corner, and wander into my Mum’s bedroom. I sit on the bed, watch her sleeping in the cold, dark room while everyone else is outside having fun outside. Sun shining. Even Margie has joined the other kids in the street for a game of Rounders.

In the bedroom the blinds are closed tight against the daylight, the window is propped open with an empty plastic bottle of Mylanta, Mum’s attempt to freshen the air, stale from cigarette smoke. She is lying still and quiet on her side of the bed. Nearby is a cup of cold coffee, its saucer doubles as an ashtray. My Mum’s bedroom is where I spend most of my time these days, checking on her, staying alert for any signs of what her Dad calls her moods.

Mum has taken to her bed for more than a week now and the doctor has been twice, with his black case of pills and needles, but still she stays in her
room. The boys go in and out to ask where their sports shirts or school socks are and Margie helps them find their things, keeps the house tidy. Aunty Mary does some washing and Dad cooks disgusting pigs’ trotters and boiled potatoes with onion and cabbage. I want Mum to get out of bed and come and sit with the rest of us in the lounge room, watch TV with us like she used to. On the Buses always makes her laugh, especially when Andy tells her she looks like Olive and our Dad looks like silly Stan.

While my Mum sleeps, I explore the contents of the drawers in the bedside table...a prayer book, nappy pins, lipstick and rosary beads, a shopping list and a doctor’s prescription. I climb into the big bed with its sagging mattress and cuddle up next to her, her warm body offering more comfort than a bowl of ice-cream with chocolate flavouring. I chat to her about school and my ballet and tap lessons and I wonder out loud why I always have to play the boy in the dancing concerts. Then I lay still and breathe with her, in and out, in and out, together in perfect time and I fall asleep.

I wake when I feel Mum moving beside me. She pulls herself up against the ugly bedhead with its great swirling gold edges, a cast off from our neighbours who won Tatts lotto and moved away to the other side of the city, to Kew, near where the Gleeson boys go to school, to a new house with a garden and four bedrooms.

Mum leans forward, her arm tucked hard against her stomach to ease her pain. With her free hand she reaches out to the bedside table and picks up the smallest of the pill bottles. Her arms are weak so I help her with the childproof cap. She fills her palm with the yellow tablets and swallows them, without water.

The bedside table is cluttered with cups and statues, unpaid bills. The dressing table is strewn with clothes waiting to be washed or put away. Baby’s clothes hang to dry on the cot in the corner. Fixing the room, I already know, is easy. Fixing my Mum is a lot harder. I don’t understand why her mind doesn’t work properly, why she goes up and down and her head spins around like the roller coaster at the Melbourne Show where Dad works in the September holidays. And I don’t really understand why our Dad sometimes moves into the boys’ room to sleep.

Now, as I move in close to Mum, the hot wind flaps at the sheet of plastic stuck to the window frame. It covers the gaping hole left from a stray cricket ball that smashed through the glass. Someone is knocking, I think, excited by the thought of a visitor, but maybe it’s just the wind.
And then I hear my friend Karen, from Number Twenty-Four McIvor Street, calling for me to open the door. She's got her school case with her. “I've come to live with you,” she says when I peep out the window. “Did you tell your Mum?” “I told her Mrs Egan's got so many kids she won't even know I'm here.”
Uncle Alf is in his garage in Gregory Grove, Preston when we arrive for the Christmas party. Alfred Vincent Gammon, who’s really my Great Uncle, is a Collingwood six-footer. “Built like a brick shithouse,” says Uncle Jack. “Played for Fitzroy so don’t let him see that red and black scarf.” Watching Uncle Alf now, in his workshop at the back of the garage, I feel scared by his size and his big voice.

I stare at him as he climbs down from the orange bar stool, his good leg easily finding the floor and his wooden leg hovering, balancing on its round, silver tip. The sound of it, clunking on the concrete floor reminds me of a soothing drumbeat, bang, bang, clunk, clunk, up and down as he walks. He leans into his big workbench, cluttered with nails and screws, rips open a packet of nails with the few good teeth he has left.

“Hand me the saw,” he barks at Andy, as I stand there frozen, watching him run his fingers along its sharp edge. He sips his beer from the glass and the white froth sticks to the ginger hairs above his lip. He takes the new skateboard from Andy, the one he got that morning for Christmas. Mum pretended it was from Santa and we went along with her, just so Margie and the little ones didn’t find out.

As I creep closer to Uncle Alf, I sniff in the fumes, the smell of petrol stacked in green containers in the corner of the garage, the oil on old rags, old paint tins. I wander around the garage taking in the contents of the crowded shelves, bits of rope and plastic hoses hanging from hooks and old Arnotts’ biscuit tins where more nuts and bolts are stored.

“Watch out for cars, Evel Knievel,” Uncle Alf says as he hands Andrew the newly repaired skateboard and we watch him push off along the smooth concrete of the garage floor, out into the street.
Uncle Alf’s wife, Aunty Patricia, hands out lolly bags for the kids. She gives me a red party hat and Margie gets the green one. My Godfather, Uncle Kevin, pours the lemonade. He’s got all the flavours from Loys’ soft drinks where he drives a truck and drops off bottles each week at our house in McIvor Street. I know the Creamy Soda will go quickly so I fill my plastic cup to the top before it’s all gone.

“Wanna job?” Uncle Kevin shouts to Paul. “You can give me a hand with the deliveries now you’re on school holidays.”

Before he can answer, Mum calls out “He sure does. He’ll be ready first thing Monday morning. Can you fit Tom in too?”

Mum looks happy, surrounded by her family for Christmas, sitting on a rug thrown over Uncle Alf’s lovely green lawn with her blue and purple striped dress spread out like peacock feathers. Baby Matthew, in his navy and white sailor’s suit, is crawling all over her. She’s skinny again now, after the baby, and I’m glad because the new kid from across the road can’t call her ‘Fatso’ any more. “Shut up, you old cow,” the brat, whose name I can’t even say properly, spat at Mum when she told her to stop picking on Margie and me. “Cally’s Mum’s a big fat cow,” she teased over and over, until I got so angry I picked up a rock and threw it at her, and even more wild when I missed.

When Uncle Alf picks Matthew up I’m scared he might drop him. He sits down on the plastic chair and bounces the baby across his wooden leg…up and down…up and down… Margie climbs on after Matthew. But not me. I shake my hand when Uncle Alf calls me for a turn. I think I’m too big for that now and I’m scared I might hurt him.

After Christmas dinner, when I’m so full I want to lie down and go to sleep, Uncle Alf brings out a big bucket of ice-cream and some spoons. He gives us kids one each and says, “Dig in.”

“He got shot in the war,” Andy told me, one night when we slept over at Uncle Alf’s big old house in the country. “The bullet went through his leg and they had to cut it off.” Together we peeped through our bedroom door into the laundry, watching as Uncle Alf undid his overalls, and the buckles on the leather straps around his waist. As he sat down on a stool he slid the wooden leg away from the top half of his real leg. We saw all of it then, the squishy pink flesh where his knee and leg were missing. I grabbed Andy’s arm and tried not to look, but I watched him hang the wooden leg up on the back of the door. That night I was too scared to walk past Uncle Alf’s leg to go to the toilet outside. I held on and tried to think of other things and then I remembered Nicky trying to find his way to the toilet in the dark at St Paul’s with all those
ghosts in the old mansion and I lay there, frozen and frightened. In the morning when I woke up the sheets were wet. I pulled them from the bed and ran them under the tap in the laundry sink next to Great Uncle Alf’s wooden leg.

Fingers in my mouth, deep down my throat I make loud gagging noises in the toilet. I don’t want to go to school. I hate it, I hate the teachers who pick on me and I feel sad when they are cruel to Harry, just because he doesn’t know how to read. My Mum doesn’t bother arguing with me. She says I haven’t had a day off for ages so I can stay home. I get a blanket and sleep on the couch by the heater. Mum fills the fireplace with briquettes from a red plastic bucket and wipes the black dust onto her brown corduroy slacks. I settle in with another Enid Blyton story, this time the Secret Seven, an old worn copy my friend Lynda has given me. Dad says Broadmeadows should have its own library by now. “What would you expect from bloody Bolte and his mob?” he says when he gets mad about it. “Couldn’t give two bob for Broady.”

Mum fills the kettle for Aunty Mary. They are talking about Russell and Paul. I pretend to read. “It’s best to keep it from the police,” she whispers.

I have to lift my head from the pillow to hear their quiet voices. “We’re sending Paul to boarding school,” Mum says. “Boarding school, that’s a bit harsh.” “We don’t know what else to do. Jim says it’s for the best.” “Russell wants to leave school, he wants to be a mechanic. You know how he loves fixing things and he’s already saving up for a car. But he’s too young.” “Fourteen? I guess it’s young, but I was working at his age. So were you. I was married at seventeen, a baby at eighteen. You must have been about the same.” “Yes, but things are different now. Our kids have a lot more opportunities than we did.”

Slowly, over the next few days, like a detective I put together the details of the story. I ask Tom and Andrew for information but they say they don’t know anything, or they pretend not to know. At school I am bursting to share my secret with Kaylene and Rita. “Why’s he going away?” they want to know, demanding and impatient. Should I tell? We sit on the hot tar at the side of the netball courts, whispering.
“He’s in big trouble,” I say, “Big strife,” I use the word the way I hear my Mum say it, like it’s the worst kind of trouble.

“He broke into the Dallas milk bar.” I can’t believe the words that have come out of my mouth. It’s too late now, and I can’t take them back but I know not to say anything more. I close my eyes and I see Paul and Russell climbing on top of the roof of the milk bar at the Dallas shops. Paul squeezing through a hole in the roof, with Russell going in after him while another, older kid keeps a lookout. They’ve got Andy’s torch, the one he got for Scouts and they shine its light around the shop, finding things to take, stuffing their pockets with lollies, redskins, bananas, milk bottles and liquorice allsorts.

“Will they go to jail?” Lynette whispers behind me. “Did they give you anything?” Rita says, standing above me now, legs apart and hands on hips, asking for proof of my story.

“Nuh...they shared it all with their mates. That’s how they got caught. One of ’em dobbed.”

I wonder for a moment if Paul was the one who was too generous, and if maybe he did keep something for me. He doesn’t tease me so much any more and he even lets me listen to his records. And just last Saturday at little athletics Paul was there at the Gibb Reserve, cheering for me. He stood up for me when nobody else would. He argued with the timekeeper when he gave the first place ticket to another girl, the girl who had a real coach, not just her big brother to train her. But Paul knew I’d won that time. He was watching it closely, and timing it. He told them to check again. So I went home with an equal first ribbon for the first time and whenever Paul teases me now, I know he really doesn’t mean it.

“Promise you won’t tell anyone,” I plead with the girls. “Even the police don’t know. Mum says it’s enough that Paul is sorry. But she’s still making him say the Rosary every night.”

When Russell calls for Paul that night, I can’t look at him. I know he doesn’t know that I know his secret but I still feel bad that I know.

“He’s not home,” Andy tells him. “He’s at work.”

“I’ll wait for him,” Russell says and heads inside our house. I follow and wonder if he’s come to fix our washing machine that’s broken down with the
dirty clothes still stuck in it. Mum says Russell is a genius, and he can fix anything.

Russell pulls the machine apart, and lays the motor on the grass in the yard and starts working on it. Andy helps, passing screwdrivers, watching closely. When he’s done fixing it and putting it back together, they go into the backyard to play footy with Seamus and Johnny. I wonder if Russell misses Maurice and Nicky when they are away at school. I think it must be lonely for him at home now.

Russell takes his turn at the handball target. The boys have painted a red circle on the back fence with a yellow dot in the middle. “You’ve gotta punch the footy hard so it hits the right spot,” he tells Johnny. “Watch me.”

“When’s ya bruva get home, anyway,” Russell asks.

“He’s going to jail,” Seamus blurts. I glare at him and Andy pushes him.

“What?” Russell says and swings around as Johnny hits him with the footy.

“Yeah, he’s going to jail,” Johnny shouts it this time.

“Bullshit.”

“Are you going too?”

“What?”

“For stealing the lollies.”

Andy grabs Seamus around the neck as Russell throws the ball and walks away. “Whatchya say that for?” he yells at him.

“Why? What’s so bad about jail?”

“It’s scary,” I tell him. “They lock you in a room, on your own.”

“See these bars,” Andy says and grabs two of the wrought iron veranda bars. “They put you behind bars like these. And you can’t get out.”

“Bet I could,” Seamus says.

“Dare you. Dare you to stick your head in. Go on.”

Seamus crawls down on his knees with two of the bars in his hands. He pushes his head between them, poking it out the other side. Andy starts laughing. Russell is laughing now too. And then all of us are laughing and pointing. Seamus is smiling back at us.

“You look silly,” Johnny says.

And Seamus soaks up the attention. He pokes his tongue out at us, pulls faces, wiggles his bottom.

Then he’s stuck.

“Help me,” he calls out as he pulls his head back the way it went in. His ears are in the way.
I go to him and try and push his head back. I hold my hands over his ears, pin them close to his head but my hands get in the way and I can't push his head through. Seamus twists and turns his head, tries pulling it through with a half turn to the left, then the right, backwards and forwards he shifts his head. Andy tries to push and Russell pulls. No luck.

"I'll get Mum," Margie says, "It must be hurting him."

"It's his ears," Mum says when she's tried a few different ways to pull him from between the bars. "They're stuck."

Seamus sobs now, his ears turning red.

"Turn your head a bit more," Mum coaxes gently. My brother's ears have got him into trouble before. Not long after he started school he got called to Sister Teresa's office when he punched a kid in the playground who called him Big Ears and his mate, Frankie, got called Noddy. It was one of Andy's friends and all of Holy Child heard about Seamus, the little preppie who bashed the grade-six boy. Seamus and his ears were already legendary and no one teased him again.

"Run and get Uncle Ray," Mum shouts to Andy. "Bloody fool," she says to Seamus. "Always sticking your head and arms in things. We'll have to cut them off."

"Dad's not home," Russell tells her.

"Then someone get Uncle Tom."

Tom Perry is always home from work early. He's a baker and sometimes brings us leftover bread. I love the Tip Top raisin bread the most, toasted hot with melted butter. Today he doesn't bring any bread, just a big saw. Donna and Graham come to watch.

As he tries to cut the bar and bend it to fit Seamus's head through, Uncle Tom swears, "Blood thing's stuck," he says as he tries to push the bars apart. "You'll have to call the police or the fire brigade, Val."

But Mum doesn't want the police hanging around. Not after the milk bar thing, she says. When there's nothing left to do she goes next door to the Wilsons to use their phone to call triple zero.

Seamus has stopped crying now as Uncle Tommy calms him and tells him he'll take him to see the Kangaroos footy match on Saturday.

I want my Dad to come home. He'll know what to do, but Mum tells me to stop my whingeing. "He can't just leave work at the drop of a hat."

The siren rings through McIvor Street as the fire engine pulls in the small driveway of our house. Three big men in blue uniforms and red helmets jump from the truck, and run around the back. They have big iron bars, much bigger
than Uncle Tommy’s and lots of other tools. “Now young man, let’s see if we can help you out,” the one with the curly hair says to Seamus, as he gently eases my brother’s head through the crooked bar.

I hold my breath and link my fingers with Donna’s as Seamus is finally free, his ears red and sore. Mum dabs Vaseline on them to cool them down and now it’s over we can laugh.

“Don’t you laugh,” Mum grins at me. “It could have been your wing nuts stuck in there. We’d have a job getting your big ears out.”

Mum’s up early on this cool Sunday morning in the middle of winter. “It’s a special day of Sacrament,” she tells Margie as she helps her dress for her First Holy Communion. And for someone as good and kind as her Margie, the celebrations at McIvor Street will be bigger than Brownlow Medal Night.

Mum slowly zips up her black boots and pulls on her new dress with its tightly fitted psychedelic jersey top and flared black wool skirt. Her blonde hair is curled loosely, her fringe teased up and away from her green eyes, brighter today with the excitement of it all. Then she sits there, alone for a moment on the worn-out sofa, looking at the nicotine stains on her hands.

Suddenly Matthew is climbing on her knee and Dad is ready to leave for Church, handsome in a new grey suit, pale orange shirt and emerald tie. His thick black hair is swept up at his forehead. Margie parades before us in her communion frock. “Maggie, Love. You look beautiful,” Dad tells her.

The veil is lace and tulle and I watch as Mum pulls it into place around Margie’s face, twirling her long thick curls into ringlets. Margie is beautiful, I think, and sometimes I’m a bit jealous, mostly when I hear Aunty Eileen’s voice, as if she were right there in the room with us now, talking about me, “Your Cally has a terrible colour about her, those black rings under her eyes, and always that frown on her face.”

“Are you scared?” I ask Margie.

“No, not really. Well, maybe just a bit. What’s it like?” She steps into her new buckle-up party shoes.

“What’s what like?”

“You know, the bread they give you.”

“Not very nice, it sticks to your mouth and it’s hard to get it off your tongue. Remember to close your mouth when you get yours. They tell you not to chew it, but you can’t anyway. You just have to wait until it melts.”
“Sister Theresa says we have to stick our tongue right out so Father Murphy can put the body of Jesus on it without touching our mouth.”

Margie makes the sign of the cross and imitates her religious instructor, complete with the Irish accent: “Jesus, Mary and Joseph ye will need to be quick, what with fifty-six of ye taking the Holy Sacrament. The poor father will be flat out, so he will.” Margie shuffles away like Sister Theresa in that big heavy dress and veil she wears all year round.

“You’ll be an actress one day,” I tell her, giggling at her perfect performance.

“Here, put on your new cross,” Mum says and places it around Margie’s neck. “It’s expensive so don’t go losing it.”

“Maybe I shouldn’t wear it.”

“Yes, you should, it’s your big day.”

The First Holy Communion Sacrament at Holy Child, Dallas, on the second Sunday of August is the biggest event of the year in our parish. There’s even a bishop from St Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne who has come to say the Mass. After the service, the party at Number Four McIvor Street begins. It’s a combined celebration - for Margie’s new status in the church as a bride of Christ - and a double birthday for Paul who is turning sixteen and Tom who will be fifteen a day later.

Maurice and Russell and Nicky arrive for the party with their Mum and Dad, then the Walkers and Goldsmiths, Roberts and Perry families and most of McIvor Street. Soon the small lounge room is full.

We run wild through the crowded house, climb over the furniture, drop cake on the floor and spill our green cordial. “Go and play on the road,” Uncle Kevin yells. “Stick your head up a dead bear’s bum,” Uncle Alf shouts. I climb a tree with my cousins, Kevin and Peter. They’re twins, but they’re not my real cousins. The twins smoke the cigarettes they pinched from their Dad. I take a drag on one, suck in the air and cough. Cough hard and try again. But the twins laugh at me.

“I’ve smoked before,” I brag.

“Have not,” Peter says and blows smoke in my face.

“Have so. Lots of times.”

“When?”

“When my Mum lets me light hers.”

“That doesn’t count.”

Someone’s calling me inside. They want a photo of the whole family and the ten of us gather around the sofa. I have to stand at the back, too tall for the
front. I look sideways at my Mum who is looking away from the camera, fussing over Johny and Seamus who have both climbed onto her lap. My dad is holding Matthew, grinning at Uncle Jack, the photographer. Paul is in his school uniform ready to return to boarding school later that night, and Tom is beside him in a dark green jumper that used to be Dad’s. Margie is in the middle, still in her Communion dress and veil, and Andrew is beside me with his Scouts jumper on, showing off his badges for first aid and swimming.

Long after everyone has gone, when I am collecting the soft drink bottles, the ones that are worth five cents, my Dad and Uncle Ray sit at the kitchen table, beer glasses in their hands.

“Our Nicky is the fastest kid in the school,” Ray tells Dad. “Runs like John Landy, got that same big stride.”

“That's grand, Ray,” Dad says, his accent thickening with each glass of cold Carlton Draught. “And that Maurice, he's a fine lad too.”

“Wants to be a journalist one day, or a teacher,” says Ray. “Do you think a blind kid could do that?”

“Aye, he could. To be sure he could,” My Dad nods, dragging hard on the last tip of his cigarette.

“Yeah, I told him he could be whatever he likes. Jesus, Jim, if only that were true,” Ray whispers and finishes his glass. He staggers out the front door to number eight McIvor Street tumbling down the porch steps on his way.
Mum rinses the teacups under the tap, and I help her look for ones with cracks or chips. Fusspot Aunty Eileen told us to throw the old cups in the bin. Germs fester in the cracks, she told me. But throwing them away doesn’t make sense to Mum. “Costs too much,” she says. “Besides, a bit of White King kills any germs.”

Wet, greasy dishwasher hands rub through her tight blonde curls, as Mum looks at me now, her eyes darker than usual. Tired and hot, she leans into the bench. It’s stuffy in the tiny kitchen. A large lump of mutton boils on the gas stove and the midday sun pushes it’s light through the bare window above the small sink. When we’re done, we splash our faces with the tap water. Aunty Mary drops in for a chat.

“Will you have sugar Mary?”
“Not for me, Valerie. Sweet enough.”
Mum scrapes the bottom of the jar of Pablo coffee for Aunty Mary’s cup, and then mixes boiling water with what’s left. She swallows it black and hot, with a couple of pills.
“What did the doctor say?”
“I haven’t been.”
Mum looks at her friend, and her cheeks flush a bright red.
“Don’t look at me like that,” she says. “You of all people should understand.”
“Valerie,” Mary says, “Why not?”
Mum turns away, eyes down at little Matty, clinging to her legs, scoops him up in her arms and settles him on her hip.
“You know why.”
“Why?”
“What if I’m right?” she whispers, wipes the baby’s snotty nose with the wet cloth before throwing it into the sink.

“You have to do something. You’ll have to tell Jim.”

“I’m too scared, Mary. I just want to go to bed, take a tablet and sleep until it all goes away.”

“Tell him.”

“I can’t. He works so hard, so many jobs just to keep on top of the bills, the school fees.” She spots me then and sends me away.

In a little while Aunty Mary calls me back inside. Strange, I think, I just got sent away. I shoot the netball into the old rubbish bin at the back door, overflowing with bats and balls and gumboots. My Mum doesn’t look at me when I sit down next to her. She just stares at the cigarette burn on the edge of the laminated table.

“You’re eleven now,” Aunty Mary says, like she’s just remembered I’ve had a birthday.

“Double figures,” she says with a pretend smile as if she has an awful toothache.

“Your Mum’s going to need your help when the new baby comes.”

New baby? The words echo and I put my hands over my ears to block them out. I panic. Confused. I love babies. I love giving Matty his bottle, putting him up high on my shoulder and rubbing his little back to burp him like my Mum showed me. And I am always extra careful when I cradle his soft head in my hands so it doesn’t flop everywhere. But another one? Another baby? Don’t we have enough already?

Even my Dad says eight is enough. “Sure we have plenty of babies,” he says to Margie when she asks about having a little sister.

“Cally, love,” Aunty Mary says to me, and I turn to face her. “Did you hear me? Your mother isn’t feeling well, she’s going to need your help.”

Don’t I help already? I want to shout back. But I stop myself. I don’t want to shout at Aunty Mary.

All I can think about is running away. I look to my Mum, willing her to say something. Tell me it’s not true. But my mother moves away from the table, away from me. As she passes, I see her eyes, her dark green eyes, dead again.

I plan my escape. I’ve done it before. Once when the boys were teasing me, calling me Pimple Face and Mop Head.

This time I will stay away forever.
I ride my bike down to the creek near the new tennis courts. I ride along the white lines until I get bored. I throw stones into the creek, counting backwards from one hundred.

The sky fills with dark clouds, almost black. Then the storm starts, first lightning, which I don’t mind, but then the loud thunder roars around me and I’m scared. I tell myself it’s just God and the angels shifting their furniture in heaven. When it rains harder I crawl into a concrete drain. I’m scared now, scared of the storm and the dark coming so I shut my eyes and pray someone will come soon. I think of Nicky and how lucky he is, away at boarding school, away from annoying siblings where he doesn’t have to worry about parents or more babies.

Still no one comes but I wait, determined never to go home. I’m not sure why I feel so sad these days, but one thing I do know for sure is that Father Murphy is not always right and maybe I will go to hell for thinking it, but at church he tells us if we are good and kind Jesus will love us and at school the nuns say Jesus can work miracles, like St Paul on the road to Damascus when he was blind and then could see. And Father Murphy says that one fine day all will be revealed. All what? I wonder now. Why Mum keeps having babies, and getting sick, why Nicky and Maurice are still blind? It seems to me that life isn’t always as good as some people pretend.

Finally I am done with the crying and feeling sorry for myself. Selfish, Mum calls it, and I decide to go home and try harder to be good, and help Mum when she asks me to. Crawling out of the tunnel and into the rain, I pedal hard to get home before it’s too dark to see.

At home, Mum is lying on the floor under a blanket watching Young Talent Time. I crawl in next to her, wrap my cold arms and legs around her warm body and feel her moving as she sings her favourite song with Johnny Young, Close Your Eyes and I’ll Kiss You, Tomorrow I’ll Miss You.

‘Oooh, you’re cold, Cally love. Where’ve you been?’ Mum lifts up her arms to cuddle me to her. “I know it’s hard on you, but Aunty Mary is right, I really am going to need your help.”

“Sure,” I gulp.

“Let me run you a bath.”

I nod, holding back the tears, feeling bad for running away and wishing I wasn’t the oldest girl in the family.
Margie and I sit on the end of our bed talking birthdays. Mum squeezes between us, sits right in the middle where the pink candlewick bedspread is worn thin. I will be twelve in a few days and Margie is ten three weeks later. Mum says we can have our presents early. “We're going shopping,” she announces. “You can pick out some new clothes.” We squeal and hug and jump on the bed like we used to when we were little. Even Mum joins in, singing Perry Como's 'Any dream will do'. She makes us laugh when she hits the low notes, just like her idol.

Then Mum turns serious, her voice changes as she kneels down in front of the dressing table and starts putting the plastic rollers in her hair.

“Cally,” she says, staring into the mirror, where she can see me standing behind her. “You'll probably be getting your period soon,” she begins, reaching for a roller to make a row of curls down the middle of her head. “So I want you to put some pads in your drawer. There are spare ones in the laundry cupboard.” She stares straight ahead, puts her hand out to me for another hairpin. “A small one this time, honey.”

“What if it hurts?” I say. “I heard some of the girls say you have to go to bed if you bleed. I’m scared. Sharon said you could bleed to death.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mum says. “Ignore her. She’s such a drama queen.” Margie sits quietly, taking it all in, but the conversation ends as abruptly as it begins. Margie and I do everything together, we share secrets about the boys at school and Mum encourages us to think and act and dress as if we are twins. Like this little talk, me a bit too old for it and Margie a bit too young. Maybe it’s just two for the price of one.

Our birthday shopping spree the next day begins and ends at Walton’s, the new store in Glenroy. Mum smiles all the way around the aisles of clothes and holds dresses, skirts and blouses next to her in front of the big mirrors on the walls. She finds matching coat-dresses for Margie and me, purple and white check with gold buttons and cute little half belts across the back. I wear mine with the long white ‘hand-me-down’ boots Donna Gleeson gave me, boots with a silver zipper that goes all the way up to my knobbly knees. In the change room, Mum looks at me closely and smiles and I think maybe she likes to see me in a dress. “You’ll need a training bra soon,” she says, and laughs at me as I stand there pushing out my chest.

“Can I grow my hair long too?” I ask. “I'm sick of short hair.”

“Your hair's too thin. If you do grow it long you will have to look after it yourself. I don't have the time to plait it or curl it all the time.”

“I don't want plaits and curls.”
My mother buys herself a tan-coloured suede coat, complete with fake fur collar. She pays for it all with Walton's dollars, money on credit from the store. The paper notes remind me of Monopoly money.

When the Walton's man comes to our house to collect some money, he wears a suit and carries a briefcase and I mistake him for the doctor. Mum thinks he's handsome, apart from that silly thing on his head that looks like a small rug, black hair swept across his forehead from one ear to the other. On the third collection, the Walton's man bangs away at the door while Mum keeps us in the bedroom, all quiet. Tom and Andrew aren't home from high school yet so Mum sends me to the door when he won't go away.

"Mum's not home," I tell him.

"Tell her I will call back next week. And if she doesn't have the money, I'll go to the sheriff," he says and heads to the Gleeson's, then slowly making his way along the rest of McIvor Street.

"I'm not talking to him next time," I complain to Mum. "He's horrible. Maybe we should give our new clothes back."

"We've paid for them and they're ours. Stop being so silly. Always worrying," she says and clicks her mouth the ways she does when she's had enough of me.

After my birthday Mum takes me to the doctor because of the pains in my stomach and too many days off school. The doctor calls it nerves. "Just like her Mum," Dr Maloney says and gives me a jellybean from the jar on his desk and a note on a piece of paper for something to make me feel better.

"Chew it slowly," Mum says as she hands me the strawberry-flavoured tablet with dinner each night.

My mother is thirty-four when she gets a job as a checkout chick at the King Street supermarket in Upfield. She tells me it's to help out with the extra school fees now that Paul is at boarding school. Still, she feels old and silly around the teenagers in their tight little mini skirts when they show her how to use the cash register, how to bag up the change for the banking.

She's changed her hair back to golden blonde and cropped it short in a bob at her neck, and as she slips her cigarettes into the deep pockets of her new lime green uniform she takes a deep breath, forces a smile.

"At least Barb is almost my age," she tells my Dad. "We have smoko together and because I'm last I have to clean up after all of them." Her voice is
still deep, but there's something different about it now. She's changed it a bit since she started work, it's softer, and sounds more like it did when she rang the priest to find out Mass times for Easter and tried to disguise her voice.

Dad gives Mum a kiss when she leaves. "You'll be the prettiest cashier in all of Dallas," he says. "And on Saturday night I'm taking you out."

"Really, where?"

"To the city, to see My Fair Lady."

Mum looks at the tickets he waves at her. "It's My Bare Lady, you fool. I'm not going to that and neither are you."

"Can't you take a joke?"

"Not that kind."

"Caroline," Mum says and I know it's important when she uses the whole of my name. "You'll have to get dinner when I do the afternoon shifts, just the little ones, the big boys can get something for themselves, heat up some stew or something." She slips into her black lace ups and I know she's trying to make me feel important. "You realise I'm going to need your help." I nod. I can hardly speak as those words come back to haunt me, 'I'm going to need your help,' and I remember Aunty Mary asking me to help Mum when she thought there was going to another baby. But baby number nine never came, and sometimes I wondered why but I never asked why and nobody ever spoke about it.

As Dad turns his Morris Minor into the car park of Broadmeadows railway station, I look up from my book. It's cold and wet outside and the windscreen is fogged up. Dad drives through the car park and pulls up right outside the gates leading to the platform. He lights a cigarette, winds down the window as he sucks hard on the filter between his yellow stained fingers, and flicks the ash with his thumbnail.

"You can't park here," the stationmaster says, leaning his head into the window. "Plenty of spots in the car park."

Dad cuts out the motor. "She's right, mate." He glances up at the short man in the railway uniform. "I saw that young fella of yours play footy last weekend. He doesn't give up, does he? Just like his old man." He winks at me and I know my Dad won't get told to move. Not now the stationmaster is smiling back at him and talking about footy and his son, Rory.
Leaning back into the worn vinyl of the driver’s seat, elbow out the window, Dad listens as the stationmaster gives a detailed account of his son’s football highlights. I study Dad’s handsome face with his perfect white teeth. Nobody in the whole of Dallas is more handsome than my Dad.

Every now and then he nods and stubs his cigarette in the overflowing ashtray, but I think sometimes he’s not really listening. Maybe he’s planning his escape, too. Out of McIvor Street, away from Tragic Street, he once called it. “When will the curse hit us?” he said to Mum when he told her about his workmate who died in the shower. Heart attack. Not even forty. Tragic, he said, shaking his head back and forth, sipping his beer longer and harder than normal, like the way I suck on a Fantale, making the chocolate last.

“Dad, when’s the train coming?”

“Who knows? Never on time on the Broady line.”

I close my book and read the writing on the station fence. In coloured paint and Texta there’s all kinds of scribble, Boot Boys Rule and ANA Sharpies Forever. I wonder if the boy waiting on the platform is one of them, standing there in his brown-striped cardigan and pointy black boots. I know a little bit about the gangs, I’ve heard my brothers talk about the A.N.A Sharpies, the King Street Gang, Oak Park Boot Boys. Andy reckons a few guys from the West Street Sharpies chased him one day after school, and now he’s too scared to go under the Broadmeadows subway at night on his own. But I don’t know which gang this sad looking boy on the station belongs to, they all look the same with their hair shaved close to their head and tight skinny jeans pulled up to their waists. I wonder why no one ever fixes the broken windows at the ticket office or cleans up the glass and rubbish on the ground.

“Train should be here soon,” the station man says, tipping his cap back to peer in at Dad and me. “The football crowd could be restless. Bloody vandals out again last night. What’s the place coming to?”

The train blasts its horn as it arrives at the platform. I start to climb out of the car to meet the train, but Dad tells me to wait in the car and lock the doors. Kneeling at the back window, I watch the people coming off the train, mums and dads swinging their football scarves around and kids smaller than me struggling to hold onto their red and black flags and waving them above their heads. Some of the passengers are singing their club songs and I join in the Bombers’ song that Paul and Uncle Jack taught me.

I can see Paul now. I think how different he looks. Is it the short haircut he got for boarding school? Or the way he walks with his head up high, now taller than our Dad. And his mouth has changed since he got his new teeth. He
makes me laugh when he pushes his falsies in and out. Two sets for the price of one, Dad joked when he and Paul both came home from the dentist in Preston with new teeth. But Mum says they must have cost a small fortune and he better look after them.

Dad walks towards our car with Nicky who holds on to his elbow, his head lowered as if he is watching his feet. Paul is behind them, walking with Maurice. I cringe when Nicky trips on the uneven footpath. “Where’s ya next trip?” Maurice teases. But I don’t think it’s funny. I feel like crying. And it doesn’t matter what anyone says, I still think it’s awful to be blind, to never see your Mum or Dad, or your friends or never find that first star in the sky at night, the one you can make a wish on, or to never see the way a rainbow breaks after a storm. Imagine not knowing what you look like. Or what your hair looks like, or the colour of the jumper you are wearing. I try hard not to think about it, but it doesn’t always work. It helps when I talk to Aunty Mary. She tells me how Maurice and Nicky remember lots of things from when they could see. “Sometimes they play pictures in their head,” she explains. So I do the same. I close my eyes and remember happy things, like when we went on a holiday to the lake and Dad made a fire and cooked some bacon and sausages and black pudding and I can see the dark blue of the lake and the sunny grass all around the edge and my brothers jumping off the pier into the cold water and Mum laughing when they splashed her.

When Paul and Dad reach the car, I unlock the doors and climb into the middle of the back seat, Maurice stretches his right arm out in front of him and runs his fingers across the top of the car door and down again, searching for the handle. When he is next to me I take his hand to let him know I’m there, I look into his brown unblinking eyes, “How was the footy?”

“It was a great game. The Cats won.”

Then they all talk at once. “That last goal by Dougie Wade was a winner,” Paul says and Maurice agrees. “How far do ya reckon it went?”

“It was forty yards, easy,” Nicky says, leaning forward, eager to relive the moment. “The crowd went crazy.”

Suddenly, Dad swerves the car to miss a kid on the road. Someone’s waving at us. I hit my mouth hard on the seat in front. “Ouch,” I yell.

“Stay down, kids” my Dad shouts now, as he turns slowly into McIvor Street and drives right past our house into the Gleeson’s driveway. But I’m a sticky-nose and I can’t stay down. I turn my face to the side window. That’s when I see him, the big man from the corner house, running across our yard towards our front door. “Grumpy old wog,” the boys call him, always
threatening to blow their brains out if a ball strays on his lawn. He's shouting now, in his thick broken words. “Ya blooda bitch.” He waves a knife in the air. “I kill ya.”

I've seen him like this before. Crazy. “Off his head,” Mum said when we helped his wife, the nice lady, when we hid her from him in our bathroom, away from the screaming and swearing as he banged on the door and we huddled together inside.

“Go around the back,” Dad yells to Paul. “Go through the fence. Check on your mother.”

“Stay in the car, love, with Maurice and Nicky.” Dad's voice is firm, quieter now: “Don't get out until we come back. Don't let him see you.”

“He's got a knife,” I tell Maurice and Nicky. “I'm scared.”

“We have to get Tammy,” Nicky says. “She'll frighten him.”

“Dad said we have to stay in the car.”

“I promise he won't hurt us. It will be okay. Just take me to the yard.”

I open the door and Nicky and Maurice take my arms, the way they do with their Dad. Leading them along the fence at the side of the house, I try to be brave as we head to the kennel. “Sorry,” I whisper when Nicky bumps his head on a low branch and the water from the wet leaves falls over us, “Should have warned you to duck.”

Tammy licks me madly. Crouching, arms out, Nicky calls her to the hole where we climb through to the fence.

“Skitch 'im, Tammy. Skitch 'im.”

“Good girl, Tammy,” Paul says as the labrador grabs at the man’s legs, jumps up at his arms, pulls him off balance and grips his pants in her sharp teeth.

I watch, ready to cheer, as Dad pushes him to the ground, pressing his face into the dirt, holding his arm across his back. Just like the coppers on Homicide.
The 1970s
Riggall Street, Dallas, with its sprawling new factories and wide-open car parks, feels different from the other, smaller streets closer to home, as I walk with Maurice on his way home from work. He slides his cane along the lower edge of the high cyclone fences where the factory workers park their cars and stops suddenly at the open gates, listening.

“Want to take the short cut through the paddock?” I ask as I slide up closer to him and offer my elbow for him to take. He looks older in his work clothes, a slim black body shirt, denims and desert boots.

“Sure, why the hurry?” he says, tucking away his cane.

“I’m on my way to my new job.”

“You’re working?” laughs Maurice. “How old are you?”

“Nearly thirteen. I’ve got a job at the milk bar.”

“Don’t believe you.”

“Well, come and see for yourself.”

I put my hand over her mouth. Why did I say that? Big mouth.

“So what do you do with all your money?”

“Save it. I’ve got enough to go to the pictures. I’m going with Andrea and Lynda to see What’s Up Doc?”

“Is that with Barbara Streisand and Ryan O’Neal?”

“Yeah. How did you know?”

“I like the movies, and watching TV. Why does everyone think I have no interests beyond work? I’ve taken up boxing, with Russell.”

“I know, at Holy Child, where Paul and Tom go. What’s it like?”

“A bit like dancing, I reckon. Spend all my time dodging a left hook or a fast upper cut. Get one in myself occasionally.”
Suddenly we go quiet and I try to think of something to say, something clever to show him I’m not a little girl anymore, I’m nearly a teenager.

“Do you like your job?”

“It’s okay, a bit boring but I’m glad I have a job.”

“What do you do?”

“Test light globes,” he turns to me now as we stop to pick some figs at the corner house, the one with the fruit trees. “It’s a lighting factory and my job is to check if the light globes work.”

“How do you do that?”

“I hold onto each of the globes, one at a time, until they get hot. If they don’t get hot, I throw them in the bin.” Maurice throws a fig over his shoulder, “Like that.”

“Are you teasing?”

“No way. That’s how it works. I have to keep the ones that burn my fingers. I stand at a bench all day long, and there’s this terrible loop music playing, the same songs over and over. Even Elvis Presley and ‘Jail House Rock’ is boring by the tenth time you’ve heard it.”

“Feel the breeze? Hopefully it won’t be so hot tomorrow.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty hot in the shed. One of the ladies fainted today.”

“God, I thought my job was hard.”

“Make sure you stay at school Cally. It’s even worse in winter. We have to huddle around one tiny radiator. The sick ones cough and splutter all over you but they won’t go home because they need the money. No work, no pay.”

“What are the other people like?”

“Nice, but not many speak English. When Joe isn’t there it’s a bit lonely. Some days I really hate it and I think of doing something else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, anything but the factory.”

It’s Andrew’s birthday and he’s sinking his teeth into a juicy chunk of chicken. He’s fourteen now and we all celebrate with a big bucket of Kentucky Fried. I’m in the back seat of our green and white Kingswood station wagon parked outside the hotel in Campbelfield where Dad works. It’s payday and Dad has the yellow envelope with the crisp twenty-dollar bills he calls the ‘crayfish’ he gives to Mum for the dinner, while he has a beer inside the hotel. Mum shares
out some of the twenty-one pieces from the bucket with a handful of French fries and two cans of Fanta to share.

“Go and get your father,” Mum says when we are nearly done. I ignore her and concentrate on licking the salt and pepper from my fingers. I dip the plastic spoon into the potato mash covered in gravy and give some to Matthew. Seamus and John wrestle in the back boot of the station wagon and Margie shares out some more of the hot, salty chips. Andrew plays with his new pocketknife in the front seat. These days, I finally get how it works, the order of things in a big family, how the oldest gets the best seat, the workers in the family get the best chops, and Andrew will get first swig of the Fanta, no dregs from us younger ones.

I don’t want to go inside the pub. I hate the smell of it, the beer on my Dad’s breath and the stale cigarettes lying in the gutter below the bar where the towels are soaking wet with beer. I hate anything to do with beer. I love my Dad, but I hate it when he drinks too much. I see him change, see how the fights start, the shouting, horrible, hurtful words that fly faster and harder than a shoe or a slammed door. Words that hurt more than a whack on the legs with a brush, which Mum likes to dish out to me when she reckons I’m getting too big for my boots. They’re not even my boots anyway, just hand-me-downs. Sometimes the fighting with Dad is so bad Mum threatens to leave, to take the little ones with her and leave the rest of us behind. I’m never sure if she means to take me, if I’m a big one or little one. Once she told me to call the police but Dad shook his head at me and I only pretended to use our new phone. Later, when Dad had fallen asleep, I helped Mum pour the bottles of beer down the sink.

After all the chicken is gone, Mum nags me again. “Quick, Cally. Go in and get your father, tell him we’re ready to go home.”

I wipe my little brother’s mouth with one of the wet towels the cute curly-haired boy at the KFC counter gave us.

“Why can’t Andy go? He’s older.”

“It’s his birthday,” Mum says but it’s just an excuse, there’s always an excuse for Andrew to get out of anything he doesn’t want to do.

It’s dark outside as I step down from the car, the sky has turned deeper than the dark navy of my school tunic, but with the lights of the hotel I find my way across the quiet street. I push open the heavy glass doors into the bar. The smoky air is heavy like fog and voices surround me as I look for my Dad.

“Dad,” I call and pull at his shirt. “Mum wants to go home.”
“Sure, Carly, love. Get yourself a packet of potato chips,” he says handing me fifty cents. “Want a raspberry drink?”

I soon forget about Mum and my brothers and sister in the cold car outside in the street. I settle on a stool next to my Dad and listen to him talking with Bozo, the milkman who sometimes brings us leftover bottles from his milk round. He tells us all about his holiday house down at San Remo. “Sure it sounds a grand place,” Dad says. “Like my own Galway Bay back home.”

Soon Margie arrives with another message from Mum, the little ones are tired and need to be in bed.

“Come up here, Maggie, love, what will you have?” Dad says. “Pick a song on the jukebox for me. There’s a good girl.”

Outside in the street it’s raining hard as I race back to the car, into the wind, the door blowing hard against my arm as I climb in next to Matthew, who’s fall asleep under an old blanket.

It’s Andrew’s turn to try and get Dad out of the hotel. “Tell him I’ll drive off without him,” Mum says. I go with him but wonder if Mum might really take off.

Dad hops down from his stool, swallows his beer and throws Andrew a coin to get a packet of peanuts. I giggle when Dad lets out a burp, but I’m glad he’s not too loud. Dad tries to smother it, not like Grandad, who’s got the best burp in Australia.

“Cop that, Cazza,” Grandad says when he lets one go.

One Saturday, late in Spring, when the white roses in the Gleeson’s front yard have opened and I can smell them from our place, my Dad calls out, “Who’s coming to the races with me?”

“Is it the Melbourne Cup?” Seamus wants to know.

“Not today, that’s next Tuesday.”

John is already in the car, waiting to go and I climb in next to him. Margie and Seamus decide to stay home and make some cornflakes into biscuits with Mum. Andy is at a scout camp. Matthew is too young and Paul and Tom are playing football for the Craigieburn Rovers.

“Look after Johnny while I do the cards for the bookies,” Dad tells me and I follow my little brother around the stables. He wanders from horse to horse, talking to them, patting their silky, sweaty skin and I think how good he is with animals, especially horses.
A crowd is gathering near the finishing post. John darts in and out of the punters and makes his way to the fence in time to watch.

"Faster, faster. Go Shaker. Go." My brother shouts and jumps in the air as if he’s riding the horse to the finishing lane. Number four, the horse he picked wins and we run back to tell Dad. We look everywhere him in the crowd and then I hear his voice shouting out numbers and I see him scribbling on cards with his big white bag over his shoulder and lots of men, some in suits, some in hats and others in sloppy jeans push their way towards him.

John darts in and out, bobs up and down, like an emu picking at scraps. He collects the cards with numbers and makes a big stack and then we build a house with the cards all leaning in together until someone steps on it.

"I’m hungry," John, says, tugging at Dad’s leg.

"Carly, love, can ye get Johnny a hot dog, and a drink for yeselves. Stay together."

We race each other from the betting ring back to the stables. The smell of the horse poo makes me feel sick and I dodge the droppings along the path.

When it’s time to pack up, I help Dad count the money he gives to the boss. On the way home, he stops off at the Greaney’s for a beer with Uncle Dick, who’s been driving his taxi around Melbourne. John has fallen asleep on the back seat of the car so Dad throws his jacket over him and he carries me inside to the warm house.

When we go back outside into the dark street I look at the stars, like I always do and I find there’s a half moon and that means it’s going to be a half good night.

"The bloody car’s gone," Dad says. Our car isn’t where he left it. He bangs his forehead with his fists. “Oh, the mother of God. Johnny asleep in the back.”

Dad and Uncle Dick call the police and leave me with Aunty Nellie while they drive around the streets looking for the car and my little brother. I wonder if we should go home and get Mum.

Before Mum even knows he’s missing he’s back. The car is found, dumped on the Hume Highway at Somerton, out of petrol and John still fast asleep in the backseat.

It’s raining hard tonight even though it’s the middle of summer so Dad and Maurice pick me up from my milk bar job. I nag Dad to let me drive the last bit, into our driveway.
“How’s the study going, Maurice?” Dad asks. “What’s that Glenroy tech school like?”

“It’s great. I love night school. I’m thinking of doing my HSC next.”

“Good for you,” Dad says. “Education.” He rolls the word from his mouth as if it’s the most important word in the world. He shifts around in the driver’s seat, turns to Maurice and then to me.

“It’s your ticket out of here.”

“Well the thing is,” Maurice says, “when I told my teacher I wanted to do my Higher School Certificate next he told me not to bother.”

“Who was that? Why would he say that?”

“This American exchange teacher. He said I should try something else, like basket weaving or pottery.”

“He’s a bit of a donkey if you ask me,” Dad slows the car outside the school.

“You can do anything you want to do, Maurice, and don’t let that Yank or anyone else tell you any different.”

I love my job at the Dallas Milk Bar and sometimes I think it’s better than schoolwork. I race there every Tuesday and Wednesday afternoon and my boss Mr Abyiad is happy for me to do Saturday afternoons too, after netball. I get twenty-five cents an hour because I’m only twelve and a half. When I’m thirteen I’ll get more, but I don’t mind because I’ve already saved enough money to buy a ticket for the Mark Holden concert.

A week before the concert I’m at the milkbar, humming his song in my head, “A white sports coat and a pink carnation...” and stacking bottles of milk in the fridge where it’s cold and dark. When Mr Abyiad calls me to the front counter I slam the big steel fridge doors closed and head towards him. I can see him watching me, his thick black glasses propped on his nose and a long moustache drooping over his wet lips. Mrs A is next to him, serving a customer.

“Check Mrs Abyiad,” he whispers to me. “Check her adding up. You must always check. She make too many mistake,” he says in his funny English.

I pray quietly that his wife can’t hear what he’s saying. I fill the small white bags with lollies and pretend not to watch. Mrs Abyiad is busy writing down the price of the groceries on a piece of paper, the bread, the slices of salami and the cheese. She is taking a long time and I offer to help her.

“I no need you.”

I walk away and stack the shelves behind the counter with tins of beetroot from the big box. I sneak a look at Mrs A, like my boss asked. She is cursing and crossing out with her pencil.
“Can I help?” I ask again, and this time Mrs A pushes the pad at me.
“You do it,” she growls. “You so smart for youself.”

I feel the tears in my eyes. I feel like I’ve done something bad and I want to run home and never go back. But I talk to myself. I tell myself to breathe deep, like the doctor showed me, deep into the bottom of my stomach. I like the job. I like the money. I take the pencil and concentrate. I add up the numbers on the list and see that Mrs A would have charged the lady too much. Typical rich people, I hear my Mum’s voice and then I don’t feel so bad. Dad will laugh when I tell him.

When I’m finished my shift I wait by the butcher’s shop next door where Andy works. He took the job from Paul when he left to go to boarding school, and then Andrew will give it to Seamus or Johnny when he’s too old for it. I daydream about the concert and what I might cook for dinner.

On summer weekends and extra hot school nights when it gets close to a hundred degrees, the local swimming pool draws us from our homes, away from the fibro cement sweat boxes that almost melt in the heat.

“Comin’ to the Broady Barz?” Donna calls to me, from across the street. “It’s the Broadmeadows Baths, not barz,” I want to say, but it’s what everyone says so I don’t bother.

We walk together across the big open paddocks with sunburnt grass crackling under our thongs and dried-up thistles scratching our suntanned legs. We walk to save the bus money and buy icypoles and liquorice blocks with our ten cents.

With my towel thrown over my lobster-red shoulders, I imagine I’m already at the pool, heading to the diving from the board, then falling, somersaulting into the cold water below. Tom and Russell are ahead of us when we arrive, climbing the barbed wire fence to get in for free. I’m too scared to sneak in so we walk the long way around to the front entrance.

Donna is quiet and I think she might be sick from the heat.

“What’s wrong with you?”
“Nothin.”
“You seem sick or something.”
“Not me. It’s Whiskey. Whiskey’s sicklish.”
“He’ll be okay.”
“Yeah, but we don’t know what it is. He won’t eat anyfink and he won’t even go for his walk.”

“Maybe he’s just getting old.”

“Yeah, that’s what Dad said.”

Donna’s quiet a long while which is not like her, and suddenly I feel sorry for her.

“Dad says he’ll get Whiskey stuffed when he dies. He’ll sit him up on the mantlepiece next his mother’s ashes.”

When we have paid and are inside the turnstiles, we race to sit with our girlfriends. There they are gathered in a circle, heads facing into the centre, chins propped up on crossed hands. Baking their bodies in the unforgiving sun, yelling out to the cute boys jumping from the high diving board. We all giggle when Tracey’s bathers fall down, exposing her boobs as she jumps ten feet to the water.

“He’s watching you,” Annette says to me as I roll over onto my tummy.

“Who?” I sneek a look behind me. Mandy’s pointing and laughing.

“Chris, that guy you like with the blonde hair.”

“Is not,” I snap, fixing my new blue crochet bikini top just in case. I want to believe her, I want the boy that looks like Derek from The Bay City Rollers to be watching me, but I couldn’t ever talk to him. I blush from the top of my head to my throat just thinking about it. Now, I’m on fire as the concrete under me feels hotter and the water on the ground under me evaporates. Lynette is teasing Alice about her small boobs and I soon forget about Chris in his white footy shorts and Golden Breed t-shirt.

“Who’s coming to my slumber party?” Kaylene asks. “You’re all invited.” She's the last of my girlfriends to turn thirteen and slumber parties, record parties and movie days have filled the summer holidays before we all head to high school.

“I’ll be there,” I sing out, and jump up from the circle to make my way to my Mum and the little ones by the baby’s pool. Mum’s stretched out on a beach towel on the lawn, rubbing baby oil into her skin and she slowly bakes, turning a golden brown colour like the skin on a roast chicken. Mum’s tummy is firm in her red bikini, flattened from her new diet of grapefruit and boiled eggs. Sometimes Mum bounces up and down the hallway on her bum, as if she’s walking on it, “Keeping it trim,” she tells me and I copy her but it hurts.

Aunty Val is by the pool with her, sharing a smoke and sipping their special diet cordial that I’m not allowed to have. I call out to Matthew who has strayed away from us towards the deep end of the toddler’s pool.
“I’ll take him in,” I tell Mum and walk with him down the steps to the pool. He’s four now and going to Holy Child after the holidays when I go to my new school, the ladies’ Catholic college in Glenroy.

In the pool I put Matthew on his back and pull him through the water, round and round in circles making a whirlpool like I used to do when I was little. He laughs and splashes as we go up and down the pool, faster and faster. Soon our fingertips are crinkled from the cold water and Matthew is shivering.

“Time to pack up,” Mum says. “Your father will be home by now. Maybe he’s got dinner started.”

“Just one more swim,” I beg.

“Ok, a quick one.”

I run back to the pool and dive under the water, searching the bottom for treasures. When I’m done instead of taking the steps, I swim to the edge of the pool, heave myself up and then bang my knee hard on the rough concrete edge. I swing around to sit on the edge and look down to scratch where it hurts. My right knee is split open and flesh is hanging out. The cut is deep and blood now trickles from the pale pink flesh.

“Are you okay?” The lifeguard is there and someone calls for Mr Milson.

Mr Milson, the boss of Broadmeadows Baths, is a huge man who wears big shorts and long socks up to his knee and is always calling out on the loudspeaker to tell kids to stop bombing or running. He carries me to the office and I sit up on a high bench as he wipes the blood from my knee.

“Looks nasty.”

“It’s itchy,” I say and I think I might faint from the horrible smell of the room’s disinfectant.

“Probably need stitches,” Mr Milson says as he moves in for a closer inspection. “You'll need to go to the hospital.”

“Stitches? Can’t I just lie down?”

I rest my head on the plastic cloth under me, feeling sick from the thought of the stitches knowing that I will miss the school sports again, the second year in a row.

“Is my Mum coming? I ask, and suddenly everything is moving around the room, my hands are cold, my eyes are closing and I’m falling.
Mum stands on my dressing table, squeezing a rag in a bucket of warm soapy water, the strong bleach stinging her nose and eyes. She's washing the windows in our bedroom while Aunty Mary changes the sheets on the bed. I throw my clothes into a box, grumbling.

“It's just for a little while,” Mum explains, “I need to have your Grandad close to me, here with us, just for a little while to help him get well.”

Mum walks the hallway late at night now, since Grandad’s car accident. She hardly sleeps and it seems she’s washing all night long, I hear the washing machine not far from my bedroom, the clunking of the mop and bucket as she washes floors while we are tucked up in bed, out of the way.

“He's lucky to be alive,” she tells us after the police have called to say he lost control of his car and drove it into a light pole in Cheddar Road, Reservoir. “Probably speeding,” they said.

“We have to get him out of there,” Mum says to Dad, as she dishes up our mash potato, tops it up with a stew of mutton and peas.

“He'll die in there,” she whispers.

“Where will you put him?”

Mum already has a plan. “We’ll shift Andy and Seamus into the new bungalow with Paul and Tom, it's big enough, and Cally and Margie can go in the room with Johnny and Matty.”

As our Grandad's arrival draws closer, Mum is reorganising the rooms at McIvor Street. She helps me empty my drawers to make room for Grandad's things. We throw my school uniform, striped Dolly jumper and favourite pale blue Levi’s into a box.

“Why can't I move into the bungalow?” I ask.

“You're too young.”
“I’m older than Seamus.”
“Well, it’s the boys’ room.”

Desperate to move into the bungalow, I plead some more. I love the sanctuary of the outdoor room, the music my brothers play and I often take myself there to listen to the records, music blaring, door closed, lights off, tuning out. Paul and Tom bring home new ones every week, I love Slade and the Bee Gees and always turns up the volume for *Darling be home soon*. Mum likes that one too. Says it reminds her of all those nights she waited for Dad while he worked late.

Aunty Mary takes my hand and looks at me. “Cally, love, right now your Grandad needs your Mum. He’s very sick. And your Mum needs you. I know you will be a great help for her. Your Mum will make a great nurse, don’t you think?”

“I actually was a nurse once,” Mum calls from on top of the dressing table as she stretches to reach the top of the windows. Margie joins us with the clean sheets, warm and stiff, straight from the line, ready for Grandad’s bed.

“When were you a nurse?” she asks sitting on the bed, ready for a story.

“When I was first married.”

“I thought you worked for a tobacconist. In Bourke Street. And that’s why you started smoking.”

“I did. When I was 14. But I’m talking about when I was married and just had the three boys. You girls weren’t even born.”

“Were you a nurse at the hospital where Maurice and Nicky went?” Margie asks.

“No. It was a different kind of hospital, a place for people who were very sick.”

“Like Grandad?” Margie says. She pulls the sheet across the mattress, tucks the corners in like Mum showed us.

“Not really. It was called Larundel, and it was for people who had other kinds of problems. In their head.”

“Like what?”

“They might be sad and feeling lonely. Or depressed, and sometimes just confused from getting old. It was a hard job and I hated it.”

“Why didn’t you leave?”

“I wanted to, love, but we needed the money. Your Dad and me and your three big brothers were sharing a tiny house in Preston with your Aunty Eileen and Uncle Tom and your cousin, Ann. Aunty Eileen worked there. She got me the job, but every night I’d go home and cry. I didn't last very long.”
A few weeks after Grandad Les moves into our house he sneaks off.

“Go after him,” Mum says. “Turn off that TV and follow your Grandad. Make sure he’s okay.”

Why don’t you go yourself? What if something happens to him? They’d blame me.

“And don’t let him see you,” Mum shouts as I head out the door. “Leave the dog behind, she’ll only get in the way.”

I race to the corner to catch up with Grandad. As I turn into Kiewa Crescent, a long street that leads us all the way to the Dallas shops, I see Grandad ahead, the brown tweed coat loose over his slouched shoulders. What if I can’t catch him? What if he makes it to the road before me and gets hit by a car, like Lizzie, our dog? Lizzie was a mongrel, a mad, cute little thing, named after Mum’s favourite character in Prisoner, Lizzie Birdsworth.

As I run up, Grandad turns around as if he’s looking for something or someone. Maybe he’s seen me? I panic, hide behind a power pole and wait until he takes off again.

Grandad has slowed up now, almost shuffling his way – to freedom and the danger of busy Blair Street. I can’t stand the anxiety anymore. I can hear my Mum’s voice, nagging, telling me to watch him, keep him safe. I can’t let him cross alone, even if it means him seeing me.

“Grandad,” I call, puffing and out of breath, “Grandad,” I scream this time through my cupped hands. I sprint hard to reach him. He has stopped to look at a dead bird on the path. I’m finally up nice and close to him and smell the Deep Heat that Paul and Tom take turns to rub into his aching muscles. I touch his jacket, the wool rough and worn and he smiles down at me as if he is expecting me there beside him. At the intersection, I look both ways, wait for the cars to pass and step out onto the road with Grandad, holding tight to my hand.

When I crawl into bed later that night, exhausted and still scared, I tell Mum that I thought Grandad might get hurt and die. “We nearly lost him once already,” Mum says, hugging me close. “But he’s tough and he’s too young to die.”

The word surprises me, death and dying is not something we talk about on those rare occasions when I get my Mum all to myself. When I’m alone, trying to fall asleep, the fear that Mum or Dad will die and what happens to their bodies often keeps me awake.
“How did your Mum die?”

Mum hesitates, lets out a long loud sigh and doesn't say anything. I can hardly believe I've said it and want to take it back. Suddenly she nudges me closer to the wall and makes room for herself next to me on my bed. She stares at the ceiling and begins. I close my eyes and imagine Mum as a little girl, like the one in the photo in the wooden frame, in her blue cardigan and white frilly shirt.

“I was nine years old,” she says, slowly, thinking over the words as if she's deciding what to tell and what to leave out.

“It was December and I was counting how many sleeps until Father Christmas comes. I made a gold star out of an old shoe box at St Brigid’s Primary School and my Grandad Albert helped me climb up on the wooden chair to put the star at the top of the tree he brought home from his work at the Fitzroy Council.”

“A real Christmas tree?”

“Of course. We had a real tree, and real live turkeys too.”

“I know. You've once told me how you used to chase them around the yard and you watched your Grandad chop their heads off and they'd race off again, headless. You liked to help but Aunty Margaret couldn't watch. Is that true, or just a story?”

“Of course it's true. We didn’t have shops then, where we could just go and buy a frozen turkey or chook like we do now. And we made the pudding ourselves. That's what I was doing when I found out my Mum, your Nana Joyce, had a new baby, a baby boy called Vincent Patrick. But I think I knew something was wrong because my Dad stayed at the hospital all day and only came home when I had gone to bed, and then he was gone again before I woke up.”

“What happened?”

“Baby Vincent died on Christmas Eve. He was just a couple of days old.”

“It must have been horrible.”

I throw my arms around Mum’s neck and kiss her.

“My Mum never came home.”

“Did she die then in the hospital with the baby?”

Mum nods, looks away from me at the cardboard boxes on top of the wardrobe where her other life is packed away in photos and letters that I'm sometimes allowed to get down and read.

“What did she die from?” I whisper.
“I don’t really know. My Dad, your grandfather, just told me she got very sick. But one of my aunties, one of Mum’s sister’s, Rose, I think, told me that it was a kind of blood poison. And someone else, many years later, said that the bleeding from a little accident before the birth caused something called septicaemia.”

“What’s that?”

“Like I said, it’s a kind of blood poisoning.”

I wish I had the right words to make it better, but I can’t think of anything to say. “I love you,” I whisper into her curly hair that tickles my nose. “I don’t want you to ever die.”
My brother Tom is getting married. I am a bridesmaid, Margie is a flowergirl and Paul is best man. Sometimes so much happens in our busy family it’s hard keeping up with the news - and other time life moves too slowly. It feels like forever for me to grow up and then suddenly I’m fourteen and trying on a gorgeous long gown of blue crepe material and wearing high heels.

At the wedding we dance and sing all night and as our family lines up for the photos I think how happy everyone looks, how beautiful the bride, my new big sister, is in her long white gown and veil.

Andrew takes over Tom’s surfboard, chases the big waves down Torquay and Bells Beach. He’s a strong swimmer and Dad says he’s glad Andrew prefers to head to Spencer Street station for the trip down to Geelong each Friday afternoon after school, instead of hanging around “Broady” with nothing to do.

“Where’s Mum?” Seamus wants to know, spinning his matchbox cars on the plastic road map I found for him at a red light special at Kmart. Mum has taught both of us girls to sniff out a bargain, but it’s me, the brazen one, she says, who strides up to the counter to get another fifty cents off the already-reduced price. Margie stands back, waiting her turn, never pushy, and usually missing out altogether.

“Mum’s gone to hospital,” I tell him, glancing up from my second-hand copy of Ecouter et Parler, thinking about how to translate it into French. I like French and study hard, dreaming of one day going to Paris.

“Why?” Seamus asks, his eyes away from The Brady Bunch for a split second. “Why is Mum in hospital?”

“Porquoi?” I say. “Elle est malade, bien entendu.”
“What?” he giggles, and the smiling faces of Carol and Mike Brady beam into our lounge-room showing just how lucky some kids can be.

“Mum’s sick,” I say and hope he will stop asking questions. I close my book, enough French for one day.

“Did she hurt herself?” Johnny has joined Seamus on the mat where they build a garage with wooden blocks.

“Look, Johnny, I’ve made it bigger,” Seamus says placing all the red cars on the roof, the fire trucks, racing cars and tractors lined up perfectly. Seamus is the artist of the family, my Dad says. He is so proud of the Texta drawing Seamus did on the wall in our hallway that he keeps the door open all the time to show off his son’s talents. Mum says he should be made to scrub it off but she too is pleased with his artwork, a huge steam train, with its engine and carriages and intricate wheels stretching from one end of the hall to the other.

“Mum has bad pains in her tummy.” I’m dishing out the Chow Mien. I think it looks a bit too runny and wonder if I’ve left something out. Mum has shown me how to brown the mincemeat, chop the cabbage in ribbons, slice the onions and grate the carrots. I’ve mixed the chicken noodle soup packet with water but wonder if I should drain the extra juice.

Margie, who doesn’t eat meat anymore, makes a toasted cheese sandwich for herself and guards it under her arms while she pours a Milo, just in case Andrew pinches it.

As I place the forks in the middle of the table I think about the pretty way Aunty Mary sets their dining table, a cotton cloth with floral embroidery and silver cutlery set at each of the eight dining chairs. I wonder when we will have a family dinner. There’s never the right time, Mum says, and besides there’s not enough room for all of us at the table.

And now Mum is in hospital and I pretend everything is normal. But I remember how scared I was when Dad called the doctor in the middle of the night. Mum had barely moved from her bed for a week. She just lay there, looking at me with those dead eyes. I preferred Mum to growl and yell and be angry than to just lie there in her awful, silent, sadness. The doctor came and jabbed Mum with a needle, wrote a prescription for more tablets and said she needed rest. After a third visit and no improvement the doctor found a bed for Mum at Sacred Heart Hospital in Coburg, the closest hospital to Dallas.

It’s easier for me now to tell my younger brothers that our Mum has a pain in her tummy, easier than to try and explain the problems inside her head, or why Mum is sleepy and sad sometimes, angry and shouting at other times. At school I am more wary with my friends, but some of the teachers seem to know
about Mum and one day when I finally go back to school I hear one of the horrible old nuns say something about my Mum’s “nervous breakdown”.

What’s that I wonder? Does that explain everything? Anything? I have no answers and no one to ask. One night, before Mum goes to hospital when I can't stand to be in the house, with its suffocating sadness, any longer, I stay late at my friend's fifteenth birthday party, tempting fate with my first taste of alcohol and Mum’s anger when I return.

She pounced me as soon as I crept in the back door.

“You selfish little bitch. Who do you think you are coming home at this time of night?” Mum screams at me. “Get out of here. Now.”

Dad hears the shouting and comes into the laundry. He doesn’t say a word, just shakes his head and glares at me. Say something, I want to scream at him.

Disappointed. I hear him mutter. Disappointed I hear, over and over. Be angry, mad at me. Anything but disappointed. But I say nothing because I want his approval so badly. I have always needed to know my Dad thinks I’m okay, maybe even special.

Then he grabs my arm, squeezes it so hard I think it might break. He's never hurt me before, never hit me or yelled at me but now he keeps on squeezing as my mother hisses at me.

After the abuse, the silent treatment sets in. I am okay with that. I stay out of my mother's way. On the rare occasion she speaks to me, I get the very formal 'Caroline', and the harshness with which my mother manages to say my real name really hurts.

When my Dad can't stand the tension in the house any longer he says I should go and stay with Tom and Trina for a while. I'm fine with that. I like my sister-in-law who is always lovely to me. I'm happy to be sent away, happy to escape.

When Tom arrives he is still in his suit, on his way home from the bank. I wait for him as he changes into his jeans and shirt for his second job at the hotel. I've packed a few things, some clothes, a toothbrush and undies thrown into my school bag, squashing them in with my books. I see my latest book, The Fountainhead by Ayn Rand and can't wait to finish it. It's tough going but I'm determined for Mrs Mason my beautiful Philippine English teacher, who chose my essay for first prize and presented me with the book. For the first time in my life I really did feel important. Who else but my Dad would think my essay was the best in the class? He tells me I should be a journalist but I think I would like to become an airhostess so I can travel to exciting faraway places. He scoffs at
me, “Nothing more than a glorified waitress.” Mum calls him a snob and says lots of lovely people are waitresses.

As I head for the front door, Tom calls me to Mum’s bedroom, tells me I should apologise.

“What for? I didn’t do anything.”

“Just do it,” he says, shifting his feet as if he wants to move out of the firing line, into a safer space.

“Sorry.”

“She doesn’t mean it,” Mum snaps. “I don’t want her here.”

“See she’s always picking on me, it’s always my fault. I help with the kids, the dinner, and go to work, but nothing’s ever good enough for her.”

“You’re selfish, you only care about yourself.” Mum shouts and moves towards me, arms out ready to push me out of her bedroom, out of her life.

“Just shut up, both of you,” Tom says, louder now.

I stare at my chipped fingernails. And I feel the tears coming.

“I’m sorry,” I say and this time I mean it. I’m sorry for my selfishness and my constant wishing for something else, something better than this.

The doctors of Dallas and Broadmeadows call Mum’s sickness the same thing – nerves with a capital N. I am still too confused to know what that really means and too ignorant to question the daily menu of tranquillisers and sleeping tablets, anti-anxiety pills. But still sometimes I can’t help but wonder why my Mum is different to all my friends’ mothers, and I wish we could have the old Mum back, the one who laughed and sang like Doris Day ‘Que Sera Sera’ whatever will be, will be.

When the drugs don’t work Mum is given shock treatment. Back to Sacred Heart Hospital again and this time the doctors stick electrical currents to her head and zap at her twice a day, every day for weeks on end.

I catch the bus from school up Moreland Road with some Kool mints and flowers for Mum.

“Get me out of here,” she says. “If you don’t get me out and take me home, I’ll climb out the window myself.”

Despite the relative peace at number four McIvor Street, I miss her and the little ones keep asking for her. I think maybe I should help her to get out of the hospital. Take her home with me on the bus and we can all lie around on the floor like we used to, sharing a box of Cheezels and laughing at Please Sir,
Mum drooling over John Alderton. On those good nights we would fight over the best pillow or the best spot closest to Mum, who would shake when she laughed too much and cough so hard she would wet her pants.

After a couple of weeks of shock treatment, Mum finally does come home. She sleeps in Margie’s bed.

“Cally, love, can you get me my tablets?” she calls as soon as I dump my school books on my bed across from hers.

“But it’s not time yet.”

I pray, silently, that she won’t ask again. It’s not fair that I have been given the job of handing out the tablets. The right dose, the right time, the right order, just as the doctor explained. But as my mother looks at me, as if she doesn’t recognise me, I tuck the key deep into a pocket of my tunic. That’s just the way it is, I am the one in charge of the locked case hidden under her bed, where the tablets are kept.

“Don’t be silly, Caroline,” Mum says. “You can give them to me. Half an hour won’t matter.”

I pretend not to hear her. I don’t want another fight. I hunt through my school bag to find my homework for the night. I think I’ll start with the grammar exercises and then have another go at the book review. I’ve borrowed a great book, A Patch of Blue, from the school library. I’m very careful that my mess doesn’t fall to the other side of the bedroom, over the line down the middle of the room. The masking tape is there so Margie’s side can stay neat. There is no way I want to upset Margie as well as Mum.

“Who do you think you are?” Mum sits up in the bed.

I never wanted this job. But Sister Veronica, the nice nun from the church who calls in now and then, says it’s for the best, that it’s to help Mum to manage her medication and get well again. I turn to walk out of the room, the afternoon sunlight desperate to brighten the dark, stuffy room.

“Don’t you walk away from me,” Mum screams, jumping out of bed and moving towards me. This time I don’t have the energy for an argument. I pull the small leather case from under the bed, take the tiny silver key from my pocket, and unlock the clips. I take all the pills, the blue ones in the plastic container and the yellow ones in strips of foil and the ones in the brown glass bottle, and I throw them at her.

“Have ‘em,” I sob. “I don’t care anymore. I don’t care how many you take.”
When Mum is well again, Dad lashes out, dips into the money he put aside for a rainy day and treats us to a family holiday. We rent Bozo’s house down at San Remo and Margie and I take the surf mats we got for Christmas and tackle the waves at Woolamai beach. Margie stays closer to the shore than me. Mum and Dad push each other over in the wild surf and the sound of their laughter as they run in and out of the water makes me think I’m the luckiest girl in the world. This is the best holiday ever.

When we climb into our beds, exhausted and delirious, Margie tells me she can’t wait to get married and have children.

“You’re only thirteen. What are you talking about?”

“I know, but there’s this boy I met.”

“And?”

“Well, I think I’m in love.”

You’re such a dreamer, I think. What would you or any of us know about love and getting married and having kids? But Margie is all smiles, waiting for me to ask more.

“Who is he?”

“He catches the bus with me.”

“And?”

“Well he wants to take me ice skating at St Moritz. Do you think Mum will let me go?”

“No way. It’s in St Kilda. I don’t think you should say anything about him to anyone. And don’t go sneaking off anywhere with him either.”

“Of course not.”

“Promise?” It’s hard to imagine Margie growing up, becoming interested in boys and anything beyond Mum and McIvor Street but I’m glad she is and that she’s sharing it with me. “Promise,” she giggles. “Good night. Sweet dreams, Sweet Caroline.”

“You too. Maggie May.”

And then Aunty Mary died. A freezing cold, icy, wet day. The first day of July, the coldest on record, according to the weather man on the Channel Nine news.

I rub hard at the goose bumps on my arms trying to warm them as I sit on the front porch watching the sleet turn to hailstones and gather in the gutters, all white and frozen as if snow has been dumped on Dallas. I have felt cold all day whether I’m inside by the heater or outside watching the procession
of cars pull up at the Gleesons. First the ambulance, then the doctor's car. And then Tobin's, the undertaker, in the shiniest, biggest and blackest car ever to arrive in McIvor Street. A hearse, a mourning car, Mum calls it.

"Give the kids some toast," Mum says and pulls on a big coat. She ties a plastic scarf over her head and heads to the front door, "I'm going to see if Ray needs anything."

I watch now as a taxi pulls up in our street. Nick is in the back seat with Michael, his mate from St Paul's who stays every weekend with the Gleesons. I like Michael now, but at first I didn't. Mum said I was just jealous of their friendship and maybe I was, but Michael is really good fun and has the loveliest dark skin and a happy smile. But he isn't smiling now.

Nick's head hangs low as I watch him step out of the cab, Russell moving to him. Hugs him. Crying. I can't watch. I go inside thinking about them. Nick walking through the house to the kitchen to sit on the bench and talk to his Mum the way he likes to be close to her. But he won't see his Mum, he won't ever get to talk to her again. She's already gone, already in the coffin. I wonder where they put the coffin and what happens next? I suddenly find myself there at the Gleeson's with Mum and Dad and don't know how I got there. There are lots of people I don't know.

"What does it matter what I wear?" Maurice says, angry about the fuss all around him.

"You have to look right. People will talk," his Grandmother Rosa says. "Come on, and choose something now so I can iron it and have it ready for the morning."

I want to go to Maurice, to hug him and sit with him and Nick and Russell, and tell them I loved their mother too, I loved Aunty Mary like my own Mum, but I back away from getting too close, as if death, like the blindness, might be contagious.

As I walk out to go home, I see Russell there on his own, away from the relatives and friends, studying his Mum's photo above the piano, her red hair all curly and wild like his own. I've never seen him in a suit, always his blue overalls.

"It was emphysema," Mum tells me as she boils some eggs for breakfast the next day.

"But why did she die? I saw her yesterday and she wasn't even sick."

None of it feels real. It feels like Aunty Mary is still next door, waiting for me to visit, for a chat, to run her messages, pick up her smokes and lemon sherbets from the shops.
"I know," Mum nods. "It was very sudden. Sometimes it happens like that," she adds as she picks up the packet of salt for her eggs.

"Bloody mice," she shouts, looking down at the black droppings scattered through the fine white grains. "Have to set some more traps."

"What's emphysema?"

"It's a nasty cough that makes it hard to breath."

"Is it from smoking?"

"Who told you that?"

"No one."

I can still hear her wheezing breaths and see Aunty Mary smiling at Margie and me while we practice the piano in her lounge room.

"Take it easy, you boys," Mum shouts at my brothers playing football in the hall. "Johnny is supposed to be resting or his asthma will get worse," The boys kick around the rolled up pieces of newspaper, all wrapped in tape to make the shape of a football.

"Egan grabs the mark, above the pack and puts it on his left boot," Matthew imitates the commentators while he and Seamus pretend they're on TV, playing for their team, the Kangaroos.

"Take that bloody ball outside."

"She died in her sleep," I hear Uncle Ray tell Dad later that night.

Sitting at the kitchen table, staring at my science homework trying to stop the tears, I can see Uncle Ray there in the bedroom shaking his wife, frantically trying to wake her, like I do sometimes with my Mum, when she's in a deep sleep, groggy from tiredness or tablets.

"She was dead when I woke up."

My Dad grips his friend's shoulder the way I've seen him touch my brothers, never a full arms-around-the-chest kind of hug, but a pat on the back or a ruffle of hair to show them he cares.

"I don't think I can go on," Uncle Ray says.

"You have to mate. For the kids. They need you, more than ever."

Death and illness seemed to hover over our house, after Aunty Mary. Paul comes home from work at Dad’s hotel one night and tells us about a stabbing. The man dies and Paul has to give evidence in court, and then my girlfriend’s little brother dies from a brain tumour and all of the Holy Child school kids sing sad songs at his funeral. Awake or asleep I see their dead faces flash before
me. And I see my friend’s Dad who died of a heart-attack, and little Wally from the end of the street who had leukaemia and Mrs Fraser who was killed in a car crash. With each of the deaths came the night terrors. And sometimes I’m too scared to go to sleep and I lay there talking to God, thinking about why children die, why anyone has to die. And now when I see the car leave with the coffin, I wonder what will happen to Aunty Mary’s body when it’s in the ground? It seems to me then, in the middle of all those questions, that the Church, where my Mum and Dad took us to pray and to ask for help, didn’t always hear you. And maybe God couldn’t hear me now. And maybe bad things would always happen.

When I find my Mum in the laundry, hiding her face in a towel, sobbing, I run away from her, scared she will be next. I remember the first time death came to us at Number Four McIvor Street. It was just after I turned nine and my mother’s cousin, Cyril, died. He was only eighteen, Mum told me. And then she told me he was killed when the Westgate Bridge collapsed to the ground and some of the workers fell from the sky, with all that steel and concrete. Under it was Cyril, on his first day in his new job, crushed to death, with all the other men. I looked at the pictures in the newspaper Dad brought home and thought how beautiful the bridge looked, its big arms spanning the sparkling water below and I wondered what it would be like to fall from the bridge, to fly through the air.
I’m jumping up and down like a little girl with a new toy. I hug my Dad so tight his whiskers scratch my cheeks. With four simple words, “Yes, you can go,” I am transformed from anguish to bliss. After weeks of relentless begging and outlandish promises - to go to Mass more, to work harder at school, to help Mum more at home - my beloved father gives in. I am off to ABC studios for the live Countdown concert, and I’m even allowed to catch the train with Kaylene and Andrea, all the way from Broadmeadows to the city and from the city to the studios in Nunawading.

“You’re not catching the train home,” Dad says. “You’re only fifteen. And you’re not wearing that skirt.” I like the red wrap-around cotton seersucker skirt I made in my school sewing classes. “Why?” I say and immediately wish I hadn’t. Think before you speak, I remind myself frequently these days.

“It’s too short, way too short,” Dad says. “Reminds me of that silly Jean Shrimpton at the Melbourne Cup. There’ll be none of those mini skirts in this house. Not while I’m around.”

The heavy wooden laundry basket is pushed up against the bathroom door to keep my brothers from barging in and spoiling my day. I stand on a stool to study my face in the mirror, paint on the glossy pink lipstick before wiping most of it off again. Carefully with my finger I pat on the baby blue eye shadow in a fashionable half moon and then spread some skin tone Clearasil on my nose and chin. Second and third outfits have been chosen, weeks in advance, in anticipation of Dad coming around to the idea. Every cent from my new job at the supermarket delicatessen has been saved to buy clothes and concert tickets. I’m proud of my wardrobe, especially my new treads with their three shades of blue material woven into a pattern and tacked onto a piece of rubber, the latest trend to hit the north of Melbourne. Now that the skirt has
been forbidden, I decide on my blue-grey Staggers, cool jeans with the big flares and strangling waistband that almost cuts me in half.

“"I heard John Paul Young was going to be on this week,” Margie says as she passes the hot curling wand to me and we fluff up my fringe like Farrah Fawcett Majors'.

“And the Ted Mulry Gang. I can't wait.”

“Yeah, Yeah, Jump in my Car,” Margie starts singing into the hairbrush, “I wanna take you home...” We jiggle our hips and arms, jumping around our bedroom. “I wish you were coming.”

“No way, it looks too scary, everyone screaming and fainting. I'd get crushed. I'll look for you on the TV.”

“What about the Skyhooks concert next year? I reckon Mum and Dad will let me take you to that.”

Every time I dip my hand into the bucket of stinking fetta cheese soaking in all that disgusting brine at the deli, and whenever I pull out a bag of slimy chicken livers or the wings with hair still clinging to them, I remind myself I have to keep working to buy clothes, records, concert tickets, even if the smell of the delicatessen sometimes makes me feel sick.

I watch Margie, now in her second year of high school, still singing, and I remember when I was her age and I went to my first concert. I was with Kaylene and Andrea on the old red train rattling its way to the city and the David Cassidy Concert at the Melbourne Cricket Ground.

“Have you got the smokes?” Kaylene calls from the other side of the carriage and I pull them from the waistband of my corduroy skirt. Escort Tens, and a box of matches. We light the smokes, one after the other, dragging on the tips to save the matches. I'm doing the draw back and coughing hard.

“God, David Cassidy is so cute,” Andrea whistles. “I can't wait to see him.”

“Very sexy,” Kaylene shouts for all to hear.

We all giggle and sing at the top of our voices, *Breaking up is hard to dooooo...*

Suddenly I stop singing. I hold my breath, drop the cigarette under the train seat and hide my face behind Kaylene. Everyone has stopped talking. Things seem to move in slow motion.

Even now, as Margie twists my hair with the curling tongs, I can see my brother Paul and his look of disgust. I am filled with shame. I feel it all over again now. I kept out of his way for days afterwards, worried he would dob on me for smoking, that I would be grounded, that my Dad would tell me I could
forget all about going to another concert, ever again. But I’m guessing Paul never did tell.

Finally, we are at the ABC headquarters, then edging our way inside the TV studio. Long-haired, crew cut, clean cut and rough-looking, pumped up boys and squealing, crying, dressed-up girls crowd into a steamy hot room; screaming and dancing as the support bands belt out songs I don’t really know. The lead singers, the guitarists, strut around the stage, down the aisle towards me, my girlfriends, fainting fans, touching our hands, touching each other.

Suddenly I feel a push from behind and I fall forward. Shirley from Skyhooks leaps onto the stage, jumping up and down, sings into the microphone “Horror Movie right there on my TV”.

Shouting. Sweating. Swaying. Singing. The crowd is crazy, wild and I’m still standing.

When one of my favourite bands, Hush, does the final song Andrea’s looking at me, crying, Kaylene is hugging everyone. I will never forget this night. Exhausted. Hot. Breathless. Heart pumping. I feel like I’m about to faint, right there in the studio, right at the feet of the big scary bouncer with the tattoos on his bare arms.

For a little while, after the smoking incident, and after Countdown, I throw myself into my schoolwork and I even manage to keep my spot in Maths A class. I’m not sure how I got there, maybe it was an easy test, but I know it makes my Dad really proud. And even Mum seems happy and well, enjoying her new job at the hospital, looking after all the old people. I make new friends in the Maths class with the brainy kids. I like Julie. She’s different from the others, with her happy laugh that gets us into trouble. She reminds me of Margie, and with her pretty face and lovely smile she oozes the fun and confidence I crave.

I reinvent myself as Stevie Nicks from Fleetwood Mac. I’m devoted to her and her wild, gypsy look and love the band’s music. I part with a small fortune – twelve dollars – to purchase a ticket to the biggest concert of the decade at Calder Park Raceway.

Lynda and Kaylene take the bus with me from Broadmeadows station, then line up with the thousands of fans who flock from all over Melbourne and Australia to make their way down the Calder Highway, past Keilor, to the edge of the farming community at Diggers Rest. The hot November sun is in full
force as we rock with Santana and fall in love with Kevin Borich Express, cool off with bottles of water poured over our faces and arms and then dance away to Little River Band. The sun starts to set as we make our way closer to the stage, wandering groups of ‘hippies’ stretched out on the dried up grass, their blankets and empty cans of drink scattered around them.

In my flowing black skirt, all layers and lace, I pretent I am Stevie Nicks as Fleetwood Mac play the longest version of Rhiannon I have ever heard. For the next one, Songbird, Margie’s favourite, I lie there in the sun on the hill. Happier than I’ve ever been before.

“What’s that funny smell?” I ask Lynda. “Is it your perfume?”

“Shut up,” a boy next to me shouts. And his girlfriend whispers, “It’s dope. Want some?”

I shake my head. Scared. The thought of dope, like alcohol, frightens me and I ask the others if we can move away. I’m scared of a lot of things these days. I’m scared of boys, and scared of getting pregnant. “A Broady girl’s got more chance of getting pregnant than going to university,” my ugly science teacher sneers at me when I confess I’ve forgotten my homework. Dad’s advice to stay away from boys, to hang on to my dreams, rings in my ears. It makes more sense than the stupid science teacher who can’t even speak English.

But an inner strugge continues as I wonder what I will become and what I will do with my life, and how I will escape McIvor Street. I desperately want to fit in, to be the same as everyone else but I don’t always know how, or even why.

When I think I have found a way ‘in’, a way to belong and it doesn’t work out, I end up feeling more alone than ever. When I’m lonely or bored I go to the Glenroy library and read. I read lots of books, at first history books like Trinity so I can understand something of my Dad’s Ireland and then, For the term of his Natural Life so I might know something more of Australia. Then I find comfort in newspapers, in other people’s stories, the often-quirky way of seeing the world. I read anything and everything at the Glenroy library, in my favourite spot, a quiet, sunny corner. Broadmeadows still doesn’t have a library and my Dad says the Labor politicians he votes for are weak and useless. Gough Whitlam and his promises for the workingman, to give families a better deal, amounted to nothing.

I know I am not alone with my teenage angst and that constant search for a place to belong, a sense of self or a way to fit. I read all about Holden Caulfield and love how he sees everyone else as weird and comes to understand his place in the world. I love The Great Gatsby and read it over and
over, dreaming of living in America and having money to travel and live in exciting cities like New York. I stumble on a book of F Scott Fitzgerald’s letters to his sister Annabel and I take note of his instructions to Annabel, when dealing with the opposite sex.

“Boys like to talk about themselves much more than girls... Always pay close attention to the man. Look at him in the eye if possible. Never effect boredom. It’s terribly hard to do it gracefully. Learn to be worldly ...Get a mirror and practice a smile and get a good one...”

So I get a mirror and I practice my smile. I just look silly and give up and think I will rely on my three older brothers to introduce me to their friends. They will have nothing of it. For a while I feel sorry for myself and believe my Dad has the answer. Stay away from boys.

And sometimes in my teenage self-pitying I think of Maurice and Nicky and I wonder what they would make of all that anxiety over looks and physical attraction to the opposite sex. I know Maurice was engaged and now he isn't and I don’t know what happened in between. There was a small party and Uncle Ray showed me photos and I thought how handsome Maurice looked and how he stared at the camera and smiled as if he could see his Dad standing there grinning back. I wonder what it would be like to be engaged and how Maurice feels now it's over. I think I kind of know because I’d been ‘dropped’ before, by a boyfriend who had gone off with my best friend, and it felt horrible. But I knew that it didn’t really count. It wasn't love, he said, we were just mucking around.

But no one talked about Maurice, not even my Mum. I know not to go snooping around and listening through closed doors the way I used to. I wonder if Nicky has a girlfriend and if he ever worries about what he looks like, and it seems to me he wouldn’t really care too much about what I look like, or what anyone looks like. Maybe I waste too much energy on what dress or shoes to wear, what colour to paint my nails.

It’s study time at the Catholic girls' country boarding school where I am finishing my final year of school. I’m supposed to be reading, reviewing Albert Camus’ The Outsider and I can’t help but wonder about the kind of a guy who can’t cry at his mother’s funeral. The wind is raging outside and I hear the brushing of the tree branches against my window. Huge gum trees sway back and forth in the forest that surrounds our dormitories and it sounds like the
branches are moaning as they bend in the breeze. I’m easily distracted but I’m not really enjoying the book. My English teacher loves it, raves about it, goes on about the sparse style of writing and reflection, the controversial views of the author and compares it to other writers of his time.

Homework is not my strong point and I know I can be lazy when it comes to detail and editing. Tonight I have a choice between this English essay and the economics one on fiscal policy and Gross National Product. The HSC trials are looming and I need some positive feedback from my teachers, to keep my Dad happy. Then I’m off for swat vac and my eighteenth birthday celebrations.

My room is tiny, more like a cubicle with just enough space for a small cupboard and the ‘built-in’ bed and desk. There’s a sunny spot on the windowsill for a couple of indoor plants. Surprisingly they’re still alive. Mum gave me the fern when I left home for the boarding school, back in February, a time that now seems like another life away. The farewell barbecue in our backyard is now a fading memory, although I have a special photo pinned to the board above my desk, to remind me of the day. It’s a bright happy one, me in the middle, arms around Mum and Dad; all smiling. The only photo I have of the three of us together. Next to it is one of Margie and Mum and me on a family holiday.

Over the loud speaker, a voice rings throughout the school dormitories, and I hear my name. Sister Agnes is calling me to the shared boarding house phone even though calls are not permitted during study. I wonder who it might be. I hope it’s not my Mum. Hope she’s not sick.

Maybe it’s Dad. Maybe something has happened to Dad at the hospital where he’s gone to get off the grog - and the smokes. I pray it’s not Dad and wonder if the doctor was right to send him to the Seventh Day Adventist clinic so far away in Warburton.

As I walk down the corridor between the rows of cubicles, I think maybe it’s just Mum feeling lonely and wanting a chat. But still I have my doubts. The nuns would only allow important calls during study.

My track pants hang low and loose around my heavy, thick waist, a legacy of the weight I’ve gained from too much snacking in study time. I get a glimpse of myself in the window as I walk to the school foyer, a dark reflection I don’t like and I promise to start that diet and early morning jog with the Cathleen and Wally, my dormitory neighbours.

I make my way to the phone, rest on the seat and pick up the handpiece.

“Hello.”
“Cally, luv, it’s me.”
Do I detect something in my Mum’s voice, a hesitation, a sigh?
“Hi Mum, how are you? What’s happening?”
“Oh, Cally, love,” Mum sniffls. “It’s happened again,” she says, her voice almost a whisper.
“What Mum?”
“What’s wrong? Another accident?”
“Um. He died last night.”
I have to concentrate on her voice. Outside the wind has picked up and branches are now banging hard against the window.
I close my eyes and I see Maurice and I think of the way he has taught me to listen, to really listen with my eyes closed, to listen so I can feel things and see things better. Maurice says he hardly sees images in his head anymore, and it’s voices, not faces that create responses or feelings for him now. And Nicky reckons it’s all about touch, when he’s sprinting at the local athletics club he loves the rush of the wind in his face, or when he meets someone for the first time, he likes to shake their hand just that little bit longer.
Now, with a downpour of rain outside, it sounds as if the tree is ready to snap and I quickly open my eyes, remember my Mum’s words.
“What are you talking about?”
“Russell’s dead.”
“How? What happened?” I wait now, for the tree to fall through the window, to crush me.
“Not Russell, please. No.”
“We thought you should know. There was an accident.”
“A car?”
“An accident with a gun.”
“A gun. Where? Were they shooting rabbits?”
“No. Some boys were with him. It was a party. Cally, love, that’s all I know.”
“What about Nick and Maurice? Donna? And Michael?”
“They are all home with Uncle Ray.”
“Are they okay?”
Of course they are not okay. Russell is dead.
Mum’s voice, the words, the gunshots echo in my ears and the sounds turn to pictures; the shape of Russell’s rifle hovering over me.
I have seen the boys shooting rabbits and pigeons. I have even had a turn with the rifle myself and remember resting the butt on my shoulder, pointing it at an empty drink can, as I pulled hard on the trigger.
First Aunty Mary dies, then Russell and now my Dad. He’s dead and it hurts like hell, as if someone has huge, rough hands inside my stomach, pulling, twisting, stretching everything that’s inside me. And when I try to breathe the same menacing hands cover my mouth, suffocate me as I struggle for air. And suddenly I am glad of the hands over my mouth, closing my lips, stopping me from screaming out, letting out all the anger churning inside, through my body, my arms and legs, throbbing in my head.

In a strange way I try to hold on to the pain, to never let it go. I never want to stop missing my Dad. Maybe it’s my way of grieving but his death was so quick, it crept up on us like a prowler, stealing the thing I loved most. One day he was there, fit and well, working four jobs, looking forward to a new grandson, telling me he would be there with me when I graduated from university. And the next week he was gone, cancer grabbing him by the throat and strangling the life out of him.

Autumn is early the year my Dad dies, just eighteen months after Russell’s accident. Leaves crunch under my feet and fall from the trees like bits of sadness floating all around me. A rainbow of colours and feelings, dark brown almost black, red and orange, yellow and green, fly past me, and through me. The sun’s rays strain to warm me, to thaw those dark thoughts as solid as ice in my head. Eyes down, I stare at the ground, the fallen twigs and the path littered with crushed drink cans, faded chip wrappers and wet cigarette packets as the cool early morning breeze lifts my pleated skirt and goose bumps rise on my bare legs.

It’s a week or so after my Dad’s funeral and I walk with my mother to the Glenroy Social Security office where the government employees will sort out Mum’s financial affairs.
“Shouldn't be too hard,” I joke with Mum, “Pretty straight forward really when there’s nothing to sort out.”

I want it over and done with so I can escape, from the stifling interrogation, the gloom of McIvor Street and the sadness of my mother. Today my Mum looks fifty-three instead of forty-three, and she walks like an old lady, hunched over and frail, as we head down the familiar streets near my old secondary school in Glenroy. She is slow and weak with grief and medication. She had been so strong, caring for Dad in the weeks when his lung cancer became obvious and the extent of it could no longer be properly hidden from us.

I link my arm in Mum’s. “You’re shivering. You haven't got enough clothes on you. Where’s your coat?” What am I, the mother?

At eight o’clock we are first in the queue on the pavement outside the stark grey building, waiting for the doors to open. I study the other people arriving, the skinny bloke in his grubby khaki overalls and then the young woman managing crutches and a baby on her hip. I wonder about their stories, make some up in my head – maybe the young boy is like Russell, and more than half of the teenagers in Broadmeadows, unemployed and desperate to find work in a place where there is none, looking for something useful to do.

I know I am lucky to have a good job. I’ve been off a few days on “bereavement leave” but I miss my work already. I love being a journalist, working at the local newspaper, writing about people and their lives. Maybe I will write my Dad’s story – the Irishman who sailed to the other side of the world, married his princess and dreamed of returning home one day with his new family, but then died, too young to make it a reality.

I remember Dad’s pride when I got my newspaper cadetship, four months after leaving school and starting my journalism degree. He had urged me to keep knocking on the door of our local newspaper office, The Broadmeadows Observer. Never give up, he told me and only a few weeks ago, just before he died, he was sitting with me, pretending to be well, beaming at my name, in bold print, By Caroline Egan, my first by-line on the front page of the The Essendon Gazette, a story about the ex-Richmond footballer Kevin Sheedy taking over as the new Essendon coach. I called him ‘the charming but disarming Sheedy’. Where did you get that one? My brothers teased when I took home a copy of the article. And now there would be no more stories to share with him.

Mum shifts beside me. Impatient now. Bloodshot eyes. She doesn’t sleep. She doesn’t eat. She doesn’t want to be here either.
“Name,” says the John Lennon look-a-like behind the grey desk.
“Valerie Patricia Egan.”

“Age?” he almost spits it out. I am about to suggest that he introduce himself, that it might be polite to say who he is, how he can help, but I guess it doesn't work like that here in the government offices where it's already frantic at nine o'clock, people lining up for the dole, sickness benefits, the widow’s pension.

“Forty-three.”
“Employment?”

“Home duties,” Mum’s voice is down to a whisper. “I've been looking after my husband.”

There were other jobs, I am about to add, even careers, I remember them all, fleetingly, as he scribbles away and I wonder should I mention them to him. Would he care? For a while, after her job at the supermarket, Mum worked as a cashier at the new Melbourne Airport at Tullamarine, not far from Dallas where the planes flew so low over our house the younger boys said they could see inside them from the roof of our house. The parking attendant job was good money, Mum said, especially the evening shift. But it didn't last long; there was a problem, Mum explained to Dad when she left there. “I don't like calling the supervisor when someone’s short a few bob,” she said and when she tried to make up the difference at the end of the night, she often didn't have enough. After that there was the job at the nursing home in Essendon, where she worked with Aunty Nellie who was the head matron. Mum would bring home some of the patients, like old Wally who lived in the back room in Dallas for a few months, after Grandad got better and moved back home in Kingsbury.

“I'm just a housewife.” Mum says as she fiddles with her cigarette lighter.

“Do you receive any other income? Investment accounts?”

The interrogator lifts his glasses up from his nose and actually looks at Mum now, to encourage a response, to fill the silence.

“Mum left her job to look after Dad,” I say. The tears come at me now, out of nowhere, slipping through at my closed eyelids, waiting to be let out. I see my Mum, as she was just days before, nursing Dad, massaging his back, the pain from the cancer moving through his body as she lifts and shifts and turns and changes her patient, executing enemas, administering medication, and love, in regular doses.

“There are no investment accounts.”
In this first week Mum has changed so quickly. I see the widow, lonely and frightened, worried for each of her eight children, struggling to comprehend what lies ahead; the youngest four still at school, me at university with a cadetship, Andrew with an apprenticeship and Paul and Tom, both married now with young babies of their own.

“My mother has never had a bank account or a cheque book."
I want to wrap this up now. We have nothing more to add.

“Okay, do you have a death certificate?” the guy says. Mum twirls the gold wedding band on her finger. I can’t look at her. We have been at it over an hour, filled in pages and pages of government forms about her income, her dependent children, and now he’s asking for a death certificate.

“Do you have one?” he repeats.
I don’t think we do, I had been sorting through papers with Mum and found Dad’s birth certificate. The original birth certificate, on dark brown cardboard, informing us that Dad was ‘officially’ born in March, not January like he told us.

So what does a death certificate look like? Should it be framed and placed next to all the other certificates on the wall, ones for Student of the Week, or the Bronze Star? Is there a medical term for the lung cancer that killed him?

“Sorry,” I finally answer. “We haven’t got one but I can chase it up.”
“Fine. Do you have any questions?”
Mum coughs and whispers to me, “Ask him.”
I hesitate. I feel sick. Just over a week ago my Dad was still alive, a month ago he was at the MCG with my brothers, and a few days before that he was at a Christmas function with me, and the journalists and editors from the newspaper office.

“Ask him.” Mum says again. Louder now. But still I can’t speak. It all feels too sudden, too close to the last time I had to do all the asking, when Mum pushed me to ask questions of the doctors treating his cancer, the question she couldn’t ask herself, “How long?”

There we were, waiting in a room at the Royal Melbourne Hospital, the consulting rooms of one of the specialists treating Dad. He was tucked up in his hospital bed on the fourth floor joking with the pretty nurses, stroking their egos with his admiration. Intelligent and warm stories, he told, bringing life to a
ward of dying cancer patients. The professor of oncology, already I can't remember his name, sat in the chair before us, his manner too casual, too distant, or maybe he was just busy, overworked.

He told us that Dad was not doing so well. The cancer was aggressive and there was little that could be done for him now. The pain in his upper arm and shoulder, they had discovered, was from a broken bone. I flinch now and rub my arm, as I remember. For the last few weeks Dad had used his left hand to lift his right one up, to shake hands with the stream of family and friends who called at the house to see him, to wish him well over a cup of tea. And then, after all that suffering, the professor told us the shoulder was broken but they wouldn't operate. Not worth it, he said.

Mum coughed, nudged my arm. 

"Mum wants to know how long," There, I had done it. I had asked the doctor and now I had to hear the answer, even if I didn't want to.

"We don't really know," the professor said. "But I would suggest inside of two weeks."

And now my Dad really was dead and buried. The doctor was spot on. 

Back with the social security interrogator, asking the question: "Mum wants to know how long the pension will take."

"It'll take a few weeks to sort out."

I understand from conversations with my older brothers that Dad will have some superannuation and that Mum will eventually be able to access it, that there will be provisions in it for an allowance for any of his children who are still full-time students, but right now Mum is desperate, there are bills to pay, school fees and no income.

"Mrs Egan," he says, smiling now as if he's Father Christmas with a gift. "You'll get a bit over two hundred dollars each fortnight and there will still be child endowment for any of your children under sixteen."

As he stands to end the interview Mum turns to me. "Ask if we can have a counter cheque."

"What?"

"Ask if they can write out a cheque for me now. I know they do it. The advance will come out of my first pension."

I dig deep for the courage to ask. I curse my Dad and the cancer for the humiliation I feel.

"Are we able to get an advance cheque today?" I ask, as he files away Mum's manila folder.

"I'll see what I can do."
The hammer slams down for a third time when the bidding reaches $22,500 and number four McIvor Street is sold. It’s a few thousand dollars short of what the family had dared to hope for. Paul and Tom work out that once the rest of the mortgage, the school fees and Dad’s funeral are paid there will be little left. Mum is grateful for our church friends who have taken up a small collection to help her on her feet again, until she can access the superannuation investment. It’s what Holy Child and Dallas people do.

Mum says she can hardly believe the sum total of their life’s work ends up being enough to buy a small car. “That’s it, for your Dad’s hard work, all those jobs - stacking newspapers, scribbling numbers on racing tickets, running in and out of cool rooms and peering into car windows at the drive-through bottle shop, just to keep the family from going under. He gave you all an education, that’s all he ever really wanted. I’ll make sure it always stays that way.”

The house, where we all thought we would live forever, doesn’t feel like home anymore. I’m glad it’s sold, soon to be handed on to a Turkish family; cousins of the boys who moved into the Spiteri house. How the street has changed since we moved in nineteen years earlier, new families with new names like the Turkish brothers, Hussein and Adrummer joining in the street games, the cricket matches, now captained by John and Matthew, not Paul and Tom. Funny how easily they have come to share the McIvor Street playground. Mum sometimes nods and smiles at Hussein’s mother in her dark robes and covered head, but they don’t speak with each other as easily as their children do.

Together Mum and I look at our house, from the opposite side of the street. There is a garden now, in place of the brown clay we lived with for years, and sunny green grass and huge pine trees and flowering gums that tower over the pavement; trees too big for the small block, but which became Dad’s pride and joy after he and his boys ripped them from the soil on the side of the freeway on their way back from Paul’s boarding school in Kilmore one cold Sunday night. I have even got used to the fake brick cladding on the house that came with a free colour TV, the first in the street. I think I even prefer the brown cladding to the stark grey concrete of the neighbours’ houses. The back wall is still naked and I wonder if the young Turkish family will finish it off when they move in.
With the auction over, Mum slides her arm around my shoulder as we walk into the empty house.

Later that night, in the cool evening with the moon hovering over our small backyard, lighting up Dad's favourite spot by the fireplace, I sit with Mum on the steps of the empty bungalow. She wraps one of Dad's jackets around her shoulders, holds her head in her hands and cries. Then, as the sky darkens she stares out into the yard, waiting for something, waiting for Dad to come home.

"Your father would be proud of you," she says, stretching her long legs out into the darkness and flicking her cigarette butt into a few half-dead geraniums. "He would be so proud of all of you. Imagine him, bragging about his three sons away at that wonderful college in the country and his beautiful Margie doing so well at her boarding school, getting involved in drama. She really wants to do acting. Can you believe it? Can you imagine your father when she's up there on the stage?"

"He would be proud of you too, Mum. You've been so strong. I'm glad Dad's superannuation included a fund for education. At least Margie and the boys will be looked after for as long as they stay at school or university."

"But it's time to leave McIvor Street now. Too many memories."

Inside the house the phone is ringing. It's Saturday night and I hope it's someone for me, even though I won't go out tonight.

"I'll get it," I say as Mum lights another Alpine, leaving one last one for the morning.

"That was Brother Thomas from the boys' school."

"What's wrong?"

"The boys have gone missing from school. Just Seamus and Johnny."

"When?"

"I don't know but he sounds very angry. He wanted to know if they were here or if we had seen them."

"Do you think they're okay?" Mum looks at me as if I might know something more.

"Yeah, if they're together they'll be having fun somewhere."

We call Paul and Tom who organise a search party for their brothers and they call up a few of their mates around Dallas. Sharkey tells them he doesn't know where they are and then Froggie dobs them in after a threat from Paul.
Oblivious to the drama, the escapees are rounded up at the Southern Cross bowling alley in the heart of Melbourne, and Mum lets them stay home the weekend before driving them back on Monday morning in time for school. Seamus only lasts a couple more weeks while Johnny sees out the rest of the term and Matthew stays on to finish Year Seven.

A major assignment is due for RMIT, where I’m studying journalism; two feature articles around a thousand words each are to be submitted within the week or I will fail. It’s my second year of my cadetship, and I’m struggling to keep up, looking out for Mum, working at the newspaper, going to lectures and tutorials, and fitting in a busy social life.

Write about what you know, the journalism lecturer suggests. I’ve heard it many times before. Write what you care about, what matters to you. I decide to write the story I’ve been thinking about for some time, the story of my friends, Maurice and Nick Gleeson. I write about their trips overseas, the work they do and their sporting achievements. Nick is off to the national athletics championships and Maurice is also in the relay team. What better story than a feature article for the International Year of the Disabled?

When both the Gleeson brothers are home, I corner them, set up the interviews and drag the stories from them. It’s not easy, they are private people, guarded about what is said or written about them. But I win their trust and they open up to me. Michael, now officially a Gleeson too, is part of their story as well. Bob Grant, the owner of Broadglen Newspapers, edits my work, sits with me, teaching me the art of observation, reporting what I see. Soon the Gleeson boys are all over every Leader newspaper across Melbourne, and of course our local paper, The Broadmeadows Observer. A television reporter follows up with stories about their athletics and other inspirational adventures. Mum tells me she loves the article, says it’s a good story and, to my amazement, she sticks it on the fridge door, next to a photo of Dad.

With a copy of the paper by my side, I steer my little brown Gemini up the steep driveway towards the entrance of my old boarding school, walk to the window at the front of the office building and ask for my sister.

“Margaret Egan, please come to reception,” the girl’s voice rings through the PA system out into the stillness of the winter’s afternoon. As I scan the familiar setting and notice the lack of life, I guess the girls are hidden away
somewhere, maybe studying, maybe gossiping in someone's crowded cubicle, sharing a Crunchie bar or Fruit Tingles.

The statue of St Martin, the one Kav, our house captain, and friends, Moylo, Macca and Toosey, decorated on ‘muck up’ day at the end of Form Six, is still there dominating the courtyard of the main buildings leading out to the dining room and the dormitories in the bush beyond.

It feels strange for me to be back at my old school, and the memories of those ten months flood back. I should have worked harder, made my father prouder, and now, as I wait for Margie to come to the foyer, I feel grateful for the friendships I made through that exciting year of boarding, the girls who came to Ballarat from all over Victoria – Morks from Jeparit, Roey from Nagambie, Harks and Gawn from Shep, and places I’d never heard of – Apsley, Nar Nar Goon.

Margie approaches now, her hand pushing back the dark curls around her fringe. What gorgeous hair she has, I think and realise I haven’t seen her for weeks, and how attractive she is, even in her baggy track pants and big woollen jumper. She gives me a quick hug and I feel the softness of her cheek against my own. Neither of us wears any makeup. Like clones of our mother, we save the foundation and lipstick for special occasions.

“How’s it going?” I ask her, unsure whether to suggest an outing or a cup of tea in the visitors’ dining area.

“Ok, I guess. Got a few essays to write and a test for Australian history this week.” Margie looks past me and out to the forest that surrounds the school hidden away up here in one of the coldest places in Victoria.

“Want to get out for a while? Head into a café or hit the shops? Need anything in town?”

“Sure, sounds good. But I haven’t got any money.”

“My shout.”

I wonder how Margie has been managing for money. I make a mental note to send her some and it reminds me of the unpaid bills and unanswered letters back home at McIvor Street, piled up on our Mum’s bedside table that we will have to look at soon enough.

“Coffee?” asks the waitress after we have decided on a table by an open fire in a small café in the town’s main street. “Hot chocolate, please,” Margie says, “And some cake.”

She picks away at the sponge cake, slicing the icing from the cake and spooning small mouthfuls in. Such a finicky eater, I notice, always was.

“How’s Mum?”
“Not that good at the moment. She was okay at first, but it’s hit her now.”
“I guess it’s hard being the only one still at home with her. It must feel lonely there.”
“Sometimes. But Seamus has decided to leave the boarding school, and I can’t see John staying longer than the term.”
“What about Matt?”
“He’ll stay until the end of the year and then decide.”
“I miss Dad,” Margie says and tears gather in those sad green eyes of hers. “I miss you all.”
“I know.”
I force my own tears back.
“This is the best place for you. You can study here, it’s your last year and it’s important for you to do well. You don’t have to worry about anything up here. You just need to get through the year, Margie.”
And then I think how wrong that all sounds, I’m always too bossy with her, too dismissive of her grief. But what good will it do her, to come home to McIvor Street, a house that no longer feels like home now that it’s been sold, a wretched place where Mum has buried herself under blankets, bound to her bed, the bed where Dad died.
“Besides we’ll all be out of there soon, as soon as the sale is finalised. Won’t it be great to start over somewhere new.”
Three months after the McIvor street house is sold, just after Margie’s last HSC exam and eight months after our Dad dies, we are hauling our family possessions from the back of the removalist’s truck into our new house.

First Margie takes the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, wrapped in blankets, from the van and carries it the door. Next is the old vinyl couch with Paul and Matthew lifting it at one end and Seamus and Andrew at the other, Tom and John with the washing machine. I help Mum with the dining chairs.

Our new house is actually a hotel, an impressive old two-storey, art-deco building of rendered brick, in trendy Carlton. There’s a spacious park opposite the hotel with giant Elms and Gum trees over a hundred years old, stretches of manicured lawn for the boys to kick a football or play basketball on the nearby courts.

Boxes of clothes and crockery, pots and pans and picture frames are dragged from the van onto the footpath at the Curtain Street entrance of the hotel. It’s Sunday. The hotel is closed so we can explore the place freely without worrying about customers. A steep staircase leads from the entrance to the second level where we will all live, above the bars and bistro. All except Paul and Tom who are both married but join us now for the moving in celebrations along with their boys, Mathew, Michael and Luke, who run up and down the staircase, along the corridor that stretches from one end of the residential floor to the other, exploring the ten bedrooms and behind closed doors. The best ones are snapped up quickly and I count four bathrooms, the largest at the end of the row that Margie and I will share. A big kitchen overlooks the park and there’s a balcony off the living room.

Mum, standing on the balcony overlooking busy Rathdowne Street, makes a pretty and proud publican, relaxed in her slim jeans and pink shirt
tucked in tight, smiling at her children and grandchildren gathered around her as she takes this brave step into a new life. It’s hard to believe she is the same person who spent the last few months grieving so desperately for Dad that I thought she would never be the same again.

“We’re here, we’re really here,” Mum says, hugging Margie as she unpacks a few family photos. Margie holds up one of the eight of us, a gift for Mum and Dad’s twenty-fifth wedding anniversary the year before.

“Can you believe it?” Mum says.
“I wish Dad was here to see it.”
“I know, Margie. We all do, it’s everything he would have wanted.”
“Don’t forget it was Dad’s idea,” I say as I drop a pile of towels and sheets on the floor to look through the photos.

“But do you think he really believed it would happen?” Margie says.
“I think he did,” Mum says. “He talked about it a lot, when he was sick.”

Dad had shared his dreams of establishing a family business using money from his superannuation payout to get the family started again. He thought a pub would be the right way to do it, but never knew if it would be affordable.

“Well, we nearly ended up with a newsagency,” Tom reminds us. “Too much paperwork though, and too much legal stuff.”

“And what did I know about being a newsagent?” Mum says.

Mum had gathered us around the kitchen table, a few months after Dad died and we all tried to map out a future with the hope that a family business would keep us together and provide an income for Mum, still only forty-three. Paul, who was twenty-five, would resign from his public service job, and Tom, a year younger, would leave the bank. Together they would manage the hotel while Mum and the rest of us would pitch in as needed. I was more than happy to mix up journalism and study with some waitressing, a school holiday job that had helped pay some of my way at boarding school.

When the beds and cupboards are eventually shifted into place and Mum’s huge wardrobe is dragged up the stairs, I wander around the public bar and imagine how it might look with Dad standing behind the bar, leaning over, telling his stories; listening to the customers, nodding politely. Smiling. Happy. Alive.

I can hear the younger boys shouting over a game of billiards. John has followed the black ball with the white one.

“Loser,” shouts Seamus and ducks to miss a ball flying towards him.
“Pretty cool isn’t it?” I say to Matthew, who concentrates on the dartboard and prepares to take a shot.

“Yeah, beats boarding school.”

“Your new school in Clifton Hill looks pretty good. Will you ride your bike or catch a bus?”

“Dunno. I’ll check it out tomorrow.”

Mum is glad the two youngest of the family are back home, going to schools nearby. Seamus has picked up a good apprenticeship working in a nursery and Margie will go to the Catholic teachers college in Ascot Vale. Andrew has moved to be near the surf at Torquay, but is close enough to help out over busy weekends or holidays.

Only the best table in the bistro will do for the Gleeson sons when they visit the hotel. Mum chooses one by the window, overlooking the park. She helps Margie and me set up the bistro, rushes in and out of the public bar, filling up drinks and taking orders for counter meals.

“It’ll be good to see Uncle Ray and the boys,” she says as we light the candles on the tables and check that all the vases have flowers.

“I’m glad they’re coming. I haven’t seen them since Dad’s funeral.”

“It’s nice to keep in touch. We’ve had some good times with them. You and Nick were babies when we first met. Inseparable little monkeys you were back then.”

“What was it like for you when Aunty Mary died?”

We’d never talked about it before and I don’t know if I should’ve mentioned it then, on what was supposed to be a happy occasion, but sometimes I speak before I think. It seems like another lifetime when I would visit the Gleeson’s to practice on their piano for my music exams, when I would go to the shops for a few groceries for Aunty Mary. She was always so generous and the best cook in all of Dallas.

“It was very sad,” Mum says as we fill the cutlery trays. “I felt like I lost my best friend, but the boys, especially, had it tough. And then when Russell died, I thought Ray’s heart would break. Of course, Paul and Tom found it very hard too.”

“I still don’t get it, Mum. Why should so much bad stuff happen to one family?”
“I don’t know the answer to that. There are never any answers. We just do the best we can. None of us know what’s ahead of us.”

“I remember when I was little I used to be so scared that something bad would happen to me or my brothers. I was frightened that if I hit my head I’d go blind, like Maurice and Nick.”

“Well you always did have a crazy imagination.” Mum laughs, shaking her head at me.

“What’s so funny?”

“You were always dressing up with your sister, making up plays and TV shows. Your father was the worst, he encouraged you both and joined in, he really did think he was a movie star.”

When Maurice and Nick walk in to the pub, either side of Uncle Ray, I think how different they look now, much older.

“Cally, Cally, Cally with the cast iron belly,” Uncle Ray says and it feels like I’m five years old again as he hugs me hard.

Dinner orders are taken, pepper steak with vegetables, chicken Kiev with chips and salad, and lasagne for Nick. I write them all down for the kitchen.

“How’s Uni, Maurice?” I ask.

“Pretty good. It’s early days but I think it’s the right course for me.”

“Social work, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It took a few goes to get accepted and to get the scholarship, but it was worth it. I even have my own driver now.”

Maurice is probably kidding me, always the joker, showing off. Sure, he’s well respected in his job, a policy and advocacy manager for the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind, and has awards for his community work. But his own driver, sounds a bit rich.

“What do you mean you’ve got a driver?”

“My scholarship includes a commonwealth car, because of all the case work and research I have to do, but the car’s no good to me so I get the driver instead.”

“Wish I had one of those,” Nick says. “Beats waiting for a train at Broady station.”

“Or the last bus to Dallas.” Margie joins in, arriving with the garlic bread.


“Ok, I guess. I’ve done a couple of teaching rounds, but I’m thinking of deferring. I need some money and I’m thinking of moving into a house with some girlfriends,” she says. “What’s Arts at Melbourne like, Nick?”
“I’m enjoying philosophy but don’t always get to the lectures. It’s such a huge place, too easy to get lost.”

From the corner of my eye, I see Dazza, one of the guys from the bar, giving Mum a look I don’t like so I call him over to introduce him to Uncle Ray. Dazza’s okay, with his tattoos and missing front teeth, probably harmless but I’m glad, just the same, when Uncle Ray stands up, towers over him and shakes his hand.

Tom stops by the table. “Loading up on the carbs, Nick. I hear you’re training for the national championships in Perth. Any chance of a medal?”

“Yeah, team selection was announced this week. And I’m taking Maurice with me for the relay. Michael’s in it too and another mate, Jim.”

“Well good luck. I think Cally’s after another front page story.”

Paul brings over the drinks. “On the house. For all those sponge cakes Aunty Mary made for our birthdays.”

We lived like Lords, entertained like Kings, and when each of us decided to bring a friend or two home for dinner there could be thirty or more gathered around the bistro tables. We were living the dream, Dad’s dream. Mum was happier than I’d seen her in a long time, singing again, like she did when we were little. Doris Day, Perry Como, Dean Martin, they were all the voices we woke up to when she was in a good mood. Mum even dated once or twice and I helped her get ready for the event. She borrowed a good silk shirt of mine to go to a party, looking gorgeous and relaxed. She gave it back with a cigarette burn in it. Once she went out with a family friend, an Irishman who’d lost his wife to cancer. I was okay with him, but not some of the men that flirted with her in the bar.

Not long after the hotel visit, Maurice is woken by a dream. He’s in a forest with a cold wind on his face, running his hands along the trees, touching the peeling bark on the tall trees that are crowding him in. He smells the dampness and hears the squelching of wet leaves under his bare feet, cold as they sink into the water below. He’s Dad is with him. Struggling to keep up. Why’s he telling me all this I wonder, where’s it leading? We are catching up for coffee in St Kilda Road, near his work, filling in the application forms for a Churchill
Fellowship. Already a leader in communicating with people with dual sensory loss, Maurice wants to investigate work being done internationally. Now all he can talk about is the dream. “I hear Dad calling me, laughing,” he continues. “Come and hold the lizard, Dad says, feel it; it’s shedding its tail. I can’t see it; I don’t see things in my dreams anymore. Haven’t for a long time, now it’s all sounds. My dreams are in conversations, not pictures or colours. Anyway, Dad is describing the animal in his hands, a lizard with a long neck and a frill like a fan around its head. And then, suddenly, he’s calling for help, but his voice is slipping away as if he’s moving out of reach. I’m struggling to hear him, the cry’s so faint I can’t find where it’s coming from. It slips further away until I can’t hear him at all. I can’t help him.”

In the morning, over breakfast Maurice told Nick about the dream, how he thought his Dad had gone away, or died.

“That’s horrible,” Nick said. “Why are you telling me?”

“Because Mum used to say if you have a bad dream or a premonition you should tell someone about it. That way it won’t happen.”

It’s Nick who takes the call late on that same day, the day of the dream. It’s early in December, and he is resting his tired body after a long training session on the treadmill, weights and cycling, glued to the TV, an adventure documentary. Helps him wind down before bed. Usually he prefers his books, but with university exams just finished he’s taking a break.

“Nick, it’s your Dad.” His brother-in-law is on the phone from Adelaide. “He’s had a heart attack.”

Nick doesn’t respond. He can’t speak. Words and sounds he wants to make are caught in his throat. John waits and then goes on: “Nick, I’m sorry. It was a massive heart attack. It was very quick.” Nick hears the information, takes in the scant details. “He was sitting in the chair and had a sharp pain, he slumped forward and it was over quickly.”

But he doesn’t want the facts; he doesn’t want the news, to finish the phone call or face the sorrow it brings. It’s too soon. He had tucked it all away with his Mum, and Russell. Now it has to be the same for his Dad. He knows no other way. No good dwelling on it, he tells me later. Still, he feels the pain, like he’s been kicked in the guts, hard into his stomach. That’s three times, three times in six short years he’s got the call.
I don’t know which came first, Mum’s gradual decline or the hotel’s diminishing revenue. Both were troubling and needed to be fixed. One day, close to the end of our time in Carlton, the accountant sat with us and told us to trim the expenses. No more free meals, free drinks. Everyone had to pay their way. The leased cars were returned and those of us who could, worked for nothing to keep the hotel afloat. Ironically business was booming and our hotel had become the most popular pub in the area, so Tom mortgaged his house and we borrowed a bit more and traded on, for a while longer. As we kept the creditors at bay, interest rates and the debt continued to rise. While our story was nothing like the Christopher Skase and Alan Bond dramas of the high spending early eighties, it was tragic enough with terrible consequences for all of us, especially Mum and Tom. Almost two years after moving in, we all moved out, broke, ready to start over again.
The 1980s
Hanging up the calendar on New Year’s Day in 1984 doesn’t feel right. It keeps falling from the wall, the weight of the glossy photos of Ireland, too much for the drawing pin to hold in place. With the third attempt I cut my finger, a sharp paper cut close to my nail and the blood smears the white background when I try to rub it away. Idiot, I grumble and bang the pin hard into the wall with a mug that breaks in my hand.

I had woken in an anxious mood that morning. Hung-over from the New Year’s Eve party, hot and sweaty from the early morning sun streaming into the car where I had crawled to sleep off the champagne and beer, after welcoming in nineteen eighty four with friends. As I rolled over and cuddled closer to Jon, his long legs curled up so he could fit into the back seat, I buried my head into his back and cried. They were quiet tears from a place I didn’t immediately recognise, a low-lying, beneath the surface kind of sadness. How stupid, I thought, as the anxiety continued to build. What was I worried about? I was engaged to the man I loved, the one person who made me feel special, like my Dad once did. I was getting married. Jon, with his unusual Dutch name and laidback way of looking at life, was now my fiancée. The word still sounded strange in the same way ‘getting married’ didn’t quite roll off my tongue. More than anything I wanted to be with him. I imagined the big white wedding and fiddled with the ring on my finger as I thought about my girlfriends admiring it.

“Lucky you,” Michele grinned when I showed it off to the girls. Lucky? I did feel lucky to have Jon who treated me like a princess. So funny he could snap me out of my moods with his wit; so handsome he could melt my misery with his charm. He looks like Mel Gibson, Margie said when she first met him at the hotel, the same night I studied him from the other side of the bar. So
handsome with his thick dark hair, summer blue eyes and perfect smile. Still, something deep down didn’t seem right. What was it? Maybe the wedding wouldn’t happen. Was I good enough for him? Maybe the dream wedding was just that. A dream. Wishful thinking.

“Who will give you away?” Kerry said when I had shared the news with her. “My Mum,” I said without hesitating.

I thought of it again then, in the hot car as I wrestled with those foolish tears. Thinking of my Mum, walking into the church beside me only made me cry more. And I really didn’t know why. I could feel the tears caught in the corners of my eyes and blinked them away.

Outside the street was quiet. The rows of new houses all looked the same and the blandness of Melton, this new suburb in outer Melbourne, reminded me of the Dallas of my childhood. Christmas bikes flung on the grass, the nakedness of the new gardens, paddocks of thistles surrounding the backyard fences and the same rock hard ground with hot northerly winds blowing fine brown dust through the streets.

Slowly it all took me back to McIvor Street and my Dad. I closed my eyes tight so I could see his face again. There he was. In his white shirt and grey pants coming up Kiewa Crescent, waving his newspaper to show he’d seen me waiting for him, me running to him and taking his shabby brown leather lunch case from him. With my eyes still closed I could bring his voice to my ears, his smooth, calm voice. “There’s a good girl, Carly, love, put on a record for your Da,” And sometimes he called me to him, as he sat at the dining table after dinner, a moment of relaxation between jobs, and then some dreaming together. “Sure you’ll be a doctor one day,” he would say. And later, when he knew that wouldn’t happen, when I was closer to fifteen or sixteen and I had told him I wanted to be a journalist, he would nod and say, “Sure, you’ll be an Editor as well. Own your own newspaper. You can be anything you want to be.” That was his mantra. From then on Dad was always on the lookout for examples of good stories and great writing, in the newspapers and magazines he brought home from his nightshift jog. In the early hours of the morning, while we all slept, he would rip articles from the paper and leave them on the table for me to read.

Now, in the back of the hot stuffy car as the tears fall, I am a little girl again, sitting on his knees while he sings those beautiful songs of Ireland and I can smell him here next to me, stale cigarettes and beer breath. Or is that Jon?

I wonder now, as the New Year’s Eve party hangover sets in, if I will ever stop missing my Dad? I ache to see him again, and on some days, on the
worst days, no matter how hard I try, I can’t even remember what it felt like to touch him, to wrap my arms around him. How I wished Jon could have met him, shared a beer, got to know him.

“Can we go?” I nudge Jon to wake him. “I need to get home.”

The youngest of my brothers is sitting in the lounge room of our rented home in Moonee Ponds, watching TV when I come in from the kitchen with my cut finger and the broken mug. Summer World of Sport is blaring from the screen. At fourteen Matthew lives for sport and he barely moves his head to greet me.

“Where’s Mum?”
“In bed.”
I glance at my watch, the fine gold one Mum gave me for my birthday.
“It’s ten o’clock.”
“So.”
“Well, has Mum been up yet?”
“Dunno.”
“What did you do last night?” I ask and sit beside him on the sofa.
“Stayed home. Paul gave me some money before he went to work and I got some fish and chips.”
“Did Mum have some?”
“Yeah. What’s with all the questions?”
Fair enough, I think as I head to Mum’s bedroom to see for myself. I scan the room. Jeans on the chair, shoes on the floor. Clothes falling out of the wardrobe, gold cross earrings on the bedside table next to a white saucer with cigarettes floating in cold coffee. I pick up a photo, stained and curled up at the edges. Mum and Dad smile out at me, him with his new white teeth and bottle of Bailey’s next to him, and Mum with a soft black shawl wrapped over her shoulders leaning into Dad, big smile on her face too. I remember the photo, the night it was taken. The three of us at the Irish ball at Camberwell Civic Centre. The irony of me in the Rose of Tralee beauty contest humours me, my Dad pleading with me to do it, just for him. “Of course you’ll win,” he told me. “And when you do you’ll get a free trip to Ireland.” Did I really believe him? I wasn’t sure but at least I’d made him happy. I’d made them both promise not to tell my brothers. Imagine their teasing, laughing at me on the catwalk, bikini and high heels. Maybe Margie knew. I wasn’t sure, but if I had to do it she would too and now that Dad wasn’t here maybe it was up to Mum and me to make sure she
did. She would win and Dad would be so proud. We all would.

“Mum,” I call hear gently. “You awake?”

There’s a soft, small groan from my mother when I lift the blanket and sheet away from her warm body. The room is stuffy and smells of sweat and cigarettes. I open the curtains and lift the window up as the sun streams through, the air already warm.

“Mum. Wake up.” Smoothing her forehead gently, I notice her skin is damp and sticky.

“Mum.” Louder now. Another groan comes up from the pillow, longer this time. “Mum, What's wrong?”

There’s no response. Maybe she’s just feeling sick. A fever? I am used to her staying in bed to deal with her dark moods, her depression. But this grogginess is different. I shake her again, harder now, trying to wake her. She responds and shifts slightly in the bed and I think she might be waking. Breathing deeply to calm myself I try talking, my voice awkward, slow.

“It was a great party, Mum. Everyone’s talking about the wedding. I can’t wait. We’re thinking of an Easter wedding. I’ve asked Margie to be bridesmaid and Vicki will be matron of honour, you remember she gets married next month.”

I ramble on, but I get nothing back.

“I love this photo of you and Dad. You look so happy. That dress, the blue chiffon you wore to Paul’s wedding. Have you still got that dress? Dad’s matching tie, so dark it makes his eyes look like sapphires,” I take a breath, twisting my engagement ring on my finger admiring the diamonds.

At least with the ring the wedding feels more real. I’m daydreaming again now as I wait for Mum to wake up. It’s all coming back to me, how Mum had hugged me hard when I told her the news of my engagement. It was the week after I got back from the big overseas trip. Three months traveling around Europe and a week at Dad’s home in Ireland, the tiny island of Inishmacatreer with its lovely thatched cottages facing out onto the beautiful Lough Corrib was as special as he promised it would be.

“Lucky you came home,” my mother giggled when Jon took me home from the airport. “He might not have waited.”

“Yeah. I missed him. I missed you all.”

“Did you like Ireland? It’s beautiful isn’t it?”
“Even more so than Dad described and I had imagined. It was spooky meeting his brother Andrew. He looked so much like Dad, or how he might’ve looked in ten years time.”

I remembered my mother’s visit to Galway, a year after we moved into the hotel. It was unexpected and a little rushed. She flew out of Tullamarine airport at the start of a long cold Australian winter and into the Irish summer, if there’s such a thing, with my brother Andrew by her side. They were the first of the Egans from Australia to travel to the other side of the world.

*It’s grand to be sure*, Andrew wrote home to us, his language and his manner sliding easily into the Irish way of life, perhaps more easily than any of us could have imagined.

*Dad’s island is a long stretch of green fields surrounding the biggest, bluest lake we have ever seen. Of course Mum loves it all, she sits by the big white rock on the shores of the lake and says she feels close to Dad there. She tells me some of the stories he told her of his childhood on the farm. Some I remember myself. Still, Mum is really sad and the long flight was hard on her. Dad’s family is very good to us.*

Now, in the middle of my daydreaming, my quiet remembering, I think I can hear my Mum trying to speak. A soft mumble, no real words. Something short, incoherent. Is she talking in her sleep?

I perch on the edge of the bed and wait for her to wake. I have flashes now of our midnight chats, talking late into the night. Those times together had become a kind of healing as I crawled into bed beside her, still in my good clothes from a night out with Jon. Maybe it was my going away, maybe it was getting engaged, maybe it was understanding my mother in a new, adult way that made me feel I was getting close to her, closer than I had ever been. And then I felt sad for those lost years, ashamed of my selfish teenage ways, of those days when we struggled to even speak to each other. So much had happened in the three short weeks since I’d returned from Europe. Maybe I had just grown up, finally.

“Light me a smoke and tell me about Jon,” Mum had said to me, during one of those memorable chats.

“Tell you about Jon?” I laughed. “You already know everything about him.”

My boyfriend of eighteen months had followed tradition and nervously asked Mum if he might marry her daughter. “You can have her, if you’re game,”
she joked and went on to make sure he was aware of all of my shortcomings.

“Well he’s good looking. But you can see that for yourself, and that’s not what I love. I love that he makes me laugh, mostly at myself. We talk all the time. Well, what I mean is he’s a good listener.”

“He’s good to you?” Mum said, serious all of a sudden.

I nodded.

“He’s good to all of us,” she said. “Always shifting my furniture for me, fixing leaking taps and dangerous cords on kettles or toasters. You know while you were away Jon was here helping out. Sometimes he stayed and listened to my records with me, told me he likes The Platters. Is that true?”

“Sure is. The Great Pretender is his favourite.”

“He’s like your Dad,” Mum had grinned at me, squinting into the afternoon sun as she sipped her coffee, “You know, your Dad and I only really ever fought when he’d been drinking. He never really got angry with me. Not even when I let the baby’s pram roll down the steep hill and into the clothesline”.

“That was Paul wasn’t it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Andrew or Tom. I’m not too sure which of you it was.”

“Remember when you sent me to school with a baby photo that was supposed to me. On the back it had Paul, then Tom underneath and after that, Andrew. All the names crossed out. And then you wrote, Caroline. You tried to pass me off with a photo of a boy.”

“Well, he was a pretty baby, whichever one it was, and it was such a lovely lace Christening dress.”

Mum looked away then. Tears in her eyes as she stared out to the yard and the unfamiliar houses around us. Was she remembering something she didn’t want to share? Hugging her then I felt her thin arms and realised how much weight she’d lost while I’d been gone. Grief had stolen a part of her, taken the best of her away. I tried to imagine what it might be like to lose your husband, the man you had known since you were fourteen, the man you had married at seventeen, shared more than half your life with. And I thought of Jon and the idea of losing him had made me feel ill.

New Year’s Day moves on as Mum’s bedroom clock now shows 11.30 a.m. and I wonder if I have dozed off in the chair. Still she has not woken, and I touch
her cheek, gently prodding at her, calling her to see if she can hear. There's an occasional groaning.

"What is it Mum? Where does it hurt?"

Perhaps she has swallowed too many tablets, tranquillisers to help her sleep and to dull her pain. Still she doesn't wake, and I am really worried now. I leave her room to ring the local doctor. It's Sunday; the surgery is closed. I get a recording and phone number for a locum service. I dial that number a few times and get no response.

Am I overreacting? I wonder as I pace the house. There are plenty of sick people out there who need doctors more than Mum. I try making a cup of tea. I can't find a clean cup amongst the dirty dishes on the sink. Matthew is still watching TV.

"Come and help clean up this filthy mess."
"It's not my mess."
"I don't care. Mum's sick and we should be helping her."
"She's always sick."

I mutter something but the TV drowns it out and I realise it's better unsaid. Don't be so selfish, I want to scream. But who am I to talk? Matthew is still so young and so often the only one home with Mum, his older siblings busy with lives that take them away from the stifling grief and emptiness of the house. I know his attitude; the detachment masks his loneliness.

"Matt," I say, softly now, looking for his eyes under a heavy fringe, "I think it's serious. I can't get Mum to wake. I'll try the doctor again."
"She got up for a while last night, for dinner."
"Was she okay?"
"Yeah, she just said she was tired and went back to bed." Matthew picks up a cricket ball, walks outside with me following.

"What are you doing for the holidays?"
"Probably hang around here. Might go to a mate's place."
"Let me know if you want a lift anywhere. Jon won't mind taking you, or I can borrow his car."

Unpacked cardboard boxes line the walls of the brick garage and I open one after the other, peering inside, under books and picture frames and plates, looking for letters I had stuffed in a shoebox. It seemed like we were always living out of boxes, never unpacking properly since McIvor Street had been sold. Especially Mum, always on the move, unsettled, searching for something. Now I search the garage for those precious letters from my Dad but I can't find any of them. He wrote often to me when I was at boarding school. Clever,
funny letters and I needed to see one now, just to hold a letter from him, to see his handwriting, to have a piece of him with me.

Dear Cally, he wrote once, I’m sending you this article on cabbage. It says it’s good for the brain and for acne.

The brain food I could deal with, but the acne? Surely my pimples weren’t that bad.

It’s after midday now and outside the air’s heating up. I can’t wait any longer. When I go back inside Mum’s groaning has become more intense, more desperate, like she’s struggling to say something. She opens her eyes briefly, giving me hope, but she doesn’t focus on anything and she doesn’t recognise me. I try the doctor again. The phone rings and rings but this time I won’t give up. I dial again and again. Finally, there’s a voice on the other end of the phone that tells me the doctor is very busy but will get there when he can. The receptionist asks a few questions.

“Has your mother hurt herself? Has she been vomiting? Bleeding?”

“No,” I say. I’m angry now. Fucking hurry up, I want to scream down the phone. But I don’t. It wouldn’t help. I need to be calm, to be nice so someone will come and help Mum.

An hour later. Still no doctor. Then two o’clock and no improvement. Now there are noises from Mum, from her throat, more like groans from a sick cat. Groans … less frequent now … more intense. It scares me. I have never seen Mum like this before. I ring the locum service again and I call every half hour after that, telling them Mum needs a doctor. Jesus Fucking Christ, how hard is it?

The house is hot and stuffy. I keep busy, washing dishes, hanging clothes on the line. I race around opening windows, leave the front door open so I can hear the doctor arrive.

Around four in the afternoon, almost five hours after the first phone call, the doctor knocks on the door. He looks like he has just got out of bed, blue shirt creased and hanging out of his brown corduroy pants, curly dark hair. He brushes past me into Mum’s room. Suddenly, everything is urgent, rushed. Questions fly at me.

“Is your mother on medication? Allergic to anything?”

I shake my head.

“Has she taken something?”

Empty prescription boxes, with Valerie Egan printed on them, are on the bedside table. Take two at night, or as needed, typed in black on the front of the packet. Half-empty sheets of foil with holes pushed through them lay on the
table. Tablets to reduce Mum’s anxiety, tablets to help her sleep, tablets to stop those tablets making her sick.

"Probably," I whisper, and suspect Mum has taken too many of something, but what that is I don’t know. Should I mention she has been a bit down lately? But the doctor has already moved away from me, from Mum, from the bed.

“I need to call an ambulance,” he says and I show him the phone on the table inside the front door. It seems to take forever to arrive and I’m finding it hard to concentrate. I let Matt know what’s happening so he can call Paul and Tom and they can let the others know.

I can hardly speak to the two paramedics, but I notice one is tall with ginger hair and the other, short and dark, seems to be the boss. Both in blue. As Mum is lifted onto the mattress, I see the blood. Her period? Or is it something else? I mention it to the doctor. I tell him about Mum’s car accident, the week before.

“Did she go to hospital?”
“No.”
“Anyone else involved?”
“No. She came home and had dinner with us.”
“Doesn’t seem related to me.”

As the paramedics take Mum to the ambulance there is still no explanation for the bleeding. I want them to wait so I can clean her up, to take her back in and change her nightgown. But they tell me there’s no time. Time? I want to scream. Why did we wait five hours for a doctor?

I ride in the ambulance with Mum. Sitting in the front seat I look over my shoulder through the plastic divide but I see nothing. I hear the older of the men in the back, talking to Mum.

“Valerie. We’re taking you to the hospital,” he tells her. “Can you hear me Valerie? Do you know what’s happening Valerie?”

But Mum only groans, as she has done all day. The ginger-haired one is driving, straight up Mount Alexander Road, over Puckle Street towards the city. The one in the back calls to the driver, “Better put your foot down, George.”

The siren goes on. We’re moving much faster now. Speeding through the red lights where the Tullamarine Freeway ends and turns into Flemington Road, racing our way to the Royal Melbourne Hospital.

Panic sets in with pain in my head on a scale of ten out of ten and I’m feeling sick from the motion and the sound of the siren. I wish I had taken Mum to hospital myself, earlier. But Mum’s car was at the panel beaters and Margie
had borrowed my old Volkswagen.

Why didn't you call someone earlier? I can hear them asking questions now, blaming me. And yet if I did call and it turned out to be nothing was I just being a drama queen. You know what Mum's like I could hear them say when I worried out aloud.

The speed and the corners make my stomach churn. Please, Dad, I pray now, help Mum to be okay. The hospital's emergency entrance off Royal Parade looks familiar and I remember it's the place where Dad was taken a couple of years earlier when the lung cancer was diagnosed. Back then Paul had wheeled him out of the hospital, a smoke in his hand. We didn't know it then, but Dad was going home to die. It was hard watching him disappear before our eyes, hearing him cough all night with the pain in his lungs and chest, ripping his body in half. But he never complained. Not to anyone. In the hospital he flirted with the nurses. Told them how beautiful they were. Charmed them. Thanked them for taking care, laughed about the bedpans and got through the last days on a few painkillers for his aching body.

The doctors will fix Mum, a voice in my head reassures. They know what they are doing. I think maybe it's Dad's voice now, soothing me, as I wait in triage for what seems an eternity. I stare at the other patients to take my mind from my mother's groans. I can still hear her, from behind a thin curtain, above the creaking of the trolley where she lies, still waiting for a doctor.

In the cold foyer, just off the emergency entrance there are lots of other people waiting for medical attention. There's a father holding a small baby with its head wrapped in bloodied bandages. A pregnant teenager, bent over her stomach, crying into a young boy's chest. He looks no older than Matthew.

And then the horror of it all hits me. A brash young registrar approaches me as if I'm nothing more than a nuisance to him. Dr Ronald Freedman, I read on his tag, but he doesn't have time to introduce himself.

"You Mrs Egan's daughter?"
"Yes. I'm Caroline," I say, looking into his narrow grey eyes behind large owl-like glasses. "Is she going to be okay?"
"Can't say." His voice is squeaky, untrustworthy, and he is looking past me at something on the wall. A clock, maybe it's time to finish for the day.
"Has a doctor seen her yet?" I ask.
"Not yet. We're still waiting." He has an angry face, a mouth that looks like he's been sucking lemons.
"Will she be okay?" I press for more information.
"We can't say. For all we know she might be going upstairs."
What did you say?
I want to slap him across the face. What a stupid thing to say. Did he mean they were shifting my mother upstairs? A room of her own? Were they going to operate? Or did he mean that other upstairs? The upstairs some called Heaven?

Before I can ask any proper questions, he’s gone.

Another long wait. Where are they? What’s going on? Jesus, why can’t they just hurry up? I go back to the triage desk, ask if someone is going to see my mother.

"I can hear her from here," I tell Trudy, the nurse behind the desk. "Listen. That’s her.”

The moaning is guttural now, like something’s buried and trying to get out.

"I know it must be hard," Trudy says and punches numbers and letters into a keyboard. "But it’s a Public Holiday and we are short staffed. Someone will see her as soon as they can. Take a seat."

The waiting is hard. Reminders of the holiday season surround me, a decorated plastic Christmas tree with colourful boxes wrapped like glittering gifts, a Season’s Greetings sign draped across the nurses’ station and red and green streamers remind me that the rest of Melbourne is still on holidays.

Through all of the waiting at the hospital, I work hard to still my mind. I have a few tricks that help, ways to keep the chattering monkey quiet. Acknowledge it, note the fears, the self-doubt and then push them away, lock them in a box and throw the box into the ocean. Distraction is another trick. Concentrate on something else; swing your mind to someone else. A woman in the hospital waiting room catches my eye. We nod at each other. If someone is nice to me I know I will cry.

The stranger’s quiet smile brings me undone and I’m no longer rational. I close my eyes and images cram my head. Empty boxes of pills scattered on Mum’s bedside table, on the floor by the bed. Did she take too many? Did she lose count? Or did she just not care? Had she really stopped wanting to live? Or did she long for that woozy warm flow of relaxant from her beloved Valium?

Did she love those pills more than us?

The phone in the hospital foyer chews up my twenty-cent pieces quickly and still I can’t get a dial tone to call Margie or the boys. Out on the street I
search for a phone box that works. Grattan Street is alive for the New Year and the cafés in nearby Lygon Street are filled with people enjoying the holidays. The sun is still high and the heat from the concrete and buildings is stifling after the cool of the waiting room with its air-conditioning and indifference. I have to get out of the sun, out of the street and away from the hospital. I’m going to be sick, my legs are wobbly and I can’t think straight. Was this how Mum felt? It seemed my mother spent her life wishing she was somewhere else, not physically, but mentally, trying to escape the things in her head. Valium, I knew, was often her only relief. And when the crushing anxiety-ridden side effects of that insidious drug wore off, she need more and more. Tranquillisers and sleepers, like Serepax and Normison, provided quick-fix solutions – but they too were always short-term.

What was my mother escaping? How could I ever really know? Over the years I had gained snapshots of her early life and I had tried to piece it together like a jigsaw. At school, I sometimes wrote short stories about her life and I changed the endings. Everything about Mum seemed too sad to be true. I wondered if the terrible grief of losing her mother when she was only nine years old, and leaving school at thirteen to help her grief-stricken father raise her younger siblings was part of her depression. A mother at eighteen, and eight kids before she was thirty-one might take its toll too. Add to that the money worries, Dad’s drinking, it can’t have been easy for her.

But, was it more complicated than that? I wondered as I waited there, in the cool foyer of the hospital, as the sun lingered longer on that first day of the New Year. Was there some other underlying cause? Could an unresolved grief, untreated depression cause madness? Could it cause someone to go crazy with the pain? Could it make someone want to die?

I sit still now. I know how to be still, and quiet. All those years hiding behind closed doors, pretending not to be there.

Maurice has taught me to see with my ears, to close my eyes and be still, to become invisible. As I wait, on the hard plastic chair, I watch people come and go, rolling in on trolleys and in wheelchairs. It’s not really a waiting room just a busy area inside the emergency doors where the ambulances pull up. I wait for one of my older brothers to join me; maybe they can make something happen, make someone do something. Then I worry that it has been heading towards this day for a long time. Suddenly, I am drawn further back in time, into one of the darkest periods of Mum's life. She was renting a small flat in De Carle Street, West Brunswick and it was her third move in the two years since Dad had died. The flats were ugly and cramped into a big block of brown brick
veneer, more like a compound, a jail reminiscent of nearby Pentridge Prison. Mum's flat was on the top floor with a narrow concrete path leading to her door from the stairs. It was small with two bedrooms and Matthew, who lived there with her, went to the nearby Christian Brothers College.

De Carle Street days were dark days for Mum, and for Matthew, a time when her addiction became more serious - and obvious - as she tried to ease the raw, relentless grief with self-medication, a cocktail of tranquillisers, painkillers and benzodiazepines. I wondered how she ever survived the lethal blend and I tried to talk to her doctors about it. I wondered how Matthew survived. He didn't talk about it, kept it inside, and sometimes he withdrew from us.

Matthew has his own story, each of my brothers and my sister have their own stories, a different experience in the family, a different mother, a different father, a different beginning and ending, a different truth. And yet we share so much of the same; the same sense of humour, the same sorrows, the same need to survive.

I remembered visiting Mum in De Carle Street one afternoon, after my politics class at RMIT and before starting work at the pub where I still lived with Grandad, Seamus and Johnny. Margie had moved out too, sharing a house in Cardigan Street with her university friends.

That day I had found Mum in bed, heavily drugged and dazed, fresh cigarette burns on the small bedside table dangerously close to overhanging blankets. I begged her to get help and finally she agreed. Together we went to see our friend, Doctor Helen in her Carlton clinic, near the hotel. Helen suggested a Melbourne clinic for rehabilitation. Andrew was the only one who could convince her to go.

"Give it a try Mum, nothing to lose."

And in she went, into a small private hospital, Pleasant Hill, that looked more like a suburban home. She shared a dormitory-style bedroom with four other women. They're all drug addicts and alcoholics, she protested, I'm not staying. She didn't last the night. Caught a cab back to the flat in De Carle Street. It was never mentioned again.

It's late now, the first day of the New Year is almost done apart from a fading sun that guides my return to the public phone box near the hospital. A bright orange-red streamer wraps the night sky, warning of a scorcher for the second day of the year. Scrounging around the bottom of my bag, I find a few coins and call the house.
“Any news?” Paul asks. He is there at the Moonee Ponds house with Matthew and John, trying to contact Seamus. “Tom’s heading into the hospital,” he says. “And I’ve left a message for Andrew too.”

“Nothing yet. Still waiting for a doctor.”

Bloody hopeless.”

“I know. There’s nothing I can do.”

“Do you want me to come in? Margie’s just arrived.”

“Yeah. That would be good. Thanks.”

I feel like a smoke. I think, as I hang up. A cigarette would be good right now. Hypocrite, a voice says. Well, it’s that or a Valium, I answer. How could you? The voice is relentless. Your Dad dead from lung cancer, Mum fighting addiction. Best to suck on a steamroller.

“Your mother is very sick,” a new doctor tells us when Paul and Tom arrive, after Mum has finally been moved from the trolley and into intensive care.

“She’s resting now,” he says.

“Can we see her?”

“We need to do some tests. It’ll be a while before we’ve finished. I think you should go home and get some rest.”

The tram is empty and the heat is already intensifying when I make my way back to the Royal Melbourne Hospital early the next morning. Sweat drips from the back of my neck and I dab at the drops on my forehead and above my lip. The light cotton sundress I brought home from Greece feels cool against my skin and finally I find relief inside the hospital lift that takes me to the third floor.

Follow the signs to intensive care.
Step through the heavy door into the ward.
Eyes fixed on the big bed in the middle of the room.
Mum’s face. Small and yellowish, grey around her eyes, a face barely visible behind a blue mask.
Tubes in her nose and mouth.
More in her arms. Her shrunken, limp body is wired up to three or four different machines, helping her breath, feeding her, checking her heart, keeping her alive. I stumble around the wires, lean into her bed.
A nurse comes in, pulls a chair close to the bed and shifts one of the beeping boxes to the side to make room for me.

“Talk to her,” she says and leaves us alone.

I take my Mum’s hand and try to rub some warmth into it. “It’s me, Mum. It’s Cally. You’re going to be okay. We need you to get well, to come home. The boys are waiting for you. Margie is cooking up some of her pumpkin soup for you.”

I stop, swallow hard, gulp down the tears. “And what about the wedding? We need to get you out of here, help me pick my dress, find the right flowers. Something nice for you to wear when you walk down the aisle with me. We’ve decided on St Brigid’s where you and Dad were married and Paul and Julie, and Aunty Margaret and Uncle Jack. It’s not far away now, Mum. I need you, Mum. Please, get better.”

Jon comes to visit, after work. “It doesn’t look like Val, all those tubes, her mouth forced open like that. I guess they know what they’re doing,” he says, holding my arm as we walk away. I don’t want to leave her alone.

“The others will be here soon, she’ll be okay,” he says and hugs me to him.

On the third day, late in the evening, just after the sun has set and the hospital is almost empty, Lisa, the nice nurse from the country, pulls back the curtains and makes room for us to move in close to our mother. She is slipping away from us.

The machines beat on, tracking her heart, her kidneys, lungs, and blood pressure. If she is dying why don’t they just turn them off? Let her die peacefully, with dignity, not hooked up with needles in her arms and wires coming out of that horrible hospital gown.

Margie can hardly speak, she sobs, hugs Mum hard and promises to keep on trying for her. Paul is next, lifting her face gently from the pillow, close to his cheek, bright blue eyes like our Dad, misted over now with tears. The Egan gang, I look at them all, standing there beside our Mum. Tom leans in and kisses her, letting his gold locks fall over his eyes. John watches and waits, bites his bottom lip hard to stop it quivering. “I love you, Mum,” he says. Seamus, seemingly the toughest of the lot is restless, fidgets and coughs, the asthma almost choking him. Then it’s Matthew’s turn, the youngest, he’s quiet and
holding back. Is it shock? First his dad, now his Mum. He’s only fourteen, too young for all this, John and Seamus, too, only a couple of years older.

Our mother dies with her children by her bed, some holding back the tears that will only fall in private, others sniffling. No one sobbing, all too afraid of upsetting each other. We weren’t allowed to cry when our father died. “Be strong,” Mum told us. Lisa returns to the room and checks the machines.

“She’s gone. I’m so sorry.”

In her navy and white uniform Lisa works around us, her eyes all red, unclips wires, turns things off. “Stay as long as you like,” she says and leaves us there.

What for? She’s already dead. And then I remember Andrew on his way from Sydney. And I cry for him, and can’t imagine how he would be feeling. Mum’s favourite, we always teased him. He hears the news, “Your Mum’s dead,” from Uncle Jack, in the hospital car park and then John is there to hold him. It seems so unfair, but nothing is fair. It is what it is.

Nicky Gleeson suddenly comes to mind, and I think of him, away at boarding school when he heard of his Mum’s death, and how he told me that whenever he smells mandarins he thinks of his Mum.

“That’s what I remember most, the smell of mandarins when the principal came to tell me she was dead.”

But Mum, like Aunty Mary, was not meant to die. Like Mary, she was only forty-five years old, she wasn’t sick from any life threatening illness and the doctors had just given her the all clear, the day before. They had removed the infection from her stomach, the reason she was so ill. They told us the septicaemia could be treated with intensive intravenous antibiotics. She would get better, they said. She would get stronger, and soon she would be home with us. We told Andrew not to rush home, we told the rest of her family that she had turned the corner that she was going to be okay. That’s what I’ll always remember, reassuring words, “Your Mum’s going to be okay”.

Twenty-four hours after the operation to remove the poison Mum’s tired body crumbled with exhaustion. Her vital organs failed her; first her kidneys, then her lungs and finally her heart stopped as her blood pressure dropped, too low to recover.

She is dead at 8.04 pm on January 3, 1984.

“There will be an autopsy,” the police say when they are done with their questions. And they leave us there, orphaned, afraid to think of what might come next, alone in the rented house in Moonee Ponds, the funeral directors already at the door.
Mum was gone. The pub was gone. But we were hanging on, sometimes clinging to one another, sometimes separately forging our own way. Gradually, life pulled us back into the ring, and in many ways Margie led the way. She threw herself into her studies, enrolled in teacher's college and majored in drama and theatre. Matt went back for another stint of boarding school and spent the holidays in another of our rented houses, this time in Strathmore and then Fitzroy, closer to where Paul was managing a pub. Tom and Andrew moved into sales - for real estate and surf wear, respectively. John dabbled in a few part-time jobs and then went back to school, skipping a couple of unfinished years and heading straight into Year 11. Seamus continued on with his gardening, bringing his past artistic talents to life through the trees and flowers he planted. After the tough times, we all got going again.

Life on the farm with my new husband, a baby on the way, I was living a fairy tale. Looking out to the paddocks with cattle grazing in the dim morning light provides a stark contrast from our Brunswick bedsit where we could hear the clunking of the Sydney Road tram even before the 5.30 a.m. alarm clock. I'm still chasing front page stories for The Herald newspaper, desperate for some kind of recognition from my editor, Neil Mitchell, who eventually rewards me with my own news round in government and education. I travel up and down the Calder Freeway each day to Flinders Street and while I love what I do, I start to dream more about growing a vegetable garden and feeding the new baby calves than interviewing Prince Charles and Princess Diana in Melbourne for the Royal Tour.
And then the call comes. Late one afternoon when I've fed and settled my tiny three-week-old baby boy to sleep and I'm making lunch for Jon and his Dad, who's helping to build our Dutch inspired hay shed, complete with a wind up roof.

"I feel sick," Margie says.
"What from?"
"I just feel strange. I have no energy. Some days I can hardly even get out of bed to go to work."
"What do you mean? You feel strange?"
"I don't know how to explain it."
"But you feel sick?"
"Yeah, but it's something more. My stomach feels really heavy. I feel heavy down below."
"Is it your period? Are you due?"
"No, it's not that, it's just this feeling there."
"I'll come down after lunch."

Together we walk across the road from Margie's Grattan Street flat to the Royal Women's Hospital. I sit in the emergency waiting room with her. I had been in the very same hospital and remembered how scared I was, how I wished Mum was still alive, to talk to me, to tell me about childbirth. She must have been an expert after eight babies.

Margie rests her head on my shoulder as we wait. "You'll be okay," I say. "You're in the right place now." But she looks pale, she's lost so much weight her skirt hangs down on her hips instead of hugging her waist.

When a young man in jeans, open neck shirt and white coat walks over to us, I squirm in the plastic chair. He looks like he's playing dress ups. Is he an intern? Is he just doing the rounds until an older, wiser, doctor arrives?

"Hi, I'm Nigel," he says and I think how much he looks like my younger brother, Matthew, his sun-blond hair and dreamy blue eyes. Nigel seems too young, too good looking to be a doctor, too inexperienced to help Margie.

"So tell me what's been happening?" he says and Margie shifts away from him as her fingers stiffen, clawing my arm like a scared cat.

Nigel looks from one to the other as Margie finally mumbles something about pains in her legs. "My stomach hurts too," she says, pressing her arm against it. "Sometimes I can't even walk the pain is so bad. I used to walk a lot
when I was in Queensland with Matthew. I would walk from Alexander Headlands to Maroochydore every day. Do you know it? Sometimes I’d walked twice a day, if I forgot the milk or eggs.”

Nigel stands there, tall and thin, hovering above us, his hands deep in the pockets of his open coat. “Can you help?” I hear myself plead. Nigel might think Margie is mad with all that rambling about milk and Maroochydore.

“We’ll do some tests. You said you were in Queensland, when was that?”
“I’ve only been back a few weeks. I was living with my brother. He’s doing his Year 12 now. I worked at the ginger factory at Buderim.”
“Think it could be Ross River Fever.”
“What’s that?”
“You get it from mozzies.”
“Is it serious?”
“Yes and No. We can treat it with antibiotics.”
Let it be that, I pray quietly. At least it’s got a name.
“We may have to do an internal,” he adds as he walks behind the curtains separating us from the next emergency patient. I suck at some air, trying to catch my breath. An internal? What for? Images of Margie’s legs spread open, knees in the air and cold, steel instruments and plastic-gloved fingers being inserted make me dizzy with the memory of my own recent medical interventions.

“Why?” I ask, but Nigel ignores me and turns to my sister.
“Could you be pregnant?”
Margie just shakes her head.

Images of Margie flood my thoughts as I drive home to the farm. I roll my neck around and around, a sharp pain in my shoulders that aches whichever way I hold it. I try the radio, turn the dial and find Roberta Flack and ‘Killing me Softly’. The diagnosis, “Your sister has schizophrenia”, rings in my ears above the music. After the trip to the Women’s Hospital Margie had called again, in a high state of anxiety. James was eight or nine weeks old by then, and I raced from the farm to Heidelberg to be with her. She was working then, taking a year off university and I thought she was doing really well. Schizophrenia, the doctor said, she needs medication. Just like that. I didn’t understand and I didn’t really believe it. Margie, for her part, wouldn’t have a bar of it.
I knew there had been some dark periods for her since Mum had died. Anxiety about her future, where she would live, what she would do with her life, but there had also been some good times, like the year she moved to Torquay to live with Andrew and John and Matthew, when she kept herself busy driving her younger brothers to the best surf spots in her bright yellow Mini Minor, cooking and caring for them, getting them out of football training when they lost interest. Seven days a week she made sandwiches at Sylvia’s cafe, “Butter or margarine? Pepper and Salt? White or Brown?” Margie would mimic the staff and customers, put on a show for us like she used to at McIvor Street. And when she wasn’t serving the sandshoe executives of Rip Curl and Quiksilver she was practising her lines for a lead role in the play, *Once a Catholic*.

Schizophrenia. Such a harsh sound. Was it really that? The restlessness, always moving, never settling, was it part of the illness? You change your home more than most people change their toothbrush, I joked with her when she announced she was heading up to Nowra and was back two days later. Then she moved in with Jon’s sister, Jo, in Albury, enjoying the role of babysitter for young Jack. And a week later she was home again.

In the Austin hospital on hearing the diagnosis, my mind wandered to those early signs of something unravelling.

“I’m not staying,” Margie said, when Tom had joined us and the doctor had left. Sitting there on the bed, looking pale and thin, her thick hair swept into a bun with the fringe across her eyebrows, her green eyes almost black as if mascara had smudged them. She was surprisingly calm. The room looked more like a motel room than a hospital. It’s what she needs, I thought, a good rest, someone to care for her, a bit of peace and quiet, and she’ll be okay. But Margie wanted out.

“I’m not staying, how many times do I have to tell you?”

“Maybe you could just have a bit of a rest here,” I said.

“They want me to take more tablets. Tablets won’t help. We know what tables do. I think I can work it out myself. I’m just tired.”

“The doctors seem okay and you’ve been working so hard.”

“Take me home. I’m not staying. They don’t know anything here.”

Tom tried to talk to her. “They said it would be just for a while, until they can work something out for you.”

“What? Tablets? They make me feel sick. They don’t work.”

“I’ll bring some things in for you, shampoo, toothbrush. What else do you need?”
“A pen and my diary would be good. Thanks.”
Margie moves, slowly, hesitating with each step, from the bed to the pram, “He’s beautiful,” she smiles. “Can I hold him?”
“Of course. You are his favourite Aunty and Godmother.”

It’s hot in the car as I check my watch, impatient to get out of the heat, the steering wheel burning my hands. Outside office workers, dressed in Melbourne’s corporate uniform of black suits, make their way to cooler cafes in the upmarket Paris end of Collins Street.
“She didn’t even interview me. I made too many mistakes,” Margie slides into the passenger seat beside me. Slams the car door.
“What do you mean?”
“The typing test. There were too many mistakes.”
“Is that what they said?”
“No. They don’t tell you. They just sit you in a room with the other girls and you get called in if they want you for an interview. I didn’t get called in.”
Margie’s hand is shaking as she moves to put the seat belt around her waist.
“Maybe you should have asked how you went.”
“I missed out. Okay,” she looks away and brushes her full dark fringe from her eyes. “I knew I would.”
“Well, why did you even bother?” I feel the anger building now, feel the weight of it in my throat most of all, a heavy voice I try to silence, but it’s bubbling at the surface. “Your hands were shaking even before you went in there.” I watch out the window, alert for parking officers ready to pounce on the fifteen-minute parking spot. “You look tired and pale. They must notice too.”
Margie’s eyes dart from me to the dashboard, the pupils large and bold against her creamy skin, small red spots spreading across her chin.
“Why do you do this to yourself?” I shout, anger pushing me on. “You only make it worse. You call me. I rush down. Run around the city. Find some clothes for you to wear, drive around in the heat, sit here and wait for you. And then you tell me you had no chance of getting the job anyway.”
Straight away I wish I could take it back. But I mean it. I regret it. I have such a big mouth. Now I have woken James, sleeping in his new capsule in the back seat, a wet towel draped across the straps cooling the air for him.
Soft cries tell me something’s upset him. He’s hot, or hungry, or both. I stretch over the seat to comfort him. Should have bought a dummy. “Don’t give him a dummy,” someone said, “Rot his teeth”. But he hasn’t got any teeth. “Well he soon will and you’ll see then he won’t give it up and his teeth will be rotten and bucked.” Still I wish I had a dummy now.

“Don’t bother coming again,” Margie sniffs. “You don’t have to do it. I’m not asking you to do anything.”

The crying gets louder, contagious. The three of us now as James’s tiny cries go up and down as if someone is stepping on a squeaky toy. I can’t look at Margie. I feel such a selfish bitch. This isn’t how it was meant to be. She was meant to get the job. It would help her get better. The candles I light at St Francis Church, the Novena I whisper as I wait while she takes the interview, they are supposed to work, to bring her a little luck, that’s all she needs. But they don’t work. And now I’ve lost my temper and made it all worse.

It’s still sizzling in the car and the air conditioner has stopped working. It’s nearing the end of a long, hot summer and motherhood is still so new for me, I feel dazed and happy and so afraid, all at the same time. It’s four years since Mum died and so much has happened for us all – weddings and babies for Andrew and me, a baby boy for each of us as well. But for Margie I have watched an overwhelming grief descend like a fog around her. I wish now, as James settles in his baby seat, that I could keep driving, take Margie home with me - to the farm where we could make pesto and chutney and Jon would make us laugh with his ridiculous and tender stories of his cattle and his crops. Always plenty to do there, calves and chooks and dogs to feed and water, trees to replace and grass to mow. And some peace and quiet for Margie, time for relaxing and reading.

Instead I steer the car along Park Street with its grand old mansions and stretches of lawn towards Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital. Charming old English elms line the roadside, once shiny dark green leaves now faded by the sun and looking tired in the heat. From the window, the sky is still a long stretch of bright blue with no sign of any clouds offering rain.

“I’m sorry,” Margie says as we stop outside the main entrance at the end of a long driveway. The hospital is surrounded by open parkland, and the imposing red brick building with iron-clad windows and signs pointing to admissions, acute care and long-stay units remind us that Royal Park is in fact a psychiatric hospital.

“I shouldn’t have dragged you down here. I’m not really ready for work. I just wanted it so bad and missing out only makes me feel worse.”
I hug her, try to stop her hand shaking as I hold it in my own, “I’m sorry too. All I meant was that you shouldn’t push yourself too hard. You need to take it slowly. You’ll get a job. I know you will.”

Inside the hospital at the back of the administration building, I wait until Margie has settled on one of the big sofas in the common living area of the Nightingale Ward and I hand James to her.

She sings as she cuddles him, ‘Baa Baa Black Sheep, have you any wool?’ She looks up at me and laughs, “I told him I was the black sheep.”

I need to go to the toilet. I hate the toilets here in the hospital, the low walls between the cubicles give no privacy, the old cisterns don’t flush and the cold broken tiles shift under your feet making it too easy to slip. But I can’t hold on any longer. The corridor is dark and echoes with the clatter of the kitchen staff. I pass Frankie, a guy Margie has introduced me to, and we nod and smile. He’s about twenty-four, Margie’s age. The Nightingale Ward is for younger patients in transition, preparing for a return to the outside world. I wonder when Margie’s return will be. It’s already been five weeks. I hope she’s home for Christmas.

Back at the farm I run a bath, breathe in the vanilla-scented crystals that Margie gave me for my birthday. I need to think. I need to understand it all some more. As I scan through the little blue book on Schizophrenia the hospital has given me, I go over the time before emergency at the Austin Hospital, the weeks leading up to her admission to Royal Park. She had just started a new job, after weeks of searching and interviews. She was renting a great flat in Carlton, sharing with a nurse in the Grattan Street complex. Her job was impressive too - an office assistant at George’s, the most exclusive store in Melbourne. I visited her there with James, only a few weeks old and small enough to carry in a sling as he slept his way around the city.

At George’s Margie looked like she was in a movie, the perfect secretary for the most fashionable emporium. Beautifully groomed, glamorous, with the mischievous eyes of Audrey Hepburn and Grace Kelly’s cool elegance. She loved expensive clothes and she sometimes mixed them with classy recycles bought at the local op shop in her own personal style. Her laughter was infectious. She made me laugh at myself. “Why the frown?” she would smile, or copy my anxious voice so that I heard myself loud and clear, “Make sure you
cook some vegetables, did you put your uni forms in yet, careful of that boiling water.”

But now, as I lay in the water, covering my ears to drown out nagging voices, I cannot dredge up any of the laughter. Just the stress, the anxiety, the phone calls. And that word, schizophrenic.

The Treasury Gardens are baked in sunlight. City workers in shorts, singlets and running shoes make their way through the meandering paths, sweating. The small pond by the children’s garden is one of my favourite spots and I find a seat under a large elm where I can park the pram out of the sun. James plays with a rattle and I watch him focus on the coloured balls in front of him. He giggles at my silly noises and his laugh is light and loving. Why can’t it always be like this?

“Over here,” I call to Maurice and watch how easily Maurice and his friend, Jim, navigate the paths and people. Jim waves to me, his thick glasses helping a little with his vision. He wears his Bombers t-shirt and I remember that it was his love of the football club that inspired his clinging to life after a violent attack many years earlier that left him close to death, horrific injuries requiring him to walk with a stick. Over the years, he had become something of an Executive Assistant to the ever, over-committed Maurice.

“You guys look fantastic. Holidays agree with you.”
“Well, you look younger too,” Maurice says, “Doesn’t she Jim?”
“So how was the trip? I didn’t think there were any places left for you to visit.”
“Our first trip to the States,” Maurice says.
“It was wonderful. Everything went smoothly. Almost,” Jim adds.”
“What happened this time?”
“Maurice invited a stranger back to the apartment in New York, he was a homeless guy and Maurice was going to shout him Maccas. Instead the guy took off with his cassette player.”
“Yeah, but then he must have felt guilty because he came back with it the next day. I was impressed,” Maurice laughs. I wonder if I would be so forgiving.
“How are all the Egans?” Maurice asks “Especially the newest grandson, young James?”
“He's smiling at you, I think he likes your purple tie. Bit loud, if you ask me. He's six months now.”

“What's Tom up to? Still in real estate, I might need him to help find a house.”

“Yeah, he's moved into a new office in Broadmeadows, the old stamping ground. And Paul's got a couple of part-time jobs, bar work and some driving. Andrew and Johnny are working and living in Torquay and Matthew's still in Queensland. Finished his Year 12.”

“That's a big effort. Taking himself back to school, on his own.”

“Yeah, he got great marks and now he's enrolled in journalism at Deakin University.”

“Seamus, what's he up to?”

“Lots of gardening work, mostly in the western suburbs, near his house.”

“What about your Grandad?”

“Grandad's good. Still living in Kingsbury.

“Did he move back there when you sold the hotel?”

“Yes, it's around the corner from Uncle Kevin. I just left Grandad and his mates enjoying a cold glass of beer at the Great Northern, it's up the road from our old hotel.”

“And Margie?”

“She's not too good. She's in hospital.”

“What happened?”

I take my time with my response. I have not spoken about it to anyone and I don't know that I can now. I don't want to be disloyal. I worry people will judge, not Maurice, but maybe he just won't understand. I don't even understand.

“What happened?” he says again and leans in to hear me. The wind has picked up and I know it can interfere with Maurice's concentration.

“Do you want to move?” I ask above the noise of the branches as they sway back and forth, creaking as if the tree might topple over. “Go to a cafe or something?”

“No, I'm fine. Tell me about Margie.”

“You know she hadn't been happy for a while, saying she was feeling sick, but we didn't really know what it was. Sometimes it was about Mum, or Dad, or she was feeling lonely. She finally took herself off to see Dr Helen, who works and teaches at the Austin Hospital. She's been Margie's doctor since Mum died and she was Mum's too for a while.”
“I remember you talking about her. I think I might have even met her and her husband at the hotel.”

“Your memory is incredible.”

“Is Margie at the Austin?”

“No. She’s in Royal Park. She was at the Austin for a while but they said she needed specialist help that they couldn’t give her. But,” I hesitate. Tears swell.

“What is it? Are you okay?”

James is sleeping and I put my hand on him as if it to remind myself of all that I have, that I have to stay strong for him.

“Margie didn’t want to go to Royal Park. After she saw Doctor Helen she said she was feeling much better and she just wanted to go home and back to work.”

“And you? What did you think?”

“I didn’t know. I was frightened. The doctors told me she was severely depressed, that she had come to the hospital because she was suicidal and that she needed help to get her medication right. They said she was schizophrenic. But she kept saying Royal Park was for crazy people and she wasn’t mad.”

Under the light cotton sheet, James stirs and I am glad of the cool breeze and the shade, as my legs feel weak and shaky.

“What did you do?”

“We tried to talk to her. She refused to go. The doctors said we would have to commit her. Tom was with me. I think we signed the papers together. I don’t really know. It’s a blur but I remember following her to the hospital. She was in an ambulance and I was with James behind her and Tom was behind us, following each other like a funeral procession. I hated what I was doing. It was the worst day of my life.”

A boy on a scooter charges in front of them, shouting to his little sister trailing behind on a bike with trainer wheels. “Race you to the duck pond.”

“It doesn’t sound like you had a choice,” Maurice says, “If you want her to get better.”

“I don’t know. It’s what I told myself, over and over; so many times it was like a broken record in my head. We have to do this. But it was like something out of a Hollywood movie, bars on windows and tiny peepholes on the doors of the John Cade assessment ward. I sat there with her, waiting for the doctor as we watched the people around us, some muttering to themselves, a middle-aged lady in her quilted dressing gown came up and yelled at us,
Margie presses her lips into James's fine hair and spreads kisses across his face as she lifts him from my tired arms. The pale blue summer sky is the same colour as his clear round baby eyes.  

"Wanna see the ducks, bubby?" she says as the three of us walk around Queen's Park, an afternoon together, away from the hospital. We wander past the children's playground with its climbing frames and thick ropes towards the small lake in the middle of the gardens, colourful with spring growth.  

"Look James, a mother duck. Quack. Quack," she giggles, pretending to imitate the noises coming from the water. "She's looking for a new home for her babies. Everyone needs a home, even the ugly ducklings."  

The irony of house hunting is not lost as I wonder where Margie will find a home when she finally leaves the hospital.  

The picnic rug provides protection for James from the dried grass as he wriggles from his back to his stomach. "Wanna hear something funny?" Margie says, breaking a piece of the lemon slice to share. "You know how Paul comes to visit me at the hospital every day."  

"Does he still come every day?"  

"Yeah, usually in the afternoon before he picks Luke up from school. He rides his bike down."  

"That's nice." I say, thinking how lucky it is that Paul's cleaning jobs are early morning ones, finished before the rest of Lygon Street is awake.  

"Yesterday someone said to me, how come your brother's in here too?"  

The lemon slice disappears in the laughter. "What? They think he's a patient."  

Margie grins and nods. It's nice to see her smile again.  

"I guess they would," I think aloud.  

"I bet he knows all their names too."  

"Better than me. Maybe he'll move in. Cheap rent."
Music flows from the bathroom, drums and guitars banging away, and blaring above it all, above Goanna and ‘Solid Rock’, is Margie's singing. I can't see it for myself, but I can hear it, her happiness is infectious. James giggles when I start dancing with him in my arms, joining in. ‘Standing on sacred ground, leanin’ on borrowed time ... ohhooo ohhoo' I sing with my sister and swing James around in my arms. Margie steps out of the bathroom, transformed, her big green eyes decorated with mascara making her lashes longer. She's even applied a pretty plum colour to her lips.

“You look gorgeous,” I say. “What are you wearing?”

“What about your blue silk dress with the cute Peter Pan collar?”

“Perfect. It’s such a great colour on you. Must be nice to dress up for a change. I wish it was me.”

“Do you? Do you really want to swap places with me? You go to the night club and I'll stay home with James.”

“No. I’m glad you’re going out. Enjoy yourself.”

When Margie leaves I head outside into the backyard and wander past the caravan, the rusted-out single room that is Margie's latest home. Still getting used to the idea, I hated it at first, wanting her to be inside with us, even if it meant sharing the room with James who lived in my bed most of the time anyway. After coming home from hospital she wanted a place of her own despite still being unwell. The caravan was a compromise.

I peer inside and I am drawn into her world. It’s a bit cramped in there, with worn-out brown cushions thrown on the small bed squashed at one end of the van. You can sit on the bed and rinse dishes in the sink at the same time. A crowded bench is covered in books and pieces of paper. Yellow and white
curtains Margie has made add a little colour to the window that looks into our backyard and over the verandah.

Picking up a notebook, I glance at my sister’s writing. Margie's scribbled words rise from the paper, big bold letters, curvy round ones; words running into each other fill the space. Margie's messages to herself are mostly musings over a long day at the hospital, lists of appointments, jobs to do, people to call. I feel like a sticky beak and put the book back where it belongs, on her bed.

Later that night, a loud ringing wakes me. Is it a smoke alarm? Sitting up in bed, I sniff the air to check. Peer into the darkness. The ringing starts again, like a bell somewhere at the other end of the house. The phone. It's after midnight. Who would be ringing at this hour? Fear grips me, scrapes its way through me, from my head, through my throat to deep and low down in my stomach where it stays, churning.

"Caroline?" A low voice whispers.
"Yes."
"Can you come and pick me up, please?"
It's Margie, her voice almost a whisper.
"Why? What's wrong?"
"I feel sick." The reply is muffled by the loud music in the background.
"Where are you?"
"At the Star Hotel."
"What happened?"
"I just got a bit frightened that's all."
"Wait inside at the door, get someone to wait with you, I'll be straight down."

Jesus Christ, what the hell's wrong with her? I shout into the windscreen of the car as I race down the highway towards Melbourne. I thought she was getting better, doing so well to be going out and socialising. A few hours ago she was singing with me, talking about going back to uni. What's happened? Perhaps someone's upset her; what the hell's wrong with her? I repeat it over and over, like a chant. She will have to tell me now. I talk to the steering wheel, caress it for strength as I battle the voices in my head. This can't go on. I can't keep pretending it's ok. Maybe she should have stayed longer at the hospital.

Soon Margie and her girlfriends climb into my car. They chat and give directions to their inner city homes. I steer the car through the Melbourne
streets. Margie doesn’t speak, and when the last of the girls is dropped off it’s a long silent trip down the freeway and on to the dark, dirt roads back to the farm.

As the engine slows and the car stops in the driveway, our timber farmhouse sits there, quiet and still, like the air in the car. And then Margie speaks.

“You remember when I told you I felt sick and I said I had a heavy feeling down below,” she mumbles as she fiddles with the seat belt.

“Kind of. When we went to the Women’s that night?”

She nods, “Well, it was worse than that. I thought I was changing into a man. I thought I was growing things on my body, my fingers were like knives, sharp points at the end and I was scared to touch anyone, scared to hold James.”

She blurts it out, not quite finishing her thoughts. She’s crying, “I thought I was half man and half woman, I kept thinking it was real and that I must be crazy to think like that. But it felt like it was really happening. It felt so real. I was scared and I wanted to die. And now it’s happening all over again. I can’t look into a mirror or a shop window without seeing something else looking back at me.”

Where’s the moon? I wonder as I stare out from behind the steering wheel into the black night, struggling to comprehend the words, the outpouring of information. Margie sits, sobbing into her chest, unable to look above her lap. I want to take her in her arms, want to hold and comfort her. But I don’t. I just sit and stare out the window. Would she want me to touch her now? Would I be intruding?

And then, for the first time, the diagnosis and Margie’s unpredictable behaviour finally begins to make some sense; the persistent phone calls, the half truths, the clouded explanations, the insomnia, lack of appetite and the restlessness. It’s adding up.

“Why couldn’t you tell me?” I ask, unbuckling my seat belt.

“I was ashamed. I thought you would think I was sick or mad or something. It was horrible, I couldn’t tell anyone.”

Suddenly there is a scratching noise outside the car and I am grateful for the distraction of our dogs, the little stray mongrel, Buddy, and then Wally, the excitable black Labrador.

“The social worker told me your body can play tricks on you when you are under stress,” Margie says, dropping her head to concentrate and picking the skin from around her fingernails. “That’s all it is, just stress,” she says. “But I
have to put more into it. I build it up in my head and think I'm bad, or crazy. I was even too scared to tell you now."

"You're not crazy," I say and turn my face to look at her for what feels like the first time in months. I look into her eyes, red from the crying, search them for hope. "I've heard of this kind of thing before. I've read about it. It happens sometimes. But I know you would have been scared. I can't imagine how frightening it would have been. I would have been the same if it happened to me."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. It's called an hallucination. Like when you see or hear something that's not really there. But it feels real. It would freak me out."

"It's not the first time," Margie says. "It's happened before."

"Did you tell them at the hospital?"

"I tried to tell one of the doctors. I only saw him once but he seemed to understand."

"Well we should try and see him again. We could ring tomorrow and see if he can see you."

Phew! That was heavy.

Hours later I toss in bed. Poor Margie. I am so angry she suffered so long, all on her own. All that time and she couldn't even tell me. Maybe we aren't as close as I think.

I turn to Jon, move into his back and bury my head in his soft neck.

"Everything ok?" he asks as I wrap my arm around him.

"Yes," I whisper.

But we both know it's a lie.

I am drawn back to the caravan and Margie's writing. Pages of ruled notepaper are scattered on her bed. She has rushed to Melbourne for another job interview and I linger, alone with just her words and the emotions she tries so hard to hide from me etched into the paper. The writing is loose and large, words crossed out, written over, turned on angles, spiralled along the side of the page. Dark and light. Soft and hard.

Now some more pages in a folder, a black pen pushed hard into the rough paper towel, the kind of paper you wipe your hands on in public toilets, the kind of paper they have at Royal Park. Like blotting paper, coarse and
heavy, you might use to soak up grease and coffee spills. I sit on her bed, trying
to read the words.

The flowers in the vase turned into knives
and swirled around the room circling her,
aiming for her,
cutting her,
lifting her skin
and peeling away
her whole personality

There are pages and pages of writing, some with holes punched in them to fit
inside a black binder. I read on, crying and reading: reading and crying. I stop
for a while. Thinking about Mum, about Dad, about Margie. Searching for
insights into Margie’s illness. Some of her lines are more like poetry, single
words. Is it a mental illness to be sad, or is it unnatural to grieve so hard and for
so long?

In parts, the writing is like Margie’s speech, sometimes coherent but
mostly unclear, unfinished, sentences and ideas left in mid air, words flying in
her brain, banging at her head, like heavy wet sheets flapping in your face.

Secrets Secrets
I know something you don’t
It’s magic, like someone casts a spell
and circles around
the lower part of my body.
It is definitely there
but not proven
because it is invisible.
My mind is playing tricks on me. It spins me
out.

Nobody had ever told me that something strange
sometimes changes your body
or that my mind had such
powers,
and through thought I was changing,
It’s the middle of the night and I can hear James stirring. Someone is in the bathroom. Margie? Has the back door, squeaking for oil, woken him? Or perhaps it’s the running water? He wakes at every sound now, and for days he has been unsettled, crying, feeding, crying. I will go crazy if I don’t get some sleep. I rock him back to sleep and pray for a few hours for myself. And it starts again, the crying, the feeding, the rocking. Is he too hot? Is he too cold? I change his nappy again. I pour over the childcare books like a pack of cards searching for clues to his state of mind. I consult the books for what each cry might mean, I shade in a daily clock, different colours, to record his sleeping, feeding, wakeful patterns. Jon shakes his head in despair at my paranoia. Tells me has never seen me like this, so particular, so analytical, so methodical.

James is inconsolable now, so I tuck him in bed beside me and we sleep fitfully until the first strands of daylight come through a small gap in the curtains. I put him in a carry pouch and wrap him close to my chest and we walk out the door, away from the chaos and up the driveway to the dirt road that leads to the wide open spaces and surrounding farms, sheep running to a noise in the distance, cries from newborn lambs. James smiles up at me now. Happy.

Walking now. Calm and alert, I remember a time not so long ago when I was pregnant and James was nothing more than butterfly kicks. It was a time when I was happily preparing for his arrival, working at the newspaper and writing feature articles, and I remembered the one about a little girl called Laura who had attention deficit hyperactive disorder, ADHD, and how her mother said she was never invited to parties, never asked to play with friends. I remembered rubbing my stomach and praying that all would be well with my unborn baby. It was the time before Margie’s diagnosis.

“Why don’t we go out for a while,” I suggested to Margie back then. “Celebrate your birthday, twenty-three’s still young enough to party,” I joked when I called at the Brunswick bedsitter she’d taken over from Jon and I. She got up and turned down the TV and Tony Barber on Sale of the Century.

“No thanks. I don’t really feel up to it.”

Out of childhood habit, or to fill the silence, I’m not sure but we both start trying to answer the questions Tony throws at the contestants.

“Remember when Dad made us watch It’s Academic?” I laugh.

“Who could forget? Every Sunday night.”
“He thought you would be on it one day.”
“That was you.”
“I don’t think he cared. Just one of the family.”
“Maybe Matt. Remember how he knew all the prime ministers’ names before he was five.”
“Come on. Let’s get out and have some fun. What about a play? Anything on at St Martin’s?”
“Not sure, but maybe next week. I’m too tired.” Margie sips on her mug of soup. Chicken Noodle.
“You’ve got to get out. You can’t sit here all the time on your own.” I was pushing her now, even when I promised myself I wouldn’t.
“I don’t want to. I can’t.”
“You can’t? What does that mean?” I try to stay calm. I pick up the dishes and start rinsing them. “You have to do something. Maybe see someone.”
“What good can anyone do? They can’t bring them back.”
I have no answer. Mum had been dead three years then and Dad more than five, but sometimes it felt like forever. Some days I could hardly remember their faces or hear their voices in my head.
“I think I might go away for awhile,” Margie announced so suddenly I wasn’t sure I heard right, “I need time to think, to have a rest. I might go and stay with Matthew in Queensland.”
I didn’t answer. Margie finally had a good job at the newspaper library. She had money and somewhere to live. I thought a holiday might be good, but not a move away. At the back of my brain, swirling around my head, I heard the concern of Margie’s boss who had called me at home the week before.
“Margaret’s work is fine,” Sarah had told me. “But I’m really worried about her. She seems lost. She doesn’t really talk to anyone, unless she has to. She doesn’t even look at me when I speak to her.” I wanted Sarah to stop there, I didn’t like where the conversation was going. Sarah had been a close colleague when I worked at the newspaper and I was scared that might change if she kept on talking the way she was. “It’s a bit weird,” Sarah went on. “Sometimes I feel Margaret is standing next to me as if she wants to say something but she just stands there and waits for me to speak to her.”
I struggled for something to say, to be polite, but the silence continued while she waited for me.
“I think she needs help,” Sarah said.
“Thanks for letting me know.”
What else could I say? Why can’t you be more compassionate, why can’t you understand we are not all the same? I wanted to scream at her and the other ignorant people who said things like, “Just tell her to pull her socks up and get over it.”

Margie came home to the farm with me that night, to our nearly finished new home and together we painted the cot, a family treasure Jon had renovated, and we put in the spare room where Margie slept, the room that would soon become the nursery.

I knocked on the closed door. “How are you feeling?” I asked, sitting on the edge of her bed. “Are you still thinking of going to Queensland?”

Her book, Anna Karenina, fell from her hands and she nodded. “Sometimes I just can’t stop crying. I hate everything, everything in my life. I try to keep going. I really try, but I feel so tired now.”

“Is it work? The flat? Your friends?” I searched for a reason, something to blame and something to fix.

“No, none of that.”

“Is it Mum?”

“I think of Mum all the time,” she said.

I glance at the growing collection of baby stuff, a bassinette waiting for its bedding, a foldaway cot and bag of clothes from my girlfriend a year ahead of me in motherhood. I feel so lucky; I have everything, a husband I adore, an exciting, satisfying job at the newspaper, a new home and now a baby to look forward to. As I start to walk away I wonder, for a moment, if Margie resents me, and my life.

“You must hate me sometimes,” I say it aloud without thinking.

“I don’t hate you,” Margie laughs. “I like you, but I don’t want to be like you. I just want to be me. But sometimes I don’t even know who ‘me’ is. Sometimes I think I’m someone else, like a character in a book. Like the crazy Anna in this book, and it feels so real.”
The campervan rolls its way down the steep road leading to the campsite at Mitta Mitta, the cool green river inviting us in. James’s silky soft skin smothered in sunscreen ready for his dip. Nearly eighteen months old now, he takes to the water easily, gliding across Jon’s chest in the rocky shallows, squealing and giggling as he plays crocodile, gathers rocks to build a dam with his Dad.

In the house before we left, for our first-ever family holiday, there was great excitement as James chose which of his favourite toys to take, a black and red teddy Jon bought home from the football the day he was born, his Thomas the Tank Engine and more balls than we could fit in. Jon packed the van, more methodically than I had seen him do anything else. He stacked the foldup cot, the stroller, picnic table and chairs and strategically stored essentials like matches, torches, extra tent pegs in places already full.

The drive through the dry countryside reminded me of my childhood holidays. There weren’t many, but they were always fun and we always headed to the water, to the edge of a river, a lake and occasionally, the beach. I remembered our holidays at Nagambie most of all, the water a shimmering blue-green like the Mitta Mitta where we swim now. I close my eyes and picture Dad with his pale Irish skin slowly turning pink and then lobster-coloured in the hot sun as he sits at the end of the pier, looking out across the vast lake. “Sure it’s just like the lake at home, like Lough Corrib.” And he was right. It wasn’t his imagination or invention. It was true and I’d now seen it for myself.

Today, by the river, a choking kind of anxiety sticks in my throat, and despite my efforts to let go, I still worry about Margie, the first time we’ve been apart since she’d been in hospital and the doctors had given her a label, one I was still struggling to accept. Even remembering it now, with my feet cooling in
the creek and James giggling in the background, my stomach churns, slow but persistent, like an electric blender grinding away in low gear. I try to relax. I try paddling through the water and take James from Jon, lift him high in the air, dipping his legs into the water. But it's no good. I can't seem to settle. The doctor's words haunt. Margie would most likely need medication for the rest of her life. “Sometimes schizophrenia is a one-off episode,” she'd said. “For others it's recurring and life-long.” Where did Margie fit? I wondered. What would her future be?

The bank of the river is steep as I make my climb to the top, wave goodbye to the boys and head through the bushes, to the quiet country pub and the public phone beside it. Long distance beeps sound into the dusty earpiece and my brother's voice immediately lifts me.

"Margie's good," Tom says. "We've been to see a couple of movies. Funny ones. She's in good spirits. Try not to worry." But I do worry. A little less when I have a glass of wine or a book in my hand, but most of the time I imagine danger and death lurking. It's always been that way, maybe it always will be, always the seven-year-old, listening to voices behind closed doors, all the time sensing something's wrong.

The hot autumn day is cooling down as I walk back to the river. Inside my swollen stomach I feel a new baby growing. Will it be a brother or sister for James? It's very close now and I'm not sure I'm ready for another baby.

"One day we will go to the sea," Margie tells James when we get home, and he grins up at her.

"You are so good with him," I tell her. "You'll be a great Mum."
"I don't know."
"Of course you will. One day you will have your own."
"I don't think so."
"Why do you say that?"
"I don't know, just a feeling."

“I’ve got a job.” Margie’s excitement is infectious as it pushes down the phone, I feel relief, like a cool gel on a sore tooth. I wonder if I might be dreaming. I’m doing it all the time lately. Day. Night. Alone. In the middle of a conversation I drift. Just last week I dreamt about my mother. I was sitting on the end of her bed, gossiping the way we used to. Mum wanted to see James and to see all was well with the one on the way. In my dream I was even thinking maybe
Mum wasn’t dead, maybe all that was a dream and this bit was now real. She really was alive. Waking was the worst feeling I’ve ever had, worse than when she died. It was like I’d lost her all over again. For many nights afterwards I was too scared to go to sleep. I asked her not to come again.

But Margie’s voice is real.

"It’s a great job, Caz." She hardly ever calls me Caz. That’s Grandad’s name for me. Not hers.

“What’s the job?”

“In the reception for a magazine. Can you believe it? Me at a magazine.”

“If it’s a fashion one, you will certainly look the part. Need any new clothes?”

“Nah, got no money. They’ve said they want me to collate articles and photos around deadline time.”

“That’s great,” is all I manage to get in before she’s off again, telling me about the interview. I take a box of matches and light a candle. I hope it works out, I whisper to the photo on the mantelpiece, my favourite one of Mum and Dad. Before us kids. At a friend’s wedding. Dad is grinning proudly, his emerald tie flapping across his shoulders. Valerie leans into him, her auburn-coloured hair swept across her face, away from her piercing green eyes that match her long gown.

“You look so much like Mum.”

“What was that?”

“Nothing.”

“I thought I heard you say something.”

“I was looking a photo of Mum. You look like her.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You’re the lucky one.”

“You think so?”

“Well, everyone says you look like her, and I look like the boys.”

Margie laughs, a good laugh, a laugh I’d almost forgotten.

“No you don’t. You look like Aunty Eileen. And you waddle like her too.”

“Thanks a lot.”
There’s a light breeze playing with Margie’s trendy new bob as she walks towards us in Domain Road end of the Botanical Gardens just around the corner from her new house in South Yarra.

“Where’s my hug?” Margie calls to James, tossing up bunches of leaves for him to catch.

“Look, Marnie, new boofs,” he says.

“Boofs?” Marnie laughs at turns to me for an explanation.

“Boots. He has trouble with his t’s. Haven’t you heard him say truck?”

“Let’s go for coffee. I need a few tips for the job.”

She looks relaxed, I think as she takes control of James and the stroller and we walk arms linked. Is she really getting better? Is it the job? The new tablets? Are the zombie-like trances and the shakes gone, forever, thrown out with the old medications?

“When do you start?”

“Tomorrow. And I’ve found somewhere to live.”

“You moving again?”

“Yeah. The sergeant major who ran the hostel said Philip can’t even visit. ‘No boys allowed’ he bellowed and threw him out.”

“Where are you moving to?” I feel the bubble bursting, the joy evaporating, the happiness I’d had a minute earlier disappearing with a shiver through my body. Please no, not with Philip, I want to say, wary of the on-again, off-again boyfriend.

“I’m moving in with a single Mum, she seems really nice. I’ll be helping out with some babysitting so the rent is only $50 a week.”

“Where is it?”

“Prahran. Not far from the magazine. Gotta dash,” she says throwing back the coffee, squeezing James and then she’s gone.

Mid May. Cold. Non stop rain. Tired, and pregnant to bursting, I hitch a backpack up the stairs to Margie’s new room. The magazine job is over. Gone after a few short weeks. Cost cutting, they said. They wanted someone to do reception and typesetting. Margie appears to take it well, but I am afraid of what might follow.

Learning to budget on a disability pension, Margie has found a room at a boarding house in Punt Road, South Yarra. Cheap and ugly, it’s more like a shoebox.

“I’ll have to go outside to change my mind,” Margie jokes.
At the end of May my beautiful baby arrives. Another boy. I call him Liam for a day, but his Dad wants William and his big brother calls him Wilma. Margie is at the hospital with me on this first day, only hours after he’s born.

I watch from my bed, my caesarean stitches hurting when I laugh or move. But I feel my heart bursting. How lucky am I? I’m surrounded by love. I feed William easily.

“You’re my big boy now,” I call to James as he leaves with Jon who promises him a ride on the tractor when they get home.

Margie visits the hospital every day. She is lost without work, without a purpose to her days. William brightens an hour or two for her. On the day I am leaving hospital, Margie is there nursing William as I pack my suitcase. She looks pale. She fidgets. Can’t sit still. Sits on the bed. Stands up again.

“What’s wrong?” I ask and pray it’s not the ex-boyfriend hanging around again.

“I don’t know,” Margie says. “I just don’t know anything anymore. I wish I had the right words to make her better. “Is it the job?”

“No, I’m just not coping,” she says. “I can’t seem to make anything work. I don’t have a job, anywhere decent to live. Everyday gets harder.”
Maurice sits in the stately ballroom of Government House, waiting patiently to hear his name so he can make his way to the stage to receive his Order of Australia Medal. As a welfare and policy advocate for the blind and vision impaired he is now an international leader in his field, one of a few people who can sign for those with dual sensory loss, people who are deaf and blind.

I tell the world about Maurice and his medal, I tell anyone who will listen to the extraordinary story of what might have been just another ordinary life.

As he waits for the call up with his sister Donna, and close friends, Pat, Robin and Jim by his side, his mind flashes through the fragments of his life that have led to this moment. Together we marvel at how far away Broadmeadows seems now, how the streets and houses of Dallas seem smaller, and yet always filled with people, living life out in the open. The applause in the room moves him to tears and memories of his boyhood stir emotions he hasn't felt for some time, how far he has come from the frightened little boy in his bedroom, too embarrassed by his blindness to venture outside. When Maurice returns to his seat with the medal around his neck, he thinks of his brother, Nick, pounding the streets of Johannesburg in the ninety-kilometre Comrades marathon. His Mum, his Dad, Russell. They are all with him now, applauding louder than anyone.

Eventually, we celebrate the OAM, Nick's marathon, James' second birthday, and anything else we can think of, with a big gathering. Maurice is not one for fancy restaurants or big parties so we gather at our farm with his friends and Donna and her family and a few of my brothers and the growing clan of nieces and nephews. There's a game of cricket, as there always is, and everyone joins in. Margie makes the cake for the August birthdays – five of
them now - Paul, Tom, Seamus, James, and our Mum, who shares her birthday, August the first, with all the horses in the world. As we sing, I smile at Jon at the barbecue and wonder if life might stay this good forever.

I'm folding nappies, watching Playschool with my boys when Maurice calls with the news. Nick is leaving in a week for Africa to climb Mt Kilimanjaro. Did I hear him properly? My legs and arms feel weird and I think I might drop the phone.

"Is he mad?"
"Yes. And determined."
"Do you think it's a good idea?"
"Well, what do you want him to do, sit at home and knit?"

I feel ashamed now. Of course Nick should do it, he should do anything he wants to do, but he's done so much already, deep sea diving at Queenscliff, the bungy jumping in New Zealand, the car racing in the driver's seat in Sydney, the stair climb of the Empire State Building. It didn't look like he was slowing down. Blindness was no obstacle, just fear, he once told me. Still, I didn't think he needed to flirt with danger. But I kept my mouth shut. Maurice didn't need to hear it.

"I guess you're right," I finally respond.
"Who will Nick be climbing with?"
"His mate Charlie, who's also blind."
"And who else?"
"That's it."
"Really?"

"No. Only kidding. There's a great team with him, people from the Achilles Running Club, Ellis and Roxanne, and he's involved with and some local guides."

"There's a program on TV next week about his preparations, footage of Nick and Charlie and the team at Mount Kosciusko. Have a look, it might make you feel better."

I hang up the phone, stare into the fire with its bright red flames leaping at the blackened glass and watch the wood burn, enjoy the heat on my shivering body. I pray Nick will be okay and as I drift off to sleep, I see Nick as a little boy again, the kid who chased me around the yard, played hide and seek.
with me. There he is in his shorts and ankle socks, the boy who could run faster, climb higher, throw further than anyone I knew. Why should I doubt him now?

Jon takes a late night phone call.

"It's Margie," he calls to me, his hand over the mouthpiece. "She sounds upset."

"Margie, what's wrong?"
There was no answer, only a sniff.
"Where are you?"
"At work, a function at the Arts Centre. I'm on a break. I feel sick. I might have to go home."
"What is it?"
"I don't know. I can't stop shaking."
"Do you want me to come and get you?"
"No. I'll just go home."
"Is there anyone at the house?"
"No. Not yet."
"Are you sure you won't come back here."
"Yeah. It's ok, I'll get a taxi home and go to bed."
"Margie, I'll come down if you like."
"No. I'll be okay."

Early the next morning as Jon and I count the newborn calves in the paddock and check to see if they are up and drinking, I make a mental note of things to pack for Margie's new house; the stockpot for soup, the electric frypan and a slice tin for her muesli bars. We all eat breakfast together, James crushing weetbix into his highchair as I feed William a few mouthfuls of rice cereal. As Jon leaves for work, I pack the car, James in the back seat next to William in his baby capsule, spare sheets and towels thrown in between them. James sings along with our favourite Carpenters cassette tape, at the top of his voice. "I'm on the top of the worrrlll."

Heavy peak hour traffic on the freeway, lots of stops and starts, jolting as William cries in his capsule. "Can you pass Wilma his dummy please, honey"
"He doesn't want it."
"Well, see if you can make him laugh." In the rear vision mirror, I watch James shaking his hair in Will's face and tickling his chin and enjoy their laughter for the rest of the slow trip.
Finally we pull into the driveway of Margie’s big empty house. It’s dark inside as I peer through a window and knock on the front door. No answer. I knock again. Still no answer. There’s no noise from inside the house. Should I wait? Go home? Call someone?


Heart racing.

Nothing.

I lift James from his car seat and he copies me, runs to the door shouting, “Marnie...Marnie...” and then to the window, peeping in like he’s playing hide and seek.

“Is this Marnie’s house?” he asks and turns to me, his eyes shining. Always, he wants to go to Marnie’s house. William, tucked into my hip, lifts his mouth to the bottom of my cheek, sucking hard. He needs a drink. I have to get into the house. Should I climb through a window?

“Shusssh, Will. I know you’re hungry. Won’t be long.”

“Let’s go around the back,” I tell James and take his small hand in mine. We walk down the side of the house to the back door. It’s locked. Panic punches my chest, hitting hard like sharp, stabbing arrows. I can hardly breathe.

Where is she?

I shout again and beat my palm into the door. James copies, bangs and shouts as if it’s a game.

It’s unusually warm and Colourful in Margie’s backyard, so early for Spring. Pink and white blossoms fill a couple of fruit trees in the corner of the large yard and the roses are opening up along the fence. I have a bad feeling. Something awful is happening. Suddenly I am a child again hiding under my blankets in bed, counting my rosary beads and praying. I see my mother lying on the floor in the hallway, her legs thrusting and her throat making noises, growling sounds like I heard when our dog Susie was hit by a car and ran under the house and died. Anything but that, I pray, as I hold tight to James’s hand and cradle William across the other arm. Don’t let me find her like that.

Memories like frenzied blowflies feed my fear. And I remember then, the worst night of all, the night I woke to hushed voices in my brother’s bedroom. “He needs a doctor,” Mum’s voice slipping out from under the door. I listened harder to the coughing, gasping; a horrible wheezing, raspy noise as he gulped for air. And then nothing. Mum’s voice, calmer, softer. “Take it easy, Tommy.

I stand there.
At Margie’s door.
Thinking of Russell now.
And the gun.
Shivering.
Heaving in my stomach.
I lay Will on the lawn.
Vomit into the weeds under the lilies.
Drag the boys out of the sun into the shade. And think.
Finally, we go back to the door. Knock again. Call out. Still no answer. What should I do? Shaking, I kneel down close to James, digging in the dirt with a twig and I put Will to my swollen breast and he sucks loudly.
“Can we go home now?” James says.
“Yes, honey.”
As we move from the back fence, the door opens. Margie peeps out, her face half of it hidden behind the door.
“Hi,” she says. “I thought I heard something.” Her face is swollen and puffy, a pale cream colour, with dark shadows around her eyes, more grey than green today. “I was asleep.”
“At ten o’clock?” I growl, my fear turning to anger as I watch my sister stumble a little and attempt to take Will from me. “No,” I say and turn away.
We go into the cold empty lounge, devoid of any signs of people living there.
“What have you taken?” I glare at my sister. I know the signs. Seen it all before.
“What does it matter?” She is too weak to care. “I had a fight with Philip. I just wanted to sleep it off.”
“He’s a useless idiot. A fucking dickhead who doesn’t care about anyone but himself.”
“I know. I’m sorry. It’s over. I promise,” Margie sobs. “I’m so sorry. I love you and I won’t hurt you again.” Margie clings to James on her knee.
“Do you need a doctor?” Should she be checked out? I wonder. Is it an overdose?
“I’ll be ok.” She stumbles towards the kitchen bench, filling the kettle with hot water, spilling it.
“Go back to bed and get some sleep. I’ll call back later.”
There's no coffee or milk in the house, I settle for black tea, the way I learnt to take it at boarding school when the milk was always sour. Turning Mum's old tea pot, first clockwise and then anti-clockwise like Auntie Eileen showed me, is relaxing as my mind goes the full circle with the brewing tea leaves. Will's bronchitis is not getting better but he sleeps now after a restless night as I wonder if family genetics meant some of us would be cursed with respiratory problems all our lives. The hum of the humidifier soothes him now as I finish a second cup of tea and James' left over toast and vegemite. Ready to start the day.

First I call Margie, a daily routine since she moved into the group home, but a little less throughout the day now that Jacinta had joined her there, in Park Street, not far from the hospital. It's a Tuesday, three days before her birthday and she's been talking about having a small party. We thought The Clyde in Cardigan Street might be a good spot.

I plan to take William to the maternal and child health centre, get the nurse to check on his chest and see if he's putting on enough weight and growing according to the charts. I dial Margie's number. No answer. Still asleep, good for her. I've been up since six o'clock, feeding the boys and mixing red and green playdough for James to make dinosaurs. I ring again at nine o'clock. Still no answer.

That's strange. It's rare for Margie to sleep so late and I feel those small bubbles of nerves jiggling in the pit of my stomach, like simmering water reaching the boil.

Jacinta answers the phone around ten as Humphrey B Bear waves to James from the TV and he squeals back at the big goofy bear.

"Margaret's not here."
"Do you know where she is?"
"No."
"Did she come home last night?"
"Don't know."
"Could you check her room please?"
"What for?"
"To see if she might have been home." I'm getting annoyed.

I shake my head, roll my eyes at James, pull a funny face and poke my tongue out. He copies, laughing as Will giggles with us.
“There’s no sign of her.”
“Is her bag there?”
“Can’t see it.”
“When you see Margie, can you tell her I called.”

A sickening, shivering creeps through me, a queasiness in my stomach that seems to twist itself inside out and I feel like one of Jon’s fish somersaulting and squirming on a river bank, out of the water, clinging to life. It’s such a familiar feeling for me, the child with her mother’s ‘bad nerves’. Anxiety and a sore stomach go hand in hand and persist when things don’t go to plan, like when Jon is running late or my boys hold their breath way too long when they cry. Somehow, I don’t know why and I hate that I do it, but I always manage to think the worst.

Now, as I wait to hear from Margie, I push those dark thoughts from my mind. I keep busy with James and William, nothing like a toddler and small baby to keep you sane. I wash Jon’s farm clothes, and James’ overalls, hang out the nappies and sheets, all the while thinking about Margie. Finally when I find myself yelling at James for tipping the sand in the wrong bucket, I know I am losing it, I have to do something. My chest is so tight that the deep breathing hurts. I call Jon at work.

“Margie’s missing,” I tell him.
“What do you mean?”
“She’s not home and I don’t know where she is.”
“Have you tried her friends, your brothers?”
“Just Tom and John, I couldn’t get on to the others. Margie would tell me if she was going somewhere.”

“Try Paul and Andrew again and I’ll give Matt and Seamus a ring.”
“I’ll call her girlfriend, Cathy, she might be there.”
“Don’t worry, she’ll be okay.”

I nod. Breathe deeply. Try to relax. Jon’s right. Margie will be okay. For a while, I lie on the bed with William massaging his chest while James pretends to read me a story from his *Mister Happy* book. I imagine the places Margie might go, the people she might see. Perhaps she has caught the train to see Andrew at Torquay. She’d done that the other week, the day after she’d taken too many tablets, and headed off for the train from Spencer Street to Geelong, wanting to see Andrew, now home from America. She’d rested up with Andrew and Jaci, shopping at Myer, then a day with them at the beach, watching Andrew surf with Casey. She liked the sea and told me the ocean gave her a feeling of freedom. I remembered her writing, from hospital, her
visions of drowning and dismissed it quickly. She had come home from Torquay, rested and gone back to work.

“No, she’s not here,” Andrew tells me, when I finally get him on the phone. “Let me know when you catch up with her.”

By lunchtime I’m a mess and call my girlfriend, Vicki, whose husband’s a policemen. They’ll know what to do.

I can’t stand the waiting any longer, can’t stand not knowing. By mid afternoon I reach Paul at work. He tells me he’ll go to the house to see if she’s there and if not, he’ll wait for her and call me when she gets home.

He rings.

“Margie’s still not home.”

“Check her room, look for her bag.”

While I’m waiting on the phone, Paul finds the letter. He sees it on her dressing table. His name is on it, and then crossed out so it reads: Dear Family

“Read it,” I urge him. “What does it say?”

My hands shake so much I think I might drop the phone but the grip is the only thing that feels real. James hears me crying, clings to my leg.

I love you all very much. Don’t ever feel upset about my going – when I’m in heaven I’ll look after you all – and you won’t have to put up with any crap. I wish I could have made it, but it never gets easier and I’m tired, tired, of trying, and nothing ever eventuating. Please don’t blame yourselves for anything, I don’t want you to think of me, only think of the good times and the laughter, and you’ll be OK.

Please try to stay together and neither of you blame each other – because its no-one’s fault only fate – inevitably. So I’m off to a happier place.

Love you all
Margaret
PS Please publish my writing on the bathroom towel paper
I drop my head low, my chin rests high on my chest, eyes fixed on the floor, on the shiny black shoes beside me.

My six brothers, Paul, Andrew, John on one side, Tom, Seamus, Matthew, on the other, arms linked across each other's shoulders, holding firm as they balance Margie's coffin above them, reverent, as if she might fall and break.

Faces strained.
Bodies bent.
The weight of death.

They walk in time, step by step, three of them older than Margie and three younger. Why did she do it? Didn't she love them too much to do this? Always fussing over them after Mum died, making her famous broccoli and salmon pie, driving the younger ones around in her yellow mini minor – to school, to the surf, whatever they needed, she never complained. Why this? Why now?

Finally I look up, and my eyes track the brown brick walls of the church, the stained glass windows where a soft sun changes the colours. Holy Child Church, Dallas. It had been several years since we’d left Broadmeadows behind. But the church, Holy Child, feels so familiar, a connection to our past that makes for a fitting farewell, if a fitting farewell for someone so young is possible. The familiar Sunday morning Mass, week after week, year after year, nineteen years of going to church, the place where our mother would overcome her anxiety and place her fate in God's hands. Somehow Mum would pluck up the courage to do a reading from the Bible for the gathering, me holding my breath, waiting as Mum struggled through the big words like Corinthians and Thessalonians and so on.
Inside the church with its blue carpet and simple white crosses on the altar the memories crowd my aching head. It almost makes sense to bring Margie here to this church to pray for her, for us, to the place we said goodbye to our parents, first Dad, and then Mum, just a few years before. I hardly have a memory of their funerals, grateful for the daze of grief that protects you from the shock of the real.

My misty eyes attempt to focus on Matthew, on the sun-streaked waves of his father's hair as I notice the tight grip of his fingers on Seamus's shoulders, Seamus strong and proud in his pinstriped suit.

Still a teenager, Matthew is too young to have suffered so much. He has battled adolescence almost alone: an orphan from the age of fourteen. How will he cope now with his sister's suicide? And John, only a couple of years older than him, standing taller than them all. What will all this mean for John?

I watch my brothers, feeling like the outsider, as they walk proud in perfect time. All are accomplished athletes – sprinters, middle and long-distance runners amongst them, footballers, cricketers, swimmers and surfers. Stories of sporting prowess, age championship trophies, hard-earned best and fairest medals and an endless array of blue and red ribbons stuffed in boxes in backyard sheds, have now turned into family folklore, ready to be dished up with the turkey and cranberry sauce on Christmas Day.

I am a little girl again, as I look beyond my six brothers, so strong and so sad, carrying Margie through the open doors of the church and outside, past where some of the mourners have spilled from the crowded foyer. There I am, staring back at me, into a dark mirror, so dark I can't see. Do I recognise that little girl? Do I like what I see? She is swinging on the monkey bars in the school playground. Her sister is with her counting how long she can hang there. Nearby her Mum and Dad, on the sidelines of the football oval, cheering on her brothers, Matthew, John and Seamus. Their muddy shorts and football boots too big for them – passed down from older brothers Tom, Paul and Andrew. Maybe Andrew never got to wear them, too busy with swimming and scouts and surfing.

They all look so handsome, in my daydream, and again now, back in the church. And when one stumbles, at the last of the steep steps of the church, and their knees buckle under the weight of the coffin and the grief of losing their sister, I can't watch any more. I look away at faces in the crowd, there's Maurice and Nick with their sister Donna. I smile and wave. I will not cry. Instead I smile as I remember the mad rush to the funeral.
Earlier that morning as Jon and I drove from the farm, Matthew and John followed behind and I prayed their old car would make it. I kept them in view in the rear vision mirror, just in case we had to rescue them. My two boys were with our kind neighbour and her young children. Playing in the sand pit. Oblivious. And yet as I waved goodbye I wondered how I might tell them about their Aunty’s death. How would I tell James his adored Godmother had died? How do you talk to a child about suicide? How do you talk to anyone about it? You don’t. That I already knew.

On the drive back to Dallas, Jon, ever reliable and seemingly calm, suddenly swore. “Shit,” he yelled as the car swerved in the gravel on the side of the road. “Flat tyre.”

“Where’s the spare?”

“Didn’t I ask you to get one?”

“Sorry. Forgot.”

We leave the shining white Ford there, on the side of the highway, and climb into Matthew’s bomb, squeeze in the back between surfboards and wetsuits and sleeping bags.

“Can I have one?” I ask John as he lights up a smoke. I hadn’t smoked for years and we all laughed as I spluttered through it and we talked of Margie then, shaking her head at me smoking and getting a flat in the new car.

Then, at the church, I felt her there with me, walking in with me, sitting in our front row seats as we held onto each other, standing proud, the seven siblings side by side, as the organist plays ‘Amazing Grace’. I try to sing but stop when I feel Andrew, beside me, shaking, noises that sound like crying. I can’t be sure. I have never heard him cry. I reach up and rub his back.

Paul delivers a eulogy, alongside Matt and me. He has no notes, just stories from the memories of her life as he dips in and out of twenty something years; Margie’s legendary kindness, her nurturing of her nephews and her niece. Paul draws a picture of our Margie and her life for the family and friends crowded into the church and spilling into the foyer and he shares some of her struggle and his despair during his visits to Royal Park Hospital. And he tells of our devastation when we finally discovered she had ended it all, that she couldn’t keep fighting.

Paul tells us how he had spoken to Margie less than an hour before she died. He saw her at the tram stop in Park Street.

“Just going into the city,” she told him.

In the city somewhere she caught a taxi to the Westgate Bridge, climbed out and jumped.
It's that picture of Margie clambering over the rail, desperate to jump, to find relief that continues to haunt me. It's everywhere. In the church now, in my sleep, images harassing me while I feed William, read to James, brush my teeth, cling to Jon, late at night waiting for sleep to save me. It never does.

"Don't leave me here," I hear her calling to me in my dreams. Locked up in the John Cade ward, 'certified' for depression, for being too sad. To protect her from herself, they said. In my nightmares I feel Margie's fear heating up next to me, so I sweat and the sheets are drenched. And all the time I smell fear, a filthy rancid smell like a dead rat under the floorboards. Or is it guilt? I should have saved her.

Paul's usually strong voice quivers as he speaks of Margie being united with Mum and Dad. I wish I had his faith, the conviction that we would one day be reunited with the people we love and lose, belief that there might actually be a life after this one, free from pain and suffering.

As Paul walks away from the altar, his feet drag along the blue carpeted stairs and nods to Tom, taking his place up there for the reading, a message of hope: "Be not afraid. I go before you. Always. Come follow me and I will give you hope." And I think of the two of them, only a year apart, doing their best to keep us all together, in the hotel after Dad died, in all those rented houses, after Mum, and now, all over again. And I imagine Paul and Tom, on that Tuesday night, after the news from the police that she was dead. Margie's big brothers, heartbroken, together at the city morgue in St Kilda Road, there to formally identify their sister. What did she look like, that day, when they went to see her? What was she wearing on that morning a fisherman at Spotswood, found her body on a stretch of water under the Westgate Bridge?

Nothing can erase that day from my mind – no kind of meditation and no amount of writing.

So, she wanted us to understand, she told us in her letter. And I thought I did, I thought I knew the depression and the unending grief that overwhelmed her so that every day was a struggle, that sometimes just making it to the shower was a battle. But did I really know the demons she battled, awake and asleep? Would the anger I felt with myself, the doctors, the world, ever subside?

Listening to Matthew now, in the church, remembering how he and Margie went to see Cindi Lauper together, took acting classes at St Martin's Youth Theatre together and shared houses in Melbourne, Torquay and Maroochydore I have some hope. He would never forget Margie, he told us,
grateful for her having taught him what really matters in life, to love and be
loved.

Was our love not enough? Was it grief? Loneliness? Relentless, psychological, pain? I wonder how I might have fixed it for her, what I might have done differently. And then I see her again. Falling from the sky, but this time the fall is not a scrambling leap, but more like a ballerina gracefully lifting her arms upwards and out, gliding through the air, across the sky, her legs pointed and hands outstretched, jumping into Mum’s arms. I imagine she is the white dove of peace, flying to freedom, a songbird migrating to a new home, a warmer place in the sun. And suddenly we are both little girls again, the two sisters in the middle of all those boys, playing in the backyard at McIvor Street. Margie is on the swing, pushing her legs up and out, making the swing go higher.

“Faster. Higher,” I hear her call to me, laughing at the wind rushing through her hair. And then she jumps, flies through the air arms open. Eyes wide as she shows me how to fly.

Is that what the taxi driver saw? I wonder. Did he think she was flying or falling? Did he see her spring from the bridge, like an eagle taking flight? A moment of benign peace? Or did it look more like diving, straight down to the water below? Falling or flying? I doubt I will ever know.

Now, as Andrew and John read prayers of reflection and Seamus puts on Margie’s favourite songs, I decide I will fly forever and never, ever fall. Like Maurice and Nick, I will grasp life in both hands and soar above whatever bad luck comes my way. As the Eurogliders and their anthem, ‘Heaven must be there’ fill the space between the sniffles and the silence, I think I might perhaps understand how we all fly differently, why some of us survive and others don’t, why some of us get a second chance.

Even when Paul read Margie’s suicide letter, I still held onto hope. I thought the words were a cry for help. I thought we would get a second chance and together we would get Margie the help she needed. I promised myself on that day she was missing that we would find her, fix her, get her back to university, as she had planned, find a miracle medication that would work for her, that all would be well.

I roll up the memorial booklet Margie’s girlfriends, Cathy and Janine, have prepared for the service. I roll it around and around in my hands, open it again to focus on the words, and then roll it back up. I flatten the curled edges of the pages to look at her face. A photo, black and white of Margaret Mary Egan
sitting at the grand piano, belting out a tune, smiling out at me, at the whole world, a flash of happiness caught there forever.

It is real. The letter, the bridge, the coffin, the photo. All of it.

And here I am with my brothers, leaving Holy Child Church, one more time, with a procession of people and convoy of cars, while a family friend sings, 'You are the wind beneath my wings'.

We make the familiar trek to the Fawkner Cemetery to bury our sister, in a hole in the ground on top of her father and mother, first one, then the other, in their fancy coffins of polished hardwood and brass handles. Buried on her birthday.
Ghazala pours tea for me, shifts a plate of food closer for me to try some of her cooking. In fragments of conversation she tells me of her family and the escape from their home in the north of Iraq, near the border of Syria. Merkus, her husband, joins us for some of the lesson, asking for help with a government form.

“Leila,” Ghazala says as she points to a small child now hiding behind her, a pretty dark-haired girl of about three, with big brown eyes like her mother’s, her party dress sparkling as she grabs at her mother’s legs.

After the lesson, we sit in the lounge room, a television quietly droning in the background in a language I don’t understand. Soon, Ghazala’s eldest daughter arrives and Ghazala takes her baby grandson in her arms and laughs and dances with him. They show me photos of another daughter’s wedding at a big reception centre in nearby Craigieburn. Every now and then she glances at the TV until I venture a comment.

“Terrible.” I say.

“My brother dead. My mother. All Saddam,” she says.

We sit there, sipping our sweet black tea, staring at the images, the desert, the army trucks, camouflaged soldiers, exploding buildings, all familiar to me, but here, in Dallas, in Ghazala’s home, they take on a new significance.

“I used to live here,” I finally say, and move towards her lounge room window. “I lived there,” I say, pointing to a place in the distance.

“Oh,” Ghazala says and smiles at me. “You live here.”

“Not any more.”

“Why?”

“I moved.”