

2014

Autobiographical journalism and the spectrum of self

Donna Maree Kilby

University of Wollongong, dokilby@uow.edu.au

Recommended Citation

Kilby, Donna Maree, Autobiographical journalism and the spectrum of self, Master of Arts - Research thesis, School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong, 2014. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/4185>

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Autobiographical journalism and the spectrum of self

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

Master of Arts - Research

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Donna Maree Kilby

(Bachelor Communication and Media Studies)

School of The Arts, English and Media.

2014

Declaration

I, Donna M. Kilby, declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Master of Arts - Research, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Donna M. Kilby

April 15, 2014

ABSTRACT

Autobiographical journalism is gaining momentum as a form, yet little literature currently exists on the topic. Ros Coward's 2009/2010 work forms the beginning of wider conversation to be had about the function of the self in journalistic writing. This paper shifts that discussion from newspaper columns to contemporary book-length works of autobiographical journalism, drawing a theoretical framework from autobiographical theorists who argue that narrative forms an inextricable role in development of self. It defines three new categories to map the positioning of self to narrative in relation to three literary case studies: Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Anna Funder's *Stasiland* and Joan Didion's *The Year Of Magical Thinking*. The categories of narrative-driven autobiographical journalism, reflective autobiographical journalism and introspective autobiographical journalism are established with reference to the literary texts. The paper then examines my own work of autobiographical journalism, *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*, and the ways in which it has been informed and influenced by the abovementioned literary and theoretical works. Ultimately this represents a reference point for discussing and analysing the role of the self in literature. As the title suggests, these three new categories represent only points on a spectrum of how the self functions in literary autobiographical journalism—they do not in any way purport to represent the entire realm of possibility.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest gratitude firstly goes to my supervisors, Dr. Marcus O'Donnell and Dr. Shady Cosgrove, who have tirelessly supported me throughout this project (even through times when I did not share their enthusiasm). I am not exaggerating when I say that without their energy and intellect this project would never have been completed.

I would also like to thank the School of Arts, English and Media—Dr. Steven Tanner, in particular, for believing I could take on this project back in 2008, and my colleagues Dr. Siobhan McHugh and John Burfitt for believing it worthwhile. The support of such a diverse, and prolifically talented group of writers has been such a source of reassurance and inspiration throughout.

Thanks are also due to Yoke Berry and her husband Bill, and Amnon Levy, who pointed me in the right direction. And to Rabbi Eli Cohen, for allowing me to attend the Newtown synagogue.

When it came time to finishing the project, I couldn't have done so without Christina Sexton, who after hearing me talk about my search for Alfons for five years, provided sound editorial guidance and caught my typos with such grace and speed.

To my friends who appear in this story and the ones that don't: thank you for the listening to me talk about this endlessly for the past five years. I wish I could say I'll stop now, but I've got another few ideas in the works. And to the amazing Michael Elkins, italics-finder and sanity-keeper: you came in late to this but have been nothing short of invaluable.

Thanks also to Theo and Maria and my family in Germany – I'd love to see you again soon.

To my mother, father, and sister: thank you for not only supporting me throughout this, but for allowing me to lay your lives out on paper. Thank you for coming with me on research excursions, for reading my work over and over and for never being offended.

And lastly, to Oma: equally frustrating and incredible—the inspiration for this story. You've lived an amazing life. You're still as brave as ever.

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CREATIVE WORK: *SEARCHING FOR ALFONS HENNEBERGER*

My grandmother is dying. She's been doing so for years, but not in the gracious, dignified way I hear of other people going. Instead, she's dying a death of incontinence-related midnight phone calls and hospital visits for feet so swollen they look like they'll burst. She discharges herself from care so she can light up a cigarette before returning to hospital a few days later because she can't breathe.

I started writing about her youth years ago, envisaging a kind of rollicking adventure story, one wherein I track down her missing husband, my grandfather, visit his family's old hotel in Namibia (complete with tales of diamond smuggling), meet his new family in (I presume) Israel, and take Oma to see her family in Germany. It was all so very Wes Anderson and I pictured myself a kind of Margot Tennenbaum, an effortless prodigy. It didn't occur to me until recently that no amount of genius can make my grandfather Alfons' story make sense. The clues I have spent years chasing have not been clues at all.

My grandfather has been missing since about 1967. As far as anyone's aware, it's a self-imposed exile. I can think of a few reasons he might have left his family, but we'll never know for sure: once he was gone, he never contacted his wife or children again. He was so keen, too, to become an Australian citizen before. He filed for and was granted citizenship in 1960, a few years after my family arrived in Australia from Germany. During World War II, my grandfather was part of a very German, very Catholic family, and yet, in 1994, when I was eight years old, my mother was informed that she had lost her Australian citizenship because her father had become an Israeli citizen. He'd also changed his name: from Alfons Henneberger to Abraham Ben-Yehuda. According to section three of the Citizenship Act 1948 (which was only revised in 2007), a child ceases to be an Australian citizen when their responsible parent renounces their own citizenship.

I still remember my dad's face growing red with anger when we first found out. He'd throw his hands up.

'That's ridiculous!' he'd say, 'You've never even been to Israel!'

My mum has spent much of her life trying to find her father; I thought maybe as a journalist I might be able to find new avenues to lead her to him. It was arrogance really. That was in 2008. Since then I have worked for magazines, websites and dodgy creative agencies, trying to fund my adventure story. I've built websites for local

businesses and written copy for beauty brands and men's deodorant. I've tried as long as I could to be the hero of my own narrative and a reliable employee. I tried and tried and now I find myself sitting on the lounge in my tiny apartment that looks straight into my neighbour's kitchen in the middle of a Tuesday. I've just lost a long-term contract, am out of work and have no real grasp on Alfons' story either. I don't know what's next.

So let's start with a series of memories because at least they're tangible: I am three years old, clutching the swirly metal gate at my Oma's house while she tries to unhook my fingers. The early morning sun stains the scene gold. I'm screaming; I don't want to go inside. My mum's going to leave me there, I know. They work together, mum and Oma, to peel my hands off, but I am determined. Dusty white flecks of peeling paint stick to my hands. Eventually, I give up and slump on the warm concrete. Oma picks me up and carries me inside, the scratchy wool of her jumper on my cheeks.

I was then, and am still now, a voracious reader. As a child my parents worried I was partially deaf: often when they'd try to speak to me I wouldn't respond. My hearing, they soon realised, was fine—I just wouldn't hear them if I had a book open. One story from that time has always stuck with me. I can't remember the title or who wrote it, but it was about a little girl and her grandfather. In the beginning he has to help her put on her shoes, eat her breakfast, push her in her pram. By the end the little girl has grown up and the grandfather has grown old. Now, she has to help him put on his shoes and eat his breakfast. She has to push him in his wheelchair. I remember liking the symmetry of the story, and the sweet hand-drawn illustrations. What seemed sweet then has lost its sheen now it's my reality.

Riiing Riiing: the urgency of the home phone, ringing at 10pm. I know it's Oma before I answer; otherwise I would have let it ring out. At this time of night it's always her. I'm staying at my parents' place while they're away for work and I have a big night of chocolate and *Law and Order* planned. I never watch TV except at my parents' house, so when I do, I go all out.

'Hello?' Oma asks, her voice scratchy.

'Do you need me to come over?' I ask and then add. 'Should I call an ambulance?'

'I think so, yes.'

'Okay, what's wrong?'

‘My feet hurt. And my chest has a pressure in it.’

I panic. I call my mum. I know I can’t call an ambulance before I see Oma; I won’t be able to answer the routine questions (Is her skin clammy? Is she breathing right now? Is her skin changing colour?). But it’s taking a chance to wait. Oma is 84 now. She lives on her own in her smoke-stained house, existing on coffee and biscuits and slices of meatloaf eaten straight from the deli paper. Oma has been admitted into hospital twice in the past few months, it’s always because she can’t breathe from years of smoking, but doctors say it’s her heart that will eventually weaken more and more until it stops pumping at all. These days, when I arrive at her house, she squints and shades her eyes, as though trying to figure out my identity based on my shape. ‘It’s all shadows’, she says. Sometimes she tells mum I haven’t been to visit when I’ve only just left. Most questions are answered with: ‘oh, Donna, how I know that?’

I grab a coat and my car keys and head over to her.

On the way thoughts turn to my friend Aemelia whose father passed away earlier this year. He was in his fifties and it was fast: a cancer diagnosis and just months to live. The night he died I navigated the uneven path to Aemelia’s front door, the air floral and thick. We went inside and she talked and I wiped the tears forming in the corners of my eyes. Her mother was there, as well as her brother. I realised only later that we were not leaving anyone alone: when her brother drove to pick up his girlfriend, her mother joined us in the living room. I waited until they came home before I left. What would happen if I left my friend in that big house, sitting on a crochet blanket, staring at the tag on the bottom of a teddy bear laying face down on the couch, pictures of her childhood self smiling back at her?

‘I’ve been seeing old couples holding hands and I just keep thinking that mum will never have that,’ Aemelia says and I think of Oma pulling on her nightie over saggy skin, sitting in her house alone.

I swing my car into Oma’s driveway and head for the door; it’s open, and I call out to her. She’s sitting at her kitchen table, in the chair she’s always in, beneath the still life photo of vegetables. Oma’s days are spent in a smoke-haze, sitting, waiting for the next visitor. Most days she covers her hair with an old beanie that sags over her eyebrows. Her blue-blue eyes are sunken into saggy cheeks. Tonight, her face is puffy and her breath echoes in her throat.

‘I think I call you why Rom come and he just tell me take two Panadol and go to bed,’ she says. ‘I didn’t know if anybody answer why I know Sylvie and Barry away for work.’

‘That’s okay Oma, I was just looking after the dog. Now, what’s wrong?’

‘My feet hurt,’ she says. ‘Is there anything on? It hurt like hell.’

Her feet look swollen as they always are. Her breath usually comes in rasps these days.

‘There’s nothing I can see,’ I say, ‘but I’ll call an ambulance if you like.’

After I’ve given the ambulance the address and hung up the phone, Uncle Rom comes in, dressed in his work overalls. He’s on night shift at the coal terminal. Mum must have called him.

‘She was like this when I was here earlier,’ he says.

‘I called an ambulance,’ I tell him. ‘If she wants to go to hospital, I’m all for it.’

The three of us sit around the dining table, making small talk while we wait. I spent a lot of time at my Oma’s house while I was growing up. Sometimes we’d watch *Days Of Our Lives* or play Trouble. I was a bright kid, but stubborn. I used to make up stories and compile them into little books, stapled at the edges. Later, I excelled at school and attended gifted and talented classes once a week. I was raised with the understanding that one day I would do something extraordinary. To me, the search for Alfons was it. Of course I would find him, sit down with him. He would be the grandfather Oma’s second husband Wally never was. And my mum would be so happy to have her dad back. Equally as importantly though, would be the creative side: I’d be able to write about the search. It would be great writing, sophisticated, moving and familiar. It hasn’t all worked out that way.

I like to remember Oma as she was when I was a child: always wrapped in a home-knitted jumper, her wiry hair in tight curls, her hands busy, knitting or cooking or picking up after me. I remember her in a purple-striped bathing suit at the beach. When I was little we’d go for walks or she’d take me to visit her friends: Auntie Margaret, who’d give me crumbly shortbread or Mrs Ludwig, whose house was decorated with clogs and birds carved from dark wood. Like Oma, both women left Europe on a ship bound for Australia after World War II and ended up here, in Wollongong. It’s worlds away from the town where Oma grew up: a little place called Roding, about three hours by train from Munich. Roding is a snowy town divided by a river that’s frozen in the

winter. It's in the Bayern Schwarzwalde, or as we call it here, the Bavarian Black Forest, home of the namesake cake and heartland of the Nazis in the lead up to the war.

It was a long time before Oma started speaking about what happened during the war; she would have been in her seventies and me in my teens. Now, over a decade later, she has memorised her stories, telling them verbatim and on repeat.

'You know,' she'll say, 'I never had any chocolate until I was sixteen. Someone gave it to me, a Yankee, why they come over from America, and I looked at him and I say "what is that?" and he say "try it, it's good." But I take it home to my mother and she eat it and I don't get any.'

When she was twenty, Oma moved to Munich. The war was over. There, she worked in a butcher shop, and as a cleaner. She met a man named Alfons Henneberger, fell pregnant and married him at the Court House. There is a photo of Oma, Alfons and my mother as they're about to board their ship, the *Castel Felice*, bound for Australia. Oma's legs are bare beneath her long coat. She looks open-mouthed at the waiting ship. Alfons trails behind with a slight grin and my mother in his arms. My mum clings to a toy with both hands. Alfons wears his coat open, the belt trailing behind as he walks. The family unit would only last a few more years.

Eventually the paramedics arrive. There are two of them, a kind of good-cop/bad-cop pair.

'What's the problem, Anna?' asks the first one, a hooked-nose man in his fifties with a mop of curly hair and full cheeks.

'My feet,' she says.

'Are they aching? Or is it a sharp pain? When did it start?'

'I get up and I make a cuppa,' starts Oma, 'And then I sit down and I drink him. Must have been this morning. Oder after breakfast. And then I stand up...'

'So this morning?' interrupts the second. He's squinty and restless. Oma either doesn't hear him or doesn't care to hear him. She continues talking to the first.

'... and then I lay across my bed a bit, watch a bit of TV...'

The paramedic works as she speaks, taking her temperature, strapping a band to her upper arm and clipping a tiny monitor to her fingers. Oma's oxygen levels are fine, as is her blood pressure. They are reluctant to take her away in the ambulance, but do so, if only to take some chest x-rays. The next day, though, we find out Oma has fractured her

toe. She kind of remembers missing the step to her toilet and kicking it. She'll be in hospital in Shellharbour for a month.

Oma always says to me, 'Donna, don't get old.' And I always reply 'Don't worry, I won't.'

I'm twenty-seven now. I always thought that by this point I would have it all together: the career, the man. I thought I'd be confident and healthy and successful. For me, the prospect of ageing like Oma is not as scary as that of turning thirty, still sitting on this lounge. Let's circle back to the beginning of this: when I started searching for Alfons. When I thought the answers were within reach.

Theo

February 2009, Munich

I arrive in Munich full of expectation. On the flight from London, I scratch notes in a tan moleskin notebook. *What was Alfons like as a kid? What were his parents like? Has Theo heard from his brother? What does he think happened to Alfons?* Notes and notes of questions. I half-expect simple answers ... *Oh, so my grandfather is living in Africa, I'll go there! Really? He wrote all these letters and they never got to us?*

I wonder what my grandfather would think if he knew I'd flown halfway around the world, from Australia to Germany, to find out about him. More than forty years ago, when he was my age, he did the trip in reverse, stepping off a ship in Australia with wife and child in tow. In my favourite photo of Alfons he holds my mother's pram in one hand on a street corner. He is looking away from her, but not at the camera either, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. I love his thick-rimmed glasses and short-sleeved shirts. His cardigans and hair that stands on end. The lazy, bored stare. Child-like handwriting in short notes my mum has kept for forty years, wrapped in sticky tape and tucked away in a box. I feel he and I are kindred spirits, that when I meet him, he'll explain everything to me and it will all make sense. And then I think about Oma, tugging at her wedding ring as she talks. She doesn't want me to find him, and so, back home, I've been tiptoeing around the subject with her, prodding her for information and backing away if she asks any questions.

Theo Henneberger looks a lot like Alfons. In pictures of their younger selves at least, it's hard to tell the brothers apart. But even if Alfons had lived his whole life in Bavaria, he and his brother wouldn't have much in common.

Let me tell you about Theo. Theo loves his *heimat*, Bavaria. He wears the traditional Bavarian felt hat when he goes out, or, on days when he wears a knitted cap instead, he pretends he is French, mock-tossing his scarf over one shoulder and turning up his chin. He's a member of the local shooting club and treasures his books and books of targets. He drags them out at mealtimes—'See here,' he says, pushing the book towards me, 'Here I shot 300,'—before his wife, Maria, takes them away. 'Donna isn't interested in how well you shoot!'

My great aunt and uncle live in a little flat near the Olympic stadium; one of many paint-by-numbers housing blocks in the city. From the outside it looks like every other block on the street, white walls, brown windowsills, a little wrought iron balcony. The neighbours are friendly, and always interested in who I am and why I'm here. The walls of their flat are crowded with family photos in heavy frames. Here are Theo's parents, sitting formally to have their picture taken. Here is Theo's late grandmother, eyebrows raised and thin hair coiffed. There is little Wuschel, Theo and Maria's much-loved Maltese terrier that died a few years back. Their children's wedding photos, grandchildren, even cityscapes. No Alfons.

For the six days I spend in Munich, Theo, Maria and I fall into a routine. I wake up early, at 7, and cycle on the indoor bike in Theo's study. I'd rather be jogging outside, but Theo and Maria don't like me to go out on my own. Cycling is a better workout than nothing, and after a few months of travelling, it's good enough. Usually about 20 minutes after I begin Theo pads in wearing saggy underwear and a threadbare t-shirt. He leans over my shoulder to look at the bike's little LCD screen.

'Morning Theo.'

'How far did you ride this morning?'

I tell him, he grunts.

'You know, when I was young, I used to ride everywhere. I worked on the other side of the city, and I rode there. That's why I'm so healthy now,' he says.

Less than six months before I got here, Theo collapsed on a city street: a stroke. He was in a coma for thirty-one days. Maria was beside herself. Even now, sometimes as we sit at the breakfast table, she leans her forehead on her fingertips and shakes her head. *Ein und dreißig tagen*. Thirty-one days. But by the time I got there he was driving again, walking without a cane. 'You know what the worst thing is?' he says, 'I got to go in a helicopter, but I missed the whole flight.'

Theo's legs show the only outward signs of the stroke. His thighs are covered in brand new baby pink flesh that has grown over bedsores. He shows these to me in the mornings, as he casts an eye over them himself. I guess I'm in his space, an inconvenience, cycling surrounded by his shooting scrapbooks and pens and papers and maps and flags.

After Theo is done talking, he shuffles out. I climb off the bike, stretch and shower. I dress and wander to the dining room, where Maria has laid out a basket of

bread, all sorts of jams and butter, cheese and sliced deli meats. For me there's a bowl of muesli, alongside yoghurt and fruit, always some kind of tropical fruit, like papaya or kiwi fruit or limes or berries.

'Papaya!' Maria announces, 'We ate this in Thailand. Do you like it?'

Maria lives to eat. She stops to admire strudel in store windows and gushes over tangerines in fruit shops, holding them to the light and grinning. She sings along to old American love songs on the radio as she bakes. She bakes a lot: cream-filled chocolate cakes, butter tarts piled high with fruit. Maria refuses any help.

'No, don't wash the dishes! Leave it, it's okay!'

After breakfast Maria settles into the kitchen while Theo sets himself up in the lounge room—television on and crossword resting on his knee. Some mornings, as I flip through family photo albums or attempt to read German fashion magazines, he talks and talks at me about the problems with Japanese cars or the state of the economy, only to stop minutes later and ask 'You don't understand, do you?' I studied German for six years in high school and have the basics down, but we learned *Hochdeutsch*; I can't understand his regional dialect, *Bayerish*. He shakes his head and goes back to his puzzle. Sometimes he tells me about his youth, and about his grandfather Ludwig.

Ludwig Henneberger owned a hotel in a predominantly German part of Namibia. The hotel, called The German Kaiser, was something out of a Katherine Hepburn film: an oversized colonial home rising from nowhere in particular, sandblasted white against clear blue sky. I've seen Theo's pictures, but other than that I can't find any record of it ever having existed.

For years Ludwig travelled back and forth between Germany and Africa, running the hotel and visiting his family. Once, at Christmas, he brought a dining table home with him. Dark wood, solid. Theo remembers watching a group of men carry the table inside and place it in the centre of the living room. But that's no place for a big table like that, he thought. He saw his grandfather extend a stocky hand to the men in thanks. They left. His grandfather surveyed the table, tapping its legs and running his big palm across the polished wood. He felt underneath and pulled out a small saw. What did he need that for? Ludwig began to work carefully, cutting into one of the thick wooden legs. He threw his whole body into each movement. And soon he'd sawed right through and the table toppled onto the now-shorter leg. Ludwig picked up the foot of the table, now separate from the rest. He turned it upside down and shards of glass fell into

his palm. Glass? Why glass? Only later, when Ludwig had sold his prize and returned to Africa did Theo realise what he'd seen: diamonds. A table filled with diamonds. Now, as he tells me the story in his little Munich flat, he looks around and throws his hands up in the air. Maria, who has wandered in to adjust the cushions under his legs, shakes her head. 'Everything gone! Nothing! He sold them all and went back to Africa!'

'Hennebergers!' says Maria. 'They're all the same!'

'Not me,' says Theo.

I'm restless. I'm here to see where Alfons grew up. I want Theo to pass me a box crammed full of Alfons' letters and old clothes. I want to meet people he knew back then. There are photos. Albums and albums full. There were family photos from so long ago it seems preposterous—who even had cameras that long ago? There are childhood pictures of Alfons and Theo, brothers in matching lederhosen, chests puffed out with pride. There are photos of Oma's house in Australia: my mum perched in a highchair, sun glinting off her curls and toys scattered around. But no letters. When I ask Theo if he has any of Alfons' letters, he claims his brother never wrote a word to them after he left for Australia. When I asked how he got the childhood photos of my mum and who wrote on the back of them, he says Oma sent them; he's convinced that even though the letters were signed by Alfons, the handwriting wasn't his.

So, there *are* letters?

'No,' says Theo, 'I burnt them. I thought, "What am I going to do with those?"'

He's not telling me something. Maybe the brothers had a falling out. Maybe they are still in contact. I ask Theo if he'd like to know what happened to Alfons. He doesn't hesitate.

'Actually no.'

'Are there any friends of his I could talk to?'

'Yes, he had friends,' says Theo, 'but they weren't correct'. He tells me this *auf Englisch*.

'They weren't correct. Lots of these friends were homosexual, but he was heterosexual with women as well. It wasn't a good time for the family.'

One morning after breakfast Theo and Maria break our established routine. They sit down next to each other and tug on their boots. I watch with interest. Where are they going?

'Come, Donna,' says Maria.

Where were we going? I slip a pair of thick woollen socks over the ones I am already wearing. I shove my feet into my boots and wind the laces around silver hooks. I wrap a scarf around my neck, throw a thick jumper over my shirt. I zip my rain- and snow-proof jacket up to my neck and pull a beanie around my ears. I am not born for this cold, this balling-hands-in-mittens, leggings-under-jeans winter. My nose is always red and I email friends, telling them about the sundresses and sandals I'll wear when I come home.

In the hall Maria passes Theo a cane and he pulls a felt hat from its hook. I bundle myself into the back seat of their Fiat and sit quietly.

In the car Theo complains about the *Amerikanische musik* that has infiltrated his once-quiet radio station. Three years earlier, the last time I was in Germany, the only songs I recognised on the radio were Don McLean's *Starry Starry Night* and Beatles classics. Back then, when I asked a relative in his early 20s about his favourite music, he told me it was 'German music.' Now in Theo's Fiat, Madonna's new single disrupts the silence.

We pull up outside the post office, a bright yellow brick building. Theo parks illegally and tells Maria to hurry as she runs inside. Theo turns around to look at me over the edge of his seat.

'We're going to show you where my brother and I lived.'

My mum was born on a couch, or so Oma says. It was in a cramped house on a street called Auerfeld Strasse. Three rooms for six people. Oma, Alfons and mum had the bedroom while Theo and his parents slept on fold-out beds in the kitchen. There was also a small bathroom. I've heard stories about this place—Oma swears Theo and Alfons' mother stole dresses from her room and sold them for cash. That's where Theo was taking me. I don't know what to expect: as though family secrets are contained in bricks and linoleum.

On the way Maria points out a church steeple: my mother was baptised there. We are round a corner before my camera switches on and I miss the photo. Not long after, Theo stops the car in the middle of the road and points out the apartment block. It is red-brick and plain. Maria crosses the street to read the nameplate on the buzzer. She doesn't recognise it. I take a few pictures; Theo points out which apartment was theirs. We climb back into the car and drive home. Is that it? A real journalist would have pressed the buzzer, spoken to the new occupants, no matter who they were. I tell myself

it's okay that I didn't: this is just the beginning. I can always go back without Theo and Maria.

The next day, *Stefan* Henneberger, my mum's cousin, whisks me off to a party in the mountains. He bounds into the hallway as though on stage.

'Mum, where is my lunch?' he booms. 'I'm hungry!'

'You're always hungry!' Maria calls back.

We eat: dumplings and pork and bread and vegetables I haven't seen before.

'Donna, you don't eat enough!' says *Stefan*.

'You'll love this party, there's a buffet.'

After lunch we set off. We stop at *Stefan*'s house to collect his wife Pauline and her friend Suzi. Pauline, dressed in black, is large and sullen. She doesn't speak to me. Suzi looks like an aerobics instructor from the 80s with her powder blue ski coat and dry, teased blonde hair. *Stefan* and Pauline's three children are excited—they get to spend the night at a friend's house. They giggle at my poor German and the eldest, Corrina, tells me the English she learnt in school:

'My fav-our-ite ice-cream is choc-o-late.'

'You'll stay in my room,' says four-year-old Simona. 'My bed is the comfiest.'

After the kids are gone, the four remaining adults climb into *Stefan*'s car. It has that distinct child-smell, of spilt apple juice and saliva. *Stefan* explains to Pauline and Suzi that I am here from Australia to find out about the family history, that I am writing a story.

'What would you do that for?' says Pauline, not really to me.

'The next time you come, you bring me back a kangaroo,' says Suzi. I noticed her eyelids are painted blue to match her coat.

The party really is in the mountains. It's in the Austrian ski fields and we have to take a train, almost vertical, up the slopes to get there. In all, the evening is a blur of endless plates of tough meat, dinner rolls, salads dripping in dressing, over-sweet desserts, cream-filled hot chocolates. I eat too much and feel the familiar discomfort of undigested food behind my ribs. The conversation moves too quickly for me to keep up. There's schnapps, drunk out of tiny bottles. My German companions light cigarette after cigarette; I try not to breathe in the smoke. I cup my hands around my hot chocolate. I wander out onto the balcony to get away from the nicotine air. Way below the party in the mountains, a town twinkles life where snow-coated mountains meet.

The next morning I wake up in Simona's pink bedroom. My clothes hold smoke from the night before. It's a quiet morning; the kids are still out. I gather my jeans and cardigan, socks and boots from the floor and put them back on in layers. I wander out to the living room, where *Stefan* is already drinking coffee. He cooks toast for me and spreads it thick with Nutella.

I'm finishing breakfast when the front door opens and in comes Ruth, Stefan's sister. Her cheeks are pink and she leaves her coat on; it's a practical, puffy green thing. Ruth greets Stefan with a kiss on the cheek. She's taking me for a drive to see some other family houses today.

'We go?' she asks in English, 'Yes? You put on your coat?'

Ruth picks up my overnight bag and carries it to her car. She sets the inbuilt GPS and off we go. It speaks out loud in simple German phrases, *geraudeous*—straight ahead, *nehm die nachste links*—take the next left. 'You understand this?' Ruth asks. I nod.

We drive past fields covered in stripes of snow. The sun glints off the brightness. Ruth chats to me in German as she drives.

We are on our way to a little town called Buch, where Ludwig had one of his country houses. It doesn't take long, probably only half an hour on the autobahn.

Buch is a quiet little town on Ammersee. In winter Ammersee is a deserted lake; a paddle steamer stands proudly next to an empty beer garden.

'In the summer this is very nice, we come here for beers after work,' says Ruth. Today is a clear day and we can see right across the lake to Zugspitze, Germany's highest mountain.

The house we went to see is all thatched roof and rounded chimney, something out of Brothers Grimm. The big yard backs right onto the lake. I can imagine Ludwig trudging out the front door in his hunting gear, leaning his hand on his gun for a photo, and whistling for his dog to follow. I wonder if Alfons swam in the lake in the summer while his parents and grandparents were served tea and torte on picnic blankets like in the photos I've seen. On the way back to Theo and Maria's house Ruth drives me to see an apartment block on Ardelheid Strasse. This was the family's home after the war: three generations crammed into a little cellar flat. Ludwig was able to afford a flat here because it was company-owned and out of the city centre.

The building itself was almost identical to the one at Auerfeld Strasse. Another set of flats, the differences hardly register. I know now that there really is nothing to be learned from staring at stacks of bricks. The things I want to know belong to Theo.

Something unusual happens when Ruth drops me home: Theo comes to the door to greet me. He grabs my shoulders and then holds my face in both hands. He hugs me to him in homecoming.

That night we have a family gathering of our own. Maria bakes a crumbly butter cake and covers it in a tropical fruit glaze. Ruth stays for coffee and one of her brothers arrives with his teenage children, Marcus and Issy. Maria asks how their schoolwork is going. Marcus is forced, in a teasing way, to practice his English with me. He's shy and fiddles with the sleeve of his jumper. The family albums are pulled down from their place above the cabinet. Theo shows them proudly. We make jokes, drink champagne and go to bed with full stomachs and light heads.

The next day Theo and I are in our usual after-breakfast spots in the lounge room when I ask if he was ever close to Alfons. He tells me a story in reply.

In the winter of 1946 Alfons was 13 and Theo 11. Their mother moved the family to a flat overlooking the Viktualienmarkt, Munich's central marketplace. The war was over, but the clean up would last years longer. Parts of the city had been destroyed. People were tired, constantly on alert. Theo says Munich was bombed nearly two thousand times in three years. 'Day and night the bombs came ... Detonation bomb, firebomb, there were lots of people killed. They thought dead people were good people.' Like Oma, he didn't know the taste of chocolate or fruit and was given only a hundred grams of meat once a week.

The new apartment was in a nice spot; the windows looked out over the Munich skyline: domed cathedrals outlined black in the afternoon sun. I've stood in the doorway and watched the Viktualienmarkt as it is now: old men huddle in puffed jackets, their frosty breath spilling onto hot pretzels and *wurstels*. Couples pose, cameras in hands in front of a traditional blue-and-white-striped Bavarian pole.

From their bedroom the boys listened to sounds from the market below. Voices floated through the glassless windows—the panes had been shattered in bomb blasts and who had the money to replace glass? The ice-tipped winter wind howled straight in, sweeping through the apartment. The boys' mother did her best, tacking newspaper and

sheets of tin over the open spaces. When it rained the three huddled in the centre of the bedroom to stay dry. Stealing firewood was Alfons' idea.

The roads in the city centre were being rebuilt, gravel spread thick over wooden reinforcements. A waste, said Alfons. When he looked at the streets he saw firewood. He told Theo his plan: 'We'll fill up a backpack with wood and we'll be warm for days. It's so simple!' With Alfons there was always some kind of half-hatched scheme. Theo pointed out that there are always soldiers on watch.

'Ah it's no problem,' said Alfons, 'we're just kids.'

A few days went by; Theo was sure his brother had forgotten about his plan. Then one evening, as the sun started to set Alfons brought it up.

'Come on Theo, we're getting out of here.'

Theo folded his book closed over his finger and looked at his brother in the next bed. Alfons was huddled cross-legged on his thin mattress, a blanket around his shoulders.

'But it's nearly dark out.'

'So?'

Alfons threw his little brother a coat. It was a shabby old thing, way too big for his shoulders. Theo slipped his arms into it. The boys walked out the front door and into the fierce cold. Alfons looked up and down the street and crossed the road, a hand signal for Theo to follow. The younger brother walked a few steps behind.

A dirty green jeep came around the corner and slowed down. Americans, surely. The car came to a stop opposite the *Viktualienmarkt* and a pair of legs swing out the door. Two heavy boots set themselves on the ground and the soldier stood tall. He looked around and fished in his pockets. Theo watched as he began to roll tobacco in his thick fingers. Some kids he knew chased the soldiers around like they were something special. He'd watch little girls swarm to parked jeeps and come back with fistfuls of candy.

'Come,' called Alfons. He'd stopped and was waiting with raised eyebrows. 'It's getting dark.'

They didn't get far before Alfons stopped walking again.

'The further we walk, the further we have to carry the wood,' he said. 'It's better if we just get it here.'

Theo didn't argue. The brothers got down on their hands and knees and started to clear away the top layer of gravel. It was sharp under Theo's knees. His fingers, frozen, couldn't work any faster. The rocky surface hurt as it gave way, but Alfons was right: underneath was splintery old wood. Alfons levered out a block and turned to Theo with a grin that took up his whole face.

'Come on slowcoach!'

The canvas bag was almost full when the jeep rounded the corner.

'Americaner!' whispered Alfons. 'Go, go.'

He leapt into action. The boys got up to run, but they had already been spotted. They ran anyway. The pair kept running, past the Isa Tower, past the marketplace, heavy footsteps on their heels. Suddenly, Theo was running on his own. The soldiers had grabbed Alfons from behind.

'Where is your father?' they demanded. They took Alfons home by the collar.

'I was a faster runner,' Theo recalled. 'When they had gone I ran back and collected the rucksack.'

For a split second I see that boy, the proud-chested boy from the photographs come back to life. But then he's gone and Theo sits across from me, thin and hollow-cheeked. The boys grew apart long before Alfons left for Australia. All he has now is memories. Yet Theo still can't believe his brother would just walk out on his family.

'That's what I don't accept I don't accept that, because for me that's a terrible, really terrible thing to do.'

When I ask him about the possibility that his brother is in Africa, he shakes his head.

'That didn't happen. Your mum imagined that,' he says. 'The little girls hang very much on their papa.'

When I leave Munich, I hug goodbye to Theo through his open car window. I kiss him on the cheek and thank him for everything. He doesn't, can't, get out of the car. I wriggle my backpack onto my shoulders. Maria walks with me down the stairs to the U-Bahn.

'When will I see you again?' she asks.

'Maybe next year.'

Maria squeezes me to her, her glasses fogged with tears. And she turns away and walks up the stairs, back to Theo.

On the train I think about them. About Theo, with his puzzles and lectures and shooting targets. Maria, with her tracksuits and wavy white hair and plates of cake and cups of tea. I thought back to breakfast when Maria was telling me about how bad Theo's father was with money, about Ruth's cheating ex-boyfriend, and about the way Alfons had no respect for Oma. I think about how she said '*Immer Hennebergers*' and shook her head. And how Theo said 'I'm not the same.'

It's now been more than four years since that trip. Theo and Maria are still living in the same place, probably still eating the same meals. We talk to them sometimes on the phone, but the language makes it hard to keep up with them. I've wanted to go back and see them so many times, but it's always been too difficult for me to save the money and find the time (or I've lost sight of the trip and instead have spent money on handbags and sunglasses so I'm not the only girl in the office with an out-of-date accessory).

I spent a couple of years after I got back working on a health magazine. Magazines were always my dream, so I ignored the low salary and the two-hour commute. I was so happy to be going to work every day for a magazine company. As an undergrad I worked with a group of students to launch a student magazine. I always thought that when I landed a job in a glossy everything else would fall into place. It wasn't the case. The magazine I worked for was new to the Australian market and under pressure to perform—which it wasn't doing by any means. The team worked long hours and was met with higher and higher targets each month. Requests for holidays were met with an incredulous stare from the editor. Still, when I think back now it was the best job I ever had. After the magazine I went to work on a start-up website: a job that seemed to offer a good networking opportunity and better salary. It turned out to be one of those mistakes you could never see coming. The commute was longer, the work harder and the search for Alfons fell by the wayside. By that stage I was struggling just to get through the day. It's taken years to understand that I may never get the story.

And then just last week Oma said that Alfons is in Africa—Theo told her.

'When?' I asked.

'When I talked to him on the phone.'

'But mum said he didn't know.'

'That's what he tell your mum.'

It's a shame her mind is going; I'd like to believe her.

Family

May 2009, Wollongong

I come home from Munich excited about Theo's stories, but with a vague sense of dread. I have great bits and pieces, but no leads or answers. I have the stuff I want to write about Oma, and I have Theo's stories, but I don't know what will happen once I've written those parts. Still, every day I wake up, run, and drive to the university to sit in the library and write. It gives my days a sense of purpose, if only purpose for the sake of purpose. I've always found that it's all or nothing with me: I'm either focussed on work, health, finances, everything at once—or I'm floundering. If one area falls, they all do. At the moment I'm going through the motions. I'm unemployed after my trip, uncomfortable in my skin after gaining weight overseas. The story though, seems to read nicely, even though I'm writing it with no real sense of structure or intent. I'm nervous to show it to my family in case the act of letting someone read my work changes it in some way. Will I still be free to write it as I please if, all of a sudden, other people are allowed input? But it's a standoff that I'm willing to lose. I let them read it. Shortly after, my sister comes home for a family dinner. I'm back living with mum and dad after the trip, so I cook homemade pizzas.

'Donna, why aren't I in it?' asks my sister Inga from across the table, reaching for a slice.

'Donna, you should really write your sister into it,' says my dad. He wasn't mentioned in it either. I didn't edit my immediate family out intentionally; I just didn't want to confuse things any further than they already were. I know Inga and dad would love to be part of the story, but it would read as a consolation: they aren't essential. I am more interested in writing something clear than something true. But even saying that is assuming the truth is in the details, which I don't believe. I hadn't included them because it made the story harder to write.

'Yeah,' Inga says, 'You make it sound like you did these things yourself, like you're an only child. I was there too.'

'Oh sure, I'll write you in. I'll write, "I have a sister. Her name is Inga and she's reeeaaallly pretty."'

Did I owe it to my family to include them? How much of writing about yourself is about pleasing other people?

I read it to my mother in the car on the way to the gym.

‘It sounds so good when you read it,’ she says of Oma’s German-English, ‘Better than when she says it.’

‘I don’t think so,’ I say, ‘I think it’s just that we hear the same stories over and over again that when she starts talking we think “ugh, not that one again!” It’s only when I typed out the recordings that I realised the way she tells her stories is actually kind of amazing.’

‘It’s just so weird,’ says mum as we’re shrugging on our jumpers to walk back to the car, ‘You’ve put so much of our family story out there.’

After the Theo chapter is complete, I am lost. There are too many avenues to follow and I don’t know which one to go down first. So instead of choosing, I sit on it, don’t do much at all. I don’t know it now, but the inability to make a decision is the beginning of an anxiety that will drag on for the next few years. The fear of not getting the story and the fear of not getting the story the way I want it is enough to stop progress for months on end.

Eventually I force myself to go to the Bluescope (formerly BHP) archives, to get a sense of what it was like when Alfons worked there. Dad works there so he organised it with the PR team. It’s funny: the Steelworks have always been such a big part of the local landscape, but I’ve never been inside the gates until now. It’s like its own little city, and I can’t find the building I’m meant to go to. After a few minutes of driving around, I call Dad.

‘I think I drove too far.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I don’t know. Some pink building.’ I scan for street signs, gripping the steering wheel with one hand and my mobile in the other.

‘The operations building?’ he asks.

‘I don’t know. Administration Road?’

‘You’ve gone too far. I’ll come out the front.’

I turn into a narrow driveway. The closer I get, the more the pink-bricked building with palm trees and square windows looks out of place in this industrial lot. The Bluescope Steelworks is a permanent grey fixture on the Illawarra skyline. Its smoke billows can be seen from the beaches, from all the lookouts. When I was a child I imagined inventing a giant dome to house the entire lot; there’d be some kind of filter to send the

pollution back into the earth's core where it would be neutralised by magma, and the outside of the dome would be covered in trees, a new mountainous landmark. My sister and I used to refer to the coke ovens as bum-burners. There was a major PR campaign when I was a little older, to inform the public that the smoke escaping from the Steelworks was not smoke at all, but tightly packed condensed steam. It hasn't been in the news as much lately.

Dad emerges from the palm trees that frame the doorway. He walks around the car and climbs inside.

'You've come too far Donny.'

'Thanks for helping me find it.'

We double back down the road I came, back toward the freeway. Dad points to the building I need to be in.

'You don't need me to come in?'

'Nah, it'll be okay.'

Dad walks back the way we came and I step towards the building, boots clicking on asphalt. Inside, I ask for the PR manager and the receptionist asks me to sign in.

'Kilby?' She asks, when I sign my name, 'Are you Daryl's daughter?'

'No, Barry's daughter. Daryl's my uncle.'

'Barry's daughter! Inga's sister?'

'Yeah, I'm Donna.'

'Oh I'm Sarah's mum!'

'Oh wow, I run with Sarah.'

That morning I'd had an argument with Inga while we were running. Inga and Sarah were already waiting for me when I arrived on the street in front of Inga's apartment at 5am.

'Pioneer Road?' asked Inga, and the three of us set off in a jog down the hill towards the cycleway. Along the way Sarah filled us in on her flight in from Adelaide—"There were screaming kids everywhere! And I got in trouble for having my iPod on!"—and I told Sarah the latest instalment in the boy saga: a cancelled date, an ultimatum, a failure to understand the significance.

'Wait, isn't he the gay one?' Sarah asked.

'Yeah, skinny jeans!' said Inga.

When we hit Pioneer Road we started to pick up the pace.

‘Ready?’

We ran at full speed to the first light post, and then slowed down to a jog. The next light post, sprinted, next one, jogged. By the fourth or fifth I was starting to regret going out so hard, so I slowed my jogs right down. The girls ran ahead.

‘Can we stop for water at the end?’

‘Yeah, we’ll run back through Puckeys.’

Puckeys Estate is a field of mangled tree roots that line the lagoon. The dirt track is uneven – not a place to run through alone. But the track is beautiful, especially with early morning sunlight streaming through high-up branches.

‘Guess what Inga!’ I said, watching the ground for rocks and sticks and soft ground, ‘After my research trip Gus and Jess and Laura and I are gonna rent a house in Spain or something for a couple of weeks.’

‘Cool, can I come?’

‘Ummmm...’ I hesitated too long, ‘If you want.’

Sarah snorted.

‘That’s a no.’

‘Fine. Don’t worry, I’m not cool enough.’

We ran through Puckeys in stony silence. Inga streamed ahead.

‘Should we run around the lagoon?’ I asked.

We were rounding a grassy corner when I tried again.

‘Inga, why don’t we do a week or so in Greece before I meet up with the others?’

‘No, I’m not cool enough.’

‘Inga!’

‘Well we talked about doing a trip after and now all of a sudden you’re meeting Gus.’

‘Why can’t I do both?’

‘I’m saving for your research trip and this is how you repay me?’

‘No you’re not! You’re going to Hawaii with Nicole and Nepal with Nat and how am I even supposed to know you’ll actually come?’

‘Because I told you I would.’

At that time I wanted to do Alfons’ journey as I imagined it, from Sydney to Queensland, to Africa, to Israel and then to Germany, where I think he settled in the

end. If I was wrong I'd at least get to see Theo and Maria. Inga and mum had jumped on board immediately, dad saying he needed to stay home to look after my dog. It was a vague plan, and one that didn't eventuate: I took a job in a start-up instead. It seemed like an extraordinary opportunity to make influential contacts in the media (the writers included female comedians, television journalists, advertising execs) but instead it took all my confidence and motivation. I have never experienced coldness like that in my old boss's stare. We make the choices we think are right at the time.

The PR manager slides heavy shelves on hinges. Dust-coated books and files and magazines fill every shelf.

'What year did you say you were looking for?'

'Well he didn't work here long—anything late '50s early '60s.'

She flips through heavy piles of grimy company magazines.

'The late '50s should be just here....'

The building is older than I expected, carpets and walls and desks and chairs all in shades of '70s brown. I take a seat at a round table and spread out my sources. Down the hall, two women argue about the office stock of soy milk running low.

I pick up the first magazine from the pile, *Contact*, and flip open its plastic cover. It's an old one, from the early 1950s, photographs all black and white. Employees are featured in profiles: *Working in the electrical install at the No. 2 Merchant Mill, Mr Geoff Crehan (left) and Les Carlis. Geoff, trainee electrician, is son of Jack Crehan (foreman). He plays rugby league for Western Suburbs in the winter.* I know it's too much to hope for Alfon's face in black-and-white ink. I'm sure he was no employee of the month ('He and Wally swept the floors,' Oma told me). There's a community in the typed letters beneath my fingers. Engagements were announced, family photos published, employees wrote in with safety suggestions for a £2 bonus. A voice in my head repeats: 'Steelworks. Best company,' in vowel-heavy Croatian-English. It's the voice of a Mile Milkovich, a man I met through a friend—he'd worked for the Steelworks for forty-two years before finally retiring a few years ago. He'd loved the company and couldn't understand why Alfons would leave as quickly as he did. He talked about mid-shift trips to the pub, about learning new skills. Even now, as a man in his seventies, he's on call for emergencies—he knows the equipment better than anyone.

I don't have much more luck when I start on *The BHP Review*, a later and more formal publication. I do find a nice chart on steel in the Illawarra, and a map of the BHP plant at the time Alfons would have worked there.

'Excuse me,' I stand in the PR manager's doorway, 'Can I please photocopy a few things?'

'Sure,' she says, and takes the piles of magazines from my arms.

I tuck my photocopies into my notebook, and hand my plastic-coated ID back to Adele in reception. From the car I call my father.

'Any luck?' he asks.

'Not heaps,' I tell him, 'but thanks again for helping me out.'

I'm not making progress. I'm just not sure where to start. I figure Sydney's Jewish museum would be a good place to start: if Alfons did convert to Judaism maybe they'll be able to help me access the archives, plus it'll be a good way to learn more about the religion—which I've realised I know little about. By this time I've moved out of mum and dad's place, into a little apartment I share with my cousin. It's in the city centre, and it's all tiled on the inside. Even my bedroom floor is tiled. I've been going out too much and waking up with friends on my couch but the night before the Jewish museum I stay in so I can be fresh in the morning.

Mum and Dad pull up outside my apartment and I climb into the car. I flip open my book and read in the back seat while they navigate to the city. After an hour and a half in the car, and with car sickness settling in, we arrive. Dad is glad to get a good parking spot, and cheap one, on a side street nearby in Darlinghurst.

The museum is sleek. We're checked by security on the door, pay entry and take the elevator to the bottom floor. In a dark and empty room the three of us sit at desks like schoolchildren to watch an introductory film: Jews being chased out of their homes, forced to wear stars on their sleeves. We watch the Germans salute Hitler from the Berlin Square we wandered around a few years ago when the three of us travelled through Europe together after Christmas spent with Oma's sisters. I wonder how old my German family were when they realised Jews were not the enemy. My throat feels tight.

We take the lift back upstairs, all chattiness gone. The bottom floor is all cartoons and paintings and timelines. In a display cabinet a bold-typed sign tells how important family is for Jews. On Saturdays, they do not work, but spend the day with their loved ones. I walk up behind my mother as she reads it.

‘It’s funny,’ she says, pointing at the sign, ‘He took up a religion where family is so important.’

We start up the stairway that curls between floors. At the top, we disperse. Dad flips through plastic-cased newspapers; mum reads bold text from a sign. I run my fingers over the glass case that housed a Star of David, torn from someone’s shirt.

‘Come on,’ says dad, coming up behind me, ‘We don’t need to see this.’

‘Dad,’ I say, ‘we do.’

In a cabinet a dark-haired caricature snarls from a poster. *Jews are biologically less-intelligent. Jews are out to steal your money*, it says.

‘I need a coffee,’ says dad.

Here are the things that stand out: a picture of hundreds of bodies cramped into a tiny space, tiny papier-mâché shoes tossed on top of each other, letters drafted to family from ghettos. I can feel myself twisting my ring around my finger. I ask myself questions that have been asked long before my time. How? And Alfons, did he have friends who were Jewish? How much did he know?

This is what tightens my chest the most: a bowl of water with one million drops, each drop representing a child’s life lost in the Holocaust. The drops form above our heads and fall one at a time. They land inaudibly in the glass bowl. And then another falls.

We find ourselves out in the winter sunshine and eat lunch in a nearby café. Nobody even attempts to lighten the mood.

Amnon and Bill

February 2010, University of Wollongong

I'm starting to understand how the search led me here. Partly it's because I am not the great investigative journalist I once pictured myself to be. I am interested in people, in telling their stories when they want to tell them, not in digging and persisting. I've had periods of months where I've all but abandoned the search for Alfons. But I never could entirely let go. Which leaves me questioning that wasted time: what if I'd followed up on leads sooner? Would I have the answers? I know that it hasn't all been about me—it's been a series of dead ends and frustrations—but I can't shake the feeling that at least part of it is.

Once, as a fresh graduate, I was working a local television news desk. Nothing glamorous—I was in the newsroom, writing scripts for a central newsreader to deliver four times a day. I'd do my rounds in the morning, afternoon and before I left the office: calling local police stations and trawling my Facebook news feed for any hint of traffic accidents, fallen trees or anything that could fill the 55 second bulletin. I had my own office, a salary that left a lot to be desired, but a job that was five minutes from home and easy enough.

That year there was a boat accident on Sydney Harbour—six people were killed when their boat crashed into a fishing boat. The driver and the man he handed the wheel to just minutes before the crash were both high on cocaine and drunk. One of the girls killed was from Wollongong. Her name was Stacey Wright and she was my age or a year younger, with straight, medium-length dark hair. At the time I wore my hair in a similar style.

A few days after the accident, my office phone rang: the chief of staff at a major television station affiliated with my local one wanted me to do an on-camera interview with her parents.

'Have you spoken with them?' I asked.

'No!' he barked down the phone. 'Why would I do that?'

Common courtesy, I wanted to tell him, but didn't. I was new to this game, and he was very important in one of the country's biggest newsrooms.

'Could I call them first?' I asked, and he laughed. How was I supposed to know how it works? That to get the shot they needed for TV they needed the shock of the

dead girl's parents opening the door to a girl who bore vague similarities to the daughter they lost. They couldn't simply call ahead and ask for the family's okay.

'Look, I can't spare a journo but I can send down a camera crew to get the shots. I'll call you back when I can confirm the time.' And he hung up.

I've done the ethics classes, I've read about how some people really want to talk, how it helps their grieving process, but to me that felt like bullshit. It still does now, and I'm glad that when he called back I told him I wouldn't do it. He told me I'd never work in any Sydney newsroom, and after I hung up the phone I cried tears of embarrassment in my little office. But even now Stacey Wright's parents have never been directly quoted in the media.

What I should have known then was that I'm not cut out for the kind of journalism that requires interviews under duress. But if I'm completely honest, it wasn't just the ethics that kept me from doing that interview. It was also anxiety. What if I couldn't think of the right questions on the spot? What if I came across as unprofessional? Or worse, stupid? It's the same fear that kept me from chasing leads in the search for Alfons.

For more than forty years my mum has held onto a few ageing mementos of her father: a photograph of Alfons wrapped in yellowed sticky tape. On the back, in curly handwriting writing, it says 'Dady.' She also taped up the legal notice from the local paper: *take notice that Anna Henneberger has filed a Petition for Divorce... on the grounds of desertion.* I think about her, in her teenage years, wrapping a roll of sticky tape around and around a newspaper clipping and tucking it away somewhere to keep it safe. And she kept two letters from him, written on thin paper, grown fragile with age. Neither says anything worth mentioning: in one he laments a toothache.

My mum has always been critical of my diet, without meaning to be. She's always been careful about what she eats—claiming that when she was an adolescent she was fat. She says she used to sneak chunks of bread and butter and eat them under her bedcovers. I've never seen a picture of her when she was anything short of beautiful, with blonde curls and cotton playsuits and sandals, or Breton stripes and Bermuda shorts. I've been reading a lot about memory lately, and the idea that we recreate history every time we tell a story about our past. It certainly rings true for my mother, always lovely and never seeing it. And for Oma, telling her stories again and again without altering the phrasing.

‘You know,’ mum says, ‘When people say you look like me I take it as a compliment, because you’re beautiful.’

I was the same. My eating issues started in high school when, in some short-lived American sitcom, a character lamented that after gaining weight her thighs touched. But hadn’t mine always? I never realised until that moment that women were expected to have empty space where I had flesh. I started running twice a day instead of just in the mornings. And when that wasn’t enough, I’d sneak to the bathroom after meals and purge myself. I remember making a list, as a newly cured 18-year-old, of why I would never go back to bulimia. The reasons were enough to keep the eating disorder at bay—until I started working at the health magazine. In the beginning, I was the healthiest I’d ever been. I wasn’t training excessively; I was bringing healthy lunches sticking to a balanced meal plan. But is that even healthy? I lost weight and loved the new-found confidence, but having to go out for a team lunch sent me into a panic. And then travelling three hours a day, trying to finish this search, wanting so badly to look more glamorous: it all sent me back. But this time I had money. At one point I was visiting the supermarket every day on my way home from work, stuffing choc chip cookies and M&Ms and jars of Nutella and chocolate mousse into my mouth—sometimes before I even got home. My housemate of the time must have known—the toilet was constantly clogged—but I just went on as though nothing happened. Eating disorders are a curse of the perfectionist. I suppose that’s part of why I’ve avoided and made excuses throughout the search for Alfons Henneberger. I wanted the story to be exactly as I’d imagined from the beginning. I wasn’t prepared for anything other than what I’d set out to do. Now it’s over and there are no more excuses.

My work situation did improve after I left the start-up where I worked after the health magazine. I spent a few months doing whatever freelance jobs I chanced upon before I was offered a four-week contract with another magazine company. A month became two and then three and then I’d been there for more than a year. It was a contract role, so I was paying my own tax, holidays, superannuation ... or at least I should have been. This year I underestimated my tax and ended up with a bill I could not afford to pay. A bill that dashed any vague ideas I had about travelling. I’ve been paying off the massive bill in instalments—a thousand dollars each month—and decided it was time to start looking for something full-time. So when a job came up at a men’s publication within my company, I applied. I was already writing for them and

knew I had the skills to do the job. And that's when I realised I wasn't as safe there as I thought. My boss (who I thought of as a friend) told me it wasn't really worth my time: the manager thought I was too junior for the role.

'If I were you, I would leave (not that I want you to go!)' she wrote in an email. Within the month she'd spoken to HR to end my contract.

'You don't really want to come back next year, do you?' she wrote to me. I had two days notice before I was unemployed.

That same week I applied for the men's magazine job I was offered an apartment in the city. I'd lied on my application, told them I worked full-time, but it was within my means and sunny. Mum and dad implored me not to take it.

'Move home!' they said. 'And then you won't be stuck.'

I argued with them for days.

'Nothing's ever going to be easy,' I told mum on the phone, 'but I have to start dealing with things as an adult.'

It was about that time that I started tallying the lies I've been telling myself, like I haven't found Alfons but maybe it's been an impossible search all along.

Amnon Levy lectures in Commerce at Wollongong University, and helped my mother translate letters to the Israeli government back in the '90s when she stumbled across the first clues as to her father's whereabouts. Being told that her father was an Israeli citizen brought her closer to finding him than ever before, but it also raised a whole new array of questions. What had made this Catholic German become a Jew, change his name and move to Israel?

I hesitated for a long time before I contacted Amnon. I wanted to know if he remembered what he'd tried to do for my family back then, if he had any insight as to what would make a man do what Alfons did, but the death knock incident at the local news station had left me doubting my own worth as a journalist, or as a professional anything.

I mustered the courage to call Amnon one day. The phone rang and rang with no answer. I sent a carefully worded email: *I'm not sure if you remember, but....* he replied quickly. I arranged to meet Amnon the following Friday; he asked me to call to confirm.

Friday morning, I call his office and there's no answer. I send an email asking him to call me. My phone rings within minutes. A thickly accented voice asks me how soon I can make it in. I pack my things and leave, forgetting my recorder and a jacket.

I walk past the office and then double back. There are two men inside; one dark-featured and short, the other tall and white-haired. I hover in the doorway, waiting for them to finish.

‘Donna?’ asks the taller man.

‘Yes, I—’

‘Come in.’

I take a seat at the round table. Amnon introduces the taller man as his friend Bill, who also came to Australia from Israel.

‘There were a lot of myths surrounding Israel in the 1950s,’ Amnon explains. ‘It was a different Israel then.’

He explains that in the wake of the war there was a definite swing towards the socialist ideal offered in Israel’s Kibbutz lifestyle.

‘Israel was loved by the world, loved by Christians,’ says Amnon. ‘Perhaps he [Alfons] came to Australia and didn’t find what he was looking for. People felt a certain way about German people...’ Amnon’s face is expressionless, the academic delivering a lecture. He’s still when he speaks. Bill is more animated, his voice charting highs and lows.

‘Don’t think Alfons was ignorant,’ he says, ‘He would have heard about missions in old times.’

Bill thinks it was not uncommon for Germans to move to Israel around the time Alfons did; they were looking for redemption but also something more.

‘There were a lot of German colonies in Palestine, started by the Knights Templar.’

I try to act as though I know of the Knights Templar outside of Dan Brown’s 2003 novel *The DaVinci Code*, but I don’t. Bill says the group was predominantly German and controlled the finances in early Europe.

‘This is a story vivid in the memory of people, particularly Germans, in this generation,’ adds Amnon.

I scribble notes, stare at coffee-stained cups; white walls make me dizzy. I had started this search with a sole purpose: to find Alfons. I’d never considered the religious and cultural implications, or that I had so much to learn and to understand about religion, for starters. Aside from the odd Sunday school cameo, my spiritual experience is limited. I remember the grainy bread and sweet grape juice and the metallic smell of

the collection basket as it was passed around. When I was a teenager, I remember finding out that my sister prays, and laughing. *God, that girl flosses and prays. How is anyone so perfect?!* And when, at eighteen, a childhood friend sat me down to tell me she was part of an extremely orthodox organised religion, I thought she was pulling an elaborate prank. What about all those years I'd taken the Lord's name in vain in front of her? Or worse. I'd done much worse than that. How had I never realised she didn't have a television. For someone so interested in the world, I navigate it from a shockingly narrow viewpoint.

Amnon and Bill go on to explain the meaning behind Alfons' adopted Jewish name, Abraham Ben-Yehuda. Abraham was the first Jew, he who signed the covenant with God. Ben simply means 'son of', and Yehuda, or Judah, was the fourth son of the biblical patriarch Jacob. For someone not born into Judaism, Alfons chose a name dripping with meaning.

Before I leave, Bill gives me his wife's phone number. She runs a local Jewish organization called KEVA.

The men suggest I go to Israel to continue my search.

'If you go there, a little blonde girl,' says Bill, 'you will get anything you ask for.'

Later, I call Bill's wife Yoke and like her immediately. Her voice is warm and she really wants to help find Alfons. She invites me to a movie screening she's organised: the cultural attaché to Israel is going to be there. So a few weeks later I pick up mum and we head over to the uni.

The automatic doors of the McKinnon building buzz open—inside people are moving back and forth, tidying, arranging. We're early. I look around for Amnon or Bill but see neither.

'What do we do?' asks mum.

'I dunno.'

We hover together in the doorway for a moment, cold air pushed inside with everyone who steps in. The light seems dimmer than I remembered from my time at the uni.

I hear my name; Bill strides over. I introduce him to mum. He says he has to go and set up and why don't we head inside. We're given little red ticket-stumps, like raffle tickets, and sweet citrus lollies.

The movie screening is held in a lecture theatre; we sit on patterned chairs with built-in desks. It was only a few years ago I sat here the first time round, as a shy, sloppily dressed undergrad. Since I started tutoring journalism classes a few years ago I've often marvelled at my fashion-conscious students. How do they afford to look so well-put-together? How do they know how to flick their eyeliner just so? I spent my university years cowering for fear of disapproval, avoiding the uni bar in case I looked out of place. I was chronically self-conscious and only now can I trace the web of romances my fellow students were engaged in then while I put in extra study hours, fretting about an incorrectly placed comma.

On the stage a blonde woman in a purple coat fiddles with the sound system. I guess she is Yoke, Bill's wife. Slowly a crowd starts to fill the auditorium, mumbling quietly as they take their places. And then it's time for the film to start.

The woman I assume is Yoke steps up to the microphone and introduces the Cultural Attaché to Israel, who is there to open the festival. A dark-haired woman takes Yoke's place.

'She's young,' says Mum.

She speaks about the good work of KEVA and then someone flicks the lights off and the film is projected onto the screen.

The movie is a sharply-written comedy about a group of overweight Israelis who start a sumo wrestling club. Afterwards, we trail out into the foyer. I find Yoke behind the drinks table and introduce myself.

Yoke grabs my hands in hers; they're warm and soft. Her smile is framed by cropped blonde hair.

'I was looking out for you! Now, where did Einat go?' She steps out from behind the tables and begins scanning the room for the Israeli Cultural Attaché.

'Yoke, this is my mum, Sylvia.'

'Oh wow!' she says, shaking my mum's hand, 'So it is your husband that is missing? No, father!'

'Yes, my father.'

'Can I get you anything to eat or drink? Are you staying for the second movie?'

'No, we won't be able to stay, mum's sick.'

'Oh, that's too bad. Wait, I'll find Einat.'

Einat is in her early thirties with long shiny hair. She's stylish and composed and speaks with a hint of an American accent.

'You know what we do? I know someone who can get the, the..' she clicks her fingers, stares up at the ceiling as though she'll find the word floating above her, 'the, every few years we answer the survey...'

'The census?' suggests mum.

'Yes, the census,' says Einat. 'Abraham Ben-Yehuda is not that common a name. I say there might be two hundred in all of Israel... and if we narrow it to men aged over seventy, there might only be fifteen.'

Imagine it: to be fifteen phone numbers away from Alfons. To dial them one by one until we find him. In the end though, Einat couldn't help. Everybody I meet is interested in Alfons' story, but when it comes down to finding him, it's too big a task.

I had lunch with Yoke once afterwards. She gave me a blue key ring from Israel, for luck. It was wrapped with ribbon. And as she asked me about my progress I felt a growing sense of guilt. Everyone wants to help, but in the end it comes down to me. I've failed everyone.

Oma

March 2010, Lake Heights

Looking back now, we didn't know how sick she was.

'Morning Oma,' I push open the heavy wooden front door and step inside. It's almost dark despite the bright day; the sun never reaches the front rooms of her house.

'What's good about it? You tell me.'

'Well, I'm not at work and it's sunny outside—'

'Ah,' she dismisses the idea with a wave of her hand, turns her back and takes a few steps back toward the lounge.

'What are you watching?' On TV people in striped shirts and flared pants are running around a boat.

'Ah, I think I see this one before. They all get arrested.' She presses a button on the remote; the television fades to black.

'You like a cuppa?' She shuffles past me and I follow her to the kitchen.

I turn on the kettle to make tea. Oma leans her elbows on the plastic tablecloth that covers her dining room table. Above her, a still-life photograph of fruit and vegetables, as it always has been. Her hair is grey and lank, she wears an old bleach-stained t-shirt. Her eyes shine bright from their place in the folds of her skin.

Oma's English is good for someone who never had the chance to learn formally: she claims she learned the language by listening to the radio. She didn't know a lot about Australia when she arrived here; the move was mostly left to fate. Oma says Alfons signed up to migrate to whichever country would take them first. Australia was in the midst of a recruitment drive so the two boarded the *Castel Felice* for Sydney.

'All what they told us, the black people are really Australia and there is not many people there. There wasn't many. There was no Lake Heights. There were hostels, the Steelworks and Port Kembla.'

Oma was happy to move to the other side of the world because it kept Alfons an ocean away from other women, or so she thought. They married under less-than-romantic circumstances—Oma was pregnant with my mother and wearing her cleaning uniform. She went back to work afterwards while Alfons took another girl to the movies. Oma claims she once caught him in bed with another woman; he'd left my mother, his daughter, in the building's foyer in the bitter German winter.

‘The last what I know, there came a letter [from the woman] and she want to get married why she is pregnant from him. And I showed him the letter. I read it first. I opened it up and then I put it nice, neatly, in how it came, and then I say ‘Here, a letter for you.’ And he read it and put it straight in fire. And I think *You bastard, you got one in Regensburg pregnant*. He had one in Italia too, he told me that later. The same time, the same year. I think You bastard. And we left [for Australia] and I never looked back. It was a good time and a bad time.’

As I scoop sugar into her mug she tells me about the day Wally, her second husband, my Opa, died. It was two years ago now, when I was working at the TV station; I got a phone call at work that morning and I rushed to Oma’s house, a strange mix of relief and panic. Wally spent his last few years a permanent fixture on the lounge. Oma cared for him full time, but he did nothing to make the effort easier on her. There were days when he’d shit himself, not because he couldn’t get up to go to the toilet, but because he didn’t want to. And yet Oma still keeps his ashes in a polystyrene box on the windowsill.

I filed news reports between trips back and forth to Oma’s house the day he died. We sat around the table Oma and I sit at now: me, mum, mum’s brother Rom and his wife Melaine, and Oma. We ordered pizza and nibbled on chocolates. The mood felt too light. Oma was practical, sorting through funeral documents, signing the death certificate. We talked about anything but Opa. Wally was the worst thing about Oma’s place when I was a child. A WWII refugee, he fled the Ukraine and travelled on foot to Naples, where he boarded a ship for Australia. He arrived before Oma and Alfons and, by the time my family arrived, he had a home in Lake Heights and a job at the migrant hostel. That’s where he met and befriended Alfons. It wasn’t long until my grandfather moved his family into his friend’s house.

Alfons started working in Sydney, leaving his family with Wally during the week—and sometimes he failed to even come home on weekends. By that time Oma and Alfons had another son, Mick. Maybe it was boredom, or maybe passion: Oma and Wally became lovers. Rom is Wally’s son, though he bears the surname Henneberger. I think Alfons must have known.

When I first traced this timeline I was shocked, but as I’ve grown older I’ve come to understand the complicated nature of love, need and want. So, while I guess that Alfons may have seen Oma and Wally’s relationship as betrayal, maybe even

enough for him to leave, it doesn't explain why he never wrote to his children after he did. It doesn't seem fair to punish them for their mother's mistake—not that she'd call it that.

There is a picture of Wally and Oma taken around the time they moved in together. They recline together in a bed of hay. My Oma, plump, smooth-faced and soft-skinned; a little older than I am now. She smiles and points at something in the distance. Wally is shirtless. His fingers start to curl around her elbow. Oma tells me this is the first photo she has of herself and Wally.

'Who took it?' I ask.

'Alfons,' she says. 'He was always taking pictures of everything.'

In the picture Wally rests his legs over Oma's. Her fingers settle on his naked shoulder. They hardly see Alfons behind the lens.

In another, Alfons is sitting on the steps with Wally and Oma and my mum. Alfons holds his daughter on his knee. Oma stands beside Wally, pushing her hair behind her ear, beaming. A few years later Alfons was gone.

I was scared of Opa when I was a child, though now his eccentricities seem harmless—he'd spend all afternoon peeling potatoes, the raw vegetables steadily piling up around him, as he did in a job somewhere in his youth. Then it'd be potato pancakes or mashed potato for a few days. We weren't allowed to put rubbish in the main garbage bin because Opa was using it to catch the water if it rained. He looked frightening too: all angular hip bones and unruly hair. Once, when staying overnight I forgot to turn off the light in the toilet. Wally grabbed my hand and dragged me back there. He held my finger to the switch and turned it off. 'Don't do it again'. And there were days when he'd make Inga and I rip piles of newspaper into shreds. When we were done, he'd stuff the newsprint into a blue Hessian sack and sit with his bony legs inside, a piece of string holding it up at his waist. It was to keep him warm, he said. But it was nothing compared to what he did to my mother and her brothers: they spent their teenage years digging a hole in the backyard. No-one knows what Wally wanted the hole for but they didn't dare question him. It's only grown over now that he's died.

I place Oma's coffee on the placemat in front of her—she's still talking me through Wally's death. When telling a story Oma speaks quickly, adding asides, changing her mind and repeating words, swapping German words for English. She doesn't say he or she but rather *Er* or *Sie*. She doesn't need a response or a nod or an

answer. Her stories are recited on repeat; I often wonder if she knows I've already heard the story she's telling me. I think she does; she's just eager to fill her kitchen with voices.

'The doctor came, was Tuesday afternoon. Wednesday *Er* was, not here. Just wandering around, didn't know what he do. Then he lie outside, in the footpath, the driveway. Near the garage. I say "What you do out here?" He just looked at me. I say "Come on, I help you up. So least when you like lie on the floor lie on carpet not on cement. Cement make it worster." *Okay*. I helped him up, brought him in. He fall down on the carpet. I say "I can't lift you up, you too heavy". Rom came, lift him up, lay him down. I go to bed and I wake up again. The next moment he sit up again. And so he died. And I think for myself why I saw him. I looked at him, I think *Yeah Wally, you use me a lot. You got everything you wanted.*'

She pauses, reaches for her packet of cigarettes.

'Oma!'

'I didn't smoke all day!'

'I'll leave if you do.'

'Ah.'

She slides the cigarette back in the box and lines it up next to the Tupperware container she uses to store biscuits. She started to talk again. Oma and Opa thought they were done with children when, in her forties, she fell pregnant with Sam. Wally wanted his only son to take his surname, so they got married.

'Before Sam he was pretty good, I can't complain. After we married and Sam came along, he didn't want to know him, he didn't want to know anyone. Everybody supposed to go. He hated everyone, but the bitch up there not.'

The bitch up the road: the woman Wally had an ongoing affair with. Opa gave the woman cash per visit, at one point even tried to sign the house over to her name, but gave up on the idea when Oma refused to drive him to the solicitor's office; he'd never learned how to drive. That didn't stop him tinkering with the car—at one point he wired Oma's brakes so that she had to yank on a brick to stop at traffic lights. He was always messing around with something—collecting water, digging holes in the backyard, re-wiring the house's electrical systems.

'And he gave her all the money. And that's what hurt me the most. Now I would have it easy, but she got the money. And I got nothing. That money what I had is almost

gone and now I have to work it out with what I get. And I would have had almost one hundred thousand dollar in the bank and I could use it anytime. Now, I got nothing, why he give it to her. So last, when he passed away, he say, "I wasn't a very good husband to you."

"That's true," I say. I say "I wish I had that money what you send away to Russia oder where, to Ukranian. And how much money you borrowed from me, I wish I had that back. So what's the big deal? Now it's passed." He says, "But you got the house." I say "What for house? Why you never fixed anything and always turned everything upside down. And that is a house? When I tried to fix something, you undone it. Now ... I can't afford it ... I had to battle it through again."

I ask her why she never left Wally.

'I didn't have a choice,' she says.

'I dream about him, a couple of nights ago,' she says, 'And I think what the hell, why I dream about him. He was here and he tried to tell me what I supposed to do and I say "No." And this wake me up. I think *Bugger Wally, what you think you doing.*'

Oma's homeland is still, even now, a land of felt hats and lederhosen-clad men with heavy-set features and big hands and houses covered in white paint so thick it bubbles under your hand. She only went to school for a year. After that she was pulled out of classes to help her mother farm potatoes. Her father wasn't around. When Oma asked about him she was told it wasn't her business.

After she left school, a teacher brought books to Oma and she learned to read in her dark little room. But her mother would take the books and give them to her youngest son, still a baby, to play with. They'd come back, teeth-marked and soiled. When the teacher noticed, Oma's mother responded: 'He has to play with something.'

I usually visit Oma on Sunday mornings. For what feels like a long time, I've dragged myself there every week, lack-of-sleep pressure behind my eyes, weighed down by last night's vodka or chardonnay or cocktails. I'm usually wearing an outfit that Oma tells me would never have been allowed when she was my age. 'Oh, we couldn't put something like that on'. If I have jeans on, they are too tight, if it's a dress, it's too short. Oma disagrees with the way I live. 'You run too much', she says. Or 'Why you don't move in with me?'

I don't really tell her much about my life anymore—it involves too much explanation.

'So. You tell me something,' she says, and slurps a sip of tea.

‘Well, I’m having a few days off work this week,’ I start, ‘But it’s not very fun. I have to go to hospital so they can do tests on my stomach.’

‘Oh,’ she says, ‘They don’t find anything. What you expect, your stomach hurts—you go out, party too much.’

I’m worried the years of bulimia have damaged my stomach in some dangerous way: I’ve been having pains and bloating for a few months now. Oma picks up a folded tissue from the table and dabs at her eye, long-damaged from failed surgery.

‘I didn’t go to dances,’ she starts. Once, she says, she went out and danced with a married man.

‘Mother came. She took me by the hair – I had plaits – and took me away. “You don’t dance with him.” Why he was not a German, he was a Russian. And you don’t dance with them. That was after the war. I was 18. No 16 or 17. Aber after the war there was so much mess anyway so it doesn’t matter.’

‘The war was murder,’ she says, ‘And after the war was murder. You see the dead bodies by the side of the road, one after another, we called *Gottsettler*, from the concentration camp... when they can’t walk, they just shot them.’

I think about the word *Gottsettler*, I haven’t heard it before, but it literally translates as ‘settled with God.’ These were men whose futures were set. Men like Opa, who spent god-knows-how-long in prison camps. He never talked about it with us. I recall the dread I’d feel when I walked in the door and he’d say ‘Donna, you see this film? On SBS last night. Very good movie!’ It happened often and always preceded a twenty-minute-long spiel on every plot-point in the film. When you spend ten years laying in the same spot on the lounge, sinking into its fabric, conserving energy, you don’t have much else to talk about.

‘The road from Cham to Roding, one body after another,’ says Oma, ‘These was all Auslander, from Russia or where Wally was from. Why Wally was also in the prison camp, he knows how this went. They get the slice of bread in the morning, some water with it, and this has to last till the next morning and when they eat all in one go they get nothing. And you know how young blokes they like to eat, and they get nothing. Some make it, some don’t. There died many. Why after the war was like ... you can’t go in the road. And then the Americaner came and they put all dead bodies in one grave, and then a couple months later they put all separate graves.’

I remember the way Wally would throw his hands up in exclamation when I arrived—‘Donnie is here!’—and feel a twinge of something. I don’t know what it’s like to live off one piece of bread a day, or to live in a place where dead bodies pile up on the side of the road.

After he married Oma, Alfons quit his job at BMW—‘Alfons didn’t like [hard] work!’ as Theo told me—and the pair moved into the Hennebergers’ apartment, the one Theo took me to see all those months ago. Alfons took a job at the same office block as Oma. They worked together, waking early to light furnaces and staying late to clean windows and mop floors.

‘He would take all day to clean a so-a-little window!’ Oma says, joining her thumbs and index fingers to form a rectangle.

On the weekends my grandparents would whiz around the city on their bicycles, or they would head out of Munich to ride along dirt tracks, past fields striped with last night’s snow.

‘We had in Germany good pushbikes!’ Oma says. ‘Was expensive too, where you could change the gear ... go up the hills, down the hills. Go lower, go higher. We went everywhere. Everywhere we went with pushbike.’

They once rode from Munich to Roding—a trip that takes more than three hours on Germany’s high-speed trains. It took twelve hours.

‘Not so fast like train!’ Oma says.

They couldn’t afford childcare—so my mother was simply carted off with her parents. In the mornings Oma would wrap my mother in a blanket and set her in the corner while she cleaned. During her break, Oma would rush home to feed her and put her to bed. Alfons finished work early in the afternoons. He was supposed to go straight home and look after his daughter.

‘In night time I come home about 10 o’clock. [Alfons] was finished working 3 o’clock. Fifteen minutes later he should have been home. But he never came. She was sleeping why I left. She sleeps about half past three, and then he came home and he looked after she. But he never showed up. And the landlady looked after her but she say ‘I not a babysitter.’ And then his mother looked after her, but she want always more and more money. She was a bugger, his father was okay but he always had other women, he always had girlfriends. Alfons was the same. And then we came out here.’

I have collected pictures and pictures of scenes on the *Castel Felice*: families waving from the edge and crowds of passengers gathered on the deck. The men are wearing too-short pants that reveal their socks.

A few years ago Oma's most-told narrative was the one in which Alfons tried to sell their baby on the ship: he had an Italian couple lined up to take his daughter as their own, but Oma refused to hand over her child and he gave up. These days Oma has changed her story, claiming she didn't see Alfons for the entire time they were at sea. He stayed in the men's quarters while Oma and mum stayed with the women. She says he kept their money with him. When they arrived in Sydney, Oma and mum were herded onto a train to Wollongong. There was no sign of Alfons. When all the other children got ice cream, my mother got bread. All the husbands were lined up to collect their families, but not Alfons. They hitched a ride to the hostel. He was already there, and he said, 'Finally, you got here.'

It's tempting to believe their life here was easier; it certainly looks happy in the sun-soaked photos Alfons sent home to Theo. But a photo proves nothing more than at some split second of time, someone clicked the shutter while their subject gave the impression of joy. In one photo, *Die veranda von den Haus wo wir leben mit Sylvia*, my mother sits in a high chair, smiling. Her face and legs are half in shadow, tiny legs dangling. Balls and bears and bunnies and a spinning top are arranged neatly on her chair and the ground in front. Oma tells me that Alfons wouldn't buy his daughter any toys and that she had only one doll that Wally gave her for Christmas. She certainly had more than one in that photo. I think I've placed too much weight in pictures already.

When they arrived at the Unanderra hostel, my mother developed a rash, refused to eat, but Oma didn't have any money to take her to a doctor. This is a story Oma tells regularly.

'I can't go. Doctor was free but medicine was not. What's the good do me? What I do I get her dry toast and tea. And then in the morning I give her that, toast and tea ... [Alfons] says, "She get only teeth". And I had no money. And the next day this broke open and I see all this mess running down [her face] and I cleaned it up. And then I see she had a little sore on side her face. The next day she had all her face one sore. I get child endowment and then I go with her to doctor. He give her a needle and then I had to take all the crust off and put on a powder. Und she screamed. *Oh boy*. I think, *what the hell it's only a powder, why she scream like that?* And then I had a little sore

on my finger and I get it in and I think now I know why she screamed, why it burned like fire. It really burned. Then I started cleaning it up with oil, I think *bugger that powder that hurt her too much*. I cleaned it up with oil every couple of hours and that went okay. She supposed to get five needles and she get three, why I had no money. One Wally helped me out.'

Both Oma and Theo say Alfons went to Africa; they both received a postcard from him. Alfons was a prolific letter writer: he wrote home to Theo, he wrote to Mum when he was living in Sydney. It doesn't make sense that he would just stop. There has to have been some kind of falling out between he and Theo. Or the letters have never stopped. I wonder if the hotel still stood in Namibia when Alfons arrived, if his grandfather welcomed him into the family business, showing Alfons how to stuff handfuls of diamonds into hollow table legs and welcome guests at reception. But then again, neither Theo nor Oma can show me their postcard. Life is not a Wes Anderson film after all. If my grandfather were a diamond smuggler, if Theo's story was true, it changes the parameters of my search in a way I don't like at all. I used to think that somehow, without meeting him, I'd inherited some of Alfons; that our history defines us without us even knowing and I should feel some kind of German-inherited guilt for the Holocaust, the way I presume Alfons did when he converted to Judaism. If he converted at all. If the diamond story was true and my line of thinking correct then I would be weighed down by even more guilt: it's ethically fraught.

I don't think that way anymore though: I know that the actions of a man I've never met have no bearing on who I am today. Oma is still in her kitchen, still telling me about Alfons leaving.

'I saved five hundred pounds up and he say he find something in Queensland if I come up there and ... then he disappeared with the money. You see that was a good excuse. I give him the money, he could buy something and then he disappeared with it. And then he wrote me a postcard, he gone for personal reason. What personal reason I could imagine.'

'What did the postcard say?'

'He is in Africa and for personal reason he moved to Africa. I never forget that.'

'Have you still got that card?'

'I think the solicitor took that when I got *entvorce*,' she says, meaning divorce. She filed for divorce so she could marry Wally.

‘And then nothing from him since?’

‘Nup.’

I drive home with the windows down, the warm Australian air streaming in. I let my arm drop out the window and the wind drags through my open fingers. I realise that Oma’s story is now more important than Alfons’: the older she gets, the less time we have to capture her stories and hold on to them.

A week later I visit with mum. The routine is the same; I make the tea while Oma sits under the fruit-and-veg photo. Mum sits at the head of the table and places her handbag on the floor at her feet. We each have our own favourite cups—Oma’s has watercolour sailboats on it, Mum’s is small, dainty, floral. I take a plain white mug. It is always the same.

‘I dreamed last night about Alfons,’ says Oma. ‘He was outside, didn’t make it in. But he tried to make it down. He stand out by the driveway and looking down and I tried to go on the door to open up for him and then he was disappeared. So something happen to him, why I never dream about him.’

She pauses, takes a slurp of tea and looks at me.

‘Oh, and Theo is gone.’

‘What do you mean “gone?”’ Mum asks.

‘He long sure gone,’ says Oma with a little nod of agreement.

‘How do you know?’ I ask.

‘They would have told us,’ says mum.

‘No. He gone. Why when I try ring the number said there is nobody in the flat. So I think he died and Maria couldn’t afford the flat so she is mit Stefan.’

‘They would have told us,’ I repeat.

‘No. It is long sure this way.’

I want to laugh at Oma’s certainty, her trust in her instincts, but at the same time, a certain dread settles behind my ribs.

‘How about I call Stefan?’ I say. I flick through an old Christmas card box, filled with addresses scrawled on envelopes, little address books, old Polaroids. I find Stefan’s phone number stuck inside a faded Christmas card. I dial. The phone rings. Nothing. I check the international time on my phone. It’s 7am in Germany. Finally an automated voice answers. It rattles German so quickly I only catch bits and pieces, but from the parts I gather, it seems the phone has been cut off.

Next I search for Theo and Maria's direct number. I find it in a palm-sized address book, the numbers traced carefully in Oma's shaky handwriting. This time the phone only rings once before Maria answers.

'Henneberger!'

'Hallo Maria! It's Donna, from Australia,' I say in unsteady German.

'Donna!' I can just see her jumping up from the big wooden table in the dining room, "'Theo, it's Donna!' How are you? How is Anna?'

'I am at her house now,' I say, mixing up the order of my words in German.

I pass the phone to Oma, but not before I speak to Theo.

'How are you?' I ask.

'Me? Tired! We were out late last night and now you call so early this morning.'

A few times, when planning trips to Europe I've tried to convince Oma to come. Doesn't she want to drink rose tea with her sisters? Her youngest sister Fanny is my favourite. She walks at a cracking pace and knocks back shots of schnapps in the evenings. Her hair is teased to a height and her children look like they've stepped out of an eighties music video, with ripped jeans and mullets and wide-set jaws. There is a skylight in Fanny's kitchen and the sun shines in over the dining table.

'No,' says Oma every time, 'I came out here and I never look back.'

I pick up her mug and place it in the sink. On the windowsill wet tea bags sit in an old margarine container, she'll strain them again when she makes more tea.

'Wally helped out a lot,' she says, changing the topic at will. 'He actually helped a lot. He was really...' she trails off.

'You have to really know a person before you commit yourself. Everyone got different characters, different thing. I always say give a little, take a little and that way it works out, both sides. You have to work together. But not when one wants that and the other wants that. Then you don't work together.'

A Funeral

September 2010, Wollongong

A few years ago my father started reading the death notices in the local paper. Every now and then he'd look up from his toast and coffee and announce 'John Dale's father died,' or something similar, with a raised eyebrows. So when dad's best friend's father dies, it's no shock. We'd grown up with the Seymours; Dad's best mate Rodney and his wife Sue have children similar ages to Inga and I. We take the day off work to support them.

At the funeral the grandchildren take the stage to deliver their eulogies. They group awkwardly as others speak, placing shaky hands on each other's shoulders. They pull tissues from pockets and nudge their brothers and cousins to offer one when needed.

It's Dan's turn; he's Rodney's son and a few years younger than me. He places a 20-year-old beer on the coffin.

'Pop, you said you'd drink this with me at my wedding, but you beat me.'

His words choke in his throat. His sister Al places a hand on his shoulder.

Later, their uncle Phil speaks about his father. His memories are much the same: a larrikin bloke who always had time for everyone and a joke to share. I cross and uncross my legs, search my bag for a tissue, trying not to make any noise. I hear Joe's widow Robin let out a sob from the front row. I've always admired her; she's thoughtful and well put together. It's awful to hear the guttural sound of her heartbreak.

And then Phil mentions his dad's birth date, *born in 1931*, and my thoughts turn to Alfons. He was born the same year. Somewhere, on the other side of the world, are people mourning him in this way? Is there another girl my age who remembers Alfons sharing a beer with her when she was just twelve or thirteen?

And I worry I haven't given enough time to my own pop, my grandfather on my father's side who is only a few hours or a phone call away. I spend so much time worrying about someone who doesn't even know I exist.

My pop died a few years after that funeral. I gave a eulogy at his funeral alongside dad and Inga and I've been congratulated since by aunts and cousins who say I spoke well. I don't know exactly what I said, standing under the hot Mudgee sun that day. Pop was a real Aussie bloke: wide-brimmed hat, lips that were always curled

up ever-so-slightly at the corners, sun-spotted hands, buttoned shirt and sturdy boots. Even as he lay in his hospital bed he was making jokes. He said there was life in him yet. He told me about an old army mate who was too fat to go on the marches, and another who refused to call officers by their ranks. He told me to watch his false teeth, and then popped them into his mouth when I looked away.

‘Donny, you lost my teeth!’

Pop was a true joker until I got a phone call in the middle of the night. My parents picked Inga and me up and we drove to RPA Hospital. Pop lay froglike, knees bent upwards; his entire body shuddered with each forced breath. A careless knot held his mouth open and the tubes in place. In. Out. In. Out. There was a small spot of blood on his gown.

Machines beeped. The man in the next bed snorted in his sleep. Quiet footsteps, snort, beep, whirr. And sobbing, so much sobbing. When another patient called out to tell the nurse he was in "bloody pain," I willed him quiet. Couldn't he see that he didn't matter here? In. Out. In. Out. Pop's head was sweat-shiny; his hair (what was left of it) glistened. He and dad looked so similar. The same line of sticky hair around their crown. The same thin lips.

Nan collapsed onto his bed. More sobbing. I awkwardly, lightly, stroked his damp hand. Nan's tears stained his hospital gown. We crowded the curtained-off area even though we were only supposed to see him two at a time. We held on to distant family members, drawn together in this. And at last we had to turn off the machines. I'd given him tape recorders in the months before his death, showed him the right buttons to click on and off when he wanted to record. He told me he'd sat in a caravan on his property in Mudgee for a couple of hours a day talking into the machines, telling me the stories of his childhood, but when he died and I collected the tapes they were all blank. He hadn't understood which button to press after all.

Oma, against all odds, survived another year. A few months before, on one of her various hospital stays, she suddenly gripped my hand and Inga's—one on each side of her bed. Her eyes turned wild and she started yelling 'I have to go! I have to go! Nononononono!' We couldn't leave her to get a nurse. She lifted her feet towards the side of her bed. She yanked at the tubes joining her to various machines. I was sure she was going to die.

‘Oma! Stop!’ we yelled.

‘No! No! Nonononono!’ she whimpered.

A nurse came and somehow calmed her down. The moment passed.

On her birthday I find Oma sitting at the kitchen table with my parents, all doors closed and the heater blasting the icy air from the room. She has a bottle of brandy, a third gone. I place the cake and chocolate chip biscuits I brought with me on the table.

‘You made this? Oh, this is good,’ she says, chewing on the corner of a cookie.

I woke up early today, had a shower to clear the wine fog from the night before and drove to the supermarket. I bought baking ingredients for Oma’s cake and my sister’s. Their birthdays fall on the June long weekend, three days apart. Oma wanted to come to my new place for her birthday. I’m told the conversation between her and mum went like this:

‘You want to have a barbeque for your birthday?’

‘No.’

‘Okay, we can all come over here then.’

‘No.’

‘No? What then?’

‘I like go to Donna’s place and she make me a cake.’

So I made a cake and some cookies this morning, vacuumed and did a load of washing before my phone flashed with a picture of my mum. She spoke before I had a chance.

‘Oma can hardly walk, you’ll have to come here.’

Arriving at Oma’s is a familiar déjà vu: swinging open the screen, pushing the wooden door over ridges in the carpet. Inside, it’s smoky as always. Mum and dad are already here. Oma’s place her phone rings soon after I arrive; it’s Sam.

‘Yes. Donna brought cake,’ she says into the line.

‘Sam says hello,’ she says.

‘Okay, thanks for the call,’ she says.

And she puts the phone down and goes back to her brandy-spiked tea. Not five minutes later mum asks if Sam is coming to visit from Canberra.

‘I don’t know,’ says Oma. ‘I didn’t speak to him yet.’

Oma pulls herself out of her chair, a process of shuffling and leaning and lifting.

‘I go back to bed,’ she says.

‘Well let’s get you showered and put some new clothes on you,’ says mum. ‘I think you’ve wet yourself and it smells.’

Oma relents and shuffles her way to the bathroom. I stand at the door while mum helps her mum peel layer after layer off and turn on the hot water.

‘Can you watch her a second?’ Mum leaves me with Oma and goes to look for some clothes.

My god, she is so tiny, hunched under the hot water. I can almost trace her youthful silhouette beneath the fat that sticks her legs together, that rolls over her stomach now. Her chest sags and her skin is dotted with thin red lines, but the line of her shoulder blade mirrors mine. Her calves, if they saw more exercise, would sport the muscular shape as my own. The mere idea of similarities between our frames fills me with anxiety. I shouldn’t be able to draw parallels between her eighty-something body and my own. But it’s not just age. Oma has always been outspoken about her hatred of “fatties,” seemingly oblivious to the fact that she is within the same weight range as the overweight people she points out in the street. So when I look at Oma’s body I think: this is what will happen to you, Donna, if you let yourself go. She cleans her teeth and washes her hair and stands under the stream a little longer.

‘Donna, don’t get old, don’t get old,’ she murmurs again and again and I have to think about breathing. I pass a towel to her and stick a pad to her underwear. I help roll a singlet down her back. I dry in between her toes and her legs and help her step into her clothes.

‘I didn’t ever think,’ she says, ‘that I would be like this.’

Australian Citizenship

October 2010, Cordeaux Heights

I am at mum and dads' house when I mention that I now have electronic access to Alfons' citizenship application file. I requested it from the National Archives and received an email back saying it was ready. I had a quick flick through it at work, but haven't examined it in detail yet.

'Come on,' says Mum, 'Let's go upstairs and look at it!'

She's right: she should be able to see her father's paperwork. There's no way she'd be able to navigate to it on her own. But I am tired, drained, hungover. I don't want to spend my weekends feeling guilty about the lack of progress on the search.

'Can't you just bring a computer down here?'

My mum walks away, I can hear the familiar cracks and creaks as she walks upstairs. I roll my half-empty mug around on its base and go back to reading the newspaper. A computer is placed down on the bench in front of me.

'It's on,' says mum. Dad is in the kitchen rinsing dishes. He looks at his watch.

'Come on mate, we're supposed to be there in five minutes,' he says to Mum. 'Denise made salads.'

'Oooh, salads!' I mock, 'Better rush for the salads!'

I open my email and click on the link. Thank you for your request for an online copy of the following record held by the National Archives of Australia (NAA). Item title: Henneberger Alfons Theodor Ludwig [German migrant; naturalisation file].

Each element of the file is date-stamped, but there are some dates as late as 1980.

'Must've been from when we were looking for him,' says dad when I point it out.

'No, that was way later,' I say, 'I wasn't even born in 1980. Weird.'

It's only now that it's occurred to me that my parents married in 1980. And my mother wanted nothing more than her father there. I keep scrolling through scrawled signatures on yellowed pages, case numbers that mean nothing to me. And then there, nearly type-written is his address: 12 Turner Street, Ryde, New South Wales. It's a heritage building now; it served as a communal boarding home back when he lived there. Mum has told

me that she visited him there once; he was working in the mental ward of a hospital as a warden.

Later, when I looked at the electoral rolls, my eye was drawn to the Alfons Henneberger who, in 1967 was registered to vote in Western Australia; he was a nurse. Could Alfons have moved west rather than overseas? Did he find what he was looking for by traipsing squeaky hospital floors or in the faces of patients?

Alfons became an Australian citizen in 1960, four years after he arrived in Australia. It wasn't soon enough for him. In a series of applications, rejected and returned, he writes that he wants to speed up the application process so he can join the Royal Australian Navy. I think of him in an Australian army uniform, hat tilted to the side and chin strap firmly in place. I have the picture of him in army greens folded into thick cardboard from his time in the Army Reserve. I wonder why he was so eager to fight for his country? A country that turned down his request for citizenship twice. And beyond that I wonder why the Australian government was so quick to turn him down. When I initially applied for the file, it was returned with conditions: that is, names had been blacked out or pages missing. But what was taken out wasn't specified. I wonder if I'm reading into it more than necessary because I want a story. One page features scrawled handwriting, illegible at first. When I spent time trying to decipher it, it says Child Letter Sent 6-2-61. Does that mean the Australian government was tracking his correspondence? And if so, why?

I spent time trying to find the women who signed their names as witnesses on Alfons' application for citizenship, Madeline Lavery and Marie Davidson. According to his citizenship application, Marie had lived with Alfons and Madeline just a few streets away in Sydney's Newtown. Of course, like everything else, I didn't have any luck. I went to the Mitchell Library once, quickly flicked through electoral role cards. I intended to return and search again. At one point it occurred to me the two women bore remarkably similar handwriting—I entertained the idea that there was something not quite right there, that maybe there was one woman who created the second in conjunction with Alfons, or that Alfons had forged them both. I took the page to forensic handwriting expert Paul Westwood who was kind enough to make a judgement free of charge. He agreed he could see the resemblance, but that it was likely the Ys curled and Ns dipped in the same way due to a class expectation, not due to anything sinister.

Part of me thinks I am giving up on the search for now. The time may come when I have less stress, more time. Then I will find Marie and Madeline. But by then it's more likely they'll both have passed away, taking their stories of Alfons with them. The pressure is constant.

The Great Synagogue

August 2012, Sydney

A long time ago Yoke Berry from KEVA suggested I call Sydney's Beth Din (the Jewish court) and visit the Great Synagogue. They became tasks pencilled into my diary week upon week, until the week passed and I still hadn't been. Eventually mum stepped in and picked a date: she decided to come with me to make sure I actually go. On the morning of the Great Synagogue visit, mum and I are running late. We've been driving for hours now, from Wollongong to the middle of Sydney. Cars, as always, are packed tight on Elizabeth Street, honking and moving forward in short, excited bursts before stopping again to a halt. I am in the passenger seat of mum's little Honda Jazz. Inside our small air-conditioned bubble the radio is tuned to Classic Hits FM. Annie Lennox's voice pulses out of the speakers and drifts through the vacant spaces of the car. We hardly hear her. We are late.

My mother isn't very good in city traffic. She's used to the spacious Wollongong streets; bumper-to-bumper is a shock. But she drove today regardless.

'You've been driving too much lately,' she said, 'you're not paying attention to the road.'

True, I guess. I drive to the city three times a week for my magazine job. I invariably leave ten minutes late and have to make up for the extra time I spent getting dressed and dressed again or emailing friends who are overseas by swapping lanes at rapid speeds, weaving in and out of trucks and bigger cars. And I'm tired. I'm so exhausted I have trouble getting anywhere on time these days. My two days in Wollongong are supposed to be dedicated to teaching and searching for Alfons, but lately I've been sleeping late, waking only to go to class. And my eating disorder has returned. Some nights—especially after working in the magazine—I spread all the sugary contents of my cupboard and fridge (Nutella, chocolate, cream) on my bed and finish them, piece-by-piece, spoonful-by-spoonful. Then, afraid of gaining weight in an office where I am already the largest by far, I spend time hunched over the toilet, watching the sweets come back up in chunks.

We'd planned to park at Annandale and catch light rail into the city, but made a last-minute decision to see if we could get closer. But now we're stuck; in the city with nowhere to park. We both keep coming up with ideas – 'why don't we park at

Broadway? It's free for the first few hours,' or 'isn't there parking at UTS?' – and traffic blocks the side street and we miss the turn-off. We drive straight past the synagogue.

'Call the synagogue! Ask them where to park!' says mum. Her eyes dart ahead; knuckles grip the wheel.

The girl on the other end advises us to take public transport.

'We won't make it in time!'

'It'll be okay,' I say.

'We should have left earlier!' says mum, 'We should have just parked in Annandale!'

In the end we park in the back streets of Redfern and catch a taxi back into the city.

'How do you handle all this traffic?' mum asks the driver.

'Been doing it for forty years.'

We step out of the leather interior and into the winter chill. The synagogue looms, blocking what little sun is trying to get through. The iron gates are still locked with a thick chain. We mill out the front near a group of tourists. They're mostly American, all backpacks and sensible footwear. I wonder aloud if I should have worn something more modest than my mini shift dress. When the gates swing open we all file up the stone stairs. At the door, the men are given yarmulke to wear. We hand over our ten dollars for the tour and take a seat in the wooden pews. It's cold inside. The place is huge, all delicate wooden carvings and candles. I stare up at the ceiling, intricately decorated with golden stars. A wooden platform rises from the centre of the room, facing rows and rows of seats. It's the first time either of us has set foot in a synagogue, though in her lifetime my mother has swung from Catholic to Jehovah's Witness to Christian.

We're here with hopes of finding out more about Alfons. We're hoping against the odds to find someone who remembered him; or to find that there were conversion records from that time. I want to sit where Alfons may have sat, to see the building that drew him away from his family.

Our two tour guides are something from a comedy skit: one round, white-haired and dithery, the other wiry with a sharp nose and sharper voice. Together they struggle with the remote for the projector—'Press this!' 'No, that didn't do anything!'—until, with a noisy whirr, the screen begins to unroll from the ceiling. As a historical video plays in the background I study the great hall. The space feels heavy in the same way as

a European castle. I am already anticipating that great sense of relief when you burst out of the building and into the sunlight.

The video ends and the guides carry out the scrolls of the Torah, carefully unrolling the delicate parchment and holding up the symbols by the heavy wooden ends, one each. The two move apart too quickly and the smaller of the pair steps forward again, reaching out as to steady the scrolls. Each one, they tell us, was written by hand.

‘But these ones are no longer used in service,’ says the older of the two. At the Great Synagogue, services are strictly Orthodox; a screen separates men from women. On days where there are big crowds, the women sit upstairs.

All of a sudden I doubt Alfons ever set foot in this building. Surely he didn’t have the patience for gender segregation? When it comes time for questions, I raise my hand. A woman nearby is chosen.

‘What are the boxes here for?’ she asks in her thick American accent, pointing to the metallic plaques in front of each of our seats. The guide launches into a detailed explanation of the boxes, how on the Shabbat one should not carry anything so selected members of the clergy are allowed to leave their prayer books in the synagogue.

I raised my hand again, am passed over.

‘What do you want to know?’ whispers mum.

I waved her question away, only because I am a notoriously loud whisperer.

‘Do most people walk to the service?’ asks someone else. The older guide’s explanation was difficult to hear.

‘Speak into the microphone!’ yells the wiry guide from the back of the room. The older guide lifts his arm closer to his mouth and continues his explanation, but by the time he has finished answering his arm found its way back towards his stomach and his voice is lost.

Eventually someone else asked my question: what is the conversion process?

‘It’s not easy to convert to Judaism,’ explains the guide, ‘Most people are born into it.’

A woman in the back chirps up, her hair shrunk into bouncy curls. She speaks quickly and confidently.

‘It’s on the mother’s side,’ she says, ‘children born to a Jewish mother are automatically Jewish, but if she converts after her children are born then they’ll have to go through the conversion process.’

She talks about the conversion process as a lifelong commitment: was Alfons capable of such a thing? I hear an echo of Oma's voice in my head, 'Oh, he was a cheater and a liar,' she said. 'He changed his name why he owe the German bank four thousand dollars.' A few years ago, when I started the search for Alfons Henneberger, I spoke to a friend, a newspaper journalist. 'Ooh,' she said, 'What if he was some kind of secret agent!' The bizarre scenario seems equally as likely at this point. I think now of the exceptions in his citizenship application. What secrets lie in those missing pages? Or again, am I trying to manufacture something that isn't there. After question time we are free to wander the synagogue. We find the older guide on his own and approach him.

'Are there synagogues in Sydney that aren't orthodox?' I ask.

'Oh yes,' he told me. 'There's one in Newtown, and one in Ryde...'

'It's just, I'm trying to find out about my grandfather who converted, probably in the sixties,' I start.

'Ah,' he says, looking around the synagogue. 'My youngest grandson did a reading on the weekend. In Melbourne. They said he was too young but he got up and he did it. He did so well.'

'Oh,' we nod.

'Yes,' he continues. 'My eldest is already married.'

'Uh huh,' we nod. He turned to say something to his fellow guide. Mum and I exchanged glances.

'You should ask the curly-haired lady,' says mum when we've walked away. 'She could tell you more than the guides.'
But she's already gone. And the tour just keeps going. Mum and I see our chance to escape and slip out the heavy wooden doors into the winter sunshine.

Marriage

March 2013, Lake Heights

It's almost harder when Oma is home than when she's in hospital. In hospital she has care, company. We can live our lives without anticipating the urgent phone calls. She's home now, so it means scheduling our days around her medication, like her eye drops, the reason for today's trip: they need to be done twice a day at the moment.

I stand over Oma with the bottle, wondering if her eyes were always so bright, or if the greyness of her skin makes them appear more so. A few years ago I used to stare at Oma in pictures, her youth confronting, almost too bold. Now I have stopped looking for meaning in everything. She blinks the drops away, most of the liquid trailing in the crests of her skin. I screw the lid on the bottle and place it back in the fridge.

'What are you doing today?' she asks for the third time in the past twenty minutes.

'I have to meet a friend for lunch soon, then I'm going to see another friend at the pub.'

'A boyfriend?'

'Nope.'

'Oh, you should get a boyfriend!'

'Nah. How about you, Oma? Do you have a boyfriend?'

'Oh there was so a one at day care, but I think I tell him "no" too much and now he leave me alone.'

'Aw! You should have made him your boyfriend!'

'Oh yes, he ask me to marry him but I say, "no, I already done that twice."'

Oma always tells Inga that she wants to go to a wedding before she dies. Her own were hardly ceremonies at all.

'You know,' she says, 'I give your mother everything, but I couldn't give she her father.'

My own parents met at a football game. My dad played rugby league with mum's brother Rom.

'I thought he was French when I first met him,' says mum. 'He had a moustache and he was so arrogant!'

But my father persisted asking her out until she agreed. After six weeks he proposed. She said to ask her again in three months. He waited one. She accepted.

Before they were married my mother had one demand for her husband: to reconcile with his father. My father didn't speak to his for a long time. His parents went through a bitter divorce when he was in his early teens and all five of his siblings sided with their mother, a stubborn, square-jawed woman with good intentions and no financial sense. She was always taking in stray animals and was always forced to give them away when she couldn't afford their upkeep. She soon remarried, as did her ex-husband. Dad never really took to his stepfather, said he was too old by the time he came around to consider him his dad. Neither his father nor he made an effort to stay in contact. So the years went by.

'You have a father that you can reunite with,' mum insisted.

It wasn't hard to find him in the phone book. Pop was living in Drummoyne in Sydney with his second wife Margaret. Margaret was twelve years younger than my grandfather, a stout lady who stood not even five foot four. What she lacked in height she made up for in enthusiasm. She collected cats and anything with a frog print. I remember visiting as a child: the heavy curtains drawn shut to keep the sun out, light from the front door's thick glass staining the room a dull orange. The meaty smell of cat food and the heavy mothball air. I remember sitting in the lounge room, feeding biscuits to the cockatoo, conveniently named Biscuit. Margaret was working as a cleaner at the local police station at the time. One morning she found a plant laying carelessly on one of the benches. So she took it away and planted it and nurtured it back to health—watering it and giving it air and sunshine, until one of her supervisors told her he was going to have to destroy it.

'Why?' She asked. 'It's sprouted new growths.'

'It's marijuana, Margaret!' he laughed.

My father disapproved of her at first, of course. She was younger, and much simpler than his father. But in time we all began to appreciate her complete lack of cynicism. There were still times when we wondered about the dynamics of their marriage, but Pop was happy. Happier still to have his eldest son back.

After I visit Oma, my friends and I have a picnic in the Botanic Gardens, only a few hundred metres from the spot where my parents were married. We spread our orange wool blanket, balance cups of tea on grooves in the grass. I unpack ricotta and

tomato tarts, zucchini slice, yoghurt with coconut and berries, olive sourdough and chocolate freckles which soon melt in the sun. We swirl our forks in the sunwarmed mess. For once I eat without calculating calories. I eat too much, but it's okay. It's a surprisingly bright day and I watch the sun's white outline make its way across the gazebo as my friends chat about people we know and girls I don't. I think about the trickling fountain over the other side of the Botanic Gardens. My friend Jess snaps a Polaroid of me, teacup in hand, bleached hair pulled into a loose bun. As the photo develops I see my mother in the outline. When I look at photos of my mother as a schoolgirl it is undeniably us. Our cherub face, our dimples.

My parents' wedding was simple enough. My mother was a natural bride, hair in loose '70s waves, a Grecian-style dress that fell straight to the floor. My father wore pale blue, suit legs slightly flared in the style of the time. They were wed beside a trickling stone fountain, shaded by vines above. A small crowd gathered to mark the occasion. The reception was held in a guest house that's now a retirement village. It wasn't until she'd walked up the stairs and met her husband-to-be at the top that my mother realised Alfons wasn't coming. A quick scan of the guests told her something she'd known all along: Alfons is gone.

My parents' wedding portrait hangs on the wall opposite their bed, all soft-focus green and white and blue. It is framed in matte gold. It's only when you look close that you can see the bride is pushed out of the clear vignette, blurred with the background.

Moving Weekend

February 2013, Wollongong

At home, on a rare Saturday afternoon with nothing to do, I lay on my stomach in front of my laptop, shifting my head from side to side, my neck cracking. The day stretches ahead. Soon I'll have to wash my hair and paint my face with makeup, shave my legs and meet up with friends at the bar across the road, but for now nothing is pressing. I pick up my iPhone, check Instagram (friends went surfing, friends got engaged, friends went running, friends had coffee), Facebook (new articles to bookmark from New York Times and Slate and The Daily Beast mixed in with some inane status updates by my teenage cousin who lives in Canberra and is in a stage of self discovery through binge drinking 'wooo! Hitchhiking to get mah hangover food y'all!') and my email (nothing of note). On my laptop I type 'German converts to Judaism' into the search box and wonder why I never have before. Pages and pages blinked on the screen. A German Catholic Jewish convert won Israel's version of *MasterChef*. An American doctor, descended from high order Nazis, converted to Judaism. I order his book from Amazon. I email the Sydney Beth Din, academic experts in Judaism, rabbis from Sydney synagogues to ask them how likely a scenario it is. When the replies come in a few days later, nobody could recall ever having met a German convert.

I find myself sitting in front of an LCD screen, typing search terms and losing myself in web pages, names and images and words flashing before me until it is just symbols on a screen. I post notices on online classifieds, I emailed the Goethe Institute where the kindly Sabine prints out my notice looking for people who have had the same experiences as Alfons and pinned it on the community notice board. I am so sure that when I find one convert, it will lead to others. I wasn't to know that nothing would ever come of my notice.

Before I know it's 6pm and Inga calls to tell me I'm late. I roll over and pick up my kitten, Daisy, and place her down on my chest. After one pat, she runs away and I too get up and pick a dress out of my wardrobe.

The next morning, I'm still asleep when my phone starts buzzing. I roll over and see a picture of mum on the screen. The night before I'd gone out to meet friends for drinks, and then drank too much out of boredom. I fell asleep fully dressed and with the light on, waking up in the same position.

‘Hi, can you please bring my car up to Inga’s so we can pack Brigitte’s things into the magic seats?’

Mum bought that car mainly for its seats that fold right down, giving her little hatchback as much room as a station wagon, yet I can only think of a few times when it’s come in handy. It’s Inga’s moving day, and one of those days. My sister is giving up on Wollongong and shifting to the city.

‘Can you give me half an hour?’ I ask. Then I put on a pair of short overalls and a t-shirt, cover my eyes with a pair of oversized sunglasses and drive up the hill to my sister’s place. There’s a truck blocking the driveway and my family dots the lawn: cousin Pete is ferrying chunks of wooden furniture from the doorway to the truck. Inside, my dad and his brother are taking the pieces and hoisting them onto the tray. I walked upstairs, trailing fingers over the handrail, swinging myself around the corners with faux-cheeriness. Outside, it is sunny and warm.

‘You’re here,’ says Inga, and hands me a supermarket green bag, packed loosely with half-empty shampoo bottles and moisturiser and body wash bottles, still dripping from the shower, with slimy soapy trails down the sides. ‘Can you take these to my car and throw out the empty ones on the way?’

I take the bag, turn on my heel and exit the same way I just came in.

‘Hey Pete,’ I call out as I swing open the front door.

Pete is my age, twenty-six. He lives at home with his mother, father and older brother. They’re the kind of family who still eat dinner at the kitchen table every night.

‘Hey Donny,’ he calls back. ‘How’s it going?’

‘Ugh.’ I can feel myself rolling my eyes. ‘Is this not the worst move you’ve ever experienced? I mean I move a lot, I know, but you just gotta grab some of those huge tartan canvas bags from the discount store. You gotta be packed before you ask people to come and help you!’

‘Haha,’ Pete nods along and I continue down the driveway, past the old man who takes pictures of the passers by. The car is locked so I just lean the bag against the back tyre.

It goes like that, to and from the car, until Inga leaves in the truck with dad. They drive to Sydney while mum and I clean the apartment ready for the new tenants. I drag a heavy line with a cleaning cloth between the carpet and the walls, collecting mounds of pinkish dust. Whatever cleaning product mum dipped this cloth into takes the nail

polish straight off my fingers. When I'm done, I wipe down the walls, and the shelves of my sister's bedroom, complaining all the while about her lack of planning in this move. Mum directs me to start the vacuuming, so I move out into the living room.

'Rabbi Cohen sends his blessings,' I yell over the lazy roar of the vacuum cleaner to my mother in the next room.

'What?'

'Rabbi Cohen emailed and wished Oma a speedy recovery. He sends his blessings.'

'That's nice of him,' says mum, 'we need all the blessings we can get.'

Mum and I were going to go to Newtown synagogue instead of helping in this move; I thought Alfons would have converted there because maps place his Newtown home from 1958 less than 500 metres from the synagogue. But it just didn't feel like good timing. So we concentrate on cleaning, getting a perverse joy out of rinsing blackened cloths and saying things like 'Oh my god it's like she never ever wiped the top of this cupboard when she lived here!'

Inga and dad arrive back in Wollongong in time for lunch. We're waiting for food at a little fish and chip shop by the ocean—after managing to drag mum from her cleaning—when there's a phone call from my aunty in Canberra; Oma just called her and sounded distressed, she says. I wonder if Oma sounded like Oma and Julianne just wasn't used to it, or if she actually is in a panic.

'Just when I was starting to unwind,' mum sighs, her voice thin.

Her and dad climb into their car and head over, while Inga and I wait until we've finished eating to follow them. We're on Oma's street when they call us over bluetooth, their voices distant through the car stereo: she's alright, they say. She was having trouble breathing but she's calmed down now. We drive past them as they pull away from her house.

Inside, Inga and I lay with Oma on her bed. She's sprawled diagonally across, resting her head on her hand. The sunlight reflects from dust particles near the window, turning the afternoon orange. I lay on my side, knees bunched toward my chest. Oma's breath comes loudly, in thick scratches from the back of her throat.

'Do you want the TV on?' asks Inga.

'No,' says Oma, 'why I can't see it anyway.'

I stare at the portrait of her three eldest children on the wall: a thick gold frame wound around a picture of my mum, uncle Rom and uncle Mick, their faces so familiar it's as though they're adults dressed as kids, not kids at all. Mum is on the left, golden hair twisted into three bunches, one on top and either side of her head. She wears a beaded necklace, a little white dress with a full skirt, and the same closed-lip smile I myself employ. Rom is tiny in the middle, wearing the same shirt and pants combo as his brother on the right. They are both smiling as though laughing at a joke my mother didn't hear. I wonder what will become of the portrait when we eventually have to clean out Oma's house. And then I remember the horror of my cousin, Rom's eldest daughter, saying to Oma when we were kids: 'when you die I'd like your watch.' There was much talk amongst the parents about that one; I overheard it from the back seat of our old Toyota Corolla. It isn't so audacious to wonder these things now, when her medical chart lists: type II diabetes, gallstones, acute liver failure, Parkinson's disease, chronic emphysema. I take a quick snap of the picture on my iPhone and lay back down on Oma's floral quilt.

'You know, Alfons he try to sell Sylvie on the boat,' starts a familiar story. 'He find an Italian couple who couldn't have kids, and they already give him one hundred mark. But I say "no!" Then he had to give them back the money why I wouldn't sell she.' Oma's voice comes in a raspy, gurgling whisper.

'Oh, everyone on the boat was sick, so nobody came to dinner. But Sylvie and I went. The chef he said I can eat anything what I want and I say "no, just give me some bread rolls please," and in this way I come not once sick. Oh all the others, they drinking water, but I say "water is for the ducks!" you get enough just from being out there in the ocean, you know.'

'I'm not sure that's true, Oma,' I venture.

'And then when we get here everybody get two shilling for an ice cream but Sylvie and I, we don't get one why Alfons is gone with the money.'

She freezes for a moment and then the coughing starts. A hacking cough, like she's choking. Oma is thrusting her chest back and forth, *eeeehhhhhheh eeeeeeeeeeh.*

'Oma, do you want some water?'

'Are you okay?'

'Do you need your puffer?'

Her face, usually grey, is flushed pink. She turns slowly toward the edge of her bed and drops one foot off at a time. Inga goes for water and I help Oma to standing.

‘Where are you going? What can I get you?’

She's hot to the touch and the cough had that choking gurgle. *Eeeeeeh eh eeeeeeh eeeeeeeeeeh eeeeeeh.*

‘Inga? Do we need to call an ambulance?’

Oma slowly waddles to the kitchen. Inga comes out holding a coffee mug filled with water. Oma doesn't so much as look at it.

'I don't know. Should I call mum?'

‘Yeah.’

I walk with Oma, down the wood-panelled hallway where I used to see faces in the grain. She's shaking. *Eeeeeheheeeeeheh*. She lowers herself into the chair she always sits in.

‘Here, Oma, have some water.’

She takes a single shaky sip and puts the mug back down on the table.

I hand the puffer to her and she lifts it to her lips. It hisses air and she drops it back on the table. The choking stops but her breath is raspier than before. Inga comes back in and asks Oma if she wants us to call an ambulance.

‘Well, I guess I got no choice,’ she says. ‘I don’t like go in hospital though.’

‘If we call the ambulance you’re going to end up in hospital.’

'I'm going to call the ambulance,' says Inga and Oma says nothing.

While she's gone I sit with Oma, watching her take sips of water.

'Give me a panamax,' she says. I'm searching for one when Inga comes back.

‘No, don’t give her anything. She might choke! That’s what the ambulance said,’ says Inga.

In her room, I fix two nighties into loose rolls and place them into one of those environmental bags from the supermarket. I fold a few pairs of her underwear, a comb and a pair of slippers and pack that in as well. Oma wanders in and asks if she has any money in her purse. I count out three hundred and fifty dollars and put it into my purse for when she gets out of hospital. She sits down on the bed and I sit beside her. She edges open the top drawer and slides out her velvet-padded jewellery box. Oma begins picking out necklaces, rings and watches, holding them an inch in front of her nose and squinting at their outline.

‘This,’ she says, with a heavy gold watch draped over her index finger, ‘this is Wally’s watch.’

She picks up a long gold chain, knotted in places and with a large aquamarine pendant.

‘That’s pretty,’ I say.

‘Oh I don’t know who give me this,’ she says, while the knots send the necklace twisting gently right and left. She places it back in the jewellery box and shuts the lid.

‘Are you okay to leave it at home while you’re in hospital?’ I ask her.

‘Oh yes I think so,’ she says, and slides it into the back of the drawer.

Next she picks up an old film canister and twists off the lid.

‘What’s in there?’

‘I don’t know,’ she answers, shaking the contents into the silky skin of her palm.

A little brass figurine falls out, thumb-sized and weighty. He’s holding what looks like a large gun at his side, face turned to the sky.

‘My little soldier!’

‘Where’d you get him from?’

‘A soldier gave him to me once.’

She puts the lid back on and returns the container to her drawer. I want to show the little figurine to Inga when the ambulance has come and taken Oma away, but she’s already collected the washing and locked the door and is ready to drive away.

Monday night after work Inga picks me up, her first week in the city, and drives to the Opera House. We meet mum and dad for dinner at the Opera Bar, sharing pizzas and delicate salad of rocket and peach. I drink wine, head still hurting from the first weekend with my new housemate. We all chat and after dinner walk around Circular Quay and eat ice cream. Mum, dad and I see Neil Finn and Paul Kelly play at the Opera House; I’d bought them tickets months ago. The show is brilliant, but when I think back to that night it’s a photo of my parents with the Harbour Bridge in the background, mum’s eyes are closed and she’s smiling with her whole face. Dad’s arm is around her and he’s laughing. The light is fading and the city lights starting to spring up. A ferry meanders in the background.

In the car on the way home, I rest my head on a rolled up jacket. I sleep fitfully and overhear mum and dad discussing Oma’s slow death.

‘I just worry,’ mum says, ‘what if Donna finds Alfons and we have to go through this again?’

Newtown synagogue

March 2013, Newtown

The more I thought about it, the less likely it seemed that Alfons converted at the Great Synagogue. Given that one doesn't drive on the Sabbath (and did he even have a car? — a question I hadn't considered), it's more likely he attended closer to home. Newtown seemed like a more viable option. The Newtown synagogue is on a leafy street where, if you stand on the eastern corner, you can see both my ex-therapist's home practice and the house that Alfons' lived in, in 1958.

It was about this time the year before last that I began seeing Marie-Pierre, my therapist. I was working on the start-up website and only realised how out of hand things had become when my lip swelled painfully; I hadn't realised I'd been biting it at my desk all day. In the evenings I'd stop at a convenience store and buy mixed lollies that I'd devour by the handful in the car, only to stand on scales pinching the fat on my stomach in despair afterwards. Despair is not too heavy a term to describe those days. I really wasn't sure I'd ever be able to eat without panic. Or that I'd ever do anything worthwhile. Marie-Pierre runs a practice from a second storey room in her inner-west terrace. She has a wonderful curly-haired Maltese poodle cross who sat pensively in the corner of all therapy sessions. I'd coddle the puppy, and Marie-Pierre would take this as a sign of my own submissiveness.

'Animals must be tamed,' she'd say. Did she love the dog? I used to wonder, thinking of my own poodle, Tiffany, and the way she buries her head into the space between my knees whenever I am about to leave mum and dad's place.

That little room overlooks a bunch of other geometrical paved squares that pass for backyards. The lines of the yards didn't quite line up the way I would have liked to see, and I'd imagine pushing them into neat parallels as I cried and Marie-Pierre watched passively. I could feel my face burning. Then Marie-Pierre would say something biting, and I'd think, holy shit, she's right! She shamed me into sorting myself out. Marie-Pierre was the antithesis to my teenage counsellor who used to look at me with such wide eyes, clasp her hands and announce, 'Oh that must be so difficult!' Marie-Pierre was not interested in me; she was interested in her own study, in bettering her own practice by fixing me. I was a result to her. She charted my progress on a graph. And yes, I improved. There was a line on Marie-Pierre's graph that marked the

point where I was no longer drowning in sorrow but had my head above water again (Marie-Pierre's cliché, not mine). And then one day Marie-Pierre and I had a disagreement. She wanted me to see a health specialist for an illness I was sure I did not have. Marie-Pierre would not accept my GP's word that I did not suffer from said illness.

‘If it was your dog, you would get a second opinion!’ said the woman whose dog has a homeopath.

‘Nope,’ I said, ‘if it was my dog, I would trust that her vet knows better than I do.’

Marie-Pierre pressed on.

‘Your face is closed, like you feel resentment,’ said Marie-Pierre.

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m just finished with this conversation.’ That was our last session. At the time I carried a to-do list that never got smaller, scrawled in the back of my diary: visit Alfons’ houses, try to find Madeline Lavery, visit state library. For a time I abandoned the search for my grandfather—never officially, but internally it was over. So the ideas came and were written down, only to accumulate with the other things I’d forgotten to do. It hung over my head with constant guilt. And all this time I’d navigated the backstreets of Newtown, parking sometimes only a hundred metres from the house Alfons shared with Madeline Lavery. In her large letters on the citizenship form, she states she had known him for two years, which places their meeting to shortly after Alfons arrived in Australia.

Mum and I stare up at the building where Alfons once lived. As with most housing in Newtown, the building takes up an entire block and has been converted into terraces, which, despite clear lines drawn in paint and fences and garden beds, cling together stubbornly. This one faces a park where, on this Saturday morning, couples cup hands around coffee in paper mugs and children venture down slippery slides, squeals escaping their mouths before being pillowed by the abounding quiet. The terrace that was once Alfons’ home is painted a light peach and framed by neat hedges that follow the path up the stairs and to the front door. The building is defined by sets of bay windows that push out towards the street. Above them are two eagles, etched in stone, wings outstretched. The roof is turreted and flat.

‘I wonder if it reminded him of home,’ says mum, out loud.

‘I guess,’ I say, ‘but compared to the Munich house this is nothing.’

I don't wonder then what room he slept in or whether he slept alone. I don't picture him striding through the park on his way to work. I just look up at the concrete against the blue of the sky. The sunlight dappled on the hedges. I snap a few pictures with my iPhone.

'It feels eerie, doesn't it?' asks mum.

I nod agreement I don't feel.

'Should we head to the synagogue?'

Inside the synagogue Rabbi Eli Cohen rocks back and forth on a chair, head submerged beneath layers of white fabric and face peeking out the front. For a second I wonder if I should approach him to tell him who I was and why I am here but decide it'd be best if I don't. I feel like we stand out blaringly, especially with the chain straps of my handbag— I really shouldn't be carrying it into the synagogue on the Shabbat— clanking together. It feels suddenly heavy on my shoulder, the chains imprinting tracks on my skin. I eye some space on the pews that seem inconspicuous and we slink into our seats.

'When you read the Torah,' Rabbi Cohen is saying to the congregation scattered on the pews, 'even if you don't understand it, it brings you closer to God.' As he speaks his body sways backwards and forwards unpredictably, sometimes fluidly and then twitching and jerking. He stops moving at times and grabs at his beard.

'...You are able to.... What's the word? Envelop the whole idea,' he says, using his hands to make a globe in the air.

The synagogue shows none of the opulence of the Great Synagogue; here, the walls are painted sundrenched yellow and the carpet is grey and worn. There's a curtained-off section towards the back of the pews and a section upstairs. I know from our visit to the Great Synagogue that those are the only places women are allowed to sit once the service has officially begun. I run my fingers on the cold wooden bench in front.

There's a thing I do in church services, where my head grows heavy and my shoulders droop and my eyes close and all of a sudden there's not enough air in the room and I have to force myself to slow my breathing and keep my eyes open by squeezing them shut and rubbing at the corners. I did that last time we went to church on Christmas Eve in Roding. I've done it in weddings. The only other time I get like that is driving long stretches of road. But inside the synagogue the air is crisp, chilled. The day's warmth is left outside.

‘How long do you think this will go for?’ asks mum in a sharp whisper.

‘Dunno, the rabbi said until 12.’

‘Where’s the rabbi?’

‘I think there,’ I say, pointing to Rabbi Cohen.

‘We only parked in a two hour spot.’

‘We’ll have to move the car, or we can leave early and come back another day.’

‘No we came all the way up here, we should stay.’

The time comes for the women to move upstairs. Mum and I hesitate, unsure if we should move to the veiled section and remain near the action or climb the stairs with the other women.

‘I guess we should go upstairs?’

‘Yeah, okay.’

In the foyer a grey-haired lady hands us prayer books.

‘Is this your first time at Newtown?’ asks a woman who introduces herself as Roseanna. I’d noticed her earlier, when she came in with a mentally disabled son. His face was contorted in tantrum and she held his hand calmly, this boy the size of his mother. Roseanna has a kind face and cropped dark hair. She’s carrying a small tote bag.

‘Yes,’ I say. And then add, ‘I’m actually doing a research project, looking for my grandfather who I think converted here in the early 1960s.’

‘Oh,’ says Roseanna. ‘Hopefully Morry comes to today’s Shabbat, he’s in his eighties and has been coming here since the 1930s. If anyone would remember your grandfather it’d be Morry.’

We take our seats in the front row upstairs, placing our prayer books upside down and wrong way round on the wooden ledge, forgetting that Hebrew reads right to left. Downstairs, Rabbi Cohen stands on a raised platform, praying and moving around.

‘We can’t start until there are ten men,’ says Roseanna. ‘When there are ten men we can bring out the scrolls. Then we will start.’

One of the issues I worked on with Marie-Pierre to sort out was my fear of time. My family have always been punctual. We would be the first to arrive at gymnastics class and my mother would always have the best parking spot to pick us up from school. If we say we will be somewhere, we will be there. So if a service starts at 9.30 am we would be there, as we were this morning, at 9.25 am. I don’t live like that so much

anymore. I usually spend too much time changing outfits and reading news articles to get to work on time. In the mornings, when I used to meet Inga for running, I would routinely show up three to five minutes late. Three to five minutes late at 5.45am seemed good to me; wasn't everyone else sleeping? 'No!' Inga would say, 'You're wasting my time!' When she still lived in Wollongong, Inga would pick me up to go for a coffee or to visit mum and dad and if I wasn't waiting, she was incredulous. Or if I happened to fall asleep, which was common in those depressed days, and miss dinner, oh god. Fifteen missed calls. I operated in constant half-panic.

'What makes it her time?' asked Marie-Pierre, one day. 'Why shouldn't you get to spend your time as you see fit?'

'One, two, three, four, five, six Seven,' counts Roseanna. 'They'll wander down slowly.'

'What's different about this service is that we talk right through it!' says Roseanna. 'The men all sit downstairs because it keeps them out of trouble, but the women don't really need to come because we don't get up to no good.' She let out a little laugh.

'Sometimes the women go over and prepare the lunch and the men sit here. At least it keeps the husbands out of their wives' hair for a few hours.'

Downstairs, a fragile old man walks in and sits on the right hand side, on his own.

'Is that ... what did you say his name was?' mum asks Roseanna.

'Oh no,' she answers, 'That's not Morry.'

Just then, a girl, about nine years old, pokes her head above the banister. She wanders towards us and stands between Roseanna and I, one hand on each chair back. She's wearing a denim pinafore, a long sleeve turtleneck and buckled shoes with socks. Her frizzy hair is held down with a wide headband and she has the biggest brown eyes and longest eyelashes. She lifts her feet and started swinging back and forth, smiling.

'Hello,' says Roseanna. 'Where is your brother?'

'He's down there,' says the girl, peering over the railing.

'And is he going to help your father today?'

'No!' says the girl. 'He's too little!'

'How old is he?'

'Foouuuurr.'

'Well then he's old enough!'

‘But he’s too small to see!’

‘So then you should go down and lift him up!’

‘But he can’t even read!’

Downstairs, the girl’s little brother is running circles around the raised platform, little cap clinging to the back of his head. The old man on his own waits patiently and Roseanna’s son sinks below the pews, laying on the floor.

‘Hey!’ she hisses at him. Downstairs, he continues crouching. Roseanna signals to her husband to get the boy up, but he would not. Eventually she gives up with a wave of her hand. At her next count there are ten men, enough for the scrolls to come out. A curtain at the back of the hall is pulled back and wooden doors folded onto themselves. Two scrolls are brought out, and paraded around the congregation downstairs. The men touch the scrolls with the edges of their shawls, or kiss their fingers and place them on the cloth covering.

‘If we were downstairs we would also have the chance to touch the scrolls,’ says Roseanna. Upstairs, women trickle in, chatting and taking their seats. They move around at will.

Rabbi Cohen returns to his praying, this time less in solitude.

‘Page four hundred and sixty five,’ he’d say, and then begin humming in Hebrew. Mum would flip the pages of her prayer book and then mine; I’d given up. What’s the point when I can’t read the Hebrew?

A young man about my age, in skinny chinos and a crisp white shirt, with the tassels of his tallit draped down the sides of his legs, takes his place downstairs.

‘Who’s that?’ whisper the women amongst themselves.

‘Have you ever seen him before?’

‘I haven’t. Have you?’

‘Is he converting?’

Later, I go to out to move the car and I come across the boy in the foyer. He’s perched on a bench in the foyer, prayer book open in his lap. Behind him, a fleck of paint is suspended by a spider web, a tiny sunshiny glint. The boy looks up from his book at my footsteps, and smiles a little with the corners of his mouth. His face is so benign; a gentleness that feels unfamiliar. He doesn’t look at me the way I’m used to; his look is totally free of judgement or desire. He isn’t assessing my outfit or my weight. I try my best to reflect his look in mine and climb back up the stairs.

‘... We spend so much time worrying about ourselves,’ Rabbi Cohen is saying, ‘that we forget about community. Oh, we worry about how stressful our jobs are or how miserable we are and we seek counselling. We spend money on telling our problems to another person when instead we should move the focus from ourselves and into God. When we are with God these problems aren’t problems at all.’

The Rabbi’s son is reaching up towards the scrolls, running his fingers through their silver casing as though playing a dangling harp.

‘Ha!’ says Rosanna. ‘That’s 9 carat silver he’s playing with.’

Rabbi Cohen gently reaches around his own back and, without looking, grabs the boy’s hand. The boy allows himself to be led to his father’s side. There are four men on the wooden platform. They stand around, examining the scrolls, marking different places with their fingers.

‘A synagogue doesn’t need a rabbi,’ says Roseanna. ‘Up until eight months ago we didn’t have a Rabbi and those two brothers, they’re from Mexico, they ran the Schul. The men are allowed to go up and read parts of the prayers. The muttering and humming turns to song and the congregation rises and claps in time. I take my cues of when to stand and when to sit from the other women upstairs.’

At one point a woman and her son, head uncovered, wander into the synagogue.

‘I emailed and asked if I could come,’ says the woman to no one in particular. She is wearing layers of purple and grey, a thick scarf snaked around her hair. She’s carrying a shopping bag in each hand.

‘Oh!’ say the women around me. They rise from their chairs and meet in a circle of discussion, voices hissing in whisper.

‘What’s happening?’ asks mum.

‘Not sure.’

One is delegated to fetch the woman. The three come up the stairs. Once upstairs, her fussing continues. The woman’s shopping bags rustle, she wrestles a cap onto her son’s blonde head. She claps her hands together and peels them apart to indicate she needs prayer books. They’re brought to her and then she leans over to see what page she needs to be on. Her son scoots across the bench and back to his mother’s side. Rabbi Cohen and the men downstairs continue their prayers. If they notice the commotion they hide it well. And then the woman stands up, and walks towards the back of the synagogue. She disappears out a door and her son follows suit. After a few minutes the women upstairs

again join in a circle, this time motioning to the shopping bags, which remain, along with the prayer books, exactly as the woman had left them. Two women carry one each gingerly downstairs.

‘You just can’t be too careful. Especially here. You can’t just leave your bags here,’ says Roseanna, later. ‘Anything could have been in there.’

The threat gone, the women upstairs focus their attention again on Rabbi Cohen. I sneak a look at the time on my phone in my bag. We rise again to sing and the air becomes voices only. Roseanna pushes her prayer book towards me.

‘See, here it is in English.’

When it’s over we move with the crowd toward the hall next door. Inside, I try to stand out of the way. The Rabbi emerges in a thick woollen coat pulled tight at the waist. A tray of grape juice and red wine is passed around the room and trays of dips and vegetables and rice crackers spread thick with hummus uncovered. The Rabbi says something and I feel everyone around me lift their thimbles to their lips and I do the same.

‘Alright,’ says mum, ‘who should we talk to now?’

We’re standing on our own, off to the side. It’s warm inside. There are two long tables packed with food. There are chairs along the tables but almost everyone stood in groups in the centre of the room. The kids spring from lounge to lounge on the stage out the front.

‘I’d like to introduce myself to the Rabbi,’ I say, but we’re interrupted by an announcement. A stout man of Chinese descent takes to the stage. He adjusts his jeans at the waist and puts his hand up to signal attention. I don’t hear exactly what he says, something about a historical discussion he’s organising at the synagogue. I go over and ask him.

The man’s name is Aston Kwok and he’s a history teacher. I tell him about our search and he tilts his head in thought.

‘You’ll need to speak to my contact at the AJHS,’ he says. I’ve already approached the history society, but perhaps with his help we’ll get somewhere this time.

‘And you should call the Beth Din.’

‘Yes I’ve done that,’ I say. ‘I’m just waiting until after Passover until they have a chance to look into it for me.’

‘I may take it on as a project, as something I’m interested in,’ he says. ‘Or I may just ask around. I have to see.’

‘Of course,’ I say. ‘Any help would be amazing.’

I copy down his email address and promise to email him the following day. After that we mill near Rabbi Cohen until we get a chance to introduce ourselves. He urges us to eat.

‘Oh, no thank you,’ I say reflexively. I haven’t had a chance to run and the bagel and tea I had earlier are sitting heavily in my stomach.

‘Donna,’ hisses mum. ‘You’ll have a carrot, won’t you?’ I take a carrot from the plate. I hold it in my hand while we speak to Rabbi Cohen, wondering if I could take a bite and still carry on the conversation.

‘Thank you so much for letting us come today,’ I say.

‘You are welcome anytime.’

In the car on the way home, I take my boots off and stretch my legs onto the dashboard, strips of sun moving rhythmically across them. I take notes and mum talks,

‘Maybe Alfons converted because he met a woman,’ she says, ‘maybe he is still with her, maybe they moved to Israel and it didn’t work out. He must have really wanted to convert if he went through all that.’

I listen, and add a comment here or there. The Israel thing is starting to worry me—I’d spent years working on the assumption that Alfons converted to Judaism and moved to Israel. That’s the story that’s always been. But I have been trusting in memories.

There are two types of dementia patient, explains my friend Laura, a nurse, a few days later. We’re drinking milky tea at a communal café table on a rainy Saturday morning.

‘One becomes dithery and sweet when their mind starts to go. Their memory goes but they don’t know, so they’re happy.’

‘The other type?’

‘They get mean.’

The hospital Laura works at had to take a woman’s cane away and give her a wheelchair instead. She’d thought it funny to sit close to the walkway and trip people with her stick as they moved past. And Laura’s grandmother went missing in a busy shopping centre. For four hours police and security looked for her, and when they came across her hiding

in an aisle of a department store, she told them she didn't want to be found. She was angry with her son.

Oma is also getting mean. After we called the ambulance on moving day, Oma stayed in hospital for three weeks. From her room you could look downwards and watch the people streaming in and out of the hospital. The buildings grew smaller as they spanned further towards the ocean. You could see the thick steam clouds streaming out of the steelworks, the blue of the sea dotted with freightliners. Cars moving up and down the hill.

'You've got a nice view here,' I said to her one day when I visited.

'Yeah? My back hurt. I like go home.'

The first chance I got I spoke to her doctor's intern, a slightly crossed-eyed boy my own age with sand-coloured hair and prominent nose. He untangled cords suspended between machines and Oma and jotted numbers down on a clipboard.

'Tomorrow I think we'll remove your catheter,' he said loudly and slowly to Oma.

'Yes I think that be good.'

'You aren't sending her home are you?' I asked. I hate knowing that she's there on her own, breath coming in gasps and unable to see the numbers on her phone.

'No, not at all. I think we'll send her to a rehab hospital after this, get her stronger, otherwise she'll be back here in a few weeks. Then we can look at assessing how she is at home and perhaps some care options.'

'Oh good.'

'How is she at home?'

'Not good at all. She doesn't eat and sends her carers away and can't see or do her own washing.'

'Okay, well, no she's not going there for a while.'

'Hey!' yelled Oma. 'When you two talk all I hear is quack quack quack!'

'That's because we're talking about you, Oma! You don't need to hear it.'

'It's like blahblahblahblah,' she said, using her hand as a puppet to drive home her point.

A few days later Oma, mum and I sit in the courtyard of Port Kembla hospital. There's a warm wind and Oma complains about the cold. She talks about life on the *Castel Felice*, the same words as always, 'I never got sick why I only ate the bread,' and

I trace her words in the concrete with a long stick I found laying on the bench next to me.

‘Oh, that look fun,’ she says, eyeing my branch.

‘Here, have a go,’ I say, handing her the stick.

‘Oh, I can’t do anything good with that,’ she says, ‘why I’m too shaky.’

I pick up another from the ground and hold it up, challenging her to a duel. We tap our branches against each other’s, swishing them through the air.

‘That’s a good game,’ says Oma. ‘I like that one.’

A nurse comes and asked if she’d like a cup of tea or coffee or a cordial. Oma asks for cordial and the nurse returned with a plastic cup and a packet of biscuits.

‘Here,’ Oma says, and gives them to me. ‘Eat!’

‘Oh no, let’s share.’

I break an edge off one of the biscuits and chew on it gingerly. It’s crunchy and floury, like porridge left too long in the microwave.

‘Oma, these are terrible!’

‘I know, that’s why I give to you.’

At Port Kembla, Oma shares a room with a woman named Helen. Helen is younger than Oma, a brightly dressed woman who doesn’t so much walk as shuffle her weight between her feet, swaying as she goes. She has a robin tattooed above her left breast, stretched with weight and age. Helen has appointed herself spokesperson for Oma.

‘Your mum told the doctors she didn’t have a cough anymore!’ she’ll announce when mum and I arrive, ‘but she’s been coughing up phlegm! Heaps of it! So I told them!’ Other times it’s ‘Your mum has been very difficult with the nurses. She keeps saying she wants to go home.’ Helen doesn’t like Oma and I going outside. ‘It’s windy out there,’ she’ll warn as we get near the doorway. One day her son came to visit and Oma reported back that he was a truck driver and ‘so big like she.’ When we brought Oma’s toothpaste to her, she informed us that she’s already got a whole tube, pointing to an antiseptic cream. I wondered if she had a tube in the bathroom and went to check, but Helen informed me it was for patients only. I wasn’t allowed inside.

After about a week in Port Kembla, Oma is discharged and sent home. Apparently there’s only so much the hospital can do to keep her against her will. Mum and I are angry but Rom’s philosophy is if she wants to go home, we should let her. After all, she’s old. In her house alone she makes panicked phone calls and grows more

and more unwell. We joke that each time she goes to hospital she comes out with a new diagnosis. This time we added diabetes to the list (joining emphysema, heart failure, Parkinson's disease, progressive blindness.) She still accepts no extra help.

I managed to get Morry Stein's phone number from Rabbi Cohen. He's the older man Roseanna thought might remember Alfons from Newtown synagogue. He's now in his eighties and lives alone in Maroubra. As the phone rang in my hand I was thinking about once, when I was a child, I didn't want to go for a ride at Wonderland, an amusement park that used to be out in Western Sydney. I lined up, holding my mother's hand, but as we got closer to the front of the line I tightened my grip on her hand. Mum, I said, I think I need something to eat! I'm really hungry! No, she corrected me. You've got butterflies in your tummy, that's all. I remember stepping off that ride and telling my mother she was right; I wasn't hungry at all.

At last Morry answered with a croaky hello.

'Hello, Morry?'

'Yes.'

'Okay hi, my name is Donna and Rabbi Cohen gave me your phone number, I hope that's alright.'

A silence. I ask hello again, into the phone. Oma never understands me when I speak; I'm too fast and I mumble. Mum always says that she thinks it's because my mouth can't keep up with my brain. My kindergarten teacher, Mrs Venum wanted to send me to a speech therapist. Of course in those days I exhibited a nervous cough and sported a lisp, later righted by having braces. I remember getting into trouble twice in kindergarten, once when I was playing catch and kiss with the boys and I ripped the buttons right off a boy named Rhys' shirt. I remember sitting up straighter in class after that and the vague sense that playing kiss and catch was out of character for me. The second time I took a colouring in competition straight from a teacher's desk at lunch. That time I didn't know I was doing anything wrong; I wanted to enter the competition and needed the template. Each time Mrs Venum told mum or Oma what I'd done wrong and I was shamed into behaving myself again. Some days Oma would pick me up from school and take me to Mrs Venum's house, where she worked as a cleaner. Mrs Venum was never home, and it was strange to be in her space like that.

'You're going to have to slow down. What did you say your name was again?'

'Oh, sorry. My name is Donna.'

‘And you say you got my phone number from Rabbi Cohen?’

‘Yes, he thinks you might be able to remember my grandfather.’

‘Is that so? Well, you’ll have to tell me his name.’

‘Yes, thank you. My grandfather was named Alfons Henneberger. He was German and converted to Judaism some time in the late 50s or early 60s.’

‘Oh!’ cries Morry, ‘that’s more than forty years ago. You’ll have to excuse me, I can’t remember that far back.’

Morry has his own stories though. He tells them twice, pausing to note that he had in fact told me that twice.

‘There love,’ he says, ‘I just told you that one twice.’

His wife was born in Holland. Raised a Jew, she fled to Jerusalem during the Holocaust. Morry met her years later in Australia.

‘What did you say your name was again?’ asks Morry.

‘Donna.’

‘Donna, I’d like to meet your husband.’

‘Oh I don’t have a husband.’

‘That’s okay. You can still visit and we’ll have a cup of tea, or a nice whiskey. We’ll find you a nice Jewish husband, won’t we?’

As soon as I get off the phone from Morry I dial the Sydney Beth Din. As it had been explained to me so many times, from Yoke Berry and Einat and at the Holocaust museum and from Rabbi Cohen, the Beth Din is the Jewish court. It holds conversion records and marriage records and if there is anyone who could tell me what happened to Alfons, it was the Beth Din. I speak with Rabbi Schlanger, who keeps me on the phone while he searches through the archives.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll find it,’ he assures me. I wait, sitting on my bed, scribbling unnecessary notes in my diary while he looks. I can hear files being shuffled down the phone line.

‘So you say late 1950s?’

‘Or anywhere up to the late sixties,’ I say.

‘Okay, give me a minute,’ he says, ‘I don’t have a computer so I’m standing in front of the files.’

Eventually Rabbi Schlanger exhaled into the phone.

‘I don’t see any Henneberger here. Is there any other name?’

I explain that when he converted he adopted Abraham Ben-Yehuda as his name, but I already knew that wouldn't help in the search. I imagined it was alphabetised by a convert's original name.

‘Hold on, there is one more place to look.’

I imagine Rabbi Schlanger rifling through drawers of old files. I can see him coming across the file marked Henneberger. He'll open it and he'd find out something key to my search. But he doesn't. There was no record of my grandfather ever having converted.

‘Does that mean he didn't actually convert?’

‘Not necessarily,’ says Rabbi Schlanger, his voice rhythmical. ‘Perhaps we are looking in the wrong place. We need more clues.’

I feel like I've missed something vital in the search for Alfons. If only I had more time to investigate, if only I was a better journalist I would have found him. I am missing something, but I don't know how to unwind the strings of clues that have brought me here. I'm tangled in them now. But then again, I could search forever. At some point it stops being logical to do so.

Christina

August 2013, Riverwood

Along the way, my mother began to step up her search for her father. We were occupying a strange space, my mother and I—I'd opened up the possibility of finding him, of dedicating years of my life to the hunt, and simultaneously the possibility of greater disappointment than my mother had already known. Her father had left and her daughter had failed. Before we gave up completely, we went to see a psychic.

'What would I even say to him if we did find him?' mum asks.

I'm driving this time, to Riverwood. We'd just stopped to buy an African Violet for Christina the psychic. She'd been recommended to mum by one of her colleagues, Craig: an ex-cop who now works as a private detective. It took mum a long time to approach Craig about her father, but when she did he was only too happy to help. I made a timeline for him outlining key dates of Alfons' life and disappearance and he passed it on to Christina to see what she came up with. A few days later Christina called Craig and asked to speak to mum. Mum later relayed their conversation to me: Christina thinks Alfons is dead. He died in a hot place, a dry place, but with some kind of water nearby. She thinks his family knows where he was. Or where he's buried now, at least.

Christina lives down a driveway packed with matching houses that appear larger than they are. She opens her front door and welcomes us in, the décor a mix of Greek columns and hippie crystals.

'I'm sorry, we'll have to do this in my bedroom because Alex is here,' she says, indicating with a nod at her son, who's sitting on the lounge. He's about my age, thin, with startling blue eyes.

'No, mum, it's okay, I'll go,' he says.

'No,' she says, 'stay.'

Mum and I follow Christina up wooden-railed stairs. In her bedroom she gestures for mum to sit on a blue lounge. She drags a wooden chair across thick carpet and places it on an angle, facing toward my mother. I'm not sure if the arrangement is part of the process—a way to channel our collective energies—or if I was in some way an inhibitor to the process. It occurs to me that Christina knows nothing of my search, only my mother's. She sits down beside mum. The sun shines through the window, painting her

greying hair a fierce tangerine. She must be in her fifties but her skin is plump and unlined.

‘You want me to read you what I wrote down first?’ she asks. ‘I’ll just go get it.’

‘He is buried with the other name in this place... Arabic writing ... there’s a bell tower and running water in this place,’ she reads from a sheet of paper.

‘You can keep this,’ she says, handing the paper to mum, who in turn gives it to me. ‘Just excuse my handwriting – I sit down and write it and it just comes as it is.’

The handwriting is large, round and riddled with missing letters and spelling errors. There’s a symbol drawn, a circle with lines intersecting in the centre and scribbles around the edges.

‘He showed me this,’ says Christina, ‘It’s something metal. There are letters and symbols around the edge, but they’re not in English. Do you recognise it?’

Mum and I look at each other. We’re both hesitant to suggest its meaning but our faces confirm the same initial reaction.

‘Maybe it’s...?’ I start.

‘The Star of David,’ mum says.

‘Does the Star of David look like that?’ asks Christina.

It does, in that it’s a circular symbol, but the lines don’t intersect that way.

‘It’s the last thing he gave me before he disappeared,’ says mum.

‘That must be it. Do you have it?’

‘No, I don’t know where it is.’

‘Okay, find it. It’s important.’

Christina asks for a photo of Alfons. We’ve brought a selection, and she picks through, choosing a portrait of Alfons wearing glasses. She runs her thumb over the picture, closes her eyes.

‘What else Samuel? What can you tell me?’

Samuel is Christina’s spirit guide. She speaks to him, closing her eyes and concentrating, and relays the messages back to us.

‘He’s sorry,’ she says, ‘he says he’s sorry.’

I like to think I’ve read enough about faux psychics to be able to judge their methods: prodding for information or supplying vague details and then allowing their audience to fill in the gaps. But I can’t come up with any reason for Christina to fabricate her story.

She isn't even charging us for this Saturday afternoon visit. I think she just wants to help.

'You're writing something,' she says, looking at me as though she's just seen me.

'Yep,' I say, 'I'm writing about Alfons.'

'Okay,' says Christina. 'You will write a book. Not this one, but the one after it will be successful. But you'll have to know where to draw the line. Don't let anyone change it.'

I'm quietly pleased. It's always been my dream to write. After leaving school I studied a year of creative writing, sure that I was going to make it. I quickly became disillusioned and switched to journalism, looking at that as the only viable way to make a living by writing. Little did I know that it's still difficult to get by on writing alone. Friends in the industry tell me they're often approached to write 900 word stories for \$30. So we take jobs pandering to fashion clients, caking on make-up to sit in offices. I've been lucky, in a way, to be sheltered in magazines, where the writing—when you can get it—pays relatively well. And even after those years of journalism training, I'm not that good at the journalism part of it all. The writing is fine, but I always know the questions I didn't ask, the people I've avoided. I'm not aggressive and it doesn't serve me well.

Christina says that Alfons knows mum cries during the night, that it's his way of healing her. It causes mum to tear up, and I search in my bag for a tissue.

'He felt he had no other choice, he had to leave,' Christina says.

But Christina is sure that Alfons is dead. She asks to keep a photo of him; she's hoping she can find a way to visualise the street signs around where he is buried.

'I can see the place,' she says, 'but not enough.'

In the car on the way back I ask mum if Christina knew about my writing beforehand. She tells me she didn't know I was coming at all. I plug my phone into the car's stereo and we listen to Bon Iver while I drive. The Parramatta River is bluer than I thought.

A few days later mum turns the key in the rusty lock of the apartment downstairs from Oma's house. I grab onto the wire that serves as a handle and, lifting the door up on its hinges, push it open. It's a two-person job to open this crooked, heavy door. Like everything at Oma's house Wally had a go at fixing it and rendered it worse than before. Everything is dusty, the air dim with old cigarette smoke and mothballs. I'm hesitant to touch anything with more than my fingertips. Every surface seems to be covered in nails

and metal pieces of something. I turn into the bedroom on the left, Oma trails behind me slowly.

‘I didn’t go down here in so a long time,’ she says.

Mum walks ahead into the room at the back. I lift the corner of a cloth, find only dust beneath. We want to find the Star of David more than anything.

Rom has moved a range of old televisions down here; there are Sam’s old clothes packed into old suitcases. The furniture is stacked in the middle of each room as though clambering from the walls. There are no real windows, just a few small dusty squares. I don’t know where to start.

The drawers are jammed shut, from dust, or swelling or age. I shimmy one open a fraction, but only a few nails and screws and unidentifiable metal objects roll toward me. Oma’s standing in the doorway and she turns and follows me out. I walk across the hall to the kitchen. A double sink juts out from one wall and there is a table and other bits and pieces jammed against the other. It’s all junk down here, and even if the Star of David were inside, we’d never find it amongst the other bits and pieces.

‘Mum?’

‘Back here.’

The room she’s in is packed denser than the others. I start from the opposite corner of the room, sifting through boxes and cases, looking for something of note. I spot handwriting and think I have found letters, but when look closer it’s just old school books.

‘Who’s ever going to clean this up?’ I ask. I mean when Oma dies.

‘Sam,’ says Mum. ‘He’s getting the house.’

About ten years ago Oma’s brother Bert died in Roding. He was alive when we went to Germany the first time, when Inga and I were children—I rode his wooden broom around the backyard like a witch and Bert, unaccustomed to the frenetic energy of children, watched with both hands folded behind his head—but died before we went back. He left his house to Oma, for her to move home and spend her final years with her sisters. She didn’t want it.

‘But Oma,’ I asked at the time, ‘don’t you want to rent it out and live off that money? Or sell it and use the money to move to a retirement village?’

She wouldn’t hear a word of it and gave the house away to a younger relative. It’s a recurring theme with Oma now. She won’t accept the help she needs.

Back at Mum and Dad's house the phone rings. It's 11pm this time, and I can't drag myself out of bed. I've been up writing sponsored relationship columns for a men's magazine, the kind of work you do out of necessity, not passion. I'm sick with a weird flu that has left my head foggy and whirring like an engine starting in the cold. I'm hot, and shaking. Everything is just too much. I hear the click of the phone being lifted off the cradle and drag myself out of bed.

'Are we calling an ambulance?' I call out to Mum as I hunt for the clothes I discarded in the corners of my room.

'She wants us to.'

We take Mum's car. She calls Rom from the bluetooth. He has been at a retirement party and his speech is slightly slurred.

'What's up sis?' asks Rom.

'We're on our way to mum's. She can't walk.'

'Alright sis, no worries. Just call the ambulance and I'll see her in the morning.'

Mum hangs up the phone and then realises she too has had more wine than she should have. She pulls over and I jump into the driver's seat.

Oma's house is lit up like a pantomime from the street. She's sitting at the kitchen table, breathing long, jagged breaths in and out, in and out.

'I can't walk.'

The ambulance takes her away and mum and I get to work fixing up her house: we drag her sheets from her bed, stained and damp and reeking of body and age and urine. Air rises in my throat and I'm choking and choking and trying to stop.

'Don't worry about helping,' mum says, but I have to.

I go to the bathroom to collect the washing, a bucket filled with old water and sodden underwear is in the bath and I start heaving again. Outside the bathroom I notice a trail of brown down the hall. She must have dragged the spill on the wheels of her walking frame. She can't she can't she can't. She has to go into care. We cannot spend our Saturday nights cleaning up shit. It's on the chairs she sits on, smeared under the bathmat in her toilet. I want to tell mum to leave it but we can't. When we're done, mum thanks me, but I know I haven't been much help at all. It's just becoming too awful.

The last chance of finding Alfons is Theo. The search has dragged on too long now.

'You know,' says mum, one day over coffee. 'I think Theo does know.'

‘I don’t know,’ I say.

‘But Christina says he does.’

‘And Oma. But he told you not that long ago that he doesn’t...’

‘Maybe he’s ready to tell me now,’ she says.

‘But how would we even approach it?’ I ask. I’m not sure I believe it. Theo might have been protecting Alfons’ new family by knowing and keeping it from us, but then I don’t want to get my hopes up over the word of a so-called psychic and Oma, whose mind is not what it used to be.

Mum drafts a letter to her uncle, and sends it by registered post. She tells him she knows that he knows, and that she too deserves the truth. I check it before and after she translates it using an online program. She hand writes it—it seems more personal—and posts the letter. Weeks go by and she hasn’t received confirmation that he received it.

‘What if I got the address wrong?’ asks mum. ‘What if he didn’t get it?’

And then one day Theo calls her: he got the letter. He doesn’t know.

‘I still think he does,’ says mum.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Christina says that once you publish your book we’ll get the answers.’

‘How so?’

‘She says that somebody from his new family will read the book and get in contact with you—that’s why it’s so important for you to finish it.’

‘That would be ideal,’ I say, but not with enough enthusiasm.

‘Or maybe we’ll never know,’ says mum. ‘He left and he knows where we are. We haven’t gone anywhere.’

Maybe Theo does know; maybe he’s saving his big reveal for his later years. There are things I’ll never know about my family.

A few days later and Oma is home from hospital again, of course. Each time I see her she has shrunk more into herself, her breathing is worse. Oma is still smoking. Her stories haven’t wavered from their original wording. When I visit and have to leave I hug her to me and walk up the driveway. There are things I’ll never know about my family, but here are the things I know for certain: as I drive away, she’ll wave and turn around, shuffling back inside, down the wood-panelled hall, to sit beneath the still-life produce. By the time I’ve turned the corner she will have lit up a cigarette and be

blowing the smoke out to fill the room around her. When I arrive at mum and dad's house the dog will scramble at the door and then, when mum flicks the switch on the sliding door, she'll run out to greet me, tongue hanging to one side. Dad will get up from his side of the lounge and will be halfway across the dining room when I reach the door. Mum will be a silhouette in the doorway, she'll step back to make way for me to get in. They'll ask me how Oma was and I'll tell them she was okay. She is. For now, she is. On the other side of the world, Theo and Maria will be beginning their day, Maria in the kitchen gathering bread and coffee cups and slices of cheese to set out at the table for breakfast. Inga will be out having coffee with friends or running by the beach: less predictable but still only a phone call away. Pop, the one who wrote letters to me when I was a child, who used to walk me through his orchard, offering freshly grown peaches, will lie forever under the Mudgee sun, right where he wanted to be. And I'll drive back to my apartment in the city and sink onto my lounge, a summer's breeze stirring the curtains. I'll sit and watch the trees moving outside my window and hope that Alfons found what he wanted. We make the choices we think are right at the time. I choose to let him be, so I can too.

THEORETICAL EXEGESIS

2.1 Introduction and scope

This thesis presents a theoretical overview of the role of the autobiographical in journalistic narratives and a critical exegesis of my piece of creative nonfiction: *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*.

It draws on Ros Coward's concept of autobiographical journalism (2009; 2010), which she developed primarily in the context of newspaper journalism, and applies it to book length works of literary journalism.

Coward positions autobiographical or confessional journalism as one of "the most striking elements in contemporary journalism," (2009 p. 34). She defines autobiographical journalism simply as "journalism given over to the intimate details of writers' personal and emotional lives" (2009 p.34) and situates it as part of a broader phenomenon of the "confessional society" that includes reality TV and performance art. She suggests that autobiographical journalism provides a lens through which readers can make sense of their own experience, albeit in an at-times voyeuristic manner.

My own interest in autobiographical journalism stems from a personal creative work I began working on in 2009. *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* was to be the story of my grandparents' life during World War II and my grandfather's later disappearance. I planned on following in my grandfather's footsteps after he left Australia and solving the mystery of what became of him afterwards. Initially, I had planned to remove myself from the piece and write from the perspective of an omniscient narrator; as I worked on the piece it became evident that I would have to include myself in the story. At the time I was only in my early twenties and considered it narcissistic to involve myself in a story that didn't feel like my own, so I turned to the literature. The concept of autobiographical journalism provided a framework for my own work, acknowledging that the injection of the author within the broader narrative can strengthen—rather than detract from the integrity of—their work. Lee Gutkind provides an important caveat to this:

“Self, however, at the centre of what you are writing or however tangential, must inform the heart of the tale you are telling. It is indeed self that is the creative element of creative nonfiction. Without you and who you are, a piece of writing that tells what happened is simply nonfiction,” (Gutkind and Lott 2000, p. 195).

I will argue that there are a variety of ways that the notion of autobiographical journalism can enhance our understanding of the dynamics of contemporary storytelling and contemporary journalism.

I will show through case studies of three book length works of recent creative non-fiction¹—*Stasiland* by Anna Funder, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* by Helen Garner and *The Year Of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion—that there are a range of ways in which journalists choose to highlight themselves, involve themselves and show themselves in the narration of their stories.

I argue that these works represent three characteristic ways of approaching autobiographical journalism:

Reflective Autobiographical journalism,

Narrative-Driven Autobiographical journalism; and

Introspective Autobiographical journalism.

Reflective autobiographical journalism occurs when the self employed to tell the story is retrospectively focused: that is, the journalistic search for information is either of a historical nature, or looks backwards. Anna Funder’s *Stasiland* considers

¹ The terms literary journalism and creative non-fiction have been used in a range of sometimes confusing and vague ways. When forming definitions, many researchers call attention to the narrative techniques used by a writer. Harvey defines literary journalism as: “Stories written in a narrative form, with a heavy emphasis on dialogue, scene setting and slice-of-life details,” (1994, p. 40). Though Lynne Bloom clearly draws a line between creative nonfiction and literary journalism when she states, “You are not a journalist,” (2003, p. 278) prominent creative nonfiction researcher Lee Gutkind concedes that the two terms are interchangeable. “I thought the word ‘journalism’ would frighten away those in the creative writing program and the word ‘literary’ would frighten those in the journalism department.” (in Gerard, 1996, p. 7).

journalistic details in relation the author's own experience, and recreates historical scenes as narrative. This style of journalism is well suited to stories of the past.

Narrative-driven journalism conversely, follows a more traditional, forward-moving story structure. All journalistic information drives a central story, which falls into a familiar narrative discourse. In Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, the driving narrative is the journalist's hunt for information.

Introspective autobiographical journalism occurs where the self is given primary consideration ahead of the narrative. Any journalistic investigation arises out of habit more so than purpose. Where reflective autobiographical journalism investigates with clear rationale (that is usually to find out something specific about the past), introspective autobiographical journalism is more fluid, even ruminative. This is clearly seen in Joan Didion's memoir written after her husband's death: *The Year Of Magical Thinking*.

Although analysis of each of these works demonstrates the particularities of each of my three categories I argue that the categories are not mutually exclusive and may overlap in any given work. My own work includes elements of all three.

I will conclude with a critical exegesis of my own work of creative non-fiction and demonstrate how application of these different approaches to autobiographical journalism assisted the creation of a more vivid and more authentic narrative. To begin, a literature review will outline the theoretical framework of my own research.

2.2 Literature review

In 1994, literary journalist Mark Kramer said: "truth is in the detail of real lives," (p. 34). His statement was in reference to the power of human experience in journalism; that is, the strength of stories produced when journalists focus on a singular human source as a representation of a wider issue. I would argue that in today's media landscape, Kramer's truth applies just as much to journalists' own lives as to those of their subjects.

Although debate over the explicit inclusion of the author in their work has long been a part of journalism studies (Schudson 2001; Harvey 1994), autobiographical

journalism is a relatively new concept first introduced by Ros Coward (2009; 2010). Coward's initial work on this emerging genre largely confines itself to newspaper columns such as her own accounts of her mother's developing dementia. Although this writing is personal, it is, she argues, like all journalism, governed by certain conventions. Some of these conventions are driven by the particular type of column: Coward argues that the "cancer diary" or the "divorce column" are each developing stylistic conventions of their own because they are so frequently published. However the most important convention, which situates this type of journalism within the broader field of confessional/autobiographical practices, is the traditional journalistic convention of "authenticity". Coward argues that "in a context where the possibility of fakery is never far away, journalism brings associations of authenticity, making personal columns by journalists or ordinary people, framed by the discourse of journalism," a significant contribution to the "confessional society" (2009). Though she doesn't make a direct correlation in her own analysis, there are commonalities between Coward's concept of authenticity and Lejeune's autobiographical pact. I will draw these out in the coming pages. Firstly, in order to appreciate the origins of autobiographical journalism it is important to understand the historical context—how New Journalism expanded notions of factual storytelling to account for more creative works.

2.2a From New Journalism to autobiographical journalism

This paper, as noted, examines autobiographical journalism in relation to book-length works, building on Coward's foundations in the field, but shifting away from her focus on newspaper journalism. It is therefore important to briefly examine how journalism itself was able to expand from the pages of a newspaper into long form, more creative works. The natural starting point for this analysis is with New Journalism. Tom Wolfe's 1973 book *The New Journalism* is widely regarded as the cornerstone of a more adventurous mode of journalistic narrative, (Weingarten 1994), though of course the ideas had begun to gather momentum before its publication date. The stories compiled for Wolfe's collection were "written in a narrative form, with a heavy emphasis on dialogue, scene setting and slice-of-life details," (Harvey 1994, p. 40) and featured writers such as Norman Mailer, Hunter S. Thompson and Joan Didion. Wolfe's hope for New Journalism, in his own words,

was to say: “Come here! Look! This is the way people live these days! These are the things they do!” (Wolfe 1973 p. 33). That is, the purpose of New Journalism was to go beyond the surface news issues and conduct in-depth studies of real lives. It did so by delving into further issues than a standard news story could, and presenting the stories in a form that appropriated tools and techniques previously confined to fictional novels. In the introductory essay to *The New Journalism*, Wolfe outlined four narrative rules that formed the foundation for New Journalism. To paraphrase, they were: scene-by-scene construction, recreation of dialogue, sources as characters and rich background detail, (Wolfe 1973). It was the fusion of novelistic writing with real life events—and the possibility of eliciting emotional response in readers²—that was most exciting to Wolfe, who wrote:

"It showed me the possibility of there being something 'new' in journalism. What interested me was not simply the discovery that it was possible to write accurate non-fiction with techniques usually associated with novels and short stories. It was that—plus. It was the discovery that it was possible in non-fiction, in journalism, to use any literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness, and to use many different kinds of simultaneously, or within a relatively short space. . . to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally." (Wolfe 1973, p. 15).

In that manner, New Journalism challenged the convention that journalists must do away with style in order for a story to be considered authentic. These writers abandoned the inverted pyramid; instead they adopted style elements of fiction and fused them with a reporter's eye. Weingarten defines New Journalism as “journalism that reads like fiction and rings with the truth of reported fact,” (2006): a particularly adept summation. Wolfe and his peers worked to redefine the concept of journalism itself, loosening the strict expectations of nonfiction writing. This marked the beginning of a wider range of contemporary journalistic forms, without which autobiographical journalism wouldn't have been possible.

In its initial emergence, New Journalism was not without its detractors. Critics were sceptical of the form's ability to breach traditional structures whilst maintaining the key element of authenticity. “Critics argued that the reports could not be realistic

² This again separates New Journalism from news journalism—rather than acting as the fourth estate and providing facts only, New Journalism goes beyond, to make the reader feel something.

because they violated the conventions of nonfiction” (Eason 1982, p. 142). This mistrust of New Journalism can be dismissed via two key arguments: a) that narrative techniques have little to do with content within a piece of writing—Eason writes, “Narrative techniques are neither fictional nor factual” (Eason 1982, p. 143)—and b) that the typical, pared-back style of news writing evolved out of convenience historically and does not guarantee factual content. Schudson states that the inverted pyramid style of news writing typical of newspapers evolved that way due to convenience of filing news stories via telegram during World War I when newspapers were paying per word the aim was to keep the total count low. (Schudson 2001, p.158). New Journalism should be considered, then, as an alternate manner of conveying stories: no less authentic than traditional forms. For autobiographical theorists, the injection of the self actually represents a higher commitment to authenticity. Philippe Lejeune, as previously mentioned, has been key to shaping this argument. Lejeune’s notion of the autobiographical pact works alongside Eakin’s concept of the autobiographical imperative to theorise why a writer engages in a work of autobiographical journalism and how that writer indicates authenticity within the work.

2.2b The autobiographical pact and the autobiographical imperative

Lejeune’s autobiographical pact declares that when an author attaches their own name to character in a story they unwittingly agree that the story is verifiable—after all, they have an off-page identity to protect.

“In many cases, the author’s presence in the text is reduced to just this name. But the place assigned to the name is highly significant: by social convention, it is connected with the accepting responsibility by a real person,” (1989, p. 200).

In autobiographical texts, Lejeune states, the author functions as an on-page character as well as a real-life human being. “An author is not just a person, he is a person who writes and publishes. With one foot in the text, and one outside, he is the point of contact between the two,” (1989, p. 200). In order to maintain authenticity, the two must bear cohesive identity markers, drawing attention to cohesion between the self in the story and the author's own self. “The autobiographical contract is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring in the last resort to the name of the

author on the cover,” (1989, p. 200), and as such a writer who appears in their own work automatically enters into a contract with the reader—that the facts, events and personalities in their work did occur as recorded, and that these elements can be proven off the page—where the author’s name on a cover serves as a promise. “The forms of the autobiographical contract are quite varied, but they manifest an intention to ‘honour the signature’,” (1989, p. 200). The question is, then, why do writers portray their own self on the page? According to autobiographical theorist John Paul Eakin, talking about ourselves is essential to understanding who we are, and is a common experience across humanity. We all engage in this identity-forming behaviour from a very young age. The urge to talk about our self is called the autobiographical imperative, and we utilise this daily when we recount events that happened to us.

“Autobiography is not merely something we read in a book; rather as a discourse of identity, delivered bit by bit in the stories we tell about ourselves day in and day out. Autobiography structures our living,” (Eakin 2005, p. 2).

Over time these repeated narratives form the foundation of identity. “The extended self as the protagonist of self-narration enjoys so central a place in our lives that we are conditioned to accept it as identity’s signature,” (Eakin 2001, p. 121). By Eakin’s theory, narrative and self-identity are inextricably related. Writers who produce autobiographical works are simply shifting this desire into a literary form.

The concept of the autobiographical imperative contains commonalities with ideas of the social self—the concept that an individual is shaped in reaction to, and anticipation of, interaction. A key shaper is storytelling. “As we interact in everyday life, the personal self takes shape as the central narrative theme around which we convey identity.” (Holstein and Gubrium 2000a, 101). According to Holstein and Gubrium, we construct our sense of self in relation to familiar identity markers:

“Interaction and communication are key constituents. As we talk with ourselves or with others, we learn and inform each other about who and what we are. In a sense, we talk ourselves into being. But not just anything goes. Social selves are not without design or restraint: they are not impromptu performances. What we say about ourselves and others is mediated by recognizable identities. We speak of ourselves in meaningful ways within the social contexts in which we communicate who we are. Selves do not just pop out of social

interaction but are deftly assembled from recognizable identities in some place, at some time, for some purpose,” (Holstein and Gubrium; 2000a, p. 101).

It is not merely external interaction that forms the foundation of self, but also the act of self-reflection. When it comes to the formation of identity Holstein and Gubrium classify self-talk as an equally important interaction as talking with others (2000a, p. 101). Autobiographical journalism, as I will examine particularly in relation to my own extended literary work, provides space for an author to engage with self-reflection. The act of writing can have effect real world changes in the author’s own self.

Searching for Alfons Henneberger was influenced mainly by three works of autobiographical journalism: Helen Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, Anna Funder’s *Stasiland* and Joan Didion’s *The Year Of Magical Thinking*. These will be examined as literary case studies in the next chapter, outlining the different ways each author has positioned their own self in relation to the narrative.

2.3. Literary case studies

In each case of autobiographical journalism, the presence of the author’s self serves a purpose. However, each writer navigates the relationship between self and narrative in a different manner. This paper will establish three new categories of autobiographical journalism that examine how the self is positioned with relation to the story being told. The concept of identity is never static,³ and as such, these are neither mutually exclusive, nor do they represent the full scope of self in narrative.

2.3a Reflective autobiographical journalism: Anna Funder’s *Stasiland*

Stasiland is the story of young Australian writer Anna Funder who, while living in Berlin, meets citizens of the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) who lived under (or as part of) the secret police, the Stasi. Funder interviews her subjects and weaves their own stories verbatim with recreated narrative and her own personal reflection. All of this is situated within historical context, gleaned from background

³ “Across all this writing about the self, what is striking is that identity is seen as something not fixed but fluid and changeable,” (Coward, 2009, p. 239).

journalistic research. This is reflective autobiographical journalism because Funder's research subject matter is situated in the historical past, therefore in order to investigate she must look backwards. There is an underlying implication that Funder and her subjects are telling the stories in order to shed light on historical events that may not otherwise have come to light. This concept is reinforced in the text; early in the book, one of Funder's German colleagues discourages her from searching for stories from behind the wall.

"For God's sake!' Scheller said. 'You won't find the great story of human courage you are looking for – it would have come out years ago, straight after 1989. They are just a bunch of downtrodden whingers, with a couple of mild-mannered civil rights activists among them, and only a couple at that. They just had the rotten luck to end up behind the iron curtain,'" (p. 13).

This exchange is crucial for the Funder-as-outsider narrative that drives the role of the self in the book—in *Stasiland*, the main purpose of Funder's self is to detail her journalistic findings in relation to her own experience as author. She reflects upon new information as she records it, situating her sources' stories in emotional and historical context. The self in this mode of storytelling is equally as prominent as the journalistic information. In *Stasiland* this is reinforced via a repeated structure that works to maintain constant links between the self, the journalistic search for information and the reflection (both historical and personal). The sequence occurs as such: a subject (who exists as someone interacting socially with Funder) divulges their biography to Funder, who records it, situates it in a journalistically learned historical context, and then reflects on it from the perspective of her own experience. For example, Miriam tells her story:

"'After we started living together—me, an ex-criminal, and he under surveillance—they would come over and search the house from time to time,' she says, 'When our neighbour, an old woman, saw this happening, she offered to keep a trunk of our books and Charlie's manuscripts at her place, because they'd never suspect her,'" (p. 34).

Funder, as narrator, uses information she has learned from her own research to situate the narrative in historical context:

"The German Democratic Republik paid lip service to the institutions of democracy. There were district attorneys, whose job it was to administer justice, and lawyers, whose job it was to represent clients, and judges whose job it was to pass judgment. There were, at least on

paper, political parties other than the ruling Socialist Unity party. But really there was just the Party, and its instrument, the Stasi,” (p. 37).

Funder then reflects on the effect the story has personally had on her:

“Miriam’s story has winded me. My head, no longer consumed by listening, started to pulse again as soon as I left her apartment, I dislike being made aware that my heart is just a small pump, pushing all that blood around,” (p. 47).

This pattern is repeated many times in *Stasiland*. Indeed, the book is essentially a series of these social interactions, distilled as moments in time. There is no real forward-moving narrative in *Stasiland*, but rather a gentle exploration without an end goal. The narrative here is fluid, gently roving from source to source, story to story. Funder and her subjects consider the meaning of their stories and reflect on the events, but the narrative never reaches a climax. It can be seen again with Klaus, whose rock band was disbanded by the Stasi.

“‘In the end it was just as they had said: we simply did not exist anymore,’ he says. ‘Just like in Orwell,’” (p. 190).

Funder situates Klaus’ narrative in historical context. In this case the journalistic research relates to the death of the songwriter in Klaus’ former band.

The Stasi had used radiation to mark people and objects it wanted to track. It developed a range of radioactive tags including irradiated pins it could surreptitiously insert into a person’s clothing, radioactive magnets to place on cars, and radioactive pellets to shoot into tyres. ... The File Authority report was cautious. It found no evidence that radiation was used to kill off marked men and women. But it did find that it was used with reckless disregard for people’s health,” (p. 191-2).

And finally Funder situates the story in line with her own experience.

“I don’t feel the cold. I don’t feel much. Rolling stone. Stone rolling home. The cobbles are wet, and the streetlamps make puddles of yellow light on the ground. I think of my friend in his room, singing himself happy,” (p. 194).

The character of Julia has an arguably more harrowing personal story to tell. The Stasi targeted her after she began a romantic relationship with an Italian man. The Stasi prevented Julia from gaining employment or access to education. When telling Julia’s story, Funder moves away from factual historical context (as she used in

Miriam and Klaus's stories) and instead switches between Julia's own recount, verbatim, and recreated narrative from Julia's story. In this case Funder's reflection is weaved with the narrative rather than added as a summation at the end. In the following passage for example, Funder embeds Julia's own voice into recreated narrative.

"Her mind flew. She could see where this was going: she was going to be kicked out of her own country. 'I thought this was my last chance to stay home,' she says. So she told him, straight out, 'Look, please, I don't want—I don't want to go to the west. But I think you people are forcing me out,'" (p. 108).

Funder then interjects Julia's own verbatim recount, situated in the present. The changing of time here reinforces the reflection of the historical narrative. That is, Julia is situated in the present tense of the book, but looking backwards into her lived past.

"He sat there and he—" Julia stops and takes a sip of tea. It must be cold by now. It goes down the wrong way. She coughs and coughs but puts out her hand to stop me helping, '— and he asked me,' she says in a choked voice, 'what they meant,'" (p. 109).

The story is then processed by Funder, who reflects on its meaning in line with her own experience.

"I have stopped looking at Julia now because in this dimness she ceased addressing her words to me some time ago. I am humbled for reasons I cannot at this moment unravel. I am outraged for her, and vaguely guilty about my relative luck in life," (p. 109).

Each of the elements in this repeated structure (dialogue, recreated narrative, historical context and narrative reflection) work to establish strong ties between the concepts of self, reflection and journalism.

Autobiographical journalism often effects change in its author. The personal narratives Funder collects begin to have an emotional effect, which evident in the following passage when Funder asks Klaus to meet her for a drink.

"'Can I come over?'

'Wuffor?'

I think I've woken him up. It is one o'clock in the afternoon. 'A visit, Klaus, I need to get out of the house.' What I need, in fact, is becoming a habit: an act of hops-and-malt chemistry. I need to feel good, temporarily, about plates and walls, old men and rules, bakeries and rug-work and corridor after corridor of rooms sealed with secret purpose," (p. 184).

All of the abovementioned items (walls, plates, old men) reference previous stories Funder has gleaned from her subjects. Furthermore, the final sentence of the book demonstrates a kind of awakening Funder has experienced in the present after looking back into the past. Funder is walking through the park next to her home when she notices for the first time: "Children spin on swings and roundabouts I never noticed were there," (p. 282). The implication is that by learning the stories of her subjects, Funder is now able to see the world around her more clearly.

The reflective autobiographical journalism in *Stasiland* also considers the function of narrative and self-identity; Funder reflects on autobiography in an Eakin-esque manner in the text itself. She asks of her reader (or herself): "Does telling a story mean you are free of it, or that you go, fettered into your future?" (p. 87) It is an idea resonant of Eakin's autobiographical imperative. Eakin, considering the role of autobiography in identity formation, writes that, "by revisiting the past that the potential future comes into focus for us in the present," (Eakin 2005, p. 6). When applied to *Stasiland*, there is the suggestion that by telling their stories to Funder, her subjects are unburdened to move forward into their future. The act of reflection has provided useful insight for Funder's subjects. As an interesting aside, Funder's subjects are not only looking into the past to tell their stories, some are also reflecting on what it means to do so. Julia, for example, is one of the more contemplative subjects.

"I think it is important, what you're doing,' she says, as if to comfort me, and I am ashamed. 'For anyone to understand a regime like the GDR, the stories of ordinary people must be told. Not just the activists or the famous writers.' Her eyes, grey-green, have a dark shape in them. When it moves, I see that it is me. 'You have to look at how normal people manage with such things in their pasts'," (Funder, p. 144).

Eakin, referring to the range of personal stories and profiles that emerged after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, argues that it is the patchwork of individual experience that make up the remembered history of an event, (Eakin 2004, p. 2). Each person's

triumph or terror exists as a symbol of a broader issue. In *Stasiland* Julia acknowledges that her own personal narrative sits as part of a wider story of surveillance states, freedom and war. In addition, the “dark shape” of Funder in Julia’s eyes hints at the difficulty of the embodied exchange of autobiographical narrative. Julia finds it hard to talk about her past, but nevertheless believes it is an important act of self-growth.

Stasiland chronicles not only the reflection of Funder and her subjects—there is also an underlying current of collective reflection. That is, the German people’s collective looking back, and struggling to make sense of and move on from their past. A strong example can be seen in the discussion about what to do with Hitler’s bunker. Funder describes it from journalistic perspective.

“Like so many things here, no-one can decide whether to make the Palast der Republik into a memorial warning from the past, or to get rid of it altogether and go into the future unburdened of everything, except the risk of doing it all again. Nearby, Hitler’s bunker has been uncovered in building works. No-one could decide about that either—a memorial could become a shrine for Neo-Nazis, but to erase it altogether might signal forgetting or denial. In the end, the bunker was reburied just as it was,” (p. 52).

These kinds of decisions suggest that the country at large is not ready to settle on a concrete narrative about its past, however there is a sense in *Stasiland* that Funder’s collected narratives are part of a groundswell of reflection. The reflection then, is on a narrative and personal level, as well as a wider, collective level.

Where reflective autobiographical journalism is concerned with looking backward, narrative-driven autobiographical journalism is focused on moving forward. Helen Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is a prime example of this mode of storytelling.

2.3b Narrative-driven autobiographical journalism: Helen Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*

As opposed to the gentle, meandering narrative of Funder’s *Stasiland*, *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is a book with purpose: it conforms to the understood discourse of the journalists’ hunt for information to convey a traditional, forward-moving story structure. That is, it is the story of Helen Garner as journalist uncovering the story of

a murder trial. There are three main narratives at work that make up the narrative-driven autobiographical journalism of *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. They are:

The narrative of friendship, which provides space for Garner to consolidate her emotional and professional selves.

The quest narrative which provides a sense of purpose and propels the story towards its ending.

The narrative of doubling wherein Garner uses other characters' behaviour to explore and understand her own self.

Each of these concepts will be examined in this section, after a brief overview of the plot of *Joe Cinque's Consolation*.

Joe Cinque was a young engineer living in Canberra with his then-girlfriend Anu Singh. In 1997, apparently driven by psychosis, Singh drugged Cinque with first rohypnol, then, while he was unconscious, injected him with a lethal dose of heroin. Before the killing, Singh held a dinner party, where, via her friend Madhavi Rao, she announced her plans to murder Joe Cinque to her guests. In *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Helen Garner—a prominent Australian journalist—travels to Canberra to write about the trial of Anu Singh and her co-accused Madhavi Rao. As the trial progresses Garner finds she is unable to present an objective journalistic story, due to lack of access to Singh and Rao. *Joe Cinque's Consolation* instead becomes a book about the journalistic process itself. The label narrative-driven autobiographical journalism applies here because the journalistic and autobiographical elements in the book work in unison to drive the story forward in a linear fashion. Unlike *Stasiland*, where the action is a series of moments and interactions with no concrete conclusion, there is a clear sense of forward-moving story in *Joe Cinque's Consolation*. The story moves ahead in time, towards the familiar narrative discourse of climax, dénouement and resolution. In the writing, Garner examines her own personal motivation as well as her journalistic process. In *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, there are two distinct parts of Garner's self. There is the emotional self presented in conversation with the reader, that is, in the private moments where Garner is alone in her hotel room or home and reflecting on events, and there is the professional self as

presented to Garner's interview subjects and colleagues. Throughout *Joe Cinque's Consolation* there is a clear division between Garner's emotional and professional selves—one directed inward and the other presented on the surface. Garner hides her emotional self from her interview subjects and colleagues. The professional self is Garner as journalist, and forms part of the familiar discourse of the journalist's hunt for information. As the book progresses, these two sides are reconciled.

The professional self is at work in the first meeting with Maria and Joe Cinque. There is evidence of Garner's emotional self in the meeting, but she keeps it hidden from Maria in an attempt to position herself as a journalist with the task of gathering a story:

"That first day, Maria Cinque and I spent seven hours in her kitchen, with the tape recorder clicking on and off between us. ... To call the encounter an interview would be to gild the lily. I was too bewildered, and too shaken by their raging anguish and grief, to do much more than listen.

Yet the day was not shapeless. Underneath the machine-gun rattle of speech, the sobs and shouts of anger, the mourning cries, the curses, the incredulous whispers, and the long stretches of quiet weeping that sounded later, on the tape, like the sougning of a wind, there lay a solid foundation of courtesy," (p. 91).

In quiet moments, Garner reveals her emotional self to her reader. After a day watching Anu Singh's trial, for example, Garner reflects in an internal monologue.

"I set out towards my hotel along the cool, white, terracotta-paved galleries that lead to Garema place. Sickened by the ugly divide between morals and the law, I wanted to put my head on a pillow and escape into sleep. But as I trudged along, I couldn't stop thinking about the authorities that the lawyers had been working through. There seemed to be an inexhaustible supply of these tales of human wretchedness. ... I couldn't understand how the summer afternoon could smell so grassy and good, so ordinary; how the world outside the court could continue its benevolent progress," (p. 270).

As Garner's relationship with Joe Cinque's mother develops into a friendship, there is the sense of Garner's professional and emotional selves coming together. Kramer argues that a journalist needs to immerse themselves in their subject matter in order to understand the story that needs to be told; yet he is wary of growing close to subjects due to ethical issues that are likely to arise. Any extended relationship

between a journalist and their subject, he says, "... is likely to develop into something that feels to both parties a lot like partnership or friendship, if not like marriage," (Kramer 1995, p. 26). Autobiographical journalism moves beyond traditional relationship barriers and allows—or indeed demands—the author to express their own point of view. There is a sense of reluctance on Garner's part to open up her emotional self to her source. In the following scene Garner shares her first emotional interaction with Maria Cinque (all previous external emotional exchange has been one-sided, with Maria revealing and Garner maintaining professional composure).

"She asked after my family. Thinking that we were linked only by her sorrows, I gave a brief formal answer, but she pressed me: she really wanted to know how things were for me. I told her that my daughter was about to have a baby. Warmth flowered in her voice. I told her how crazed our mother was, how lost in her dementia. I told her that I couldn't think or write. She was quietly concerned. Later, when my granddaughter was born and my mother died at last, Maria sent me cards inscribed with the good wishes of her whole family: 'Maria, Nino, Anthony and <Joe> Cinque': Joe's name was always there, enclosed in pointed European brackets. I felt the closeness of her sympathy. It touched me. For the first time I dared to hope that we might one day become friends," (p. 287).

In the book's final scene Garner's professional and emotional selves are reconciled as she watches a home recording of Joe Cinque acting as MC at a wedding with Maria.

"But I wasn't the only person to be struck by Joe. At a casual moment of the proceedings, while guests were contentedly attacking their dessert and nothing formal was in progress, when children were tearing about the dance floor among the drifting balloons, and Joe was just standing there alone behind the long bridal table, smiling benignly and looking around him with a calm, bright curiosity, the camera zoomed in discreetly and framed him front on, head and shoulders, against the dark curtain.

It had no reason to single him out at that moment, let alone dwell to focus on his agreeable face. But it found him, and it dwelt on him. It lingered, intimately without his ever realizing, for a good seven or eight seconds. I sat on his parents' couch with my heart in my mouth. Maria too ceased her murmured commentary. We gazed in silence at her undefended son," (p. 342-343).

Garner's identification with accused murderer Anu Singh provides an interesting counterpoint to her friendship with Maria Cinque. As Garner grows close to Maria

Cinque, she concurrently begins to see narrative doubling between herself in Singh. Alexander argues that “any protracted relationship between a journalist and subject is likely to bring whatever qualities—real or imagined—they may share, to light,” (2009, p. 61). During the courtroom proceedings, Garner seeks to untangle the perceived similarities between herself and the defendant. Garner is simultaneously repelled by and fascinated by Singh. When her lawyer tries to establish his client’s mental illness, Garner notes “Call that mental illness? She’s exactly like me,” (p. 43). She also identifies with Singh’s body image issues. “Dislike of the body. I imagined every woman in the court thinking, with an ironic twist of the mouth, tell me about it!” (p. 60). Garner also transposes her own experiences onto Singh⁴. When Singh’s father testifies that his daughter was distracted when she visited the family home, Garner projects her own youth on Singh: “Any woman who has left home for university could fill in the gaps here, I thought. Drugs. Booze. Stupid, risky sex....” (p. 33) and “I lay on the bed for a while thinking about Singh and her distracted visits home from university. I wonder if my parents had guessed what was the matter with me, in 1964, when I took the train home to Geelong after I had an abortion,” (p. 38). An interesting observation is that the commonalities between Singh and Garner, only serve to make her more repulsive to the writer. “But, oddly, this insight did not melt the hearts of the women who sat listening in court. On the contrary, the more like an ordinary woman Singh came to appear, the less sympathy she had to draw on,” (p. 60.)

The author’s raw reaction to Anu Singh is a fundamental driver of the narrative. Initially Garner pursued the story out of what she deems “a feeble sort of politeness, the inability to say a straight no to someone who thought he was doing me a favour,” (p. 21) but realizes that the narrative doubling between herself and Singh is a prevailing reason behind her desire to write the story. This motivation is another element that reconciles the emotional and professional selves in Garner’s book.

“I understand now that I went to Canberra because the breakup of my marriage had left me humiliated and angry. I wanted to look at women who were accused of murder. I wanted to

⁴ The act of writing about past experiences calls to mind Lejeune’s autobiographical pact. That is, Garner in the book can be reconciled with Garner in real life as the two share identical, verifiable history.

gaze at them and hear their voices, to see the shape of their bodies and how they moved and gestured, to watch the expressions on their faces. I needed to find out if anything made them different from me: whether I could trust myself to keep the lid on the vengeful, punitive force that was in me, as it is in everyone – the wildness that one keeps in its cage, releasing it only in dreams and fantasy,” (Garner 2004, p. 28)

This personal attachment is common for a literary journalist. Alexander (2009) argues that the writer’s own life is often a significant factor in the stories they pursue.

“In many examples of literary journalism one can detect an “uncanny” correspondence or “doubling” between the subjects of the stories and certain characteristics of the literary journalists who write about them,” (Alexander 2009, p. 57).

There is much commentary in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* on the relationship of journalist to story, as Garner records her experience of writing about Joe Cinque. When she can’t gain access to speak to Singh, Garner’s book becomes the story of getting a story. This postmodern mode of narrative is well suited to the literary journalism format. “Whereas routine journalism bans discussion of the reporter’s relationship to organization and event, New Journalism often makes this aspect of reporting its central story,” (Eason 1982 p. 146). In this case the narrative takes on a familiar narrative discourse of the journalist’s hunt for information. Garner establishes her premise early on: “This is the story of how I got to know him,” (p. 10) she says of the murdered boy, and then proceeds to chronicle her journey of reportage. The research begins with calm and disinterest on Garner’s part. She sifts through the story without a real sense of purpose.

“That day in the newspaper office, ploughing through the repetitive cuttings, I thought it was all a waste of time. I was behind the action. I had already missed the entire Crown case against Anu Singh. There was nothing here for me. I might as well go home,” (p. 27).

After the first meeting with a source connected to Madhavi Rao, however, the story begins to take shape. Garner’s journalistic instincts kick in when she reads a transcript of the emergency call Singh placed while Joe Cinque was dying.

“It was the shrill blast of this dialogue that broke through my indifference and galvanised me: the killer’s voice pleading, dodging, feinting; the dispatcher’s desperate striving for command; and the jolting visuals of Joe Cinque’s death throes – the close presence, behind the screaming, of a young man’s body in extremis – his limbs, his mouth, his teeth, his heart,” (p. 28).

The story begins to take hold of Garner, and she longs for the hunt for information when she is not actively taking part in it. The following passage shows her growing interest in the case.

“Back in Sydney, my hilltop flat was just a set of rooms. ... I found I missed the trial: the daily intensity of the drama as it unfolded, the rituals of leaping to one’s feet and bowing, the silent companionship of the other watchers, the long tracts of intent listening. I could hardly wait for Monday,” (p. 47).

Journalistic ethics are considered in the text when Garner opens a dialogue with both the murdered and murderer’s families. When she sends copies of her previously published work to Singh’s family she realises she must also send them to Cinque’s.

“I had to do the same for both sides, and to make it clear to each family that I was speaking to the other. Everything was starting to get complicated,” (p. 82 – 83).

As she becomes more involved with the main players, Garner questions her right to tell the story. Lynn Bloom, in her work on the ethics of creative nonfiction, gives considerable thought to the question of who owns the story. That is, is it fair to send a private story into the public arena? Bloom argues that it is, as long as the writer’s motivation doesn’t hinge on revenge, or a desire to air a private grievance in a public space, (Bloom 2003, p. 277). Garner ultimately examines her own motives that drive the narrative, and—after considering turning her journalistic work into fiction—comes to the conclusion that the story is already in the public arena and that the weight of the crime justifies her story. She examines her thought process in the following passages:

“What further hurt might I inflict? What right did I have? How could I unpick the ethics of it? It was a confused drive that had been firing me, so far – first, curiosity, then a repelled fascination – even an identification – with Anu Singh; then, as I came to know the Cinques, a contagion of horrible grief,” (p. 142).

And again in the below:

“I had a stubborn attachment to the story. I did not want to put it down. I wondered if I could find ways to fictionalize the events, to disguise the characters and their ethnic groups, to break the whole mess of it into a series of short –
But wait. Hang on a minute.
Joe Cinque was murdered.” (p. 143).

Despite her efforts, Garner isn’t able to present a truly objective story. Both Anu Singh and Madhavi Rao decline to speak to her—“The women won’t talk to me. My fantasy of journalistic evenhandedness, long bucking under the strain, gave way

completely,” (p. 281)—at which point she decides to abandon the project completely. This forms the climax of the traditional story structure present in the book. Maria Cinque intervenes in a phone call and Garner responds.

“I was dumb with shame. How could I have just thought that when I couldn’t bend the story to my will I could just lay it down, apologise for inconvenience caused, and walk away? Her son’s murder was not an opportunity for me to speculate on images of disharmony and disintegration. It was not a convenient screen on to which I could project sorrows of my own that I was too numb to feel. It was not even ‘a story.’ It was real,” (p. 283).

These passages demonstrate the progression of Garner’s self in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. While the driving narrative in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is the journalist’s hunt for information, the act of storytelling has a real-world effect on Garner, which leads to the narrative resolution: the reconciliation of Garner’s professional and personal selves.

In contrast, Joan Didion’s book *The Year Of Magical Thinking* places more emphasis on the self than the narrative. The following chapter argues that *The Year Of Magical Thinking* can be classed as introspective autobiographical journalism.

2.3c Introspective autobiographical journalism: Joan Didion’s *The Year Of Magical Thinking*

Joan Didion’s book *The Year Of Magical Thinking* is a vastly different work to the two previously discussed. It was originally included as a counterpoint, however as *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* progressed, my own work veered towards Didion’s. In *The Year Of Magical Thinking* self is given primary consideration, ahead of the narrative—the journalistic elements are not driven by an urge to move a story forward as in *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* but rather to understand the self. Like *Stasiland*, Didion’s book has no real story structure: no climax, no dénouement. Rather, the book features a non-linear structure that veers off its course at regular intervals.

The Year Of Magical Thinking explores the concept of grief and bereavement from a personal perspective. In 2003, Didion’s husband John Dunne died while their daughter Quintana was in hospital with a severe sudden illness. Didion struggled to

cope, and wrote *The Year Of Magical Thinking* in an effort to understand her own mind. Didion establishes her purpose early in the work.

“This is my attempt to make sense of the period that followed. Weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I had ever had about death, about illness, about probability and luck, about good fortune and bad, about marriage and children and memory, about grief, about the ways in which people do and do not deal with the fact that life ends, about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself,” (Didion 2005, p. 13).

The Year Of Magical Thinking is a prime example of introspective autobiographical journalism, wherein any journalistic investigation arises out of habit more so than purpose. Didion is a revered writer and one of the pioneers of New Journalism. As a result of her long-running career, research is second nature to her. She notes this in the text:

“In times of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control,” (p. 40).

Thus, when she wants to understand her own grief, she almost unwittingly conducts journalistic research. Unlike *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, where there is a clear narrative purpose driving the journalistic research, *The Year Of Magical Thinking* is a ruminative book with a nonlinear structure. Chronologically, the book moves forward, but it does so slowly, circling back into the past as it does. Didion has no one real research goal and instead looks into ideas and concepts as they occur to her and in most—if not all—cases, the information gathered sparks an internal reaction, usually a reflection on Didion’s biographical narrative. It is almost the opposite process of what occurs in Funder’s book, where the research sparks reflection. For example, Didion researches the concept of grief in an effort to understand her loss. She learns about complicated and uncomplicated grief, which sparks a chain of memories.

“One situation in which pathological bereavement could occur, I read repeatedly, was that in which the survivor and the deceased had been unusually dependent on one another. ...Once in 1968 when I needed unexpectedly to spend the night in San Francisco (I was going a piece, it was raining, the rain pushed a late-afternoon interview into the next morning), John flew up from Los Angeles so that we could have dinner together. We had dinner at Ernies. After dinner John took the PSA “Midnight Flyer,” a thirteen-dollar amenity of an era in California when it was possible to fly from Los Angeles to San Francisco or Sacramento or San Jose for twenty-six dollars round trip, back to LAX.

I thought about PSA. ... When Quintana at age two or three flew PSA to Sacramento to see my mother and father she referred to it as “going on the smile...” (p. 44).

In this instance the memory trail continues for three pages, touching upon John’s book, Dutch Shea Jr., marriage and faith. This pattern of journalistic research fused with memory is repeated often in the book. Stylistically, *The Year Of Magical Thinking*’s structure reflects Didion’s personal inner struggle. The book is ruminative; unlike *Stasiland* or *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*, there is no sense of driving action or a clear research rationale. The circular patterns of reflection often return to Didion’s reflection: “You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends,” (p. 12, 27, 53, 64, 81, 148). While writing *The Year Of Magical Thinking*, Didion is struggling with the loss of her husband—she has understood her identity in relation to him for forty years and without him she feels lost. There are many instances of Didion reflecting on her closeness with her late husband (the flight to San Francisco is one such example). When John is pronounced dead at the hospital, Didion’s instinct is to discuss it with him.

“I remember thinking that I needed to discuss this with John. There was nothing I did not discuss with John. Because we were both writers and worked at home our days were filled with the sound of each other’s voices,” (p. 21).

At the heart of it, *The Year Of Magical Thinking* is a book that arises from the autobiographical imperative. By telling stories about ourselves, we build up a bank of identity markers: “It is this store of memories that constitutes identity and personhood, the familiar materials of life story and memoir,” (Eakin 2004, p. 6). By reflecting on her past, Didion is working to regain the sense of self that is contained in these autobiographical memories. Didion acknowledges this in the following passage.

“I have been a writer my entire life. As a writer, even as a child, long before what I wrote began to be published, I developed a sense that meaning itself was resident in the rhythms of words and sentences and paragraphs, a technique for withholding whatever it was I thought or believed behind an increasingly impenetrable polish. The way I write is who I am, or have become, yet this is a case in which I wish I had instead of words and their rhythms a cutting room, equipped with an Avid, a digital editing system on which I could touch a key and collapse the sequence of time, show you simultaneously all the frames of memory that come to me now, let you pick the takes, the marginally different expressions, the variant readings of the same lines. This is a case in which I need more than words to find the meaning. This is

a case in which I need whatever it is I think or believe to be penetrable, if only for myself,”
(Didion 2005, p. 13).

There is a vast difference between Didion as narrator and the remembered, Didion of her reflections. The Didion portrayed in her own remembered history is fundamentally ordered, as are her days. The lived pattern of Didion and Dunne’s summer in Brentwood Park is one such example.

“We fell into a pattern of stopping work at four in the afternoon and going out to the pool. He would stand in the water reading (he reread Sophie’s Choice several times that summer, trying to see how it worked) while I worked in the garden ... Just before five on those summer afternoons we would swim and then go into the library wrapped in towels to watch Tenko, a BBC series, then in syndication. After each afternoon’s Tenko segment we would go upstairs and work another hour or two ... At seven or seven-thirty we would go out to dinner,” (p. 26).

The regimented lifestyle depicted in the summer at Brentwood Park is in stark contrast to Didion as grieving narrator. The description of Didion’s days recorded in *The Year Of Magical Thinking* reflect a chasm between the ordered, structured life she had with John, and the disorder that prevailed after his death. Her attempts to implement order are futile at this stage of grief. One such example is shown when Didion attempts a crossword puzzle.

“One morning during the spring after it happened I picked up The New York Times and skipped directly from the front page to the crossword puzzle, a way of starting the day that had become during those months a pattern, the way I had come to read, or more to the point not to read, the paper. I had never before had the patience to work crossword puzzles, but now imagined that the practice would encourage a return to constructive cognitive engagement. The clue that first got my attention that morning was 6 Down, “Sometimes you feel like...” I instantly saw the obvious answer, a good long one that would fill many spaces and prove my competency for the day: “a motherless child.”

Motherless children have a real hard time—

Motherless children have such a real hard time—

No.

6 Down had only four letters.

I abandoned the puzzle (impatience died hard), and the next day looked up the answer. The correct answer for 6 Down was “anut.” “Anut?” A nut? Sometimes you feel like a nut? How far had I absented myself from the world of normal response? (p. 102-3).

The self at the end of the book is not a cured, clear-thinking self (there is no familiar narrative discourse of the journalist’s hunt) but rather there is a suggestion that Didion will be okay on her own⁵. She ends as she started the book, on reflection, but rather than reflecting in an effort to keep her husband with her, her reflection has shifted to letting him go.

“I do not want to finish the year because I know that as the days pass, as January becomes February and February becomes summer, certain things will happen. My image of John at the instant of his death will become less immediate, less raw. ... I realized today for the first time that my memory of this day a year ago is a memory that does not involve John. This day a year ago was December 31, 2003. John did not see this day a year ago. John was dead. ... I think about leaving the lei at St. John the Divine. A souvenir of the Christmas in Honolulu when we filled the screen with blue. ... Leis go brown, tectonic plates shift, deep currents move, islands vanish, rooms get forgotten.” (p. 172 – 173).

This series of memories expands the reference point of Didion’s identity. Instead of a displaced self, Didion’s perception of her own self is firmly embodied in the physical world of tectonic plates and islands. The act of writing has effected real world change in Didion. I too, have come to understand myself more thoroughly by writing *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*. Likewise, my work has greatly benefited from the literary case studies detailed in this chapter.

2.4 Critical exegesis: *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*

Searching for Alfons Henneberger has been a work in progress for more than five years. Over that time the work has changed significantly as I have developed a greater understanding of how the character of the self functions in autobiographical journalism—and what’s required to produce stories that resonate with a wider audience. At first I didn’t intend to include myself in *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*. Even though the story involved my family, I viewed the search for my

⁵ This is reminiscent of the progression of self that is referenced in Coward’s confessional columns.

missing grandfather strictly as a work of investigative journalism. Alfons Henneberger was born to a Catholic family in the heartland of Nazi Germany, before moving to Australia with my grandmother and mother. He later disappeared, possibly moving to Israel and converting to Judaism. I wanted to know where he went. Did he have his own family now? Why did he leave? I wanted to solve the mystery, but to leave myself out of it. I felt, at the time, that my absence would align the story closer with the objectivity norms I'd at that point in my writing career adhered so strictly to. The insertion of myself into my grandparents' story felt selfish at best and unethical at worst. But as I began to write without including myself, it became difficult to tell the story at all. Even for purely logistical reasons—manoeuvring myself out of scenes became more difficult than inserting myself. I began considering the possibility of including my own perspective in my work, and as such, investigating the true role of objectivity in journalism. Schudson's 'The objectivity norm in American Journalism' (2001) explores the historical evolution of objectivity as a norm in journalism. He argues that the development of detached reporting was ultimately arbitrary and arose out of practical concerns, such as limiting the characters in a telegram despatch and the desire for newspapers to appear impartial in order to generate revenue from all political factions (2001, p. 158). My own work would require no such constraints. I then read up on New Journalism and its relationship to objectivity: Eason states that early critics mistrusted the genre because, by utilising literary conventions usually reserved for fiction, it violated the expected mode of journalistic storytelling (Eason 1982 p. 142). As previously discussed, he states that this criticism was ultimately misguided (1982 p. 143). A Norman Mailer quote I came across cemented my idea that a journalist is always part of their own work, and that it is perhaps just as authentic to include oneself in the telling as it is to write from a place of objectivity, as I had been taught to do: "I had felt that I had some dim intuitive feeling that what was wrong with journalism is that the reporter tended to be objective and that was one of the great lies of all time," (in Weingarten 2006, p. 74). That is, readers instinctively know there is someone behind the written word, so why not use that to my advantage? The most important issue at hand for a successful journalistic narrative is not objectivity, but authenticity. For me this brings to mind Lejeune's argument that a writer of autobiography enters into a promise with the reader to "'honour the signature'," (1989, p. 200). The insertion of

the self, as I will explore in the coming paragraphs, ultimately led to more authentic storytelling⁶.

At first I began to include parts of myself in order to provide a counterpoint between my life and the life of my grandfather. My approach prioritised the journalistic hunt for information over the representation of the self. In this initial model, the journalistic information drives a central story and as such could have been considered narrative-driven autobiographical journalism. A passage from an early draft reflects a focus on creating a forward-moving narrative with minimal authentic personal detail.

I wonder what my grandfather would think if he knew I'd flown halfway around the world, from Australia to Germany, to find out about him. More than forty years ago, when he was my age, he did the trip in reverse, stepping off a ship in Australia with wife and child in tow.

I am fascinated by this man I've never met. In my favourite photo of Alfons he holds my mother's pram in one hand on a street corner. He is looking away from her, but not at the camera either, his cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. I love his thick-rimmed glasses and short-sleeved shirts. His cardigans and hair that stands on end. The lazy, bored stare. Child-like handwriting in short notes my mum has kept for forty years, wrapped in sticky tape and tucked away in a box. But it is more than that that draws me to him: it is Oma, tugging at her wedding ring as she talks, it is the thought that at my age my grandparents were married and on their way to Australia, it is the vast difference between our lives and the similarities I see between us. His story is mine.

This passage conveys a sense of movement toward an ultimate goal: of finding my grandfather. Like *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, it is closely aligned with the familiar

⁶ Authenticity, here, is a subjective term that is interpreted in line with an author's philosophy. It can range from a strict agreement to report all facts unaltered, to a more instinctive emotional authenticity. Soffer address the idea that a journalist should not change anything: "The journalist's testimony is a substitute for the observation of the citizens themselves: therefore, the reporter's observation should reflect the world as if the reader was seeing it," (2009, pg 479). Some authors, however, are more focused on capturing of a feeling. In *On Keeping a Notebook*, Didion states that an author's remembered past is the most important mark of authenticity: "Similarly, perhaps it never did snow that August in Vermont; perhaps there never were flurries in the night wind, and maybe no one else felt the ground hardening and summer already dead even as we pretended to bask in it, but that was how it felt to me, and it might as well have snowed, could have snowed, did snow," (1968, p. 307).

overarching narrative of the journalist's search for the story. My self in the story in the early stages also had a symbolic presence: I believed at the time that there was an intrinsic link between my grandfather and I, and that I could create interest by juxtaposing my youthful experience with his. Seeing myself as a narrative device and symbol meant that in early drafts I was quite reserved when it came to how much of myself to include in the story. I was careful not to include anything that felt too raw, for fear of real-world consequences, and instead presented an edited persona. I was honouring the autobiographical pact in factual terms, but not in lived experience. Holding back didn't work for a number of reasons. I thought the inclusion of my self grounded the universal themes of migration, loss, family and family history in an accessible focal point. But as Lynn Bloom states, "stories that are written from the heart must be understood from the heart," (p. 286)—creating a persona to deflect any emotional resonance with my own self meant my story wasn't authentic. I was afraid to show my vulnerabilities, and aimed to present what I believed to be socially acceptable reactions to events, rather than my true thoughts and feelings. Referring back to Lejeune's autobiographical contract—"The autobiographical contract is the affirmation in the text of this identity, referring in the last resort to the name of the author on the cover," (1989, p. 200)—it was clear to me that I was representing myself by name only. The following is an excerpt from an early draft.

I can see them laughing as tree after tree becomes a blur, slowing down to cross bridges or to hand over my mother, a cloth-wrapped bundle they'd take turns clutching to their chests. And again I realise just how young they were. Theo refers to them as Annie and Fonsi. They were parents, husband-and-wife, but never adults.

While the narrative is factually verifiable, the voice doesn't ring true—it is a romanticised, glossed-over version of events that pays more attention to the rhythm of words than to the narrative's resonance. I came to understand that for my story to work, I would need to include much more of myself on the page. Eakin states that it is common for writers to misunderstand the full extent to which the self informs autobiographical narratives. "We tend instinctively to think of autobiography as a narrative container or envelope of some kind in which we express our sense of identity, as though identity and narrative were somehow separable," (Eakin 2004, p. 7). I had thought I could edit the story as I pleased without any significant effect on

its authenticity, but by doing so, the autobiographical element was lost. I instinctively knew that for the story to resonate with a reader, I had to fearlessly write my own autobiographical truth into Alfons and Oma's story. My newfound commitment to accurately represent myself on the page necessitated an entirely new approach, one wherein my emotions and reactions were more strongly represented. This had the effect of bringing the self positioned closer to the narrative—a shift that saw *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* move much closer to introspective autobiographical journalism. Take the passage below, from the final version. It is a raw, more honest manner of storytelling that gives primary consideration to the self ahead of the narrative.

My mum has spent much of her life trying to find her father; I thought maybe as a journalist I might be able to find new avenues to lead her to him. It was arrogance really. That was in 2008. Since then I have worked for magazines, start up websites, dodgy creative agencies in Sydney's Western suburbs, trying to fund my adventure story. I've built websites for local businesses and written copy for beauty brands and men's deodorant. I have tried as long as I could to manage being the hero of my own constructed narrative and a reliable employee. I tried and tried and now I find myself sitting on the lounge in my tiny apartment that looks straight into my neighbour's kitchen in the middle of the day on a Tuesday. I've just lost a long-term contract, am out of work with no real grasp on Alfons' story either. I don't know what's next.

Ison states: "If you find the right voice – one savvy and appealing enough to make the reader say 'yes, I've been there. I know what you mean' – you have something good, (Ison 2001, p. 107). My final version of *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* is much closer to this ideal than earlier drafts. Yet I couldn't predict the full impact writing *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* would have on me. Bamberg states that the act of writing about oneself commonly leads to self-discovery and awareness.

"Acts of thematizing and displacing the self as character in past time and space become the basis for other self-related actions—such as self-disclosure, self-reflection, and self-critique; which in turn enable moves toward more or better self-awareness, self-consciousness, and self-understanding (but also self-deception); which in turn can lead to acts of self-constraint, self-control, and self-discipline" (Bamberg 2010, p. 11).

For me, the commitment to an honest representation of self in *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* facilitated self-discovery during the writing process. The act of

recording events from my own life allowed me to make sense of them in sometimes surprising ways. I identify with Gutkind's statement that self-knowledge is key to creating strong works of autobiographical journalism. "I wanted my ideas and experiences to make an impact on other people—to change or influence a small part of the world, in one way or another. In order to achieve those goals, I had to more thoroughly understand myself," (Gutkind and Lott 2000, p. 206). In my own work, for example, I hadn't considered the way in which ideas of the body were intertwined—Oma's decaying by a natural ageing process while I abuse mine with starvation, over-exercising and binge-eating—until I wrote passages about both. It became evident after I read the initial drafts that my own unhealthy attitude to my body takes on a new meaning when seen in light of Oma's ageing body. Take for example, my observation of Oma's body in the shower. She is sick and dying, and her body is betraying her.

Oma relents and shuffles her way to the bathroom. I stand at the door while mum helps her mum peel layer after layer off and turn on the hot water.

'Can you watch her a second?' Mum leaves me with Oma and goes to look for some clothes.

My god, she is so tiny, hunched under the hot water. I can almost trace her youthful silhouette beneath the fat that sticks her legs together, that rolls over her stomach now. Her chest sags and her skin is dotted with thin red lines. She cleans her teeth and washes her hair and stands under the stream a little longer.

'Donna, don't get old, don't get old,' she murmurs again and again and I have to think about breathing.

This stands in stark contrast to my own relationship with my body—a body that would be physically healthy if not for my own abuse.

I was the same. My eating issues started in high school when, in some short-lived American sitcom, a character lamented that after gaining weight her thighs touched. But hadn't mine always? I never realised until that moment that women were expected to have empty space where I had flesh. I started running twice a day instead of just in the mornings. And when that wasn't enough, I'd sneak to the bathroom after meals and purge myself of what I'd eaten. I remember making a list, as a newly cured 18-year old, of why I would never go back to bulimia. The reasons were enough to keep the eating disorder at bay—until the health magazine. Travelling three hours a day, trying to finish this search, wanting so badly to look more glamorous: it all sent me back. But this time I had money. At one point I was visiting

the supermarket every day on my way home from work, stuffing choc chip cookies and M&Ms and jars of Nutella and chocolate mousse into my mouth—sometimes before I even got home. My housemate of the time must have known—the toilet was constantly clogged—but I just went on as though nothing happened.

In later versions I worked to bring these themes closer together, and to the forefront of the text.

I can almost trace her youthful silhouette beneath the fat that sticks her legs together, that rolls over her stomach now. Her chest sags and her skin is dotted with thin red lines, but the line of her shoulder blade mirrors mine. Her calves, if they saw more exercise, would sport the muscular shape as my own. The mere idea of similarities between our frames fills me with anxiety. I shouldn't be able to draw parallels between her eighty-something body and my own. But it's not just age. Oma has always been outspoken about her hatred of "fatties," seemingly oblivious to the fact that she is one. She'll point out overweight people in the street, or voice disapproval to their face. So when I look at Oma's body I think: this is what will happen to you, Donna, if you let yourself go.

While the above passage still portrays an unhealthy relationship to the body, ultimately writing about Oma's fragile body in contrast to my own helped me to navigate to a much healthier place. Of course body acceptance is an arduous process and cannot be solved simply by writing about it, but I hadn't considered my own body in relation to Oma's until I did so in text, which in turn had positive repercussions in my life off the page.

Throughout *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* I explore in-depth the litany of personal and journalistic frustrations encountered during the research process. In the later drafts, as I became more comfortable with presenting an honest account of events, my struggles are as much a part of the narrative as the journalistic elements—that is, the story of (not) getting the story. I drew heavily from Didion in these sections, with regard to both tone and how much of the self to represent on the page. Didion's brave portrayal of her own struggles in *The Year Of Magical Thinking* served as a strong source of inspiration for my own work. Writing about my therapy sessions, for example, is an area that would have been much more daunting had I not been able to fall back on Didion's work for guidance.

The Newtown synagogue is on a leafy street from which, if you stand on the eastern corner, you can see both my old therapist's home practice and Alfons' share house where he lived in 1958.

It was about this time last year that I began seeing Marie-Pierre, my therapist. I was working in the start up website, a job that left me biting my lip until it swelled and eating scoops of lollies while I was driving and then later standing on scales pinching at the fat on my stomach. Marie-Pierre runs a practice from a second storey room in her inner-west terrace. She has a wonderful curly-haired Maltese x poodle whose name I forget, who sat pensively in the corner of all therapy sessions. I'd coddle the puppy, and Marie-Pierre would take this as a sign of my own submissiveness.

'Animals must be tamed,' she'd say. Did she love the dog? I used to wonder, thinking of my own poodle, Tiffany, and the way she buries her head into the space between my knees whenever I am about to leave mum and dad's place.

That little room overlooks a bunch of other geometrical paved squares that pass for backyards. The lines of the yards didn't quite line up the way I would have liked to see, and I'd imagine pushing them into neat parallels as I cried and Marie-Pierre watched. I could feel my face burning and Marie-Pierre watched.

I also borrowed structural conventions from Didion in the sections where journalistic discoveries make way for personal memories and meandering consideration of ideas. The passage below, for example, explores the notion of religion from in a fluid manner that can be likened to Didion's ruminative sections, such as when she discusses *The Smile* (see chapter 2.3c).

I'd never considered the religious and cultural implications, that I had so much to learn and to understand about religion, for starters. Aside from the odd Sunday school cameo, my spiritual experience is limited. I remember the grainy bread and sweet grape juice and the metallic smell of the collection basket as it was passed around. I remember finding out that my sister prays when I was a teenager, and laughing. God, that girl flosses and prays. How is anyone so perfect?! And when, at eighteen, a childhood friend sat me down to tell me she was part of an extremely orthodox organised religion, I thought she was pulling an elaborate prank. What about all those years I'd taken the Lord's name in vain in front of her? Or worse. I'd done much worse than that. How had I never realised she didn't have a television. For someone so interested in the world, I navigate it from a shockingly narrow viewpoint.

Funder was a source of inspiration when navigating the historical elements of the story. Josephi and Muller (2009) state that *Stasiland* was not as well-received in

Germany as it was in Australia, partially due to the liberties Funder takes in recreating scenes—a common practice in Australia. “This freedom, which also includes writing about matters that have not been experienced firsthand, is reflected in such books as Garner’s *The First Stone* or Funder’s *Stasiland*. As a consequence, authors in Australia have access to a far wider range of topics, and they can give their books a “dramatized” [dramaturgisierte] narrative that attracts readers far more than a mere recounting of facts,” (Josephi and Muller 2009 p. 73). I took cues from Funder and recreated the scenes based on interviews where I felt it would make a story more easily relatable. This can be seen, for example, when Theo and Alfons stole firewood.

From their bedroom the boys listened to sounds from the market below. Voices floated through the glassless windows—the panes had been shattered in bomb blasts and who had the money to replace the glass? The ice-tipped winter wind howled straight in, sweeping through the apartment. The boy’s mother did her best, tacking newspaper and sheets of tin over the open spaces. When it rained the three huddled in the centre of the bedroom to stay dry. Stealing firewood was Alfons’ idea.

I believe this method of storytelling—appropriating tools and techniques that were confined to fiction prior to New Journalism—invites a greater reader response. It also aligns itself closely with reflective autobiographical journalism whereby the subject matter is looking back historically. There are many parallels between Funder’s work and mine, and not merely due to the German focus of the narrative. Like Funder, my sources are reflecting on and trying to make sense of their pasts. Even though the story is intensely personal, there are times when I am also an outsider like Funder, for example when I visit the synagogues and travel to Germany. And like Funder, I reflect upon events and journalistically gleaned information from my own experience. This can be seen clearly in the following passage, which follows a similar structure to that of *Stasiland*: whereby a source’s reflection sparks a personal reaction. In this case Oma’s use of a foreign word leads me to consider her second husband’s fate in the war.

‘The war was murder,’ she says, ‘And after the war was murder. You see the dead bodies by the side of the road, one after another, we called Gottsettler, from the concentration camp... when they can’t walk, they just shot them.’

I think about the word Gottsetzler, I haven't heard it before, but it literally translates as 'settled with God.' These were men whose futures were set. Men like Opa, who spent god-knows-how-long in prison camps. He never talked about it with us; he never talked anything except nonsense with us. I recall the dread I'd feel when I walked in the door and he'd say 'Donna, you see this film? On SBS last night. Very good movie!' It happened often and always preceded a twenty-minute-long spiel on every plot-point in the film. When you spend ten years laying in the same spot on the lounge, sinking into its fabric, conserving energy, you don't have much else to talk about.

As demonstrated, my work has drawn heavily from both literary examples and journalistic and autobiographical theory. *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* has evolved in ways that were surprising at the time, but upon reflection make perfect sense within the framework of autobiographical journalism and the spectrum of the self in literature that I have outlined in this paper.

CONCLUSION

Strong autobiographical journalism allows the author to inform every aspect of the work, and for that story to exist alongside the journalistic subject matter. Brett Lott puts it this way: “I do not mean creative nonfiction is simply writing about what happened to me. Rather, it is writing about oneself in relation to the subject at hand,” (Gutkind and Lott 2000 p. 194). When I failed to come up with any conclusive evidence pointing to the whereabouts of my grandfather, I began to examine my own self and failings in order to understand why. The result is a story that is personal, but also stands for a wider range of issues and experiences.

This paper has worked to analyse the placement of self across literary book-length works of autobiographical journalism, and to understand the implications of that analysis on my own work, *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*. In order to understand my own place in my grandparents’ narrative I conducted a literature review which encompassed two main focus points: the first looked at the historical evolution of New Journalism, a form which introduced a new manner of producing journalistic stories by utilising modes of storytelling traditionally reserved for fiction. The form of New Journalism, I argue, relaxed strict conventions around journalistic work and therefore opened up a space in which autobiographical journalism could develop. Autobiographical journalism tends to utilise New Journalism techniques such as slice-of-life storytelling as well as a focus dialogue and the characters behind events, while simultaneously placing emphasis on the role of the author’s own self in the work. The other equally important focus of my literature review looked at the existing research into autobiographical journalism and the role of the self in literature. This shed light on Ros Coward’s pioneering work on the theory of autobiographical journalism, and also at ideas of autobiography: namely, how do stories of the self come to exist? And what do they mean? I outlined Eakin’s argument that stories of the self exist as a way for individuals to develop self-identity, and that one cannot exist without the other. I also looked into Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, which outlines how much of an author’s own self is necessary in order for a work to be considered an authentic work of autobiography. Using that theoretical framework I conducted in-depth analysis of three works of contemporary, book-length works of autobiographical journalism: Helen Garner’s

Joe Cinque's Consolation, Anna Funder's *Stasiland* and Joan Didion's *The Year Of Magical Thinking*. Each of these bore some resemblance to the story I wanted to tell via *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*. I was interested in the purpose of the self in each book: why had these authors chosen to tell these stories from their own perspective? And how did that impact or enhance the journalistic elements? I examined the role of the author's self in relation to the narrative being told in each book and came up with three labels that explain how the self operates in the context of the story. *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, I argued, is a work of narrative-driven autobiographical journalism whereby Helen Garner attempts to act as the quintessential journalist, driving the story forward toward a satisfactory conclusion. Alongside the story of getting the story is Helen Garner's personal account of coming to terms with the emotional burden of the Joe Cinque's murder. In this manner the book follows a traditional story structure, culminating in a character arc and a neat ending. I drew upon narrative-driven journalism in my own work, which, like *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, maps out my own attempt and ultimate failure to find my missing grandfather. I examined *Stasiland* as a form of reflective autobiographical journalism. In this case the journalistic discoveries made by Funder spark reflection in the self of the narrator. This structure works particularly well for stories situated in the historical past, as both Funder's and mine are. I appropriated structural elements from *Stasiland* to demonstrate the reflective autobiographical journalism at work in *Searching for Alfons Henneberger*. Lastly, *The Year Of Magical Thinking* was categorised as introspective autobiographical journalism. This mode of storytelling places the self ahead of the journalistic aspects, and the where journalism occurs it springs from a personal place. Throughout the book Didion draws upon her journalistic background in order to cast light upon issues and events she can't quite make sense of. By turning to facts she is able to make sense of her husband's death. My own work became increasingly introspective as I allowed more of myself in the story, and I found myself drawing upon Didion's precedent in terms of honesty and emotional openness. Each of the literary examples inspired something different in my own work of autobiographical journalism and I believe *Searching for Alfons Henneberger* is a well-rounded work because of this. As I have previously stated, the categories established in this paper are in no way mutually exclusive: any work of autobiographical journalism can contain elements of any or all three. Most

importantly, these categories represent only a starting point of new ways to talk about self in relation to narrative and journalism.

In addition to my establishment of categories for discussing the spectrum and function of the self in autobiographical journalism, I encountered common themes across all three studied works, and my own. The most poignant was the effect that writing about the self had on the self in the real world. I noted, as I wrote about the search for Alfons, that the act of writing and recording my own thoughts and feelings often forced me to consider certain themes and events in relation to each other, which in turn led to a gradual shift in my own consciousness. I have demonstrated this in relation to ideas of the body, however this is in no way the only area where change was sparked by writing. A similar shift can be traced in all three referenced works: Helen Garner's alignment of emotional and professional selves, Funder's new manner of seeing the world around her, and Didion's move toward understanding her own grieving process. Journalism is always personal, right down to the choice of subject matter. A Gay Talese quote I came across early in my search for Alfons—when I was still grappling with issues of objectivity—sums up the incestuous relationship between author and subject matter: “The subjects that involve me are those that have, literally, involved me. I write about stories that are connected to my life. Although on first impression they might appear to be nonfiction that features other people's experiences, the reason I'm drawn to them in the first place is that I see myself in them,” (in Alexander 2009, p. 60). Autobiographical journalism signals a shift toward openness across all aspects of the research and writing process.

It is an exciting time for autobiographical journalism: the form, as shown by Coward, is gaining momentum across a number of mediums. My own research relates to literary book-length works, but even in this relatively narrow category I have only scratched the surface of possibility: there are many ways in which the author's self can interact with and inform the journalistic narrative at hand. This paper represents a starting point in the wider conversation about the role of an author in their work. I, for one, am eager to watch the ways in which the theoretical conversation surrounding autobiographical journalism unfolds in the coming years.

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