

*Distance* (creative component)

**Writing within history: the challenge of representing significant cultural moments in fiction (exegesis)**

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## **Certificate of original authorship**

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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## **Abstract**

The creative component of my MCA thesis is a novel set during the lead-up to Australia's 1996 federal election. It tells the story of Abi Platter, a seventeen-year-old living in Sydney, who is beginning to outgrow the family she once loved unconditionally. Halfway through her final year of school, Abi becomes friends with Lucinda Whitford, the eccentric daughter of a wealthy barrister.

Initially Abi is besotted with the Whitfords, and their cultured, opulent lifestyle. She longs to follow the talented Whitford children on their path to successful and important lives. Then she unexpectedly falls in love with Adina, the girlfriend of Luce's older brother, Jonathan, and everything she thought she knew about society and her place within it shifts irrevocably.

Embedded in the personal story of the novel are power plays that mirror the dynamics on the 1995–1996 Australian stage. Just as the Liberals were able to gain the support of middle Australia only to betray it, so the Platters become casualties in the Whitfords' pursuit to protect their own status. Just as Howard harnessed fear and prejudice within society to win the election, so too does Jonathan Whitford use Abi's sexuality to silence her.

By paralleling a personal story with the events happening on the broader political landscape in Australia in the mid 1990s, my novel explores the values, hopes and fears of a nation at a pivotal moment in its history, as well as its schisms — between 'middle Australia', the Liberal Party's traditional affluent voting base, and the educated social progressives that Keating spoke to. It examines the machinations of power: majorities over minorities, rich over poor, men over women.

In the accompanying exegesis, I outline a brief history of the politics that characterised the 1996 election and its consequences and describe how my novel engages with the political themes of the era. I position my novel within existing literature and explain the original contribution it makes to the field. I describe my methodology and consider the value of exploring historical events through fiction. I contemplate the strengths of fiction in representing such events, as well as its potential limitations. I then discuss the challenges of dramatising an abstract moment in history, the ethics of the political novel, the problem of polemic, and finally the ways that fiction's unique properties can be used to explore the process of history making itself.

# Distance

‘Yes,’ says the man behind the gallery counter. ‘I know the name. She comes here often.’

He is tall and thin, in a crisp white shirt and spectacular gold pants. His voice reaches the wide walls and makes its way back to me. The walls are white, like his shirt. Like the counter. Like the solitary chair behind him. Everywhere white, except for his pants; everywhere empty, except for a few washed out artworks. On a street of colour — shops cluttered with spices, furnishings, homewares — the gallery space is both an absence and an assault.

‘Yes?’ I repeat.

His eyes travel across me. I watch the shimmer of his pants and wait. I can tell he is bored with me already — a thirty-something Australian in jeans and Birkenstocks — but I need to hear the word again, need to witness again his steely certainty, to confirm I haven’t dreamt it. After a month of *no*’s and *maybe*’s and *not sure*’s this is necessary. I have visited so many galleries. It is hard to believe I have found the answer in a place like this — so new and empty, and on the wrong side of the city.

He leans back, prodding at the bridge of his thick-rimmed glasses. His fashionable moustache twitches. ‘The art scene here is bigger than it used to be. But I know everyone, pretty much.’

Behind him hangs a collage: a pale blue painting of a girl with her arms raised towards the sky. In the sky: child-like sketches of objects that are half-bird, half-plane. Wedged in her open mouth: a three-dimensional seagull made of canvas.

I raise my arms like the girl in the painting, who has travelled in the plane and is grateful for the bird between her teeth. ‘Thank you. I’ll be back.’ I open the door and step out into the narrow street.

The ferry arrives late. I push my way through the peak hour crowd making its reptilian crawl along the dock. Tourists, businessmen, spruikers with their smoking hotplates, juice stalls displaying halved fruit swollen with seeds.

*Yes.*

As soon as I’m off the main road it is quieter: just playground chatter, shop gates clattering, the occasional car. I walk up the hill, keeping close to the edge of the narrow, footpath-less streets. Now the word throbs steadily, in time with my heartbeat.

*Yes. Yes. Yes.*

A cat slips out from an alleyway and races ahead, thin tail pointed high. The call to prayer begins, crackling through the darkness. At last the apartment block. I let myself in with my borrowed key and climb the narrow stairway.

I pour wine into a glass and lay out my dinner ingredients on the kitchen bench. On the other side of the room, the television flashes its light show on the wall. I am putting the wine bottle in the fridge when I hear the Australian accent.

I look up.

It is the pose I recognise first, even before the face and voice: the chin pointed high, the arm held wide on the podium, making its claim on a broad circumference of air. My heart cramps. There he is, on the screen: Jonathan Whitford, with Parliament House in Canberra as his backdrop.

It has happened, then. Today, of all days, when my search might be over at last. I had hoped that in coming here I could make amends, and protect myself from this. As if by placing distance between us, I could sway the course of these events.

But that opportunity passed years ago. I stare at the image and wonder whether, had I done things differently, he would be standing there at all.

By the time I find the remote to switch it off, the anchor has already cut to another story. I look out through the glass of the balcony door, hoping to fix upon something to hold me to this place, to this present, but my eyes glaze over, and the sound of stereos in passing cars fade. The cluttered laneways, the street cats, the mosques, towers, the entire city: dissolved. I am remembering the three of us — me, Luce and Jono — in the back of Jono's Holden Commodore on my first trip to Whale Beach.

It is mid-November in Sydney, 1995. Luce and I have just finished our final exams. The windows are down; the upholstery is warm from the sun. The coast road bends to the shape of the continent, taking us past takeaway shops and furniture warehouses, alongside sports ovals where children race back and forth across grass. Luce and I are in the back, Hole is on the stereo and we're straining at our seatbelts, shouting out the lyrics with our eyes closed. In front at the wheel with a can of beer in one hand, Jono watches us in the mirror and laughs.

Not that Luce can be reduced to a single moment; you may as well try to take a still shot of a hummingbird. As for Jono, the car and the beer are mere props, distracting from the truth. To believe in these objects, in this picture of him, is to understand nothing.



The question I ask myself is this: what did the Whitfords hold over me to make me act the way I did in the weeks that unravelled from that car ride, like fishing line from spool? That are still unravelling? That have even brought me here, to the other side of the globe?

To answer it I need to reinhabit the person I then was: a teenager at the end of my school years, about to embark upon life and knowing nothing about the world. I need to remember, as much as I can, not how it was, but what it felt like.

One thing I recall from that summer is asking myself whether I was happy, and deciding I was. It is difficult to look back on. I have never felt that way again, because of everything that happened; and because once we articulate our happiness its purity is lost.

## **Part one**

## One

In the July of 1995 my family was chosen by the Nielsen Company to represent the television viewing habits of the average Australian household. My father answered the door in a bath towel when they came knocking, water dripping from his hair. He stood on the front step for a good ten minutes like that, responding to the rep's inquiries with his barrel chest on display until my mother, having just returned from the supermarket, discovered him in this state of undress and made urgent signals from the hallway for him to wrap things up and come inside.

He was grinning when he strode into the living room where Justine and I were practising our singing. Justine was at the piano, attempting to sight-read the tune of a hymn we'd been asked to perform at a wedding. *The King of Love My Shepherd Is*, I think it was. I was standing beside her, a hip pressed against her shoulder, annoyed she was making such a hash of it but not saying anything.

'I can't do this with you standing over me.'

'But I need to read the music.'

'I've got to get this right, first. Go over there, beside the pot plant.'

Then my father blew in with his towel flapping at his legs, and we stopped our bickering.

He showed us the pamphlet from the Nielson Company and explained how it worked. A box with four buttons would be fitted to the television; a button for each of us. Every time we watched a program we would be required to press our button and the box would record what we watched.

No sooner had he explained the premise than he revealed he'd lied to the rep about our ages and occupations. Now he sought our cooperation: how would we like to further confuse things by swapping buttons? He would log on as the nineteen-year-old hairdresser he'd reported me to be (I was seventeen and in year twelve) and the recorded appeal of Bill Collins' Sunday movie program to the younger age bracket would spike. Justine (who the Nielson Company believed to be an eight-year-old boy, not the nineteen-year old Medical Science student she really was) could log on as our mother, recast by my father as an ex-navy retiree of seventy-five.

The only occupation he hadn't lied about was his own. This would have been impossible because my father had a face people recognised. The ads for his swimming pool business ran on commercial TV on Saturdays when the football was on. Filmed at

his display centre in Sylvania with its checkerboard of model backyards, they featured my father dressed up as a giant duck.

The costume he wore had been custom made to fit around his sizeable stomach and consisted of a yellow-feathered body suit attached to huge webbed feet. The head piece was an enormous plastic yellow bill from between whose flaps he peered out, grinning, to shout about the various features of the swimming pool behind him: the wide seating ledge; the generous side entry steps; the fibreglass finish. Towards the end of this recitation a tuneless jingle would start up and my father would cock his head, making the plastic bill wobble, and point his feathered wings at the camera like a referee making a line call. He would recite his awful catch phrase: ‘This duck ain’t out of the water yet.’

The words were irritating and meaningless enough to stick in viewers’ heads, and Justine and I endured plenty of teasing at school because of them. It followed us through corridors. It was called out of windows as we walked past, particularly on rainy days. When it first aired I spent a great deal of time reporting these humiliations in vivid, often exaggerated detail to my father in the hope he would pull the ad, until I realised he was more pleased by the brand exposure than remorseful about its side-effects. Not that he needed the reassurance: the campaign proved so successful that within its first year he was able to open a second display centre in Dural.

Even the ritual humiliation of his younger daughter (as I’d reported it) wasn’t enough to convince him to relinquish the most powerful weapon in his grab for empire. When it came down to it, he was proud of the ad, and proud of the business he’d built from scratch, even though it meant spending most days in a demountable in a back-lot suburb and coming home to his family reeking of chlorine. He was the boy from Botany who’d made something out of nothing, who’d climbed out of the hole in the earth he’d been born in, paved it with pebblecrete, filled it with water, and planted a palm tree beside it.

‘Come on, girls, whaddaya say?’ He cocked an eyebrow.

I tried to hide my smile. ‘Okay, I guess.’

Justine rolled her eyes, which was as good as a yes from her.

‘That’s the way.’ Beside the piano my father jiggled his broad hips in victory. He drew an arm up over his head and dropped it onto the piano keys with a flourish. The noise made Justine jump. He leant forward and nuzzled his face in the crook of her neck, tickling her with his whiskers. She squirmed and squealed ‘Da-ad!’ and he

nuzzled further. Eventually she gave in, sliding an arm around his thick neck and smiling at the piano keys, and it was the same smile as the one in the photo album on the bookshelf: Justine as a little girl at the Royal Easter Show, her arms draped around the neck of a woolly lamb.

Now the lamb turned his head beneath her arm, caught my eye and grinned.

It's my last memory of that look: the childlike glee present in all my early images of my father — the man who could vanish coins into his elbow, detach his thumb at the knuckle, and pull his finger from his mouth with a champagne cork pop.

## Two

It was the week after the Nielson Company visit that I met Lucinda Whitford.

To say that, when we'd already been at the same north shore private girls school in the same grade since year eight sounds like I'm stretching the truth. Our year group was made up of only a hundred girls, so it was possible to be on familiar terms with everyone, if that was the kind of thing you were into.

I wasn't; or rather that's what I told myself. The truth was, I was too self-conscious to pull it off. I was aware that I sounded different to the others. My consonants were muddier, my vowels flatter. My vocabulary was cruder, too, although it had taken me several awkward conversations in the early days to work this out. By the time I'd reached year twelve I was better at fitting in than when I had started, but those initial years had entrenched in me a rule of not talking to someone unless directly addressed.

I knew most people in my year by sight though, Lucinda Whitford included. But because of my rule we'd never actually spoken. It wasn't until mid-July of our final year that we did.

That was the month my drama class and Luce's music class were asked to collaborate on a brief dramatic piece with soundtrack. Twelve of us would work together for two weeks in the Margaret Fanning Hall — all of the venues at our school were named after obscure women — before presenting our visionary masterpiece to the year group, an examiner and, presumably, ecstatic applause.

Our first combined session was during second period on a wintry Tuesday. I walked down from the main school building with Janice Aitken, who was also coming from Modern History. Janice was a short girl with prominent ears that she talked about getting pinned as soon as she turned eighteen. She was taking acting classes outside of school and considered her ascent to Broadway contingent only upon her pending surgery. We walked with our shoulders forward, our hands shoved as far down into our blazer pockets as they could go. It was below fourteen degrees, a travesty by Sydney weather standards, but the air was still, with that breathless quality certain cold days have, as if waiting for a curtain to open; and as we passed the gym we could hear balls bouncing on the polished parquet and the swimming pool door sliding on its tracks. From the courts beside it came the sound of Mrs Langford's caustic drawl shouting

instructions to the netball players: ‘Georgie. Get out of the circle. Get. Out. Of. The. Circle. You’re not the keeper,’ followed by a shrill whistle.

As we walked, Janice and I discussed the project.

‘Forget Arthur Miller and all that dreary American stuff,’ said Janice with the derision of a doyen who had seen it all. ‘I want to do something important for once. Something meaningful.’

‘You know Sally and Lena will be pushing for a take on a Greek tragedy, don’t you?’

‘What’s wrong with those two? I mean, hello. It’s practically the new millennium.’

As we talked, our cold breath misted at our mouths. In Year Eight or Nine we might have put our fingers to our lips, guiding an imaginary cigarette; now Janice toked on an absent joint, holding her lips tight, before passing it to me.

‘I agree.’ I inhaled deeply. ‘I’m imagining something Beckettian.’ Being able to employ words like ‘Beckettian’ was one of the great benefits, as I saw it, of having achieved our level of schooling.

Janice groaned. ‘No way. *Waiting for Godot* made me want to kill myself. Beckett is completely overrated. They’ll give the Nobel Prize to anyone, if you ask me.’

We got to the Margaret Fanning. Janice paused to smooth her thick brown hair over her ears. After checking in the door pane that they were sufficiently draped, she pushed it open.

In the hall the vision of an architect and the bland, utilitarian taste of the school’s administration had been poorly synthesised. Blonde brick walls and a row of skinny, aluminium-framed windows undermined the grandeur of its high ceiling and sweeping timber floors. On the back wall a series of wide wooden steps reached a height of about two metres: these were a versatile type of choir stall that could also double as class seating. On either side a door led into the storage space behind where instruments, music stands, plastic chairs and other flotsam attaching to a school music department was kept. Nothing lived in the hall itself, except for a nine-foot Steinway Grand piano.

The instrument had been donated by a wealthy former student, and was the most glamorous object our Methodist school, with its Methodist tastes, possessed. Now the music students gathered around it. On the other side at the back, our drama class had formed a distinctly separate group on the choir stalls. Sally Edwards and Lena Nazarian

stood on a step above the others, apparently holding court, and the stark division between the groups gave the whole scene the feel of a cul-de-sac before a neighbourhood fight. Neither of the teachers had arrived yet.

‘The themes of *Antigone* are still really, really relevant,’ I heard Lena say loudly from the back.

Janice nudged me and rolled her eyes. She made a pincer movement with her thumb and index finger and pivoted her toe on the floor. Arranging her hair again in front of her ears, she headed towards the drama cluster, no doubt to argue against *Antigone* and all the suggestions that would follow.

I was about to join her, but hesitated. I gazed instead over at the musicians, who were involved in an energetic discussion of their own.

The fact I was taking drama and not music is for me one of those glitches you sometimes find in your personal history that make little sense looking back. I suspect it had to do with my sister. Music was Justine’s passion. She played the violin, guitar and piano, all of which she guarded from me like a squirrel guarding its winter nuts, practicing at them for hours, usually behind the closed door of her bedroom. (The piano was the exception to this rule, but only because it was too heavy to move). The sole part of her musical world I was allowed into was the singing part and that’s because my voice complemented hers.

There’s science behind why sibling voices sound so good together. It’s to do with the similarities of facial structure. Parts of the face and head amplify tones, and vocal quality is ruled by the size and shape of a mouth. With me and Justine the science did not apply. Justine had inherited our father’s face — round with arresting features: owl eyes, wide mouth, spread nose. She complained a lot about it, claiming her broad cheekbones made her look fat even when she wasn’t. I didn’t believe this; I thought they gave her a fifties glamour, like Marilyn Monroe. My features were from our mother: small brown eyes, pointed nose and a pencil-thin mouth suggesting shrewdness — a lie, in other words. Justine and I were a study in opposites. Though there were many things about her I resented, I secretly longed to be as beautiful as my sister.

But we sang together well. Even Justine had to admit she sounded better with me than without. By my final year of high school we were staples at weddings, family birthdays and the Sunday service at church.

Despite Justine’s singing concession, though, I knew to steer clear of music at school.



I won't share the scale of my failure in the dramatic arena, only to say that in my brief inglorious acting career, consisting solely of those two years at high school, I never had a speaking part in a play; my two units of drama were 'dropped off' my final HSC mark; and as a result of falling off the stage in my role as a nameless maid during a production of *Taming of the Shrew* — people in the audience actually gasped; my father captured the whole thing on video — I have an enduring aversion to Shakespeare. On the Tuesday I met Luce in the Margaret Fanning Hall all this was ahead of me, although the clouds of the oncoming storm had already started to gather.

I was not at all interested in the tedious battle that was taking place on the choir stalls. Sally and Lena had the numbers. Instead my gaze lingered on the Steinway: the lid propped on its shiny stalk, the polished angled surface throwing winter sun onto brick, lending a luminescence to a dreary picture. Four girls stood around it, and one sat in front; it was a scene from a painting, painstakingly composed, with the perfect balance of light and shadow.

Wendell Roberts, who was in my Three Unit English class and a violinist, leant against the piano at the bass end of the keyboard. She had her arms folded across her chest, and the freckles that covered her face had converged along her forehead in a deep crease.

On the other side stood three girls who were often together. I have long since forgotten their names, but I know they all began with a P; the 'Three Ps' was how people referred to them. I had seen them once in the accessories section of Grace Brothers wearing similar ankle-length skirts and purchasing identical maroon-coloured handbags.

Sitting between Wendell Roberts and the Three Ps, on the stool of the Steinway, was Lucinda Whitford.

She was one of a handful of students at the school who had the status of minor celebrity. On any given day in the Year Twelve common room amid talk about the latest *Melrose Place* episode, you would hear someone gossiping about Rachel Kiernan, the richest girl in the year (her family owned the largest management consultancy in the Asia Pacific); Bianca Bell, daughter of the Ambassador to Rome; Andrea Tupman, who'd had more boyfriends than Molly Meldrum; or Lucinda Whitford.

Her celebrity didn't come from her love life or any family connection, although her family was extremely well connected. It came from her success at the instrument she was now seated behind. According to the biography the Principal would recite every

time Lucinda Whitford was wheeled out to perform, she'd begun learning piano at age four and was currently studying out of school hours with a renowned professor at the Conservatorium of Music. She'd won numerous competitions and prizes, the names of which were presumably too lengthy or too dazzling to recite, and had been 'blessed' (ours was a religious school) with the opportunity to perform with some of Australia's top classical musicians.

I'd been thirteen when I'd first heard her perform, and even at that age I had a sense of her talent. Watching Lucinda Whitford play, you were barely aware of her fingers on the keys. Every note seemed as inevitable as the ground to a falling apple; every rest as absorbing as the still after a gunshot. Of all the other things they said about her, I never met anyone who doubted that Lucinda Whitford was terribly good at the piano.

Justine had bought the sheet music to a number of pieces after hearing Lucinda Whitford play them, and would tinker for months at the edges of a Chopin Prelude, or a Beethoven Bagatelle in A Minor, until the day would come when my mother, father or I would find her weeping frustrated tears, her head against the piano sideboard, the music flung to one side, soon to be relegated to the bottom of the sheet music box.

Justine's admiration for Lucinda Whitford despite her being two years younger was perhaps another reason I'd made no effort to know her. Now, however, I broke away from the Margaret Fanning doorway and headed to where she sat at the Steinway.

'That's ridiculous,' Wendell Roberts was saying as I came within earshot. She was turned towards the windows, and her crease of freckles had darkened like a bruise. Realising that I'd stumbled onto the sidelines of a confrontation, I was swerving around to head back to the dramatists when Lucinda Whitford spoke.

'It's a prerequisite, actually,' she said in a sweet voice. 'Or should be. Baby goats can do this stuff. I'll play it again.'

I stopped my retreat but changed course, to come up not beside Wendell, who seemed volatile, but the Three Ps. Standing behind them, I watched Lucinda Whitford press out, with deliberate slowness, seven distinct notes.

'If it's that easy,' said Wendell moodily, 'why not just *play* the harmony?'

'Because I want one of you to prove to me that you can improvise,' Lucinda Whitford said pleasantly. 'One more time for the dummies, okay?'

She played the notes again, and on the last one pressed the damper pedal, so that it continued to sound without fading.

As the note rang out like an insult, nobody spoke. Wendell had turned red with silent fury. The Three Ps remained expressionless as shop dolls, as if the whole performance had nothing at all to do with them.

I knew what Lucinda Whitford wanted. Finding the complementary notes was a favourite game of mine. Justine hated it, complaining it threw her off her singing.

As Lucinda Whitford played the notes again, I sang a harmony in my head. She finished and I cleared my throat. I sang out the thirds in a self-conscious series of 'la's.

Until that point, I don't think they'd even noticed I was there; now Wendell and the Three Ps turned to stare at me. Lucinda Whitford took her foot off the damper pedal and looked up, fingers hovering in resting position over G, E and Middle C. She played her seven notes again and I joined in with mine.

'Who's this?' she asked one of the Ps when we were finished, as if I wasn't standing within two metres of her.

'Abi Platter,' came the muted reply.

She had a beautiful smile, Lucinda Whitford, with straight, white teeth, the front two separated by the narrowest strip of pink gum. Showing it, she ran a hand through her thick yellow hair. 'Thank the baby fucking Jesus for you, Abi Platter. Come sit with Luce,' were the first words she ever said to me.

### Three

That year, my mother and I were not getting on.

We had never been close. From a young age, I had shown a talent for disappointing her. I was shy in company, averse to most green vegetables and afraid of chlorinated water. Craft did not interest me, nor did almost all forms of athleticism. I made a habit (her phrase. I had done it twice) of decorating myself with the leaves of poisonous plants. I was allergic to mosquitoes, mangoes and bluebottles.

The problem was not that these characteristics were especially atypical in children. It was more that, apart from the apparent poisonous plant fetish, my mother had many of them herself. She feared that I was timid and peculiar in both character and constitution, just as she had been as a child; that despite my potential I would fail to succeed. It was the very way she framed the trajectory of her own life. And so we fought. It was bickering, mostly. Those tetchy exchanges you witness most days in supermarket aisles.

‘Put back the Space Food Sticks.’

‘You never let me get anything I want.’

‘They’re for little kids, Abi.’

‘So?’

‘You don’t even like them.’

‘I didn’t used to but now I do.’

‘Oh, I see. You expect me to keep up with every little variation in your tastes.’

‘If you paid attention —’

‘I do nothing *but* pay you attention. I barely have time for anything else.’

Our arguing was unpleasant and irritating and ordinary. I hardly thought about it. But then came 1995, the year our skirmishes turned brutal, the year we replaced glares and side remarks with shouting matches across the dinner table; rolling eyes with slamming doors.

It began with my refusal, in January, to take tennis lessons. Without asking me, my mother had arranged weekly sessions for me at a local tennis club. She announced this over breakfast one morning.

‘But I don’t want to play tennis.’

‘I’ve already paid. It’s expensive. And non-refundable, I might add.’

‘Then why didn’t you ask me first whether I actually wanted to go?’

My mother eyed me over the rim of her coffee cup. ‘It will do you good. You spend too much time indoors.’

‘If you were worried about *that* you should have bought me a hammock.’

Across the table my sister smirked.

Again, I told my mother I would not go. She insisted. She kept insisting every day for a week. So, on the afternoon of my first scheduled lesson I simply failed to show up.

A year earlier I would not have been so bold. But now I was seventeen. By the superior reasoning only teenagers are blessed with I decided this kind of thing had gone on for too long. Before tennis lessons it had been ballroom dancing lessons. Ten hours of cha cha-ing with the shortest and pimpest boys on the upper north shore. Before ballroom dancing lessons, it had been leg-waxing appointments. Who bothered with that when you could shave? These forced activities were a cruel joke. My *mother* was a cruel joke.

I knew what was behind it all, of course. She was trying to transform us, to extract from us the influence of our Botany childhood. We had spent our primary school afternoons hanging out at the local skate ramp with the rest of the neighbourhood; our evenings cruising the streets in someone’s cousin’s fitted out car; and our weekends lounging in front of the box watching the Rabbitohs lose yet another match as we simultaneously ate our body weight in salt and vinegar chips. In essence: our childhood had been spent fine-tuning our bogan sensibilities.

Then there had been my father’s ad, and the subsequent boom in business, and the second showroom in Dural. To avoid an exhausting commute, my parents had decided to move house so that we would be halfway between the two showrooms. Hence our relocation to Lindfield.

Compared to Botany, it was another world. Neater. Quieter. More polite. There were no low-flying planes in Lindfield. The houses, behind sandstone or neat white picket, were bigger, the gardens magnificent. Nobody ever wore beachwear.

I still missed our old suburb: the early swims. Fish and chips on the bay. Riding my bike to La Perouse on Sundays to see the Snake Man show off his reptiles. I resented these losses and thought my mother shallow for caring so much about appearances. Most of all I hated her for getting it so wrong. I had picked up enough in four years at private school to know that even in Lindfield only dogs without friends took ballroom dancing lessons.

I hated my sister, too, for so readily embracing our new life. Since the move she had acquired a whole new group of friends, mainly from the Uniting Church my mother, sister and I attended every Sunday (my father was a lapsed Catholic. He had no intention of becoming a lapsed Protestant as well). Very soon, Justine was wearing her hair like the fellowship crowd: neatly, with bobby pins; dressing like them, in long skirts, collared shirts and fob chains; and taking delight in dorky pastimes like sleepovers and ‘coffee dates’.

Only my father was constant. He still lived in singlets and thongs. He kept his Vic Bitter in the crisper and his black leather armchair with the fold out footrest in the lounge room. When South Sydney played he inflated a red and green rabbit and hung it from a string out the front of the house where, every time there was a breeze, it beat against the porch light with a steady thwack. I had always loved him the most.

All of which is to say I spent most of that year grounded. It is therefore a minor miracle that Luce and I became friends at all.

It might never have happened had I not run into her in the foyer of the Orpheum at Cremorne one Thursday evening. She was holding an enormous box of popcorn, and in the company of a boy who looked somehow familiar but who was far too good-looking to be anyone I knew. He was wearing a flannel shirt over a white t-shirt, jeans and Converse sneakers. My first thought was that I recognised him from television — *Neighbours* perhaps. He looked a bit like Malcolm Kennedy, whose current storyline had him embroiled in a passionate and forbidden romance with Danni Stark, a tear-away with diabetes recently expelled from boarding school.

The very possibility made me swivel quickly in the other direction. I was also wary of an encounter with Luce. She’d been warm to me in class, but it was not a warmth I trusted. Besides, it was the weekend, we were out in the wider world, not at school, and different rules applied.

Since I couldn’t talk to Mike, my date, who was queuing at the candy bar to buy us ice creams, I pretended instead to be studying the noticeboard pinned with recent film reviews. I was running my eye across a line of newspaper print when I heard my name. ‘Abi Platter, sing to me,’ called a voice across the foyer.

About a dozen people turned. Luce was skipping across the plush red carpet towards me: yellow hair and popcorn flying, the thin straps of a miniature backpack dancing above her shoulders. At the sight of her open face my wariness evaporated, and

it suddenly seemed perfect, the two of us running into each other at the Orpheum on a Saturday night. The art-deco cinema had an old-fashioned glamour: high ornate ceilings, rounded corners, soft pink lighting that gave everything a flattering glow. On centre stage a man played music on a large white organ, the kind you might find in an Elvis Chapel in Las Vegas. As the chords sounded, the curtain behind it rose along a series of vertical lines, tugged by hidden strings, to reveal the screen — a curtain of such thick, heavy velvet it was easy to imagine it suffocating anyone who got caught underneath; but it would be a warm, sensuous, cradling sort of death, so they would hardly mind. There was no other place like it on the whole of the north shore, and in that sense, it was like the Steinway in the Margaret Fanning Hall: a rare thing of beauty in a wasteland.

As Luce approached I looked down at my clothes. I had a slip dress on over an old t-shirt, shapeless and faded, which I suddenly regretted. Luce was in a black skirt with a silky green top, knee high socks, also green, and Blundstones: the perfect outfit for a night at the movies. How was it that people knew what to wear? To me this was one of life's enduring mysteries.

'I was just thinking about you this afternoon,' Luce said coyly when she reached me. 'This is Jonathan, by the way.' She gestured towards the good-looking boy who had come up beside her.

I registered Luce's casual tone. So, Jonathan was her brother, not her boyfriend. He looked familiar, I realised, because he looked like her.

'Hi,' said Jonathan, smiling.

Awkward, nervous grins I was used to; Mike had one of those. I'd also been the recipient of the nods, weird hand signals and grunts that boys who thought they were cooler than me bestowed before gazing over my head to find someone else to talk to. Jonathan Whitford looked straight at me, with brown eyes that were clear and still and nothing at all like Malcolm Kennedy's. I couldn't remember the last time a boy had done that. Possibly never.

'What are you seeing?' Luce asked me.

'The *Bridges of Madison County*, I think,' I said.

She looked at me with a hint of amusement.

'I let Mike choose,' I felt compelled to add.

Luce glanced around for someone who might be Mike, before leaning into my face in a familiar way. It was like we were old friends already, I thought giddily, not

people who had effectively only met that week. ‘You know Clint Eastwood’s in it, don’t you?’ she asked. ‘Who is this Mike? Is he...’ She deepened her voice. ‘...an older man? And if so, how old are we talking? Thirty? Forty? Pension age?’

Mike was seventeen and the brother of a boy from church who my sister had a crush on — Ed, a minister-in-training. The way Justine conducted her crushes was to subtly and steadily infiltrate the life of the person she was interested in, like mould in a bathroom. First, she researched his hobbies, next his timetable. He had barely learnt her name before his swimwear matched hers, they had a joint subscription to the Chamber Orchestra and their siblings were dating.

I had agreed to go out with Mike because I needed someone to take to my school formal. The relief of having this task squared off, and so early in the year, had made me rather fond of him; since then we’d been out together twice: to a play at his school and a church-related birthday picnic interrupted by a hail storm.

It was possible Mike was in love with me or hoping to be: sometimes I caught him in a watery gaze, his eyes aqua-bright. While I wanted to fall in love back, I doubted this would happen. As far as I could tell, people in love were willing to do ridiculous things for each other — stand outside windows in the cold, break the law, write terrible poetry — and Mike didn’t inspire in me a willingness for that kind of humiliation.

He was though, the only reason that on this particular evening I had been let out of the house. My mother adored him.

I pointed Mike out to Luce. ‘He’s just over there, in the candy bar queue.’

Luce peered over, craning her neck, and I saw him through her eyes. How similar his checked shirt was to picnic basket lining; how he looked, with his shoulders forward, like a houseplant in need of watering.

‘What movie are you seeing?’ I asked before Luce could declare judgment.

She flashed her ticket, grabbed Jonathan’s arm and flashed his as well, moving him like a puppet. This he tolerated without expression. ‘*Mad Love.*’

‘What’s it about?’

‘Well,’ said Luce. She glanced at the movie posters above our heads. ‘From what I’ve heard, it’s the story of a lovely lady. Really, really lovely. A single mum, though.’ She made a sad face. ‘She’s got these three kids, also really lovely, all girls. The loveliness runs in the family, apparently. And they’re blonde, the mum as well as



the three daughters — possibly the mum dyes her hair, but who knows? Anyway, Mum and the older two have straight hair. The youngest one's in curls.'

Jonathan kicked Luce's shoe. 'Don't listen to her, Abi.'

I was pleased he had spoken to me at last and that he remembered my name. 'She's got the wrong movie,' he said.

Luce gave him a puzzled look. 'Are you sure?'

He nodded. 'I read a review in the paper on Thursday.' He fixed me with a serious gaze. '*Mad Love* is actually about a very tall Scottish man, he's the head of a clan, and he has to fight in a kilt against an evil nobleman in the Scottish Highlands to defend the honour of Jessica Lange, who he's married to.'

'You mean Jessica Lange, the American actress?' Luce clapped a hand to her chest. 'What on *earth* is she doing in the Scottish Highlands? I thought she lived in New York.'

Jonathan shrugged. 'Search me.'

Nobody I knew talked like this. There was Janice from school with her fake marijuana, but everything was so self-conscious with her, so rehearsed. I sometimes imagined her standing in front of her mirror at night, hands pressed against her errant ears, practising different expressions, delivering lines to her reflection. *They'll give the Nobel Prize to anyone* (smiling, grimacing, rolling her eyes) *if you ask me*.

The Whitfords' talk was different. It was a kind of scattng, like I'd heard on the old jazz records my grandfather owned. Luce threw a handful of popcorn in the vicinity of her mouth, letting half of it miss. Luce wasn't some kind of popcorn fiend, I realised. The oversized box was a prop.

I said: 'I hear Jessica Lange does this seasonal thing, where she spends summers in Scotland and winters in America.'

Luce and Jonathan looked at me for a long moment. I felt my neck grow hot. Clearly I was supposed to be their audience. I wasn't supposed to join in.

Then Luce tutted. 'Sounds rather awful, I must say. If you've got that much money, why not go to the Bahamas for the summer? Who needs Scotland, with its bagpipes and its haggis and its log-throwers and its *ghastly* cheapskates? Nobody!' On this last word she drew her hand holding the popcorn up and forwards. Kernels erupted from the box and littered the ground.

I pushed the air from my lungs with relief, and breathed in.

'Hi,' said a voice beside me.

Mike was back. A heaviness descended on me. My fondness for him seemed suddenly stained, like old film. He'd wrapped a serviette around the cone of my ice cream. Now he handed it to me along with the money I'd given him to buy it; a pathetic type of chivalry, I thought, where ten minutes before I'd have been grateful. I was aware of how he smelt, like milky soap, and hated that, too.

I introduced everyone.

Luce smiled at him placidly. Jonathan put out his hand.

'Luce and I go to school together,' I told Mike.

'And how did you two meet?' Luce asked Mike in a perfect imitation of someone who wanted to know.

'Through my brother and her sister,' Mike said. He took a large bite into his choc-top. Chocolate cracked.

'Oh! You've dropped some,' Luce said, pointing.

While Mike knelt down to clean the mess off the carpet with his serviette, she mouthed something at me. *Blow him off.*

I blushed, humiliated by her judgement of him, but thrilled as well that she had articulated my precise desire. I hoped Mike hadn't seen: what she'd said, or what I felt. I suddenly wished we'd never come to the Orpheum, but it was a hollow wish, because if we hadn't come I wouldn't now be talking to Lucinda Whitford and her brother in a way that was a game but also its opposite.

The crowd began to shift. Luce and Jonathan went ahead of us. As we neared the rope where tickets were being collected, Luce slyly jerked her head in the direction of Cinema 3, the one she and Jonathan were heading towards.

'How keen are you to see *The Bridges of Madison County*?' I asked Mike. 'I know we've got tickets for it, but once we're through the barrier we can really go to anything we like.'

'Oh,' he said, surprised. 'I've heard it's really good. I've already seen the *Brady Bunch Movie* and *Rob Roy*. I know nothing about *Mad Love* except it reviewed pretty badly, and there's not much else on offer.'

'Never mind. It's fine.'

We reached the ticket collector and handed her our tickets. 'I've got to go to the bathroom,' I said when we were through. 'Save me a seat?'

'Of course.'

Still holding my choc-top I smiled at him with rigid lips and walked around the corner.

Luce and Jonathan were just heading into their cinema. 'Wait!' I called.

I am not proud of this moment. There are mistakes I have made in my life that still wake me at night, and while this is not one of those, an image of Mike sitting in the dark, faithfully awaiting my return, is something my mind will drift to once I'm lying there sleeplessly, watching light grow upon the ceiling. I hope I can say I've never done such a cruel and childish thing to anybody since.

## Four

‘What did you say it was for again?’ asked Justine.

She was doing her hair at the bathroom sink, wielding her brush in long, violent strokes, her gaze fixed on the mirror. I watched her from my perch on the lid of the toilet, where our mother stood above me holding my chin between her fingers, applying lipstick with the devotion of a cartographer plotting a newfound landmass. ‘Go like this.’ She flattened her mouth in a way I found hilariously grotesque. ‘What?’

‘Nothing.’

‘WILL SOMEBODY ANSWER ME.’

‘Justine,’ our mother scolded.

My sister had on her plaid skirt and fuzzy pink sweater: a clear sign she was hoping to see Ed today. This was one of the reasons she was in such a foul mood: earlier in the week during one of their regular hour-long phone conversations Ed had relayed to her the whole sorry Orpheum story. Mike was apparently ‘a mess’, I was a ‘psycho freak’ (Justine’s words) and Ed was holding Justine responsible by proxy. She suspected Luce, whom I had stupidly name-dropped, was at the heart of it. Now I was skipping a wedding rehearsal to visit the culprit, and she was furious.

‘The Whitfords are having a morning tea,’ I said. ‘At their house. With about a million people.’

‘Like they could get a million people in their house.’

‘Maybe they can. Have *you* been there? Anyway. It’s a big deal.’

‘Stop talking. You’re getting it on your teeth,’ my mother said.

Justine grunted. ‘I don’t care how big a deal it is. Singing at this wedding is something we committed to in June. And Pete and Jenny set the rehearsal date weeks ago.’

‘Well I didn’t know about the morning tea then, did I?’

‘Well you should have said no to it, shouldn’t you?’

‘Well it’s just a stupid rehearsal. I’ll go to the next one.’

‘Well maybe they won’t want you at the next one.’

‘*Girls*,’ said our mother.

Justine made an exasperated sound. ‘Come on, Mum, it’s rude. Why are you letting her get away with it?’

It was a question I had asked myself. When it came to social obligations, my mother usually had very strict protocol. ‘There’ll be another rehearsal, Justine,’ was all she said in the curt way she used to shut down a conversation.

‘What are you ladies doing in here?’ Dad filled the bathroom door. He was dressed for work in beige pants and the light blue ‘Platter Pools’ t-shirt with the logo in the left-hand corner. The letters of ‘Platter Pools’ made a circle and inside the circle was my father’s face. ‘Oh, Abi’s wearing makeup. You look lovely, dar!’

Justine put her brush down. ‘Why are you going in today? I thought Ray did Saturdays.’

My parents exchanged a look.

‘Ray’s taking a break today,’ Dad said. ‘Come on Abi, I’ll give you a lift. They’re in Killara, right? Easy enough to swing past. Where are the keys, my dove?’ he asked our mother.

‘I’ll get them.’ She stood up. ‘And Abi, don’t forget the biscuits.’ Being in possession of a plate of her oatmeal biscuits was basically a condition of leaving the house.

When they were gone Justine squeezed a long, neat cylinder of paste onto her toothbrush. ‘I don’t see why you’re all of a sudden hanging around with Lucinda Whitford.’

‘We get on,’ I dabbed my lips inexpertly on a square of toilet paper. ‘What’s the big deal? I thought you liked her.’

‘As a *musician*, sure. But as a person...’ She put the lid back on the tube and considered me, like a cake in a shop window she was trying to work out whether to buy. ‘You know she once threw a book at Andrea Russell’s head.’

I laughed.

‘*Andrea* didn’t think it was funny,’ said Justine. ‘And she wags school all the time. She pretends it’s for piano rehearsal but somehow those rehearsals are always on test days or when a sports carnival’s on. Don’t you think that’s a bit of a coincidence?’

‘Come on, Jus. What do you care? You’re not even there anymore. You used to wag the swimming carnival yourself. Remember Year Ten?’

‘That was a legitimate head cold. Anyway, she might be brilliant but nobody actually likes her.’ She looked at me to see if this comment had hit home, before adding, ‘She’s mean.’

In the car, Dad put on his Dire Straits CD. It was what he played whenever he drove to the Dural showroom. On a good run, the length of the album was the length of the drive almost down to the minute, which was just the type of serendipitous fact that appealed to him. My father was the kind of man who got excited about people with the same names as celebrities, and carpet stains shaped like countries of the world. We stopped at traffic lights and he performed the guitar solo in ‘Sultans of Swing’, partly with his voice but mostly with his face, and I turned away to deny him the satisfaction of my grin.

The lights changed, the traffic edged forward and I thought about whether Justine was right about Luce. It was true that if someone irritated her Luce was frank about it, the way she’d been frank in the Margaret Fanning Hall with Wendell Roberts and the Three Ps. But was she mean? Justine’s problem was she thought kindness equated to goodness, and she had a tendency to divide the world into good and bad people. This was what the church and Ed had done to her.

And the trick Luce had encouraged me to play on Mike — when she’d mouthed the words *blow him off*, how could she have known I’d actually do it? Her intention wasn’t to ruin a relationship for sport, I reasoned. Anyway, if her intentions weren’t always pure, so what? For years it felt I’d been killing time, waiting for things to properly start, and with Luce now in the mix they had.

We drove into a wide street flanked by large houses. Dad looked around with interest. ‘Very fancy,’ he said, pulling into the curb. He parked and opened his door.

I glanced at his Platter Pools t-shirt. ‘It’s okay, Dad, I’ll be fine,’ I said before he could get out.

‘All right then, love.’

On the Whitfords’ wide veranda I waved at Dad until he’d driven off. Only when the car was out of sight did I ring the doorbell. I had the plate of oatmeal biscuits in hand, and a handbag I’d borrowed from Justine without her knowledge, clutched beneath my armpit. The longer I waited, the more I doubted the biscuits. They were porridge-coloured and a funny shape. The plate was a dull green and covered in craze lines and cracks; it was from an old dinner set that my mother was inordinately fond of.

While Luce hadn’t told me much about the occasion, one thing she had said was that the morning tea would be catered. It occurred to me now I hadn’t mentioned this to my mother. I wasn’t sure whether you were supposed to turn up with food to a catered function.

A minute passed and nothing stirred. I gazed around. The patterned veranda tiles had been recently swept. Beside the cross-hatch doormat stood an immaculate orchid in a wrought iron stand painted white. It was the kind of thing I knew my mother would have loved to have sitting beside our front door had there been room enough on our narrow porch.

Should I wait longer, or ring again? I tried to peek in through the stained-glass window, but its mottled colours obscured the view.

Another minute passed. I rang the bell again. For good measure, I followed up with a brief but deliberate knock.

Footsteps at last.

The sound made the biscuit problem suddenly acute. I imagined Luce, or even worse, her mother, greeting me, and her gaze dropping to the plate. I hastily opened the top of Justine's handbag. But the plate, which I now had on a slope, its biscuits avalanching in a heap beneath the cling wrap, was too wide. I heard the sound of the retracting door latch and the moan of hinges. I pushed harder at the plate. The door swung open, releasing the sound of a hundred chattering voices; I gave the plate an emphatic shove. There was a loud snap as one of its fault lines capitulated and the dull green china split in half.

I knew the bible passage by heart from a dozen Easter services — the one where the earth shakes and the rocks split and the temple curtain is torn in two. That was what came to mind. For the plate to split like that was implausible, and yet it had happened. I pressed hurriedly, but one half caught on something inside the bag and wouldn't go down. It was too late to do anything now.

## Five

They were about ten years old, the girl and boy, standing at the open door with straight backs and serious faces. No Luce or other Whitfords in sight. I breathed in relief as the girl handed me a flyer.

‘Recital’ it said in flowery cursive. Beneath in a smaller font was the date and Luce’s name. So, this was the occasion. Not just a morning tea, after all. How modest of Luce. I gave my mother’s broken plate a thrust so that it sank finally into my sister’s handbag and I followed them into the house.

A man was standing at the end of the hall. He was about my father’s age, in tan pants and a navy shirt, holding a glass of wine in the air like he was about to make a toast with it. He held my gaze as I walked towards him and I gave him a tentative smile. He responded with a bow like a butler in a period drama, and I relaxed. Wine sloshed about in his glass. I wondered if he was drunk, whoever he was.

‘Are you attached to Jonathan?’ he asked. ‘Or our other one?’

‘Lucinda.’

‘Good for her!’ He nudged a man who stood to his right with his back turned. ‘Look Neil, our Luce has a friend.’

The other man looked.

‘Is she...?’ I glanced over their shoulders.

The room behind them was teeming with people. Three wait staff stood behind a long row of tables, where wine, beer, juice, tea, coffee, plates of sandwiches, fruit and desserts were laid out. At the other end of the room was a baby grand piano. Dull winter light poured through a row of large glass windows framing a cottage-style garden that I knew my mother would die for. Flowering camillia, gardenia bushes and an overgrown lavender hedge pawed at the lower panes.

I couldn’t see Luce anywhere.

‘Upstairs,’ said Luce’s father. I was sure now that this was who he was. ‘Doing her meditative oms. She’ll be down soon, I expect. Ah, it’s the Langford-Symes.’ Raising his glass again, he nudged his way past me to follow the children to the door.

The man called Neil was still looking at me. He was tanned except for the glowing white band on one wrist where his watch had come loose. This, along with his linen shirt and tassled shoes made me picture him on a yacht. ‘I’m the uncle,’ he said.



‘I’m Abi,’ I replied, glad to have found a solid bearing. I had in fact heard of Luce’s uncle. He was not a professional sailor but some sort of developer. He had a daughter at our school and his name was often mentioned in connection with the high-rise apartments slated for the Pacific Highway corridor at Wahroonga, about which everyone had an opinion, my father especially — he disapproved of apartment living.

‘I don’t think we’ve met before, have we?’ Neil asked, smiling suddenly but without warmth. I knew what the look he was giving me meant, although as a general rule I didn’t get looks like this from men, from anyone. I was wearing what I often wore: a knee-length pleated skirt and a collared shirt. A bit of my mother’s lipstick, some foundation and mascara were all it took, apparently. Laughter pushed at my chest. How ridiculous and gross: his daughter was in the year below me at school. As he continued to stare the ridiculousness and the grossness somehow grew large enough to cross a boundary and implicate me, so that when Luce’s uncle finally said, ‘let me get you a drink,’ and pressed a firm palm to my back, liquid rose in my throat.

‘I should find Luce,’ I said. ‘How do I get upstairs?’

The arm dropped, the cool smile returning. He raised a slow, tanned finger. ‘Follow the hall to the bathroom and turn right.’

‘I feel like a whore,’ Luce said.

She was standing in the middle of a vast bedroom. She had pyjamas on, but I could tell she hadn’t slept in them. I knew at once they were a costume. The iron creases were too sharp, the fabric too stiff. Her hair was more convincing, tangled in a wild knot on top of her head.

‘A real whore.’ She took my hand in greeting. Hers were cold; they were always cold, I came to learn. When Luce practised the piano she wore fingerless gloves, even in summer, a green woollen pair ratty with loose threads.

I looked around the room. Except in size, it was not that different from my own: a bed, a desk, band posters on the walls. I’d expected posters of orchestras or pop violinists posing windswept on coastal rocks, but it was Radiohead that gazed out from the door of the inbuilt wardrobe. Nirvana and Faith No More were on the wall furthest from the bed.

I had exactly the same Nirvana poster in my room, with Kurt Cobain leaning towards the camera: blonde hair across his face, dark roots, his chin coarse with stubble.

I'd actually been meaning to take it down for ages, having decided that I was too old for band posters. My mother's hints about buying me some 'framed artworks' had helped the thought along. But then in April Kurt Cobain had died and it had seemed wrong to remove it and besides, I liked staring at his pretty face and imagining myself kissing it. The fantasy was only mildly tainted by the knowledge he was now a corpse.

'I have that same poster,' I said. My voice betrayed my excitement at finding this common ground.

Luce, in her pyjamas and carefully tangled hair, said nothing, and I realised my mistake.

'Why do you feel like a whore?' I added hastily. On another wall was a gigantic timber floor-to-ceiling shadowbox full of CDs.

Luce sighed theatrically. 'Because they just hire me out,' she said as I stared at the CDs. 'That's what they do with whores. Sell them for money to any old creep. Except it's worse than that, because I don't even get a cut!' She released my hand.

Like a small planet freed from one orbit only to be drawn into another, I moved towards the CDs. Everything was here: symphonies and operas and Nina Simone and Johnny Cash and recent chart toppers like Janet Jackson and Red Hot Chilli Peppers and the Cranberries. Elvis. The Beatles. Paul Kelly and Ben Folds Five and bands I'd never heard of: The Clouds, Weezer, Aphex Twin. They were not arranged in any discernible order. The ones in the top row were too high for me to read their covers. I looked around for a chair.

'They didn't even tell me what this whole morning tea was for.' Luce was still speaking her riddle.

'They didn't tell you it was a recital?'

'I knew *that*. But not the rest. Well, they can all rot in hell. Screw them if they think I'm going to perform for that lot.'

As she made this pronouncement, her gaze drifted past me. I followed it to the open door. A girl our age stood leaning on the frame. She was slight, a head shorter than me, with straight dark hair that reached her shoulders. She had jeans on with a fitted black t-shirt and lace-up boots. I ran a hand through my hair, feeling suddenly self-conscious in my daggy skirt. I thought she looked good, but not the sort of 'nice' that the people downstairs looked. Was she here for that, I wondered, or something else?

'Are they here?' Luce said.

The girl nodded.

‘And Jono?’

‘He brought them.’

At the sound of his name my ears pricked.

Luce put a hand on her hip. ‘You agree that this is fucked up, don’t you?’ she asked the girl, who smiled grimly.

‘Of course.’

I heard feet on the stairs and Jono brushed past the girl and into the room.

At last. I half-expected him to turn to me like I’d imagined him doing dozens of times since the Orpheum. He would meet my gaze the way he had then and this time, I would smile suavely. But Luce was the one he stared at. ‘What the fuck are you doing?’ he hissed.

‘What?’ Luce was triumphant. She tugged at the bottom of her pyjama top. ‘Nice shirt,’ she said.

Jono’s t-shirt had the Liberal party logo on one side with the name of the local candidate in dark blue letters underneath. I didn’t follow politics but my father and grandfather did, and I’d eavesdropped on their conversations enough to know who the guy was. They’d talked about him recently, in fact, during one of their regular sessions on the front porch of Pa’s house at Botany. According to Pa, he was a ‘scumbag turncoat’ who’d left Labor to join the Libs. My father called him ‘the Pansy’ on account of the diamond earring he wore in his left ear.

Pa was a union man who still boasted about his role in the general strike. Before that he’d driven trains up and down the eastern seaboard. In my father’s family Labor had equal status to God. And now here was Jonathan Whitford in his t-shirt.

Luce fell back on her bed.

‘Get up,’ said Jonathan. His tone was flat.

‘Make me.’

‘Don’t be a shithead.’

Luce rose on her elbows. ‘*I’m* the shithead now? We wouldn’t be in this situation, *Jonathan*, if you’d been honest with me from the start.’

Jonathan shifted his legs violently. ‘So you’re planning to sit up here all morning, are you?’

Another boy appeared in the doorway, wearing the same t-shirt. ‘You’ve got to come down.’ He was speaking to Jono. ‘They reckon Howard’s about to arrive.’

Luce whistled. ‘The big man, eh?’

‘There’s some amazing food, you know,’ Jono said, his voice suddenly smooth. ‘New York cheesecake. Raspberry friands.’ He pronounced the last word with an accent.

Luce snorted.

‘Suit yourself.’

‘Prick,’ Luce said as we listened to his feet hit the stairs. She looked across at the girl. ‘Sorry.’

The girl laughed. ‘Don’t apologise to *me*. You’re entitled to your opinion. Anyway, I happen to agree today.’ She looked at me. ‘I’m Adina, by the way.’

‘Oh,’ said Luce. ‘I should have introduced you. This is Abi.’ And to me: ‘Adina is Jono’s girlfriend.’

It was disappointing news, if surprising given the way she’d been talking about him. But it also made sense. Of course Jono had a girlfriend, and a gorgeous-looking one at that.

‘You know the worst thing?’ said Luce. ‘I would actually kill for a piece of New York cheesecake right now. I’m bloody starving.’

‘I didn’t bring anything, sorry,’ Adina said. She glanced at me, an expectant glance, and I felt the blood rise to my cheeks. I looked away, at Luce, wishing I could offer something.

I remembered the biscuits.

‘I’ve, um, got something, actually.’ I opened Justine’s handbag and pulled out one half of the broken plate. I regretted it as soon as I saw my mother’s sad-looking biscuits bunched beneath the Glad Wrap, but Luce took the broken plate from me without comment, peeled back a corner of the Glad Wrap and edged one out. She bit into it. ‘Oh, these are good,’ she said, brightening. ‘Are they homemade?’

I nodded, surprised by her enthusiasm. I offered them to Adina, who also took one, and we ate in companionable silence until the boy who’d been here earlier with Jono came to the door again. Adina leaned back from the frame and he murmured something in her ear. She shook her head. ‘Leave me out of it. This has nothing to do with me.’ She looked at Luce. ‘They want me to convince you to come down.’

‘Tell my brother,’ Luce said with the deliberateness of a stage actor performing a monologue, ‘that if he wanted me to participate in his boss’s fundraiser he should have told me what this was all about prior to a mere —’ she looked at her watch, ‘three hours ago.’

The boy caught my eye and raised an eyebrow, as if we both knew what we were dealing with here. I made a point of looking past him to the hallway.

‘Is Dear Leader here yet?’ Adina asked with a mocking smile.

‘I think so,’ said the boy. ‘I haven’t seen him, though. So maybe not.’

‘Then what’s the hurry?’

The boy had no answer to this. Casting a final look at Luce, he sighed heavily and left.

‘Give me another one of those,’ Adina said, coming over to the bed, where Luce sprawled and I perched on the doona. She grabbed a biscuit from the half-plate on Luce’s lap and threw herself between us. We bounced against each other, limbs knocking.

‘Jono is going to be as pissed off with you as he is with me, you know,’ Luce said.

Adina shrugged. ‘Maybe. He knows my views.’

‘I don’t get you guys at all.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Adina.

There was a silence.

‘I could get us drinks from downstairs, if you like,’ I said in an effort to fill it.

This broke the mood, somehow. Luce got up off the bed. ‘It’s all right.’ She went over to the wardrobe.

‘What piece do they want you to play?’ Adina asked.

‘The Mendelssohn.’

‘The one you played at the Town Hall?’

‘Yah.’ Luce turned to me. ‘Have you heard me play the Mendelssohn, Abi?’

‘I don’t know. Have you ever played it for the school?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then no, I guess.’

Luce took the elastic from her hair and mussed the knot loose. ‘Good. Then I shall play it for you and no one else. I will pretend none of those sycophants are even in the room.’

She opened the wardrobe and began to undress. I watched her pull a long silk dress off a hanger and put it on. After she had found shoes and had spent some time at the mirror applying lipstick and brushing her hair, she turned to us. ‘Ready?’

She looked impeccable. She seemed focused and calm. The transformation had taken less than five minutes.

Adina and I followed her downstairs.

We reached the bottom and Jono and his father came over.

‘Darling, you look beautiful.’

‘Give it a rest, Dad,’ Luce said, pushing past him.

His face darkened. Then, like it was all a bit of a joke, he said to Adina and me, ‘Howard’s just arrived, apparently. Although I haven’t seen him. Then again, they do say blending in with the commoners is a special talent of his.’

Ignoring his father, Jono touched Adina at the elbow and leant into her shoulder to speak.

‘Don’t thank me.’ She looked annoyed. ‘Abi was the one who convinced her.’

Mr Whitford studied me with narrow eyes. He raised his glass. ‘Abi,’ he said. ‘I liked you from the moment we met.’

The compliment sent a warmth through my chest. I watched Luce move through the crowd. She was different, suddenly, to how she’d been upstairs. She held up her hem up with one hand and smiled graciously as people parted for her. Conversation stuttered, thinned, fell away. In the kitchen someone turned the InSinkErator on and off again. Luce took her place at the piano.

## Six

I finished my final school exams on a Thursday in early November, and on the Friday my mother took me out for lunch to celebrate. It was late spring. The air was fragrant, the sky a faded, carnival blue. I was still in shock that the school part of my life was over, so unending it had seemed, but the stunned feeling was beginning to lift, leaving in its place a weightless, breathable air I was unaccustomed to.

The restaurant was on the water at Mosman, with vast windows that looked across to million-dollar houses on the escarpment. When we arrived, my mother offered me the window-facing seat and took the chair opposite, which gave her full view of the interior and anyone coming in through the entrance. It was her usual way: a showy restaurant we couldn't afford, and a spot within it that allowed her to spy on any regional celebrities in attendance. It was not long before she caught sight of one.

'Ah.' She watched the waiter fill our water glasses. 'Tom McClintoff's over there, the head of St Ives Prep. I wonder what he's doing here on a weekday.'

She would find an excuse to talk to him later. If she could not be a part of the upper set, at least she would be on speaking terms with those who were. This was why she had sent Justine and me to private school in the first place — to meet the offspring of people like Tom McClintoff — and why she insisted on dining at restaurants like this with white tablecloths and an international wine list, places where the wait staff placed the napkin across your lap and you felt its delicate heft, and could imagine being in any city, living any life.

'Are you seeing Luce this weekend?' my mother asked. It had become clear that she was very pleased about my growing friendship with Luce. There was Uncle Neil, the developer. I had also learnt since first meeting Mr Whitford that he was well known, too; a highly regarded criminal defence barrister, according to my mother.

Her interest in the Whitfords was purely aspirational. She still had not met them or Luce. Although Luce and I had been spending a lot of time together over the last four months I had not brought her home yet. I wanted to spare her my mother's fawning. There was also the problem of my unforgiving sister, and our two-storey brick townhouse. Built off a kit home template by a 'mate' of my father's, it had recently been described in a complaint to council as 'the local eyesore'. I doubted Luce would have bothered being polite about the house; and so this was a part of my decision, too: sparing my family from her.

Instead we hung out at the Whitfords': sometimes in Luce's room listening to music from her CD collection, sometimes in their vast garden, sometimes in the piano room while Luce rehearsed.

'Are you sure you want me to stay?' I asked the first time Luce announced during one of my visits that she was going to practise.

She put a hand on my arm. 'You must. I understand the music better when I play for an audience. Your energy in the room informs my performance.'

I fought the urge to smile, knowing I must not. This was the way she talked about the piano. It was a serious topic to her, her central life problem. She was continuously striving to play better and to understand more. How to combine technique and style. How to ensure one did not dominate the other. How to bring to the music something that no other player had brought. She listened to famous musicians play the classical pieces she was rehearsing, but her taste was far broader. She was interested in how all music worked. She would turn up the volume of her stereo and her face would become stern with concentration. 'You hear that? The guitar note beneath the harp. That tension.'

It was the way my father and grandfather talked about the football team they rooted for: with focus, without restraint. The girls at school would have laughed if they'd heard her and been brave enough.

I began to love that Luce talked like this. I loved that in the Whitford household conversation about music — about all art — happened often. 'Tell me, Abi,' Mr Whitford had said during one of my recent visits. 'What do you think about this actress who's been sleeping in the middle of a London gallery?'

We were at the breakfast table: Mr Whitford, Jono, Luce and me, after one of my regular sleepovers on the foldout bed in Luce's room. Mrs Whitford had left early to visit her sister. The table stood beside the lengthy back windows and outside them the garden seemed to go on forever, green upon green, broken only by a bare magnolia, its branches thin against a clear sky. The air whirred with glinting insects.

I looked at Mr Whitford blankly. These types of conversations did not happen over Saturday breakfast in the Platter household.

Luce rolled her eyes at her father. 'You make it sound like this actress is a homeless person in a sleeping bag or something. Curled up beside a Picasso for warmth.' She gripped her arms and pretended to shiver.



‘I hope it wasn’t one from his Blue Period,’ said Jono. ‘Not much warmth there.’ He winked at me and took a nonchalant bite of his toast.

Luce reached across and tilted her father’s newspaper around so that I could see the page he was reading. On it was a photograph of a white-walled gallery room, and in its middle, in an iron-rimmed exhibition case, a woman asleep on a mattress.

‘This is what passes for art these days,’ said Mr Whitford. ‘Look!’ The page creased beneath his pointing finger. ‘She couldn’t even be bothered to dress properly. Slacks and a flannelette shirt. All those supposed art-goers tramping in to see her. Don’t you think it’s outrageous, Abi?’

At home we never sat around a table for Saturday breakfast. We ate on stools at our breakfast bar, watching my father cook. It was the only day he went anywhere near the kitchen and his repertoire was always the same: bacon, sausages and eggs, all extremely well done. As he prodded at the food and the room filled with smoke, he sang lustily. He enjoyed himself at the stove the same way a first world tourist enjoys visiting a developing country; my mother, who cooked all our other meals and sometimes sang along to the car radio, never uttered a note in the kitchen. My father’s singing did not leave much room for contemplative discussion.

‘I think it’s wonderful,’ I told Mr Whitford. I was conscious that my words ran into each other.

He looked suspicious. ‘And why’s that?’

I tried to think of something intelligent to say. ‘Because...because it’s so *different* —’

‘Those horrid hypercolour t-shirts were different, too. Should we put *them* behind exhibition glass?’

I tried again. ‘Didn’t Andy Warhol say that art is what you can get away with?’ My art teacher had taught us the quote, and repeating it was easier than putting into words what I wanted to, which was something about art that was alive and breathing, not still and dead; and the permission it gave to study another living human in a way we were never given in real life. Not those of us who slept alone. I would have told Luce’s father, had I been able to articulate this, how much I wanted to press my forehead against that glass case and look, and look. But before I could say anything else Mr Whitford said admiringly, ‘Not just a pretty face, your friend, eh Luce?’ And the conversation moved on.

At the waterfront restaurant our entrees came: tomato and parsley bruschetta with an artful drizzle of olive oil. We ate. My mother chattered about congregation gossip — her friend Pamela’s daughter was getting married in February but disastrously the church hall had been double booked — and her decision to buy a rhododendron for the front yard. After the waiter took our empty plates she handed me a present wrapped in gold paper.

‘A graduation gift.’ She suddenly looked nervous.

Carefully, I opened it, my heart beating with the childlike anticipation I always have with presents. Beneath the paper was a navy box with gold cursive script. I lifted the lid.

‘I know you don’t wear bracelets. But every young woman needs a good bracelet. You’ll find as you get older that you have functions to wear it to.’

My mother had a list of things she thought I would be doing when I was older. Attending formal functions. Hosting dinner parties. Not to mention the tennis and the ballroom dancing.

The bracelet was too expensive and had nothing to do with anything I wanted. She would have been wiser to give me nothing at all.

‘Justine and Ed helped me choose it.’

A low grunt escaped my lips. What a bore that Ed was. He and my sister were finally officially dating. Even so, he surely had better things to do than go jewellery shopping for me. And he and Justine were so pious. There was something about their relationship I found distastefully chaste. If I ever managed to find a boy I wanted to go out with, and who felt the same way about me, I certainly wouldn’t waste the opportunity like Justine was doing.

‘Is she really in love with him, do you think?’

My mother looked startled. ‘Who, Justine?’

‘Who else?’

Her expression turned weary. She looked past me to the flower arrangement in the middle of the restaurant. ‘What you will come to learn, Abigail, is that falling in love is the period of blindness to another person’s flaws. Staying in love is accepting them.’

I hated it when she said things like this. She was implicitly criticising my father and I felt this to be disloyal. I had been sorry for her earlier when she had looked nervous about my present, but I wasn’t any more.

When our main course arrived I said, to harm her, ‘The Whitfords have asked whether I’d like to go up to their beach house for the summer.’

My mother looked up from her salmon. ‘For how long?’

‘The whole of December. Longer if I want. Uni doesn’t start until the end of February. If I get in, that is.’

‘Of course you’ll get in,’ she said crossly. She rested her fork on her plate. ‘What about your jobs?’

My jobs were babysitting for a handful of neighbourhood families and answering the phone in the demountable office on the Dural site of my father’s pool business every Sunday — the job my mother often did during the week. The demountable had a linoleum floor, an uncomfortable chair, a desk and a fan. The fan did nothing but circulate hot air, so we kept the door open in summer, which flapped in the breeze and let in asphalt dust and insects. When my father was onsite you could hear him running his sales pitches at the far end of the display area. ‘It’s the first of its kind in Australia,’ or ‘Have you ever *seen* anything so luxurious?’ or ‘Look, I never do this, but for you I could take ten per cent off.’

‘I don’t need to work this summer. I have some savings,’ I said, although the savings weren’t a lot.

‘What about Christmas?’ Christmas was my mother’s favourite time of the year. She spent months picking out matching tree and table decorations. Even though it was usually just the four of us and my grandfather, she cooked for it for a week.

I girded myself. ‘They’ve said I could stay for Christmas, if I wanted to.’

Picking up the fork again, she placed a pink wedge of fish into her mouth, chewed, swallowed. ‘You have just finished your big exams. I suppose I could talk to your father about getting extra help on Sundays.’

Her tone was light. I wondered if she was trying to disguise her true reaction for my sake, but she was hopeless at doing that. No. She was genuinely comfortable with my plan. I realised then how much my mother wanted me to be friends with Luce, enough to sacrifice her Christmas, and her Sundays as well. I couldn’t see my father agreeing to hire a replacement for me, not on double penalty rates. I watched her dip another piece of salmon into a streak of balsamic.

A whole summer with the Whitfords: this was the gift I wanted. The chance to belong to something. I did not feel like a part of my family, not anymore, and even if I

had done, my family did not belong to anything bigger than itself. In our kit home, we were out of place in our own suburb. Luce's family was part of the fabric of the world.

## Seven

I remember every part of the drive to Whale Beach: the warm, bright day; the smell of the exhaust; the red cloth of the car seats. Sitting in the snailing traffic with the music blaring and the windows down, as the hobby farms and gardening shops of Mona Vale flashed past.

Luce and I sat together in the back. She had insisted on keeping me company and made a game of Jono driving us like a chauffeur, issuing instructions at intervals: 'Turn right at the lights, thanks Belvedere.' 'We'd like a bit of air back here, Belvedere, if you wouldn't mind.'

Jono, at the wheel, had on a loose white t-shirt, which the breeze kept blousing up. Luce was wearing a one-piece swimsuit and a towel around her waist with some of its tassels missing. I half-expected her to leap out of the car at the first sign of water. I turned to the open window, gulped a mouthful of air and let it enter my bloodstream.

Already my old life seemed far away. I was a part of something new now. I looked over at Luce to confirm it. She was dabbing sun cream on her wrists like it was perfume. She glanced at me. 'How are you at Scrabble? We always play it on our first night.'

'All right, I think.'

'Don't forget the s'mores,' Jono called from the front.

'Of course I haven't,' Luce called back. 'We play Scrabble and eat s'mores,' she said to me. 'Have you ever had a s'more? It's a melted marshmallow in a chocolate biscuit sandwich. That's our tradition.' She reached for my hand and squeezed it. 'I'm so glad you could come. There's a television crew up there most days, you know. Filming that horrible soap opera beneath the Norfolk pines. Why don't we check it out tomorrow? See if we can wander into the background of one of their shoots?'

'Okay.' I held back a grin, felt a taut balloon fill my chest. I watched through the window as the road widened and the hobby farms and houses gradually thinned out. Traffic whooshed past us with a sound like an ocean, until there it was, the real thing, behind the palm trees at Newport, broad and as silver-bright as the bonnet of Jono's car.

Jono drained the beer he'd been drinking and examined the empty can. 'Do people really enjoy this stuff?' He tossed it behind his seat.

The can just missed Luce's head and she let it fall without comment. I watched it crash about around her shoes like a buoy on a tide, waiting for her to pick it up. She

didn't. 'Let's stop for hot chips at Avalon, Belvedere,' she said when we were through Newport.

'And scallops,' said Jono.

'I hate scallops,' Luce said.

'It's chips *and* scallops or I'm giving notice.' But he had already steered the nose of the Holden into the turnoff and Luce was digging for her purse.

'You brought that horrible car of yours, I see,' said Mr Whitford at breakfast the next morning, lowering his mug of coffee. We were in the living area upstairs — the level you entered from the street. At the back of the room, the entire sea-facing wall was glass: glass windows above glass doors that concertinaed to give access to a vast balcony, fenced in by low glass walls. Beyond it: the headland, the ocean, the sky.

'Did you expect we'd catch the bus?' Jono stood above his father and jangled his keys.

Mr Whitford stabbed a piece of bacon with his fork. 'Well you can't leave it in the driveway. It's blocking the Saab. I'd have to get you to move it every time I want to get out.'

Luce and I hovered in the doorway. We were waiting for Jono because he had offered us a lift down to the beach.

'I can't park it on the street. It's too narrow,' Jono said.

'Then park it in another street.'

'And walk half a block every time I have to drive somewhere?'

'Let's just go,' I said to Luce in a whisper. 'What's the walk? Five minutes?'

But Luce was resistant. 'I forgot my sandals. The pebbles will hurt my feet.'

The living room interior was as striking as the view – pale blue walls, matching floor tiles, and a navy leather lounge setting on an enormous cream raffia mat. The room's simplicity reminded me of the photograph of the art gallery room Mr Whitford had shown us, with the woman lying asleep behind glass. There was something elegant about a near-empty room, I decided then, although I had never given much thought to it before. Who needed ordinary trinkets to distract them when, on the other side of glass doors, beyond a green and white striped umbrella flapping on a timber deck, the vast ocean shimmered?

Downstairs was more cluttered: objects acquired over almost three decades of Whitford habitation had been thrust into the cupboards of the three downstairs

bedrooms, the bathroom, the laundry and the piano room, and into the overflowing bookshelf at the bottom of the stairs. The night before, Luce had taken me on a personal tour of nostalgic highlights: the wooden stepping stool she had once needed to reach the bathroom basin; the flower press she'd been given for her eighth birthday, which still held a few shrivelled daisies; her collection of Enid Blyton books; a family of Pool Ponies; her first Boogie board.

'The car won't be there the whole time anyway. You're not the only one commuting back and forth this year,' Jono said to his father. 'I've got stuff to do for Nelson.'

Mr Whitford raised an eyebrow. 'Well, if you ever plan to leave the house on foot, make sure you leave your car keys here.'

Jono looked at his father with considerable disgust. He turned and pushed past us. I gave Mr Whitford a sympathetic smile before Luce and I followed him out.

Once on the landing I glanced at Luce. 'It's the whole Nelson thing,' she said in a low voice. 'They've been fighting about it since Jono started working for him.'

'Your father doesn't vote Liberal?'

Luce laughed. 'Of course he does. But he thinks politics is grubby. He doesn't want Jono so directly involved.'

Jono drove the car down the hill with his foot flat on the pedal. He sped around a blind curve and, when an oncoming car appeared, braked hard. 'Calm down.' Luce gripped the dashboard. Jono revved the engine, skidded around the final curve onto the beachfront and hit the brakes in front of the low wooden railing that separated bitumen from sand. My seatbelt cut into my chest. Jono got out and slammed the door.

'Dickhead,' Luce muttered.

We locked our doors and walked over to where her brother was perched on the timber railing, taking his shoes off. While we were sitting there two other cars pulled up. I undid my shoelaces and watched a man, a woman and two young children climb out of one and a young woman close the boot of the other. I followed their passage to the beach with my gaze — the boys in speedos and t-shirts, the girls in swimmers, sarongs and raffia hats — and realised for the first time that I had packed entirely the wrong clothes for my holiday. This was confirmed by a glance over the other people on the sand. The dark green surf t-shirt and navy shorts I was wearing that would have been a common sight in Botany now stood out in a sea of white, cream, pink and pale blue.

I watched the waves send a mist of water high into the air. The sea looked far too rough to go out in, despite all the heads bobbing around beyond the break line.

Luce fixed her gaze on Jono. 'Have you calmed down yet?'

Jono grunted and pegged his thongs into the open car boot. 'It's like nothing matters to that man unless it happens inside a courthouse. We're on the brink of winning an election here. Changing the course of this country. Improving people's lives!'

Luce laughed. 'Like you care about any of that.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' said Jono. 'Oh, I know. You'd rather walk up the hill to get home, huh? Don't worry, Abi. *You* can come with me.' He put an arm around my shoulders and squeezed.

I felt my neck grow hot. It was the reaction I always had when Jono showed me physical affection, which he had done occasionally during my visits to their house: taking my arm, or poking me in the ribs, and one time even enveloping me in a bear hug when I answered a question correctly for our Trivial Pursuit team. I knew his affection was brotherly, because he was just the same with Luce.

Still, it made me wonder where his girlfriend, Adina, was. It had been weeks since I had heard anyone mention her. Which meant nothing, of course. I was hardly Jono's confidante. But I remembered how critical of him Adina had been on the day of the recital.

Then again, if Luce was to be believed, this was just how they were. They had met at uni in student politics, where they represented different parties — Adina was a member of the Greens — and arguing was part of their 'thing'.

Luce rearranged a strand of hair that was flying about her face in the breeze. 'God, Jono, you're embarrassing her. Look, she's gone red,' she said, pointing to me. 'I'll be happy to walk up once I've found some shoes. I'm sure there's some at the clubhouse I can borrow. I've got to go back up in an hour in any case.'

This was news to me. 'Why so soon?'

Luce groaned. 'I have a lesson with Juliet back home in preparation for my stupid Opera House concert next month.' She glanced at her brother. 'You're not the only one commuting this year, you know.'

Jono gave her a tight smile.

'Look, Abi,' Luce pointed to the headland at the far end of the beach. 'Just on the other side of that bend, on the next beach along. That's where they shoot the soap.'



‘Oh.’

‘Come on, then.’ Luce stood up. ‘Who wants an ice cream?’

The corner shop was across the car park. We filed inside past buckets of flowers and clusters of hanging soap-on-a-rope. The shop was dark and crammed, and on the shelves was the peculiar mix of luxury and everyday goods typical of stores in holiday towns — safety matches, firelighters and Band-aids next to scented candles and boutique moisturisers. Luce made a beeline for the standing freezer in the corner and pulled out a Cornetto. ‘What do you guys want?’

‘Do they have any Paddlepops?’ I asked.

Jono said, ‘I don’t care. Choose something for me.’ He was watching the shop girl who was in the opposite corner unpacking a box of biscuits. Her hair was shaved at the back and a long fringe fell across her face. Every time she bent over the box she smoothed it behind her ear only to have it fall down again.

‘Here. Have a Heart.’ Luce tossed an ice cream packet at her brother, smirking at her joke.

We approached the counter to pay. The shop girl took her time placing the last of the biscuit packets on the shelf, brushing her hands on her shorts and strolling to the counter.

‘Shit. I’m out of cash,’ Luce said, flipping through her purse. ‘You take credit cards?’

With a bored expression, the shop girl pointed to the handmade ‘no credit cards’ sign hanging sideways from a single piece of sticky tape behind her.

Jono took out his wallet. ‘It’s Caitlin. Isn’t it?’ He seemed amused.

She stared steadily at him for a moment without saying anything. She took his twenty and pressed at the keys of the register until the drawer popped open.

‘I’m Jono. This is Luce and Abi.’

Caitlin handed him his change.

‘Have a good one,’ said Luce brightly.

We walked out into the sunshine.

‘Well, you absolutely charmed the socks off *her*.’ Luce ripped the cardboard wrapping from her ice cream.

‘She’ll come round. It’s so obvious I’m her type.’

This set them both off into a fit of giggles.

‘What?’ I asked.

Luce looked at me with mock pity. ‘Poor, innocent Abi. Should we tell her?’

‘Definitely not,’ said Jono.

I knew by now to refrain from asking further questions of the Whitfords when they were in this kind of mood. Luce and Jono set off along the path that led to the beach and I followed. On the shoreline, the stiff breeze sprayed sand into our hair and mouths. I gripped the edge of my t-shirt to stop it flapping about. Despite the sunshine, it was a terrible day to be at the beach.

We had almost reached the end when Luce suddenly swooped to pluck a pair of thongs from a yellow towel. ‘Hark, Jonathan! Hark Abigail! Abandoned footwear! What a spot of luck.’ As she slipped on the thongs I spared a thought for the swimmer who would soon return to find them missing.

‘See you later this arvo,’ said Luce. She wandered off in the direction we had come.

Jono looked after her, shading his face with a hand. ‘Charmer, isn’t she.’

I scratched at the sand on my scalp. ‘I hear it runs in the family.’

I wondered if I was flirting with him. Jono seemed to think so. He cocked his head at me. ‘You hungry?’

The surf club cafeteria was loud with scraping furniture, sizzling meat and chatter. I ordered a hamburger and chips from a girl wearing a bikini and no shoes. Yellow hair, coarse with salt, ran in a long plait down her spine. She leant sideways for a number on a metal stick and I watched the plait swing against her shoulders. I took the stick back to the table by the window where Jono was.

A boy in board shorts and a polo shirt was sitting in my chair. He was laughing, presumably at something Jono had said, but he stopped when he sensed me hovering.

Jono introduced us.

‘We’ve met,’ said the boy, whose name was Daniel. He stared up at me.

I looked at him again. I realised he was the boy from Luce’s doorway, the one who had come with Jono to Luce’s recital.

‘You two work together, don’t you?’ I was pleased to have remembered.

‘Yep. Daniel’s on Nelson’s team as well,’ Jono confirmed.

‘You’re Luce’s friend,’ Daniel flashed a smirk at Jono. ‘Adina’s not coming up, then?’

I had remembered Daniel as flustered and sullen, but he wasn't that way now. His insinuation made me redden, which Jono saw. Daniel wasn't looking at me. It was clearly of no interest to him whether I had heard.

'She'll come up,' Jono said.

'Still in the dog house, eh?' Daniel's smirk widened to a grin. 'Well, Fitzzy's starts at eight tonight. Bring her if you like.' He indicated me with a thumb and scraped back his chair. After nodding to Jono, he wandered off in the direction of the sandwich bar.

I felt a pressure in my jaw.

'Don't worry about him,' Jono said when I had sat down. 'He's a bit of an idiot around women.'

I assumed that by 'women' he meant me. I put the numbered stick on the table.

'Shy. That's his problem,' Jono said — too generously, I thought. I had come across enough boys like Daniel to know that shyness was not the problem.

My sister's boyfriend Ed, was a case in point. He was a proud church boy, and therefore not crude in the way Daniel was, but I often heard him saying things to Justine that I didn't like: comments about the length of her dress, or the indelicacy of her cleavage, or even the size of her waistline — something she was especially sensitive about.

It wasn't only Justine who copped it. 'I don't know why some women wear their hair short,' he had said to me recently, while waiting in our living room to take my sister on a date. Ed had helped himself to a magazine from my mother's magazine holder — as if he were waiting for the dentist and not his girlfriend — and had held up a double page spread to show me. The offending picture was of Winona Ryder in *Reality Bites*.

'Men want feminine women, I can tell you that for free. Not this type of business,' said Ed, flicking his finger back and forth across her hair as if it were a pen he was scribbling it out with. 'Not that I should be giving you dating advice. I'm not sure you deserve it.'

I personally thought Winona Ryder's hair looked terrific. Ethan Hawke's, on the other hand, was a greasy mess, but it had never occurred to me to share this opinion with every boy I knew, while proclaiming I spoke for all women. Of course, I realised what Ed was doing, in his self-righteous way: he was punishing me for my fateful cinema date with his brother.

I hadn't seen Mike since that night — he had taken someone else to his formal, and I had skipped mine altogether. I did not miss his company, except on the occasions when I was confronted with boys like Ed, and Jono's friend, Daniel, and began to think he was not such a bad specimen after all. Before getting too nostalgic, however, I would remember what a sap he could be, and that not all boys were awful, just most.

Take Jono, who I had decided knew how to talk to a girl like she was her own person, and in the room. Now he shifted in his chair, which squeaked against the high polish of the floorboards. 'What did you order, anyway?'

'The hamburger.'

He smiled. 'Damn. I ordered the fried chicken but now I want a hamburger, too.'

'You can have some of mine if you like.' I challenged myself to hold his gaze.

For a minute it worked, and it was the feeling of the magician who turns a scarf into a dove or levitates a rope: Jono gazed back. His eyes were as clear as the sky. Then he looked across the dining area, towards the door, and when he looked back his smile was set. 'We're all very grateful, you know, that you've befriended Luce.'

What an empty, ridiculous thing to say. I laughed loudly to show this, and to indicate how little I cared that he'd more or less changed the subject.

'I mean it,' Jono said. His tone was light. He extended his hand on the table so that it lay closer to mine. 'She can be difficult. People tend to get fed up with her pretty fast. But I know you appreciate her for who she is, which is actually a very caring and passionate person.'

'Luce is great.' It sounded lame, although I meant it. How else could I reply? 'Caring and passionate' was such a Hallmark phrase and had little to do with the experience of knowing Luce.

'Tell me about *you*, though,' said Jono, which stirred me out of the ditch a little, although it was Hallmark still. 'We've never really had the chance to get to know each other, have we?' He rested a chin on his palm. 'Your family's only been here recently?'

I raised an eyebrow.

'On the north shore, I mean.'

'Over four years.'

'Not so long, in the scheme of things. Particularly considering where were you before.'

'You mean Botany?'

Jono nodded. 'Kingsford Smith. Deep Labor territory there. I suppose your parents have always voted for them.'

I nodded.

'Do you think they'll vote Labor this time round?'

'I'd say so.'

Jono cocked his head. 'You're not sure though, are you?'

'Only because we haven't talked about it. But it's what they always do.'

Jono smiled, a little smugly. 'This time's different, though. Keating's on the nose for a lot of people, you see. Especially people like your parents.'

I wondered what he meant by that. It was not like he had met them.

Our food came, carried by the yellow-haired waitress. We ate in companionable silence and went back to the house.

The first thing we saw as we swung around the corner and into the driveway, was Mr Whitford stepping off the front porch. Clutching the portable house phone in one hand, he hurried towards us. Jono turned off the engine and opened the door, and the throb of cicadas replaced the sound of the Holden's noisy air conditioning. Mr Whitford grabbed the top of Jono's car door and peered in. 'Is Luce with you?' he cried.

'No.' Jono got out, forcing him to step back. 'She came back before lunch.'

'No, she didn't,' said Mr Whitford. 'Juliet called at twelve to see where she was. She was supposed to go back home for her lesson but there's no sign of her there, either.'

An alarm sounded in my head.

'I don't know where she is,' Jono said coolly. He sidled past his father.

Mr Whitford walked around to my side of the car. 'You seem to have her ear, Abi.' His tone was fond, his gaze expectant.

I swallowed. My stomach felt suddenly hollow. Where an earth was she? 'I'm sorry, Mr Whitford. I have no idea. I wish I did.'

He studied me to see if I was lying. Having decided I wasn't, he patted my arm and turned brusquely. I watched him hurry across the wide driveway.

Luce failed to show up or to contact the house. This went on late into the afternoon. I thought about what I could do about it, and realising the answer was nothing, since Mr

Whitford appeared to have deployed others for the task, I committed to finding a distraction.

Jono was an obvious option, being at the house where Luce was not. But he was preoccupied pacing the balcony, portable phone at his ear. At first I thought he must have been trying to locate her as well. Then I realised the conversations were too lengthy and involved to have anything to do with his missing sister — this much was obvious even from the other side of the double-glazed doors.

So instead I went downstairs to explore the crowded bookshelf. Ignoring the two bottom shelves, which housed law journals and alphabetised legal textbooks — *Malice* sat between *Indictable Offences in New South Wales* and *Uniform Evidence Law* — and the single row of children's picture books above them, I studied the fat, glossy spines of a series of Le Carre novels and the shelf of orange Penguin classics before pulling out *Johnno* by David Malouf.

It was different spelling, but I figured that Jono was why the Whitfords owned it. It did not occur to me that Jono had been named after the book, as I already knew the senior Whitfords did not read fiction. Luce, who was an avid reader of novels, had told me this. The pristine condition of the book in my hand seemed to confirm it. I took *Jono* to my room and sat on the mattress of the bed against an upturned pillow, slipping easily into the world of the story and the heat of a long-ago Brisbane summer. I must have read for hours, because when I finally looked up the wall that had been sunlit before had fallen into shadow, and the lorikeets in the palm trees had begun their twilight chatter.

I realised I was hungry. Since I didn't feel comfortable helping myself to food in the pantry, I made do with one of the muesli bars I'd stashed in my bag for emergencies. It was stale. Finally, at around five-thirty, I heard the sound of a car pulling into the driveway.

I waited for Luce to come down, and when she didn't I went upstairs to find her.

It wasn't my friend who had arrived, but her mother. She was in the kitchen unpacking groceries from shopping bags. When she saw me, Mrs Whitford came out from behind the bench and pressed her hands into mine.

'Abi,' she said in her intense way. She looked far too dressed up to have been at the supermarket, but then Mrs Whitford always looked dressed up. She was the kind of woman that my father described as *a bit of a glam*. Unlike my own mother, she did not

have to worry about work attire of any sort, since she didn't work. That was not to say she was idle. Mrs Whitford always seemed to be hurrying out the door to a sewing bee for the Children's Hospital, or a bush regeneration day or a cocktail fundraiser.

'Any news of Luce?' I asked her now.

Mrs Whitford looked confused for a moment, before her face cleared. 'Oh yes. Tom rang to say she'd been AWOL. She missed the bus, that's all. I spoke to Juliet. Two hours late for her lesson, but she got there at last. Not before Juliet had driven to a public phone and back again to find out where she was, of course. Look at your face,' she said. 'Aren't you a lovely friend to be so worried!' She beamed at me with flattering force.

If I had flushed red, it was from incomprehension. Mr Whitford and Jono had obviously been given this update but had failed to pass it on to me.

Luce wasn't coming back tonight. That was the nub of it. Her lesson would finish too late, so she had decided to stay at home. I waited for Mrs Whitford to pass on Luce's apologies to me. In vain, as it turned out. Half-fearing a long evening by myself sitting in my room again I was grateful that, when I asked her if I could help her prepare dinner, she agreed.

As I grated vegetables for the lasagne, she asked me questions about school. What was my favourite subject? What was my impression of our history teacher, Mrs Marron? Luce was not too fond of Mrs Marron, she didn't think. I found it easy talking to Luce's mother, who did not require considered responses. Her questions were like the notes on a sheet of pianola music: she pressed the pedals and they came out in an endless flow, entirely removed from thought.

It was when we were putting the final touches on the salad that, as if by magic, Jono and Mr Whitford both wandered in. Mr Whitford stood before the liquor cabinet and poured two glasses of scotch. He handed one to Jono before calling out to me, 'You want to try a gin and tonic, Abi?' Not waiting for a reply, he began rattling about in the bar fridge hidden in one of the cupboards.

I started to set out the cutlery on the table as Mrs Whitford placed heat mats out for the food. After watching me lay out three sets of knives, forks and spoons, Mrs Whitford said, 'Tell you what, Abi. Why don't you join Tom and Jono?'

'It's no trouble, really.'

'Nonsense. You're our guest.' She eased the cutlery out of my grip.

When I went to find them, I saw that they had moved to the balcony. I carefully opened the glass door and stepped out. The wind had dropped, leaving in its place the sound of waves breaking on the cliff face. How far away was it? Fifty metres? One hundred? It seemed remarkably close. I could see the individual branches of bushes swaying against the rocks. Mr Whitford handed me my gin and tonic. ‘They call it Mother’s Ruin, Abi. Be warned,’ he said, and Jono laughed. The two of them seemed to be getting on again.

‘I must apologise, my dear, for leaving you stranded this afternoon,’ Mr Whitford said, sidling close. Gratitude swelled in my chest and some of the weight of the strange, lonely afternoon lifted. ‘I hope you were able to amuse yourself. I don’t know that Jono here was doing anything useful —’

Jono angled a contemptuous snort into his glass.

‘— but I happened to be preparing for a very important case. A gross miscarriage of justice is in the wings if I don’t intervene, you see.’

I checked to see if Mr Whitford was saying this with tongue-in-cheek; he wasn’t. He had turned very grave.

‘Oh,’ I said, cautiously. ‘What kind of miscarriage of justice?’

‘That I can’t tell you.’ He patted his stomach. ‘Confidentiality constraints, you understand.’

I was reminded of a recent conversation I’d had with Luce about her father’s work. She had described him as a ‘defender of the innocent’. On that occasion, too, I had checked for irony but found none.

‘Surely he has to defend guilty people sometimes?’ I had asked her.

Luce had shaken her head. ‘Daddy only takes on cases where he knows they didn’t do it.’

I had made an effort not to smile at this. I thought of my own father. Even though he was by every measure a very successful businessman, none of us was under the illusion that there was anything noble in his success. I was nine when I had asked him about a banana chair he was selling for \$59.99. ‘Why don’t you just say \$60?’

‘Because it sounds cheaper, my darling,’ he said, giving me a generous wink.

During the long, airless afternoons I spent in the demountable at his showroom, I often heard him arguing with his suppliers on the phone. ‘They’re the wrong colour,’ I heard him once say to his pebble trader. ‘No, I said off-white not brown. I’ll take them, but only for a discount.’ On one occasion he had received a hefty fine from the



regulators over a misleading television ad aired during *Hey Hey it's Saturday!* The ad had raked in such an enormous profit that even with the fine it had been worth it.

‘Another?’ Mr Whitford asked when I’d finished the drink, probably faster than I should have. I had never had a gin and tonic in my life. ‘Unless it’s time for lasagne,’ he added thoughtfully. ‘In which case we had better switch you to wine.’

Mrs Whitford directed us to our seats: her husband to the head and Jono and I on either side. She waited until we were seated before sitting down opposite her husband at the end closest to the kitchen. I noticed straight away that the dessert spoons I had placed beside the knives now sat next to the forks.

‘You’ll never guess who I saw down at the club this afternoon,’ Mr Whitford said, glancing at his wife. He plunged a knife into his lasagne so that the pasta cracked. As if they had been waiting for this signal, Jono and Mrs Whitford picked up their cutlery.

‘Who?’ asked Mrs Whitford pleasantly.

‘Tony Dean, of all people!’

‘Is that right?’

‘You know, I don’t think I’ve seen Tony in five years. Probably not since the old boys’ reunion.’ Mr Whitford leaned back in his chair. ‘He’s still practising, thank God, despite all that dreadful nonsense he had to go through in the eighties with that hyena of a woman. We need all the surgeons we can get, and if there’s one thing I can say about old Tones it’s this: he’s got damn steady hands, even after a half-bottle of scotch.’

Jono looked up from his plate. ‘You tested this this afternoon, did you, Dad?’

Mr Whitford chuckled. ‘We were well on our way, I don’t mind telling you.’

‘And was this before or after your case preparation?’ Jono glanced at me with his eyebrow cocked.

I grinned at my plate.

‘I had some medical testimony that needed cross-checking.’ Mr Whitford was defiant. ‘The Crown has pressured some quack into spouting nonsense that supports their case. I assure you Tony agreed with me. He’s got a fellow I can speak to about a second opinion.’

‘What’s the evidence about?’ I asked.

Mr Whitford frowned. ‘Blood spatter, if you must know.’

There was a brief pause.

‘This is turning into delightful dinner conversation,’ said Mrs Whitford brightly.

‘Isn’t it?’ Mr Whitford patted his mouth with a serviette. ‘Perhaps Jono would like to tell us about the machinations that played out today in the heady world of federal politics.’ His eyes sparkled as he gulped at his wine. ‘Then again, we wanted to change the topic to something rather *less* gruesome, didn’t we?’

‘Ha, Ha,’ said Jono drolly.

‘Or perhaps policy, not politics, is the ticket.’ Mr Whitford leaned forward. ‘I’ve been meaning to ask, dear Jonathan, what *are* the Coalition’s policies this election? Because as far as I can tell, there don’t seem to be any.’

‘I have an idea, Dad.’ Jono’s voice was strained. ‘Why don’t you shut up about what you don’t understand? You just sound ignorant and stupid.’

‘Jonathan,’ said Mrs Whitford sharply.

‘Sorry, Abi,’ said Jono, laying down his knife and fork. He stood up from the table.

‘Sit down for Christ’s sake.’ Mr Whitford’s tone was still jolly.

We watched Jono cross the room to the stairs.

Mr Whitford gave a sigh of exasperation and scraped his chair back.

‘Let him go,’ murmured his wife.

It was at least an hour before Jono reappeared. In the absence of anything else to do — Mrs Whitford had refused help with the washing up; Mr Whitford had wandered off murmuring something about Handel’s Twelve Grand Concertos — I had returned to the balcony and was watching the sky turn dark. Crickets blared from a nearby patch of shrubbery. The air had grown warm.

I was not used to drinking, and after the gin and the wine, I felt decidedly drunk. I stretched out on the deck chair, enjoying more than I would otherwise the sensation of smooth timber against my skin. The fact I was at the Whitfords’ holiday house in Luce’s absence was beginning to feel less strange than it had earlier.

‘Nice view, isn’t it.’

I turned my head. Jono was standing beside my chair, facing the ocean.

I spent a few seconds composing my response. ‘If you like that kind of thing,’ I said.

He gave my chair leg a playful kick. 'I guess you're bored of the beach, given you grew up with one just down the street.'

'Yes. I find them very dreary.' I yawned loudly.

He grinned and sat down in the empty chair beside mine. I looked at him, deciding whether to make reference to what had happened at dinner. I decided not to. I didn't want to set him off again.

Chin on one hand, he leaned close. He looked mischievous. 'I know what we should do.'

'What?'

'We should get your parents up.'

I had no idea what he was on about.

'What do you mean?'

'Your parents. Those two adults you grew up with. Or have you forgotten about them already?' He was leaning in, still. 'They should come up for lunch one day.'

'Here?'

'Yes, here.'

'Why?'

Jono pretended to look offended. 'Because I'd like to meet them.'

'Why?'

'Why not?'

He watched me, a smile on his lips. 'I'll talk to Mum about it,' he said, when I didn't answer. 'I'm sure she'd love to meet them, too.' He said this in a murmur, and leant forward in his chair, so that his face was very close to mine.

I felt a little jolt in my stomach. Was he actually doing what it seemed like he was doing? Again, Adina entered my mind. Jono had told his friend, Daniel, at lunch that she would be coming up. But now he was close enough for me to smell his aftershave and the wine on his breath. He would kiss me if I waited for it. At the same time I was thinking this, I wondered again what had caused the rift with Adina that Daniel had referred to. Why was he in the 'doghouse'? It was probably something to do with politics.

I hardly felt it, when Jono finally leant forward. I suppose my lips were numb from the wine. I regretted this lack of feeling afterwards. He placed a hand on the back of my head and drew me in again and this time I kissed him back. It was the first time I had kissed anybody, and I spent most of the kiss worried that I was doing it right. It felt

strange, having someone else's tongue in my mouth. It took up a lot of space, and I had difficulty working out how to avoid injuring it with my teeth. I kept one hand holding my wine glass, and the other in my lap. I did not close my eyes. I don't know why I didn't. If there was one thing I knew about kissing it was that you were supposed to close your eyes.

I had got everything wrong, and Jono drew back.

As soon as he did, I wanted him to draw close again, so that I had the chance to do things better. I thought about leaning towards him, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Instead I froze, watching him stare into the darkness as if we were two strangers on the deck of a cruise ship who had happened to sit down side by side to watch the sunset. I thought about getting up from the chair but didn't do that either.

We sat there.

'I'm going to go to that party that Daniel mentioned,' said Jono finally, glancing at me and away again. He paused. 'Do you want to come?'

The pause made it easy for both of us, made the script clear.

'I think I'll stay here,' I said.

He got up.

He did not take the car. I have always been sure about that. The car was still parked in the driveway, exactly where Mr Whitford had forbidden him to park it, when I went downstairs to my bedroom half an hour after I heard him leave by the side gate. After what had happened on the balcony I was sharply attuned to his noises in the house and I timed the half hour to be sure he was gone: that I would not run into him, back for some forgotten item, when I came inside again. I closed the balcony door and walked across the vast living room.

Luce and Jono's parents were watching television in the sitting room off their bedroom. I could hear the faint soundtrack of the eight-thirty movie from the top of the stairs. I stood there for some time, trying to work out what it was. The music and the dialogue sounded familiar — it had Steve Martin in it, I was fairly certain — and it was while I stood there that I noticed the car in the driveway.

It wasn't until much later, hours later, that I heard Jono's engine start. It woke me up, in fact. I looked at my watch, which I had taken off and placed on the bedside table. The car made the whining sound it always did when Jono put it in reverse. Then I

heard the sump scrape the gutter and the sound of the motor fading down the road. I went back to sleep.

The next morning, when I came up for breakfast, two things were different: Luce had returned and Adina had arrived.

## **Eight**

I started to feel unwell the following afternoon. My throat turned scratchy. I began sneezing. By the next morning, I was feverish and lethargic. I knew I should return home rather than be a burden on the Whitfords, but when I floated this idea with Luce she vigorously opposed it.

‘Don’t be idiotic. You can’t go home because of a stupid cold! Let me set you up in bed with some hot tea and a book.’

Luce had been especially solicitous since her surprise absence. ‘I hope Jono looked after you,’ she had said when she got back. ‘I should have called you from home and told you what was going on.’ Her voice was full of regret.

Jono, too, was being kind to me, although his motives were less clear. ‘Take my room,’ he insisted when Luce told him I was ill. ‘It has a far better view than yours, and I’m never in there except at night anyway. It’s wasted on me.’

Whether his generosity was out of guilt about what had happened between us or about what hadn’t or was a way of pretending to the others that nothing had, I didn’t know. But I was grateful for the room, and for his impressive ability to remain playful and teasing with me. It made it easier to be that way with him, and to be around Adina, who I liked, irrespective of how I felt about Jono.

How I felt about Jono was a deep preoccupation mixed with frustration: the way a swimmer might feel who, struggling against a current towards land’s edge, loses grip after reaching it and slips back into deep water. Now Adina had arrived, land seemed farther away than it had. But I admired her too much to let this show. Since I had last seen her, she had cropped her straight dark hair to just below her ears. She wore black jeans and long-sleeved cotton shirts most days. I respected this all the more because my own ill-suited clothing had made me feel inferior, whereas Adina clearly didn’t.

She and Jono seemed to be getting on fine, despite her unexplained absence and Daniel’s comments at the club. I noticed that she was often derisive of things that Jono said, especially when he talked about his job, but there was a way she would then look at him, with amusement and knowing, that made it obvious how much she liked him. I noticed how she found excuses to touch him — to brush a crumb from his lips or glide a hand along his thigh when she walked past. In private moments I found myself thinking about those actions a lot.

In summary, I was pleased not to have to return home with my cold. Not only did the idea of the trip itself, down the jerky, winding coast road, fill me with dread, but my mother was a terrible nurse. She believed so deeply in my hypochondria that any symptoms I ever displayed, even those measurable by objective means like thermometers she treated with suspicion. When faced with proof of my condition she criticised me for my constitution, as if I were to blame for that as well. Justine tended to take her cue, and my father paid no attention whatsoever other than the occasional clucking when he thought to stick his head through my bedroom door on the way past.

By contrast, over the next two days, the Whitfords, with Luce at the helm, regularly performed their sympathy. They set me up in Jono's room, which had a view as magnificent as promised. The eye could follow the slope of the garden all the way down through the row of frangipani to the cliff edge and across the blue pane of the ocean. As I sweated through my pyjamas, gargled salt water and dozed, Luce kept me company. Even during the hours when she could have been swimming or lying on the sand she sat on a cane chair beside the bed with a book, her legs crossed at the ankles, a cotton hat pulled low against the streaming sunshine. It was an old paperback copy of *East of Eden* that absorbed her and every so often she would read aloud to me a favourite passage.

“I remember my childhood names for grasses and secret flowers”, Luce read. “I remember where a toad may live and what time the birds awaken in the summer — and what trees and seasons smelled like — how people looked and walked and smelled even. The memory of odors is very rich.” She swivelled in her chair, bringing her legs up so that her shining knees pointed at me. “Do you think that’s true, Abi? For you, I mean? Do you remember smells from being young?”

I thought about it. “I suppose I do, yes,” I said, and we began a conversation like we were very old already, our childhoods distant memories. “My grandmother used to make us an apricot slice whenever we visited her. The smell of apricots and burnt coconut. That’s what I remember.”

Luce screwed up her nose. “Coconut is so horrible. I don't know why people like it. I see someone with a Cherry Ripe bar and I want to throw up on the spot.”

I agreed. “They put it in that hideous tanning oil everyone uses. I could smell it down at the beach just the other day. That’s another smell I remember from childhood summers.”

“What about hot chips with chicken salt? That’s my strongest memory.”

‘Oh, and the smell of meat pies from the shop beside the Botany RSL car park. The fat of the meat, mixed with the sugary smell of Rosella tomato sauce. Too much of everything. Spring smells are better. I think of freesias in spring. Mum had them in the garden.’

‘It’s wisteria for me.’ Luce looked dreamy.

‘That makes sense. You have that trellis in your backyard. What else?’

‘Oiled rosewood, of course.’ She meant the piano.

‘Of course.’

‘And winter?’ asked Luce.

I thought about it. ‘Vicks VapoRub, definitely. And burned wool. Justine always stood too close to the heater. Still does. What about you?’

‘Oiled rosewood again. All year round, forever and always.’ Luce looked suddenly glum. ‘And sheet music. There’s a definite smell to sheet music. They put acid in it, I think. I feel it, sometimes, at the back of my throat.’

I thought it was an odd remark until the following afternoon. I was feeling a little better and Luce insisted I was no longer contagious. She climbed under the sheets with me so we could read *East of Eden* together in silence, with each of us calling ‘now’ when we were ready for the page to be turned (usually Luce; she read faster than me). It is difficult to overstate the pleasure I felt in those hours; the two of us side by side beneath the covers, sharing our body warmth in companionable silence as the sea glimmered in our line of sight. If I’m honest it is a pleasure that increases the farther away I get from the day itself — although I know I took great pleasure at the time — as does the melancholy of the fact that it will never be precisely repeated with anyone else, for reasons I will come to.

We had been reading like that for over an hour when Luce put the book down.

‘I should probably tell you something.’ Her voice had the dramatic edge I had come to recognise.

I waited.

‘I was late on purpose to my music lesson the other day. I did it so I could stay the night in Sydney.’

I’d suspected something like this. *You abandoned me to your family on purpose?* I refrained from crying. ‘Why did you want to stay in Sydney?’ I half-dreaded it had something to do with me.

Luce had a smile on her lips. ‘I’ve joined a band.’



This took me by surprise. ‘What do you mean? A rock band?’

Luce laughed. ‘I guess you could call it that. There’s a guy at the Con I know through Juliet,’ Luce said. ‘We’ve done some classical concerts together. He’s a violinist, but he also plays the guitar. He has a friend, Eve, who’s an amazing drummer. Simply amazing.’ She said this with a note of awe. ‘Anyway, we had a rehearsal. That’s what I wanted to be in Sydney for. You’re the first person I’ve told. Not even Juliet knows.’

‘Why does it have to be a big secret?’ I asked, although I had some idea. She was involved with this guy from the Con. I felt hurt that I was only hearing about it after the fact.

Luce groaned. ‘You really have to ask?’ She tilted her head at the door, meaning to indicate her parents.

It seemed ridiculous that she thought they would mind. The Whitfords were far more relaxed about their children’s love lives than my parents were. Ed never stayed the night at our place, not even on the sofa, whereas Adina was sleeping in Jono’s bed. Nobody acknowledged it, but nobody was stopping it, either. And there was nothing wrong with playing in a band. It made sense that Luce, with her talent, would pursue something like this. ‘Why would they care? It’s not like you’re going to quit classical piano or anything,’ I said.

Luce grimaced guiltily, before falling forward onto the mattress with a pillow over her head.

‘You’re joking,’ I said. ‘That’s not even funny.’

‘I’m thinking of cancelling the Opera House concert.’ She was solemn.

I gasped. ‘Why would you do that?’

Luce looked angry. ‘Because I’m sick of it, that’s why. They bloody chain me to that piano. I’ve spent more hours at it than I have at school.’

I wondered if my sudden feeling of disjunction was exaggerated by the state of my health, but I think I would have found Luce’s revelation jarring whatever state I had been in. During visits to her house, I had sat with my elbow on the edge of the keyboard as she played Chopin. I had watched her fingers on the keys. I had seen her mouth loosen, the lids of her eyes ease closed, how far away she went. It seemed to me that the music she played was who Lucinda Whitford *was*.

Luce drew the pillow away. ‘So what if I am giving it up? It won’t necessarily be forever.’

‘Oh, Luce.’

‘Don’t you start,’ she said crossly.

‘Is this about the music, really?’ I ventured. ‘Or about...what did you say the violinist’s name was?’

Luce looked startled. ‘This has nothing to do with Cameron at all.’

‘If you say so...’

‘I mean it.’

She was earnest, and I believed her. ‘Sorry,’ I said.

We were quiet — me with my back against the bedhead, Luce flat on her stomach, before I said, ‘I’d love to hear your band play some time.’

Luce sat up and grinned shyly. ‘Then you shall,’ she declared. ‘I will arrange it.’ She picked up *East of Eden*, and we resumed reading in silence.

For two days we lay in bed, and the household carried on in its regular ways around us. We heard Adina and Jono coming back and forth from the beach, running up and down the stairs in their thongs, and dumping and retrieving surf boards, towels and hats from the porch outside my window. Mr Whitford backed the Saab out of the driveway in the mornings and each evening at dusk backed it in again. Meanwhile Mrs Whitford kept up her routine of shopping, lunching, and paying visits to friends who lived nearby. Each time she left the house she would duck her head in beforehand to say to Luce, ‘I haven’t heard you practising today,’ or ‘You know, it’s only a month until the concert,’ or ‘How is your practice coming along?’

Everyone dropped in at least a few times a day to say hello: Jono and Adina trailing sand across the tiled floor, their faces brown, their skin smelling of sunscreen. Mr Whitford sat on the edge of the bed to deliver the latest bulletin on the case he was running, rotating his wrist absentmindedly to make the ice cubes swim in his glass of scotch. Between her scheduled lunches with local friends, Luce’s mother delivered food and other offerings, including a green sarong she had seen in Avalon and thought I might like. The gesture, which was so unexpected, touched me. On the second afternoon, Luce made an out-of-season whale sighting, and we had the whole family in the bedroom taking turns with binoculars. I have since decided it is my favourite state of existence: to feel enveloped in a household, but without the burden of participation.

I heard things as well, on those quiet afternoons, with the only background noise the sound of the televised cricket test match — Richie Benaut’s endless drawl,

occasional crowd applause and the brash interruption of fast food advertisements. I heard kids splashing and screeching in the neighbour's lap pool. I heard Jono and Adina having sex in the room next door. It was an animal noise, utterly compelling, and the sound of muffled groaning was enough to send a sharp heat through my body. Luce, reading beside me, did not appear to notice.

At other times, I heard furious whispers and mutterings coming from upstairs, some of which I couldn't make out, but others that I could. I heard enough to know that something was going on. It involved Jono most definitely, and Adina seemed to know about it, although I wasn't sure Luce did, at least not to begin with. And then the peaceful convalescence ended. I began to get well, I suppose, and coming out of the fog to perceive more clearly, and to discern the unease and imbalance around me. Things had shifted. That was when the best of the holiday ended.

## Nine

The unease had something to do with the girl everyone called the Geisha. Luce pointed her out to me when I was finally well again, and we went down to the beach.

‘There she is.’ She said it with her mouth closed.

The Geisha was standing across the road from us, alone beside the surf club’s open roller door, eating a packet of CC’s. I watched her for a while pulling corn triangles out of the packet one by one; biting off the narrowest point, crunching, and licking the cheese dust off her fingers, until there was nothing left but the packet, which she let fall like a snowflake onto the concrete.

On the other side of the roller door was the surf club boat shed, where two boys not much older than us wearing surf lifesaver jackets were roaming among the rows of metal shelving. Dinghies, canoes and kayaks sat idle above their heads. The boys were talking to each other loudly, the Geisha clearly their audience: there was no one else within earshot. But when one of them passed her to retrieve a hose from the stand she happened to be leaning against, he did not meet her eye.

‘Why do they call her that?’ I asked Luce.

She turned around and raised an eyebrow. ‘Can’t you work it out?’

I glanced over again. It occurred to me for the first time that everyone else I had seen at the beach was white. I knew though that this was not the only thing that Luce was referring to. It also had something to do with the very short denim skirt she was wearing, frayed at the hem, and the tight low-cut top and platforms. It was not the type of outfit true geishas wore, but of course it could serve the same purpose.

I heard ‘the Geisha’ referred to again the following evening at the house. Luce and I had spent the afternoon cycling to and from Barrenjoey where we had circled the lighthouse on the point before racing each other home. By the time we reached the top of the Whitfords’ driveway on our bikes we were sweaty and exhausted. We dumped the bikes on the grass and walked down the side path, following the smell of barbecuing onions. Chatter and laughter floated up from the back garden.

Halfway down we met Adina and another girl I’d never seen before, tying strings of homemade lanterns fashioned from paper bags and tea lights between the trunks of the palms that lined the boundary.

Luce observed all of this with a sour look. ‘Has Jono decided to throw a party?’

Confusion crossed Adina’s face. ‘He said he’d told you about it.’

‘Well, he didn’t.’

Adina and her friend exchanged a look that said they were not surprised by Luce’s revelation or by Jono’s omission, and that also said, God, boyfriends can be *such* a drag. ‘I’d have told you myself if I knew that. Sorry, Luce.’

‘I know,’ said Luce, generously.

We watched them tie lanterns for a while. Adina said, ‘You’re taller than me, Abi,’ and placed a hand lightly on my back. My t-shirt was damp from the bike ride and stuck wetly to my skin, and I felt a swell of embarrassment. ‘Would you help us string this lantern up a little higher?’ she asked.

‘Sure.’

Adina handed me a lantern.

I carefully tied one end of the string around the first branch and knotted it, before doing the same around the second branch. Then I tied the paper bag on. Adina passed me the box of matches and I lit the candle. I stepped back in line with the others, and we watched it flicker in the growing dark.

It was the type of party that started as one thing and became another. First it was a few people eating sausages in buns beside the barbeque, plucking beers from a nearby Esky and talking about sport. Then more people arrived, and some of them had wine, and some of them had spirits, and a boy in boat shoes showed up with three bags of ice. Jono led him inside to empty the ice into the downstairs bath.

It was then that the second phase kicked off.

The barbeque was abandoned; newcomers were directed indoors. Soon the downstairs passageway was clogged with people snaking all the way into the alcove.

More people crowded in; their voices echoed off the tiled floor. The ceiling light blew, and everyone cheered. A delivery boy arrived carrying a tower of pizzas. Someone put on the *Pulp Fiction* sound track and those in the alcove began to bounce and sway in the dark. The vibrations rattled the books on the bookshelf, the half-finished drinks, the crushed serviettes and smoking ashtrays that had accumulated in front of Mr Whitford’s row of law reports.

Where were Mr and Mrs Whitford in all of this?

‘Out,’ Jono informed Luce without elaborating. Clearly they had been given more notice than us.

The soundtrack finished; upstairs, Jono's friend, Daniel, found Mr Whitford's old records in the sideboard cupboard beside the Scotch stash. He began to sample Queen, Billy Stewart, the Beatles, the Bee Gees and Dire Straits. Partygoers ascended to rifle through the LPs, to find liquor — supplies were running low downstairs — to open the kitchen cupboards for something to eat, to slide the long glass doors wide open, to step onto the balcony and into the night's cool darkness.

Three hours after the party had begun, I found myself at its heart on the wide leather couch in the Whitfords' living room wedged between two young men to whom I had been introduced but whose names had, by that point, become as unknowable to me as an ancient language out of use and never written down. The brown-haired one was Tom or Tim. The blonde's name I hadn't the faintest clue about. Even if I had remembered their names, I am not sure my lips would have cooperated with any attempts at enunciation. Something I had drunk a while before had turned them completely numb — possibly the blue and yellow cocktail I had sucked out of a test tube (was the yellow part an egg yolk?) — so instead of risking failure I sat mute as they talked across me.

It had been at least half an hour since they had bothered to direct any conversation at me. This had encouraged the perverse illusion that I was quite alone. I held my lips between my index finger and thumb (I could not resist touching them, so peculiar they felt), rested my head against the cushions and let my eyes close as I listened to them talk.

‘Rooty Hill RSL?’ guffawed Brown beside me. ‘You pulling my leg?’

‘It was fucking hilarious, mate,’ said Blonde. His breath had the scent of whisky. ‘You should have seen Jono waltz in and take a seat beside the punters. This row of guys glued to the overhead television sets, watching the dogs. He leant over the bar and ordered a fucking Four X.’

Brown choked on his drink.

I wondered about the breadth of their accents. What prompted these private school boys to flatten out their vowels? I wondered where Luce was. We had been together earlier; how long ago, I wasn't sure.

‘Got the outfit right, too,’ said Blonde. ‘Wife-beater, stubbies, blunnies. The trifecta. No one knew he was taking the piss. It was classic. And it bloody worked. We got around fifty signatures.’

Brown cackled.

Blonde said, 'Good to be somewhere else for a few days, anyway.'

His friend nodded, suddenly sombre.

'She's still hanging around, you know,' said Blonde after a pause.

Brown looked at him sharply. 'The Geisha? Are you serious?'

My ears pricked. I concentrated on sitting perfectly still.

'Saw her today, in fact. Right outside the club, of all places.' Blonde sniffed.

'She should just piss off. Doesn't she know that that's what she should do?' He sounded angry.

The shadow of someone passed over me. I opened my eyes. Adina stood above us. She had rolled up the sleeves of her collared shirt to the elbows, and glitter shone on her long, tanned arms.

I let go of my lips.

'You two aren't allowed to hog the pretty ladies,' Adina said to the boys, stern but playful. 'Not all night. Go on.'

Suddenly they were all grins. They stood up from the couch without so much as a backward glance at me and, as if by prearrangement, made a beeline for the kitchen.

Adina fell onto the seat where Brown had been. She sighed luxuriously. 'It's good to be off the ol' feet. And you looked like you needed rescuing.'

I was glad she was there, especially in the absence of Luce, who was god knows where. She would stop me sinking further into drunken stupor, and I was pleased that out of all these people, many of whom were her friends, she had chosen to make time for me. I sat up properly and smiled. 'Yeah. Thanks.'

'Tired?'

'I guess.'

'I'd like to be able to tell you to go to bed, but there are about a dozen people in your bedroom right now dancing to Alanis Morissette.'

I grinned. 'That's okay. I'd rather stay up anyway.'

She was holding a bottle of beer and took a sip. 'Want some?'

I shook my head.

She tilted hers and said, 'You think Luce is all right?'

I looked around the room to see where Luce might be. A crowd still hovered around the record player. The kitchen was packed with people making drinks, and in the spaces between, people were dancing drunkenly to a moody sixties soundtrack. Luce was nowhere in sight.

‘She’s downstairs smoking dope with some of the local guys,’ said Adina.

By ‘local’ she meant kids who lived around here — who went to the public high school a few streets back from the beach and lived a few streets back from there again; who served in the fish and chip shops and the rundown corner stores their parents managed in the strip malls. ‘Local’ as opposed to the rest of us, who were attached to the rich families that owned the summer houses with the million-dollar views.

‘About six months ago I was around at the Whitfords’ and Luce caught Jono and I sharing a joint in the backyard.’ Adina smiled. ‘She gave us such a lecture about it, how it fucked up your brain cells, how she’d never do it because she worried it would affect her playing.’

‘I think she’s going through a bit of thing when it comes to the piano,’ I said without thinking.

This was clearly news to Adina. ‘Is that right?’ She shook her head, in disappointment, I thought. ‘God, what I’d give to have her talent.’ She looked angry. ‘Not to mention the opportunities she’s had. The time and money they’ve thrown at that girl.’ She gave me a quick glance. ‘Sorry. I shouldn’t say these things to you. You’re her friend.’

‘It’s okay,’ I said.

‘It’s just —’ She gave a short laugh. ‘The comparison. My parents wouldn’t even let me learn the clarinet for a term at school.’

‘Why not?’

Adina shrugged. ‘The cost, I guess. And the fact they couldn’t see the value in it. Sport is all my family cares about. I have two brothers and they’re both massive footy heads. My parents are the same. I lived half my childhood at Panthers games. Probably spent more time under the bleachers at Penrith Stadium reading paperbacks than at home.’

I hadn’t known that Adina had grown up out west. I had assumed I was peculiar in the Whitfords’ circle for having grown up beyond the noble parklands of the north shore. Jono had certainly made me feel that way. I felt a sudden allegiance. ‘My Dad’s a huge Rabbitoh’s fan. My Pa, too,’ I said, proud of it in a way I had never been when it had come up in conversation with Luce.

Adina nodded. ‘Then you get what I mean.’

We had only ever gone to a handful of live games. Mostly we watched them on television, my father in his leather armchair with beer in hand, and the three of us —



him, Justine and me — all in our team jerseys. When we did go to the games though, I loved it: the crowd noise, the smell of cafeteria pies and hot chips, the contagion of joy when our team scored a point. There was a tribal impulse that took over. It lifted you to your feet, propelled your arms in the air, brought a scream from your lungs that you could barely hear above the other screams.

‘Of course, AFL is far more civilised than League. NRL is a thugs’ game,’ said Adina.

‘I guess that’s right,’ I agreed.

Adina brought her knees up to her chest and turned to face me. ‘Do they let you play music in your house, Abi? Or is everything sport for you, too?’

‘Oh, music is big in my house, actually. My sister plays all sorts of instruments.’

‘And you?’

‘No instruments. But I do sing.’

‘Really?’ Adina smiled. ‘I’d love to hear you some time.’

It was a generous thing for her to say; we barely knew each other. I thought it was lovely of her, even if she’d only said it to be polite. ‘Of course, Jono loves sport. Can’t get enough of it. Why did I agree to date him again?’ She laughed.

‘I get it,’ I said carefully. ‘He’s very...charismatic.’

It felt bold to say it, to name it: my crush. To his girlfriend, of all people. I had risked it because I was drunk, and also because in the glow of Adina’s unexpected attention the desire to prolong our closeness gave rise to the urge to confess something to her, and it was the first thing I thought of.

Adina looked at me. She put a warm hand on my arm and squeezed it. ‘Don’t tell Jono that, whatever you do. His head is big enough already.’ She laughed again, and my blush deepened; because Jono already knew how I felt. Because her hand on my arm was sending an unexpected warmth through my body. Because saying it out loud, confessing what I had in essence confessed — *I love Jonathan Whitford* — made me realise — how strange! — that it was not true in the slightest, not at all.

## Ten

Two summers before the Whitford summer at Whale Beach, I had met a boy near our family's rented holiday house on the south coast. We spent a couple of afternoons on a jetty side by side, our lines in the water, bringing up leatherjackets, mostly, and the occasional bream. He showed me how to hook bait, how to reel in properly, how to slice a fish through the middle to reveal the brittle steps of bone. At the end of the holiday a letter written on airmail paper was slipped underneath the door of our weatherboard rental. *Dear Abi*, it began. *You have put my life through a blender*. It finished with a declaration of love and his phone number.

The starkest emotion I felt upon reading that letter was embarrassment for the person who'd written those words, and to someone he hardly knew. On the way home along the freeway, I opened the car window an inch. I thought of the halved fish lined up on the jetty, their vertebrae exposed. I held the frail paper to the opening and watched it take flight.

The way that boy had felt for me was the way I felt about Adina, I realised. It had started as something barely conscious, like a faint pulse in my finger, only to sweep me up like that football crowd, leaping to my feet. A crazy rush as the ball flew between goal posts.

I tried to think my way out of it, but there was no mistaking the situation for anything else.

From that point on, Adina occupied my thoughts. I started each morning by locating her within the house as I lay in bed. I listened for her voice. I got to know the tread of her feet on the staircase, the precise sound she made spitting out her toothpaste.

I followed her into rooms, in the hope of striking up another private conversation like the one we'd had that night. But really, being near her was enough. Just seeing her generated a wild and private heat.

Fortunately for me, Adina had a lot of idle time waiting for Jono, who had entered a new phase in his relationship with his father. I often observed them both slipping in and out of Mr Whitford's study with one or more of Jono's friends in tow. I was pleased by the development; it gave me something to ask Adina about. I followed her onto the deck one morning with this purported purpose.

‘What’s going on in there?’ I asked brightly, nodding in the direction of the study as I pulled up a deckchair beside her, aware of every millimetre of air between our resting arms, careful not to pull up too close.

Adina bent to pick absently at a layer of skin that had begun peeling from her knee. I watched mesmerised, as she worked at it with her fingers. ‘God knows,’ she said.

I said with careful casualness, ‘Last time I noticed, they weren’t talking.’

‘Well, things have changed.’ Taking her cup of coffee off the table by her chair, she turned it in a circle on her palm.

‘How so?’

Adina slowly brought the cup to her lips. ‘Believe me, you don’t want to know,’ was all she said.

I waited for more, but none came.

I had more luck with Luce later that morning. We were making a spinach dip in preparation for our lunch guests, which included my parents. Luce had raided the fridge for anything that could pass as an ingredient and now we stood side by side, each in front of a chopping board, doing our best to prepare what she had found. As I grated cheese, Luce sliced shallots. As I rescued the parts from the sour cream tub that hadn’t yellowed, Luce defrosted the frozen spinach in a colander, running water through it that flowed down the sinkhole the colour of a boreal forest.

True to his word, Jono had arranged the lunch invitation for my parents. Mr Whitford’s brother, the developer, was also coming with his second wife, as was Mrs Whitford’s best friend, Sue, and her husband.

‘Why are Jono and your dad spending so much time together all of a sudden?’ I asked Luce, as she stirred the sour cream through the defrosted spinach, now decanted into a bowl.

She sighed. ‘It’s this Geisha thing,’ she said.

‘What Geisha thing?’

She looked up from the bowl. ‘You mean you haven’t heard anyone talking about it? Lucky you. I feel like I can’t get away from it.’ She licked a splatter of cream off her wrist. ‘She’s made a complaint to the police about a few of Jono’s friends after some party they all went to. Daddy’s helping them get the complaint dropped.’

‘The police?’ I repeated. The fact that Luce was mentioning this so casually was incredible to me. ‘What kind of complaint?’

‘That they raped her,’ Luce said simply.

She saw my face. ‘Come on, don’t act shocked. It’s what girls like that say all the time.’

Having no experience whatsoever with girls like the Geisha, I didn’t how to respond to this. ‘Who has she complained about?’

‘Daniel. Tim, I think. Definitely Fitzzy, whose party it was.’

A faint chime went off in my head. ‘When was this, exactly?’

‘The night I went home for my rehearsal.’ She lowered her voice. ‘You know, with the band.’

‘Yes, I remember,’ I said.

I had not seen my parents since my holiday had started. They were finally meeting the Whitfords, which my mother was certain to be delighted about, of course, but I wondered how the Whitfords felt about it.

I wasn’t sure how I felt myself about my two worlds colliding. I was not conscious of missing my family, even though we had barely spoken since I’d been away. I had rung home a week earlier to invite them to the lunch upon Jono’s instruction. My father had picked up.

‘Darl!’ he had cried, and hearing his voice, so warm and excited, after such a long time, suddenly seemed so wonderful that I found myself grinning into the phone.

‘Hi, Dad.’

‘How is the salt air treating you, love?’ He spoke loudly above a sharp scraping sound.

‘What’s that noise?’

‘Just filling in some gaps between the bathroom tiles,’ said my father cheerily.

‘And how are you getting along with Edwina?’

‘It’s Lucinda, Dad. Luce,’ I said, something tightening in my throat.

‘Oh yes, that’s right.’

There was more loud scraping.

‘Is Mum there?’ I finally asked.

‘She’s out the back. Would you like me to put her on?’

My mother's tone was wary when she took the phone, as if she expected to be sold something or asked a hundred questions that would keep her from her day. 'Hello?'

'It's me,' I said.

'Yes, I know. Your father told me.'

'Oh.'

We fell silent. It was as if she were waiting for me to explain myself. As if it had never occurred to her that I could just be calling for a chat. She was right — I had not called for that — but I felt wounded nonetheless.

I told her the details of the lunch.

'Do you think you can make it?' I asked, anxiously twirling the Whitfords' kitchen phone cord around my finger. My desire to please Jono, who was so enthusiastic about the prospect, was still stronger than my growing reluctance to see my parents.

'We'll have to get someone to cover at Dural, but yes, of course we'll come,' said my mother.

It took me a moment to understand what she meant. 'What about Ray? Doesn't he do Saturdays?'

'Abi, we had to let Ray go months ago.' My mother sounded cross.

This was news to me. 'Nobody told me that!'

'Your father's been working Saturdays since September. Hadn't you noticed?'

A sick feeling grew in my stomach. I didn't want to have this conversation now. I was away from home, and while I was gone I needed home to remain the shape that I remembered it, even if this was not the shape that it was.

I looked out across the Whitfords' living room, to where Mrs Whitford was reordering a pile of magazines on one of the side tables. She was wearing a dress of pale denim, with a thin white belt around the middle like a miniature rope. On her feet were slip-ons with tan treads: the right one flashed at me as she leant forward. I lowered my voice. 'Perhaps bring some nice chocolates, or something. Not your oatmeal biscuits. And even though it's a beach house, they tend to dress up a bit,' I added, keeping an eye on Mrs Whitford.

'What do you take me for, Abigail? An imbecile?' My mother's voice was a sudden churn of anger and hurt.

'See you on Saturday, then.' I hung up quickly.

It wasn't until I put down the phone that it occurred to me that I had not spoken to Justine since I'd left. I hadn't even thought to do so, nor to extend the lunch invitation to her. Since being here, apart from during that strange, lonely night that Luce was absent when I wished I was in my own bed, I had not longed for a single aspect of home.

So much had happened since I'd left. I felt changed, and I wondered if my parents would notice.

I heard my father before I saw him. He was loudly complimenting the front garden bed, as if speaking to the plants directly on the assumption they were deaf. I heard my mother respond in an agitated tone, and then the doorbell rang.

It was Jono who let them in, shaking my father's hand vigorously, one hand on his arm, a wide smile on his face. My father, beaming as bright as the moon after meeting the sun, walked past him through to the greater living room where I waited to greet him.

He stopped in front of me. 'Hello, love.' His voice trembled with a deep vibrato. He threw his arms around me, squeezing me tight. I breathed in his familiar smell — of fresh paint, chlorine and sweat — and for a moment I forgot about the complications of the past fortnight and relaxed in his embrace.

My mother came up behind us, and we drew apart. She leant forward and pecked me on the cheek.

'Hi Mum.'

That was when I noticed what they were both wearing. My father had on chinos with a garish blue and white striped shirt, which he had matched with a tie that was almost the same colour blue, but not quite. The stripes were too much on his wide torso, and the tie sat so short that it accentuated his large stomach. My mother was in a winter dress with heels. She was wearing a great deal of makeup.

Every choice they had made was wrong, and even worse, my fault; I should never have told my mother to dress up. But there was nothing I could do about it now, so I led them out to the deck where the other guests, who had already arrived, were having drinks.

When lunch was ready, the men trailed in from the balcony behind Mr Whitford, who held his scotch high in front of him like a beacon. Uncle Neil came in behind him,

looking tall and relaxed: his limbs swayed as if through water, and the contours of his face were strangely smooth for a man of fifty. He seemed even more tanned than the last time I had seen him, at the recital. I wondered if he really had stepped off a yacht this time, which was the impression I'd had then. It was easy enough to imagine a single keeled pocket cruiser moored in nearby Pittwater under a shady tree: ropes chiming in the breeze, fibreglass glittering, awaiting his return. Coming into the room, he saw me, and his lips turned up slightly in what might have passed as a smile. With a sharp intake of breath, I remembered our first meeting, the way his eyes had passed over me. The firm feel of his hand on the small of my back. I turned away quickly.

Next came the husband of Mr Whitford's best friend, whose name was Alan, and whose remaining clump of thinning hair perched so lightly on his scalp I expected the next gust would blow it away. Close on his heels was my father. 'Crikey. You really can see for miles from here, can't you?' he was saying to Alan in a perfectly audible murmur. 'I don't even want to know how much this place cost. They must be hoping these interest rates stop rising.'

He guffawed, and Alan smiled politely.

Mrs Whitford, who stood next to the table, directed everybody to their seats. 'Beth, you haven't been here before,' she said to my mother. 'Why don't you take this chair, with the view?'

I watched, with interest, as my mother obeyed her.

'Now. Where's Adina?' Mrs Whitford asked Jono.

A look of discomfort momentarily crossed his face. 'Downstairs, I think,' he said vaguely.

'Actually, I'm here,' said Adina, appearing at the top of the staircase. Jono looked over to her, but she did not meet his eye. Instead, she moved towards the side of the table opposite to where he stood.

Mrs Whitford stopped her with a hand. 'Why don't you sit next to Jono, over there?'

Adina reluctantly turned back.

From there Mrs Whitford sat everybody boy, girl, boy, girl, but then she got to Luce and me, who mucked up her arrangement. She took out her displeasure on our spinach dip. 'What on earth have you done here?' she asked Luce with disapproval.

'We've made a loaf of bread into a bowl,' said Luce, as if it were obvious.

'And what have you put in it?'

Luce gave her a dumb stare. ‘Are you asking for a general description? Or the precise ingredients?’

Jono leant out of his chair, stuck his finger into the middle of the dip, pulled it out, and sucked it clean. ‘I don’t think it matters what’s in it. It tastes delicious,’ he said above his parents’ chorus of ‘Jonathan!’ He winked at Luce and me.

Mr Whitford reached for the meat, which prompted other guests to reach for other plates, other bowls, other condiments. There was an orchestra of scraping chairs and tinkling cutlery. ‘Remind me what business you’re in, Bernie?’ Mr Whitford said congenially as he dragged a limp sausage back to his plate between tongs, head cocked like one of the lorikeets that landed on the deck railing every dusk.

‘Swimming pools,’ my father said proudly.

‘Ah, yes.’ Mr Whitford reached over again, for a chicken breast this time, before pausing suddenly, leaving the chicken suspended to drip oil on the tablecloth. ‘Hang on. You’re the one on the ad! *This duck ain’t out of the water yet!* Am I correct?’

I slid down in my chair as my father beamed. ‘Guilty as charged.’

‘Never admit your guilt, Bernie. That’s my professional advice,’ said Mr Whitford.

This appeared to amuse the whole table.

‘How *is* the pool business these days?’ Jono asked when the chuckles had died down.

I glanced across at my mother, who looked decidedly tense.

The mountains that were my father’s shoulders rose and fell. ‘We’ve had better years, to be honest.’

‘And why’s that, do you think?’ asked Jono lightly.

My father fumbled with the silver salad spoons. ‘Oh, well. Not as many people are buying pools, I’m afraid. And employing staff is expensive...’

‘You can blame the unions for that,’ said Jono.

‘I think that’s probably true, at least in part,’ said my father, frowning deeply in a show of thoughtfulness. ‘My own dad was pretty involved with the ARU in his day, and he’d hate to hear me say it, but those were different times. Running a small business has particular challenges —’

‘And not ones that the current government has any interest in solving, I can tell you,’ Jono said, prompting Adina to give him a sharp shove with her elbow. Nobody, barring Jono and me, appeared to notice.



‘I must say I’ve been a Labor voter my whole life,’ my father went on. ‘But this Keating fellow...’ He shook his head. ‘I’m not sure he understands the kind of issues that ordinary Australians are dealing with.’

Jono nodded vigorously. ‘He’s a tosser,’ he said.

My father laughed uncomfortably and glanced around the table.

‘It’s okay,’ Jono said. ‘There’s no need for political correctness here.’

‘Is that what they’re calling it now?’ Adina muttered, causing the table to glance her way. Keeping her gaze low, she scraped back her chair. Jono reached for her but she batted his hand away. We watched her head wordlessly towards the stairs.

Jono pursed his lips, his cheeks crimson. Mr Whitford coughed into a serviette. ‘In the spirit of full disclosure, Bernie, if you think you are being campaigned at, you are absolutely correct. Jonathan works for the Liberal Candidate for Bradfield.’

‘And Mr Nelson is clearly lucky to have him,’ chuckled Uncle Neil.

Glancing in the direction of the stairs, Jono threw up his hands in a show of surrender. ‘I’m just saying that I think mainstream Australia has a right to be disappointed.’ He speared a tomato with his fork.

A conversational lull followed, during which the table made progress with the food on their plates. ‘And what do you do, Sue?’ my mother asked Mrs Whitford’s best friend politely.

Sue’s hair was thicker and greyer than her husband’s, and she wore it loose at her shoulders above a long, shapeless dress that resembled a muumuu. ‘I paint,’ came the reply.

‘Oh. Pictures?’

‘That’s right,’ said Sue. ‘Landscapes. Portraits.’ She raised an arm and pointed to the wall behind my mother. ‘That’s one of mine.’

My mother swivelled to observe a small oil painting in an extravagant frame, depicting a sandy island, a palm tree, and the ocean, flat and grey. ‘That’s very nice.’

‘Between you and me, I painted it in one of my darker moods,’ said Sue. ‘I was going to throw it away, but Philly said she liked it.’

‘Oh yes, well.’

There was a brief pause.

Recovering, my mother leaned across the table. ‘And how’s the piano coming along, Lucinda?’

My stomach dropped, but Luce gave her best false smile. 'I don't know. It comes along, and then it goes along, I suppose.' She glanced at Mrs Whitford, who had shot her a warning look. 'What?' she scowled.

'Perhaps you'd like to play us something. One of your pieces for the concert, for example.'

'All right,' Luce said, to the surprise of everyone. She wiped her hands on a napkin and rushed downstairs.

My mother clasped her hands together. 'How wonderful. She is such a marvellous player,' she murmured to Mrs Whitford. 'You must be beside yourself with pride.'

'Some days, yes,' said Mrs Whitford calmly.

'So, Bernie,' Uncle Neil asked, while we waited for the music. 'Do you do commercial pools, or just backyard numbers?'

My father put his knife and fork down. 'Plenty of both,' he said with gusto. 'Do you use anyone in particular? For your developments?'

I remembered then that Uncle Neil was the one who was building the apartments in Wahroonga. He worried a piece of gristle from his teeth with his tongue. 'I had a guy,' he said as his tongue performed its acrobatics. 'But he got expensive.'

'I'd be more than happy to give you a quote.'

Uncle Neil nodded, and angled one buttock off his chair. He reached back one hand, which returned with his wallet. 'I'll give you my card now in case I forget later.'

'Beaut,' my father murmured, taking it.

Just then crashingly loud, disharmonious piano notes erupted from below, as if someone was plonking at the keys with a pair of house bricks. My mother jumped.

Uncle Neil scratched his chin with a bemused look.

'Well, then,' said Mrs Whitford with a strained smile. 'Who would like dessert?'

## Eleven

They were to be my last days at the beach, and I spent them entirely preoccupied. Adina was all I could think about. I thought about being alone with her. I thought about kissing her. I fantasised about conversations with her that led to kissing, then touching. This was new to me. How did people contain these feelings? What a miraculous feat everybody performed.

Well, not everybody. I had seen how Jono behaved with women. With Adina, of course. When they walked along the beach his hand sat snugly in the back pocket of her shorts. It was not just her, though. On the night of the party, I had watched his fingers graze the upper thighs of plenty of girls. His mouth had found the mouth of more than one of his female friends during a welcome kiss.

‘It’s what men are like,’ my mother had once told me. This was after a family gathering for my Pa’s birthday, at his house, when I was fourteen. The party had started at lunchtime, with a barbeque, salads, beer and champagne. It had gone on late into the night. Never was there a moment Pa did not have a tinnie in his hand. By the time it was dark and the festoon lights were bright against the black windows, crickets throbbing, Pa was sloping around the room, knees bent, a sly grin on his face, a tinnie still in hand. I sat on the couch, half-asleep, and watched him as if in a dream, sidle up to every woman one by one, sling an arm around her waist and press the front of his pants against her bum.

‘It’s the chemicals in their makeup,’ my mother explained the next day, matter-of-fact, as she glided a spitting iron across our school tunics.

But as each day passed and my yearning for Adina grew stronger, so too did my doubt that there was any difference between my urges and Jono’s. Except that I resisted the impulse to touch, even though the force of containing it some days pressed hard against the inside of my skin. I did this because I knew desires like mine were not acceptable. But I also knew how important it was not to touch without permission.

Adina’s daily movements were getting harder to predict. She and Jono were spending more and more time apart. Often, I’d hear a terse conversation through their bedroom door of a morning, before Jono would leave the house to go to the beach alone, or Adina would.

One afternoon I discovered her — by accident, if you can believe it — with her eyes closed, lying on the grass that abutted the rocks leading down to the ocean. A bush of blooming morning-noon-and-night flowers blocked the view of her from the house.

I stopped abruptly and turned to leave her alone. But she must have heard my feet twist on the grass or noticed my shadow, because she opened her eyes. ‘Abi. Sit with me.’

Carefully, I lowered myself onto the patch of grass beside her. She remained sprawled, with a hand across her eyes to block the sun. Together we looked out at the sea crashing against the cliffs. Sometimes it felt like it was all we ever did at this place, at this house. In almost every room that battle line was visible. We couldn’t tear our eyes away.

‘Luce said that she told you.’ Adina scrunched her outstretched toes and loosened them. ‘About the charges,’ she added when I didn’t answer.

‘Yes.’ I wasn’t sure what to say, what she wanted me to say; how to please her. ‘It sounds pretty serious. It’s quite an accusation. But given what people think of — of *her* ...’ I thought of the girl by the boatshed with powdered cheese stains on her fingers. I couldn’t bring myself to say the nickname.

Adina rolled onto her side, leaning on her elbow to face me. Her eyes searched my face, and I fell briefly into their twin pools. ‘You think she made it up.’

It sounded like an accusation.

‘I — I don’t know.’ My heart quickened. Was she wanting me to condemn Jono’s friends? ‘I don’t know her or those boys. At all. And I wasn’t there.’

‘No,’ she said. Her voice was searching. ‘You were here at the house. With Jono, weren’t you?’

I hesitated. Did she know what had happened that night between Jono and me? Was this a trap? I couldn’t imagine any reason for him to have told her.

‘Yes. We were both here.’

I thought about stopping there. What I would now give to have stopped there. But I didn’t want to keep anything from her. Not Adina. I wanted us to share everything; even more than words, as impossible as that was. At least in telling her the truth, in handing it to her like a precious, glittering thing so she could run her finger over every rut and ridge until she knew it better than she’d ever known anything or anyone; in this way, I thought, I was giving her a part of myself. In this way, she would know *me*. And what is love, if not the desire to be known by the person you love?

‘Jono kissed me,’ I said. The grass blades glinted beneath my stare. I felt a pulse beneath my ear, so loud it seemed to be punching a hole in my cheek.

‘Jono kissed you.’ Adina’s voice was an echo.

‘We kissed.’ My body, which I had betrayed, had turned cold. ‘That night. On the balcony.’ I inhaled.

Adina sat with this for a while, expressionless. A small boat appeared, sailing along the water from the direction of the beach. It crossed the sea and disappeared behind the cliff. ‘That’s all that happened?’ she finally said. ‘A kiss?’

I looked across at her, the breath balanced in my throat. I nodded. ‘I don’t know why it happened. And I’m sorry that it did. Anyway, it was a mistake. It went...badly. One thing I am sure of?’ I thought about reaching for her hand then, but it felt false. ‘How much he cares about you. I knew that already.’

It sounded trite and condescending, though neither was my intention. I watched with dread as Adina sat up slowly. She brushed the grass and dirt off her hands. She crossed her legs and looked at me. She seemed calmer than before. Her face had softened, and realising this, my chest flooded with heat.

‘You have a right to be angry with me,’ I said, which was easy, because it was clear now that she wasn’t angry, though she should have been.

Adina ran a hand across her thigh. ‘I thought he was at the party.’ She spoke carefully. ‘I thought he was there when it happened, and that he had lied to me about it. He was lying about something. Now I know what. I’m just glad it wasn’t to do with being at the party.’ She reached out a hand and placed it on my shoulder. The nerves beneath my skin tingled. ‘Don’t worry. I know the kiss, or whatever it was, wasn’t your fault.’

‘But he *did* go to the party,’ I said, surprised by the conclusion she had reached. ‘Or if not the party, then somewhere else close by.’

Adina looked confused. ‘What do you mean?’

‘Before driving to your place. He left the house on foot before coming back for the car. He was gone for a while’

Adina’s face changed. ‘How long?’

‘About two hours,’ I told her.

When I walked back up the hill I saw that Uncle Neil was standing on the square of concrete that abutted the downstairs back door. He’d been at the house since late the

night before. Over breakfast I'd mentioned my father to Neil, and the work he was doing ordering supplies. For the 'big job', as I'd put it. This was how my father had referred to it when we'd spoken earlier in the week. He had told me excitedly how Neil had 'taken him on' to supply the pools for three of his luxury apartment complexes. 'This could change things for us, love,' he'd said.

But when I mentioned my father, Uncle Neil, who was busy pouring sugar onto Special K with a Whale Beach souvenir teaspoon, merely nodded, and changed the topic.

Now he had a glass of wine in one hand and a folded newspaper in the other, which he was squinting at in the burning sunlight. From inside the house I could hear a kettle whistling, or at least that's what it sounded like. It wasn't until I got nearer, and Neil raised his head and said, 'Make yourself scarce for an hour. That's my advice,' that I realised that the sound was not a kettle at all. It was screaming. It was Luce.

For a few seconds I kept up my trajectory towards him and the door, and Uncle Neil, still holding his wine and the paper, made a casual sideways step to block the entrance. I didn't know yet whether I even wanted to go in. It would mean wrestling my way through the noise and chaos to find Luce and then working out a way help her. I didn't know if I could do this; if it were even possible. But the physical block Uncle Neil had made with his body made it clear that it didn't matter what I wanted. He was not merely loitering; he'd been placed there to keep me out.

'If Luce asks, tell her I'm down at the beach,' I said, surrendering.

Uncle Neil took a sip of wine and watched me. Slowly, I turned away. He lifted the paper to his face.

I had left the house with nothing but my purse, an inconvenience I only tuned into once I'd made the steep trek down between the row of neighbouring houses and onto the road that abutted the beach. The day was hot; except for the thin lines the palm trees drew on the sand, there was no shade; and I had neither swimmers nor sun cream.

I did not much feel like climbing up the track again having just climbed down it. So I headed for the closest place offering both shelter and nourishment — the little corner shop.

The difficulty about this situation was not that I didn't know what was going on at the house; it was that I knew exactly what was going on. All week the wave had been cresting, driven higher and higher by Mr Whitford's questions to Luce about her piano

practice, and her increasingly dismissive, then rude, then hysterical retorts. I imagined she had finally told them she was not doing the concert. She had joined a rock band. She was quitting the piano. And the wave had come down on their heads.

What precisely had happened this morning, I couldn't guess. I would find out later. Right now, I needed a cool drink, and an excuse to be gone for a while. Perhaps if I found some sun cream and a hat, I would walk to Palm Beach.

The shop was just as I remembered it from the time I'd come with Jono and Luce: dark and cool, quieter than the street, and crowded with wares. The same girl slouched behind the counter. She looked up from the magazine she was flipping through.

I headed to the drinks fridge, which was in the far corner. I pulled out a lemon Solo. Angling past rows of shampoos and packaged biscuits I made my way back to the counter.

'No Paddlepop?' said the girl as I put the Solo before her. Her mouth drew up into a half grin. She raised a hand to the shaved part of her scalp, above her ear, and scratched it. 'It's what you got last time.'

'Oh.' Heat rose up my neck.

She glanced at the door again. 'Not with your friends today?'

'No.'

'They left you to it, did they?'

'They're busy this afternoon.'

The shop girl nodded. 'It's Abi, yeah?'

'Yes,' I said, surprised, putting my eighty cents into her palm.

She closed her fingers over the coins.

I stepped outside into the glare and under the awning of the holiday flats next door to have my drink. I had just unscrewed the lid when I heard beeping. Jono's silver Holden sped down the short and narrow street and pulled up beside me.

Luce rolled down the driver's window. Her eyes were swollen. 'Thank God I found you,' she said in a hoarse voice.

'Are you okay?' I crouched by the window and peered inside. She was alone.

'I'm fine' she croaked. 'Get in.'

We sped down the street with such violence that even a group of surfer boys made the effort to turn and watch us.

‘Does Jono know you have his car?’

‘I don’t give a fuck what Jono knows or doesn’t know,’ Luce said, taking the corner way too fast.

‘Where are we going?’

‘Who cares. Somewhere else.’

The wheels screeched. She was frightening me. ‘I could drive, if you want, Luce.’

‘I’ll slow down.’

At a reasonable pace, we drove south.

It was cool in the car with the windows down. Luce shoved a Radiohead tape in the player. The music broke the edge of our mood. As she wound in and out of the hairpins we sang ‘Creep’ at the top of our lungs. When we stopped at the lights we kept on singing. People in other cars looked over at us. Between us we didn’t acknowledge this — that people were watching, that we were creating a spectacle — but it charged the air inside Jono’s car, and a feeling inside my chest. After the confusion of the last few days, I felt happy again. Happy to be alone with Luce, away from her family and mine and even Adina, on a sunny day in a car that smelt of holidays. Sand on the dashboard, in our hair, in the creases of our skin. Lips chaffed. Faces caked with salt.

That was Luce and me that afternoon. We found a way back to the ‘us’ that we were on my sick bed, weeks before, when we had read together, our breathing synced. Back further, as well, to the hours of piano practice, and the pleasant hypnosis of watching the green shadows shift in the Whitfords’ lush back garden as she played. Back still further, to that night in the cinema — searching for Luce after the lights had gone down, walking the rows, studying the shadowy faces, and then finding her — there! — and Luce calling out — my name on her lips! — and sinking into the velvety chair beside her.

I was full with it: our perfect friendship. I sat in the passenger seat and the wide windscreen showed me the world. We shared everything. The future as well as the past. I felt that strongly.

‘You told them, didn’t you.’

Luce nodded. ‘No more stupid concerts for me. All that is over now.’ She giggled. ‘What are they going to do? Tie me to the fucking stool?’

‘Good for you.’ I felt very tender towards her.

Something passed behind her eyes; a flicker.



‘What?’ I said.

‘He tried it, though,’

‘Who? What?’

‘Dad. He held me in front of the piano. With both hands. I’ll get bruises on my hip bones, wait and see.’

A chill passed through me. ‘Luce, are you serious?’

‘He couldn’t get me to play a single note, though. I screamed and screamed. He had to stop eventually. Like son, like father, I suppose.’ She laughed in a false note.

‘What do you mean?’

We drove beneath an underpass. Luce’s face went into shadow. ‘Jono was in the room that night. At the party.’

I stared at her. ‘I thought you said she was making it up.’

Luce faced me. ‘Maybe. I don’t know. But he was there. Dad’s managed to keep him out of it so far, because he’s threatened to withdraw his legal services if Jono’s friends decide to drop Jono in it. Some of them can’t remember if he was in the room or not, which has helped. But he was at the party. And Adina knows that now. And you obviously do, too.’

‘What makes you say that?’

Luce looked at me like I was stupid. ‘Because you were the one who told her. Hey, I feel like a Slurpee,’ Luce said, suddenly chirpy. ‘Let’s turn in here.’

Inside the servo, we took turns at the Slurpee machine. Luce tried all the flavours, drinking a few mouthfuls before filling up her cup again, keeping her eye on the boy behind the counter. He could see what she was doing, but he was younger than us, and didn’t say anything. We paid for the Slurpees and took them back to the car.

‘What did Adina say to you?’ I asked as Luce turned the key in the ignition.

‘Nothing to me. But boy, did she let Jono have it. She was yelling at him in the garden as I left. That’s how I got the car without him noticing.’

The news filled me with horror and cautious joy. I wanted to tell Luce, then. I wanted to say: I am in love with your brother’s girlfriend. This was the moment: our bond had never been closer.

But then I remembered myself. Jono was her brother. She hated him, but she also adored him. I remembered something else: the story she had told me, months ago, about what her mother thought.

In Mrs Whitford's opinion — so Luce had told me one day at her house — there was 'something juvenile' about the type of feelings I was on the verge of confessing to Luce. It was all right to have a best friend in high school, a buddy to help style your hair and buy clothes with. It could even be cute to wear your hair the same! Luce's mother had had one of these types of friends herself.

But it was something you grew out of. Most girls, normal girls, matured past that point. In a pair of older women such habits were distasteful, because it was something they had failed to leave behind.

Luce had declared all of this from the dais of her piano stool. She had not been asking me for an opinion, nor questioning her mother's take. It was mere conversation. I had forgotten all of this, until now. I thought better of saying anything.

It was getting dark. We were on some wide, apartment-littered highway I didn't recognise. The traffic was slow. Our Slurpee cups gave hollow knocks as they rolled beneath our seats. 'Maybe it's time to go back,' I said.

Luce tapped absently at the steering wheel. 'I have an idea.'

By the time we reached Newport, back on Mona Vale Road, we were starving. Luce pulled into a carpark on the strip mall and we crossed the road to the chicken shop. We bought a burger and chips each and ate them at a picnic table specked with cigarette burns and dried bird shit, watching the passing cars and the ocean.

The elation had gone — for both of us, I think. But anticipation had slipped in to replace it, at least temporarily. Luce had found out, through one of the locals she had met at Jono's party, about a party happening tonight.

'I reckon we can walk from here,' said Luce, the chips a bland mush in her mouth.

'In what direction?'

'That way. It's only two streets back from the shops.'

We finished our meal and set off.

Ten minutes later we turned into the street. The party house was not hard to find. Kids sat on the lawn, on the footpath, in the gutter. Music throbbed distantly.

We shouldered our way up the path and through the open door.

Incense burned in the hall, smoke rippling from its stick. 'Hey,' said a boy as we approached. He was wearing board shorts and a loose surf singlet. He raised his hand to Luce.

She greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. ‘Brett, this is Abi.’

‘Hi,’ I said.

‘Glad you came, Luce. Really glad.’ He grinned at her. ‘Hey, you want some of this?’ He held up a bottle of bourbon. ‘There’s more drinks out back but it’s a bit of a shit fight out there.’

‘Sure.’ Luce took it from him, and I felt the two of us separate. We were no longer together at a party. She was now with this boy, Brett. She took a swig and held the bottle out to me.

‘Nah,’ I said. ‘Reckon I’ll try my luck out back.’

Leaving them to it, I turned into a room off the hall, aimlessly. Inside the room, people were dancing to electronic music. Candles shivered on a wax-pooled mantelpiece. I walked through another doorway, into a dimly-lit kitchen. Here, kids milled behind the counter – kids in Stussy t-shirts, in Mambo t-shirts, in short-sleeved collared shirts with ‘Billabong’ embroidered on the pocket. They reached into the fridge whose door hung open, pulled out cans of beer, ate party pies from an oven tray. A girl with white-blond hair and a deep tan sat on one end of the bench with her legs gripping a boy’s waist. They were kissing. At the other end of the bench, another girl was pouring vodka into a large bowl of punch.

She looked up and saw me. ‘Abi,’ she said.

I squinted. It was the girl from the shop at Whale Beach.

Upstairs was quieter. The music was trancier. A crowd swayed to it in a large room without furniture. On the narrow balcony, a line of people talked and smoked, tapping ash over the railing.

‘How weird that I saw you just this morning, and here you are again,’ said Caitlin — she’d had to remind me of her name — offering me her bottle of vodka.

I held out the plastic cup I had brought from downstairs and let her fill it.

‘So how do you know Liz?’ she asked, pouring herself some from the bottle.

‘Who’s Liz?’

‘The person whose house we’re in.’ Caitlin grinned. She had a pretty face, I realised. Freckled and open.

‘Luce knows her. Just from the beach, I think.’ I gulped at the vodka, which seared my throat.

‘They met on the sand, did they?’ Caitlin sounded amused.

‘I don’t know, I guess. Luce probably stole her towel or something.’

Caitlin laughed. ‘There’s nothing better than towel-stealing to start a conversation.’

‘So I hear.’

‘And how do you know Luce?’ Seeing me hesitate, she said, ‘Sorry if I’m asking too many questions. You don’t have to tell me.’

‘No, it’s okay.’ I liked that she was interested. ‘School.’

‘You go to one of those rich schools?’

I nodded.

‘Wow,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t have picked it. I mean that as a compliment,’ she added. ‘I just mean you don’t seem like a snob.’

‘Thanks, I guess.’ I pulled a face.

Caitlin grinned. She kept her eyes on me. ‘You’re cute.’ She was still grinning.

Something kicked inside my chest. I looked away in embarrassment, out to the lawn beyond the balcony. Three boys were tossing a beer can between them on the grass. Beside the letterbox a girl wept, as another girl gripped her by the waist and rubbed her back.

‘Want to dance?’ Caitlin was still looking at me.

‘Sure,’ I said casually, meeting her gaze at last, although I felt as if my stomach was about to collapse.

She took my hand and we entered the pulsing room.

We danced separately but close together, surrounded by bodies shifting to the beat. I finished my vodka and dropped the cup onto the floor, where various feet kicked it away. Caitlin danced with her shoulders, bringing them up and down and letting her other movements flow from them. She pressed a shoulder against one of mine. I pressed back. With her head swaying in time to the music, she raised a hand and rested her wrist on the side of my neck. I inched closer, into the tug of her body’s orbit. I let my hands do what they wanted, which was to run lightly across the shaved part of her head. She met my eyes briefly, hooked an index finger into one of the front pockets of my jeans, drew me forward, and slowly kissed my mouth.

I felt the kiss like a wire pulled taut. I kissed her back, deeply. I pressed my body into hers, my hands low on her hips. It was not a question of knowing how, I realised. ‘How’ didn’t come into it, when it felt like this.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. I ignored it.

Another tap.

Brett stood behind me, looking awkward, hands in his back pockets so that his elbows stuck out like wings.

‘Luce wants you,’ he said, eyes to the wall. ‘She’s downstairs.’

Luce had vomited, very recently. The wet, rank-smelling stain on the concrete floor of the carport was still inching outwards. Having shown me to her, Brett had already disappeared. I helped my friend to her feet and pulled her over to a brick ledge by the side door, where I sat her down.

‘Where the fuck have you been?’ she spat at me. Her breath was rancid.

I found a handkerchief in my pocket. ‘Here. Wipe your mouth with this. I’m going to get you some water.’

‘Likely fucking story,’ I heard her mutter as I climbed the side steps.

I turned back angrily. ‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘That you always piss off.’ Her words were slurry. ‘I invited you to this party. You were supposed to stay with *me*.’ I was shocked to see her face crumple.

I came down the stairs again slowly and sat down beside her. She put her face in her hands and began sobbing.

‘Hey, Luce. It’s okay,’ I said nervously. Remembering the girls I had seen beside the letterbox, I slipped an arm around her waist. ‘I didn’t know you wanted me to stay with you. I thought you wanted to be alone with Brett.’

Luce snorted. ‘Are you kidding? Brett is a dickhead.’

‘Well, why didn’t you tell me that?’ I said.

‘I thought it was obvious!’ she cried.

Our eyes met, and we cracked up.

When we had finished laughing, Luce sighed. ‘Oh, Abi. What am I going to do?’

‘About what?’

‘Everything.’ She wiped her nose with my handkerchief and stared at the insects beating against the carport’s fluorescent light. ‘My life,’ she said. ‘School’s finished, everyone wants me to play the fucking piano, and I’m sick of it. But what else have I got?’

‘More than most people, I would think,’ I said carefully.

‘Name one thing.’

Talent; good marks; beauty; rich parents with connections. But I didn't say any of these things. 'You've got me,' I joked.

'No, I don't,' Luce said bluntly. 'You'll find your groove and go off without me. Just like you did tonight.'

I remembered Caitlin, who I'd left upstairs. 'What makes you think that?' My tone was defensive; guilty.

'Because I feel you drifting from me,' she said, with a sob. 'It's what always happens. Something goes right in my life and then I fuck it up somehow.'

I looked at her, stunned. Glorious Luce, whose life I coveted. 'I don't know what to say to you. I don't think you've fucked us up.'

'But the drift has already started. We aren't as close anymore,' she said, grabbing my hand, studying my gaze, and I couldn't say anything, because of the things I hadn't told her; because she was right.

It took an hour and a half to get Luce home: the slow stumble to the car, and the twenty-minute drive made longer by the need to stop whenever Luce complained her head was spinning and sit by the side of the road with the windows down, letting the wind blow in off the water. When we arrived at last, I helped her down the back steps and led her to her room. I even put the toothpaste on her toothbrush and held her hair back while she cleaned them in the en suite, her face pained, her eyes squinting against the dim glow of the bedside light.

I helped her out of her clothes and into a t-shirt and pyjama pants and spread a sheet across her when she laid down. 'Thank you, Abi,' she mumbled.

'Sweet dreams,' I said, the way my father always said to me, and turned off the light.

I walked carefully across the tiles to my own room, conscious of being quiet in case Jono and Adina were at home and asleep. I opened the door. Someone shifted on the bed.

'Sorry,' Adina whispered. 'It's only me.'

My heart flipped.

'I just want to talk to you. Is that okay?'

'Of course.' I hovered in the doorway. The room was dark, but I didn't want to switch on the light — it would be too stark, and far less intimate. Instead I left the door open so that the hall light could filter in. I sat down beside her on the bed.

‘I wanted to thank you,’ Adina said. ‘For being honest with me this afternoon.’ Her voice was a murmur. ‘And to say again that I don’t blame you. For anything. I know what Jono’s like, okay? I mean, with women.’ She put a hand on my arm and it seared my skin. ‘Am I making sense?’

‘I think so,’ I said, breathing deeply.

‘But it’s worse than I thought.’ She took her hand away. Her voice got very low. ‘If he was at the party he was in the room.’

I swallowed and dipped my head towards hers. ‘God,’ I murmured.

‘I’m leaving tomorrow, first thing.’

‘Of course,’ I said. But the weight of her imminent departure bore down on me. I felt suddenly desperate, and the house felt empty already. ‘I wish you weren’t,’ I whispered.

She gave my thigh a firm press with her palm. ‘That’s kind of you.’

I looked at her face. Her lips trembled, but her eyes were steady.

‘Is there anything I can do?’ I asked.

She shook her head. ‘Nothing. You’ve been perfect.’ She shifted her weight on the bed to face me. ‘Goodbye, Abi,’ she said. She leant forward, her arms extended.

She wrapped them around me. Her cheek brushed mine. I traced a line across it with my nose, until my mouth found hers. Softly, I kissed her.

Adina froze, and I drew back quickly.

What a stupid mistake.

‘I’m sorry,’ I murmured, standing up quickly.

She stood up, too. ‘It’s okay.’

A shadow passed the doorway.

Adina saw it. ‘I’ve got to go,’ she whispered. She smiled at me, reassuringly. ‘Take care, Abi.’

She slipped out of the room.

I was grateful for sleep, when it came. I climbed into it, as if into a hammock. I let it hold me deep, in the hope I could hide from my error, and when morning came I was still wrapped within it. Sun shone through the slats between the blinds, noises tinkered outside the door. Footsteps, voices. I heard them as if through heavy canvas. I squeezed my eyes shut and drew in further.

When I finally woke, it was far too bright. Hours of morning had passed. The sun was high. My limbs stuck to the sheets. Sweat balled along my upper lip, and in the creases of my skin. I heard shouting outside the door.

I sat up.

I hurried out of the bedroom to find its source, ungluing the hair from my face. Luce stood outside her bedroom, composed and unharmed. I breathed out in relief. Mr Whitford was storming down the stairs. Jono knelt at the back door. Everything about him — shirt, shorts, shoes and hair — was heavy with water. He looked stunned. He lay his palms on the tiled floor and leaned his weight onto them.

‘She’s dead,’ he said, staring up at the three of us, his voice coming apart.  
‘Adina. I’ve killed her.’



## **Part two (summary)**

The Whitfords and Abi learn from Jono that he and Adina went out for an early boat trip and that Adina fell overboard. Adina's body is recovered and her death confirmed. The incident is widely understood to be an accident.

Jono is aware that Abi suspects there is more to the story. He tells her that he witnessed her kissing Adina, and that if she talks to the police he will out her. He also indicates he has influence with Uncle Neil and could threaten the lucrative business deal with Abi's father.

Abi prevaricates. She then learns from her father that the deal is off, even though her father has already invested significant money in it. Terrified that Jono will out her, and in the hope that she can rescue the deal, Abi gives a statement to police denying all knowledge. Jono is cleared of every potential charge.

Meanwhile, Luce's parents arrange for her to have some 'respite' in a private hospital after a violent outburst. When she is released she is devastated by the course of events. She suspects Jono is guilty and can't understand why Abi didn't tell the police what she knew. Abi doesn't want to tell her she's gay, and their friendship falters.

The business deal with Uncle Neil never reignites, which triggers the beginning of the end for Platter Pools. Bernie is diagnosed with heart disease, and his health deteriorates. Years later, when her father is dead and Jono's political star is on the rise, Abi runs into Luce. She learns that Luce has given up music and married Jono's friend, Daniel. Still plagued with guilt about lying to the police, Abi goes overseas in search of 'the Geisha' to make amends.

## **Writing within history: the challenge of representing significant cultural moments in fiction**

I think fiction rescues history from its confusions. It can do this in the somewhat superficial way of filling in blank spaces. But it also can operate in a deeper way: providing the balance and rhythm we don't experience in our daily lives, in our real lives. So the novel which is within history can also operate outside it — correcting, clearing up and, perhaps most important of all, finding rhythms and symmetries that we simply don't encounter elsewhere. (DeLillo, quoted in DeCurtis 1991, p.56)

### **1 Introduction**

In the above quotation, Don DeLillo considers what fiction can do for history. It is a theme at the heart of much of his writing, for example, his account of the Kennedy assassination in *Libra* (1988), told through the eyes of a fictional Lee Harvey Oswald, and his September 11 novel *Falling Man* (2007). I have always been drawn to novels like DeLillo's that are 'within history', partly because of the 'rhythms and symmetries' found there, and partly because the historical moment can provide a heightened context and resonance for the personal stories told through fiction.

These are some of the reasons I chose to write a novel whose story is told against the backdrop of the 1996 federal election, an event that I consider to be a significant turning point in Australia's cultural history, yet one that has rarely — if ever — been the subject of creative scrutiny.

In March 1996, after thirteen years in the political wilderness, John Howard's Coalition won a landslide victory over Labor to take government in Australia. About half a million voters deserted Labor, a large proportion of whom were lower income earners or working-class.

The preceding years had been a time of transformation for the country. Political scholar and commentator Robert Manne (2004) identifies two social revolutions over the quarter of a century prior to the 1996 election. The first, a cultural one, saw the repudiation of attitudes to ethnicity and race that had been unquestioned since Federation. The White Australia policy was buried, and immigration, especially from Asia, increased. Aboriginal rights were finally being recognised. In 1991, Prime Minister Paul Keating championed the idea of multiculturalism and placed the question of the republic on the national agenda. The second revolution, an economic one, involved the deregulation of

the financial system. Keating was not only the champion of this revolution, but also its ‘chief architect’ (Manne 2004, p.6).

Prior to 1996, Labor had been successful in painting the Australian Liberal Party as governing in the interests of ‘affluent old middle-class Anglo Australia’ and out of touch with the new realities of ‘multiculturalism, single-parent and blended families, and the struggles of the unemployed and working poor’ (Brett 2004, p.75). But Keating’s economic revolution had destroyed thousands of jobs in blue-collar industries, a consequence that, along with factors such as the Prime Minister’s cultivated image and progressive policies (for example, his support for a republic and his lifting of the ban of homosexuals in the Defence Force) alienated portions of Labor’s working class base (Manne 2004; Watson 2002). And while in the 1980s Labor had used ‘minority issues’ like gender equity, the environment, and racial and ethnic diversity to its advantage, during the 1996 election campaign Howard found a way to turn the tables. He presented *Labor* as out of touch with ‘mainstream Australia’, arguing that it governed in the interests of the economic and cultural elites. ‘Powerful vested interests seem to win the day when it comes to douching the government and access to public funding,’ Howard said in his 1995 speech, ‘The Australia I believe in’:

The losers have been the men and women of mainstream Australia whose political voice is too often muffled or ignored — the families battling to give their children a break, hard-working employees battling to get ahead, small businesses battling to survive, young Australians battling to get a decent start in their working lives, older Australians battling to present their dignity and security, community organisations battling the seemingly ever-expanding role of intrusive central government. (Howard 1995).

It was a pitch that was overwhelmingly successful, significantly broadening the Coalition’s voting base within middle Australia. So began the long reign of a socially-regressive government that prioritised majority opinion, marginalised informed public opinion and deliberately widened the divide over values between the so-called ‘elites’ and ‘ordinary people’ in order to maintain power.

This is the broad context of my novel, *Distance*. By paralleling a personal story with the events happening on the broader political landscape in Australia in the mid 1990s, my novel explores the values, hopes and fears of a nation at a pivotal moment in its history, as well as its schisms — between ‘middle Australia’, the Liberal Party’s traditional affluent voting base, and the educated social progressives that Keating spoke

to. It examines the machinations of power: majorities over minorities, rich over poor, men over women.

When *Distance* opens, the pre-election battle for the nation is in full force. It is 1995 in Sydney and Abi Platter is seventeen. By the time of the election she will be eighteen, old enough to vote for the first time. Just like the nation, her life is on the verge of change. Embedded in the personal story of the novel are power plays that mirror the dynamics on the 1995–1996 Australian stage. Just as the Liberals were able to gain the support of middle Australia only to betray it, so the Platters become casualties in the Whitfords' pursuit to protect their own status. Just as Howard harnessed fear and prejudice within society to win the election, so too does Jonathan use Abi's sexuality to silence her.

The novel borrows its structure from the interloper narrative used in works such as Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1945), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1992). In these novels, an outsider from lower or middle class stock is given entrée to a world above their station. Initially the outsider is infatuated by the world they find themselves in, until something occurs to destroy their delusions. Books by Australian writers that use this basic structure include M.J. Hyland's *How the Light Gets In* (2005), about an Australian exchange student who goes to live with a rich suburban American family, and Kirsten Tranter's *The Legacy* (2010), about a young Australian woman who travels to New York to investigate the disappearance of a friend and finds herself in the heady world of the city's wealthy and glamorous art scene. Unlike in these novels, which both take their protagonists into a higher-class world overseas, *Distance* examines the class divisions within Australia itself.

The novel is also informed by the fiction of suburban nostalgia, such as Steve Carroll's *The Time We Have Taken* (2007) and Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* (1991), narratives that present a previous generation's experience of suburban life in Australia through a nostalgic lens. As the rhetoric of suburban nostalgia was a key tool that Howard employed during his term as Prime Minister, I was especially interested in exploring how the fiction of suburban nostalgia works, in order to critique the 'fiction' of Howard's rhetoric.

Australian novels that take as their focus the local political landscape include Frank Hardy's *Power Without Glory* (1950), Amanda Lohrey's *The Reading Group* (1988), Peter Temple's *Truth* (2009) and Bernard Cohen's *The Antibibliography of Robert F. Menzies* (2013). Where my novel differs from these, and what makes its contribution

original, is that with the exception perhaps of Casey Bennetto's *Keating! (The Musical)* (2005), nobody has yet written a fictional account of the 1996 election or explored through fiction the legacy of the Howard years. There are many possible reasons for this. One is the length of Howard's reign as prime minister. The number of significant political events that occurred within that ten-year period and the shifts in Coalition policy throughout that time make capturing the legacy of the Howard era in a single narrative challenging. Another possible reason is the relatively short amount of time that has passed since Howard was in power, meaning that his legacy in many areas remains uncertain. Howard's carefully cultivated image as an 'ordinary Australian' has perhaps also dissuaded writers on the basis that Howard is an uninteresting subject for fiction. Compare Howard's image to Paul Keating's, whom Bennetto considered a great character for musical theatre: 'Those suits, that sharp tongue, and his clock collecting made him ideal' (Bennetto, quoted in Clarke 2008).

A further potential dissuasion is Howard's reputation as an enemy of culture and the creative arts, originating from his government's destructive policies; for example, its reduction of university and ABC funding (Marginson 2004; Manne 2001) as well as his deliberate efforts through rhetoric to distance himself from those he described as 'cultural elites' (Walker 2001, p.81). In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising that writers have resisted devoting their creative efforts to memorialise — however negatively — a prime minister who made such an enemy of the arts. Finally, there may also be at play a reluctance by Australian fiction writers to face the challenges inherent in writing fiction about politics — challenges that this exegesis explores. Despite these factors, the 1996 election and the Howard years are important subjects for fiction; a part of Australian history that, as DeLillo might say, deserves to be 'rescued' from its 'confusions'.

## **2. Methodology**

The challenge of writing my novel involved solving a number of puzzles that writers of political fiction commonly face, including: how to dramatise what is essentially an abstract moment in history; how to engage in an ethical way with the politics of the era; and how to avoid turning the novel into polemic.

After making a case for the value of history-based fiction in Part 3, I explore these puzzles in Parts 4 and 5, by examining and comparing the techniques and approaches of the works of four writers who have fictionalised significant cultural moments: Alan

Hollinghurst in *The Line of Beauty* (2004) which, set in the mid-eighties in England, examines the atmosphere and impact of the Thatcher years (and also utilises the interloper narrative); DeLillo in *Falling Man*, which describes the effects of the events of September 11, 2001; Jesmyn Ward in *Salvage the Bones* (2011), which illustrates poverty and hardship in Mississippi through the story of one family's attempts to survive Hurricane Katrina; and Ian McEwan in *Saturday* (2005), a meditation on post 9/11 values set against a backdrop of the anti-Iraq War demonstrations that took place in London on 15 February 2003.

In comparison to some of the events these novels explore, the 1996 federal election on its face may be considered relatively benign subject matter. An additional creative challenge, then, was to explore this event through fiction in a way that creates interest for the reader and conveys the significance of this turn in our nation's history. One of the ways I chose to meet this challenge in *Distance* was to explore, through metanarrative, the process of history-making itself. In Part 6 I examine how DeLillo explores this process in *Falling Man*.

### **3 The value of history-based fiction**

The 1996 Federal election and its repercussions are well documented. Numerous non-fiction accounts exist of this time in Australia's history. Some are contemporaneous, for example the commentary in the national papers and political essays published at the time. Retrospective accounts include Don Watson's memoir, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart* (2002); *The Howard Years*, a collection of essays by leading political commentators (Manne 2004); Margo Kingston's *Not Happy, John!* (2004); a number of biographies of John Howard; and Howard's own autobiography, *Lazarus Rising* (2010). These sources provide varied perspectives on what occurred, forming a rich body of work detailing the factual minutiae of how events unfolded and why and, in some cases, in depth analysis of the short- and long-term consequences of those events.

When so many non-fictional accounts of the 1996 federal election exist, a question that arises is what the value is of writing a fictional account of this period in Australian history. The inquiry raises a number of broader questions. What can a fiction writer do that a journalist or historian cannot? Can fiction truly fill in the 'blank spaces' of history, finding useful 'rhythms and symmetries', as DeLillo suggests? What are fiction's representational capacities and responsibilities when it comes to true events? Broader

still: what is the value of fiction? As McEwan's protagonist, Perowne, remarks in *Saturday*, 'The times are strange enough. Why make things up?' (66).

One possible answer is that fiction allows an exploration of history's impact in a way that official histories and journalism cannot, by providing a unique window into the interior lives of characters experiencing history. Fiction, it might be argued, gives voice to the individual and the personal. Kate Grenville controversially argued along these lines when talking about her novel, *The Secret River* (2005), set in the early years of British colonisation in Australia. When talking about how she drew upon archival and secondary research about the era to write *The Secret River*, Grenville said: 'I feel very passionately that this book is probably as close as we are going to get to what it was actually like' (Grenville, quoted in Sullivan 2005, p.1).

Some Australian historians — Mark McKenna and Inge Clendinnen in particular — took exception to this and other statements Grenville made about *The Secret River*, arguing that she overstated the nature of historical understanding offered by a novel as opposed to that offered by the writing of scholarly history (McKenna 2005; Clendinnen 2006). As historian and academic Sarah Pinto has noted, however, a surprising feature that haunted these and other historians' engagement with *The Secret River* was 'the possibility of access to a real, authentic, and truthful past'. Pinto considered this especially surprising given the 'wide and ongoing discussions' occurring at the time about the 'constructed nature of truth' (Pinto 2010, p.190). I engage with this idea further in Part 5.

Another argument for the value of historical fiction is that in accounting for the experience of people that history and journalism overlook, fiction can provide a counter-narrative to the dominant narratives attached to an event. American novelist John Updike once remarked: 'My fictions about the daily doings of ordinary people has more history in it than history books' (Updike 1975, p.482). Many artists have engaged with this idea. One unique project that explores the distinction between the capacities of fiction and official history writ large is The Museum of Innocence in Istanbul, the brainchild of Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk. The physical museum, situated in the city's Beyoglu region, was conceived at the same time Pamuk wrote a novel of the same name. The novel describes life in Istanbul from the 1950s through to the turn of the century through memories and flashbacks involving two families — one wealthy, one lower middle class. The museum 'presents what the novel's characters used, wore, heard, saw, collected and dreamed of, all meticulously arranged in boxes and display cabinets' (Museum of Innocence website, 'The Museum of Innocence'). The displays include a reconstructed

bathroom, a collection of salt shakers, maps of Istanbul, wooden shadow boxes full of trinkets — a thimble, a toy car, a yellow marble — as well as a large glass case that holds 4,213 cigarette butts, each smoked by Füsün, the love interest of the novel's protagonist.

In his 'A Modest Manifesto for Museums' on display in the museum foyer, Pamuk articulates his intention to critique state-sponsored museums like the British Museum, the Louvre and Turkey's own Topkapi Palace. 'These institutions, now national symbols, present the story of the nation — history, in a word — as being far more important than the stories of individuals,' he writes. 'This is unfortunate because the stories of individuals are much better suited to displaying the depths of our humanity' (The Museum of Innocence website, 'A Modest Manifesto for Museums').

Similarly, perhaps, to the state-sponsored museums that Pamuk critiques, a lot of the non-fiction covering the 1996 Australian federal election and its repercussions focuses on the impact of events on the nation as a whole. When individual lives are examined, they are usually those of the main players — Howard, Keating, other politicians and their staffers. The impact of political decision-making on private citizens is harder to access, and the non-fictional narratives that attempt to explore this aspect are more likely to make observations about its generalised impact than the personal and emotional repercussions of government policy upon specific individuals.

Perhaps then this is where fiction fits; its properties make it uniquely suited to the task of telling individual stories. Speaking in particular about novels with political ideas at their centre, scholar and critic Joseph Blotner (1955) says:

Since its beginning the political novel has fulfilled the ancient function of art. It has described and interpreted human experience, selectively taking the facts of existence and imposing order and form upon them in an esthetic pattern to make them meaningful. The political novel is important to the student of literature as one aspect of the art of fiction, just as is the psychological novel or the economic novel. But it is important in a larger context, too. The reader who wants a vivid record of past events, an insight into the nature of political beings, or a prediction of what lies ahead can find it in the political novel. (Blotner 1955, p.1).

While it is not unprecedented for non-fiction to provide 'a vivid record of past events' — consider, for example, the work of Belarusian journalist and Nobel Prize winner, Svetlana Alexievich, who weaves together detailed oral histories to give voice to people who have lived through major historical events, such as the Chernobyl nuclear disaster of 1986 (Alexievich 2006) — it is unusual; whereas it is a staple technique of the novelist to drill down to the small moment and the individual experience. In their aforementioned works,



DeLillo, Hollinghurst, McEwan and Ward all describe and interpret human experience within a specific historical context, focusing on ordinary citizens rather than the ‘main players’ of history. This is a choice often made by contemporary writers of historical fiction. Consider, for example, Roger McDonald’s novel, *Mr Darwin’s Shooter* (1998), which tells the story of Charles Darwin’s assistant, Syms Covington, whose role in history, in comparison to Darwin’s, is minor. Possible reasons for this choice include the ethical issues inherent in fictionalising a real person’s story, and the lack of interest the writer has in retelling a story that has already been told in other forms; through biography and news coverage, for example. The existence of these alternative texts not only place creative constraints upon any retelling, but potentially remove the impetus that drives many fiction writers in the first place — that desire to fill in history’s gaps, to discover a story afresh, and to give voice to those who lack one. It is perhaps understandable therefore, that the focus of the fiction writer so often falls not on those who have had an active role in history, but rather on those who have been acted upon.

Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* tells the story of Nick Guest, a young man from a geographically and socially remote part of England, who, by virtue of a university connection comes to live in the house of a Tory MP. McEwan’s *Saturday* similarly focuses on a citizen rather than a ‘main player’, following the daily activities and musings of a neurosurgeon on the day of the anti-Iraq War protests in London. DeLillo’s focus in *Falling Man* is on the lives of the September 11 survivors and the story of one of the hijackers, whose perspectives are famously absent from the dominant historical narrative of the attacks. Instead media coverage and political debate surrounding September 11 tended to focus on the tragic deaths of the victims and on demonising the terrorists.

DeLillo provides comment within the text of the novel on the paucity of narratives that consider the terrorists. In one of the characters’ therapeutic writing classes, established to help people heal after the Twin Tower attacks, ‘[n]o one wrote a word about the terrorists’ (63). In this sense *Falling Man* functions as a deliberate counter-narrative.

Ward’s *Salvage the Bones* is about a poor black family living on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August 2005 in the lead-up to and during Hurricane Katrina. When asked why she wrote it Ward said:

I lived through [Hurricane Katrina]. It was terrifying and I needed to write about that. I was also angry at the people who blamed survivors for staying and for choosing to return to the Mississippi Gulf Coast after the storm. Finally, I wrote about the storm because I was dissatisfied with the way it had receded from public consciousness. (Ward, quoted in Hoover 2011)

For Ward too then, one of fiction's uses is to draw attention to experiences that have been overlooked.

#### **4 Dramatising the abstract: *The Line of Beauty* and *Saturday***

Unlike DeLillo's September 11 or Ward's Hurricane Katrina, the 1996 Australian Federal election was an abstract historical moment. It has more in common in this sense with the events examined by Hollinghurst in *The Line of Beauty* (Margaret Thatcher's re-election) and by McEwan in *Saturday* (the mood of post 9/11 London, with a specific focus on the anti-Iraq War demonstrations). Although important periods in history, these events are not dramatic in and of themselves. No blood was shed. No lives were lost. There were no great escapes to describe. The consequences of such events play out over months and years, and in ways that are not always clearly linked to the event itself. Even still, Hollinghurst and McEwan make this type of history resonate in fiction.

The Thatcher era of Hollinghurst's novel was a significant episode in Great Britain's history. It was characterised by reduced government intervention, privatisation of state-owned businesses, lower taxes and deregulation of the stock markets, all associated with the economic revival in the mid to late 1980s (Edwards 2017; Mandel 2013). However, many have criticized Thatcher's policies for widening the gap between the rich and the poor and for destroying the welfare state (see, for example, Timmins 2001; Young 1993; Evans 1997).

Thatcher's social conservatism has also been criticised; for example, her failure to stem the vilification of gay men that resulted from the outbreak of AIDS during the era of her reign (Janes 2012). While it is true she voted to decriminalise homosexuality, her government was also responsible for passing a law forbidding local authorities to 'intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality' or 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship' (*Local Government Act 1988 (UK)*, s 28; Doran 2013; Janes 2012; Cook et al. 2007).

Hollinghurst dramatises the politics of these years and explores the political themes of the era in two key ways. The first is by placing his protagonist, Nick Guest, in intimate proximity with one of the 'main players' of history: in the home of the fictional Gerald Fedden, a Conservative MP. This enables the narrative's unfolding drama to be closely linked to and ultimately collide with events on the political stage.

Nick is a friend of Gerard's son, Toby, whom he met while studying at Oxford, and he is renting one of the Feddens' many bedrooms. Nick's physical placement within the Fedden family unit means that he (and therefore the reader) is privy to the political conversations that regularly occur in his presence, for example, talk 'about the Falklands War and the need to commemorate it with a monument' (134) — the war is considered to be one of Thatcher's key achievements — or the political-themed baiting that occurs between Gerald and his children:

When the last case was in, Gerald said, 'We were stung for a hell of a lot of duty on this stuff.'

Toby said, 'Of course if trade barriers were lifted in the EC you wouldn't have to worry about that sort of thing'. (22)

One of the novel's great achievements is the way Hollinghurst creates an aura of allure and mystery around Thatcher herself. The novel opens with a reference to her victory and a 'pale-gilt image of the triumphant Prime Minister' (3) on the cover of a book about the election. It is the only image we see of her for some time, despite her being frequently referenced. Indeed, her absence is a constant presence in the narrative; for example, in this exchange between Gerald Fedden, Rachel Fedden and Lord Kessler about the guests expected at Toby Fedden's twenty-first birthday party:

'We're not getting the PM,' Gerald said, as if for a while it had really been likely.

'A relief, I must say.'

'It is rather a relief,' said Rachel.

Gerald murmured in humorous protest, and retorted that various ministers, including the Home Secretary, very much were still expected.

'Them we can handle,' Lord Kessler said, and shook the little bell to call in the servant. (50)

Other characters are also obsessed with Thatcher — from the wives of the Conservative ministers who dress to look like her ('they've all got the blue bows, and the hair', p. 62) to Nick's boyfriend's lower-class mother:

'So, you met *her*?'

Nick smiled back with a little pant of uncertainty. 'What, Mrs Fedden, you mean...'

'No...! [...] No — *her*. The lady herself. Mrs T!'

'Oh...No. No, I haven't. Not yet...' He felt obliged to go on, rather indiscreetly, 'I know they'd love to have her round, he, um, Gerald Fedden, has tried to get her at least once. He's very ambitious.' (155)

Finally, after a deliberate will-she won't-she build up, Thatcher makes an appearance towards the end of the novel at the Feddens' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary party: 'The well-known voice was heard, there was a funny intent silence of a second or two, and then there she was' (376). The reader's lengthy wait is rewarded in spades when the tipsy Prime Minister agrees to hit the dance floor with a coked-up Nick:

All Nick's training with Mrs Avison came back, available as the twelve-times table, the nimble footwork, the light grasp of the upper arm; though with it there came a deeper liveliness, a sense he could caper all over the floor with the PM in his grip. Anyway, Gerard put a stop to that. (385)

Of course, it is the PM who has Nick in her grip, not the other way around: Nick is ultimately a victim of Thatcher's worst policies and of the power structures her reign supports. By focusing on this aspect of his story, Hollinghurst dramatises the political themes of the era.

Nick is disadvantaged by the prevailing politics by virtue of his class and by his homosexuality. Through his love affairs with a black Londoner, Leo, and the Lebanese heir to a supermarket fortune, Wani Ouradi, he is also aligned with the non-white characters of the novel, another underclass in Thatcher's Britain (although in Wani's case, this status is complicated by his family's wealth). In *The Line of Beauty*, the racism of the Conservative characters is frequently illustrated. One of the Lords at a party refers to the only black guest, Charlie Mwegu, as 'Woggoo' (90). Gerald calls a guest pianist, Nina Glaserova, 'Nina Something-over'. The narrator's wry observations throughout the novel further point to the racism of the politically conservative class: '[Nina] had simple expressionless English, and the English people talked to her in the same way, but louder' (245).

Classism is similarly amply demonstrated. It is at the heart of the lavish pleasure the Feddens and their associates take in their wealth — the grand parties, the manors, the summer trips to France — and their thoughtlessness for the less fortunate: 'In Britain the poor have got poorer and the rich have got...well, they've got the Conservatives' was one [Labour ad] that even Gerald had laughed at' (394). 'I'm afraid the fact is that some people are just very rich,' one of the Feddens' (very rich) holiday guests remarks (330). Those in the Feddens' circle don't contemplate the reasons for class disparity. They certainly don't reflect upon the unsavoury means by which many of their acquaintances have acquired their wealth. Gerald's wife Rachel references their friend Badger's alleged pillaging of valuables in Africa with nothing more than a 'guilty grimace' (452). When the Feddens acquire a Gauguin landscape painting that has hardship and poverty as its

central themes, Gerard ‘can’t help thinking of [their] lovely walks in France’ (364).

Most damaging for Nick personally is the homophobia of Thatcher’s England. Gerald’s friend Badger uses the term ‘shirtlifter’ to describe a gay man (119). Wani’s father complains about his son hiring ‘all these bloody pretty poofy boys’ (248). However, the prejudice goes further than name-calling — it is cause for exclusion. This is established early in the novel, when it is reported that a junior minister in the Foreign Office has been forced to resign after being found in his car with a male prostitute (24).

Paul ‘Polly’ Tompkins, one of Nick’s gay acquaintances from university, is keenly aware of the consequences of being gay: he marries a woman a month before the election in order to win a political seat. Nick is less savvy. ‘You don’t think we’d be at a party like this if people knew what we did, do you?’ Wani asks him at one point and Nick replies, ‘I don’t see why not’ (254).

The novel’s climax demonstrates that Wani’s caution in this regard is well founded. Gerald Fedden is caught up in a ‘creative accounting’ controversy, and the political consequences worsen for him when his daughter Catherine talks to the media during a manic episode, revealing Gerald’s affair with his secretary and Nick’s relationship with Wani. Gerald uses Nick as a scapegoat to deflect attention from his own wrongdoings. Despite Nick’s fantasies of being a part of the family, and their benign acceptance of his presence, they ultimately betray him. One by one, each family member turns against him, and he is ordered to leave the house, despite having committed no crime.

In this way the Feddens’ treatment of Nick serves as metaphor for the disastrous effects of Thatcherism on minorities and the poor in British society, and on homosexuals in particular. Despite reports from gay Conservative politicians who were her contemporaries that there was nothing in Thatcher’s personal attitude to demonstrate any prejudice (see, for example, Coleman 2007), in an era of AIDS hysteria, Thatcher scapegoated Britain’s homosexuals for political gain, just as Gerald Fedden scapegoats Nick. The effects of Thatcher’s notoriously anti-gay changes to local government legislation in 1987 ensured that:

gay-rights discourses were reframed into the notion of ‘pretend families’. Schools that ‘promoted homosexuality’ were, thereby, alleged to be leading children into the temptations of same-sex activity and, hence, into the danger of contracting HIV, the costs of NHS care for which would then fall on the taxpayer. (Janes 2012, p.212)

By effectively requiring schools to remove references to homosexuality from teachings, Thatcher's government cemented the place of homosexuals as outcasts from 'normal society'. In this context, it is perhaps no surprise that 1989, the final year of Thatcher's leadership, saw 'the highest ever number of arrests and prosecutions for consensual sexual activity between men since records began' (Cook et al. 2007, p.206). Homosexual men were effectively punished for who they were, and nothing else. 'The strange, marvellous thing,' Nick observes towards the end of the novel, 'was that at no point did Gerald say what he considered Nick actually to have done' (481).

Three related historical moments are central to McEwan's *Saturday* and yet McEwan's protagonist, Henry Perowne, is at a distance from all of them. The most immediate of the three is the anti-Iraq war demonstration in London, which occurs on the day the novel is set. While being in close enough proximity to get caught in the traffic jam it has caused, Perowne does not attend the demonstration. The second significant historical event is, of course, the war the demonstration relates to, which has yet to happen, and which will occur in a country both geographically and socially remote from Perowne's London. The third event, again distant in time and space, is the one that has arguably precipitated the first two: the September 11 attacks in New York.

The challenge for McEwan is to explore the politics of these events and the impact of the terrorist threat more broadly — the suspicion, dread and fear that has leached into the national psyche — despite the abstract nature of their effects. It is a challenge illustrated perhaps by Perowne's description, early in the novel, of his hospital's recently updated Emergency Plan:

Simple train crashes are no longer all that are envisaged, and words like 'catastrophe' and 'mass fatalities', 'chemical and biological warfare' and 'major attack' have recently become bland through repetition. (12)

The potential consequences of terrorism are significant, but nevertheless still remote to England's privileged middle class (notably, *Saturday* was published prior to the London Bombings of July 2005) and therefore lacking in potency. One technique McEwan uses to overcome this remoteness is to create drama through events that act as a proxy for terrorist events. We see this first in the novel's opening passage. Perowne wakes before sunrise and watches through the window the descent of a burning plane. The spectacle 'has the familiarity of a recurrent dream' (15) both for the reader and protagonist. Perowne's thoughts quickly jump to the possibility of 'a man of sound faith with a bomb

in the heel of his shoe' (17). In this way, McEwan introduces a local (though ultimately unfounded) threat of terrorism early in the narrative, and establishes one of Perowne's — and the novel's — key preoccupations. This and the decision to set the events on the day of the anti-war demonstration create a space for political discourse within the work.

Since the novel closely follows Perowne's stream of consciousness, a lot of this discourse is Perowne's internal discourse. For example, while watching a television news report with his son to see if the burning plane gets a mention, Perowne contemplates the impact the September 11 attacks have had on him and his fellow Westerners:

Perowne held for a while to the idea that it was all an aberration, that the world would surely calm down [...] or that like any other crisis, this one would fade soon [...] But lately, this is looking optimistic. [...] The nineties are looking like an innocent decade, and who would have thought that at the time? Now we breathe different air. (32)

Throughout the day Perowne's musings return to the imminent war and the threat of terrorism. Thoughts about sex with his wife move effortlessly to a contemplation of the psychology of Saddam Hussein (38). Later on, as he observes an array of locals in a nearby square, Perowne 'imagines himself as Saddam, surveying the crowd with satisfaction from some Baghdad ministry balcony' (62). He recalls one of his former patients, an Iraqi professor of ancient history, as well as his stories of the torture he was subjected to under Saddam Hussein's regime. Perowne also discusses the anti-war demonstrations with friends and family: with his son, Theo, his squash partner, Jay Strauss, and his daughter Daisy, with whom he has a lengthy argument in the second half of the book. The inclusion of these thoughts and reflections enriches the novel's historical and political dimensions, and illustrates the ordinary citizen's preoccupation with the war and the terrorist threat at the time, and the extent to which it was a key part of the national conversation.

Similar to the representation of Thatcher in the anniversary party scene in *The Line of Beauty*, McEwan briefly introduces one of the era's 'main players', Tony Blair. This not only provides dramatic interest, but also the opportunity to encode a discussion about Blair's contentious decision to involve Britain in the Iraq war. Perowne recalls in detail how he once met the Prime Minister at an art show and Blair mistook him for the artist. It is clear that Perowne's attempt to correct him ('You're making a mistake' p.146) remembered as it is at a certain point within the narrative, is a reference to the Iraq War decision. Where a dramatic work centering on the political figures involved in the Iraq War decision might address such issues directly — David Hare's play, *Stuff Happens*

(2004) is an example of a work that presents conversations between Blair and other prominent players about his decision to go to war — within a novel about an ordinary citizen, an involved discussion between the protagonist and prime minister about foreign policy would be unrealistic. The scene at the art show therefore provides a symbolic discussion of the issue, which acts as a proxy for a literal one.

The most significant proxy in the novel is the character Baxter, who stands in for the real (yet remote) terrorist threat, which is one of the novel's key concerns. Perowne first encounters Baxter on his way to playing tennis when their cars collide in a narrow laneway. Immediately prior to the collision, Perowne is deep in his musings about the state of the world:

The world probably has changed fundamentally and the matter is being clumsily handled, particularly by the Americans. There are people around the planet, well-connected and organised, who would like to kill him and his family and friends to make a point. (80–81)

The collision soon follows, and we meet Baxter, with whom Perowne has an altercation; the man who, merely hours later, invades Perowne's home armed with a knife and literally terrorises him and his family. Thus the remote drama that the anti-war demonstration is concerned with is played out for the reader by proxy in the final scenes of the novel, ensuring dramatic interest as well as furthering the novel's themes.

In *Distance*, I draw upon some of the techniques used by Hollinghurst and McEwan to make the abstract moment of the 1996 Federal election resonate. For example, much like Hollinghurst places Nick Guest in the Feddens' house, I have placed my protagonist, Abi Platter, in close proximity to a Liberal staffer. And similar to the way Hollinghurst and McEwan dramatise the themes playing out on the national stage through personal dramas, I dramatise the politics of the election through the parallel power plays occurring between Abi, her family and the Whitfords.

## **5 The ethics of the political novel and the problem of polemic: *Falling Man*, *Saturday* and *Salvage the Bones***

The political novel is difficult to define. Many a critic has despaired of 'generating adequate classifications' for it (Boyers 1985, p.4) and in recent decades it appears that few have tried. American literary critic, Robert Boyers (1985) explains that the problem is not just that writers have taken such a wide range of approaches to writing a political novel, but also that the best political novelists continue to test the strictures of the novel



form itself:

Solzhenitsyn may be in some respects an old-fashioned realist, but there is a documentary intensity in his fiction that calls into question certain formal presuppositions. Grass may work on the margins of farce, but he is as interested in preserving a recognizable ethical perspective as the bourgeois novelists his work would seem to repudiate. (Boyers 1985, pp.4–5)

Almost thirty years before Boyers explored the topic, American literary and social critic Irving Howe (1957) argued that the term ‘political novel’ can at most ‘point to a dominant emphasis, a significant stress in the writer’s subject or his attitude toward it’ (Howe 1957, pp.16–23). That dominant emphasis will have to do with the relationship between political ideas and the experience of characters who take hold of those ideas (Howe 1957).

A challenge common to all novels that engage with political ideas is to avoid polemic. Polemic can damage a work of fiction in reducing literature to argument, and flattening the characters into mere mouthpieces, thereby limiting the complexity of the work and leaving fiction’s potential unfulfilled. Novelist Marie-Henri Beyle (or Stendhal) puts it thus in *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839): ‘Politics in a work of literature are like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert, something loud and vulgar yet a thing to which it is not possible to refuse one’s attention’ (Stendhal 1839, p.42).

As Blotner notes, however, ‘this is not to say that the use of political material must disrupt a work of literature. The trick, of course, is all in knowing how’ (Blotner 1955, p.3).

McEwan has suggested that ‘the successful or memorable novels we think of as ‘political’ are always written *against* politics’ and that ‘the ‘political novel’ at its best, just like any other good novel, remains an open-ended voyage of exploration of experience’ (McEwan 1989, p.xii). But whose experience is the writer obliged to explore, and to what end?

The ethical territory of the political novelist is complex. While novelists are not historians or political scientists, readers arguably expect novelists to go beyond the public rhetoric attached to an event. This in turn means that readers grant fiction writers a great deal of trust in confronting and depicting history (Batchelor 2011); and history-making, whether in fiction or in history books, has its own complexities, as the public discussion that followed the publication of *The Secret River* demonstrates. In *Is History Fiction?* (2006) Australian historians Ann Curthoys and John Docker discuss how in recent years, history — and in particular, history about the foundation of nations — has become a source of fierce public debate, with different versions of a country’s past being compared

and challenged. Curthoys and Docker make a case that ‘the very doubleness of history — in the space between history as rigorous scrutiny of sources and history as part of the world of literary forms — gives it ample room for uncertainty, disagreement, and creativity’ (Curthoys & Docker 2006, p.4).

If we accept that even scholarly history cannot provide an objective truth about the past, then it is clear we cannot demand such truth from political novelists, who are — by their own admission — writers of fiction. Certainly ‘one should not go to political novels expecting to find, except in rare cases, complete objectivity, solidly documented references and exhaustive expositions of political theory’ (Blotner 1955, p.8), if only because such features would do little to further the novelist’s cause to engage and move a reader. Nor is the political novelist restricted by the same ethical frameworks of historians or scientists. Arguably a political novel will always reflect ‘a view of life shaped by an individual set of preferences and dislikes, talents and blind spots’ (Blotner 1955, p.8). And yet certain expectations of an ethical standard do exist for novelists. Writing about the ‘terrorist novel’ in particular, American literary critic Margaret Scanlan remarks:

Anyone who loves literature and deplores the war on terrorism will wish that the terrorist novel were [...] an intervention. We take for granted that Rupert Murdoch’s *24* will follow the Bush administration in conflating the merely alien with the sinister and violent Other, but we expect serious fiction to challenge the complacencies of public rhetoric. (Scanlan 2010, p.266)

By this measure, DeLillo’s *Falling Man* meets — or at least attempts to meet — the ethical standards of ‘serious fiction’ that Scanlan refers to, in that it is concerned with providing a counter-narrative to the ‘complacent’ public rhetoric about September 11. One way DeLillo attempts to do this is by presenting the perspective of the hijackers. Despite these attempts however, it could be argued that DeLillo inadvertently reinforces the dominant rhetoric by privileging the Western perspective in the novel. The majority of the narrative follows the lives of the survivors. And as Scanlan argues, while DeLillo is ‘at pains to suggest that the Islamic terrorist is a human being with whom we may have some sympathy, [he fails to create] a context large enough to include ordinary Muslims, people with differing political and religious perspectives’ (Scanlan 2010, p.267).

Nor has DeLillo entirely avoided the problem of polemic. As is often the case in political novels, characters are used as mouthpieces for political ideas; for example, Martin and Nina arguing about the motivation of the terrorists:

‘They invoke God constantly...How convenient it is to find a system of belief that justifies these

feelings and these killings.’

‘But the system doesn’t justify this. Islam renounces this.’

‘If you call it God, then it’s God. God is whatever God allows.’ (112)

Passages like these have led critic Martin Randall to describe the novel as ‘at times essayistic’ (Randall 2011, p.130).

We see this weakness in parts of *Saturday* as well. A notable example is the argument between Daisy and Perowne, during which both parties express their strong and conflicting ideological views about the Iraq war. The argument is seven pages and mostly dialogue, rendering this part of the novel flat. Here *Saturday* fails to deliver the emotional engagement that is expected of fiction.

Like *Falling Man*, *Saturday* has also been criticised for reinforcing the dominant rhetoric about terrorism without seeking to understand its causes. The result is a portrait of Western privilege that, though not entirely uncritical, is arguably not critical enough. The novel’s protagonist, Perowne, is a white, middle-aged London professional with a home, a family and leisure time, who is demonstratively opposed to Islamic terrorism and Saddam Hussein, and supportive of the Iraq War. His Western prejudices are on clear display, from his distaste for burkhas — ‘How dismal, that anyone should be obliged to walk around so entirely obliterated’ (124) — to his soliloquising about the products of consumerism:

What simple accretions have brought the humble kettle to this peak of refinement: jug shaped for efficiency, plastic for safety, wide spout for ease of filling, and clunky little platform to pick up power...someone had thought about this carefully, and now there’s no going back. The world should take note: not everything is getting worse. (68)

Throughout the novel we observe Perowne actively enjoying the spoils of material progress — his London home, his squash games, his Mercedes-Benz — without sparing more than a passing thought for the people suffering from the inequities created by the progress he enjoys (Gauthier 2013).

With similar blindness, Perowne characterises the streets of his neighbourhood as ‘harmless’, an embodiment of ‘the tolerant life’, without acknowledging his own intolerances. The ‘new enemy’, on the other hand, he describes in extreme and negative terms, as ‘tentacular, full of hatred and focused zeal’ (76).

Of course, it is possible — and desirable — for a novel to present a character’s bias and then critically explore it, and there are plenty of hints that the reader is not

supposed to take Perowne's views as the novel's. An example is the irony of Perowne claiming 'he is living proof' that people can live without stories, right before picking up the newspapers by the front door, an action that immediately indicates to the reader how much he wants to find out the story behind the flaming plane he witnessed in the opening scene (68). There is also the moment when Perowne shares his opinion that '[a]t every level, material, medical, intellectual, sensual, for most people [life] has improved' (77). Then, in the very next scene, Baxter appears, who, being lower class, and with an untreatable neurological condition is clearly someone who has not benefited too greatly from the improvements Perowne has just referred to.

Perhaps the most obvious instance is when Perowne contemplates self-blindness:

How useful it must once have been, in another age, to be prosperous and believe that an all-knowing supernatural force had allotted people to their stations in life. And not to see how that belief served your own prosperity — a form of anosognosia, a useful psychiatric term for lack of awareness of one's own condition. (74)

As British academic Naomi Booth suggests, 'Perowne's failure to acknowledge that his own beliefs, in *this age*, might serve his own prosperity and uphold his middle-class status' is surely a deliberate omission (Booth 2015, p.855). But while this passage makes it clear that the novel attempts to critique of Perowne's privilege, the story arc, climax and ending suggest that the novel might suffer from its own anosognosia, sharing more of Perowne's perspective than it knows. The characterisation of Baxter, Perowne's antagonist and the novel's proxy terrorist threat, illustrates this.

Through Perowne's eyes, Baxter is severely diminished, practically sub-human. During their first encounter we get a description of his hairy hands, his 'muzzle'-like face, his 'general simian air' (87–88). We learn little more about him other than the fact that, according to Perowne, he has a hereditary neurological disease. This key detail serves to establish his irrationality (used in the novel as a metaphor for the irrationality of Islamic terrorism), which is in contrast to Perowne's (and the West's) rationality.

Even if we accept that this stereotyping is supposed to signal Perowne's bias, to what extent does the novel disclaim that bias? At no point is Baxter's point of view contemplated, or the fact that he might have a legitimate grievance against Perowne and what he represents, or by extension, the fact that the terrorists might have a legitimate grievance against the West. Baxter's perspective is illegitimised by his apparent neurological limitations. The terrorists, when described, are depicted as equally irrational — nameless 'fanatics' — and the possibility that they have a different and even legitimate

cultural perspective is never contemplated. Not even Daisy, the one character who openly challenges Perowne's perspective in the novel, criticises his views about terrorism. Rather, she attacks his pro-war stance in the following terms: 'No one's against going after Al-Qaeda. We're talking about Iraq' (191).

In making Baxter's neurological disorder the source of his disadvantage, the novel also avoids difficult questions about structural disadvantage, which is an undeniable factor in both class tensions in England (also relevant to the relationship between Perowne and Baxter) and tensions between the Middle East and the West. In the world of *Saturday*, structural disadvantage is underplayed: those who are talented and work hard are duly advanced, irrespective of class or race. *Saturday* describes Perowne's own rise from the working class to the professional class, where his colleagues include women (Gita Syal is the registrar of his colleague and tennis partner, Jay Strauss, 247), and black people (Perowne's registrar, Rodney Browne, has ambitions to set up a head injury unit in his homeland, Guyana, 249), and his patient, Andrea Chapman, who is black, dreams of becoming a neurosurgeon herself — an ambition that Perowne encourages (260). The implication appears to be that access to the upper classes is available to all and those who fail to climb the class ladder have only themselves to blame (Ryle 2010).

The novel's resolution consolidates the preference for Western life and values. When Baxter invades Perowne's home, Perowne is first able to distract him by promising to help him get treatment for his medical condition. Daisy is then able to halt his attack by reciting Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach', which Baxter responds to so positively that he drops his guard, allowing Theo and Perowne to ultimately throw him down the stairs. Through this sequence of events, the family's advanced scientific and cultural knowledge defeats the uneducated and neurologically inferior Baxter. Middle class privilege (and the privilege of the West) is maintained and the danger of the outsider is neutralised.

Later that evening, Perowne is called into the hospital to treat a patient with a depressed fracture over the right sinus: Baxter. The final scene is Perowne in his element, in surgery. The scene suggests that Perowne has not learned anything that compromises his world perspective. Rather, our enduring image of him is as an all-powerful figure, taming the beast on the operating table.

The novel richly invokes the political atmosphere of post-9/11 London, and skillfully weaves the political and personal throughout much of its narrative. However, its success in offering a counter-narrative to the dominant public rhetoric — or at least

exploring the experience of people on both sides of history, as McEwan himself has suggested is the duty of the political novel (McEwan 1989) — is less sure.

Jesmyn Ward is an American novelist whose literary focus is the experience of black Americans living on the Gulf Coast. Her novel, *Salvage the Bones*, tells the story of a black family living through Hurricane Katrina. Unlike in *Saturday*, politics and political argument are never foregrounded. *Salvage the Bones* is political, not because it is explicitly about politics, but because its narrative is from the perspective of people who have been neglected by government and by recent history. Writing such a book at such a time is itself a political act; it is Ward's way of speaking to power; of encouraging people — politicians included — to 'see us, to know what life is still like in the South for many poor black people' (Ward, quoted in Murphy 2014).

After Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast in late August 2005, local, state and federal governments were heavily criticised for their inadequate preparations and relief efforts. After the hurricane hit, residents were left without water, food or shelter, and many people died as a result of thirst, exhaustion, and violence. In a survey conducted of 680 evacuees, 70% blamed President George W. Bush and his government for their handling of the problem, and 60% felt the initially sluggish response made them feel the 'government doesn't care' about people like them (Morin & Rein 2005). In a benefit concert for Hurricane Katrina relief aired on NBC on 2 September 2005, rapper Kanye West went off-script to criticise the federal government's handling of the crisis, saying, 'George Bush doesn't care about black people' (West, quoted in Alfano 2005). Ward, too, has suggested that racism — as well as classism — were at play in the response to the tragedy:

I think that Katrina revealed yet again a lot of ugly things about the South and the country in general — ugly things about race and class and about how certain human lives are valued more than others. (Ward, quoted in Murphy 2014)

Ward lived through Katrina and experienced the racism first hand, and this experience is her entry point for the novel. Through its focus on the lived experience and avoidance of overt political discussion, *Salvage the Bones* eschews the pitfalls of polemic faced by *Saturday* and *Falling Man*, while retaining its political heft. When asked whether she thought her writing was political, Ward said:

After I finished my first draft of *Salvage the Bones*, I felt that I wasn't political enough. I had to be more honest about the realities of the community I was writing about. After my brother died in

the fall of 2000, four young black men from my community died in the next four years — from suicide, drug overdose, murder, and auto accidents. My family and I survived Hurricane Katrina in 2005; we left my grandmother's flooding house, were refused shelter by a white family, and took refuge in trucks in an open field during a Category Five hurricane. I saw an entire town demolished, people fighting over water, breaking open caskets searching for something that could help them survive. I realized that if I was going to assume the responsibility of writing about my home, I needed narrative ruthlessness. I couldn't dull the edges and fall in love with my characters and spare them. Life does not spare us. (Ward, quoted in Hoover 2011)

The lives the novel depicts are plainly difficult ones. The narrator, Esch, lives with her three brothers, Randall, Skeetah and Junior, and their father, in a rundown house in a town on the Gulf Coast. Their grandparents are dead, and their mother has died while giving birth to Junior. Even before the hurricane hits, food is scarce. They have little money. The love that exists in their world is a rough and twisted kind of love. Their father is largely absent, leaving his children to fend for themselves. Esch is pregnant to Manny, one of Randall's friends who has another girlfriend, and who physically abuses her when he finds out she is carrying his child. Skeetah dotes upon his pitbull dog, China, in a sad echo of the way their mother doted on her children when she was alive.

Ward's depiction of misery could be gratuitous if it were not for the dignity and humanity with which she draws her characters. Despite their hardship, the siblings and the small community they are a part of take care of each other: Randall, the eldest sibling, looks after Junior like a surrogate father; when Esch cuts her finger on a broken bottle, he stems the flow of blood; knowing Randall can't afford it otherwise, Skeetah plans to sell China's litter to raise the money for his brother to go to basketball camp; Skeetah protects Esch from their father, and sacrifices China to save Esch from drowning during the storm; a neighbourhood boy, Big Henry, looks out for them all as well, and has long played this role:

When we were little, Big Henry used to let me ride on his back in the deep part of the pit, the part that was lined with oyster shells. He used to carry me so my feet wouldn't get cut, even though his feet were bare as mine. (27)

Big Henry and his mother ultimately provide the family with refuge and food after the hurricane. Through such portraits, the novel attempts to restore the dignity denied to poor black Mississippi residents after Hurricane Katrina.

The lot of Esch and her siblings is painted in stark contrast to that of white people living on the Gulf Coast. White people are never foregrounded, but they are referenced throughout the book, and in ways that subtly signal their comparative wealth as well as

their comparative lack of empathy. When Esch describes the path of the hurricanes, she explains how they ‘knock against the old summer mansions with their slave galleys turned guesthouses before running over the bayou’ (4). It is an image that succinctly describes how white wealth has been built on the subjugation of black lives. At the neighbouring house where white people live, ‘a wooden and barbed wire fence rims the pasture’ (64). When their white neighbour catches them on his property, he fires his rifle and sends his dog after them. When they are waiting in the hospital after their father has injured his hand, a white couple with clothes that are:

clean and faded along the ironed edges [...] studied the receptionist area the whole time we were there and never looked over to Big Henry and his hands, Junior’s feet that kicked in his sleep as if he were dreaming of falling, and me. (132)

In this way, the humanity of Esch’s family is drawn in contrast to the lack of humanity of their white neighbours, and by extension, the lack of humanity shown by the white president and his government in response to Hurricane Katrina.

It is possible that the novel’s treatment of white people might be considered two-dimensional and stereotypical, in the same way it has been argued that the depictions of terrorists in *Falling Man* and *Saturday* are two-dimensional and stereotypical. However, this reading ignores the broader context in which *Salvage the Bones* was published — the history of black subjugation in America — a context that affects the ethical questions at play. Ward is writing *against* the silencing of black voices by white voices, and *against* the dehumanisation of black people in American life and literature. By centering her story around black characters, and encouraging the reader to see their plight as universal, Ward provides a counter-narrative to the mainstream ‘othering’ of the black experience. When *Salvage the Bones* won the National Book Award in 2011, the *New York Times* said: ‘It feels fresh and urgent, but it’s an ancient, archetypal tale....It’s an old story — of family honor, revenge, disaster — and it’s a good one’ (Sehgal 2014, p.BR13).

Ward’s use of Greek mythology — specifically, the tale of Jason and Medea — consolidates this reading. Esch is studying a book of myths for school, and Medea is never far from her thoughts. When she notices her father’s smallness, his physical weakness for the first time, she asks herself: ‘Is this what Medea saw, when she decided to follow Jason, to flee her father with her brother?’ (61). When she and Skeetah run through the woods away from their white neighbour, she asks, ‘is this how Medea ran with her brother, hand in hand?’ (67).

The strength and force of Medea-like mother figures is a key theme in *Salvage*



*the Bones*. Like Medea, who ultimately sacrifices her children, Skeetah's pitbull, China, kills one of her pups. Katrina, the 'mother' of all hurricanes, wreaks devastation in the Mississippi. Esch comes to learn of her own strength, and how that strength is tied to her imminent motherhood, as the book's final lines suggest:

*China*. She will return, standing tall and straight, the milk burned out of her [...] and she will know that I have kept watch, that I have fought. China will bark and call me sister. In the star-suffocated sky, there is a great waiting silence.

She will know that I am a mother. (258)

Ward has said that her engagement with Greek mythology was a deliberate act of reclamation:

It infuriates me that the work of white American writers can be universal and lay claim to classic texts, while black and female authors are ghetto-ized as 'other.' I wanted to align Esch with that classic text, with the universal figure of Medea, the antihero, to claim that tradition as part of my Western literary heritage. The stories I write are particular to my community and my people, which means the details are particular to our circumstances, but the larger story of the survivor, the *savage*, is essentially a universal, human one. (Ward, quoted in Hoover 2011)

By universalising the story, Ward makes the reader recognise its commonality to her own. We see Esch's humanity, identical to our own, and the humanity of all the black southerners abandoned by their government during the hurricane. The effect of this universalisation and the novel's characterisation of Esch is especially pointed in its challenge to the prejudices surrounding black teenage sexuality and black single motherhood (Moynihan 2015). One example of such prejudice is American conservative political commentator George Will's (2005) response to Barack Obama's critique of President Bush's lack of empathy for the victims of the hurricane:

America's always fast-flowing river of race-obsessing has overflowed its banks...[Obama] might, however, care to note three not-at-all recondite rules for avoiding poverty: Graduate from high school, don't have a baby until you are married, don't marry while you are a teenager. (Will 2005)

Just like the automated phone call the Batistes receive from the government prior to the hurricane that states 'if you choose to stay in your home and have not evacuated by this time we are not responsible' (217), Will, and others like him, seek to shirk any responsibility for the predicament of poor black Americans. Rather than recognising the limitations that entrenched disadvantage creates (the Baptistes, after all, have nowhere to go to escape Katrina and no means to get there even if they did) and indeed, white America's role in creating those conditions, they frame the actions of the poor black

American as a choice and blame her for her plight.

Skeetah's murmurings to China before her dogfight, '*make them know, make them know, make them know*' (171) could be Ward's own mantra; and it is worth noting the structural challenges associated with race, gender and geography that Ward herself has faced in 'making them know':

My first novel was reviewed nowhere, and I remember being told that people thought it was just a Southern book. Even with *Salvage the Bones*, I got a good number of reviews when it first came out, but I didn't get reviewed by the *New York Times* until after I won the National Book Award. I understand those papers are catering to an audience, and maybe they think their audience is more interested in literature that takes place in New York or on the East Coast. Or maybe they just have to see that readers want something else before they're willing to cover it. (Ward, quoted in Murphy 2014)

Ward's experience raises important questions (unfortunately ones that I do not have space to delve into further here) about the relative status of black female writers. While Ward's profile has grown considerably since winning her second National Book Award for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* (2017), the work of women of colour is significantly underrepresented on prize lists and as the subject of book reviews, as national statistical surveys such as the VIDA Count in the United States (Clarke & King 2016) and the Stella Count in Australia (Harvey & Lamond 2017) demonstrate. One of the political imperatives underlying Ward's writing to address the underrepresentation of black voices in literature, remains, seven years after it was published.

## **6 Exploring the process of history-making in fiction: *Falling Man***

If we accept the suggestion of Curthoys and Docker that history, as 'part of the world of literary forms', has ample room for uncertainty, disagreement and creativity (Curthoys & Docker 2006, p.4), it is worth considering the way that certain histories come to be privileged or foregrounded in official records — or more broadly, how history is 'made'.

As previously mentioned, DeLillo is a writer interested in exploring the process of history making in fiction, and in particular the interrelationship of the media image and history. *Falling Man* opens with the immediate aftermath of the World Trade Centre attacks. Keith is walking out onto the street having just escaped from one of the towers. The scene, with 'people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads [...] handkerchiefs pressed to their mouths' (3) is one that contemporary readers will instantly recognise from the footage and photographs that dominated media coverage

at the time (see, for example, Shortell 2015). DeLillo's challenge then, is to rescue the individual from the historical moment as depicted in the sensationalist media coverage and already framed by political and cultural narratives.

The idea that these images and their associated narratives overshadow and distort the individual experience is explored throughout the novel (Gleich 2014); for example, when Keith arrives at the apartment of his estranged wife, Lianne, after the attacks, she turns off the television to protect him 'from the news he's just walked out of' (87) as if the reportage is as powerful, or as 'real', as what he's just been through. When Keith and Lianne finally watch the footage together, Lianne's previous experience of watching the footage as the events unfolded when she believed Keith was dead still dominates: 'She felt it in her body, a deep pause, and thought there he is, unbelievably, in one of those towers, and now his hand on hers, in pale light, as though to console her for his dying' (135). Even Keith struggles to preference his lived experience over the footage: 'It still looks like an accident, the first one. Even from this distance, way outside the thing [...] I'm standing here thinking it's an accident [...] the way the camera sort of shows surprise' (135).

An additional complicating factor is that the event itself — the planes crashing into the towers — is so much like a scene from a big budget Hollywood film that it feels unreal, even to those who experienced it. In *Falling Man* the unreality of the event extends into its aftermath, so that Keith and Lianne feel they are playing out a film script rather than living their own lives. When Keith goes to visit his empty apartment, which he hasn't gone back to since the towers came down, he thinks: 'In the movie version, someone would be in the building, an emotionally damaged woman or a homeless old man, and there would be dialogue and close-ups' (27). When Keith and Lianne make love in a taxi, '[s]he said, in urgent murmurs, *It's a movie, it's a movie*' (104). 'Real' life has become mediated by the cinema and the news reel.

In an attempt to counter this phenomenon, the novel endeavours to refocus our attention on the material and corporeal realities of the historical event: to reinsert the missing body, or bodies, into the narrative (Brandt 2014). Empty clothes are one of the recurring motifs in *Falling Man*. Keith sees an empty shirt 'coming down out of the sky' (88) outside the window of his office after the impact. At one point Lianne describes 'feeling like a skirt and blouse without a body' (23). She says of Keith after the event: 'He was not quite returned to his body yet' (59).

DeLillo attempts to 'return the body' to the September 11 narrative by describing

it in vivid detail. We learn about the ‘organic shrapnel’ that may have entered Keith’s body as a result of his experience: ‘pellets of flesh, human flesh that got driven into the skin’ (16). We witness Keith undertaking repetitive physical exercises to heal his damaged wrist. But it is through the image of the Falling Man that DeLillo articulates most thoroughly his desire to re-present the historical event by emphasising the lived bodily experience.

In the novel the Falling Man refers both to photo-journalist Richard Drew’s famous photograph of a man falling from the North Tower on the morning of September 11, and to David Janiak, a performance artist, who stages unannounced public performances ‘not designed to be recorded by a photographer’ (220) in the streets of New York City. Janiak, who performs in a harness, falls from an elevated position and jolts to a stop, assuming a position similar to the one in Drew’s photograph.

However, even though Drew’s photograph is a primary source of the historical attacks, it has been critiqued as distorting the reality of what happened on the day. American journalist, Tom Junod (2003) has said:

Photographs lie. Even great photographs. The Falling Man in Richard Drew’s picture fell in the manner suggested by the photograph for only a fraction of a second, and then kept falling. The photograph functioned as a study of doomed verticality, a fantasia of straight lines, with a human being slivered at the center, like a spike. In truth, however, the Falling Man fell with neither the precision of an arrow nor the grace of an Olympic diver. He fell like everyone else, like all the other jumpers — trying to hold on to the life he was leaving, which is to say he fell desperately, inelegantly. (Junod 2003, pp.180–181)

The photograph, in other words, disguises the true horror of the events. It misrepresents the physicality of what occurred. It is another example of the difficulties of documenting an objective ‘truth’. DeLillo explores this idea further when he describes Lianne’s reaction to Drew’s photograph:

It hit her hard when she first saw it, the day after, in the newspaper. The man headlong, the towers behind him. The mass of the towers filled the frame of the picture. The man falling, the towers contiguous, she thought, behind him. The enormous soaring lines, the vertical column stripes. The man with blood on his shirt, she thought, or burn marks, and the effect of the columns behind him, the composition, she thought, darker stripes for the nearer tower, the north, lighter for the other, and the mass, the immensity of it, and the man set almost precisely between the rows of darker and lighter stripes. Headlong, free fall, she thought, and this picture burned a hole in her mind and heart, dear God, he was a falling angel and his beauty was horrific. (221–222)

More than anything it is the photograph’s artfulness, its aesthetics that Lianne responds

to: ‘the enormous soaring lines, the vertical column stripes’ and the horrific ‘beauty’ of the falling man.

What Janiak tries to do with his performance of the Falling Man is to reinsert the physicality of the fall, and to make an impact on his audience by removing the medium of the photograph. His audience must watch him in real time, in confronting proximity. For Lianne, witnessing his performance feels ‘too near and deep, too personal [...] There was something awful about the stylized pose, body and limbs, his signature stroke. But the worst of it was the stillness itself and her nearness to the man’ (163, 168). Janiak’s artistic pursuit mirrors the novelist’s own attempts to re-present the lived experience of September 11. And while the performance artist appears successful in awakening his audience to the true horror of the events, *Falling Man* also hints at the limitations of art, including the author’s own, in re-presenting an historical moment.

DeLillo ends *Falling Man* with Keith’s recollection of September 11: ‘Then he saw a shirt come down out of the sky, he walked and saw it fall, arms waving like nothing in this life’ (246). Here is the empty clothes motif again, but whether the body has been returned is unclear — are the waving arms the arms of the shirt or a human within the shirt? The phrase ‘like nothing in this life’ also suggests the limits of the author’s power to represent the lived experience. If we accept that ‘real’ life is mediated, as DeLillo illustrates, then fiction offers just another layer of mediation. Fiction is just words, after all, another medium like the newsreel, or the photograph, or the blockbuster Hollywood film; opaque, removed from life, imprecise and open to interpretation.

## **7 Conclusion**

One of the ideas that my novel, *Distance*, explores is the way Howard shaped and exploited narratives about family, home and nation to his advantage. Through his rhetoric Howard sold a very particular image of an ideal Australia that sounded universal but was code for an exclusionary national vision.

Selling a vision of ‘nation’ is, of course, part of the role of the federal politician. As political scientist and historian Benedict Anderson has said, the nation is an ‘imagined community’, held together by a shared collection of narratives, identities and symbols (Anderson 1983). It is only through constantly imagining ourselves using these frameworks that we experience a sense of belonging to a unified community.

For Howard, ‘home’ was one of the more potent symbols of Australia’s

nationhood, ‘a compelling notion in our psyche’ (Howard 1997, p.9). His particular vision of ‘home’ fronted his ‘Future Directions’ package in 1988, which depicted a white nuclear family standing in front of the white picket fence of a suburban house (Liberal and National Parties, 1988). He often talked with nostalgia about his suburban childhood in the Sydney suburb of Earlwood. Australian cultural critic Fiona Allon has noted:

In each reference the same imagery appears: ordinary, middle-class suburbia, safely Anglo-Saxon. For Howard, Earlwood represented ‘quintessential middle Australia,’ a classless suburban utopia where ‘everybody was about the same’. (Allon 2014, p.31)

In his election campaign launch speech in 1996, Howard lamented that this ‘egalitarian innocence’ had disappeared from Australia (Howard 1996, p.8). This seemingly benign description of an ideal suburban past hides the gendered, racialised and heteronormative aspects of Howard’s vision. It is what American social theorists Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have called ‘national heterosexuality’:

[T]he mechanism by which a core national culture can be imagined as a sanitised space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behaviour, a space of pure citizenship. A familial model of society displaces the recognition of structural racism and other systemic inequalities. (Berlant & Warner 1998, p.549)

The related concept of ‘family’ was another symbol Howard embraced, saying, ‘We have always been a ... people who regard the family as the central institution of our society’ (Howard, quoted in Nethercote 2001, pp.vi–vii). But his idea of ‘family’ was, of course, a limited one, threatened by, and threatening, less traditional social arrangements.

Similar to DeLillo’s project in *Falling Man* to explore the process of history making and, by extension, the mediated nature of ‘reality’, my project in *Distance* is to explore Howard’s process of making the ‘nation’ through rhetoric. I do this by citing and then challenging the imagery Howard used to define us; for example, by employing his imagery of the ‘white picket’ home and family (*Distance*, 16) and then progressively dismantling the myth. I critique the way Howard employed nostalgia by having a narrator tell the story of her past through a nostalgic lens, and by raising questions through her narration about where the truth about the past really lies. Finally, I show the dangerous power of Howard’s political rhetoric to shape the thoughts and feelings of those within the ‘imagined community’, and in doing so legitimise some of the darker incidents of our national history that occurred during his prime ministership, like Tampa and the Cronulla riots.

Randall has remarked: ‘if the artist has only the realm of the symbolic to respond

to and then re-present, what can an added layer of symbolism add to the already existing image?’ (Randall 2001, p.128). Considered from a different angle, one might say that fiction’s claim on the lived experience is just as strong as any other medium. If the rhetoric of our politicians can inform and even shape the lived experience of being an Australian in the late twentieth century, like Howard’s did, then I am hopeful fiction can as well; and in doing so, tell an altogether different story.

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