

EXQUISITE CORPSE
STORIES AND AN EXEGESIS

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February 2014
A creative work and thesis submitted in
fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Creative Arts (Research)
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
University of Technology, Sydney
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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 except as fully acknowledged within the text.

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.

Signature of Student

Date

Acknowledgements

This research project involved the support and assistance of many people, whom I gratefully thank:

Dr Debra Adelaide (my supervisor at UTS), for her extraordinary generosity, mentorship and patience!

Gabrielle Carey (my alternate supervisor at UTS), for reading this thesis at the eleventh hour and getting me over the line.

John Dale and Tegan Bennett Daylight for their generous advice and gentle critique.

The UTS FASS Research Students Fund for research funding assistance that allowed me to give a paper that was crucial for my research at the Interdisciplinary Net SUI3 Conference in Salzburg in November 2012.

Jane Britton from the Woollahra Local History Centre for her advice and research assistance.

Daniel Mudie Cunningham, for permission to use his *Funeral Songs* project as a device in 'Goosebumps'.

Victoria Spence for her inspired 'real world' work on death and dying.

Friends and family members who shared their stories.

The late Don Ritchie for giving people hope.

Lastly to anyone who has lost a loved one to suicide.

Contents

Statement of Original Authorship	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Contents	iv
Abstract	v
Key Words	vi
Part One: The Exegesis—Death Wishing & Cultural Memory	
Prologue: Suicidal Thoughts 1–7	1
Introduction: The Accidental Thanatourist	5
Chapter One: A Walk Through Japan’s ‘Suicide Forest’	9
Chapter Two: The Gap in Between	18
Part Two: The Creative Work—Exquisite Corpse	
Introduction: Writing the Suicidal Self	32
Chapter One: Goosebumps	35
Chapter Two: 25 Words or Less	41
Chapter Three: Mortal Sins	51
Chapter Four: Dominoes	59
Chapter Five: Dishpan Hands	64
Chapter Six: The Charm	73
Chapter Seven: Backwash	79
Chapter Eight: Slipstream	87
Appendices	
Research Methodology & Ethical Considerations	a
References: Bibliography	b
Filmography	c
List of Publications	d

Abstract

Does landscape have a memory? Can past events—historical facts and cultural fictions, personal stories and public hype—impregnate a site, marking it so deeply that those who pass through it feel its pull, creating attraction and desire, so the landscape itself becomes a magnet—a lure into the abyss? Put another way: can landscape have a soul?

My research looks at the interplay between history and cultural memory at two of the world's most popular suicide sites: Aokigahara Jukai, the sacred 'suicide forest' lying at the base of Mount Fuji; and The Gap, a notorious headland at Watsons Bay, Sydney.

By looking at the unique circumstances that have marked these two very different, yet similarly popular suicide destinations, I question whether the very aura of a site can influence the creation of a suicidal self. Whether a history of voluntary death narratives creates *loci memoriae*—memory places that mark a landscape or a landmark as a suicide destination, codifying and transforming a very public place into possibly the most private space of all—the environment in which someone chooses to end their life.

Exploring the factual and the fictional, the literal and the literary, this project excavates beneath the surface of these liminal landscapes to reveal their roots through storytelling and unearth whether these landscapes are, as Pierre Nora says, 'inscribed in the flesh of memory' (Nora 1989).

The exegesis also explores the process and underpinnings of my creative work and demonstrates how my fiction has been informed by my scholarship. Extensive research in the field of suicide studies has given me an historical, cultural and philosophical framework from which to write deeply on a topic that is still taboo to many.

The creative project was developed in parallel to the exegesis. *Exquisite Corpse*, a collection of interlinked stories, tackles the notion of the suicidal self

and the suicide bereaved, and looks at the dynamic relationship between place and identity.

Key Words

Voluntary death, suicide, cultural memory, Japanese cinema, Aokigahara Jukai, Golden Gate Bridge, The Gap, liminal landscapes, monstrous geography.

Part One: The Exegesis—Death Wishing & Cultural Memory

Prologue: Suicidal Thoughts

Suicidal thought 1: Suicide runs in the family

My mother has been threatening to end her life for as long as I can remember. Even though she's strong as an ox, she talks about wanting to die as casually as someone who says they want chicken for dinner. My hunch is she fantasises about death because she loves life so much, but for a multitude of reasons she's been locked out of it, she's outside life looking in and that kills her in small ways every day. My mother has survived a lot of near-death-wish experiences. For years we've pulled her back from the brink, talked her away from the edge, saved her from drowning, calmed her when the spaceship didn't arrive. Perhaps her suicide ideation, while unnerving for those around her, is actually what keeps her going on. The desire to die appears to be firmly entrenched in her DNA and, like genes or shared mannerisms, it's a trait that's been passed on through generations and is easily spotted in other members of our family.

Suicidal thought 2: Suicide hurts

When I was at art school in the mid eighties, my best friend's father filled his car and lungs with carbon monoxide. Something in my friend died that day too. A year later, another friend's younger sister jumped off The Gap. Not long after, my partner, who was ten years my senior, ended his life by leaping in front of a train. Then the HIV epidemic hit. My inner-city community of fledgling artists and writers and uni students was in absolute crisis, the plague was relentless, there were pages and pages of obits in the community papers each week, and the rest of the world was going on as if nothing was happening. So many young men were dying from AIDS-related illnesses (often within two years of diagnosis from rare, opportunistic diseases that attacked their ravaged immune systems) and some who feared ending their lives alone and ostracised in St Vinnie's Ward 17, chose to end their lives their way, rather than by wasting away on a gurney.¹

¹ Ward 17 South was the AIDS hospice established at St Vincent's in 1988. Although it became known for its remarkable and compassionate treatment of HIV/AIDS patients, in the very early days, as a Catholic institution with a certain degree of homophobia, it was pretty grim.

Suicidal thought 3: Suicide is a-rational

There was a time, when death was everywhere, when I too, didn't want to wake up the next morning. I'd had enough of all the darkness and dying and felt the 'pull'—the permission, the freedom of the same possibility for myself. Once I'd decided, I enjoyed a recklessness that only those who don't care about what happens to them has. I was fearless, because nothing in the world could pose more danger to me than myself. I felt resolved and an absolute urgency to exit came over me. When I went to The Gap early one morning, in that surreal space before dawn, and just six feet away from certain death, a miracle stopped me from jumping. An event so implausible it would read as a magical realist narrative if I were to write it as it happened.² Suffice to say, it worked, and from that moment on I chose to make peace with the ghosts and the grieving and suck all I could from life.

Suicidal thought 4: Suicide is a dirty word

When discussing my research or personal history of suicidality, people often tell me—in hushed tones—that they, too, have contemplated suicide in the past, or had a brother, lover, friend, colleague or parent who took their life. It seems so many people have lost someone to suicide, or had an urge towards suicide themselves, yet it's not acknowledged as a universal experience. Although some religious communities have adopted a more forgiving view, in many instances the act of suicide is still considered taboo, as is speaking of it. When my partner died, his death was reported in the local press as an *accident*. The Monsignor presiding over the requiem mass called it an *accident*. When I was with his parents I, too, spoke of the *accident*—not for religious reasons, but because of the stigma and not wanting to cause them more hurt from my need to cleave to the truth. Stories are invented to avoid speaking of it—myths made of soldiers lost at war, runaway brides, mysterious illnesses. Stories passed down from generation to generation, all masking the truth.

² 'Goosebumps' is a fictionalised version of the event.

Suicidal thought 5: Suicide is a sin

‘This is going to be a sad funeral, dear,’ Erin announced, side-saddling her way in to the front seat.

Caitlin switched the radio to a classical station. ‘Funerals are always sad, Ma.’

‘But this is going to be very, very sad,’ her mother’s voice punched the air for emphasis. Erin sucked in air between her teeth, then with a hissing sound, cursed ‘Sssuicide’. Her voice as shrill as scraping metal.

Caitlin wanted to yell out ‘la-la-la-la-la’ over her mother’s voice. Here she was, a middle-aged woman with kids of her own and she felt like a child.

‘But you said...’ Caitlin stopped. Years of gestalt and roleplaying their mother–daughter relationship had made her adopt an artificial language, a controlling newspeak that removed *blame* words. ‘I thought it was an accident.’

Erin turned squarely to face her. ‘The funeral notice said it’s an accident. His father is saying it’s an accident. The priest will say it’s an accident.’

‘Why?’

‘Because suicide is a mortal sin.’

‘Mortal Sins’, *Exquisite Corpse*

Suicidal thought 6: Suicide is contagious

Why, as a society, are we complicit in hiding the prevalence of suicide? What do we fear most when someone chooses to end their life: could it be fear of contagion—does one person’s suicide give permission for another to do the same; or fear that suicidality can be triggered by suggestion—that telling a child her grandfather took his life could be all that’s needed to persuade her to one day take her own?³ It’s as if naming it is enough to sew a seed of possibility in another. Yet, there is a very real concern: a report in the *Journal of the American Academy*

³ Copycat suicides are known as the Werther Effect, from Goethe’s novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which inspired many suicides that mimicked the main character’s. The book was subsequently banned in Italy, Leipzig and Copenhagen.

of *Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (Wilcox et al. 2010) found that children or adolescents who lost a parent to suicide were three times more likely to commit suicide than children and teenagers with living parents.⁴

Suicidal thought 7: Suicide leaves a hole that never closes

Suicide ruptures memory, making it impossible to remember the lives of those who have gone without also remembering the way in which they left. It's impossible to hear of a suicide (or imagine one's own) without thinking of *how*. Just as an artist chooses her medium, the person planning their suicide requires a certain methodology or set of tools. The way someone chooses to take their life paradoxically says so much about their life. So too, does the place they choose to end it. Most popular suicide sites are places of extreme beauty. Many are tourist destinations, not due to their dark past, but despite it, as they persist as natural (or man-made) wonders.

⁴ According to a retrospective study of 44,397 Swedish child and adolescent survivors of parental suicide from 1969 to 2004. There was no difference in suicide risk when the researchers compared those who were 18 years and older.

Introduction: The Accidental Thanatourist

The lure of the abyss

When I was thirteen, my family lived near South Head, a sandstone headland that marks the entrance to Sydney Harbour and faces the open sea to the east. After school, I'd ride my pushbike along the coastal road, dump it in the scrub and climb through a small fence, across the rocky outcrop to the tall cliffs facing the ocean. It was my secret place. I was drawn to the edge, to the lure of the abyss, and although I wasn't at all haunted by suicidal thoughts at that time, I always had to fight an overwhelming urge to jump off. I'd lie on the warm rock, slither along on my belly until my head hung over the edge, and look down at the gull-swept cliff-face to see the ocean smashing the rocks below. On most days, the wind was fierce and brought up primeval smells from the bottom of the sea. It felt like I was hanging off the edge of the world, suspended in a liminal space between land and sea, past and present, life and death. Years later, I discovered my rock was known for jumpers. The Gap, as it's called, is considered the world's third most popular suicide destination.⁵

What was it about The Gap that drew me to it? Other bluffs and lookouts close by were equally as beautiful. Had its one-hundred-and-fifty-year history of recorded suicides left an impression on the landscape that lured me to it?⁶ Was the site itself a lure into the abyss? Can a history of voluntary death narratives create loci memoriae—memory places that reframe a landscape or a landmark as a suicide destination, codifying and transforming a very public place into possibly the most private space of all—the environment in which someone chooses to end their life?

This exegesis looks at the history of voluntary death narratives and their impact on landscape and place, more specifically the memory places that arise and frame a suicide site. Although a universal phenomenon, the incidence and response to suicide varies immensely across different cultures. There are many

⁵ An estimated 50 people jump from The Gap each year, although figures are most likely underestimated. The Golden Gate Bridge and Aokigahara Jukia have the grizzly honour of first and second place.

⁶ The first suicide at The Gap was reported in 1863.

novels and films that deal with the subject, yet, to the best of my knowledge, there has not been a comprehensive study done on the lure of popular suicide sites around the world, nor a cross-cultural analysis of those sites.

Using an interdisciplinary framework, this research looks at two suicide destinations, from two very different perspectives. I had originally intended to focus on the three most popular suicide sites around the globe: the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco; Aokigahara Jukai, the forest at the base of Mount Fuji; and The Gap, the high, sandstone cliff at the southern entrance to Sydney Harbour. However, midway through my research, an excellent book was published on the history of suicides at Golden Gate Bridge, the world's most popular—and infamous—suicide destination.

In May 2012, Golden Gate Bridge celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary. It also marked a seventy-five-year history of suicides and suicide attempts.⁷ *The Final Leap* (Bateson 2012), written by the executive director of the San Francisco Bay Crisis Centre, John Bateson, is a passionate plea for installing a protective net under the bridge. Detractors argue a barrier wouldn't prevent suicides from occurring, it would simply direct the suicidal person towards another place or a different method. Yet Bateson defends his proposition by referencing a 1978 study by Richard Seiden, a psychology professor from the University of California.⁸ The study asked: 'Will a person who is prevented from suicide in one location inexorably tend to attempt and commit suicide elsewhere?' Seiden's study focused on five-hundred-and-fifteen would-be Golden Gate jumpers who were pulled back from the railing between 1937 and 1971. An astonishing ninety-four per cent were still alive twenty-five years later.

In many articles and interviews about Golden Gate (as well as Eric Steel's extraordinary documentary, *The Bridge*), time and again survivors (one per cent of jumpers survive), and would-be jumpers, state that the Golden Gate Bridge was

⁷ The bridge opened to the public on May 27, 1937. The first recorded suicide occurred in August that year.

⁸ John Bateson, *The Final Leap: Suicide on the Golden Gate Bridge* (California: University of California Press, 2012), 199.

their only option.⁹¹⁰ Potential suiciders who experienced some sort of intervention chose to live when ending their life at Golden Gate wasn't possible, even though another as-deadly bridge was located close by and there are of course other methods one can choose.

Bateson's important work is the culmination of many years of field research. Armed with his wisdom and careful argument, I narrowed my focus to concentrate on the thousand-year history and national acceptance of voluntary death at Aokigahara Jukai through the lens of Japanese cinema; and investigate the transformation of The Gap from a purely tourist site to a 'traumascape' by exploring the story of Ann Harrison, the first recorded suicide in 1863, via media reports and court transcripts from the time.¹¹

Why did the world's largest Art Deco monument become a magnet for the vulnerable? How did a Japanese forest lodge itself in the national psyche as a 'suicide forest'? When did an ancient sandstone cliff transform into a traumascape? This project aims to explore the interstices between these sites of cultural memory and the lived experience of them, in an attempt to understand the potency and 'pull' of a place impregnated with a history of suicides and asks whether the very popularity of a known suicide site can influence one's suicidality. By looking at the interplay between national identity, history and cultural representations of voluntary death at two very different suicide sites, we can explore whether these sites are, as French historian Pierre Nora has described, 'inscribed in the flesh of memory'.¹²

The creative project comprises eight stories about the death wish and its ramifications. *Exquisite Corpse* is a collection of short stories written as a

⁹ Eric Steel, *The Bridge* (USA, documentary, 2006).

¹⁰ According to Bateson, 1% of jumpers survive by correcting their position within the 4-second descent to reduce the impact on their body—most suicides from the bridge die from drowning in their own blood after puncturing internal organs. Of those interviewed, all stated that they instantly regretted their decision to jump.

¹¹ In her 2005 book, *Traumascapes: The Power and Fate of Places Transformed by Tragedy*, Maria Tumarkin argues that sites of great atrocity and suffering effectively scar the psychic and physical landscape.

¹² Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire,' *Representations: Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory* 26 (1989): 7-24.

discontinuous narrative. The collection investigates concepts of dissolution of self, social media and suicide, contagion, intergenerational suicide, and the nature of place and memory, all explored from the perspective of the suicidal person or the suicide bereaved. Each story revolves around a central suicide, some of the stories' plots and characters are intimately connected to the protagonist, others just fleetingly so. This approach allows for multiple thematic entry points and differing points-of-view. Without the constraints of a linear narrative, the stories are able to tackle diverse areas within suicide studies and interrogate the *meaning* of suicide in relation to contemporary ethical, religious and ontological questions. Regardless of plot or character arc, at the heart of each story lies the question—how does suicide inform our ideas of life, death, being and belief?

Suicide may be a deeply individual decision, yet its ripples spread far across families, communities and nations. This project, through both academic research and fiction, tries to unravel some of the mystique associated with suicidality and the mysterious places people choose to end their lives.

Chapter One: A Walk Through Japan's 'Suicide Forest'

The cabin filled with fatigue. Across the aisle, rows of passengers were laid out, anonymous and intimate, mummified with pale blue blankets and eye masks from their free comfort packs. Sara was glad for the empty seats on either side of her. She tucked the thin blanket around her thighs and buzzed for a vodka and tonic.

Sara was so exhausted and so awake. She lifted the armrest, slid it into the space between the seats and wriggled back, careful not to spill onto the other seat. She wanted to get in the mood. Think about Japan—that would make her feel better. Downloading the Lonely Planet Tokyo app and buying a phrasebook at the airport was the only preparation she managed to do. She flicked through the movie channels and found a film about three students living in Tokyo in the sixties. Based on a bestselling novel—must be good. A decent plot at least. Better than Manga. Or old black and whites with too much puppetry.

Ten minutes in, one of the male students—handsome, a few years younger than her—fills his car and lungs with gas. *Wow*, she let herself go. How could he? She buzzed for another can of vodka and tonic. Later, another student—his girlfriend, sweet in the way that Sara could never be—hangs herself in a forest. *Wow*. The film lingered on an image of the girl's dangling feet, delicate and relaxed as if she was floating in water, her blue-green skin glowing with the luminosity of the newly dead. Sara fumbled with the remote, switching channels till she turned her Japanese lesson off. She could never take her own life. No, never, no matter what.

'25 Words or Less', *Exquisite Corpse*

Locals call Aokigahara Jukai 'the suicide forest'. Located at the base of Mount Fuji, the thirty-five-kilometre-square forest is the world's second most popular

suicide destination with an average of one hundred deaths recorded annually.¹³ The dense forest's popularity as a place for ending one's life has been attributed to Seicho Matsumoto's 1960 novel *Kuroi Jukai* (Sea of Trees), which ends with a lovers' suicide in the forest.¹⁴ Yet, the forest has had an almost thousand-year-long association with voluntary death and is believed by many Japanese to be haunted by Yurie—the angry spirits of those who have died there.

When Mount Fuji erupted in 864AD, lava streamed down into the lake at its base, transforming the landscape into a hive of volatile chasms formed deep below a webbed volcanic rock surface. Over centuries, giant trees have grown so densely over the otherworldly landscape that it feels like night, even when it's mid-afternoon. Thick foliage blankets every sound, rendering the forest eerily still and deadly quiet. There's no wind and virtually no wildlife. The ground is booby-trapped with a web of gnarly roots that threaten to grab one's ankles like a child's scary fairy-tale forest, dragging the unsuspecting into the cavernous underworld below. Here, the entangled Japanese hemlocks, hinoki cypresses, beech and firs take on a different meaning—no longer a symbol of life, these trees offer a departure from it, a branch for those who opt for a noose, a mossy bed for those who choose pills.

Several of the forest's caves are popular tourist attractions. Visitors who stray off the heavily signposted walking trail can get lost within minutes. Compasses don't work as iron deposits in the volcanic soil are said to demagnetise them. The massive size of the forest, combined with no human habitation, means that those who enter are unlikely to be rescued or have their bodies recovered. Many suicides involve people deliberately disappearing themselves—getting lost and wandering around until they expire from exhaustion or exposure.

¹³ A 2010 National Police Agency report revealed that there were 32,753 suicides throughout Japan in 2009, exceeding 30,000 for the 12th consecutive year and accounting for 3% of all deaths. According to the 2011 figures from the World Health Organization, Japan's suicide rate is about 49.4 per 100,000 people, with men performing suicide more than twice the rate of women. Japan's suicide rates are more than twice the United States (22.2 per 100,000) and at least three times the rate of Australia (16.4 per 100,000) and the United Kingdom (13.9 per 100,000). See http://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide_rates/en/

¹⁴ Unfortunately, the novel has not been translated to English.

Coloured tape stretches from tree to tree like breadcrumbs for those who are uncertain, or just curious, and want to find their way out again. Scattered everywhere are signs of life—a mosaic of relics and artefacts: a leaf-covered car in the parking lot with a map left open on the passenger seat; an umbrella neatly folded and propped against a tree-trunk; photographs of loved ones; camping gear for someone who needed a little more time; and now, increasingly, copies of Wataru Tsurumi's *The Complete Manual of Suicide* are found near corpses.¹⁵

Suicides in the forest rose with the 1993 publication of *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, a DIY guidebook that outlines various methods for taking one's life. In a suicide-positive culture where ending one's life is not so stigmatised or considered as shameful or unspeakable, the manual can be easily purchased in corner stores and has sold well over a million copies. Its popularity was so great that the author, Tokyo journalist Wataru Tsurumi, sold the film rights for two splatter adaptations and is himself a minor celebrity. The films' flimsy plotlines follow police investigating a spate of group suicides and feature a how-to infomercial that graphically depicts one suicide method after another.¹⁶ The manual chronicles many different ways to take one's life, and claims Aokigahara Jukai is 'the perfect place to die'. Tsurumi gives directions to isolated areas of the forest, has a map, lists hotel recommendations and gives advice on how to avoid both police and curious locals. He gives explicit instructions for a painless death and proposes that hanging from a tree is a work of art—a highly aestheticised form of self-annihilation. He writes: 'Your body will not be found. You will become a missing person and slowly disappear from people's memory'.

Although a universal phenomenon, the incidence and response to suicide varies immensely across different cultures. National identity, history, myth and cultural narratives—films, novels, art, media stories—help to create either a socially permissive or prohibitive environment. In his 1897 study *Suicide*, the French sociologist, Emile Durkheim, drew a sharp distinction between suicide in

¹⁵ Wataru Tsurumi, *The Complete Manual of Suicide* (Tokyo: VDM Publishing, 1993).

¹⁶ *The Suicide Manual*, (original title: *Jisatsu Manyuaru*) (2003) and *The Suicide Manual 2: Intermediate Stage* (original title: *Jisatsu Manyuaru II*) (2008). These videos are available via YouTube.

the West and what he described as ‘altruistic suicide’ in tribal cultures.¹⁷ In Western suicidology, the self is commonly understood as singular, with the suicidal person in a stage of personal psychological anguish, while in Japanese culture, the self is deeply connected to the communal. The social mechanism at play here historically valorises suicide as a worthy act if committed for the benefit of others. Identifying sub-groups of those at-risk is near impossible as it ranges from teenagers connecting online to perform netto shinjū (group suicide pacts, where strangers meet to die together), through to salary men who no longer want to suffer the indignity of unemployment, or the elderly wanting to make way for the next generation. Innately hierarchical, and structured by invisible networks of deference and obligation, conventional Japanese society is bound by a code where self-inflicted death is regarded as an ultimately heroic act. To quote Japanophile, Donald Richie, suicide in Japan is ‘considered as a natural, logical, and permanently available response to experience and to the exhaustion of life’s possibilities. It implies neither shame, nor trauma, nor defeat.’^{18 19} Further, to broadly reference Durkheim’s thesis that religion provides a societal permission to act, death in Shinto and Buddhist belief systems is viewed as part of the cycle of life.

In his seminal text: *Voluntary Death in Japan*, psychologist Maurice Pinguet examines the acceptance of suicide throughout Japanese history.²⁰ Pinguet illustrates how in early Japanese legends, acts of self-immolation were considered heroic. This tradition of self-sacrifice has existed within the Japanese psyche through myth and cultural texts for many centuries and expresses a distinctive way of relating to death. Pinguet examines the customs and rituals surrounding its largely universal acceptance, and shows how suicide is viewed as an ethical act, a way of restoring order to the world. The samurai code of seppuku; ubasute—the eighteenth century ritual of the elderly or infirm choosing death to make way for the next generation; kamikaze fighter pilots; and shinjū, the romantic ideal of

¹⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951).

¹⁸ In Japanese, the term for Japanophile is ‘shinnichi’ loosely translating as ‘pro sun’. Donald Richie is not to be confused with Don Ritchie, famous for officially saving over 160 (unofficial numbers are 3-400) lives at The Gap.

¹⁹ Donald Richie, *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (California: University of California Press, 1998).

²⁰ Maurice Pinguet, *Voluntary Death in Japan* (UK: Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

lovers united in death, are just some of the voluntary death practices that have taken place throughout Japanese history.

In *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, Astrid Erll describes cultural memory as the ‘interplay of present and past in socio-cultural contexts’.²¹ This definition allows for phenomena such as group remembering (say, in the case of victims of institutionalised child abuse reuniting decades later), trans-national remembering (the global outpouring of personal grief in response to 9/11) and national remembering through popular culture, such as novels and films (and in the case of Japan, puppet-plays) that reconstruct or invent ‘memory-making’ narratives.²²

Japanese cinematic memory traditions

If fictional narratives have the power to shape the public’s imagination and an individual’s ability to imagine certain ways of being in the world, then Japanese cinema provides a shorthand for understanding the nation’s cultural understanding of voluntary death.

By taking a quick look through the lens of four Japanese films: *Ballad of Narayama*; *Harakiri*; *Double Suicide*; and *Norwegian Wood*; we can see some of the cinematic memory traditions at play that have inscribed an idealised view of suicide on Japan’s national psyche and thus allowed the possibility of a ‘suicide forest’ to exist.

Ballad of Narayama

During the Edo period, and well into the nineteenth century, elderly people willingly submitted to *ubasute*—death from perishing in the forest. Set in a poor village a century ago, Shohei Imamura’s 1983 masterpiece, *Ballad of Narayama*, depicts the brutal story of a man forced to carry his mother up the mythical mountain of Narayama.²³ Just turned seventy, his mother Orin wants to die to

²¹Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nunning, eds., *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 2.

²²Ibid, 396.

²³*Ballad of Narayama* must have touched a nerve as it went on to win Best Film at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival.

make way for the next generation. Although full of vigour (she deliberately smashes her famously healthy teeth with a rock to pretend they've fallen out), she happily and actively prepares her family for her death. Finally, Orin insists that her son carries her up the mountain in a wicker basket on his back.

The film portrays the arduous journey with a reverential, almost mystical awe. When they reach the sacred space where many others have perished before her, Orin calmly prays among the graveyard of bones, shoos her distressed son away. He rushes back moments later as snow falls gently on her smiling face—referencing an earlier motif that signifies that this is unquestionably the right thing for them to do.

Harakiri

In *Harakiri* (1962), director Masaki Kobayashi dramatises the demise of the samurai during the peaceful Edo period from 1605 to 1867. After the Tokugawa shogunate had consolidated power, samurai suddenly became masterless in a post-feudal society that had no need for warriors. They were cut off from their lords (daimyo) and left to roam the countryside. No longer part of the noble class, these noblemen were forced to give up sword-work for farm work or live in poverty.

Bushido, the way of the warrior, is a code of honour that upholds the central tenets of loyalty to the master and freedom from fear of death. A samurai imbued with bushido spirit would perform seppuku, or harakiri, to die honourably rather than surrender in defeat. This is not specifically an endorsement of suicide, yet there's no denying that completing the act is to choose death by one's own hands. Seppuku has unofficially been practiced in recent times; the most infamous case was the samurai-style seppuku of Yukio Mishima in 1970. Mishima, one of Japan's most famous novelists, had often represented seppuku in his novels and homemade films and carried out his ritual suicide in public as a nostalgic gesture for the past.²⁴

²⁴ In the 1960s, Mishima created a group called the Society of the Shield and conscripted young male students with the intension of protecting the Emperor, though he wasn't under threat. They wore gold braid uniforms and practiced boot camp at Aokigahara Jukai. Mishima named one of the boys, Morita, as his 'second' (giving him the honour of slicing off Mishima's head after the first stomach incision and then taking his own life) but ordered the other boys to stay alive. Was

A less common form of seppuku, sokotsu-shi, was also performed to make amends for wrongdoing or causing shame. It's a principle that still resonates today. Suicide rates escalated during the Japanese economic crisis in the 1990s and many of today's suicides are a response to the shame of underemployment or not wanting to be a financial burden on one's family.

Harakiri begins with a penniless samurai arriving at a palace to beg permission to use the courtyard to perform seppuku—a request for one last honour, a chance to die with dignity. *Harakiri* is told via flashbacks as the samurai kneels in the palace courtyard, clearly not wanting to take to his life, but unable not to do so. The heartless master insists that the bushido code must be upheld and the impoverished samurai (who has traded his sword for food) is forced to perform harakiri with a blunt bamboo stick—to die with his honour intact rather than be humiliated by his peers or by poverty.

Double Suicide

In traditional Japanese theatre and literary traditions, shinjū, (double suicide) was the simultaneous suicide of two lovers whose ninjō—personal feelings, are at odds with giri—social conventions. Double suicides were so common they became an important theme of bunraku puppet theatre repertory. Over half the domestic dramas written by Japan's most famous 18th century dramatist, Monzaemon Chikamatsu, depict shinjū.

Double Suicide is the 1969 adaptation of Chikamatsu's 1721 doll-drama 'The Love Suicides at Amijima'. Directed by Masahiro Shinoda, the film depicts the inability of a merchant to pay out the debts of his lover, a courtesan. As they can't be together in this world, they decide to die together so they can be united in the next. Shinoda succeeds in revealing his characters' inability to confront societal tensions through masterful use of mise-en-scène. An exponent of the Japanese new wave, Shinoda places kurago (bunraku puppeteers, masked and

his politically motivated suicide a cover for shinjū—a lover's suicide? The shinjū that united Mishima and Morita was also a junshi—a suicide through fidelity, and refers to the medieval act of lower-serving officers committing harakiri after the death of their lord.

dressed in black) as players throughout the film. As silent witnesses to the unfolding tragedy, the kurago are always present, manipulating the lovers towards their inevitable fate as if to say *shinjū* is the only way.

Norwegian Wood

Norwegian Wood, Tran Anh Hung's 2010 film based on Haruki Murakami's best-selling novel, is yet another example of two young lovers united in death, although they take their lives eighteen months apart. The delicate feet of the young woman hanging in the forest, the de-saturated blue-green grade, soaring music score and elegiac *mise-en-scène*, combine to echo Wataru Tsurumi's grizzly proclamation in *The Complete Manual of Suicide* that hanging from a tree is a work of art.²⁵ It is no wonder that *shinjū*, as an idealised portrayal of romantic fulfilment, continues to be a common theme in contemporary Japanese culture.

Conclusion

As Ross Gibson (Gibson 2002) describes in *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, a badland is a 'paradoxically real and fantastic location where malevolence is simply there partly because it has long been imagined there'.²⁶ At what point did Aokigahara Jukai transform into a magnet for malevolent forces?

Today, many Japanese believe the life energy of people who've died in the forest have been infused in the trees and permeate all of Aokigahara Jukai. According to them, this generates paranormal activity that has profoundly detrimental effects on one's state of mind. Locals shun the forest and believe that simply entering it can create mental anguish that will lead to suicide. There is no question that the romanticised cultural narratives spanning a century have created an aura or impression upon Aokigahara Jukai that both repels and lures people to it. Add the historical acceptance of voluntary death and the heroic representation of suicide within Japanese popular culture and it is no wonder the forest is a ghostly repository of cultural memory.

²⁵ Wataru Tsurumi, *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, (Tokyo: VDM Publishing, 1993).

²⁶ Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (Australia: UQP, 2002).

Emile Durkheim argues that the cultural context one inhabits will either increase or decrease suicide risk in the vulnerable.²⁷ If collective cultural memory, combined with contemporary cultural representations, work together to create the basis for the construction of a nation that is susceptible to suicidality, what chance does the vulnerable individual have? If fictional narratives influence one's sense of self and shape our idea of reality, how do cultural products such as films, fashion, books and pop songs that valorise voluntary death affect a nation's collective response to the issue?

²⁷ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951).

Chapter Two: The Gap in Between

Life on the edge

Just before midnight on Monday 5 October 1863, Ann Harrison shakes open the bottom drawer of her dresser. She senses a presence in the room with her, even though she's alone. Something, then nothing. She thinks that's what it must feel like to be a ghost. To float through life observing people you once knew, a disconnected entity watching loved ones go about their day, but unable to connect to them. Could it be any different to how she feels now?

She quickly sorts through her papers and places her will and deeds on top of the dresser. She regrets not writing a note; she'd like to tell William she's sorry for leaving this way, sorry for her barrenness, sorry for all the melancholy. But they would be the last words she would ever write, she would have to choose them with care, and she does care, cares too much to use the words that come to her now. A sense of urgency pulls her. She changes into her plainest clothes: a brown dress, black jacket, stockings and walking boots. She pauses in front of her shawl and runs her hand, gently, over the embroidered silk. Yes, it's a long way there, a shawl would be wise, but no, it's too lovely to ruin. Wind rattles the window, impatient for her. Ann slips fifteen shillings into her pocket, and carefully closes the door behind her, eager to find a cab before it's too late. She hurries down the main road, aware it's not customary, nor safe, for a young woman to be alone on the streets so late at night. Yet she is not so young. Thirty-five and married fourteen years.

She feels a sudden wave of pity for her husband. She stops at a lamppost and looks back to their hotel. William wouldn't return to their rooms for a few hours yet, she has time to go back and hide the papers and put her nightdress back on. She'd turn away from him in the bed and he wouldn't notice her flushed cheeks, and then tomorrow, she'd just pretend all over again.

She hears the clop-clop of a hansom cab and waves the driver over. He's reluctant; the journey to The Gap is long, at least two hours. He'll have to feed and water his horse and keep it in the hotel's stables overnight. She smiles and

gives him fifteen shillings. Even in her inferior clothes he can tell she is a woman of substance.

The wind whips her face. She leans into the back corner of the cabin. She remembers there was a cold wind that day, seven months ago. She remembers insisting her nephew wear the jumper she'd knitted for him. She remembers him throwing his little arms around her neck before he went outside to play.

She knows what she is about to do, and yet, right now, she feels happy.

Liminal landscapes

In contrast to Aokigahara Jukai's thousand-year history of voluntary death, The Gap's first recorded suicide was in 1863, just over one-hundred-and-fifty years ago. Differences in cultural history aside, both sites share the same notoriety in their own countries. Both are hauntingly beautiful landscapes and equally monstrous sites of recurring tragedy. What differs between them is that Japan has an established tradition of cultural works that have focused on the forest's infamy, whereas very little has been produced about The Gap (other than media reports and, even then, for many years suicides were not reported in the press for fear of copycat deaths).²⁸

To investigate The Gap's dual narratives as a place with a profound ability to both entrance and haunt us, we need to look at the site's history prior to becoming a suicide destination and the events that defined it, beginning with the wreck of the Dunbar in 1857 through to the tragic circumstances surrounding Ann Harrison's suicide six years later.

New beginnings

Situated on South Head peninsula at the entry to Sydney Harbour, The Gap is literally a gap in the sandstone coastline that stretches seven kilometres from

²⁸ Claire McIntyre's *On the Edge: Deaths at The Gap*, is a rare exception that documents a cross-section of suicides spanning a century, from the first recorded suicide of Ann Harrison on 6 October 1863 to the death of Caroline Byrne on 7 June 1995.

South Head to North Bondi. Flanked by dramatic sea and harbour views, it's impossible not to appreciate The Gap's appeal to the early settlers.

The first European claim on Sydney Harbour occurred on 21 January 1788, when Governor Arthur Phillip landed in Port Jackson and camped overnight at Camp Cove.²⁹ Not long after, one of the first settlements in Australia was established at Watsons Bay. The South Head peninsula was significant, not just because of the towering cliffs that offered an unparalleled vantage point for welcoming ships from the motherland, but as a strategic logistics and military site.

By the mid-nineteenth century, Watsons Bay was a busy fishing village that was home to Australia's first lighthouse (Macquarie Lighthouse, built in 1818 by convict architect, Francis Greenway). Grand marine villas were established for colonial gentry and senior officials, while weatherboard houses were built to accommodate lower-ranking government officials working at the lookout, signal station and lighthouse, and the fishermen, pilots and traders working in the village. The Gap, Camp Cove and South Head were popular picnic destinations for day-trippers, with two major roads (Old South Head Road and New South Head Road) providing access by horse-drawn carriage or, from 1854, a twice-daily ferry service transported visitors to and from Sydney town.

The shipwreck

The beginning of The Gap's transformation can be traced back to one of Australia's worst shipwrecks, six years before the site claimed its first suicide. Built in 1852, the Dunbar was a three-mast sailing ship designed to carry passengers and cargo quickly between England and Australia. On 31 May 1857, the Dunbar departed Plymouth for its second voyage to Australia, carrying sixty-three passengers and fifty-nine crew. Many of the first-class passengers on board were prominent Sydneysiders returning to the colony after visiting England.

Arriving late at night on Thursday 20 August 1857, in the middle of a heavy storm, the ship's captain either thought he had already passed the southern

²⁹ At the time of European colonisation, South Head was home to the Gadigal peoples.

headland or mistook The Gap's break in the coastline as the port's entrance, and drove the Dunbar into the cliff. Gale force winds broke the masts and heaved the ship onto its side, smashing it against rocks and preventing the launch of lifeboats. By dawn, the mangled bodies of men, women and children, as well as cargo from the vessel, had been washed ashore.

The shore is literally white with candles, and the rocks covered or so deep with articles of every kind—boots, panama hats and bonnets are here in abundance. Drums of figs, hams, pork, raisins, drapery, boots and pieces of timber are piled in heaps along with the keel of the Dunbar.³⁰

Although a massive rescue operation was initiated that morning, due to poor conditions and big seas, only one person survived.³¹ Never before, nor since, has a shipwreck off an Australian coast lost so many lives and traumatised so many of the living.

Daniel Egan, a wine and spirit merchant, former Mayor of Sydney, State MP and the future Postmaster General of New South Wales, lost his second wife and two stepchildren in the shipwreck. A few years later, Egan purchased a parcel of crown land above the site of the tragedy for use as a 'pub'.

The Gap Hotel

According to Megan Martin's 'A Thematic History of Watsons Bay', at some point between 1862 and 1864, The Gap Hotel was officially opened in a repurposed building the locals referred to as the Iron House.³² Comprising a complex of single-storey, iron-roofed structures, the hotel sat on a parcel of sloping land that backed on to the cliffs and faced a roadway, which is now

³⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald* 23 August 1857.

³¹ The anchor recovered from the wreck is on display at The Gap as a memorial to those who lost their lives.

³² In the absence of a comprehensive history of Watsons Bay, a valuable resource has been Megan Martin's 'A Thematic History of Watsons Bay', 1997, an unpublished report held at Woollahra Library.

Military Road. The pub is described in the coroner's report as 'having a back gate leading from the public-house, about twenty yards from the Gap'.³³

Entries in the *Sands Directory* (Sands 1863-64) indicate that Egan maintained a city residence during his ownership of The Gap Hotel and was a member of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly until his death, with no involvement in the day-to-day running of the pub. Although he lived in town, he maintained a close relationship with the hotel, dying there after a short illness on 16 October 1870.³⁴

William Harrison and his wife Ann were quite possibly the first licensees of The Gap Hotel, and were most definitely in residence by January 1863, when Harrison advertised a celebratory lunch for the Anniversary Day holiday (today's Australia Day).³⁵

The accident

A couple of months after taking residence, Ann's young nephew, William Bates, came to visit her at The Gap Hotel. His baby sister had died only a month earlier and it's unknown if he was just visiting for the day or staying with his aunt and uncle for a longer period while his parents grieved. The Harrisons were childless, and Ann (who was thirty-five) adored her young nephew as if he was her own (McIntyre 2001). On the afternoon of 11 March 1863, while playing in the garden, William wandered out to The Gap and accidentally fell over the cliff. An article in *Empire* on 12 March 1863, recounts the accident in detail:

Shocking Accident at the South Head

Yesterday afternoon, as some children were playing at the South Head, one of them, a fine boy named William Henry Bates, aged about five years, was suddenly missed. His companions, at once

³³ *The Sydney Morning Herald* 3 November 1863 p.4

³⁴ There's no suggestion that Egan's visit to The Gap Hotel on that occasion was unusual, although press reports referred to the loss of his wife at South Head thirteen years earlier, and the coincidence of his dying in such close proximity to the site of the wreck.

³⁵ The *Sands Directory* lists Henry W Harrison as a Watsons Bay resident in the General Alphabetical section of the issue of *Sands Directory* published for 1863, but without specific reference to The Gap Hotel.

conceiving that he had fallen over the cliff, ran to the Gap Hotel at Watsons Bay, where he was on a visit to his aunt, Mrs Harrison, who keeps that establishment, and related what had happened. The poor little fellow's relatives, with some of the neighbours, hastened to the spot where his body had been last seen, but could not see any appearance of a body amongst the rocks. The depth, however, made it difficult to see clearly to the bottom. A pilot boat then went outside the Heads, but although, a close survey was made of the rocks, the boat going as near to the rocks as the heavy surf would permit; the efforts of the boatmen to find the body were unsuccessful up to a late hour last evening. The boy was the only child of Mr William Bates, butcher, of 224 Sussex Street who only a month since lost a little girl, aged one year and eight months. Last evening, a telegram was sent to Mr Bates, communicating the sad intelligence, when he hastened off with his wife to the scene of the awful calamity.³⁶

Losing two young family members in the space of a month was too much, too soon. Overwhelmed by grief, Ann sank into a deep depression and could no longer bear to live at the site of her nephew's accident. When her husband decided to relinquish the license to The Gap Hotel, the death of little William Bates (noted in terms of a 'family bereavement') was cited in press ads he placed in early May 1863 advising of the hotel's availability for takeover.³⁷ Newspaper ads continued into June, but by the beginning of August, Francis Earp was advertising that he had taken over the running of the hotel. Reports of the testimony at the inquest into Ann Harrison's death confirm this, suggesting that by the time of her suicide in October, just seven months after William's fall, the Harrisons had been based at the Duke of Wellington in Chippendale for several months.

³⁶ Full transcript from *The Empire* 12 March 1863, p.4.

³⁷ The full advertisement from *Sydney Morning Herald* on 7 May 1863 p.6 reads:

GAP HOTEL, WATSON'S BAY For SALE, the goodwill, lease, license, fixtures, stock, and furniture of the above first-class house, now in full trade, and doing a remunerative business. The proprietor being desirous of retiring in consequence of a family bereavement will treat with a respectable tenant on liberal terms. Apply to Egan and Co., wine merchants, Market Street; or to William Harrison, on the premises.

The Duke of Wellington Inn, where William and Ann were living at the time of her death, was located at 60 Parramatta Street, an earlier name for the section of Parramatta Road, which is now known as Broadway. The hotel was on the southern side of the roadway, within the land parcel now consolidated into the single site occupied by Central Park, previously home to the Kent Street Brewery, established in the 1830s. This area was impoverished with substandard housing and a proliferation of ‘public houses’. It seems The Harrisons had moved to a place that was very different in character from the grandeur of the South Head district.

Crime of passion

In October 1863, at a time when *felo-de-se* (self-murder) was still regarded a crime, Ann Harrison chose to end her life at the site of her nephew’s accident.³⁸ Ann’s actions on her final day show careful planning and clear intent: she paid out debts, left her papers in order, wore ‘inferior’ clothes.³⁹ The Harrisons had continued to live at The Gap for at least two months after William’s fall and one can’t help but wonder at what point The Gap transformed into a suicide destination for her. Was it while she was still residing there—and her move away was an attempt at self-preservation, a desire to distance herself from the lure? Or after moving to the city, was the pull back to little William’s memorial too strong to resist? We’ll never know, but this marking of The Gap as a suicide site is a critical turning point in its history.

Accounts at the time stated that Ann had fallen into a deep depression after the death of her nephew and chose the site of his accident for her own end. The stories recounted the lead-up to Ann’s suicide in lurid detail and it didn’t take long for the tragedy to grip the public’s imagination. A typical (though shorter) example from *Freeman’s Journal* published four days after her death:

³⁸ *Felo-de-se* was abolished in New South Wales in 1876.

³⁹ There are references in the inquest to a man named Piper who, having become insolvent, harassed Ann for money (the Harrisons were quite well-off). Early on the day of her suicide, she visited Piper in gaol and gave him 150 pounds. Piper then told Ann he owed another publican, Toogood, money and told her where he kept some jewellery as recompense, hence her visit to Toogood’s hotel on the way to The Gap.

Considerable excitement was caused on Tuesday, by a rumour that Mrs Harrison, wife of Mr William Harrison, of the Duke of Wellington, Parramatta Street, and formerly of the Gap Hotel, Watson's Bay, had left her home, and could not be found. The report, which unfortunately, turned out to be true, was confirmed by a cabman named John Garvie, who was employed by Mrs Harrison on the day mentioned. Shortly after midnight on Tuesday, Garvie was engaged by Mrs Harrison, and by her directions proceeded to the Rainbow Hotel, at the corner of Pitt and King streets, kept by Mr Toogood, who having been awoke by the ringing of the bell, went down stairs and spoke to her. She appeared neither intoxicated nor excited, and having had some brandy and water, she bade good night to Mr Toogood and left him apparently with the intention of going home, but after leaving the Rainbow, she desired Garvie to drive to the Gap Hotel, at Watson's Bay, which they reached about two o'clock in the morning. The cabman then went to attend to his horse, and shortly afterwards, wishing to speak to Mrs Harrison, he inquired for her, but she was nowhere to be found, although upon her arrival at the hotel only a few minutes before, she had gone to Mr Earp's room for the purpose of speaking to him. The alarm was immediately given, and Mr Earp, with the policeman and several of the residents, commenced to search in every direction for the missing woman, but without success. Early in the morning four men proceeded in a boat outside the heads searched the rocks about the Gap and went some distance out to sea, but could find no trace of her. It will be remembered that at the beginning of March a little boy named Bates fell off the rocks at the Gap and was dashed to pieces, the loss of the child had so great an effect upon the mind of Mrs Harrison that she has been suffering from ill health ever since, and it is feared that she may have committed suicide by throwing herself off the rocks from the spot where the child fell. Up to this evening no information concerning her had come to light.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Full transcript from *Freeman's Journal* 10 October 1863 p.3

Most intriguing is the extent of the media frenzy at the time, both prior to the inquest and following it. Long articles in the front pages of the papers appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald*; *Freeman's Journal*; *The Empire*; *The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser*; *The [Brisbane] Courier*; *Queanbeyan Age* and *General Advertiser*.

On 13 October 1863, William Harrison placed an ad offering a £10 reward to: 'any person who shall recover the body of his late wife Ann Harrison, supposed to have been drowned off the cliffs, Watson's Bay'.⁴¹ The following Sunday, her body was discovered at Little Coogee (now known as Clovelly) by a young boy. Ann's body was jammed between rocks, which kept it from being carried into the ocean by the reflux of the tide.⁴² Her body was partially decomposed and greatly mutilated, the only articles of dress on were a pair of elastic-sided boots and striped stockings. The following morning, Ann's body was moved to the 'dead-house' at the Benevolent Asylum.

After Ann's body was recovered, an inquest was held, which took several days. The jury returned the following verdict: 'We find that the remains we have viewed are those of Ann Harrison, aged 35 years, that she died from injuries received by throwing herself off the cliffs at the South Head on the morning of the 6th ultimo, whilst labouring under a fit of temporary insanity'.⁴³ Ann Harrison's tragic end would be vividly recounted and thus remembered as the first suicide at The Gap. Had Ann's death been handled less sensationally, would The Gap have developed the same notoriety? An example that demonstrates the disturbing richness of detail is from *The Empire* on 3 November 1863:

Dr. Renwick stated that after removing with much difficulty and success the effect of decomposition upon the remains he made a post mortem examination; the body was that of a woman about five feet four or six inches in height; the right and left forearms and

⁴¹ *The Sydney Morning Herald* 13 October 1863 p.1

⁴² To this day, it's not uncommon for rips to land those who jump from The Gap at Clovelly.

⁴³ *The Sydney Morning Herald* 3 November 1863 p.4

hands were entirely gone, and the flesh on both sides torn from the arms; the armpits, left hip, and thigh were much frayed; the front of the left thigh bone was left bare, and the right leg broken through; the roof of the skull and the face to the upper jaw, were smashed in; the upper part of the skull bone was gone, and the ribs were broken in with a crash; the body had been exposed from one to three weeks after death; the injuries described were produced by great violence, most probably by a fall or falls; the arms, thighs, and other parts of the body might have been frayed by fish; the body was that of a middle-aged woman.⁴⁴

And from *The [Brisbane] Courier* on 9 November 1863:

The result of the Coroner's inquest on the human remains lately found at Little Coogee, leaves no doubt that they were those of Mrs Harrison, and that the unfortunate woman deliberately jumped off the cliffs at the Gap, near South Head, under the influence of monomania, brought about by grief at the loss of her nephew, who had fallen over the precipice at that place. The body of Mrs Harrison was shockingly mutilated, and it was plain that much of this was caused before it reached the sea, the head and face having been crushed and smashed in a fearful manner by the rebounding from shelf to shelf on the face of the precipice.^{45 46}

Harrison postscript

In November 1863, a month after Ann's death, William Harrison was again advertising day trips to Watsons Bay, billing himself as the 'late proprietor of the Gap Hotel'. The *Sands Sydney Directory* for 1864 shows that Harrison's immediate neighbour at 58 Parramatta Street was Catherine Hendrick, a dressmaker. In February, two issues of the *Sydney Morning Herald* (6 February 1864 and 20 February 1864) announced that on 5 January 1864, William

⁴⁴ *The Empire* 3 November 1863 p.8

⁴⁵ Monomania is a 19th century psychiatric term that means insanity from concentrating on one obsessive thought.

⁴⁶ Full transcript from *The [Brisbane] Courier* 9 November 1863 p.3

Harrison, a licensed victualler of Sydney had married Catherine Hendricks. The marriage had taken place in St Paul's Anglican Church, Redfern, precisely four months from the day on which Ann Harrison took her fateful trip to Watsons Bay and within two months of the inquest and its findings. Even more surprising, Catherine gave birth to a child, Robert, in late 1863 and William is listed as the child's father. Unless the infant was premature, conception must have occurred soon after little William's death. As Ann's neighbor from May-June, one can't help but wonder if William's adultery and Catherine's ex-nuptial pregnancy influenced Ann's suicide.^{47 48}

Dark histories, dark futures

After Ann's suicide, reports of suicides and inquests continued to dominate newspaper headlines until the mid 1900s. Publicity about a suicide often resulted in a spate of copycat incidents that, McIntyre claims, initiated a police-enforced embargo on publishing news of suicides at The Gap. According to McIntyre's research, an average of one suicide a year was reported after 1863. However this doesn't account for bodies that were washed up outside the South Head precinct, as there was no way to establish from where they had jumped. Although bodies were found 'as far afield as Narrabeen, Sutherland and the inner harbour; for many unidentified persons and for those who leapt unseen, no association would have been made with The Gap.' (McIntyre 2001: 9)

It was still dark when Anna reached the headland. The air was cool and thick, a silvery mist hung over the cliff merging the sky with the sea. Gulls cawed from their nests in the cliff below as if they, too, were waiting.

He brought her here when they first met. So beautiful she said. Beautiful-terrible, he whispered. He brought her to a place where people choose death over life. A landscape scarred by tiny

⁴⁷ The wedding announcement ad in *Sydney Morning Herald* 20 February 1864 p.8: 'HARRISON—HENDRICK—January 5th by special license, at St. Paul's Church, Redfern, by the Rev. A. H. Stephen, Mr. William Harrison, licensed victualler, of Sydney, to Mrs. Catherine Hendrick, native of Dublin.' The marriage of Hendrick and Harrison is also listed in the Births Deaths and Marriages of NSW Index (registration number 1141/1864).

⁴⁸ More children followed to Catherine and William Harrison: three born in Sydney (1864, 1865 and 1867) and lastly a child born in Parramatta in 1869.

brass engravings mourning the dead, with inscriptions scratched into fence palings and makeshift memorials clustered around the cliff-top like the rough wooden crosses and plastic flowers that mark accident fatalities on roadsides.

‘Goosebumps’, *Exquisite Corpse*

Angel of The Gap

Today, the number of suicides at The Gap is anecdotally between twelve and fifty each year. Unrecorded are the numerous rescues by police, residents and visitors of those attempting suicide. From 1964 until his death in May 2012, Don Ritchie lived in a two-storey home directly across the road from The Gap, which most likely sits on one of the residential sub-divisions that was previously The Gap Hotel site.⁴⁹ Much has been written already about this extraordinary man, an ex-officer, and ironically, former life insurance salesman, who would sit behind the expansive windows on the second floor and admire the view. If he saw anyone pacing or looking vulnerable, he would wander over and ask ‘would you like a cup of tea?’ Ritchie was officially acknowledged with saving the lives of one-hundred-and-sixty people, though unofficially the number is claimed to be closer to four hundred.

Conclusion

The Gap is a landscape pulsing with life as much as it is a constant reminder of life lost, yet The Gap’s dark history is so embedded within the public’s imagination that it overrides its other histories as a place of great natural beauty and a historic reminder of our colonial past.

In his monumental work, *Realms of Memory*, Pierre Nora establishes the role of physical places and events in the creation of our collective memory and how we attach meaning to these places to constitute our sense of history.⁵⁰ Nora’s

⁴⁹ The property was described as ‘The Gap Hotel’ for the last time in the *Sands Sydney Directory* for 1888. The land was subdivided and the hotel repurposed as a Town Hall/Council Chambers. In 1910 the old hotel building was demolished and the parcel of land carved up even further for a mix of commercial and residential properties and a new Town Hall. This former Military Road Town Hall has variously been a cinema, car museum, and today is used as an antique shop.

⁵⁰ Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Vol 3: Symbols*, trans. Arthur Goldhamme (USA: Columbia University Press, 1998).

‘sites of memory’ can be signs: symbols and rituals, such as memorials; or, places like The Gap, Aokigahara Jukai or the Golden Gate Bridge, with emotional and topographical features that serve as a magnet to attract some and repel others. This magnetic pull is historically evident in religious pilgrimages—the routes and rituals set aside for worship (Lourdes, the Wailing Wall, the Batu Caves) or, their modern-day equivalent, the war pilgrimage (trekking the Kokoda Track, visiting war memorials and Holocaust sites). It also extends to dark tourism, the fascination with monstrous geographies—sites personified by death or human atrocity.

By looking at the history of The Gap, we can see how a cliff could become a site of cultural memory, transforming its topography into a liminal landscape, a repository of human sadness. The question is, if once a place has become a suicide site, is it possible to reimagine it as John Bateson is hoping to do with his mission to install a protective barrier on the Golden Gate Bridge? Likewise, had the Dunbar not crashed into The Gap, had a grieving Daniel Egan not established a living memorial to his wife and children with The Gap Hotel, had the Harrisons not moved there, had little William not visited his aunt and fallen to his death, and had Ann not chosen to follow him, would The Gap have an entirely different history? In his book *Landscape & Memory* (Schama 1995), Simon Schama says:

(If) landscape is the product of shared culture, it is by the same token built from a rich deposit of myths, memories, and obsessions. The cults of the primitive forest, of the river of life, of the sacred mountain are in fact alive and well for all us if only we know where to look for them.⁵¹

⁵¹ Simon Schama, *Landscape & Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995).

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Part Two: The Creative Work – Exquisite Corpse

Introduction: Writing the Suicidal Self

The exquisite corpse will drink the young wine¹

In the collaborative, chance-based drawing and word game they called the Cadavre Exquis, the Surrealists subjected the human body to fantastical distortions that resulted in composite figures. Each player would write a phrase (or draw a section of a body), fold it over to reveal a small section or last few words and pass it to the next player to add their contribution. The resulting poems and images were both figurative and metaphorical. My collection, *Exquisite Corpse*, uses this device as a kind of organising principle.

To reveal the fully fleshed out character at the centre of the collection, I have juxtaposed images and threads within individual stories rather than create a strictly linear narrative, so as to simulate the protagonist's fractured identity (the character suffers from an unnamed mental illness). This schizophrenic storytelling through different narrative voices has the potential to create a symbolic double to the character's experience.

Underpinning this structural device are plotlines and character arcs that tackle the experience of suicide from the point of view of the suicide bereaved. The stories in *Exquisite Corpse* cover a broad range of topics from the idea of contagion or the domino effect; the ethical, cultural and religious responses to suicide; suicidal ideation (fantasies); intergenerational stigma; the significance of suicide sites; and mythologising suicide as an 'accident'. At the same time, individual stories scrutinise how suicide is hidden in contemporary experience; the obscuring language we use when talking about it; and how, when dealing with our own or another's suicidality, we are actually asking questions about what it means to be alive.

¹ This line is an early example of the parlour game and clearly inspired the name.

Like the Surrealist parlour game, the figure is fleshed out from collective impressions and the reader is only able to construct a fully realised image of the central character by the effect of his actions on others. Each story has its own plotline, yet imperceptibly links to a greater plot revolving around a group of people affected by suicide. Little memory triggers connect the stories as the thread of the central protagonist's suicide weaves them together. This thread anchors the reader in each story, reassuring them of the interconnectedness of the stories.

This approach, with its independent parts, links to form a complete narrative (well, an almost complete narrative as I have restricted the number of stories here due to word limitations). When drawn together, the individual stories of *Exquisite Corpse* create a pattern, a kind of scrapbook of images that evoke involuntary memories in the reader. It's these impressions or sensations of the multiple, fractured experiences of processing a suicide that I most wanted to create. The cumulative effect of the stories should be both a greater understanding of the many different ways a suicide can impact those left behind and greater care for those who have lost the ability to care for themselves.

The skeleton of the Exquisite Corpse

Before embarking on the collection, here is a précis of each story to highlight the various themes:

'Goosebumps' explores the anxiety of absence and the way that 'private' moments of grieving are ruptured by social media and how ideas of selfhood are performed in the public sphere.

'25 Words or Less' follows a woman on a trip to Japan to recover from the shock of her friend's suicide. She visits the 'suicide forest' at the base of Mount Fuji and develops an understanding of the cultural specificity of suicidality.

'Mortal Sins' explores the idea of the suicidal self from the perspective of a young woman growing up around her mother's suicidal journey as well as religious responses to suicide and the resulting language used to obfuscate.

‘Dominoes’ looks at intergenerational suicidality from a child’s perspective.

‘Dishpan Hands’ is about the fear of *not* dying. It poses the question, does keeping someone alive overtake our duty to let them die with dignity?

‘The Charm’ is about suicide and mental illness and the impact that has on others.

‘Backwash’ investigates the post-traumatic stress disorder experienced by a train driver who experiences a suicide at work.

‘Slipstream’ is told from the point-of-view of the suicidal character.

Chapter One: Goosebumps

Anna waited in their rented weatherboard with its mismatched couches and matching dreams. She waited in their home that felt like a favourite song played over and over. Their little house with creaky floorboards and daisies in jam jars and old dictionaries with tattooed margins and rust-coloured leaves resting between the pages.

She sat at the kitchen table, staring at the refrigerator he'd decorated with kitsch 3-D magnets from all the places he'd been. Mexican sombrero. Moroccan slipper. Flamenco dancer. Whirling dervish mid-whirl. Anna flattened out the bent corner of an old exhibition invitation pinned under a miniature Sicilian cannoli. Sicily was one place they'd been together. He was always talking about going back. Said he didn't feel alive unless he could hear foreign accents and sleep in strange beds.

Put this bird in a cage and it'll die, he'd said.

She often heard him streaming foreign radio in his studio. At first she thought it was for the music, but once, she rushed in after work, so excited to see him, and he beckoned her to sit next to him on the floor. He placed his finger softly on her lips to shush her while the radio announcer spoke, even though she knew he couldn't understand Arabic. He was like that, and she liked that he was like that. He heard things other people didn't hear, saw things they couldn't see. It was his gift, and his affliction. When she asked him about the bottle of pills she found in his bedside drawer, unopened and past their use-by date, he smiled and said taking meds messes with my muse.

Anna stayed up all night. She sent texts and left messages on his voicemail in the disquiet between tears. She checked his Facebook to see if he'd left a status update and scrolled through Twitter and Foursquare feeds for signs of where he'd been. She played an old voice message—a song he'd sung down the line and made her promise not to delete so he wouldn't forget the tune. As she listened to him singing to her, his voice was so close she could almost feel his breath. She read quips he'd written to friends and searched for pictures he'd been tagged in. There were images she'd never seen. Posing with his hand-carved mandolin as if Annie Leibovitz was shooting him for a *Vanity Fair* cover. Kohl-rimmed eyes and bearded at his art school graduation—incongruous in academic gown with

mortarboard tucked underarm and curls flying free. A gallery of over-styled shots of gross things he'd eaten. Crickets in Thailand. Guinea pig in Ecuador. Cobra in Vietnam.

She scrolled down to an album named *Nirvana* and a photo of her popped up. Her stomach lurched. He'd taken it not long ago, a few weeks or so. She remembered he'd been writing songs all night and woke her to take her to watch the sun rise at a craggy cliff-top looking out to sea. She saw herself as he'd seen her then, wine-coloured hair hiding half her face, a squinting girl, soft and pink in the early morning light. No don't, she said, when he took the shot. You look so peachy, he said and pretended to chew the tip of her nose.

Anna usually distrusted social media, sharing intimacies in public embarrassed her. The pressure to *like* things she couldn't care less for and connect with girls she went to school with, girls who'd ignored her when she was there. She accepted their requests, because she didn't want to appear aloof, and responded to birthday notifications with pithy posts on their profile pages. Yet each time she did, she felt inauthentic, felt fake. Anna realised, not long ago, that she'd created a fraudulent identity. Little by little, she had willingly formed an idealised version of herself—someone who spat out clever one-liners and took perfect pictures, who had a good eye and made smart observations. The online Anna was cool and wry. It looked like her, but a prettier, smiley-er version formed from only the most flattering photos she allowed herself to be tagged in. She had, unconsciously, created an avatar of herself.

But now, alone in her kitchen in the middle of the night, the social network comforted her.

Anna googled him and found a video, a mini doco about his music posted on YouTube. As he talked to her through the screen, she felt as if he was with her right there at the kitchen table.

She imagined him sitting beside her, drinking cups of black vanilla tea. She wanted to talk it over, hear what he had to say, tell him that leaving her wasn't a decision he could just make on his own.

He'd hold the smooth, warm cup and say sorry over and over and she'd forgive him. She would take his hand and lead him to the bedroom, to the sheets that still smelled of him. They'd lie on the bed he'd made from recycled railway sleepers and she'd remind him of how they both laughed that first night they slept

in it, at the thought of sleeping on sleepers. She imagined stroking his long, unruly hair, her fingers lost in his black curls, and he'd say sorry, sorry, sorry. She'd say, tell me three other words, and then she'd make up a story of hope and whimsy with those three words until he was lulled to sleep.

Anna thought about his sleeplessness, his voices, his unopened meds. A wave of panic rushed through her and she felt every hair standing on end. Anna's body started shaking violently, she needed to move, to get away from her thoughts. She grabbed her mobile and ran barefoot out of the house and left the door wide open. She placed the phone in her bicycle basket face-up so she could see the screen and rode up the long hill, past the sleeping houses, past the garbage truck circling the suburban streets. The amplified sharpness of smashing bottles made her long for her childhood home. Since the city had brought in mandatory recycling, entire neighbourhoods would wake as one to the sound of the weekly glass collection. She was comforted by the noise, it belonged to her, reminded her of living above her father's pub when she was a kid.

As Anna cycled up the steep road to the lookout, a frigid wind rose up from the ocean, cursing through her, and she noticed she didn't have proper clothes on. She had got on her pushbike wearing only a nightdress—a raw linen smock he'd found at a street market when they went to Sicily last summer. She remembered him haggling in Italian with the nonna who had embroidered it so carefully. Even though she couldn't understand what he said to the old woman, Anna knew he'd flattered her by the way her cheeks had flushed like a young girl's. He'd held the starched smock over Anna's dress and she remembered saying, it'll make me look like a sack of potatoes, and he'd pulled her close and said I love potatoes.

It was still dark when Anna reached the headland. The air was cool and thick, a silvery mist hung over the cliff merging the sky with the sea. Gulls cawed from their nests in the cliff below as if they, too, were waiting.

He brought her here when they first met. So beautiful she said. Beautiful-terrible, he whispered. He brought her to a place where people choose death over life. A landscape scarred by tiny brass engravings mourning the dead, with inscriptions scratched into fence palings and makeshift memorials clustered around the cliff-top like the rough wooden crosses and plastic flowers that mark accident fatalities on roadsides.

Anna's skin prickled. *Horripilated*. She learned the word from a game they used to play. He would place his hand on her old dictionary as if he were taking an oath and, with eyes shut tight, ask a question—the more absurd the better. He'd flick the pages of the dictionary and blindly drop a finger on a word. She'd read it out, interpreting the answer, making associations, enjoying the revelation, the way the meaning unfolded itself like an unexpected twist in a story. They'd play for hours, letting the words take them to new places.

The game began as nostalgia for books. She'd missed feeling the weight of unknown words in her lap. With a Kindle and a dictionary app on her iPad, there was no need to *search* for meaning, it was always just there, available on demand. She collected old dictionaries and saved for six months to buy the two-volume *Compact Oxford English*—a leather-bound boxed set bought from a second-hand dealer. The words were so tiny they could only be seen with a magnifying glass that lived in a little drawer on top of the box.

She remembered sitting in his studio one afternoon when he asked the dictionary, *how can I know truth?* She said, that's a little earnest, don't you think? He closed his eyes, flicked open Volume 1 and swirled his hand in dramatic circles over the spread pages. He pointed to a word and she leant down with the magnifying glass to read it out.

'*Horripilation*: noun [mass noun] literary; the erection of hairs on the skin due to cold, fear, or excitement.' She laughed. 'It's goosebumps, your truth-o-meter is good old goosebumps.'

At that point they stopped playing. As Anna waited at the lookout she strained to remember why. There must have been a reason it was the last game, the final word. She wondered if that's when he knew he was going to leave. Or was it last week when he lay awake night after night in their bed made of railway sleepers. Or yesterday when he put all her old letters and postcards in a wooden box on her desk.

The ground was wet beneath her feet. Anna sat on a park bench and pulled the potato sack over her legs. As she leaned back, a small, hard rectangle pressed into the small of her back. Anna's body had become hypersensitive, pain was magnifying the tiniest detail. She turned around to illuminate a small brass plaque with the light from her phone and accidentally tapped her SoundCloud app. His *Funeral Songs* album opened, she noticed there were 247 tracks. He created the

project a year earlier, asking friends, other musicians and artists what song they'd want played at their funeral. Some responded immediately, a few had gone silent as if they were reliving a terrible memory, and others would send him their song after weeks of careful consideration. It was a never-ending project and he uploaded a new song whenever he met someone interesting who was willing to join in.

It would be daybreak soon. Anna smelled jasmine. The same star jasmine that tumbles down limestone cliffs and cushions houses in the little Sicilian village he lived in as a boy.

She looked up and saw him standing under a streetlight that was still on in the pre-dawn light. As he walked towards her, the streetlight haloed his silhouette against the silvery sky. He has come to tell her what she already knows. She tells herself I can endure this. But the wind whips through her body as if she is hollow and the tiny swollen lumps on her arms tell her she has had and lost some infinite thing. She wants to be easy with him. Wants to say she can be happy. She can dance. She can skip. She can dig up positive things from the past, look for positive things in the future, she can live deep and suck all she can out of life.

Anna shivered.

He sat next to her and cupped his hands around her face. Fast-jumps of pleasure and pain made her feel solid again. He looked older and younger. He looked like he was in love and she felt nothing but despair.

Now she hoped he had met someone. Prayed he had left her. Wanted him to be getting on a plane to Sicily. But despite her hope, despite her will, she knew he had come to tell her that he is dead. She needed to hear it, but didn't want to hear it. She was ready for him to tell her, she'd say I know, I know, I just don't know what to do. And he'd hold her tight and then she'd know.

But he said nothing.

The sun breached the horizon like a crowning newborn. It pushed through, breaking the silence. She closed her eyes and when she opened them again he was just an afterimage that follows a flash of light.

She wanted to know if he wanted her to go with him, wanted to know if she should jump off the cliff, wanted to know if she should live. She imagined her spinal cord anchoring her central nervous system to the bench, holding her to it. She thought of her father, her mother, her friends. She thought of him—yesterday,

last week, last year in Sicily. She had so many questions that would never be answered and remembered their old dictionary game. She looked at her phone and the *Funeral Songs* album was still open. She kissed the cold glass and saw an extra song had been added to the playlist—there were now 248 tracks. She scrolled down past Leonard Cohen’s *Hallelujah* and Lou Reed’s *Perfect Day*. She scrolled past hers, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. She remembered telling him it had to be Judy singing it, not a tacky Broadway version.

She paused at the bottom of the playlist. His name was there. She felt hollow as if her body was a wind tunnel spinning with emotion. She said his name out loud, her voice grabbed every syllable, not wanting to let any of them go. *Gab-ri-el Man-et-ti*. Next to his name was the word *Live*.

Anna breathed in deeply and tapped it. She heard the familiar twang of his mandolin. Then he started to sing to her, his voice, high and soft and slightly flat.

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Chapter Two: 25 Words or Less

Japan wasn't far—a ten-hour red-eye. Sara wanted the big-adventure, butterfly-in-the-stomach feeling that travelling somewhere new always gave her, but right now, she couldn't remember why she was still going. She loosened the seatbelt. The cabin air smelt faintly of chemicals and was fridge-cold. Just an hour out of Sydney and she missed the late summer stickiness, the heady frangipani air.

Sara sighed, a short, staccato suck in and a slow breath out finished with a soft *wow*. Her first *wow* slipped out a fortnight ago. She heard it before realising it was she who had said it. And then another. The *wows* stumbled out of her, sometimes one, other times in a cluster of three or four, falling over each other, disappearing for a few hours, then back again. She imagined them trapped inside her organs like minuscule air bubbles and each time one escaped she felt something release from deep inside. If she had a choice she would have picked a better word, a gutsier word—even *fuck*—like someone with Tourette's would say. But she was stuck with *wow*. She hoped no one overheard her, it's a word better suited to a young boy—a big-eyed, slack-jawed kid drawing the vowel out for emphasis.

The cabin filled with fatigue. Sara was so exhausted and so awake. Across the aisle, rows of passengers were laid out, anonymous and intimate, mummified with pale blue blankets and eye masks from their free comfort packs. Sara tucked the thin blanket around her thighs.

She looked at the empty seat beside her and buzzed for a vodka and tonic. Sara lifted the armrest, slid it into the space between the seats and wriggled back, careful not to spill onto the other seat. She wanted to get in the mood. Think about Japan—that would make her feel better. Downloading the *Lonely Planet Tokyo* app and buying a phrasebook at the airport was the only preparation she managed to do. She flicked through the movie channels and found a film about three students living in Tokyo in the sixties. Based on a bestselling novel—must be good. A decent plot at least. Better than Manga. Or old black and whites with too much puppetry.

Ten minutes in, one of the male students—handsome, a few years younger than her—filled his car and lungs with gas. *Wow*, she let herself go. How could he? She buzzed for another can of vodka and tonic. Later, another student—his

girlfriend, sweet in the way that Sara could never be—hanged herself in a forest. *Wow*. The film lingered on an image of the girl's dangling feet, delicate and relaxed as if she was floating in water, her blue-green skin glowing with the luminosity of the newly dead. Sara fumbled with the remote, switching channels till she turned her Japanese lesson off. She could never take her own life. No, never, no matter what.

'You take the window,' she said when they booked the flight. 'I don't want to lap-dance on you every time I need to pee.'

Gabriel laughed. She remembered that.

She wanted, needed, another vodka. It's his fault. He's the reason she's alone on a plane, going to a place where teenagers hang themselves. She didn't cancel his ticket or email the hotel. Just couldn't. Even yesterday, she wasn't sure if she'd go. Could've stayed home. Maybe should have. But all those days she had taken off work—she couldn't stand the idea of moping at home. Going by herself was a dare. She had to prove she could do it, she was determined to show him she'd be fine.

The trip was a folly, a prize she'd won from a competition on a bottle of soy sauce. Back home, she worked the phones for an insurance firm. While she took calls from abusive drivers at roadside accidents and irate men whose prestige cars had been keyed, she'd flick through women's magazines and store catalogues circling competitions that demanded more skill than licking a stamp. At the supermarket, she'd cruise the aisles, studying the back of cereal packets and milk cartons, never wasting time on games of luck, where the odds were stacked against her. She only entered competitions that required skill, a pithy response in '25 words or less'. She wrote ironic one-liners for fizzy drinks and crafted sentimental phrases for baby products, even though she didn't have babies in her life. If she had a chance, Sara thought she could be a real writer one day. A paid writer. How hard could it be? She comes up with wittier headlines than she sees in the papers, she's good with a pithy line, tells a good yarn, prides herself on being able to throw a few bon mots into any conversation.

Three months ago, the anticipation of this trip had dominated her days. Just the two of them again, like the old days. All expenses paid for a week. Snow. Not for him, but for her, snow for the first time. Sara had a lot to think about. Not

now, she thought, swallowing a Xanax. She can think about it later. Tomorrow she'll feel better. Tomorrow will be a fresh start. She'll wake clear-headed and full of enthusiasm. She'll take the bullet train to the hotel, have a shower then walk around Tokyo taking it all in. She'll walk and think and work it out. She'll feel snow on her face and have a lightness in her bones.

Sara woke to a tap on her shoulder. The flight attendant placed a tray of rubbery eggs and a plastic cup of sweetened orange juice on the fold-down table in front of her. The blue mummies were stretched out around her. She doesn't want eggs or juice or to leave her seat. Her hotel room suddenly feels a long way away. She doesn't want to deal with other passengers and customs and bags. She certainly doesn't want to catch the train that the guidebook has warned takes forever to get to Tokyo. She'd be happy to never get a train again. She thinks it must be possible to avoid them, surely there are trainophobes who find other ways to get around? She wished the flight was longer just so she could stay in her seat and sleep. Sleep for days. A four-day flight—that would do it. Then she'd be ready. She put the lid back over the eggs and placed the tray on his table. How could he?

At Narita, she waited for the bullet to Tokyo. As she stared at the tracks, the shinkansen slid in like mercury. Maybe Japan isn't the best place to have a train amnesty. She lugged her suitcase into the carriage and pulled down a seat flap next to a sleeping businessman. The train flew. It was the fastest she'd ever been on. She imagined it running over someone. *Human Incident*, she'd read that's how they announce a delay from a suicide on the tracks. She knows not to think about it, but just goes there. Would the train stop or slice through and keep going? Wheels sharp as blades, sharper than a samurai sword—aren't the Japanese famous for their knives?

Suburbs flew past. She wondered how many trains have carried bits of bodies to every corner of Japan. Sara squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted to erase the thought from her mind. She was tired of death.

With a sudden jerk the businessman's head fell back, his mouth open and gaping, his comic book sliding off his lap. She picked it up and wedged it under his arm. She'd read that suicide was common among salary men. She'd read it was normal, acceptable even. No wonder with all the samurais, kamikaze pilots, the young lovers in that damn movie.

It's still early when the train arrives in Tokyo and already so many people are about. Yet everything is quiet, apart from the chirping birds piped through the underground. Her hotel towers directly over the station and, right now, Sara loves that. She takes the glass elevator to the 20th floor lobby. The hotel receptionist is wearing an embroidered silk kimono and looks so perfectly, immaculately Japanese she could be a parody.

She scanned Sara's passport. 'Your husband coming later?'

'Sorry, no, just me.' When she won the competition, Sara told the soy sauce people she'd be newly married by the time she went. The prize was a twin share, so why not make the most of it? She and Gabriel were used to bunking in together. Gypsetters he used to call them. She thought it would be fun to pretend they were honeymooning—champagne on arrival, an upgraded suite, a couch if either needed it. She'd forgotten that till now, and suddenly it didn't seem like such a fun idea.

The receptionist showed no expression, just looked down at the keyboard and typed. Sara imagined her as a geisha who'd spent years cultivating a lowered down gaze to use whenever she heard something she didn't like.

'Business.' Sara blurted out. 'He's stuck at home on business.'

The receptionist raised her head. 'Hai. Business.'

Sara felt an instant solidarity with her. Even with a lie, they were connected by a distant truth in their lives.

Behind the reception, an enormous plate glass window framed the miniaturized city. Pale and clear in the morning light, all colour sucked out of the cloudless sky. Sara pointed to a nipped mountain peak covered in snow.

'Mount Fuji?'

'Hai'

'Just like the woodblock print, huh?'

'Hai. You like to go there?'

'Maybe.'

The receptionist opened a drawer and passed Sara a brochure with both hands. 'Good tour. Small. Eng-rish guides.'

Sara took the brochure with both hands, nodded and smiled—she guessed that's what you do, use both hands, nod and smile. She followed the porter as he

pulled a brass luggage trolley nursing her bag through the lobby and up to the honeymoon suite on the 36th floor.

After he left—nodding, smiling, no tip, not yet, not till she works out the rate on XE—Sara opened every drawer and cupboard. It's what she always does, looking for treasure—shoe-polishing mitts, laundry bags, sewing kits, mini bar. All there, and a champagne bucket with two flutes on top of the fridge cabinetry. She and Gabriel weren't lovers, never would be. They'd known each other since kindergarten, they were easy together, uncomplicated. He always had someone, often several someones, while she was perpetually single. She'd stuck by him, through all his lovers and mood swings and hospital stays. They were meant to be friends for life.

She found a pair of matching kimonos on a shelf in the wardrobe, folded like origami, with sheets of rice paper between the layers. Sara placed one on the bed and ran a bath. Hot, insanely hot, water poured out.

The bathroom was huge. She unpacked her duty-free cosmetics and lined them up on the terrazzo bench as neat as a department store display. Bottles of pastel-coloured creams and citrus tonics nestled up to a large pump pack of sunblock. Sara closed the door and undressed. She was flanked by floor-to-ceiling mirrored walls on either side of her naked body. As she moved, her body cloned. She multiplied into infinite Saras. Infinite tummies. Infinite freckles. Hats and sunblock all year and still more freckles. Sara thought her inner thighs looked velcroed together. She wished she could slide a ruler between them without touching the sides. At highschool, she'd envied a bandy-legged Japanese exchange student who'd hitched her uniform so high, she made the shape of an isosceles triangle from her crotch to her ankles. Sara dimmed the light, convinced her thighs are the reason she's still single. Freckles and thighs. She inches into the boiling bath. She'll start a new diet tomorrow, today she's too tired, today she'll get room service, book a tour, take Xanax, but tomorrow, yes, diet tomorrow.

The next morning Sara works her way down the long breakfast buffet in the hotel dining room. She avoided the seaweed and miso soup, too strange to have lunch at breakfast. She slept badly even with the Xanax, felt so alone in that big room. She joins the tourist bus outside the hotel. It was drizzling and cold, not cold enough for snow, but cold enough to wish she had Ugg boots on. She tightened the

toggles on her anorak. The bus sidled up, at least it's not a train, she thought. Everyone was already on board: two guides, Mitsuko and Shohei introduced themselves; an old American couple in matching purple windcheaters sat in the front row holding hands; and a group of five South Koreans spoke loudly between themselves. The drive would be two hours to the base of Mount Fuji. A day trip—not enough time to reach the crest, but enough to explore the ancient underground ice caves or go for a walk through the volcanic forest at the base, then drive up to a sacred lookout for dusk. The Koreans choose the ice caves. The Americans opt to tag along with the Koreans.

'I'll do the forest.' Sara said, waiting till last to pick whatever the least people wanted. She wouldn't mind company, but later, later. Besides, exploring ice caves in the cold just wasn't appealing.

The guides spoke softly to each other in Japanese. 'Sorry, best not go on your own,' Mitsuko, the female guide said.

'It's no problem, I like walking on my own.'

'Sorry, I come with you.' Shohei shook his finger like a stern father. 'Very scary on own.'

'I won't get scared, promise.'

'No, I come with you. Yurie spirits there.'

'Yurie?'

'Hai, angry ghosts.'

Sara nodded and smiled. 'Okay.' She can't imagine Shohei protecting her from angry ghosts. He is at least fifty and slim as a chopstick.

It was mid-morning when the bus arrived at the Mount Fuji parking lot. Sara and Shohei were dropped off first, the driver promising to come back in four hours before driving off so fast Sara's arm was almost caught in the door. She took a deep breath. Now she can breathe.

Wet leaf litter covered a car at the entrance to the forest. Sara wiped some leaves off the passenger window and looked inside; a road map lay open on the front seat.

'Come,' Shohei stood a few metres away from the car as if it had a contagious illness.

She followed him up a signposted trail. The air thickened and darkened as they went deeper into the forest. They walked in silence past hinoki cypresses, beech and fir trees. The path narrowed until they were forced to walk in single file. Shohei strode ahead, looking down, not straying off the path. She can tell from his hunched shoulders, his unnecessary hurrying, that he's not happy about being here. She doesn't know why he's so on edge, she just follows, breathing in the damp air, diligently tracing his steps.

A thick carpet of moss covers the forest floor and foliage blankets every sound. There are no wildlife or bird sounds. Sara feels uneasy—she'd be happy to hear the piped birds right now. Fog rises from the ground and wraps around her legs.

She turns into a cordoned-off area. Blue and red-coloured tape stretches from tree to tree, creating veins through the forest.

'Shohei,' she called out. 'What's this?'

Sara followed the tape. Twigs crackled and broke under her boots, the ground beneath was spongy and booby-trapped.

Shohei ran after her, his eyes wild. 'Don't go there.'

'Why?'

'Get lost there.'

'But we'll just follow the tape back.'

'Follow the tape, you find something you don't want,' he whispered as if someone was listening. His tone was stern and she wondered if he was worried about insurance—the ground was unstable and it would be easy to fall.

'Well, just over to that tree then.' Sara pointed to an ancient tree twenty metres away, its trunk wider than the king bed back at the honeymoon suite.

She knows Shohei doesn't want her to, but she's drawn to go deeper, as long as she can still see the trail, a little further won't hurt.

The ground was uneven. Gnarly roots and fallen branches had created a criss-crossed web over the forest floor. As she climbed over the roots, they threatened to grab her ankles and suck her down into their cavernous underworld like a scary fairytale forest. She reached the tree and felt secretly proud. Her mind was quiet. She stretched her arms out and pressed her torso against the wide expanse of trunk, felt her cheek against the cool, rough bark. She wanted to circle the enormous tree, then she'd head back, follow the tape to the track only twenty

metres away. She clambered over the roots. On the other side of the tree, not far, she could see a small canvas tent that was badly pitched.

‘You okay?’

Sara bristled; she hadn’t heard Shohei behind her. ‘Look.’ She pointed to the tent.

Shohei stepped back. He looked at the tent as if it were toxic, calculating whether it was safe to go any closer.

‘Camping?’

‘No. No good in there.’

‘What do you mean?’

Shohei dropped his head and began whispering.

‘Shohei? Shohei, are you praying?’

He looked at her. ‘Shhh. You stay.’

She watched him creep up to the tent. He crouched down and started speaking quietly to it. Shohei looked back at her—and made a hand signal to tell her to wait.

After ten minutes, the tent unzipped from the inside. A young girl—sixteen, seventeen—crawled out. She looked startled like a child caught touching herself. She reminded Sara of the exchange student, small, bow-legged in stripy tights and a denim skirt. Her thick black hair pulled tight in pigtails with pink plastic clips. The girl shivered. Shohei took his coat off and placed it around her shoulders. Sara clambered over to her, slipping on the moss as she went.

‘You chose a strange place to go camping,’ Sara tried to look at the girl’s eyes, but she hung her head so low all Sara could do was stare at the perfectly straight part separating her hair. A thin blue line ran through it, she must have used a biro to part it, Sara thought.

‘I’m Sara,’ she tried again.

The girl crawled back inside the tent.

Shohei shook his head. ‘No English. I ask her to come with us. No good here.’

‘Why, why do you keep saying that?’

‘No good this forest. Suicide forest.’

Sara felt weak. She wanted to get away from the tent and the forest and get onto the bus and back to her nice room with the slippers and mini bar and boiling

bath. She looked up at a gap through the canopy of trees. She wanted to crawl up into it, open it up to bring some light into the darkness.

‘Please make her come out and we’ll all go wait for the bus.’

He spoke softly to the tent. ‘She won’t come, she says she stay here.’

‘She can’t stay here,’ Sara’s heart was beating so fast her voice squeaked. ‘Please, just tell her we won’t go without her.’

Shohei nodded. ‘Hai, we get help.’

‘Yes, we get help. Maybe I can just sit with her for a while. Can you ask if that’s okay?’

He rubbed his hands from the cold and lent down to the tent and spoke in a fatherly way. He lifted his head and nodded at Sara.

Sara wished Gabriel was here, if only he was here, he’d know what to do. She crawled inside. The small tent was like a girl’s cubby-house. A Hello Kitty bag, framed photos and chocolate wrappers were scattered over the floor. She sat cross-legged across from the girl and wondered what to do. A bulging scrapbook lay beside the girl’s sleeping bag. Sara pointed to it.

The girl nodded and passed the scrapbook. Underneath it was a half-eaten rice ball and a box of unopened pills.

Sara turned the first page, it was blank. The girl leaned forward and flipped the book over.

Sara laughed. ‘That’s right, we’re back to front.’

The girl smiled.

Sara carefully opened the scrapbook; photos and poems were stuck on every page with drawings and elaborate doodles written in blue biro around the edges. There were photos of an elderly couple in traditional dress, pictures of the girl with other children, photos of her as a toddler, formal family portraits, pictures in school uniform. Sara pointed to the people in the photos then ran a finger down her cheek to indicate tears. The girl lowered her head.

‘How long you stay here?’ Shohei opened the tent flap and looked inside at the two young women sitting opposite each other.

‘As long as we need.’ Sara said.

Sara placed her hand over the girl’s and was surprised she let it stay there. Here she is, a child who knows so little about life, imagining death. When the girl looked up at her, Sara realised how easy it could be. As simple as not wanting to

be a burden. As simple as forgetting you matter for a moment. As simple as pitching a tent in a forest and thinking no one cares. As simple as throwing yourself in front of a train.

Shohei stuck his head inside the tent, ‘Now. The bus come now, she have to come.’

Sara smiled and nodded at the girl. ‘Yes, we’re coming.’

The girl picked up her scrapbook and carefully placed it in her backpack.

As they rolled up the rickety tent and sleeping bag, Sara slipped the pills into her anorak.

The temperature had dropped sharply. They followed the tape back to the trail and the girl walked gently between them, almost floating over the forest floor.

When they reached the car park, the three of them stood in a row and waited in silence. The air softened and snow fell where the tent was pitched. It fell on the makeshift graves and the broken branches, and as she looked up to the sky, it fell gently on Sara’s face.

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Chapter Three: Mortal Sins

Her mother liked going to funerals. She never said as much, but Caitlin could tell. Like everyone else she knew, Caitlin dreaded them, but if Erin missed a service, she'd be cross for weeks. Most of Erin's people were gone now: her husband died at sea when she was thirty; her two brothers lost to a heart attack and alcohol; her brothers' wives—one long-dead, the other divorced for decades and as good as. Old friends had been devoured by cancer; even children of old friends had started dropping off.

Caitlin first noticed her mother's morbid delight one windy summer morning as they battled the weekend papers while her boys played cricket.

'Look!' Erin had cried out, jabbing a funeral notice with her finger like she'd just won Bingo. 'Mister Melick. You remember, from the deli.'

Caitlin shook her head. Sure, she remembered old Johnnie Melick with his pervy stares.

'Of course you do. Cancer. His poor wife. Come back to mine after and we'll send her a nice card.'

'I'm busy later.' Caitlin was surprised at how instantly purposeful her mother had become, as if she was planning an impromptu dinner party.

'It won't take long. It's just a card.'

Caitlin flicked the newspaper to the real estate section. It was her version of sticking her fingers in her ears. She had no intention of buying a flat, didn't have the money even if she wanted to, but scouring the property section had become her hobby. She'd draw red biro circles around deceased estate inspection times and spend the afternoon visiting them. She'd found comfort in seeing old peoples' lives. She'd sat on the end of a single bed in a makeshift lean-to and imagined the old man still curled up in it. She'd stood on a tiny balcony crammed with terracotta pots and emptied her water bottle over the dried-up ferns. She'd found a quiet beauty in empty rooms with carpet pock-marked from years of bearing heavy furniture. She'd run her fingers along tobacco stained wallpaper, tracing the oval-shaped echoes of framed photographs, now most likely at the council tip. And she'd choked up when she saw a pair of matching leather recliners, sitting side by side, one scuffed and indented with its footstool still angled, the other tidy as the day it was bought.

Caitlin could feel her mother glaring at her. She closed the deceased estates.

‘Okay, Ma.’

‘Good.’

‘We’ll stop by the newsagent and get a card there.’

‘No need. I have plenty.’

‘You do?’

Erin held her chin high like a puppy with its head out the car window.

‘Well, you never know.’

‘That’s a bit grim reaper.’

Erin looked at her with an all-knowing, mother-knows-best, full stop smile.

Caitlin went back to the deceased estates.

After the match, the boys crawled in to the back seat of Caitlin’s white Toyota. She adjusted the rear-vision mirror to watch them buckle up as they played with her iPad. Her babies. Her twins. Her IVF miracles that came to her as she was giving up. Just turned nine, they could still entertain each other all day—she was grateful for that. Yet, she was nearly fifty, and felt panic for the years ahead. Short of amphetamines, how was she going to keep up when they became hairy and hormonal? How would she make sure they’d turn out to be good men, really decent men, the kind of men who respect women and are good to small animals? They’d already started ganging up on her in little insignificant ways. She knew the numbers would always be in their favour: one of her and two of them. So she’d taught herself to be strict, the type of strict usually reserved for dads. She hated disciplining them, it made her feel fake, she hated how her voice sounded and the feeling in her stomach, but she consoled herself by thinking it’ll make each one the type of man she still hopes to meet one day.

Caitlin switched on the classical station, laughing, even before the boys had a chance to pull faces. When they arrived at Erin’s, the boys ran down the side of the bungalow to the back garden, hollering and jumping on the trampoline Caitlin had bought to lure them there when she needed free babysitting. From the kitchen window she watched them out-leap each other and had visions of four arms and legs in plaster.

‘There you go,’ Erin rattled open the top drawer of her cabinet and pointed to a pile of sympathy cards stacked neatly in a corner.

Caitlin sifted through the cards. An envelope with a severe black border fell to the floor. ‘This is creepy, Ma,’ she said, picking it up.

Each card was unique. Most in protective plastic sleeves. ‘Sorry for your loss’ was written in swirling cursive letters on one, a small card with rounded corners was simply embossed with RIP, and watercolour lilies had been hand-painted on another. As Caitlin laid the cards in rows across the cabinet—seventeen all up—Erin looked fondly at her collection.

‘Which one’s for my funeral then?’ Caitlin asked in a faux serious voice. Making light of her mother’s dark side had long been a survival strategy.

Erin tsked. ‘Now, this’ll do nicely,’ she said, waving a card with a poem of Walt Whitman’s.

A few weeks later, Caitlin’s mobile woke her just after dawn. The caller’s number was blocked, which either meant a cold call from someone trying to sell her something she didn’t want or her mother. ‘Ma,’ she answered on a punt. ‘What’s up?’

‘Sorry darling, dreadful news. I’ve just found out your second cousin, Gabriel, on the Manetti side, was in an accident last week.’

‘Is he okay?’

‘He’s gone.’

‘Oh, Ma. I’m sorry.’

‘I know. I know. Funeral’s tomorrow. You’ll come won’t you?’ Erin had fine-tuned the art of the rhetorical question.

‘I don’t—I didn’t know him.’

‘Doesn’t matter. He’s family.’

‘Distant family.’

‘He’s your cousin Margaret’s son. You went to his christening.’

‘That must be twenty years ago.’

‘Twenty-three.’

‘I’m not sure.’ Caitlin suspected her mother just wanted to make a grand entrance, flanked by one of her brood.

‘We must go. We have to represent this side of the family. His poor mother.’ Erin suddenly sounded herself very much like a poor mother.

‘It just feels weird to top and tail his life.’

‘You’re coming, then?’

‘Okay, okay.’ Caitlin cursed herself for letting her mother have her way again.

The next morning Caitlin dropped the boys off before school peak hour started. Eight schools separated her from her mother’s house. There was no avoiding the 40-kilometre zones with the lollipop ladies shepherding their herds and bumper-to-bumper latest model SUVs doing the morning drop. Caitlin tried not to resent chauffeuring her boys around. She’d fret if she didn’t—it wasn’t safe like when she was a kid. Caitlin suddenly missed her rickety school bus rides. Chugging along with no suspension, she’d monkey up to the back of the bus and sit on the high seat straddling the thrum of the wheel. She’d sit there quietly looking out the window, squeezing her thighs tightly together whenever the tyres lurched over a hump.

Caitlin made sure she’d get to her mother’s early. As Erin had aged, the more punctual she’d insisted everyone else become. When Caitlin was growing up, Erin was late for everything. She’d miss school concerts and sports carnivals, arriving towards the end of parent and teacher nights, making a grand entrance, perfumed and red-lipped and over-dressed, flirting with teachers of either sex as they packed up. Then she’d reluctantly go back home with Caitlin and her little sister and the three of them would sit at the kitchen bench till way after midnight. Caitlin would pour her mother tall glasses of scotch and ice while she acted out Tennessee Williams or Beckett or Albee by heart, jumping from one role to the next, reenacting whole arguments between characters.

‘More, Ma, please!’ ‘Do another one,’ the girls would yell out if she threatened to stop.

She always obliged. Erin would turban a tea towel around her head and then take it off to flick at an imaginary character. She’d demand more booze if her character was a drunk, though her drinks were never props. The girls would whoop and squeal and no one cared what time it was. Then she’d tell them she could’ve been a great actress if only her stupid, no-good husband hadn’t left her to bring them up all on her own, and the girls would wet the tea towel and wash her mascara-stained cheeks and put her to bed.

Erin sure liked a drink back then. But when she turned sixty, she gave up hard liquor and her timing reversed. She'd turn up to dinner parties early and would become sullen if friends kept her waiting.

Caitlin pulled in to the driveway. It wasn't worth honking, she'd done it once before and they'd sat in silence for half an hour until Erin was satisfied her daughter had learnt her lesson. Caitlin turned the engine off, but kept the radio on to listen to a scientist defending intelligent design.

Erin opened the front door and waved. Caitlin could tell she'd fussed and preened as if she were going to a wedding. She'd had her hair done and had bought a new dress. Tiny and sharp featured, the weight she'd suddenly put on after her husband died had just as suddenly slipped off again in her sixties, too late she'd bemoaned, to make good use of it. Caitlin thought it suited her nature better. With her finicky ways, her mother had always had a controlling trimness about her.

'This is going to be a sad funeral, dear,' Erin announced, side-saddling her way in to the front seat.

Caitlin switched the radio to a classical station. 'Funerals are always sad, Ma.'

'But this is going to be very, very sad,' her mother's voice punched the air for emphasis. Erin sucked in air between her teeth, then with a hissing sound, cussed 'Ssssuicide'. Her voice as shrill as scraping metal.

Caitlin wanted to yell out 'la-la-la-la-la-la' over her mother's voice. Here she was, a middle-aged woman with kids of her own and she felt like a child.

'But you said...' Caitlin stopped. Years of gestalt and roleplaying their mother-daughter relationship had made her adopt an artificial language, a controlling newspeak that removed *blame* words. 'I thought it was an accident.'

Erin turned squarely to face her. 'The funeral notice said it's an accident. His father is saying it's an accident. The priest will say it's an accident.'

'Why?'

'Because suicide is a mortal sin.'

'So's not having your seatbelt on. I mean why did he...'

'Why does anyone?'

'His poor mother.'

'I called Margaret last night.'

‘How is she?’

‘Devastated, dear. Dev-a-stated.’

‘Of course.’

‘I said, well it’s a good thing he wasn’t a Hindu, otherwise he’d come back as a cockroach.’

Caitlin slammed the brake. ‘You said what?’

‘If you take your own life, you get reincarnated as...’

‘What possessed you to say that?’

‘It’s not what I say, it’s what the Hare Krishnas say.’

‘Who cares what the Hare Krishnas say? We’re Catholic. Margaret’s husband, what’s-his-name?’

‘Joe.’

‘Right. Joe. He’s Italian, old school, pope-loving Roman Catholic Catholic. Jesus, Ma. Cockroaches.’

‘Don’t get worked up, dear.’

‘Put your seatbelt on.’

They drove in silence to the church. Caitlin parked behind the rectory. She knew St Jude’s well. It was their church. A blond brick edifice only relieved by a high row of small stained-glass windows depicting the Stations of the Cross. It was characterless, built quickly in the late fifties to service local Catholic families like her mother’s, Irish and British citizens who had come to Australia as Ten Pound Poms. St Jude’s was too new and too big to have the charm of an old sandstone church, and was too insignificant to have manicured grounds or a copper steeple. But it was and would always be where her family had its rituals, where their babies got christened, first confessions were made and bodies of loved ones sent off to be buried. As much as she would have liked a more charming church, once you have a family church, you can’t go changing it.

‘We should have a permanent room here,’ Caitlin said, letting Erin know the cockroach standoff was officially over. She leaned across her and pulled out a travel pack of tissues from the glove box.

‘Here, take these.’

‘No thanks, I’ll be fine dear.’

Caitlin stuffed the tissues in her bag and they walked to the front of the church where the empty hearse was waiting.

‘He’s already in, then.’

The people milling around the church looked like uni students, too young to be burying one of their own. Erin and Caitlin signed the guest book and were given a hastily folded pamphlet with a handsome boy-man’s face and birth and death dates on the front.

They took turns hugging Joe and Margaret, who seemed to have also forgiven Erin for the cockroach comment, and took a seat in a pew halfway up on the family side. The coffin was sealed and huge: black lacquered wood punctuated with brass handles.

‘Don’t waste good money on one of those for me.’ Erin’s voice was loud in the hushed space. A little boy in the pew in front turned around. His mother bristled and pulled him to her.

‘Shhh,’ whispered Caitlin. ‘Why? Do you want to be cremated?’

‘No. I want you to put me in a cave.’ Whenever Erin spoke of her death, she put on a haughty tone as if her funeral was going to be a big posh event like having a private box at the races.

‘A cave, huh? To be eaten by vultures, like a Tibetan sky burial?’

‘No, dear. In case I resurrect.’

Their family was conventionally buried in a graveyard nearby. It was still the proper option for Catholics. No matter how expensive real estate had become, people would take out a second mortgage to finance a plot. Caitlin’s family couldn’t afford to keep buying them, so they were stacked up, one on top of the other. Heaven’s sandwich they called it. Caitlin’s paternal grandfather was there with her grandmother side-by-side at the bottom of the pile, then her uncle on top of her grandpa. Her dad was meant to be there, but he wasn’t. She was only knee-high when he disappeared at sea. But his name was etched in the stone as if he was there and she tried to believe he was, somewhere in the sandwich. Her mother’s people were buried back in Ireland. Erin was meant to be laid out on top of her mother-in-law, a thought, which horrified her so much, she bought weekly Lotto tickets in the hope she could afford something more appropriate for her afterlife. Caitlin knew that even with her mother’s resurrection plans, Erin would join the sandwich one day and there wouldn’t be any room left after that, so she’d quietly planned to install a chute next to the gravestone and slide future dead relatives’ ashes down it.

‘Great. A cave.’

‘I could go any time, you know.’

‘Fine, I’ll start looking tomorrow.’ Caitlin squared the corners of the pamphlet together to correct the fold.

‘You know dear, I don’t believe suicide is a sin.’

‘I don’t either.’

‘Sometimes people are better off being free. Sometimes the fear of not dying is worse.’

‘I guess.’

‘You know, I’ve wanted to die most of my life.’

‘I know, Ma.’

‘It’s all your father’s fault.’

‘I know.’

‘You’re what’s kept me here. You and your sister.’

Caitlin looked at her. ‘You tried to drown us.’

‘Lucky your school taught you to swim.’ Erin smiled.

‘Still.’

‘I didn’t really want to drown you. I didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t know how to grieve back then, I just wanted to follow your father into the sea.’

‘Well, I’m glad you didn’t.’

‘So am I.’ Erin’s voice was a barely-there whisper. ‘So am I.’

The congregation stood instinctively as the monsignor entered the back of the church.

Erin squeezed Caitlin’s hand. ‘Would you pass me the tissues, darling?’

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Chapter Four: Dominoes

My brother's coffin is closed. I want to look inside. When my uncle died last year, they kept his casket open, even with the brown spots, which made him look like he'd just had his face painted at the school fete. I wanted to touch one, it was raised like a mole and looked soft and suedey, but Gabriel wouldn't let me.

When grandpa died a few months back, they placed him on top of his bed for three days. I sat next to him and whispered in his ear, said I was sorry for sneaking comic books into mass and promised not to do it again. At least not at his mass, especially as I was being made to read out loud from the holy book. And he'd know anyway, as he's watching me from heaven now.

My brother's coffin is locked. I wonder if his head is missing. It's not padlocked, but there's no way to open it with all the sunflowers on top. I want to see if he's all-together. See if he's got that just sleeping look. Check if they painted his cheeks pink and combed his hair and put his Sunday clothes on. I touch under the lip of the lid and my mother slaps my hand.

'Is he all there?' I ask.

Mother gasps air like she's choking.

'What's missing?'

She grabs my hand and pulls me to the front pew. I yank my hand back, it's babyish to hold my mother's hand and I'm almost ten.

The priests say mass in Italian. Gabriel will understand. I think they're talking about him being with grandpa.

'Is he in heaven yet?'

Mother says he'll have to wait a bit. I think about the picture of Jesus ascending in my prayer book. Floating up to heaven with his arms raised so he won't bump into anything.

'Cause he's not in one piece?' I ask.

Mother buries her face in her hands. I imagine Gabriel in limbo, looking after all the dead babies, waiting for the other bits of him to float up.

After mass, we drive in a convoy of Fiats to Rookwood Necropolis. My father used to joke this was the dead centre of town until people we knew started coming here. Now he doesn't joke anymore. We snake through the sandstone gate to the Roman Catholic section. In the city of dead people, everyone is buried in

little suburbs. There's Chinatown, here's the Jewish area, we pass Gallipoli and the dead soldiers where my other grandfather rests, past the Chinese people covered with small golden plaques and red ornaments over them and the Greek Orthodox folk with giant double crucifixes on top of their graves. I think it must be hard for people to know where to go if they have parents from different places, with a mother in the Jewish section and a father with the Catholics. I ask if that's why most people marry people from the same place. Mother big-eyes me. It must be because she's Anglo and my father's a wog.

My father parks the car and we amble through the Italians. We pass a large marble crypt with wilting lilies stuffed into a stuck-on vase on the wall. I press my face against the glass doors. A life-size boy-doll, like a shop window dummy, sits in a chair and stares back at me with big glassy eyes. The giant boy-doll has a rosary wrapped around his plastic hand.

I think about Gabriel's hands spreading dominoes across a table, the bone pieces clinking against each other. Click-clack. He'd left home years ago, but on some hot Saturday afternoons he'd catch the train over and take me to the Olympic pool in town. I'd do laps and handstands and climb up to the highest diving board and try and get him to watch me do cannonballs and pencil dives, while he huddled around the tiled tables playing dominoes. He'd wave and the other men would smile and then he'd get bored and say 'Let's go, Squid.' My real name's Dom, but that's what he called me.

We'd go to the train station and he'd buy a ticket for himself and get me to duck under the turnstiles. We'd stand in the carriage just inside the doors. Gabriel would wedge the door open to let the fast air fly in. Holding onto to him, I'd stick my head out like a dog in the back of a ute. A dizzy-tingle feeling would start in my toes and whoosh up my legs till it reached my head. Weeeeeeeeeeeee. The same panic-thrill you get when you swing the cabin back and forth at the top of the Ferris wheel and make the guards point and shout.

'Donchya ever wanna jump?' I yelled into the fast wind.

'Sure. Sometimes.'

'C'mon, then,' I lean out further.

Gabriel pulls me back into the carriage. 'Don't ever.'

'You're hurting me,' I push his hand off my shoulder.

He grabs me and holds me to his chest. ‘Just go to the pool if you feel like that. Swim instead, okay Squid?’

Six men carry Gabriel’s coffin through the Italian section. One of the smiling men from the pool walks at the front, but he doesn’t smile now. We follow them, solemnly passing a maze of pink walls. We turn into one of the corridors and stop in front of a long wall divided into twelve marble panels. Framed photos and people’s names are carved into each one. Pictures of the Virgin and vases of faded plastic flowers mark them like roadside memorials for car accidents. One panel is missing: three up, four across. It leaves a hole like an open post office box, only much bigger. The priest says something I don’t understand and they lift Gabriel’s coffin up. I think I hear the click-clack of dominoes. The man from the pool is too short and he butts the front of the coffin into the marble panel below. Everybody gasps and Mother makes a horrible animal sound. The guy at the back must be a rower’s cox, he yells out ‘Hold er up’, then gets the six men to step back and they heave Gabriel up again and into the hole, posting him to limbo.

At the wake, Mother makes me walk around and offer people risotto balls and potato frittata. I don’t mind because I want to find the smiling man from the pool. I want to ask him why Gabriel needed to join Grandpa so much. Why he couldn’t wait. It’s a scorcher. Clusters of people are gathered in small groups around the garden. The smiling man isn’t anywhere. I think he must have gone back to the pool because he felt bad about head-butting Gabriel.

My father sits with his workmates on the patio drinking grappa. I lay the frittata tray on the white ironwork table that looks like it’s made of doilies and one of the men leans in to kiss me in the Mediterranean way. His breath is garlicky. I don’t pull back like I want to. I ask him if he knows if Gabriel’s head is in the coffin. My father overhears and orders me to go to my room.

‘He doesn’t know what he’s saying Joe,’ the man with garlic-breath says.

‘He’s just like his brother,’ my father says, his face getting redder.

‘Sorry, Dad.’

‘Go to your room.’ He stares at me, I know I shouldn’t try a stare-off today. ‘Now!’

My father has his thick leather belt on so I run upstairs. I go past my room on the second landing and to the closed door at the end of the hall. Gabriel's bedroom is still the way he left it when he moved out years ago.

'This place makes me sick,' he'd said. Then he had wiped my wet cheeks and said he'd always come and see me and take me swimming.

A row of trophies sits on the mantelpiece. I pick up a heavy bronze statue. A plaque is engraved in cursive letters that say 2007 State Swimming Champion. There's no dust, the room is vacuum-sealed. A framed photo of his swim team sits on the dresser. Gabriel smiles at me from the photo.

His bed is soft. I feel scared. I know nothing will be the same. I want to run to Gabriel and beg him to stop. My stomach heaves. I open the window and vomit up some frittata. I wonder if the smiling man has gone back to the pool. Crawling onto the sill, I hold onto the jasmine trestle and clamber down the side of the house. I brush the petals off and run up the street to the train station. I tell the stationmaster I've forgotten my wallet and he looks at my church clothes, opens the gate and says that's okay. I go into the station and rush up to the walkover bridge. A cat's cradle of tape crisscrosses a small ledge extending over the tracks. I look onto the tracks to see if there's anything left behind. A freight train whooshes beneath me, sucking all the air with it. Maybe it's collecting a little piece of Gabriel now. I wonder if trains have picked up bits of him and spread him all over the country. When the last carriage passes, I climb over the railing to get a better look at the tracks. The dizzy-tingle feeling starts in my toes. I lean forward a little and the stationmaster yells 'Hey. Get down from there!'

I climb down to the platform and the stationmaster walks towards me with a red face. An express train arrives and I say 'Look, it's here' and he lets me get on. I know Gabriel would be proud that I bummed a ride. I stand inside the doors and wedge my shoe between them. As soon as we leave the station I push the doors open and stick my head out just like a dog. The fast air stings my eyes.

A sandwich board at the pool entrance says 'Closed for maintenance'. Pulling the turnstile towards me, I squeeze through it sideways. Canvas drop sheets and buckets are stacked in the foyer. The canteen's metal cage is down. I run past the 'no running' sign.

The sauna is locked and the pools are drained. The baby pool glistens like a wet peppermint. I kick off my shoes and socks and as I run over to the diving board, the concrete burns the soles of my feet. A heat haze bounces off the ground making the air look thick and wavy.

I wriggle my toes over the edge of the diving board and get that dizzy-tingle feeling. Five long, black, parallel lines have been painted on the bottom of the pool to mark the swimming lanes. A single horizontal line crosses them at the 40-metre mark, making them look like a row of crucifixes. In the distance is the dominoes table and I think I can see Gabriel playing.

The dizzy-tingle feeling starts to whoosh up my legs and I feel like jumping. I hear him say 'Swim, Squid'. I climb all the way down the ladder into the empty pool. I rotate my arms and run up and down the new black lines and swim and swim and swim.

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Chapter Five: Dishpan Hands

‘I want to die when I want to die,’ Margaret Manetti said aloud as she washed the dishes, but not loud enough for her husband to hear. Joe was watching the game in the TV room with the volume turned up loud like a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign. Margaret put the plastic colander upside down on the dish rack. She looked at her reflection in the window directly above the sink: the tortoiseshell reading glasses she wore even when she wasn’t reading, her silvery-white bob. She scanned the face looking back at her, wondering if she’d ever have the expression she saw on her mother’s face at the nursing home only a few hours earlier.

She used to tease Gracie with threats of a nursing home, though neither of them seriously thought she’d end up in one. Then, when Gracie was still living on her own, she fell three times. When she slipped in the shower, Margaret tried not to fuss. She stuck non-slip strips on the tiles and got Joe to mount a chunky metal handle diagonally along the wall. When Gracie tripped over the hall runner, Joe rolled up all the Persian rugs and stored them in the garage. The third time she fell, Gracie lay on her kitchen floor in a wet nightie for six hours before her neighbour heard her calling out. Margaret decided it was enough.

‘You can’t do that,’ said Joe.

‘What choice is there? You want her to live here?’

Joe looked at her like she was Mussolini and turned back to watch the tele.

Like everything else, they argued about it for weeks. At the same time, she quietly asked friends, did research, followed tips. She visited a nursing home one lunchtime to see if her mother could stomach the food. She walked along the long linoleum hallway, her shoes squeaking with every step. Each door had its resident’s name on it, some names were hand-carved into wood, others drawn on paper and stuck to the door with blu-tack, the more popular names were on signs that looked like they had been made for children’s bedrooms. Margaret stopped at a door with a piece of paper with cursive letters spelling Nell on it. She peeped into the room and saw a purple-haired woman folded over in her wheelchair; the old lady lifted her head and reached out to Margaret as if she was trying to grab hold of her. A male nurse pulled Margaret away and took her into an empty room. The room was so sunny it seemed almost cruel. The cot was turned down with giant fluffy pillows that looked to Margaret as if they had never been slept on, and

a floral easy chair faced a large plate glass window looking out to a manicured rose garden.

‘Do all the rooms have windows like this?’

‘Of course.’ As they stood in silence, the nurse smiled hypnotically. He looked at Margaret as if she were a child, not someone’s adult daughter with a twenty-three-year-old son of her own. She wanted to tell him that she knew all about institutions, her son had been in and out of them, she knew about the forced smiles and reassuring nods, the attentive veneer that hid the understaffing and over-medication.

‘Well, I guess I should get a brochure then,’ she said, forcing a smile back.

When Tall Trees approved of her mother—Margaret discovered this was just as vital as her approval of them—she cleared out Gracie’s weatherboard worker’s cottage, sold the three-times re-upholstered furniture and sent crates of mismatched crockery and cookware to St Vinnie’s. She hired a builder’s skip and threw out all the faded Vogues and unopened boxes of flesh-coloured stockings. She got friends to help her heave out the single mattress and the Singer sewing table and the two televisions her mother never watched. She gave the op shop a jewellery box full of marcasite brooches and two fox-fur collars with gaping jaws and dangling paws.

The real estate agent stabbed his ‘For Sale’ sign into the once-envied rose garden that was now so overgrown with weeds, all that remained of the orange-tipped Queen Mary roses was a gnarly crown of thorns.

Within weeks, Gracie’s front door key was traded for a mechanical bed in an airless room and a \$300,000 bond to keep her there. Smoky, the 12-year-old Burmese, moved in with the cat lady down the road and all Margaret kept of her mother’s belongings was a tall colonial corner cabinet with tiered shelves, and forty-six cherished porcelain figurines. After Mr Sheening the maple shelves, Margaret carefully angled the cabinet into her station wagon. She packed the figures head-to-toe in a milk crate with a tea towel between each layer and strapped the crate into the passenger seat, safe as a young child, and drove as slow as a hearse to the nursing home. She parked in the No Stopping zone right out front and dragged the shelves up the ramped pathway, into the elevator—more spacious than Gracie’s room, she thought—past the nurse’s station and into her

mother's new home. She wedged it into position in the corner between the bed and the sealed window.

Even with the shrill of scraping furniture, Gracie was deeply asleep, her mouth slack and gummy. Margaret tried to coax it shut, but it fell wide again. She closed the curtains and kissed Gracie's forehead, then went back to the car and brought the figurines up.

She stayed for two hours, arranging and rearranging the ceramic statues on the shelves, clustering them to make narratives: a group of dainty art deco women huddling together like old friends; royal characters from every period rubbing shoulders; a quartet of Victorian ladies in corsets and crinolines trading secrets. The rest of the statues were children, presents her eldest son had given to Gracie each Christmas after he turned five. Margaret would take him to David Jones and steer him towards little princes, Bunnykins figures, characters from children's literature, but he always chose sad-faced children—a Dickensian toddler with a scruffy dog, a nineteenth century flower-seller, a pauper in tattered clothes. They lay on the floor looking at her. Margaret struggled to give meaning to the collection of lost children and placed them in a circle on the top shelf.

Gracie started to fade as soon she arrived at Tall Trees. She seemed bored at first, then absent, then looked like she was always trying to remember the answer to a crossword. Margaret blamed herself for her mother's sudden dementia. She thought it was Gracie's survival strategy for being put in there.

As much as her mother no longer recognised her, Margaret didn't recognise her mother, either. She had the same fairy-floss hair, still insisted on wearing her diamante-studded reading glasses, although her sight was so bad she hadn't been able to read in years, and re-applied her frosted apricot lipstick after every meal. But where was the woman who was tall and straight-backed and walked four miles a day? Where was the woman who'd raised her daughter on her own by making evening gowns for idle society wives? Where was the woman who kept working as a seamstress until she was seventy-three, who was so afraid of losing her independence, she'd said, 'I'd rather be dead, thank you,' when the government offered her the war widows' pension if she agreed to stop working? Gracie had become generic, just another elderly lady in a floral housecoat.

Tall Trees was close enough for Margaret to drop in to after work. Near enough if ever there was ever a late-night call. It was also the same nursing home

an old school friend's father was in. She hadn't seen Elaine much over the years, but now that their parents were sharing a home together, they'd each check in on the other's parent and would catch up every couple of weeks. Elaine was all long fair hair, new-agey and girlish, even though she was fifty-three and hadn't had any work done.

A few months after Gracie moved in to Tall Trees, Elaine said, between sips of hot water, 'You know, when they do pass over, they always do it at three in the morning.'

'Always?' Margaret said, looking for the little pack of Earl Grey she kept in her handbag for visits to Elaine's.

'Well, not always, but often in the dead of night.' Surprised by her own flagrant use of the D-word, she quickly added, 'It's a biorhythm thing.'

'She's got to go soon,' Margaret said, giving up on the idea of tea.

'You can't be sure.' Elaine poured more hot water and pushed the delicate cup and saucer across the table to Margaret. 'Thing is, you have a mother who should go, but won't. And a son who should live, but doesn't want to.'

Margaret wanted to throw the hot water at Elaine. She picked up the teaspoon and stirred instead. From that night, Margaret woke at 3am. Gracie—who had always been a stickler for punctuality—was now making everyone wait. She kept hanging on, spending day after day watching reality TV and beating her biorhythms.

Margaret was no stranger to death; her father-in-law had died only a few months earlier and her own father went to war when she was six and never came back. Now, she was at that age when friends and friends of friends were getting cancer—a colleague here, a girlfriend's husband, an old buddy from school, breasts were chopped off, glands removed, bald women were a common sight. Margaret knew the process of dying could itself be another type of living. Only Gracie had already gone to some other kind of place and Margaret knew her mother wouldn't have a chance to experience any of that.

Margaret liked washing the dishes. Liked the meditation of it. Keeping an immaculate home made her feel as if she still had some control. When she was doing the dishes, she'd stack the cutlery and plates into the dishwasher, then hand

wash the serving bowls, utensils and pots in that order, while the water was at its hottest. She'd drain the sink clear and wash the wine glasses under running water until they squeaked. Tonight she forgot to empty the sink; she had too many other things on her mind.

On today's visit, Gracie was lucid. When Margaret walked into her room, Gracie pushed her shrunken body higher up on the pillows and pointed to her dentures. Margaret took them out of the glass as Gracie pushed her gaping mouth forward.

'Maggie.' Her mother hadn't called her that since she was a child. 'Get rid of those stupid statues.'

Margaret looked at the corner cabinet, at the congregation of figurines she lovingly arranged almost a year ago. Statues that her mother had collected, that had been given to her by so many people, over so many decades. Statues that she accepted so graciously, had fawned over every Christmas and birthday and Mother's Day.

'All of them.' Gracie spat.

'No.' Margaret stared at the shelves. 'You love them.'

'I don't love them. I've never liked those little people.' Gracie lurched toward the shelves, her upper body shaking.

'Relax, Ma.' Margaret went to the cabinet and picked up a rare hand-painted Royal Doulton figurine she'd bought for one of Gracie's birthdays.

'Stop fussing, Maggie!' Gracie yelled out, jiggling in her mechanical bed. 'Smash 'em!'

'Okay, okay, calm down.'

Gracie leaned back on her pillow and let out a deep sigh. She closed her eyes, the expression on her face—usually so tight and bitter—softened into relief. Margaret had become so used to the veil of haughty disapproval her mother wore, her chin cocked high and lips pursed. But as she lay in her cot with the echo of trolleys delivering meals to distant rooms and a promise to erase decades of history, her mother looked suddenly young again. Her face was softer, the hollows of her cheeks rounder, the bluish tinge of her skin almost pink. Her expression was kind and knowing like the saint on the yellowing communion card Gracie had kept in her purse since she was six. Gracie was relieved; she was at peace, suddenly free.

‘What’s going on here?’

Margaret swung around to see a nurse standing at the door. She was squat and fleshy like a white marshmallow and had a small paper cup in her hand.

‘Nothing.’ Margaret felt like she was about to be put on detention.

The nurse walked over to Gracie and tapped her on the shoulder. ‘Now Gracie, let’s give you something to calm you down, shall we.’

‘She’s fine.’ Margaret pulled the nurse by the wrist into the corridor and took the cup. ‘Please, lay off the meds.’

‘That’s not how we do it here.’ The nurse pursed her lips and held the palm of her hand out flat.

‘But, she’s ready, I know she’s ready to go,’ Margaret held the cup behind her like a child keeping a toy from another child. ‘It’s not right, keeping her like this.’

‘It’s not right not to,’ said the nurse, as she snatched the cup back and walked back to Gracie.

That night Margaret made spaghetti and meatballs, which she ate with Joe in front of the telly—he, being Sicilian, said it was one of the few Italian dishes she knew how to cook. She didn’t tell him about the figurines. She didn’t mention the look on her mother’s face.

After Margaret washed the pots, she forgot to run her finger braille-like along the bottom of the sink to find the plug’s little metal chain and yank it out. She lowered a glass into the sudsy water and swished it around. Shiraz sediments were stuck inside as if they’d been sandblasted into it. She knew wine glasses were too fragile for the dishwasher, yet couldn’t think how, if she placed them gently enough in their plastic cradle, the dishwasher could manage to break them.

The doorbell rang above the roar of the game. She scrubbed harder and the glass crushed in her palm like a hollow Easter egg. She looked up at the window, but couldn’t see beyond her reflection. The doorbell rang again as a glassy shard speared the mound at the base of her thumb. Margaret’s blood seeped into the sink, blushing the suds the same colour as the bathwater she’d found her son floating in, nine years earlier.

Margaret and Gabriel had never bonded the way a mother and son should. She

blamed herself for not having a stronger bond because she hadn't fed him from her breast. She felt guilty when his cries didn't bother her the way she thought a baby's should. She blamed his moods and introversion on being an only child, but still swallowed her contraceptive pill every day. And then, when Gabriel was thirteen and she thought she was too old, she fell pregnant again and had Dominic.

Gabriel's first attempt was at fourteen. He kept the tap running long enough for water to pool under the bathroom door, soaking the chocolate shag pile Joe had proudly laid along the upstairs hallway. Margaret opened the door to scold him, but her voice skipped with a staccato scream when she saw the little blade in the soap dish. Pink bubbles circled in the corner of the bath, while his body lay splayed across the rim, limp as the *pietà*. She ran downstairs to get her mobile and called triple 0 while wrapping a hand towel tightly around the incisions. She sat on the edge of the bath and held him as she waited for the paramedics.

Gabriel developed a talent for it. At fifteen, he went to Margaret's en-suite cabinet and emptied her blister packs and bottles of sedatives. He hid in the cupboard under the stairs and swallowed them with a big glass of Milo. Buster, the family dog who for once lived up to his name, barked at the cupboard so incessantly that Margaret opened it expecting to release a neighbourhood cat. When Gabriel fell out, she knew what number to call. Feeling helpless, she squeezed his hand while the paramedics pumped his stomach twenty minutes later.

When he was seventeen, she came home from the supermarket with a car full of groceries, and as she waited outside the garage for the electric roller door to open, was overwhelmed by the smell of petrol. The door slid up to reveal Gabriel's six hundred dollar Datsun inside with the engine still running and a hose snaking from the exhaust into the rear window. Coughing, she opened the driver door and dragged his body onto the lawn.

A few days later, as Gabriel was recovering in hospital, Joe and Margaret went to see the doctor at his offices.

'Please, sit down,' the doctor gestured to the plastic chairs. The doctor was a short, hairy man who tugged on his long eyebrow hairs as he spoke. 'Gabriel snuck out of the hospital earlier today. We've got him back now, but he upset a few people.'

‘How?’ Margaret asked.

‘He was asking people if they believed in God and then saying, but does God believe in you?’

Joe breathed out heavily, ‘Gabriel’s not a practising ...’

‘It doesn’t matter really, what matters is that he’s hearing things.’ The doctor plucked out one of his eyebrow hairs and looked at it. ‘He needs observation and quite possibly medication. He’s a minor, so I need your permission.’

Gabriel came home six weeks later with an ongoing prescription. He stayed for a month then left the pills on the kitchen bench with a note that just said, ‘Sorry.’

For the next six years, Margaret only saw her eldest son when he came to visit Dominic. If she was lucky, he’d stay for lunch, but mostly he’d take Dom down the pool.

Margaret lay in bed at night wishing the front door would open and she’d hear his Doc Martens clomping up the stairs. She lay stiffly with Joe snoring beside her, while her mind whirled with visions of Gabriel’s death. In her half-sleep she played out different scenarios: electrocution, drowning, firearms, asphyxiation—always reassuring herself with stories of how she would save him. Fear consumed her every thought. She scoured newspapers for articles about suicide and analysed survival statistics. She managed panic as a constant emotion until it became normal. If anyone noticed, they didn’t say anything, but she knew she was close to the edge: quick to anger if she got stuck in traffic, rude to shop girls, disinterested in Joe’s attempts to have sex, less tolerant of Gracie.

The doorbell rang again. No one they knew would come by at this hour. No salesman would continue ringing the bell like that.

‘Can you get it?’ Margaret called out to Joe as she picked the shard of glass from her hand.

‘You expecting someone?’ Joe yelled back as he walked towards the front door.

Margaret raised the kitchen window until her reflection disappeared. A pungent rush of jasmine consumed the air. Looking out to the street, she saw a police car parked across their driveway, the engine turned off. Two officers stood

under the Italianate portico Joe had insisted on building at the front door. ‘Every proud wog’s home should have one,’ he’d said.

Both police officers took their hats off as soon as Joe walked out on the landing. The female officer stepped forward, cuddling her cap protectively like a cushion as she spoke. Joe stumbled, then doubled over like he’d been punched in the stomach. He fell to his knees, howling like a speared animal.

Margaret tells herself what to do. In a moment, she’ll go outside and put her arms around Joe. She’ll thank the officers; after all, this isn’t the job they signed up for. She’ll bring Joe inside and hold him tight. She’ll grieve with him and buffer him from the cruel certainty she has lived with, knowing this day would come. She’ll shower him till the water starts running cold and then put him to bed with two sedatives. She’ll wait until three o’clock passes and then she’ll take a sedative too.

Margaret pulled the plug from sink and watched the pink water gurgle down. She took a deep breath and closed the window, bringing her reflection into view again. Her expression looked just like Gracie’s.

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Chapter Six: The Charm

The first time you have a gun pointed at you, you're five. You're with your grandfather in a pub just across from the greyhounds. You're staying with him in his small flat while your father's at work and your mother's in hospital getting you a baby brother. You're wearing school shorts that have sat in many classes before you and you're crouched against a tiled wall playing marbles on patterned carpet that's stiff from years of spilt beer and urine. Your grandfather stands near an upright piano that a woman in a stripy halter-top has just been singing along to. He has a hand on her bare shoulder. He calls out to the big-haired barmaid and shouts the bar another round of drinks, then laughs loudly to men with red faces, while his thin cotton pocket boasts his good luck.

Later, as he piggybacks you down the road towards another night of crumbed sausages, you hear fast footsteps coming from behind and a sudden pressure like a coin is being pressed into your head. You move and it moves with you. You imagine this coin, big and silver and shiny like the one the tooth fairy left under your pillow. You hear tobacco-smelling words you don't understand. Then the coin goes away. You smell metal and see smoke and your grandfather suddenly deflates.

The second time a gun is pointed at you, you're eleven. Your family's on the verandah, all together like it's a special occasion. It's mid-morning and there's a cool breeze, but sweat lacquers your father's forehead as if he has a fever.

'It's holding on,' your mother says, stroking your pet rabbit's ears. You wonder if she means holding on the way that newborns hold onto grown-ups' fingers. Or holding on like your brother does each night in a half-dream on his punishing plastic sheets. Or holding on as you are now to the lucky pebble in the pocket of your corduroy pants.

'Can't you do something?' You look at your father.

'Sorry, son,' he says, lifting up his singlet to wipe the sweat from his face.

'Please, Popstar?'

You'd always called your father that. It made him sound bigger—like your very own superhero. When you were little you'd yell it out loud and pretend that you had to be rescued from climbing too high up a tree.

Your Popstar was in the papers once—before he got in the papers a lot. But your family doesn't ever talk about those times. Like they don't talk about his long trips away. Or the baby your mother gave away one summer. Or about having to hide under the beds whenever the cops came knocking at the front door.

That first time your mother was proud, calling people up, buying extra copies of the afternoon edition, cutting them slowly with small measured snips. For a moment Popstar had become someone else's hero and you had to share him with a freckly boy he'd rescued from the sea. 'Saved by the Kiss of Life!' the headline said—but you'd never seen your father kiss a thing.

Two days later, after all the back-slapping and teacakes and late-night sherries, a newspaper man came calling by to say that the boy had died that morning from lungs so filled with salt that he'd take weeks to decompose.

'Please, Popstar,' you say again softly.

Your mother puts the rabbit in your lap and goes to make tea. Making tea is what she does when there's nothing else she can think of to do. The screen door slaps behind her.

Your father looks down at the rabbit as it lies limp in your lap. You want him to give it his miracle kiss. He puts one hand on your shoulder in a father-calming-son kind of way and looks straight at you, his eyes clamping your eyes so you can't look away. Then his other hand snaps the rabbit's thin neck. He says it's the kind thing to do. Says you can get another. Says your mother's right, it was holding on and needed help to let go. But you know it was Popstar who couldn't hold on. Couldn't stand the rabbit's bubbling breath.

You carry your rabbit to the vacant lot at the back of the house and dig a small rectangle in the earth. You don't want to bury it while it's still soft and alive-feeling, so you decide to keep it in your lap and wait until it's deader. The butcher's son from next door has been watching and comes down to the vacant lot when he knows there are no grown-ups around. He sneaks up and points a shotgun at you—the one his dad uses for shooting beer bottles and kangaroos. He makes shoot-em-up sound effects. You close your eyes, you put your fingers in your ears, you want to disappear.

He laughs and says 'Gimme,' then snatches the rabbit from your lap and runs away.

He finds you later that day still sitting by the empty grave. He squats beside you and tells you that he skinned your rabbit and fed it to the cats. His fat fingers—red from bad circulation and the bunny’s blood—press a small alfoil parcel into the pit of your palm.

‘You killed it,’ you want to say to the boy, but you know it’s not true. You watch as he mimics rabbit ears with his fingers on top of his head and hops all the way back to his house. You open the alfoil and see a stumpy severed foot. You hold it for a while and take your lucky pebble from your pocket and put them both into the too-big grave and fill it with dirt. You wish that your Popstar could shoot beer bottles and kangaroos.

The next time, you’re sixteen. Your father has taken the family up north to chase work and you’ve moved to the inner city on your own. You go to a technical college during the day and have a job at a pizzeria in a seedy part of town at night. Across the road is a long sandstone wall and boys your age stand against it while cars drive slowly by. Late one shift, when you’re working alone, a boy with cropped bleached hair and wearing frayed denim shorts comes in and orders garlic bread.

‘It puts them off kissing,’ he says, then smiles. His front teeth have a gap between them that’s wide enough to fit a five-cent coin.

You smear extra garlic butter into the sliced breadstick and wrap it in foil. He waits while it cooks. He sits on a stool close to you and leans over your counter as he flicks through a year-old *Weekly*. When you give him the hot parcel, he opens it and offers you a piece. You say you’re not hungry. He looks at you, scanning as much of you as he can see. A sudden heat rises up through your body and you look away. As he eats, he watches as you wipe down the bench and fill the straw canister tin and push paper napkins into an already bulging metal dispenser. When he’s finished, he rolls the alfoil into a tight silver ball and hands it to you.

‘Just like a mini mirror ball, eh?’ Then goes back to his spot on the wall until a car takes him away.

Next evening, you watch him slowly cross the road to you. You could start on his order, but you don’t. You like the wait, like watching him eat the pillowy pieces. He shows up again the next night, and the night after, always at the same

time for three weeks. Then one night his spot at the wall stays empty. A couple of nights later he comes to the pizzeria just as you're cashing up at the end of the shift.

You feel nervous seeing him, 'I'll turn the oven back on.'

'Don't bother.' He closes the door behind him. He walks over to you behind the counter.

'What happened?' You reach to touch a pink slash across his cheek. He stops your hand and leans down to kiss you. His mouth is big and wet and tastes of mints. You jerk back from him and stare at the scar.

'It's nothing.' He looks back at the door like he's expecting someone to come in. 'Anyway, I just came to say bye.'

'How come?' You want him to kiss you again.

'I'm going away for a bit.' He steps back and looks around the shop. 'Yeah, anyway, I thought maybe you could help me out?'

He gestures to the neat stack of notes laid out in little plastic coffins in the open register. You close the till drawer.

He leans in and whispers, 'Just say you got held up.' He makes a gun shape with his thumb and forefinger and presses it through your Tasty Pizza T-shirt into your heart.

'I can't.'

He drags his finger down to your nipple and flicks it. 'Lend me some then.'

You want to take his finger-puppet gun and put it inside you. You open the till and get a little yellow envelope with your name on it from under the tray. 'Just for a week.'

'Sure, thanks.' He takes your pay packet, kisses you on the forehead and walks out of the pizzeria. He crosses the road to a waiting car. You wave, but he doesn't look back.

Five years later, you're living in a disused railway yard close to the city. You have a sometime lover who comes and goes. He has the name of an archangel and wears silver polish on his nails. When you press your chest against his and kiss his mouth hard, your tongues mad and mercurial, you taste metal from his daily dose of lithium.

One night you come home later than usual. When you open the roller door to your warehouse, you see he's been there. It's landlord-inspection tidy and deadly quiet, so you go to put on a CD. He's stacked them in alphabetical order. Your books too. Spines straight like soldiers, start marching from Artaud and finish with Zola. You need a drink. You go to the kitchen and he's sitting at the linoleum-topped table with a gun to his head.

You know that he's capable. You've heard of his earlier attempts. Before you that is. You're convinced you can save him, give him pluses, pros, positive reasons.

You've distracted him. He looks at you calmly, as if he's just been meditating. He turns the gun slowly from his own head and points the gun at you, at your face. He pulls the trigger. With a sudden reflex, the gun shoots out a little white flag that says 'Bang'. Then he smiles his wonderful bad-Italian-teeth smile.

'I'll take that as an order, then.' You laugh uneasily.

You pretend he's fine. Say it's okay. Try to make it sexy. You take the toy gun from him and toss it in the bin, then undo his belt and bring him back into his body.

A few weeks go by and there's been no word from him. You resist calling or sending a text, that's not your thing. Easy come, easy go. Must have got serious with his girl, you think, or met another boy. Just after dawn there's a loud knock at the roller door. You think it must be him, think he's forgotten where you hide the keys. You open it, and a policeman and a policewoman are standing in front of you. They take off their caps. Show you his wallet with your card in it. Tell you that your archangel has flown in front of a train.

A few months later, after the flowers are long dead and the smell of him has faded, you decide to get a gun. You find a firearms shop near Chinatown. The squat salesman asks what you're looking for. You know you can't tell him, so you say something about marksmanship.

He points to a cabinet of silvery pistols and says, 'Beretta is best, hands down.'

'Don't you mean hands up?'

The salesman ignores you. He unlocks the cabinet and takes out a shiny handgun. Stroking it, he says, 'It's the loveliest model you'll ever lay eyes on.'

You like the way he talks about guns as if they were lovers, admiring their looks, their prowess. You choose a pistol with a black textured rubber wrap-around grip and a long barrel in a chrome finish. You like its sleekness, the weight of it in your hand. He checks you have no record; you haven't, so he makes none. He takes your cash and gives you this gun and you walk out onto the street.

It's been drizzling and the smell of diesel and roast duck chokes the air. You feel the gun in your pocket, heavy against your thigh, aware of the irony. You place your hand over it and become self-conscious, like you're reading porn in public, and wish you were already home. You pass giggling schoolgirls wearing long socks and short skirts queuing to see a Hong Kong movie. The walls are plastered with posters of a gun-toting, lip-pouting girl in a catsuit. You get a cab.

Your place is clean. You've rehearsed this moment. You go to the bedroom and place the gun on the bedside table. You undress, shower, shave. From now on everything will be okay. You go back to your room and open the bedside drawer where you keep all your toys and get out a tube of lube. You take your gun and tenderly smear gel all over its shaft. And when you start to move with it and against it, and your breath shortens, you remember the smile your lover gave you when his toy gun went 'Bang'.

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Chapter Seven: Backwash

The End

I want to reverse. I'd seen a face like that before. Eyes wide, staring into mine. Begging. Daring. Not again. Not now. I pull the emergency brake. Press the horn. He knows I won't idle at this station, knows I can't stop in time.

He's on a ledge jutting out from the pedestrian bridge. I thought the railways were getting rid of those. Makes it too easy. They've put cyclone fencing on suspension bridges and CCTV cameras on cliffs, but the railways' idea of community service is to give jumpers a comfy ledge to leap off.

He sticks his arms out either side, tightrope-walker-tight to help him balance, like he doesn't want to fall by accident. He stands stiff, focused, staring directly into my driver's cab. He's been waiting for me. Picked me because I have the momentum he needs, picked my express as a sure bet. I press the horn again and again, but can't hear a thing. He keeps his arms Jesus splayed and dives onto the tracks. I go under the bridge and over him without a bump.

The train pushes on against the brake, finally stopping five hundred metres later. I yank the cab door open and throw up on the tracks. Tuna mornay. 'Don't look back. Wait in the cab. Call emergency services. Lie to the passengers.' I can't obey the rules.

Stars press-stud the velvet sky. Why like that? Why the eyes? I climb out of the cab, see what I can do. I like this station, it's how they used to be, old school suburban with flower gardens and wooden benches. It's friendlier than most on the city circuit. One of the few above ground.

I run past the carriages, past the passengers snub-nosing windows, back to the bridge. There's nothing on the track, no one, no body there.

I look back at the last carriage. The passengers are waiting for me to come back. I turn away from the train, turn away from the passengers and walk home along the tracks.

Yesterday

'You promised,' Elsa slides the large, square brochure across the kitchen bench, clipping my elbow as I sip. The cup knocks against my tooth, splashing the tea back in.

The upside-down ocean liner looks brand new, like it's never set sail, never ridden a storm. Its enormous white hull sits smug and barnacle-free. Hundreds of little people lean over the edge of the upper balconies, wide-eyed in anticipation, multi-coloured streamers snapped frozen mid-air. Elsa glares at me.

I push the boat back to her. 'It's not my thing, love.'

Elsa takes the glossy booklet and holds it close to her chest as if it were her childhood diary. She rocks back and forth on the kitchen stool. Her ears redden. It's my warning sign, in the old days it meant she was excited.

I can't look at her face, so I stare at her arms—arms that have carried three children and cooked my dinners for thirty-four years. Forearms, strong like the Soviet peasants on the propaganda posters the young Trotskyites used to pin up in the railway locker-room—back in the day when working on the railways was an ideological position, not just a job. Looking at her hands, I can't remember when I last held them. Can't remember the feel of them. I know I should touch her. I know she needs me to touch her.

I lean across the table and squeeze her arm. 'You'd have more fun with the girls,' I try to convince us both.

Elsa pulls away from me. 'Why—how can you even say that?'

She walks to the window. 'Have you got something better to do?'

The shape of her flattens into a slab eclipsing the late-afternoon light. She was so lean as a girl. I can't stop myself from comparing her to her younger self. I don't feel bad about it if I think she does the same to me.

'No, it's just—'

'There's always something.' Elsa thows the brochure into the bin. 'I'm sick of your excuses.'

I try to stay focused. I want to be here with Elsa as she yells at me. Give her that at least. My final act of kindness. I want to stay present with her, be grateful for the kids, for her sacrifice. I want to do something nice for her. Beg forgiveness for the promises I've broken. For the lies and made-up shifts. But as her voice gets louder and her mouth moves faster, I leave our kitchen and am in bed with Jonie in her flat two hours away. She's the one I want to be holed up with in a small cabin on the third-class deck. Elsa starts sobbing and the thought of not seeing Jonie for a month is making me panic. Is this it? Do I have to destroy one part of my life for the rest to come alive?

‘Shhh, shhh,’ I offer Elsa a tissue. ‘Calm down, it’s going to be all right.’

‘No, Max, it’s not all right.’

‘Hey-now. We’ll go on a big trip when I finish work,’ I tried to look enthusiastic. Pretend that I want to retire, that I want to be like all the other grey nomads playing bridge on big-hulled ships, counting out the years till they die. I put my arms around her.

‘I can’t wait for that,’ Elsa pulls away from me. ‘That’s ten years away.’ She goes somewhere further than a P&O cruise could ever take her.

We’d lived the two of us, waiting for the future to come. Waiting for the kids to grow up. Waiting for a windfall. Waiting for something good to happen. I’d reckoned that when the future came it would come to both of us together, at the same time. Team Max and Elsa. But the future did arrive and Elsa wasn’t in it. She was there, in the next carriage, but she wasn’t driving up front with me. I thought she hadn’t noticed. That the grandkids and the charity work and the summer holidays at the caravan park were enough, that I could have Jonie, without hurting anyone.

‘I can’t keep waiting for you to come back,’ Elsa wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. ‘You’ve never been the same since that incident.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I hear myself say.

I feel the floor crack open between us. A deep cleft wedging us apart. Elsa stops crying and gently shakes her head. Elsa can’t leave me. The crack gets bigger. Elsa has made it bigger. I see my life falling in the chasm between us. Our children falling in. Our grandkids falling in. Our house and our friends falling in.

‘I’m sorry Elsa.’

‘It’s too late.’

‘Don’t say that, honey.’ I start falling, falling, falling. I want her to stay. I want to tell her everything. Tell her about Jonie. Tell her I’ll end it. Beg her forgiveness.

‘I’ve had enough Max.’

I reach over to hold her hand and she pulls away.

Last Year

It was a perfect day. One of those days when I loved my job. Windows down, mid-afternoon, chasing the Pacific down the coast. Listening to the cricket on my transistor radio. Ricky Ponting just gone in to bat.

In the distance I spotted a kid on the tracks. I yanked the emergency brake and pulled the horn. That girl—fourteen I later learnt—stood stiff as a cadaver with one leg straddling either side of the track.

‘Move!’ I yelled, though I knew she couldn’t hear me.

She’s bluffing. Surely. Bloody kids. Bloody school holidays. Gotta be a prank. She picked the track closest to the edge. Good for a quick getaway. Was sure she’d give me the birdie and run to friends hiding in the bushes.

‘Move!’

The train was almost motionless, the distance between us sandwiched, the coast disappeared. The view was gone. Just her, as she inched closer and closer. Patient, egging me on. Fair hair pulled into a ponytail, schoolgirl-tight.

‘Move!’

Skinny. Black leggings. Oversized jumper—her brother’s? Boyfriend’s? I gripped the brake like a rosary. Just a girl. Pixie-faced. Her forehead close enough to kiss. I shut my eyes on impact. Blood in my mouth.

The train stopped fifty-three metres later. Fifty-three metres too late. I opened my eyes. Released the horn. The crowd roared at the SCG.

I pressed the emergency services intercom. Stay on the train, they said. Don’t leave the cab. Calm the passengers. I unlocked the cab door and slid jelly-legged down the stepladder.

Outside the third carriage a dog was fitting like an epileptic in the dust. Must’ve got him too, I thought. I ran towards the dust ball. Passengers’ faces flattened against the windows. As I got closer I realised it wasn’t a dog. The girl’s upper body thrashed as blood spurted from her black leggings. Her ponytail. Her mohair jumper. So like a dog in the dust.

‘Sorry,’ I said, kneeling down to stop her head from bashing the ground. Her hair matted with blood. Half here, half gone.

A passenger ran towards me. ‘I’m a nurse,’ she said, stripping off her cardigan. She wrapped the girl’s legs to hold back the bleeding. The nurse’s hands worked quickly, confidently. She looked at me like it was no use, but did it

anyway. We held the girl's thrashing body together, held her till she calmed into a throbbing ricochet, held her till the ambos came.

When I went back to work two weeks later, I felt a hand on my shoulder as I shook the locker open. I turned to see my boss.

'Sorry about what happened, mate. You okay?'

I like Pete. He's seen a lot. If he's had someone go under, he's not letting on. I wanted to straight-out ask him if he's had one. But I know there's a code. I'm not supposed to talk about it. He's a die-hard railways guy. A stickler. He won't want to stir the other drivers up. Either they've had a jumper or they're scared shit about having one. Either way, it's a no-go zone. I suck in some air. 'I'm okay,' I say.

'Well, you know, every job has its hazards,' he patted me on the back, looking at me as if I'm not up to it.

'I've been switched to the city circuit.' It's the only thing I can think of to cut the silence.

'Yeah, it's best not to do that stretch for a while.' It's his way of telling me he knows.

'The city line's safer?' I sound weak. Got to man up, I tell myself.

'It happens anywhere. Best not to linger on it, mate.' Pete shoves an envelope in my hand and walks off.

My name is in small even letters on the front. I think it's a cheque, notice of more time off, something to soften the blow. I open the slippery paper.

'Hi, I'm the nurse from the accident. I was hoping we could have a coffee, maybe talk about what happened. I understand if you can't. Jonie.'

I closed the locker and called her. Seemed the right thing to do.

The Beginning

'It's much bigger than the picture,' Elsa's ears were flushed with excitement. She tugged my sleeve. 'C'mon.'

She insisted that I wear the pale grey suit I'd worn to my mother's funeral. Pollen still dotted the lapel where I'd pressed against the lily spray on the coffin. Elsa licked her thumb and rubbed the pollen into a dark orange smear.

'Now look what I've done,' she laughed.

‘Sure you want to do this?’ I looked up at the officers pacing the top deck of the ocean liner. A long ramp covered with royal blue carpet stretched from the wharf to the entry of the ship. It looked too exclusive for us.

‘You scared?’ She pulled me to her.

Wind slapped us, blowing her straw hat onto the pier. I ran after it as it cartwheeled away, trying not to look too stupid—we were still new to each other. I caught it and waved the trophy high above my head.

She looked so beautiful, my girl, in her embroidered white dress and knee-high boots. She’d gambled no one would bother us if we looked like we were used to being looked at.

‘Let’s just walk around the docks, eh?’ I put the hat on her, cocking the brim so it tilted up slightly to the left.

‘You are such a fraidy-cat.’

‘It’s just him,’ I nodded to the uniformed purser guarding the entry at the top of the ramp.

‘Forget him. We’ll walk straight on. Pretend it’s our honeymoon.’

It could’ve been our honeymoon. We’re both nineteen and just eloped. Not because it was romantic or because of the baby lurking deep inside her belly. But because I’d just started at the railways and didn’t have any cash for a hall. Not that I cared, I loved her so completely a round of beers at the local would have done it. But Elsa wanted a proper wedding with a tiered marzipan-coated cake and read-out-loud telegrams from abroad. ‘All or nothing,’ she said.

Elsa pulled me towards the gangway. ‘Isn’t it the grandest thing you’ve ever seen?’ Her eyes were wet and sparkly as the harbour.

A snow-haired couple in his and hers tracksuits were talking to the purser. Another couple came out from inside the ship and then another, forming a small group in matching windcheaters. They huddled around the purser, unfolding maps and pointing at pages in their guidebooks.

‘Now,’ Elsa whispered and took my hand.

I try to hold her back, but she lets go. She walks away from me, looks back and smiles, then strides up the gangway. I let her go. I want her to have whatever she wants. I want her to dream for us. To imagine us making love in a room with a porthole, seeing the sun set on a new horizon each night. She walked past the purser and tapped the brim of her hat at him as if she’d walked up that gangway a

million times before. He looked Elsa up and down and pouted slightly, savouring her, then turned back to the pointing tourists.

I followed her, so confident. Pushed past the windcheaters, walked straight past the purser, careful not to look at him, just watching Elsa as she followed the blue carpet. She spun around and beckoned me to follow her.

‘May I help you, Sir?’ The purser called out too loudly. I stop, but Elsa kept walking. I watch her long, thin legs striding into the mouth of the ship.

‘Sir!’ he boomed.

I turned to face him. He wasn’t much older than me.

‘Sir, only passengers are allowed on board.’ His voice was overly strict. The windcheaters looked at me, suddenly silent. He was enjoying the chance to display his authority in front of them.

I walked towards the gangway, not turning back to look for Elsa. Not wanting to implicate her. The windcheaters separated, giving me a clear path to walk through.

‘It’s our honeymoon,’ Elsa called out from the blueness. Her voice was posher, higher than usual.

‘Hey, honey.’ She came up behind me and slipped her hand in mine. ‘We’ve decided to extend it. Why not make the most of it, right?’ She was so sweet to him, almost flirtatious. ‘We’d like to join the cruise for a leg.’

‘Wait over there,’ he gestured to a railing away from the tourists.

‘What are you doing?’ I want to take her away, give her a proper honeymoon.

‘Isn’t it beautiful?’ Elsa leans over the railing to look out beyond the port, to the open sea full of promise. ‘Maybe he’ll let us have a room for an hour.’

The tourists descend the ramp in a single mass. The purser rubs his hands together as he walked over to us, enjoying his prey.

‘We’d like to see a room with a porthole,’ Elsa swung her hips slightly.

The purser cocked his head as if planning his next chess move. ‘Well the cruise is fully booked.’

I know he’d like to take her into a room with or without a porthole. I take Elsa’s arm.

‘Can’t we have just a little peek?’ Elsa said, giddy with excitement, the tips of her ears reddening.

‘No, that’s not really possible.’ The purser stares at her Elsa’s lips.

‘There must be one empty room we can look at, for next time.’ Elsa looked at him almost adoringly. I wanted to stop her.

‘Okay. Let me see if I can arrange something.’ The purser leans his face into hers. ‘But I can only take you in one at a time.’

I lean in to his face. He smells of cheap aftershave.

He pulls back and scoffs, ‘Captain’s rules.’

A burning sensation shot through my body and I clench my fist. I think Elsa might want to see the ship so badly she’d go in alone with him. An uncontrollable desire exerts itself in me, I want to hit his clean-shaven pouty-lipped face. Elsa puts her hand around my fist, runs her fingers between mine. She smiles at me and a sudden gust of wind flicks her hat into the water, scuttling along, dimpling the surface. We watch it spin and dance, the wind carrying it out to sea.

I put my arm around Elsa’s waist, she’ll soon be starting to show. ‘Let’s go home.’

We run down the ramp. I want to give Elsa whatever she wants. I want more of everything for her. More money. More ships. More kids in her belly.

‘Tell me everything’s going to be all right,’ she says, her eyes wide open. I can’t tell if it’s fear or hope.

I pull her close to me. I want to protect her, this child-woman who wants so much for us. I smell her hair and think of us old together. I try to imagine us in ten, twenty, thirty years. So easy with each other. I’ll get out of the railways, get a better job. Take her across every sea. I want to fast forward to that place and close my eyes. ‘Everything’s going to be all right.’

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Chapter Eight: Slipstream

My friend is in danger. By the time you finish reading this he'll be dead. Don't feel any pressure, he's been waiting for this moment. Gabriel has been coming here a lot lately. It's where he comes when he gets unstuck. Mostly, he sits on the bench, ten steps from where you're standing now. He sits for a while, looks for a sign, waits for the moment to come.

He needs the right person—no one too soft, too traumatised. He can tell on sight if someone has been abused or violated or swindled. It's something in the way they walk. He senses their hyper-vigilance.

It's all about timing. If the right person doesn't show up or his mood changes—when the parts don't come together—he'll stand on the forbidden side of the yellow line and wait for the next train to take him home.

Gabriel would like someone to push him, bump him, nudge him over the edge. You've heard of pushers? I don't mean drug dealers, but a person who pushes someone in front of a train for no reason. Anyone could be one, acting whenever the feeling takes them, just for the thrill. It doesn't happen that often now there's CCTV, but the potential is still there with each approaching train. Gabriel would prefer to be pushed. It would make it easier for his mother; she'd say it was an accident, a mistake, no one's fault.

Most passengers avoid Gabriel. Until you, that is. He checks the platform and there you are staring at him. He looks at you and the air feels suddenly humid.

Gabriel doesn't like having too many people around. Don't get me wrong, he can be very sociable with strangers; there were over two hundred at his exhibition opening last year. It's the people he does know that unnerve him. Lucky for him train stations are as mutable as his moods. For instance, right now, it's calm as a chapel. Yet five minutes ago there were dozens of people standing soldier-stiff behind the yellow line. Workers staunchly claiming their place on the platform, trying not to eye off their fellow travellers, yet too aware of their smells. The young executive wearing cheap aftershave. The pretty receptionist with wine-breath. The teenagers who'd shared a joint after school. They're all safely on their way now. Most heading home to parents or partners or pets. Others to the gym because they live alone.

You were ready to board when the train sidled up. You even dog-eared this page. The carriage doors opened right in front of you. You looked in and hesitated. A group of private schoolgirls inside hugged giant cased instruments like amateur gangsters. But you didn't get into the carriage with them. The platform emptied and you stood still as people moved around you like iron filings.

Gabriel thought you were going to board. Was sure you would, but here you are. It's the sign he needed. It'll be dark soon. The station's empty now apart from you and him and me of course. It doesn't give him much time. Just ten minutes till the express comes.

He'd like to come over right now and tell you how grateful he is. He'd like to scoop your hair up and let the evening breeze cool your neck. He imagines the smell of your hair. Green apples. He'd like to cup your thin face in his hands and apologise, then kiss your forehead. He curls his hands into fists to stop them coming over to touch you. Sit on your hands, he thinks. That's better, good hands.

I'm looking after him today. I tell him you're the one.

'Yes,' Gabriel says aloud. The incision in the silence surprises you.

He's been waiting for you. You won't judge him, you'll go home and know it wasn't your fault, know you couldn't do a thing.

'Yes,' he says again.

He's relieved you're here. There's a pact between you now. An understanding. He combs his fingers through his hair. Slowly, he removes his mobile phone and his wallet from his pockets and places them on the bench. He walks towards you and stops. Gabriel looks into your eyes. He undoes the chain around his neck, holds it in his palm and kisses it, then walks back to the bench and places the chain next to his phone.

Have you ever boarded a train and just kept going? Not a country train for a weekend trip—a regular commuter train. A train that was meant to take you to work, or to school, or violin practice. But when your station arrived you didn't get up. Something inside wouldn't let you move and you stayed put till the doors slid together again and you watched unfamiliar stations fly past, wishing they'd never stop.

Ever just stared out the window, avoiding your sudden reflection in tunnels, staying on and on till you reached the end of the line when you had no choice but to get off? When all you could do was cross the platform and get a train back to the city, each station bringing a little increase in panic until you finally arrived at Central and worked your way up the escalator.

Ever walked into your open-plan office just in time for morning tea, armed with a box of iced donuts and a sick-neighbour excuse, wishing you were still on the train?

Gabriel thinks that you're an artist. An angel. An artist-angel. He'd like to tell you you're beautiful. He doesn't want to frighten you, he wouldn't hurt you, he's not like that. He'd just like to watch you sleeping, because it's so difficult for him. He won't take the pills the clinic gave him. He can't deal with the drowsiness, the formlessness, the absence. He took them for four, maybe five months. Couldn't draw, couldn't play his mandolin, couldn't be here.

He introduced me to a friend from the clinic a few weeks back. Another train buff. Ralph asked us over to see his model railway. He lived in his parents' garage, a mattress in one corner, a raised wooden platform in the middle. Railway tracks ran over the platform, across miniature inner-city suburbs out to satellite towns and the Great Dividing Range. We bent down to watch the trains fly past at eye-level. In the centre stood a tiny station with a pedestrian bridge and little plastic commuters. You were there, leaning against the guardhouse wall, reading, waiting for the express to come.

Ralph's mother fussed about, getting us cinnamon teacake while electric trains rattled around and around. Ralph had one good leg, the other was as skinny as your wrist and stopped short of his knee where he had a prosthetic strapped on. He told us he'd lost it from jumping in front of a train two years earlier—that in the half-second he was falling, he'd smelt his mother's porridge and heard her say, 'More, Ralph?'

Ralph jerked his prosthetic leg behind him and twisted his body up to demonstrate how he'd looked back at the platform when he'd imagined his mother's voice, and when the train hit, only one leg was on the track. The papers said it was an accident, but everybody knew. I asked if he still liked trains. 'Blood oath', he said, then hobbled to the garage door with us to say goodbye.

Gabriel knows that's the real danger. Messing it up. There's no way out then. A one-legged guy has Buckley's of getting himself in front of a real train again. Not with all the do-gooders that help get him around safely and whatnot. The reason someone jumps is because they want to get it right. No one can help Ralph now, his circle of keepers are too cluey, they've got him doped up and tucked in and playing with toy trains for life.

Gabriel walks over to the pedestrian bridge crossing the tracks. He looks back at you to make sure you're watching. He knows not to think of his mother. Anything but. I remember when he took all his mother's pills and she had to get his stomach pumped. She increased her sedatives after that, installing a heavy metal safe on the floor of her walk-in wardrobe to house them. I tell him to think about you instead.

He's worried it will change your life. I tell him you'll be fine. You've got resources. Just look at your clothes. Your leather satchel. Your strappy shoes. You've got a job, a post-graduate degree, a good therapist—she'll help you 'process' it. It's better that you haven't got off scot-free. You have your secrets. Did the schoolgirls upset you before? Did they remind you of the talent you let slip? Prodigy was a common word used around you, wasn't it? You had potential. Talk to Gabriel about it—he knows what it's like to be very good, but know you'll never be great. He'd like to hear about your debut appearance at the Town Hall. You were twelve, or was it thirteen? Your father liked telling people he had a concert violinist in the family, even though it was your first recital. Remember when he turned up back stage with a pretty velvet dress he'd borrowed from his boss's daughter? But when you put it on, you had to hold your stomach in so tight it cramped. Your father tugged and tugged at the zip, cursing as the teeth bit into your skin.

You went on stage in the too-tight dress, sucking in so hard you could hardly breathe. Everyone that came to hear the prodigy went home wondering what all the fuss was about. You didn't eat any chicken sandwiches after the recital and even though your father tells you it was first-night nerves, he wears his disappointment like a lead suit. Later that night, once everyone has gone to bed, you sneak in to the bathroom and stick your fingers down your throat until you gag and splutter and tears run down your cheeks. It takes fine-tuning and a lot of practice, but you find a new way to make your fingers work magic.

Are you interested in Gabriel? You think he's handsome, bohemian. Someone you could be attracted to. An experiment. You find it hard to keep your men don't you? Never mind, he says you're it. You're the one.

He likes this station. He can smell jasmine now. Have you noticed the award stuck in the stationmaster's window? 'Garden Station of the Year' it says. This summer, everything's dying from the heat, but he can still smell jasmine.

You look at my friend on the bridge. Come over. Let me introduce you—you're about to have a huge impact on each other. I'm sure you'd like to meet, properly, at least once, though there's not much time. I'm glad it's you. You are just what he needed. Most try and stop him. If I thought you couldn't handle it, I'd tell him to come back another time. I've stopped him before. He's been told he shouldn't listen to me. But I tell him his psychic reflexes are good today, he can make up his own mind.

Are you ready? The train will be here soon. Gabriel's got his spot on the centre of the bridge. He's calm now, sitting perched on the wooden railing like Humpty Dumpty. He can hear the whistle on the tracks. Everything's going to be all right. I repeat, everything is going to be all right. He can see the train coming. And he can see you on the platform. He tries to get your attention.

You're reading.

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Appendices

Methodologies

This thesis brings together cultural memory studies, cinema studies, literary studies and suicide theory in an interdisciplinary way to allow for an original contribution in the field. My methodology focused on media analysis, case studies already in the public sphere, textual analysis, memoir and field research (my own experience at the sites).

Ethical considerations

I took the UTS ethics workshop and have an understanding of the ethical considerations. As I was conducting textual, scholarly and media analysis, I did not require ethics permission. Furthermore, even though I was working with material and case studies that were already in the public sphere, I was very conscious of the considerable ethical considerations and fictionalised characters and stories that were based on fact to ensure compliance.

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List of Publications

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- appeared in *The Best Australian Stories 2013*, Black inc. Kim Scott (ed)
- shortlisted Commonwealth Writers’ Short Story Prize 2013
- longlisted Fish Literary Prize 2013

‘Slipstream’

- appeared in *The Evening Lands, UTS Anthology 2013*
- runner-up Hal Porter Prize

‘The Charm’

- earlier version appeared in *Brand Literary Journal, Vol 07, UK, 2010*, Nina Rapi (ed)
- earlier version appeared in *Award Winning Australian Writing 2010*, Melbourne Books, Adolfo Aranjuez (ed)
- earlier version won Shoalhaven Literary Award
- earlier version shortlisted Alan Marshal Short Story Award

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