

In a Cool Blue Light

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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.

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Personal Statement

I wish to advise that I have addressed the examiners' comments and incorporated the recommendations in this final version of my thesis.



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Abstract

In a Cool Blue Light is a creative work of fiction. Written in loosely chronological order it is a collection of linked short stories followed by a short essay. The stories explore domesticity through the eyes of a traditional housewife in contemporary society. Identity is a major theme in this work, bringing into question the validity of the played

Friction

1.

nonfiction

I like darkness more than light. Fiction. Drama. I like mystery. I also like to make up stories.

She was in her thirties when I met her. She answered my advertisement in *The Sydney Morning Herald* for: FLATMATE req

\$120 p/w, ASAP,

old stone cottage,

Paddington.

She was perfect (*is* perfect). It was her eyes that gave her away; they were troubled – velvet brown, plush with sadness. I wasn't exactly her *ideal*. She was actually wanting a man, at the very least a baby. She wanted to feel love.

As for me, I was twenty three, quite lost. But things changed when she came along. The more time I spent with her, the more I felt I was becoming her.

2.

fiction

'This is it.' She said as they slowed to an idle in the sedan. Beyond the 'For Sale' sign she could see a small fibro cottage peeping through the bushes, grey with white window frames. Around the letterbox, orange and yellow flowers sprouted and strange looking weeds that reminded her of the plants in the horror movie, *The Day of the Triffids*.

'Don't get your hopes up,' he said.

'Trust me, this is it. I'll bet money on it.' His lips protruded in response, plump and rubbery, and a loud breath shot from his nostrils.

'They'll want plenty for it,' he said.

She looked at him. Bulky. Fit. She could picture his lungs: two big rugby balls beneath a firm breast plate. Reaching across the seats, she shimmied her hand up the back of his head. 'You, my dear boy, can get whatever you want.'

It was three days later when he put the phone back on the hook. 'They took the offer.'

'You see, I was right.' She was running on the spot, beating her fists in the air. 'Yipeeee. I was right. I was right. I was right.'

'Sure. You were right. But I have to get rid of my unit, first. Then we have to work out how we're going to pay for it.' His voice called after her as she spun across the wholemeal carpet and into the kitchen. She opened the fridge, singing falsetto, *the hills are alive with the sound of music*, kicked the fridge door shut then swung round, hair flying, hip out, a bottle in each hand, remaining fingers fanned in the air.

'Which would Monsieur prefer? Champagne? VB? *Come on*. Let's drink.'

3.

nonfiction

Oh, one of the things I loved about this crazy girlfriend of mine was her voices. She was English so there was the imperious and nasal: *wan this* and *wan that*, when she was annoyed. A good dollop of cockney slipped in when she was relaxed. And there was the nutty little chipmunk voice when she wanted something.

4.

fiction

Later that night at the unit she hugged him.

'We're going to have a home, a *real* home,' she said, and she squeezed him to her, so close, he yelped.

'Shit, steady on, you'll have one of my ribs broken in a minute,' he said.

'As if. Don't be such a girl.' She put her arms around his neck. Then she lifted a leg to his waist, and with a jig he helped her wrap herself around him. And then: 'I just love you. I love you like a house on fire, I love you ten feet under the sea. I could drown in you.'

5.

nonfiction

She really was beautiful, this girlfriend of mine. I suppose if I'd been an optimistic young man I'd have done something as reckless as marry her. But I must say, one day during a long car journey she rather alarmed me when she said in a very taut voice, 'Do you realise only five percent of the world population are considered beautiful. I am one of those in the five percent.' Her eyes were still on the road as she drove, quite fixedly, so she didn't see my heart sinking.

'Oh,' I said, quietly. And I remember a feeling of being overwhelmed by my ordinariness. Up until then in our relationship I had been, albeit vicariously, quite stunning.

6.

fiction

He'd hired a truck for the move. Apart from the few wedding presents that belonged to them both, her possessions filled two suitcases and a black rubbish bag, neatly fitting into the boot of the Fairlane. The entire contents represented the last five years of her discarded working life as a pharmaceutical rep. She detested that word – *rep*. It brought to mind horny skinned creatures encrusted with scales. Subterranean. Her calling card read, *Executive*, but nevertheless she was incensed every time she passed a flea bag motel on route with the pitiful sign, 'Reps Welcome'. But that seemed a lifetime away, although only six months had passed.

The black rubbish bag contained eight half-heartedly folded suits, ten silky blouson tops, six high-percale cotton business shirts. The stilettos were in the suitcases with her current wardrobe. They looked good with jeans.

7.

nonfiction

I remember the first time I saw my girlfriend's breasts, just a glimpse before looking the other way. They were long and fat and shuddered like trout on invisible hooks. I'm sure any man would have found them enormously desirable, but I have no idea why I felt such disappointment. I think I'd wanted them to be round and full, like poached eggs.

8.

fiction

'Of course you'll fall pregnant...tits and arse like that.' He was on his stomach, talking into the mattress. She, lying next to him. His hand shoved across her, smearing her breast, and she watched as he squeezed the pale fat with his fingers – an effort to reassure her? she wondered.

'Jesus. Careful,' she said. 'You're pressing on my stomach.'

'Sorry.' He lifted his arm, but then he pressed down again.

Her brow wrinkled. She propped a pillow beneath her. Lifted her knees. She had the urge to stick her legs up the wall so that his spunk fed in, but she couldn't imagine how her buttocks would look upside down. Split stone-fruit, bloated with ripeness. Carcass on a butcher's hook. He was bound to roll over.

She noticed now that her forehead was aching, despite the soft nest of feather pillow beneath her head, and for a moment she wanted his hand gone from the surface of her body. She stared at it over the planes of her cheeks. Chin doubled. She turned away.

Now she was facing the back of his head; a mushroom of blackish brown hair, simple – it fitted the contours of his skull like a man who knew who he

was; silken sheen of a cat that sups on fish. So many times she'd envisaged losing him, had actually tormented herself with the thought.

'Look at me,' she said. But he just grunted, as if he was half asleep.

'Don't look at me then.'

She coughed, and his spunk slid out, trickling cool and prickly like cactus juice.

9.

nonfiction

Once my girlfriend came home from work, her briefcase in one hand and a little white bag in the other.

'This is for you,' she said with a big smile.

Inside was a chocolate éclair exploding with real cream.

10.

fiction

Since they'd moved into the new house she dreamed, almost night after night, that her stomach was a hot steaming mound of dough. He would watch as she lowered her head and sank her hands into the warmth of her belly, and when she brought them back out, there it was, a baby, fat and moist on her palms, its feet kicking the air. It was darling, the inner pink of shells, its face squeezed tight and gurgling with life. He reached over and took it from her, and it was then she became completely liquid, her organs swimming, rolling and flipping inside her. She felt like a goddess, completely full, for the first time in her life.

11.

nonfiction

My girlfriend called me her little Peepee. The number plate on my limited edition Laser was PPE863—it was the *Shades* series, with the vile baked on transfer in the rear triangle windows, a row of racy lines that looked more like venetian blinds. She said that every time she saw little Peepee weaving down

the road she'd squeal with delight and say, *There's my little Peepee*. I was honoured. Despite the fact we lived under the same roof, drank together, ate together, I *still* inspired such a heightened response.

Sometimes we fought. Sometimes I thought she might hit me, yet strangely enough I found that quite flattering. Later she'd hug my face to hers and whisper little chipmunkish apologies. I was never slighted, I was just glad she'd gone back to loving me all over again.

12.

fiction

He was up showering at 5.30 am. Back in the bedroom, she listened to the rustle of his pants sliding over his legs, the rip of his zip, chink of his belt buckling into place, mattress springs as he sat, his breath compressing as he slid his foot into the casing of his large polished shoe. He wasn't lean limbed, didn't own a leather jacket; he was heavy, hard jawed, had hairs on his back, had his head screwed on top of his feelings. Every nerve in her body had gone BING when she met him and she'd been slightly afraid of him ever since.

She kept her eyes closed, hiding beneath the sheets, smiling at the sounds of his movements, bathing her jaw in warm exhalations, bathing in the smugness that she would go back to sleep when the door clicked; when the strip of glowing amber disappeared from the foot of the door.

Later, it seemed incredible to her that a day could start so sweetly, and then end in nightmare.

13.

nonfiction

We were curled on my girlfriend's bed one night, each with a glass of wine, relaxing before we dolled ourselves up for a night at *The London Hotel*.

'All I want in the world is a good man, someone who loves me and wants to care for me,' she announced, her face long, her voice – flat. What was

she worried about? I remember thinking. She was sleeping with her boss, in hotel rooms – he was married. I thought that was exciting. So clandestine. So well beyond the scope of me who had found her ecstasy in nachos, wedges smothered in garlic aoli. She was losing weight. I was putting it on.

‘I tried on my black pants this afternoon,’ she said. ‘The ones I just had dry cleaned, but they’re hanging off me. If you’re interested, I’ll sell them to you. In fact there are a few things you might be interested in.’

She dressed me up like a store dummy, pushing and prodding, a pad and pen to keep track of the prices. Everything of course looked, *Fabulous, Sweet, Transforming. You wouldn’t know yourself if you bumped into you.*

I’d discovered style. I was indebted to her.

14.

fiction

It was nine am before she woke. She wrenched the sheets from the bed, turned the dial on the new washing machine; they’d had to buy a new one, and logically it had to be a bigger one, in anticipation of a washing basket brimming with nappies and bibs.

She unlatched the windows and filled the house with the sea breeze that flew up the ridge. She noticed the sound of the birds. The twitter made her smile. They were part of this new world, this substrata of niceness and decency, this white glow of spray ‘n’ wipe freshness that lay beneath the leafy canopy and hot baked tiles.

A sharp triangle of sun cut through the window of the spare room and stretched out over the carpet. She was lying on her stomach across it, a cup of Nescafe and a Donna Hay cookbook at her elbows, flicking through the pages. Maybe she’d buy an apron today; she *should* really have one.

15.

nonfiction

One evening when my girlfriend was out, I picked up the phone to hear the little pips of a long distance call. There was an English voice on the other end. Male. He spoke very clearly, and slowly, as if it were talking into an ear horn.

'No, I'm sorry,' I replied, 'There's no Ann living here. You must have the wrong number.'

'Are you *sure*?' said the voice. 'I'm quite positive I've dialled correctly. Her name is Ann. Ann Jardine.'

'*Jardine*. Oh, I think you mean Bianca Jardine. We have a Bianca Jardine here.'

'Oh,' I heard, very faintly. There was a pause, then, 'Well, may I speak to her.' He sounded tired.

'I'm sorry, she's not here at the moment.'

'Oh. Well, could you please tell her to call her father.'

A few days later I happened to be in her room – I can't remember why I was there, particularly since she was out. I'd been raised to respect people's privacy, but I do remember the sensation, the tremble and swell in my chest as I touched the objects on her dressing table; smooth cool bottles, tubes, little pots of creams. I read labels, lifted lids, sniffed, poked, dabbed and rubbed. I picked up her brush and ran the bristles across my nose, they smelled sweet and waxy. My reflection in the mirror looked haughty yet mystical as I dragged her odour through my hair; earrings tinkled in porcelain dishes, dangled by fingers from my earlobes. Then there was the low yawn of wood sliding against wood, my hand sinking wrist-deep into a soufflé of soft underwear, cool and silky against my skin. At the bottom of the drawer: envelopes, plastic folder, scraps of paper, photographs – anonymous ones taken in photo booths at train stations with old friends – they all fell across my fingertips. Finally a blue book, sandwich size, an intricate filigree of bright gold pressed onto its cover.

I went straight to the photo. She looked so bare with her hair drawn back into a ponytail, so much smaller. I shut her face between the pages – and it was at that moment I realised what I'd come for.

The typed text sealed in plastic read: English citizen. Born April 29, 1954. Yorkshire. *Ann Elizabeth Jardine*. She was not Bianca.

The deception, the fraud – it made me tingle all over.

16.

fiction

Later that night they sat at the card table in the kitchen.

'Do you like it, gorgeous boy?'

'It's great.' But she was watching his jaw. His Adam's apple. He was chewing and gulping, chewing and gulping. He wasn't tasting.

'It's got something called sumac in it. Have you ever heard of that? Mmmm?'

'Uh?'

'I wanted to make something special. Just for you.' She put her hand over his where it rested against the side of his plate, a broad fist holding a fork; her hand landed like a web, she thought: light and creepy. What was it about *him* that was making her feel this way.

'Are you happy with me?' And that's when he said it. *You need a job*. Just like that. She let the chunk of succulent chicken resting on her tongue fall like shit; it flopped back, wet, on the piled plate. He looked at her, then sideways at the kitchen bench.

'How can you say that to me? How? Mmmm? Do you know what I'm going through. Look at me. Would you please look at me. I'm your wife.' He did look, but without turning his head away from the bench; she remained on the outskirts of his eye.

'Look at me. Look at me front on.'

But he wasn't playing ball, so she picked up her fork and threw it sideways, in the direction of the sink, a gleam of surprise in her eyes as his big

shoulders flinched at the steel flashing through the air. She laughed, high pitched, 'Arhaah'.

The fork missed the sink and clattered on the tiles. She picked up her plate – arched an eyebrow. Quick as a whip, he cuffed her wrist in his fingers. *Now* he was looking at her. His fingers squeezed tight, eyes tight, breath tight. She smiled. Licked her lips.

'Do you really think I'd drop it? Will she? Won't she? Will she? Won't she?' her head jerked left, right, left, right, with each taunt, pupils as hard as ball bearings. He said nothing, but she saw a nerve flinch in his cheek.

'Oh darling,' she sighed, 'I wouldn't do that. Besides, if I dropped it, I'd have to clean it up.' She smiled, so he let go of her wrist and she lowered her plate to the kitchen table.

'God, sorry. I'm so sorry.' And her fingers reached across and began to needle his hand, pressing and molding it like a lump of putty.

'I can't go back to work. I have to go forward. Do you understand? But I'm trapped.' She was begging.

'Well, staying here all day is not helping you,' he said, but his voice was remote, devoid of the concern the words implied.

She had to make him see, so she squashed the sides of her face with her palms so that her mouth and eyes became holes. But he looked back at his plate.

'Oh God, I want a baaabee.' She began to cry, her lower lip rolled out and smeared across her bottom teeth. He looked up, then looked back again at his plate.

'I don't want a job. Everything's changed. I'm a wife. What if it doesn't happen? What if it doesn't happen?'

'Shhh.'

'I'd want to die.'

'Shhhh.'

'What's happening to me? What am I becoming?'

17.

nonfiction

My girlfriend wore liquid liner on her eyelids, the black was painted on in the shape of a fingernail clipping, an up-stroke at the outer corner in the tradition of an Egyptian Queen, but there was also the red lacquer on her lips, that effectively threw Hepburn or Harlow into the equation.

'Come on Peepee, I'll teach you how to do it,' she said one day as I watched her slick her tiny brush of black across her eyelid. 'If you build it up in the centre it opens the eye right up. See?' I watched her, marvelling at the height of her cheekbone in the mirror as she arched her neck, the plane of concentration that fell from the bone and down to her chin.

'You see?'

'It looks great.' She must have seen something wistful in my expression. She turned to me and with a chuckle she pinched the sides of my cheeks.

'If you hold very still, I'll do it for you. Would you like that? Now hold perfectly still.' I held my face out to her, and closed my eyes. I think it was the microscopic movement, soft waves of breath, feathery strokes of the brush: I was completely in heaven.

The next day I bought my own bottle of liner. At first she pulled me up on common errors in application; ant specks, breaks, heavy handedness, but day by day I got better and better at it, until it seemed as if I'd always worn my eyes this way.

18.

fiction

She stroked his thigh in bed that night as he lay there with his back to her. According to the *Billings Method* she was ripe for fertilization.

Her hand fell lightly onto the springs between his legs. *Where was it?* He'd had clamped it back between his legs like a girl, he was hiding it from her. *Spiteful.* She pretended not to care and continued gently to stroke his thighs.

Then her hand flickered over his hip and onto the mound of his buttock. There, she circled, a-ringa-ringa-rosey, toiling in apparent absentmindedness.

It had to happen tonight. Although the window of opportunity spanned a week, according to the book, she was quite certain that there was something portentous about tonight. The fact she sensed his impending refusal made her even more certain of that.

He gave a jerk – she wanted to ask what that was about, but decided to remain silent.

Her hand ran back to the front again, to where it was supposed to be.

He stirred, so she decided to take a chance, thrust her hand between his thighs, twisted her wrist and reached in, grabbed a handful of soft warm sponge. Squeezed.

His voice was muffled by sheet, too thick, as if the tongue was swollen. 'No,' he said. That was all. Just no. Not, 'No, I don't really feel in the mood.' No excuse, no apology, no opening for negotiation.

In that instant, she imagined something heavy and hard in her hand, something as leaden as steel bar; she could see herself lifting, from the shoulder, freeing herself of sheet, reaching up into the space above him, letting her arm swing down, the weight of it rushing down to meet his head. A dead thud: and the thought of it relaxed her, ever so slightly, the thought that she *did* have the power to do that, if she so pleased. But of course she wouldn't do it. She loved him as much as she hated him.

No she'd rather fuck him. Give it to him then and there, like a man sticks it to a woman. Shove the bones of her hips into him. Have him grunt and roar beneath her like a pig while she clamped his head back, his hair like grist beneath the butt of her palm. The look of shock on his face – and she'd just keep pounding away, until she filled the walls and the ceiling with her screams. *Man, if she had the strength, she'd do it. She'd show him. She'd teach him not to treat her like this... make her desperate...make such a fool out of her.*

But if she were going to be successful, it would have to be performed with cunning. Subtly and insidiously. It was going to be a long night.

19.

nonfiction

I was with my girlfriend the night I met my husband. It was a Friday night coming into summer. We were at this new bar in North Sydney. *The Arizona Bar*. The crowd was businessy, young, arrogant.

I'd been losing weight and gaining confidence. We now shopped *together*. Tonight, we were dressed in Von Troska suits, silk blouses, superfine black stockings and pointy heels. Our hair was dark, coloured chocolate—burnished under down lights, chin length, lightly curled and tucked behind one ear. Our lips were tomato red and dewy. We'd retouched the breaks in our eyeliner in the ladies when we'd arrived—*together*.

We'd just started on our third round of reising when I became uncomfortable with my girlfriend's lapses in concentration. She wasn't listening properly, and people kept bumping me so that my wine trickled between my fingers.

'Don't look now,' she said, 'But that group of guys behind you, they keep looking over here. Cute. Nice suits. Very established looking.' She looked over my head, made a splendid arc with her eyebrow.

I kept my back turned; I knew she was the honeysuckle, the tantalizer. I was just the humble imitation.

Another bump? No. It was softer, it rested on my shoulder.

I turned and saw him standing there, a cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

'You wouldn't happen to have a light would you?'

And as it so happens, I recognised him immediately, as every nerve in my body went BING. Yes it's absolutely true—it's far too hackneyed for fiction. We were married within a year.

20.

fiction

She fell asleep. It was a bit after two when she woke. Her thoughts immediately picked up where she'd left them as if only a second had passed rather than several hours.

She listened for his breath: low and laborious, the entire force of his large body whistling through the inadequate holes of his nose. He had not moved since he'd shunned her. It was not a good sign. It suggested immobility. She would have to work around him.

She slid out and made her way to his side of the bed. She felt stupid, naked, criminal, pathetic, ugly – many things as she passed the foot of the bed, but the one thing she felt above all was completely ruthless.

Kneeling, she quietly undid the tucking of blankets and sheets and burrowed in, head first, up to her shoulder blades – like a small subterranean predator, she made soft long licks with her tongue before riding him back to front like a horse.

When she woke the next morning she knew that it was all going to be okay – he was still lying there. She may have lost her pride, but she was quite happy to trade that to achieve her ends.

21.

nonfiction

My girlfriend didn't come to the wedding. Her father had been unwell and she made a sudden decision to fly home. I wasn't surprised, nor disappointed. I was too madly in love to care. I felt as though my bones were stuffed with his marrow and he was beading on the surface of my skin.

And I remember distinctly that to complete my joy, I simply had to have a baby. But an entire year passed, each month, a steep mountain to slide down. I was desperate.

I hadn't seen her for a while, so I was apprehensive when making the arrangements. She was still in the East and I was in the North, amidst golden

retrievers, station wagons and bobbed hairdos. But today she was taking me away from it all. We were going shopping on her side of the city.

'I've got a big secret to tell you. You can't tell anyone,' I blurted out as we pulled away from the curb in her car.

'Of course I won't tell. What is it?'

'I'm pregnant.'

'Oh,' she said. I wanted her to turn, look at me, squeal, laugh, something, but she just kept looking at the road, hunching too close to the wheel.

'Did you hear what I said, I'm pregnant.'

'How many weeks?'

'Six,' and there was another pause as her head tipped five degrees.

Then—'Well don't get too excited. It's quite possible you'll lose it. You need to get to week twelve. My sister got to eleven and a half and then she miscarried. And I can tell you she was a bloody mess.' Her voice was brusque—no, I think more than that—it was quietly furious.

We spent the day together on Oxford Street. I didn't feel at all well. I was sad. There was too much to look at. Sale time. Trolley racks all out—hospital gurneys. Rows and rows of bargains—disasters—possibilities—disasters—possibilities. Rows and rows. Endless. I was dizzy. She was determined, grim jawed, wanted something adorable. Would know as soon as she saw it. Would light up, squeal like a soft toy. Her hand flapped through garments, an industrial sorter, row after row, shop after shop.

I was dead inside.

Later that night that I began to bleed and bleed and bleed.

It was a couple of days before she called. I'd agonized over what to say, but what came out was simply this—

'I don't want to speak to you.'

'What? What have I done?' She was incredulous.

'It's what you said.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'Yes, you do. Goodbye.' And I put the phone down.

It may have seemed ruthless—but my emotions are strong, too close to the surface. I cried on and off all day.

22.

fiction

She'd been right that night, to push it with him.

Looking into the mirror she could see that things had already begun to change. It was true what they said. Pregnant women have a translucency about them. Even he'd noticed, on one of their more pleasant days. She'd once heard that Parisian women fall pregnant for the sole purpose of skin rejuvenation, only to terminate in the third month. She could believe it. Her foundation glided across her skin like silk. She had come into flower, barely needed the touch of blush. But she persisted, turning her chin, right then left.

Today it mattered — *it was important to look especially nice* — just thinking that made her heart feel tight. It had been a while since they'd seen each other and she knew she would appraise her with a very critical eye.

The pencil strayed as she outlined her lips. Silly mistake. She had to fix it with a tissue. Red lipstick followed—less, not more. Eye liner last. She took a breath—What was the time? she wondered. Very necessary to have a steady hand for liquid liner. You simply cannot rush it.

The left eye came naturally. Thankfully. She was on to the more stubborn right eye when the doorbell rang. *Damn, Damn.* The line was too fat.

'Darling. Guess who's here?' he called.

'I'm coming,' she said, sing song, as she squirted a blob of cleanser onto a tissue and slapped it on to her eye, rotated it in vigorous arcs and smeared it across the lid.

'Come on. I thought you were desperate to get going,' he yelled. Oh shut up, she thought—her eye was red and stinging. Water, water, she needed water. More tissue. Water and tissue. Towel. She couldn't believe it—now the tear duct was leaking.

'Hullo stranger.' And there she was, standing right behind her. As tall and glamorous as ever.

'Bianca! You scared me.'

'What in god's name have you done to your eye Peepee?'

'I was trying to hurry, I think I got a bit of liner in my eye.' And a little laugh came from the top of her throat, not unlike the sound of a goat bleating.

The other woman gave a motherly tut-tut. 'Come here, my funny little Peepee. Bianca will fix it for you.'

23.

nonfiction

I never saw her again.

In a Cool Blue Light

'Don't say fuck. You sound like you're trying to be something you're not,' he says.

She looks at him, her tongue working on a seed stuck between her molar and her wisdom tooth.

'I like fuck,' she suggests.

'No baby, you like *to* fuck,' he says, hypnotist's eyes. 'It's just when you say it, it doesn't suit you.'

Too soon to argue, one day into a marriage.

As she fills in her outline with lipstick, she whispers *fuck* into the small circular mirror that she keeps in her handbag. He's right. Her mouth looks wrong. The glossy lipstick that had made her mouth look like a perfect bite out of a ruby-skinned apple no longer looks like her shade. She recalls the surge of defiance she had felt as she handed over the three fresh twenties to the sleek woman in black. Now she wonders if the colour makes her look hard. Or maybe she has become too soft. She is married now.

When they get to town she asks if he feels like coffee. And of course he feels like coffee – any excuse to sit with his knees crossed, a suede brogue cocked in the air, watching the world pass by.

He lets her scrape the chocolate off his cappuccino like a little girl and she is wondering if one day they will have their own. Searching his features with surgical interest she constructs a face for their daughter. His eyebrows cross his forehead, thick and dark, like an underline for his thoughts. Very impressive when they move up and down with the undulations of his radio quality voice. The combination makes her squirm in her seat – but would their daughter have one eyebrow? She smiles at him so he will not know what she is thinking. Unfaithful already.

'You know what I really feel like?' he says, looking directly into her eyes. She feels a rush of expectation. She knows she will be included.

'A big steaming bowl of spaghetti bolognese and a nice little drop of vino.' His arms stretch up and the taut pull of cotton across his body reminds her of the straps of muscle beneath his skin. He is butcher's meat, raw slabs of beast.

'Can we do some bolognese sauce without mince?' she asks, hunching her narrow shoulders up towards her ears. She notes that she sounds defensive—complicating their lives already.

But he says, 'Of course we can. You can have whatever you want honey,' in a pseudo Bronx accent.

As they drive up into the hills she feels the elastic pull of the town stretching away from her: picture theatre, wine bar, blackboard menus, couples out on dates. He is humming a Frank Sinatra tune like an old man. She reads contentment and it tightens her throat.

'Happy?' he asks, placing a heavy palm on her knee.

'Tired.' She looks at the span of his hand. And then considers if this is perhaps true after all. But it's too early, far too early to work it all out.

The buoyant suspension of the vintage Jaguar gives him satisfaction as it rises and falls over uneven road. He is delighted with the lodge. It is cheap, comfortable and the surrounding pine trees create an illusion of a forest in a Bavarian valley; that damp cool light and winter green, so clumped together it pretends to be black, the smell of pine needles spiking the soft membranes in your nose. All this place needs is a lake and a rowing boat for the perfect romantic honeymoon—but hell, it's only eighty dollars a night.

She's as capricious as a Siamese cat at the moment and he knows he has to take control—bring back some stability after the weeks of wedding madness. She seems oblivious to the fact they have been spending so much money—hers as well for that matter, although her contribution is hardly proportionate. She is barely interested in talking about money but when she does he notes she speaks about what she earns while he talks in terms of what he makes. There is a creative difference. He has tried to explain it in simple terms—that when she spends one hundred dollars, they have to make two hundred before tax. But

she spends with impatience, as if driven to convert cash into something more than repetitious pieces of paper. And the cunning little fox tells him he needs to be less *anal* about money or he'll stop attracting it. Jesus! There's a lot of breaking in to do.

*

The next morning the sun yellows the flounced homemade curtain some seamstress has run up in the name of romantic decoration. Her eyes wander the room. The doona cover *almost* matches the curtains. Muted teal and salmon patterns, she notes. Half-priced undie colours.

He is still asleep, his deep measured breath as steady and as loud as a respiratory machine. She cannot hear her own breathing.

Flicked across his forehead is a distinct stripe of grey, stark in a short brown fringe. Like a military honour awarded for maturity beyond his years she muses. It had been the first thing about him that attracted her, that streak of old man.

Her hair is brown too, but with a violet translucence when the sun is shining on it. She has to get it done every five weeks or it starts to look opaque. Every morning she washes and stretches it straight on a roller brush. If they have something special on she goes to the trouble of running over it with a cool iron. He'll be laughing at her as she bends over her head so that she becomes part of the ironing board. But when she is finished and turns to him he'll make some statement like, 'Darling, you are a *beautiful* woman,' with a thick note of arrogance she does not comprehend.

Before she met him she'd had a penchant for fortune tellers. But looking at him lying there, as large and as real as a lump of wood, she realises she can't possibly have her fortune read again. She can't risk some mystic telling her that he isn't worth the effort as they are going to be divorced in twenty years time.

Besides, their lives were now full of domestic details that tethered her to reality. Since she had moved into his place, her mind had been consumed by package goods, particularly cleaning fluids. Their dramatic labels zapped her with positive affirmations – *New and Improved, Brighter, Fresher, It's Magic*. She

kept all her surfaces sparkling, even the insides of her cupboards. And when his parents came to visit, she'd search his mother's pupils to make sure she was focused and taking it all in, completely convinced her son had made a splendid choice.

Now the deal was done. She had passed the exam and successfully manufactured herself into a packet cake bride: looks good, sounds good and promises to rise to domestic expectations. But Jesus, was this what she wanted? She didn't know anymore. It was so fucking exhausting.

When they were considering the wedding she told him she wouldn't feel comfortable having anything too flash, her mum being on a pension and not being able to contribute.

'That's not a problem, darling,' he'd said. And he'd looked at her with his eyes respectfully half-closed, a priest giving absolution. 'My family has decided they'd like to pay.' She had been so relieved at the time. They could have a *proper* wedding after all. He could invite all his old school chums and their attachments. She would not invite her friends – airfares were costly and despite herself she would feel let down when they said no. Besides, it had been two years. She'd lost her beer-pot and her garlic breath and was four stone lighter, slowly dissolving into another person. They wouldn't even recognise her.

Awash with inspiration she decided to make the most romantic invitations to put something of herself into the event. She ripped petals off the climbing rose next door and pressed them between the pages of his law books. She shopped for satin ribbon in sepia pink to match the petals and practiced ornate letters with a gold calligraphy pen on pieces of paper that looked as edible as whole-wheat crackers. He would think she was terribly creative.

But instead, he had hovered over her shoulder nervously.

'You don't think they're a bit too...folksy?' He was smiling as he said it.

'No. But if you don't like them, I'll bin them. We'll get them printed off like doctor's bills. Then we can be clinical instead of folksy.' She wanted the flush in her cheeks to appear aggressive but her voice tapered away thinly.

'They don't have to be clinical, darling. Have you ever seen invitations on parchment, *embossed*, very plain but elegant? You should ask Mum. See what she thinks.' She could tell he was squirming but trying to sound casual. She looked down at her fingers and the clutter of craft about them. Her nails looked so childish, all different-shaped moons staring back at her amongst the snips of ribbon and browning petals. She had been enjoying herself so much she hadn't considered how anyone else might feel. Most of his friends were professionals, like him. You weren't supposed to have the time for such amateur expressions, nor the inclination. But she would not ask his mother. And that felt so petulant, not wanting her advice.

She was learning that things were no longer right or wrong. She would know she was transgressing a subtle margin when he would say to her, 'Do you think that is appropriate, darling?' She would be in the middle of doing something completely natural, like pulling on a pair of jeans to go to the doctor. And he'd say it, the *appropriate* word, with his mouth pasted across his face, looking down at the scissor cuts she'd made in the knees of her jeans. She was always committing some mysterious *faux pas* rather than just plain screwing up.

'You're right. The invites are crap. Why didn't you stop me earlier? I get so carried away I don't...'

'You go on a bender and I don't like to hurt your feelings, darling.' He'd pulled her over to him and pressed her head to his chest in one firm action. And it had felt so nice to know that whatever she did he would still love her, even if it were at some expense to her feelings.

But waking up this morning, she feels different.

*

When he begins to wake, he does not bother to open his eyes. It does not matter where he is, he is comfortable anywhere. He reaches for her warm buttocks to hold against his groin but they are not there. A vague question starts to form but disappears. His waking is an evolving process that cannot be interrupted.

I'm married. The thought jolts his head but his breath against the pillow is warm, so peaceful. Images of her body skim past his eyelids, turning and bending. Bare round portions far more swollen than they really are. Her long brown hair twisting into lengths of silken rope that tie her to him, winding around moons of flesh, tickling against his thighs. He moves up to her face and the only brush of colour is on the rise of her cheeks. He is about to inject himself into her, engorge her with movement and heat, but no, she is frowning at him.

Now he remembers her performance last night. They had been watching TV. It had been a shithouse American budget film. A miserable story with a dying child and divorcing parents—a supposed true story. He insisted they change the channel and she'd kicked up such a fuss as if it were her own family and she were personally involved.

'But look at you,' he'd said. 'You're *crying* on our honeymoon.' He was angry at the sight of her tear-stained defiant face.

'I'm crying because the movie is sad. *Okay?*' She snorted into a ball of wet tissue.

'Which is exactly my point. Why the hell would you want to make yourself bloody miserable?'

'You know, you should really try to have more empathy. Try and feel a bit more of what's out there. It's a very imperfect world, compared to yours.'

'What's that supposed to mean? You forget I deal with people every day with real problems. I'm a professional and I'm not about to become an emotional misfit. And quite frankly, I don't want to spend my honeymoon looking at this shit.'

'You're cold. I don't even know how you shut down your emotions, as if you're the only fucking person that counts in the world...try feeling a bit more.'

She'd gone into the bedroom and howled into a pillow. He was not alarmed at the time—silly little madam, he'd heard it all before and it was best to just let it run its course. The slightest upset and she would throw herself on her bed and howl over her father as if he'd only died yesterday. He realises he

is completely inexperienced in matters of death, thankfully, but surely after five years she should be back on the emotional straight and narrow. Growing up, no one had ever carried on like that in his home and he isn't about to let her continue with it. He'll pay for professional counselling if he has to.

Why did he have to pick a temperamental one? Probably the very same reason he chose to restore the damn Jag, always setting himself up for a challenge. He's dated plenty, but never before has he felt that surge that drives through his core when he thinks of her. He'll be sitting somewhere drab, a very deadly courtroom for example, where little microbes just hang in a strip of light, and in the middle of an engulfing yawn, she'll suddenly appear. She'll be lounging back in his head like lady muck, her legs apart, smiling demurely.

He had always imagined he'd marry a girl with a brown bob, probably wide-set eyes too, from the Upper North Shore. Her only complex would be the size of her bottom and how many potatoes she should allow herself with their nightly baked dinner.

Then he met her in a bar one night. He had curved around the wooden bench to where she sat for a closer inspection. Camouflaged by a clump of his mates in charcoal suits, when he was ready he moved from the fog with natural ease. He felt he already knew her. It was chemically clear.

He wanted answers straight away. She wasn't sure whether to stay in Sydney or go back to New Zealand to her marketing job. It all sounded so free, so full of options. Within the first hour he found himself saying, 'Don't go. I want you to stay here with me.' And they'd laughed at his big come on, as if he was trying to be some sort of Casanova. And then it dawned on them both that he actually meant it and they blushed.

But she was terribly impatient. Had no comprehension of pacing, taking things easy or biding time. Four months later at his apartment, she looked at him sternly.

'Don't fuck around with me. I'm not going to set my life up around the *possibility* you might marry me. You're either in or you're out.' He loved her being ballsy. It was amusing.

A month later he blurted it out under the shower. Something about being naked and wet made him impulsive. He couldn't even see her with his face screwed up under the shower rose. When he did open his eyes, she was staring at him, the shower curtain twisted in her hand and her mouth pursed around a toothbrush.

'Are you serious?' The foam spilled on to her chin.

'Deadly, I'm afraid. But before you say yes, I have some conditions.' And she thought, *fuck*, because it seemed there was always some hoop to leap through.

She was waiting for him on the sofa, like a client. He watched her from the hallway as she pinged her nails and smoothed her hair.

'What?' She looked up at him. He could tell from the quiver in her lips that her heart was palpitating. He did love her. But he had to be sensible. He sat down on the sofa and put his bare arm around her shoulders. She twisted her head to look up at him.

'What?' she said again, but more aggressively now that the weight of his arm was reassuring her that this was not going to be an ultimatum, but rather a negotiation.

'Firstly, I do want to marry you. I love you. Two. It is very important to me that we have children...and I think it auspicious if you pay a visit to our family GP. Just to be sure all the knobs and pipes are in working order. And three. You have to clear any debts you have.'

*

Cupboard doors are banging out primitive messages. Is she trying to tell him it's time to get up? Why? Why should you have to get up on your honeymoon? That's just bloody ridiculous.

'Oi! Mrs E, come here.' He is pretending to be demanding. Pretending at pretending. She appears at the bedroom door, hands on hips. She looks cute. He knows he's just going to have to give her a damn good fucking sooner rather than later.

'Where have you been?'

'On the veranda.'

'Doing what?'

'Just thinking.'

'I've been thinking too.' He throws back the doona, checking the increase in the size of his penis.

'Oh shit, the sun's shining out there!' she says. 'Why don't I just go and put the jug on while you give yourself a wank?' She swings out of the room with a flick of her hair.

It's a tease he decides and not so quietly stalks her on cracking toes into the kitchen. She keeps her back turned, pretending to ignore him until he manoeuvres her hips into position. She relents by helping him. And when he is finished she says nothing, heading off to the shower to empty herself out.

He feels they've got off to a better start this morning.

He opens the packet of Weetbix and puts four in his bowl. Shit, no bloody milk. They were at the store just last night and he wonders what in god's name she fills her head with. He adds hot water to his bowl and grimaces as he works the glug to the back of his mouth. Not exactly a honeymoon breakfast.

When she comes out of the bathroom she is bathed in pale oyster satin and powdery steam. She feels like a scented apparition. He does not look up from the *Who* magazine that his blocked nose is whistling over. Why doesn't he just blow the shit out of his nose she wonders.

Perching on the edge of the sofa, legs folded, arms stretched out across her knees, she meditates on her finger. The platinum ring, its emeralds and diamonds are radiating the icy whiteness of her skin. She flicks from this image to his large unshaven face, heavy with blood as he leans over the magazine. Crossing the floorboards on tiptoe, she pushes her way onto his knee and nestles her head into the soft velour of his shirt.

'What brought on that, gorgeous girl?' he asks, nuzzling his nose into her neck.

'I just love you,' she says, enjoying the satin robe sliding over her thighs like chill cream. 'Are you glad you married me?'

'No. I'm more than glad. I'm delighted.'

'Delighted? That isn't the most passionate verb...would you say you're a passionate person?'

His hands glide over her but the material is slippery and he's unable to get a grip. He pulls away.

'Hey! You didn't have this before.' He lifts the silky fabric between two fingers, creating a peak that leaves her thighs uncovered.

'I bought it. For our honeymoon.'

'Shit. How much?'

'The sort of price you'd expect to pay for something like this. Do you think it's too wifey looking?' Distracting him, steering him.

Finally, they organise their departure from the lodge. His shoes crunch on the gravel as he siphons the cool air into his nose. 'How about a nice drive in the country?'

'Mmm, I guess we could. But I'd really like to look around town. Can we do that too?' She knows she is being difficult again.

Sitting in the car, he warms the motor up, taking his time. It's a mark two. Immaculately restored, red leather seats, silver finish. He'd worked on it for the last two years. A project that was emblematic of his ability to stick at things, to preserve, to control, to build. She'd boasted to her mother, 'Imagine our boys trying something like that. They only know how to smash things.'

She pulls down the visor so that she can examine herself. She looks groomed, maternal even. She had chosen a softer lipstick today. But it is still not her face—it is an interface, a compromise between him and her.

He puts the car into reverse.

She is belting herself into the seat. 'Hey,' she says on impulse. 'Would you mind if I drove?' Something about being a passenger for the last six months is suddenly not okay. She'd gone from being a chaperoned VIP to feeling like a dog on a lead.

'Umm, I guess you can. Why?' he looks at her. Her head is on an angle, as if sensing currents in the air.

'No reason. Just that I'm your wife and this car is technically mine too and I guess I just feel like taking it for a burn.' Her voice sounds thin and light.

'Well, technically, in the legal sense, since you've brought it up, what is brought into the marriage remains...' He is laughing but it sounds arrogant.

'Oh fuck off. I need to drive...*please!*' She makes a grab for the keys but he is too quick and leaps out the door, laughing with fright. To her surprise, he arrives at the passenger's door.

'Come on then. Slide your arse over.'

She starts the motor. Nothing is said by either as a series of ill-timed gear changes thrusts them backward and forward. They head out onto the main road and she speeds up. She can feel him assessing the relationship between his *girls*. His mechanical, his flesh girl. Their performance.

'Gutless heap of shit,' she mentions in passing.

He laughs at her. the car is groaning like a cow calving. It has slipped out of gear.

'Look, it's not like driving a Toyota *dah-ling*. It's a temperamental piece of engineering. You're doing well but try to imagine you're a chauffeur. You've got a glass of water sitting on the end of your bonnet and you're not going to let a drop spill.'

She turns off the main road and into the township and the Jag sighs to a stop in a gap of sunlight in a no-standing zone. The shop fronts here are small and specialised with gold loopy letters arched across their windows. Narrow pavements as thick as slabs of fudge are just wide enough for prams to pass in opposite directions but not to overtake—no one is supposed to hurry in this place. She would be happy to spend the day here but he wants to zoom in his car past paddocks, hills, sheep and clouds.

'I'm not coming with you. We need some time apart...I just want to be alone. I love you.' Shouldn't have said that, she thinks. Sounds too serious. 'But I need to be alone. Just today.'

His face is grave and she is tempted to laugh and say that it is not such a big deal. That in fact, forget she ever said it. They'll do what he wants to do.

He is looking at the dashboard directly in front of him. He swallows, straightens his lips and a lump in his throat follows. He puts his fingers over his mouth, the tips touching the end of his nose. She knows he is preparing to say something. Does he spin it out on purpose? She puts her hand lightly on his knee to soften whatever is going to come out of him.

'It's only a day,' she adds.

'I'm afraid that's not the point.' He pauses and swallows again. 'Correct me if I'm wrong but I've got the distinct impression that you've been depressed since the wedding. It's as if you're a completely different person.'

'That's not true. I ...'

'No. I'm not finished.' He holds a palm up to her face. 'I've been bloody patient because I was hoping it would pass. But now *I'm* not satisfied.' He swallows again and looks stonily in her direction before blinking and returning his gaze to a point on the dashboard. 'You're scatty. Moody. As sexy as a wet fish...'

'Well that hasn't stopped you, has it?'

'You've spent more time preening in the bathroom than you have...'

'Jesus. I was trying to make myself appealing, for you.'

'Crap. You *are* appealing. *You* the person. Not some fucking hairdo.'

She feels bad. She realises that he loves her and that it is she who is the totally mixed up cluster-fuck. She hasn't even fulfilled her part of the deal. She forgets the milk. She fusses about food. She has been rubbing creams into her body when she should have been rubbing them into his. She can't even go on a simple outing without forcing some sort of a negotiation. She wonders what she is trying to prove.

'I'm really sorry. I won't let you down. I'm just adjusting to this whole wife business. I'm feeling a bit brown. A bit dowdy brown.'

He doesn't look impressed with this reference to brown. 'Apology accepted. But you head off for the day. So will I.'

'No, no. I'm okay now. I wanna be with you.'

'Nope. You get going. We're in a no-standing zone. Here's a hundred dollars. Don't spend it, will you?'

She takes the money.

'I'll pick you up in the same spot at five. Would you mind getting something for dinner?'

She slams the door and cringes when she realises she's done it too hard. *Push, not slam*, he tells her all the time.

After a couple of hours stepping over thresholds, walking in aimless circles around candles, soaps, essential oils and photo frames, she is sufficiently anaesthetised to know what is wrong. It's her hair. Long and dark on either side of her face, it makes her feel like an Arab cloaked in a chador. She is painfully subservient to maintaining it. And he says she is a preener. A mirror image of the person he thought he was marrying.

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At five o'clock he pulls into the spot he had left her. It is still day but the sun has shifted leaving the space in a cool blue light. Someone steps out from behind a tree. It's her. She is dressed in the same clothes but her hair is missing – in its place a neat cap of cropped brown.

He feels his face clench.

'It's an act of love,' she says through the door, before it is fully open.

'I want to be your wife,' she says, leaning in. 'But I have to be allowed to be myself. This says it for me. Do you like it?'

'Hop in the car,' he says, his eyes circling her face and her now very small head.

'I don't care if you don't like it. But it may be some consolation to you that it will cost remarkably less to maintain.' She is sitting next to him and he notices that her eyes look more longing than usual. Larger and loving. But perhaps it is the lack of hair that is creating the illusion.

Good Morning Mrs Edwards

We are to stay with his parents at their new country home, Saint Cloud, in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, until we sort ourselves out – this is the plan. As we drive into their road he reaches across and squeezes my knee, but I'm too preoccupied to react. Too apprehensive.

We'd extended our honeymoon—technically speaking, working in London to help an old uni friend of his set up a new business, our desks jammed together like twin mattresses. The business failed. Sometimes I thought we might too.

His parents have never fought. He has never seen a woman shout, hit and hurl insults and consequently he is under the impression I'm mentally unstable. Mostly we fight about fighting. I tell him that me giving him hell is part of the attraction. I'm helping him express his emotions. I yell at him and he yells back, and when we are finished I fall into his arms, completely sated. He thinks he is forgiving me.

He has been so excited at the prospect of going home, in that anxious way, singing loudly at pedestrian crossings, jiggling his leg under tables in cafes. His exuberance has been making me nervous.

As we drive up a short incline and onto the property he toots the air horn repetitively. It's a fairground sound, like someone's won first prize on the big hammer. I flex a smile.

'It's a big bastard, isn't it?' he says with a laugh. He's right. The new house rises large on the paddock as though it has descended from the wintry sky, white paint glowing with opalescence, grey roof looming like a mountainous rain cloud. Newly planted trees are staggered over the paddock – many of them looking like skeletons.

'You have to envisage it,' he says. 'Three years from now it'll be beautiful. They're experts at getting the foundations set in place.' I nod, as if I can see this.

We follow the red paving around the back. Alerted by the horn, his parents are already scissoring across to meet us. His father is gesturing where we park with a flamboyant sweep of his arm. His mother is in tartan pants, father, a tartan bush shirt. I have to smile – they are highlanders now, albeit Australian ones, and are dressed accordingly. His father waits with his hands behind his back, his stomach projected like a little boy's. Her arms are rising from her sides, preparing to engulf. Mama and Papa Bear. It's as though their fleecy stuffing has been completely renewed with this move to the country – all this rosy fresh air. What have I been so worried about?

Before I know it I'm sinking onto his father's fuzzy front. He feels warm and I feel a moment of contentment as I lie against his chest, my chin on his shoulder.

'Well, well, well,' he says, pressing his lips together as though he might cry. She, I see, is in fact crying. We hug silently.

'That's lovely,' I say, grinning at a brooch she has fastened over her top button. It looks like a piece of toffee, swirly with cream, and I would like to pluck it from its filigree surround and pop it in my mouth.

I stand back, smiling as they embrace their son – Biscuit, the family terrier, joins in, yapping madly under his arm.

Breaking their hug, his father looks serious as he turns to me, 'Now, this is your home,' he says. I see Biscuit is looking at me too, with equal intensity.

'For as long as you need it to be,' she adds, with one distinct nod. She stretches a hand out to include me in their group. The effect of her touch on my shoulder causes a fleeting abrogation of responsibility. A fleeting abdication of doubt. I have to square my feet on the ground.

'You got that?' his father says.

'Yep,' I nod, and I have to gulp. This is what my husband wants. For us all to love each other. I hear him say *thankyou*, quite solemnly, as though terms

have been reached and set. I sometimes have an incongruous reading of reality, but I'd swear I've just been made their daughter. I'm flattered, amazed at how they seem to like me so much when they know so little of me.

We walk across the cobbled patio to the house together, with him telling them how wonderful the house is.

'It reminds me of an American homestead,' I say, and she laughs, doubtfully.

His father is pulling my ponytail as I walk through the door, saying, 'As if you can't tell.' I have no idea what he is talking about, but I take it as a compliment.

We sit on cane chairs, improvised thrones with their high fantail backs. These are arranged in a circle around a coffee table that reminds me of an African drum. There are large urns like Ming vases bearing palms, their great long arms reaching out to stroke us. Here we sip tea and nibble on butter cake from the highland bakery while discussing the business in London. He gives a precis of the events in setting up the business—detailing all the negotiations and the reasons for its failure. Despite this failure I can't help but feel proud and pleased by their intense interest. His father is thrusting questions and he is responding with respect, like a military officer in a congressional inquiry. Unsmiling. Slightly flushed. His sentences slow but so carefully constructed. I've got a smile pushing up my cheeks as I look from father to mother – as if to say, *Come on, don't you think he's just wonderful, don't you think he's fabulous?*

'And what did you do with your time, Jacqui?' his mother asks.

'Oh, um, I ran the business with the boys. Morton and I shared an office.'

Morton leans in. 'Jacqui was very good at handling the promotional side of things with the advertising agency.'

'We both were,' I say as I reach across to squeeze his thigh.

His father is saying, 'Well, that's terrific, terrific,' but he wants to talk more about our future plans—'More importantly, Mor-ton, your legal career'. He says 'legal career' so nasally it saws right through my eardrums. But she is

telling his father, not now – we are tired and she is going to show us our room in the attic.

When she suggests one of the men take my bag, I insist on hauling it up the stairs myself, much to her surprise.

‘I really think you shouldn’t. It’s far too heavy for you to manage,’ she says.

So I force myself to carry it with a straight back, determined to impress her with my strength.

It’s hardly an attic. It’s enormous—broad and airy with dormer windows cut into its low sloping ceiling. Just as I go to place the bag along the skirting board, she warns us to be careful not to hit our heads on the sloping ceiling. Too late. I hit mine on the unrelenting board with a thud.

‘Oh dear, are you all right?’ she cries.

‘Yes, I’m fine, thank you Marian.’ I suppress my desire to hiss *shit*, and laugh instead, in a manner I’m sure indicates a mild nature.

‘Silly duffer,’ says Morton.

She is explaining the under-floor heating to us and how they are able to isolate those sections of the house in use, but I’m more fascinated by the light filtering through the window; soft pink drapes tinge it with rosy hue to create a peaceful air. It has the light and dimensions of a chapel. Adding to the atmosphere are two convent chairs flanking the dormer window on the far side, their upright backs impressed with the crucifix. No one would sit like that of course, up against a wall, on either side of a window, nor at such unrelenting right angles, no one but penitents.

Marian indicates the en suite. Through the door I see the stark white tiles – it sparkles like an igloo. Everything is white. There are white guest soaps in a white china dish on the vanity, fluffy white towels and slim white cotton ones more like hankies embroidered with white flowers – I can’t imagine wiping my hands on those – they’re so clean and ironed flat. She seems to be treating us with undeserved reverence, I think, but later he would explain it’s just the way Mum does things.

'Now why don't I leave you two to nap,' she is saying, her hands on her hips.

He has already collapsed on the bed. He has sunk into the middle of four enormous frilly white pillows. The bed head rises like a steep bell curve behind him—blue peacocks on pale yellow within a rich mahogany frame. The bedspread is in the same fabric. It's very exotic. I imagine all the public seats his pants have rubbed over during our 36-hour journey from London; planes, transit lounges, toilets too I imagine, as he's not very careful about that sort of thing. But Marian looks happy to see him luxuriating and I must say he looks perfectly at home. So I kick off my shoes and lie down next to him.

'Here,' she says. She lifts the satin eiderdown at the foot of the bed and drapes it over us until it reaches up to our chins.

'Thank you, Mummy,' he says in a baby voice.

'Thank you, Mummy,' I say, equally baby. They laugh, and for a moment I feel we're as thick as thieves.

When she has gone I close my eyes. But they won't rest beneath my lids. The nerves are jumping like spawning insects. I have so many questions. Like what's going to happen next? Because it's not up to me any more. He *says* it's up to us, but that's a laugh—how long will we lie here for, for instance? He could sleep for hours. I breathe deeply, forcing the country goodness to swell inside me then drain like a slow leak. But it's no good. Out the window all I can see is cloud, long frays of faraway cloud.

'It's a Quaker's sky,' I whisper to him in a haunting voice, but he sighs his head the other way.

Finally I close my eyes, but a dog barks, probably Biscuit. The sound cracks like ice in the thin air.

Duncan's wives. Where are all Duncan's wives? Are they in a box somewhere? Will I end up in a box too, despite it being Duncan's little brother I've married? I am in the green room, standing in front of the china cabinet. It's made from

dark bowed wood, a formidable piece carved with inflexible garlands and ribbons, and upon its top is a collection of silver frames.

Duncan's wives have been replaced with Duncan grinning into the face of a rainbow trout; Duncan in a snugly argyle knit, leaning with the main sail and laughing into the wind. There's also us on our wedding day, a hesitant smile frozen on our faces.

There is another frame that I pick up for closer inspection. It's an extraordinary photo: Duncan, Morton, their sister Elizabeth, and the father all in wig and gown, outside the Supreme Court—admission day. What a feat for one family. They look like wizards. I have seen a similar one where they all stood smiling next to Morton in the grounds of Trinity Hall in Cambridge, in his cap and gown; the last in the line to graduate there. Marian is not in this photo though. I imagine her hunching over a camera, the only one in civvies—she would have spoiled the legal flush.

Morton has found a Burt Bacharach recording and we lie back on cream sofas covered with cabbage rose cushions, a fire spitting savagely between giant slabs of pale stone. His father stands next to the fire with a poker and a wine glass.

'Sit down, Harvey. Relax.'

'I'm just fine as I am,' he says, and he moves his hips to *The Look of Love*. 'I'm admiring my beautiful son and his lovely new bride,' he grins. 'It's really hard having your kids out of the country, you know that?' he says looking at me. I nod and smile, warmed at how pluralising 'kids' seems to include me.

'Sure I can't help?' I say, as Marian puts blue cheese and crackers on the coffee table.

'No,' she says, 'I want you to totally relax and enjoy yourself.'

How irresistible it is to be so utterly cared for.

'This house is far too big for you, you know,' he is saying to his father. 'You'll go mad rattling around in all this.'

'Well, you know, we've bought it for *you* guys, so you can get away from all that rat race. You'll *all* be here in a few weeks. Duncan, Elizabeth, Rick.

We've planned a weekend.' *Why can't it just be us?* I think. *It's so nice, just like this.* 'And you'll all come down for Christmas, no doubt,' he is saying.

'Well that's *lovely* of you, Harvo,' Morton replies 'But I imagine we'll still be here, anyway.' He laughs cunningly, and I join in with his father. Now we're all barking like otters, our heads thrown back for sardines.

Over dinner we discuss Duncan's new relationship.

Harvey says, 'Jesus, the last one was a real psycho.' His voice can be so nasal at times, it almost rings in my molars. 'You're not going to turn psycho on us are you, Jacqui?' he teases. I smile brilliantly at him, as I'm unable to think of a response, and they all laugh as though I've said something extremely clever. I have to take a mouthful of red. Ahhhh - it descends like a ribbon. I sink back, my bottom sliding over the velvet of the dining chair. This psycho talk is making me feel slightly woozy.

I have told him it's his parents who are not *normal*. Everybody fights in the real world.

'No, I suspect it might be you, darling, that's not normal.' I didn't like this, especially the word 'suspect'. I suspect I am still under suspicion. I have told him this is not good. It's not good for my confidence—it's suggestive and detrimental—which at the time I thought sounded very balanced and self-possessed.

Sometimes he says, *But that's the thing about you, darling, you have no confidence*, and he looks into my eyes and says, *I believe in you. I only wish you did too. You could be anything, anything.* I love it when he says this. He looks into my eyes with such a deep longing, and I feel as though I've already won some race without having run or heard a shot been fired. I adore his belief in me. I adore him.

In the latter stages of the meal, his father draws him into a serious discussion about prospects while his mother engages me. She is saying, 'I want a donkey. I've always wanted a donkey with a big loud eee-aw and lots of cherry trees.' It's the glass of wine, I'm sure, and I titter with her, as though we women are

filled with quite silly propositions. But I'm listening to Morton. He's talking in first person, about us – *I this, I that*. I have to swallow.

'Why do you say "I"?' I ask him in bed. 'You should say "we". What *we* are going to do.'

'I don't know,' he says, looking perplexed.

'Well don't. It makes me *sick*. It's as if I don't exist.' I feel quite invigorated having spent the evening with my mouth in the shape of a gentle crescent. My lips are flexing and stretching in all sorts of directions.

'I'll try and remember,' he says softly. 'It's not personal. I do it to protect you, I think.'

'Protect me? From what?'

'My parents are very demanding in a quiet sort of way. And I guess if things don't work out, I want any mistakes that are made to be *my* fault, not yours.'

'What do you mean, *fault*?'

'I don't want them to be critical of you; I want to protect you from being judged,' he says. But I don't believe a word of it. *I this, I that*. What a blow hard.

The following week, I come across an art supplies shop in one of the towns that circle Saint Cloud. The idea of painting fields and skies suddenly becomes a necessity as I stand looking through the window, hot plumes of breath between me and this diorama of possibilities. The Chinese easels are cheap and the canvasses are on sale. I enter, question the old man on the cost of setting up with a small range of paints, tell him to wait. I'll be back.

He frowns. 'I suspect this is an aberration,' he says.

'It's not. I swear. I have nothing to do at bloody *Saint fucking Cloud* – no offence,' I add softly. I can see him thinking, feeling a bit guilty, perhaps, about the time it is taking for him to sort out his affairs. Finally he agrees to the old man's seventy dollar quote.

'But not a penny more,' he says, knowingly. My arms open like a cape and wrap round him.

‘Thankyou. Thankyou. Thankyou.’ He shakes his head, his smile dubious, as though he’s been swindled. And of course he has. It comes to seventy-eight dollars.

I work on my canvasses from first light to sunset in our bright white bathroom. I’ve never painted before, but now everywhere I look my heart swoons with pigment and light. My head is filled with marigolds. My eyes are torch beams. Black trees are electrified with lime, I see red polka-dot toadstools everywhere, inexplicable purple shadows—I’m a spinning top streaking with colour.

Another week passes and his parents have begun talking to me about the importance of a good breakfast. I’m getting too thin. Thin is good, I’m flattered. At lunchtime they holler up the stairs, ‘Jacqui. Luuunchhh.’ Every day. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, breakfast, lunch, dinner. And it takes so long. I’m beginning to resent them eating up so much of my time. All I want to do is paint in my igloo.

‘Why can’t I grab a couple of crackers?’ I ask him.

‘You can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘They would find it disrespectful. It’s just the way they are,’ he sighs.

‘You treat them like a king and queen.’

‘Well they are of sorts,’ he says with a snort.

Lunch is set under the pergola, beneath the soft leaves of a grapevine, unless it rains. We sit around a chunky cast-iron table resembling lace, with placemats, wine glasses and linen napkins and condiments. We could be in Italy. We all talk, back and forth, experimenting with crossways too. But Marian and I have found our place is with one another, and Harvey’s is with Morton. The latter discuss law, politics, moneymaking.

She seems to have less to say about things. She listens to me traversing a wide range of topics, as serene as a Brahman cow in the way she stares and moves her head from ten-to-two to ten-past-two, her eyes slightly crossing over

the tip of her nose. It's hypnotising. My language is boring into the middle of her face, way beyond its normal speed. It's as though the world is going to end and I have less than twenty minutes to explain myself to her. She has to tilt to help me, twisting this way and a little that way to help me get the words inside her head, but I'm still not sure she understands.

When lunch is over I watch Morton slump, allowing his food to digest at an obtuse angle. His arms hang over the sides, thighs apart. He'd be prostrate but for the chair. '*Relax,*' he mouths. *Relax?* Fuck you, I think.

'Now Jacqui, sit down. Let *me* do that.' Marian's voice admonishes as I leap up to clear the table.

'That's okay. I'm fine. You sit down. Really. I insist.'

She gives in with a little satisfied smile. It's a minor struggle now, I notice. She's cornered me. The alternative is to sit on my chair, indifferently, like the men.

Morton kinks his head to watch as I retrieve the plates. He reaches out his hand and runs it over my behind, gripping a handful of flesh to finish. His father snickers and Morton smiles up at me. *Lazy prick,* my eyes gleam. But I'm obliged to smile, as she is laughing a falsetto of little haha's.

Later. In the bedroom.

'You're such a dickhead. *Sometimes,*' I say, as a small consolation. 'You know that? You can be so *fucking* infuriating.'

'I beg your pardon. Jesus. Pull your head in. How *dare* you speak to me like that.'

'*Dare? Dare?* Just who do you think you are?'

'Good morning Mrs Edwards,' she says when I arrive in the kitchen. She says it every morning like a schoolmistress introducing the day's lesson.

And I say, 'Good morning Mrs Edwards' back. I go to her and press the corner of my mouth on her cheek. Both parents kiss their son on arrivals and exits. Now it's customary they do it to me. But she is already busy at the stove,

and I feel she treats this kiss as bit of a chore this morning. Where's that encouraging little *schmuck* she makes with her lips? She stands with her back to me, now. I hang at the edges of the bench. Heavily.

I notice her elbow is cranked up like an axle, twisting and turning the spitting rashers. I pick up a cloth and wipe a dead moth into the sink. I drop the cloth back into the sink. I fold my arms. I unfold them.

'So, what are your plans today, Jacqui?' she calls out over the ruckus in the pan. Plans? Oh please. I think this is pretty obvious. Why is she asking me this?

'I'm painting,' I say, a little unsurely.

'Righto,' she replies. 'Now, *you* like your bacon well done. Don't you?' she says.

'*Actually*, would you mind if I just had toast? I find it a bit rich...'

It's a retaliatory gesture I suppose, but why should I have to eat everything they eat?

'Oh,' she says. 'Righto, then.'

'Sorry, it's just my tummy... it feels a bit funny. Maybe I could set the table.'

But she says, 'No. I've done that,' throwing her voice over her shoulder. 'But you could make the toast. That would be a big help.' *Really?* It doesn't sound like much help. My hand rummages in the bread bag. Moving beneath the sweaty soft plastic it looks about the size of a rat, and I shiver as though it is not my hand, but in fact a rat, trying to find its way out the sealed end of the bag. I whip my hand out with a bundle of bread. As I line the white slices up in the toaster I wonder if painting a picture is actually a plan. They had shown tentative curiosity the other day, asking what my expectations were, as though I were Margaret Ollie. According to Morton's elaborations last night, although my painting gives me intense pleasure, unless I become serious, practically speaking, it's unlikely to provide such a benefit for others—especially the graveyard scene I'm painting up there at the moment.

'They believe in setting goals,' he explained firmly when I became exasperated. 'They're just trying to help.'

The thought that his mother might consider me too ephemeral, too self-absorbed, too odd perhaps, is scratching back and forth in my mind when his father walks in.

'Good *morning*, Jacqui.' He moves smoothly and lightly across the black and white check floor towards me. Although top-heavy, he walks in full possession of his girth, a little spring off the top of his toes; there's theatre in the way his hands turn at the wrist, too. He's almost feminine. I feel his cheek press into mine. I sink into his face slightly, and it's as though beneath the skin he is filled with cold water.

'You smell nice,' I say.

'Yerse. I know. It's my ablutions,' he says, borrowing from Morton's bag of funny accents, or perhaps they were his in the first place. I hate that word 'ablutions'—it makes me think of watery bowel motions. He grins, cunningly, as if he knows this.

'And how are we today?' he says. 'Good... and where is that gorgeous son of mine? You *do* think he's gorgeous don't you?' He leans into me and bares his teeth like a rabbit.

'Oh yes, he's very gorgeous,' I say.

'Oh, *dear*. That doesn't sound very convincing. What's the matter eh?' He rubs my back to jolly me up. 'Are we getting ready for the arrival of *la famille* this weekend? You haven't seen them for a while have you? Happy? Good on you.'

We sit in the sunroom next to the kitchen, awaiting Marian's arrival with the plates. Morton is so sweet to me—*darling* this, *darling* that, as though nothing harsh was said last night. Funny Morton, not the tiniest bit of a grudge. I don't know whether to feel slighted or relieved.

'You're not having bacon and eggs?' Harvey asks in a wild exclamation.

'She's not,' Marian answers for me.

'Good, well that's more for us,' Morton adds helpfully.

I munch in discreet circles on my piece of white toast while they clack about with their knives and forks. Morton is feeling optimistic about a partnership opportunity with another solicitor. I know all about that. I know every little detail—I make it my business to discuss these things in bed every night. The men speak between mouthfuls about the pros and cons of such a move while licking their teeth, and the women listen.

‘Why don’t you buy brown bread?’ I ask Marian. ‘My mother bakes her own lovely wholegrain loaf.’

‘Oh, I don’t think brown bread is all that good for you,’ she responds. ‘We’ve always eaten white.’

‘Oh but it *is* good for you,’ I smile.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ she says, shaking her head. ‘My doctor has told me it causes polyps in the bowel.’ I can’t believe she has said this while her plate is still covered with yolk and bacon.

I swallow my mouthful of dry paste.

‘My understanding of it,’ I say, ‘is that it has completely the opposite effect. They have found that the grains in brown bread *clean* the bowel by gentle exfoliation.’ I run my fingers across my palm to demonstrate.

‘Well that’s not my advice,’ she says with a shrewd laugh.

‘Well, I’m sure that’s what the latest gastroenterological studies have found.’ That was quite a mouthful. I feel my face begin to prickle for I’m not sure I’ve said that word properly. I have to take a breath before making my next move.

‘You wouldn’t mind if I get a loaf, would you?’

‘Not at all, Jacqui,’ she cries, ‘you can have whatever you want.’ Head lowered, I imply my pleasure with a single nod.

‘What does she want?’ Harvey calls.

‘Wholemeal bread,’ she says, flatly.

‘Actually it’s wholegrain.’ I look up and pull my lips blandly across my teeth.

‘*Wholegrain?* It’s bad for your gut.’ Harvey screws up his face.

'She's read somewhere that it *cleans* the bowel.'

'Oh please Marian. Do you mind not talking about bowels while we're eating. *Really. Dear oh dear.*' He looks at her with disgust. Then at me. The 'dear oh dear' is belittling. She shrugs and I raise my brow, and for a moment we are allies, cast off to some scullery quarter in our minds.

'Hey, tell me,' says Morton, cutting through the slightly thickened atmosphere. The 'hey' sounds so exciting. Their ears have become pricked. So have mine. 'Have you two seen Jacqui's latest painting?' They look quite startled. They shake their heads vigorously as though disguising an involuntary shudder. 'It's bloody good.' I gather he is referring to the yellow brick cottage dwarfed by giant sunflowers and bumblebees as he has not seen the current effort modelled on the local cemetery. 'She's got a real talent. I take my hat off to her. She's only just picked up a brush a week ago.'

'Is that so?' they chorus.

Oh, what a dear boy. I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

Later. In the bedroom.

'You're a cunning fox,' I tell him. 'I don't know what had them gagging more at breakfast – the talk of bowels or my painting.'

He is lying on the bed with his hands behind his head.

'What *are* you talking about?'

I roll onto my elbows and grin at him.

'What am I *talking* about? I'm talking about "*Oh, you really ought to see Jacqui's painting – oooo she's so good.*"' I'm wobbling my head at him, four four time. 'You nearly made them *sick.*'

'What on earth are you talking about?'

'Oh, come off it. You were protecting me. You know they don't like me painting. They hate it. They can't *get* at me up here.'

'I swear I have no idea what you are talking about. *Dear oh dear, what goes on inside your head?*' He makes a prim line of his mouth. Harvey says 'dear oh dear'. Harvey does the same thing with his mouth.

'I'm not stupid. They hate me. Okay, maybe they don't *hate* me, but they hate the fact I'm not going to be what they want me to be. And they know it.' I leap up onto my knees to get closer to his face. 'They can't corner me into being a doormat. I'm a free spirit. And, by the way, I know *exactly* what they're up to. They want another *Marian*. I know it. They're as cunning as can be.' I've been swivelling above him, but he doesn't move. His hands remain clasped behind his head, intransigent, elbows and biceps protruding from the sides like large antlers.

'What an odd girl you are. You've got *real* problems. You *do* know that, don't you?'

'Why did you marry me?' His eyes roll. 'You have to understand my parents *only* want the best for you. You have to stop this dangerous nonsense. You have this shocking habit of twisting everything. *Everything*.'

'Don't muck with my head.'

'No darling.' He looks at me with sad love. 'You're doing a good job of that entirely on your own. You *see* things that are not even there.' He wipes a tear falling from my face. 'This is your *modus operandi*. I've been observing you for a while now.' I look at him, puzzled.

'Maybe I *see* things that you don't see,' I suggest.

'No,' he says, 'I think you *think* you see them.' I stay with this for a moment.

'Do you really think I'm deluded?' I'm curious now. For I'm thinking I will be anything. Anything at all... *anything* but *Marian*.

'I think there may come a time when you may need some help. In the meantime you have to try and modify your behaviour.'

Modify? This word makes my face twitch.

'Do you love me?'

'I don't change that quickly.' His voice is cautious, as though it toes a tightrope. This is my fault. I threaten his balance. His equilibrium. *Oh God, what am I doing to this man?*

I must look sad, for he says, 'Come down here and lie next to me.'

Harvey and Marian are seated in the carvers at either end. Rick, their son-in-law, is opposite me, with Duncan and Elizabeth on either side. There is a white platter in the centre of the table, covered with the broken carapaces of bright orange crab. I'm grateful that Morton is at my side, his hand on my thigh—although he still seems so far away. Maybe it's just the wine mixing with antibiotics doing things to my eyes. My head feels like a hot air balloon. I've been sick with a throat infection for the last few days.

Duncan looks clean, scholarly too with those Einstein glasses on the end of his aquiline nose. I've been watching him speak, wondering: if I could fall in love with one brother, could I fall in love with the other? He's certainly more attentive than Morton, smoother, asking me about my family and how I enjoyed England, and seems fascinated and cheered by my responses.

'And how are you settling in to Saint Cloud?' he asks with a slow rumbling laugh.

'I feel very at home,' I lie.

'Well that's terrific. Here's to you Jacqui,' he raises his glass. 'Or should I say, Mrs Edwards. You're one of us now.' I smile, thinking of past brides as I watch them toast me and swallow their wine. 'We're not perfect, but we do our best,' he adds with a smile.

'Yes,' says Harvey, 'we *do* do our best.'

'Who says we're not perfect?' This is Elizabeth. She pulls her head in, mockingly.

'Yes, speak for yourself Duncan,' says Harvey. Morton's hand squeezes my leg.

Rick sits up in his chair. He looks every bit a Kennedy in his navy blazer and polo shirt. He's just thought of something. A joke. I remember now. Rick fires jokes, one out after the other.

'I'm sorry,' I say, putting my hands to my cheeks when I fail to laugh. 'I think I'm a bit hot.'

‘What you need, Jacqui, is another glass of the falling-over water,’ his face serious. He picks up the bottle. ‘There you go, that’ll fix the bugs,’ he winks. He misses my smile of appreciation, for he’s off onto the next thing.

Down the other end Elizabeth’s hands are twisting at the wrist as she describes something to her mother. She reminds me of her father, but she wears heavy rings on her fingers, and has false nails that she has been using to tweeze the meat from the crab claws. There are a variety of bracelets on one wrist that have been crashing up and down since we sat down to lunch, and a thick gold chain around her neck, weighted by a large pearl; it sits just above her powerful chest, her cleavage a deep wedge as she leans into her mother.

‘It was absolutely divine.’ She speaks in sighs, swirling her descriptions around her hands like plumes of chiffon. Marian’s lashes are quivering with concentration.

‘We’re talking about a party I went to,’ she says, sensing me watching. ‘I was just telling Mother that the detail they’d gone to was *extraordinary*. I imagine you’d be good at planning that sort of thing – you’ve got a good eye for detail, haven’t you?’

‘Me?’

‘Well, you’ve worked in that *world*,’ she exudes, as though my world is a mystery to her. ‘You’re a creative type.’

‘I’ve only worked in sales.’

‘Yes, but it’s that magazine world,’ she persists.

‘She’s been painting, you know,’ Marian says.

‘Yes, I’ve heard. Look, I think it’s wonderful. Really, I do. It’s about time *someone*,’ she roars this down the table to the others, ‘demonstrated some creative talent in this family.’

‘Absolutely,’ agrees Rick. ‘If you’d been another lawyer, Jacqui, I’d have gone out and shot myself.’ Elizabeth rolls her eyes at her husband.

Another calls for a definition of creativity and as if this is his cue, Rick leaps out of his chair, reaching for my plate.

'Oh no, Rick, please I'll do that.' It's Marian, calling from the other end of the table.

'No, no. I've got it,' he calls back. 'You just stay there Marian.' I watch Rick as the others deconstruct creativity. Head down, rushing back and forth. There is something lugubrious about his handsome face that reminds me of a faithful bloodhound.

'Oh, what is creativity?' I say, when I realize they are all looking at me. 'Um. Well, I guess it's self-expression, isn't it?'

Duncan rubs his chin. 'I think it has to be more than that, Jacqui. It's a good point, but I think you'd have to narrow it down to expression through an accepted artistic form.' I feel myself slightly bristle at his pedantic tone.

'Why?' demands Elizabeth, with operatic force. 'I might be expressing my creativity through forms outside those commonly accepted.'

'Like what? Creative spending?' Morton jibes. She pretends to look affronted.

'Oh thank you, Rick-ee darling,' she says as he takes her plate. 'Now,' she says, 'Let me take issue with you, Morton.' Minutes later the debate has moved on to the merits and misuses of creativity in the law.

'Hey.' It's Harvey, beckoning me closer. I lean in so our heads are a hand span apart. 'That's what a *Cambridge* education does for you,' he says, nodding at the three. His eyes twinkle with pride and I smile warmly at him before taking another swallow of wine.

My head is getting lighter and lighter. I look for Morton. *Love you*, he whispers. *Me too*, I whisper back.

We eat lamb cutlets next. At least they do. 'It's this bug,' I say flippantly, flapping my hand about my throat as I dump them on to Morton's plate. Too bad. Too spaced out to care.

I don't know how we've got on to drugs, but Duncan is admitting he has puffed on a reefer. He calls it 'mara gee wana', in a silly voice. 'I didn't inhale though,' his laugh rumbling again.

It seems dope is the worst misdemeanor of all three. Marian raises her eyebrows and Harvey makes a horseshoe of his mouth as each describes the circumstances of their experience. It's ridiculous. I can feel my throat tightening, for if there is an area of worldliness I have dabbled in, *it's this*. They all seem so naïve.

Now Duncan is saying that if any child of his came home with drugs he would throw them out of the house.

'Well that's a bit hypocritical, I have to say,' says Morton.

'Seriously,' Duncan says, his head driving an arc, 'zero tolerance. I just wouldn't stand for it.'

'I'm sure that would work,' I add, quietly. It's a facetious remark. It dangles. I'm surprised they even heard it.

Harvey looks up as though he has seen me for the first time. Duncan touches his fingertip to the bridge of his glasses. I feel everyone is looking at me except Morton beside me, whose hand rests on my thigh.

'Yes, I have to say Duncan,' Morton says, clearing his throat, 'Your views are rather extreme.' Morton, my darling Morton. Everyone is back looking at Duncan now, and I take this opportunity to take a slug from my glass.

Duncan ignores this. 'I think Jacqui was about to say something... weren't you Jacqui? Go on, I'm interested to hear what you have to say. What's your angle?' Everyone is looking at me once again.

'Angle? I can't say I actually have an angle. I just think you just can't stop kids, or anyone for that matter, from doing things by using *force*.'

I have read snippets in the newspaper. I know terms like rehabilitation, decriminalisation, prohibition, supply and demand, but I forget them all. My argument runs along the lines of getting your kids to share a few low-impact drugs at home in a family environment, such as over a game of Scrabble with your mum and dad. It's not good, I can't think straight—alcohol, antibiotics, lack of legal training.

'Non sequitur,' Duncan says when I'm finished.

I would have said 'I beg your pardon,' but nothing comes. I'm thinking, *What do hedge clippers have to do with drugs?*

'Duncan, she doesn't know what "non sequitur" means.' Morton sounds unimpressed.

'I think what she is saying is...' Duncan begins, but I find my confidence and interrupt him.

'Actually what I'm saying is... what I'm saying, Duncan, is...' I can't think of anything. I start to laugh.' What I'm saying, Duncan, is that *you are...* a fuddy duddy.' My voice is teasingly high. I've not heard this term for at least a decade and it has amused me.

'A *fuddy duddy*? Excuse me?' Duncan has stiffened.

'Jacqui. I'm sorry, but that is totally uncalled for. Duncan is not a fuddy duddy.' Elizabeth looks at me, truculent.

It's not a rude word. It's a harmless word. It comes from the same barrel of friendly words as 'silly ninny', 'ning nong', 'wally woofter'. My family used to use them daily, with affection. I'm completely confused and now they are all staring at me with their eyebrows raised. I don't know what to say. It certainly won't be 'sorry'. I react, I suppose, as most people do in a panic situation—completely on reflex, and I do something I have not done since I was a child. I stick my thumbs in my ears and wiggle my fingers at them.

'Darling, please.' It's Morton. 'Stick your tongue back in. Come on.'

It's a new day. He has brought me into his parents' bedroom, *So we can get this all sorted out before people start forming opinions.* I feel sick. Hungover and beaten. Harvey is in a singlet leaning up against the bed head, pink skin and fuzzy chest—he's like a peeled crustacean. Marian, next to him, looks like a reprint in a faded papery nightie. I'm sitting on the edge of the bed in a borrowed robe. Morton, curled at their feet.

'Don't you worry. We perfectly understand what you're going through,' says Harvey. I fist my eyes and wipe my nose with the length of my index finger.

'Thankyou,' I say, lifting my head for a moment to look at him.

'I think it's those bloody awful antibiotics,' says Morton. 'My poor darling's not been feeling well for days. And it all got a bit much for you. Didn't it chooky?' I nod and give him a pitiful look as I wipe my snot along the length of my robed leg.

He says, 'Why don't I make us all a milk coffee?' and they say that'd be lovely.

'You stay here,' he says, as he bounces off the bed. Now is not the time to appear disagreeable, so I do as I'm told.

'Hey, come here,' Harvey says, in a playful voice, patting the mattress. I give a little smile and shift closer up.

They smile as he rests his arm on my shoulder. 'Between you and me, Jacqui,' he says, 'I have every faith in you.' I nod, meeting his intensity by looking him in the eye. He holds the look and I feel so grateful to him for this sign of mutual respect, considering my escape across the paddock and the lengthy disappearance that followed.

'You know a lot of people have a thing about us. We know that.' I nod. 'They've got chips on their shoulders. You know what I mean?' I nod, again. 'They can't handle our success. But I know you can work through it.' I look at the sheet and inhale fragments of them, breath, cotton, their skin. 'You're a great girl. Isn't she Marian?'

'She certainly is.'

'You're smart. You look good. You've got a good sense of humour. You'll work through it. I have every faith in you. In fact, you remind me a lot of Marian. And I thought she was so good I married her. She was just like you. You'll make a great wife and mother. Morton's a very lucky man. So don't worry about those couple of big gallumfas of mine, eh! Cambridge wallies, eh! He's rubbing my back, so hard that it simulates the stunted sounds of laughter. When he has finished he plants a kiss on my forehead. Then I lean across so that Marian can give me one too. I'm so filled with relief I nearly faint.

Later. In the bedroom.

'They think I've got a chip on my shoulder,' I tell Morton. He is sitting on the edge of the bed holding my hand on his lap.

'Did they actually say that?'

'I think so.'

'Mmmmm. Do you think you do?'

'Do *you* think I do?' I look at him closely.

'I think they may have a point,' he sighs.

'Jesus.' I can't look into his eyes; I have to lower my head.

'Don't worry, don't worry,' he's telling me. He cups my face in his palms and lifts my gaze. I look out the window at a long streak of pale cloud. 'You've apologised to everyone and that's what counts. You've done the right thing.' His thumbs wipe away at my cheeks.

'But I'm so ashamed,' I say as he crushes me to him, the pressure making me wail. Snot loops like yolk from my nose and runs into my mouth. I nuzzle his woolly shoulder, rubbing my face into its soggy fuzz. I can feel all the bones in my body. I'm a bundle of sticks he holds together, and it's only morning.

Remember Sleepy Creek

As we wind our way over the ridge we can feel the wind muscling in against the side of the car; above, dark cloud fits tightly over the layers of green and blue landscape, like the curved seal of a lid. We are a tiny bubble in this watery light, and I am grateful this is the last leg of the eight-hour journey – less than an hour to go. At least the lightning has stopped.

‘Jeeesus,’ you say suddenly, as we round another bend, and the rain fires horizontal nails at our windscreen.

I know what that means. It means, ‘Whose bloody idea was this?’ but you don’t say that bit. We’re thinking pleasant thoughts, smiley thoughts, aren’t we? Somewhere in these hills our new friends are waiting for us, and we are going to have a wonderful, wonderful week away with them, despite this weather, despite our mood.

‘What’s his name again?’ you ask me.

‘You *know* his name. Why are you doing this?’

‘Francis, isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I say, and I feel the corners of my mouth lift a little. ‘It’s Francis.’ I like priggish names.

In all the time we’ve been driving we’ve avoided saying anything about them, up until now. All of the friends *you* have are old school friends, and I imagine you feel I’m tugging you away from your familiar circle. Your sandpit. This will be a good test for you. I’m trying to feel ebullient, to make up for you, but I guess it’s making me testy.

‘Francis and Margo.’ You interrupt the silence with this.

‘Yes,’ I reply. ‘Francis and Margo. Is there anything wrong with that?’

‘I can see why the other people dropped out. You’d have to be an absolute nong to drive this far for just a few days break.’ You say this as you pivot us around another bend.

'They were going to fly, not drive. So *we're* the nongs. And they didn't drop out. Her father was ill. It's fate. I'll admit it's all a bit last-minute, but Margo didn't even know us three months ago, when they made the booking.' I pause, expecting you to say, 'She barely knows us now,' but you don't - you're off form, so I keep going - 'I like adventure,' I say, 'I like the impromptu-ness of it.'

'Impromptu-ness?'

'Yes. And I like *serendipity*.'

'Serendipitydoo.' You shake your head.

'You know, our lives will be over before we know it. We'll have died of boredom. Seriously. These guys *do* stuff.' You're smirking, so I look out the window on my side.

Margo, I guess you could say, is my new best friend. Yes, I know I'm smitten, but so is she. You do like to tease me about that. You have made me blush at times. And I have to say, I don't mind that nice feeling of blood warming on the surface of my cheeks. I think the last time I ever felt such a feeling was with you. Strange, isn't it. I feel exhilarated all over again. You've told me I'm becoming a lesbian - sleazy you. I've told you you're ridiculous, that in fact we're more like sisters - we've just clicked, and we both have the snapshots on our fridges to prove it: *Year One mothers at Vera Cruz*. Significantly, we're in the middle of the shot, our heads touching at the temples, rosy with champagne.

'Have you got the address?' you ask, gruffly.

'Shit!' I hiss as I rifle through my bag. 'Yes, I've got the bloody address.'

We have to backtrack. It's very confusing on these little country lanes, isn't it? I'm about to say that, but I skip it. Your nose is screwed up and you're leaning over the wheel like a hawk.

Then suddenly you announce, 'This is it,' and you swing the wheel sharply.

Yes, there is the sign nailed to a gnarly tree trunk, a grubby white sign, its font like the masthead of a newspaper, but with the letters having started to grow together with some sort of fungus. It reads: Sleepy Creek.

‘What do you think?’

‘Well we can’t tell yet, can we?’ you say. You drive us over a ridged metal grate and down, down, down into trees and scrub which in places have grown together to form an intestine. We dip, we climb and turn. The surface of the drive is chucking us about with its potholes. Rustic. You pay for those holes. But we’re not paying, are we? But you did say you were going to offer half, it would only be right, as it would only be right they don’t accept. Margo has already stated emphatically, *We simply wouldn’t hear of it*. She actually put her hands over her ears to shut me up. Dear Margo.

We come up over another rise only to discover yet another fall in the drive, and I start to laugh. Nerves. And now you’re laughing, too. We’re uptight and practising at being light-hearted.

Now we arrive at a wall of trees, and we stop, and you go, ‘Mmmmm.’

And I go, ‘Mmmmm,’ too. Bunches of bright yellow flowers clump in the trees and a wonderful vine of purple bells weaves through the tangle of green. Everything’s juicy wet with rain. Fat, full drops as big as ball bearings explode on the windscreen. I feel excited. We start again, following the curve round, crushing stones beneath our wheels.

Now I remember they’d called it a villa. Before us is a two-storey house rendered in the mottled grey of a plover’s plumage. Wooden shutters in plain timber are fitted to the windows—authentic ones, I can see the hooks. In the gravel courtyard Margo and Francis’s red rental car is parked like a tethered horse with its nose to the old stone wall. They’d flown up.

‘Oh, isn’t it pretty?’ I say.

‘Who needs to go to France?’ you say shrewdly.

‘Exactly.’ And I find your hand, and squeeze, but you’re all action, I can almost see the electrons sparking off your reddened face.

‘Come on, what’re we waiting for?’ you say. ‘Let’s go.’

'There's *Mar-go*.' It escapes me like a wonderful sigh as I get out of the car.

'Yes, here's Margo. *Jacqui*. You made it.' Her cheeks are as fresh as crushed strawberry against the black shine of her hair, crinkles gather at the corners of her eyes, small, keen eyes that glitter like black sequins. She is wearing that finely-striped navy boat neck with the shaping—oh dear—and a small loop of pearls around her neck. Very old-fashioned. Her hair sweeps far left like a salute and mushrooms neatly beneath her ears, but strangely it does seem to suit her. She's just Margo. My Margo.

She opens her arms wide.

'Welcome to Sleepy Creek.' We fold into one another quite naturally, like utensils, no fat between us. 'I was worried about you, driving all that way,' she says, her breath shooting hot in my ear.

'Don't be silly. It was a good drive, wasn't it Morton?' I look back to include you.

'Yeah. Apart from a bit of weather. Great to see you Margo.' Your voice glows, warmed with sincerity, and you kiss her cheek with a big sucking sound. 'Thank you so much for thinking to invite us. We're really chuffed you thought of us.' You touch her arm and smile, almost shyly.

'It's a pleasure,' she's saying. 'It's worked out for the best, actually.' I notice Margo's eyes are wet, probably from the smiling. Mine feel a bit leaky, too.

'Now this place is fantastic,' you say, breaking into up-tempo. 'What a find!' you boom. You really know how to say all the right things. I'm proud of you.

'Yes, isn't it gorgeous? This is our second time here. We just *love* it. Now come and see inside. I've got champagne chilling in the freezer. Don't let me forget.'

'Where's Francis?'

'Oh, he's gone for a walk over the hill. Filling his lungs with cow dung.'

We all laugh.

I notice Margo is very proud, moving through rooms with the long slow legs of an owner rather than a holiday renter. I get all excited over the thick slab of table in the kitchen and the odd assortment of old dining chairs, and the Aga—I just love the curved corners and that milky-coloured enamel, and the still life painting on the walls, little chunky ones with thick daubs of paint.

‘Naïve,’ you say as you inspect them and Margo and I make discerning sounds, agreeing with you. The owner collected everything from absolutely everywhere, Margo tells us. Even the doors and window frames have been recycled from old homes.

‘The house is a puzzle of pieces. How clever,’ you say. And I think you are glad you’ve come.

‘And this is the lounge, or the hunter’s den,’ Margo says, a wry smile. There is a fire crackling in a soot-blackened recess, there are mounted deer and leather sofas with saggy seat cushions and strapping ends like shiny rumps—I watch you as you sink into one of them and buttress your back and neck with two cushions.

‘Ahhhhgh.’ You sound like a horse, so we leave you to rest. We steal away, to empty the car ourselves.

She leads me up the stairs. The steps are smooth in the centre where feet have polished the wood to stone, and this almost sensual curve is reassuring, as if I’ve walked these steps many times before. In my nose, dank stone air, hits hard as I lug my case. I notice the light hangs limply at the stair window—outside a rainy sky, although none falls now—the pane looks as cool as cold water, making me feel snug inside myself. Margo carries your sausage bag and your tweed jacket on its hanger. I’m looking at her bottom—you’re right, it’s flat, tucked away neatly into her long thighs and narrow hips.

She flicks a switch and we are standing in a hallway, red walls and lantern lights, the floorboards are blackened with stain and at the end is an oriental-looking cabinet with a painting above it.

‘Fresh towels are in there,’ Margo says, pointing to the cabinet, but I’m looking at the painting; it is of a woman with her back turned, a bowl of water

in the foreground, her arm is raised, and her head tilted down as she touches a white cloth to her side – a basin wash. My eye is drawn to the palest tinge of mauve worked into the creamy paint, a suggestion of where the breast begins to fill with tissue.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ Margo says.

‘Yes it is, isn’t it?’ I almost whisper.

‘Now, that room is ours,’ Margo is explaining, ‘and I’ve put you in next door, as I think this is much nicer than the one on the other side. So, I hope you don’t mind, I’ve made it all up for you.’ She is telling me this as we wait at the door, instilling the moment with a touch of suspense. I play along, my eyes wide with curiosity.

‘Your boudoir,’ she says, and she flings the door open so that I may walk through first. She’s right, it’s too romantic to be called a bedroom. I go straight to the white curly rug in the centre of the room, and I turn in a spiral under what might be a tasteless chandelier anywhere else. It is a room full of its own grace.

‘Oh, the colour. It’s divine,’ I say.

‘It’s sort of ballet pink.’

‘Yes, you’re right. It *is* ballet pink. Did you make up the bed – oh Margo. And look at those beautiful flowers.’

‘We were in town yesterday. I just thought I’d brighten it up for you.’

‘You’re the dearest.’

‘I’m so glad you like the place,’ she says, almost shyly, as she puts your things so carefully down on the chair, draping your jacket so that it doesn’t crease.

Now she sits on the edge of the bed, and she is smoothing a circle around herself with her palm.

I hear her sigh. ‘Still, it’s nice to get away isn’t it? Away from kids.’ Her voice dwindles away as if she is suddenly weary.

Then, ‘Hey,’ she says. ‘I’ve got something for you. Sit down here,’ she says, patting the mattress next to her, ‘and *don’t* move.’

I do as she says, taking pleasure in my girlish obedience. When she returns she's holding a neat little turquoise paper bag between her fingers.

'For you,' she says, sitting down next to me. She watches as my fingers ruffle the tissue.

'Oh my God,' I breathe. Inside is a ring, woven from tiny green glass beads, mostly forest green with specks of teal and lime, and set in the centre is a large baroque-style pearl, shimmering with iridescence. It really is beautiful.

'But why?' I say, as she takes the ring from me, sliding it onto my middle finger.

'Because you liked mine.' She holds up her finger to show me her own ring, which is in amber tones. 'They're made by a French woman,' she says. 'Quite exotic really, aren't they? I can always change it, if you don't like the colour.'

'No. It's gorgeous. I'm going to treasure it.' Then I think she might say something else, but suddenly she is practical, suggesting I need time to get myself all organised. But I lie there after she is gone, for quite a while, the bedside lamp on, holding my hand up every so often, altering its angle in the light.

Francis slouches in a carver's chair, making his legs appear longer than they really are. He is a man who sits with his ankle on top of his knee—I do like that—there's an arrogance about it. Francis is smart, he cuts people open, he saves lives, but his auburn hair is short, like an adolescent's.

Margo is vigorous at the kitchen bench. We all watch, you sitting squarely in your kitchen chair, upright, your legs apart, a grin like a sickle.

Francis is pissed off he has forgotten to bring his CDs. Have we heard of Otis Oberon? What about Spearhead? The worst thing to happen in the music world this decade was the death of Jeff Buckley.

'Really? You haven't heard him? He's phenomenal. Seriously, you have to hear him. Tomorrow, Morton. We'll go downtown and pick up some CDs.

If I'm right, he'll blow your brain. Beautiful stuff.' He kisses the tips of his fingers.

'Sounds good,' you say, and I'm glad you look amused by his enthusiasm.

The air is thick with lamb. Margo opens the Aga, her face glowing as she lifts out the oven tray. She doesn't know I detest lamb, how could she? I find myself smiling lovingly at the slab of meat as I place the vegetables I've chopped around it. Now Francis is up out of his chair to fill our glasses, but you tell him to sit down, insisting you'll do it, chipping in already, I like that. You're so considerate.

Now you are at the fridge with Margo, jostling her out of the way with your elbow, and she is giggling and telling you to nick off, that she was there first. I can't tell you how happy I am. I feel so warm. I turn to look at Francis. When he smiles back I see his jawbone, it's strong and follows the exact curve of his smile. He swallows and a lump in his throat undulates—I have to look away. I look for you, holding my glass out to you.

'There you go,' you say as you pour. And your cheeks are full and soft as you look down at me, and you give me a cutie-pie smile.

Over dinner we talk about movies. Francis is very intense about Russell Crowe.

'Yeah, the guy can act, but he's too much of an arsehole,' you say.

'But he's a genius,' says Francis.

I decide to support you and I work out what I'm going to say before I open my mouth.

'My theory,' I begin, 'is that you don't watch a movie with Russell Crowe in it. You watch Russell Crowe.' It doesn't sound as good as it did in my head, so I try to elaborate. 'His reputation has destroyed his ability to...' But Francis cuts me off.

'I'm sorry, but there comes a point as a viewer, where you have to contextualise. We all know actors are only acting, and he is the most outstanding acting talent in the world today.' Francis squares his jaw at me.

'But you can't argue that,' I say, matching his insistence. 'It's a matter of taste. Opinion. And I don't like him. Nether does Morton.' I look over at you, but you couldn't care less now. You and Margo are talking about something else and you're making zigzag movements with your hands as you explain something. Probably your next fishing trip with your old school buddies.

'I think you're wrong.' Francis leans his head towards mine. 'I think acting talent can be quantified.' He says it in a low nasal voice as if it's a dirty secret no one else is to know about. He's serious. I laugh out bubbles of light fluffy air, because it seems nothing to do with Russell Crowe anymore.

Margo looks over at me. She winks. Her face is flush with red wine and she looks soft and pretty, so I tell her so.

'Yes she does, doesn't she,' Francis affirms, and he looks very pleased. So must I, because you're raising your eyebrows at me.

'You girls are as sticky as glue,' you say, suspiciously. And Margo doubles her chin, and I shake my head at you as if you're really quite odd. Then we smile, not at you, but at each other.

Over dessert, stewed apple and vanilla ice cream, Margo complains about the attitude of so called 'working' women.

'I'm sick of being patronised. I don't have to make *money* to be considered useful. I make *babies*, I make *food*, I make a home, I make...'

'*Lurve*,' Francis interrupts.

'Yes, that too,' she smiles up at Francis who is now standing, excusing himself from the table.

'And just because nothing we do can be quantified in dollars,' she continues after he has left the room.

'No disrespect to you, Margo,' you interrupt. We wait for you to clear your throat. 'But your worth is equated with the cost of a full-time nanny-slash-housekeeper. An insurance company would probably set your worth between sixty and eighty thousand a year, at best. *Hey, don't shoot!* I'm not saying I'd pay that. I reckon around forty, 'cos you guys have got cleaners.' You're laughing as Margo and I bark you down.

'We're not keeping house or nannying, we're mothering. That's an art.'

'We represent an institution.'

'I can't believe we're having this...'

'OK, OK. How about this. Mothers are worth their weight in gold.' You attempt to flutter your foreshortened eyelashes.

'You,' says Margo, with a jab at your chest, 'don't know how lucky you are.'

Then Francis sticks his head in the door.

'Hey dudes! I have some A-grade shit here. I'm just gonna roll a couple of nice little spliffs in front of the fire, if you care to join me...' His voice is groggy with suggestion.

You look at me, a grin on your face. 'Why not?' you say, raising your eyebrows.

Francis is sitting cross-legged on a shaggy rug, back as straight as a Buddhist, magazine for a flat surface, a little plastic pillow of green mulch and a packet of papers. He smiles up at me, 'You smoke?' I'm sure his eyes are already dilated.

'I have done,' I try to sound nonchalant. Then I add, 'But a while ago now.' Margo takes a position behind Francis on the armchair. Legs apart, she starts to dig her fingers and thumbs into his shoulders. I notice the pearls still gleaming at her neck. You and I on a sofa opposite, as snug as a pair of thick socks, watching her as she slinks her arms down his chest and runs her cheek adoringly over his hair, for us I think. She looks up, breathes a smile through her nose. Then Francis starts to suck, cheeks hollowing like a drug-fucked malcontent in one of those nineties fashion shoots. I go to nudge your ribs, but you are already beginning to lean forward, reaching as he passes the joint, palm up like a precious offering.

'You guys have this one.' His voice sounds dry and pinched. 'I'll light one for Margo and me.'

We smoke, and everyone coughs, except for Francis who inhales cleanly, with medical expertise. When I finally turn to you I see your eyes are hooded.

It has been a long day for you. I remember, we'd agreed marijuana sends us to sleep.

'We should go to bed,' I say to you, and I smile at them way, way, across the rug. Margo smiles back, and Francis nods his head, very slowly. I haul you up with two hands and then I slowly travel across the rug, and I lean down and press my lips to Margo's, a goodnight kiss, a thank you kiss, on the lips—it's the drugs I suppose, but it feels so natural. She puts her hand up to my cheek and cups my face, and I wait for a moment, until the hand drops.

Not sure what to do with Francis, I touch my hand to the top of his head. He looks up at me, his eyelashes quivering. I see the pale stretch of his throat, the knot in the centre poking out, almost painfully, and I turn away.

There you are, waiting, my sentry, your palm held up to say goodbye—and they respond with palms too, and you click your heels, wobble and laugh.

'He's an unusual boy,' you whisper across your pillow.

'How do you mean?'

'A bit of a master of the universe.'

'Do you think?'

'Do *you*?'

'Dunno. Are you glad we came?'

'*Yeah*,' you say, but I know you're not sure.

'You're a team player,' I say, encouragingly, and I stroke your brow.

Now I hear the knob on their bedroom door turn. How did they get up those stairs without me hearing? My heart starts to gallop ridiculously and I have to put my hand over your mouth as if the sound of hooves might take a circuitous route through you. We wait. We wait quietly, until we hear their bed creak.

Now your hand feels like a paw between my legs, but I'm lying there thinking of *them*. I can still hear them, very faintly, but nevertheless, they are there, they are there.

'I can't,' I whisper. 'Wait until morning.'

In the morning I wake up to Francis's groan. It is very dramatic. I open my eyes and see you, just as your eyes open too, for the first time this morning I think, because your lips are a softly crumpled 'W'. You swallow, and then your eyes droop shut. But there goes Francis again. He has one of those voices that carries--it's trapped inside a fresh coconut, pubescent and woody. I close my eyes with you, and wait, half expecting them to stick their heads around the door.

There is a tang of bacon in the air. Margo is sitting at the kitchen table, still in her dressing gown, a Mothers' Day present I seem to recall, cream velour. Francis is in camouflage board shorts at the Aga, a pair of tongs pointing in the air. A quick glance, and I note his legs are athletic; the hairs are not apishly dark, thank God, but a light fuzzy felt, like yours. For some reason I find this reassuring.

I smile and say, 'Hi guys,' and they're grinning at me and I'm grinning back. It's as if we're all *in* on something—last night I guess—this is how they are, they're a club, we're a club—I see it gleaming in Margo's eyes as she looks up at me.

'So guys, what can I do?' I say, suddenly guilty that I've only wiped a few plates since I've been here, but they tell me to sit down and relax, there's nothing *to* do, apparently. So I sit opposite Margo, and we both lean forward on our elbows, like girls do, pretending Francis is not there.

'Did you have just the *best* sleep?' Her hand is on top of mine.

'The best.'

'There's no noise here. Absolute dead silence. And no kids jumping on you at six a.m. It's unreal, isn't it?' And I tell her I love it, too, and I tell her again we are so glad we've come to Sleepy Creek. We're as happy as pigs in mud.

Now she is asking me if I heard anything this morning.

'Um, no?'

'Blow job,' she mouths, and she shakes her head and rolls her eyes.

'He's so noisy,' she mouths again, and at the same time you barge through the door and a sort of hiccup yelps between my shoulderblades.

We look at you. You pretend to click your heels, but you're wearing socks, but we get the idea.

'*Guten tag*, playmates.' They laugh at you, and although I don't, I'm happy they're growing fond of you; I'm still busy thinking about what Margo just said. I know what *you'd* say – you'd say she was showing off. But if I know Margo, I'd say she's letting me know the barriers between us have completely dropped.

You're diplomatic, moving straight into a collaborative arrangement with Francis on the bacon and eggs. And I'm watching, remembering that you normally wield the tongs, but not this time, he is the surgeon, after all. You're crashing the cupboards and drawers as you look for plates and things.

'No, no mate, up there. Next one along,' I hear Francis say. Then he has you chopping frantic sprigs of parsley.

What next? This is a question that often preys on my mind, even now. Not yours I think. You're happy for *nothing*, next.

You're saying, 'No you two go. I actually need to make a few business calls this morning.' And I can even sense what Margo is going to say next, before she even says it – yes, I'm on a downhill slide.

'Look. I did it yesterday,' she's saying. 'And I'm happy to just potter around here this morning. I've got three chapters left in my book.'

Francis is looking at me with amusement as I look from you to Margo, to you again, and then back to him. I'd made the mistake of saying I felt like exploring, and now it seems it's just Francis and me.

The truth is, you're the only man I've ever walked with in ten years, and prior to you, I can't actually recall any male with whom I've shared a perambulatory relationship. Walking is very personal, don't you think? Your conversation should move with your limbs, flowing, without thought.

Individually, I actually have nothing to say to Francis. Our relationship is structured on a square. With two struts removed we become a couple of pointless sticks; either that, or two pillars, which must by all rights rise to the occasion, support, carry, uphold a fascinating conversation. Certainly, I'm not capable of that. Not with him, anyway. We will be lopsided. We will limp in awkward silence.

'Make your damn calls when you get back.' I'm suddenly gruff with you. 'This is supposed to be a holiday.' But you're not taking the hint, are you?

'Take her right out to the point,' Margo is instructing Francis, her face flush with such goodwill. 'You'll be blown away,' her voice whooshes as she turns to me. 'It's so beautiful.'

Francis smiles at me, 'You're happy with that?'

Not quite. I tell him I'll be ready in a minute and I run up the staircase. I'm stalling. I'm rubbing blobs of thick sunblock into my cheeks when you come into the bathroom. I shut the door behind you - because of course you don't.

'Thanks a lot.'

'Oh go and enjoy yourself.'

I threaten you with a scornful look, a finger against my lips to shut you up.

We're taking the bright red rental car. Francis is tweaking buttons and dials on the radio, an expression of scientific accuracy set in his jaw. His ear is finally satisfied.

'It's surprising how well you can get Triple J up here,' he says, and I notice his voice has that nasal quality again, the intrigued wonderment of a connoisseur.

'Really?' I say. 'You're a Triple J listener? That's funny, I was thinking more Radio National.' We reverse out of the turning area of the courtyard, the engine screaming like a high-powered drill as we cut the gravel.

'Oh, I don't mind a bit of national program,' he's saying as we set off. 'I stumble on a few interesting interviews, now and then. But Triple J's got its

finger on the pulse, musically—and I'm also partial to a bit of leftist shit-stirring.' He glances the side of my face with his eyes, then tightens the wheel to meet the bend, his palm whacking the gear shift down. Our back chassis flares out. Now he thrusts the gear stick up, and I can hear we're spitting stone out the back like some ludicrous cartoon. I catch him in the corner of my eye. He looks deadpan, so I take it he sees this as normal. This is the way Francis drives. We change down, another bend, and I have to use the muscles in my legs to pinion myself to the seat.

We reach the ridgeline and my heart lifts. When you and I came along here the other day, the sky was leaden, and a mist clouded the shape of the land, but today its mood is changed; it's drenched in clarity, and every colour dazzles as we enter into the diorama; the fields and hills are luminous greens with fuzzy clumps of camphor laurel and caramel velvet cows; closer in there are little dots of yellow buttercups, and clusters of flamboyant palms celebrating their hairdos in the thermal lift. We can see for miles up here, absolutely miles; the subtle variegation of blue sky and deeper blue sea, the streak of sand and diaphanous salt haze, swatches of silver for township. Further away, rising out of the sea is the promontory, appropriately a shade of almost-navy—I can even see the lighthouse, its whiteness, its solitary tip. This is where we are going. You should be here with us.

'Pretty damn fantastic, isn't it?' he announces over the top of the radio. 'I love this place. We're actually driving along the rim of a volcano, right now,' and then he points across my face. 'It sweeps all the way to the rocks out there—Julian Rocks.'

'Yeah? Wow. It really is beautiful.' But I'm uncomfortable agreeing with him. I'm thinking that maybe friends' husbands are meant to be a bit like brothers. You have to treat them with disdain. That's what I'm thinking at this moment, anyway. And the thought helps me to relax.

Ten minutes later, we come scooting down a steep hill to a sandy little beach, and we stop next to a clump of flax with a lurch. I see the sign: 'Cape Byron Lighthouse walking track, 2km'.

'Well let's do it,' he says slapping his thighs. I take a big, wide-eyed breath.

'What's the matter?' he says.

'Nothing,' I say, and then I'm out the door, clasping my hands and stretching them down the length of my back.

'Gotta hat?' he says. 'Sun's a scorcher. Even in winter. Better chuck this on.'

I catch it. It's Margo's, a wide-brimmed straw hat. I put it on my head, but it makes me feel like Miss Daisy. I must look doubtful.

'Don't worry. It looks *really* nice.' He's smirking at me, a soft floppy surfie hat on his head.

'I'll swap you.'

'No bloody way mate,' he says, and he leaps away from me as I make a swipe at his head.

We attack the steep cobbled steps like mountain goats. He's vigorous. So am I. We focus on keeping a good pace. He makes the odd observation, and I second it with a breathless, *yeah*. Like you say, nothing is as bad as I imagine. You're always right, aren't you?

'OK,' he's saying, and I can see his forehead is prickled with sweat. 'We can either keep going, or divert down here, and join back later.'

'Let's divert then,' I say.

So we set off down the narrow stone steps, Francis in front. The steps are deep and we have to watch our feet as we stumble down, the thump we make shuddering in our thighs.

At the bottom we take in the shape of the point: it's long and curled like a thumb resting on the sea, the grass is bright, synthetic green against the foaming white of waves. I can just pick out the railings of a lookout. We walk along the crest, taking in both sides—it's a cusp of yin and yang—on one side the water is sparkling against a gentle rim of sand, on the other side there are vicious crags of black rock and great hurls of sea spray - this is the side to which we are drawn.

We lean our forearms against the railing and watch with great concentration as the sea bursts its guts against the might of the rocks. I push Margo's ridiculous hat from my head and let it hang down my back.

We stand there for quite a while, not talking, then he leans into me, and he says, 'See how there's a washing machine churning at the base. Those are opposing currents and they're being sucked together into this relatively small nook.'

I like the sound of that, and each time the currents smash against the rocks I can feel my heart lift and groan with pleasure. You should have come.

'Come on,' he says, 'I'll race you to the top.'

You know me. I can't help myself. I'm flying along behind him, and as soon as he realises I'm right on his tail, he turns to catch me in the corner of his eye, and I catch the corner of his grin as he makes for another burst of speed. When we get to the top of those damn stairs our lungs are thumping and whistling with thin needles of laughter. We have to hold our knees and let it all spill out.

'Jesus, you put up a mean fight,' he tells me. As you can probably imagine, I'm glowing, smiling and panting, and he's doing the same.

It's kind of embarrassing, so I say, 'Well, what are we waiting for? *Come on.*'

We head back up the main track again, climbing our way to the lighthouse. A little slower now, in tandem. We talk about you and Margo missing all this, how silly you are, we've got *carpe diem*, *joie de vivre* and all that stuff happening in our hearts. It puts a spring in our calves.

At one point, Francis reaches over and puts Margo's hat back on my head. I say nothing, but I feel a little smile weaken my mouth.

Now we can see the lighthouse. We're right out on the point now, cutting across the cliff above the Pacific Ocean, and no longer alone—the path is now a snake of Japanese tourists heading in the opposite direction. Francis is nodding and saying *Ohayo gozaimasu*. I join in, and I feel a little silly because I feel oddly proud, like I'm an ambassador for Australia. Francis mutters little

asides with a Japanese accent, and I blow smiles through my nose, although I have no idea what he is saying. I feel so happy.

As they pass us I consider it's a little weird, you know, the way you see yourself reflected in the faces of other people—their eyes are blinking like camera shutters, and they take an image of us, they think we are a couple, and they shoot it back at us in their smiles—the picture is as tiny as a pinprick on their pupils, but I can see it, I can see it. Francis and Jacqui. Like two pools of water slowly merging.

We squeeze together to let them pass and I feel the back of my hand glance his thigh, and now I feel his palm between my shoulder blades, hesitantly soft. It makes my breath catch in the base of my throat, and then my nerves are hitting a sudden chord.

I remember this feeling. It makes me think of you. I let myself go closer, so I can feel my shoulder nudge into his arm. Now he steps in behind, letting a larger group of Japanese pass by. I can feel him inching behind me like a phantom, and I'm considering how nice it would be if I were to suddenly fall backwards, heavily—how he would suddenly materialise, a human cup all round me.

But now he's in front, he's overtaking me, racing up the final set of steps like a greyhound to the lighthouse. And I scamper up behind, distracted by my new and exciting thoughts.

'Made it.' He turns to smile at me, a look of breathlessness freshening his face. 'Isn't it a beauty?' He's looking up now at the lighthouse, full of mankind's universal admiration for tall construction. I start making noises about the tessellated brick surround, and *look*, how lovely it was that they left a ring of natural sandstone around the top. Yes, I'm gabbling.

'Come and look at the view from this side,' he says. And we lean on the rail looking out across the district and to the hills from where we came. 'See that sharp point, there?' I tilt my head so he can see I am following his finger. 'That's Mount Warning. They say that when Cook came into the bay the needle on his compass went haywire. He couldn't get a reading. They say it's

something to do with Mount Warning. According to local lore, it radiates some sort of magnetic field that draws people into the area. It's meant to be hypnotic.'

'How do you know all this?'

'I know lots of things.' He looks sideways. I do, too, and although we're not quite looking at each other as we lean into the rail, I know we're inhaling from the same well of air. Deliberately. It's as if he's sucking me slowly up his nose and into his head, and his lungs, and something inside my ears starts to warm and melt, making liquid pool beneath my tongue. I have to look away, for I don't want him to see me swallow or hear me gulp. When I look back, he's looking at me, right in my face.

'So, what next?' he whispers, and I see his eyelashes, they are chestnut, and they seem to be sprinkling his cheekbones with tiny freckles as they quiver, and I'm so close I feel my breath might blow the chestnut dust away.

When we get back, we find you and Margo around the back, lying on deckchairs in a spill of sun. You're drowsy and content.

'I hope he's been good company, Margo?' I say, mocking you with a disapproving tone.

'He's been absolutely lovely. We're great mates now, aren't we, Morton? Not that we weren't before,' she says, with a little cackle.

'Yes, Margo is my new best friend. We know everything about each other now.'

I smile drily at you.

Back in the kitchen, Margo puts her hands on my shoulders.

'Morton's a sweetheart.'

She says it with such sincerity I have to say, 'He's OK,' and I clasp her shoulders too, so that we're balanced.

'Was Francis fun?'

'He was *great*.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, really. He's a blast.' And she squeezes my bones.

We decide to go out for dinner that night. They pick an awfully expensive restaurant.

'Let's make it special,' Margo says, and she suggests we girls get dressed up. But I've only got jeans—perhaps I'll just wear them with high heels. But she's doubtful, it would be better if I borrow something of hers.

She wears a red shantung silk dress with a Chinese collar and lots of powder pressed onto the pink of her cheeks and a black blazer and formal black shoes. The little black shift dress is not quite me, she agrees. I'm not tall enough for such an elegant dress, I say—but I can see she's disappointed.

I wear jeans, high heels and a long fake fur coat, and I feel comfortable, and uncomfortable. In the back of the car, I show her the ring on my finger, and she holds up her finger, too. We don't have to say a word.

It's the sort of restaurant you and I would go to for a special occasion, but I'm just loving the spontaneity of such extravagance. We're silent as each plate arrives, looking down our noses at the food, our faces bathing in the sticky aroma of meat jus. And we chew in a circular fashion, round and round, like *Herald* critics. I notice you and Francis make quite a performance of swirling and sniffing the wine before you wash it around your mouths with your tongues. You're both being terribly conceited, and Margo and I smile at each other, amused and strangely proud of you both as though you are children and we two, matriarchs.

Later in bed you slide across the pillow up to my ear.

'Did you notice the way Margo spoke to the waitress?'

'You mean over the water spilling?'

'Not just that. *Everything*. She couldn't speak to her without her lip curling. *Strange girl,*' you say with long vowels. Then you are silent for a moment, and then—'What about jug ears. Did you see him turn scarlet when I asked him to let me finish my sentence?'

'On tax.'

'No. *Iraq*.' You inhale a little cry.

'*Jug ears*? I whisper.

'You haven't noticed?' And then you add, 'I reckon he's got a dirty little temper. She's terrified of him.'

'Jesus. Where do you get this stuff from?'

'I observe.'

I stick my mouth up to your ear: 'I bet they're not lying in bed saying things about us.'

'Oh,' you say, not even bothering to whisper. 'I bet they're saying plenty, m'dear,' and you roll over.

But I'm angry with you, and I'm rolling right behind you, and I'm up on my elbow and in your ear.

'Why can't you just think they're *fabulous*, and *ordinary*? Why do you have to complicate them, and turn them into freaks?'

In the morning you announce you're going on a drive. It sounds very bold. When I ask you if you want me to come, you say of course you do—in fact you *expect* me to. So I decide to wait for you before heading down the stairs. You can break the news to them.

It's agreed that toast is all we need, and a glass of orange juice to replace any vitamin loss from last night's intake of wine. And while I'm doing the toast, thanking God it's nothing as harrowing as my famous rubbery eggs, I hear you tell Margo we thought we might go for a drive. Oh God, I'm glad you said *thought*. I'm not looking yet. I can't bring myself to. But now you're asking them if they'd like to come with us.

'Oh no. You two go. It'll be nice for you to have some time together,' says Margo. It sounds faintly ironic.

When I turn to look at her I can see she's pale with a light flush in the centre of her cheek; her colour goes with her voice, which is pastel. She bruises

easily, and I think you know this as you're saying, rather unctuously, 'You know, you're both *most* welcome to come.'

'Oh, come *on*.' I say. But the atmosphere does not lend itself to jolly persuasion.

We settle for breakfast, like the little family we are not. Jam, Vegemite, butter, teapots and a TV antenna of toast. Very civilised.

You're talking enthusiastically about fishing, and Margo is doing an admirable job of showing you interest, asking you dull questions about the speed of trout, their extreme sensitivity, and how it is they're able to change colour in different circumstances. You don't know the answer to that one. Perhaps it's related to heat, I suggest.

And Francis. Oh, Francis is quietly sipping his tea, his eyes darting over me, occasionally. I have to look the other way – it's almost embarrassing – their newness has rubbed off, already. And yes, I already know what you're going to say to me later, when we're heading off up the road. You're going to say it very gently, because you'll notice I'm looking despondent.

'They're not really my cup of tea, but it doesn't mean we can't still be friends. Perhaps just in small doses, though.' Or something like that. A judgement of sorts. And you'll be right. I know I would have let them envelop us, let them sweep us along in their fast current until we washed up downstream. But it's the novelty Morton – it's almost worth it. Wouldn't it be wonderful if life was just one big long beginning?

We leave the next day, a day early. I look blandly on as you tell them in your pragmatic voice we've decided to break up the journey with a night in a country town. We must be rubbing off on them, for they agree it is sensible, they completely understand.

That night under the low stippled ceiling of our motel in Port Macquarie you kiss me. I'm not sure what moved you to do that, my quietness perhaps, intuitively reclaiming me, for it's been such an awfully long time since we've kissed. It usually happens when our faces get in the way of each other, when our lips graze, and out of respect for something lost we are moved to recall

those early days. Your tongue is so cool though—it doesn't even seem to fit, and we writhe and lash against each other's teeth.

Remember how we used to kiss? There really is nothing quite like the first kiss.

The Fat Man

I coiled my hair around my finger as I waited for him to step out of the car. He'd been chatty on the phone, and when he said he couldn't come till the end of the week, I'd groaned and told him I couldn't possibly wait that long. Let me see what I can do, he'd said with a loud hum. So I dropped the kids off at school and here he was, less than an hour later. I was not surprised. Things had a habit of falling into place, lately.

He'd backed into the drive. That was odd. Most people drove in nose first. I'm not sure what it said about him. Fussy perhaps. But it was a funny old car, its spearmint metallic duco had lost its sparkle, and there was a hokey looking advertisement on the rear window: *Computer repairs – No fix, no charge. 24 hours. Call 0400 482111.* They were not vinyl cut letters but chalky white ones, streaked with transparent brushstrokes. Not the sort of car you normally saw in these parts. I started to chew the inside of my mouth. He was certainly taking his time.

I saw his bare calf swing out first, it was solid and rose out of the concrete like a small trunk. Moments later a broad fist gripped the edge of the car door, then another leg joined the first. The metal body of the car wobbled as though it was soft and springy like a mattress, then he emerged, with great momentum.

He was a tall man, but any advantage in carrying extra weight had completely gone to waste. He was enormous. I frowned as I watched him stick a pen behind his ear. As he walked across the front I saw much of his body mass had slumped around his hips. It swayed like a giant hula-hoop beneath his shirt.

I felt heavy. *A fat man.* I'd never even considered a fat man. I couldn't even recall ever meeting one. Last time I'd seen one so large was at Disneyland. There were dozens of them there. We'd commented on the way their flesh

seemed to cascade like soft-serve. They'd buzzed around the attractions on scooters, weaving aggressively between the crowds— their little heads like bottle tops.

For a moment I felt a pinch of anger, as though I'd been a victim of a minor fraud. I turned on the sink tap and let the cool water run over my hands. As he walked up towards the house I noticed how he swung one sandaled foot out in front of the other making his back rear with each step. And I noticed the way his mouth turned down with the effort of breathing, giving him the look of someone inhaling a distinctly unpleasant smell. I flicked my hands sending sparks of water over the bright steel bench— patted them on the front of my shorts as I stepped out onto the front patio.

'Thank god you're here,' I called, loudly. 'Eugene?'

'Yeah mate. Jacqui?'

'That's right,' I said.

He took a big step over the low hedge up onto the patio, not bothering with the row of steps. Two teak sofas and a coffee table separated us, like a tight obstacle course.

'Yep, mate, made it,' he said, his arms swinging out from his sides, as if to say, *Take me as I am*. I realised my own were folded across my chest. It made me laugh and give a little shrug. He laughed too. Like most fat people, he had a disproportionately small mouth. It pulled tight like a rubber band revealing a tiny row of bottom teeth— teeth well worn from chewing and tearing I thought, cruelly.

'Darling,' I called over my shoulder. '*Eugene's* arrived,' my typically low tone made higher, like a call for help.

I watched as the fat man took a few steps forward, bent his knees and cautiously lowered himself onto the sofa. He seemed to wait for a second, as though listening for the wood to crack, then he sat forward, his feet wide, hands on his knees, elbows turned out like wings so that nothing pressed together.

I was making a comment about the dreadful heat when Morton came up behind me and clasped my shoulders.

'Ah! *Hi yah, Eugene.*' It was a robust welcome, larger and jollier than usual. It seemed to compensate for their difference in size. Morton came out from behind me. He was shorter than the fat man, rudely muscular and compact in comparison, a factor emphasised by lycra cycling pants that hugged his quadriceps. Up top he wore a racing vest, bright orange and blue with the word *Verve* leaping in a garish display of good health across his chest.

'So! You've come to fix our computers, eh?' he said, smacking his palms together and lathering them up. 'Well, we need all the help we can get around here,' he said. 'God, you'll have to excuse me. He sniffed under his armpit. 'I'm sweating like a pig.' He looked up, his eyes round and slapstick.

I smiled nervously at the mention of pigs. 'He's just been on a bike ride,' I explained.

'You're right,' the fat man said, good-naturedly. 'And who said summer was over, eh.'

'Yes. Well we were just saying how shocking it is, weren't we darling?' my voice rising at the end as the sandpapery sound of paws grew louder. 'Oh god. *Watch out!*'

Our knees caved as our barrel chest dog rounded the side of the house and bound through a parting between us. She made a beeline for the fat man, leaping in the air before him, shimmying to get higher.

'Heel, Tallulah. *Heel,*' I cried. 'God. I'm sorry. She's *so* outrageous.'

'She's right mate.' The fat man reached out to pat her. 'I love dogs.' He took her by her head and his big hands moulded her skull like a lump of clay, thumbs working in hypnotic circles around its ears.

'You like me don't you, Tallulah,' he soothed. 'Oooooo, *yearse, Tah-lulah-lulah-lulah.*' He turned his hands for her to sniff. The smell of him seemed to excite her all over again, and in what seemed a surge of compressed emotion she bowed her head and set about cleaning his feet.

They were large feet in leather sandals with toes protruding from the ends—a collection of hairs like fish scales darkened their chunky shafts. We three all watched as Tallulah began with firm lengthy licks that scaled his entire

foot. Then narrowing in, she licked his toenails meticulously, short fast licks before probing into the darkened cleavages of his toes.

'Oh, stop that, Tallulah,' I cried. 'Stop it. You must have something on your *shoes*,' I told him.

'She's right, mate,' he reassured. 'You're my friend, aren't you Tallulah,' he said talking to the top of her industrious head. 'Ah, yes, you're my friend. And you think my toes are tasty, don't you? Oh God, you're *killing* me Tallulah.' He looked up at me. 'It tickles,' he appealed in a giggly voice, but I was too distracted, rubbing the nape of my neck as I watched her tongue.

'Dogs *love* me. Uh-uh—not there matey,' he chuckled, as Tallulah suddenly burrowed her nose in between his legs. 'No, no. Not there.'

Morton sat down on the other bench. 'Tallulah, come here,' he commanded, slapping his knee.

She obeyed immediately, and I watched as my husband's arms stretched around her body, embracing her as though she were a woman.

'You know who your Daddy is, don't you. Oh yes, oh yes, you do, don't you. She likes the bristles,' he explained to the fat man as her bright pink muscle now grazed up his neck like a razor, scaling itself clean.

I watched the tongue approach his lips, saw them roll in—too late. As it slithered across. I heard his splutter of laughter, my own perfectly gay-hearted titter that hid my disgust.

It was Morton who finally had to ask the fat man to come inside. I watched him as he held on to the door jam, lowering his arm like a rope to hook off his sandal.

'You don't have to do that,' I said, thinking guiltily that his feet might be moist on my shiny floorboards.

'She's right mate.'

He followed me across the living room. We'd gone modern in this house. Sterile almost. Large-scale pieces of modern art hung from the walls, mostly abstract. He paused to look at one of them with the backs of his hands on his hips, his feet turned out like a large duck.

I looked with him, as there seemed little else to do as his eyes followed the thick brush strokes; then slowly, I noticed his cheeks beginning to plump into a smile. I realised he'd finally untangled the mass of limbs and upended torsos, heads fitted to groins like a single beast. Morton and I had bought this painting for his last birthday.

'You an artist, Jacqui?'

'Oh no, not me. Not really. I just like art. I love it,' I added – demurely – then felt as though I'd just made a sordid confession. I blushed as he rubbed his finger back and forth over his chin as he smiled at me.

'*Interesting,*' he said, his voice unpeeling wryly. It sent a quiver of nerves around my lips and I had to press my fingers to them and move away, the sound of his heavy feet making sticking sound on the floor as he followed me.

The laptop rested on an old writing desk with intricately turned legs. On the desk was a naked Spartan cast in pewter, her arm drawn back as she prepared to hurl an electric ball of light, breasts arced high, their tips like tiny arrow heads. I picked the lamp up and shifted it onto the floor, *Out of your way,* I said as I motioned for him to sit. I watched as he did so, slowly, the same way he'd sat at the bench, using his knees to lever himself down. The chair was lean and elegant with a high back that followed the gentle 's' of the spine. Expensive. There was a pause as we both waited. No cracking sound. He seemed to smile up at me to acknowledge this and my lips settled into a satisfied line. I was about to offer him a drink but instead I told him I'd leave him to it.

'Just call me if you need me,' I hollered, noticing my American intonation – nonchalant, like nothing was a problem. On my way back across the boards I looked to see if his footprints had created a fog on the polyurethane finish. They hadn't.

In the kitchen I frowned at sticky patches on the bench from breakfast, rubbed at them vigorously. I stuck my head around the corner. Everything appeared as it should. I was surprised his sides were not protruding from the edges of the chair. All I could see were his calves, surprisingly well turned

calves for a fat man – they were neatly angling away from his feet in a ‘v’ rather than sprawled apart.

The shower was running. I pictured Morton’s jaw clenched, his neck fanned as he massaged a thick slurry of soap in with his palms. I could hear the fat man too, softy mumbling to my computer, birds calling to one another outside. He would be gone soon and everything would be just as it was.

‘Hey Jacqui?’

‘Yes!’ I called, glad to be of assistance.

‘What did the paper clip say to the magnet?’

‘Oh. Um. I don’t know.’

‘I find you attractive.’

‘Pardon.’

‘I find you attractive.’

‘Oh. *Hah*. I’ll have to remember that one,’ I called, weakly. And then I stopped rubbing at my bench and stared out the kitchen window as though appealing to an invisible tv audience, my eyes wide in disbelief.

Morton was making coffee when the fat man’s feet padded back into the kitchen.

I could hear them from the laundry. ‘I’m all done mate. Just needed a little bit of a de-frag. Right as rain.’

‘That’s cool Eugene. Good on you. Like a coffee?’

‘Yeah. Why not?’

I sighed, inwardly.

When I returned to the kitchen I saw the fat man balancing on one of our new retro barstools. The purple padded disc had disappeared beneath his backside giving him the appearance of a man skewered by three chrome bars. He was smiling at me, and I smiled back, a little sheepishly, for at that moment I was picturing the thin layer of fabric straining between the seat and his intimate parts. It had just popped into my head, completely uninvited. I couldn’t help it. Then I began wondering what that flesh would look like as though I was the seat and the seat had eyes. I saw a thick flap of flesh

cloistering his member, I felt the weight of it as I imagined lifting it up to look beneath.

‘All done, Jacqui,’ he said.

‘Oh. Good. Terrific.’ I refreshed my smile with a little snort of appreciation for I couldn’t help but like the way he seemed to like using my name.

I watched him accept his coffee from Morton. One of my good café latte cups I noted as I watched his lips curl at the ceramic edge, his thick, filed fingertips guiding the cup’s contents into his mouth. I shivered at the thought of his tongue, pictured it as one of those large sheep’s ones I’d seen in the butcher shop, extra thick with a seam running down its surprisingly long shaft. He sipped, his little finger lifting daintily as he tipped it back. He swallowed and I watched the rings around his neck softly palpitate.

‘Coffee, darling?’ Morton interrupted, his hand heavy on my shoulder.

‘Oh. Ah. I don’t think so. I don’t feel like anything too rich.’ I smiled as Morton’s freshly shaven face leaned in towards me, inhaling the astringent warming on his skin. The fat man was watching so I shared the smile with him too, briefly, before looking at the floor.

We were silent as the noise of the coffee machine bore into the room. Then the fat man spoke. ‘I wasn’t always like this.’

‘Like what?’ I asked cautiously.

‘Fat.’ The word sounded like a slap. Like a big loud fleshy slap.

‘Oh.’ I raised my eyebrows, wondering if my expression should suggest I had no idea what he was talking about, or whether it should be gentle and sympathetic, confirming his condition. But it seemed I didn’t have to worry – he was looking into his coffee cup.

‘I’m on a diet, now. Just started it. It’s not easy, Jacqui,’ he said looking up at me, frankness brightening his blue eyes.

‘I have to drink a litre of pineapple juice. Every morning. You try downing a litre of pineapple juice,’ he said, throwing his voice at Morton, but Morton was busy wiping down his stainless steel coffee machine.

'Pineapple juice is full of sugar,' I frowned.

'That's what I said. But they reckon it's the go.'

'Moderation,' Morton finally slipped in as he wandered over, but the fat man ignored him.

'Lost two kilos,' he said, proudly to me.

'Good on *you*,' Morton said, hitching himself on to a stool.

He looked at Morton. 'What do you do?' he said, ignoring the perfunctory compliment he'd just paid him.

I noticed the way his small eyes narrowed in on him, and I took this opportunity to study the fat man more closely, noting his complexion was not the rosy colour you'd expect. Was he wearing make-up? *My god*. Yes. I was sure of it. Something thick and skin coloured; it had sunk into the large pores in his t-section like spackle, filling some holes, leaving others as dark as pinheads. Then I registered his brown hair was artificially coloured too. It had a violet reflect. It was puffy too—too big from blow-drying. I pictured him standing in the mirror in a poorly lit bathroom, combing his hair, rubbing cream into his rubbery cheeks with those thick white fingers, the home colouring kit on his shelf. He was experimenting with womanly ways as though it was a simple case of application rather than art, like mending something broken with putty and stain from the hardware supplies. And at this very moment he was looking at Morton with that down-turned mouth as though he were smelling him and was faintly contemptuous of the odour.

Then he looked at me. I felt conspicuous. Had to look away. And when returning, seeing his eyes meet mine again, I felt as though my attractiveness was swelling inside him. It made me feel shy, quite vulnerable with loveliness for a moment.

I could hear Morton chuckling, self-deprecatingly in the background. 'I suppose I'm an entrepreneur of sorts these days. Not a very good one, I suspect.'

The fat man gave a nod, glancing at me again.

'Mostly, I buy and sell businesses, now' Morton continued. 'It takes me away overseas a bit.' He lifted his hands like scales and shrugged. 'I really can't complain. Life is good.'

'See you've done a bit a work in the garden,' said the fat man.

'Yes, well that's going to be my topiary garden one day. It's got a long way to go. But we'll get there. We've only just moved.' Morton smoothed his hand down my back.

I smiled at the fat man gently, but this time he didn't smile back.

'That's something I know nothing about. Plants,' he said. 'But I know a vegetable when I see one. That's about it.'

'I'm a bit like that, too,' I agreed with a little laugh.

'Hey!' he said to Morton. 'What do you call two rows of vegetables?' He looked at me and winked and I beamed back.

'Um. Dunno.' Morton said, getting to his feet. 'What do you call two rows of vegetables?'

'A dual cabbage-way,' he replied, firming his jaw.

'Hah-hah. Good one, Eugene,' said Morton, then he looked at me, his arm in a wide gesture. 'The man's not just a computer whiz. He's a *card*.' His voice was teasing, but when I looked quickly at the fat man I saw his lips had pressed and lengthened.

'Now you must really excuse me, Eugene. I would love to stay and talk all day, but I'm afraid I have some business to attend to.' Morton hopped off his stool and lathered his hands. 'Busy, busy, busy.'

'You're right mate,' he said.

It was time for him to go, for him to say, well I'll be on my way too, mate. But he just sat there and we both listened to Morton's trouser legs frisking loudly across the room.

I inhaled a smile, one that opened my diaphragm to full size. I looked around for something to clear away, but Morton had already put his cup in the sink, and the fat man still seemed quite attached to his, his finger wrapped firmly round its waist. I exhaled.

'I'll get going in a minute,' he reassured me.

'You're right,' I heard myself say warmly. 'You have that coffee, Eugene.' He liked that. How easy he was to please.

'Okay. Now here's one for you, Jacqui,' he said lifting his index finger. 'What's in Paris that's tall and wobbly?' He made it sound important, like a test of my general knowledge.

'Tall and wobbly.' I frowned. Shook my head. 'I don't know.'

'Trifle tower, mate.'

I nodded. Felt myself smile lamely. 'Cute, Eugene. Cute.'

He was happy with that, his bottom teeth showed and he lifted his cup in a toast, took another small sip of his coffee.

'Got kids, Jacqui?'

'Three.'

'That's great, Jacqui.' He wanted to know what they were. Ages and names too. And I told him, happily.

'I nearly had a kid once, mate. It died,' he said, baring his teeth on *died*.

I didn't believe him. Who called their child *it*? Then a wretched vision overtook me – that moment of conception, folds of flesh lapping like mud. Why did I do this? I felt my face redden. I bit my lip guiltily as I looked to him, but thankfully he was looking past me out the kitchen window.

'Sandy, me fiancée too, mate. She copped it. Car accident. Week before the wedding, mate. She was pregnant. They reckon it was a boy.'

I put my hand to my chest. 'My god. *Really* Eugene? That's terrible. Terrible.' And then softly I asked, 'How long ago, Eugene?'

'Twenty years, mate.' He hugged his lips, in a stubborn sort of way.

'Twenty years,' I repeated – it was a faint question. Two would have been shocking to me, but twenty? Twenty was something else. I wasn't sure what.

'That's life, mate,' he said in a high voice. 'Learnt to live with it.'

'Oh *Eugene*,' I pleaded. I saw his big white fists loosely clasped on either side of her café latte cup, so close to my own hands. It seemed cruel not to

reach out. But I couldn't. I just couldn't. Instead I slipped my hand away and folded my arms, narrowed and shivered as though I was cold.

'I'm okay mate,' he said. 'I'm okay.'

I nodded, feeling my face drain.

'Had a tow truck after that,' he said. 'You know what?' He looked bright now.

'What?'

'Reckon I've seen more dead bodies than most doctors. Yep. *Fact.*' The word *fact* slapped hard. He paused for me to take this in. Then he hunched closer, as though he was going to tell me a secret, but he'd come too close across the bench, way too close. I had to sit upright to create some distance.

'Jacqui?' he said, his voice so low it was almost a whisper.

'Yes,' I said, tilting slightly forward again.

'I've seen kids *smashed* to bits.'

I frowned.

'True. Just meat, mate. Blood and guts. Did nothing to me.'

I shook my head.

'You wanna know what got me, though, Jacqui? You wanna know? Huh?'

I nodded, vigorously, lifting a hand to my mouth.

'Stuffed toys, mate. Stuffed toys. Used to pick them up off the road. That's what got me. Them *bloody* stuffed toys' – his voice breaking into a little cry. 'Stuffed toys survive everything. Never seen a stuffed toy come a cropper. They take a beating. Used to find 'em on the road and take 'em home. Until they told me I should toss it in. They reckoned it was getting to me. I've got a lotta stuffed toys.'

'Oh, Eugene,' I sighed, for I could see him in a way I'd not seen him before. He'd become smaller, quite tiny in fact. It was as though I was looking at him from the wrong end of a telescope, and there he was, miles and miles away, a little baby enveloped in thick bracelets of fat. An ordinary man, tall,

perhaps even handsome, sporty too judging by his calves, caught up in this strange reversal. He needed nursing.

I saw him watch me as I wiped a loose tear out of my eye.

'I'm right mate,' he chirped. 'Versatile. Switched to computers.' He tapped his head with his finger. 'Got a good mind mate. Not everyone wants a fat man, though. No, no. Don't look like so surprised, Jacqui. It's true. If they were all like you now, well, that would make my job a helluva lot easier. *Fact.*' He leaned closer, looked into my eyes. 'You're real nice, Jacqui.' I could hear his breath whistling in his nose. Smell the sourness of his coffee breath.

'Not really, Eugene,' I said, smiling sadly.

'Yeah, you are. Take it from someone who knows, Jacqui. I see all types. You're kind. You're real kind.' He hugged his lips together again and I had to look down at the floor.

'Hey! Why don't you come and visit me. I'm home most of the time, unless I get called out on a job.' He rummaged in his pocket, passed me a warm soft card. 'No one ever comes, mate. It's gets a bit lonely.'

'I'll come. *Okay,*' I said, nodding as I looked at the dog-eared card. 'I will, I will,' I said softly, like a mantra. And I thought I meant it.

'Gee. I'd really like that, Jacqui.'

'So would I, Eugene. I'd really like that, too.'

I came out onto the patio to wave him off. It seemed a nice warm thing to do. I felt genuinely happy, relieved as though I'd got beyond the world of matter into another one, a gentle world full of feelings and hope. He tooted his horn like a happy man, his arm out the window, hand still fluttering like a flag as he drove out into the street, a thick puff of fume chugging out his exhaust pipe.

'See you soon, Jacqui,' he called.

I nodded and I kept waving until the spearmint green disappeared.

I felt dismal now. Weighed down. I didn't want to go back inside, but I walked up the steps anyway, my arms folded, shoulders hunched around my heart.

I stood in the living room and looked around me. The walls freshly painted New York White looked as brittle as eggshell, and all the things I'd carefully arranged in the room, unsettled and somehow different. I noticed one of the paintings was crooked. There were filmy patches on the floorboards that had attracted hairs and dust. And the light—it was steely and lifeless, and all the colours in the room seemed damp with shadows.

I began by putting the cups into the dishwasher with big breaths. The fat man's cup I picked up with my thumb and forefinger. I examined it thoughtfully, as though I'd never seen one of these cups before.

Next I ran a sink full of warm soapy water. Let my hands sink into it. Let them swish back and forth, fish tailing and rolling. I was stalling, focusing on the liquidity, the fluidity of the movement, marvelling at how even enormously fat people were probably just as weightless as anyone else in water. That was comforting thought. A good thought. But not enough. I pulled the plug and watched the water yawn eerily down the drainpipe. With the last of it gone, a little shiver ran through my shoulders.

In the cupboard beneath the sink, I found the pump action spray and an old cloth—one I could throw out.

I walked across the floor, heading for the computer, my brow solid, compressed like a stack of heavy books.

I stopped myself from spraying the keyboard, just in time. Heard myself mutter some expletive, then turning the nozzle on the cloth I pumped the plastic trigger several times. I rubbed and rubbed until the keys on the board were all chattering with a sort of nervous excitement. A protest of letters and punctuation marks came up on the screen. I looked at these for a moment as though I might discover an intelligible message amongst the gobbledygook, but nothing made sense, so I wiped the screen too with my cloth.

I put the naked Spartan back into position. Stopped to look at it. Stroked my hand down its back and buttock, along the thigh; the pewter felt cool, but somehow molten beneath, as though in its memory.

Next I folded the rag in two and set about the seat of the chair where he'd sat. My arm worked in circles, then back and forth. A wisp of hair in the corner of my eye rose and fell with my heavy breath. I pushed this hair away with the back of my hand, several times, until it felt as though I had a nervous tic. I squared myself. Stood with hands on my hips, then angled my face away from the computer like someone distracted in thought, but there was no thought, no thought at all, just an awful, awful hollowness.

An invitation to dinner

I'm the sort of person

I called Su to tell her I couldn't meet her at the cafe in Kirribilli. I wasn't in the mood, and as far as I knew we'd only made a tentative arrangement to meet. She'd understand.

'Oh, I see,' she said down the line. Su was Chinese, but she was educated by the British, so she could speak with a commanding accent when she wanted to.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'but I've got this appointment in the city that I made ages ago. I'd completely forgotten about it when I spoke to you the other day.'

'All right then. Some other time,' she said, crisply.

'But it wasn't a firm date,' I insisted. 'I said I'd ring you in the morning to confirm.'

'That's all right. You go and do what you have to do.'

'You're shitty,' I teased.

'No I'm not.'

'Yes, you are.'

'Well,' she said. There was a pause while she gathered breath. 'When I make an arrangement with a good friend, I consider it a commitment. I don't let them down. I make time in my diary, and I stick to it. And as a matter of a fact, I'd arranged for Leo to start late today. He was going to look after the kids so that I could meet with you for a full hour.'

I was disturbed to hear that Leo, her husband, had now become involved. It seemed the cup of coffee was gaining unwarranted proportions with him having to take time off work.

I could imagine what Morton would have to say about that. He would say Leo displayed poor judgment and probably that Su was a control freak. I made a mental note to tell him about this tonight. We'd laugh about it.

The fact remained, however, Su instinctively knew I'd not placed much importance on meeting her, and now I felt cornered, like a rat. So I told her that of course I'd be there, within the hour.

I had to insist several times before she'd relent.

I watched her as she walked up the street. After three children she remained petite and pencil shaped, almost pubescent. She was in her hipster jeans as usual with the big oval belt buckle, and her 2.5 inch stack heels. I knew she kept a drawer full of little thin singlets, like a dulux fan deck of pale organic shades, but today she wore a tight white tee – it matched perfectly with her neat set of teeth which I could see reflecting at least a block away. She kept that smile going the whole way as she approached the cafe. A careful sway in her boyish hips. She was gorgeous, and completely aware of it, and we grinned at each other with equal amusement over this fact as she made her slow progression towards me. I should mention her hair. Long and straight, and shiny black, like most Asian hair, but Su had boofed it up around the crown – 'boof' being her expression, which I guess comes from the word, bouffant. Her finishing touch: two pieces from the centre part pulled like partially closed curtains over the corners of her eyes, Yoko Ono style.

We took a seat outside in the sun. The table was a metallic circle of silver that required our large dark glasses to stay on, so we couldn't see each other's eyes.

'What a gorgeous day, huh,' she said with a sighing breath.

'Beautiful,' I replied, looking up at the sky. Behind Su was the harbour bridge. I could see the sandstone pylon and the powerful underbelly of steel; the rising strut work was just beginning its rainbow rise, and from this end it looked like a compressed concertina of power that was about to release and spring across the harbour to the city side. It was an angle that lifted my heart and gave me a miserable yearning to do great things.

I looked back at Su. She'd gone to so much trouble to look nice. She always did. I sat opposite her in my old jeans and buckled sandals, feeling more like a man than a fellow housewife, particularly as I was mumbling

amends for my lack of attentiveness. I made my legs cut a wide vee as I leaned forward, chin in the butt of my hands, elbows splayed – I could hear myself explaining that lately I wasn't feeling myself. I felt disorganised, tired, and most importantly, *forgetful*. I could feel her eyelashes quivering as she leaned in to hear my excuses, and I imagined the sound those lashes would make if they were capable of such a thing – it would be the intense sound of a cicada vibrating its wings.

'I just need a bit of space, Su,' I trailed off. This was the sort of thing Morton said to me. And I imagined Leo probably said it to Su, too, so she'd understand. 'And I'm really, really sorry, but I was convinced we only had a loose arrangement.'

She lowered her chin so that her eyes fixed on me at a more penetrating angle, then she began: 'I'm the sort of person who places the highest value on friendship. And I believe you have to work at friendship, if you want to keep your friends. And I do.'

I knew Su relatively well. She was inclined to make statements that began with, *I'm the sort of person*. They always made me feel uneasy. Probably because I was the sort of person who didn't pick up phones when they rang. I was the sort of person that avoided dinner at people's places, because I never wanted to have to return the favour. This had already proved a problem. I owed Su several invitations, because *she* was the sort of person that loved to cook dinner for her friends, whereas I was happier for them to stay at home and cook their own.

'And I expect,' she continued, 'that as great friends, we should make a commitment to one another, to meet at least once a week, for coffee. Or lunch,' she said, 'at my house. Life is too short.'

At that moment our coffee arrived, a weak latte for Su, and a short black for me. She looked up at the waiter and smiled at him, beautifully – it was like watching a diamond shift to catch the light.

We chatted about the kids, a new Italian restaurant she'd test run the other night, our plans for the school holidays, then I asked her how Leo's business was coming along.

She looked distracted. 'Do you know, my husband won't stop giving money away. We're with bloody Amnesty, Greenpeace and some other fund with a frigging big black panda on the envelope and we can't even afford a new carpet. People just stop him in the street, and bloody Leo can't say no. But I suppose that's the sort of guy he is.' She shrugged.

I gave a nod, waiting to see if she'd ask me if Morton was like that, because he wasn't. Morton's motto was *Charity starts at home*.

Sure enough, she asked. I repeated his motto. I even did it with a touch of gravitas, for Morton's sake.

She nodded and slumped in her seat with defeat. 'I guess I've just got to accept my bloody husband's got a whacking big heart,' and she made a little sound as if she were spitting a lemon pip.

We moved on, talking about other things until Su leaned forward, her hair leaving just a small strip wide enough for her mouth and nose.

'Can I ask you a question?' she said in a low voice. 'Has Morton got life insurance?'

It took me by surprise. 'Dunno. Has Leo?'

'He's insured for a mill,' she said gravely.

Now she leaned even further across the table. 'The girls were talking about it the other day at coffee. They were saying, *Su, you're crazy, it's not enough.*'

I could tell by her tone she'd been offended.

'Jess was saying, *You've got to up Leo, you've got to up Leo. To two mill' at least. One's just not enough in today's money. Not to live here anyway.*' She flexed her brow. 'What do you think?'

'I dunno. It sounds pretty rough though.' I could hear Jesse's South African vowels repeating the refrain, *Up Leo, up Leo*. It sounded quite militant. I imagined Morton's reaction when I would repeat it tonight – his complete

disdain at these bloody Mosman housewives. Thankfully, I didn't consider myself one.

As we readied to leave, I offered to pay.

'No I will,' she said.

'No. It's my treat,' I insisted. Su couldn't bear tight people—I'd managed to slide beneath the radar so far by paying for the odd coffee.

She ought to bloody try earning the dollars,' Morton had said once, and she'd be less likely to throw them around.'

Morton is my Minotaur

...my half man, half beast. When he flexes his muscles his chest doubles in size, and his neck fans out from his jaw – so it's not hard for me to imagine the coarse tufts of dark hair required to complete this mythological creature--especially when he bares his incisors and growls from his belly. I keep his cave, 'my dreary broom sweeping up the pieces of yesterday's broken dreams.' (Hendrix)

I could smell his breath. It was pungent, probably from his stomach churning on acid; Morton suffered from a bad gut. We hadn't found any solutions for it, as yet. I said nothing about his breath as I kissed him.

'You seem so tired,' I soothed.

'I am, I am. And starved.' He turned away, opening the refrigerator to get out a beer. 'What's for dinner?' he asked, biting off the end of a cold sausage as though it was a fat cigar.

As he bit down a second time I swiped the sausage from his mouth, and smiling, I wagged it at him. Morton was watching his weight, but he had absolutely no willpower.

'We're having fish tonight,' I told him. 'Beautiful fillets of blue eyed cod.' I had recently read that three serves of fish a week would increase his life expectancy quite dramatically, by up to thirty-three percent.

'Not fish *again*,' he moaned. 'We had salmon the other night. It made me feel quite queasy.'

'Oh please Morton, you know I'm doing this for you.' I came up behind him and ran my hands up over his chest. 'I've fed the kids, so it's just you and me.' I rested my face against his back, and when he tried to pull away I playfully clasped him by his shoulders, making him falter backwards.

'Let me go,' he said in a half-joking voice.

'What are you in such a hurry for?' I teased.

'I want to take off this stinky suit and my shoes. I need to relax.'

I felt a smile pull across my teeth as I let him go—'Love me?'

'Of course I love you,' he said, as he walked off down the hall.

I heard his footsteps on the floorboards, bypassing our bedroom. He was going all the way down to the rumpus room. Then I heard him terrorise the children with one of the Minotaur's monstrous growls. I heard their shrieks and then his lungs boom with laughter. I turned the gas on and with a sigh I slapped a piece of cod down hard into a pan of cold green oil.

He didn't come back into kitchen until dinner was ready. Morton had projects. He liked to fix things, like Harry's model train or the carriage clock belonging to his Grandma that had lost its ding.

He told me once that in another life he'd like to be a Frenchman living in a little studio above a bakery in Montmartre. Would you wear a black beret? I asked. Absolutely, he said. And what would you do all day, apart from eating croque monsieurs and apple danishes. I'd be a fine craftsman, he said. *Really?* That wouldn't make you much money, I said, sceptically. Wouldn't care, he said, I'd make cellos, the most beautiful cellos in the world. I don't know why, but I was hurt by that—probably because I suspected I wasn't included in this vision. As far as I knew Morton had never even picked up a cello in his life.

We sat down to eat in the kitchen. Morton put on a jazz CD for advanced listeners, which I was not. Then he poured me a glass of the *Mad Fish* chardonnay I had bought to go with the cod; he decided he'd finish off an open bottle of merlot that had been sitting around on top of the fridge.

'That's probably off,' I told him. 'And red won't be nearly as nice with fish.'

'Waste not, want not, m'dear.' He smiled at me, his nose hovering over the top of the glass. 'No potatoes?' he asked.

'No. Remember what I told you. Carbohydrate and protein combinations are very difficult for the body to digest after six pm.'

He gave a nod, as though he remembered, but I was sure he had no recollection.

'Crazy music huh?' he said.

I smiled. Morton loved his jazz. Sometimes I found his music a bit claustrophobic in a hot kitchen. It was a tight space but we'd both agreed we would forgo a dining room. We made a slightly larger kitchen instead and bought a little parquet table that just fitted the space. It only sat six – thankfully, too small for dinner parties.

Morton said, 'This cod is *really* delicious. I take back everything I've ever said about fish.'

I felt my lips curl at the corners like a cat. Then I sighed, 'Only two more dinners together.'

Morton was leaving on Sunday night for Saudi Arabia. He hadn't been since September 11, and my heart seemed to pool with blood every time I thought of him going. I saw him flying over the desert, not in a plane, but on a magic carpet, his face pressed into the wind, smiling so hard his cheeks bulged – and then I saw my fingers clawing at the clouds.

'Are you looking forward to it?'

'You've got to be kidding. I'm so busy at the office. I really shouldn't be going.'

'*Really*. Is there a chance you'll cancel then?'

'Can't,' he said with a mouthful of fish. 'All the meetings, flights – the lot. It's all locked in.'

We busied ourselves eating for a while, trumpets and saxophones squawking and hooting. I felt as though we were breathing and chewing like two large horses, cooped up in a barn full of smaller farm animals.

I told him I'd met Su that day for coffee—'I couldn't get out of it', I added.

As I'd predicted he shook his head over Leo skipping work to care for kids.

'Bloody Su. She's got him wrapped around her little finger, hasn't she?'

'Sure has,' I smiled. 'She wants us over for dinner, but I told her we couldn't because you're going away.'

'Good,' he said.

Then I told him about the life insurance conversation.

'Oh god, poor bloody Leo. He'll kill himself trying to pay the premiums. Two million, Jesus. This is why blokes die young. The pressure.'

'I know,' I agreed, 'I know.'

'Those wives are out there,' he said waving his fork, 'bloody whacking tennis balls and the guys are driving their blood pressures up behind desks.'

'I hope you're not including me in that lot.'

'Of course not, darling,' he said, softly.

'I don't play tennis. I could never.'

'I know. You're lovely,' he said, reaching over to put his hand on top of mine. I turned my palm over and clasped.

'I'm going to miss you so much.'

'Believe me, if I didn't have to, I wouldn't go.' He looked at me over his wine with silvery blue eyes, and beneath the deep red rippled like a fat muscle in its glass balloon.

We paused to drink. Then a little snort of laughter spat out my nose.

'What are you up to?' he asked.

'Well...' I began.

'Well what?'

'Well, I suppose if I was a practical sort of woman, I'd be asking you if *we* had life insurance, considering it is, after all, the Middle East you're travelling to.' I could feel my foot madly swinging beneath the table.

'Ah funny you should say that,' he said, chewing. 'I was only thinking the other day I've let it lapse.'

'Oh, so we *did* have it,' I was quiet for a moment. 'How much for?'

'Five hundred,' he replied, matter-of-a-fact.

I nodded, quietly contemplating the food remaining on my plate. Then I took a breath. 'There's something about that place that makes me think of evil sultans and genies. I see you being sucked into a flask,' I said, conveying this process with my hands, 'And then I see a man with a balaclava beard sticking a stopper on top of the bottle and sealing you in for good.'

'You're *funny*.'

I shifted my knife and fork so they lay straight on my plate. 'Do you think that maybe you should be renewing your life insurance before you go.'

'Can't. No time,' he said, throwing back a mouthful of wine. 'I'll do it when I get back.'

'But what if something *did* happen?'

'Nothing's going to happen.'

I took another breath. 'I think to say nothing is going to happen is tantamount to an outright gamble.' It sounded like something Tony Jones from *Lateline* would say on the Middle Eastern crisis.

'Jesus. Listen to you,' said Morton.

I cowered. 'You can't blame me.'

'Tomorrow's Saturday, okay. It's just not possible to get bloody life insurance on a Saturday.'

'Five hundred thousand,' I murmured at my plate.

'Yeah, five hundred thousand.'

We got up to clear the table. 'I mean, you can see how I feel, can't you?' I added.

He whacked the old grains out of the coffee filter several times, so hard the dregs shot across the bench and onto the floor. 'Of course I can see how you feel. I can see I shouldn't have let it lapse. I'm an idiot. I'm accepting I'm an idiot. But there's nothing I can do about it.'

'You're not an idiot Morton. Never say you're an idiot. My husband is not an idiot.'

That night, we fistled the sheets under our chins, creating a cool channel of air between our backs. But I woke up cold during the night. I slid over to his side of the bed. I almost felt sly as I did it. I flung my arm over him, flung it as though it had been thrown from a great distance, and it had just so happened to land across him. I felt him nestle his back into the crook of my body, and I felt my heart sigh with gratitude.

Later, he rolled over again, and sometime after that, I'm not sure how long, he gave a start, and lashing out at some unknown enemy, he punched my shoulder and kicked his toe-nail into my shin.

'Jesus Morton. *Stop it.*'

He gave a couple of soft grunts and went back to sleep. I was used to Morton attacking me in the middle of the night. I'd talked to him about it. I guess we all have a catastrophe we live in fear of. Mine was walking off the edge of a cliff. Morton's was being buried alive – my guess was he was breaking the lid off his box.

He didn't tell me what he was doing the next morning. But as our family congregated around the table, I could see his big fingers, dusty with gingery hair, scampering through the telephone book.

'What are you doing?'

'I'm going to call this life insurance agent. I remembered where he lives.' Morton sounded serious – probably because he hated disturbing people with business calls in the weekend.

I heard him say hullo, and saw him smile unnaturally into the receiver as though the person on the other end could see him.

'What's wrong?' I asked when he got off the phone.

He looked up at me. 'He's not an insurance salesman anymore.' There was a pause, and then he said, 'He's not got long to live. He's got the big C.'

'Oh, that's terrible. That *poor* man.'

'He's only forty-nine.' Morton's mouth hung open as though the altitude had changed and he was breathing thin, cold air.

'See, what happens,' he finally said.

'What do you mean?'

'Well, the poor bloke has worked his butt off, hasn't he? And for what? He'll be dead soon.'

'It's just bad luck.'

'Is it?' he asked.

'Yes, it is. At least he'll have every insurance policy under the sun.'

Morton looked at me. 'It sort of proves my point, doesn't it. *What!* Well it's true. Isn't it?'

Morton laughed at my attempt to keep a blank face, and then I joined in – laughing with relief, I suppose. Shedding the burden of cancer along with the previous evening's tension.

'You know what, I don't care about you getting insurance before you go. I'm just glad you tried.' I went over to him, and put my arms around him and squeezed him so tight he pretended to yelp in pain. 'I love you. I love you so much.'

Aren't you interested in the world, Morton?

Su called me later in the week. Her sentences were sagging at the ends.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'Oh, we looked at cars yesterday.'

'*And?*' I was not that interested in hearing about cars.

'Leo wants a top of the range Toyota, and I want the bottom of the range Volvo.' She sounded fed up and I instantly pictured her entire Sunday evening, she and Leo, relentlessly deliberating on their worn-out sofa.

'So?' I said.

'Well, Leo says we can't afford the Volvo.'

'Well, there you go. Your problem is solved.'

'It's only ten thousand more.'

'You can't have it, Su. You're not being fair to Leo.'

'I know. It's just that, oh God, I don't know. We sat in the Toyota show room in white bucket seats with this pushy salesman who kept saying, *This deal's only on for today*. It was awful. And then you go into the Volvo sales room, and it's so nice...you know what I mean. I know it's really, really bad, and I know I shouldn't be like this, but I can't help it. I just *can't* drive a Toyota.'

'Jesus, Su.'

She started to laugh.

I was unavailable for coffee that week. After dealing with my disgust, I had to consider, quietly, whether I could give up my own comfortable car without a second thought. Was Su just saying the things I just couldn't admit to myself?

Su left messages on my answer machine. Petulant ones:

'Where are you?'

'Where the *hell* are you?'

'Don't you love me anymore?'

I ignored her while Morton was away, reading the newspaper from front to back each day about the death of the environment, refugees, increases in home spending, fat kids, murder, the **BIS** Shrapnel predictions on property movements on the North Shore. I caught the hourly Radio National updates with Paul Rivette. I caught *The 7.30 Report* with Kerry O'Brien, *SBS World News* with Sandra Nassan Arahyatt, *Lateline* with Tony Jones, as well as *Foreign Correspondent* and *Four Corners*. By the time Morton got back, I felt as though I were capable of running the country.

'Morton, guess what the Tamil Tigers were up to in Sri Lanka, today? Do you know that iPods create early sexual activity in children? Jesus Morton, you'll never guess what Tony Blair said to George Bush at the G10 summit. But it's fascinating. What's *wrong* with you? Aren't you interested in the world? For godsake Morton, get your head out from under your desk—there's a whole

world out there. People are killing each other right this minute, you realise, as you chew eye fillet.'

'I look after my lot,' he said.

'And what do I do?'

'You look after me and the kids.'

I was maddened by this narrow description.

I'm not that sort of person

Su called me. 'I'm inviting you and Morton to dinner on Friday night. Just *cas*' okay.'

'Well thank you,' I said, staring into the whorl I had stirred in my teacup.

'You're not doing anything are you?'

'Well no, but, I owe you several dinners, Su,' I laughed.

'That's okay. I don't care, I really don't mind,' she said. 'You know me—I'm the sort of person who loves to cook, especially for my dear friends, one of which is *you*, whether you like it or not.' Now I could hear her smiling broadly into the phone.

I felt mean and small.

'Well, are you coming?'

'I'll just have to check with Morton, okay.'

Su and Leo were younger than us. They lived on the outskirts in a little street off one of the main arterial routes. I guess you could say they were doing it tough; their semi-detached house was in dire need of renovation. Su met us at the door in one of her little pale organic tees, her face tan, teeth white as coconut, hair shining like frayed silk. She was giddy to see us, and her kids bounced up and down around her like jumping beans. They were hyperactive, compared to ours who were more than capable of standing with their arms hemmed to their sides. Morton and I wore fixed grins.

Su explained Leo was held up at work, *as usual* she said, rolling her eyes. She led us up the narrow stair, sideways in her high heels, leaving all the

children to a tv show on incredibly high volume. There were three flights and we sounded like a small herd of goats rapidly escaping to higher ground.

I leaned against the bench in Su's tiny kitchen, no bigger than a small garden shed, talking as she prepared food for the children. Morton paced about next door in the dining area. We could hear the steel plates on his shoes clacking on the boards.

'What's he doing?' Su asked.

'Unwinding,' I smiled.

She looked at me.

'You know. Big day at the office.'

'Look what I have to do to get a bit of space in this place,' she said, pulling out the utensil drawer and resting her chopping board across the knives and forks. 'It's ridiculous isn't it? Tell me it's ridiculous.'

I couldn't. What seemed ridiculous was that Su had had about two meters of bench space taken up by expensive French and Italian appliances and cookware. Both she and Leo had a thing about quality and design. *What's the point in buying an inferior product*, was their excuse. Su stood at the drawer chopping Chinese sausage – the utensils madly chattering beneath the board.

I called out to Morton. 'Darling, why don't you pour some wine.'

He came into the kitchen, rubbing his hands together efficiently. 'Right girls. Wine it is. Now Su, where would I find some glasses?'

'Just open this,' I said, handing him a bottle.

Su laughed. 'Men are bloody hopeless, aren't they?'

'Speak for yourself Su. I reckon you're bloody hopeless,' Morton said, kicking her with the side of his foot.

'Oy. Watch it you.' Now he nudged her softly with his shoulder.

'Hey, I've got a knife you know.'

'Yes. Never trust a Chinese woman with a knife.'

'Who said that?' Su said.

'Confucius.'

'Bullshit.'

I grinned, happy Morton was in a playful mood. I took some wine glasses down from the top cupboard. Whoever had washed these glasses had not used hot water. Su saw me wiping them out.

‘They’ve got crap in them, Su. Dust or grease or something. Sorry.’

‘Oh thanks a lot. Not everyone can fit a dishwasher into their kitchen you know – this is the machine – you’re looking at it. I mean look at this place would you.’ She started to laugh. ‘Can you believe we live like this?’

‘You’ll renovate soon,’ I said, with little confidence.

‘Savings. It’s all about savings,’ Morton said.

‘Savings, savings, wood shavings, that’s what I reckon.’ Su spat one of her lemon pips and picked up three bunches of bok choy.

‘Can I help?’ I asked.

She got me to wash the bok choy. When I had finished I put the washing rack on the floor to make room for a board and I chopped the leaves the way Su asked me to. I was glad for something simple to do. There was a sort of goodness about such bright green leaves.

Meanwhile, Morton talked to Su about Leo’s business.

‘He’s working twelve hour days,’ Su complained. ‘I never see him.’

Morton sounded priestly. ‘It’s all the little things you have to do away with. You have three kids relying on you guys – their needs are not cheap. We’ve been there, and I’ve gotta say there was no extravagance, Su.’

‘I know, I know, you’re right,’ she agitated. I kept my head down chopping bok choy.

‘I mean you probably think of me as a boring old fart, but I have to manage everything. I’ve gotta keep it all under control.’

‘Morton,’ she said interrupting. ‘Would you do me a favour and call the kids up here. This is all ready, now.’

We could hear him downstairs clapping his hands together. ‘Right this minute, right this minute,’ he was saying.

Su and I laughed. ‘Ty’ll be going, what the fuh,’ Su said, impersonating her four-year old son.

Morton came back into the kitchen. He was shaking his head. 'He's a little bugger isn't he?'

'Who? Ty?'

'He completely ignored me.'

'Oh, he's got a mind of his own that one,' laughed Su.

Morton raised his brow as she left the room. 'No discipline,' he mouthed. 'Like his mother.'

We were still standing in the kitchen when Su's husband, Leo, arrived. We were on our second glass of wine. Leo was a tall northern Englishman. He looked a bit like a Beatle with his long brown hair. He gave a small smile as though shy to see us. He made to kiss my cheek, and Morton gave him a whack on the back that sent him slightly forward. We were quite jolly by this stage, raising our voices over the sizzle in the wok. In fact, we were so at ease in comparison to Leo, it seemed like it was our kitchen, not his. We shifted to make room for him as he went about getting himself a drink. 'Are you guys right?' he asked, nodding at our glasses.

'Yeah, we're right. We've been helping ourselves for the last few hours.' Morton said. 'Hope you don't mind, old chap.'

Morton, was of course, joking. We'd brought wine. Decent bottles according to Morton. I'd also bought a large lemon tart from the French patisserie and a couple of fancy cheeses from the deli. I was determined to appear generous.

Su was frying duck pieces in a thick brown sauce.

Leo kissed her and stood back to join us in a small semi circle around Su.

'Look at us, Su. You're the star attraction.'

Su put a hand on her hip and wagged her spoon. 'I should have a TV show really, shouldn't I?'

'You should. You'd be *perfect*.'

'So how's business?' Morton asked Leo.

'What are we having?' I whispered to Su.

She described three different dishes. Noodles. A curry. A sambal.

'You're kidding,' I said. 'You've gone overboard. You must have spent a small fortune.'

'Oh you know me. I'm just a generous sort of girl,' she winked.

I helped clear the children's plates, anything to appear helpful, and then we sat down for the first dish. Leo sat at one end and Su at the other. The food was great. Morton was ooing and ahing so much it made Su grin with pleasure and Leo crinkle his brow.

On the wall opposite me were a series of professional family shots. Six in total. They looked like they had been taken on location in a Moroccan villa. Stylistic, black and white photos, depicting the family in various states of repose on an ornate carved bench—no one smiling. I tried to imagine Morton in one of those shots. He'd be pulling stupid faces.

'Why don't we do some family shots like that, Morton,' I said pointing to the wall. 'We don't have anything like that.'

'Well that's because I've got a rough head, darling. Now if I looked like Leo here, well I'd half consider it.'

Leo lifted his chin, not sure if he was being teased.

'I think you could look very distinguished in a formal shoot,' said Su.

And I agreed with Su, smirking at Morton as he wriggled his shoulders and combed his hair back with his fingers.

Then Leo spoke. 'Actually, I think what Morton is trying to say is he doesn't really have the confidence to take himself that seriously.'

'Oooo hooo,' Su cat-called.

Morton pretended to be a little boy with a long face, while Leo shook his head.

'My poor baby,' I said to Morton.

'Thank you, darling,' he said in a little voice. 'Leo's not being very nice to me.'

'Well, what can I say,' Leo said. 'The man proves my point with his childish behaviour. He'll grow in confidence, with time.' We all laughed, and Leo allowed himself a small smile.

During the second course, Morton told Su and Leo stories from Saudi Arabia. They seemed really interested and I was able to help with little bits he'd forgotten—little dashes of colour.

He had been writing up an agreement for an engineering company who were building a light-rail to Mecca. Leo listened carefully to the design difficulties they faced. He was an intelligent man, and he cross-examined Morton in a way that made me think he wanted Morton to remember this was the case. Leo was in advertising, and I imagined he spent all his time assembling information about projects he would never have any direct involvement in. I understood his need to pin Morton down. His desire to show he was no fool.

Su did not talk much at all through the evening. The men's intensity did not allow for secondary conversation—Morton had stopped being funny, responding to Leo's determination to be serious. Leo wasn't always like this—perhaps he'd had a bad day, I thought. Su and I occasionally made a stab, in our lighter pitch, to include ourselves in the conversation. They were talking business now, the property market—a general discussion displaying their theoretical knowledge as opposed to discussing their personal circumstances—but there were currents beneath the swell. I wasn't enjoying myself.

At one point Su left for the kitchen. Then Morton got up to go to the bathroom. I suppose Leo had had quite a bit to drink by now. I'd noticed him becoming a bit more illustrious with his hands, quicker with his repartee. In the couple of years I'd known Su and Leo, I'd never had any time alone with him. All our conversations seemed to be affected by the presence of Su, and therefore made light and playful—something neither Leo nor I probably were. We were quiet people. Thinkers.

I breathed in and smiled at him. 'God I'm so full. I think I'm going to burst.' It was a Su sort of comment and he seemed to disregard it, sipping from his wine with a raised brow.

'She's a fantastic cook, isn't she?'

'Certainly is,' he said. He was making a diamond with his fingers around the base of his wine glass, staring into its bowl. I felt slightly panicked.

'It's very good of you to have us over. I was saying to Su, it's really our turn, though. But she was *insistent*. We'll get you guys over in the next few weeks—I feel quite bad about it. We're pretty hopeless, I know.'

He looked up at me. 'Oh, I don't think you'd want people sitting on your *nice* furniture, would you?' He made a feather duster of his fingers, and issued several neat sharp flicks. At that moment Su walked in, my lemon tart held up high.

'Now would you take a look at this, guys. This looks *de-lish-ous*.' Su was so busy turning on a dazzling smile, she did not read the mood. But then again, Leo's expression revealed nothing. Perhaps mine didn't either. I smiled at Su, and Morton returned and we all carried on as though nothing had been said. It was so easy, so empty—except of course we were filled with food.

I told Morton what happened in the car. 'He kissed me goodnight. Like Judas.'

'He's just an angry man, darling.'

'I'm not that sort of person. I'm *not* that sort of person.'

Morton put his hand on my thigh. 'Of course you're not that sort of person.'

'I hate all this. These dinners—it's all so false.'

He didn't reply.

'I'm not precious or small-minded. I like things tidy. But so do you.'

'You have a sense of order, darling.'

'I don't like kids screaming and jumping on sofas or running around the house with food and dirty fingers. But who does?'

'They just don't care. They're dreamers, darling.'

'Why does she do it? Why does she make us come?'

'It's about getting what she wants.'

'*Is it?*' I looked out the window. We were just passing the car dealership, its windows lightly lit—just enough to create a perfect gleam along

the body of a red Porsche. I thought of the Volvo that Su wanted. How special she'd feel driving it. Sexy. Rich. I heard her laughing hopelessly at her flaws. I thought of all her friends, the sixty or so people who turned up for her thirty-eighth birthday, with unusual gifts as opposed to chocolates and soap. These gifts had been displayed on the cluttered ledges and sideboards in her home for the last six months; the candelabra, and the cake stand she admitted to being quite ugly, enjoying equal status alongside the tasteful designer things—in fact the ugly things were more special for being her dear friends' unfortunate taste rather than her own. These gifts represented people who loved her, needed her. Since I'd met Morton I'd stopped making friends; and then there were the ones I'd let drift away.

I thought of Leo's three charities, the one with the panda envelope he filled each month; and there was Morton refusing to sponsor a World Vision child for forty dollars, saying, *don't sign me up for anything. I've got more commitment than I can handle.* I thought of the sofa Morton and I had so carefully chosen, its pattern of purple bouquets reminding me of Leo's feather duster fingers.

'Or is it about generosity of spirit, Morton?' I asked. He didn't answer. 'Morton? Would you look at me a minute?'

'I'm trying to drive.'

'Just for one second. Please.'

He turned, his face cooled by the flashboard's green glow, shadows covering his eyes like swimmer's goggles.

I felt my own face become ghostly, and sad, as I looked at him. 'Are we becoming *mean* people?' I asked, as though he could possibly know all the answers.

He frowned and turned back to face the road.

I thought he was not going to answer, but then he cleared his throat, and said, 'Leo's closing down his company.'

'What?'

'He's winding up his company so he won't have to pay his creditors. He won't have to pay his tax either – hasn't done so for years.'

'He's bankrupt?'

'No. He'll just start up a new company. He's just going to walk away from all those people he owes money, people with their own families to feed. Then he'll start the whole thing rolling again. But my bet is he'll be in the same boat in five years time. They're frittering other peoples' money away. You realise that don't you?' He looked across at me, and I nodded.

'You might think me hard, but I think they are. I'm the one who lies awake at night worrying about how to pay the bills. So they're not generous, darling. They're weak. They rely on everyone else to make them feel good about themselves. At least she does.' Then he gave a little laugh. 'She married a slow horse but that's not going to stop her whipping him all the way to the finishing line.'

I said nothing. There was too much to think about. Morton seemed so sure of what he was saying. And I got the feeling he was glad he was so sure, as though somehow being right was very important – or was it just me that was feeling that? I couldn't tell any more.

We drove through the streets, black rooftops threaded together by electricity lines all the way along, thick clumps of encroaching tree shadow. I felt as though we were getting smaller and smaller, and the suburbs we drove through were pulling up over us like a soft black sock, one that we would never find our way out of.

Bon Voyage

They'd moved. They were much closer.

On Sunday morning we left our flat and followed the trail of traffic to Beecroft, our stomachs empty. Within half an hour we were on the veranda next to the pool, sipping sparkling white. The air seemed cleaner over here, more lucid; in my memory I find it hard to separate the senses, the taste of wine from the strong scent of the gardenias swelling around the edges of the pool—both seemed to mix with the light making it as viscous as a clear glaze. Occasionally we all looked up to see a distant jet make a white scratch across the bright blue sky. These were the days before the baby was born, the days before we all started to pretend that nothing had changed.

We ate moussaka for lunch, inside, the room cool and dark like a cellar made our voices echo. Afterwards, we moved to the softness of the yellow room to drink our coffee, Morton on the sofa, Harvey and Marian facing us in their squat club chairs. There was always something girlish in the way Marian sat, with her knees pressed together in what she called 'slacks', her court shoes wide apart so that her calves formed a triangle. Harvey clasped his hands and made a triangle too, with his index fingers, resting his chin on the apex. It meant he was thinking.

'Mmmm. Isn't this nice,' Harvey sighed, smiling at me, and when I smiled back we exhaled through our noses. A smile laced across Marian's lips—I don't really know what amused us, but we three often did this back then. Morton didn't notice, of course, in his own world. I watched him groan his arms above his head making a sound like an elephant, before letting them loop expansively across the back of the sofa.

'So. Tell me,' Harvey began. 'How's the house hunting going?'

'We're getting there.' Morton's tone was reflective of the limited choices available to first time buyers. I heard his fingers drumming the upholstery next to my ear.

'Have you considered looking for a house over here?'

Morton shook his head.

'You could be so much closer.'

I smiled at Morton's profile. The Hills District was where he was born, where Marian grew up and where Harvey's parents finally settled.

'We want to be in the centre of things,' Morton frowned. 'While we're young.'

'I think you'll find lots of young families are moving here,' said Marian. 'It's a very go-ahead area.'

I could see Morton had one ear on and one ear off. He was like this a lot these days. But I listened, marvelling at their interest in us. I used to complain about it, call it interference, but not any more. I'd come to rely on them. Especially since I'd become pregnant. I liked to pop over midweek for lunch, usually stopping on the way to pick up caramel tarts or fudge. Both Harvey and Marian loved caramel. They always complained it was bad for them, but they could never help themselves. I got a lot of amusement from watching them lose their self-control.

Morton said I was very good to make these visits. He said he appreciated my effort. *Effort?*

I'd say, 'I only go because I want to go. I'm not trying to ingratiate myself with you, or anyone else. I'm not like that.'

'I know – and aren't you *lovely* for it,' he'd say, teasing. The fact was, his parents and I were mates. Sometimes I even wondered if I was even closer to them than he was. It didn't seem to matter to them where I'd come from. We lived in the present. All that seemed to matter to them was the future. Our future.

Sometimes, however, I had an overwhelming urge to tell them about my past. My family. The cousin who drowned her two children, and who later

threw herself off a bridge before a high speed train. The uncle who slit his throat. Another who jumped off the CBA building – the tallest in town at the time.

I'd told Morton. I had to, for it would have been immoral not to.

I'd expected him to be shocked, sickened like I was, but he said, 'They're nothing to do with you.'

'But they *are*.' I'd almost felt offended. 'They're where I come from. I'd grown up with them dropping off like flies each year and in some ways I felt we all fitted together.' But he'd disagreed.

So far I'd resisted the temptation to tell Harvey and Marian. I worried it might sound like a confession.

*

The house was sound, Morton told me. And it's this word – *sound* – that resonated like a spell. It went with stable.

My nose pinched with the dust, the cool earthen air of old mortar. The walls or perhaps the very light itself, sepia. Paint had been applied so many times it curved over the edges of the windowsills like glossy icing. I found the dimensions of old space comforting. A lounge room and perhaps what was once a small dining area were now joined by what Morton called an arch, despite it being square. Another arch led to a sunroom with a quaint box seat window overlooking a bright square of green lawn. In the centre of the lounge room stood two upholstered chairs. But for these, there was nothing else in the room, just a naked bulb dangling from a cord that had furred with dust – it hung above the chairs like a deflated party balloon.

'Do the chairs come with the house?'

'I can ask for you,' said the agent.

One was tree trunk brown, its high winged back like a powerful torso, its legs, short and bulbous, were turned from dark wood. The other was leaf green, as though the decorator had been working on the botanical principles of

colour; its legs were comparatively fine, like a woman's, its shape contained, in fact it was rather like a little open box, I thought. I saw a chicken hutch. A squat hen wriggling her soft warm underbelly into place as she prepared to lay her egg. Later, we'd call this one Grandma, the other, Grandpa, in honour of the elderly couple that died in the house.

To me, the chairs represented the fundamental principles of a fruitful marriage. One man and one woman. Although funnily, that afternoon, it wasn't us I saw sitting in those chairs, but Harvey and Marian, relaxing after a Sunday lunch at *our* house as opposed to theirs, Morton and I stretched out on the floor before them like two hounds, a fire in the hearth warming our backs.

*

'No one knows better than me what you're going through. I know *exactly* how you feel,' said Harvey.

We were sitting in the yellow room after lunch on Marian's newly covered club lounge – bronze and gold, the slightest shimmer of metallic thread shot through what she called a regency stripe. Harvey was talking to Morton about the business and we women listened, relaxing as we sipped the last of our wine from lunch.

'The anxiety of running your own business. The constant worry. *God*, son. I feel it in here.' He groaned and put a fist to his belly. 'I can feel it churning in my gut like it was yesterday,' he said, twisting his wrist like a knife.

His hand returned to the arm of the club chair, with soft thud. Looking at me, he said, 'He's just like me. Morton and I are the same.'

I nodded and turned to look at Morton. The length of his finger was resting along the shelf of his lip, contemplative. I turned to Marian. She gave me a worried smile, commas appearing at the corners of her lips. It's resignation I thought, for there was nothing we women could do. *Nothing*. I took a breath and lengthened my lips.

'You women can't understand what it's like,' Harvey said as though reading my thoughts, and I felt the nerves around my mouth flickering with

impulses. 'The pressure is e-nor-mous. I always protected you from it, Mother. And I don't doubt Morton will do the same for you, Jacqui. We don't want to drag you *in*-to it. You girls are our *Eden*. Our sanctuary.'

I saw Marian lift her chin slightly, hug her lips together.

'Jesus, my bloody neck's killing me.' This was Morton, tipping his head forward to stretch.

'Bloody thing,' said Harvey, grimacing, as if he could feel that pain too. 'It's from hanging your head over your desk all day, son. Why don't you look into one of those incline desks. I'm quite sure it'd make the world of difference.'

I lifted my hand from Morton's thigh and moved in it behind his head, feeding my fingertips into his hair. Then I worked hard into his small movements, just the way he liked it. His eyes lowered and he got that look of strained pleasure, sucking the air between his teeth. He made little murmurs of appreciation and I glanced a smile at Marian and Harvey. Pleasure lulled on their faces as though their own necks were being touched, and for a moment the room seemed so full and potent, like a droplet fattening with its own weight, stretching and dipping towards the floor.

*

After we moved into our house I started searching for fabrics for Grandpa and Grandma. We couldn't afford to cover them straight away, but while I was waiting for the baby to be born it was a pleasant way to pass the day. I felt so transitory, so full of anticipation—it was like being caught in a little pocket of air.

I'd never looked for upholstery fabric before and I was discovering just how serendipitous the experience could be. The places I visited in the east were not done justice with the word, *shop*, they were more what someone might call a *salon*. And in keeping with the East, their opulent interiors conjured images of vivid spices, silk and gold souks, fabrics swooning from the ceiling like boat sails.

Grandpa and Grandma were more rural, too quirky. Eventually I found just the right place. The sales assistant told me the fabrics were English *linens*, a word I'd only ever associated with tablecloths and Marian's pants suits. These linens were thicker though, and seemed to range from a combination of neat little patterns such as checks, stripes and sprigs to larger illustrious ones laden with bunches of grapes, apple trees, bouquets trailing ribbons, lemons and oranges with their stalks still attached. *What's that one?* I asked. *Plumbago. Plumbago?* What a word. I *loved* that word.

*

Harvey, Marian and I always talked on the phone during the week.

Once Marian and I had had our little chat, I'd say, 'And how's Harvey?'

'Well, he's standing right here next to me. He can tell you *himself*,' she'd say with a laugh. This was how it was.

'So. How *is* he?' Harvey's tone was humorously dim.

'He's fine.'

'Is he treating you well?'

'Of *course*.'

'Mmmmm. Well I'll have something to say about it if he's not. Just you send him to me, Jacqui, and I'll sort him out.'

I giggled, because I knew he'd like that.

'So how's *Reichmann*?' As usual, he accented the '*Reich*'. .

The fact was Morton was never good. It was the house, the business. But more than anything it was Reichmann. Reichmann did no work. He bought and sold shares to make up for his lack of contribution, and Morton said, it was fine by him, so long as the money was coming in.

'He's okay,' I said, sighing slightly.

'Mmmmm,' Harvey sounded.

'I think he's spending a bit too much time at the psychiatrist, though.'

'Psy-*chia*-trist?' Harvey cried.

'Yes. Psychiatrist,' I repeated, my face flushing.

'Cripes, isn't that just dandy. I warned him, didn't I? Did you hear that Marian,' he hollered. 'Reichmann's seeing a psychiatrist now.'

I waited for her response—a muffled *oh*.

'What's more,' I added, gingerly, 'He's going in *work* hours.' I felt a strange sense of lightness expanding in my head, something like innocence spreading and pushing my eyes apart. I was acting in Morton's best interests, I told myself. So was Harvey. Morton needed help. He needed Harvey to set him straight, to bring him back into line, much like a father would with a teenager experimenting with the wrong friends. He was fifteen years too late for this sort of thing—he'd missed his chance.

I remembered the day Morton came home from having lunch with Reichmann. Their first lunch. It was like a date. I remembered the way he described Reichmann's trench coat to me, in such detail; its mustard colour, its wide lapels; he talked about the way Reichmann wrapped it around his body and knotted the belt—like an SS officer he thought, despite Reichmann's Jewish-ness.

'At lunch he'd kept the coat on,' he said, 'Flung it open so that it trailed over his seat.'

He even commented on the *way* he sat, not facing Morton, as you'd expect, but facing out into the room like a man with much longer limbs, his seat pushed back against the wall, his legs crossed. Morton said he'd sat the same way.

'What are you going on about?' I'd frowned.

'I don't know. It just felt different, I guess. He wears his hair longer too—like European men.' Then he rubbed his hand roughly over his head.

'Not like my short back and sides.'

I frowned again. *European men*.

'I'm just saying he's *interesting*. That's all,' he said, defensively. 'Clever. He talks about not working *hard*, but working *smart*. I actually think he sees the world in an entirely different way to me. Does that sound weird?'

'No darling, it doesn't,' I said doubtfully. 'But like...in what way?'

Harvey and Marian were very curious. They invited Reichmann over to lunch.

I could tell Harvey didn't like him, straight away. He hitched his lip whenever Reichmann spoke, exposing his teeth as though he was hard of hearing. Marian had been too polite, her pronunciation of words too clear. I saw her watching the way Reichmann searched through his food, using the prongs of his fork like a leaf rake.

'And how do you like your new flat?' Marian had asked him.

'It suits me very well, thank you. In fact I've never been better.' Then Reichmann had grinned as though recalling something funny.

'Yes, I'm afraid I'm not built for marriage.' Still grinning, he'd leaned in towards Marian, and in a loud whisper said, 'In fact, I'm quite sure if I'd stayed with my wife, I'd have blown my brains out all over the *cream* carpet.' He lurched back in his seat, slapped his thigh with a crack.

Morton in the corner of my eye gave a red-faced giggle as he looked sideways at Harvey.

'You don't come this far without developing a nose for this sort of thing, Jacqui,' said Harvey into the phone. 'The guy's got Morton hoodwinked. He's dangerous.'

'Mmmm,' I sounded, and so did Harvey.

'So what's for dinner tonight then?' he finally said.

'Chilli con carne.'

'Mmmmm. Chilli con carne. You hear that Marian. They're having chilli con carne. Good on you. My, he's a lucky boy. No doubt about it.'

*

I picked red cherries for Grandpa, fat and juicy on an ochre background scattered with green leaves. Grandma was to have small box checks, red and white like an Italian tablecloth, in keeping with her square shape. I asked Morton to note the red in the squares matched Grandpa's cherries.

Morton gave a tired smile. I realised how vacuous I must sound.

'Do I sound vacuous?' I asked.

'No, you don't sound vacuous, darling. I just have an awful lot on my mind.'

*

I was late getting back to our new house. Unfamiliar with traffic flows I heard myself complaining to Morton, rehearsing as I sat in an endless queue of brake lights.

Normally I met Morton at the door – he never carried keys, unless he was driving a car, and on those occasions he tended to lose them.

Normally my cheeks were flushed from the hot oven. I liked to have my hair tied back, a touch of lipstick to make my teeth look whiter when I smiled at him. Normally I leaned in to kiss him, and say: How was your day, darling? Then more quietly: How's Reichmann?

Normally Morton said, *Man*, he was so glad to be home. And *man* he was pooped. The day was okay, but his shoes were too damn tight; he had blisters from running for buses. He had a headache too – neck was playing up again – what about taking up Harvey's suggestion of an incline desk? *Yeah, yeah, yeah*, then he'd sigh heavily – *And how was your day?*

Tonight, he was waiting for me. On the doorstep of our new house. In the dark.

'I've been sitting here for the last hour, you realise. Freezing my bloody butt off.' I couldn't see his face in the dark, but I could hear it. I was rummaging in my bag, wondering what I'd done with my keys.

'You know. Maybe it's about time you got yourself your own keys. I can't *always* be here. I'm not your mother.'

'I *beg* your pardon. I've been working all day for this family I'll have you know. I've had a bastard of a day, and I'm chilled to the bone, and frankly...I think you couldn't give a shit.'

'No. I *am* sorry,' I said, finally poking the key unsuccessfully against the lock.

'No you're not.'

'I *am*. I've been worried *sick* about getting back, but I was stuck in peak hour traffic.'

'You're *not* sorry.'

'I am. I truly am. But I must say, the reality is, if you had your own damn key this wouldn't have happened. I refuse to take all the blame.'

The door swung open.

'So where were you?' he asked as we bundled inside. Light switches on. He could see my face.

'I was in Chatswood.' I turned my head away.

'Doing what?'

'Looking at things. For the house.'

'What sort of *things*?'

'Oh, all sorts of things. Just looking. Why?'

'You've bought something haven't you?'

'I haven't,' I frowned, but I was unable to stop smiling at the same time.

'I swear I haven't.'

'You're lying.'

'I'm not.'

'Yes, you are. I can tell when you're lying,' he said, coming up close, lifting his jaw.

'I'm not.'

His eyes looked narrowly down the length of his nose. 'I can tell.'

'*Jesus*, just leave me alone. Sometimes I hate you, Morton. I just *hate* you,' I said making a fist and bringing its curled edge down on his shoulder, hard. Once, then a second time.

'Don't *tell* me what I'm thinking,' I screamed, as now he was pushing me, across the hall, moving with me as I faltered backwards. It was a mad choreography, I turned to see where I was going, but almost fell. Dug my thumbs into his collarbones, and he dug his into mine, his fingers lacing around the back of my neck, and like two stranglers we squeezed each other for dear

life, and he kept pushing, pushing me through our bedroom door and I kept clutching and squeezing to keep upright. I could hear his breath hissing and my own wrestling in my nose.

'Morton. I'm pregnant,' and as I gasped this, my feet stumbled between his. He gave me a shove, a low barbarian grunt rising from his throat, a cry tearing from my own. I landed on the edge of the mattress, safely, as I thought I might, but it was the shock of it, and I wailed as I slid down onto the floor, my knees parting to fit my stomach, huddling into the shape of an egg.

'I do my job. You do yours,' he said, striding from the room.

'You do it for you,' I cried after him. 'You do everything for you. Everything's about precious bloody you.'

I heated up the leftover chilli concarne for dinner and we sat quietly in the kitchen, our cutlery clacking officiously on our plates, our back teeth grimly grinding seeded toast. He rinsed the plates off in the sink when we'd finished. There was something about this show of humility that shamed me. I looked at his bare feet planted at the sink, his legs in underpants. They were good legs, I thought sadly. Honest legs. Thick and muscular like the hind legs of a draughthorse. He needed legs like that to pull this heavy cart. Poor Morton. Rinsing plates. He married an unstable woman, and now he was struggling to keep his own balance.

I couldn't bear to go to sleep with my guilt, so I told him. I told him I was so, so sorry but I did buy something at Chatswood. Guilt and vacillation made me late, not traffic.

'I feel so bad.' He put his arm around me, coaxed his hand up and down my back.

'What did you buy?'

'A lipstick,' I whimpered. 'I just felt so drab.'

'How much?' he whispered.

'Not that much?'

'Twenty? Thirty?'

'Forty,' I whispered back.

He sighed. 'Darling.'

'It's just sometimes nice to get *something*. Sometimes, I feel so...'

'You know that's eighty dollars before tax I have to make – it's my labour. My blood you're spilling, my sweat.'

I have a vision of his red blood smeared like whale fat across my lips. 'I'm sorry.'

'Those days are gone, darling. No more, okay? We've got a mortgage now. It's killing me.'

I couldn't tell him I'd bought a mascara, as well. Another forty dollars. He was just as likely to tell me to take it back, so I decided I would live with the shame instead, become completely invisible with it.

*

Midweek. Lunch at Beecroft. Marian and Harvey were planning another cruise. Mediterranean this time, in three months time.

'Well after the baby is due,' Marian reassured me with smile.

Harvey spread out a map over the coffee table and with the end of a ballpoint pen he pointed to all the spots they would visit. I pretended to be interested but I was absorbed in the low sounds he was making as we leaned our heads over the world, thinking sounds, I felt sleepy with the little spidery lines he drew, they were like eyelashes falling onto the page.

Later, we had lunch and Marian asked me how we were enjoying our old chairs. The fact was they were not very nice to sit in at all. The slouching body, I'd discovered, had no choice but to become the hypotenuse of the triangle, but I wasn't going to tell her that, for by the time I was finished with them they would at the very least conjure images of great comfort.

I didn't tell her about my trips to buy fabric, either. I suppose I was being secretive. She'd see the fabrics soon enough I decided, the following Sunday, as it turned out. We were finally having them over to lunch. At *our* house. I couldn't wait.

*

Morton went to the nursery that weekend. He bought fertiliser and potted colour for the pathways—I remember they had a special on impatiens—\$3.99 a plant.

He created an enormous compost heap of slashed branches, uprooted agapanthas and strappy things that had multiplied at an almost sinister rate. He stopped occasionally and called me to see his work, commenting happily on how we seemed to be increasing the size of our property by the minute.

I was relegated the job of planting impatiens, my ears alerted to the sound of a truck arriving. The table was being delivered.

We'd been looking for something for a long time now, something really special. Morton didn't mind spending on big-ticket items. Unlike fripperies, they were an investment in our future. To date we'd found nothing that represented our style, our taste, *us*, and in the absence Harvey and Marian's rickety card table with its green vinyl top was becoming a permanent fixture.

Having a desire to impress Harvey and Marian on Sunday, I'd gone out on my own and found a little French vintner's table.

'On approval,' I told Morton. 'If we don't like it they'll come and collect it on the Monday. No charge.' It was small, hardly a dining table, but we could collapse it into a semi circle later and use it as a sideboard.

It arrived while I was at the supermarket.

'Mmmm,' Morton sounded as we both stood in front of it. 'I'm not sure it's an antique. It's got a new piece of wood under here,' he said, peering beneath it.

'Well it's restored isn't it? I just think it looks pretty.'

'Cherry wood I think,' he said, running his fingers over its surface.

For the rest of the day I dusted, wiped and vacuumed throughout. I brought out the numerous vases we'd been given for wedding presents, filled them with shiny camellia leaves from our garden. Morton washed the windows, scrubbed the entrance steps with acid, and hosed down the sides of our white house until it looked as naked as fresh white skin. We were both

exhausted by the end and when we flopped onto the sofa he tucked me under his arm and kissed my forehead.

‘You’ve done a great job,’ he said, and I was so content with having pleased him, it never occurred to me to say, *Well so have you.*

*

Up early the next morning. I made Harvey’s favourite pudding. Treacle and batter in a metal bowl tied with paper and string. It hissed and spat in a pot of boiling water while I prepared the moussaka – Marian’s recipe.

When Morton returned from the bakery with the bread sticks he placed a long parcel of tightly wrapped flowers on the bench. I drew them to my nose. Pink stock.

‘You *darling*. Are they for me?’

‘Well yes, I suppose they are,’ he said. ‘I just thought they might brighten the place up a bit. Mum always likes to have a few flowers about.’

I poked the flowers into the vase of leaves that sat on the vintner’s table, laid the bread sticks beneath the canopy of pink and green along with a stack of white plates, cream napkins, silver salt and pepper shakers and bone handled cutlery. When I’d finished I decided the table setting looked like a styled shot from one of Marian’s *Vogue Entertaining Guides*. I pictured a title running across the edge of the stock in white elegant italics – it read, *A Simple Sunday Afternoon.*

Marian arrived with a basket over her arm. ‘Just some little bits and pieces for you,’ she said, poking at cellophane so that it made a crackly Christmas sound. Harvey was clutching a wine cooler under his arm.

After we’d all hugged and kissed, we made our way, single file down the darkened hall into the kitchen, Harvey leading. He stopped for a moment and we all waited behind him while he creaked back and forth on a loose board.

‘Yes. There’s a few needing seeing to,’ agreed Morton.

We moved on.

‘It certainly smells good,’ said Marian, when we got into the kitchen.

‘It should do. It’s your recipe. Moussaka,’ I laughed.

'I just *feel* like moussaka. How did you know?'

Marian was standing in the centre of the kitchen, the basket still over her arm. 'Hasn't she got it looking *just* like home. No doubt about you, Jacqui,' she said as I took the basket from her.

I pretended to be embarrassed, lifted my eyes skyward.

'Yes, she's certainly a homemaker,' said Harvey.

Morton pretended to be miffed. 'Never mind me,' he said. 'I've been hard at it too you know.'

'Is that so. Aren't you a good boy,' teased Harvey. He wandered over to the bowl of nuts. Scooped a handful, tilted his head and threw them back.

'What's this table?' he said as he chewed. 'Score it from the old folks did you?'

Morton explained the story as Harvey got down beneath it. Father like son.

'Antique? My foot,' Harvey's voice strained as he pushed himself up. 'That's a piece of shoddy pine they've stuck on the bottom there.'

He stood back, red faced with the exertion, anger too, I think. Morton could see it. He explained, calmly and reasonably, it was not a substantial piece like the Edwardian style he and Marian favoured, 'But more a rustic piece.'

'*Rustic*. You got that bit right. You said you can send it back, can you? Good. Cause they saw *you* coming,' he said, looking wide eyed at me. 'Bloody charlatans. Bet they knocked that up in some workshop in China. Christ. It's atrocious.'

Marian was touching my arm, asking me to show her the rest of the house.

'It looks so lovely in here, so much lighter and fresher,' she said in the lounge room.

'It's just a bit of cleaning,' I swallowed.

'Nonsense. It's your *touch*. And oh, these are some of the fabrics you're looking at for the chairs?'

Grandpa and Grandma stood facing the hearth. Once I'd confirmed my order the girl had cut me much bigger swatches and I'd arranged these over the backs of the chairs like antimacassars. Marian picked up the cherry swatch. I told her it was linen as she rolled it between her thumb and finger.

'Very nice. *Just* lovely. I've told you about the place I go to, haven't I?' She turned to me, her eyes lit with surprise. 'I get *all* my fabrics there. *Redleman's*. Have you been there? Oh you really should go. You can pick up all sorts of beautiful fabrics at just a fraction of the cost.'

I told her I'd been to all sorts of places.

'Oh. It would be a mistake not to go there. You're bound to find something you like.'

'But I've already ordered my fabric.'

She looked worried.

'It's coming from England.'

As she flattened the fabric back over the chair, I kept on explaining, saying we felt we could afford something special, seeing as the chairs cost us nothing. And they weren't that expensive.

'Oh, I really wish you'd told me you were looking for fabrics,' she said. 'I would've come with you.' She turned to face me, her smile crumpled with regret.

'Now,' she said, a clap of her hands rousing me from my stupor. 'What do you suppose those boys are doing down there. Shall we take a look shall we?'

'All right,' I said, but I didn't want to. On my way down the hall I excused myself, slipped into the bathroom as she continued, the heels of her court shoes catching on the threads of the hall carpet.

Don't take it personally, I whispered to the face in the mirror. This is what Morton would say. I bared my teeth, several times, tensed my cheeks like biceps.

Stepping back down the hall, I heard Harvey's voice. 'Cripes. You just can't have her buying rubbish like that.'

I stopped, grimacing as a board beneath my feet creaked.

'What about getting her into some sort of antique course. There must be something like that available where she could at least learn the rudimentaries.'

I turned back again, tiptoed. In our bedroom I stared aghast at the blank wall. *Rudimentaries* – I whispered, *rudimentaries*.

Footsteps. They were on the move, Harvey clearing his throat, and then what sounded like Marian's heels making that little kh kh sound as they caught in the carpet. I put my hand to my throat. Moments later, Morton's stride, expeditious.

'Morton?' I hissed through the door.

He yanked his head back as he passed. 'What are you doing in there?'

Frowning, finger to my lips, I motioned for him to come inside.

'It's not right,' I told him. 'They're guests in our house and they're attacking my personal taste. Personal taste cannot be wrong. Nobody's is, because its *personal*.'

'*I know. I know.* But what can I do about it?'

'*Do?* For godsake. Tell them to stop it.'

'*Why don't you?* You should stand up for yourself.'

'*I can't.* They're *your* parents. You do it.'

'*There's no point, darling. It's just them,*' he said resting his hands on my shoulders. '*They don't even realise what they're doing. They really don't.*'

'*I don't care. They should be told. Don't my feelings matter?*'

'*Of course they do.*' He rubbed my arm. '*Of course they do, poor darling. I know how you feel – I've just gotten used to it, I suppose. You learn to shut off.*'

'*Well I can't.*'

'*And you shouldn't have to. I'll say something, okay? Leave it to me.*'

I sat on the edge of the bed and waited for his return.

He was back in minutes. I looked at him expectantly.

'*They're leaving,*' he said.

'*What?*'

'They're not staying for lunch. They're leaving.'

I found them sitting in Grandpa and Grandma. I'll never forget the way their arms flopped over the arms of the chairs. They looked propped up, like cadavers, muscle-less, their faces blank, eyes unblinking.

'Marian? Harvey?' They remained expressionless. 'I've just come to say I'm so sorry. I'm not sure what Morton said to you, but obviously...'

'He made it perfectly clear,' Harvey interrupted, his voice toneless, his eyes staring into space at some point past the hearth. I looked at Marian. She was staring at a point on the other side of the hearth; only the chirpy crest of hair on her forehead seemed to retain any of her former character. I decided I would be able to get them to focus if I stood at the vortex where their eyes crossed, so I took my place before them, my palms upturned.

'*Please*. Listen to me. You must realise there is no way in the world I would want to hurt you two. I just felt a little disappointed. You *know*. I have my own taste in things and I just felt, well...a bit sort of like you were trying to tell me...Oh god. *Please*. Don't do this.'

Marian tapped her fingertips on the arm of the chair.

Harvey cleared his throat. 'Nothing will be the same again,' he said, 'You do realise this.'

'What? *No*. Please, I've made lunch. You can't go. You just can't.'

'I'm afraid we're not staying thank you very much,' said Marian.

'Marian. *Please*. I *overreacted*. It's hormones. I'm about to have a baby.' They still wouldn't look and by now the tears were streaming down my face. My shoulders slumped over my big belly, arms hung and felt too long for my body, the hands too big. It was then it dawned on me. They couldn't look...my lack of delivery, composure, control, my raw emotions, wet face and slackened mouth...I repulsed them.

Harvey stood up. Marian joined him. 'Come on, Marian,' he said. And they turned, walked straight past me almost brushing my nose with their shoulders. I had an urge to reach out and clutch as they passed, but I resisted it.

Morton was standing at the door, his face red yet somehow chilled.

'Morton. *Do something,*' I called over their heads.

'It's too late, I'm afraid, son. Unfortunately the damage is done.'

'So you're quite sure you won't stay for lunch? No. Well that's a shame. I'll get your bags for you. Won't be a moment.'

I waited too, behind them. Marian with high heels apart for balance, fiddled with the side of her pants as though it was just her thin cream belt, too high around her middle, that was the cause for her discomfort. Harvey arched his head and appeared to be studying the cornice, his hair holding his head together like moulded pewter. Perhaps now was the time to tell them. To say, *excuse me*, but there are some things you should know about me. I'm really not as strong as you are. I am *trying*, though. But the truth is I come from a long line of depressives; we're suicidal, infanticidal, weak stock, and I'm so sorry to be telling you this now, I know I should have warned you, much, much earlier, but Morton said....

As they walked up the path past the newly planted impatiens I heard my voice trailing after them. 'I'm sorry. I'm so so sorry.'

'Come on. Let them go.' He put a hand on my shoulder.

'What did you *say* to them?'

'Nothing. Just what you said. I told them to stop telling you what to do. That they had to stop giving you advice.'

We were on the sofa, becalmed, in shock.

'What are we going to do, Morton?'

'We do nothing for now,' he said. 'We just sit it out.'

'Sit it out.' I repeated. 'And then what?'

'Nothing. You watch. It'll never be spoken about again.'

*

It had been my idea. Morton said it was a lovely thought.

'If my mum was here, I'd have asked her, so it's only right that you be able to have your mother. It's your baby too,' I said to him as I pictured myself lying back on a bed, my legs open like a human sacrifice.

Morton made the call. I knew she wouldn't be able to resist. She wore a plain white blouse with a pin tucked front, an oval brooch clasped at her throat. She sat in the grey vinyl armchair in a corner of the theatre. It looked low and deep from where I was— designed for an upward angle. She kept her knees pressed tightly together.

I wondered what I looked like down there. A baboon, red and raw, the hairs bulging apart. I'd examined myself once in a small hand mirror and wondered, just as she probably did now, what on earth it was that Morton saw in it. I was sure she'd never examined herself in such detail. This must be a shock to her. An ugly shock. Perhaps even an insult. I wondered about this, too. Is that what I partly intended, to disturb her sensibilities? Or was I still trying to impress? Or was it submission? My pale thighs rising in supplication. Maybe I just wanted her to *see* me...she was certainly looking at me now.

Sensing something, she looked up at my face, as though recalling there was a top half in all this, uncomfortable too I think to see my face there, at the other end, watching her. I smiled pretending it was nothing, I was liberal minded. I saw a hesitant smile close her mouth, and she swallowed, then returned to the spot, transfixed.

Another contraction. I bit my lips together as I bore down towards her. I was burning, ripping apart. I felt I might scream, but I didn't. Not a sound left my lips. I was completely self-contained.

*

The following Sunday we were on our way to Beecroft. It felt surreal. I was an actor in a movie. Superficial. I painted my lips red, lengthened and thickened my lashes with the wand.

It was an important day. Samuel Harvey Edwards' first visit. And apart from this, Morton and Harvey had much to discuss. With Reichmann so ill with cancer, Harvey was returning to the workforce to assist Morton with overflow, *to take the pressure off*, as Harvey said. And as Morton said

affectionately, it'll be good for the old bugger because part of Harvey's problem was that he didn't have enough to do.

We began with champagne on the veranda, French to honour the occasion. Harvey had made tiny pikelets with Marian's help and I watched him bend from the waist to place a blob of crab mixture on each, his stiff little finger quivering as it slid off the teaspoon. I only had one pikelet. Harvey offered me another, unctuously, I thought.

'No,' I told him, 'I'm sorry. I really don't think I like them.'

'Don't like them?' He laughed, heartily, as though I'd told a clever joke. Then he told me how *terrific* I was looking. 'Isn't she Marian?'

'Oh. She certainly is.'

We had lasagne for lunch with tangy iceberg lettuce served with Stormy Bay chardonnay, followed by a fruit platter and crème caramels. Then after lunch we went into the yellow room. To digest.

I sat with the baby on the club lounge, unbuttoned my shirt and took out my breast, squeezed so that a tiny prick of milk appeared, then I feathered the nipple across my son's lips. He latched straight away.

'Nothing slow about him,' laughed Harvey, his face red with pleasure, and the others laughed in agreement. 'Here's to Samuel Harvey.'

After a moment Harvey said, 'Well isn't this just fantastic.' He twirled the stem of his wine glass and we all watched the legs of his last mouthful sliding down its sides.

'New beginnings, eh?'

'Yep. New beginnings,' said Morton.

I saw Harvey wiping his eyes with a curl of fingers. 'You know, when I look at you two sitting there, I see us. You're just like us,' he said laughing now as he wiped a tear out of his other eye. 'Silly isn't it. Must be the damn pollens.'

'Now will you tell them Mother, or shall I?' Harvey grinned.

'Tell us what,' said Morton.

'You do it, darling,' Marian said.

‘All right then. All ears children?’ He laughed. ‘Now, your Mother and I got talking the other night about how we’re going to miss you *three*, when we head off on our Mediterranean cruise. In fact we realised we were going to miss you so much we decided we’d like to have you come with us. You both deserve a holiday we can think of no nicer pair to share our wedding anniversary with us. So how about it, kids. Monaco, Genoa, Capo Ferro, Palermo, Tunisia, Peloponnese...’ and he kept going, laughing at his own extravagant pronunciation of the words. ‘Iraklion, Piraeus, Algiers, Valencia, *Barthelona*, Majorca...’ He was standing by then, wriggling his hips and clicking his fingers like castanets.

The Maiden Hair Fern

I used to take a short cut through this very road a few years ago when we lived in a little flat at the bay. I liked the semi-detached cottages, the way each half was finished in distinctly different colours despite being joined at the hip. I'd always look out for the clinic, slowed to observe its pillared entrance and the brooding pines that concealed it from the outside world. Back then, I thought a quiet street a strange location for such a place, although it makes perfect sense to me now. It belonged here, extending deep into the suburban block like an internal organ. *The Fern Clinic, by appointment only*, reads the small brass plaque as we bump over the metal grill.

We drive through a cavalcade of trees before coming into the light, lawn on either side, cut so short it resembles an undulating sea; and the car is a boat, its low vibration as we ride over the thick tar makes me feel sea sick.

I lean my forehead against the cool glass and see my reflection in the side-mirror. My face looks long. Long-ger. Not just an illusion, I think. It's all to do with the verb that underpins the human jaw, hinges it shut, tongue pressed flat to the palate. It's the French verb, *to be*. I am having trouble with my sense of being.

We arrive at a long low building, blonde brick. Park beneath a white structure that resembles the wing-span of an albatross. Seventies architecture. He looks at me before he opens his door to get out, and sighs as I look away.

I stand next to the boot, stilled by the drone of cicadas as he removes my case, my hands loose at my sides.

In reception it's cool. The walls are green. They tell him to wait while they take me straight through. I wasn't expecting it to be that quick. He rubs my back.

'Love you,' he says as I turn my head away, and I feel his kiss slide off my hair.

I walk with the nurse along a wide linoleum corridor.

'It reminds me of a maternity suite,' I tell her.

'Yes. I suppose it is a bit like that, isn't it,' she says, with matronly jolliness. I notice she walks lopsided with my case.

When we arrive at door 14, she says, 'This is you. You're in here with Sarah.'

Sarah? 'But, my husband booked me a private room.'

'Our private rooms are full,' she says, and as the door opens wide, a pool of sunlight spills into the corridor to claim me.

'Our Sarah's from South Africa, aren't you Sarah?'

I can see a blond head sitting in an armchair by the window. The face looks up and smiles, gums pink and wet. They remind me of the false teeth you buy in joke shops.

Barely audible, I tell the nurse I want my own room.

'You'll be fine here. Sarah's quiet. She likes to read. You like to read too, don't you? A little bird told me you read the *dictionary*.'

It's true, but the little bird makes it sound ridiculous. My face prickles with heat.

'I don't *read* the dictionary,' I say. 'I study words.'

*

If I was to pinpoint a moment where it all began, I suppose it was at the park at the top of Prospect Road. I could so easily revere the moment I met her with rambling paragraphs. But I must convey the normality.

We were pushing our children on the swings. It's hard to remain aloof when you're pushing a swing. I wanted to leave when she came and stood next to me. But Cynthia, knowing her as I do now, was aroused by the soft light of early spring, the scent of freshly mown grass. She would have been thinking, *Oh, isn't this just a lovely afternoon for making friends.*

As we pushed, we surged forward like a chorus line engaging in an inane sort of dance step.

'I'm Cynthia by the way,' she said, with a wry smile, as though she too was noting the silliness of our movements.

She offered me her hand as the swings careered away from us. It was a soft dry hand, and it surprised me with its strength.

'I live just up the road from you. Five doors up to be exact.' I looked at her closely. She had small onyx eyes, a lean face atop an elongated frame, and on her feet she wore pumps, long and white like a rabbit's hind legs.

'My daughter goes to the same school as your kids,' she said, 'You're new to the area aren't you? And you've got test paints around your front door. I've been watching you.'

She grinned as she winked, for I must have looked astonished. Then I was reminded, guiltily, I was the type that never noticed anyone – but she didn't seem to care, for now she was telling me with wide eyes I had an absolute eye for colour. I had a consultant choose my colour combinations, but instead of correcting her I let a smile spread over my face.

I suppose if there was anything that should have put me on guard, it was in what she said next.

'What does your husband do?' It was calculating, so suddenly invalidating, yet at the same time, sadly enticing. So I told her what he did. She looked suitably pleased. And in the silence that followed, I gently queried, 'So what does yours do?'

She rolled her eyes as she answered as though his success pained her, and she smiled knowingly at me, as though we were both in on the same joke.

***identity n 1.** the fact of being who or what a person or thing is > the characteristics determining this, (whether they be yours or your husband's.)

*

The psychologist's name is Ruth. If I could smell the name Ruth it would have the heavy odour of dark soil. No one tells you about social typecasting I tell her, you just feel it, recoil from it and before you know it you become invisible

with it. We spent all our time snootily ignoring one another, only to discover our exciting similarities in serendipitous chance meetings.

*

Cynthia had tulip shapes cut into the palings of her picket fence.

Her ironing board was sitting out on display like a piece of 1950s art, a pile of glaring whites piled on one end in a plastic washing basket.

She had a large play centre in her backyard in hideous orange and yellow, and it looked particularly ugly beneath the beautiful old lemon tree. My youngest was inside this plastic contraption, sucking a red ice block.

‘To keep her quiet,’ she said with a wink.

I remember thinking there was something almost too wholesome in the chunkiness of her furniture, the dogged reappearance of tulips on her leadlight kitchen cupboards. I could easily imagine her lank front covered in the red checks of an apron.

Then I saw *The Sydney Morning Herald* spread out on the dining table.

‘Do you get the paper delivered?’ I asked.

She nodded. ‘Can’t live without it.’

‘Neither can I,’ I flung back, as though this was a bizarre coincidence.

She intimated another coffee with her cup, and as she went into the kitchen to make it, she kept talking, throwing her voice. I liked her tone, it was intelligent, opinionated. I found myself rubbing my chin, carefully composing my responses. We were enjoying ourselves so much, morning tea moved smoothly into lunch, our conversation slowing as we chewed on baguette.

Cynthia explained she was *just a country girl* and had followed a rather set path to being a schoolteacher. I made a little sound in an attempt to convey *that’s interesting*, but she shrugged it off. Changed the subject to me.

I told her I’d wandered between jobs, trainee chef, bank teller and so forth, so forth, but I emphasised my last position as an assistant to a producer on a radio station – I felt that sounded the most interesting.

'You've had a much more exciting life than me,' she said, and I laughed this off, insisting I hadn't at all, but at the same time I believed she was right. I could see myself from her perspective, as someone less constrained, more open to possibilities. Her path had been rigid compared to my more serendipitous one. Cynthia had never left the classroom, except than to marry, and I suspected that made me more worldly.

'We can hardly complain, can we?' I heard her saying, smiling in a way that revealed her narrow eyeteeth. 'Look. I just don't care what anyone else says. We're living in the most beautiful area of Sydney,' she said with a flourishing hand, 'we're married to men that love us' (that's an assumption I thought, seeing as she was yet to meet mine), 'and I've been blessed with one child, and my *god*, you've got *three*.' She leaned across to rub my knee. 'How do you *do* it?'

I frowned. 'I don't really think about it, I guess. My kids have been incredibly easy.'

She shook her head as though I was underrating myself. 'Well, I think you're amazing.'

I smiled dubiously.

She came closer, tilting her head, 'I wanted more children,' I heard her say, 'but it hasn't happened.'

I wanted to reach out and touch her knee back, but it wasn't my way.

'I know I should be thinking about going back to work now. But I can't,' she went on, 'I just can't bring myself to do it—I love being a mother.'

I clenched my lips, resisted the dismissive cliché, *it'll happen*.

Walking down her hall that afternoon, she touched her palm to my back.

'It's so important we get to know each other.' She said it in a way that wrapped me in an aura of possibilities. It was as though she had a plan in mind. For us. I didn't. I just had a nice feeling that Cynthia liked me a lot, and I liked her, and although it seemed like an odd word to use, I also had a sense we were looking at each other with respect—it was something I hadn't felt in a long time.

***respect n.** a feeling of deep admiration for someone elicited by their qualities or achievements. L. respectus, from respicere-look back at, regard. We were two halves looking to feel whole.

*

On the third day my muscles ache from lack of use and I find myself wandering across the corridor to a door marked Lounge. In here, I finds a squat woman knitting in a tub chair. Her needles make a soft clack, and I cock my head to listen, finding it strange the way her elbows wriggle at her sides like stumps

*

It was the same week I'd met Cynthia. A Friday. I'd been in the city and was running late by the time I arrived at the school. As I pulled up outside, I saw the the space where the children should have been was empty, a bubble almost filmy with translucency.

The woman with the Mediterranean accent in after-school-care stood rubbing the skin stretched over her knuckles.

'I can't think, I just can't think what has happened,' she said. 'Maybe someone else collected them.'

'No,' I told her. 'Not possible.' My husband is at work and there is no one else with any authority.'

'I cannot understand it. I cannot,' and her nails scratched through her hair. She would go to the office, she said, and talk with the supervisor about the procedure. Procedure was not a comforting word.

I ran to the children's toilets, flung open the doors, one after the other as though I expected to find their little bodies slumped in the far corners of a cubicle. Up the stairs, I checked another six or so toilets.

Coming back down, I saw the woman loping across the basketball court, a forearm clamped across her chest. Now I was jogging towards her and a whirly of wind wrapped around us, wrenching at our clothes.

'Good news,' she breathed, her hands falling upon my shoulders. 'Mrs Martin has your children.'

'Who?'

'Mrs Martin.'

'Who's Mrs Martin,' I asked, shaking my head. 'I've never heard of her.'

Cynthia Martin stood on her doorstep. 'Look at you,' she said, with rueful affection. 'You look like you've been in the wars.'

'Oh, I'm all right.' I tried to smile. 'Hey, thanks for picking them up.' My lip trembled.

'Oh come here,' she crooned. I noticed a wash of red climb her neck as she stepped down onto the veranda and put her arm around my shoulder. 'Next time, *ring* me,' she admonished. 'You know I'm here. Always,' she said leading me inside. 'Nothing is ever too much trouble.'

I wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe I'd just been saved, not thwarted. It's all to do with perspective, I told myself, as I walked down Cynthia's oriental hall runner, past the hat stand, the row of decorative plates, botanical prints in crackled gold frames. In the family room I found my children sitting on an oversized sofa in front of a disproportionately large tv.

'Look who's here, children,' said Cynthia, in a contrived announcement. 'It's *Mummy*. Aren't you going to say hullo to mummy.'

The volume of the tv was deafening I reasoned when they didn't look up. Their eyes were glued to the set and their hands were rustling in the fist-sized packets of biscuits—the sort of product I never deemed to buy.

'Come on,' she said, winking at me as her fingers gripped my arm. 'They're fine. And I know just what you need my dear girl. An early drink.'

I smiled, weakened. 'Actually. You know. That's just what I need.'

*rely v 1 depend on with full trust 2 be dependent on. *Origin, Latin. religare* from *re-*(expressing intense force) + *ligare-* 'bind'. *Rely on me. Rely on me.*

I was not aware of the Latin meaning of *rely* at the time, but nonetheless I could feel its archaic root binding my arms to my sides as I followed her into the kitchen.

*

Ruth and I talk about marriage. It really *is* an institution. I tell her I didn't know I was about to be institutionalised. Like words, marriage had its own origins; it was root bound and full of hidden meanings.

*

There's always something odd about meeting a friend's partner for the first time. I couldn't help but imagine them together, and my head became a light box of flickering images of intimacy. They didn't match. He had red hair and was at least half a head shorter with cheeky-boy freckles and ears that looked too large and naked for his small face; with her towering over him he resembled more a son than a husband. I watched the way she moved around him – too carefully, blushing with her own stealth as she stooped to kiss his cheek, her long arm passing around his back like a serpent proffering a bottle of beer.

She introduced me to him as a future Australian author.

'Oh, please Cynthia. *Don't.*'

'Well I believe in you, even if you don't,' she said. 'She's very, very clever,' she told him, 'But *far* too modest.'

The fact was, Cynthia had never read anything I'd written.

'She's exaggerating,' I told him, blushing. 'I'm just doing a course by correspondence. Post modern literature.'

'Well good on *you*,' he said, with thorough admiration, then as an afterthought he added, 'Cynthia needs to do something like that.' I looked across to see if she'd heard him.

She hadn't. She was calling out, 'She's writing a book,' grinning at me as she poured wine into two cut-crystal glasses. 'I'm going to be her agent.'

It was the first I'd heard. I smiled weakly, and pondered on whether she had some sort of intuitive skill, a unique ability in divining talent that enabled her to see right through me to where my potential lay dormant, like a buried spring.

Later she told me her husband was very clever.

'But we just play along with them, don't we?' she said, her eyes conspiring with humour.

'We do,' I said, hoping I appeared just as complicit, but I suspected she was passive, completely in awe of her man. Perhaps even a little afraid of him, as I was of mine.

***fear n 1** an unpleasant emotion caused by threat or danger origin *foer danger*
also *revere* of GMC origin

***revere v 1** respect or admire deeply from *veveri* 'to fear'

The meanings are innate.

*

Well of course, I tell Ruth, we wanted our men to be clever, to do their best, we even *wanted* to fear them—anything less would have spoiled our illusions. And when our dependency became unbearable, cynicism was the best defence followed by a flurry of guilty laughter.

Ruth lifts her eyebrow. Who are *we*?' she asks.

I looked surprised, 'I'm speaking generically, of course.'

*

We were off to the town hall for the choral performance of Handel's Messiah. The four of us. We'd already had a couple of dinners together and this event signalled a change—*Lets not just eat, lets do things!*

Cynthia and her husband had been amused by our invitation. I suspect they thought a choral performance was stuffy and highbrow—we all

did; and perhaps it's why we were suddenly very giddy when we saw each other in our very cultured, evening attire.

We sat together at the performance, between our husbands, on upright chairs like schoolgirls, giving each other sideways looks. On one occasion as the choir reached a crescendo, Cynthia closed her eyes and threw her head back and pretended to howl like a dog at the full moon; and then she winked at me. I was convulsing with silent laughter as she reached across and squeezed my hand, *tight*, to help me control myself. Then she left it there for a while on my lap, in a loose clasp. I was delirious with good fortune.

That night we walked the streets in pairs, all the way down to The Rocks. We could have caught a cab, but we felt like wandering, for it was a still night and after such haunting strains we needed the stars above us. It was nice to know the men followed behind us, their hands dug into their pants, a blazer flung over a shoulder, low chuckles; Cynthia and I in front, clip-clopping in our heels like mares. We stepped in rhythm, a contented sway in our lean hips. Then Cynthia hooked my arm in hers and pulled me closer. I did not resist, so she twisted her hand, and picking up mine, she linked our fingers together.

I laughed, and I said, 'People might wonder.'

'Let them,' she said.

I felt strange. I wanted to feel comfortable, but I couldn't for my heart was beating ridiculously fast, and I was afraid my hand would begin to perspire.

'Are you okay?' she asked.

'I'm fine.'

'Guess what?' she said, leaning towards my cheek.

'What?' I asked, and she dipped her head even closer so that I could feel her breath hot in my ear.

'You look so beautiful in that dress.'

'Don't be stupid.'

'You *do*, you *do*,' and her *do* growled against my cheek. Now I could feel each fine bone in her hand squeeze, clutching my bones between hers as she

pulled me even closer. My face radiated a bright heat. It felt shameful, I had to put my head down as her eyes glanced across my face.

‘You two a coupala lesos up there?’ It was my husband calling out from behind.

‘Too right we are.’ Cynthia hollered. I saw a wink in the corner of my *own* eye, but it was her eye winking. Not mine. *Wink wink..*

***flatter v 1.** lavish compliments on, especially in order to further one’s own interests. Origin Fr *flaterie*, from *flater* (stroke, flatter)

That night in bed – *You* look beautiful in that dress. You look beautiful in *that* dress – her words were floating in and out, piping softly with my breath, and I wondered if she was right, that perhaps I was beautiful and had lived all these years in complete ignorance.

*

One of the women explains she has a lithium deficiency, ‘A clinical condition, not a personality disorder.’ She makes clinical sound bright and clean. Disorder, like an excuse, nothing more than a failure to keep things tidy.

‘Well I’m just having a rest,’ I told her, making it sound as though I’d weighed up the clinic against a deckchair vacation in Fiji.

*

It was our ritual. Friday night. The oven on bake, in a yellow kitchen light we basked in the warmth, throwing back wine while the children quietly watched re-runs of their favourite videos.

Cynthia crossed her legs and talked with her hands, using old-fashioned phrases such as *waxing lyrical* and *God love y’or!*

‘I don’t know what I’d do without you,’ she said one night during a pause in conversation.

‘Wow. That’s the loveliest thing anyone has ever said to me,’ I told her, feeling a tear bead in my eye.

She smiled warmly, put her hand on top of mine and feathered her fingers.

‘I have to get back,’ I groaned. ‘He won’t know where I am.’

‘He’ll survive.’ She folded her arms, sat firm against the back of the kitchen chair. ‘Let him manage on his own for five minutes. It’ll do him good,’ she said in a flat voice. ‘They can be such selfish pricks, can’t they?’

She grinned at my surprise.

I told her I still had dinner to cook yet. He’d be hungry. He’d be tired. So we bailed out the door, but somehow we ended up sitting again, on the steps this time, murmuring just beyond the halo of the streetlight, the children running relays up and down the pavement, racing against the sigh of the cars returning from the city.

‘Look at them,’ she said, ‘Isn’t it wonderful. These are probably the best days of our lives. Never go away, will you? Or if you do—*please* take me with you.’

I shivered as I made my promise to her, that I’d never leave her, and she pulled me to her, rubbed my arm as though I’d said I was cold, and it was then the sweeping arc of a car came to land at the darkened curb like a spaceship. Her husband’s return.

The moment was extinguished with a sigh, and as I walked back up the road I wondered where it would all end. We were technically married to men, but emotionally, we were committed to one another. Did it have to end? Of course it didn’t. It wasn’t a love affair. There was no reason why she wouldn’t be there forever.

***forever adj 1** for all future time—a very long time (used hyperbolically)
Everything was hyperbolic, heightened, dramatised for maximum effect.

*

I'm beginning to enjoy myself here. I've started to take my meals in the main dining room with my roommate.

Today there is a new guest. She is dark skinned with glossy black hair, so long and thick it resembles the seaweed that washes up on the sand after a deep ocean storm. I'm immediately steeped in a hazy memory, a sort of briny vapour coming off a wide Sargasso Sea.

*

Cynthia picked up my three children now since my youngest started at school, mornings and afternoons. She was going past anyway – she might as well, she said.

'But I can do some runs. It's not fair on you,' I'd said.

'Pointless,' she insisted. She had to go, anyway.

Cynthia was on several of the school committees, she was also a volunteer on the school reading program. I had noticed she thrived on responsibility, still, it just didn't seem right that she do so much for me.

'Think of me as your benefactor. A benevolent supporter of the arts,' she said as we sat at my kitchen table.

It was disorientating. I was beginning to feel I'd lost my bearings, and I complained the only way I knew how. 'Cynthia, my writing is just a folly. A hobby at best. I'm really not even any good,' I told her.

She turned her head slightly so that the whites of her eyes looked sharp. 'I know where that comes from,' she said.

I drew my chin in, and she took up the slack, leaning in to point her finger at me.

'Don't you let *him* tell you that. They'll take all your power if you let them, and you'll end up a shell. Sapped. Doing everything to please and nothing for yourself.' Her face was flush with blood and her eyebrows stood up like prickles. She clunked her mug down on the tabletop, took a breath and sighed it out her nose.

'I just don't want to see you undermined,' she said, almost wearily now.

'But he doesn't undermine me. At least, I don't think he does.'

She reached across and stroked my hand. 'No, I'm sure he doesn't,' she said, as though regretting any inference. I felt better on this familiar territory, and she looked at me warmly. 'I'm sure he really wants the best for you.'

I knew what that meant. It meant *she* wanted the best for me. My darling friend, she really cared for me, and for such little return. I could have leaned across and kissed her, right then.

I stopped going to the school. I can't say I missed the traffic snarl, or the stressful search for a park. Before long I'd even stopped reading the screwed-up newsletters and notes that came home in the children's bags. Cynthia filled me in on the details of what was happening, and I listened, with only half an ear. She found my poor recollection of details very amusing.

'One of the hazards of the artistic temperament,' she said, shaking her head.

Or, 'Nothing for you to worry about, toots.'

'Where's your purse? I'll take the money out for you.'

Or, 'Sign here,' handing me a pen.

'But what's it for, Cynth?' I'd ask.

'You're such a ditz,' she'd say, mussing my hair with the palm of her hand.

My head was filled with other things. Murder, sexual assault, infidelity, infanticide, all plot points for fiction that fast became dead ends as the fridge droned, and the dryer tumbled and the clock ticked silently.

I would hear the children coming up the steps each afternoon, see their shadows through the stained glass of the front door—like little ghosts. Feel the sudden impact of them, a gale force funnelling down the hall, their hands greedily clutching treats—things I'd never buy them, expensive chocolate-coated ice creams and bags of chips. Cynthia behind them, wearing an incorrigible grin, long legs in black, as sharp as shears scissoring down the hall, gold bracelets and silver keys jangling with life.

'You're only a child once,' she'd say, apologising for the treats.

'I suppose,' and I'd give her a rueful smile.

She began making her purchases in twos, because, *Well, I thought I may as well, while I was there.* A new cookbook for me, a bamboo steamer from Chinatown, a g-string, for a joke, because *get with it!* no one wore *undies* anymore.

I told him about the underwear.

'She fancies you,' he said.

'That's absurd.'

'I'm telling you, she does.'

I grinned. 'Do you really think so? I've never thought of that before.'

'Oh come *on*. Isn't it half obvious?'

Was it? I began to think.

I couldn't resist the way she'd call and say, 'It's me!'

'Hullo me,' I'd say. 'How am I today?'

She was just popping into Woolies or stopping at the park on her way home from school. Was it okay if she took my kids with her? Did I need her to pick something up for our dinner?

'Oh god, you're so good to me,' I'd sigh. 'What would I do without you.'

***depend v.** intransitive. to hang; to be sustained by; to rely on; to be contingent on; (*law*) to be awaiting final judgment.

*

'Of course I realised what was happening, Ruth. That's what made it so hard. I was powerless.'

*

The house was becoming a mess. A pigsty he called it.

'There's more to life than keeping surfaces tidy.'

'But you have to have some semblance of order.'

'Order.' I slapped my knife down on the steel bench and swung round, diced carrot falling on the floor like polka dots. 'You're trying to suck the life out of me. I know it. I know exactly what you're trying to do.'

'What the hell's got into you? You're mad.'

'You're right. I'm *mad* as hell.'

'You've lost the plot,' he said with disgust.

'Plot? You're right,' I told him. 'My life has no plot. *You* try doing this. Day after day. Nothing happens. I've lost all sense of meaning.'

'You have no idea how lucky you are.' His voice was scathing.

The next morning I caught the scent of Cynthia in my kitchen, and as I turned, felt the coolness of her moisturised skin as she pressed her cheek against mine.

'How are you *me*,' she said.

'I'm okay,' I whispered in her ear.

'No you're not,' she whispered back. 'You're not okay.'

She came back after she'd dropped the kids at school. She brought me roses. Orange and yellow ones wrapped in white tissue. A burst of held-back tears and breath broke free as I put them to my nose, and she took the roses from me and held me in her arms.

'I'm wetting your shoulder,' I told her as she rubbed my back, saying it didn't matter.

We sat down at the kitchen table. She'd brought takeaway coffee, and I watched her lift a cup from the carry carton and hand it to me. We sat quietly for a while, almost shyly sucking coffee through the plastic slots.

'You're not coping,' she said after a while.

'Is it that obvious?'

'Yes. It is,' she said. She pulled her lips across her teeth, then I watched her stand up.

'Now, I'm going to clean up these breakfast things while you hop in the shower,' she said, looking down at me, her hands on her hips.

'But I don't feel like a shower.'

‘Well, you need one. Now come on.’ She turned on the sink tap and there was the sound of water beating against steel.

She was just finishing off my bed when I came out of the shower, turning back the cover so that it opened up like a white envelope.

‘Righto,’ she said, ‘I’ve done all I can here.’ She put her hands on her hips again, and breathed, ‘How do you feel?’

‘A little bit better,’ I said – to please her. ‘What’s wrong with me Cynth?’

‘I think you’re depressed. And I don’t care what anyone says...’ She stopped to stem a trickle of water on my cheek with her little finger, ‘but I really think it’s high time you got some professional help. Oh don’t look so crumpled. There’s absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. It happens to the best of people.’ She put her hand on my shoulder, her cool thumb moving back and forth over my bare skin. ‘There’s a clinic not far from here,’ I heard her say, almost under her breath.

She pulled me to her. Shushing. ‘It’s a good thing. It’s a good thing. They’ll help. I know other women who’ve been there and I know how good it will be for you. Here now,’ she said, ‘into bed.’ And as she pulled away my towel dropped. Ignoring my nakedness like a nurse, she patted the mattress. ‘Hop in. I’ve brought you a little sleeping pill. You’ll feel better after a rest.’

‘Oh god, Cynthia. A pill?’

‘It’s fine. You’ll thank me for it. I promise you.’

She pulled back the cover, and feeling all the more pathetic in my nakedness, I climbed into the opening she’d made.

I shrugged into the sheets and when I’d settled, she sat down next to me and kissed my forehead.

‘I’m just going to get you a glass of water. Okay?’

‘Cynth?’

She stopped to look down, smiling at me gently.

‘I feel terrible that I’ve never told you this before. I’ve been so, self-absorbed, but I want you to know...’

‘Shhh. I know what you’re going to say,’ she said stroking my hair. ‘I know. You don’t have to say it. I can feel it.’

***love n. 1** an intense feeling of deep affection –a deep or romantic attachment to someone— a great interest or pleasure in something. Origin: old English *lufu* of Germanic origin; related to **leave (2)**

***leave (2) n.** time when someone has permission to be absent from work or duty.

It seems the meanings of *love* and *leave* are quite synonymous. How fickle even words are.

*

I’m told he’s waiting for me in the clinic’s family room. Singular. I can’t believe he’s not brought the children.

Sitting before him on the edge of my chair, he tells me he didn’t think it was wise for them to see me here.

‘It’s not as though we’re walking around in circles banging our foreheads,’ I say. His smile is weak.

‘Has anyone asked after me. Has anyone called,’ and I watch as his lips shrug up over his teeth like a fist.

*

I rang Cynthia that afternoon to tell her I’d had a lovely sleep. I called her place several times, but all I got was her warm recorded voice telling me to leave my number and she’d get back as soon as she could. I rang the next day as well. This time I left a worried message— ‘What’s happened to you? I’m worried sick.’ And the next, ‘If you’re not there Cynthia, could someone just please get back to me.’ Other times I called and hung up before the message bank picked up.

The children didn't go to school that week. We didn't even leave the house. They watched videos while I dozed on and off, tried to read, but couldn't. I fed them the remains of the groceries in the fridge. Things like packaged pancakes spread with Vegemite, dry cornflakes mixed with peanut butter for lunch. We didn't shower. My five o'clock drink shifted to four o'clock, then I stopped bothering to check the time, and just poured a drink when a cloud, dull enough, passed over the house.

'Are these children going to school?' he asked me on the fourth day.

He called it a dereliction of duties. Selfish, deliberate. He was probably right, but knowing it only made things worse.

I had to see her. I would see her, and everything that had built up would melt away. Paranoia. Illusion. It was all in my head. We'd laugh tears of relief for what could only be a terrible misunderstanding

'It's just me.' I waited for her to say *Hi me*. She didn't. Through the bars of the security grill I could see there were tiny pockets beneath the corners of her mouth.

'This is for you. It's a maiden hair fern.'

'Oh,' she said, and she opened the grill, and as the plant passed between us the lobes shivered as though alive with nerves.

'I had an extra one and I thought...'

'Thanks. I'm sure we'll find a place for it.' Her friendly tone was automated, like her phone message.

'They wither really easily, so you've got to keep it indoors. And you've got to water them a lot. Regularly...but not too much.' I stopped, took a breath for my voice had lost its wind, all that was left, a faint whisper, 'Can I come in?'

She jerked her head, indicating over her shoulder.

Code for something. I leaned in, eager to understand.

'I've got someone here,' she said under her breath, and I saw her blush.

Looking down the hall, as my eyes adjusted to the light I distinguished long bare legs crossed over a barstool, blonde hair, the reflective chink of light caught on the curve of a wine glass.

'I'm sorry,' I said, pathetically.

'Don't be. It's okay. *Really.*' There was a touch of reassurance, and I grasped it like a twig.

'Is there anything wrong, Cynthia? Between us?'

'No.' Her brow puckered. 'Everything is fine,' and then as though she'd suddenly remembered the other day, she reached out and gripped my forearm. 'How have you been? I've been worried about you.'

'Okay,' I said, and I tried to smile.

She frowned. 'Look I'm really sorry but I've got to get back. I'll call you, okay. Promise. You take care of yourself.' She nodded, anxiously.

And I nodded back, as though I believed her.

That afternoon I called my husband. I described what had happened, and I asked him what he thought.

'Oh look, I really don't have time for this. You do *realise* I'm under enormous pressure. And you're ringing and telling me about some blonde at bloody Cynthia's. She's a silly cow. Get over it.'

I hung up. I went upstairs and I looked out over the roof-tops, over the orange tiles, the occasional mossy grey, row upon row; they reminded me of half open books absorbing tales of family life. I could just see hers, the ridge of capping, the weathercock towards the street, the tv aerial at the back above the upstairs veranda and the parents' retreat. It looked so normal from here, nothing amiss. I could even see the top of the old lemon tree. I climbed out onto the sill. We were two stories high. I imagined if I jumped, I'd break a bone at best.

***estrangle.** 1 cause to feel less close or friendly; alienate. Origin C15 OFr. *estranger*, from L. *extraneare* 'treat as a stranger' - from L. *extraneus*-irrelevant, An abbreviation of *estrangle* is *strange*.

strange adj to feel indefinably unwell.

*

'Three years together. It was bound to feel like a death,' I tell Ruth. The strange thing was there was no discernable end, unless a subtle facial expression can be counted as a last breath.

Finally he comes for me, and we drive away, our tyres peeling off the warm bitumen, the pleasing drape of lawn on either side gently squeezing us out like a pip.

*

We left the school. I hear Cynthia heads the P&C now. She's still with the blonde, an ex-airhostess apparently, with three children and another on the way. Cynthia will have her hands full there.

It's lonely without her, but I have a lot to thank her for. I have found my power in meaning. I take one word a day, like a pill, it calms me, grounds me in its roots.

Occasionally I bump into her, but only in the freezer section at Woolworths, quite coincidentally. We're savvy smilers, although I know we both sense the duck and weave of our eyes. On occasion we've forgotten ourselves and have glanced each other's cheek; we stand there, arms crossed, shivering with the buzz of the fridge freezers, blaming the brisk temperature for our hasty need to depart. The parting mantra, always – *we must catch up. Yes, we really must catch up.*

The Jennifer Paradox

Many authors seem to face a reoccurring question from their readers, *What was the inspiration for that story?* Or more crudely, *Is that character based on you?* Or, *Did that really happen?* The question is usually circumnavigated, as the author attempts to account for the overlap in fiction and nonfiction, or what one critic describes as the 'dangerous gap' between the two.¹ When readers ask these questions of fiction writers they are demanding another story, a context, a story hidden behind the original text.

Perhaps it is no coincidence in a market that favours nonfiction books that writers have begun to play with the very concept of fiction, feeding the public's craving for a more voyeuristic reading experience. *The Bride Stripped Bare* by Nikki Gemmel is considered by some to be a shameless and commercial attempt to exploit this gap between divulging secrets and inventing fiction. Norma Khouri's *Forbidden Love* tried to completely invert the concept by blatantly presenting her fiction as fact.

The source of fiction, and how we define it, has been a major preoccupation for me during my studies and my own attempts to write. How much imagination should be exercised when writing fiction, and how much personal experience can be safely used, or as is so often said, 'shamelessly exploited?'

When I began my undergraduate degree as a would-be writer in the year 2000, I was preoccupied with the question, *Where does fiction come from?* I began with two pieces of advice from different tutors. Jennifer Kremmer said, 'You should *never* write about something you haven't personally experienced.' And the other, Jennifer Smith, said, 'For god's sake whatever you do, *don't* write about yourself.'² With such opposing views, I had a dilemma. I called it

¹ Helen Garner, *The Feel of Steel*, Picador, 2001, back cover, excerpt from *The Bulletin*.

² Jennifer Kremmer and Jennifer Smith, tutors in creative writing, The University of Technology, Sydney, 2000.

The Jennifer Paradox. There seemed to be no compromise as I entered the world of fiction.

I spent the next few years worrying about where my stories should come from. Was there a preferable source? I still found I was naturally leaning towards writing about subjects and themes directly related to my own experiences. While inclining to the more agreeable advice of the lenient Jennifer, I was haunted by the stern advice of the other: 'Imagine what it would be like to be blind for god's sake!' I didn't want to. But I soon learned there were even problems with the quieter Jennifer's advice. She'd failed to mention that writing about personal experiences had its own set of dichotomies. There were ethical quandaries—how do you fictionalise experiences without feeling subversive, or as though you are transgressing boundaries?

I began to write short stories with guilt. I felt that I was a fraud, not a true fiction writer with a bountiful imagination. Sometimes my guilt even felt a little sordid; was I exposing myself too much in my stories? The dismissive label, *writing as therapy*, was another issue to consider. There was also the possibility that my subjectivity was resulting in writing that was dull and self centred. All these concerns compounded to slow me down, for rather than worrying about *what* the story was about, I was worried about *me*, or rather the identity of the implied author. Perhaps not surprisingly, this question of identity is reflected thematically in the eight stories presented in this collection. My main character, a suburban housewife, has lost her identity, and therefore fails to thrive in her suburban environment much like the writer was failing to thrive in the world of fiction.

Eventually, an opportunity to write an experimental fiction caused me to address the dilemma I began with: who was the 'I' figure in my stories? 'Friction', the piece that begins this collection is a story that plays with the paradox of fact and fiction. It pays homage to John Barth, most famous for his piece, 'Lost in the Funhouse' where he draws attention to the *artifice* in fiction.³ I was attempting to do the opposite by flaunting the *realities* in my own. For me

³ Barth, J. *Lost in the Funhouse*. Bantam Books, New York, 1969.

it was a turnkey piece that allowed me to stop feeling self-conscious and just get on with the job of writing fiction.

In 'Friction' the implied author in the nonfiction text is searching for a character from her past for the purpose of creating the intertwining fictional text. 'Give a man a mask and he'll tell you the truth,' said Oscar Wilde.⁴ In this story I wanted to explore the relationship between character and implied author, to give credence to the idea that *all* authors adopted character to mask their personal connection to text.

Through the process of writing 'Friction' I discovered that despite my best efforts to create a strictly external narrative persona, aspects of my own identity always bled into my fiction, sometimes at a level well below my own consciousness. I would later learn I was also gaining first hand experience of one aspect of Derrida's theory, which is, there is not any extra textual story beyond *the* story, there is only the story.⁵ There is no greater representation of what is only representation in the first place—it's all just a facade. I'd broken the ice and I now felt free to write whatever I wanted. But my problems did not end there. I was supposed to be writing a novel. My character Jacqui, in keeping with her struggle to find her identity, seemed just as ill suited to the novel form as she was to her fictional suburban setting.

Through further research and much experimentation I came to realise that the novel was not the right form or structure for such a character. I'd tried a first person narrator and an omniscient narrator, and the more time I spent writing experimental chapters the more I realised they were culminating in nothingness. Looking back, I can now see a novelist has to be a bit like a conductor of an orchestra, managing her characters so that they come together to represent a complete world. My problem is that, Jacqui, my surrogate fictional self, was more a percussionist in the back row, clanging her cymbal in the wrong places. She was clearly in opposition to her environment—as I was.

⁴ Quote in *Behind that mask of refinement*, Sydney Morning Herald, article by Angela Bennie, September 20, 2004, p.16.

⁵ Referred to in Wenche Ommundsen, *Metafiction? Reflexivity in Contemporary Texts*, Melbourne University Press, 1993, ch: Metamimesis, pp40-41

There was always going to be a strong element of reflexivity in my fiction that I couldn't avoid, and this led me in the direction of the short story. The form seems more suited to outsiders rather than insiders some might say.

Frank O'Connor in his study of the short story, *The Lonely Voice*, says that generally every novel needs a hero. The difference is that the short story doesn't have one at all, rather it has a representative of what he describes as a 'submerged population group'.⁶ He describes the subjects as having the sense of 'outlawed figures wandering the fringes of society'.⁷ To elaborate on this notion of society, O'Connor best describes the difference between the novel and short story forms in the following way:

'The novel can still adhere to the classical concept of a civilised society, of man as an animal who lives in a community, as in Jane Austen and Trollope it obviously does; but the short story remains by its very nature remote from the community – romantic, individualistic, and intransigent.'⁸

He describes Maupassant as a writer representing the submerged sexual population of nineteenth century Europe; Chekhov as a writer inspired by Czarist's Russia's savage treatment of intellectuals; D.H Lawrence an underdog in the English class system who typically blends people living in fairly humble circumstances with aspects of nature.⁹ These writers' stories, he implies, were highly reflective of their own relationship to society in the time they were written, a society they were not at ease with. I began to see the connection. I wanted to write about the housewife in the twenty first century, because I was one. In spite of feminism—or perhaps because of it—my character had not transcended but remained submerged. She was not heroic, she was more a dissident, and perhaps this was why writing a novel from her perspective was always going to be difficult—she didn't have a novelistic panoramic viewpoint.

⁶ Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice*, Melville House Publishing, 2004, p. 18

⁷ *The Lonely Voice*, p. 18

⁸ *ibid*, p.20

⁹ *ibid*, p. 17

Elaborating on this concept of society, O'Connor also notes that throughout its history, the short story thrived in certain geographical locations. These were in America, Ireland and Czarist Russia, whereas in England, where society, especially 19th Century society, ran on well-oiled wheels, the novel prevailed. He theorises that the short story form generally found its writers in places where there was a greater sense of injustice and social fragmentation; the short story writer was inspired by a cynical attitude towards the overriding social and political system they lived within. They were outsiders rather than insiders – thus the title of his study, *The Lonely Voice*.¹⁰

Once again, I was able to see a connection in relation to my own writing, albeit on a smaller local scale. The community that my character finds herself amongst is at odds with the surrounding contemporary society. Although North Shore housewives live in comfort compared with most submerged population groups, ironically it is this comfort that undermines the voice of the housewife in society. Fulltime housewifery is generally considered a traditional life choice with undesirable bourgeois characteristics, and intelligent society has little regard for such women who, long after the sexual revolution, continue to trade independence for status and comfort.

In the media, this 'submerged' population group, to use O'Connor's term, is so often associated with negative qualities – the bullish four-wheel drive vehicle, the larger sized carbon footprint, elitist education and general over-consumption. In my stories, Jacqui is painfully aware of society's tendency to poke its finger at her group, another reason why she herself rejects her own kind. I began to see, with respect for O'Connor's theories, that Jacqui's point of view was more than well suited to the short story form.

In my stories, I look beneath the surface of Jacqui's middleclass suburban marriage to Morton, a professional from Presbyterian conservative roots. They are two people who appear to be happy and have everything, but of course, they don't. They are constantly negotiating their differences with each other and their environment. Each story looks at the same characters from a slightly

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.19

different angle, exploring their human behaviour and offering varying insights into themes such as neurosis, power and exploitation. Overall the collection builds up a picture, like a kaleidoscope going round and round a single situation until it yields all its possibilities. There is something obsessive about the process, but I felt the neurotic circling suited the rhythm of suburbia where the minutiae of life can be so compelling, all-consuming, despite nothing major ever happening.

During the process of writing this collection, I was inspired to find masters of the short story form who wrote with a similar repetitiveness. Jonathan Franzen has reviewed the work of Alice Munro, noting with astonishment and admiration, rather than criticism, that she has worked within an extremely small territory all her writing life. He describes her as 'crafty' for not even attempting to have something new to say. Her own simple life story has been fuelling all her writing for the last fifty years, the same elements being used over and over to retell and reinvent.

'What makes Munro's growth as an artist so crisply and breathtakingly visible...is precisely the familiarity of her materials. Look what she can do with nothing but her own small story; the more she returns to it, the more she finds.'¹¹

I believe Munro's work is based upon this hybrid of fiction and life writing that seems so suitable to the short form. Often Munro's collections involve a large cast of characters but there is always a familiarity about them despite their different names. Her attempt to write a longer work resulted in the collection *The Beggar Maid*. It was short-listed for the Booker prize as a novel, but any writer can see it has risen organically from the hand of a short story writer. Munro's daughter, Sheila Munro, makes direct links in her

¹¹ Jonathan Franzen, *New York Times*, November 14th, 2004

memoir, *Lives of Mothers and Daughters*, between the characters Flo and Rose and her own mother and grandmother.¹²

The Beggar Maid, much like all of Munro's collections, is a series of episodic stories that resemble life. Perhaps because life is a series of episodes rather than highly structured dependent chapters. Her work doesn't feel invented or stylistic, and perhaps that is more due to Munro's application of technique, but I also think it is because the reflective element in her stories distinguishes them as more true to life. They have the quality of a memory, even if they're not—the voice is personal, summarising with affection, wit or mockery, also darting off on little irresistible tangents too as though the author just happens to have remembered something else. Munro re-enters the text, her own story in *The Beggar Maid*, over and over, each time from a fresh angle. The effect is a highly textured reworking of a small world, one that is rich with colour and detail. It is a very comfortable world to be in.

By contrast, Mandy Sayers' collection *15 Kinds of Desire* creates a variety of worlds. Sayer's work here is a perfect example of a technically skilful collection. The common theme of desire connects fifteen fairly disparate stories. Characters do make fleeting reappearances, but this is more as a structural device to connect a diverse set of characters and settings. There is no sense of familiarity in these stories however, no accumulative effect, as each story introduces a completely new set of circumstances to illustrate the theme, desire. The same approach is taken in Cate Kennedy's collection, *Dark Roots*. I suggest that this approach to a short story collection lacks intimacy. Both authors seem to have broad imaginations but far less personal connection to the text. They are very clever storytellers but their work does not seem compellingly important to them, that is, it does not appear to have the energy of something they just *had* to write. Such stories leave an informed reader with a great appreciation for technique, but at the same time a hunger for a little bit more than just performance. Perhaps what is missing is something of the writer's soul.

¹² Sheila Munro, *Lives of Mothers and Daughters*, McClelland & Stewart Ltd, Canada, 2001, ch 1

Pretending you're a blind man is fine if you can do it with authentic feeling. I certainly can't. I'm sure Sayer would try though. Perhaps it is this fearless imagination that alienated me from her work in the first place and made me dizzy with the changes of setting and characters. Clearly the project of fifteen stories requires a dextrous mind and a lot of variance but the overall effect is light rather than textured, each story wrapped up and neatly twisted at the end. Everything Sayer writes in this collection is forced to fit her original idea, that is, the structure imposed by the title, *15 Kinds of Desire*. The writing becomes formulaic. It demonstrates that each story has to be ground out of its own piece of stone or it will suffer from a lack of authenticity that no amount of technique or polish can carry off. You have to mine your soul for the connections, they cannot be superimposed or invented on demand. The final story in Sayer's collection, 'A True Story', is a nonfiction piece. In this Sayer reveals that as a child her world was full of strange and fleeting characters. Ironically, this personal connection when it is revealed goes to explain why there is so much coming and going in Sayer's stories, and no time to feel comfortable dwelling in a particular world as we do with writers such as Munro.

Other fiction writers such as Frank Moorhouse in *The Americans, Baby*, Kate Jennings in *Women Falling Over in the Street*, Katherine Mansfield in *At the Bay*, have created the same sense of familiarity and realism as Munro. Perhaps this is because their fiction seems more true to life than invented? These works feel reflective, highly evocative and descriptive, less based on action and plot and more on moments and feeling—they seem to be attempting to resolve or make sense of something personal, complex or abstract. They have a similar quality to Helen Garner's nonfiction collection, *Feel of Steel*. But even Garner has said of her nonfiction, anyone who thinks she is the 'I' in her stories is seriously mistaken.¹³ I was also to find as I progressed in my writing that despite my personal connection to my fiction, point of view, tone, plot, narrative drive, all the essential narrative elements of story would demand of

¹³ Helen Garner, *The Secret Self: Exploring Biography and Autobiography*, Meanjin, March 1, 2002

me that I use my sluggish imagination. So before I knew it, I had to write fiction to make the stories work.

As O'Connor is one of the masters of short story criticism, I was disheartened to read his appraisal of another master of the short story, Katherine Mansfield. His criticism calls to mind those sensitivities about where the inspiration for a short story should come from, your life or otherwise. O'Connor describes Mansfield as 'a writer without a subject'.¹⁴

The real world of [her] stories is not New Zealand but childhood, and they are written in a complete, hypnotic suspension of the critical faculties.¹⁵

Is it necessary for a short story writer to contextualise her representation, in this case depict New Zealand with the cool eye of an objective adult, or can she create her own world, a wistful one clouded with her own memories? *At the Bay* has its own magical world. I do not consider Mansfield's individuality and subjectivity lessens the value of this story, yet O'Connor certainly thinks it does. He also describes her work as that of a 'clever, spoiled, malicious woman', one without a submerged population group to represent, one whose brilliance is reflected in how far the 'brassy little shop girl of literature' got with her writing rather than the quality of her work. He goes further to say her stories represent only herself, her internal conflict between her false personality and the ideal one. The result, he says, is 'an antithesis—pure contemplation,' and therefore a lack of a subject in her work.¹⁶ But I would suggest that perhaps this is one of her strengths as a writer. O'Connor's words, however, set out to belittle the scope of Mansfield's work. It must be noted he is writing from the 1960's, but I find it curious that his criticisms resonate so much with me today in relation to my own collection. His words seem to press against the concerns I have about my own writing being so personal, so subjective, so very confined to a domestic space. Have I also been lacking a subject?

¹⁴ *The Lonely Voice*, p.125

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*, p133

Women writers in Mansfield's time did not always write with the worldliness of men, or contest the 'human situation', as pointed out by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir would say this was because the female artist had not assumed the human situation, liberated herself, become transcendent.¹⁷ Certainly, my character, Jacqui, does not assume to have progressed far from the very situation that caused Beauvoir to write her major work in 1949. However it is this very irony that motivated me to write this collection in the first place. It seemed intriguing to me that the 1950s housewife was still quietly flourishing like a leafy plant in the suburbs forty-five years after *The Second Sex*, even more bizarre that I'd become such a woman without even realising it. Does this mean this small, selfish, often paranoid space does not beg description? I am not so sure a small world is any less valuable than a lofty one that reaches for the heavens. Philosophically, one cannot exist without the other.

What I found through the process of writing fiction is that inhibitions drop away out of necessity. And fiction evolves naturally, for the more stuck you get the more you have to rely on the dramatic tools of fiction to save you from shapelessness and meaningless dross. So in a sense I don't think either Jennifer was right in her advice. The Jennifers were too polarised. You must write what you can write, or 'write what you know' as Anne Lamott said in her writing book, *Bird by Bird*; that knowledge could be psychic, fantastical, intuitive or grounded in reality.¹⁸ And it can be gained through many sorts of experiences. D.H Lawrence famously said 'I can only write what I know.' Recently, David Malouf said, 'I write because I *don't* know.' Interesting. But the point is not, I think, what you do or don't know, it's the journey. And in the end, once it's all been through the mill, whatever I have said or did not say about my life as a housewife will still read like fiction, but hopefully it will be ringing with a sense of truth.

¹⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Vintage, 1997, p.721

¹⁸ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anchor, 1st Edition, 1995

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