

The Mistake: Some Questions of Ethics and Form

Part I: Inspiration

Chapter 1

The question about ‘your influences’, so often posed to writers, is hard to answer, however great the desire to give an honest reply. You’d like to know, yourself, why you do things the way you do. It hardly seems graceful to admit that, if you take your ambition from Shakespeare, you take your inspiration from ‘Flats to Let’. —Hilary Mantel¹

My usual, perfectly honest reply is, ‘I don’t get them; they get me.’ —Robertson Davies²

The best stories I know, I must not tell. —Bonnie Friedman³

The Mistake was initially inspired by the sensational true story of Keli Lane and the disappearance of her infant daughter Tegan, who has been missing since their discharge from hospital a few days after her birth in September 1996.⁴ The alleged crime did not come to light until some years later. Investigations into Tegan’s disappearance only began in 1999, and the case came to its judicial climax, with Lane’s conviction for murder, at the end of 2010, some months after the initial draft of my novel had been completed. The case is ongoing, with Lane being refused bail in February 2013, pending an appeal against her conviction and eighteen-year sentence.⁵

Keli Lane had been in the news for a couple of years before her story properly crossed

¹ H. Mantel, ‘Where do stories come from’, *The Guardian*, 14 November 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/14/hilary-mantel-newspapers> (accessed 9 January 2012).

² R. Davies, cited in R. Nordquist, ‘Where do writers find their ideas?’, n.d., <http://grammar.about.com/od/advicefromthepros/a/Where-Do-Writers-Find-Their-Ideas.htm/> (accessed 14 April 2012).

³ B. Friedman, ‘Your mother’s passions, your sister’s woes: writing about the living’, in J. Heffron (ed.), *The Best Writing on Writing*, Cincinnati, OH, Story Press, 1994, p. 37.

⁴ W. James, *The Mistake*, Camberwell, VIC, Penguin, 2012.

⁵ ‘Keli Lane defence positive about appeal despite bail refusal’, *The Australian*, 28 February 2013, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/nation/bail-denied-for-baby-killer-keli-lane/story-e6frg6nf-1226587521926> (accessed 28 February 2013).

my always-humming writing radar. Featuring as its main players a prominent rugby star and an elite water-polo player, the tale was shocking to say the least, generating front-page headlines and articles that seemed more appropriate to a gossip column than a serious police inquiry into the fate of a long-missing child. Take, for example, *The Daily Telegraph's* 'The dark shadows of a secret life—Keli kept truth from everyone—WHAT HAPPENED TO BABY TEGAN?'⁶

I vaguely recall hearing of the case via a radio news bulletin, but the story barely registered and was half forgotten even as I heard it. I was busy, with babies of my own, older children, and a book underway—a big historical novel dealing with a story that seemed light years away from the bizarre actions of a not-quite-Olympic water-polo player and her famous footballer ex. My novel, a retelling of a nineteenth-century infanticide, was concerned with matters of consequence, in the past and of the moment: women's suffrage, the plight of unmarried mothers, the genesis of the monumental transformation that was to take place in the lives of twentieth-century women.⁷ The sordid contemporary tale held no particular interest. Not then.

Fast-forward a few years to 2006. The big historical novel had been finished and published, and another was underway, this time concerned with maternity and creativity, inspired by the tale of another lost child and mother (Australian modernist artist Joy Hester and her son Sweeney Reed).⁸ My own children were growing, with the eldest completing his Higher School Certificate (HSC) just as I finished the final draft of this novel, and the youngest old enough for preschool at last. Keli Lane was prominent in the news again, the New South Wales (NSW) coroner having found that he was 'comfortably satisfied' that the infant Tegan was dead, and recommending a murder investigation be carried out.⁹ Once more, the headlines were shrill: 'The many lives of Keli Lane'¹⁰ and 'Lies, possible foul play, mask truth behind Tegan'.¹¹ Tawdry and sensational, with the recounted details barely credible, this was a story tailor-made for

⁶ Front page headlines from the *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, NSW, 29 October 2004.

⁷ W. James, *Out of the Silence*, North Sydney, NSW, Random House Australia, 2005.

⁸ W. James, *The Steele Diaries*, North Sydney, NSW, Random House Australia, 2008.

⁹ D. King, 'Murder probe into missing Tegan', *The Australian*, 16 February 2006, p. 3.

¹⁰ N. Wallace, 'The many lives of Keli Lane', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 February 2006, p. 31.

¹¹ N. Wallace, 'Lies, possible foul play, mask truth behind Tegan', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 February 2006, p. 5.

media exploitation. This time, I listened properly. What I heard was compelling. I wanted to know more.

What I discovered was complex to say the least. The story was oddly difficult to put into logical order, and to express succinctly and coherently. The facts seemed to resist any sort of neat compression, sliding backwards and forwards in time, the ‘truth’ slipping sideways, constantly out of reach. Even now, when I know the story so well, it remains a challenge to get a firm grip on the ‘facts’, and almost impossible to know where to begin. Nevertheless, here are the known facts.

In September 1996, Keli Lane, then twenty-one years of age, a professional water-polo player and teacher in training, gave birth to a daughter, Tegan Lee Lane, in Auburn Hospital, Western Sydney.¹² During her brief stay in the hospital, Keli received no visitors, nor were there any phone calls or enquiries into her wellbeing. She told the nursing staff that the baby’s father was absent, as were her own parents. Both Keli and the baby appeared to be coping well, and on the third day, some hours before the routine final check-up, Keli discharged herself and her child. Tegan has never been seen since. Four hours after leaving the hospital, Keli arrived at a friend’s wedding in Manly, with her then boyfriend, footballer Duncan Gillies. None of her family or friends were aware that Keli had given birth. In 1999, Keli gave birth again, this time in Ryde hospital. Once again, she received no visitors, explaining that her husband and family were overseas, where she would be joining them shortly.

Immediately after the birth, Keli made it clear that she did not want to keep this baby and that she would like to put the infant up for adoption. Her case was assigned to a social worker, interim foster care was arranged and Keli was able to leave the hospital without the child. It was during the processing of routine paperwork relating to the adoption that another community services worker came across records indicating that Keli Lane had previously given birth to two other children. The first, a daughter, was born in 1995, when Keli was just nineteen, and had been adopted out. The second, Tegan, was born in February 1996 but her birth had never been registered and her current whereabouts were unknown. Initially, Keli denied that these children existed,

¹² This chronology has been compiled from a number of sources, which are listed in the bibliography.

but she later claimed that Tegan was living with a family in Perth. The community services worker, concerned about the fate of the missing child, and unconvinced by Keli's assurances, alerted the authorities, and an official investigation into the whereabouts of the missing infant, Tegan Lane, commenced.

As a result of various errors and bureaucratic mishaps, the official investigation moved incredibly slowly. It was not until 2001 that Keli, now partnered and mother to a fourth child, was interviewed by the police. In this initial interview, Keli explained her silence, saying that she had had no choice but to keep quiet about the pregnancies, fearing the reactions of her family and friends. When questioned by the police as to the whereabouts of the missing child, Keli claimed that she had given Tegan to the child's father, Andrew Morris. Interviewed again in 2003, Keli changed her story, claiming that she had given Tegan to an Andrew *Norris* and his partner, Mel, in the hospital car park. News of the case went public at about this time, and Keli was forced to resign from her position as sports mistress at the prestigious Ravenswood School in Sydney. With no resolution in sight, the Manly detectives referred the matter to the NSW coroner in 2005.

The coronial inquest lasted eight months. Lane's friends and family, water-polo teammates, former workmates and ex-lovers were questioned, along with nurses, doctors, and other hospital staff who had been involved in the births and adoptions of Lane's first three children. Lane herself refused to give evidence: when asked whether she could tell the court what had happened to Tegan after she left the hospital with her, Lane replied, 'I do not wish to answer the question, sir.' The NSW Coroner, Mr Abernathy, later stated that this was one of the most frustrating cases of his career. He concluded that although he allowed for the possibility that Tegan was alive somewhere, he was satisfied that all evidence pointed to her being deceased, and recommended that the case be referred back to the NSW homicide squad for further investigation, as he was disturbed by the possibility of foul play.

The police continued to investigate the matter over the next few years. Extensive searches were carried out by police in an attempt to locate both Tegan and the elusive (or illusive) Mr Norris, but to no avail. Eventually, the NSW police referred the brief to the director of public prosecutions, who charged Lane with the murder of Tegan in

late 2009. Lane pleaded not guilty and the case went to trial in August 2010. The trial ran for four months, and despite the entirely circumstantial nature of the evidence, no body, no motive and no intent, the jury found Lane guilty of murder. She was sentenced to eighteen years imprisonment, with a non-parole period of thirteen years, in April 2011.

For this story, the cliché rings true: whatever the ‘truth’ of this particular tale, it is surely stranger than any fiction. The details of the case are labyrinthine: complex, conflicting and frequently confusing. Trying to tell even the outline of the story chronologically and coherently is quite a task; my understanding of what occurred changed constantly as the investigation progressed in real time. Like a badly devised soap opera, the plot twists became ever more absurd and unlikely.

Along with the beyond-belief sequence of events, there was a large and varied cast of characters: the defendant herself, close-lipped, apparently composed; and her bewildered husband, astounded parents, appalled ex-boyfriend, and amazed colleagues and friends. Hovering above the proceedings, omnipresent in her absence, was the missing infant, Tegan.

Keli Lane, or the Keli Lane who was represented in the media, appeared both brash and vulnerable—publicly poised and reserved, yet, on occasion, disarmingly open and clearly emotional. She seemed a familiar type, like the girls with whom I had gone to high school in Manly back in the 1980s. A regular Northern Beaches girl: blonde, pretty, bright, prodigiously sporty, popular and obviously successful. Exceptional, but not unusual. However, for all her familiarity, she was oddly blank, unknowable, maintaining a singular and fascinating opacity. Who is Keli Lane? No one, it appears, really knew her. Her former coach, who has worked with her since she was fifteen, described her as being ‘a puzzle’. One of her best friends has described her as happy-go-lucky but reserved.¹³ Certainly, no one—none of her supposedly close family, her friends or her team-mates—had any inkling of the major events in her life. Three pregnancies, three births, three babies.

¹³ J. Cadzow, ‘Keli Lane’s secrets and lies’, *Newcastle Herald*, 15 April 2011, <http://www.theherald.com.au/story/924422/keli-lanes-secrets-and-lies/> (accessed 12 November 2012).

How could something like this happen? I wondered. With easy access to effective contraception, and, if that fails, the option of safe termination (an option, it would be revealed later in court, that Lane had previously taken) it was difficult to imagine a healthy middle-class Australian girl of my generation or younger giving birth to an unwanted child. As the declining number of Australian-born children being put up for adoption shows, this particular option is very rarely taken.¹⁴ It was even more difficult to imagine that such a thing could happen not once but three times. So, how did it happen? Why did it happen? And most importantly, what happened to the baby? What happened to Tegan?

And I realised, with that heady mixture of absolute certainty and abject terror that seems always to accompany the first stirrings of inspiration, that if I wanted to know more, I would have to make it mine. I would have write this story myself.

The Mistake is not the story of Keli Lane.

It could have been. The real case struck so many familiar chords. Lane's stamping ground, Manly, Freshwater, Curl Curl, was my own. I was born in Manly and, in between forays into western NSW, much of my childhood and my teenage years as well as a fair portion of my adult life was spent in the Northern Beaches. Despite our difference in age, I knew, or felt that I knew, Lane's 'type' fairly well. Surely I had known similar girls at high school (the sister school to Lane's own)—golden girls who were popular with teachers and students alike, who were part of the local community in ways that I, who had moved back and forth between city and country, never could be. I knew the geographical terrain, too, and figured that I could make a reasonable stab at Lane's social scene. However, more compelling than any surface familiarity was the fact that my curiosity was piqued. I was intrigued, just like the rest of the nation, by Lane's psychology. It would be a great narrative challenge, I imagined, to construct an authentic and credible fictional version of Keli Lane, a young woman whose real-life choices, so publicly exposed, were almost impossible to comprehend.

¹⁴ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Most Adoptions in Australia from Overseas* [media release], Canberra, Australian Government, 14 December 2011, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/media-release-detail/?id=10737420915>.

The parallels to the story told in my first novel were also striking. *Out of the Silence* (2005) was a fictional retelling of a historically significant turn-of-the-century infanticide.¹⁵ The main focus of the narrative was the tragic story of nineteen-year-old domestic servant, Maggie Heffernan: her doomed romance and shamefully hidden pregnancy, the drowning of her baby son and her subsequent incarceration. The work had also involved an examination of the political and social situation of women in *fin de siècle* Australia, and the opportunity to examine a loosely analogous occurrence 100 years on seemed an ideal way to look closely at how much has really changed over the last hundred years. The world inhabited by contemporary women would be virtually unrecognisable in many ways to those nineteenth-century women, but the actions of Lane made me wonder: what effect have the vast social changes of the past century had on the psychology of women? Conversely, why haven't the vast social changes managed to transform the interior as well, completely eradicating the necessity, the *possibility*, of certain actions? It was disturbing to think that despite all the changes for the better, a well-educated, well-resourced young woman like Keli Lane could feel just as desperate as poor Maggie Heffernan when confronted with an unplanned pregnancy.

So, it was settled—in my mind, at any rate. My next novel would be based on the Keli Lane story. I wrote to my agent and told her my latest plan. Naturally, she had heard of the case. ‘Great idea,’ she said. ‘What a crazy story! And perfect for you.’ However, I was a long way from anything more than the germ of an idea. My second novel was only in its editing phase and was yet to be published, and the viability of my career as a writer was still uncertain. There might not even be another novel.

I discussed the story with a friend who was visiting, telling her I planned to write a novel based on this notorious case. While our children played noisily in the adjoining room, we chatted at the kitchen table, dissecting the facts of the case, interrupting our conversation intermittently to provide drinks, fruit, sweets, advice, the occasional reprimand. We talked about Keli Lane and decided that whether or not she had actually killed the infant was almost immaterial; more significant was the psychological condition of Lane herself. She must be *mad*, surely, and not bad. ‘And there has to be something weird going on in that family,’ my friend argued. ‘Something very dark.’ I

¹⁵ W. James, *Out of the Silence*, op. cit.

asked what she meant. ‘For that girl to have behaved the way she has—the lying, the hiding, the recurring pregnancies. Even if that baby is out there alive somewhere. Something must have happened to her, to Keli Lane, herself. I mean, it looks like she’s got everything, doesn’t it? Success, money, good looks, a good job, a decent family. She shouldn’t be such a mess. So what’s going on?’ This was what made the Lane case so fascinating. *Of course* there was something dark going on behind that apparent normality. Of course she shouldn’t be such a mess. But what? Why?

My friend and I, both writers, habitually collected stories and characters, in the same way a quilter keeps baskets of scraps—waiting to fill that elusive gap, to complete that perfect pattern. It was nothing out of the ordinary, then, for us to discuss various scenarios, to coolly dissect this sordid possibility and to toss our own stories into the mix: an aunt who behaved like this, a father who did that, a wife who let this or that happen, a mother who turned a blind eye, the effects of certain actions on subsequent generations, the ongoing trauma. It was so easy, gossiping like this about people like Keli Lane, reluctantly caught in the public spotlight and so brightly illuminated that they are somehow no more real than storybook characters or figures on a screen. Lane’s story, disembodied from its lived reality, had already taken on the distancing mantle of history, and we had blithely appropriated the story, claimed it as if by right, as our own.

I spoke about the case to various other friends and acquaintances. Not surprisingly, it soon became apparent that the degrees of separation between Lane and me were somewhat less than the notional six. My doctor had played football with Lane’s father as a schoolboy; Lane’s ex-boyfriend’s mother, at one point charged by Lane with the secret delivery of the missing Tegan, now worked in a friend’s medical practice; a family member had been the Lane family’s butcher. I had a sudden fantasy of making use of those connections: perhaps I would be granted access to some of the main players. Perhaps I could even interview them in my quest to make sense of the story. Perhaps, by some miracle of intervention, I would be able to speak to Lane herself. And maybe—maybe—Lane would tell me what she had failed to tell anyone else.

I told my mother about my plans for the new book, just in conversation, over the phone.

There was a long silence. Then: ‘You want to write *that* terrible story?’ I thought at first that the odd note in her voice was simply surprise. ‘But that’s awful. You can’t do that. It’s so sensational. What a dreadful thing to do!’ She sounded appalled. I was bewildered, my mother was seldom less than enthusiastic about my mooted writing projects, and never critical.

‘But I wouldn’t write it sensationally,’ I assured her. ‘I’d be sensitive. Careful. Just.’

‘You can’t write that story,’ she said, suddenly fierce. ‘She’s a *real* person.’

‘Oh, but Mum —.’

She cut me off, saying with certainty and some severity, ‘It’s just not right.’

I didn’t argue, instead turning the conversation to other, safer subjects: house renovations, children’s doings, family matters.

Later, though, I thought about what my mother had said: ‘It’s just not right.’ At first, I laughed it off. Surely I had the right, perhaps even a responsibility, to take whatever story—*whoever’s* story—and tease the inherent meaning, the larger truth, out of the chaos that is the real world? Weren’t writers supposed to be exempt from worldly considerations? Shouldn’t we embrace, without flinching, the legendary sliver of ice in the heart that allows us to write our passions clearly, coolly and without fear or favour?

Of course, if I were to write a fictionalised account of this story, I would make every effort to write soberly and unsensationally; I would do my best to provide a fair and serious interpretation of the situation—just as I had in my historical novel. But I would attempt to write, too, with a certain firmness of hand and heart, and there was no telling where my sympathies might lie. If my fictionalised portrait of Keli Lane was not entirely sympathetic, it would be because it was necessary to my pursuit of a larger truth.

Still, my mother’s words haunted me: ‘It’s just not right.’

I read all I could about the case, printing out endless articles from Australian newspapers, and following online commentary and blogs. I read around the subject, too—works on hidden pregnancies, infanticide, adoption.¹⁶ My research was a little

¹⁶ See bibliography for a list of sources.

premature. I wasn't really ready to embark on another novel, but I was excited, as always, by the prospect of new work, a fresh start. I thought hard about the way I might turn this story into fiction. I compiled lists. I even wrote out the bare bones of the narrative. It was simple, really, to sketch a sort of structure, a frame on which I might begin, when the story and all of its protagonists already existed. All I had to do was to come up with a solution to the central mystery—what happened to the baby?—and I already had some ideas about this. What I needed was a way in. I searched for a voice, an image, a scene, a place to start, but nothing came. That's okay, I thought. I wasn't ready to begin. Not yet, anyway. I had other things to do—another novel to complete, a job, a family to look after. I had too many other things to do. Keli Lane would have to wait.

In a bid to build up an online writing presence, I decided to run a blog, which I named *Literary Gnat*, where I offered up bits and bobs of news, and the occasional odd and entertaining story, to what was usually a very small audience.¹⁷ Old newspapers are a great writing resource, and a number of my early stories were based on articles I had come across while trawling through library microfilm, or sneezing over dusty old papers I had picked up at market stalls and second-hand book stores. Many of those articles, cut from the pages of now defunct British scandal rags of the fifties and sixties (*News of the World*, *Truth*, *The Daily Mirror*), related sensational and frequently bizarre tales of human sin, tragedy and folly. Regardless of the tragedies enacted, the historical nature of the reports, along with the old-fashioned language in which the stories were related, the grainy photographs and the faded print, made these stories seem distant, vaguely quaint, fairytale-like—and often, somehow, amusing.

One day, I came across a story I found particularly diverting—a brilliant cautionary tale, a perfect narrative exemplar of the straw breaking the camel's back.¹⁸ Edith Chubb, a respectable middle-aged wife and mother from Broadstairs, Kent, had strangled her sister-in-law, Lilian, with her own scarf when Lilian had left a dirty cup on the sink. Lilian was clearly an unwelcome visitor—she had come for a three-day visit six years

¹⁷ The original version of *Literary Gnat*, along with the content of entries recorded here, is no longer online or accessible. A new version of the weblog can be found at <http://literarygnat.blogspot.com.au/>.

¹⁸ While I can no longer find the originally cited article, an interesting study of the case has been made by L. Seal: 'Issues of gender and class in the Mirror newspapers' campaign for the release of Edith Chubb', *Crime, Media, Culture*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2009, pp. 57–78.

earlier and never left. To add insult to injury, it was claimed that she had never lifted a finger in the house. Mrs Chubb's patience was sorely tried, with ultimately fatal consequences for her sister-in-law. The judge was most sympathetic, not towards the victim but towards the much put-upon killer, and Chubb was given a surprisingly lenient sentence. I typed up the article in full, including names of both victim and perpetrator, added a few smarty-pants comments, and then posted it. There were a few amused rejoinders, all tongue-in-cheek, none particularly sympathetic towards the victim, from my blog's readers. Then, in the evanescent way of the blogosphere, the post was superseded by the next and then the next until it was all but forgotten.

Or so I thought. A few months later, I received a rash of emails and blog comments from the grandson of the killer, challenging me on my insensitivity and callousness. How could I laugh at someone who had gone through such pain? the writer asked. What sort of person was I to make light of such a tragic situation? His grandmother had been a wonderful woman, he wrote, a widow who had struggled hard in difficult times to bring up her children, one of whom was severely disabled, and the visiting aunt had ruined her life. His grandmother had acted badly in a fit of anger, but she had paid for her crime. The man's letters, his accusations and pleas for understanding, were heartfelt and rather heart-wrenching, and they brought me up short. I would never have blithely posted the article had I imagined that the woman could still be alive, but snared by the illusory distancing mechanism of the past, I had never considered the possibility that the woman's family would still be around, or would care enough to spend time Googling her name and thus alight upon my blog post. Chastened, I apologised for my thoughtless behaviour, my poor taste. There was little I could say to excuse myself, though. Somehow, it had escaped me that this person—a momentary sensation, a headline in her native land more than fifty years ago and consequently a minor headline in distant Australia—had actually existed. In real life. I did not take account of the fact that my words, so heedlessly written, and for such petty satisfaction, would have any consequences.

In light of this, I began to think seriously about the ramifications of fictionalising a well-known story, with protagonists who were clearly recognisable and based on 'real people' who, as my mother had pointed out, might even read what I had written. Although I had vaguely considered the dangers to myself—the accusations of

sensationalism and opportunism that might be levelled—I had not considered the ripples and waves such a narrative might produce, moving outwards, initially, but inevitably finding their way back to the source, to the real Keli Lane and her family.

Chapter 2

How can we expect novelists to be moral when their trade forces them to treat every end they meet as no more than an imperfect means to a novel? —
Randall Jarrell¹

What *is* ethical practice for a fiction writer? What does it mean to write fiction ethically? Unlike most professions, novelists are not bound by any sort of formal professional code of conduct. We are subject, of course, to the judgement of others—our peers, critics and readers—as well as to the laws of libel and defamation. However, as such legal strictures can be difficult to apply in practice, there is little to stop a fiction writer from writing what they will and claiming, as the familiar legal disclaimer has it, that any resemblance to actuality is purely coincidental. It is very much a case of being led by the individual conscience—which, naturally, is subject to considerable variation.

For writers of non-fiction, the case is somewhat different. Journalists, the frontline providers of non-fiction, are bound by industry rules as well as the law. In Australia, members of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) must adhere to a specific code of ethics that demands honesty, fairness, independence and respect for the rights of others.² Journalists are also expected to abide by the laws of libel, defamation and disclosure, and can be jailed or fined for deviating from these laws.

Despite these defences against both untruth and injurious behaviour, non-fiction is increasingly subject to a considerable blurring of boundaries, particularly within new sub-genres such as creative non-fiction, and with controversies erupting over particular works.³ Helen Garner's *The First Stone* (1992), a non-fiction account of a sexual harassment scandal at Melbourne University's Ormond College, created something of a literary storm, not only because her critique of sexual politics was regarded as heretical by a number of prominent Australian feminists, but because Garner explicitly

¹ R. Jarrell, *Pictures from an Institution*, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1986, p. 8.

² Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, *Journalists' Code of Conduct*, n. d. ,
<http://www.alliance.org.au/code-of-ethics.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

³ L. Appeganisi et al., 'Literary non-fiction: the facts', *The Guardian*, 21 September 2012,
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/sep/21/literary-nonfiction-the-facts> (accessed 22 September 2012).

fictionalised some aspects of the story in order to avoid litigation.⁴ While detractors of the work argued that the fictionalisation created an unfair bias in Garner's account of the affair, and even some who broadly supported the substance of the book were concerned that Garner's use of fictional techniques undermined the validity of her account, *The First Stone* remains well within the ethical parameters expected of non-fiction.⁵

More recently, vastly embellished and even blatantly fictional biographies and autobiographies have further muddied the once clear waters of non-fiction. In Australia, Norma Khouri's bestselling memoir, *Forbidden Love* (2003), which apparently told the story of the honour killing of her best friend, was exposed as a fabrication.⁶ In the United States (US), James Frey was publicly outed as, at best, an exaggerator, undergoing a public scolding by his erstwhile champion Oprah Winfrey when his misery memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, was found to have veered from the truth quite substantially.⁷ A class action on behalf of Frey's duped readers, the first of its kind in the US, was subsequently mounted against the author and his publisher, Random House, with the plaintiffs raising claims of negligence, false advertising, breach of contract and fraud.

Although both Khouri and Frey claimed to have lied and embroidered the facts for some sort of 'greater good', it appears that most readers still expect a well-defined demarcation between truth and fiction; there is an expectation that writers who are presenting works labelled 'non-fiction' should at least attempt to tell the truth. The ethical ramifications in these cases seem quite clear: calling fiction 'non-fiction', or stories 'truth', for whatever reason, is clearly unacceptable, and the deceit leads to a sense of betrayal on the part of the reader.⁸

⁴ H. Garner, *The First Stone*, Sydney, NSW, Picador, 1995; Following the publication of *The First Stone*, two collections of essays responding to Garner's perceived attitude towards feminism were published: V. Trioli (ed.), *Generation F: Sex, Power and the Young Feminist*, Port Melbourne, VIC, Minerva, 1996 and J. Mead (ed.), *Bodyjamming*, Milsons Point, NSW, Vintage, 1997.

⁵ See, for example, Marion Halligan, 'That's my Story and I'm Sticking to it', *Australian Humanities Review*, September–November, 1998, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-1998/halligan.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

⁶ N. Khouri, *Forbidden Love: A Harrowing True Story of Love and Revenge in Jordan*, Sydney, NSW, Bantam, 2003; M. Knox and C. Overington, 'An imaginary life', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 July 2004, p. 25.

⁷ J. Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*, London, UK, John Murray, 2003.

⁸ S. Stern, 'Sentimental frauds', *Law & Social Enquiry*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2011, pp. 83–5.

While historians are not bound by additional laws (other than in the case of holocaust deniers) or an industry code of conduct, they too are obliged to write from verifiable sources—and are generally dependant on acceptance by the academy and subject to the critiques of their peers for publication. Any deliberate deviation from what can be shown to be true—imaginative excursions into the minds of historical figures, conjectures about undocumented actions and motivations—tend to be clearly signposted as speculative, as in the case of Simon Schama’s writing, for instance, or experimental.⁹ While there is always debate about the possibility of objective truth, historians are very protective of the need to maintain the boundaries between fiction and history. When Australian historian Inga Clendinnen took novelist Kate Grenville to task for her reported assertion that fiction could more effectively tell the story of the past than history, she criticised what she regarded as the novel’s ‘casual transpositions’ of actual events, and disputed Grenville’s assertion that empathy was the ultimate tool in explaining past actions.¹⁰

While the ethics of writing about real people for the purposes of non-fiction are subject to certain limits and are regularly scrutinised, the ethical ramifications of using real stories and real people (however disguised) in fiction has received little serious attention, although readers are always fascinated by the connections between a writer’s biography and their creative work. Perhaps because writers of fiction generally make no claim to be telling the objective truth, the relationship between reality and fiction seems far less problematic. Fiction writers are bound by no formal codes, and once they have appended the common disclaimer that ‘the characters and events depicted in this novel are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental’, they are rarely subject to any legal constraints.

Although it is not a common occurrence, those who feel their reputations have been damaged in a novel can sue, and a novel can be abandoned by a publisher for fear of

⁹ S. Schama, *Dead Certainties: Unwarranted Speculations*, London, UK, Granta Publications, 1991.

¹⁰ J. Sullivan, ‘Making a fiction of history’, *The Age*, 21 October 2006, p. 12; I. Clendinnen, ‘The history question: who owns the past?’, *Quarterly Essay 23*, Black Inc., Melbourne, VIC, October 2006; Grenville has publicly distanced herself and her work from this argument, maintaining that the comments that sparked the debate were taken out of context and distorted, and that subsequent claims and attributions have been patently false—see Grenville’s website, *Facts and fiction*, <http://kategrenville.com/node/75> (accessed 26 May 2013).

legal reprisals. British novelist Amanda Craig's first novel, *A Vicious Circle*, was pulped by her publisher when a high-profile critic claimed that he was the model for an unpleasant character, and threatened legal action.¹¹ Happily for Craig, who refuted the purported resemblance, the novel was taken up by another publisher and no legal action was ever taken.¹² In 1988, Australian novelist Amanda Lohrey had her novel *The Reading Group* pulped and, in addition, was forced to pay a cash settlement after Tasmanian senator Terry Aulich claimed he had been defamed in the work.¹³ More recently, French author Christine Angot had to pay tens of thousands of dollars in damages for creating characters that were clearly based on her husband's ex-girlfriend and her family.¹⁴

Those who feel they have been wronged in fiction may also take action outside of strictly legal procedures. Academic Stuart Glover, who was aggrieved to find himself a character in former friend Nick Earls's 1996 novel *Zigzag Street*, issued him with a joke defamation writ, and later insisted that he sign a document that would require Earls to acknowledge his appropriation of Glover's life in any plays or future editions of the work.¹⁵

Notwithstanding the skirmish between Clendinnen and Grenville outlined above, even writers of historical fiction are often reluctant to challenge accepted accounts of history in any serious way; rather, they offer up the usual qualifications, and admit that their account will be biased, subjective and largely imagined—that is, fictional.¹⁶ However, in truth, no writer can claim to write solely from the imagination: writers of fiction are notorious for using their own lives, as well as those of their families and friends, or versions of them, as fodder for character and plot. Regardless of any disclaimer, there will always be some implicit connection—some correspondence, however tenuous—with a writer's lived reality. However, the question of what it means to use real people and real stories is one that is often overlooked, perhaps because even the

¹¹ A. Craig, *A Vicious Circle*, London, UK, Fourth Estate, 1996.

¹² A. Craig, 'Honestly, it's only a novel', *The Guardian*, 16 September 1996, p. T8.

¹³ S. Caterson, 'Pulped Fiction, it's a fact', *The Age*, 3 April 2005, p. 32.

¹⁴ J. Walsh, 'If you're going to write fiction, do at least try to make the stuff up', *The Independent*, 29 May 2013, p. 22.

¹⁵ N. Earls, *Zigzag Street*, Sydney, NSW, Anchor, 1996; S. Johnson, 'Truth or dare', *QWeekend Magazine*, 26 May 2012, p. 10.

¹⁶ For my own such 'qualifications' regarding *Out of the Silence*, see W. James, 'History and fiction', *Meanjin*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2009, pp. 15–16.

writers themselves have difficulties negotiating, or even recognising, the boundaries between the real and the imagined.

While the question of ethics, of rightness, seems most urgent when applied to the *explicit* fictionalising of real situations and real people (in novels that are clearly based on real events, historical as well as contemporary), even in the writing of fiction that situates itself as almost wholly imagined, questions of betrayal, exploitation and appropriation inevitably arise. In her exploration of the ethics of writing fiction, ‘Appropriating others’ stories’, writer and ethicist Claudia Mills attempts to hack a path through the moral maze that confronts fiction writers.¹⁷ Initially, she acknowledges the difficulties of imposing any sort of code of ethics on fiction writers, whom she describes as being ‘an unruly and unorganised bunch, scribbling away in isolated garrets and bars, hardly the model of what we take to be a *profession*’. Mills disputes the possibility of any writerly exemption—the notion of artistic licence—from ordinary moral values.¹⁸ She takes a harm versus benefits approach, distinguishing between two major categories of harm that a writer can inflict on those whose lives they draw on for material: publicly damaging their reputation, or privately causing them psychological pain.¹⁹ It is impossible to know how frequently friends and family members of fiction writers have had their reputations damaged within their own circle, but Mills contends that the desire for revenge that frequently accompanies such fictionalisations is unfair and unanswerable. Further, she claims that this sort of harm is indefensible unless the writer is serving a ‘larger’ political truth, in which case the metaphorical slinging of mud at public figures may be justifiable.²⁰

In the second category, Mills theorises that only portraits that are unkind and unflattering in an ‘untruthful sense’—those created out of spite or resentment, and those that are one-sided or caricatures—are harmful psychologically. In both private and public categories, Mills argues that there is no justification for art that causes pain, and that as greatness or worth in artistic endeavours can never be measured in any objective sense, there is no way of judging whether the hurt was

¹⁷ C. Mills, ‘Appropriating others’ stories : some questions about the ethics of writing fiction’, *Journal of Social Enquiry*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2000, pp. 195–206.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 195.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 197.

²⁰ *ibid*, p. 198.

‘worth it’.²¹ She also makes the point that any such ethical derogation will always undermine the work itself. Mills contends that, essentially, greatness in art cannot come from meanness of mind, and that no great truth will be discovered in works that are themselves unethical. Ethical shortcomings inevitably lead to artistic compromise: in the end, moral flaws become artistic flaws and therefore harm can never be justified.²²

Australian novelist Charlotte Wood has written of the ethical quagmire in which she found herself while writing her novel *The Children*.²³ Although the novel is largely an imagined narrative, not based on any specific real-life scenario, Wood inevitably found herself drawing material from the real world, and confronting complex issues of appropriation and acknowledgement. In general, her dilemmas were resolved positively, but she occasionally caused unintentional hurt or confusion, forcing her to ‘face the idea that causing pain to others is a novelist’s occupational hazard’.²⁴ Eager to use a particularly traumatic family incident as the starting point of her novel, but anxious to avoid wounding her family and not wanting to be seen as heartlessly exploiting their story, Wood went to the trouble of asking for permission, and was shocked by the subjects’ blithe acquiescence. Conversely, a relatively insignificant childhood argument that she mined for the purposes of fiction unexpectedly generated additional sibling angst. Wood’s interviews with other Australian writers—Malcolm Knox, Helen Garner, Robert Drewe, Ashley Hay and Tegan Bennett Daylight—revealed similar experiences. Only Ashley Hay, fearful of media attempts to shoehorn authors into their fictional worlds, claimed to make any deliberate attempt to obfuscate reality. Of the writers interviewed, only Hay, Daylight and Wood have ever asked permission to use a friend or family member’s story in a fictional narrative. Such permissions are themselves ethically complex, Wood concedes, as the ‘subjects’ could not know what use the writers were going to make of the material, or how readers might respond. Many of the writers acknowledged that while they had certain reservations about the ethics of using others’ lives as material, and were not willing to sacrifice friendship, and although they worked hard to avoid inflicting pain wherever possible, it was sometimes unavoidable.

²¹ *ibid*, p. 200.

²² *ibid*, p. 202.

²³ C. Wood, ‘Forgive me, forgive me: the ethics of using other peoples’ lives in fiction’, *Meanjin*, vol. 68, no. 4, 2009, pp. 66–83.

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 66.

Helen Garner, who acknowledges that her writing is almost exclusively autobiographical, is less circumspect in her appropriation.²⁵ In an earlier essay, she defends her use of others' lives along with any hurt she has unwittingly inflicted:

The deal is this: if I'm rough on myself, it frees me to be rough on others as well. I stress the unappealing, mean, aggressive, unglamorous aspects of myself as a way of lessening my anxiety about portraying other people as they strike me.²⁶

In *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, American critic Wayne C Booth also considers the tricky matter of writerly appropriation.²⁷ In answering his own question, 'What are the author's responsibilities to those whose lives they use as material?', Booth maintains that the limits on a 'writer's freedom to expose, in the service of art or self, the most delicate secrets of those whose lives provide material', can only be applied by the individual writer.²⁸ He concludes that it matters little to the reader whether a character is based on a real-life person or is entirely imaginary.

As Charlotte Wood discovered, readers themselves are not always reluctant to provide the subject matter. Novelist Anne Lamotte, in her memoir of writing, *Bird by Bird*, writes of the intense anxiety she experienced as a child when her writer father's disparaging commentary on the local community was published.²⁹ Fearing social exclusion and hostile confrontation, she was pleasantly surprised to discover that many in the community regarded his opinions in a positive light—indeed, they felt he had written of them and for them. Discovering, in her teenage years, a talent for observational writing herself, Lamotte was encouraged by her friends to write accounts of what went on in their lives: parties, schoolyard blow-ups, scenes between parents that they had related to her. 'I could make it vivid and funny, and even exaggerate some of it so that the event became almost mythical, and the people involved seemed larger, and there was a sense of larger significance, of meaning.'³⁰

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 72.

²⁶ H. Garner, 'I', in P. Craven, (ed.), *The Best Australian Essays*, Black Inc., Melbourne, VIC, 2002, p. 152.

²⁷ W.C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1988.

²⁸ *ibid*, pp. 130–1.

²⁹ A. Lamotte, *Bird by Bird*, New York, NY, Anchor, 1995.

³⁰ *ibid*, p. xix.

However, when the mythologising and significance run counter to the expectations of those whose stories are being told, the experience can be hurtful, and regarded as a betrayal or even rank treachery. As Mills observes, ‘Authors who expose family secrets, even those who simply publicize the quiet textures of everyday family life, may seem to transgress certain boundaries that appropriately protect intimacy.’³¹ In a very public airing of what was already rather conspicuous grubby linen, British writer Hanif Kureishi’s sister, Yasmin, demanded in the pages of *The Independent* that her brother stop using his family as fodder for his fiction.³² Outraged by Kureishi’s constant and frequently negative portrayal of family members in both his novels and screenplays, Yasmin declared that her brother should not ‘expect to be able to just trample over others like a greedy shopper at the first day of the sales, rifling through the gear for the best bargains to enhance his own image’. Although conceding that writers should be able to make use of personal experience, she denounced Kureishi’s use of his art for malicious purposes, or to settle scores, as ‘an abuse of privilege’.³³

What was I to make of all this when it came to my own situation? It was evident that writing fiction, any sort of fiction, could be ethically tricky. As real life is necessarily and unavoidably mined to provide subject matter, which is then inextricably woven into the fabric of fictional narratives, a dilemma arises. My own writing habits attest to this: over the years, aspects of my own and my friends’ and family’s lives—sometimes transformed beyond recognition, but often not—have provided plot and character elements in my novels and short stories. In the main, when it has been noticed by those whose lives I have borrowed, such appropriation has been accepted, greeted with appreciation and, occasionally, delight. Once or twice, I have had to argue about the provenance of this or that character (‘It’s not *you!*’) or my take on a particular event, but there has been no reaction strong enough to make me stop writing, or even alter, any particular story. So, why did the Lane story feel so different, so fraught? Why shouldn’t I take her story, lock, stock and barrel, and use it overtly, unashamedly? There could be no accusations of maliciousness, no charges of betrayal, when I had no real connection to the protagonists or to the story. Surely, the benefits

³¹ C. Mills, op.cit., p. 8.

³² Y. Kureishi, ‘Keep me out of your novels: Hanif Kureishi’s sister has had enough’, *The Independent*, 4 March 2008, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/keep-me-out-of-your-novels-hanif-kureishis-sister-has-had-enough-790839.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

³³ *ibid.*

would outweigh any possible harm?

Along with the countless newspaper and magazine articles covering the case, the Keli Lane story has already been the subject of two non-fiction works, both written by journalists who had previously reported on the development of the investigation in the Australian print media.³⁴ As well as factual analysis, the Lane case has also been the subject of countless speculative articles, opinion columns, editorials and letters to the editor in the conventional print media.³⁵ Public scrutiny and interest is no longer confined to arguments around the kitchen table or the office water cooler, as were those that raged after the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain in the early 1980s. In these days of the internet, public discussion is far more ubiquitous and tangible, with countless websites and blogs of widely varying provenance, respectability and relevance recounting details of the case, surmising, accusing and (although only very occasionally) defending Lane. If the story was already so much in the public eye, what possible difference could my fictional version make? Why shouldn't I write a novel set in Sydney's Northern Beaches, using a protagonist a little younger than me, who is an elite sportswoman with a policeman father, a footballer boyfriend, three pregnancies and a missing baby? Why not use all the available facts? Once a story is so clearly and ubiquitously in the public domain, doesn't it belong to all of us?

While public stories have always been a source for novelists (and poets and playwrights), there has been some criticism from both writers and critics in recent years of what some regard as fiction writers' growing preoccupation with characters and stories that are real rather than invented. Some of these critics regard an investment of creative energy in stories that are already available, and whose significance has already been thoroughly investigated in the public arena, as evidence of widespread imaginative exhaustion. Others are more concerned about the ethical ramifications of such choices. For instance, American writer Jonathan Dee contends that contemporary novelists' increasing fascination with fictionalising real people, historical and contemporary, is evidence of a 'cultural sea change that slowly establishes a total equivalence

³⁴ A. Langdon, *The Child Who Never Was: Looking for Tegan Lane*, Double Bay, NSW, Park Street Press, 2007; R. Chin, *Nice Girl*, Sydney, NSW, Simon & Schuster, 2011.

³⁵ See selected articles on the Lane case in bibliography.

between what's real and what's plausible'.³⁶ This equivalence, Dee claims, is disturbing, signalling the modern world's growing discomfort with the unknowable, and auguring a decline in the continuing vitality and relevance of fiction itself.³⁷ Canadian writer Guy Gavriel Kay extends Dee's argument by citing contemporary works that feature characters based on public figures from the recent past.³⁸ Kay argues that novelists' claims to access the interior workings of real people are not merely the result of an increasingly atrophied capacity for invention, but evidence of an 'erosion of the ethical value of privacy and a parallel emergence of a widespread sense of entitlement to look at—or to make use of—the lives of others.'³⁹

Historian Anthony Beevor, stung by an inaccurate and unsympathetic characterisation of his great-great-grandmother in Kate Pullinger's novel *The Mistress of Nothing* (2009), also voices his concerns.⁴⁰ While acknowledging that fiction has always made use of history and real people, Beevor fears that the increasing erosion of fact and fiction in such 'factional' works will result in a general corruption of history. This, he claims will create a credulous populace that willingly accept the propaganda of false legends and conspiracy theories—what he refers to as 'counter-knowledge'—and is thereby made vulnerable to both political and religious fundamentalism.⁴¹

Entering the fray with a more personal, but no less relevant, perspective, Booker Prize-winning novelist AS Byatt has also expressed doubts about the ethics of using real-life characters, including historical figures, in fiction. Although Byatt, along with her sister Margaret Drabble, has in the past been both victim and perpetrator of such usage, she now regards the appropriation of others' lives as an invasion of privacy, and 'a kind

³⁶ J. Dee, 'The reanimators: on the art of literary graverobbing', *Harper's Magazine*, vol. 298, no. 1789, pp. 76–84.

³⁷ *ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁸ G. Kay, 'Are novelists entitled to use real-life characters?', *The Guardian*, 20 August 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2009/aug/20/novelists-real-life-characters> (accessed 20 May 2013). See also Kay's extended discussion on the ethical ramifications of the erosion of privacy: 'The fiction of privacy: fantasy and the past.' *Journal for the Fantastic in Arts*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2009, pp. 240–7.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ K. Pullinger, *Mistress of Nothing*, London, UK, Serpent's Tail, 2009.

⁴¹ A. Beevor, 'Real concerns', *The Guardian*, 25 July 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jul/25/antony-beevor-author-faction> (accessed 20 May 2013).

of attack on them'.⁴² Concerned about the ramifications of such appropriations, and knowing of several suicide attempts by those whose lives have been used by writers of fiction, Byatt now avoids putting real people into her work.

I had already encountered related ethical questions during the writing of my first novel, *Out of the Silence*.⁴³ While there had been little fear of my inflicting pain on anyone directly involved in the case, as the main protagonists are long since deceased, there was still the question of how to best represent the historical figure of the Australian suffragist, Vida Goldstein, an important figure in the story of Maggie Heffernan and a secondary protagonist of my narrative. Goldstein was a prominent public figure in her own time, much written about retrospectively, and the prospect of bringing her to fictional life was daunting. With the spectre of those other authorities on the subject—historians, biographers and others—looming over my shoulder, it took me some time to find a way to bring her to life authentically as well as sensitively.

An unexpected but significant problem with the figure of Goldstein is that in all accounts she is purely a force for good. She had very little in the way of a known private life—although there were some rumours of past love gone wrong, she appeared to have led an entirely respectable, eminently blameless existence.⁴⁴ Her personality and character also seem without blemishes: she was, by all accounts (and nothing I have read by or about Goldstein has ever contradicted this view) highly intelligent, good humoured and even-tempered. Hers was a life of public service and private incorruption. Goodness, as any writer of fiction is well aware, is not a compelling property in narrative fiction, which obtains its momentum from tension, so, after various experiments and much angst, I gave up trying to give her a direct, unmediated presence in the text. Instead, I came at her sideways: in the novel, we only ever see Goldstein from the perspective of other, invented characters, flawed and thus able to be critical, to find fault with her seemingly impermeable virtue. I had considered

⁴² A.S. Byatt, 'Byatt attacks novelists who use real-life characters', A.S. Byatt, 'Byatt attacks novelists who use real-life characters', *The Guardian*, 13 August 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/13/byatt-novelists-real-life-characters> (accessed 20 May 2013).

⁴³ W. James, *Out of the Silence*, North Sydney, NSW, Random House Australia, 2005.

⁴⁴ See, for example, J. Bomford, *That Dangerous and Persuasive Woman*, Carlton, VIC, Melbourne, 1993; L. Henderson, *The Goldstein Story*, North Melbourne, VIC, Stockland Press, 1973.

inventing a failed love affair, or even a lesbian relationship, but the sticky question of ethics and the writer's responsibility to their subject (along with those ever-present historians breathing down my neck) prevented me from wandering along those particular fictional paths.

It is one thing to invent a narrative around a public figure who is dead, who cannot complain or be hurt, and whose life and work is an official part of the wider national story. It is quite a different matter when the main protagonists are still very much alive, when there is a possibility of them reading, and perhaps being hurt by, a fictionalised account of their doings—their private lives, loves, motivations. Did I really want that to happen? Regardless of the legal bulwark that classifying a work as fiction generally provides, could I really justify appropriating Keli Lane's story? Would I be using reality to create an object of larger significance, or would I merely be using Lane's tragic situation to satisfy my own imaginative impulses, and to further my own career? I began to think that perhaps my mother's objection had some credence. Perhaps I shouldn't write that story; maybe it wouldn't be right.

Chapter 3

The writer's only responsibility is to his art. He will be completely ruthless if he is a good one ... Everything goes by the board: honor, pride, decency, security, happiness, all, to get the book written. If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies. —William Faulkner¹

Notwithstanding the doubts expressed by other critics and writers, and the disquiet I was feeling myself, this worry about the ethics of using a real-life story sometimes felt like a complete non-issue, a self-created storm in a teacup. Many of the fellow writers I'd discussed the matter with had shrugged, metaphorically and literally, and advised me not to worry about it. 'It's just a novel,' they'd say, or, 'It's only fiction,' as if the simple designation was enough to excuse me from any other responsibilities or claims.

It was essential, then, that I consider the work of others who had been in similar creative situations, others who had written novels based on contemporary stories that were already in the public domain. I needed to consider stories based around people who were still alive, and whose stories were ongoing. In particular, I was looking for people who, like Keli Lane, were not willing participants in their own fame or public notoriety, but unwittingly caught in the public spotlight; and who, again similarly to Lane, could potentially be hurt by the fictions that were woven from their lives. I was most interested in the public reception of such stories, in discovering whether reviewers and critics—and even the subjects themselves—regard such use as transgressive or exploitative, or whether they are more sanguine, seeing any stories as fair game, sharing Faulkner's view that the writer's only responsibility is to the work.

The response to Malcolm Knox's most recent novel, *The Life*, gives some indication of the confused and ambivalent attitude towards fictionalising real stories.² Knox has received some criticism over his protagonist's resemblance to the iconic, and still living, when the novel was published, Australian surf champion, Michael Peterson, or 'MP' as he is widely known. Although Knox has readily acknowledged Peterson's biography as source and inspiration, he maintains that the character of 'DK' is largely

¹ W. Faulkner, 'The art of fiction', *The Paris Review Interviews, II* [special edition], New York, NY, Picador, 2007, p. 37.

² M. Knox, *The Life: A Novel*, Crows Nest, NSW, Allen & Unwin, 2011.

invention.³ However, various friends, colleagues and fans of Peterson have expressed uneasiness over the parallels between Knox's fictional DK and the real MP. In an otherwise glowing review of the novel for the *Australian Financial Review*, surfing journalist Nick Carroll expressed his confusion over Knox's claims that the novel wasn't based on MP's life:

the story wore a different flesh, names and dates had been changed, purely functional fiction arcs had been affixed, but the hard bones of it all corresponded. This DK wasn't a fictional character at all. This was Michael Peterson. Or was it?⁴

Bemused by the clear similarities, Carroll contacted Knox in an attempt to clarify Knox's position. Although Knox was anxious to have his work evaluated in terms of its literary, rather than historical, provenance, he admitted to having given a great deal of thought to whether he was 'crossing the line between exploitation and inspiration', and was horrified by the idea that he had misused MP in any way. Carroll wondered whether there might be a test for such a thing: 'Might it be as simple as asking: could *The Life* have been written without MP's life having been lived?'⁵ MP's biographer, Sean Doherty, admitted to Carroll that he too had felt conflicted about the work, finding it awkward to read in light of his intimate knowledge of Peterson. However, Doherty had felt unable to raise questions with Knox because although he'd written MP's biography, it still wasn't his story.⁶

Despite his protestations that the work was not closely based on MP's life and character, Knox sent copies of the novel's manuscript to MP's mother, Joan. Although Knox was told initially that Joan thought the novel was 'crap', during a subsequent meeting at the Byron Bay Writers' Festival, she admitted that both she and her son had actually enjoyed the work:

She said, 'I wanted to see you face-to-face so I could tell you I really like the book, I'm loving it. I didn't read it initially but I'm sitting there and reading bits to Michael and we're both having a good laugh about it, we're spotting which bits are real and which bits aren't real, and how did he come up with this and how did he come up with that,' and she was absolutely fascinated by

³ M. Knox, 'A novel about surfing: *The Life*, by Malcolm Knox' [interviewed by Peter Mares], *The Book Show*, ABC Radio National, 8 August 2011, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bookshow/a-novel-about-surfing-the-life-by-malcolm-knox/2929380#transcript> (accessed 20 May 2013).

⁴ N. Carroll, 'A Collision of Myths', *Australian Financial Review*, 5 August 2011, pp. 3–4.

⁵ *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ *ibid.*, p. 4.

the book and finding it a real hoot.⁷

Knox's desire to have his work sanctioned by his character's real-life counterpart whilst, at the same time, denying the extent of MP's influence, showed just how murky the particular ethical waters I was entering were likely to be. It might even be that these waters would be impossible to navigate without considerable risk. Knox had written a largely sympathetic account of a character apparently only loosely based on a public figure, in a work dealing notions of national mythology. I was planning to write a not-necessarily-sympathetic novel explicitly modelled on an already sensationalised true story. While Knox's ethical qualms may have been reduced or even made irrelevant by MP's enjoyment, as per Anne Lamotte's experience, my own work was unlikely to bring any pleasure to my subjects, and I imagined both critical and private responses to such a work might be a little less benign.⁸

An examination of several recent novels inspired by prominent true-crime stories provided a closer parallel to my own dilemma. US author Joyce Carol Oates is a frequent fictionaliser of real-life stories, making use of both her own as well as those that have become part of the wider cultural landscape and the national and international mythos. Oates's most recent crime novel, *My Sister, My Love*, took as its inspirational subject matter the tragic murder of six-year-old 'beauty queen' JonBenet Ramsey in 1996.⁹ The child, who had been bludgeoned and then strangled to death, was found in the basement of her Boulder, Colorado home some eight hours after she went missing, presumed kidnapped. Circumstances meant that suspicion initially fell on JonBenet's parents and brother. The case quickly became a media sensation, with her parents' affluence and their undoubted influence, along with JonBenet's involvement in child beauty pageants, providing further tantalising morsels for public speculation.

Oates has stated that she was not interested in exploring the grisly details of the crime; rather, the Ramsey case was a launching pad for issues she wanted to investigate:

I wanted to write a novel from the perspective of a young person from a notorious family, those families that are often in the tabloids and have reporters constantly following them around... I envisioned a young person, an

⁷ M. Knox, 'A novel about surfing', loc. cit.

⁸ A. Lamotte, *Bird by Bird*, New York, NY, Anchor, 1995, p. xix.

⁹ J.C. Oates, *My Sister, My Love*, London, UK, HarperCollins, 2009.

innocent person, in tabloid hell with no place he could go.¹⁰

However, even before the narrative begins, the reader is made aware of the novel's complex and contradictory relationship to the real story. The author's note at the beginning of the book states that 'though *My Sister, My Love* has its genesis in a notorious true crime mystery, it is a work of the imagination solely, and lays no claim to representing actual persons, places or historical events'. However, the blurb on the back of the book announces the connection to the Ramsey case without qualification. The novel is clearly dependent on the actual case not only for its subject matter and cultural significance, but also for plot and characterisation. Told from the point of view of the murder victim's older brother, Skyler, the fictional embodiment of JonBenet's older brother, Burke, this highly satirical chronicle of the Rampike family tragedy cleaves closely to the known facts of the Ramsey case.

Although there has been no questioning of the novel's literary quality, Oates's fictional take on the Ramsey murder has come under fire from critics and reviewers for what many regard as its questionable ethics. While acknowledging that such cases have always been fair game for fiction, many critics found that the novel's unrelentingly satirical take on the tragic events, its frequently vicious mockery of its characters, and the simplistic moral universe of the novel work to undermine any possibility of wider significance or transformation. In terms of its relationship to the true story, the novel has been variously described as 'parasitic', 'indecent', 'cold', 'sneering' and 'cruel'.¹¹ The possibility of real-life consequences flowing on from Oates's much vaunted fictional solution to the crime is seen as further complicating the ethical underpinnings of the work.¹²

It is difficult not to feel that regardless of Oates's intentions, *My Sister, My Love* has paradoxically become a real-life exemplar of the very tabloid hell that Oates set out to

¹⁰ A. Kashkashian, 'JonBenet in fiction', *Boulder Weekly*, 24–30 July 2008, <http://boulderweekly.com/archives/20080724/newsbriefs1.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

¹¹ See, for example, S. Churchwell, 'The death of innocence', *The New York Times*, 10 August 2008, p. BR8; D. Robson, 'My Sister My Love' [review], *The Daily Telegraph*, London, UK, 5 October 2008, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/fictionreviews/3561683/Review-My-Sister-My-Love-by-Joyce-Carol-Oates.html> (accessed 20 May, 2013); J. Smith, 'Skating on very thin ice', *Sunday Times*, 19 October 2008, Culture, p. 50; S. Clarke, 'Deep anger at little girls lost', *The Australian*, 15 November 2008, p. 12.

¹² C. Mills, 'Appropriating others' stories: some questions about the ethics of writing fiction', *Journal of Social Enquiry*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2000, p. 204.

critique within her narrative. The Ramseys' tragedy has been treated as little more than a fictional commodity, disregarded in the pursuit of wider artistic and cultural meaning. Any possible consequences for any remaining real-life counterparts have been unavoidably conflated, in the mind of the reader, with the fictional Rampike family. What could have been a profound exploration of what Oates sees as the malaise at the heart of American culture remains untransformed; the story never rises above its source, and in Oates's mocking interpretation, is rendered both banal and grotesque. In what seems to me a clear illustration of Mills' thesis, the work's ethical shortcomings have resulted in artistic compromise. The narrative is fatally undermined by its dubious ethical underpinnings—in this case, its contorted relationship to a reality that is simultaneously appropriated and denied.

More recently, in her Booker Prize–shortlisted novel *Room*, Emma Donoghue tells the story of a woman and child held captive in an 11- x 11-foot room. Donoghue based the novel on the notorious Fritzl imprisonment case.¹³ The Fritzl story hit the headlines in 2008, when Elizabeth Fritzl, then 42, revealed to Austrian police that she had been held captive in a small basement room by her father, Joseph Fritzl, for twenty-four years. During this time Fritzl had physically assaulted and raped his daughter numerous times, leading to the birth of seven children, three of whom had been held captive with her.

In interviews both prior and subsequent to publication, Donoghue has attempted to distance her novel from the Fritzl case by stating that it was less inspiration than 'trigger' for *Room*, which is written from the perspective of the incarcerated child:

The newspaper reports of Felix Fritzl [Elisabeth's son], aged five, emerging into a world he didn't know about, put the idea into my head. That notion of the wide-eyed child emerging into the world like a Martian coming to Earth: it seized me.¹⁴

Donoghue maintains that the novel is less about the more horrifying aspects of the incarceration—indeed, these are carefully sidestepped—and more an exploration of the mother–child relationship, which in this case is tested by extreme proximity:

Really, everything in *Room* is just a defamiliarisation of ordinary parenthood...

¹³ E. Donoghue, *Room*, London, UK, Picador, 2010.

¹⁴ S. Crown, 'Emma Donoghue: "I knew I wasn't being voyeuristic"', *The Guardian*, 13 August 2010, p. G2.

The idea was to focus on the primal drama of parenthood: the way from moment to moment you swing from comforter to tormentor, just as kids simultaneously light up our lives and drive us nuts. I was trying to capture that strange, bipolar quality of parenthood.¹⁵

Donoghue has also refuted accusations that the case was cynically chosen in an attempt to garner sales and boost her literary profile. She maintains that as an award-winning writer of some longevity, she was hardly in need of any sort of sensationalised story to set her career alight.¹⁶

While the vast majority of reviewers and the Booker Prize judges themselves approached the work without more than a passing reference to the Fritzl story, a small number have questioned the ethical stance of the novel. The work came under fire even before publication, when Irish writer Darragh McManus, writing in *The Guardian* on the morality of fashioning art—and making money—from writings based on actual human suffering, questioned Donoghue’s motives as well as her morality. McManus implied that Donoghue chose this story cynically and exploitatively, seeing it as an opportunistic bid for fame and wealth:

Basing works of fiction on infamous criminal cases is undeniably a good career move; the book is guaranteed a sympathetic audience and huge sales. By her own admission, Donoghue’s literary earnings were modest until now; with *Room* she earned a chunky advance. Publishers know there is a vast audience of ghouls out there, keen to wallow in others’ misery and pay for the privilege.¹⁷

Kathy Hunt, writing in *The Australian*, was also disturbed by the ethical issues surrounding the novel, mistrustful of Donoghue’s stated reluctance to engage with the real horror of the plot and, like McManus, dubious about the author’s motives:

The legitimacy and integrity of a book like this depends on its intention, and this is no *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*... Simultaneously denying, appropriating and manipulating other people’s lives and truths not only raises questions about taste and ethics but compromises a narrative.¹⁸

However, in my own reading of the novel, I found the narrative to have only the most

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ D. McManus, ‘Real life tragedies for real life cash’, *The Guardian*, 13 August 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2010/aug/12/books-real-life-tragedies> (accessed 20 May 2013).

¹⁸ K. Hunt, ‘Childish whimsy is tainted by depravity’, *Weekend Australian*, 7 August 2010, p. 24.

rudimentary connection to the Fritzl case. The real and the fictional have only the fact of incarceration in common, as Donoghue has stated, and very little else in *Room* can be seen as an attempt to fictionally re-create the horrors experienced by Elizabeth Fritzl and her family. This is no schlock horror exploration of an almost unimaginably dreadful scenario—not only do the facts of the narrative diverge significantly from the real story, the more sensational elements that could have been emphasised in the novel have been deliberately glossed over or played down. The work is written from the perspective of the child, and just as the mother hides the child in the wardrobe during her father’s visits, these scenes, which might have been exploited for dramatic effect, are also hidden from the reader. What is of importance in the first part of the novel is the symbiotic nature of the mother–child relationship, and an investigation of the isolated world (an oedipal paradise) that the child inhabits.

Of the three works, with their vastly differing relationships to the real-life stories that inspired them, only Donoghue’s really struck a chord as a potential ethical and creative model. While Knox’s decision to give MP and his mother the manuscript prior to publication, not exactly seeking permission, but in the hope of approval, seemed a useful way of alleviating authorly anxiety, an ‘authorised fiction’ of the Keli Lane case, with the spectre of the missing, possibly murdered child at its heart, was never going to be possible. Although Oates has stated that it was the wider societal implications of the JonBenet Ramsey murder that compelled her, *My Sister, My Love*’s close similarities to the real story and real people are unmistakable, and the Ramseys are forever conflated in the minds of readers with their deeply repellent fictional counterparts, the Rampikes. At the very least, the novel adds yet another layer to the public voyeurism that Oates is critiquing, and there is a further possibility of the work actually causing grief to the Ramseys themselves. Notwithstanding criticisms of Donoghue’s intent and motivation, *Room*’s connection to the Fritzl story is ultimately of little consequence: there are no echoes of the real characters, and the work can be read without inviting reference to its real-life counterparts. It seems unlikely that the work could have any impact, negative or otherwise, on those involved.

From my examination of these works, and their public reception, it was evident that to write a novel in which the protagonists, however disguised, could still be recognised as versions of their real-life counterparts, would be to invite not only

criticism of my intent and motives, but could potentially be harmful to others. Could I, should I, write a novel that followed closely and explicitly the trajectory of Lane's own, knowing that this might be considered exploitative, and might even contribute further harm to the protagonists, their families and friends?

I should admit here that while the wider significance of the Lane story interested and intrigued me, and invited further exploration, the 'grisly' detail of the Lane case, so compelling, so bizarre, was an added attraction. It was a narrative gift that was hard to resist. Part of me yearned to follow Oates's example—perhaps I should lie back, think of Keats's Grecian Urn, and damn the consequences.

But what are those consequences? In *The Faith of a Writer*, her memoir of writing, Oates has written of the invasive nature of art:

To write is to invade another's space, if only to memorialize it; to write is to invite angry censure from those who don't write, or who don't write in quite the way you do, for whom you may seem a threat. Art by its nature is a transgressive act, and artists must accept being punished for it.¹⁹

Oates's concern here is reserved for the artist, whose punishment, in the western world at any rate, will rarely entail more than public and private criticism, some sort of financial penalty, or perhaps the boycotting or pulping of a work. However, what of the unwitting subjects of such invasion—those whose lives have been used, fashioned into fiction, those who can be hurt or damaged by such exploitation? Of course, it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to ascertain the impact of a writer's work on those written about. Hurt cannot be measured and is not knowable in advance, or even later, when those affected tend, other than in cases of libel or defamation, to remain silent. However, as AS Byatt has pointed out, the stakes can be impossibly high.²⁰

The more I considered the possibilities, the larger the ethical and moral dimensions loomed. It was, as Booth has pointed out, entirely up to me to set the limits, to make the

¹⁹ J.C. Oates, *The Faith of a Writer: Life, Craft, Art*, New York, NY, Ecco, p. 33.

²⁰ A.S. Byatt, 'Byatt attacks novelists who use real-life characters', A.S. Byatt, 'Byatt attacks novelists who use real-life characters', *The Guardian*, 13 August 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/aug/13/byatt-novelists-real-life-characters> (accessed 20 May 2013).

decision about how I was going to write this story.²¹ In the end, perhaps I just wasn't brave enough, or a committed enough artist. Perhaps that required splinter of ice in my heart had warmed or somehow dislodged. Far from following Faulkner's advice that I should be willing to rob my mother in the service of Art, it seemed that I could not even ignore her. She had been right all along: I could not tell this story. This particular story belonged to real people, living real lives.

It wouldn't be worth it. And it wouldn't be right. I would have to find another tale to tell.

²¹ W.C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1988, p. 130-131.

Part II: Conception

Chapter 4

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant—Success in Circuit lies. —Emily Dickinson¹

So my decision was made: my novel would not involve an explicit fictionalisation of Keli Lane’s story. However, if the novel was not to be closely modelled on the Lane case—a course of action that in many ways would be far easier and more convenient, with so many decisions already made for me—how *could* I write this story? I was back to square one. Without the scaffolding of that real-life narrative, I no longer had a plot, characters, location, timeframe, back-story or peripheral players, and even, if the case were to be resolved satisfactorily, the ending that the real story could provide. I had the germ of a story, but nothing more. I would need to call on my imagination and powers of creativity to take this seed and grow it into an entirely independent narrative.

Where to begin? The first thing I needed to do was to tease out of the original story those elements that most intrigued me—the cultural and personal truths that resonated most deeply. I had to identify exactly what had seized my interest in the first place and ensure that it could be taken from the context of the Lane story and used as a springboard for something that would propel the reader far beyond that story’s limited cultural specifics. Just as Donoghue had discovered that what most interested her were ideas that were almost incidental to the more sensational aspects of the Fritzl case, perhaps I would find my particular narrative truth by considering the Lane story ‘slant-wise’ rather than approaching it literally.

There’s no denying that a particular interest in the alleged crime itself compelled me initially. Why? As someone with no personal experience of violent crime, and no professional connection to this world (other than through being married to a police officer), it was slightly disturbing to have to confront my own interest in such deeds. Although a fascination with the act of murder is far from uncommon among largely law-abiding folk, it is difficult to avoid wondering whether this sort of imaginative

¹ E. Dickinson, ‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’, in T.H. Johnson (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, London, UK, Faber, 1970, no. 1129.

engagement with crime—a type of vicarious pleasure, surely—is in itself morally dubious, a possible indicator of all sorts of troubling impulses.²

While it was impossible to unpack my motivations completely, a large part of my interest in this particular crime was connected to an ongoing fascination with mothers' crimes against children, which was in turn connected to my own experience of motherhood. After all, the experience of motherhood was what had jolted me into writing in the first place. Astonished, overjoyed and sometimes affronted by the monumental life changes wrought by first-time motherhood, and forced to confront the 'the real feminine dilemma', as sociologist Anne Oakley puts it, much of my early writing was driven by a desire to confront and examine—though not in an easy or sentimental way—those seemingly irreconcilable experiences of transcendence and immanence that characterise motherhood.³

I was struck, too, by the relative scarcity of works of fiction that directly addressed the issue of maternity. It seemed that every other crucial moment of female existence that I had thus far experienced had been written about exhaustively in novels, both contemporary and historical, preparing me well for what lay ahead. I had read works that examined aspects of childhood, adolescence, romance, sexuality, career and marriage, but I had read very few works that explicitly dealt with maternity—and I had been entirely unprepared, imaginatively, for motherhood. Of course, this absence may have been peculiar to my own book choice; perhaps I simply had not managed to discover works that explored this subject. However, further investigation suggests that my experience was not unusual, particularly when considering fiction written from the 1970s to the end of the twentieth century—the period that constituted my formative reading years. In her study of maternal narratives, Jane Messer attributes what she describes as this 'malaise amongst writers to write stories of mothering' as being largely a response to second-wave feminism: motherhood was regarded by many women as antithetical to self-actualisation, to lives lived fully and freely and, more importantly,

² For an absorbing investigation into the ethical implications of the human fascination with murder, in art and in life, see W. Lesser, *Pictures at an Execution: An Enquiry into the Subject of Murder*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1995.

³ A. Oakley, *Taking it Like a Woman*, London, UK, Flamingo, 1984, p. 126.

intelligently.⁴ Messer quotes Australian writer Kate Jennings, who describes the prevailing attitude towards maternity:

My (feminist) peer group regarded it almost a crime to bring children into a world that was not only overcrowded but going to hell on the back of a hedgehog. Hippies and sentimentalists had children; not us, we knew better.⁵

I had not known better. In addition, as a member of the next feminist generation (despite my putative hippie/sentimentalist parentage), I felt it was important to enter into an imaginative engagement with these neglected but essential female experiences, to write stories that explored pregnancy, childbirth and child rearing.

My own experience of motherhood, with a reasonably solid social and personal scaffolding to support me, had been relatively straightforward. But what of others who had not been so fortunate? What would it take to abandon, or even murder, an infant or child? The figure of the abandoning mother simultaneously compelled and terrified me; tales of infanticide were especially fascinating. Was infanticide simply the most abhorrent and least defensible of crimes imaginable? Or was it, as Adrienne Rich has argued, a more fathomable, though no less frightful, response: an extreme manifestation of the vast chasm between long-held ideals and expectations of motherhood and the starkly dissimilar lived reality?⁶ Eventually, these creative, emotional and theoretical ideas coalesced around the history of Maggie Heffernan, and led to the writing of my first novel, *Out of the Silence*.⁷ A number of my early short stories, and then my second novel, also dealt explicitly with motherhood, and in particular, the figure of the abandoning mother.⁸

Beyond the bizarre details and the gruesome speculations, Keli Lane's story was also about the sometimes impossible expectations of motherhood. Like *Out of the Silence*, it involved a secret pregnancy, a young woman unable to cope psychologically or materially with the pressures of unplanned motherhood, and a dead or abandoned infant. It was not so much the possibility of the child's death, but what had led up to that point,

⁴ J. Messer, 'Being impossible: narratives of mothering', in E. Lamothe, P. Gardin-Damestoy & J. Sauvage (eds), *Of Mothers and Death: From Procreation to Creation*, Passac, France, Press Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2008, pp. 57–72.

⁵ K. Jennings, cited in J. Messer, *ibid.*, p. 61.

⁶ A. Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York, NY, Norton, 1986.

⁷ W. James, *Out of the Silence*, North Sydney, NSW, Random House Australia, 2005.

⁸ W. James, *Why She Loves Him*, Crawley, WA, UWA Publishing, 2009; W. James, *The Steele Diaries*, North Sydney, NSW, Vintage Australia, 2008.

that interested me. I had gained some understanding of what had driven Maggie Heffernan to her desperate act, more than 100 years ago, but I wanted to understand the specific circumstances, social conditions and emotional tendencies that might push a contemporary woman to such extremes.

A personal connection to stories of mothers compelled to relinquish or abandon their children intensified my interest in the Lane case. Several years before my own birth, my mother, who was eighteen at the time, gave birth to an infant boy whom she was forced to relinquish in a private adoption. Like so many young Australian women who found themselves pregnant outside marriage during the 1960s, she had been subject to what now seem unimaginably punitive social and legal strictures, from familial shunning to the involuntary relinquishment of her child to a system that enforced a closed adoption policy. My mother had a similar experience to those described by Carol Major in her recent study of the history and consequences of Australia's closed adoption policy.⁹ Convinced by both family members and authorities that the right—indeed the only—course of action was to give her child away, she had been unprepared for the strong maternal feelings that had followed the birth, and the terrible grief that accompanied her loss. The trauma of the relinquishment, and her ongoing heartache, were compounded by years of enforced silence. Like so many women in the same situation, my mother was forced to suffer her shame in a prolonged state of 'mute distress', only revealing the existence of this relinquished child to the rest of her family relatively recently.¹⁰ While I have never made explicit use of my mother's story in my fiction, her memories of these traumatic experiences have become a potent presence in my imagination—a transmitted memory or perhaps even a form of 'postmemory' that has provided both inspiration and impetus to much of my subsequent writing.¹¹

Another aspect of the real story that I found intriguing was the treatment of Keli Lane by the Australian media. The contrast in the public attitude towards the two women,

⁹ C. Major, *Closed Adoption Policy in the 1960s: Exploring The Construction of Motive Through Fiction*, Lambert Academic Publishing, Köln, 2009.

¹⁰ C. Major, *ibid*, p. 22.

¹¹ Postmemory, as defined by Marianne Hirsch, is 'the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that preceded their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right'; See M. Hirsch, 'The generation of postmemory', *Poetics Today*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2008, pp. 103–28.

Maggie Heffernan and Keli Lane, was stark and shocking. When Maggie Heffernan's arrest was made public, letters were sent to the Melbourne papers decrying not her crime, but the immorality of the society that failed to take care of its most vulnerable members. No doubt there was a private chorus of condemnation, but the public conversation was largely non-judgemental. Although Maggie had broken the rigid moral code of her time, there was no public vilification of her character or her behaviour. Little was made of her lies and her transgressions; instead, discussion revolved around her plight, her relative youth and the tragic nature of her situation. In a petition for the commutation of the death sentence, signed by 17,000 concerned citizens and sent to Victoria's lieutenant-governor and members of the executive council, all condemnation was reserved for the uncaring society that allowed such a tragedy to occur:

Your petitioners believe that the unfortunate girl is deserving not so much of legal punishment as of the deepest sympathy. Society has not taken any adequate steps to take care of and protect unfortunate girls placed in the position of prisoner. Seduced, betrayed, deserted, homeless, friendless, left to starve in the streets in a physically exhausted condition, with nothing but water to give to a newly born babe, the hanging of such an unfortunate creature, no matter how excellent the legal definitions and procedures, would be an outrage on our common humanity.¹²

In stark contrast to the public championing, and eventual release, of Maggie Heffernan, there was no public outcry in defence of Lane, and no questioning of the morality and values of the surrounding culture. Rather, the story became an immediate media sensation. By 'media', I refer not only to the traditional platforms, newsprint, radio and television, but also to those freewheeling disseminators of news and gossip—weblogs, forums and various forms of social media—that have sprung into existence on the internet over the past decade or so, extending and subverting the old forms and conventions of mass communication.

During the years of the investigation, much of the media focus was on Lane's perceived 'character' rather than her possible crimes. Even in the traditional media, she was deemed promiscuous, secretive, overly ambitious, a liar. Like Lindy Chamberlain (now Chamberlain-Creighton) before her, Keli Lane was found guilty in the court of public opinion long before she went to trial. Her numerous and frequently contradictory lies were regarded not as potential signifiers of fear, shame and perhaps confusion, but as

¹² Petition to the lieutenant-governor, 9 March 1900, cited in W. James, *Out of the Silence*, op. cit., p. 260.

an indication of her corrupt, depraved and most likely murderous nature.¹³ That wild frontier, the world of online commentary, was vicious in its condemnation.¹⁴ The demonisation was so blatant and ubiquitous, the prejudice so overt, that in his summing up remarks at Lane's trial, the presiding judge was moved to remind the jury that 'Moral judgments, bias, condemnation of other people's behaviour and dislike of people, have no place in a court of law.'¹⁵ Following her conviction, a virtual regiment of anonymous bloggers and commenters—those seemingly conscienceless purveyors of public bigotry—triumphantly and vindictively proclaimed their victory. This small but unedifying sample taken from the comments section of the *Sydney Telegraph* online, subsequent to news reports of Lane's conviction, illustrates the sort of vicious commentary that prevailed:

Keli Lane is a CHILD KILLER and I hope she rots in jail for at least 15 years. Focus your thoughts on that little baby Tegan struggling for its life as she killed her.

The last time I saw a face like that over the course of a trial was Lindy Chamberlain's. This woman was found guilty and is a cold, heartless murderer.

Well, ten years in prison is good enough time to stop her from breeding any further. This cold, emotionless female is evil personified. Just what did those men see in her ...?

How many children's lives do you have to ruin before you realise you're a monster. As part of the sentence, she should be forced to have a hysterectomy.¹⁶

One hundred years earlier, Maggie Heffernan, who was also caught out in her lies but who eventually confessed to killing her infant son, was pitied and championed; Lane, who continues to deny her child is dead, is publicly pilloried and demonised. This is noteworthy when we consider that Lane—in contrast to Maggie Heffernan, who broke

¹³ See bibliography.

¹⁴ See, for example, post and subsequent comments, 'Inconvenient human beings', The Front Row Forum, League Unlimited, 10 August 2010, <http://forums.leagueunlimited.com/showthread.php?t=366671> (accessed 20 May 2013).

¹⁵ K. Arlington, 'Keli Lane jurors told not to make moral judgements', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 December 2010, <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/keli-lane-jurors-told-not-to-make-moral-judgements-20101202-18hdp.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

¹⁶ These comments appear to have been removed, but were made in the online comments section of the *Daily Telegraph* attached to news of Lane's conviction in December 2010.

every rule in the nineteenth-century book of proper feminine behaviour—lived largely within the moral codes of our own time. Sex before marriage is no longer frowned upon, and if recent statistics are anything to go by, most Australians don't blink an eye over a baby born out of wedlock.¹⁷ Sexual relationships with multiple partners, and even cheating on these partners, is hardly uncommon. The option and availability of safe terminations means that putting a child, or even children, up for adoption is no longer usual, but it is certainly not outside the boundaries of contemporary standards of behaviour.

There were clear parallels, too, between the Lane case and a number of contemporary high-profile cases of missing and murdered children: the Chamberlain case, the still unsolved murder of JonBenet Ramsay and the more recent disappearance of English child Madeleine McCann in the Portuguese resort town of Praia da Luz. It was not that the details of the cases themselves had any real commonality, but parallels existed in the scrutiny applied to the missing children's mothers, and in the way suspicions were fuelled not by hard evidence but by public perceptions of personality.

In the tragic embodiment of what psychologist Paula J Caplan has identified as the mother-blaming tendency of contemporary culture, these women became Medea-like figures, symbols of maternal deviance and malignancy.¹⁸ Each of these mothers—Keli Lane, Lindy Chamberlain, Patsy Ramsey and Kate McCann—were thrust unwillingly into the public gaze because of the unexplained or suspicious disappearance of their children. Subject to intense and negative press and public scrutiny, nothing was off limits: appearance, fashion sense, exercise regime, religious beliefs, speech patterns, public displays of grief (or lack thereof). In each case, every aspect of the woman's image and behaviour, however tangential to their child's disappearance, was analysed, critiqued and frequently used to insinuate proof of their guilt. In a slew of contradictory assertions, Kate McCann, for example, was criticised in both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers for being blonde, thin, middle class, neurotically reclusive, too much in the

¹⁷ S. Dunlevy, 'One third of infants born out of wedlock', *The Australian*, 29 March 2012, p. 4.

¹⁸ P. Caplan, 'Mother-Blaming', in M. Ladd-Taylor & L. Umansky (eds), *'Bad' Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America*, New York, NY, NYU Press, 1998, pp. 127–44.

public eye, too emotional and not emotional enough.¹⁹ Germaine Greer commented in *The Guardian* that ‘the sight of Kate McCann on television for the umpteenth time clutching a pale pink toy called Cuddles in lieu of her lost daughter, Madeleine, makes me feel a bit sick’. Julia Hartley-Brewer, columnist for *The Sunday Express*, remarked that she ‘didn’t like the McCanns very much’, an attitude that was echoed and extended in Booker Prize-winning novelist Anne Enright’s essay in the *London Review of Books*, ‘Disliking the McCanns’.²⁰

I wanted to know, and badly, just what was going on. Why this viciousness, this almost frenzied dislike, this savage desire to find these women guilty and to punish them? What was it about these women that pushed such punitive buttons? It was undoubtedly more than merely a concern for the fate of their dead or missing children, Azaria, JonBenet, Madeleine and Tegan. Was this, as Australian ethicist Leslie Cannold suggested, a clear case of moral panic?²¹ Nicole Goc, writing of the parallels between the McCann, Ramsey and Chamberlain cases, posits the theory that the instinct to judge such mothers as monstrous creates a distance between these women and

the rest of us, between the unimaginable and our own safe lives, reassuring us that it was alright to be captivated by their story, it was alright to hungrily surf the web for the latest news, because *it could not happen to us*.²²

In her analysis of the media treatment of Kate McCann, Caroline Bainbridge posits that the vicious media treatment was connected to the way in which McCann simultaneously represents both the idealised view of contemporary motherhood and its opposite:

How is it possible for such a woman to check so many boxes around image, motherhood, career aspiration and media-savvy responses to tragedy and yet still lose a daughter through apparently thoughtless or careless planning of responsible childcare decisions?²³

In Bainbridge’s view, McCann, embodying all that is most threatening about the

¹⁹ C. Bainbridge, “‘They’ve taken her!’: Psychoanalytic perspectives on mediating maternity, feeling and loss”, *Studies in the Maternal*, vol. 2, no. 1, http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/back_issues/issue_three/documents/bainbridge.pdf (accessed 20 May 2013).

²⁰ J. Hartley-Brewer, ‘McCanns are no killers’, *The Sunday Express*, 16 September 2007 p. 29; G. Greer, ‘Cuddly toys’, *The Guardian*, 27 August 2007, G2, p. 28; A. Enright, ‘Diary’, *London Review of Books*, vol. 29, no. 19, 2008, p. 39.

²¹ L. Cannold, ‘Lessons to be learnt from tale of tragic baby Tegan’, *Sunday Sun Herald*, 19 December 2010, p. 4.

²² N. Goc, ‘Bad Mummy: Kate McCann, Medea and the media’, <http://inter-disciplinary.net/ati/Evil/Evil%209/goc%20paper.pdf>, p. 3 (accessed 20 May 2013).

²³ C. Bainbridge, op. cit., p. 16.

‘postfeminist’ world, was the victim of an anti-feminist backlash:

Perhaps then, because this case centres on issues of motherhood and the actual loss of a child, it becomes symptomatic of fearful fantasies of disintegration that accompany the loss of the perceived certainties of a female identity achieved as a result of and sometimes in spite of feminism.²⁴

In the Keli Lane case, both propositions ring true: Lane’s public reputation as a liar, sexually promiscuous and reckless when it came to the all-important issues of conception and childbirth, makes her behaviour appear deviant enough to remove her from what is regarded as typical or right. In this way, she is obviously ‘not-us’, and can therefore be easily and safely judged from afar. Like McCann, Lane also ticks many of the boxes relating to successful contemporary womanhood, and as such, represents both a betrayal and a threat.

Considered in the context of a world where an unmarried woman with a newborn infant could not even find a safe place to sleep the night, and with the prospect of public and private shunning and dire poverty looming in her future, Maggie Heffernan’s desperate act can seem almost comprehensible. In contrast, how does someone as apparently privileged and educated and as thoroughly contemporary as Keli Lane end up in such a tragic mess? What could such a woman’s history be? If she was not insane, and her defence has never raised that possibility, what personal demons could drive such decisions, whatever these decisions were? Such actions were clearly the result of a tangled nexus of broken relationships and desperate moments, but what were these relationships and moments? What relationship could a woman have with her family, her friends, and more particularly herself, to be left so isolated and desperate? Finally, what does a story like this say about contemporary society? How culpable were we, in our expectations of women, of mothers? How could all the bureaucratic structures that we assume are in place to ensure that birthing and raising a child out of marriage is no longer the shameful ordeal it once was, have failed so miserably? All these factors needed to be explored, and could be explored in a fiction that was not remotely connected to the unknown, and of course unknowable, history of the real Keli Lane.

²⁴ *ibid.*

But it was Nicole Goc's 'us'—the 'us' that such things should not happen to—that intrigued me most of all. The story of Keli Lane is deeply embedded within the story of a family, and a particular type of family: white, middle class, educated, suburban. It is not just the story of a mother, but of a daughter, a sister, a member of a class and a particular subset of a particular culture. What, I wondered, would happen to the average suburban middle-class family, a family not so different from my own, perhaps, if such a devastating secret were revealed to be at its core? What would be the effect of such a revelation on such a family's stability and continuity?

This novel, then, would use certain aspects of the Lane case: a long-held secret would come to the surface; a child born many years ago, her current whereabouts unknown; a revelation rupturing the smooth surface of family life. There would be a mother who may or may not be guilty. There would be the public vilification of that mother in the media. There would be a complex back-story and some exploration of the psyche of the mother, in an attempt to shed light on what happened and, more importantly, why. In addition, I wanted to create a compelling story of family life, to explore how an ordinary middle-class family, neither used to nor seeking any sort of public attention, would deal with such unexpected and unwelcome notoriety. I was interested in how the family members would (or would not) support each other and whether the family unit could survive such an experience. As Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton has stated about her own experience, and that of the McCann's: 'Nothing can make anyone else understand. It's impossible, like learning to swim while drowning.'²⁵

This, then, would be my mission: to write a novel that would, perhaps, help others to understand.

²⁵ F. Thorn, 'Lindy Chamberlain shudders at parallels with Madeleine's disappearance', *Hello!*, no. 988, 25 September 2007, pp 94–8, cited in N. Goc, op. cit., p. 9.

Chapter 5

Genre breathed its corpse-breath in her face, and she was lost. She was defiled. She might as well be dead. She would never, ever get invited to write for *Granta* now. —Ursula Le Guin¹

These were the elements that I wanted and needed to foreground from the story of Keli Lane, the springboard from which I would take my imaginative leap. The next question was exactly how was I going to do it? This question led inevitably to the matter of genre.

While Oates's *My Sister, My Love* and Donoghue's *Room* both featured crimes at the centre of their narratives, neither provided a genre model that suited my particular needs.² Oates's novel, a scathing condemnation of American culture, is driven by satire, while *Room* offers a singular and highly subjective exploration of a childhood circumscribed by four walls. Neither was quite the type of novel I was interested in writing, nor the type I had written before. I wanted to produce a work that would examine the cultural and political significance of the tale, while simultaneously paying attention to the finer details of character and circumstance; the sort of traditionally realist fiction that could create the illusion of authenticity and intimacy while remaining accessible to a wide readership. The unravelling of the suspected crime would provide the central focus of the work, and I expected that a successful build-up of suspense would be crucial to the forward momentum of the narrative. Taking all these rather diverse requirements into account, it seemed that there were two possible genre directions I could take, two particular types of fiction that most suited this particular tale: crime fiction and the very loosely defined 'domestic novel'.

Genre itself is a slippery concept. With any definition dependent on ever-changing cultural factors, it is necessarily dynamic and endlessly contestable.³ As many writers have pointed out, in the literary and publishing worlds genre is not merely a

¹ U.K. Le Guin, 'On Serious Literature', *Ursulakleguin.com*, 2007, <http://www.ursulakleguin.com/Note-ChabonAndGenre.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

² J.C. Oates, *My Sister, My Love*, London, UK, HarperCollins, 2009; E. Donoghue, *Room*, London, UK, Picador, 2010.

³ D. Rain, 'Literary genres', in S. Earnshaw (ed.), *The Handbook of Creative Writing*, Edinburgh, UK, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 54–64; D Chandler, 'An introduction to genre theory', http://faculty.washington.edu/farkas/HCDE510-Fall2012/Chandler_genre_theoryDFAnn.pdf (accessed 20 August 2013).

descriptive term, but one that is heavily value-laden. It sets up what is often an unwarranted and sometimes hostile division between those works regarded as 'literary' and those regarded as working to some sort of narrow genre formula, and usually refers only to forms of romance, science fiction and crime fiction.⁴ While there is not space in this essay to discuss my position on this argument, I would like to expand the concept of genre as per Ursula Le Guin's more comprehensive classification guidelines, and consider domestic fiction as representing a distinct contemporary genre category.⁵

Having already written several novels and a volume of short stories that had been categorised by some critics and readers, if not my publishers, as crime fiction, it seemed sensible to consider writing this story, which would have some sort of crime at its centre, within the crime genre.⁶ But what, exactly, would it mean to write within this particular genre? Were there rules I needed to follow, structures I needed to apply, directions I needed to take? Would writing a crime novel force me into some sort of creative straitjacket that would distort or undermine the story I wanted to tell?

It had never before been my intention to write specifically within a genre, following established rules, shaping plot and character within traditionally defined and circumscribed boundaries. The two so-called crime novels that I had previously published had been written without any explicit genre models or guides. For instance, the details of plot and character in *Out of the Silence* had been determined by historical events, while *Where Have You Been?* revolved around the story of an impersonation, with the revelation of character and identity rather than any actual crime providing the narrative emphasis.⁷ A number of the stories in *Why She Loves Him*, and in particular the eponymous narrative sequence, also featured some elements of crime, along with both criminal and police protagonists—but again, the emphasis was on character and

⁴ See, for example, U.K. Le Guin, 'Le Guin's Hypothesis', *Book View Cafe*, <http://bookviewcafe.com/blog/2012/06/18/le-guin-s-hypothesis/>, 18 June 18 2012 (accessed 20 August 2013); K. Wilkins, 'Read and let read', *Hexebarts Well*, 22 August 2013, <http://fantastictthoughts.wordpress.com/author/hexebart/> (accessed 22 August 2013).

⁵ U.K. Le Guin, op cit.

⁶ Despite not being marketed as crime fiction, *Out of the Silence*, *Why She Loves Him* and *Where Have You Been?* were all nominated and/or shortlisted for national crime-writing awards. *Out of the Silence* went on to win the Ned Kelly Award for first fiction in 2006.

⁷ W. James, *Out of the Silence*, North Sydney, NSW, Random House Australia, 2005; W. James, *Where Have You Been?*, Crawley, WA, UWA Publishing, 2010.

aspects of domestic life rather than details of or investigations into the crimes themselves.⁸

If I was to undertake the writing of a novel true to the genre, I needed to know whether there was in fact a definitive model. My formulation of what constitutes crime fiction, based on a vast quantities of novels read rather than any theoretical exploration, was rather vague: a crime novel was a novel in which a crime, whether committed on the page or off, is central to the plot. Was this definition too broad? I consulted both scholarly sources and technical guides, rapidly discovering that while the definition of a crime novel is somewhat elastic, and most experts are loath to specify any absolute requirements or characteristics of the genre (preferring to break it down into historical periods and sub-genres), there are some commonly featured attributes.⁹ Along with a criminal act that provides the central narrative impetus, most crime narratives require a degree of suspense, which usually involves putting the protagonist into a situation of danger or jeopardy. A hero, villain(s) and victim(s) also feature, although the victim and hero can be conflated in the one character. Plot is generally elevated above character development, although serial novels that feature a common character or characters—usually detectives or investigators—can offer a more complex evolution of character. Many of the most enduring works are part of a series, an essential element in the popularity of the genre, and one that frequently guarantees a committed fan base.¹⁰ In most works of crime fiction, the act of detection is a critical element, as is the provision of a satisfying solution.

If I was going to write a crime novel, certain narrative elements would have to be emphasised and others played down. The element of suspense would need to be highlighted, and the fate of the missing child, the central mystery of the narrative, would have to be the thread that pulled the reader through the novel. Characterisation

⁸ W. James, *Why She Loves Him*, Crawley, WA, UWA Publishing, 2009.

⁹ See, for example, P.D. James, *Talking About Detective Fiction*, London, UK, Faber, 2009; M. Priestman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 2003; C. Rzepka & L. Horsley, *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, Chichester, UK, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010; S. Knight, *Crime Fiction, 1800–2000: Detection, Death, Diversity*, New York, NY, Palgrave, 2003; M. Day, *How to Write Crime Fiction*, St Leonards, NSW, Allen & Unwin, 1996; M. Robotham, *If I Tell You I'll Have To Kill You*, St Leonards, NSW, Allen & Unwin, 2013; J. Dale, 'Crime Fiction', in S. Earnshaw, op. cit.

¹⁰ D. Crabtree, 'A growing genre', *Bookseller + Publisher Magazine*, vol. 87, no. 4, 2007, pp. 28–32.

would need to be secondary to the plot, and the status of each character would need to be clearly defined: the work would require both a hero, most likely in the guise of a detective, and a villain. The crime's solution would need to be clear, with little ambiguity of motive or intent.

Some of these elements I could happily incorporate: the whereabouts of the child would provide the mystery and the suspense would involve both the child's physical wellbeing as well as the mother, Jodie's, moral/psychological danger. However, other of these genre expectations were less appealing. Even though the interiority necessary for complex character development is likely to slow down the forward momentum required in crime fiction, I had no interest in emphasising plot at the expense of characterisation. While I have always considered a compelling plot essential, my main objective has been to create believable and authentic characters, and this was something I intended to continue in this work. Most importantly, in terms of characterisation, I had no interest in creating either a hero or heroine who would solve the crime and set the world to rights, nor a villain who was definitively bad; instead, my villain and my heroine were to be synthesised in one character. Additionally, I could not be sure that any ending I could provide would be completely satisfying. I was already leaning towards a resolution that was ambiguous, conditional, perhaps precarious. I was not in the least bit interested in tying things up, but in making the reader ask questions, leaving things open.

My interest in writing about the domestic lives of my characters created another element of discord between the story I wanted to tell and the narrative imperatives of generic crime fiction. While novels that feature female detectives and investigators have been immensely popular since the golden age of the detective novel, and the attitudes and lives examined may be very different to their male counterparts, they very rarely emphasise the domestic and/or maternal lives of their protagonists—even when the works represent a feminist re-visioning of the crime genre.¹¹ In all of my previous work, I had tried to offer not just the wide-lensed version of any narrative, but the smaller, inside, intimate story, and the domestic landscape had featured prominently. Why should this work be any different? It had always seemed imperative to me that the most

¹¹ C. Cole, *From Davitt to Deconstruction: Politics and Social Commentary in Feminist Crime Fiction*, DCA thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, NSW, 2001; S. Munt, *Murder by the Book?: Feminism and the Crime Novel*, London, UK, Routledge, 1994.

ordinary aspects of life should be examined in fiction, that the pathos and nobility of small lives is illuminated, given fictional representation. I was determined that ‘the mundane’, as John Updike puts it, ‘is given its beautiful due’.¹²

It appeared, then, that if I was to do justice to the story I was trying to tell, I would need to look beyond the generic crime novel. Perhaps the domestic novel would provide a better narrative model. The term ‘domestic fiction’ or the ‘domestic novel’ has generally been applied to a style developed in the eighteenth century, written largely by and for women. By the mid-nineteenth century, this style had become the pre-eminent form of the novel. In contrast to the (largely masculine) works that preceded it, the domestic novel foregrounded human character and behaviour rather than social status, and signalled a vast transformation not only in the stories told through fiction, but in the way character itself was portrayed and regarded. While nineteenth-century domestic fiction incorporates a vast and diverse expanse of literature, most works are characterised by a heroine whose subjective experience and moral development forms the heart of the novel. The geographical scope of the domestic novel is usually circumscribed; in contrast to the male *bildungsroman*, there is no dangerous quest, no sexual exploit or foreign adventure. The landscape of the domestic novel is just that—domestic—with an almost exclusive focus on aspects of home and family.¹³

While twentieth-century fiction, representing twentieth-century life, has subverted much of what was previously regarded as essential in terms of female self-actualisation, modern offshoots of the domestic novel still abound in what is now labelled ‘contemporary women’s fiction’ or ‘women’s fiction’.¹⁴ The contemporary domestic novel is routinely regarded as being lightweight and somewhat frivolous, dealing only with trivial concerns, however, such a critique often depends on definitions of literary worth and thematic import that are inherently masculinist.¹⁵ In contrast to their perceived lack of depth and relevance, these works often relate highly topical stories of

¹² J. Updike, *The Early Stories: 1953–75*, New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf, 2004, Foreword, p. xv.

¹³ L. Logan, ‘Domestic fiction’, in J. Gabler-Hover, J. & R.D. Sattelmeyer (eds), *American History Through Literature 1820–1870*, New York, NY, Charles Scribner’s Sons (Thomson Gale), 2006.

¹⁴ This is a loose publishing category that incorporates those more commercial titles written for and about women, including romances, family sagas, and ‘chick lit’ and its maternal offshoot ‘mommy lit’, in addition to those works that, due to their more explicit engagement with issues of ideology and politics, may be regarded as more serious.

¹⁵ J. Lamond, ‘Stella Vs. Miles: Women Writers and Literary Value in Australia’, *Meanjin*, Volume 70, Iss 3, Spring 2011, pp.32-39.

contemporary women's lives—providing narratives that deal with the pressures and complexities of female existence, exploring important issues, including sexuality, career, body image, marriage, friendship, motherhood, family, health and aging.¹⁶ As Shari Benstock argues in a recent study, both serious and popular versions of contemporary women's fiction crystallise 'some of the most important cultural issues women are currently engaged in addressing', and as such should be regarded as being part of an evolving feminist perspective on women's lives.¹⁷

Regardless of the elements of mystery and crime that characterise them, my first three novels fit comfortably within this domestic tradition. For instance, much of the narrative of *Out of the Silence* is concerned with the domestic lives of its female characters, both real and imagined.¹⁸ The story examines not only the wider issues surrounding the political and economic position of nineteenth-century women, but also details the more mundane aspects of these women's existence: from the rigours of child bearing and rearing to the time-consuming and back-breaking reality of domestic labour. *The Steele Diaries* engages explicitly with the conflict between motherhood and creativity, through several generations.¹⁹ Even *Where Have You Been?*, an 'imposter' novel that was closely modelled on other similar works, focuses heavily on family life, chronicling the havoc wreaked on a comfortable suburban existence when a long-missing sister moves in.²⁰ All of my work, both novels and stories, has been written with a strong sense of being a part of a wider feminist tradition; I attempt to voice those otherwise lost or disregarded voices, to reclaim and revision women's lives, past and present.

My new novel could work quite effectively as a domestic drama that would sit comfortably within the contemporary tradition. If the fate of the missing child was revealed early in the narrative, the emphasis could be on character exploration and development, with the dramatic focus on the breakdown of the protagonist's marriage, other family relationships, and the wider social implications of the revelation, rather

¹⁶ See R. Vnuk, 'Rebecca's rules: defining women's fiction', *The Booklist*, vol. 109, no. 14, p.63; N. Hill, *Reading Women: A Book Club Guide for Women's Fiction*; Santa Barbara, CA, ABC-CLIO, 2012.

¹⁷ S. Benstock, Afterword, in S. Ferris & M. Young (eds), *Chicklit: The New Woman's Fiction*, New York, NY, Routledge, 2006, p. 254.

¹⁸ W. James, *Out of the Silence*, op. cit.

¹⁹ W. James, *The Steele Diaries*, North Sydney, NSW, Vintage Australia, 2008.

²⁰ W. James, *Where have You Been?*, op. cit.

than on suspense and revelation. In this scenario, the novel could even have a happily-ever-after resolution.

However, this was not the novel I wanted to write, either. While I wanted to create authentic, three-dimensional characters, I also wanted the novel to be something of a page-turner, tightly plotted, with clear elements of suspense and an unexpected revelation. I was not sure exactly how my story would resolve, but I was certain the ending would not be unequivocally happy.

In the end, neither model quite fitted my purposes. The generic crime novel, with the narrative impetus provided by the crime, its investigation and ultimate solution, would not provide the best setting for the nuanced character-driven narrative I had in mind, while the domestic novel would not work with certain plot elements that I had deemed necessary, including a degree of suspense. The solution would need to be something in between—a hybrid that would combine elements of both models in a way that satisfied my narratorial impulses. I did not want to write a novel that was focused solely on unravelling a crime; nor did I want a work that was primarily focused on female self-actualisation. What I wanted was a high-stakes crime novel with elements of the female *bildungsroman*. A simple matter, surely?

Perhaps not. Another factor I needed to consider before embarking on what would undoubtedly be several years of writing was whether there was an Australian readership for this type of novel. Writing the novel you are compelled to write is one thing; writing a novel that will be accepted by traditional publishing houses is quite another. Would a novel that dealt explicitly with a crime, and a crime committed by a woman at that, lessen the work's appeal in the women's fiction market? Conversely, would readers of crime fiction ignore a novel with a clearly domestic bent? Although my first two novels dealt with what I considered serious subjects—infanticide, suicide, art, politics, motherhood—they were both, in their initial publication, marketed as women's fiction of a vaguely romantic bent. The misleading nature of the covers and blurbs of both novels, widely commented on by reviewers and readers, may have had a negative impact on the works' reception: while the content of the work was not appealing to those who expected to be satisfied in a romantic sense, the books were unlikely to be

considered by those readers looking for a different sort of novel.²¹ Perhaps presenting a publisher with a work that is not easy to categorise—a hybridised novel that is neither straight crime fiction nor one of the more popular varieties of the contemporary domestic novel—was too risky an enterprise.

In the contemporary Australian literary scene, the two genres remain quite distinct. While local varieties of both the domestic novel and crime fiction are published in Australia in ever-increasing numbers, works that explicitly combine the two forms are comparatively rare.²² While researching this exegesis, I was surprised to discover that there were very few Australian works that reflect my particular fascination with crime and its impact on family and domestic life in a form that combines elements of both narrative traditions.

Over the last two decades, the number of Australian women writing works that are clearly identifiable as crime fiction has burgeoned.²³ While only seven crime novels were entered in the inaugural Davitt Awards (Australia's female crime-writing awards) held in 2000, thirty-seven were nominated in 2013, which was almost double the number of the previous year.²⁴ The first SheKilda women's crime-writing conference, held in 2001, extended invitations to twenty writers; the second conference, held in 2011, featured over sixty almost exclusively Australian women crime writers, and more than eighty women were invited.²⁵ Along with the increase in numbers, the critical and public prominence of female crime writers has also risen, if the increasing number of reviews, feature articles, international publications and awards, along with reported sales figures, is an accurate indication.²⁶ The change is most evident in the female component of two crime-writing anthologies that bookend the two

²¹ See, for example, M. Mason Hill, 'Don't put a good painting in a cheap frame', *Antipodes*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2009, p. 97; K. England, 'More than a romance', *Adelaide Advertiser*, 14 June 2008, p. W10.

²² D. Crabtree, loc. cit.

²³ D. Johnston, 'Femmes fatales of the pen', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 September 2003 [special crime supplement], p. 1.

²⁴ C. Shute, 'Record 61 books ...', [sistersincrime.org.au](http://www.sistersincrime.org.au/content/record-61-books-contention-13th-davitt-awards-best-crime-books-australian-women), 10 July 2013, <http://www.sistersincrime.org.au/content/record-61-books-contention-13th-davitt-awards-best-crime-books-australian-women> (accessed 20 August 2013).

²⁵ L. Cameron, *Inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award: Kerry Greenwood* [award speech], Davitt Awards, 31 August 2013, <http://www.sistersincrime.org.au/sites/default/files/Judges%20report%20&%20%20author%20speeches%202013.pdf> (accessed 6 September 2013).

²⁶ J. Sullivan, 'Taking peep at crime stripped bare', *Sunday Age*, 25 September 2005, p. 20; D. Johnston, loc. cit.

periods: in Marele Day's 1996 anthology *How to Write Crime*, only four of the twelve chapters were written by Australian women crime-fiction writers, while in a similar compilation published this year—Michael Robotham's *If I Tell You I'll Have to Kill You*—ten of the twenty chapters were contributed by Australian women crime writers.²⁷

Over this period, the type of crime novel written by women has also changed markedly. Many of the works written during the late eighties and nineties were characterised by a deliberate feminist re-visioning of the genre. Examples can be found in the work of Marele Day, Jean Bedford and Claire McNab, whose protagonists (similarly to the work of their North American counterparts Sarah Paretsky and Sue Grafton) were female versions of the male private investigators (PIs) popularised in the hardboiled tradition. Solitary, tough and generally unencumbered by long-term or intimate relationships, their personal feminine lives were more or less disregarded to fit into what was still clearly a male world. While these works were driven by an explicit feminist consciousness, subverting, parodying and extending the genre, in line with Messer's thesis, these fictions rarely evoked the protagonist's maternal and/or domestic worlds.²⁸

This explicit feminist re-visioning is no longer a thematic or stylistic concern in Australian women's crime novels. While a feminist consciousness no doubt informs the works of, say, Angela Savage, Leigh Redhead or PM Newton, who all write variations of the hardboiled tradition, their novels engage less explicitly with the feminist concerns of their second-wave precursors. The feminist ideology so prominent in earlier works is no longer foregrounded; rather, it has been 'mainstreamed', as former publisher Nicci Gerrard (half of the United Kingdom (UK) crime-writing team Nicci French) argues, having been absorbed and replaced by other social concerns.²⁹ However, these works retain many aspects of the traditional masculine model, and the domestic world remains largely absent. Even looking beyond the hardboiled tradition and considering the diversity of styles and sub-genres in the contemporary Australian women's crime-fiction scene—from the historical crime series of Kerry Greenwood and Felicity Young,

²⁷ M. Day, loc. cit.; M. Robotham, loc. cit.

²⁸ J. Messer, 'Being impossible: narratives of mothering', in E. Lamothe, P. Gardin-Damestoy & J. Sauvage (eds), *Of Mothers and Death: From Procreation to Creation*, Passac, France, Press Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2008, p. 61.

²⁹ N. Gerrard, *Into the Mainstream: How Feminism has Changed Women's Writing*, London, UK, Pandora, 1989. For a critique of Gerrard's thesis, see B. Levy, 'Mainstreaming women writers', *Hecate*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1991, pp. 110–17.

the gothic confabulations of Sara Foster and Kate Morton, and the ‘cromances’ of Bronwyn Parry and Helene Young, to the forensic investigations of Kathryn Fox, and even taking into account those mainstream/literary novelists who take what Stephen Knight refers to as a ‘passing interest’ in the crime form, such as Kirsten Tranter, Merlinda Bobis and Deborah Burrows—it is evident that Australian women’s crime fiction still touches on the domestic lives of its protagonists only infrequently.³⁰ While some romantic entanglement is less uncommon, domesticity and family life, in particular, maternity, are rarely examined. While it would be easy to jump to the conclusion that this particular marriage of domesticity and crime is somehow fatally flawed, the popularity of such hybrid novels in the UK and more particularly the US works that are frequently republished and/or distributed in Australia seems to preclude such a judgement.³¹

The reasons behind this gap in the Australian literary marketplace are no doubt complex and deserving of a more comprehensive investigation than is possible in this essay; however, the anomaly may have something to do with the relative youth of Australian publishing. While genre-fiction titles now constitute up to eighty per cent of Australian novels published by the large commercial Australian publishers, this is a relatively recent development.³² The difficulties inherent in establishing a loyal readership in a small market that has entrenched tastes and preferences, and which is already saturated with international bestsellers, may militate against the publication of difficult-to-place experimental and hybrid work.³³

³⁰ S. Knight, *Continent of Mystery*, Carlton, VIC, Melbourne University Press, 1997, p. 105.

³¹ See, for example, recent works by Laura Lippman, Christina Schwarz, Jennifer McMahon and Heather Gudenkauf; This interest in crime with a domestic flavour is not an entirely contemporary phenomenon. Sarah Weinman’s recently released anthology of stories written by the ‘unjustly forgotten queens of domestic suspense’, *Troubled Daughters, Twisted Wives* (Penguin, 2013), features stories by female crime authors writing between the end of World War II and the beginning of the womens’ movement of the 1970s. The anthology includes the work of well-known authors such as Patricia Highsmith and Shirley Jackson, along with authors such as Celia Fremlin, Margaret Millar and Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, who were critically and commercially successful in their day. The stories involve crimes committed in the home, using the ordinary domestic world as both narrative backdrop and wellspring. Weinman sees these works as an antidote to what she regards as the narrowing scope and concern of the popular crime novel, and she hopes a renewed appreciation of these writers will encourage a resurgence of female-centred crime writing that reflects the real world.

³² K. Bode, ‘Publishing and Australian literature: crisis decline or transformation?’, *Australian Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2010, pp. 24–48.

³³ Agent Sydney, ‘Who’s afraid of Australian novels?’, Call My Agent!, 12 March 2012, <http://callmyagent.blogspot.com.au/2012/03/whos-afraid-of-australian-novels.html> (accessed 20 May, 2013); K. Wilkins, ‘Popular genres and the Australian literary community: the case of fantasy fiction’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2008, pp. 265–78.

This anomaly may also have something to do with the literary status of genre fiction. Australian academic and prize-winning writer of fantasy and historical romance Kim Wilkins has recently questioned the centrality of literary fiction (specifically, realist fiction) in the Australian literary scene, along with what she regards as a long-standing commitment to retain a clear distinction between literary and genre fiction. According to Wilkins, very few works that can be regarded as genre—fantasy, science fiction, romance and crime—are shortlisted for non-genre-specific prizes, or studied at tertiary level. Genre novels also receive considerably less media coverage. Wilkins draws on her personal experience as a literary award judge, pressured to exclude a fantasy novel from the shortlist in order to protect the ‘reputation’ of the awards, to argue that such prioritising ultimately ensures the maintenance of the literary status quo.³⁶ While the enthusiastic reception of multiple Ned Kelly Award recipient Peter Temple’s Miles Franklin Award-winning crime novel, *Truth* (2010), suggests that these particular boundaries may be slowly eroding, this residual tendency to discount genre fiction may also discourage experimentation with and between genres, particularly among those writers who wish to be considered literary.³⁴

One notable exception to this gap in the Australian scene can be found in the work of Dorothy Johnston, who has made a very deliberate effort to harness the domestic in her crime series featuring Canberra-based public servant/investigator/mother, Sandra Mahoney:

I was interested, and still am, in how much domestic detail crime fiction could accommodate; not so much general domestic detail, but that which has to do with the ‘female sleuth’ also being a mother.³⁵

Mahoney, simultaneously juggling a failing marriage, motherhood, a new career and an affair, is unwittingly drawn into uncovering white-collar crimes. In some ways, Johnston’s works are typical of the genre: Mahoney is intelligent, but spiky and difficult, and somewhat lonely and isolated. She is an outsider who frequently backs the underdog—a stereotypical ‘hardboiled’ heroine. As is essential in the noir tradition,

³⁴ P. Temple, *Truth*, Melbourne, VIC, Text, 2009; J. Steger, ‘Truth and Fiction’, *The Age*, 24 June 2010, p. 17.

³⁵ D. Johnston, ‘What is literary fiction?’ [comment], *whisperinggums.com*, <http://whisperinggums.com/2013/06/14/what-is-literary-fiction-a-personal-manifesto>, 16 June 2013 (accessed 20 September 2013).

Johnston's setting, Canberra, though an unconventional choice, provides a fitting urban backdrop to her narrative: 'Canberra is a stratified city, and the lines between order and chaos... are very starkly drawn.'³⁶

However, in contrast to the masculine tradition, equal narrative weight is given to Mahoney's domestic life as to her sleuthing, and rather than running parallel, the two are frequently integrated. Johnston has attempted to make her heroine into an 'everywoman', as opposed to the more familiar domestically disembodied sleuths like Marele Day's Claudia Valentine. In a tradition that relies on relentless momentum and a degree of action, this is an enterprise fraught with narrative difficulties, as Johnston has acknowledged: 'to people a crime narrative and saddle a female investigator with a family and a weight of domesticity, as I do, is to take rather a heavy risk.'³⁷

In the first novel of the series, *The Trojan Dog*, Mahoney's domestic duties necessarily take centre stage: her husband is overseas for a period of months and she is sole carer of her son, Peter.³⁸ In addition, she has recently returned to work after an extended absence from the paid workforce. The investigation of the crime, a case of cyber fraud, runs in tandem with the exploration and development of Mahoney's personal life—her career in the public service, her care for her young son, her growing disenchantment with her absent husband, her relationship with her dead mother, and her affair with her lover and co-investigator, Ivan.

The development of Mahoney's character is an essential element in the work. According to Johnston, 'the attention I give her thoughts, her imagination, her physical life, are exactly the attention I would give them were she to inhabit a literary novel'.³⁹ In what is a radical departure from the freewheeling style of protagonist characteristic of both the masculine and feminist traditions, Mahoney's primary responsibility is to her son, rather than to her lover, her career or her investigation. Occasionally, as when Mahoney attends a party of class parents in the hope of obtaining information crucial to her

³⁶ D. Johnston, 'Cyberspace and Canberra', *Australian Humanities Review*, September 2000, <http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-September-2000/johnston.html> (accessed 20 August 2013).

³⁷ D. Johnston, 'Female sleuths and family matters: can genre and literary fiction coalesce?', *Australian Book Review*, November 2000, p. 35.

³⁸ D. Johnston, *The Trojan Dog*, Kent Town, SA, Wakefield Press, 2000.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p. 37.

investigation, Mahoney's domestic and public life coalesce in unexpected ways.

Motherhood is itself a wider concern of the novel. The woman whose alleged crime Mahoney is investigating was once involved in a lesbian relationship with her own mother, with whom Mahoney's relationship was difficult. Mahoney's identity as a mother is constantly emphasised: the narrative is punctuated with stories of her relationship with Peter, both past and present. Her sadness during an enforced absence when Peter visits his father is palpable, and in a moment of imminent danger, Mahoney, glad that she had not washed his pillowcase, sucks up 'the faint smell of my son, as I waited for the attack'.⁴⁰ The wider social implications of motherhood are also critiqued. Mahoney's past unhappiness while a stay-at-home mother, her lack of energy and all the associated marital tensions, reveal a slow, unconscious slide into what appears to have been postnatal depression. However, in line with Johnston's integration of the domestic and the investigative, these memories are used not merely to provide back-story, but to create revelatory moments essential to the solution of the crime.

While the romantic/sexual quest is a crucial part of the narrative, Mahoney's son's acceptance of her lover, Ivan, is viewed as essential to the relationship's progress, as is Ivan's capacity and willingness to nurture Peter. Rather than providing a peripheral, and possibly transient, romantic interest, as is more common in the genre, by the end of the novel Ivan has become a permanent fixture in Mahoney's domestic world.

The second of the trio of novels, *The White Tower*, continues the focus on motherhood, within both the mystery and the ongoing narrative of Mahoney's life.⁴¹ Mahoney, who has recently given birth to a daughter, Katya, no longer works as a public servant, having set up a computer-crime consultancy with her partner/lover, Ivan. Throughout the novel, the difficulties of combining a career and motherhood—in particular, new motherhood—are examined. Mahoney's ambivalent attitude towards her unexpected second pregnancy is made clear from the outset: 'I hadn't wanted a second child, and, in my mid-thirties, was determined to make a career for myself... But the night before my... termination I'd changed my mind.'⁴²

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.209.

⁴¹ D Johnston, *The White Tower*, Kent Town, SA, Wakefield press, 2003.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 6.

The difficulties, both economic and emotional, of juggling career and motherhood are examined from the opening chapters of the novel. For instance, while Mahoney is clearly no great fan of childcare, dismayed by her infant daughter's foreign smell after a day in care—'the smell of a baby who all day has been looked after by other people. I didn't like it'—her aversion is qualified almost immediately by her conflicting need for additional hours.⁴³

Work life and home life are shown not as existing in separate spheres, but as being unavoidably interconnected:

All the time I was cooking and Ivan was feeding Katya, and I was feeding Peter's dog Fred, who knew it was Wednesday and moped, and Ivan and I talked in snatches, testing one another...

Domestic life would always pull in too many directions at once or else the bottom would fall out of it...⁴⁴

Home again, having fetched Katya from the creche, and heard Peter's school news while I made him a snack, I got out the police report, and flicked back through the statements and interviews.⁴⁵

In what is a clear departure from the narrative emphasis of most crime novels, the minutiae of ordinary lives is examined as comprehensively as the details of the crimes under investigation in both *The White Tower* and *Trojan*. Throughout the narrative, readers are made privy to details of the protagonist's life, as well as to those of other characters, that are not generally the concern of detective fiction: meals are prepared, housework is done (or ignored), children bathed, school teachers interviewed. The effects of pregnancy, the primal experiences of childbirth and breastfeeding, the difficulties of marriage, the consequences of divorce, as well as the profound bond that exists between mother and child, are all reflected upon.

In what might be regarded as a metaphoric questioning of the price children are forced to pay for their mothers' outside preoccupations, the climactic moment of the *The White Tower* occurs when Peter, Mahoney's young son, is abducted by the murderer. This ambivalence is echoed at the close of the novel when Mahoney and her family must

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.9.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.9.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.15.

return from the safe, warm haven of a seaside holiday, to Canberra, ‘city of white towers and dark plunging verticals’, a return that is viewed with some apprehension but ultimately deemed inevitable.⁴⁶

These tensions—common fare in much contemporary women’s fiction—provide an illuminating and thought-provoking subversion of the usual crime paradigm. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that, in line with Johnston’s own stated anxieties, the details of family and domestic life impede the narrative momentum of *The Trojan Dog* and *The White Tower* somewhat, slowing the pace and occasionally undermining or overwhelming essential elements of suspense. Johnston has voiced her doubts about the merging of forms a number of times, concerned that such a detailed evocation of her protagonist’s domestic life may in fact be antithetical to the structure and purpose of the crime narrative.⁴⁷

In *Eden*, the third of what is to be a four-book series, it appears that Johnston has cleverly circumvented this difficulty by sending Mahoney’s family away on holidays during the period in which the novel is set.⁴⁸ While their absence is not viewed in a particularly positive light, Mahoney’s investigation into the events surrounding the death of a politician is able to take precedence in her life and in the narrative. Although there is some development of character during this period, with Mahoney recapturing her sense of what it is to be a single woman, the plot moves faster than in the previous novels in the series. In a narrative development reminiscent of the hardboiled school, Mahoney’s romantic life also receives a boost, with elements of unresolved sexual tension between Mahoney and the third partner in the investigative team, the cancer-suffering police officer, Brooks. It will be interesting to see what Johnston does in the fourth book: whether Mahoney’s family life is to be further complicated or even ruptured, and how this can be combined with the narrative requirements of a fast-paced

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.225.

⁴⁷ D. Johnston, ‘Female sleuths and family matters’, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–7; D. Johnston, ‘What is literary fiction?’ *loc. cit.*

⁴⁸ D. Johnston, *Eden*, Kent Town, SA, Wakefield Press, 2007.

crime novel.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ It is interesting to note that American writer Ayelet Waldman's *Mommy-Track* novels, featuring a public defender turned stay-at-home mother who unwittingly stumbles into crimes, cover similar territory, albeit with a lighter touch and owing somewhat more to the 'cosy' sub-genre than the hardboiled tradition. A number of Scandinavian crime novelists, such as Sweden's Camilla Läckberg, and Norway's Anne Holt and Liza Marklund, also foreground the domestic travails of their respective investigators in their works. The complexities of domestic life—in particular, marriage and the raising of children—provide an essential and continuing feature of each series, with the investigation of crimes woven around, and sometimes incorporating, the protagonists' family responsibilities. It is also noteworthy that a number of highly popular television crime series, such as *Scott and Bailey*, and *Blue Murder* in the UK, and the Danish series *The Killing*, also feature the domestic concerns of their female protagonists, managing to investigate the tension between family and career, along with the necessary crimes, without any notable diminution of suspense.

Chapter 6

Beginning is daunting; being in the middle makes you feel like Sisyphus; ending sometimes comes with the disappointment that this finite collection of words is all that remains of your infinitely rich idea. —Hari Kunzru¹

Even before I put pen to paper, I had been thinking long and hard about just *who* my main protagonist was going to be. Initially, my idea had been to re-create a woman with strong similarities to Keli Lane. This imagined woman, who at this stage was nameless, would, like Lane, be a high achiever career-wise, clearly heading for some major triumph—sporting, academic or perhaps musical. The birth of a child would, in her view, present a considerable obstacle to her continued success, her brilliant career. She would be solidly middle class, a Sydneysider, and her life would, as closely as was fictionally possible, follow the major trajectories of Lane's. Once I had made the decision to move away from the Lane story, and to create a story that followed the contours of the case thematically only, it was as if I had been handed a blank slate, character-wise. This prospect was slightly daunting, when all my previous novel concepts had involved a simultaneous genesis of plot and character. However, once I had established exactly what it was that interested me about the real case (as outlined above), the slate was happily a little less blank. The requirements of the story and its particular focus provided me with a vague character blueprint.

As Catherine Cole has pointed out in her study of feminist detective fiction, 'Female villains can be difficult for female crime writers to pull off'. For me, creating a villain who is also, paradoxically, the heroine of the novel, felt challenging, to say the least.² In the first instance, I needed to create a character who could somehow provoke the media storm that was to surround her. She would have to be a character who was not necessarily easy to like or to sympathise with, a woman whose ideals, motivations and desires were not typical or necessarily seen as acceptable to the vast majority. Like Chamberlain, Lane and McCann, once in the media spotlight, she would rub the public up the wrong way, albeit unwittingly.

¹ H. Kunzru, 'Writing for a living: a joy or a chore?', *The Guardian*, 3 March 2009, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/mar/03/authors-on-writing> (accessed 20 May, 2013).

² C. Cole, *From Davitt to Deconstruction: Politics and Social Commentary in Feminist Crime Fiction*, DCA thesis, University of Technology, Sydney, NSW, 2001, p. 105.

I needed a character who was not immediately likeable—not feisty or witty or particularly fun to be with; not someone a reader would admire, laugh at or want to befriend; not someone a reader would want to be. She had to be a character whose positive attributes were not immediately apparent—character who may, or may not, have done something bad, but who was clearly not a ‘bad’ person. More than anything else, I needed a character who wouldn’t necessarily ‘play’ well when it came to media attention.

However, I was aware that the creation of such an unlikeable character might pose serious difficulties for readers. Many readers, in what critic James Wood has described as ‘a contagion of moralising niceness’, need to *like* the characters they read about. They want to empathise and sympathise, to identify with characters and be able to relate to their experiences. In particular, they want to approve of behaviour, and to see aberrant behaviour punished or, at the very least, condemned.³ If there was one thing I was certain about, it was that there would be no unequivocal condemnation from me. This was another narrative risk I was willing to take.

The main protagonist of my novel, Jodie Garrow, is not a character designed to evoke sympathy, nor is she easy to relate to. She is ordinary: middle-aged, middle class, married with two children and a dog. She is reserved, a little uptight, conventional, conservative, maybe even a little bit of a snob. She is no shining exemplar of female advancement or of cultural achievement. Her aspirations are modest: she is a good mother, a faithful wife, a dutiful citizen. On the surface, at least, she is what some might regard as an almost tediously commonplace woman, and perhaps not the usual ‘type’ who receives attention in fiction. However, Jodie is a woman with a secret past, and her past becomes, suddenly and frighteningly, very present. When her ‘mistake’ becomes public knowledge, she does not endear herself; rather, her actions remain inexplicable and her feelings opaque. Like Lane, Chamberlain and McCann, she is not an experienced media player, nor a clever manipulator. Like most women unwillingly dumped into the pit of public opinion, she is unable to deflect the self-righteously cast stones, and completely incapable of hurling them back.

³ J. Wood, *How Fiction Works*, London, UK, Vintage, 2010, p. 80.

Next, I needed a strong and believable reason for my character's desperation to keep her pregnancy secret and to either hide or kill her baby. A high-flying career was an obvious reason, but for the character that was slowly forming, this was highly unlikely—indeed, it was counterintuitive. However, what if, in a bid to keep my character as ordinary as possible, her desperation was for something rather less exciting? What if all she wanted was something that many of us take for granted? The guarantee of material security? For the young Jodie, whose childhood was one of emotional neglect and material deprivation, the desire to escape into what she regarded as a world of comfort and ease became overwhelming, omnipresent:

She has imagined, frequently, the life she might have had with that child: she'd have been a single mother, her socio-economic status always difficult, regardless of her education, occupation, her life one of hard graft, like her own mother's but even worse surely, because unlike her own mother Jodie had been capable of seeing, and desiring those other possibilities. She'd seen the alternative so clearly, she could almost smell it—the small rooms, dingy furnishing, grinding work, the bitter stink of poverty, of desperation, desolation, the regret that would colour every aspect of her diminished expectations. She'd known it was possible to live a life very different to the one her parents had provided her with—a life of solidity, security, prosperity and the understanding, at the very least, of posterity. And though she knows, now she's older, that grief, sadness, bitterness, sorrow, lurk beneath the surface of all lives, that in the end, death, decay can't be avoided, there's no denying the fact that most jagged edges can be smoothed, that money and social status can ease every journey, every transaction, from birth to death and all that lies between.

All she wants, all she has ever wanted, is a life without grubbiness, a life without chaos, a life that follows a clear trajectory of progress, of achievement. Surely, she thinks, it wasn't that much to ask? (p.265)⁴

Jodie's initial decision to hide first the birth and then the death of her child stems from her adolescent desperation to maintain her relationship with Angus, to follow the particular life trajectory she is so determined to follow, and is in keeping with her determination to achieve social advancement through marriage rather than career. Her subsequent and ongoing lies and omissions regarding the whereabouts of her baby, once the case becomes public, are again motivated by desperation and desire—but this

⁴This quotation and all subsequent extracts from *The Mistake* have been taken from this thesis.

time it is not just herself she is concerned about. Jodie is desperate to keep the family she has worked so hard to nurture intact.

I also wanted to explore and to question, in fiction, the public condemnation of women such as Lane and Chamberlain. To do this, it was necessary to complicate my characterisation, to find ways to make readers feel some sympathy, if not empathy, for Jodie's plight. While it is in no way meant to absolve Jodie from culpability or to reduce her agency, the gradual revelation of Jodie's history—her neglectful parents, her miserable home life, her youthful determination to move beyond her limited background—is included to broaden readers' understanding of Jodie and to confound any initial assumptions. When all the facts, past and present, are laid bare, it is, hopefully, rather less easy to condemn or judge either Jodie's personality or her actions. While the book is related predominately from Jodie's point of view, sections of the narrative are told from the perspectives of Jodie's teenage daughter, Hannah, and her husband, Angus, to create a fuller picture of a family in crisis (one of my main objectives in writing the novel).

Jodie's revelation comes at an already difficult time in her relationship with Hannah, and their relationship inevitably deteriorates. Mirroring the reactions of the public (and possibly readers), Hannah is initially entirely lacking in sympathy for her mother: she is highly critical and suspicious of her mother's actions from the outset, and the public notoriety complicates her already tenuous position in her own social milieu. In stark contrast to her mother, Hannah is desperate to escape the suffocating confines of small-town life. Just as Jodie wanted to move beyond her origins, Hannah too finds her family structure oppressive, if for vastly different reasons:

It's not a bad place to grow up, or shouldn't be. But right now Hannah hates Arding. She hates it's facile prettiness, it's eager citizenry, despises it's right-on reputation as a tolerant town with it's pretensions to being an edgy, artsy, intellectual outpost—a kind of Balmain of the tablelands—almost as much as she detests the desperate gentility and subtle snobbery that characterises her own milieu. The reality is, or the reality that Hannah currently sees, is that Arding is just as full of racial and class tensions as any small town. And its artistic pretensions are only that—pretensions. Hannah's parents and all their friends, all the town worthies, the old families, the rich and influential, are no better than the bogans, of whom there are also a plentiful supply ...

Her parents' absolute lack of ambition pains her too, their horizons stretching no further than Arding. Such small town aspirations; they shame her. Is this all they ever wanted? All they've ever needed? Her Dad has worked in London. What on earth did he come back here for when the world was so obviously a more appropriate oyster, when his abilities so obviously deserved a wider sphere? And Jodie, who has chosen to be just a mother, just a wife: her life is unimaginable, intolerable. Almost her entire extended family is still here. Only one of her father's three siblings lives elsewhere, and she sometimes thinks longingly of her mother's father, who she has never met, the only one of her immediate family to escape. Perhaps he had something the rest of them lack, some vitality or curiosity that she has inherited. Hannah's own ambitions stretch far beyond the town limits, and far beyond the small and stagnant pond that constitutes her parent's world. Marry one of those popped collar boys in boating shoes? Become one of those women with their bobs and pearls? Hannah would rather die. (pp.115-116)

However, Hannah gradually becomes more sympathetic towards her mother. Her shocking realisation of her father's betrayal of her mother, in combination with her meeting with her neglectful grandfather, gives her some insight into Jodie's predicament, and allows her some degree of appreciation for the woman her mother has worked hard to become. Regardless of her understandable anger and confusion, Hannah, who is clearly loved and secure, undeniably privileged, and an essential part of a loving family, also provides a stark contrast to the young Jodie—unloved, uncertain, insecure, and without any real moral compass with which to chart her direction.

Initially, I had regarded Jodie's husband, Angus, as what EM Forster calls a 'flat character'—a philandering social climber included merely as a foil to Jodie, providing the object of her youthful desire and wifely devotion.⁵ However, such simple cardboard-cutout villains are never very interesting to write or to read about, and once I began to consider both his perspective and his history, he became, like Hannah, an important character in his own right, as well as providing a further perspective on Jodie.

Paradoxically, Angus is both Jodie's most loyal supporter and her betrayer, a contradiction that has echoes in the history of their early relationship. While his affair with Manon is evidence of his weakness, this is complicated by his unequivocal support of his wife in the face of her public vilification, and the desertion of her friends and

⁵ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harmondsworth, UK, Penguin, 1962, p. 75.

colleagues. As with Jodie, Angus is presented as neither all good nor all bad, but as human—capable of mistakes, but also of remorse and redemption.

Bridie, Jodie's old friend, indeed, her only friend from childhood, was a latecomer to the novel. While her return is highly serendipitous and could be criticised as being far too coincidental (which, as David Lodge suggests 'can jeopardise the verisimilitude of a narrative'), her appearance allows the reader to see Jodie in a different light—as a little girl, open and trusting, full of possibilities but already desperate for something else, something bigger for herself.⁶ The reader is made privy to the very moment that Jodie's desire is formulated, the moment her obsession is given words and becomes real in a way that even those most hardened against her must find both revealing and instructive:

“You know, Jodie, you can actually be whoever you want to be. That's what my mother always tells me. Definitely. Maybe you don't have any one to help you, but no ones going to stop you either.” Bridie grimaces at herself in the mirror, bares her teeth, widens her eyes. “I'm not totally sure yet, but I think maybe I'll be a movie star when I grow up. Or maybe an artist, a sculptor like my mum. Or a musician, maybe. Or actually ... maybe I'll be a gymnast!”

To accentuate her point Bridie executes a strange contorted somersault off the bed, landing with a thud on her behind. When their laughter subsides she stays squatting, her eyes meeting Jodie's in the mirror. “What do you want to be, Jodie?” Jodie scratches at the side of her nose, picks a loose bit of peeling skin. Thinks for a moment. “You know what,” she pulls her hair back into the messy bunch again. “I think I just want to be one of those normal grown ups. The ones with pink lipstick, and high heels, and—and a station wagon.” She purses her lips, turns her head from side to side. She thinks of her mother. Adds. “And a husband. I'd like a nice handsome husband. Handsome and rich. *Definitely.*” (p.233)

The introduction of Bridie also solved the vexing problem of how I was going to reveal the fate of Elsa Mary, Jodie's missing daughter. Until Bridie appeared, it had been extremely difficult to imagine in what form a satisfying revelation of the truth could come. I had considered having Jodie confide in Angus. However, as the writing of the book progressed, it became clear that Angus and Jodie were becoming more and more distant, and that they were barely talking. There could be no revelation followed by a loving reconciliation—not within the pages of the novel, anyway. I considered presenting Jodie's memory of the event directly to the reader, without an intermediary—

⁶ D. Lodge, *The Art of Fiction*, London, UK, Penguin, 1992, p. 149.

perhaps as an interior monologue. However, this lacked a particular narrative punch. It seemed necessary to have the crucial question asked and answered, simulating the reader's own desire to know the truth. While Bridie exists in the novel as an interesting character in her own right, she also performs a useful technical function.

At the heart of the novel is a weight, a silence, an omnipresent absence—that of Elsa Mary, Jodie's missing child. It was important in the writing to ensure that the reader would never forget that small human whose birth and subsequent death are so central to the work and, indeed, drive the plot. While much of *The Mistake* is concerned with the details of Jodie and her family's life as they negotiate difficult times, the fate of Elsa Mary should never be far from the reader's mind. The episodes recounting Jodie's arrival at hospital, the baby's birth and the subsequent arrangements for Elsa Mary's illegal adoption are interspersed chronologically throughout the novel, providing an alternative source of tension to the events of the present. In a deliberate anticlimax, the tension surrounding whether or not Jodie is to face court is cut abruptly, and the narrative appears to have been resolved— with Jodie in the clear, Jodie and Angus separated, Hannah returned and reconciled, Bridget and Jodie resuming their acquaintance, and family life transformed but limping along. However, Bridie, like the reader, is not satisfied; something is clearly missing. Bridie's question is asked on behalf of the reader, and gives voice to readers' suspicions, which ultimately demand satisfaction: *What has happened to Elsa Mary?*

The death of Jodie's baby through the too-common tragedy of hyperthermia, after being left in a hot car, provides the story's fulcrum and the tragic 'mistake' of the novel. The details of the infant's death and the subsequent disposal of her body are not revealed, though the journalist Caro McNally alludes to several possibilities in her article:

It was easier – much easier – to believe that she'd done away with the child (and we could all imagine that grisly act; it's not all that hard to dispose of a not-quite-three-kilo, 22-inch newborn, after all, not hard to drive to a secluded spot – a dam, a river, a deserted industrial bin – to dump said child) than to believe anyone could have been so naive. We're talking about the late eighties here, not the nineteen fifties. (p.261)

The late placement of Jodie's revelation—which occurs at the end of the novel, after the

main action has ostensibly ended—was deliberate, an attempt to dramatise the way the legal and public culmination of a real case such as Lane’s does not necessarily signal the end of the story, or the attainment of truth. Jodie’s late revelation was intended to provoke a retrospective reconsideration of the protagonist and her situation, a rethinking of the rush to judgement, and perhaps an increase in understanding and sympathy.

Developing a sense of place was essential in the creation of *The Mistake*. It was important that Jodie’s family life appeared initially to be physically and geographically idyllic. The town of Arding is an imagined amalgam of the small regional cities I have lived in over the years: Dubbo, Armidale, Orange, Bathurst. I used the name Arding, which is the name of an outlying area of Armidale, because of its phonetic similarity to Shakespeare’s romanticised forest of Arden (another name had contemplated using) and the Edenic qualities it represents.⁷

Most commonly in crime fiction, the site of the crime is the underworld of the dark and dangerous city: what Californian writer Ross MacDonald once described as the fictional investigator’s personal darkness, a darkness that ‘could only be explored in terms of badly lighted streets and unknown buildings, alien rooms and the strangers who live in them’.⁸ However, in *The Mistake*, with its ostensibly green, clean, open, picket-fence, *safe* setting, that underworld is metaphoric—an underworld of the soul, of the emotions. Tangled and dysfunctional family relationships can engender just as much dread and sorrow as sinister unknowns; danger and tragedy are just as likely to have their genesis in brightly lit kitchens as in the dim back alleys of St Kilda and Kings Cross. Ultimately, *The Mistake* is not about the mysterious and threatening other, but the possibility of transgression that exists beneath every surface, and within every one of us.

⁷ W. Shakespeare, *As you Like It*, London, UK, Penguin, 2000.

⁸ R. MacDonald, cited in R. Baker & M. Nietzel, *Private Eyes: One Hundred and One Knights: A survey of American Detective Fiction, 1922–1984*, Bowling Green, KY, Bowling Green State University Press, 1985, p. 58.

Coda: Reception

Chapter 7

Sending your book out into the world is a lot like sending your child to the first day of kindergarten. You hope the others kids play nice and that she makes a lot of friends. —Mitchell Zuckoff¹

My novel was written, then published as *The Mistake* and sent out to make its lonely way in the big wide reading world. Of course, being published by a commercial publisher (Penguin) meant that the novel did not have to make its way completely unaccompanied, but received considerable support, being styled and pitched and promoted by the company's marketing and publicity divisions. The book was packaged and marketed as commercial women's fiction: the cover's soft-focus image is vaguely reminiscent of Jodi Picoult, and the blurb emphasises the domestic drama rather than the crime aspects of the work. Penguin's publicity and marketing department, while aware of the parallels to the Lane case, made no mention of this in their general press release, again preferring to concentrate on the family drama and the novel's wider concerns:

The Mistake is a heart-wrenching story of a seemingly normal family in which everyone is silently fighting their individual battles, whether it is the trials of growing up as a teenager, the temptation of infidelity or the pressures of conforming to ideals of wifely perfection. *The Mistake* brilliantly explores the meaning of family and the role of the media in shaping our perceptions.²

In an effort to promote the novel, a version of the first chapter of this exegesis was published in *The Australian* soon after the novel's publication.³ While the piece explored the ethical conundrum I had found myself in prior to writing, ultimately distancing the work from the actual case, it simultaneously alerted readers to the parallels. Inevitably, comparisons to the Lane story were made in numerous radio interviews, newspaper and online reviews, and commentaries on the novel post-publication. However, contrary to my apprehensions, very few reviews were critical of

¹ C. Du Chateau, 'Amazing Shangri-La rescue story', CNN.com, 8 May 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/LIVING/05/08/author.mitchell.zuckoff.interview/index.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

² Penguin's press release for *The Mistake*, December, 2011.

³ W. James, 'Truth, lies and intrusion', *Weekend Australian*, 24 March 2012, p. 20.

the connection.⁴ I was pleased to find that many also appreciated the parallels to other high-profile cases like Chamberlain and McCann.⁵

During promotional appearances, I continued to encounter people connected to Lane, including several with close and ongoing ties to her and her family. While these encounters were generally benign, they were still rather confronting, particularly when, as happened occasionally, it was assumed that I had insider knowledge, or had attempted to solve the real mystery. An article commissioned by online magazine *The Hoopla* (again, taken in part from this exegesis) in which I explained my interest in Lane and the rationale behind *The Mistake*, and discussed Lane's public vilification, prompted an 'old friend' of Lane's to vent her considerable anger, along with her frustration with what she considered my ill-advised championing of Lane:

I can't believe an intelligent well educated Author like yourself who has never met Keli could feel sorry for her and put her lies down to fear and confusion.

Keli was given every opportunity to come clean about Teagan's [sic] whereabouts before the inquest began ... She should be put under a microscope and by her past alone I believe public vilification is justified. And for the record, yes I know Keli. Or at least I thought I did ...

Trust me, I had compassion and was considered one of her closest friends and biggest supporters, that was until all the details began to emerge during the inquest ... I never claimed to be perfect, but I will say I'm an honest person and am expressing my personal experience knowing Keli, her family and this case first hand.⁶

In an interesting postscript, Sue Williams, a journalist writing a feature on Keli Lane's upcoming appeal, contacted me recently to find out whether I thought Lane was guilty as charged. When I asked why she had called me—a novelist, hardly any sort of authority—she admitted that I had been mentioned as someone who might defend Lane, or protest her innocence. I reiterated what I had said elsewhere—that I had no clue as to whether or not Lane was innocent or guilty, but that I felt she had been treated

⁴ One notable exception was an online reviewer who considered the novel 'trashy', largely due to its parallels with the Lane case: booksaremyfavouriteandbest, 'The Mistake by Wendy James' [review], 29 April 2012, <http://booksaremyfavouriteandbest.wordpress.com/2012/04/29/the-mistake-by-wendy-james/> (accessed 20 May 2013).

⁵ See selected reviews in bibliography.

⁶ W. James, 'Keli Lane: murder and mercy', *The Hoopla*, 5 April 2012, <http://thehoopla.com.au/murder-mystery/?cpg=2> (accessed 20 May 2013).

badly, and that her trial had been compromised by a lack of impartiality.⁷

There was some critical commentary on the issue of writing about real people, but it came from a direction I had not anticipated. As mentioned, I had used the name of an outlying area of Armidale, Arding, for my fictional town, and had vaguely based its geography and demographics on Armidale. Similarly to Armidale, Arding boasts a university, cathedrals, several private schools, a neatly gridded centre, a shopping mall, a lookout where teenage couples canoodle in parked cars, and cold weather. This had more to do with creative convenience than any particular artistic imperative or satirical urge. However, it appeared that certain residents of Armidale felt rather differently. Indeed, they felt that I had deliberately insulted the town. When an Armidale journalist—a former acquaintance—asked to interview me prior to the release of the novel, she suggested that it would best that I talk to her and not the editor of the local newspaper, who, she confided, had muttered darkly that it was no wonder I had moved away.

I spent a large part of that interview arguing against the idea that the town of Arding was Armidale, explaining that it was an invention, a fictional amalgam of many similar Australian towns, and that none of the novel's characters was based on real Armidale residents. Despite efforts to make clear that my characters' negative attitudes toward the fictional Arding were theirs alone, and in no way representative of my own feelings toward Armidale, my defence was ignored. The ensuing article, which featured the rousing headline 'Armidale lampooned', opened with the following: 'A former local who moved to Newcastle a couple of years ago caricatures Armidale mercilessly in her latest book', and continued in a similar vein.⁸

While the novel's connection to the Lane case had, in the end, been hardly problematic, other unanticipated ethical issues arose. During a pre-publication discussion with my publicist, I had confided that part of my interest in the story had to do with my mother's experiences, and had told the story of her adopted child. This had immediate appeal as a platform for the forthcoming media campaign: in the marketing

⁷ S. Williams, 'Man on a Mission', *Good Weekend*, 20 July 2013, <http://www.smh.com.au/national/man-on-a-mission-20130715-2pyvk.html> (accessed 20 August 2013).

⁸ J. Carey, 'Armidale lampooned', *Armidale Express*, 21 February 2012, p. 3.

world, an interesting author back-story is sometimes more important than the work itself. Knowing that my mother would have no desire for her story to be made so public, I said that although I would be happy to discuss the issue of adoption in very general terms, including the historical stories of abandonment and relinquishment that existed in my extended family, I was not prepared to discuss my mother's story directly.⁹ This was agreed.

However, when the release of the novel happened to coincide with the Royal Women's Hospital's apology to those women forced to relinquish their children, adoption stories were suddenly big news.¹⁰ I was aware of the controversy and more than happy to discuss any connections to my work. However, when, during a live radio interview, the announcer stated that he had heard that my family had had direct experience of illegal adoptions, I assumed that someone had told him my mother's story. Shocked, I said huffily that I had no idea where he had received this information.¹¹ The interview floundered, ending rather abruptly. On questioning my publicists, it transpired that while they had made no mention of my mother's story, in an attempt to make the most of current interest in the issue, their pitch to radio and television had made a little more of the adoption angle than we had agreed, incorrectly stating that I had knowledge of at least three illegal adoptions in my own family. The publicists subsequently wrote to all media, alerting them to the fact that I was only willing to discuss the subject in the most general terms. An invitation to appear on the now defunct women's chat show, *The Circle*—an unprecedented promotional opportunity and cause for considerable excitement—was cancelled immediately.

Despite the hybrid nature of the narrative, and Penguin's promotion and packaging of the book, *The Mistake* was reviewed primarily as a crime novel. In only one major review—in which the story was accompanied by a picture of newborn babies and featured the headline 'Not just for she who does the Cooking', in reference to the derisive 'Aga Saga' label that sometimes accompanies family dramas—was the novel discussed in the context of the domestic fiction tradition.¹² Although some reviewers—in particular, a few devoted exclusively to crime fiction—expressed

⁹ W. James, 'Secrets and shame', *Good Reading Magazine*, June 2012, p. 10.

¹⁰ A. Rosenbaum, 'Hospital sorry for forced adoptions', *The Age*, 24 January 2012, p. 1.

¹¹ W. James, *Drive* [interviewed by Mike Welsh], Canberra, ACT, Radio 2CCC, 21 February 2012.

¹² S. Green, 'Not just for she who does the cooking', *The Australian*, 25 February 2012, p. 21.

reservations over the equal weight given to domestic matters in the narrative, these have been a minority.¹³ For most reviewers, the emphasis on character and family life has not detracted from the suspense or slowed the momentum; instead, it has expanded their understanding of the context and repercussions of the ‘crime’.

Another unexpected element in the reception of the novel was the issue of the main protagonist’s likeability. Because the book was, in part, a response to the treatment of women like Lane, Chamberlain and McCann, I had deliberately attempted to create a character who was not superficially appealing, whose personality ‘defects’—as represented (and judged) by the public—could be regarded as somehow providing evidence of guilt. For this reason, it was important that Jodie was not a character with whom readers would immediately identify.

Readers are generally comfortable with characters who are obviously ‘bad’, like the imposter Carly in my earlier novel *Where Have You Been?* This sort of character, clearly a villain determined to stir up trouble and have fun at others’ expense, is an unexceptional, if stock, character in fiction: a caricature of sorts, a necessary foil to the other more clearly sympathetic characters. However, the reader’s relationship to a main protagonist like Jodie Garrow, who is distant and deliberately opaque, is necessarily ambivalent. While empathy for her plight may be engendered, readerly identification is less likely.

While my agent wasn’t too worried by Jodie’s lack of appeal, the manuscript was initially rejected numerous times, with a number of publishers citing my unsympathetic rendering of Jodie amongst their reasons:

I’m sorry to also say that what I struggled with here was that I didn’t really like any of the characters that much ...

There was something to her character that didn’t allow me to really feel sympathetic... Jodie (in particular) needs to be a more... sympathetically drawn character to give the novel greater power ...

¹³ Petrona, ‘*The Mistake* by Wendy James’ [review], 19 April 2012, <http://petronatwo.wordpress.com/2012/04/19/book-review-the-mistake-by-wendy-james/> (accessed 20 May 2013).

I worry that Jodie was just too unsympathetic a character to appeal to a commercial audience ...

Even when a publisher eventually accepted the manuscript, there were reservations about both Jodie and Angus's lack of appeal. Initially, it was suggested that I make them more sympathetic in order to make them more engaging to a wider audience. Happily, I was able to convince my editors that it was important that Jodie, in particular, not be too simpatico, and that a degree of impenetrability—even mild antipathy—was essential to the narrative. I needed readers to *not* like her to make my point.

This issue of character likeability has become the subject of discussion recently, after American writer Claire Messud expressed considerable exasperation at being asked whether she would want to be friends with the female protagonist of her latest novel:

For heaven's sake, what kind of question is that? Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert?... If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble. We read to find life, in all its possibilities. The relevant question isn't 'is this a potential friend for me?' but 'is this character alive?'¹⁴

When *The New Yorker* asked a number of writers whether likeability of character was an issue for them, the response was complex and divided, with some seeing such concerns as irrelevant, even abhorrent, and others regarding the desire to identify with fictional characters as a natural human response that was no different to our response to real people. However, as Margaret Atwood pointed out, this question is more likely to confront female writers, and their characters, than male: 'The snaps and snails and puppy-dog's tails are great for boys. The sugar and spice is still expected for girls.'¹⁵

Readers of *The Mistake* were also divided on this issue. Some reviewers found that Jodie's opacity, her distance from the reader, diminished their regard for the novel, while others barely mentioned their feelings about her. Many, though, found that while they were initially unsympathetic towards Jodie, as the novel progressed, they were prompted to question their assumptions and rethink their judgements about character and culpability, as had been my intention:

¹⁴ A. McCleave Wilson, 'An unseemly emotion: PW talks to Claire Messud', *Publishers Weekly*, 29 April 2013, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/authors/interviews/article/56848-an-unseemly-emotion-pw-talks-with-claire-messud.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

¹⁵ M. Atwood, 'Would you want to be friends with Humbert Humbert? A forum on likeability', *The New Yorker*, 16 May 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/books/2013/05/would-you-want-to-be-friends-with-humbert-humbert-a-forum-on-likeability.html> (accessed 20 May 2013).

As in the public narratives we devour with tea and toast in the morning, there is nothing to convict Jodie upon except our own judgment of her character; we relish or condemn her according to our sense of moral distance from her. We take part as armchair jurors, comfortable in our own safety, never suspecting that buried secrets of our own may one day be uncovered.¹⁶

It's sneakily challenging, disconcerting, compelling, car crash fascinating, and probably one of the best fictional reminders I've had in a while that public and media opinion should never be mistaken for the justice system, regardless of the ultimate outcome.¹⁷

Fittingly for a novel that is critical of a rush to judgement, no absolute moral position is taken. It thereby successfully avoids stereotyping and knee-jerk reactions, focusing instead on the very individual circumstances that lie behind the case.¹⁸

These readers had read the story I had hoped to tell and tried to write; made the connections I had hoped they would make; been challenged to think, to try to understand. What more could any writer ask?

¹⁶ N. Milthorpe, 'Burdened by buried secrets', *Canberra Times*, 10 March 2012, p. 24.

¹⁷ AustCrime, 'The Mistake' [review], 6 July 2012, <http://www.austcrimfiction.org/review/mistake-wendy-james> (accessed 20 May 2013).

¹⁸ Mrs Peabody Investigates, 'Wendy James, *The Mistake*' [review], 6 May 2013, <http://mrspeabodyinvestigates.wordpress.com/2013/05/03/36-wendy-james-the-mistake/> (viewed 20 May 20, 2013).

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The Mistake

But his wife looked back from behind him,
and she became a pillar of salt.

-Genesis, 19:26

It's not the tragedies that kill us, it's the messes.

-Dorothy Parker

In loving memory of James Francis Kennedy

12 August 1992 - 30 October 2011

For Jane and Anne, who made it possible.

And for Darren, who made it.

She wakens out of that same nightmare of darkness, of heat, of airlessness. In the dream she is stricken, choking and gasping for air; feels her lungs about to burst, her body ablaze. It is hell, but even dreaming she knows that this is only a vision of hell, and that the real nightmare is out in the waking world, waiting for her.

Part I

one

If she had been asked how her life was, before all this happened, before what she thought of as her – as *their* – unravelling, she'd have said that life was good. Not perfect, of course. When is it ever? In the way of all families, there had been problems, the commonplace complications of marriage and child-rearing, but there had been no insurmountable, no insoluble problems. Nothing they couldn't get past, move beyond. They were happy. Happy enough.

And looking back later – it seems idyllic.

It was the night before Hannah left on her Sydney excursion. There had been nothing special about the day itself. It had been rather ordinary, really, a day busy with humdrum domestic activity, but it was the beginning of spring and the hint of warmth in the sunshine, flooding through the back windows and then in the air as she'd hung out the washing, had made the day seem something out of the ordinary. Arding winters were long and hard and Jodie had found this winter interminable, though she couldn't say why, had imagined herself impervious after a lifetime's exposure. But the change in season was, for once, more than just a calendar note, and the prospect of colour and warmth brought an almost palpable sense of pleasure, of anticipation. Spring – the season of hope, of rebirth, of new beginnings.

It was the evening more than the day itself that had been memorable. For once the four of them had been home together for dinner – Hannah had to leave at some ungodly hour the following morning, in order to arrive in Sydney in the early afternoon, and had no homework, no social engagements, had been uncharacteristically communicative – helping Jodie get dinner ready, chatting about this friend, that plan, offering up the odd bit of gossip about teachers, a friend's parent. She had even given into Tom's pestering and played on the Wii with him before dinner; Hannah had been gracious in her inevitable

defeat, letting her younger brother slay her in a second game and then a third. Angus had arrived home in time to eat with them – and for once he had been all there, had been fully present, hadn't gulped down his dinner and rushed into his office to make a call, or read some report or other, but had remained with them at the table after the meal. He was at his most charming and expansive – asking Tom about his latest cricket score, regaling him with childhood sporting stories of his own, interrogating Hannah on the plans for the week in Sydney, recounting his own escapades during a high school excursion, giving a comic impersonation of affronted hotel staff, an appalled teacher. Tom had laughed uproariously, and even Hannah had appeared mildly amused.

Jodie had joined in the conversation only occasionally, preferring to watch them, relishing the scene. It happened far too rarely of late, she thought – all four of them together like this, just enjoying one another's company, being themselves. Without tension, friction, distractions. Angus, far more handsome now than when she'd first known him, grown into himself somehow; Hannah, her dark curls falling untidily over her face, her quick tongue, sometimes barbed humour, her little barking laugh, so oddly infectious; and the baby, her darling Tom, trying hard to maintain an air of insouciance, but failing, his cheeks pink with pleasure, his sentences tumbling together in his excited rush – his father's undivided attention so rare and precious. Here: the family she'd worked so hard to put together, keep together. There were other things in Jodie's life – friends, work, community – but her family, they were her core, her centre. This was all she wanted, and all she had ever wanted; all she would ever need.

She wonders sometimes if it is a real memory, or whether the recollection has acquired the rosy glow of nostalgia, making it somehow softer, sweeter, more significant than it ever really was. She remembers this as their last night, although in truth there were plenty of other nights when the four of them ate together, laughed together, nights that appeared carefree – but none after this could ever be, for her, as straightforwardly happy. For Jodie, no subsequent gathering came without the knowledge of the past, the uncertainty of the future, casting their shadows, tainting every moment of joy with bitterness, with doubt.

*

It had arrived, as such moments always do, quite without warning.

Jodie had imagined it already, had rehearsed, if not this particular dissolution, endless variations. In more vulnerable times, when she and Angus were first married, she had obsessively conjured up various scenarios of devastation: the police at her door, hats clutched respectfully, eyes downcast, voices hushed, announcing her young husband's death in some terrible accident or other. Later, as a new mother, the nightmare visions had become more urgent, had leached into reality – waking slowly from a rare undisturbed night's sleep, she would imagine her babies gone blue and cold in the crib, or pushing a stroller along Arding's busy streets would be assailed by an image so vivid it would take her breath away momentarily – an out of control truck, the pram and baby crushed, her own life over.

But the moment, when it finally arrives, does not announce itself quite so dramatically. And it's not really the beginning, either. Not quite.

She's just come in the back door, is struggling under a load of washing, yelling over her shoulder at Tom, who's still in his pjs, standing zombified in front of the TV, flicking through the channels, to get changed quickly or they'll be late for swim squad, when the call comes. She almost doesn't make it, the contents of the basket spilling all over the table, and onto the floor, but just at the moment before the call clicks over to her messagebank, she picks up the phone, with no time to collect herself before a breathless, uncharacteristically discomposd greeting.

“Mrs Garrow?”

“Yes?”

“It's Dr Guilfoyle here.”

Jodie notices immediately that Dr Guilfoyle is oddly tentative, unusual for the school Principal, who she finds more intimidating (with her rounded vowels and precise

enunciation) over the phone than when addressing her in person.

“Mrs Garrow, Jodie. I’m afraid we have some slightly bad news.” Jodie feels her throat constrict, her breathlessness increase.

“Hannah?”

“Now don’t panic – she’s alive and well. But I’m afraid there’s been an accident.”

“Oh... Is she?”

“She’s broken her leg, which is I know bad enough, but not critical.”

“Oh, no. How?” And then the odd draining away of terror – the relief settling, she feels herself cold then warm again, the ground shifts a little beneath her feet, rearranges itself, a chasm closes over.

“Well, it sounds terrible, it is terrible – but she was hit by a car.” The headmistress is brisk now that the worst is done. “I don’t know all the details, but from what Miss French told me, and she’s in a terrible state poor woman. What a thing to happen! From what Mrs French told me, the two girls – Hannah and Assia – had been outside in the middle of the night, retrieving, they tell us, a dropped mobile. And somehow ... well, somehow your daughter was hit by a passing vehicle. Both girls allege that they never left the pavement – but well. Perhaps it’s best not to dig too deeply, but I know your husband, being a lawyer, will be rather interested. From the information I’ve been given, it seems it wasn’t necessarily the driver’s fault.” Her characteristic dryness of manner has reasserted itself completely.

“Oh, dear. And, what? She’s in hospital? Can they reset?”

“Well that’s the thing, if it was just a simple matter of resetting she could rejoin the excursion, well, with considerable inconvenience to herself and her fellow travellers, and just come home. They’ve done a temporary cast, and that’s eased the pain of course, but I’m afraid it’s a rather nasty break, not a compound, but messy, and she needs surgery – a plate, or pins they’re saying... and well no doubt you know more about these things than I do.”

“Well, no, it’s not really...”

“So I expect you’ll want to head down to Sydney immediately. We can’t, you understand, have a teacher stay with her. And I’m sure you’ll want to be there to make decisions about treatment.” The Principal’s words are straightforward enough, but somehow her tone is accusatory.

“I do understand, of course. Thank you, Mrs Guilfoyle. I’ll head down immediately. Which hospital? Is she at Westmead?”

“Oh. No, It’s – actually she’s at a small private hospital further west. I’m not quite sure why. Beds, I suppose? In Greystanes. Bellview? Belltrees? – oh yes, here it is. Belfield Private. Perhaps you’ve heard of it? Mrs Garrow? Jodie? Hello?”

But Jodie isn’t listening. She has the phone clutched tightly to her chest, as if to calm the sudden wild beating of her heart. She can sense the rift yawning open again; feel the faint, but familiar tremor. Belfield Private. Belfield.

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath. “Sorry, Doctor Guilfoyle. I dropped the phone. Anyway, I’ll make arrangements and get down there right away. And yes, I know where Belfield is,” she hears herself saying calmly. “I’ve been there before.”

October, 1986

Jodie had chosen the hospital quite carefully. She looked for one that was distant – far enough away from her own suburb that she wouldn’t have to worry about chance meetings with friends, neighbours, fellow students; and consciously chose a hospital in a less affluent suburb, one where teenage pregnancies wouldn’t be regarded as anything out of the ordinary. She had made sure there was a cheap hotel nearby, and had booked a small and dingy room there for two weeks prior to the due date. What she hadn’t considered though, was the size of the hospital – and as she waited for her check up at her first midwives clinic – *a little bit late booking in, aren’t you, dear? You’re almost seven months...tsk tsk* – she was struck by the compact nature of the maternity wing. She could see the infants’ nursery from where she sat, and it was virtually empty, only two babies slept on the other side of the glass. The wards themselves were just beyond the waiting room, along a hallway with four doors on either side – which meant, she supposed, that there was a maximum capacity of between sixteen and twenty-four beds.

She had imagined, when she had allowed herself to think of it at all, that maternity wings were all vast and impersonal, like the wards in the huge public hospital where she'd done her last prac, that to be a patient was a bit like being a tiny bit of plankton in the belly of a whale, that her presence would make no conceivable impact – she would be anonymous, virtually invisible – that the baby could be born then instantly whisked away into some cool and sterile space, taken for good and with no questions asked. But here, in this diminutive cosy room, all timber and worn vinyl and muted colours, the middle-aged nurse on the desk brisk but kindly, it seemed impossible that her desire to relinquish the baby would go unremarked. And without judgement.

The realisation that she had made a mistake was almost immediate, but she did nothing about it. Jodie could have walked out then, booked in elsewhere – the large hospitals her GP had suggested, RPA, Women's – but instead, when the nurse beckoned her over, handed her a disposable cup and directed her to the nearby bathroom, she acquiesced. This baby was going to be born; surely where it was born was not really all that significant.

*

It takes her a little less than an hour to arrange all that needs arranging. To call Angus, her mother-in-law, Tom's school, to pack an overnight bag for herself, a few extra night-clothes for Hannah. She is too busy to really think into the situation too much until she is in the car, and then, even with the radio on, it's difficult *not* to think, impossible to ignore the panic edging through. It's enough that her teenage daughter has been hit by a car in a strange city, that there's some intimation of fault or bad behaviour, there's plenty enough in this to induce obsessive wondering and worrying, the mind's inexorable crazy gallop into a nightmare future: will there be some sort of law suit against Hannah? (dangerous behaviour, emotional trauma, car damage), could the surgery provoke a fatal morphine reaction, or worse, addiction, or even death from anaesthesia? (Hannah's only been under the knife once, as a baby), or further on, might not there be intense social isolation generated by the break, or the pain, or the scar, and the resultant depression, self-harm,

drugs, suicide.

Plenty enough here to be anxious about, even without the prospect of revisiting Belfield. Her disquiet is real (*Why this hospital, of all the hospitals in Sydney? Why Belfield?*) but it's little more than a vague and formless apprehension, not tethered to any dread scenario. What actually happens next is still unimagined. Unimaginable. Despite her fevered prognostications, Jodie has no real inkling of what lies ahead. She weaves the car carefully up and around and then down the dazzling green ranges, accelerates along the long coastal highway that leads to the capital; rushes blithely, unsuspecting and utterly unprepared, straight into her own catastrophe.

Jodie experiences a slight shock every time she's reunited with her teenage daughter after any sort of separation. When she thinks of Hannah it's always as her younger incarnation – in Jodie's imagination she's still twelve or so, slender, underweight, her chest still flat, her hips narrow. The Hannah who had still been hers to love, and who had loved her back unconditionally. This evening she pauses momentarily, confused, in the doorway of the hospital room, before she realises, with an odd pang of dismay, that the rather pudgy adolescent lying slumped and dazed, half asleep, mouth open and tongue protruding slightly, one plump plaster-encased leg hanging from a frame above the bed, is in fact her beautiful baby daughter. But it's only a momentary lapse, and she pushes herself over the threshold as the nurse announces her arrival in a quietly cheerful voice.

“Now here's someone you've been waiting for, sweetheart. Mum's here.” The nurse pats Jodie on the shoulder. “I've just got a few things to see to. I'll be back to check her vitals shortly? Give you two a chance to say hello.”

She gives Hannah a cheery smile as she left. “Poor mum. You kids are such a worry – can't leave you for five minutes.”

Hannah glares at the woman's retreating back before turning and sinking back into her pillows, while Jodie stands at the end of the bed, tentative and awkward, knowing that to rush in with her instinctive motherly concern would be a mistake. She would love to be given the opportunity to provide something more than some polite textbook mother words

to her impassive daughter, would love to be required to placate anger, console frightened tears. But even in Hannah's current vulnerable state it's obvious that any such intimacy would be seen as an unwarranted invasion, and is likely to be met with resistance. Hannah had never been an especially cuddly child, but there's a definite distance now, a prickly withdrawal. Hannah's no real exception, she knows, most of the teenage girls she knows are similarly stand-offish, but there's a sharp pang, nevertheless.

"Hello, Darling." Jodie hates herself for the slight uncertainty in her voice, but can't disguise it.

"Hey, Ma." Hannah presents her cheek for kissing, permits a brief and awkward hug. Close up, Hannah's appearance is not heartening: her hair a greasy bird's nest, her face covered in hot red acne, her hospital night-dress, pulled at a rather immodest angle, gaping open at all the wrong places.

"So what on earth did you do?" Jodie knows almost immediately that she's said the wrong thing, in the wrong way, and that any hopes she'd had for mother daughter harmony have been well and truly scotched. Hannah's eyes narrow, she gives a bitter little smile.

"God, Mum. You could at least *pretend* to be concerned before you ask what I did wrong." Jodie can hear in her response all the pained resignation, the bitten back accusations that characterise even their most banal conversations of late. Sometimes it seems that no utterance of her mother's is too slight to provoke this newly sensitive Hannah – the most innocuous observation about what she was wearing could be construed as an affront, an insult, eliciting a defence out of proportion to the original innocent statement.

"Darling. You know I didn't mean it like that." It's exhausting, but she keeps her voice low, remains patient.

Hannah rolls her eyes.

"You didn't mean what? You just asked me what I did. In that voice. Don't think I can't hear it. You're wondering what I did *wrong*, aren't you? Well, why do you have to assume that I did anything? I'm in hospital with a broken leg!"

"Oh, Hannah, sweetheart, you know I was just – " Her protestations are pointless, her daughter squeezes her eyes shut, turns her face away. "Just leave me alone." But Jodie has

seen the tears welling, heard the slight quaver in her voice. Her own eyes sting in response. She sighs, and pulls the blankets up over Hannah's rigid back, pats her shoulder gently, leaves her alone.

By the time the nurse returns, the specialist has made his visit, has recommended another overnight stay in hospital, just to monitor the effects of the anaesthetic, watch her pain levels. Tomorrow they can travel home with a referral to the local specialist, who will arrange further surgery, refer her on to the necessary services, physio, X-rays, counselling if necessary. Jodie has provided Hannah with the basic requirements for her hospital stay: night-clothes, toothpaste, along with a supply of magazines, fruit, and several blocks of chocolate all bought for exorbitant prices from the hospital kiosk.

Jodie is seated a decent distance from the bed, reading a magazine, while Hannah sleeps, sprawled awkwardly, the blankets bunched around her again. The nurse fusses over Hannah for a moment, then approaches Jodie with a clipboard and pen.

"Now, I think we need to get some details from you, Mrs Garrow. If you could just fill out these forms. It's ridiculous, I know, all this paperwork. When I first started out it was nothing like this." She chats away irrepressibly, distractedly clearing the chaos that Hannah has somehow managed to create even whilst immobilised and confined to a hospital bed. Jodie fills out the forms, looks up at her slumbering daughter every now and then, only half listens.

"... an odd thing, Jodie. Our matron – well we don't actually call them matrons, haven't for years, actually, though it's a pity, I like the old titles: matron, sister. They had some dignity. I liked the hats too. And all the starch." Wistfully. "And hospital corners. But anyway, our nursing unit manager, Debbie West, she's been back for a few years, but worked here twenty years ago or so, I think. Anyway, Debbie was wondering, when she saw your girl's, what's it called? That webbing between her toes?"

"Syndactyly," Jodie doesn't look up, responds automatically.

"Right. That's it. Syndactyly. Well, she said that she'd only ever seen one other person with both feet webbed completely like that. A newborn; years ago. She'd thought at first that it might have been Hannah here." Hannah stirs, yawns, her eyes flicker open, close

again.

“Oh.” Jodie has paused in her writing. “That is odd. I haven’t. I haven’t heard of it either. I mean – I have heard of it, obviously: my toes are the same, and one of my brothers has it, and my Dad, too, as well as Hannah. It runs in the family, I guess. But I’ve never met anyone else...” Her voice trails off, she returns to the form, which has unaccountably blurred. Her hand shakes.

The nurse rattles on. “But then Debbie had the records pulled – and of course it was the wrong date. Another baby about five years before Hannah here was born. But here’s a funny thing – the mum’s name was the same as yours: Jodie. But she was from Sydney, Newtown or somewhere. Not Arding.”

Jodie forces herself to respond normally. “Well, that is interesting, isn’t it? Maybe she’s some ...” she hears herself give a weird high-pitched laugh, almost a cackle, “some long lost cousin.”

“Oh, look.” the nurse pulls some creased A4 documents off a pile of newspapers, “she’s left ‘em here for you to look at, I guess. What does it say? Now, let me...”

Jodie is by her side quickly, almost without thought. “No, it’s okay, I’ll have a look.” her voice low, glancing urgently at her ostensibly still sleeping daughter, but the nurse ignores her appeal.

“Oh, yes. Here it is. Jodie Evans. I’m not sure what she was doing having her baby here then – it’s not exactly a local hospital. But look how young she was. Only nineteen. She mightn’t have even known she was preggers. It happens more often than you’d think.”

‘Really, I’d love to look –’ desperate now. But it’s too late, Hannah is struggling to sit up, looking wide awake, energised for the first time since Jodie’s arrival.

“Jodie Evans. But that’s your maiden name, Mum. Evans. Wow. That’s so random.” A giggle, then: “Hey, that wasn’t you, was it? Mum?”

Somehow, the nurse is oblivious, goes on. “A little girl it says here, Elsa Mary Evans. Six pounds eleven ounces. Her mum was only nineteen, but I always think young is better than the alternative. Awful to start pushing them out in your forties. I hope this next generation doesn’t leave it all too late. I had my first when I was only twenty-one – didn’t make the big fuss these older mums do. And I have to say it’s kept me young. Plenty of time to do

other things...” Her voice peters out, and she looks up, suddenly aware of the frozen silence.

Jodie is saved from attempting an airy denial when a woman, another nurse, squeaks across the threshold, beaming expectantly.

“Jodie. It is you. I thought this little miss must be your girl.”

Jodie recognises her immediately – she is oddly unchanged after twenty years – the slanted blue eyes still sparkling, the slight gap between her teeth, the freckles splashed across her nose and cheeks. “Hello, Debbie,” reluctantly.

“I’ll bet you haven’t had a thing to eat since you arrived. I know you mothers. I’m on my tea break. Why don’t you come and have a cuppa with me? I’m sure Miss Hannah here won’t mind. It’s been a long time.”

Jodie looks at Hannah, who gives a shrug, an almost cheerful grin, the first since Jodie’s arrival. “Off you go, Mama.” She is fiddling with the television remote with one hand, while the other scrabbles in the drawer beside her. “Don’t worry – I’ve got the telly to keep me company.” She slams the drawer shut, brandishing her prize: “And the chocolate.”

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“... I was so passionate back then, so intense. Oh, it’s not that I don’t care now – but you know how it is when you get older. I got out of middy a few years back now, not long after I had my own. I’d started to feel a bit uncomfortable with the ... over zealousness of the anti-intervention crowd who were in charge then. Suddenly I could see how self-righteous it was – and how some of the mothers were just as harmed by that as they were by those who wanted the whole thing micromanaged. Eventually it got to me. Especially after I’d had my own. I had everything prepared for a natural birth – the incense, the oils, a doula, I’d been doing yoga, and was looking forward to embracing the pain and all that – and then I ended up having an emergency caesar myself. What a joke!”

The two women are sitting in the dreary hospital cafeteria, which is almost empty at this time of day. The nurse, Debbie, has ordered coffee, which she is too busy to drink,

enthusiastically regaling Jodie with the history of her career. Jodie sips on watery tea, nodding, only half-listening, dreading the inevitable destination of the conversation, wishing desperately to be elsewhere.

“So, now I’m a surgical nurse. I came back here when a job came up. I’m the unit manager, actually. Bizarre, isn’t it, to return after twenty years? But it’s a very different hospital these days. There’s no maternity unit, for one thing. It was such a funny little unit really. Our old matron – do you remember her? Sheila O’Malley? She only died a couple of years ago. She was a real tyrant. Had complete control of the place. No one in admin dared say anything to her – it was like her own little private kingdom. Anyway, it wouldn’t be possible now. You’d remember what they could be like, those old matrons. You finished, your training didn’t you?”

“Yes. And then I worked for about ten years, a bit of this and that, A and E, pediatrics. But I stopped after the kids. I’ve been thinking about getting something part-time, now that they’re both older.” Jodie is guarded, reluctant to share more than is strictly polite.

“Yeah. I took a few years off after kids, too. Anyhow – I’m in charge of the surgical team here, and that’s how I got to see your daughter’s feet! They’re almost exactly the same as the other baby’s, aren’t they? And I think I remember you saying you had them too? It’s really very unusual, according to the surgeon, having the complete webbing on both feet. You see a lot of the other, the second and third toe, and then occasionally I’ve seen some really terrible deformities, where the syndactyly is so complete that the toes are basically a solid clump. But such amazing things they can do to fix these now.” The woman stops abruptly – spoons sugar into her coffee carefully, one spoonful, two, hesitates over the sugar bowl and then adds another, smiling ruefully as she stirs. She continues along the same conversational trajectory, disregarding Jodie’s continued lack of response. “So anyway, when I saw your daughter’s foot, I thought of you straight away. And then when she came out of the anaesthetic – which she did very nicely, by the way – I told her that I’d only ever seen the same sort of webbing once before. And then from what she said, that her mum, Jodie, had the same webbing, that you were a nurse too, I worked out that it must

have been you. At first I'd assumed that Hannah must have been that baby ..." she drifts off again here and looks up at Jodie again, notices her expression, gives a reassuring smile. "Oh, it's okay. I didn't say anything to Hannah. Once I worked out that Hannah didn't know anything – she said she was your eldest – I didn't let on. I just let her think I was confusing you with someone else. But, well, I've never forgotten you, you know. You were my first birth. And I've always wondered about how you got on. You were so young, younger than me, but you seemed so level-headed, so cool. The little baby? Elsa Mary? What happened? She ... she didn't die did she?"

There's no way that Jodie can continue her silence. Her instinct is to get up from the table, to run as fast she can away from this – her past rearing its head so unexpectedly and so shockingly. To have to come here was one thing, but this, now, is almost beyond belief. If only she could go and not look back, but she can't. She can see that this woman will require an answer – that she expects, that she needs to know, regardless of any reluctance on Jodie's part. This woman, Debbie, is implacable, determined, curious, the intelligence obvious in her steady gaze, and Jodie can sense that's there's no way she'll let her escape without some sort of explanation. So Jodie closes her eyes for a moment, composing herself, takes several breaths, deep ones, before replying.

"No. Not that. As far as I know she's alive and well." She can hear a sort of desperate pleading in her own voice.

"As far as you know?" the woman is frowning, licks the froth off her teaspoon. "What do you mean?"

"I ... Well. In the end, I didn't keep her. I had her adopted out." It comes easily, more easily than she'd ever imagined.

"You're kidding." The woman looks stricken. "Shit. I didn't realise that things were so difficult. You seemed so, well, certain about everything. I mean, I can remember being slightly worried – you were only young, and obviously all alone – but you seemed, I don't know, so capable."

Jodie shrugs, tries to keep her expression neutral.

"Oh, God – that's why you were so determined about not breast-feeding, isn't it? You

knew you wouldn't be keeping her? That there was no point? And why you never seemed to hold her unless you had to. I guess you couldn't risk all the bonding stuff either?"

Jodie tries to smile, to lighten the conversation, to divert her perhaps.

"Well, you'll be happy to know that I breast-fed the – "

But the woman interrupts, her coffee forgotten, obviously more interested in following the fate of that first child, than in Jodie's subsequent maternal experiences. "But what I don't understand is why – well, why you didn't tell us that you didn't want to keep her? I mean the midwives, the hospital authorities, the social workers ... Surely the hospital was the logical place. To start the process? Usually the decision's made antenatally, and it's all arranged before the baby's even born. But it happens sometimes postnatally. and the procedures are still pretty straight forward, even if it's rare."

Jodie makes a split second decision about how much to reveal to this woman, how much to keep to herself. She's thinking – of course she is, who wouldn't? – about damage control, about containing the story, leaving it here, ensuring it goes no further. She says the thing that will keep her safest. A miscalculation, in retrospect. She'd have done better to stay closer to the truth. She says glibly: "I really hadn't sorted anything out beforehand. I only ever had one antenatal check-up, and then it was just too hard here. I couldn't face the... the feeling of failure. The maternity wing, the nurses, the other mothers. It was meant to be such a happy, such a joyful event. Everyone was so kind, so helpful, so supportive." Debbie's expression is sympathetic, intent, her coffee forgotten as she waits for the conclusion to this narrative. "I felt that if I admitted that I didn't want to keep my own baby, here, that I would be letting everyone down. So, I pretended. I waited. I organised it all when I left."

Debbie is all wide-eyed sympathy. "My God, that's awful. So, where did you go? How did you go about it? Did you take the baby home to your parents? How did you arrange it all? What about your boyfriend, the father? There was a boyfriend, wasn't there?" She pauses, moves her hand over Jodie's and squeezes briefly. Jodie had forgotten the woman's casual warmth and easy familiarity, an offhand demonstrativeness that had been – and still is – so foreign to Jodie herself. "God. You poor thing. You were so young, and having to do all

this on your own. I can't imagine."

Jodie grimaces. "I was so young, and it was all so long ago, I can – well, I can barely remember what happened. Even if I wanted to. It was all sorted out quite quickly. She went to a good family, people who wanted her. People who could love her. I try hard not to think about it, really. And now, as you can see, my life's so busy, and I'm sure she's happy – and that we're all better off. It would have been no sort of a life for either of us."

The woman gazes at her, shaking her head as if dumbfounded. "God. Really, it's just amazing when you think of it. To come back here, now. To this very hospital, after all those years, and to meet up with me. You couldn't have imagined it, really."

The women give slow simultaneous sighs, then laugh at the absurdity.

Jodie looks at her watch, goes to suggest that she should move on, but Debbie, sipping from her coffee at last, puts down her mug so suddenly that the liquid slops over the edge, speaks.

"Your daughter. Hannah. I hope she ... I tried to divert her once I realised, but I know what they're like. Teenagers." Eyes wide, anxious. "God, I'm sorry – I just didn't think. I hope this won't cause trouble." Jodie shakes her head quickly, desperate now to be gone, to get out of here, to end the conversation.

"No, no. It's fine. Look she doesn't know, but I'll just tell her it was some sort of mix up; that you knew me from elsewhere, that we worked together years ago or something. Anyway, she's a teenage girl, she's really not interested in much other than her own social life at the moment. And certainly not her mother's boring past. Look, it's been lovely meeting you again, Debbie, but I really –"

"Oh, yes, of course. You've driven all that way today – and then all the worry – you must be exhausted. And I should get back home. Where are you staying?"

The two women gather their belongings – bags, papers, keys – prepare to go. Then just as they're shaking hands, just when Jodie thinks it's all over, one last question, too intimate

for such surroundings, the slightness of their relationship, but delivered in a forthright, disinterested manner that makes it impossible to take offence: “Have you ever thought about contacting her? About contacting Elsa? She’d be grown up now wouldn’t she ? twenty or so. There’s a register, you know – she could be on it. I mean, it’s possible that you could hear from her one day. Likely, in fact.”

“A register?”

“Well, you know the adoption laws have changed since you relinquished her. Parents and children, they can choose now. It’s reasonably simple to make contact.”

“No.” Jodie’s interjection is instinctive, blunt, surprises them both. “There’s no way I’d want to contact her. It was another life. I know I might seem hard, but I can’t, I can’t go back.”

“Oh.” Debbie pauses, looks at her consideringly. “But it doesn’t just go one way, Jodie. What if she tries to contact you? It’s not unlikely, you know.”

Debbie sits down again, and Jodie follows her, reluctant but resigned, perches on the edge of her chair.

“You know, after you left the hospital, I tried to ring you. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay. I was very, very – I had strong sense of responsibility in those days,” her voice wry, “and I still do I suppose. Anyway, I was worried and wanted to ring. Just to check that you’d made it home okay and that the baby was all right. That you were coping. Anyway, it was obviously a wrong number. I don’t know if it was deliberate or you’d just written it down wrongly, but it was some shop or something. Nobody there had ever heard of you.”

“Oh, it was deliberate, definitely.” Jodie sighs. “It was silly, looking back. I don’t know why, but I didn’t want anyone to know. My boyfriend, my flatmate. It was all so complicated. It still is, I guess. Even more, now.”

There’s a definite break in the conversation, and Jodie half stands, ready to go, but Debbie looks at her seriously, speaks slowly, tentatively “Jodie. I could investigate it for you, if you like. I’ve helped a good friend of mine recently – well, in reverse. She was tracking her mother, but I actually have a contact in the department, who’s happy to bypass a lot of the official admin stuff. So, if you want some help, I’d be more than happy –”

Jodie interrupts again, appalled. “Oh, no. Really. Thank you – but I’d rather not.” Adds

more fiercely than she intends. “I really don’t want to know.”

Debbie’s voice is unbearably sympathetic. “I understand, of course. But if you –”

“No,” she smiles to lessen the rebuff. “But thank you. It’s a kind offer.” She swallows, adds “And if I ever do, I’ll contact you first.”

Debbie smiles broadly, obviously pleased by this slight concession.

“You know, I’ve always remembered her name. God, you’d think I’d forget wouldn’t you, after all this time, but it was so unusual. Elsa. We all wondered at the time why on earth you’d given it to her. It seemed such an old ladies name. But it’s actually a really pretty name, isn’t it. And I’ve never had another one.”

“Another what?”

“Another Elsa. You get all sorts of weird and wonderful baby names these days: Tyleeka, Bardooka, Zamish. Just last week I heard of a Garleeka. They’re like little kids, aren’t they, making up silly names for their dolls.”

They laugh, shake hands, part ways.

Jodie heads back to say good night to Hannah. She is desperate now to get to her hotel, have a drink, go to bed. The interview with Debbie – unimagined, impossible to prepare for – has left her drained and shaken, but somehow she managed to strike the right attitude, find the right tone. She might need to deflect a few questions from an inquisitive daughter, but other than that, it’s finished. Debbie will finish her shift and go home. Maybe (while the oddness of their meeting is still fresh), she’ll want to share it with someone – her husband, her partner, her best friend. Perhaps it will eventually become some sort of cautionary tale, or a narrative about coincidence and continuity. But eventually, surely, and sooner rather than later, she’ll forget all about it. Forget about Jodie; forget the baby.

two

Jodie helps Hannah get comfortable. Pushes the car’s front seat right back, reclines it fully and straps her in. It’s a little like being a baby again, and Hannah submits to her mother’s

ministrations with uncharacteristically good grace. Her leg, blissfully numb yesterday, is aching a little today, but she doesn't have the necessary energy right now to complain or whine. Instead, she's making an effort to appear in good cheer. The journey ahead of them is long, and she wants to travel in comfort. If she keeps her mother in a good mood, she'll get control of the stereo. She's already plugging her iPod in, and there'll be frequent food breaks. It's in Hannah's best interests to be compliant, receptive to her mother's fussing. In truth, Hannah's half looking forward to it; it's not very often she gets to experience the helplessness of childhood anymore, and there's a pleasure in relaxing and leaving everything to mum, being waited on, deferred to, coddled. She remembers the strange pleasure of illness when she was a little girl (not so long ago, really) and sick in bed: the back of her mother's hand, cool against her forehead, the smell of eucalyptus steam, the offerings of soup, lemonade, milky tea. Her mother would sit and read to her, plump her pillows, straighten her bedclothes, dim lights. Quite often Hannah would drag the convalescence out for a few days beyond what she needed, out of sheer enjoyment. She was looking forward to being home, to being able to relive this, though her room isn't the cosy and bright little girl's room it once was, but a dark and dirty teenage den.

But now, in the car, her mother isn't quite as solicitous as she'd hoped. Jodie's face is set, she's subdued, enquiring only vaguely into Hannah's well-being as they set off. Hannah is nonplussed, slightly disappointed, but in a way it's a bit of a reprieve. Her mother hasn't questioned her too closely yet about the accident, and she'd been half dreading the inevitable disingenuous questions, has barely the energy required to gently deflect (let alone conduct a full-frontal defence) questions and the occasional mild criticism. She sets her iPod on shuffle, bumps the volume to loud, leans back with her eyes closed. She's beginning to get nicely in the zone, when with a giddy lurch that's as unexpected as a dip in the road, she remembers. She opens her eyes and sits up.

'Mum?'

"Hmmm? Is there something wrong? Is your leg hurting? Isn't there enough room for you to get comfortable?" Her mother glances at her only briefly and then her attention's back on the road ahead, intent on negotiating the unfamiliar city streets.

“No, my leg’s fine. But Mum, what was that nurse talking about yesterday? Someone with the same name?”

She notices her mother’s quickly indrawn breath, the slight stiffening of her shoulders, but she answers casually enough. “Oh, that was nothing, darling. Nothing important.”

“But she said something about a baby.”

Her mother’s voice is tinged with impatience now. “It was just an administrative mix-up, Hannah. I don’t know all the details. It was nothing.”

“But you went and had coffee with her. You obviously knew her. It looked pretty important, to me.”

“Hannah.” Her mother’s voice is firm. “I have to concentrate on getting us back on the freeway now. Not another word.”

Hannah rolls her eyes. She bumps the volume up a notch and leans back again, her plastered leg sprawling awkwardly in front of her. “Yeah, Mum. Okay. Whatever.”

There’s something going on, Hannah senses that much. Even at the hospital her mother had asked her only the most cursory questions about the accident. She’d been surprised, had been sure that she’d interrogate her, had rehearsed her story over and over in anticipation, making certain that there was no way she’d slip up, get caught out in a lie – but oddly, apart from the initial tension on her arrival, her mother has barely inquired into the actual nature of her accident. Hannah knows that now, alone in the car together, is the perfect time to broach the subject. Ideally she would like to get it over, to get the explanation out in the open, have the questions and answers done and dusted before she has to face her father, who will be much more difficult to fool. But now is clearly not the time to press. Her mum isn’t in the mood, has other things on her mind, and Hannah really couldn’t be stuffed. The analgesics aren’t quite as effective as the morphine, and the dull ache is ratcheting up in force moment by moment. Instead, she lets herself drift off into a mildly unpleasant drug and pain induced delirium.

Over the past couple of years, Hannah’s relationship with her parents has changed. Her connections with both father and mother had become strained in common and expected ways. She’d found her mother, her mother’s strictures, her nagging, her insistence on

Hannah's keeping a clean room and a clean soul, particularly annoying; and her father, with his irregular but decisive incursions into matters domestic and disciplinary, almost equally so – but in this she was really no different to most of her friends. For many of them it was as if those formerly powerful symbols of all things good and possible were suddenly viewed from a completely new perspective. Not only did their parents lose the last vestiges of mystery and magic they retained from childhood, but they lost most of their status as major players, were transformed into hindrances, difficulties to be overcome, mere subplots in the central drama of their offsprings' lives.

Where Hannah differs a little from her friends is in her attitude to the town where she was born, the town they're heading back to now. While all the day girls (the boarders are less savage in their critique, naturally) complain bitterly, but more or less mechanically about Arding, Hannah's dislike is somehow more fundamental, and is profoundly tied up with her parents. Not only is Hannah chronically, crazily, almost terminally bored, she blames her parents – and more than four generations on either side – for her current situation, perhaps fearing that this geographical torpor is as genetically inevitable as the webbing between her toes.

Arding is an undeniably lovely place, planted with splendid European trees, teeming with buildings of local historical import. It's neat and well-maintained, the streets running tidily in a grid surrounding a central business and ecclesiastic district. The town boasts two magnificent cathedrals, though in recent years these have been all but deserted, as has the traditional town centre, its formerly devoted patrons flocking to the two new shopping malls, ugly concrete behemoths that bookend the town. It's a university town, which means that the demographics are slightly different to most Australian country towns, with a constantly replenished supply of young people, an artsy and academic focus, a slightly less sports-oriented populace.

It's not a bad place to grow up, or shouldn't be. But right now Hannah hates Arding. She hates its facile prettiness, its eager citizenry, despises its right-on reputation as a tolerant town with its pretensions to being an edgy, artsy, intellectual outpost – kind of Balmain of

the tablelands – almost as much as she detests the desperate gentility and subtle snobbery that characterises her own milieu. The reality is, or the reality that Hannah currently sees, is that Arding is just as full of racial and class tensions as any small town. And its artistic pretensions are only that – pretensions. Hannah's parents and all their friends, all the town worthies, the old families, the rich and influential, are no better than the bogans, of whom there are also a plentiful supply.

Hannah is infuriated by what she sees as her parents' unquestioning acceptance of Arding's consequence, its influence over every facet of their lives; her father's comfortable historic and familial ties just as much as her mother's impoverished past, her subsequent social transformation. She notices with a pang her mother's efforts to be included in guest-lists for balls, parties, her willingness to be on organising committees with the good and the influential, to be accepted by certain civic worthies – successful small business people, those on the land. It reminds her so much of her own desperation as a fourteen year old to hang out with the pretty girls. A desire that was extinguished by fifteen and then satisfied by default when Hannah's rage at being excluded was channelled into comedy and cruelty until her personal stock magically rose in value, almost overnight. Now, she wonders how her mother can bear it at her age, how it can still matter so much.

Her parents' absolute lack of ambition pains her too, their horizons stretching no further than Arding. Such small town aspirations. They shame her. Is this all they ever wanted? All they've ever needed? Her Dad has worked in London. What on earth did he come back here for when the world was so obviously a more appropriate oyster, when his abilities so obviously deserved a wider sphere? And Jodie, who has chosen to be just a mother, just a wife: her life is unimaginable, intolerable. Almost her entire extended family is still here – only one of her father's three siblings lives elsewhere, and she sometimes thinks longingly of her mother's father, who she has never met, who is the only one of her immediate family to escape. Perhaps he had something the rest of them lack, some vitality or curiosity that she has inherited. For Hannah's own ambitions stretch far beyond the town limits, and far beyond the small and stagnant pond that constitutes her parents' world. Marry one of those popped collar boys in boating shoes? Become one of those women with

their bobs and pearls? Hannah would rather die.

The Sydney excursion had promised to be an agreeable interruption to the usual tedium, an much anticipated escape from Nowheresville, and Hannah is disappointed to have her visit cut short so painfully. She and Assia had had a few more interesting interludes planned: there was meant to be a visit to night club at the cross tonight, under the guise of an overnight visit to Assia's parents. The other girls had been green with envy, their own afternoon and evening filled to the brim with various cultural delights: a visit to the NSW Art Gallery, the Maritime Museum and then some dreary contemporary theatre. Regardless of her disappointment, and perhaps because of the analgesics, Hannah is feeling more lucky than otherwise. Not just because this morning's X-rays had shown that the break was far less complicated than they'd thought, that she wouldn't need a pin or additional surgery, and no one in their right mind would call being hit by the car itself good luck, exactly – but Hannah (and she knows Assia and Bessie would agree) has to admit that there is an element of extreme good fortune in the fact that the driver wasn't willing to hang around after (a hit and run – she should be so lucky!) and tell anyone what had really happened. She didn't blame the driver one bit. It was her (and to a lesser degree, Assia's) fault entirely. And that was something else she doesn't fancy coming to light. She doesn't know exactly what would happen if it came out that she and Assia had been dancing on the median strip in their underwear, somehow they'd got away with the issue of them being outside at that time of the night by telling Mrs Bussell that Lucy had dropped her mobile out the window and they'd come out to retrieve it, and that the car (driven by some drug or alcohol affected madman) had veered wildly and knocked her down, then sped off again, not stopping to check on her well-being.

Okay, so it was her own fault – well, their shared fault, to be fair. But it could, it probably should, have been worse. It could have been the two of them: both she and Assia could have ended up with limbs broken, or have suffered even more serious damage. Two lots of parents would have been called down to retrieve their wounded daughters – what a scandal! The bishop would have been consulted, no doubt, and maybe the board. And the teachers' (poor unsuspecting dupes) heads would have rolled. Just the thought of Assia's

parents and the fuss they would have made, makes Hannah quake.

Oh, not her ageing magistrate father, enormously fat and jovial, seemingly vague. He's nothing to be worried about. But Assia's mother is another matter: a weird little elf-like creature with her wild hair, her black eye-makeup, her ultra-hip wardrobe and her wispy high-pitched voice. The way she could suddenly turn hard and sharp and go on the attack, pulling spiky legal words out of the air, incontestable arguments, so easily, so coolly. But ultimately ruthless, vicious – as inexorable as a samurai in an old martial arts movie. Hannah had only once witnessed her in action, battling the former vice-principal over some aspect of the school's disciplinary code she didn't agree with, but it was hard to forget. She'd won easily, her eyes slanted with laughter throughout the confrontation, the feline smile not once leaving her face. And Hannah suspected she always won. They needed to keep the truth from Manon at all costs, though a part of Hannah thinks it would almost be worth getting her involved, just to witness the spectacle of her rage, although there is no knowing where her wrath might be focused this time. She has seen it directed once or twice at poor Assia, who has inherited neither her mother's sharpness of wit, nor her father's insouciance and is therefore utterly defenceless, too easily annihilated. And it could be that the fearsome creature would have seen through it all – would have realised that the girls were lying through their teeth.

There's a fair chance that Assia's mother – unlike her own darling mum, innocent, unsuspecting – might have twigged that the accident wasn't merely the consequence of the innocent high-jinx of spirited teenage girls (something from *Girl's Own Annual*, where Penelope and Lucy daringly sneak out of their dorm at night, camouflaged by their dark skivvies and black ski pants, their gleaming hair pulled neatly back with regulation headbands, in a quest to discover the whereabouts of the mysterious trench coated fellow they've spotted gazing wistfully at their virginal Sports mistress, Miss K, hoping to somehow orchestrate a romantic union between the two...). That she'd somehow sniff out the sordid reality, work out that it was something more than just a naughty escapade – an illegal midnight feast, a quest for take-away, fizzy drink, chocolate, cigarettes – but something much darker and deeper.

Which was this: a surreptitious meeting between the two girls and a guy they'd hung out with during their few hours free time – squeezed between visits to a small and exceedingly dull suburban museum and Sydney university – at the Broadway Mall, who'd promised to bring them a shitload of E, enough to get them through the next few parties, for half the price they would usually pay at home. During the day the boy had seemed an unlikely enough source, thin, stooped, bespectacled, acne scarred, and they'd doubted that he'd turn up. But in the gloom of the unlit park across from the hotel, he'd seemed less nerdy, had appeared satisfyingly sinister, his thin face shadowed, his glasses obscured beneath the regulation hoodie, and simultaneously more attractive – his skinniness transformed into a kind of ruined, gaunt grace. They'd paid up, using all the money six of them could put together in addition to promises of repayment from another three, and had decided to test the wares before heading back to the hotel. There was no real hurry: Sam and Bella were lookouts, at the ready with excuses for Assia and Hannah's absence, and with a coded text prepared for their immediate return. So they had stayed in the park with the boy, who was as innocuous as he'd originally appeared, a second-year music student at the con, a trumpeter, his dealing helping pay for his tuition, and the three of them had each taken half a tab. And as he'd promised, it was good stuff, with power enough in it to ensure a few hours of pleasurable chemical diversion.

And of course she hadn't just tripped (*rofl!*) from the median strip, as she'd claimed. There'd been a game of chicken, played successfully on similar occasions – how many other times had she managed to jump at the critical moment with what felt like almost supernatural precision? But this time the car had sped up, or she'd just plain misjudged the timing. And so she'd been winged. To Hannah's thinking it was entirely a matter of good fortune that the car had driven on. If the driver had been a concerned citizen, properly appalled, eager to help, there really would have been hell to pay. A broken leg seemed like a gift by comparison.

Hannah had not admitted to taking anything when they'd asked during her ambulance ride – no drugs, no alcohol – had looked the picture of outraged innocence. *Drugs? What do*

you think I am? Despite all the adult imprecations that one should always admit to drug-taking, to tell the truth in times of crisis, she'd decided to keep that bit of information to herself. And luckily Assia had kept quiet too. There was no need for anyone to know. The effects were wearing off anyway, and by the time she'd been given a shot of pethidene, had X-rays taken, and they'd found a surgeon to do the work, there was no need. They'd gotten away with it. And they still had the baggie. Hannah had managed to get it pass to Assia when no one was looking. It'd be a bore, partying with a cast, but the E would no doubt improve things.

It seems that Hannah's dissimulation has been more successful than she'd expected. The details of the accident are clearly not bothering her usually overprotective mother. There's not even the barest hint of doubt, it's as if the butter in her mouth has miraculously hardened to the consistency of a boiled lollie. Jodie's so uncharacteristically preoccupied that there's obviously something else going on, Hannah's certain of that. Just what it is she has no idea, but *wtf* – she'll suck it and see.

three

Jodie sits at the outside table with Angus. Away from the little pocket of warmth provided by the patio heater, the evening is cold – the temperature expected to return to zero overnight, a frost expected in the morning. Mellowed by a few glasses of red, Angus is in a cheerfully chatty mood. He's made it very clear that he's glad to have them return safely, to see for himself that Hannah's condition is not too serious. He has missed Jodie in theory if not in practice. She knows he will have been far too busy for her short absence to have had any real impact, but as always after any absence, even after so many years of marriage, she's oddly relieved to discover that he still cares, that he wasn't happier alone.

It's just the two of them. Tom has gone to stay over at a friend's for the night, and Hannah is holed up in her room for the evening, on no account to be disturbed, with a two litre bottle of coke, a packet of corn chips, a family sized block of chocolate and the entire third

season of *Sex and the City* to get through. Angus is telling her about some case he is working on, some obscure, incomprehensible point of law that he's explaining in exhaustive, and exhausting, detail, and though she nods in the right places, *hmmm hmms* here and there, knowing the patterns of these conversations so well, in reality Jodie is not even half listening.

She makes a decision, breaks into his monologue. "Darling. Angus. She puts her hand on his arm. "I need to tell you something." He pauses mid sentence, and frowns in surprise. "Oh, Okay. Am I boring you?" he sounds huffy, mildly embarrassed. Jodie strokes his arm half-heartedly in an attempt to soothe him. "No, of course not. It's –". She falters.

"What?" His voice is immediately irritable, anxious. "It's not Hannah is it? I knew we wouldn't get out of this broken leg business without trouble. Is someone suing? Was it Hannah's fault?"

For once Jodie doesn't rise to Hannah's defence, though with Hannah's behaviour and attitude becoming more and more intractable, it's somehow becoming a habit.

"No. It's got nothing to do with Hannah, Angus. It's to do with me. Something I've done." He raises one eyebrows, gives his best impression of a patronising smirk. "Oh, so the little woman's Mastercard balance is out of con –"

She interrupts again. "No. It's nothing like that, Angus. And it's not a joke. I wish it was. It was ... well there's no easy way to tell you this I suppose. It –" Jodie is finding it hard to find the words. Where to begin? She casts about for a place to start the story, but there's nowhere safe, nowhere innocent, no easy way in.

"Remember when you went to England? No, not last year. That first time. After uni. Before we were married. When you were working in London."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Well, when you were away – before I came over. I had this thing."

"A thing? What sort of thing? What are you talking about?"

Her voice has descended to a whisper, she clears her throat. "I went, I slept with someone else. A boy. It was nothing – just one night."

She can't go any further, looks up. Her husband is gazing at her incredulously. And then

he's smiling, chortling. "Jesus, Jodes. Is this something you've had on your conscience all these years. Sweetheart, I don't mean to disappoint your desire for, well, whatever it is – penance or forgiveness or closure or whatever – but that was a long, long time ago. And we weren't married. And we were very young. And I have to tell you, I wasn't exactly celibate myself."

She clutches his forearm again. "No, Angus. it's more than that. Much more. Just listen, will you? Please?"

He listens. She watches his face closely as she tells her tale, sees his eyes harden, his lips compress, his jaw set. She doesn't tell him the whole story – but what she tells him is enough.

December, 1986

She'd come in to the hospital far too early in the labour, panicked by the first minor signs: a show, some mild cramping, ignorant and afraid, having no idea of what was ahead and uncertain what to expect and not wanting to be caught, alone. The woman, a middle aged Irish nurse – the matron she found out later – had been the midwife on duty, and she'd accepted without question or any sign of doubt Jodie's carefully prepared story: how her parents were travelling in far-northern Queensland, that her boyfriend, the baby of the child, was absent too.

The woman, short and stocky, with her hair in a tidy grey bob, had examined her expertly, cool fingers pressing down here and there on her distended abdomen, her eyes distant, face thoughtful. When a pain came she stretched her hands firmly along Jodie's belly and smiled down at her.

"Well, that's a nice solid contraction, love," she'd said. "There's no doubt you're in labour." When the pain subsided, she took a stethoscope and moved it across Jodie's belly, then stopped, listened intently. "Well, the bub's fine – his little heartbeat is just perfect." she said soothingly, as if Jodie had made some sort of anxious enquiry about the foetus's

well-being. “Now, how often are these coming?”

“How often? Well, that’s about the tenth one, I think. I had to pull over a couple of times, getting here.”

“The tenth one!” The nurse laughed. “You haven’t been timing them, then, love?”

“Well no. I didn’t know.... I thought that once the pain started it meant ... and then there was a bit of blood, earlier this morning, in my undies.” Jodie was suddenly sharply aware of her ignorance, of how stupid she sounded. How stupid she was.

But the nurse’s smile was kind, she wasn’t laughing at her. “No that’s okay. The tenth one since when, darling?”

“In the last couple of hours or so, I think. Perhaps an hour and a half?”

“So, they’re coming every twenty minutes or so, then?”

“*Yees*. I think so.” She hazarded a question, wanting to know more, regardless of showing her ignorance. “Is that good? Does that mean the baby’s not far off then?”

The woman held out her hand to her and Jodie pulled herself up to sitting, panting, breathless.

“Well, it’s your first, so it could be, let me see. Twenty minutes apart means that, all going to plan, this baby could come anytime from this afternoon to – tomorrow afternoon.”

“Tomorrow afternoon. Oh.” Jodie couldn’t keep the embarrassment, the disappointment from her voice. “So, what should I do? It might be ages then, mightn’t it? Should I, should I go back home?” Her eyes filled, her voice quavered – despairing at the thought of heading back alone to the dank hotel room that had been her home for the last weeks.

“Well, normally, darling,” the nurse helped her to her feet, absent-mindedly smoothing out her crumpled dress, “I’d be telling you to go home, to go for a good long walk, to get some sleep, and to come back in when they’re say, five minutes apart. But as you’re all alone, I’m guessing you don’t want to make the trip again?”

“No.” Grateful.

“Well, then,” she said briskly, “let’s get you booked in, get a room sorted. You can watch some telly, have some lunch. It’s been a dull, slow day, and to be honest you’ll be giving me something to do.”

Jodie is taken to an unoccupied double room. She lies on the bed and flicks through the stations, unable to concentrate. Her mind, empty of anything other than the fear of what is likely to happen next, grinds over and over the problem, never coming close to any sort of solution: what on earth is she going to do when this baby comes? She is almost relieved whenever a pain comes. At least then she can stop thinking. In a way, now that the moment has arrived, a moment that just has to be lived through, survived, she feels freer than she has for the past few months. Now at last something must change. One way or another, something must, will, be decided. A solution will arrive, by default, with the baby.

The pains go on all day, never really getting much worse, or even closer together. It is a pain that's not unlike a period pain, but much much fiercer, that lasts twenty or so seconds and then subsides completely, recurring every twenty minutes, like clockwork – or as Sheila puts it during one of her frequent afternoon visits, “cramp work”.

“And that's what it is, darling. Work. That pain is telling you that your body's working for you in a good way – opening you up, to let that bubby out.”

She is casual in her questions, but Jodie can tell Sheila is curious about her circumstances. Concerned and not a little suspicious. “Are you sure your parents know about this?” she asks during a routine examination. “That your young man knows?”

Jodie makes no answer, gripped suddenly, alarmingly, by a pain of such ferocity that she is unable to do anything but hold her breath – squeezing the nurse's hand tightly until it subsides.

“Breathe, honey. Breathe.” The woman smiles gently, pushes the damp hair away from Jodie's face. “Now, my sweet, now that's a labour pain. Might be time to give you an internal, now. See how much progress you've made.” But there is no time for any sort of examination. Jodie yells out, stiffens, preparing for the return of that insane grip in what has surely been less than a minute. Sheila holds her hand through it again, stroking her forehead, her voice soothing, though her repeated imprecation is patently absurd: “Relax” she says as Jodie bites through her lip in an effort to stifle a moan, a shout, “Just relax...”

Afterwards, when it (*A girl, what a sweetheart! What a little beauty!*) is safely out in the world, Jodie feels herself floating, weightless, thoughtless, almost absent, as if mind and

body have been split – although they tell her she has been stitched back together successfully. She makes no move to hold the baby when it has been cleaned up, weighed, pinned into its first nappy, wrapped, but asks them to take *it*, to take her, away.

The midwives (Sheila, who has stayed through the entire ordeal and delivered the baby, along with another midwife, Debbie – young, rapturous – who attended during the final stages of the birth) who are obviously used to all sorts of odd postpartum behaviour, say nothing, exchange only the briefest of glances, smile sympathetically, understandingly. “Sure then,” says Sheila, “We can give the wee thing a suck on a bottle if she needs it, let this poor sore girl have a rest”, and the young nurse wheels the baby away in its Plexiglas trolley.

Sheila stays behind, cleans Jodie up a little, wheels her back to the ward, then into the shower, dresses her, tucks her into her bed. She brings her a cup of tea, a plate of toast. Through all this Jodie hasn’t spoken, has barely uttered a sound, except for an odd sob that she’s hardly aware of, that could be coming from someone else.

four

Happiness. It’s not really something Angus thinks about, not something he lets himself think about. He thinks perhaps it exists in some separate dimension, no longer accessible beyond the age of consciousness, an ideal connected to dimming childhood memories of circuses and fairy floss, beach holidays and ice cream. Or perhaps it’s merely a construct, a chimera, not quite the fire-breathing monster of mythology, but a kind of illusory carrot used to coerce forward movement – always dangling tantalisingly, just out of reach, never quite within chomping distance, regardless of effort.

But his life, he would say, is pretty much running the way he expected it to run. He has nothing to complain about. He works hard, his work is challenging and well-remunerated. His family life is settled, comfortable. His children are happy. This he is certain of, and this

is only right. Happiness is, or should be, though in too many instances it's clearly not, the entitlement of all children. His own two are well-loved, well-behaved, not overindulged, and as appreciative of their many privileges as they should be. As far as he can tell, his wife, Jodie, is busy, content. She is not demanding in any way, there is no pressure on him (a pressure that he sees in so many of his colleagues' and friends' marriages) to perform, to compete. There's not some endless list of outrageous material demands – no diamond rings, no European cruises. Not, however, that Jodie has anything to complain about in this department either, as they are, by any standards very comfortably off. If it should ever come up, a European holiday would not be out of the question.

His marriage is, as marriages of more than twenty years tend to be, a little on the dull side, but no more than is expected. Jodie is still an attractive enough woman, can still arouse the requisite lust at the appropriate moment. Angus had once or twice during the early years of his marriage let more than his eye wander, although he has never strayed too far or too seriously. But he is past all that now. He knows that what he has is good, is worth keeping.

No, beyond this, Angus doesn't think too much. He hasn't time, nor, it must be admitted, inclination, to go any further: to tote up achievements, successes, against losses, regrets. After all, what would be the point? If he's not precisely happy, he wouldn't regard himself as unhappy either.

So he's surprised when the waves of sudden panic first hit. They begin soon after Jodie's confidence, revelation, confession, whatever you want to call it, though he doesn't really think that the two are connected. Naturally, what she had told him had been unsettling, and it has taken him a few days to adjust to the idea, to examine the facts and assess the possible consequences – for a few nights he had taken himself off to the guest room, had found it difficult to sleep, had been short tempered at work and at home. He had sensed Jodie waiting for him to bring up the subject again, to ask questions, dig further. She'd made it clear that she'd be willing to tell him anything, everything he wanted to know, but after those days of deliberating, he'd found himself curiously unconcerned, and so he'd told her.

“It’s not,” he’d said, “that I don’t understand the impact it must have had on you. Having to keep this to yourself all these years would have been just dreadful. It’s just that, well, unless you want to get in contact with her, with the child – and I’m not sure that would be possible anyway – I can’t see how this changes anything. For us, for you and me. And the kids, too.” It was late, the two of them were getting ready for bed, and though the children’s rooms were distant they spoke in whispers, hisses. When she didn’t answer, he assumed she was upset. “I’m sorry if I seem to be treating it too lightly, but I’ve thought about it, and really it doesn’t matter. It’s – ” He broke off, not quite sure what he wanted to say, anyway. But Jodie was smiling, whether with pleasure or relief, he wasn’t sure.

“Oh, Angus. I didn’t, I don’t expect anything from you. I was just worried that this, that what I told you would make a difference. Spoil everything. You know. But if you want to know, if you want the details? The father – ?”

“Oh, no.” He felt a surge of something – dismay, alarm, dread – at the prospect, was quick to reassure her. “You’ve told me enough, Jodes. Really. I honestly don’t care about that. In fact I really don’t want to know. Maybe some things are best left... ”

The panic began a few days after this particular conversation. He had been lunching with Arding’s mayor, Jim Dixon, at the Grand. Though separated by almost a generation, the two are old family friends. Jim’s father had been Angus’s father’s best man. But the lunch was more business than pleasure, had been set up to explore the possibility of Angus standing as conservative mayoral candidate in the next local election. Angus’s eventual succession to the (mayoral position) was a long-standing, but unspoken agreement. His reputation in both the commercial and civic community is solid, his success more or less guaranteed. Jim, a genial Santa Claus of a fellow, a retired stock and station agent, now keen golfer, who had enjoyed more than a decade in office, had been saying something about Jodie – asking whether she’d be comfortable in the role, would she welcome it, resent it? He knew from experience that the mayor’s spouse, the first lady, was also expected to commit much time and energy, and that he hoped it wouldn’t compromise their family life – when Angus had felt himself overcome by wave after wave of terror. He had

thought, briefly, that it was a heart attack, could feel, not a pain in his chest, but distinctly, deafeningly, the rush of blood through his arteries, too hard, too fast, too loud. His breathing had become shallow, laboured. Happily Jim was too busy talking to notice, and Angus had managed to cover the moment by professing nausea, and escaping to the hotel bathroom.

It was a good ten minutes – time spent sitting on the toilet, his head in his hands, taking slow deep breaths – before he could compose himself enough to unlock the cubicle, to face his reflection in the mirror. He'd spent another few splashing water on his face before he rejoining his concerned friend in the dining room. He had avoided looking into his own eyes after his first brief glimpse in the bathroom mirror, which had revealed them flecked with blood, and far too wide, the whites revealed, like the blazing orbs of a headlight-dazzled dog, just before the moment of impact.

After this the attacks come frequently. First once a week, then twice, then every second day. They come at odd, unexpected times – always when he is his most relaxed, often when he's alone, and never in moments of stress or crisis. He tells no one, not his mother, his partner, his doctor, not Jodie, and somehow no one ever seems to notice. Miraculously, he's able to manage his sudden urges to run, to escape, and then the time alone, waiting for his heart rate to subside, his breathing to return to normal, without drawing any attention to himself.

He looks up the symptoms on the internet – they are classic panic attacks that he's experiencing –and then searches for a cure. He isn't impressed by any of the recommended pharmacological treatments, is sceptical about the less traditional remedies. He has no interest in looking for a cause, for the present accepts the attacks as an inconsequential, but unavoidable impairment, a consequence of ageing, like bunions, arthritis, as if hoping that this lack of serious engagement will make the symptoms disappear. He works hard to minimise the likelihood and the impact of the attacks, and almost automatically relegates them to the murky backwaters of his consciousness: he doesn't want to know, what they mean, or what they augur.

five

Jodie had been surprised by Angus's final response. The two days of awkwardness, with Angus a polite but cold stranger, the separate sleeping arrangements, these were what she had anticipated. But his almost airy dismissal of the events, his determination to leave the past in the past, though a great relief, had been unexpected. They had made love that night, more fiercely than they had for years, then Angus had turned on his side, away from her, and gone straight to sleep. Within ten minutes he was snoring, with Jodie beside him, rigidly awake. Remembering. Wishing there was some way she could un-remember, or even better, some way to undo the whole thing – to make it untrue.

She thinks about Angus's lack of desire to know any more. Perhaps, she thinks, he's avoiding being confronted by this betrayal, a betrayal so long ago in the past she'd almost forgotten it herself, a betrayal that should never never have come to light.

She wishes she could somehow avoid it too, but it's unavoidably there, the past looming larger than the present, larger than Angus likes to imagine, throwing its shadow over everything, like some sort of terrifying temporal eclipse.

The act itself was singularly meaningless, indeed she has so little memory of it that she would be hard pressed to remember even a single feature of the man, the boy, himself. Was his hair brown? Or was it reddish? He was dark, rather than fair, surely? His hair was long, of that she's certain, held back from his face in a ponytail. She thinks he may have been tall and thin, but no, she might be thinking of someone else; he could just as easily have been short and stocky. Even slightly pudgy. Oh, God. He had been a boy, that's all she really remembers. Just a boy. She thinks of her daughter's male friends: at sixteen and even eighteen, the boys' features are still not quite defined, they seem closer to their toddler selves – their brows smooth, jaws soft, eyes clear – than the men they're on the brink of becoming. And that's what *he* had been: just a boy, a long-haired, denim-clad, beer-drinking boy she'd sat next to in the pub. That he was the father of her child, the

father of any child, was simply unimaginable.

She'd gone out that night with Sharon, her flatmate. Angus had been in London then for over two months and in all that time she'd dutifully stayed at home on weekend nights, watching hired videos, reading, or writing long, forlorn letters that she could never bring herself to reread, let alone post. Sharon, a city girl and impatient with Jodie's shyness, her excuses, had finally persuaded her, talked her into coming out to the pub.

"Oh come on, Jodie. You're like a bloody old woman. You're eighteen, aren't you? Not eighty. You need to get out a bit, see some life. I'm sure your Angus won't give a shit. You don't really think he's staying home night after night in London, pining for you, do you? Come out and have some fun."

And so she'd gone, not expecting fun, not expecting anything much really, with Sharon to some pub in Newtown, the Sandringham, she thinks, and there'd been a band, a bit of a crowd, and *he'd* been there – was it Gibbo or Hendo or Sheppo or Stevo ? – a friend of a friend of a friend of Sharon's, up from Melbourne or over from Adelaide or down from Brizzie. He'd bought her a drink, two, three, six, and they'd danced. It had been some sort of a punk outfit as she recalls, though they were already at the arse end of that particular musical scene, not that this was something Jodie would have known or cared about at the time. What she does recall is the sense of risk. It wasn't the sort of place Angus would have taken her to at all: the pub was dark and seedy, hazy with cigarette smoke, smelling of dope and dirty carpet, crowded with long-haired students, half of them stoned out of their brains, all of them pissed, and Jodie had found herself, despite everything, enjoying it. The dark, the dirt, the heat, the pounding music, the sense of being out of it, being out of herself. She had found herself embracing, for once, the sensation that nothing, nothing more than the here, the now, was of any consequence.

And she'd drunk more, and he'd drunk more, and they'd gone outside to share a surreptitious joint – not quite her first, but still, to the virtuous young Jodie, a joint was daring, forbidden, vaguely indecent. As the evening wore on she'd lost sight of Sharon,

and had eventually staggered back to the flat, accompanied by this boy, after closing, in the early hours of the morning. They had staggered home giggling and swaying, clutching one another in order to stay upright, had climbed the stairs to the flat and collapsed onto her bed. And so they had fucked, drunkenly, clumsily, not out of any real desire, but almost as a matter of course. Because, in those days (and in these days, too, she supposes) that's what you did.

Jodie remembers nothing of the sex, really, the only detail she can summon up is her dope-induced wonderment at the way a starburst of small black freckles adorning the boy's scrawny shoulder kept dilating and contracting in her vision as he juddered above her.

And that was the end of it. They'd laid there together for a while, not touching, not talking. He'd lit a cigarette (that's what you did, in those days), ashed on the floor, and then, muttering something about having a train to catch, had pulled on his Levis and his t-shirt and left. He'd gone without so much as a good-bye or thank you, let alone a contact address, a phone number, a name. Jodie had fallen asleep and hadn't woken until late in the afternoon – sick as a dog, vaguely regretful. It was only later that the regret had sharpened into disgust, a mild self-loathing at her weakness, her betrayal of Angus, but she'd resolved that it would never happen again. And it wouldn't. Hadn't.

But the one thing she does recall quite clearly, all these years later, is that the disgust, even the guilt, though real enough, had dissipated almost immediately. The encounter hadn't really touched her, had left no lasting impression. It was a no-strings-attached sexual experience – unexceptional for girl of her age, her generation, her culture. There'd been no intent, no preparation, not even a condom in those reckless post-pill, pre-Aids aware, abortion-on-demand days of her youth.

So, it was a one-off. Fun, a notch on her bedpost, perhaps, if she was the type to mark such events, but eminently forgettable. And there was no reason that Angus, that anyone, would ever have to know, was there? No need for confessions, recriminations. There was no need for anyone to get hurt, ever.

December, 1986

“Is there someone you want rung? I’d be happy to call for you if you’re too exhausted.” Jodie would like to sleep, but somehow sleep won’t come. She flicks through the television channels again, but can’t concentrate. She still feels suspended, disoriented – even the discomfort in her buttocks, her lower torso, the muscular ache in her thighs (as if she’s run a marathon) seems distant. It’s as if her body isn’t back yet, isn’t quite her own. Sheila seems reluctant to leave her alone, has brought flowers discarded by some discharged patient, is arranging them fussily. “There must be someone, sweetie. It’s a huge event, a baby. Maybe the biggest in a woman’s life. There must be someone you want to tell. What about the father? Your parents? Shouldn’t you let them know?”

“I don’t want it.” Jodie is amazed to hear her own voice, so certain, so substantial; surprised that there are still words, and a way to say them.

“Eh?”

“I don’t want it.” More confident, louder. This time there’s no mistaking what she’s saying. The woman’s eyes widen. She stands still for a moment, considering, then raises her fingers to her lips, tiptoes to the door, closes it, goes back to rearranging the flowers, casually.

“What do you mean you don’t want the baby, sweetheart?” The woman’s words are careful, quiet, unstressed. “I thought you said you had a fellow, that your parents knew all about this?”

“It was a lie. There’s no one.” Jodie’s voice is flat and expressionless and hard. “I don’t even know who its father is. And I don’t want it. If I’d known in time, I would’ve had it aborted.” It seems slightly obscene to utter that particular word here, in this place created specifically to welcome and nurture new life.

“What about your parents? Won’t they support you?”

“Nope. There’s no way. ”

“It’s a hard thing, lovey, having a baby when you’re so young and all alone, but you know – there are ways, these days. It certainly wouldn’t be impossible. There are pensions, not

much, I know, but it's possible to live. You'll get help with rent and all the services. I've seen girls younger than you take their little ones home and make a go of it. Often as not, they make wonderful mums."

"No. I can't have it." She pauses. "I need to talk to someone about having it taken away. I want to, I want to give it up for adoption."

It's out. Jodie glares defensively, trying to conceal her wretchedness, fearing the woman's objections, her judgement. But her expression hasn't altered.

"Well, It's not a simple decision – not one a girl as young as you should be expected to make so quickly."

"Who organises these things? I need to find whoever it is can arrange things." Jodie is beginning to feel the air in her lungs again, her limbs feel as if they might be attached to her body, her body to her mind. Isn't there something I can do, something I can sign. I know there are people desperate to adopt out there. You hear all these stories about how hard it is."

The woman sits down on the bed beside her. "Now, Jodie. Hold up a bit. It's not as simple as you think. They don't just let you give the bub away like that." She takes hold of Jodie's hand, almost absentmindedly. "You'll have to have some sort of social worker talk to you, and then she'll refer you on to a psychologist to make sure it's not an impulsive decision, or just a symptom of something – post partum depression, for instance – something done on the spur of the moment that you'll come to regret. They'll want you to spend some time with the child now, to make sure. Then they'll put the baby into foster care for a while so you have an opportunity to reconsider. It might be quite a while before it's all finalised. Adoption's not something you can do lightly: there's consequences for both the mother and the child, you know. And it can come back to haunt you down the track. You need to take time, see how you heal; how you think later, when you've recovered. You might feel like there's no way you can deal with it all today – and believe me so many first time mothers feel just this way straight after they've given birth – you're exhausted, terrified, can't see how you'll cope. What your experiencing isn't unusual at all."

Jodie pulls her hand out of the woman's warm clasp, pushes herself up to sitting, "I'm not depressed. And I'm not terrified. I've had months to think about this, and I don't want her. I just want someone to take the baby away now. Can't I just sign something and go home

and get on with my life? I'm not going to change my mind." She speaks slowly, wanting the woman to understand that she's thinking clearly, that she means what she says, that it's not spontaneous, a momentary consequence of pain and exhaustion, but heartfelt, considered.

Sheila sits quietly, thinking. Jodie can't read her expression. "Look. You've just been through something enormous. You need a good sleep, a proper meal. I'll arrange to have someone come and talk to you then. You haven't even seen your little girl, yet. You really should –"

"No. I don't want to see her. I want her – I want her to be gone. Don't you understand? Can't you understand? I don't want this baby. I know that. I don't want to see it. I don't want to touch it. I just want it gone. Oh, God." She turns away, pushes her face into the pillow, closes her suddenly stinging eyes. "Isn't there someone who can just make it all go away. This is unreal – like some sort of crazy nightmare. I wish I were dead."

The woman captures Jodie's hand gently between her own again, rubbing them as if trying to warm her. "Now. It's not that bad, lovey, surely?"

Jodie says nothing, pushes her face harder into the starchy hospital pillow, tries to swallow her sobs.

The woman sits quietly for a moment, then moves closer, strokes Jodie's hair gently, her voice a soothing whisper.

"There is, there may be something – if you're certain you don't want her. There might be some sort of private arrangement that can be made more quickly, without all the fuss." Her voice drifts, but Jodie, attentive now, waits for the woman to continue.

"The rules for adoption are very rigid, and there are sometimes good people out there who can't adopt through the official channels. They might be too old, or not married – just some official reason that means they're deemed less suitable. But that doesn't mean they wouldn't make perfect parents, given the opportunity."

The girl turns to her. "Do you think – do you think you can help me?" Wonderingly.

"Well," the woman is stroking her hand with a vague unfocused tenderness, as if her mind is far away. "I might just be able to help you sweetheart. I might be able to find a solution."

The woman sighs, and releases Jodie's hand, patting her on the shoulder. "Now, you just sit up and wipe your eyes. I'll bring you something tasty. I think they were doing beef rissoles and mash for lunch – and believe me after labour that's just the sort of meal you need. Watch some telly, and then see if you can have yourself a good sleep." She plumps up her pillows behind Jodie's back. "I'll get them to keep the baby in the nursery for a while longer, make sure you're not disturbed. And when you wake up, Sheila will have found you a solution. Is it a deal?" She holds out her hand, and Jodie grabs it, clings on. It's a deal.

six

The letter arrives in the week before Christmas. Jodie opens the envelope unsuspectingly, doesn't even bother to glance at the back, to check the address, assuming that it will only hold a christmas card, or a friend's annual circular message. It is a brief letter, only one page, and somehow official looking, though hand-written, in small, upright printing, on smooth unlined paper, with the sender's address and the date primly inscribed on the top right hand corner.

Dear Jodie

I'm writing to let you know that according to a search that was made subsequent to our conversation in October, it appears that there is no official record of an adoption being processed for your daughter Elsa Mary. Further enquiries indicate that her birth has never been registered.

Because our conversation was not strictly official, and what you told me was in confidence, I thought it only right that I should contact you personally with this information. However, as it is my legal duty to report such findings, I have made these discoveries known to the relevant authorities, including the police.

Yours sincerely

Debbie West.

Jodie crumples the letter up tightly in her hand and shoves it in her trouser pocket. She tears open the next envelope in the pile, then another, briskly adding each bright card to the display on the kitchen dresser, without once pausing to read the inscriptions.

She leaves the paper in her pocket until the evening, can make out the ungainly lump through the denim, and feel its slight diminishing whenever she sits, whenever she relaxes. She extracts it from her pocket, later that evening, when both children have disappeared for the night – Tom to Christmas-coloured dreams, Hannah to a movie and then sleep-over. Angus is sitting on the family room couch, drinking red wine and channel-surfing, and she hands the crushed and body-warm note to him without a word, then turns away and gazes unseeing out of the window into the darkness of the garden while he reads it.

“Fuck.” He barely breathes the word. “Oh, Fuck.” She waits through an interminable silence, turning back when she hears him stand, breathing heavily. Jodie looks at him, desperate for some sort of recognition, some further reassurance, a clue to what he is thinking, what should be done, but his face is closed, he doesn’t meet her eye.

“Angus?” She moves towards him, holding out a hand as if in supplication, but he walks past her, exits the room rapidly, almost running, knocking over his half-full glass in his haste.

Jodie mops up the worst of the spill, and then waits, certain that he’ll return, that he’ll want to talk to her, that he’ll have answers, assurances, some sort of a plan. But he doesn’t come back. Instead, after an age, she becomes aware of the dark rumble of his voice coming from the office. Jodie can’t imagine who he could be speaking to, she hasn’t heard the phone ring after all, and it’s unimaginable that he should make an ordinary business call right now.

It occurs to her that he is perhaps ringing his mother, breaking the news to her, letting her know that the doubts she has been harbouring for almost twenty years now – about Jodie’s

suitability as a spouse to her beloved son – have been justified. Angus has always kept a wary distance from his cool and controlling mother, but over the last few years, ever since Angus’s elder brother’s death, she has noticed that the two have become closer, thrown together of necessity – Angus being the only one of her three children still living in close proximity. Lately, as his mother ages, becomes noticeably less certain, his advice on almost every aspect of her life has been sought – from managing her still-substantial income, to arranging for her carpet to be cleaned (though any such trivial domestic detail had in actuality been delegated to Jodie, with little recognition or gratitude from the old lady, naturally).

Now, she moves toward the office carefully, quietly, trying hard not to make a noise on the timber floor. As she gets closer, the rumble becomes more distinct, and even before she can make out the words, she can sense the intonation. Angus’s voice is clipped, businesslike, nothing like the restrained soothing timbre of his conversations with his mother. For a moment she’s relieved, but when she realises that he’s talking to his friend, Peter, who’s a lawyer, and then takes in what he’s saying, the relief turns to dismay.

“She adopted the baby out – illegally, for some sort of a payment ...”

“To be honest, Pete, I haven’t really wanted to ask any more. And if it comes to that, maybe it would be better to be able to say that I know nothing. I don’t know what the laws are that we’re dealing with here, or what the legal position would be after so many years, but even if the adoption itself can’t be prosecuted, I suspect that there’d have to be some sort of investigation. That somebody somewhere is going to want to know what happened to that child. Especially as the birth hasn’t even been registered.”

“I don’t think so. No. She says she doesn’t remember anything about the people who took the baby – only that they were quite old. Evidently the matron arranged everything. She told her that everything was kosher.”

”Yeah, she seems to remember that she signed some bit of paper or other, but she wasn’t

given any sort of a copy – or she lost it. I imagine it would be worthless, anyway. All she was worried about was that no one she knew ever got to hear about it. And that she could walk away, that there'd be no questions asked.”

“No, I haven't asked. I don't think I want to know any more than I already do. Look, do you think you could come over? I know, I know, I'm really sorry. It's just that I have a bad feeling about it, mate. A really bad feeling. I just want to ... to go over the possibilities. Find out what you think is likely to happen. If there's really any likelihood of the police getting involved. Maybe we could make some sort of contingency plan?”

Jodie creeps back into the lounge, grabs the bottle of red wine as she passes through the kitchen. She hears the ensuite shower running and then the low murmur of the television in Angus's office. She thinks about going in and confronting him, asking him why he's phoned Peter, why he won't speak to her, or even look at her, but somehow it's all too hard. Instead, she fills her glass to the brim, waits.

Angus answers the door when Pete arrives, then leads him down the hallway and into the lounge, where Jodie's still sitting, polishing off the last of the bottle of red alone. Angus answers her questioning glare with an oddly apologetic smile, before backing into the kitchen, leaving them alone together. She stands and holds out her hand – Pete's an old friend, best man at their wedding, and she expects his usual friendly, affectionate greeting, a hug, a kiss. Instead, he puts down his briefcase, takes her outstretched hand and squeezes it briefly, reluctantly offers a bristly cheek.

“Jodie. How are you? How's Hannah's leg?”

“Well, the plaster's been off for few weeks –” But he's not really listening, shakes his head. “Bloody children. There's always some drama. Sometimes you gotta wonder if it's worth it.”

She murmurs something inconsequential, stung by his conspicuous lack of warmth, his awkward formality.

“It's lovely to see you, Peter, at any time of the day,” she smiles to lighten the atmosphere,

“but I’m not quite sure?”

“Well. Angus has told me all about your situation, Jodie. Now, I’m not actually a specialist in this sort of situation, though it’s a very odd situation, and I’m not sure where we would find an expert. Anyway, Angus thought it might be a good idea if we put our heads together and tried to work out a plan of action, work out what sort of – well, what sort of strategies we can put in place to minimise the damage. If it comes to that, which of course it may not.” He sits down abruptly, and she follows, sits directly opposite him. He pulls a notebook and pen out of his case and places them carefully on the coffee table, opening the notebook and placing the pen at the top neatly, as if he’s setting up his office desk. He hasn’t looked at her properly since he arrived, his eyes darting back towards the kitchen, as if anxiously awaiting Angus’s return.

“Now,” he says, when Angus finally arrives with another bottle, fresh glasses, and settles down with them on the lounge. “Can you show me this letter, Angus?”

Angus pulls the letter from his own top pocket, folded neatly now, but there’s no disguising the evidence of its earlier ill-treatment, and hands it over.

Pete smooths his fingers over the letter’s dog-eared edges as he reads, slowly, consideringly. Jodie watches carefully, but his expression gives nothing away.

“Well?” Angus’s voice is edgy with anxiety. “What do you think? Could it go any further?”

Pete looks up from the letter, gives him a brief, grim smile, nods his head slowly. “I’m afraid it could go all the way, mate. But before we start panicking and before we think about making any plans, I need you to tell me what you told Angus, Jodie. He’s given me a rough outline, but I really need to hear it from you. The whole story. ”

Peter sits very still, with his eyes half-closed as she tells him, his fingers peaked beneath his chin. He nods now and then, but says little – occasionally double-checking a statement or gently insisting that she keeps the narrative ordered. He wants the bare bones only, he says, is not interested in anything but the facts – not motivation or explanation. Angus paces restlessly around the room while Jodie speaks, interjecting at various junctures, worried that she has changed details, or left out some vital element.

When she has finished, Jodie leans back in her chair, exhausted. There's a strange sense of disembodiment connected to the telling of this tale: for so many years she has kept this story buried, hidden, and the relief is overpowering. Now suddenly she feels light – as if she is floating, unburdened, free of the past. “Well?” She gives Peter a weak smile, and for the first time since his arrival he looks at her properly, his smile slight, but genuine, and, she imagines, a little apologetic. “Well.” He sighs and gives his shoulders a little shake, as if releasing tension.

“So what do you think, Pete?” Angus sits down heavily, slumps beside him. “Should we be worried.”

“Oh, yes.” Peter's tone is neutral, but his face is sombre. “You should definitely be worried. There's quite a lot here to be worried about, believe me. In the first instance there's the adoption itself. Look, we can argue that Jodie was young, that she was coerced. But she was over eighteen – and it would be hard to argue that she didn't know that what she was doing was wrong. She did it outside the system, knowingly and for money. And then –” He falters.

“And then what?” Jodie's voice is faint, it feels like it's coming from far away.

Peter clears his throat. “I'm almost certain the authorities will institute a search – they'll have to. Essentially she's a missing person. Then there's a very strong possibility that they won't be able to locate the child, after all this time, that no one will want to admit to adopting her this way. Why would they, after all? There would have been reasons that this couple didn't go through the ordinary channels. I can't imagine them volunteering the information. They'd be liable to prosecution, too. So then, assuming that the child – the young woman now – can't be found. Well, that will open an absolute Pandora's Box.”

Angus speaks before she can ask the obvious question. “So where do we start? What should we do? Should we just wait and see what happens? Wait to see what they – the authorities, the police, whoever – are planning to do?”

Peter thinks a moment, drumming his fingers on denim-clad knees. “This might seem counter-intuitive to you both, but I have a feeling that it might be smarter to pre-empt them. Make a huge effort to stay one step ahead.”

“And what does that entail?” She can hear the anxiety leaching from Angus's voice, as his

professional self engages. He has stopped slouching, is sitting up straight, looking alert. Jodie curls up on the lounge with her wine. She listens to the men's plans, but contributes only when absolutely required, is grateful to have it all taken away from her, happy to let them take her in hand, take her over. It's almost as if she isn't there, isn't Angus's wife, Peter's friend, but merely a problem to be solved.

"I think that what we should do is make an onslaught on the media before they can make an onslaught on you." Peter pauses again, momentarily, takes a deep breath, rushes on "So we'll second guess them. My instinct is that this will move pretty swiftly. I imagine that your nurse friend, Debbie, must have gone straight to Community Services to check their records – though it's a complete mystery to me why she decided to get involved. Was it something you said, Jodie? You definitely didn't tell her about the matron?" He looks at Jodie for an answer.

"All I said was that I'd arranged the adoption after I left. But she, well, she was very concerned when I told her. She offered to help me find the child, to reconnect. I think she said she had some contact in the department, someone who could help me bypass all the red tape. I kept telling her that I wasn't interested, that I didn't actually want to meet her, but I think she was probably – trying to help..."

"Oh, God save us all from helpful social worker types. Anyway, someone at Community Services would have discovered that there was no record of any adoption, and then no registration of the birth, no Medicare notification, and they'll have sent the file to the police. They'd have no option. "

"The police where?" Angus sounds, for the first time slightly nervous. "If it's here, maybe I can talk to Don..."

"Actually, I imagine it would be the Police nearest to – where is the hospital? Greystanes, maybe? And then on to the detectives at their local command, rather than here. It'll come under their jurisdiction, because that's where the cri–, where it all took place." He pauses. "But Don could still be useful. Any contacts you have could be useful. The city detectives will have to liaise with the cops here, I'd imagine, if they need to do interviews. It's just a

courtesy thing. So, if you can get on to Don, in say the next twenty-four hours and tell him what Jodie's told us, and prepare him – that'll help. Then when they get in touch he won't be surprised, and you can perhaps—. Well, you can ask him to arrange to have the initial interview here, rather than at the station.”

“Here? Why? What difference will that make? Do we really have to have the police here? Wont people talk?” Angus's distaste is obvious.

“It just means that she'll have the advantage – you'll be on your own territory. If it's at the station, in an interview room, you'll feel much more intimidated, even if they tell you that it's just a conversation and not an official interview. Here at home you can ask them to sit down, offer refreshments even – and then ask them to leave whenever you're ready.“ He gives Angus an inscrutable look. “But you're going to have to get over worrying about people talking, Angus. It's going to happen. ”

“I suppose – but surely we can try and keep it as quiet as possible. You know I'm due to stand for Mayor this year, and it would be an absolute disaster if –” He breaks off, embarrassed, as if just realising the absurdity of this particular concern.

“Mate. Angus.” Peter's voice is gentle. “It's going to be a complete PR catastrophe – there's no avoiding it. You need to prepare yourself.” A slight pause, then he pushes on, “You might need to pull out of the running if it comes to that. That's not my concern. But – and this is what I've been trying to suggest – you really shouldn't just sit and wait for the blade to fall. I think that we don't wait for it to be made public – we make it public ourselves.”

“What?” Angus sounds shocked. “What do you mean? Surely this should be kept as quiet as possible.”

“No. This is what I meant about remaining one step ahead. I think we'd be smarter to actually release the story ourselves. Before the police, or the authorities make it public. That way *we* can control the information: say that you've begun a private investigation

yourselves, that you're actively looking for the child, perhaps realising after all these years, that something wasn't quite right, that you're concerned for the well-being of the child. Maybe you should even offer a reward."

"A reward...?" Angus looks slightly sick.

"Not too much. Fifty grand or so for information leading to the discovery of the whereabouts, or positive identification of the child."

"Oh, God."

There's a long silence. None of them speak, or look at one another. Jodie refills her wineglass, drinks deeply. She is over it all now, would like nothing more than to take herself to bed, to leave them to discuss her future without her. Jodie finds it hard to connect with anything they're saying – the conversation is swirling around her like far-off music faintly heard.

Then Pete turns to Angus again. "Look. I know this is difficult to contemplate, but this is as much for Jodie's sake as anything else. We've got an opportunity now to make her appear like a concerned mother, searching for news of a child that she reluctantly relinquished years ago. We have to try and make the story work for Jodie: the court of public opinion is probably more crucial than any court of law, and it can be a very very tough one. If we leave it to the police to make all the initial statements she'll end up looking a lot worse, believe me. But if we're pro-active – if we play the media before they can play us...well, we have a chance. We'll make a public plea – play up Jodie's youth, her vulnerability, her lack of support, the absence of good advice. Make it into a sympathetic tabloid story: a young mother, alone, despairing, penniless, without a friend in the world. And then make it apparent that she's genuinely grieving the loss of that child now, would like to be reunited, and so on. It'll work. The fact that that matron has died is a blessing – she can't refute anything Jodie says.

"I know it sounds cynical and opportunistic – because it is. But the alternative is that Jodie'll become a kind of latter day Lindy Chamberlain. And you know what the press did to her. She'll be tried and convicted and hung in the first five minutes. The public aren't necessarily going to know that the police have begun their investigation – not if we get

there first. And if we're play our cards right it'll look like the police are helping you with your investigations, rather than the other way around."

"But what if it backfires? What if the media think that we're covering our arses? What if that nurse speaks to them – tells them how it all came to light?"

Peter shrugs. "It's going to be a shit fight, Angus. There's no getting around it. But at least we can have the *first* word. That's got to count for something.

"The first thing to do is to place an advertisement – discreetly – in all the major newspapers. A few regionals, and maybe some of the women's magazines. *New idea*, *Women's Day*. Elsa Mary, is that what you called her? Elsa Mary Evans. It's possible that we're being presumptuous, that the police won't investigate – but I doubt it. However you look at it, there's still a missing person. Even if it goes no further, it's not going to hurt, is it – it'll just be the cost of the ads. But if there *is* any sort of investigation, it's not going to hurt, either. It will look, at least, like you're honestly concerned, that you're not interested in covering up, or denying anything."

"But there's no way of knowing." It's not an objection, but a query. "Say she does appear – there won't actually be any way of knowing whether it's her or not, will there?"

"Well, there will be records, actually. And there's the toe-webbing. She'd still have it presumably – or it would have been surgically corrected, I suppose? And you would have had a pinprick test done on the baby, surely? The Guthrie test? It can be used to establish DNA. It wasn't originally done for that obviously, but they're using it more and more to establish identity."

Did the baby have that done? She can clearly remember Hannah and Tom having the test, the way her own heart felt pierced as the tiny new foot was pricked and squeezed, the shocking red blot on the card, but that baby? Elsa Marie? She didn't know, and couldn't remember anything, had probably left it to Sheila or one of the other midwives. Just one of the essential aspects of mothering – like the bathing, the feeding, the changing, the nursing

– that she had very deliberately taken no interest in, and that had left no imprint on her memory.

She can't tell whether Angus is excited or appalled. "So there will be a way – a definitive procedure – to test any one who comes forward? God. How awful. But I guess that will simplify things, won't it?"

"Yeah, well it's not exactly going to simplify things, Angus. The situation will always be very complicated. But you'd better pray that someone does come forward, that the child – she'll be an adult now, what twenty-three, twenty-four? – can be positively identified as being Elsa." It sounds like a warning, Peter's gaze is fierce, his jaw tight.

"Otherwise?"

"Otherwise, who knows." Jodie sees him give Angus an odd imploring look, Angus's eyes widen momentarily, his expression becomes suddenly bland. He yawns, stretches, gets to his feet, gives Jodie a sympathetic grin. "Jodie, darling – you look half dead." He holds out his hand and she takes it, noticing how her fingers unfurl, relax in his warm clasp. "Why don't you go to bed." He pulls her up gently, propels her with a firm hand in the middle of her back, towards the door. "Pete and I are going to have coffee and sort through a few more details. I'll fill you in tomorrow."

seven

When Angus first read the letter the panic had struck so severely that he'd been forced to almost run from the lounge room. The symptoms had taken longer to subside than usual. It had been a full ten minutes – interminable, inescapable – before his heart stopped racing, his breathing returned to normal. Nausea had followed this attack, and he'd had to lie down on the office floor, hoping that the churning in his gut would cease without him actually having to throw-up. He had tried to think about the contents of the letter, to consider what should be done, could be done, as he lay there, but it had been almost impossible to get his mind to focus properly on anything other than his own physical

symptoms. When the worst of the churning had stopped, and he could get to his feet without vomiting or worrying about passing out, he had called Peter, his best friend of many years. But this had been out of an urge to be seen to do something, to be able to show Jodie that he was in control, rather than any because he had any particular faith in Pete's expertise.

But it had been a good decision, a perfect decision; he had been pleasantly surprised, even impressed, by his friend's lightning quick lawyerly reflexes. Despite their long friendship, he'd never actually seen Peter in action professionally, had assumed that his work persona would be as laconic and dryly humorous as his social persona; hadn't expected this transformation into a polished, but unsmiling – dour even – legal virtuoso. And if Pete's tendency to plan for the worst case scenario had seemed extreme to Angus at the time, subsequent events would prove his precautions to be more than merely prudent, but prophetic.

After Jodie floats off to bed, smashed, her eyes glazed, face glowing rosily, Angus opens another bottle of wine, persuades a half-reluctant Peter that this is a better idea than coffee, that he can afford to stay longer, that there's more to discuss. It is past midnight, but Angus – as is common after an attack – is wired. He won't be able to sleep for a few hours yet, and although he will regret it in the morning, knows that a few more glasses of red will help vanquish the inevitable insomnia.

The men take their drinks outside to the front verandah, as far from Jodie and Angus's bedroom as possible. There are cane chairs, a table, but they stand leaning against the verandah rails, sip their drinks. It is summer, but cool and clear, a half moon smiling gently, the slight breeze making the swings in the park across the road sway eerily in the bluish light. Angus speaks first. "Thanks, man. I appreciate it. I couldn't have – I couldn't think." he shrugs, stuck for words. Pete sighs, shakes his head. "Fuck, Angus. This is – well – to say it's unexpected, is an understatement. It's fucking crazy. When I first got here, I was stunned. I didn't know what to say, how to behave. Poor Jodes. But she, well, she seems amazingly calm, really. Considering."

“To be honest, I think she’s got no idea of how serious it is. I mean, what you were – what you didn’t say – do you think it could really happen? That she could actually end up being charged with.” He can hardly bear to think the word, let alone say it.

“If the child doesn’t turn up? Anything could happen –you know that. And trust me, public opinion is going to count for something here.”

“Jesus. Shit. This is nuts.” Angus drinks deeply from his glass, pours more.

“You really didn’t have a clue? She never told you – anything?” Peter sounds genuinely curious.

“Nothing.”

“It’s almost beyond belief that she would keep something like this to herself all these years. Makes you realise, doesn’t it?”

“Eh? Realise what?” Angus slurs the words, hit with sudden surge of tiredness.

“How fucking mysterious people are. You’ve known her all this time, you’ve been as intimate with her as anyone could ever be, and yet she’s never told you something so important, so huge. And whatever happened – she’s had to live with it. Alone. For more than twenty years.”

“Yeah, well – we know what happened, mate. She told us everything that happened, didn’t she? I mean, I know it was wrong, and bloody stupid – but she was young. Afraid. She had no one to help her. And she didn’t hurt anyone.”

“She says.”

“What do you mean?” Angus is suddenly wide awake again, his words snappy, defensive.

“We only have her word for all this Angus, you do realise that. Whatever happens legally, you’re probably never going to be certain. Unless the girl actually emerges.”

“Fuck that.”

“Exactly. See – you’ve got no really happy alternative. This is really going to complicate your life, mate. Either you’ll end up with a stepdaughter that you never wanted or knew about, or you’re going to spend the rest of your life wondering where she is.” He pauses.

“And wondering whether Jodie knows a whole lot more than what she’s saying.”

Angus feels an unexpected rush of anger, a furious response welling – then feels it dissipate as suddenly as it arrived, extinguished by another wave of fatigue. He gives a shiver, rubs his arms. “Jesus. It must be all of ten degrees. Fucking Arding. Whatever

happened to summer?”

“Do you love her?” Peter almost mutters the words, as if embarrassed, but Angus responds in a heartbeat.

“Of course I love her. She’s my wife.”

“Then here’s my advice to you. Lawyer to lawyer. And friend to friend.” His voice is louder now, firmer.

“What?”

“If you do ever start wondering, just leave it, mate. Don’t ask. Whatever you do, just don’t ask.”

“Of course I love her. She’s my wife.”

His mother had warned him off Jodie at the outset. Back when Angus and Jodie were first going out, back when it was nothing, his mother had, in her usual blunt way, advised Angus against the connection.

“There’s no doubt that she’s a pretty girl, Angus, and from all accounts, she’s bright enough – she’ll have had to work hard to get that scholarship. But,” and here her voice takes on what he always thinks of as her diamond tone – sharp and brilliant, he can feel her slice effortlessly through his own convictions, his desires, “But she’s not exactly one of us, is she dear?”

He would have laughed (and years later, he did – repeating the conversation at some work do, an unacceptable flippancy that Jodie will never forget), and probably should have, because it is a joke, surely, his mother’s insistence on there being a “them” and an “us” – such old fashioned distinctions in this day and age. The nineteen-eighties, he would love to remind his mother, and not the eighteen–nineties. But he says nothing, dares not be too open in his defiance. Angus is afraid of his mother, though he could never admit as much, even to himself.

So instead of walking out in a huff (she has previously buttered him up with the offer of a

beer, a cigarette, if he'd like – *after all, he's a man now, with a man's appetites as well as a man's responsibilities* – and he should have been prepared, known what was coming) or better yet, actually defending his girlfriend, he listens, smiling uneasily as she conducts a lengthy and vicious deconstruction of Jodie's character, her potential and – most significantly – her background.

“Have you met the mother, dear?” She begins innocuously enough. “I haven't myself – though I probably wouldn't know her if I fell over her – but I've spoken to Nancy Butterly about her, and as you know I respect Nancy's opinions on these matters absolutely. She's been working at Grammar for so long, an old girl herself, of course, and she was saying that she would never, ever, on account of the mother, have let the girl in if it had been up to her. Which says something, don't you think, Angus? As Nancy's a very – how shall I put it? – a very *egalitarian* sort of person. No one could ever call Nancy a *snob*,” here she waves her hand dismissively, “although if anyone does have cause to think well of herself it's Nancy Butterly.”

Angus murmurs his assent, wonders how long he will have to sit here, listening, wishes he had taken up the offer of a beer, a whisky, even.

“You might think I'm overreacting. You've only been seeing her for a few months, haven't you? And I do know that these youthful entanglements aren't likely to be serious. No doubt you'll be hopping in and out of bed with dozens of girls, all sorts of girls, before you find someone suitable.” She gives a tight smile. “But the thing is, Angus dear, you need to be very careful. A girl like this, from a background like that –” She trails off. Takes a breath. “The thing is, Angus, I believe that this particular girl is likely to be very ambitious. She's pulled herself up this far, from such a very difficult background, to a place in a premier girls' school. And yes, that's a remarkable achievement, certainly. But. I have to say that I think your getting involved with a girl like that could be very dangerous. I've seen it before – quite a few times over the years, actually: boys like you, with expectations, responsibilities, position, who get caught by these very clever girls – mushrooms, my old granny would have called them – and it's always always always an unmitigated disaster.”

His mother frowns at him, expectant, but Angus only shifts uneasily in his chair, gives a nervous smile, says nothing. She sighs. “Do you remember Bruce Davies, Angus? He was an old friend of your father, boarded at New England when he was a boy, they had a big property out near Moree – Swan Hill. No? Anyway, he married a local girl, a Moree girl, Susie someone or other. She came from a terrible background: a big Roman Catholic family, the father was a drunk, deserted the family and shacked up with some gin, and the mother had to work as a barmaid, or take in laundry, or something dreadful, to support them all. Anyway, this Susie was exceptionally bright, and quite beautiful to look at – naturally. She went off to teachers’ college in Sydney, and then came back to Moree to teach. Anyway, she and Tom got married – much to the dismay of his parents. Apparently there was some friend of the family he’d been keen on for years; they’d expected him to marry her. But he married this Susie and almost straight away it all turned to disaster. Tom did the right thing, gave one of her brothers a job – overseeing the shearing or something like that – and evidently he did something dreadful. Stole from them, I gather. Terrible business. And then the woman herself, Susie, couldn’t cope living so far from town, she wanted to keep her job, hadn’t realised how isolated they would be, what life on a property was like – the hard physical work, lack of company. And then when children came along, things got worse. She became an alcoholic, a depressive, and –” She takes a breath, as if steeling herself. “Well, she ended up killing herself *and* the two children. Drove the ute into their dam one weekend when Bruce was away. Bruce, poor fellow, was never the same after that. He went bankrupt eventually, lost the property. He had a stroke a few years ago, not long after your father passed away. He was only fifty-five.”

She pauses a moment in deference to both unseasonably deceased men.

“I worry about these things, Angus darling. I know you just think I’m terribly old fashioned, but you have to credit me with some knowledge – some perspective on the way the world works.

“I know we’re meant to think that we’re all equal these days, that a person from the gutter

is just as good – or can be just as good – as a prince.” She gives a sad smile. “But you should never believe it, Angus. I know your Jodie seems like a lovely girl, and no doubt she is lovely, and I’m sure she’ll go on to have a successful life, a career, a decent husband, children. But she’s not for you, Angus. And if you’re – I’m not sure how to put this – if you’re conducting an affair with her, you’re just not playing on a level field. She’ll be expecting something – something more from you. Girls like that always are. It won’t be a fling for her, dear. She’s not like Susie Baldwin, or Annabelle Briggs, or the McDonald twins, or any of the other girls you know. She doesn’t have security, options, expectations of her own. You need to get rid of her, dear, before she hooks her claws in. Before she gets you where she wants you.”

But he can’t imagine it. Angus is still just a boy, after all, whatever his mother says, not yet a man. He’s bright enough, he’s not bad looking, he comes from a good family (and in Arding good means old, established, with roots, connections, as well as money), he’s a decent spin bowler, has a mean forearm, swims for the school. He’s not quite school captain material, has never excelled at rugby or public speaking – non-negotiable qualities in a leader – but he’s a prefect, trusted by teachers, is popular enough. He’s a nice boy, kind: the type who helps old ladies across the road, chats to parents amiably, pitches in to clean up after parties. He’s polite, responsible, reliable. He’s never caused his mother a moment’s grief. He helps his older brother with work on their property cheerfully enough in the holidays – doesn’t even mind shearing – though he’s not keen to make a career of farming. Which is lucky, as he won’t be. That’s his eldest brother’s blessing and burden. In the way of second sons of the minor gentry throughout history, he’s been promised to the law already, and the law will suit him down to the ground. He’s cautious, unimaginative, methodical. He’s easy-going, even-tempered. He really never does anything other than what’s expected of him, never plays outside the rules.

Until Jodie.

Angus had known Jodie, or known of her, for years. She’d been there in the background, at parties, at school dos; known, but not really known, in the way that these things work

between boy's and girls schools. But they'd got together at a recent B&S in what he'd thought was a completely spontaneous alcohol-fuelled mutual attraction – although someone, Angus can't quite remember who, though it may have been one of the McDonald twins, had told him later that Jodie had had the hots for him for yonks, had been working up courage to seek him out, angling for invites to anything he was likely to attend for ages, and that he should watch out, that she was one determined girl.

He'd seen her a few times since. He'd taken her to see a film, and they'd ended up together again at some other party, just snogging, a bit of tit, nothing serious, and they weren't even officially an item, but then he had, with no one better in mind, asked her to be his Formal partner. She hadn't said yes immediately, had appeared to consider the question very seriously for a long moment before giving a strangely grave assent. "Thank you," she'd said stiffly. "Thank you, Angus. I'd really like that." She'd always wanted to go to a New England School formal, had heard the music was fantastic, and that the food was always excellent. And this might be her only opportunity. She had smiled slowly, shyly, her enthusiasm genuine, if muted. He had expected either the cool casual consent or over-ebullient enthusiasm typical of most of the girls he knew, and Angus had been surprised and oddly touched.

It was Jodie's gravity, this quality of restraint that attracted him from the outset, and that continues (a circumstance that surprises even Angus) to attract him, almost against his better judgement. Her unselfconscious solemnity made her very different to most of the Grammar girls: the jolly hockey-sticks and horse-mad types favoured by his mother, her friends' daughters, the girls he had known all his life. They were nice enough, fun with a capital F: bright, cheerful, enthusiastic, endlessly confident, utterly focused, all knowing what they wanted, where they were going. But they were all a bit same-y to his way of thinking, indistinguishable, interchangeable, with their regulation perms, their regulation clothes, regulation smiles, their regulation attitudes and aspirations. But Jodie – Jodie was different. She was beautiful to look at – and there was no doubt that this had a good deal to do with his initial interest: slender, blonde, her features refined, regular. But there was nothing else that was regular about her. Not her clothes, nor her manner, her bearing, even

her accent – nothing was quite regulation, nothing was quite right. She wasn't entirely in her milieu, that was easy enough to see. Though she appeared to have plenty of friends, and was obviously well-respected in the school community – like him she was a prefect – somehow she wasn't quite comfortable. She was watchful, circumspect, always sparing in her conversation, cautious in her proffered convictions.

He knew that she came from a difficult background, but when they were together, she wasn't at all interested talking about this, about her life. "So what do you talk about?" one of his mates had asked him impatiently, obviously put out at the time Angus was spending with this girl, and astounded that he could possibly want to spend time hanging around with some bird, rather than hanging with him. "What the hell do you do with her all day, Gus, if you're not porking her?"

And he couldn't answer. What did they say, what did they do? They had the past few weekends, taken a picnic, and driven out to one of the national parks, found a quiet spot, under a tree, near the water, and had spread out a blanket and simply laid there most of the day. He wasn't porking her, no, but they were close (though this was not something he was going to discuss with Roly) and getting closer. They had spent hours in a state of constant arousal, touching, sucking, rubbing, moving inexorably towards that moment, yet never quite arriving. Not together at any rate. They would drink a bottle or two of beer – Angus always drinking the lion's share – eat chips, chocolate, fruit. They would talk desultorily about this and about that, though he could never recall later what it was they discussed. He talked about his plans, he supposed, and Jodie hers, though he couldn't if pressed have related what hers were: Sydney, he thought. Uni? Teaching, maybe. Or was it nursing? But he enjoyed – far more than he would admit to his coarse-minded friend, avid only for titillating details of sexual conquest – he enjoyed Jodie's company, her seriousness, her lack of pretension, the odd dignity of her uncertainty, her indefiniteness. But most of all he enjoyed her unquestioning admiration of him, of Angus.

An hour or two in her presence and Angus felt himself taller, better looking, more intelligent, more in control. Jodie made Angus feel good about himself. She made him feel like a man.

Which often enough, and perhaps more frequently than anyone likes to admit, is all that's needed for a boy to fall in love.

eight

Though she's never forgotten her mother-in-law's early attempts to get her out of Angus's life, her patent disappointment when they actually married (there's not a single wedding photo where Mrs Garrow senior is smiling – in every shot her mouth is pinched) over the years of their marriage, Jodie has managed to get along well enough with her mother-in-law. The two women are united in their approach to Jodie's chief preoccupation – which is increasing Angus's health, happiness and success and that of the children. The two women have built up a relationship that if not exactly friendly, is one of mutual respect, with each recognising in the other certain similarities of character and temperament. Angus's mother respects Jodie's loyalty, her devotion (only what's due) to her son and her grandchildren (whose upbringing she cannot fault). In gratitude for her efforts in rearing and nurturing this next generation of Garrows, Mrs Garrow senior is willing to overlook, even forgive, Jodie's background, which admittedly, she has done her best to escape. Jodie's people have made no shameful incursions into the respectable world of the Garrows; her mother is kept at arm's length, so there are no painful meetings between the two grandmothers, and Jodie's idiot brothers are easy enough to avoid, ignore altogether.

Happily, both of the children fit neatly into the Garrow matrix. Tom is really just a miniature version of his father – bright and respectful, easy-going – and is clearly his grandmother's favourite. Hannah is rather a different matter. She is perhaps a little too bright, a little bit prone to taking risks, displaying signs of adolescent restlessness, revealing a worrying resemblance to Angus's Aunt Ruby – a (reputedly) lesbian potter who lives in the nearby mountains, the Garrow's own blackish sheep. And Helen is critical

of her grand-daughter's current physical lushness, her plumpness, which is something she feels Jodie needs to take more seriously. She tries herself with the odd pointed comment about diet and exercise, about the curse of excess fleshiness, all of which Hannah, being the type of girl she is, pretends to ignore.

Her mother-in-law knows, of course, about Angus's past infidelities (is there anyone in town who doesn't?) and though there has been no conversation between the two women about the matter, and confidences would have been awkward, Jodie knows that Helen respects, even admires her stoicism, her ability to take it on the chin, to walk with her head held high, to stand by her man. Perhaps Angus's tendency to stray was inherited. Jodie knows from family gossip that hers is almost identical to Helen's own marital experience – in any case there is a tacit understanding, perhaps shared by many other women of their particular class and situation, that this was a reasonable price to pay for security and position – and, perhaps, affection.

Angus rings his mother, at Jodie's request, the day after their conversation with Peter. Jodie waits nervously in the kitchen, while he makes the call from his study, can hear the quiet murmur of his explanation, a short silence and then the unmistakable sound of the phone disengaging. She rushes up the hall and into the office where Angus is sitting at his desk, an odd expression on his face, one she can't quite place, not sure whether it is one of anger or misery.

"Well? What did she say?" Jodie is slightly shocked by her own intense anxiety, would never have expected she'd be so afraid of her mother-in-law's disapproval. Despite their distant but cordial relations, Jodie really has no idea how she will react.

Angus gives a deep sigh, shakes his head as if to clear it. Jodie notices that his shirt is untucked, the centre button come undone, his pale stomach peeking through unappealingly. She has to work hard to resist the impulse to move toward him, tidy him up.

"She was fine." Wonderingly. "She said – she said that you'd been put in an almost impossible situation, that she's behind you, behind us, one hundred percent and that she'll

be making her position clear to anyone who cares, or who dares, to ask. She'll call in this afternoon after golf to talk to you, she says. To help work out a – a survival strategy, she called it.”

“Oh God.” Jodie sits down heavily on the other chair, looks at her husband disbelievingly.

“You’re kidding? Aren’t you? I thought she’d be appalled.”

“I know.” Angus rubs his eyes, grimaces. “I did too. She didn’t seem at all surprised though, that’s the odd thing. But she couldn’t know anything about it, could she? You’ve never told her anything, have you?”

Jodie gives a hard, short laugh. Doesn’t bother to reply.

Her mother-in-law tramps up the side of the house to the back entrance late in the afternoon, the crunching of gravel signalling her arrival. She does this frequently, a habit that never fails to irritate her daughter-in-law – the surprise element of the visit putting her somehow on the defensive. Jodie is in the kitchen, simultaneously peeling the potatoes ready for dinner and helping Tom with his maths homework. Helen stands for a few moments in the doorway, coolly surveying the scene, before walking in.

“My goodness, Thomas – look at all that homework. They work you children so hard, these days. I don’t think I ever saw your father do his homework. But then again, I suppose he was boarding at this age.” She plants a kiss on the top of her grandson’s head, then turns to Jodie. “I wonder if he could take a little break, watch some television, play something on the computer, just while I talk to you, dear?” Thomas looks up at his mother eagerly, she nods, and he skips away quickly, before minds change. Jodie hears the slam of his bedroom door, and then more faintly the television, the distant sound of gunfire from his Playstation.

Helen sits down in Tom’s vacant chair, rifling through his books and papers aimlessly.

“Where’s Hannah?”

Jodie shrugs. “She’s out. God knows where. I’m not expecting her home anytime soon.”

“Good. We can talk plainly, then.” Helen motions to the chair beside her. “Leave dinner for a moment – it can wait.”

“Do you want tea? Whisky?”

“No. Nothing.” Impatient now. “Just sit down. We need to talk.”

Her life at this moment appears to have been reduced to a series of directions to be obeyed, and Jodie follows the command without question, though ordinarily she would balk at being ordered around by her mother-in-law – would attempt some slight gesture of resistance. She sits down at the table, takes a deep breath, prepares herself for the onslaught.

Helen looks at her for a long moment, frowning, and Jodie wills herself to meet her gaze steadily. So closely regarded, Jodie is shockingly aware of her mother-in-law's advancing age: her once fine features seem suddenly undefined, her faultless skin is grey, her eyes sunken, dull.

Helen looks away first. "As I'm sure you know, Angus has told me all about everything." She gestures vaguely, expressing the inexpressible. "Now, I'm quite sure that between you you've sorted out some very sensible plans to deal with the situation, and you probably feel you don't need my opinion or my advice," dryly. "But I'm going to give you the benefit of my wisdom anyway."

Jodie forces an encouraging smile.

"Actually, I'm not going to give you my opinion. It's largely irrelevant, isn't it? And all I really know is what Angus has told me, which I suspect has been cleaned up somewhat – trying to save me, no doubt, from being shocked." She gives a slight humorous lift of the eyebrows. "Though it might surprise him to know I'm pretty unshockable. Anyway, that's neither here nor there – what I do want to give you is my advice on how to handle others – the town, your friends, the children. Angus."

"Oh, but –"

Helen holds up her hand. It is clearly an aged hand, spotted, wrinkled, but her fingers are still strong and straight, the fingernails filed and buffed. Jodie's own hands are work-reddened, the fingers are short, stubby, the nails torn and at this moment slightly grimy from the potatoes.

"Jodie. I know I'm an old woman now, and I'm probably rather out of the social loop – it happens when you get old, y'know: your social garden tends to die off a bit – actually, rather more literally than I'd like." Again the sudden flash of humour. "But credit me with some understanding of these matters. You're about to be at the centre of what we used to call, in the olden days, a scandal. And I know that to you, the details – what actually

happened, whether people believe you – seem terribly important, but in my experience, the particulars of the scandal are largely irrelevant. When this all becomes public, you – and Angus and the children too – are likely to find yourselves in a very difficult situation. You’re going to find that people you’ve trusted, even dear friends you’ve assumed will be loyal, will avoid you. The usual invites will dry up very quickly – though to be honest dear you probably won’t feel like going out. On the other hand, people you barely know will suddenly want your company – though I’ve never really understood why. Out of curiosity maybe. Or pity.” She pauses for a moment as if considering.

Jodie is curious herself, “Did you –?”

“Yes. It’s obvious that I’ve had some first hand experience, but now isn’t the time or place to go into all that. Ancient history anyway. What we really need to talk about is just how *you’re* going to deal with it. The obvious thing would be to get away for a while. You’ll feel like it, you know. Arding will begin to feel very very small – and the prospect of running away will be very appealing.”

The thought of escape offered immediate relief, and Jodie is surprised it hadn’t occurred to her. “Perhaps we should take a holiday? All of us. We could even go overseas, I suppose. Get right away.”

“Well of course you could. But it’s not really going to solve anything in the long run is it? This isn’t going to go away – whether you’re here or elsewhere. Eventually you’ll have to come back and face things. You’re not going to be able to leave permanently. Angus has his practice, the children have school, their friends. So we’re going to have to work out a way to make it bearable. The way you handle things is going to matter a great deal – not just for your own sake – but for all of you. All of us.”

Us. How it pleases Jodie to be included, to be so unthinkingly embraced even under these bizarre circumstances. *Us.*

“So what do you suggest I... What should we do?”

Her mother-in-law doesn’t hesitate, shrugs off her expansive, almost philosophical mood in an instant, replacing it with a rapid-fire set of instructions, and giving no opportunity for discussion or demurral. Jodie feels as if she is in a war-briefing, wonders whether she should be making notes, taking minutes.

Jodie, her mother-in-law instructs her, is to go about her business as if nothing has happened. If any one asks anything, she's to tell them she's been advised not to discuss the matter. If anyone's rude, Jodie's to ignore them. She's not to get into sentimental discussions over the lost child, her youthful follies, or God forbid, into any sort of argument or conflict over the matter.

If the situation becomes too heated, if public opinion really turns on her, Helen will take the children away to Sydney, protect them at least. There's not much she can do about Jodie and Angus though, they will just have to ride it out. If the worst comes to worst and there's some sort of charge – Angus has apprised her of that possibility – well, they'll deal with that when it happens.

The one consolation, Helen tells her, is that eventually it'll be yesterday's news – not even fit for wrapping fish and chips in, these days.

Helen leans back in her chair, stretches out her legs, lets her head drop backward. Sighs. “Actually dear, I've changed my mind. A whisky would be lovely. Make it double. Neat.”

nine

Hannah has noticed something going on – it would be impossible not to. Since their return from hospital in Sydney her mother has continued to behave strangely – her disorienting remoteness during their trip home never quite disappearing. Even though her mother had been properly solicitous during the time Hannah's leg was in plaster, even though her mother's rigorous domestic schedule had been adhered to without alteration, even though there'd been the usual rows, somehow Jodie's full attention hadn't been given. Sometimes – even in the middle of a rancorous disagreement about the state of her room, her irresponsibility, her unkindness to her brother, her thoughtlessness, her bad attitude, or whatever, Hannah had become aware of a strange void in her mother, a blankness – as if

she was just doing what she had to do, going through the motions, without any proper feeling, any real engagement..

Now, over the Christmas break, Jodie has been virtually off the air. Christmas is the time when Jodie is generally hyper-vigilant regarding her family's outward appearance: policing their outings, their attire, giving both children constant advice on how to behave around grandparents, relations, providing a running commentary on their table manners, grammar, accents, on keeping their hair tidy, hands clean, dress sensible and modest.

Although it had no doubt been going on since forever, Hannah has only really begun to notice her mother's frenzied social anxiety over the last few years: her desperate attempts, Hannah assumes, to keep up with the Jones's, impress the neighbours, the relatives, even her best friends. Hannah had been invited to stay with Assia's last Christmas, and had marvelled at the casual way Assia's family muddled through the season's obligations – cancelling dinners, spontaneously heading off to the mountains for the day, or to a cafe instead of a family barbecue, leaving the presents unwrapped and instead stuffing them willy-nilly into grimy pillowslips, to be opened at the children's pleasure. It was a whole new experience of Christmas, and of family relations in general, one without any traditional observances or painful and senseless formality and one that Hannah – and as far as she could tell, everyone else involved – had thoroughly enjoyed. It had put a very different perspective on her own stuffy, over-catered, anxiety-fuelled experiences. When she expressed this to her friend, Assia had just rolled her eyes and said it wasn't a deliberate attempt to create a happy Christmas Day on her own parent's part, but had just evolved organically from her mother's hatred of domestic organisation, and her general slackness, and while this Christmas appeared to be working out okay, it occasionally led to huge family brawls when Manon's indifference towards her own and her husband's extended family became a little too conspicuous.

Assia's Sydney home was a renovated Victorian terrace in Glebe, and Hannah had loved being so close to the city, too – had wondered at her friend's peculiar choice of school, that she had actually volunteered to board in such a Godforsaken place when she had the pick

of so many city schools. Arding Grammar had certainly not been Assia's parents first preference; it was not particularly renowned for its academics, the only point in its favour being the boarding facilities, which Manon conceded were useful for two busy and ambitious parents.

But this Christmas had been somewhat less stressful than usual: her mother seemed to move through the days in a state of vague and vapid cheerfulness – almost as if she were sleepwalking, without any of her usual brittle anxiety. Hannah found herself, for the first time ever, excused from many of the usually compulsory family engagements. She'd even been allowed to leave the Garrow Christmas Eve dinner early and head off to a gathering at a friend's place. This dinner was always a depressingly tedious occasion for Hannah, with no one her own age – her cousins were either Tom's age or adults themselves with partners – and the whole bunch of them were horrendously dull grazier types, with no apparent interest in anything other than cattle and headers, wheat prices and weather forecasts. No Garrow, it seemed, other than Hannah herself, had ever read a book, attended a play, taken an interest in music. (Not counting the infamously sapphic great aunt, but sadly, she was never invited).

On Christmas morning itself the presents had arrived as beautifully wrapped and as satisfying as ever – Hannah received the new iPod she'd coveted, iTunes vouchers, a gratifyingly large pile of clothes, as well as a plane-fare to Sydney and tickets to the Big Day Out in January; and Tom's Lego, some sort of remote control flying machine, a pile of games for his Wii, had all been gratefully received. Both parents had feigned surprise at one another's gifts, and had expressed genuine pleasure over their children's largesse. But Hannah could sense that her mother's heart wasn't in it – that her mother's heart appeared to have gone elsewhere.

Her mother had maintained her eerie calm throughout the day. Where once there would have been determined nagging about the state of the lounge room, with an enforced joint cleaning session that was guaranteed to ruin whatever Christmas spirit the family were enjoying, today there was just resigned indifference. Where once there would have been

tense discussions between her parents, usually involving irritable reassurances from Angus, vain attempts to convince Jodie that his mother or cousin or whoever was unlikely to care whether the Bernaise sauce she made used non-organic eggs or that she'd used stock cubes in her soup, or that she hadn't made some dire social gaffe or other. For the first Christmas ever, Hannah didn't feel the urge to tell her mother to take a chill pill. Jodie had frozen solid.

While Hannah's activities had been seriously circumscribed when her leg was in a cast (and there has still never been any serious interrogation of the circumstances surrounding her accident – even her father has barely questioned her about that) she has been pretty much left to her own devices since her return, and virtually ignored over Christmas. And ordinarily this would suit Hannah, of course – as long as she keeps a low profile, it appears that no one will enquire too seriously into where she's going, what she's doing. But perhaps because it's school holidays, and she has more time on her hands to actually notice what's going on around her, what's going on in the adult world, she has begun to worry that something serious is up. She'd tried to find out what it was that was going on, had even gone as far as asking her father straight up, a few days earlier, but he'd given her a brilliant smile and told her not to worry, there was nothing wrong, nothing to worry about. She'd taken him at his word, had been reassured for a few days.

But then her father had started behaving strangely, too; had suddenly become more considerate, like some sitcom SNAG-dad, than she had ever seen him. Oh, he was just as busy as ever, probably busier than was usual for this time of year, heading off early to work and then not back till late, but when he'd been home, he seemed to really be there – talking to Hannah and Tom, expressing a genuine interest in their various activities, and had put himself out to be helpful, Hannah noticed. He had cleared the table occasionally, wiped things down. She had even seen him attempting to put on a load of washing – though he had been rather comically defeated in this once he'd realised he didn't actually know where to put the detergent, or how to turn the machine on.

Not only has her mother's indifference intensified (if indifference can be said to intensify)

over the past couple of weeks, but now it seems obvious that both her mother and father are in the grip of something more significant than the customary holiday strains and stresses. There have been whispered conversations, locked-door conferences, unscheduled visits to undisclosed locations. And now both of the parents are completely vlogged out – are basically off the air. They're not fighting, it's not that, but they're also not really talking. Not to each other; not to anyone.

So when her parents call her in for a serious talk, a few days after Christmas, she's half-prepared to be told something terrible, something earth-shattering, life changing. But she's not quite prepared for what she does hear.

She's lying on her bed, flicking through *Frankie*, listening to Erika Badu on her iPod, Facebooking, and sending the occasional text, and is alarmed by her father's polite request that she come into the lounge-room, that he and mum have something important to tell her and Tom. She sighs and gives a miserable pout, rolls her eyes. "Oh, God. What is it? Are you two getting divorced?" She says the words too loudly, trying hard to sound bitchily unimpressed, her iPod blaring in her ears. "You know what? I really don't care if you do." Her father stands in the doorway, eyebrows raised, unsmiling. "Hannah." She sighs and rolls off the bed, limps slowly across the clothes-strewn floor.

"You really have to do something about this, Han." Her father, who is only occasionally confronted with her room, follows her progress with obvious distaste. "It's – it's completely feral. Can't you – ?"

Hannah leans against the doorway with her arms folded, carefully maintaining a blank expression, waits for him to finish, the music still blaring in her ears. "Though honestly, why would I even bother at this point." He sighs and gestures for her to walk out the door, but as she's passing, he puts his hand on her shoulder, forces her to turn and look at him, gently prises the iPod jack from its socket.

"Hannah." His voice is quiet, gentle. And more tentative than she can recall hearing for a long time.

"What?" Her own voice comes out in a squeak, barely audible.

"It's just – this is going to be difficult. Really difficult."

“Oh God. It’s something really awful, isn’t it. Someone’s died.” A sudden terrifying thought, explaining it all. “Oh God, it’s Mum, isn’t it? That’s why you’ve been so ... She’s got something? Cancer?” Her stomach has begun to churn.

Her father pulls her to him for a brief hug. “No, sweetheart. It’s not that. It’s –” but he stops, sighs again, this time more heavily, looks at her gravely. “Go on into the lounge darling – and can you please get rid of the iPod. We need you to listen.” He pushes her gently ahead of him.

“And don’t worry – nobody’s dying. Nobody’s dead.”

Tom is there ahead of her, bouncing about on the lounge as if he has fleas. Hannah sits as directed on the lounge but gets as far apart from her brother as she can. “Can you just sit still, Tommy?” She glares. “It’s bad enough having to be here at all.”

Her parents sit side by side on the chairs opposite, both looking extremely formal, both of them looking determinedly cheerful. “Well.” Hannah’s father clears his throat, he speaks slowly, as if he’s quite not certain about what he’s saying. “We’ve got something to tell you – and it’s not good, I’m afraid.”

Tom’s eyes widen, his jiggling peters out. “You’re not getting divorced? Mummy?”

Their mother smiles at him gently. “No, sweetheart. It’s not that. It’s just something that happened to Mummy a long time ago.” She speaks as if relieved to be able to say something reassuring, but to Hannah the words sound distant, as if they’re coming from a long way away. “And it’s really not going to –”

“Jodie.” Her father interrupts. “I thought that we agreed that I’d do the talking.”

Her mother’s nervous reply comes immediately “Of course, yes. Sorry, Angus.”

Hannah feels irritation flare, suddenly maddened by her mother’s compliance, her passivity, her impassivity. Why won’t she do the talking? If it’s her story, thinks Hannah, why not tell it herself, her own way. She wonders, half-seriously, whether her mother has sustained some sort of brain damage recently or whether she’d been zapped – lobotomised in some tragic psychological experiment – or perhaps she’s suddenly started smoking pot. The improbability, the absurdity, of this scenario makes her giggle, but then she feels slightly sick – perhaps this newly-distant mother *is* under the influence of some drug.

“Okay.” Her father draws himself up, takes a breath. He gives Tom a steady glance,

looks Hannah in the eye. He tells them.

“Is that it? Really?” Tom says, his relief evident. Then, after a decent pause: “So, can I go now? I’m almost up to the third level.” He submits to his mother’s fierce hug before hurrying back to his room. But Hannah stays seated. She can’t move, can’t raise her head. Can barely breath.

The relief that coursed through her once she was certain that no one was dying, no one was divorcing – those particular fears that still lingered from childhood – has been replaced by a disbelieving rage. Like most children Hannah has only vaguely understood that her mother had really had a life prior to her own advent, and while the narrative of Jodie’s existence before her marriage, before Hannah’s own birth had not exactly been shrouded in mystery, it was very rarely discussed. Jodie’s family – her parents, her brothers – had never had any part of Hannah’s own life. They belonged to Jodie’s past, and from the little she had seen of them, Hannah had been glad to leave them there. But this, this announcement, this revelation. It has taken Hannah no time at all to seize upon the ramifications – that her mother might have a criminal past, that her life past and present – was about to be made public property. Hannah will be implicated in this. Hannah, along with her mother and father and even little Tom, is about to be publicly shamed.

She can envision her future, has seen it happen (has done it once or twice herself if truth be told) enough times to know exactly what will awaits her. First there will be the little groups that gather without her; she will have to move through huddles from which she’s somehow excluded, that aren’t quite welcoming. Then the smiles on her erstwhile friends faces will become slightly stiff, and the invites to certain parties will not be extended. Her friends’ mothers will smile at her patronisingly, asking kindly how her mother is, and even the teachers will look at her differently, regard her as someone to be pitied. Even the contacts outside school – the university drama group, for instance, that she has worked so hard to become part of – will look at her differently; she’ll become a kind of prize, a curiosity. “Aren’t you that girl whose mum –?” It makes her sick just thinking about it.

She has had to work hard to find her place at school. It has taken her years – trying to be both herself and to be one of them. To fit in. Now, for the first time ever Hannah is happy with the way she is regarded by her peers, satisfied by the place she occupies in the social pyramid. She's far too bright, is too plump to be pretty, is hopeless on a horse or wielding a hockey stick or any type of ball, and her musical ability is completely underwhelming. She's got to where she is on her wits – she's the class clown, fun to be around, entertaining. She's not queen of the pile, she'll never be that, but she's well-liked and well-known. Popular enough. And light years away from her painful to remember, desperately eager, younger self.

Hannah is a Garrow, and is smart enough to know that being a Garrow has provided her with innumerable social privileges; that being a Garrow she's considered an asset by certain others. She knows enough too to know that as soon as being a Garrow, or being her mother's daughter, carries a different sort of association, things at school might be very different. She would always have Assia of course, whatever happens, whatever's said. She knows that her friendship with Assia is unconditional, that Assia will never be susceptible to anyone else's valuation of her, not even her parents. But Hannah needs more than just Assia, and she knows that other girls – and more alarmingly, boys – are not so independently minded.

Hannah realises she should be able to discuss her concerns with her parents sensibly, responsibly, calmly, adult-to-adult. She's sixteen, after all. But sixteen or not, she can feel her uncontained toddler self, a self she had thought banished years back, re-emerging, a tantrum – all those inarticulate emotions seething and churning – erupting. She feels her eyes prickling with angry tears, can feel her skin swelling with heat and rage. She sucks her bottom lip in, then bites down on it hard. She can feel her hands turn to fists, her nails sharp against her palms. She pushes harder, waiting for the piercing, the pain, trying hard to contain, or at least re-channel her fury.

But her anger has taken on a life of its own, until somehow it's no longer hers to check. "This is *so* fucked." She hisses the words, looking up but beyond them now. She can sense

their paralysed concern, knows that this is exactly what they expected, that they've steeled themselves against it, have already prepared themselves for her rage.

“You have just fucked everything. My entire life. This will be – everyone – everyone will know. Do you have any any idea what you've done? Any idea at all?” Her voice comes louder, the rage swelling in her chest like a wave. She can feel it pushing and pounding and expanding inside her, almost breaking through her skin. “You're so fucking clueless. How could you have done this? I knew there was something going on – back in Sydney – the way that nurse was looking at you.” And then Hannah asks the obvious question, the one that needs asking, that no one else has ever asked: “Why the fuck couldn't you just do the normal thing, the usual thing, Mum – you know, what anyone with half a brain would do. Why the *fuck* didn't you just have an abortion?”

“Hannah, I –” her mother is silenced by a look from by her father. Now, Hannah looks directly across at them and sees nothing beyond the red that's coursing behind her eyes.

Hannah moves her hand towards the antique cut glass lamp that's standing on a nearby table, feels the terrible inevitability, the necessity of her action, of what she's about to do. Her parents watch her anxiously, but remain mutely immobile. It's as if they're waiting for her to act, stunned into acquiescence. She picks up the lamp, the square marble base cold to her touch, feels the solid weight of it heavy heavy heavy in her hand, then throws it swiftly and precisely, a few feet to the left of her mother's head. The lamp hits the wall base—first with a heavy thud, the crystal shattering and spraying around the room. Her father moves towards her, takes her, released now, and sobbing with distress and fright, in his arms, but her mother just sits there, as Hannah had known she would, impassive, unresisting. Unreachable.

Sydney Morning Herald, Australian, Courier mail, Age, Women's Weekly, New Idea, Woman's Day, West Australian, The Land, Adelaide Advertiser, etc etc etc.

Any information on the past and/or present whereabouts of the child formerly known as ELSA MARY EVANS, born 23rd January 1986, Belfield Hospital. Please contact Peter Silvers at Silvers Wood and Watson, Arding. (02)67772331 or email p.silvers@sww.com.au

ten

In the event it is more than six weeks after the arrival of Debbie's letter, a month after the notices go out, that Jodie receives her first official visit from the police, though in the interim there have been several unofficial conversations. On Pete's advice, Angus has spoken to his mate, Don Phillips, the local Police Inspector, casually, over golf, drinks, and he has counselled them to bide their time, to do nothing precipitate. He had predicted the time lag, to the day, almost. "It'll take some time," Angus, he'd said, "I'm guessing a month, minimum, to ascertain firstly, that something untoward has actually occurred – that your nurse friend isn't leading them up the garden path, though they'll pick up on those ads, the media attention. Don't imagine they'll miss them. And then they'll need more time to ascertain that there's some sort of criminal case worth pursuing. But if there is a missing child – even if that child went missing twenty years ago – there will be an investigation."

Angus tells her the night before, without any preamble, that he'd had a call from Don Phillips that afternoon. Jodie feels her stomach lurch, and then that odd numbness engulfs her – descending like the cone of silence in *Get Smart*. The initial panic recedes and everything is muffled, there's a muted buzzing, like white noise, in her head. "And what did he say?" she hears herself ask calmly.

"It's what we expected, Jodie. The missing person's unit have begun an investigation. They're sending some detective up to talk to you tomorrow. He said that ordinarily he'd get you down to the station for questioning by the detectives, but that out of respect to me, and to try and head off the press, they'd be happy to come here to talk to you. He would have preferred to handle the initial questioning himself, but they're sending some young

gun detective up and while he's agreed to come here, he won't make any other compromises. They'll be here in the morning."

Angus watches her in silence, obviously waiting for her to say something. She casts about for a suitable response. "I guess we need to keep it quiet, do we? The police visit, I mean." He shakes his head, out of bewilderment at her banal comment or an attempt to clear his head, Jodie can't tell.

"Jodes. Jodie. You don't seem to understand the ramifications. This is huge. At the very least this could destroy your reputation – and mine. We could lose everything. If they don't locate this – your child – the question will be open, you'll have it hanging over you forever."

"What question?" She is genuinely puzzled. "What question, Angus?"

He looks at her for a long moment before speaking. Takes her hand in his. His voice is low, and gentle, "The question of whether you killed that baby, Jodie; of whether you murdered your own child."

Don and a sharply dressed Sydney detective arrive punctually at the specified time. They bring along a local female officer who Jodie has seen every now and then around town, always accompanied by a clutch of fractious toddlers. The young woman usually looks tired, harassed, her face drawn, with that slightly stunned look that's habitual to women with very young children ("Two of us on night shift. What on earth were we thinking? Sometimes I think it's toddlers who should be bloody-well locked up. Give me a crook any day"). But here in her police uniform, she is a different person – poised, cool, collected, official, her expression unreadable – and it is Jodie who is floundering, out of her depth.

They have come to the house, the Inspector explains, only because Angus has made a fuss, ordinarily they would have asked Jodie to come to them, to the station. She wonders for a moment why he is explaining this so carefully, before she realises that he is explaining for the benefit of the younger detective, who shrugs and gives a complacent smile.

She asks – good hostess that she is, of course she does! – whether they would like tea, coffee, but this is quickly, politely vetoed. The Sydney detective, whatever the normal social procedure of his country colleagues, making it very clear with suddenly icy formality that this is an official visit and no sustenance will be required.

They sit in the lounge room, Angus determinedly offering the officers the three-seater, while he and Jodie sit in the single chairs opposite, Jodie on the edge of her seat, her hands arranged in her lap, ankles crossed, like a child awaiting a scolding. Her nervousness dissipates, and she feels – as she has so often of late – merely flat, empty, and utterly disconnected. She knows she won't be able to make even the slightest effort to thwart the intentions of those around her, that she must let whatever is about to happen, happen.

She watches with vague curiosity the way that Don – a man who she has known for years, who has visited their home for dinner on more than half a dozen occasions, whose wife has been on the Grammar fete committee with Jodie, whose son plays on Tom's cricket team – scratches at the side of his nose when he is uncomfortable, as he is clearly now. He clears his throat – rather phlegmily, she observes with vague distaste – and makes an awkward start to the conversation. “Well, thanks for this, Angus. Jodie. We should get down to business, then. I'll hand you over to DS O'Rooke here. He's going to conduct the ... erm ... ask some preliminary questions. I'm just here as a courtesy.”

Angus raises his eyebrows in a way she is familiar with, and has always found intimidating when directed at her. “But this is just an informal discussion, isn't it, Don? I don't need to get a lawyer, do I?” Her husband's voice is cold and hard, and she wonders that the other men don't flinch. But of course this is a game they're all used to; this constant power play between legal adversaries means nothing personal to them. Tonight they will go to their respective homes, and forget all about the personas they have assumed, the people they've attacked or defended. Her life will just be a professional problem to be solved, at best. At worst, gossip to be spread all about the town.

The Inspector, however, has the grace to look slightly uncomfortable. He squirms under

Angus's direct gaze. "Well – Senior Constable Scanlon here will take notes, of course, but no, it's not a formal interview. Well, look, really this has all come from Sydney, Angus. It's out of my hands. But," he turns to the Sydney detective, "Jodie, Mrs Garrow doesn't need her lawyer present, does she?"

O'Rooke frowns down at his notes. "But I understand that you are a lawyer, sir?"

"I am, yes. But naturally, I wouldn't represent my wife. I'm a succession lawyer. This sort of business is not my area of expertise. However, if this is a formal interview I can have someone here in five minutes. But my wife won't be saying a word until then."

O'Rooke looks up from his papers and smiles. His smile is brief, cursory – more like a wolfish baring of fangs.

"That won't be necessary, Mr Garrow. This is only a preliminary questioning. What we're really interested in at this point is finding out where the child – where the young woman, Mrs Garrow's daughter – is now. We can't proceed any further until we've established whether there is actually any sort of case to answer."

"What do you mean, a case? I thought this was just a fact finding mission. There is no *case*. A case would presuppose a crime, and all we've got here is an adoption. And even if the adoption wasn't done strictly according to the law, surely it's all a bit pointless?" A glare from Angus, bypassing O'Rooke, directed at Don. Jodie notices the female officer give a slight smirk, which is quickly smothered.

"Well, sir. It's not quite that simple is it? It's a little more than just an adoption, as I'm sure you're aware. It involved the sale of a child, which is a criminal offence. And as I'm sure you're also aware there's no statute of limitations on criminal cases. But you're correct – that was just a figure of speech. There is no formal case. Not yet." That brief baring of teeth again and Jodie can feel a snarl of tension, like a low growl, just below her range of hearing, between the two men.

"Perhaps sir, we could, if you'll allow me, just go over the facts of the ca – of the situation."

"Go ahead." Angus folds his arms; leans back easily in his chair. "The facts. That sounds like a sensible place to begin."

And so the facts are reiterated.

“Mrs Garrow,” the detective begins, “it has been brought to our attention, by Ms Debbie west, a Nursing sister at the Belfield private Hospital in Sydney, NSW, that you gave birth to a baby girl, Elsa Mary, on the 29th December 1986. “

And it goes on, through her stay at the hospital, and then to the date of her discharge, the lack of any subsequent official registration of the birth, the absence of any record of adoption through the established and official routes; the legal – he emphasises the word slightly – channels. The lack of any records whatsoever pertaining to the child Elsa Mary beyond the evidence, indisputable, of her birth.

There are no surprises, nothing that she, that they, did not expect. The man relates the facts emotionlessly, asks Jodie frequently whether this or that detail is correct, encourages her to intervene if any fact is untrue or unclear, but doesn't ever ask her to expand. The detective is as straightforward, as lacking in emotion as Peter had been and Jodie knows that she too sounds calm, composed, her answers unhurried, precise, her demeanour unruffled. On the face of it, they could be talking about someone else completely, could be talking about anybody. But for the first time, Jodie feels a lurch of panic, of giddy fear. It's only momentary, a blip, a tick, and she is almost immediately able to still her heart, her thoughts, to return to that more comfortable state of detachment.

“Of course,” she answers evenly, when called upon to verify dates, places, names. “Yes, this is all correct.”

“Mrs Garrow, you can see that it is plainly our duty to investigate this matter further. We can find no record of this child existing, subsequent to your leaving the hospital. Nothing. Now, you must see that we have to ask you,” he spreads out his fingers in a strangely theatrical gesture of conciliation, “what exactly happened next. What you did with the baby. You're the only one who knows, you see.”

She is about to speak, strangely moved by his plea, to reassure him that of course she understands, that anybody would be concerned to find this child, that she will do everything in her power to help the investigation, anything, but Angus speaks first, his voice curt.

“Hold on. You said this would just involve some preliminary questions. You’ve told us what you know, and Jodie’s own recollections correspond with all that you’ve said. Anyway, we’ve already made this clear, no doubt you’ve read the papers, seen the notifications surely. We’ve already begun looking for this child.”

“Oh, come on. We all know –”

“What we all know, Sergeant O’Rooke, is that my wife is under absolutely no obligation to say anything more. Not another word.”

“Well of course, Mr Garrow. And I’m sure you’ve told her to say nothing, or you wouldn’t be the professional that I’m certain you are. But you do understand, that your wife’s status – her guilt or innocence – will be much easier to establish if she assists us voluntarily.”

“Guilt? Innocence?” Angus’s anger is undisguised now. “There’s no question of innocence here? Innocent of what? I’ve let you say your piece, check your facts, but it’s clear that you’re jumping to some fairly spurious conclusions if you’re already bringing concepts of innocence and guilt into the discussion.”

“But, sir, we need to establish –”

Angus ignores his explanation, gets to his feet purposefully.

“Well, gentlemen. I’ve let you say your piece. And now I’d like you to leave.”

The Sydney detective looks vaguely shocked, appeals to Don, who is gazing composedly off into the middle distance. The WPC is looking down at her lap, studiously picking

invisible fluff off her regulation skirt.

Donald gives his viscous cough. “Well, Sergeant, I think we may have overstayed our welcome.” He stands, brushes down his trousers.

The detective looks mulish. “But – ” He receives a glare, stands reluctantly.

Don thrusts out his hand. “Thank you both for your time. Angus. Jodie.” He nods and heads towards the door, is followed quickly by the female constable.

“We’ll be back in touch, Mr Garrow. Very soon.” The detective’s voice is stiff, his incredulity clear.

“I’m sure you will.” Angus sounds mildly amused. “But we’ll be making a comprehensive statement to the press ourselves later this afternoon. You might want to get back to us after that.”

Press Release:

Statement of Jodie Garrow

Published in the Arding Times, Sydney Morning Herald, Australian, Courier Mail, Melbourne Age, West Australian, Adelaide Advertiser, Hobart Star.

Twenty four years ago, when I was 19, I gave birth to a baby girl, who I named Elsa Mary. On the advice and support of the matron of the maternity ward at Belfield Hospital, Sheila O’Malley, the child was given in a private adoption, to an older couple that I knew only as ‘Simon’ and ‘Rosemary’. These may not have been their real names, however. I was given a small sum of money – \$5000 in cash – which was not intended as a payment for the child, but was to help give me time to get over the trauma of the birth. Although I knew that the adoption was not entirely official, I at no point realised that I was engaging in what I now know to be a completely illegal act, having been advised by Sheila that everything was above board, and that all the legalities of the situation would be handled for me. At my own request, no further

details of this couple were ever provided. I was given no surname, no contact details, phone numbers or address. I had the impression that they resided somewhere in the Hunter area, but may have been completely wrong in this. At the time I was perfectly content that the baby was going to a loving home and that the future being offered the child by this couple would be vastly superior to any life I could provide – being at that time a nursing student, with no support from either my family or the father of the child, none of whom were aware of my condition.

The baby was handed to the man and woman in the car park on the day of my discharge, as had been arranged prior to my leaving, and that was the last time I saw her.

I have had no contact either with the nursing sister who assisted me, nor the adoptive parents of the child, nor the child herself since that day.

I have recently come to realise the magnitude of my youthful mistake, and would very much like to re-establish contact with my daughter.

Sydney Morning Herald

“Relinquishing mother searches for long lost baby”

An Arding mother has sent out a nation-wide call to help her find the baby that she gave away more than twenty years ago.

Mrs Jodie Garrow of Arding, in the New England region of NSW, was only 19 – a nursing student – when alone and a long way from her country home and family, she adopted out her new born baby, Elsa Mary. The adoption, which was arranged by a member of staff at Sydney’s then Belfield public Hospital, was far from legal, though this was something Mrs Garrow was unaware of at the time. “The nurse told me she

would be going to a good home,” Mrs Garrow says, “and at the time I was happy to believe her, relieved that the business had been taken out of my hands. I didn’t really understand that not going through the proper channels was a mistake. Over the years, like many relinquishing mothers, I have become increasingly concerned about the welfare of Elsa Mary, and would like very much to establish contact with my daughter.” Mrs Garrow was not told the adoptive parents’ full names but thinks they may have been ‘Simon’ and ‘Rosemary’. Baby Elsa Mary had full webbing of all the toes on both her feet – a genetic anomaly shared by her mother and half-sister – and may have received cosmetic surgery at some point to rectify this.

Mrs Garrow, who is married to prominent Arding solicitor, Angus Garrow, placed an ad in the personal column of this newspaper and other city and regional newspapers and magazines throughout Australia several weeks ago in an effort to locate her daughter.

If you have any information on the current or previous whereabouts of Elsa Mary, please contact Silvers Wood and Watson, Arding. 02 67772331 or p.silvers@sww.com.au

December, 1986

Later Jodie will wonder at the speed of it all, the smoothness of the operation. Will wonder whether perhaps she was not the first, not the only, young mother to have made this very deal with Matron Sheila O’Malley. But at the time haste seemed necessary – how did she have any choice but to gratefully accept the offer, the conditions? When a hospital stay for a new mother lasted four days maximum, and three if all was well, time was of the essence. There was no time for second thoughts, no time for doubt.

She knows a couple, the matron tells Jodie calmly, without drama, who are too old to adopt. There are so few adoptions these days. Young girls, and you my dear are the miraculous exception to this, she says – and for the first time Jodie hears the steel in

Sheila's voice – would rather commit murder, would rather kill their unborn babies (it takes Jodie a moment to realise that she's talking about abortion and not infanticide) than carry them to term and give them to those multitude of desperate couples who are not so blessed. And because such babies are so scarce, the terms on which couples are able to be granted an adoptive child have become harder and harder. So many couples are disqualified even while they're waiting to reach the top of the list, betrayed by time, deemed too old, unfit to adopt, and the child will be given to more suitable – younger – couple. Now, Sheila knows one such couple, they're in their mid-forties already and so unlikely to qualify now, who would dearly love a child. "No one," Sheila's voice is suddenly full of passion, "thinks anything of it when a woman gives birth to a child in her mid-forties – it's a natural process and what's to stop them? But for adoption it's different. They're trying to set them up with the 'perfect' parents, you see, though how age comes in to this, I don't know. Anyway," she goes on, calm again, "this couple – I'll call them the Browns, shall I? – are very dear friends of mine. They're good, clean-living, respectable, happily-married professional people. The only thing missing in their life is a child. They'd dearly love a little baby, and have been trying for years, but with no luck, poor things. And now, as I was telling you, it's too late. They're officially too old to adopt. They'd find one from overseas, a black one or one of those poor little Asian bobbies, but they haven't got the money for all that. And they'd rather a white baby anyway, to be honest. They're not prejudiced," she adds quickly, though Jodie hasn't made any sort of comment, "they just think it'd be easier all round if the baby was ... one of us. "

But Jodie isn't at all interested in this couple and their trials and tribulations, their questionable racial predilections. Her interest in them is far more immediate, far more practical: they want a baby; she has a baby she doesn't want. It all seems beautifully simple – a transaction made in, well if not heaven, somewhere close by.

"Now, I've spoken to them and told them about you, and your lovely little girl, and they're all excited. Over the moon. They wanted to rush over right away, and talk to you, see the little bub, but I said they should wait, let me discuss it with you, settle the terms."

“The terms?”

“Well, as you can imagine, they don’t want there to be any – repercussions later in the piece. No involvement from you. Sometimes mums want to give the baby away, but still have visiting rights and so on. They don’t want that. It has to be a clean cut, if you know what I mean. And they want to make sure you don’t change your mind later.”

“But you know I won’t. How many – ?”

“Hold on a bit.” Sheila shushes her gently. “So they’re willing,” and her lips suddenly purse as if she’s holding in excitement, or perhaps it’s disapproval, it’s hard to tell which. “They’re willing to pay you a little to smooth things over for you, so to speak. A little bit of ready might make the decision – and all the hardship you’ve been through already – seem that much easier.”

“But I thought you said they didn’t have any money? And anyway, I don’t – ” The dubious nature of the offer is suddenly apparent. “I don’t want to *sell* the baby. It wouldn’t be right. It’s not – it’s not moral.”

“Now, now, Jodie, don’t take it the wrong way; you wouldn’t be *selling* her. But supplying a little oil to grease the wheels never hurt any one. It’s just to ensure that it’s all above-board, that you’ll be – that you’ll be getting something for your trouble, so to speak. And it’s not a great deal, they don’t have that much money, just a thousand or two – just something to tide you over for the next few months, while you get over all this. So you can have some kind of break and don’t have to rush back to working right away. Of course, you don’t have to spend the money on yourself: you could donate it to some charity, if you’re truly opposed to taking anything – that would be your business. The thing is – they’re not just willing to pay, they really want to pay. As a sort of thank you.”

“But –”

“First, though,” she ignores Jodie’s interjection, her voice brisk now, businesslike. “First, though, you need to give the bubba a name.”

“Oh, but I –”

Sheila interrupts her protest again. “Now, we don’t want anyone here thinking there’s anything odd going on and calling social workers and the like.” She pauses, frowns. “You will have a visit from the community health sister at some point – I don’t think I can stop that. But I’ll work out how we’re to deal with all that later. Now, come on, a name. It doesn’t have to be anything special.”

“I don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter what. It won’t be permanent, you know.”

Jodie shrugs. “I can’t think of anything.” She has a list of beloved names, names for her fantasy child, her future child, the child she and Angus would conceive together, and Angus’s own favourite – Hannah, after his paternal grandmother – but these are not names for this infant.

The matron rolls her eyes, impatient. “How about your mother. What’s her name? ”

”Oh, no. No way.”

“Your grandmother?”

“Elsa.” Jodie gives the name – her mother’s mother, her never met grandmother, dead before she was born – without thinking, half in a daze, her mind whirling.

The woman nods, satisfied. “And your other grandmother? For a middle – you need a middle name.”

“Mary.” Her father’s mother – long gone too.

“Perfect. That wasn’t so hard was it? A good simple old-fashioned name: Elsa Mary.”

It’s surprising just how easy the whole deception is. Sheila’s not there every shift, of course, or even every day, but she makes it clear to all the other midwives that young Jodie, though finding the transition to motherhood particularly painful, is responding well to her attentions. She is matron’s special protégé, best left to matron’s care. And most of the other midwives, rushed off their feet, far from being suspicious, are happy enough to do the minimum, to leave her be.

Sheila makes a point of spending as much time as she can with Jodie, ostentatiously wheeling the baby down to her room every now and then, commenting to all and sundry (with a almighty sigh) that it's time Miss Jodie learnt a few things about being a mother. Nobody seems to take much notice, though, they're short-staffed and have other things to worry about, are just glad to see someone else taking over a potentially troubled patient.

Jodie's main priority during her stay in hospital, Matron insists – as a single mother without support – is to regain her strength. She's to be bothered as little as possible with the baby – who is to be bottle-fed and kept in the nursery as much as possible. The hospital's maternity ward is slightly old-fashioned – leaning more to the Truby King ideal than the Sheila Kitzinger – and the rooming-in ideal (soon to be seen as a necessary adjunct to proper mother-infant bonding) hasn't yet caught on. The nurses are happy to look after the babies: first time mothers, with their nervous uncertainty, their tendency to weep, their endless lactation difficulties are still seen as being slightly troublesome, especially by the older midwives, and as more likely to unsettle their own baby as not. So Jodie's desire to see the baby as little as possible isn't regarded as being completely outrageous.

And luckily the baby is a placid little thing, sleepy, easily contented, and requires little more than bottle-feeding and changing and the occasional nurse. All of which can be just as effectively done in the nursery, by others.

eleven

Just as his mother had predicted, their social freezing out, which has all the hallmarks of an old-fashioned shunning, begins slowly, but gains momentum remarkably quickly.

Knowing the viral qualities of small-town gossip, Angus and Jodie had forewarned their closest friends one by one, quite deliberately, before the notices hit the paper. They had

called them on the phone, or let them know what was coming over coffee, drinks, dinner, in an effort to stem, or at least reduce, the inevitable gossip. Angus had told David – who is perhaps his closest friend – almost casually, over drinks after an afternoon game of tennis, a few days before their dinner engagement, and had been relieved by Dave’s nonchalance, his easy acceptance of the facts as he relates them. Angus had already been pleasantly surprised by the supportive attitude of the few people he’d told, but still he was hugely grateful for Dave’s easy acceptance, his lack of curiosity. “Shit, mate.” Dave had frowned thoughtfully, given his bushranger beard a characteristic tug. “That’s got to be a bit of a shock. For all of you.” He’d asked after Jodie’s well-being briefly, and then the conversation changed tack entirely, moved on to a more pertinent discussion of the local union team’s latest disgrace. This reaction, Angus thinks later, is reminiscent of the way any emotionally charged announcement is handled by most of the blokes he’s friends with. With news of an impending birth, a marriage, divorce, death of a parent, there’s never much said in words, never any fuss made – but there’s a tacit understanding that nothing has changed, that the mate will be there, unquestioningly, when needed.

But between this conversation and their next meeting during a dinner at the Power’s house – their monthly dinner together a long-standing engagement – it appears that something, that everything, has changed.

This change in attitude, or whatever it is, doesn’t become apparent until half way through the meal. Until this everything has gone as normal. Their arrival had been greeted with pleasure, or so he had imagined. Tom and Harry had run off to the rumpus room together to play Wii and stuff themselves with chips and fizzy drink; Hannah and Laura had headed out to some party together, rolling their eyes good-naturedly at their parents’ customary directives to not drink, not drug, not drive. Champagne had been poured, beers opened, the two women had fussed about in the kitchen, while the men decamped to inspect David’s latest motorcycle acquisition.

Angus would count David and Sue as being amongst their best friends – and certainly their best couple friends. David is a year or two older than him, like Angus his family were on

the land, but further west, and the two of them had been boarders at Grammar before Angus's father's death and his family's subsequent move to town. Although they hadn't been particular mates in those days, when Dave moved back to Arding in the nineties, to set up as a stock and station agent, and then married Sue (who is almost family – her mother a friend of his mother) the two couples had grown close, and closer still when the births of their children, daughters and then sons, occurred in close proximity. Although Sue and Jodie had mixed in different circles at school and though, other than the children, they have nothing obvious in common (Sue, an ex-lawyer, is now the driving force behind the Arding Pony Club) they appear, to Angus's inexperienced eye, to also have become fast friends over the years. The four of them get together regularly for dinner, barbecues, tennis; occasionally holiday together down at the Power's coastal holiday house.

Angus is comfortable in their house, comfortable in their company. Every thing about them feels known, in the way of family. He can almost imagine having had just this life, David's life, effortlessly switching households. Sue could so easily have been his wife, and this his home. The house itself – a stately old blue brick in the centre of town – is very different to his and Jodie's contemporary brick veneer on The Hill, but utterly familiar in its run-down grandeur, almost identical to the home he'd grown up in. Inconvenient in so many ways: dark, impossible to heat, in desperate need of remodelling, modernising, cluttered with impractical and ugly Victorian furnishings, bits and pieces bought by some illustrious ancestor, and held on to, thanks to the parsimonious streak of most grazing families, for generations. He is utterly comfortable with Sue, too. She reminds him of his sisters, some of his Garrow cousins: devoid of self-doubt, content with her self and her place, reliable and competent, perhaps slightly insensitive of others' feelings. She can be fearfully blunt, but is rarely deliberately unkind.

By the time the four of them sit down at the table to eat – the small boys having spirited their dishes back to their gaming den – the adults have all had a fair bit to drink. The meal is delicious as always. Sue is an excellent cook, naturally, and though there is some sporadic conversation, the four of them eat with very little talking. So pleasantly preoccupied is Angus with the quail, that it takes a while for him to notice that his wife is

upset. Jodie is sitting primly upright, her cheeks red, her eyes dangerously wide, and when she speaks her voice has the high and slightly brittle quality that he recognises, one it only acquires when she's feeling out of her depth. He doesn't know for certain, but assumes that there has been some falling out between the two women.

Susan's famous frankness, he knows from experience, can be challenging. She had given him an enormous serve, years back now, when news of his affair with Wanda Robinson had leaked out. She had cornered him at a party and enunciated very clearly her opinion of him (a prick); of Jodie (loyal, blameless), of how he could (and should) redeem himself (go down on his knees and beg forgiveness). "You can't go on feeling hard done by just because you married your first girlfriend, Angus. You had plenty of opportunities to dump Jodie before you married her. And plenty of encouragement, in case you've forgotten. But you married her, mate, and it's too late to regret that now. You've got kids, and she's been a bloody loyal wife – even if we all know she's not the sort of girl you should have married. Grow up." At the time he'd defended himself strenuously if not particularly persuasively, but in retrospect he'd found her plainspoken vehemence more endearing than alarming, and had thought once or twice in a more sentimental mode that she was probably the sort of girl he should have married – that she would have kept him in line in a way that Jodie, with her uncertainty, with her feeling that the obligation was all on his side, never could. This sort of anger directed at Angus was one thing – he was her equal – but he knew that for his wife it would be different, that seemingly minor slights could be deeply wounding.

He is busy observing Jodie, trying to catch her eye, to interrogate her anxiety, reassure her with a glance, a smile of solidarity, is barely attending to the discussion. So when the conversation suddenly leaves the safe harbour of the general and enters into more dangerous waters of the personal, Angus flounders, unprepared.

"I take it you won't be standing now, Angus?" Sue makes the statement quite casually, looking at him levelly across the table. Angus hears a slight gasp from his host, but David looks away quickly, won't meet his eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I’d assumed that since this – *news* – of Jodie’s, you’ll have decided not to risk losing it; that you’ll pull out, let them put in someone else. Personally, I’m not sure that it was ever going to work anyway. You know Greg English has been saying he’d like to stand? And he’s got Mardi’s family – the Jarvis’s – behind him, too.”

“Susan. I don’t think this –” David’s voice is tight, nervous.

It takes Angus a moment to respond. “No. That’s okay. It’s just that – I hadn’t really thought about it. This has all been very sudden, as you can imagine. I mean, obviously, the party will advise me.”

“Oh, come *on*, Angus.” Sue’s always very proper enunciation – there’s a particular Grammar drawl that Angus would recognise anywhere, what one of his public school mates once described as a kind of a whinny – has become more pronounced; from drink or hostility, he can’t be certain. “You don’t really think that you stand a chance of getting in, not with all this happening? The Mayor of Arding has to be squeaky clean. In theory if not reality. And this so-called missing child of Jodie’s,” there is a slight jeer in her voice, “makes you look slightly suspect, don’t you think?”

To his surprise Jodie is there before him, her voice calm now. “I don’t see that something that happened to me all those years ago, and that didn’t involve Angus, can have any bearing on him whatsoever. That would be unfair.”

“But you’re Angus’s wife, Jodie. And however absent Angus himself was when your daughter was conceived, your reputation is still going to reflect on him. Short of divorcing you – and I don’t think he’d do that at this point – I really don’t see how he can remove himself from the equation.” Susan pauses and takes a few sullen sips of her wine, before continuing. Her voice is growing louder. “And how you spoke about that baby just now, Jodie, how you told me the whole sordid story – I have to tell you that it gets up my nose. I mean to say, what sort of woman describes selling off a baby, if that’s what you actually did, as something that *happened to them*. That’s just appalling. It’s not something that happened to you, you know – it’s something you did to someone else, Jodie. Even if you were only nineteen. What sort of excuse is that? What sort of person uses that as an excuse. That child would be more than Hannah and Laura’s age now – a woman.”

Angus takes a great slug of beer, a deep breath, glares at Susan across the table.

“Now, look Susan, I don’t know where this is coming from, but – ” He can hear how ineffectual he sounds, is almost glad to be interrupted.

“Angus, Jodie, I’m sorry. Sue, I don’t think –”

“Oh, come off it, Dave. Don’t be so feeble. We’ve already had this conversation. We’ve both read those statements you’ve had published – and well – it just seems fishy. Why is it that you’re only searching now that police are interested? What’s going on? It’s been twenty-four years, Jodie. It all seems too little too late, if you ask me. And you might not have asked me, but if we’re such good old friends, why shouldn’t I say what I, what *we*, think?”

“Susan. That’s enough.” David’s voice shakes. He pulls at his beard anxiously.

“No, it’s okay.” Jodie is pale, her lips moving stiffly. “Actually, I think you’re right, Sue. It is best if people say what they think. At least then we know where we stand.” As if to illustrate the point, Jodie pushes back her chair and gets to her feet. She looks at Angus across the table. “I think we should go, darling. You get Tom and I’ll meet you both outside. It’s a nice night. We can walk.”

He follows her directions, robot-like, collects their belongings, calls Tom. David fusses about them, almost weeping with shame, assuring and reassuring Angus of his loyalty, his undying friendship, trying hard to explain and excuse Susan’s unexpected and violent hostility: “There was that miscarriage back when we were first married – she took it so hard – and we didn’t even really want kids, back then.”

The walk home is more or less silent, Tom sleepy but acquiescent, ultimately enjoying the novelty of a walk late at night, skipping ahead of them, waiting at each streetlight. Angus feels eviscerated, can hardly bear to broach it, the episode had been almost frightening in its intensity. When he finally attempts some sort of denunciatory comment Jodie merely shrugs her shoulders, and says “She was pissed. Who knows,” and continues her homeward march without making any effort to elaborate or disentangle things.

Angus is glad really, that she doesn’t feel the need to engage him in any sort of post-mortem as they trudge along. That way he is able to hold himself together when the panic

descends, the only outward sign his suddenly quickened pace, his laboured breathing. When he reaches the front doorstep he rushes straight to the bathroom, pleading a desperate urge to pee, the need to shower – and locks himself in the bathroom until it's over.

twelve

Jodie herself hadn't found Sue's attack surprising – nor strangely, had she found it particularly hurtful.

Unlike Angus, Jodie had never considered Sue to be her best friend. In fact, regarding herself in the cool and dispassionate way that is fast becoming a habit, she can see that though she has a vast number of acquaintances, none of them is truly, exclusively her own. Those she sees most frequently are they are wives of Angus's colleagues, or like Sue, Garrow family friends. And although she is accepted and included – even in her most paranoid moments she could never say she was left out of anything or made to feel different – none of them could be classed as true intimates, either. Giving her news to those they know best, she had noticed that no one had sought further information, she has not had to field any awkward questions, or been invited to confide her thoughts, or feelings or to justify her actions. The common response from those she's personally informed has been one of mild incredulity, bemusement, and then a furtive, but not necessarily unkind, retreat.

She had noticed immediately on their arrival at the Foresters a change in their manner – almost imperceptible, but unmistakable – the way that Sue had avoided looking at Jodie directly, the coolness of her voice, set expression, David's agitation, his anxious deferring to her, the overwrought laughter, strained conversation. Sue had barely spoken, had declined all Jodie's offers of assistance, which would be eagerly accepted in the ordinary scheme of things. There had been a few odd moments early in the evening, first when the

two girls were leaving and Hannah had been rude to her mother, very deliberately avoiding her proffered farewell kiss and hug, though willing to take her money. Jodie had noticed Sue watching approvingly, had seen her give her own daughter a collusive half-smile. Later, when the girls were on their way out the door, she had overheard Susan reassuring Hannah quietly: “If you need to talk to someone about everything, darling, just give me a call. Anytime. And you know we think of you as our daughter – so if you ever need to get out.” Jodie, standing only a few feet away in the dark hall, had pulled back as if stung, her ears burning, had waited for an explanation, but there was none forthcoming. Susan had stalked past her back to the kitchen, muttering to herself about the casserole.

When the evening descended into utter farce soon after, it had almost been a relief to have what needed to be said, said. To have it all in the open.

In the days following, she notices, as Helen had warned her, an almost immediate dropping off of engagements, both social and otherwise. She can't quite tell, though, whether this withdrawal is external or self-imposed; perhaps it is Jodie herself who is retreating. She has never felt less like meeting up with friends, engaging in chit chat, doing coffee; suddenly all those things that once seemed vitally interesting, seem rather pointless. Once the new school year had begun, she had rung and excused herself from the various organising committees and volunteer positions she had signed up for in previous years: the trivia night fundraiser for the new school theatre at New England Boys, the annual Grammar school fete, the school canteen work, library book covering. And where once her involvement seemed crucial, her ideas sought, now she sees very clearly that she's not indispensable, that they will do very well without her. She has stopped playing Thursday morning tennis, too, pleading a pulled hamstring, that requires rest, but when she calls to apologise to her long-term doubles partner, she can hear the quickly disguised relief in Mary's voice, her instant assurance that it'll be no problem to find a replacement, she already has someone in mind. Then the hollowness of Mary's regretful flattery. “Not that Fiona will really be able to replace you – her backhand is pretty patchy,” offered up as a consolatory afterthought.

Despite the tapering off of outside occupation, she makes an effort to keep herself busy, trying hard not to think much beyond the here and the now. She spends extra time on the house, doing the jobs she would ordinarily subcontract: cleaning windows, touching up wall-paint, washing curtains. She devotes extra time to Tom, helping him with the maths homework he loathes, and reading to him at night. They have reached the third book in the *Narnia* series in as many weeks, though he is really too old, and would rather read to himself. She suspects that, typically of Tom, he is only consenting to keep her happy. He hesitates slightly when she asks if he wanted to go and see the new *X-Men* movie with her one evening after soccer practice, looks slightly bewildered, momentarily reluctant. But then he shrugs “Yeah. Why not? It’ll finish late – so that’s cool.” Adding in the most innocent betrayal of his true inclinations: “I can always go and see it with Harry and James later, can’t I? I guess it won’t matter if I see it twice.”

Most weeknights, after putting Tom to bed, Jodie spends the evenings alone (Angus, returning home late, eats quickly and removes to the office; Hannah locks herself in her bedroom ‘studying’), desultorily reading, flicking through the channels, or making shopping lists: itemising ingredients for elaborate meals she’d never make, complicated cakes, bread dough, pastry. Occasionally Angus joins her, and the two of them sit together quietly, reading or watching television, but by tacit agreement, there is little conversation, no discussion of the madness that is unfurling around them, no consideration of the innumerable what-ifs. Angus has taken to long sessions in the bathroom, sometimes leaving the room abruptly, without warning. She will hear the bath running, and knows he won’t emerge before bedtime.

Awake, it is almost as if she has attained a state of suspended animation. She has spent the last twenty years not thinking about certain things: her childhood, her lonely pregnancy, the labour and everything that followed, and later, Angus’s betrayals. The ones she knows about anyway. Now when the past is coming at her from all angles, is ever-present, she is still able to expertly avoid thinking.

Even in bed Jodie successfully maintains her distance from herself, from her thoughts. She

has perfected her own bedtime ritual, a sort of homespun meditation, involving a long gathering of breath, a holding and then releasing, all equally timed, that miraculously ensures she is asleep within moments of her head touching the pillow. Paradoxically, it is only when she sleeps that Jodie is compelled into awareness; asleep, the dreams come, uninvited but inescapable, and she is forced into memory, obliged to recall events that would be better forgotten.

Thirteen

She meets him at a party. Not one of the regular, but very exclusive, weekend parties attended by the Grammar girls and Newie boys – where getting messy and hooking up is still the main, the only, game – but a much more hardcore party held by a bunch of theatre studies students from the university. She and Assia had auditioned for a student play last summer, a clever adaptation of some Marvel comic, and Hannah had been chosen for a small part. She'd been disappointed at first, given only a tiny part in a crowd scene, and certain that she could have handled the main character better than the girl who was eventually chosen: a tall thin blonde girl, slightly older, who attended the public high school. Still, in the end the small role had been enough, she'd been able to enjoy, with minimal effort or responsibility (and the attendant nerves) the pleasure of ensemble work, which was, she realised, what she most enjoyed about acting; almost as much as being able to transform, miraculously into quite another person. She had been amazed to find that the half dozen high school students who'd been given roles were automatically included in all the theatre studies gatherings and parties and that within this particular group, age seemed not to matter. The theatre studies group, mostly college kids recently moved out into shared accommodation, were friendly and laid back, and invitations to party were extended willy-nilly to the younger members, who of course responded enthusiastically, turning up to every party or shindig or gathering that was on offer, drinking and drugging themselves silly. Of course, getting to the parties in the first place had been slightly problematic, but nothing more than Hannah could handle. It was easy to make the parties appear as innocent and enterprising as possible; she only had to claim that they were rehearsing, or, when the

initial run was over, that they were rehearsing new work, or helping the director with an original script. Her mother had occasionally been suspicious, but her father, always a fan of her mixing – moving beyond what he considered the slightly insular Arding private school scene – encouraged the new social connection.

Though Hannah had absolutely no intention of ever attending what she regarded as the strictly only-for-losers' Arding University campus, she'd been surprised to discover that the students – some of them local, a few from Sydney and Brisbane, but most from other country towns and regional cities – were such an easy, fun, non-judgemental bunch. Though there was no way that she really wanted to be a part of the sort of funky boho post-punk dippy-hippiness they affected (with their try-hard retro, op-shop bought vintage clothes, their incense, their laconic faux-metro drawls) she somehow felt released from those very conventional, prescriptive ideas of fashion and beauty that were an inescapable part of her own school's culture. At Grammar the popular girls are all deliberately, painfully thin, their long hair gleaming and full, make-up packed on, the expensive designer clothes and whole competitive atmosphere. A competition that included the comparative wealth and success of parents, natch.

Up until the thing with her mother, she had been firmly, and almost comfortably, situated near the top of the tree, socially speaking. But now, as she'd predicted, her position was slightly less assured. There was nothing she could put her finger on: in the way of these things her loss of status was very gradual, very subtle, and there were larger elements at play, not just the bitchiness she'd half-expected from her so-called friends. The school itself seemed to be complicit – she hadn't been made a prefect, for instance – which had always been touted as guaranteed, and while she could tell herself (and her parents) that it had something to do with the Sydney debacle, the fact that both Assia and Bess had been given the honour made her wonder. There was the matter, too, of the lost invitations to a couple of recent parties (*OMG! You really didn't get my text? We wondered what happened!!! Love yooooo xxxx*), the suddenly blocked access to certain Facebook pages, the friend requests that are never accepted. A few of her classmate's mothers have walked past her down the street, avoiding eye contact.

She had made a few attempts to wrangle her way back 'in', but she had moved too far from her try-hard past to really want to go back that desperately. In the end it was easier, and more dignified, to snub those who had never been true friends before they snubbed her. And of course she had, would always have, Assia. And now these new friends too; friends whose whole worlds didn't revolve around the stagnant pond that was Arding, whose parents, in the main, didn't know her parents, kids whose only response when they'd realised that it was her mother in the papers, was *Cool* or *Awesome* or *That must suck*.

Here amongst these older kids, kids with no axes to grind, she could relax into being more herself, though she only had the dimmest of ideas about what that – who she – actually was. But she could stop feeling self-conscious, stop holding herself in, stop sneering, stop always being entertaining; she could get rid of the brittle, always bitchy, always sharp, persona she'd developed over the past few years. The students were almost an undifferentiated bunch, casually generous, always kind, expected nothing, seemed to like her for no particular reason, and she could feel herself expanding, enjoying herself genuinely for what seemed the first time since she'd hit the thorny years of adolescence.

The boy had rocked up to the party late. Most of the company, Hannah included, were already completely smashed. The police had left only minutes before, responding to noise complaints, and Hannah (understandably cautious – a few parties ago a couple of their friends, still very obviously underage, had been given an official 'escort' home by some zealous young constables) had just clambered, giggling hysterically, from the wardrobe she and Assia had hidden in.

The boy was standing alone, leaning against a wall smoking. He was watching the goings-on around him – it was all disintegrating at a rapid rate, bodies collapsed across the carpet in various stages of consciousness and coupling – with a look of somewhat grim bemusement, maybe even disdain, his eyes narrowed, lips slightly curled. He was tall and exotically dark-skinned, with fair dreadlocked hair escaping from a very grimy rastafarian beanie, and Hannah was immediately intrigued. There was something very authentic about

him, something in the way he held himself, the way he wasn't quite a part of the scene. She was sure he wasn't just a middle class boy affecting seediness; his toughness looked real. Hanna had tried a bit of everything on offer tonight – some E first, a few tokes on a joint, and then downed a considerable volume of goon – and all her edges had been nicely blunted. She had no qualms at all about making a direct beeline for him, ignoring a request from her suddenly queasy friend that it was time to call up a taxi and head home.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Close up, and she'd come far closer than she'd normally dare, she was breathing in his air, close up he was slightly less exotic, not Brazilian as she had hoped, but Aboriginal, maybe, his skin brown, with an odd little sprinkling of darker freckles, his nose slightly too broad, his teeth – bared in his return greeting – crooked and slightly yellow.

He's obviously not going to extend the conversation, instead considers Hannah coolly as he takes a toke. Waits for her to make the next move. Or not.

“So. I haven't seen you around before?” As a pickup line, it's lame, but it's said before she can think of anything more original.

His reply is terse, flat; his accent broad, with a vaguely Koori inflection.

“Haven't been around before.”

For some reason she isn't in the least put out by his unresponsiveness, his apparent lack of interest.

“Where've you been?”

“Here and there. Mostly there.” Another indrawn breathe.

“Sweet.” She holds out her hand for the joint. He hesitates a moment then bypasses her outstretched fingers, easier to push it between her eager lips.

“Sweet.”

Five minutes later they are in Jamie's bathroom, fucking. She offers her mouth first but he says no, he doesn't want that, pushes her up against the bathroom door. All or nothing. Assia knocks once, calls out, her voice tentative, slurred. “Han? You in there? You okay?” She smothers his grunts with her hand, manages to gasp out between thrusts that she's

okay, that she doesn't give a flying fuck if Assia leaves, that she should go – go if she wants to just go. Ignores Assia's urgent reminder that she can't just go alone. She's staying at Hannah's, remember.

It's fast, unprotected, noisy – the door banging and banging, the boy moaning loudly, then shouting out – but Hannah's beyond worrying, doesn't care who hears, her hands caught in his tangled hair, breathing in his sweet, slightly woolly, boy smell. She just wants this hard uncommunicative boy, he is all she wants, and all she can see for the moment. This is not her first time, far from it, but it's the first time she's ever felt any real desire, the first time she's really seen the point, the first time it's felt the way she'd imagined it's meant to feel; it feels good, feels right.

*

After that first night she'd worried that, for him anyway, things might have cooled off. That she'd been a casual hook up nothing more. And ordinarily she'd have been happy enough for that – he wasn't her type, really, not the sort of guy any Grammar girl would be seen dead with. He was a full-on townie, it was clear just from looking at him. His clothes, his hairdo, even his crooked teeth were clear evidence of this: there was no popped collar polo shirt, no boat shoes, no long shorts, no short back and longer sides, no sign of ten thousand dollar orthodonture, either. But his dark skin put him in another category altogether – he wasn't obviously Aboriginal (which would put him beyond the pale – *ha!*), but just dark enough to look exotic. Despite his fair hair, he looked vaguely Mediterranean, could be Spanish, or even, flavour of the month, Brazilian.

Ordinarily, she'd have cooled down herself, pretty rapidly, and dumped him, if not by word, by omission. It was easy enough – she'd been on either side of the equation often enough – and had perfected her technique. There was the walk past and look the other way scenario; or the 'look through' which was vaguely more humiliating (*hey, I sucked your dick, douchebag – don't pretend you can't remember me!*); or better yet – the ignore all texts and Facebook chats. Then there was the awkward 'let's just be friends'

conversation', which she had experienced herself most recently with an old school mate whose regret was so overwhelming he'd been oblivious to her eagerness (*thank Fuck!*) at their next awkwardly sober meeting.

She has never really been into anything other than the most casual of relationships before, and certainly isn't interested in the almost domestic Ma and Pa Kettle situations that she's seen some of her friends with long term boyfriends get sucked into. In the stark sunshine of sobriety the boys she'd been with had transformed back into their pumpkin selves: dull, pimply youths lacking any particular wit or presence. But with this time she's more intrigued than usual. She can't work out what it is that she so likes about Wesley. He's not particularly quick or clever – in fact he doesn't even speak that much. He's confident enough – but doesn't have the gloss of privilege and entitlement that most of the boys she's grown up with exude. It's not that he's not confident, but it's a quieter sort of confidence, without the swagger. A confidence built up from experience rather than expectations and connections. It's like his looks: he is good looking, but he's not an arse about it, and though his body's good – well muscled, hard – it's no big deal, and somehow real, as if developed through solid labour and not as a result of hours of pumping and preening. He's a natural in every way, and right now he's just what Hannah needs.

fourteen

Angus was over it quickly enough: over Jodie, over the idea of the two of them, their romance. The way any boy would have been. Oh, it was fun, and he'd been right into her at first, for say, the initial six months, when all it was, all it could be, was occasional visits to her place, a party here and there, a movie, a picnic, during the long holidays between school and uni. All done pretty much on the sly, hiding their meetings from his mother, avoiding hers.

He was fascinated at first, by her freedom, had never met a girl – or anyone really – whose

family (not quite working-class, what the Americans called white-trash, he guessed) showed so little interest in her whereabouts, were so indifferent to achievements, her doings. Jodie's mother was like some television caricature of a typical Australian barmaid, but without the cliched big-heartedness: small, brittle, her face coarsely red from too much sun and booze, lines deeply etched around her eyes her mouth with it's cat's bum smokers' lips, her eyebrows plucked into virtual non-existence, her hair big, her tits even bigger, her accent bursting at the seams. He barely exchanged a word with her, though he had spent days and even nights in their home. Mrs Evans – *call me Jeannie, love* – was always on her way out when he was on his way in. He wondered vaguely if she was a whore, she had the sort of tired prettiness that he associated with ageing tarts. But who would want to sleep with her now, how desperate would you have to be? Jeannie's dislike of Jodie was obvious, even on so casual an acquaintance. Their communications were limited to absolute practicalities, but Jodie's mother could make the most innocuous enquiry – *so, you're going to the movies are you, or, off on another picnic, eh?* – sound like a sneer, an insult. She was polite enough to Angus during their infrequent meetings, always asked after his mother, who she'd had the pleasure of meeting at some 'posh do' she'd waitressed at years before. *I always remember that Mrs Garrow likes her whisky neat*, she observed somewhat suspiciously, and as she repeated this at their every encounter, Angus was sure that he was meant to infer that his mother was a closet alcoholic.

He had been warned, by Jodie herself and several well-meaning and other less-well-meaning friends, that the brothers were not exactly high achievers, or the most respected or respectable members of Milton society, but even so he was unprepared for the reality. The eldest, Shane, was, at the tender age of twenty-one already a full-on crim – with a record for break and enters, assault, theft. He'd done time, and seemed bent on doing more. Though at this particular period he was back living at home, accorded full man-of-the-house status. He had initially made some threats of violence against Angus, but his mother, aware of Angus's background, his family's reputation, had quickly scotched this. So his visits were tolerated, if not encouraged, by Shane – from time to time he was even privileged to receive a grunt of greeting, and once the offer of a beer. "If you're gonna come around and root me little sister, you oughta have a drink with a bloke," had been his

charming invitation, one that Jodie had thankfully declined on his behalf. The youngest brother, Jason, was a moron; there was no other word for it. He spent his days in front of the TV; smoking, eating chips, drinking coke, running errands for his bully brother when ordered. He had no occupation, no friends, his appearance was not endearing – with a front tooth missing, others rotting, a face cratered with acne, the beginnings of a small beer belly. He spoke with a stammer, was incoherent and virtually unintelligible. Other than to provide physical evidence of God’s intransigent lack of fairness when it came to handing out looks, intelligence, privilege, there was no reason for his being on the earth, so far as Angus could see. Of all the family – if they could be regarded as forming such a unit – Jason was the only one who appeared to treat Jodie with even halfway civility; at least he wasn’t, or didn’t appear to be, actually malicious. And Jodie treated him, if not with affection, with some attempt at sisterly concern – providing him with a nutritious meal now and then, encouraging him to bathe, washing his his clothes occasionally, attempting to curtail the endless drinking.

Thus confronted with her family (and he thanked God that the father – by all accounts a nasty bastard, Shane’s role-model, no doubt – had long ago taken off) Angus’s admiration for Jodie only increased. How had such a girl sprung from such unaccommodating, possibly toxic soil; and how had she thrived, blossomed? Very few people, he thought, really knew what hardships she’d faced, what challenges. Jodie was very circumspect about her origins – as far as Angus was aware none of her family had ever attended any school or civic function, any meeting – they were unlikely to have encountered many of her peers, or even teachers. Her scholarship to Grammar was remarkable, but perhaps less remarkable than her highly cultivated surface demeanour. Though there was no doubt that she was in some intrinsic, but indefinable way, very different to most of the girls of his acquaintance, he had never – how could he? – have expected this background of extreme disadvantage, of squalor.

So those first months were odd. The clandestine nature, the slightly tense and uncertain air of their every meeting, made them exciting – the combination of his mother’s disapproval, the scornful indifference of hers. But soon enough, around the time he was getting ready to

head off to college, to university, he began feeling cramped, feeling constrained. Had begun to look at other girls, talk to other girls, differently. To wonder what it would be like to have someone lighter, someone brighter around. There was nothing that he didn't like about Jodie – it wasn't that simple – he hadn't gone off her exactly, but found himself occasionally wishing for some variety. Fantasising about a girl with brown eyes, dark skin, curly hair; or a redhead, with downy freckled skin, large breasts. A warm Italian girl, maybe, or a cool swede. An older woman, married, a mother, going down on him, or a whore even, a one night stand, a series of one night stands. He began dreaming about, then wanting that freedom, though he had no idea how such a smorgasbord of sexual delight could ever be made available to him. He wanted to go off to uni free, unshackled, had Roly in his ear bagging him, telling him to *piss her off, man; what did he think he was doing, was he gunna marry her? Why didn't he book himself into the nursing home, like, now?* And he would have dumped her without regret and almost without compunction, he had a speech worked out, a time planned, knew that his escape route was guaranteed. But then, just days before he was due to leave, his mother, in an attempt to ensure that he would ditch her, had made his release impossible.

He had found out about it in a roundabout way – not from Jodie, herself, thank God, nor from his mother, though there was no possibility that she would have admitted to any such heinous act – but from Jodie's half-wit brother, Jason. He had driven down to Milton to pick up Jodie, they were to head out first for a picnic (their code for a fuck) down at the Green Hole – a currently dried-out waterhole in the Gandar National Park. But Jodie hadn't been home. She had gone out, Jason had offered with uncharacteristic clarity from his habitual position on the lounge, and an odd look of malicious interest, for a walk.

“A walk? But she knew I was coming.”

“Yeah. She prolly did, mate. She seems to spend half her life waiting for you to come. Ha ha. But your old lady turned up about an hour ago – and they had some kind of a barny.” Jason gave a burp, turned back to the blaring screen.

“My old lady?” Angus felt his stomach turn suddenly; the blood rush from his face. “What do you mean my old lady? Jason? Was my mother here?”

“Yeah man. Your mum, your muvver – whatever you wanta call her. I call mine an old

bag.” He gave a sudden high-pitched chuckle. “Anyway, this was a fussy lookin’ old chook with a pruny face. Drives a big red Mercedes. That’s your old lady isn’t it? Thought it was one of them Mormoils at first – standing out there with a face on her like the world was about to end – and I was gunna tell her to piss off, but then she asked pacifically for Jodes.” He gave a lunatic grin and rubbed his gut. “Jodes went outside with her, and then the next thing Jodes comes back in here crying and I heard the car drive off. Sounds good,” he added reflectively. “Them big Mercedes. It’s a V8 is it, mate?”

“A what?” Angus was feeling worse and worse, was finding it hard to stay upright, if truth be told. He could feel bile rising in his throat, his heart pounding in his ears. He wanted desperately to run back outside, get in his car and drive a long way away, fast, but knew that he would have to find Jodie first, find out exactly what had just happened. “So then what happened? Did Jodie go again? Do you know where? Did she tell you where he was going?” He could feel his voice becoming shrill, feel a kind of quaver. He swallowed, closed his eyes briefly, breathed deeply, willed himself to be calm.

“I dunno. She just run out. You wouldn’t know with Jodes, mate. She don’t tell us nuffink. Maybe she went down the river. There’s that old willow with the rope. She used to go there with that girl – that lezzo friend of hers.” Jason grinned, gave him a wink. “Bit before your time, I s’pose.”

He ignores this. “The willow? Where’s this willow?” He can’t quite explain to himself the feeling of urgency – he needs to see Jodie, before – before what? The idiot was unbearably slow, stood grinning, watching Angus’s face interestedly, rubbing at his dimpled stomach, scratching his crotch. “Come on, man. Tell me where it is.” Angus stepped towards him, could feel rage welling up along with the fear, thought perhaps he would like to do damage to this moron’s smile, and the boy’s smile faltered, his eyes went suddenly wide with fear.

“Yeah, okay, Hangus. I’m jest finking, mate. The best way to explain. You know. No need to get hot under your shirt. Okay. If you head back to the highway, then go down Russell street, and then turn left down O’Keefe, and then head straight down to the river from the little park there. You know the one – right on the river. Where that kid got raped last year? Well – the willow’s in that park there. It’s real big. You can’t miss it.”

Angus slammed out the door, almost ran to the car, drove back down the high way as if his

life depended on it. She was there, at the park, sitting under the willow, just as Jason had guessed. He headed across the park – brown, dreary, the climbing frames rusted, swing chains seatless, the lawn dead, scorched, most of it dust, desolate and unused and unloved as everything in this Godforsaken town – and there was Jodie, crouching beneath a giant willow, down beside the bank. The tree was remarkable – huge and twisted, but too old now to bear the weight of children, a frayed rope dangled down sinisterly above the dried riverbed. Jodie's eyes were puffy, her face red – but the smile she sent when she saw him striding purposefully toward her, her expression so expectant, so full of love, of tenderness, of relief.

Angus feels the nausea return, the urge to run becomes even more compulsive. He can sense his future taking shape, feels it harden and then solidify around him. He straightens his shoulders, stands tall. He makes himself smile widely, reassuringly, keeps walking steadily towards her.

fifteen

Years later Angus will laugh about it – uncomfortably it's true. But he's turned it once or twice into an entertaining dinner-party story, told drunkenly, using various uncomplimentary epithets to describe his mother – silly old bitch, cow – that are so unlike Angus's usual distant and respectful attitude that Jodi almost enjoys the recounting. Even at this distance, and regardless of the improved relationship with her mother-in-law, she still finds it impossible to view the experience with anything approaching levity.

It was a Saturday morning, and Jodie had abandoned any pretence at studying, despite an English essay – discussing aspects of filial love in *King Lear* – being due in first thing Monday morning, had instead been preparing for a picnic at the Green Bank with Angus. This required considerable effort, rising early, to first prepare herself : a long soak in the bath, legs and underarms shaved smoothly, her body moisturised all over with some musky lotion she'd picked up cheap at Jonas's pharmacy, hair washed and conditioned, put in

curlers while it dried to give her naturally straight hair some body (she couldn't quite bring herself to spend her hard-earned savings on the permed hair that was currently all the rage at Grammar). She'd chosen her outfit carefully the night before – the short short denim skirt she'd bought only the week before at The Arding Jean Emporium (size eight, down from a ten; she'd done it, finally), and a cute striped cotton shirt she'd remodelled herself from a man's business shirt bought at Vinnies. She'd left the actual dressing and the make-up until the last half hour – wanting to be as fresh as possible, to avoid creases, stains, runs in her mascara.

She could make her preparations in peace. Her mother had stayed out all night – and would, she knew from past experience, not arrive home until late afternoon, just in time to get ready for her next shift. She'd be tired and hung-over, the pouches under her eyes dark, her expression sour, her temper rancid. Jodi was glad she had plans to be elsewhere. Even during her relatively short visits home – with maybe only time for a shower, a change of clothes, a bottle of beer – her mother could wreak havoc, disrupt any plans Jodie made, create a scene. Her elder brother too was absent; she could get ready without his teasing, would not have to find something to wedge the bathroom door shut to short-circuit Jason's barging in and out. The key had been lost years ago, and she'd had to fill the keyhole with plasticine to stop him peering in at her. There was only Jason, and he was predictable, not interested in her movements, happy to loll in front of the television, watching cartoons, the midday movies, drinking coke from the bottle. He was unlikely to even ask her where he was going. She could have her bath, certain that she'd be left in peace.

But Jason had interrupted her in the middle of her ablutions. She was just finishing off her left leg, making satisfyingly neat strips in the froth, going carefully over her knee and midway up her thigh, stopping at the precise point where the hair, almost magically, seemed to disappear, when he called out her name from just outside the room.

“Jo. There's someone at the door. A lady,” the doorknob twisted back and forth, she could hear him pushing against the door.

“Well, who is it, Jason? Didn't you ask? Tell her Mum won't be back till later – that she can probably catch her at the Grand tonight.”

“But she says she wants you, Jodie.”

“But who is it?” She leaned over to grab a towel, resigned.

“I think it’s his Mum. Your boyfriend, fella. Whats-is-name. Hang-arse. She come in that big car, the red one you showed me that time. The V8.” His voice has lost its customary slowness, is almost snapping with excitement.

“Mrs Garrow?” Jodie’s foot slipped on the curve of the bath, she clutched at the shower tap to steady herself.

“That’s her. That’s the one.”

“Tell her –” her own voice cracked, fizzed, disappeared. She took a long breath. “Tell her I’ll just be a minute.”

Mrs Garrow stood waiting, smoking a cigarette, outside on the nature strip, facing away from the house. She turned – a small, slender, well-dressed matron, her ash grey hair tightly permed, clutching a shiny Glo-mesh handbag – as Jodie made her way down the grassed-over brick path. “Well, you took your time, Jodie.” Her voice was cool, the smile cursory.

“Hello, Mrs Garrow.” Jodie didn’t bother smiling. She walked to the gate, but didn’t go through, stayed on her side of the fence.

The woman surveyed her carefully. Jodie couldn’t remember ever being so obviously looked up and down, even by hostile teenage girls.

“You are pretty enough, I suppose,” she said. “Nancy said you weren’t anything special, but you’re young – and that counts for a great deal, doesn’t it? Your skin’s good, your features are regular, your figure’s trim enough – everything’s still firm. “

Jodie suspected her input wasn’t required at this point, so said nothing, let the woman continue. “Now, I’d like to have a bit of a talk with you, dear. I’ve a, a proposition of sorts to make. We could go to a cafe if you like – I could buy you a cup of tea? Or we could walk, I suppose.” Jodie half-smiled as the woman looked around doubtfully. There were no designated walking areas, no proper footpaths, in this neighbourhood, just neglected half-dead or overgrown lawns, patches of red earth. The potholed road wasn’t even guttered properly.

“I’m sure that anything you have to say to me can be said right here, Mrs Garrow.” Jodie

was surprised by the steadiness of her own voice, the clarity, the ease of her response. The woman was obviously taken aback.

“I... Well, that’s not what I had in mind.” She frowned, obviously discomfited. “I’m sure it would be easier if –” she paused, looking hard at Jodie, standing solid and immovable on the other side of the fence. She sighed. “Okay. It doesn’t matter where we speak – and I suppose here,” she gives the overgrown yard, fibro house, neglected street a brief disdainful look, “is as good as anywhere else.” Jodie stood silent, impassive. Waiting. The woman cleared her throat nervously, but her voice was clear, unwavering.

“I’ll be straight with you, Jodie. I think that’s always the best way to handle these things. Now, I have nothing, absolutely, against you personally. Indeed your Principal, Mrs Doulton, who is a great friend of mine – we have a long history together – both old girls you know, and her mother and mine were dear friends, too. Mrs Doulton has told me that you’re a good girl: hard working, clever, industrious. Well, obviously you are or you wouldn’t be there, would you? And that you’ve achieved a great deal, considering,” cue another purse-lipped glance at her surroundings, “considering your background. Anyway, “this is all of no consequence. I came here today to ask you something – to ask a favour if you will.” She paused, gave a brisk enquiring look, but with no response from Jodie, kept going, undaunted: “What I’d like, dear, is for you to stop seeing my son.”

Jodie had been expecting something of the sort, knew that the woman’s presence could mean only one thing, but she could feel her stomach turning again, her throat tighten, found it difficult to keep her expression neutral. The woman had watched her face carefully, but kept talking when it was apparent that Jodie wasn’t going to offer anything. “Now, I’m not going to go into my reasons for my request – though I should imagine it’s quite clear to you that you and Angus are completely unsuited to one another in numerous ways. I imagine you’ve no intention of stopping seeing him just because I’ve asked – as a matter of principle, without true regard for Angus’s well-being, his future? So I thought it might, that it might help you to make the right decision, if there were some obvious benefit to you.” She paused again, as if certain that this would provoke some sort of response. But Jodie had taken her eyes off the woman, was gazing down at her own bare feet – her silver painted toenails shining a pretty contrast to the surrounding weeds – and said nothing.

“So, dear, I thought that if there was some way I could help you, say with finances, you might find it in your heart to help me, too.”

Now Jodie did look up. She looked straight at the woman, gave her a twisted smile. Said bluntly. “So how much? How much is Angus worth to you?”

“Well. I don't think you really need look at it quite that way, dear. But I'm willing to give you five thousand dollars. Cash. Obviously. I hear you're hoping to study and I imagine you'll need all the help you can get. Five thousand should pay for your living expenses for your first year at university if you're not extravagant.”

“But why? We're just going out. We're not engaged – not even close. It could all end tomorrow.”

“There are certain ways, ones that we're all aware of, of keeping a man, of tying young men up in your lives, binding them to one.”

Jodie gave a disgusted snort. “You're talking about babies, aren't you? But why would I want to do that? I've got my own plans.”

“Yes, well plans have a strange way of going awry. And there are easier, more effective, more definitive ways to move ahead – away from this life – than career, education. And I know my son,” dryly. “He's very loyal. He finds it hard to hurt people. An admirable trait in many ways. But. He could end up being forced into doing something he'd come to regret. You know what I'm talking about.”

There was a long silence. The two women stood on either of the fence, the elder smiling slightly, Jodie's clenched fists the only sign of her rage.

“Fifty.” Jodie couldn't quite believe her own words, nor that her intonation had remained so smooth, when her heart was pumping so madly. “That will pay for whole degree. What point is there in just paying for first year. What am I supposed to do after?”

The woman looked at her in disbelief, suddenly discomposed. “Fifty thousand? That's ridiculous, girl. Where do you think I'll find fifty thousand dollars?”

Jodie shrugged. “That's not my problem, is it?”

The woman glared, but looked away when Jodie met her gaze.

“You want fifty thousand?”

Jodie smiled, but said nothing.

The woman clasped and unclasped her handbag convulsively.

“How about thirty?”

“Fifty.”

The woman gave a long sigh, as if relinquishing something. “I’ll find it, then. Whatever it takes. You’re a hard little bitch, aren’t you? Extraordinary. But I guess you have good reason. I expect you’ll go far.” She gave Jodie a slight smile, then, a smile that felt almost genuine, admiring. “In different circumstances I might have quite liked you.” She turned, headed over to her car. “I’ll contact you on Monday with the payment arrangements. You can see my solicitor. We’ll organise a contract, set up some sort of trust. I’ll give you half, we’ll open an account – and then you’ll have a week to drop him, or dump him, or whatever is the term you children use. You’ll see the rest of the money once that’s done.”

As the woman turned to open the car door, Jodie leaned over the fence, speaking just loudly enough for the woman to hear.

“Mrs Garrow. I won’t do it. I just wanted to see how far you were willing to go. I’m not really going to dump him or drop him or whatever it is you’re expecting me to do, you know.”

The woman turned back swiftly. “What do you mean you won’t do it? I’ve just promised to give you what you want.”

Jodie could barely suppress a smile.

“You really think you can do that? That you have so much power? You really think people can just be bought off like that?”

“I’ll give you sixty. Seventy.” Jodie shook her head. “A hundred.” For the first time the woman was sounding panicked. “Then what do you want?”

Jodie shook her head in disbelief. “Angus. I want Angus, Mrs Garrow. I don’t want your money. I’m not interested in money.”

The woman stood as if stricken for a long moment. “You mean it don’t you? Nancy Butterly was wrong – she thought you would be easy to persuade. But you’re far, far smarter than she assumes. Smarter than anyone has guessed.”

“I love him. I’m sorry.”

“Love.” the woman’s voice was a hiss, her smile full of contempt. “There’s no such thing.

Love is just an excuse for getting what you want.”

What had Jodie wanted, really? She had told the woman that she wanted, simply, Angus – the boy himself. But the attraction was complex, as attraction always is: Jodie had also wanted, somewhat oddly for a girl, a bright girl, of her generation, a husband. Not just any husband, but one whose status was guaranteed, his antecedents clear, his respectability ironclad, his future assured. She hasn’t ever allowed herself to think about it – this desire for social status and security through a man – what it says about her, what it meant, or what it means.

What it will mean.

PART II

Aap News

‘Missing ELSA MARY may be in Tasmania, police reveal.’

A young woman from Hobart is to undergo tests to establish whether she is the missing daughter of Jodie Garrow. NSW Police have begun a nationwide search in an attempt to ascertain the whereabouts of Elsa Mary, who has not been seen since three days after her birth at Belfield Hospital in December 1986, when she was discharged into the care of her mother. A young woman from Newcastle will also undergo tests...

Daily Telegraph

‘ “Jodie’s not my mum” – negative DNA tests shatter adopted girl’s hopes’

Two 24-year-old women who share a birthday with Elsa Mary Garrow, missing since 1986, have had their identity – and the identity of their parents – put under scrutiny as the nationwide police search for missing baby Elsa Mary continues.

Jessie Farrell from Hobart and Anna Brown of Newcastle, were required by NSW police to undergo blood and DNA tests, but their identity is no longer in question, as no biological links to Mrs Garrow have been established.

Miss Brown, who was adopted when she was a newborn, has been searching for her birth mother, and says she volunteered for the tests because her birthday is the same as Elsa Mary’s. “It was just a stab in the dark, really. Mum and Dad have always said the adoption was above board, but I thought it was worth checking out anyway.”

Miss Farrell declined to comment.

Aap News

‘Twenty–four-year-old women with webbed toes urged to volunteer for DNA testing.’

The search for Elsa Mary, missing daughter of Jodie Garrow, has taken a bizarre twist with police urging any young women born between 1984 and 1986 who have complete webbing between the toes of both feet (syndactyly) to come forward for testing. While a search for any records of surgery has lead nowhere, the police spokesperson says there’s a strong possibility that Elsa Mary’s webbing has been left intact anyway. “According to medical advice, this sort of syndactyly isn’t actually physically disabling in any significant way, and it would really only be corrected for cosmetic reasons,” a spokesperson said yesterday.

The Australian

“Elsa Mary, where are you?”

Despite a three month long nationwide search – conducted through media outlets, as well as many official channels – no evidence has come to light of the fate of baby Elsa Mary Evans. Mrs Jodie Garrow, of Arding in Northern NSW, claims to have no knowledge of the child’s whereabouts since she allegedly gave her up in an illegally arranged adoption only days after the child’s birth.

Despite several false leads, and a \$50 000 reward offered by the Garrows, the current or past whereabouts of the the child have not been established.

If you have any information on Elsa Mary, or on her alleged adoptive parents, Colin and Mary Simpson, please contact Detective Sergeant Paul Rossi, NSW Mispers , 97652323, or toll free 018 153 153

Aap News

‘Search for Elsa Mary goes global’

NSW Police today confirmed that they would be working with Interpol in an effort to locate the whereabouts of Elsa Mary Evans, missing since her discharge from hospital a few days after her birth in December 1986. Detective Sergeant Paul Rossi, who is heading the investigation, says that ‘while we have no particular reason to believe that Elsa Mary was taken overseas, every avenue must be thoroughly investigated.’

Daily Telegraph

‘Jodie Garrow lied: former midwife speaks out’

Debbie West, former midwife at Belfield Hospital, and a central witness in the investigation into the whereabouts of Elsa Mary Evans, says the missing girl’s mother, Jodie Garrow, lied to her when questioned recently about her actions following Elsa Mary’s birth. Mrs West, who was instrumental in bringing the case to official notice, says that when she inquired into the baby’s wellbeing, Mrs Garrow assured her that she had arranged for Elsa Mary’s adoption through the ‘proper channels’. “Jodie Garrow is a very good liar,” Mrs West said. “She’s convincing and plausible. When she told me that she’d adopted the baby out I believed her. I only had the records checked in an effort to help her, should she decide to connect with her daughter at some later date. I was as shocked as anyone to find there was no record of adoption, no birth certificate. She’s expert at lying – she didn’t turn a hair. And what she’s saying about Matron O’Malley is a lie too – I had the privilege of working with Sheila O’Malley when I was a young nurse, and she was a midwife who maintained the highest ethical standards. It’s a disgrace to have her reputation so publicly damaged.”

News of the Day

Editorial

As the nationwide search for the missing Elsa Mary enters its third month, with any positive results looking less and less likely, people are justifiably beginning to wonder why an official police investigation into Jodie Garrow is taking so long to get off the ground. Could it be that Garrow (see inset picture), wife of a prominent Arding solicitor, and no doubt getting the best legal advice that money can buy, is being treated very differently to your common garden variety suspect? It's another indictment of our so-called fair system – where the rich have recourse to the best legal advice before they even need it, and perhaps ensuring they never do. Anyone else so intimately involved in the disappearance of a child – even twenty four years ago – would be under far greater scrutiny than Garrow, who by all accounts has said nothing beyond her official public statement.

Shame on NSW police, and shame on Jodie Garrow...

Arding Times

Letter to the Editor

I would like to express my disappointment and frustration – sentiments that are shared by many others – at this newspaper's lack of proper coverage of the Jodie Garrow case. Mr Garrow may be one of Arding's most respected citizens, as this paper constantly reminds us, but that should make no difference in the way this news is related. There's still a missing child at the centre of this story, and, most significantly, Mrs Garrow was still the last person to see her alive.

Name withheld,

Arding.

sixteen

Of course, if she'd been raped, it would have been an entirely different story.

The whole thing would have been just that little bit easier. There'd have been, what do they call them? – Extenuating Circumstances. Of sorts. So there'd have been some kind of defence. She could have said – or they, others (and there would have been others if this had been the case: Women's lobbies, advocates, public figures championing her cause) would have declared Jodie to be a victim, emphasised *her* suffering. She could maintain that she'd had no agency, no choice – at least in the beginning, the conception. It would have been clear that she'd been wronged; that she was more sinned against than sinning.

But that's not the real story, is it? And no matter which way you turn it – looked at from whichever direction, whatever perspective – there's no way that she's the victim here, is there?

No way at all.

A few years back Jodie had been on the front cover of the local paper – her image practically life-size, beaming cheerily, her hair glossy, eyes sparkling. She had been the spokesperson for some committee or other – wool awards, greening the park, literacy in homes – one of the myriad of community initiatives she'd been involved in over the years, and she'd been mildly flattered by the very faint aura of celebrity that surrounded her for the next week or two. *Hey, didn't I see you in the paper...? Isn't that you?* She had enjoyed the comments from near strangers, shop staff, the woman behind her in the supermarket queue, as well as her friends – there had been some friendly teasing over her ubiquitous image, her photogenic features, her model potential, the flattering line of cleavage revealed. She had enjoyed every one of her allotted fifteen minutes, had cut out the photograph and article and filed them away with all the other family newspaper cuttings and forgotten about it almost immediately. It had given her absolutely no inkling into the consequences of the public notoriety she is currently experiencing.

The local paper have been remarkably discreet – out of some sort of residual loyalty to Angus’s family probably, as the proprietor is a New England School old boy, and his father too. The story has been front page news once or twice over the past few months, but the stories have never been accompanied by pictures, and there has been no editorial commentary. But the national newspapers, the tabloids as well as broadsheets, are another matter. Somehow they’ve managed to get hold of what must be one the least flattering photographs of her in existence: anonymously supplied, the picture was taken at last year’s Grammar christmas party moments after an unpleasant encounter with Hannah, and Jodie’s frowning, looking sour and rather unfriendly. She has no idea who’s supplied the snap or why – but it’s devastating to think of so-called friends, or even acquaintances, supplying such evidence. Then again, she’s barely heard from any of her so-called friends since the news hit the street.

If she’d stopped for a moment to imagine what might happen, to consider it, perhaps she would have realised that she would be pretty much on her own when the whole thing became public. Somehow, despite knowing that her adult friendships were inherently superficial, lacking an essential something, she had expected a show of support from the women in whose company she has spent the last few decades. She had taken Sue’s virulent anger and subsequent distancing with relative equanimity (there has been no apology, no remorse, no further communication at all, though she knows Angus still sees Dave occasionally), but she would have expected Fiona, Peter’s wife, and Karen, a colleague from her nursing days, to be making an effort to keep in touch, to ask her out, include her in social events, keep her busy. But even these two – who she counted her best, her most intimate friends – had, after their initial declarations of allegiance, of ‘being there’ for her, gradually distanced themselves, virtually disappearing from her life. And there are others, people she has helped out in times of crisis – divorce, infidelity, illness, births, deaths – that she’d expected would appear on her doorstep with casseroles, with bottles of wine, with invitations, offering their unconditional support, sympathy, loyalty. But other than a few awkward conversations, unavoidable meetings down the street or at school events, and that one dreadful dinner party, Jodie’s been left stranded. She knows she’s been summarily

judged, condemned and discarded. It appears that even in friendship, contrary to popular wisdom, everything's conditional.

She had never been good at friendship, she realises this – even as a child she had always been at the periphery of any group, routinely included but never essential, nobody's particular buddy. Slightly different, mildly aloof – from shyness more than anything else. She remembers intensely the one true friend she had as a child. For a brief time when she was in fifth grade, a visiting child, Bridie, had befriended her – they had become inseparable, sharing their lives, their time, their food, their homes, their secrets, but Bridie had left as mysteriously as she'd come, never to reappear.

Now, every excursion outside the house – for shopping, to pick up Tom from school, sport, visits to solicitor – has become fraught and painful.

She can no longer expect a mildly flirtatious conversation with the local butcher (an old school mate of Angus's) when she buys her meat, for instance, or a chat about the unseasonably warm weather with the local newsagent (a former colleague), or a friendly inquiry about the children's doings from their old baby-sitter (daughter of her old schoolteacher). People tied to her own family in countless ways offer a curt hello, at best, or give her the cold shoulder. And it seems she can't leave the house without some malicious wit calling out to her, can't avoid the refusal to meet her eye, the swiftly downturned faces of people she would once have smiled at easily in the supermarket. She has even heard the words fucken murderer hissed by someone vaguely familiar and has had to lower her flaming cheeks, blink back tears.

Twice she has actually been spat upon – once by a young high school girl (from the public high school, so not traceable), who let out an obscene torrent of abuse after gobbing at her feet, and once, even more shockingly, by an elderly woman, well dressed, who stopped in front of her and grabbed at Jodie's hand. She'd assumed that the old woman needed help, that she'd lost her balance, perhaps, and so had allowed herself to be gripped, had tried to steady the frail birdlike creature, but the woman, instead of thanking her, had pulled her

head back slowly, her eyes narrowed. As if in some strange alternate reality Jodie had watched the woman's jaw tense, her throat working as she collected the vile projectile in the back of her mouth, had realised finally what the woman was about to do, had reared back in horror, but it had been too late: the spittle found its target, hitting her in the side of the face. The old woman had hissed something at her, as Jodie pulled free of her clasp, but Jodie hadn't tried to make out the words, had hurried on, trying desperately to remove the shameful tracery of mucus from her cheek. Utterly humiliated, she had told no one of either instance, had tried hard to forget them herself.

She has no idea how to act in public, whether to hold her head up, refuse to bend, to look all her accusers firmly and boldly in the eye, or whether she should be timid, apologetic, deferential. To beg her erstwhile friends and acquaintances, if not for mercy, then for their sympathy, their assumption of her innocence, and resumption of their good will.

Angus had merely shrugged and told her to ignore it when she'd asked him, genuinely bewildered, what she should do, how she should respond to this terrible coldness, her sudden pariah status. But her husband too has retreated in some essential way, has distanced himself. There's nothing obvious, nothing she can put her finger on: he has remained cheerful and solicitous, indeed has been more helpful than usual, ferrying the kids to and fro, occasionally visiting the supermarket, running errands, and there is no obvious discord between them. She had expected the tense arguments, the eruptions of anger, that have occurred, that generally occur, when things between them have been difficult. She would have preferred this, anger is something she could bear, could understand – could fight. But this icy expanse between them – it's untraversable, impenetrable. And she can see no end.

After the initial revelation and then the slow slow accretion of doubt and innuendo, Jodie finds that there are days when she speaks to no one other than Tom and Angus and, less and less frequently, Hannah. She goes for long walks with the dog, Ruff – walking for hours some days, from their house on The Hill, and out along the dirt roads connecting the small acreages on the outskirts of town. Once, she would have enjoyed the walks, would

have had friendly company, Fiona, Karen, sometimes Sue, they would have chatted about this or that, or perhaps walked silently, lost in their own thoughts, commenting occasionally on the prettiness of the changing seasons, the landscape, on the architecture, the gardens of the houses they were passing. But now there's no choice – there's only her own thoughts – or a one sided conversation with the ever-ebullient Ruff. She imagines herself eventually becoming one of those women – bag ladies she supposed they're called even in the country – who walk through the streets muttering to themselves, oblivious to everything but their own internal narrative, endlessly reliving the memory of some desperate failure, some terrible bitterness.

There was a girl who'd been at Grammar when she was there – a few years older than Jodie, she had come from an artistic sort of family, ran in a wild crowd, but was drop-dead gorgeous, smart, popular. She was destined to be something, someone, that was clear: she could act, sing, dance paint, write. After school she'd hit the city and for a while through this and that avenue Jodie had heard stories about her life – maybe true, maybe apocryphal: she'd scored a part in some big soapie, sung in some night-club, taken up with some mogul, lived in London or New York. Paris, maybe. Jodie didn't know the full story, perhaps no one did, but the girl – Arabella her name was – had arrived back in Arding, moved in with her ageing parents, ten or so years ago – a shadow of that former glamorous self. Frighteningly thin, her once beautiful face cratered and wizened. Drugs, they said. Alcohol, Love. Her old friends and acquaintances had avoided her, her family just tolerated her. Though she had never known her well, Jodie had been one of the avoiders, not wanting to meet her eye, be forced to acknowledge her, make conversation. But now when Jodie sees poor Arabella make her odd aimless circumnavigations about town, it's hard not to empathise, to be reminded of her own isolation, her own loneliness.

Daily Telegraph

'Hospital defends reputation of midwife at centre of Elsa Mary adoption claims'

Belfield Private Hospital last night released a statement defending the reputation of former midwife Sheila O'Malley.

According to claims made by Jodie Garrow, the woman currently under police scrutiny over the disappearance of her infant daughter twenty-four years ago, Matron O'Malley was instrumental in setting up an illegal adoption, in which money is said to have changed hands.

However, Dr Chandler Purvis, CEO of Saratoga Private, which now owns Belfield, and a former colleague of the late Matron O'Malley, has publicly repudiated Mrs Garrow's accusations.

"Having passed away a few years back, Mrs O'Malley is unfortunately not able to defend herself. Belfield and Saratoga Private would like to make clear our complete repudiation of Mrs Garrow's allegations," Mr Purvis said yesterday.

"Matron O'Malley was one of the best midwives this hospital has ever had the privilege to employ, and to suggest that she did anything that was against the law or in any way unethical is a terrible slur against a remarkable woman."

Investigations into the disappearance of the child, who would now be twenty-four, and a search for her alleged adoptive parents continues.

seventeen

Knowing how painful all social appearances have become for her, Angus has been making a real effort to relieve Jodie, doing some of the shopping, volunteering for much of the running around of children, leaving work briefly to pick up and deliver Tom and Hannah to sporting practice, music lessons, rehearsals, visits to friends. Sometimes he goes back to the office and returns to retrieve them when they're ready, but occasionally he waits. Today, he's caved in to Tom's appeal that he stay and watch his indoor hockey game at the high school hall. The games are relatively short, two twenty minute halves, and he has no clients, no urgent work to do. He settles back on the wooden seat, grins over at his touslehaired, mouthguarded boy, and prepares to enjoy the noisy battle.

"Angus." The mother of one of the team members, sits down beside him, gives him a

slightly strained smile.

“Mary.” Angus nods, “How are you?”

“Oh, you know. Busy. How about you?” Her gaze drifts away towards the game, back again, never quite looking at him fully. “Yeah. We’re pretty busy, too.” Drily. He ploughs on, asking the expected.

“And how’s Big Jim? Haven’t seen him for a while. Still playing soccer?”

“Well – he’s retired, actually. He’s getting too old. He hurt his leg last year – tore a ligament.” She pauses, and he can almost hear her brain whirring as she wonders whether to continue down the well-worn track.

“And how’s, how’s Jodie?”

“Well, you know. She’s okay, I guess. Coping, anyway.”

“Oh. Well. Pass on my regards. We’re missing her – tennis, canteen...” She drifts off, her voice edged with anxiety now, and stares straight ahead as if following the game intently.

Angus makes a split second decision, moves the conversation into dangerous waters.

“Well, you could pass them on yourself, you know. Our phone number hasn’t changed.”

He masks the sharp edge in a friendly tone, open expression. “It would be good if she could get out a bit more, actually, get involved in things.” He pauses, waiting for an evasive response, but Mary’s side-stepping is more literal than he’d expected – she has jumped to her feet, is waving maniacally at someone on the other side of the field. “Oh, sorry Angus,” breathlessly, “I have to talk to Christa about something. Good to see you.” She trips away, her handbag clutched to her chest, her relief at escaping evident.

Angus sighs, disappointed but not surprised. He has tried this manoeuvre a number of times, and each time the response has been one of shocked embarrassment at Angus’s indecent mention of his wife’s problem, his explicit plea for support. A few of his victims had murmured hasty reassurances, vague promises, others had ignored the challenge completely, pretended they hadn’t heard him, deftly changed the subject, then quickly moved on. Only one woman, the district magistrate’s wife, slightly eccentric, renowned for her tart remarks and trenchant opinions, had made an honest response – not one he’d enjoyed hearing, but honest nonetheless.

“It’s right of you to support your wife, Angus,” she had spoken softly, but intently,

gripping his forearm with surprising strength. “But you can’t expect everyone to be so loyal – not when we don’t know the full story.”

Angus doesn’t know the full story either. And one part of him – the cool, disinterested, lawyer part of him – the part that, as the years pass, as his work becomes almost a second skin, has begun to define him, the part that allows him to keep a strict division between business and pleasure – that part of him doesn’t want to know the full story. That part is warning him to proceed with caution where Jodie is concerned. It’s not that he doesn’t believe what his wife has told him – he does. It’s what she’s not telling him that worries him. The consequences of that knowledge, what that untold story might mean to their future, his, Jodie’s, their children.

He sits alone for the rest of the game, distracted, only half watching the boys’ clicking progress up and down the wooden boards, though he manages to clap when when required, cheer when Tom gets a goal. So often, these days, in any public situation, he feels his presence as a challenge, almost a provocation – as if it’s all pretence – that he’s only acting the role of upright citizen, good father. As if the reality is something else.

Angus has noticed that the incidental contact he has with people around town has changed significantly since news of Jodie’s missing child became public knowledge. People are still friendly enough, respectful – he’s still Angus Garrow, after all, and not a person to be casually slighted – but he can sense a certain wariness in some people and occasionally, particularly amongst those who were formerly the most deferential, a barely concealed contempt.

He has, as Susan had predicted, been forced to relinquish his Mayoral ambitions, and though outwardly resigned to his sidelining, has observed the local elections with frustration and considerable envy. While his own social exclusion has not been as extensive nor as obvious as Jodie’s – like many men of his age and work habits, his social life is fairly restricted anyway – he has noticed a slight dropping off of lunch engagements. His practice had suffered in minor ways, too – several long term clients have moved their

accounts elsewhere, offering up reasons that were so awkwardly and incoherently expressed, that he'd been embarrassed on their behalf.

His employees – the two PAs, and a young law clerk – have, after their initial unguarded expressions of surprise and incredulity, nervously avoided mentioning the investigation. His partner Gemma, with whom he had had a brief and almost perfunctory fling with years ago, is even more careful to be noncommittal on the rare occasions when Jodie is mentioned.

Angus's public life goes on pretty much as normal. There have been some alterations – in others' attitudes more than anything – but there have been no major upsets, there's nothing he can't live with, adapt to.

At home, though, things are not so easy to disregard, or to bear. While they have become more intense, Angus's panic attacks have also become oddly and unaccountably predictable – occurring now only in the evenings, usually soon after his arrival home, after he winds down, when he should, by rights be relaxing. He has been able to rush off to the study, or the bathroom, claiming work, the need for a long soak, and somehow – so rapt in her own worries – Jodie hasn't noticed anything odd. Though Angus can find no way to explain this manifestation, and though he's grateful that he no longer has to lock himself in his office at work, pleading a migraine, while the panic passes, this virtual absence at home has strained his relations with everyone – Tom included. He has thought about confiding in Jodie, telling her what's happening, would welcome her sympathy, her advice. And he and is stricken with guilt, knowing that she will be feeling his absence keenly right now – that she must feel that he has abandoned her, betrayed her in some terrible manner. But he can't tell her, won't – he doesn't want to make her suffering any worse, give her more to worry about: there's enough, more than enough, on her plate already.

When the game finishes – the other team winning 3-2 – Tom doesn't hang with his mates for the usual debrief, but wanders over to his father, dribbling the ball despondently. Angus gets up ready to go, ruffles his son's hair. "Well played, champ. They were a good

team – you did well.” But Tom doesn’t reply, keeps hitting and stopping the ball, his head down. “Tom?” He peers down at his son’s half hidden face, glimpses red eyes, tearstained cheeks. “what’s going on, mate?” But Tom can’t answer, is sobbing openly now.

“Oh, shit.” Angus kneels down in front of him. “What’s wrong, Tommy.” “*Chay thaid mrum...*” the boy can’t speak clearly, chokes on his words, his lips still clenched around the plastic guard. “Pull it out, Tommy, will you? Come on. Act sensibly – you’re a big boy.” But his son sinks to the floor, as if overcome, his hands covering his face, his chest heaving. Angus half lifts, half drags the boy through the hall and out into the car park, ignoring the concerned faces of other parents, the coach, team members. By the time they get to the car, the worst of his crying has stopped, and he has finally managed to spit out the guard. Tom sits in the back, his face turned away from his father, the occasional hiccup-like sob erupting.

Angus waits for a moment before turning on the ignition, his hands gripping the steering wheel. “What happened in there, Tom? Do you think you can tell me?” he keeps his voice gentle, calm.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“Please, Tom. It does matter. I need to know. Did someone hurt you – is that it? It wasn’t because you lost?”

“Of course not!” The boy glares at his father, his scorn unmistakable.

“Well then what? Tommy?”

The boy hesitates, looks away again before speaking.

“They were teasing me – a couple of the boys on the other team.”

“Teasing you? What about?”

“About. They were talking about you and Mum.” The words are hesitant, his voice half muffled.

“About me and mum?” Angus’s heart sinks. “What were they saying? Tom?”

“They were saying all sorts of stuff. Sort of whispering it at me when I was down the back. Two boys from St Marks.” The words come in a rush now, as if he’s suddenly desperate to be rid of them. “One of them kept saying that mum was a murderer. That she killed that baby. That everyone knew it. And the other one –”

“What? What did he say?”

“The other one was saying that you must be in on it, too. And that you’d both be going to jail.”

“Oh, Tom.” He can’t think of a suitable response, is helpless in the face of his son’s terror.

“It’s not true is it, Dad. You’re not – ?”

“None of it’s true, sweetheart. Your mum did just what she said she did.” His voice loud, clear, certain.. “And no one – no one’s going to jail.”

Daily Telegraph

Dear editor,

I am writing to you as I am Jodie Garrow’s mother and I thought I should tell you a few things about my daughter as people are very interested and there are so many things being said and I thought it would be better to get the story straight.

I live in the small town of Milton, near Arding, which is where Jodie grew up. Since I had my first stroke 5 years ago, I have required full time care, and now live in Restwell Nursing Home. Jodie’s older brother Shane and his 4 children also reside here in Milton, so the gossip that is around the place is having a bad effect on more than just Jodie.

I just wish it to be known that my daughter is not quite the do-gooder she makes out to be as she has to all intents and purposes abandoned her natural family. It has been almost 8 months since her last visit here, although Arding is only a ten minute drive from Milton. She has not been in contact with her brother, or his children, for over five years, and so far as I know her children have never even met her father, Bob, who now lives somewhere on the north coast.

This is just to give you a picture of the sort of woman Jodie is – she is a social climber who couldn’t wait to get away from her background and who has always been ashamed of her parents and her family. We were only ordinary battlers. Jodie’s

Dad was a truck driver and I worked as a barmaid here in Milton, so we were never what you would call a rich or high and mighty family, but we were hard working and tried our best to give all our kids a decent life. But even as a little girl Jodie was always wishing she come from somewhere else: she was always working hard to be friends with kids who came from a very different background to her own – doctors' and teachers' and university people's children, for instance.

So it didn't come as a surprise to any of her family, or those who have known her all her life, to find out that she had got rid of a baby all those years ago. She wouldn't have let anything at all come in between herself and Angus Garrow, who she had her sights on since she was only 16 or so. I never saw her during the time she was pregnant, but if I had I would like it to be known I would have encouraged her to keep the poor little thing – that I would have supported her and there would have been no shame for her in bringing up a little one alone. I would have loved to have been able to be a proper grandma to my daughter's children. It's a great sadness to me that I barely know the two kiddies that she's kept – as she doesn't bring them to visit except for once or twice a year as I suppose we are not good enough for the Garrows!

Anyway, just to set the record straight rest that it was not our doing or with our approval or in order to not upset us, that Jodie took this course of action, as we would have been more than happy to welcome her baby and help rear it as best we could despite our own difficult circumstances.

Yours sincerely,

Mrs Jeannette (Jeannie) Evans (nee Bardon)

eighteen

After the letter her mother had been interviewed on a national current affairs show, had earned some cash for her opinion, no doubt. Jodie didn't watch the program itself –

couldn't bear to. She had read the letter when it was published, though, had seen it first on the internet, though someone had thoughtfully pushed the cutting under her door later that day. She had spent the rest of that day cleaning the bathrooms – had scrubbed every surface – the bath, shower, every tile, every millimetre of grout, the toilets, basins, interiors and exteriors – using the strongest bleach she could lay her hands on – the fumes so strong that it was impossible to tell whether the tears that ran in a continual stream, virtually blinding her, and the violent churning of her stomach, were chemically or emotionally induced.

Fiona Harris had called the morning before its airing with news of the tv show – times, channel – and had left a message, her voice uncharacteristically breathy, out of nerves or trepidation, to let her know that it was on. “I thought you might like to know. I thought ... I thought you had a *right* to know.” As if she were doing Jodie a favour.

Angus, however, had watched it through, locking the door of the lounge room and listening through headphones. He'd called the station immediately and demanded a written transcript – a single mention of the word libel and they'd been more than eager to comply. They'd emailed it the following day, and he'd read it at work, handed it to Jodie wordlessly on his arrival home. But she couldn't read it in front of him, had snatched the document without meeting his eye, walked stiffly into the bedroom, locked the door, sat down on the bed.

‘Jodie’s devastated mum tells all : Jodie Garrow’s mother talks about her daughter on Today Tonight’

Interview Transcript

Reporter: Melissa Cartwright

Melissa Cartwright: Mrs Evans, you wrote a letter to the media last week about your daughter, Jodie Garrow, who’s currently under investigation, following the revelation that unbeknownst to her friends and family she’d given birth to a baby as a young

woman – a baby that has since disappeared. I'll just read an extract to the audience...

(reads excerpts from letter)

Melissa Cartwright: Well, it was a very honest letter Mrs Evans, I have to say. And quite a surprising one. I wonder if you could tell me what prompted you to write such a revealing and heartfelt letter? To make your sentiments so very public?

Mrs Evans: (clears throat) Well dear, a few people around here – those who never really knew us, I'm talking about, because anyone who knows the Evanses will know that we aren't the type of people who'd kick our daughter out if she come home pregnant or with a baby, but there were a few people about who have been making certain ... um ... intonations – saying that poor Jodie couldn't come home, that she couldn't tell her family about it because she'd of been scared and anyone who knows us knows that there's no truth in that. Even though we've had our troubles the same as anyone else, I suppose ... There was never any violence or anything like that, but just troubles, like everyone has. But there's no way I'd ever of kicked Jodie out or done anything except what was right by her. When my eldest, Shane, was in prison a few years back – it was nothing serious, just a ... a misunderstanding and he can be a bit of a lad when he's on the grog – I took on two of his kiddies for a couple of years when his fiancée Laura went off the rails for a bit... They're better now, no harm done. And Shane's out and got two more...

Melissa: I can understand you wanting to protect your family's reputation, so to speak, Mrs Evans. But it hasn't occurred to you that in defending your own good name, you may have done some very public harm to your daughter's reputation at this very difficult time?

Mrs Evans: Well, I'm only speaking the truth. We *would* of welcomed Jodes back with open arms. I'd have loved that poor wee baby like she was my own. There was no need for her to do whatever it was she did. It woulda been hard; we never had a lot of spare time – or cash – since Jodie's Dad left. A deserted mum I was with three little kiddies, and barely heard from him since. Now I come to think of it, Jodie's a chip off the old block really, he always thought too highly of himself, thought he was too good for us, for Milton.

Melissa: And what is it that you think happened, Mrs Evans? As a mother – and

who knows a daughter better than her own mother? – what do you suspect really happened to baby Elsa Mary?

Mrs Evans: What do I think happened? Well, really dear – I've got no idea, have I? It's a real mystery, isn't it? Like they're saying on the telly. I suppose she might of adopted it out, like she says. I mean, there are all sorts of people out there, aren't there? Though, I have to say, I'd have thought Jodes was a bit smarter than to do something like that. Even as a little girl she was quite ... not cunning, exactly, but clever, I suppose you'd call it . You know what I mean: she always knew which way was up – always good at looking after number one. She wasn't the type of girl you really had to worry about – with boys, getting pregnant and all that. She was a good girl in that way. (pause) But I guess we were wrong about that, weren't we? She might of been too good for us, but she wasn't quite as clever as she thought.

Melissa: Perhaps I can rephrase that question slightly. Do you think your daughter would be capable of harming a small baby?

Mrs Evans: Oh, I see what you mean. Yes. Well, I guess she could of couldn't she? Yes. Well, I don't know. But she was never a cruel girl. Oh, I guess she had a barney or two with Shane and Jason when they were little. But I don't ever remember her hurting anyone, I have to say.

Melissa: You don't think she'd have been capable of killing the baby, then, and disposing of the body? Perhaps because of her fear of being caught – of putting her relationship with her future husband at great risk? It's not possible that all this, combined with the shock of childbirth, might have driven her to such an act?

Mrs Evans: Well, I... I don't ... I really know, dear. I suppose if she'd had to choose between Angus and the baby.... Oh deary me. Really – I don't think she would. But then what do I know? She's a bit of a cold fish, Jodie. She's sort of an unfeeling type of woman, if you see what I mean. She's not been a real daughter to me at all, you know. My sons are wonderful, but at a certain time of life a woman really needs a daughter...

Melissa: Well, thank you for that, Mrs Evans.

Anchor: That was Melissa Cartwright speaking to Mrs Jeannie Evans, mother of Jodie Garrow, from her home in Milton, near the regional city of Arding, in

Northern NSW

Jodie's relationship with her mother could never be described as friendly – it's quite true that she rarely sees her, though she does her duty, sending birthday presents, cash, paying for any extra nursing that's required. But still she can't quite understand how their relationship has descended to this. Though she knows that her mother's shameful public critique of her character is vindictive, is more about her mother than her, still it hurts. It's the injustice more than anything: Jodie knows she isn't an overtly warm person – she's restrained, self-contained, reserved if not exactly shy – but she's not unfeeling, has never been unfeeling. She has always felt.

Had her mother ever loved her? Jodie didn't know. Couldn't.

She wonders sometimes whether she only imagines that her mother's hostility, and their subsequent estrangement, really stemmed from her childhood, or whether like Hannah, she had only developed this antipathy to her mother as she grew into an adolescent, whether before that things had been perhaps rather more normal – whether she had perhaps been an affectionate, well-meaning, good enough sort of mother – not entirely besotted by her progeny, but what mother really was (in those long ago days before self-esteem became more vital to the raising of a healthy child than pasteurised milk). Perhaps there was some truth to her mother's accusations. Perhaps she wasn't an engaging child. Was she prickly, whiny, withdrawn, critical? Unlovable?

Her mother's life had been unimaginably difficult. It had been enough even while her father was there – he'd never had a steady job, had been in and out of work for years, had been a drunk, occasionally violent. He'd finally left Jeannie with the three of them when Jodie was seven, the two boys eight and five and by any reckoning a handful. Shane was already in trouble at school; already hanging around with the type of boys he would always attract – older, tougher, always in trouble, and Jason showing signs of some sort of learning difficulty – he'd be diagnosed autism now, for certain. Her mother had assuredly had a hard time of it, she can see that. Looking back, she had most likely suffered from some sort of undiagnosed depression for years, but back then she'd done what she'd had to

do to make sure they had a roof over their heads, to keep food on the table and shoes on their feet, and that had meant work, hard work, as a barmaid, cleaning, whatever employment was on offer in a small, impoverished place like Milton – which wasn't much, and certainly wasn't conducive to family life.

There wasn't much left of her, Jodie supposed now, to properly nurture her children: neither 'quality' or 'quantity'. Her mother had found her pleasure (drinking, smoking, gambling, men) where she could – obviously regarding her children as an encumbrance rather than consolation. And they – the three kids, well, they'd had a hard time of it too, had virtually reared themselves, had to struggle to survive. There had been a casual arrangement with a neighbour, Aunty Val, who was paid to keep an eye on them – but in reality it was only Jason who needed looking after. Shane's afternoons were spent out on his bike with his mates, causing trouble, while Jodie was old enough and responsible enough to be at home alone. She had spent much of her childhood on her own – mooching about the place, reading borrowed comics, books from the school library, watching tv, pretending to be someone else, wishing to be someone else. Her mother's return from work only ever augured trouble. Jean would be tired, irritable, and almost always angry. And no wonder: complaints about Shane came thick and fast, she had never-ending money troubles, along with her own chaotic personal life. She had less than no time for her increasingly withdrawn daughter.

For as long as she could remember Jodie had existed at a distance from her mother – she'd been different, on the outer reaches of whatever family unit still existed, and if not unwanted, certainly not understood or approved of. From an early age she'd known to cringe at her mother, with her broad Australian twang, her chain smoking, often as not stinking like grog even at four in the afternoon, seen the squalor of their housing commission home, her mother's wrong hair, wrong clothes, wrong comments, the chilly politeness of the other girls mothers, the inevitable freezing out.

She had to be a changeling, Jodie had thought at the time, though her mother had compared her from an early age with her own elder sister Barb, who'd always, according

to her, had tickets on herself. Barb had married young – a bank clerk from the city (now a bank manager somewhere down south) – had got the hell out of Milton, never to return.

Her mother had a more conventional relationship with her brothers, though. Despite or perhaps because of Shane's criminal tendencies, Jason's behavioural difficulties, her mother had seemed to enjoy, in her particular offhand way, their company. This is not to say that they didn't frequently receive the sharp end of her tongue, or the back of her hand, but somehow it didn't mean anything, it was never serious. However unappealing to outsiders, the boys belonged in her mother's world. She recognised them, loved them as much as she could love anybody. Unlike Jodie they held no surprises, no challenges, they accepted their home, their mother, their lot in life. It was as if her mother had given her up as a dead loss – a worthless emotional investment – early on, perhaps even when she was a baby.

The shining oasis in Jodie's lonely desert of childhood, her one experience of companionship, is something she still remembers clearly, holds dear, more than thirty years later. Jodie had been eight, had wandered bored, one afternoon, down to the local park to play on the swings.

The park had recently been given a complete makeover, during an enthusiastic, but short-lived effort to improve Milton's civic infrastructure. Originally just a few swing sets in a grassy area by the river, the park had been extensively remodelled, turf laid in a sweeping area from the river bank to the footpath, saplings planted, a small pond and fountain constructed. The area, which fronts a small sandy beach on the river, had become the exclusive hangout of the town's delinquents and bored youths – the perfect place for beer and dope and not-so-surreptitious sex.

But none of this concerned Jodie, who being ten was really only interested in the fact that the revamped park boasted a swing set with a rubber seat, a smoothly spinning pipe-metal roundabout, two slippery-dips; the house shaped climbing frame, with a horizontal ladder that stretched all the way across forming the peak of the roof – the whole contraption

sitting atop a brightly painted cement base with a generous hopscotch grid already neatly marked up.

Jodie's mother was particularly occupied – spending most of her afternoons and evenings drinking with the man (a shearer in town for an extended bender) who was the original source of estrangement. She had dumped the youngest, Jason, on her own mother for a period, and had left the older two to look after themselves. Shane, who was twelve, had run wild – joining a bunch of bigger boys every afternoon after school riding their bikes and generally causing trouble, though he managed to drift from home to home at least for a decent dinner every now and then, while Jodie was more or less left to her own devices every day after school. Though her mother would call in in the late afternoon, and check that they were both there, watching television as instructed, or to find out where Shane was. He'd generally cop an earful later for not being around to look after his little sister as he had been asked. "You bloody little shit," their mother would yell, swiping at him as he grinned and ducked.

"I'm out there working my arse off trying to support you little deadshits. I don't know what for. Jesus! You need to watch her, Shane. Anything could happen," she'd add cryptically, her voice full of some dark knowledge that Jodie could not quite fathom. Even knowing that Shane was never there, her mother made no other arrangements other than a casual directive that she could go over to Aunty Val's if she was worried. Now Jodie, bored by television, or playing alone, looking for ways to distract her self from the hunger that seemed to gnaw at her vaguely, had ventured to the new park, which was just at the end of the street, drawn by the lush grass, the brightly coloured play equipment and the prospect of company.

This particular afternoon there are two other children playing, an unfamiliar girl of around her own age, and an older boy, her brother perhaps, practically a teenager. The boy is sitting, smoking a cigarette, swinging fitfully, desultorily, dragging his feet through the remaining patch of dirt on every downward swing, and watching the girl, who is climbing on the frame. She is worth watching. Jodi stands and shyly watches too. She is obviously

some sort of expert, better than anyone Jodie has seen before: she swings expertly from rung to rung, as easily as a monkey, then spins around on one leg until she is sitting atop the bar at the highest point. She hangs down, her arms dangling, her two neat blonde plaits following suit, then spins again, hangs down again gracefully and yet with dizzying speed. Finally after another fiercely graceful spin, she flies off the bar, her legs bent together, hands clamped about her knees like the young Olympic gymnasts Jodie has seen on the television. Jodie holds her breath in terror, but the girl lands neatly and securely with two feet together. The girl stands upright and then remains quite still for a moment, arms before her, eyes closed, breathing slowly, swaying slightly.

Eventually she opens them and turns to the boy, gives him a disdainful look. “Told you I could do six in a row. You owe me fifty cents. Hand it over.”

The boy doesn’t answer, just keeps sweeping through the dirt with his feet. “Do eight, and then I’ll pay you.” He flicks the half smoked cigarette in her direction.

The girl rolls her eyes. Holds out her hands. “No way, crater face. Pay up now, or I’m telling Aunty Del that you’ve been smoking – stealing her fags, too I’ll bet.” He digs in his pocket, hands over some change – first a fifty cent piece, and then he adds a couple of gleaming twenties – before muttering something incomprehensible and sauntering off.

The girl gazes at the handful of money for a moment, her eyes wide – then turns and beams at Jodie, who is standing enraptured, still half holding her breath. “Hello there,” she says. “He’s given me a dollar. You can get fifty coppers for that, up at Rafferty’s. That’s way too many for me. D’you want to share?”

Her name is Bridget O’Sullivan – Bridie – and she tells Jodie that she and her brother Rory are staying with an aunt, her mother’s sister and her husband, a childless couple who have recently relocated from Sydney having bought the local newsagency. Her mother has had to go away for a while, she tells Jodie, because of the new man in her life.

She’s overseas somewhere, maybe in Italy, or is it Ireland?, anyway, somewhere, but she knows it’s definitely not America. Her own father is dead, she confides, as they cram as

many of the chewy chocolate caramels into their mouths as they can, (*I've done ten, once* Bridie confides, *but I nearly choked to death. True story*), or maybe he just disappeared. She can't be certain. But he was definitely Irish and a tyke, though she and Rory definitely aren't Cathos cause her mum can't stand the nuns, and that's why she's called Bridie because her Dada named her after his own Mother, who was a blessed saint – true story – which is a stupid name, really, when you think of it because she's not a bride and is definitely not going to be because boys are the most stupidest invention ever – her brother is possibly the stupidest – and she is going to change her name to Vanessa which is the most perfectly pretty name in the world, when she is grown up, because you can do that. Or maybe Cassandra, which is better because then she could be Cass. Yes, definitely Cass. This is her mum's third husband, though they aren't actually married and he's an artist and so is her mum but she's a sculptor not a painter like him though she can't really afford to work very much as materials are so expensive, though once there was this man, a millionaire, who gave her a studio and all the clay she needed. *True story ...*

Bridie is her first, her only, friend. She is like no other girl that Jodie knows, like no other girl in Milton, and Jodie falls headlong in love, in the way that only small girls can – spending every spare minute with her, counting down the hours that they can be together. Bridie's not attending school for the short time that she's there – it's only meant to be a few weeks, though it stretches into a month and then beyond – so they spend every afternoon after school together and then the entire weekend, usually at Jodie's place, hiding in the bedroom with the door locked against Shane, or at the park. Bridie has as much freedom as Jodie, it seems, but with the added bonus of money. Her aunt bribes the kids to keep out of mischief, with silver coins and the occasional note. “We're actually meant to buy our lunch,” Bridie confides, “get fish and chips or a sandwich at the cafe, but I'd definitely rather get lollies, wouldn't you?”

Bridie's life is a revelation to Jodie. For the first time, Jodie's unasked-for freedom from adults seems filled with excitement and adventure instead of anxiety. And for the first time she has a companion – a companion who can give her pointers on how to survive. Bridie's own family situation couldn't be more different to Jodie's. Bridie loves her mother – is

proud of her in ways that Jodie can't imagine. She brags about her constantly, quotes her, models herself on her. It's an extreme contrast to Jodie's already half shamed disregard for her own mother – her intuitive knowledge that her mother isn't someone she can look up to, let alone brag about. Bridie carries a creased photograph of her mother in her pocket. She is young, much younger than Jodie's mother – and much prettier. She has long glossy hair, and wears clothes that Jodie has only seen in magazines or on television. She is blonde, and beautiful, her face serene, unlined, unworried. Bridie's mother, constantly professing her love for her, promises the world – and Bridie is always expecting gifts and letters and postcards that never arrive (*I think she's probably somewhere where there's no postman – maybe Africa, right now. Or in Paris and they can't read the address. That would be it. Definitely*) She boasts about what her mother has done, what she might be doing, who she's doing it with. Bridie's mother has told her, told both her children, that they should regard freedom as a right and a privilege, though to Jodie's eyes, the life they're living now, here in Milton, doesn't seem to be all that much better than her own. Bridie's aunt and uncle are constantly mad at her for some misdemeanour or other, her own clothes, unlike those worn her mother in the photograph, seem to be an assortment of hand-me-downs donated by from various friends, or worn second hand items bought at charity shops. (*Mum says that only people with nothing in their heads worry about what they wear*). And though Jodie envies the fact that her friend doesn't have to attend school during her stay in Milton, she doesn't envy her the long days spent in front of the television, or the ten different schools, that – already – she has attended.

During the weeks that they have together, much of their time is spent locked in Jodie's room, hiding from Shane or Jason, until they discover, during one of their rambles around the park, a willow with branches that stretch right out over the river, easily climbed, and with a natural platform formed by a series of close growing branches in the centre of the tree – high up enough to be exciting without being particularly dangerous. They spend hours perched up there with their bags of sweets and the occasional tin of beans or spaghetti that Bridie's aunt's pantry provides, playing pirates, Robin Hood, Princesses and dragons, venturing down to play on the equipment only when the park is empty, occasionally encountering Bridie's brother, a silent and benign presence, who checks on

them from time to time, a stolen cigarette dangling from his lips and a comic book in his hands.

While most children's relationships at this age revolve around action rather than conversation, in Jodie's memory Bridie is constantly talking. About her parents, about the places she's lived (in the desert), the houses (a mansion in the poshest bit of Sydney), apartments (a penthouse – which means it's right at the top), the schools she's been to (this posh one was the worst where we had to wear hats – and gloves!), the pets she's had (a python, and even a monkey, once), her plans to travel the world as soon as she's grown up, the jobs she'd like to do (a trapeze artist or a fisherman). There's one particular thing she says though, that is to stay in Jodie's memory for many years, one thing she would, if asked, say transformed her life.

The two girls are at Bridie's place – the visit illicit, as Bridie has been told on no account is she to have other children visit without supervision. The girls have stolen a packet of chocolate biscuits from the pantry and have filled tall glasses with cold milk, and have taken them to the bedroom that Bridie shares with her brother. There's a full length mirror running along the wall opposite the bed, and the girls lie close together, watching themselves closely as they sip from their glasses, chew the biscuits. They watch the chewing – their teeth churning the contents of their mouths into a gluggy brown mush – most carefully, seriously, as if they're conducting some sort of scientific research. When the chewing has been completed to Bridie's satisfaction (*You only chewed sixty times, definitely. I was counting. But I got up to a hundred*), Bridie considers her friend in the mirror for a long moment. Then: "You know, Jodie, if you washed your hair and did it, you'd really be quite pretty." The two girls are a study in contrasts: despite her blonde mother (*she's a bottle blonde*, Bridie tells Jodie proudly. *Peroxide. True story*), Bridie's hair is mousy brown, her body is slight, freckled – but her arms and legs are taut with sinew and muscle, she's broad across the shoulder. Her eyes are dark, heavily fringed, her face elfin. Jodie is shorter, more solid. Her hair is blonde, but dirty, long and unkempt. Her eyes are a washed-out blue, her face long, pale, serious.

"Do you think so?" Jodie has never considered herself either pretty or not pretty. It's

something she's never really thought about.

“Definitely. All you really have to do is do your hair properly, maybe put it up? You wouldn't have to wear make-up or anything I don't think. My mum says you're lucky if you can just be natural, if you don't have to work hard.” Solemnly: “ She says I'll probably have to work a bit, to overcome my, my imperfectments.” Jodie doesn't really understand what Bridie's saying, but she knows a compliment when she hears one, and is happy to accept. Bridie conducts a new experiment: she pulls the tangled mass of hair off Jodie's face, gathers it up in a makeshift ponytail. “See.”

And Jodie does see. She looks quite different to her usual self, looks suddenly like one of those girls whose mothers pick them up from school and hold their hands when they cross roads, whose shoes are shined, uniforms ironed, lunches packed neatly into special boxes. The same girls who carefully avoid making eye contact with Jodie when they meet her down the street, who never invite her over to play.

Bridie watches Jodie looking at herself, gives a sympathetic smile.

“You know, Jodie, you can actually be whoever you want to be. That's what my mother always tells me. Definitely. Maybe you don't have any one to help you, but no one's going to stop you either.” Bridie grimaces at herself in the mirror, bares her teeth, widens her eyes. “I'm not totally sure yet, but I think maybe I'll be a movie star when I grow up. Or maybe an artist, a sculptor like my mum. Or a musician, maybe. Or actually, maybe I'll be a gymnast!” Bridie executes a strange contorted somersault off the bed, landing with a thud on her behind. When their laughter subsides she stays squatting, her eyes meeting Jodie's in the mirror. “What do you want to be, Jodie?” Jodie scratches at the side of her nose, picks a loose bit of peeling skin, thinks for a moment. “You know what,” she pulls her hair back into the messy bunch again, “I think I just want to be one of those normal grown ups. The ones with pink lipstick, and high heels, and – and a station wagon.” She purses her lips, turns her head from side to side. She thinks of her mother. Adds. “And a husband. I'd like a nice handsome husband. Handsome and rich. *Definitely.*”

Close to the start of the school holidays, Bridie and her brother leave suddenly without

any warning and despite promises of letters, protestations of lifelong devotion, Jodie never hears from her again. She walks to the newsagent and asks Bridie's uncle shyly whether she might be able to get her address. He gives a curt negative, then keeps talking, not quite looking at her, but obviously eager to vent his spleen on someone, even if the recipient of his indignation is too young to really understand what he's saying. "Don't even know where that woman's taken them. She turned up in the dead of night with some new fellow in a flash car. Woke those poor bloody kids up and took them just like that. Wearing their pyjamas, not even a dressing gown, bare feet. They didn't have a clue what was going on, But then they never do. And she was six months gone. Women like that ought to be sterilised, if you ask me. Not fit to raise chickens, let alone kids."

By twelve Jodie had made the decision to get as far as way as possible, and as fast as she could – and had insisted her mother enrol her not at the local central school in Milton, but at one of the bigger comprehensive high schools in Arding. Her mother had made no real protest, there was no reason why Jodie shouldn't go to Arding, there was no extra expense involved, bus travel was provided by the state, her only (vaguely catty) comment being that she didn't suppose miss big-britches could be expected to attend school with the local riff raff, could she? Jodie had held her tongue, something she'd become accustomed to early on, around her foul-mouthed, easily roused mum, had let it slip, let it ride. What, in the greater scheme of things – this whole distant life she was set on creating – did her mother's opinion matter? There were some opinions that mattered to Jodie, but not that of her mother, whose opinion, anyway, was transient, and who, it was evident, wasn't all that interested in her aloof adolescent daughter.

From there it had been easy to remake herself. In Arding she had no reputation, no one – neither teachers nor parents nor the other students – knew her mother or her brothers by sight or reputation. She had little time for any real social life, had joined committees and councils, thrown herself into volunteer organisations, sport, worked hard at her studies, established a reputation as a competent all-rounder. Without any particular ambition, more a sense that this was the way to get on, to move up and away, she had decided that

enrolment at the private girls' school held the key to her success. She filled out her own Grammar scholarship application in year ten, forged her mother's signature, then sat the exam. She had had to work hard to persuade her mother to attend the compulsory Principal's meeting once the scholarship had been awarded, but that one meeting had clarified the school's decision: the Principal had been impressed by this obviously self-made girl, and despite some discreet opposition from several old girls on the board, Jodie had been welcomed into the school community. Her mother's refusal to pay for anything having been made clear from the outset, an additional bursary provided her with those necessities – uniform, books excursions – that weren't covered by the scholarship. And Jodie had proven a good choice – she had brought honour to the school, winning academic as well as civic awards. She had kept her home life as far separate from her school life as possible, and had hoped that nobody ever knew how bereft of all the ordinary middle-class privileges and expectations, how desperate it really was.

So what her mother had said in the interview was true: she had run as fast and as far away from her home as she could. But it wasn't just the poverty that had run from, or the social exclusion – it was something more profound. What she had been most desperate to circumvent was the paralysing sense of littleness, the lack of drive, ambition, simple resolve, that seemed so deeply ingrained in the soul of her own family. And for years she had imagined that she had somehow managed to really escape this – had felt her self expand into the Jodie that she wanted to be, that she felt she could be – the Jodie of her dreams and imaginings. Jodie Garrow is not the mean, lazy, purposeless harridan that her mother was, and that Jodie Evans was always destined to be – she is generous, hardworking, busy, hospitable, dependable, respectable, and able, with few lapses or errors, to negotiate the complex social proprieties and protocols of her adopted world.

But now, Jodie feels herself shrinking, almost as if it's a physical reality, as if she's becoming smaller by the day, her sense of herself contracting into some hard object. Stone-like, impervious, cold. Lumpen and worthless.

Her mother's daughter

nineteen

If anyone had thought to ask Hannah to describe her mother before all this happened, what would her response have been? Incomprehension? A raised eyebrow? An incredulous laugh? Describe her mother? For heavens sake, there's nothing to describe: she's just her mother.

But lately she's been forced to do just this. First by the police – stuck in a cramped and dingy interview room with some dykey policewoman asking questions in what is so obviously a fake kindly manner, with her polite but furious father interjecting at almost every juncture – *not appropriate, not relevant*. When the woman asks about her relationship with her mother – did they get on okay? – her father grimaces, but shrugs, gestures for her to speak. Hannah finds that really, she has very little to say. She tells the woman the truth, pretty much – they have had their problems, but they're no bigger (well, until now that is) than any of her friends'. They have all the usual arguments – about cleaning her room, doing her homework, spending money, seeing boys, going to parties. Nothing special. Nothing out of the ordinary.

When the woman asks her whether her mother is ever violent, she laughs, and answers before her father has an opportunity to stop her. Tells her no, her mother is never, and never has been, physically violent. She's never hit her. Not even a smack when she was little. And she's never hit her brother. Or her dad for that matter. Here the police woman glances nervously at her father, who sits with his legs stretched out, arms folded, his expression unreadable. "Mum," says Hannah in the sweetest, brightest, youngest voice she can come up with, "is a very calm woman. She's kind and she's generous and she keeps the house tidy, cooks excellent meals, helps in the community." Her mother, Hannah is saying, is, in every conceivable way, exemplary.

Naturally she does not tell the police woman what she really thinks about her mother – that in fact she does not know what to think about all the claims that are being made, in the press, and by her own grandmother. That she does not know whether what's being hinted

at has any basis in fact, or whether it's just just gossip, innuendo of the most scurrilous kind. That she has realised, shockingly, that she doesn't really have any idea who her mother is, that this woman she has known – and loved – forever, should turn out to be, so comprehensively a stranger. That she finds her mother's deep unassailable ordinariness, her capacity to go on as if nothing, nothing is happening, appalling and incomprehensible. And that right now – when it's apparent that there's a sword, invisible but no less deadly for all that, hanging just inches from their heads – she finds her mother's utter paralysis, her seeming inability to do anything, change anything, stop anything, say anything in her own defence, utterly terrifying.

There have been moments when she has wanted to admit her fears, to fall on her knees before her mother, to be gathered in, comforted, reassured, to be a child again. She wanted to see her mother in that old adoring light, to see have a sense of her as someone solid, essential, inseparably connected to her and providing a safe conduit to the world beyond. But there is no way back. Her father offers what he can in the way of encouragement, support, but though they're close enough, there's still too much unsaid. And too much that's unsayable.

*

Required in a school drama class improvisation to attempt a physical impression of somebody recognisable – a family member, a friend, a public personality, someone the class will be able to easily identify – Hannah decides, in a moment of reckless defiance, to impersonate Jodie, her mother.

Both Assia and in his own limited way, Wes, have made tentative efforts to talk to Hannah about what's going on in her family. Both have offered their ears, if needed, and unconditionally, their loyalty. Hannah appreciates their friendship, needs it right now, but cannot bring herself to confide. She would not know what to confide, in truth, she finds it hard to articulate even to herself, what she is feeling. Lately it seems the only place where she feels right, the only place where her real self can emerge, is on the stage. Only then – when she's someone else, and not herself – can she say what needs to be said, only then

can she find the way to say it.

Hannah stands before the class. She doesn't think much initially: when she performs she finds it's best to just do, to be. She turns her back on the audience, makes some minor alterations to her physical appearance. She does her best to push her thickly layered hair into a tidy bob, smoothes out the creases in her tights, pulls her school kilt down on her hips so that the hemline sits demurely to her ankles, tucks in her shirt, straightens her collar, sucks in her stomach, shrugs off her fashionably elegant slouch and squares her shoulders. She pulls herself in psychologically, quite consciously now, reins in every random flyaway thought, and when she turns back to the class she is barely recognizable. It is as if she has discarded completely her own vivid, bulgy, irrepressible self, and replaced it with another: taut, cool, opaque. When she speaks her customary drawl has been abandoned for more refined accents, her voice has been ratcheted up a notch, there's a faint quaver (indignation? distress?) as she asks of no one in particular, an invisible antagonist, Hannah herself perhaps, whether she really considers *that* (what? it doesn't matter, her audience is well able to imagine this familiar scenario) to be appropriate behaviour for an intelligent girl, from a respectable family? How *dare* she? She doesn't quite know how to express her – her *disappointment*. “You were such a sweet little thing, however did you transform into such a difficult girl?” She takes in an imaginary retort, her eyes wide, then her lips compress, she turns away. “Oh, where did we go wrong?” she moans, shoulders slumped, her defeat manifest. There's a long pause. Then: “And what ... *What will people think?*”

There's another pause, and the scene moves swiftly from comedy to drama. Hannah is determined to garner not just the customary laughter, cheers – but requires some other response from her audience, recognition of something deeper, more mysterious. Suddenly the rather fatuous matron becomes someone menacing – it's hard to see why, to pinpoint how Hannah manages it, as she doesn't speak, but suddenly the character, the caricature – still recognisably the Mrs Garrow they all know – has assumed a darker mien, has become sinister, her intent unmistakably malign. The Jodie grotesque smiles cruelly, then moves forward – toward the audience, her purpose indefinable, but somehow terrifying.

There's a gasp from the audience, and then some suppressed squealing as Hannah moves toward them, her arms stretched out, eyes wide, her intent unclear, but full of menace – and she breaks right there, in a moment of white-knuckle tension. She gives an ironic bow; waits expectantly for a response.

There is a gurgle of appreciation from her peers, even her usually scathing year eight nemesis Anna emits a breathily admiring “Awesome!”. Her teacher, the usually circumspect Mrs Dennison, is smiling uneasily, guiltily entranced by both the caricature, and its unexpected Hammer Horror transformation. “My goodness, Hannah. That was a – a remarkable performance. Well done. Though I think we might keep this one to ourselves, don't you? I don't think we'll share it. Not one for our drama night, perhaps.”

The girls laugh about it, later at lunch, Hannah summarily restored to the fold. She can sense there's something wrong with Assia, though, who hangs back a little from the crowd, slightly distant, cool, a tension about her that Hannah immediately recognises. As soon as she gets the opportunity, the minute they're on their own, she corners her, asks her what's wrong. She can't resist – has to know – though she will probably wish, later on, that she had never asked.

“How could you do that?” Assia says, obviously glad to be given the opportunity to speak her mind.

“Do what?” Hannah has affected a nonchalance she doesn't quite feel.

“Do that to your mother. In front of all those people. It was awful. I could never be so cruel. So disloyal.”

Hannah snorts. “I didn't do anything to her, Assia. And – well no you wouldn't would you? You couldn't. Your mother's cool. My mother's not. And then there's the, er, whole baby killing-thing.”

Assia doesn't quite look at her. “God, Hannah. She's your mother. And she's explained what happened with the baby. You should be more – you should stick up for her. Be sympathetic. And even if you are angry with her or whatever, you shouldn't be making it into a joke in front of everyone.”

“You’re not serious, are you?” Hannah is genuinely affronted by Assia’s accusations. “You’ve no idea what it’s like.” She kicks at a rock, hard, with her new shoe. It leaves a nasty scratch on the patent leather. She kicks again. Viciously. “She’s been an utter bitch, lately. You know that. Barely lets me do anything. Then there’s all this shit about that fucking baby. And she doesn’t do anything, doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even try to defend herself. What’s everyone meant to think? She’s fucking stupid.” What she’s saying is the truth, but even as Hannah speaks she knows there’s something missing, that she’s disregarding some essential element, leaving something out.

Assia, however, can see it clearly. “Oh, come on, Hannah. Just because she doesn’t let you do whatever you want! That’s all it is, isn’t it? What mother does? She’s not that bad.”

Hannah prickles up defensively. “She *is* that bad, actually. What would you know.” She can feel the words harden, but forces them out like bits of gravel – sharp, biting, hot. “What would you know? Your mum’s a normal person, not some dumbbo Stepford wife who has a major breakdown if the towels in the linen closet don’t line up perfectly. If I try and talk to my mother about anything that’s important she asks me whether I’ve done my homework, or put away my clean clothes. There’s nothing,” she screws a finger into her ear, gives a daffy grin, trying to lighten the mood “absolutely nothing, up there – except air, maybe.”

Her attempt to be funny doesn’t work, Assia’s face is red, she’s biting at her bottom lip as if to stop from crying. “Your mum’s just normal, Hannah. That’s what mothers are supposed to be like. They’re supposed to give you shit about that sort of stuff. They’re not supposed to be telling you about the great head job they were given by some celebrity or the acid they dropped in the eighties. I know you think my mother’s fantastic – she looks so great on the surface, sometimes she is. But she can turn – in an instant. She can be black and cruel. And she’s said stuff to me that you would never have thought possible for a mother to say. You know she named me after some famous fucking suicide, right? How crap is that? Some bitch who killed herself and her kid. I know you think my mum’s really cool, but your mother – your mother’s kind. And she really loves you. And I think, I think what you did in drama was awful – and really, really wrong.” And before Hannah can say

anything, Assia's striding away across the grassy playground, then lost in the noisy lunchtime crowd.

Aap News

'Search for Elsa Mary fails – case referred to coroner'

After a police investigation has failed to find any trace of either missing Sydney girl Elsa Mary or of the couple who allegedly adopted her, the matter has been referred to the coroner.

Elsa Mary, who will be twenty-four if she is still alive, has not been seen since she was discharged into the care of her mother, Jodie Evans, now Garrow, three days after her birth on December 22nd 1986.

Despite extensive searches, nationally and overseas, NSW Police have not been able to determine whether Elsa Mary is still alive. The coroner, Conrad Westerby, QC, will consider whether an inquest is necessary.

Police ask anyone with information about the circumstances of Elsa Mary's disappearance, or anyone who knows her current or past whereabouts, to contact Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

twenty

The photo comes out of the woodwork a few days after the case is handed on to the coroner. Angus phones her, it's almost eight, he's working late as usual. He launches straight in, doesn't bother greeting her. "I've just had a call from someone. They've unearthed a photograph; it'll be in the papers tomorrow." his voice sounds as it always does lately, deeply grim somehow, held in, held back, as if he scarcely dares to give voice to his thoughts.

"A photograph? And? What's the problem?" The media have released a new photograph

every other day, it seems to her. In the newspapers, on television, in the *Women's Day*, even *Famous*. She would never have imagined she'd been so profligate with her image. School photos taken at Milton Central, at Arding High, receiving a citizenship award at Grammar, photographs of her in her twenties, at uni, nursing, in her thirties, with Hannah as a newborn, wearing a bikini just after Tom (her postpartum stomach stretched and soggy, her thighs maternally dimpled – what had possessed her?). Jodie could weep – every one of these older photographs evidence of her own smug acceptance of happiness, contentment. How could she have not known what was approaching: Now, her former insouciance seems obscene, offensive. Recent photos seem more real – snapped without warning or permission, her face drawn, grim, in one her arm thrown up in an attempt to shield herself from the intrusive gaze of the camera. What more can they show of her. Surely there's nothing left?

But there is something else it seems, the image of a moment she'd forgotten: "It's a snap of you and the baby, Jodi."

It takes her a moment to digest.

"The baby? But they've already published those awful pictures after Hannah –" she begins stupidly

"Of her. Of Elsa Mary." she can almost hear his teeth clench as he reluctantly speaks her name. "It was taken in the hospital. Someone who was there when you were took a snap. They've obviously sold it to the papers."

"God. Oh, God."

"Yes, it's not good, Jodes."

"What do you mean, not good?" She gives a hard laugh. "How can it be worse than it already is?"

"It's the expression on your face." She can hear the sympathy in his voice, evidence of his residual tenderness. "You look ... I don't know what to say, Jodie. You don't look like yourself. Everyone knows it's not the best time to take pictures of a new mother, it was probably just hours after you'd had the baby, for Christ's sake, you would have been exhausted, confused, overwhelmed. I can remember what it was like when you had Hannah. But you're looking down at the baby, in this shot – and your expression ... it's ... you're ..."

“What? What on earth am I doing?”

“Well, it’s not a loving expression. It’s probably just the camera angle – you know what it’s like, but you’re scowling – you look angry. And the media are running with this, they’ve pulled out all the stops this time. They’ve honed right in on your face, you know, blown it up . And they’re saying – “

“Oh God, Angus.” She can hear the panic in his voice now, the fear. “What are they saying?”

“They’re saying it’s the face of a murderer...”

December 1986

The maternity ward boasts a recently refurbished sitting room for new mothers. It’s a friendly space – decorated in bright primary colours, with a tea-and toast-making station, a huge pile of women’s magazines, (along with the ubiquitous baby care and breast-feeding guides) a number of comfortable vinyl clad lounge chairs, and a big wall-mounted colour television set. Most of the new mothers shuffle in a couple of times a day – usually when their babies are asleep – to have a cuppa, a break away, a chat with fellow-sufferers, some to have a surreptitious cigarette on the balcony, or to spend some time with their other small children, toddlers, school aged kids, away from the babies. It’s not a place that Jodie frequents – other than to hurriedly prepare a cup coffee or tea, or, starving again, to take a handful of the cheap biscuits that they’ve provided, but the young new midwife, Debbie, taking advantage of Sheila’s absence, has insisted that Jodie join in a special talk on baby care that she’s giving – early, before visiting hours. Following Sheila’s advice that she make as few waves as possible where Debbie is concerned, she has reluctantly made her way down, and seated herself in one of the slippery armless chairs. She had hoped to get out of it, to be excused, the baby had woken just before the talk was due to start, needed changing and feeding, but Debbie had called into her room on her way down the corridor, had pooh–poohed her objections, insisted that she attend. “Bring the bottle, and feed her there. It doesn’t matter – this is a maternity ward, you know. It’ll give you an opportunity to have a gasbag with some of the other mothers. “ And then she’d taken the matter out of

Jodie's hands, finishing the nappy change herself, and wheeling the squirming infant along the corridor, so that Jodie had no choice but to follow along in the woman's determinedly cheery wake, clutching the half warmed bottle, her hair unbrushed, still in her pyjamas, silently cursing.

She'd sat through the talk, barely listening, but relaxed, the baby taking the bottle easily for once, without any tussling or fidgeting, and then falling contentedly straight back into sleep on her lap. She'd been happy enough to sit while Debbie rattled off her piece, and then stay through the other women's anxious questions. Though the talk itself had been far more wide-ranging, covering topics as diverse as supplementary feeding and the developmental benefits of reading aloud to your newborn, most of the women's questions were to do with ways of persuading their babies to sleep: techniques for wrapping, the efficacy of burping, of rocking to sleep, all of them vaguely desperate already to find a way back into this once taken for granted, but now desperately desired state of unconsciousness.

When the questions peter out and the talk officially winds up, most of the women, their infants momentarily content, stay seated, chatting desultorily about this or that – comparing births, babies, breasts, rooms. The women are friendly enough, though distracted, and obviously exhausted, with a hollow unreflecting inward look in their eyes. It's a look Jodie has noticed once or twice in the eyes of people who have undergone major trauma – death rather than birth – and a look she supposes she has herself. Jodie would prefer to get back to her room, to be alone, but the prospect of disturbing the sleeping baby is worse than the unwanted, unavoidable contact.

One of the mothers, only a little older than Jodie, peers down at the sleeping baby

“That's a cute little one – a girl?” The woman's voice is gravelly, her accent broad. Her face is freckled, her expression startlingly lively.

“Uh huh.”

“Mine's a monster – 9 pound 6. He nearly tore me to shreds on the way out – the little bugger.”

“Oh.” She has no intention of swapping birth stories, would rather not speak at all, but the woman persists

“It lasted almost eighteen hours. I couldn’t believe that it went on for so long – if someone had offered to shoot me in the head I’d’ve said do it! And then – he got stuck right at the end – literally! I’ve got stitches from arsehole to breakfast time...”

Jodie can’t repress a bark of laughter at the apt description, the startling familiarity of the crude image.

“So, how was yours?”

“Oh, you know... Horrible.” It’s not something she wants to recall, let alone discuss.

“Amazes me that the human race keeps going – that anyone ever does this twice. Still, it’s all worth it in the end, isn’t it? The woman smiles tenderly down at the baby, lying so contentedly on her lap. Jodie follows her gaze, half unwillingly

She’s spared making any reply – there’s a dazzling flash from a camera, a click, and Jodie looks up, startled and annoyed. Debbie laughs over at her, a little instant camera swinging from her wrist. “I’m just taking a few snaps. I really want to remember all this – you’re my first lot, you know. It was a lovely moment, Jodie, it’ll be a lovely mother and babe shot – you were looking right down at her with such a loving expression. Perfect.” Debbie gives a satisfied smile. “I can send a copy on to you if you like. You’ll want to remember these early moments one day.”

The other woman snorts. “You’re kidding, aren’t you? Why would we want to remember this. Jesus. I’ve never understood anyone wanting a photo taken just after they’ve had a baby. I can understand taking a photo of the newborn, but the mother. *Urgh*. My skin’s turned to shit, my face is puffy, and I’m still twenty pounds overweight – at least.” She pushes at her belly “I’m hoping there’s another baby in here somewhere, to tell you the truth.” She gives Jodie the once-over. “You don’t look too bad, though, considering.”

“She looks great, doesn’t she?” Debbie has perched on the vacant seat beside Jodie, is holding the baby’s hand. “If I hadn’t seen it for myself, I’d be wondering if this was really her baby, if she’d really given birth.”

twenty-one

Jodie had made up her mind that she would not look at the photograph – that there was nothing to be gained from looking directly into the gawping jaws of the past. She has done her best to avoid it for so many years, and right now it's clearer than ever that she must not look back, that her progress must continue to be relentlessly, desperately forward. But it seemed that she was not to be given the choice – a copy of the photo and accompanying article has been posted to her by some concerned citizen – no name or message attached of course. Though she wishes she had crumpled the paper immediately it had arrived, it's too late, it's there in her hand, and she cannot look away.

The photo of Jodie herself holds little interest, it's a bad photo – as Angus had told her she is frowning down at the baby, her face puffy, her lips curled strangely in a not quite sneer, thin and slightly cruel. Just an odd moment, uncharacteristic, meaningless – she looks unattractive, it's true, and she certainly looks older than her nineteen years, and it's certainly not the Hallmark image of rapturous motherhood – but it's surely not deserving of the “The Face Of A Murderess” headline, either.

The picture of the baby is another matter though; Jodie can barely take her eyes off the grainy image. For years she has managed to keep all thoughts of the infant from her conscious mind, always insisting to herself that this baby meant nothing, changed nothing – that her birth was little more than a minor knot in an otherwise seamless progression through to adulthood. There has been little suffering on her part, other than in those first few weeks after the birth – no remorse, no real sense of loss or wondering why or where or how or what might have been. Jodie has always been able to manage an effective sort of thought control, is expert at burying things – her feelings, about her parents, her humiliations as a child, more recently her hurt over Angus's philandering – somehow she has managed to sweep so many feelings into some dark recess of her mind, to bury them, to forget and just get on with things.

Her unconscious mind, however, is another thing altogether. Once or twice in those first

years she had woken with the the distinct feel of that tiny burden in her arms, or still safely within her body kicking, or with the sharp awareness of a dream in which she's watched a strangely familiar toddler, attended by devoted parents, playing on a swing, in a park, and known that this was her child, the infant Elsa Mary. A few times there'd been a very different sort of dream – one she could not or would not recall – and she had woken overcome by inexpressible, unbearable, sadness.

After she'd had Hannah those particular dreams had stopped, but Jodie had experienced an odd sense of loss, in those first few months of her new, ecstatically welcomed, baby's life, that she couldn't account for. She had felt obscurely bereft – as if something, or someone, was missing. She had tried to dismiss it, had put it down to missing the physical sensation of being pregnant – a feeling she has heard is not all that uncommon. Luckily, this vague malaise had not lingered too long, had been quickly supplanted by the other more positive sensations.

She had been unable to feed Hannah or Tom herself – the irony of it was something else she did not let herself linger on too closely – those young breasts that had been so full, so ripe, so clearly able to fulfil their maternal function, and yet so were determinedly withheld from that first no-doubt willing recipient of her bounty. And then the physical distress of that withholding – the tender rocklike breasts, the weeks of leaking, of mess. She had been so determined to feed these other babies, desperate to do the right thing, the best thing, but the bounty was no longer there for the taking. Her milk, regardless of all the pinching and prodding and pulling and expressing, the cracked and bleeding nipples, the advice of this and that nurse, the endless round of lactation consultants, doctors, midwives – still the milk would not come, she could not feed her babies.

But now, gazing down at the tiny indistinct figure of the infant, all of a sudden she wants to remember this lost child. But she can't. Whatever vague recall she'd once had of those features has completely dissolved – she'd worked so hard during those few days in hospital to barely let her gaze meet that of the child, had deliberately not implanted a picture of those particular features in her memory, worked so hard to not preserve or recall the image.

Instead she can only recall Tom and Hannah – their cherubic faces, their initial unmistakable physical resemblance to Angus – dark hair, dark skin, full lips, large eyes, solid energetic limbs.

This other baby had been only five pounds, she remembers: small, pale. Her limbs had seemed small, delicate – frighteningly frail, alien – whereas the other two had been solid, robust – and known, somehow familiar. Hers. She wonders now whether her impression of the fragility of that baby had been all her own emotional state. Perhaps she had been no less robust in reality, but had not been anchored securely to Jodie’s consciousness, her lack of vitality merely a figment of that absence.

In the newspaper photograph the baby’s face is barely visible, swaddled in a rug despite the summer heat, all that’s visible are her small bunched up features – dark creases for eyes, nose, mouth, like a cartoon character. A tuft of hair; impossible to know the colouring. Just a baby. She could be any baby, utterly unfamiliar, utterly unknown.

She wondered if Debbie, the midwife, perhaps remembered more. It seemed impossible amongst all those births, over all those years, that she would really retain a distinct memory of just one baby. But she had remembered Jodie herself, so perhaps she would be able to recall the colour of hair, of eyes, the shape of Elsa Mary’s limbs, the weight of her head in the palm of a hand. But there is no way she can ask her; no way she can admit to not recalling, to never noticing. At least some things are indisputable, have been recorded – the baby’s weight, length, head circumference – but this small blurred snap is the only record of her image. And however hard she tries, however closely she gazes, there is nothing it can tell her, it has nothing to reveal.

Twenty-two

Every Tuesday fortnight, Angus takes an early afternoon to play nine holes with Dave. Despite some initial awkwardness after the dinner-party debacle, the two men have

continued their years' long tradition – both of them regarding it as sacrosanct. With their increasingly busy business responsibilities, it is often their only week day encounter with sunshine, the outdoors. Their first few meetings after the dinner were distinctly uncomfortable, the golf played in almost total silence, and both men pleading subsequent engagements, not staying for the usual round of drinks. But though the evening has never been referred to – and there have never been any further invitations from either party – the men's relationship has resumed its former laid-back character, and each afternoon concludes with a leisurely drink at the clubhouse – which may not be the most modish watering hole in Arding, but is as good a place as any to while away an hour or so, enjoy the cheap beer, the easy banter of long established friendship.

This afternoon Angus has enjoyed himself. He likes to think of himself as a reasonable golfer – had come at the top of the local competitions once or twice before his working and family life became so all consuming. Today he felt himself play well, a return to form that he had thought lost over the past months. He had managed a double bogey at the difficult seventh hole, and his swing, which has been stunted and erratic, seems to have settled, become more reliable.

The two men discuss the game over the first drink, then move on to work for the second, both complaining about the constant pressure, the lack of time spent doing things they enjoy. “I guess, with everything that's going on with Jodie, you've got even less time.” David hesitates, as if unsure whether he's gone too far. “I hope you don't mind me mentioning it mate, it's just – well, you being a lawyer and all – it must be hard to switch off. To not look at all the angles, see all the possibilities.” He falters again, and sips his beer nervously. This is the first time that the men have broached the subject – their conversation somehow managing to stay light, if not superficial. Angus reassures him, with a certainty he's not sure he feels, that he's coping. “Actually, Dave, it's not as hard as you might think. All the media stuff's a bit dire, but other than that I guess I'm not really that worried. We've got Pete handling all the legal stuff, anyway. It's not really my area.” “And are things ... okay? With you and Jodie, I mean. It must be taking a toll.”

Angus is surprised by his friends continued efforts to discuss what's previously been so

carefully avoided, and though he suspects that he's been primed by his curious wife, answers honestly, and without too much consideration.

“Actually, it's weird – how normal things are. And I'm bloody busy at work – we barely see one another.”

“And you don't take any notice of what's being said? All that shit from her mother. That must have hurt...”

“That old bitch.” Angus dismisses her with a gulp of beer. “Anything she's said has already been said to Jodie's face. And I guess the important people, Jodie's family, her friends,” here he pauses a fraction, “know who she is, what she's like. They know what sort of a person she is – what she's capable of.”

“I can't imagine what it must be like – for you. I mean, having your wife ... All that publicity. It must friggen hurt. But you really seem like you're doing alright. You're saying the right things, anyway. I gotta say I admire, you mate.” Dave must be drunker than Angus had thought, his voice is slurred, his conversation lurching.

“What do you mean?”

“I wouldn't want to be in your shoes, Angus. If it was Sue, I think I'd want to cut and run. But I guess we signed up for better or for worse, eh, and worse is going to arrive sometime. You just don't get to pick and choose when. Or how.” He claps his hand on Angus's shoulder, gives it a friendly squeeze, “And you and Jodie have been together so long.” He lowers his voice, speaks almost conspiratorially. “And you've already done the dirty on her – which I have to say I admire, too mate. Always wish I'd been brave enough ... but you know Sue – a bit different to Jodes. She'd never've put up with it – she'd have killed me.” Angus tries to interrupt the flow, but Dave's on a roll, isn't stopping for anyone.

“You shoulda got out when you had a chance, Angus. You've left it a bit late, now. You're over the hill, mate: your hair's grey, your dick's shrivelled, your stomach's soft. You might've been a player once, but no bird'd look at you twice these days. You may as well stick with Jodie.” He gives a hiccup, adds thoughtfully: “And you know something: if you tell yourself you love her often enough, it'll feel like the truth eventually.”

Angus knows that his friend's boozy confidences have far more to do with Dave's own marriage than with Angus's relationship to Jodie. Still, he can't help but wonder how much

of what Dave has said is true of him, too. Now – and in the past. The unthinkable question. Would he leave if he could? And if he could go back, what would he do?

*

Angus had not been an uncommonly principled or ethical boy, and his ties of affection to Jodie had already frayed, but he possessed a keen and refined sense of loyalty, of obligation, along with an unwillingness to inflict any sort of pain on others. In the face of his mother's appalling treachery, and then of Jodie's unswerving, and thoroughly undeserved, loyalty – she had been willing to give up what he knew was an almost inconceivably wonderful opportunity to prove her love for him, like some knight from a medieval fable. Jodie was like a saint, perhaps, was anyway someone bigger and better than he could ever hope to be. He determined then, in the intensity of those moments after she told him the details of what had transpired, when shame and fury directed at his mother were almost inextricably bound up with admiration and indignation on Jodie's behalf, that he would not be the one to leave her; that if the relationship were to end, Jodie would have to be the one to make that call. He did not suspect, at eighteen, that this would never happen, that this impulsive promise would bind him in ties of moral obligation as securely and as finally as any marriage vows, to this girl who he barely knew. He waited for her to tire of him, all through uni, but saint-like, she remained loyal and true, never wavering in her devotion, her desire. She loved him.

They married, despite his mother's disapproval, his friends' bemusement, and when the children came along, Angus supported his family lovingly, unquestioningly, all this he did, determined, resolute in his youthful decision. And though he came to believe that he loved his wife, he did not, of course, remain faithful.

The first affair had been almost accidental. During his year's internship in Plaice and Warbelow's London office, he'd worked hard – had committed himself to learning (and earning) as much as he could in that time, knowing that he had been given an incredible opportunity to learn about what had been decided would be his particular area of law –

successions. While the historic entails and archaic rules of succession and inheritance of the English gentry and aristocracy weren't directly applicable to his work with grazing families, many of the thorny, sometimes insurmountable issues surrounding inheritance were clearly universal. Observing his immediate supervisor's patient and ever-diplomatic handling of families in crisis – shocked, hostile, angry, grieving ; or alternatively dealing with an ageing paterfamilias, attempting to guide the sometimes despotic and stubborn elderly into a just distribution of their estates – provided him with knowledge of a sort that couldn't be found elsewhere, and that he knew would stand him in good stead in his subsequent career.

So once in London, he had thrown himself into work. He started early, left late, and had left himself barely any time to really get to know either London, or either of his flatmates: his putative landlord, Martin (a distant cousin, independently wealthy) seemed perfectly happy to keep the dull colonial at a distance; the other, Amelia, a pretty Arts undergraduate, whose brother had attended the same boarding school as Martin, and was almost an invisible presence, so rarely did the two meet – the only evidence of her domicile the occasional jug of daisies in the kitchen, damp underwear left hanging on the back of the bathroom door.

It wasn't until a near disaster just outside the flat that they were thrown together. Angus had been walking home from the tube – early for him, just past seven on a Friday evening. Most of the partners had left for a weekend party at the senior partner's Devon estate, and the rest of the office had taken advantage of their absence, left early. He'd been invited out for drinks by several colleagues, but had declined, not for the first time, had instead made copies of several cases that were of particular interest, taking them home to read. He had just rounded the corner, was walking briskly across the road, directly in front of their flat – a Georgian conversion in not-yet-trendy Notting Hill – when he saw a car scream through the lights, then skid on the damp crowded traffic, and swerve as if in slow motion straight towards him. Of course, it wasn't really moving slowly, and he had had to move quickly, to almost throw himself out of the car's way – which he managed with only centimetres and seconds to spare. The car had swerved back into the traffic with a screech, but Angus

had lain on the footpath, dazed, unable to move or speak, for a few moments, while a crowd of helpers had gathered about him. They had been a rather indecisive lot – no one had thought to call an ambulance, rather they had checked that he was alive and relatively unharmed – one taking his pulse, another putting him into the recovery position, then helping him sit up when it was evident that he was intact and quite conscious, been reassured that he lived nearby and would be okay. There had been a few minutes of hemming and hawing and then they had all drifted off to their own important Friday night engagements, leaving Angus still sprawled in the middle of the footpath, grazed and bruised and utterly shocked.

He would have continued to sit there indefinitely had not Amelia chanced upon him as she was leaving the flat. It had taken a moment for her to recognise him, she told him later, she had assumed he was a drunk, and would have turned her head, hurried past, as one did. But then her eye was caught by the glint of his cufflink (a gift from his mother on leaving for London) and she had paused and looked more closely, recognised him with a jolt, and hurried over, concerned, to render him assistance.

Angus had been unable to give a coherent account of his being there, clutching desperately to his briefcase, his legs bent oddly, his pinstripe blazer torn, tie askew, trousers damp and muddied, and Amelia had taken charge. Having ensured that there had been no serious damage, she enlisted two amiably pissed, but hefty passers-by to help him up and half drag, half carry him, protesting weakly that he was in fact fine, could manage himself, thanks anyway, up the stairs to the flat, where they dumped him unceremoniously on the lounge. There he had sat, stunned and blinking while Amelia brought him whisky, then set about tending his wounds in a brisk, matter of fact way: helping him out of his damaged blazer, rolling up his sleeves and trouser legs to inspect the damage (grazes, nothing more) on his forearms shins and knees, swiping it all over gently with diluted antiseptic.

After his second glass of whisky Angus began to feel less dazed, and though the sting and throb of his wounds was suddenly evident, he found himself oddly comfortable, in what was by any definition a rather peculiar situation – him lying prone on the settee, an almost

unknown, but extremely pretty (in an understated English way) girl fiercely concentrating on tending him in a uncommonly intimate fashion, unbuttoning his shirt, unbuckling pants, wiping and rinsing and patting and rubbing and bandaging with cool gentle fingers. Angus lay silent, enjoying himself unexpectedly, the warmth rising from his feet through to the tips of his fingers, and then feeling the almost forgotten pleasure of an erection.

Amelia had barely spoken all through her ministrations, merely murmuring and tutting, apologising softly in the face of his occasional gasp of pain, but when finally he was cleaned and bandaged to her satisfaction, she leaned back against the sofa with a sigh, giving him a slow grin. “Well,” she said, her smile made incredibly sexy by the gap between her two front teeth, “There you go. My Girl Guide first-aid badge came in handy after all. Don’t know what Brown Owl would say about the whisky, though. I don’t think that was on the list of approved remedies. I could do with one myself now.” But she stayed beside him on the lounge, leaning back and folding her arms as if unwilling to move. “Now tell me, Angus, what on earth happened to you? You’re not drunk, are you? I mean I couldn’t smell anything on your breath – well only the whisky, but I’ve gave you that, didn’t I?”

He explains to her, then, his voice slow, the story coming in weird little spasms – a rush and a pause, mimicking his heartbeat, irregular, barely coherent. But for once he’s not worried about sounding stupid, sounding less intelligent than he really is. And the girl, who has poured herself a whisky, now, and wriggled out of her trench-coat, having given up whatever plans she had previously made for her evening’s entertainment, is leaning back beside him listening, asking the occasional pertinent question, looking appreciatively appalled, satisfyingly concerned. And for the first time, Angus realises, he’s talking to an English girl without feeling conscious of being Australian – a colonial, raw, uncultured, boorish. In his bombed-out state he’s incapable of attempting to minimise his accent, change his utterances, reconfigure his body language from its open Australian looseness to mirror his more frigid British counterparts. It’s probably nothing that anyone else would notice, but Angus is conscious of the change: he’s sitting as he would sit at home, letting knees hang wide, sprawling, shoulders slump, stomach muscles unclench – letting that old

upper lip go soft, he guesses, and it's got something to do with Amelia.

It's not long before their conversation, too, takes twists and turns and dives that he hasn't experienced since he'd been away, and very soon they've ordered an Indian meal from the local take away, and sharing their second bottle of wine – the first having been polished off soon after the whiskey.

She's easy to be with Amelia – interested and articulate. She's a country girl, from a village in Dorset, and is finding it difficult, she says, to get used to London. She's come up to study history – although she'd initially been accepted into the local regional university, she'd thought it might be fun to come to the city instead. But it's not fun at all. Although the university course – she's studying history and political economy – is just what she'd wanted, and she's doing well, she's lonely, has failed to make the expected social connections, feels hideously rural, dull, and not up to scratch. All the other girls in her classes seem faster, brasher, cleverer than she – and connected. And whatever hopes she'd had of leading some sort of friendly alternative home life have been utterly dashed – with both Martin and Angus both away most of the time and neither of them seemingly much inclined to socialise anyway. The few friends she'd had who'd made their way to London had all drifted their separate ways – their occasional meetings (she'd been heading to one this evening, but was more than pleased to have an excuse to call it off) growing more and more strained as their lives, and points of commonality drifted further and further apart. She is, she tells him with a sad shrug, seriously thinking of calling it quits, heading back home, starting again at the local university. Maybe London life just isn't for her, she'd admitted. And she missed her parents, her siblings (four of them) and their small dairy farm more than she liked to admit. She'd been so desperate to leave – and now, she said with a wry shake of her head, all she wanted was to be back there again.

Angus finds himself reciprocating, telling her how hopeless he feels, how he's out of his depth in the practice, how he's working like a madman so that no one will notice that he hasn't a clue what he's doing. He tells her – and it's not something he's even admitted to himself really, that he's not even sure that he wants to do law, that it's just what has been

expected of him, there hadn't really been a choice. That like her, he'd much rather be in the country, on the property that his brother's running. That the best time he's had in the last couple of years was during the university holidays, when he had to work out there, shearing, fencing, working hard physically. His mother, he knew, had considered it a sort of punishment – a way to keep him away from his girlfriend, his mates – but Angus had been thoroughly content.

And then he's telling her, hesitantly at first, about Jodie, about his mother's proposition, about their illicit engagement.

"You're kidding!" Amelia appears satisfyingly shocked by his confession. "You were only kids. You can't make that sort of decision at that age and be expected to stick by it. That's ... that's crazy. You could end up married to someone you don't really –" She hesitates, as if aware that she's saying something that shouldn't be said, instead breaks into her own comment with a question "I'm sorry. I'm making a big assumption here. It's only that ... Do you love her, Angus? Are you missing her?"

"No." He answers before he thinks, and is shocked by the force and immediacy of his negative – quickly tries to qualify it. "Well, what I mean is, I do love Jodi, definitely, yes. Love her. But I'm so busy here – I haven't had a moment to miss anybody really." The girl's scepticism is obvious in the tone of her voice, her expression, "You don't actually sound all that definite, Angus. I'm busy too, but I know I'm missing home. That sounds like rubbish."

Angus shrugs, and reaches out for the wine bottle, fills his glass, then hers.

"Yeah, you're right. I don't know really. I don't what I think about anything, right now." He takes a sip. "To be honest, what I'd like to do is just stay here, forever."

"What, stay in England? Working your guts out? Doesn't sound like much fun to me."

"It's not that. I don't mind the work." He fumbles to find what it is that he means. "It's just that here, I don't have to be anyone. I am no one. There's no one here that expects anything of me. I'm just this – just this kind of organism, going through life, soaking things up. Nobody has any expectations of me. There's nothing to prove."

“But I’d have thought you’d have a lot to prove. All the stuff you’re learning, being in a new place, being Australian.” She sounds puzzled.

“Yeah. There’s that. But in a way, that’s not about me. Nothing’s personal, I don’t have to be that, that person everyone wants me to be, the person I’ve been all my life. You know – you’re from a small town. I’m dependable Angus Garrow, always reliable, always doing the right thing, always doing what I say I’ll do. If I go to work and I’m an absolute arsehole to say, one of the secretaries, it almost doesn’t mean anything. I don’t mean anything.”

“But that’s exactly what I hate about being here. I’m invisible. No one knows me, no one cares what I do. It’s like here, I don’t exist. I just want to go home. It’s like nothing I do touches anyone – and I hate it.” Amelia sounds miserable all of a sudden, close to tears. Angus moves closer, pats her awkwardly on the knee.

“Hey. It’s okay. I’ve met you now. You’re not invisible to me.”

She wipes her eyes angrily. “Oh, it’s stupid, isn’t it? I thought it would be so bloody fantastic. You know, you have all those ideas and dreams about uni, about making it in the big city – it’s something you’ve waited for all your life, you’re grown up and you don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do and you can make all your own decisions, go where you want, when you want, with whoever you want. But there’s no one I want to see, no one to go anywhere with. I go to uni, I hand in my essays, I go to the library. I see all these people hanging out – they all seem to know one another, have places to go. But me, I feel like I’m pretending. I just want to go back home, and wake up in the morning to the sounds of my little sister and brother racing around the house, my mum yelling at me to get up and get ready for school. Everything I was desperate to get away from. God, I’m sorry,” suddenly she’s attempting a grin. “You’ve just been practically knocked over by a car, and here I am, whining. Just ignore me – it’s the grog.”

“Hey, listen.” Angus thinks for a moment. “I was going to say, why don’t we go out to one of those places you always wanted to go – and really – there are places I really wanted to go to, too, before I actually got here. What about some club? We could listen to some music. Is there a show you want to see?”

“Oh, but I’m really broke,” doubtfully, “and really, you’ve had a bit of a shock, you’re not really in any state to go out.”

“I’ve got tons of cash, so it’ll be my pleasure. I’ve barely spent anything since I’ve been here. But you’re right – not tonight. I am too sore. And to be honest, I think I’m probably too pissed.” He gives a regretful smile

She touches his knee gently. “You should probably have a bath, go to bed. You’re going to be really sore tomorrow.”

He can feel the return of his erection, captures her hand beneath his.

“Actually,” his voice catches in his throat, “a bath is exactly what I need. But I think,” his voice creaky, almost apologetic, he pushes her unresisting hand further up his thigh, the manoeuvre unmistakable, “I think I might need some help with that. Maybe you could ..?” She moves closer, he can hear her breathing, fast and shallow, her other hand slips around his waist, under his shirt, her fingers warm this time across his chest. “I could,” she says. “What ever you need, just say.”

It’s an odd affair, not an affair of passion for either of them, or so it seems to Angus, but one of mutual need – two lonely transiting souls needing companionship for a period of months: a warm body to share a bed, a warm heart to share the occasional bottle of wine, film, trip to the theatre, dance, the occasional gallery. The inevitability of the relationship’s end – it is limited from the start by Angus’s necessary return home – doesn’t make the whole thing any more urgent or desperate, rather the opposite, as they both seem to take a certain pleasure in the temporary nature of their relationship. And there’s barely a raised eyebrow from Martin, who, even taking into account his vagueness, his virtual absence, couldn’t have failed to notice.

In the end, the affair ended well before Angus left – and fortuitously only weeks before Jodie’s surprise appearance. Amelia had gone home after her second term holiday, and had taken a job as a residential tutor at a local boarding school, deciding to defer her studies until the following year.

Angus had missed Amelia far more than he had imagined he would. He hadn’t heard from her at all, had been informed by a bemused Martin of her decision, and had spent several weeks working hard, staying back ever later at the office, giving himself as little spare time

as possible – anxious to avoid the nagging sense of loss he felt whenever he was at home alone. He had resisted for weeks the temptation to call and speak to her on the phone, but found himself hoping, every day, for some word of or from her – a postcard, a phone message. But there was nothing. It wasn't until he overheard Martin, on the phone to some friend, mentioned that he'd met up with Amelia's brother, Dan, who'd told him that Amelia was on the mend, that he had even the faintest inkling that the affair might have meant more to Amelia than to him, and that she'd sensibly taken herself away to avoid getting in any deeper.

He was stricken – and wondered at his own stupidity: of course, this terrible hollowness that he'd been feeling, that he'd thought was merely boredom, or over work, was in fact the result of missing her, missing Amelia. He had determined to see her – had planned a trip to Dorset, had gone as far as to book a room in a pub near her school, had prepared in his mind a sort of speech, a conversation, had half made up his mind that he should, as Amelia had suggested once or twice, rethink his hasty youthful promise to Jodie. He had even attempted a 'Dear John' letter, had begun many times, but could never overcome his sense of cravenness. Anyway, it was all to be for nothing: Jodie had arrived without warning, the day before his planned departure to Dorset. There had been no trip, no resumption of his casual affair with Amelia, no test of whether it was in fact something stronger, bigger than a temporary affair. And there had been no 'good-bye' letter written to Jodie, then or ever. Jodie had moved in with him for his last month in London. She had not the slightest inkling of what had been going on. They had returned to Australia as planned and were married a year later, his degree complete, his position at what was then Silvers and Harwood secured. His mother was unhappy, but resigned; Jodie coolly beautiful, triumphant.

Angus threw himself into his busy new life, never really let himself examine his feelings. He avoided thinking about Amelia – he had always been good at that – but he couldn't control his dreams. Frequently during those first few years after his return from England he would wake feeling nauseous and somehow homesick, missing the cool touch of the sweet English girl. On the rare occasions that he thinks about her now, it is those first moments

that he best remembers – her unconditional kindness, her gentle touch, as she cleaned and dressed his grazed limbs. Sometimes, when he’s feeling his most bereft, barren of all powerful feeling, he wonders whether what he’d felt for Amelia had been love, after all.

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

“Stepford perfection hides dark interior”

by Caro McNally

I had coffee with a couple of friends the other day, and inevitably the conversation got around to the topic *du jour*, the bizarre tale of Mrs Jodie Garrow and her long-missing child.

Like most of the nation we’d all seen the interviews and statements, gawked over the photos of the blondely pretty, impossibly preserved forty-three-year-old, watched her carefully choreographed television interview and seen snaps of that happy, happy, happy nuclear family.

We’re all around her age. One of my friends worked out that she’d actually attended the same small city college at the same time as Jodie. They didn’t know one another, of course: Sophia was in Communications, Jodie in the then brand-new Faculty of Nursing, but maybe they sat together at the bistro, or bumped into one another in the library queue. Who knows? We none of us knew her – and we none of us even knew anyone like her. We’ve all exclaimed in disbelief at her professed naiveté: how could a bright girl of our generation – and I like to think we Gen-Xers were no less savvy than teenagers now – how on earth could such a girl have got knocked up and not known about it until it was too late? And how could she go through the whole birth drama alone, without reading up a little, finding out something about the legal ramifications of adoption and so forth? It’s unimaginable, and – we all agreed – frankly unbelievable.

There’s something highly ‘sus’ – in the parlance of our long-ago youth – about the whole thing. It was easier – much easier – to believe that she’d done away with

the child (and we could all imagine that grisly act; it's not all that hard to dispose of a not-quite-three-kilo, 22-inch newborn, after all, not hard to drive to a secluded spot – a dam, a river, a deserted industrial bin – to dump said child) than to believe anyone could have been so naive. We're talking about the late eighties here, not the nineteen fifties.

Not since the Chamberlain case has the story of a missing child so gripped the Australian imagination. In case you're wondering, yes – I was too young to have really understood all the ins and the outs of the Chamberlain debacle, though I do remember (or is it just the footage from the film, masquerading as a memory?) some rather heated discussions, and the polarisation of opinion between those who wanted to shoot the dingo, and those who would have taken pleasure in shooting poor Lindy. Not since the Chamberlain case has the nation been so galvanised, so shaken from its usual apathy and indifference. Forget about conversations around the water cooler – I've been accosted by little old ladies at the newsagents, those customarily gentle blue-rinse types on their way to bowls, or to meals-on-wheels or whatever, who practically froth at the mouth when confronted with front page pics of the woman in question.

“Just look at her,” one little old lady spat, completely without encouragement. “So cool, so calm. Not a hair out of place. Ought to be strung up, women like that. There's women out there'd give their right arm to have a baby. Oh, that poor little mite. You hate to think what she did with it.”

There's the photographs her minders have supplied for use in the media, no doubt to make Jodie Garrow look as mild, as respectable, as appealing, as just-one-of-us as possible. Oh, but how they've missed their mark. The one taken out the front of her – dare I use the term? – McMansion, the rendered, two-storey job that seems oddly out of place in the dignified university town of Arding. (I lived in Arding myself as a student, and *chez* Garrow is a far cry from the charmingly dilapidated – and utterly freezing in winter – weatherboard cottage of my student days.) Garrow is pictured standing calmly on the doorstep (the front of her 4WD just nosing its way into the viewfinder, though the sleek black Audi coupe is perfectly clear) with her arms around her teenage daughter – who provides the only jarring note with her

scowl – and her young son, who’s standing beside her looking positively boy-scoutish in his private-school uniform with his short back and sides, his boater. The lawyer husband (from a wealthy grazing family), handsome, tall, obviously supportive, is standing protectively behind them all.

And then there’s Jodie herself – her hair neatly bobbed, glistening, the expensive jeans, the padded vest that’s *de riguer* for all good middle-class mums, the single row of pearls around her neck. She’s slim, she’s pretty, she’s blonde; her teeth are perfectly white and even. She’s the kind of woman that I – and a lot of women I know – love to hate. No doubt she’s a good enough woman – a paragon of a mother (now that it suits her!), a good citizen, working at the school canteen every week, running the netball team, volunteering at the hospital once a month. But what difference does it make in the end? What difference does any of that make to the child that went missing?

In the photos her expression isn’t precisely joyous – I mean she’s not grinning, no one could be that silly; but she’s not exactly grim, either, is she? You can’t see any discomfort, any sense of having transgressed in any way, can you? She looks calm, collected, beautiful, cold. Untouched and untouchable. And that’s why we’re so suspicious. We get the sense that she remains unmoved by her own situation, that she’ll be buffered, protected, by all that material privilege. In a way, she’s representative of all that’s wrong with modern Western culture, isn’t she? She’s got everything she needs and wants – I suppose so many of us do – but there’s no questioning of her right to all these privileges. We all know what her life is like: her house is dirty, she calls a cleaner. The car engine’s playing up; she can buy a new one. Her teeth aren’t as good as they used to be. Well, cap ’em. Sebastian or Olivia aren’t happy at one school, send ’em to another. A baby you don’t want? Easy, just get rid of it.

And whatever happened to that baby all those years ago – whether or not she sold it to ‘Simon and Rosemary’ on the advice of poor old Matron O’Malley; or did the unmentionable, unthinkable – whatever it was that happened to that child, you can almost be certain that it’s never given her a restless night’s sleep, never added a single wrinkle to that smooth (botoxed?) brow.

You also have to wonder about the Garrows' very savvy manipulation of the media – what sort of people would have the nous to go to the media themselves (surely it's like inviting a vampire over the threshold)? And to offer a generous reward for information just days before the police initiate their search? These people are too clever by half, methinks. Then there's the language of Garrow's public statement: it's as brief and as uninformative as possible, every word measured. There's no way to read anything significant between those lines, because there's simply nothing there. Even in her single television interview she remains chillingly composed: there is no sense of stress or strain, no hesitation, no erring from the script in any way. Jodie Garrow's husband is a lawyer, and no doubt she's been prepped by the best, but still – you'd think there'd be a slight bursting out of emotion, even a quaver.

And then there's her excuse – that she'd been young and silly – that she'd made a mistake, a series of mistakes. Well, it's lame. Actually it's more than lame – it's a criminal misuse of language. We've all been young and silly, and we've all made mistakes.

But this wasn't just a 'mistake', Jodie. This was a baby.

twenty-three

Of all the things that have been said about her this last should mean nothing, she should be immune by now, she has been deserted by her friends, denounced by her own mother, accused of having the face of a killer – and yet nothing has rocked her as much as this. Something in the woman's writing, her tone, has hit something raw in Jodie, something vital. That woman, that writer, she can't even bear to think of her name now. Once – in some former life – she'd actually been someone whose writing Jodie had admired, whose opinions she'd respected.

Part of her, and it's a big part of her, still wants to admire this woman, she imagines writing a letter, explaining herself, providing a little potted bio – stories from her not so

straightforward life, trying to win this woman over, to have her see her as she sees herself. Look, she'd like to tell her – these were my parents, my brothers, the house – not home – I grew up in, this was my life as a child. It's not what you assume; things were hard, I wasn't loved, I wasn't told that I was special, as you no doubt were, as so many others were, I was never told that the world was my oyster, that I could have what I wanted, if only I worked hard enough, used my brains.

She'd like to show this woman just how limited, how stunted, her expectations had been – that everything she had she'd had to fight hard for, sharpened tooth and bloodied claw, that nothing, not one thing, not her neat blond hair, not the handsome husband, not the two car garage in the nice suburban street, that none of this had come easily, none of this had come, as it were, naturally. She'd like an apology from the woman, like her to offer an alternative story, more sympathetic, a narrative that included not only her mistake, but some understanding of all that had led to that moment – because even now, or perhaps even more now as she ages, as she sees what a different, what a difficult road she'd had to travel, now she has more sympathy for that girl – so determined to succeed, so hopelessly unworldly, so desperately alone.

Another part of her would like to damage the other woman, to berate her, to make her see what she can't see from her own privileged position. She'd like to make her see things differently. She'd like to make her eat her words. She knows exactly what she looks like, the writer, though she has never met her, never even seen a photograph – knows her type inside out – wearing all black, her hair sleek and straight, her funky IQ enhancing spectacles, retro-reddened lips, her Camper-clad feet. She knows this woman's position in the schoolroom of yesteryear – she'd have been a popular girl, bright, cool, well-connected, well-heeled, and Jodie knows too that she'd never have been invited to her birthday party, or asked to play on her team. How dare she sneer at Jodie's ideals, her yearnings, laugh at the old-fashioned string of pearls, at the Country Road outfit, the dull middle class respectability.

How she'd love to push Ms. Caro McNally up to the glass and force her to look at herself,

to admit to her own entrenched thoughts about privilege, to concede that if an establishment does exist, a place where the powerful and influential congregate, this writer is not, as she so loudly and frequently proclaims, on the edge, a coolly observant outsider, but smack bang in the middle. She, not Jodie, is the insider. Because, unlike Jodie, Caro McNally belongs.

Jodie knows – as her mother, and this woman – have pointed out, that she’s had to abandon one life in order to have the life she’s living now. She has imagined, frequently, the life she might have had with that child: she’d have been a single mother, her socio-economic status always difficult, regardless of her education, occupation, her life one of hard graft, like her own mother’s but even worse surely, because unlike her own mother Jodie had been capable of seeing, and desiring those other possibilities. She’d seen the alternative so clearly, she could almost smell it – the small rooms, dingy furnishing, grinding work, the bitter stink of poverty, of desperation, desolation, the regret that would colour every aspect of her diminished expectations. She’d known it was possible to live a life very different to the one her parents had provided her with – a life of solidity, security, prosperity and the understanding, at the very least, of posterity. And though she knows, now she’s older, that grief, sadness, bitterness, sorrow, lurk beneath the surface of all lives, that in the end, death, decay can’t be avoided, there’s no denying the fact that most jagged edges can be smoothed, that money and social status can ease every journey, every transaction, from birth to death and all that lies between.

All she wants, all she has ever wanted, is a life without grubbiness, a life without chaos, a life that follows a clear trajectory of progress, of achievement. Surely, she thinks, it wasn’t that much to ask.

twenty-four

It seems utterly surreal to Hannah that right now, with all that’s going on, nothing much has actually changed. This morning before she’s even out of bed, her mother, who’s come

in to deposit a pile of neatly ironed clothes on top of her television set – which is the only area of clear horizontal space available, other than Hannah herself – has already made the usual vain request that Hannah do something about her room. Bending to pick up a discarded chocolate wrapper, she has asked the gods – because what’s the point in asking Hannah, who’s lying there with her eyes tightly shut, feigning sleep, how it can be that Hannah has absolutely no respect for her own space; which is to say, her own self. All the new furniture, the curtains, the pretty carpet, the computer. She gives a final gusty sigh, suggests her daughter get out of bed if she doesn't want to be late for school, and leaves the room. When she’s gone, Hannah opens her eyes, but lies still a few minutes longer, marvelling at her mother’s capacity to find the time, the energy, to give a shit about the state of Hannah’s bedroom. At a time like this.

But that’s the thing: their world has changed irrevocably, unequivocally, inutterably, and in ways that Hannah can barely grasp – but somehow, on the surface, nothing has changed at all. A tedious concern with insubstantial detail still motivates her mother, this woman who it seems she knows now even less than she did two months ago.

How can it be that even in these extreme circumstances – she’s under investigation, possibly for murder, for fuck’s sake! – how can it be that even in these completely unimagined unimaginable jaw-droppingly bizarre circumstances, this woman who says she’s her mother (but who knows, given her mother’s crazy past, perhaps Hannah belongs to someone else, she can only hope) is still keeping religiously to her pre-revelation routine. She is still jumping up every morning, walking the dog, showering, blow-drying her hair, dressing in her sensible trousers, her shirts and quilted vests, applying her foundation, her mascara, her lippy, all before seven. Then emptying the dishwasher and hanging out two loads of washing before waking Hannah and her brother Tom promptly at seven twenty-five. There will be a rack of warm toast ready for her when Hannah wanders downstairs, a glass of orange juice will be filled without asking. Her mother will be cheerfully cleaning or cooking or perhaps preparing their lunch boxes. Not one aspect of her pitiful routine will have altered; not one element of the household upkeep will be slipping out of her mother’s iron-willed control.

Hannah wonders, briefly, whether her mother succumbs to despair when she and her brother and father are safely out of the house, when she's alone. She imagines her mother curled foetally on the bed, tears sliding down her face, wailing, but dismisses the idea almost immediately. Her mother, Hannah concludes before sliding reluctantly from her tangled, junk-strewn bed, and making a start on her own rather complex morning toilette – is now a shell, not a person.

Hannah's standing in front of the mirror, naked apart from her undies, her hands under her full breasts, contemplating the effects of a combined pushing up and together, when her mother walks in again, this time bearing a collection of discarded shoes. She picks her way carefully across the room and tosses the shoes noisily into the wardrobe, without comment, never once looking Hannah's way. By the time her mother knocks over a stack of precariously piled books, then steps on a half-eaten piece of pizza that's been left on the floor, Hannah's primed for an altercation. She'd do almost anything to see a ripple in that placid surface, a crack in that armour. To find out if there's actually anything underneath.

Hannah puts her hands on hips and bellows: "You should knock, Mum. How many times do I have to say it. This is *my room*. Can't you read? You're always going on about respect – well, why don't you practise what you preach occasionally, try respecting my space for a change?"

Her mother says nothing. She picks the mangled pizza from her shoe and lets it fall onto the carpet, treads around it carefully and heads for the door, then pauses, turns back: "Hannah," her voice is cool, unhurried. "I really wish you'd go a little easier on the eyeliner, sweetheart. Dr Guillfoyle won't tolerate it, you know that. You'll end up on detention. And you do look a little – what's the word you girls use? – a little *skanky*, if you don't mind me mentioning it." She smiles sweetly in her daughter's general direction before turning back down the hallway.

Hannah rushes after her, livid. "You're a cow," she screams at the implacably retreating

figure of her mother. “Did you know that? You are such. A. Fucking. Cow.”

She sees Tom hovering, peering nervously around his bedroom door. He backs up as his sister advances on him, red faced, topless.

“And you, you little – you little *cunt*,” she says the word loudly, deliberately. “You better watch out. If I were you I’d keep well away from her. She’s murdered one kid – and who knows, you could be next.” She shoves him viciously and he lets out a squeal, scurries back into his room.

This time she’s done it. Finally, Hannah’s gone too far. Her mother marches back up the hall, is there before the girl can retreat to her room, lock the door. She plants herself directly in front of Hannah, blocking her way, her face devoid of expression, but her eyes are icy, hard. She draws herself up to her full height – and it’s somewhat of a surprise to Hannah who has imagined herself to have outgrown her mother, that she’s still a few inches taller – then draws back her hand and slaps her, slaps her hard, right across the face. It’s the first time, the only time, that Hannah has been hit by her mother.

“Don’t you ever,” her mother speaks quietly, evenly, her eyes never leaving Hannah’s face, “use that word. Not in this house. Not in my hearing. Not ever.”

twenty-five

Jodie is quietly going mad. On the surface things at home seem to be running smoothly, the same as ever. Jodie is good – is a genius really – at keeping up appearances. Thanks to the few extra hours a week put in by the new cleaning lady, Elaine, (the woman who had cleaned for them for years, Margaret, had resigned soon after the news of the Elsa Mary hit the papers), the house is kept as immaculately tidy as ever. The clothes are washed and ironed and put away as efficiently as always; the evening meals are as delicious and nutritious as ever, if slightly less adventurous. She is on time for any pick-ups and drop-

offs that Angus can't do – though there is no lingering anymore, no chatting with the other mums at the tennis court, the drama club, the swimming pool.

And Jodie looks much the same – she hasn't let herself go in any way – though her weekly visits to the gym have been replaced by early morning walks and the occasional session of Wii – aerobics. Her hair is still done regularly, she has recently found a hairdresser who works from home, rather than visiting her old gossipy salon. She dresses as usual – always neatly, conservatively. If anyone was watching – and they are, she knows that – nobody would notice that anything about her had changed. But it has. How could it not? Inconceivable that everything, that she, would stay the same under this much pressure.

Though she's surprised at the direction this madness, this obsession, takes.

The madness – because what else can she call it ? – began after she'd reread that McNally woman's piece online. After her first horrified reading, she'd thrown away the paper, but a week or so later, having decided to conduct a somewhat less hysterical evaluation of what she now only dimly recalled, she'd Googled the story and reread, an act which only confirmed her initial horror and distress. But she'd been surprised to discover that in fact the online article had no real end. At the bottom the piece had been opened to readers' comments and she'd read on, despite her growing sense of disgust, almost as if hypnotised. Had been assaulted by the opinion of “Bess and Annie of Newcastle” that “women like that are the worst sort of all rich enough to think they can get away with anything she should be put in prison and the key thrown away.” And then there was “Florence of Pittwater”, who agreed with the writer that Jodie Garrow in fact “represents the very worst of the McMansion dwelling aspirational, with their increasingly heavy environmental footprint, their privileged private-school progeny.” Three comments discussed the probability of her having had botox (something about the position of her cheeks, and the set of her lips, maybe also her forehead, which apparently isn't quite as creased as it should be). There are numerous sentimental outpourings mourning the loss of the baby: “Beautiful Elsa Mary we are thinking of you allways with jesus now. RIP.” There isn't one comment in defence of Jodie or condemning the woman's vicious spiel, save a rather self-righteous

suggestion that “however clear it seems that the Garrow woman has indeed murdered her child, we should not forget that under our legal system innocence must be presumed until proven otherwise.” But the cruellest comment of all, the comment that had made her draw in her breath, had come from a TS of Arding, NSW: “I have known the Garrow woman for most of my life, and though she acts as if butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, she is from a rubbish family – and is rubbish herself. She killed that baby. I know it. We all know it.”

She had been unable to stop returning to the site – watching mesmerised as the comments increased, until there were more than two hundred, three, then four, posted from all over the world. The affected indignation, the condemnation, the calls to bring back the death penalty, the comparisons with this or that other notorious murderers of infants – Kathleen Folbigg, Andrea Yates – or with those other infamous mothers of dead or missing children – Lindy Chamberlain, Sally Clark, Kate McCann – all of them hard faced bitches, all of them obvious child-killers, wrongfully exonerated, protected by some powerful agent or other.

From there she’d made the mistake of following the commentor’s own links. A handful had begun ‘conversations’ (mad rantings usually) on their own blogs, stating their opinions, linking to the original article. And then there had been comments, more links to be followed ... It seemed to multiply infinitely – from this blog to the next, from one discussion forum to another, from one online news site feature to personal blog; the conversations, speculations, opinions, rants, sprays, commentary spiralled endlessly. Some featured images of her, some of these distorted, enhanced. There was one picture that had been given a radical makeover. It looked like a photo taken at a charity ball she’d attended a few years back, she recognised the dress, the background, but her face had been altered – all her wrinkles and creases had been removed so her skin was unnaturally smooth, and much paler than was natural. The colour of her eyes – the little bit of iris showing – had been brightened until they were a strange and frightening electric blue, her lips had been thinned, made to look grim and hard, and her teeth, originally bared in an awkward smile, had somehow been lengthened until they were almost fang-like. Her hair had somehow become a stiff shiny helmet, brassier and glossier than in reality. She looked sinister, evil,

like something from a horror movie – a counterfeit human, struggling to contain a demon.

She eventually discovers a site dedicated solely to Elsa Mary – complete with weird sentimental hand-drawn pictures of a baby that resembles no child she has ever seen – with impossibly large (and tear-filled) blue eyes, round cheeks, a perfect pink rosebud mouth. Somehow it's so impossibly sweet it's sinister. Below this is an artist's impression of what – based on the bleary photograph taken in the maternity ward (also displayed) – Elsa Mary would like like now, at twenty-six. A pale and blandly pretty woman with nondescript blonde hair, with some vague resemblance to Jodie herself at that age. It was unlikely to lead to any accurate information – though perhaps, if it received serious publicity, it could lead to any number of blandly pretty blonde girls across the country requesting DNA checks. There are the more serious web entries too. She comes across the missing persons site operated by the state and federal police, their request for information regarding the whereabouts of the child Elsa Mary, born December 1986, at Belfield Hospital.

There is one particular site that frightens her – a dedicated site, jodiegarrow.com.au. Obviously maintained by someone local, it contains little commentary, just images of Jodie, Angus and the children over the years, scanned from the local paper, she imagines, and others, obviously taken recently – snapped outside their own front gate, at sporting events, whilst shopping. There's even one of Jodie on her early morning walks with Ruff. She bookmarks this one, determines to show it to Angus, have it investigated, though even she knows there is little hope of finding the blogger in the real world, of having the posts pulled down.

These links, this previously unknown, unexplored, world of the internet both appals and compels her. She reads everything that is written, every day, Googling herself, checking out every reference on technorati, and then rereads, transfixed like a rabbit in the headlights of her own notoriety. She limits herself, at first to one hour, then two – then finds she is rushing through her morning cleaning so she can spend as much time as possible in front of the computer. Soon she is spending almost the entire time the children are at school in the study – breaking only for coffee or to hang out a load of washing. She

is almost shocked when she comes upon the occasional dissenting view, the voice urging calm, circumspection, an end to the idle speculations, occasionally even defending her. Sometimes she can't resist commenting herself, usually something mild and innocuous: *You should all leave this woman alone – what do you know?* She shows nobody, not Angus, not Peter, is ashamed – not only of what is being said, but also that she has succumbed to this sad onanistic surfing. What a term to use, she thinks: *surfing*. This virtual experience so distant from the real thing – with none of the joys of physical exertion, of unity with nature. Instead, this surfing induces nothing but a headache-y disgust – a feeling of excess and indolence, of listlessness and myopia, disengagement and ennui. Jodie has not felt quite like this since her teens, when she'd spent entire days in bed reading or watching television, moving only to surreptitiously replenish her supply of chips, chocolate, Coke, biscuits.

It is like being sucked into a looking-glass world – one that offers up only the most distorted image of her self: depraved, malign, sinister. In a bizarre way it is almost comforting – as if she has already been judged for any act she might commit, past or future. And maybe what she's reading here is the truth: perhaps these nightmare versions of Jodie are revealing something that she's known all along, something rotten at the heart of her.

*

The only person who has kept in any real contact, ringing occasionally to see if she's okay, if she's holding up, is a younger woman, who she knew vaguely from the gym, Amber. Other than attending a few exercise classes together, they'd really not had anything much in common. They mix in very different circles. Amber is a mature-age arts undergraduate, single mother of two very unkempt looking toddlers, one of what Jodie still thought of as Arding's hippy community, though the real hippies were long gone – penniless, but eager, clothes worn, slightly grimy, always smelling vaguely of sandalwood and onions. Jodie doesn't really like her, finds her irritating, but she appreciates the woman's concern, her persistent offers of support, even friendship.

One morning, Amber calls her early, before she's even got Tom out the door for the school bus (having given up driving him since he told her that he'd prefer it if she dropped him several blocks from their regular set down area outside the school gates). She mentions that she has seen the notice of the inquest possibility, her voice breathy and nervous, her statements lilting upwards in a way that sets Jodie's teeth on edge, then asks, a little tentatively, whether she would like to meet for coffee.

Jodie is suddenly wary, says bluntly "Why now?"

"Oh. What do you mean, why now?" The girl sounds nonplussed.

"I'm just not sure why you're ringing me now. If you've seen the announcement. You must know what that means. And you must be reading the papers. It's kind of you to think of me, but it's not really the best time for socialising."

"Oh, I just thought. I thought you might enjoy – the company?" The woman sounds even more nervous, and Jodie feels herself bending a little. There are so few people, after all, who would voluntarily spend time with her these days.

"Oh, look – you're quite right – it would be fun. Thanks. But I'd rather not go out." She risks some slight vulnerability.

"Oh, no. I understand completely. Where would you like to go then? You could come here?" Jodie can sense some slight reluctance.

"No. My place would probably be better, I think. Easier."

"Oh. That would be wonderful." She hears the relief. "What day would suit you?"

"How about today? I haven't got anything on."

"Fantastic," says the girl, her voice full of an inexplicable excitement. "I'll bring the coffee. How do you like it?"

They sit out on the deck with their café-brewed lattes, the girl, obviously anxious, fidgets, twirling her hair around one finger, constantly shifting her position on the cushions, coughing nervously at the start of every sentence. Initially Jodie is resigned, gracious, they talk about this and that – their kids, the local schools, a recent council scandal, the outrageous price of supermarket vegetables. Amber is pleasant enough, and the rare

company should be welcome, but Jodie finds herself irritated by every aspect of her – her accent, her youth, her pale plumpness, but most of all by the intensity of her endlessly banal conversation. It's almost as if she's speaking randomly, that in fact there's something substantial she wants to say, something she's afraid to say, something she's desperately avoiding saying. Eventually Jodie loses patience, breaks into a rambling monologue about non-toxic weed-killer: "Yes, I've heard that garlic's very effective. But I get the feeling there was something you wanted from me, Amber. I mean ... you've been very kind with your phone-calls, but it's not as if we've ever really been close friends – and this does seem an odd time to choose to further out acquaintance, doesn't it?"

Amber's cheeks flare, she gives a slight gasp, breaks into nervous coughing. It takes her a moment to recover, but she rallies, makes a tentative admission: "I actually wanted to ask if you'd come to a meeting...?"

"A meeting?"

Now the words come out in a incoherent rush. "Some friends of mine at uni, actually it's our book club. And our tutor, as well, she organised it, really. Anyway, we were wondering, we thought, maybe ... you'd like to come." She takes a breath, starts again, though only slightly more cogently. "You know I'm doing a couple of units of a BA? Well, I chose a women's studies subject this term – Women and the Media? And so anyway, we were talking, you know, about the treatment of you in the press and we thought. Well it seems that you've really been totally victimised, objectified in the media, and – I mean it's dreadful," her eyes wide, her voice heated, full of indignation, rushing. "It's dreadful, isn't it, we all think so, anyway, the way they've taken to you – without any actual evidence – it's like ... And well it's because you're a woman isn't it? And it's really similar to – what was that woman's name, that one from the eighties? It was before I was born, but there was a movie with Meryl Streep. You know – the dingo woman?"

"You mean Lindy Chamberlain?"

"Yeah. It's exactly like that. Don't you think?"

"Well, no I don't think there's really –"

"Not on the surface, but I mean the way they're treating you and all that, and that writer who had a go of you a few weeks ago in the *Herald*, that McNally woman, that was just so

nasty, wasn't it? Really bitchy? The way she went on about your looks, about the fact that you're well off. As if that makes any difference. It's almost as if she *hopes* that you killed –” the girl stops abruptly mid-sentence, as if appalled by her slip. She sits miserably for a moment, looking down at her feet, her cheeks and now her chest a deep crimson.

Jodie feels some sympathy for her plight, her embarrassment; but more importantly, she feels grateful for her support – however awkwardly expressed, however dubiously come by. And the support of these other, unknown women, championing her, God knows why, fills her with a kind of desperate cheer, some vestige of hope. She breaks into the silence, says drily. “Yes, well, the sisterhood isn't exactly cheering for me, are they? They seem to have forgotten about the presumption of innocence.” She stands up and picks up the empty cups. “I think you're right. I think there is something really nasty going on – there seem to be a whole lot of people out there who hope that I *have* done what they think I've done. You should have a look on the web. It's a – a viper's nest.” Amber looks up at her, surprised, and pleased. Jodie refills the cups, hands one to the other woman. “So, tell me more about this Book Club, maybe I should come.” She shrugs. “Why not. It's not like I've got anything better to do right now, is it? And I suppose it could be a way of meeting people. Making new friends.”

*

She goes to the first meeting that Friday evening. She has fed the children, left a plate ready for Angus, who is working and not expected back until late, cleaned the kitchen and left Tom with a strangely compliant Hannah. It's dark already; she doesn't have to worry about being seen by anyone, or having to encounter the nervous sideways glances she seems to receive from people who would have waved or smile, exchanged greetings, just a few months back. The meeting is being held at a member of the group's home, a part-time academic in the French department, with a PhD according to the brief bio on a website that Jodi has consulted, but who is still living in a campus flat.

She arrives a little late, nervous, she has misread directions, taken wrong turns, then found

it difficult to make out the house numbers on the ill-lit campus streets. A plump dark-haired woman opens the door, greets her, introduces herself as Dr Jillian Stanford, ushers her into the lounge room, where a dozen or so others sit in a loose circle on an assortment of chairs and cushions. A coffee table in the centre of the room is covered with plates of food: slices, cakes, biscuits and cheeses, and there are several bottles of champagne and white wine, and as yet unfilled wine glasses. All of the women are nursing copies of a hefty paperback book, some open, some firmly closed. The conversation falters when Jodie appears in the doorway, and it seems that all the faces are raised expectantly towards Jodie, most smiling widely, welcomingly. There's a short, but intense burst of clapping as she makes her way across the room into the only space left for her to sit. She squeezes between two middle-aged women, who look alarmingly identical, both dressed in black, both with iron grey hair cut into slanting short-fringed bobs, both wearing steel framed glasses, black skirts, and chunky purple lace-up boots – Doc Martens she thinks, though she hasn't noticed any of her own acquaintances wearing them for years. Jodie looks around, expecting to encounter someone she knows, but other than Amber, who smiles at her encouragingly from amongst the floor cushions, they're all strangers.

Dr Stanford waits until the applause has died down, then beams around the room, makes a short speech. "What a wonderful, wonderful welcome. Thank you ladies. And thank you Jodie for joining us. We're really excited to have you here tonight. I'm hopeful that there's a great deal that you can add to our discussion." She beams again at Jodie, her small dark eyes almost disappearing, then waits expectantly for her guest to respond.

"Thank you. It's lovely to have been invited." Jodie hesitates. "But I'm not really sure how I can add to the discussion. I'm afraid I haven't even read the book – in fact I'm not even sure what it is. Amber only invited me the other day, and I forgot to ask." She trails off, embarrassed and confused by the encouraging smiles of the other women.

"Oh." Dr Stanford looks a little put out. "Amber – didn't you explain to Jodie?"

Amber is in the middle of chomping on a biscuit, she swallows, then gives a nervous shrug, her habitual cough. "I, well ... I thought I explained properly? But you know, maybe I didn't? Sorry." She takes another bite, chews vigorously, obviously disinclined to say any more.

“Well, I’m sorry, Jodie. You’ve obviously come here under slightly false – I mean, of course it would be lovely if you could join our book group on a regular basis,” the woman gives a perfunctory beam. “But tonight we wanted *you* here particularly – as a special guest. Occasionally we read a book by a local author and have them in to answer questions and so forth. And every now and then when we’re reading something more technical, we get in an expert to enhance our understanding – usually from the university. I always think we’re so lucky to have that resource to exploit, aren’t we ladies! So when we chose our current book we immediately thought of you. We could have asked someone from the law faculty, I suppose, but we thought that a more personal perspective would be far more interesting. I think hearing about your current experiences might add a add a whole other dimension to our understanding. As Jess, who’s sitting next to you, has pointed out – some of the parallels are quite disturbing. The viciousness of the media coverage, in particular.” The woman falters, as if sensing the mistake, Jodie’s appalled silence.

All of a sudden Jodie knows what it is they’re reading, and understands why it is they’ve invited her here: the book sitting closed on Jess’s lap comes into proper focus. She gazes down at the suddenly familiar cover photograph, speechless.

The woman gives her a warm smile, and pushes her copy of the book closer so that Jodie can read the title. There’s a woman on the cover, her dark hair cut into an unmistakable page-boy, gazing down lovingly at a bright eyed, bonneted infant. *Through My Eyes, The Autobiography of Lindy Chamberlain*. Jodie keeps staring down at the book, though the picture blurs; she feels her eyes prick, her throat tighten.

The room is silent. All Jodie can hear is her own harsh and ragged breathing. She can barely raise her eyes, can’t focus, has to fumble for her handbag, her keys, and stands, gazing blindly about the room at the women, a couple of whom seem embarrassed now, squirming at her obvious distress. “I’m very sorry,” her voice is thin, but steady. “I would never have come if I’d known what it was you wanted. I’m not ... I can’t ... I thought this was just an ordinary book group, that you wanted my company – that you’d invited me to join in, because you ... I had no idea you wanted me as a type of specimen – that you

wanted my story.” She takes one last desperate look around the circle, then stumbles through the crowded silent room, keeping her eyes down, not daring to breath or look up until she is out of there, the hostess following close behind her, entreating, apologising bewilderedly. But Jodie ignores her, runs through the dark to the sanctuary of her car. She drives away fast, without looking back, eyes streaming, heart pounding. Utterly disbelieving.

She had thought that this was what she wanted – champions, supporters, people who wouldn’t condemn, but would try and understand, to put themselves in her shoes – but somehow these women are almost worse than the internet haters. Despite their good intentions Jodie knows she doesn’t really exist for them: she represents a theoretical point, provides an exemplar, whether of good or evil, it doesn’t matter. She’s nothing more than a cardboard cut-out, a vessel waiting to be filled with other people’s desires.

When she arrives home, both children are in bed asleep; Angus has eaten and gone back to the office. She opens a bottle of red, takes it into the study with a glass. Sits down behind Angus’s computer and pours a glass, downs it quickly, pours another. Sips as she reads the latest links, clicks aimlessly through older stories. She doesn’t drink often, not in any significant quantity, anyway, but tonight she needs the numbing effects, the anaesthetic qualities of the alcohol. She can see now, how it happens, to the Amy Winehouses, the Heath Ledgers, the Michael Jacksons – can see why they seek the solace of drugs or alcohol or risky behaviour. Perhaps it makes no difference really, whether they’re feted or maligned, adored or abhorred – either way, they’re endlessly exposed, their every action scrutinised, discussed, critiqued. They’re like butterflies trapped under glass, microbes under a less than benign microscope. Separate. Isolate. Utterly alone

twenty-six

The next morning Jodie sleeps in, doesn’t wake until after ten, which is the latest she’s slept for years. She feels horrible – hung over, her tongue thick, her eyes bleary, her head

aching dully. The television is blaring, but the house is empty, the front door left unlocked. The kitchen is a mess of unwashed dishes, and Ruff is standing on the table, helping himself to leftover toast and egg. Angus must have taken Tom to cricket for once, and as for Hannah, she has no idea; she never has any idea lately what Hannah spends her time doing and has given up asking. She shoos the dog off the table, and locks him outside, starts clearing away the chaos. Under one of the breakfast plates she finds a note written in Tom's babyish scrawl : *call Briget Sullan*, she reads, *she wants to talk to you about last nihgt*. There's a number written more carefully, though all the sevens are back to front.

Bridget Sullan. The name rings no bells. Last night, Tom has written, which she imagines means that the call will have something to do with the meeting she'd run out of so precipitously. She would much rather not discuss last night with anyone – Christ, perhaps Bridget Sullan is a journalist with the local newspaper, angling for the story of this latest humiliation. The way her life is heading now, she wouldn't be surprised. She screws the paper into a ball, tosses it into the bin, forgets about it. Starts methodically stacking the dishwasher, glad to have the distraction, a few solid hours of cleaning that will keep her away from the pull of the internet for a while.

But the woman is persistent, calls again that evening. Jodie has finished cleaning up the dinner dishes, is about to iron the children's uniforms, has plans to bake a slice for next week's recess – though she doesn't know why she bothers; even Tom rarely seems to eat any of the healthy baked goods she so conscientiously provides.

Angus has gone back into work for a few hours; it seems he has work to catch up on almost every evening. He has spent the early afternoon helping Tom with a science project, and then a few hours out in the car with Hannah – who has just got her learner's permit – and other than some inconsequential utterances over dinner he and Jodie have again barely exchanged two words. She picks up the ringing phone without thinking, without checking the number.

“Oh, Jodie.” It's a woman, her voice low, pleasant. “I'm so glad you answered. It's me.

Bridget O’Sullivan. Bridie. ” Jodie says nothing, and the woman goes on, “I was there last night, at book club. It was awful, wasn’t it? I was so embarrassed. Not for you, but for those women. But it’s so strange, you know – until you walked in I had no idea that you were you. I mean – that you were Jodie Garrow. This whole thing ... I really had no idea. True story.”

True story. Suddenly Jodi knows who this is. It might be a woman’s voice, but it’s a voice she knows, a voice she’ll remember forever, a voice she still hears in her dreams occasionally, even though she barely remembers the girl it belongs to in any real sense.

“Bridie? Bridie!” her own voice a whisper, small and light, as if she’s been swept back to the past, to her younger self. Then in hope and wonder. “Oh, God,” a catch in her throat, a half-laugh, half-cry, of relief, of sudden unreasonable hope. “Bridie? Is that really you?”

It is without doubt the same Bridie. She arrives for morning tea the next day, bearing gifts: dandelion tea (good for stress), milk fresh from the cow, a basket of wizened apples (excellent for pies) and most bizarrely, a two dollar bag of mixed lollies (heaps of cobbles) – which are for the two of them, she insists, and not to be shared with the kids. There is no time for awkwardness, Bridie envelops Jodie in a fierce hug, then draws back to take a good look at her face. “My God, you wouldn’t believe how often I’ve thought about you!” She looks about inquisitively, adds: “So, it looks like you got your wish. You got your station wagon. Your rich husband. Your ordinary life.” She grins, her bright eyes almost disappearing in a mass of wrinkles.

“God. You remembered! I can’t believe I actually said that. But yes, I suppose I did.” Adds drily. “Not quite ordinary though. Not anymore.”

Jodie hadn’t recognised her old friend at the book group, but now, seated across from her, she’s unmistakably Bridie. She’s still tiny, only just five foot, and thin, but still sinewy, athletic looking. Her face has thinned out, the features matured, a network of fine lines creasing her eyes and cheeks, but her eyes are still fringed by those huge dark lashes, her smile is still wide and wild. Jodie gazes at her. “It’s unreal, isn’t it? You. Us. Meeting

again.”

“*Definitely.*”

They laugh, remembering. Bridie continues.

“Well, it was unreal seeing you first in that weird situation the other night. I’d been invited by my neighbor. D’you know Jenna Robards? She’s something at the uni, women’s studies, maybe? But I really had no idea what was going on.”

“*True story.*”

“No, really I had no idea. I thought it was just a run-of-the-mill book club – not a bunch of mad femmos, looking for a cause.” She shrugs apologetically. “If I’d known...”

“Oh, don’t apologise. I’m quite a celebrity these days. The weird thing is that none of my old friends want to know me, while all these people I’ve never had anything to do with are suddenly eager to get in touch.”

“You know, I’ve half-followed your story – only half, it’s not really my thing. I was only vaguely interested because it was local, you know how it is, but it had never occurred to me that it was you. I mean, I looked at the picture, I suppose, and it’s not that you’ve changed all that much. Well, not close up; not really.” She grins, raises an eyebrow, adds with a laugh: “True story. Anyway, I’ve been meaning to find out about you since I got up here – find out if you were still around, or where you’d gone. I know someone would know. I just hadn’t got around to it. And it seemed, a bit presumptuous, I guess. I didn’t know if you’d even remember me.”

“And I do. *Definitely.*” They grin at one another again, the lame joke somehow endlessly amusing

“And how did you – get here? Obviously you know all about me, or as much as everybody around here knows, but what have you been doing? What’s happened in your life?” Even as she asks, the strangeness of the question is clear – it’s too big, impossible to answer, and it’s too intimate, not the way Jodie usually addresses other women, even friends.

But Bridie doesn’t seem perturbed. She gives a short hard laugh. “Well, to answer your first question – and all of them really – I got here in a very roundabout way. Although that would be putting it more kindly than the reality. It’s been the the usual thing. To start with I had a totally fucked up adolescence – too many drugs, too many bad boys – but what would you expect, with a childhood like mine?”

Jodie doesn't answer, asks another question instead. "Did you – this probably seems really stupid – but did you end up doing gymnastics? You were so talented, so determined – I always thought I'd see your name in the Olympic team or something."

"Gymnastics? Oh, my God – was that my fantasy then? How funny. I haven't thought about it for years! Well, gymnastics would have been a healthy sort of obsession, I guess. Nah. I probably nagged at Mum for a while to go to lessons or whatever, same as I nagged to learn the piano, take up horse-riding. But there was no point. We were never anywhere long enough to do anything, really. Except get into trouble. When I finally took off on my own I was always at the fringes of the arty crowd – the same crowd my mother hung in I suppose, before she went straight. You know – would be writers, artists, musicians, actors. I dabbled in everything a bit, but never really had any focus. It was more the scene that I was into than the art: drugs, booze, unrequited love. You know the score."

It's not a score that Jodie's ever been familiar with, or taken any interest in, but she nods, smiles. "But now? You're an artist now?"

"Yeah." Bridie's long fingers plait and unplait the fringe of a cushion. "Trying to be, anyway. I'm just trying to grow up, really. I had a baby, a daughter – Iris – when I was in my late twenties. Having her made me rethink everything. I wanted a straighter sort of life. Settled, you know, but not quite what you have. I didn't want a station-wagon, although a rich husband might have been handy." Her smile takes the sting out of her words. "I was on my own; I didn't tell the father. Anyway, I got into art school in Melbourne. Mum gave me a reasonable allowance – she'd gone pretty straight herself, married a doctor eventually. My God, our little sister – she was born just after we met – even went to a bloody private school! Anyway, I went and set up a little place, rented a studio, worked hard. Had a few fantastic successful happy years. "

"And then?" Jodie knows what is coming, understands suddenly the look of absolute weariness in her friend's face.

"And then Iris died."

"Oh, God. No. Bridie, I'm so sorry –"

"It's okay. Well no, it's not okay. It won't ever be okay." She pauses. "But it was years ago. I'm – getting used to it, I suppose."

"What happened? To Iris."

“It was – well I could give you the precise medical diagnosis – but let’s just say it was very fast and fatal form of cancer. She was diagnosed when she was three-and-a-half and didn’t make it to her fourth birthday. She’d have been ten now. So it was a while back.”

“Oh, it’s – it’s –” Jodie falters.

“Yeah. It’s unimaginable, isn’t it? When it first happened I thought that I was living in some sort of nightmare, that eventually I’d have to wake up and everything would be the same. Now it’s the opposite,” sadly. “Sometimes I think I just dreamed up her whole little life – and that entire wonderful part of *my* life. Anyway. So I’ve come up here with my partner, Glenys.” There’s a split-second pause. “She’s an artist, a sculptor. Just like poor Mum always fancied herself. Funny, eh? We wanted to move away from the city. Glenys has two young kids, and it’s a better life. You know – we can grow vegies, bake, live simply. And I always had really good memories of Milton. I think it was the happiest time I ever had as a kid. And it turns out that it’s the perfect place for people like us. Houses are cheap and there’s a bit of a community, you’ve probably noticed. Somebody told me it’s got the highest concentration of lesbian couples outside the metro in Australia. Who’d have thunk it, eh? Good old Milton.”

And then Bridget jumps up from her seat, in an unnervingly abrupt move that seems somehow utterly familiar. She stalks around Jodie, hands behind her back, paces back and forth, all the while looking at her consideringly, coolly. She looks her up and down and all over, a professional gaze – almost as if she’s measuring her. “What?” Jodie isn’t sure whether she should be amused or alarm, giggles nervously, squirms. “What on earth are you doing?”

“I’m just thinking, honey. I’m having one of my amazingly brilliant ideas. I have them every now and then. True story.” She gives a deliberately mad chuckle.

“What?”

“You know – I told you I paint?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I actually paint portraits. I’ve been entering the Archibald every year for yonks. I’ve even been a finalist a couple of times. And I’ve been runner up in the Portia Geach. Third place in the Moran. So, you know, I’m getting there.”

Jodie murmurs something appropriately congratulatory.

“The thing is I haven’t lined up anyone for next year’s Archibald.”

“Lined anyone up?”

“Well, it has to be someone socially significant. Someone famous. Or, you know – infamous.”

Infamous. Jodie does know.

“Anyway, I’d more or less decided not to bother for next year. But there’s still time.”

Bridie’s still pacing around her, moving backwards and forwards. She opens a blind, closes it again. Peers at Jodie from this angle and that, regarding her through half-closed eyes.

“So how about it? What do you think?”

“About what?” It takes a moment for Jodie to see where she’s heading, but then it’s no surprise at all.

“I want to paint your portrait.”

“What?” Even coming from Bridget the request seems ludicrous. “You want to paint me? But why?” She and Angus had once approached a local artist to paint a family portrait, but the cost had been prohibitive, and judging by the portraits on display, the results uncertain, but there’d never been any thought of anyone wanting to paint her portrait. The vanity of it, the presumption – and then, who would want it?

“Why not? You’d be better than my last local subject, anyhow. When we first got here I painted Alma McNeeman – that journo who lives out near Bundalong, she won all those environmental prizes.”

“Oh, I think I remember someone telling me that Alma’d ...”

“The painting was good – it was excellent, really – but that Alma’s a bit of a self-righteous cow.” She pauses suddenly, her eyes wide. “God, I hope you don’t know her.”

“Well, I do. Doesn’t everyone? But that’s okay. She’s not really what you’d call a friend. Her husband works with my husband. And she is a cow, I agree. A big fat cow.”

The two women laugh, as silly and conspiratorial as schoolgirls.

“When I was out there I took photos, and then had her sit for a few hours over a couple of days – anyway, she was unbelievable. She never so much as offered me a cup of tea the entire time. It was as if I was some sort of indentured servant. And she held forth while she sat there – droned on and on about the environment, sustainability, her own role in saving

the world from itself. All the while sitting there in her expensive silk dress, her cultured pearls, with her four-wheel-drive out in the perfectly manicured garden, planning her next overseas jaunt. Reducing her carbon footprint, my arse. And then when I showed her the portrait – God. She actually sneered – I swear. I was too afraid to ask if she wanted to buy it. It’s in my garage. I don’t have a clue what to do with it. It didn’t win anything, or even get an honourable mention, but I think it’s a pretty good portrait. It captured some interesting things about her – she’s pretty powerful, passionate. Large, in all sorts of ways. But honestly, who’d buy it? Glenys thought we could turn it into an archery target, or a dart board, but I can’t quite bring myself to destroy it. So I’ve got it stored out in the garage, facing the wall.” She grins. “Only place for it.”

“So what do you reckon, Jodie? Can I do it?”

“Well, I don’t know. I’m –”

“Oh, come on, Jodie.”

“What would it mean? How long would it take? What would I have to do?”

“Do? Nothing much, just sit here while I work. I’ll take a heap of photos, too – and I’ll work off those as well. I’d only need you for a couple of weeks – four max, I reckon.”

“Can I think about it?”

“What if I take the photos now – and get started with some sketches.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“Go on. Say yes. You won’t regret it. “

In the end she gives in.

“Fantastic. I can get some snaps now, and we can do the sittings later – in a month or so. Maybe things won’t be quite as fraught then.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they’ll be extra fraught.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll make you sit. Even if I have to visit you in prison.” Their laughter is slightly hysterical.

“Definitely?”

“Definitely.”

twenty-seven

Later, looking back, Hannah has absolutely no idea what possessed her, what made her think that it would be okay to bring Wes home after their party, to drag him up their garden path, both of them swaying and giggling, then through the front door – *the keyhole keeps moving, Wes, I swear. Bloody hell. You do it* – then attempting to creep noiselessly down the darkened hall, past Tom’s bedroom, stifling laughter, and into her own lair, and with the barest of pushes, down down down onto the tangled surface of her bed. Well, maybe she does know what possessed her – the demon drink, lust – but even so, what had she been thinking? The answer is – she hadn’t. She hadn’t been listening either, not once they’d made it safely to her room, not once they had pulled off those items of clothing that needed removing, had embarked on that journey of mutual discovery that Hannah has suddenly recognised as being one of such great pleasure. She hadn’t been listening, but there was no way of avoiding her mother’s horrified expression when she’d opened the door and switched on the light. Jodie had retreated hastily and Hannah and Wes, immediately sober, separate, had listened carefully for the inevitable summons, the humiliating eviction, had laid blinking at one another in the light.

“Is it because he’s black?” The argument has been raging for almost an hour, has gone back and forth, ground over and over, without any resolution. There’s been plenty of time for Wes to make his escape without any humiliating encounters, for Tom to wander up the hall and into the lounge room, give one brief look, and hurry, terrified, back to bed. Far from being embarrassed, ashamed at being caught out, Hannah is giving a good impression of being the victim here: it’s her right, her bedroom, she’s of age; and there’s nothing, nothing that Jodie or Angus can do. And again: Jodie should knock. This question of being black, though. That’s a new one, dragged up from some obscure place, and it takes her mother by surprise.

“My God, Hannah. I didn’t even see him. I really tried not to look. I didn’t even notice that he was black. The point is I don’t want you bringing boys back to my home in the middle of the night. If you must have sex, do it somewhere else.”

But Hannah has hit on something of interest – her mother’s actual reply is inconsequential,

meaningless, she wants to follow this trajectory, see where it will take her.

“So, basically you’re a snob and a racist. And you’ve so little reason. Look at your family. Granny Evans. Your brothers. You may as well be black. You’re no better.”

Her mother shakes her head, sighs. “What is going on in that head of yours, Hannah? This isn’t about me. This is about you. It’s not that complicated, surely? You know the rules.”

Hannah stares at her mother for a long moment. She can see her in triplicate, three figures shimmering across her field of vision. “How can you say that it’s just about me. Everything in my life is about you and what you want. If it was just about me, things would be very different.”

“Oh, Hannah, that’s just –”

“And don’t talk to me about rules. From where I’m standing it looks like you’ve broken some very big ones.”

“Hannah. I want you to go to bed. This is stupid. We’ll discuss it in the morning. When you’re sober.”

“But actually, this is what I think. You know – what’s the saying? In vino...vino, something or other?”

“Goodnight, Hannah.” Her mother turns as if to go, but Hannah reaches out, grabs her sleeve, pulls her back. Subjects her to a long stare.

“You know, Mum. You scare me. First you dump your family. Then you hook up with Dad. Then you dump that baby. How could you do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“How could you just sell it? If that’s what you actually did? And then not tell anyone? Not until you absolutely had to.”

“You know the story.”

“But it’s not the truth is it? Not the whole truth.” Hannah suddenly feels sick. She staggers slightly, her head spins, she wants to lay down. Her mother goes to steady her, takes her arm, but she pulls it away, makes herself stand upright. “Don’t touch me.”

“Hannah, –”

“Don’t even talk to me. I really don’t know who you are any more. I used to know you – but maybe that wasn’t real either. You’re not my mother. I don’t know who my mother is.”

Sydney Morning Herald

‘Missing Elsa Mary to be subject of Coronial inquest’

NSW’s Chief Coroner Conrad Westerby, QC, announced today that there is to be a coronial inquest into the matter of missing infant Elsa Mary Evans, who has not been seen since her mother’s discharge from Belfield Hospital twenty-four years ago.

Despite extensive searches throughout Australia and internationally for both Elsa Mary and her alleged adoptive parents ‘Rosemary and Simon’, no evidence of Elsa Mary’s current whereabouts have come to light. What now has to be determined, Mr Westerby said, is the likelihood of Elsa Mary’s still being alive, and whether this is a matter for further police investigation and possible criminal prosecution.

The Coroner has asked anyone with any information that could assist police to come forward. ‘This is a case I would prefer not to investigate, but if no conclusive evidence of Elsa Mary’s current whereabouts is forthcoming I will have no choice but to investigate this as a suspect death,’ he said.

Hearings are scheduled to begin at the Glebe Coroner’s Court in August.

twenty-eight

Manon is Hannah’s suggestion, made offhandedly, without consideration, a throwaway line during a tense conversation about the impending inquest.

Despite their forewarning, Jodie has reacted badly to the publication of this news – as if it has only just dawned on her how far this thing could go, what could happen next. She is standing at the sink, washing the breakfast dishes with unnecessary violence, though it’s a job that could be more easily done by the dishwasher. Angus is standing beside her with the tea-towel, valiantly attempting to save the dishes from a sorry end, wresting them from her before she crashes them savagely into the basket. “Just give them to me, Jodie,” he

hisses. “It’s all right. I’ll do it. Will you just calm down. Stop worrying. It’s only an inquest. You haven’t been charged.” Angus too is worried – not so much by this news, which they had expected, but by Jodie’s reaction to it. Up until this moment she has been almost eerily calm. Now, suddenly, this morning, all her self-possession has disappeared, and she’s hysterical, beside herself. She slams a froth covered cup into the basket, breaking off the handle, insists he ring Peter again, that he ring the police, ring the bloody coroner – tell them that it’s crazy, that it’s all gone too far. “Oh, come on,” she half sobs, half laughs, “you’re Angus Garrow, aren’t you? Surely there’s someone you can talk to, surely you can get someone to fix things?”

“What’s going on?” He had forgotten Hannah was home, that she starts late Tuesdays, is appalled to find her standing in the kitchen doorway surveying the crazy scene, her eyes wide, mouth open. “What’s wrong with Mum?”

When he tells her, playing it down, rather disjointedly, and ending with his usual lame reassurances that everything’s going to be alright, that she shouldn’t worry, Hannah merely rolls her eyes. “Yeah right, Dad.”

“It’ll be okay, Hannah.” Then desperately, “Anyway, would you be able to help your mother with these dishes? I need to get to work, sort out some legal stuff.” He pats Jodie’s shoulder, but she ignores him, maniacally scrubbing. “I’ve got to go, darling. I need to arrange things. We need a barrister.”

Hannah accepts the proffered tea-towel reluctantly, takes his place beside the sink. “Why don’t you get Assia’s mum? Manon’s a shit hot criminal barrister, isn’t she? A QC or whatever they call them. She defended that old bloke – you know the one who was on Underbelly? That gangster guy? If anyone can get Mum off, Manon can.”

He checks first with Peter, who is unhesitating in his assent. “Well, at this point it looks like we’re going to need a barrister. She’ll be expensive, but she’s one of the best. If you can get her, I’d say go for it.”

So he calls.

He had encountered Manon before, of course – she was his daughter’s best friend’s mother, after all. They’d met casually a number of times over the years, at school functions, when she’d flown up for speech nights, drama performances, special assemblies. They had chatted in that perfunctory way that parents do at these events – polite, but vague, scattered, eyes constantly checking the time, scanning the exits – and he knew how much his daughter admired her. Hannah’s reports of visits to Assia’s Glebe home were always full of stories about Manon – her wardrobe, her advice, her conversation, her eccentric lifestyle. He knew her, too, by reputation, as did everyone in the legal world. She had defended a number of high profile criminal cases, had a reputation as being a hard bitch, and almost always won her cases. But their legal practices existed in two very different worlds – they had never crossed paths professionally and were unlikely to – until now, when he needed her skills for personal, rather than professional reasons.

When he calls her they chat for a moment about the girls, school, a forthcoming examination. Unlike most of his colleagues and friends, she asks unhesitatingly about Jodie – she knows most of the public details of the case of course, but is surprised when he tells her about the impending inquest. She hasn’t read today’s papers, didn’t know.

“Shit.” He can hear her sharply indrawn breath. But the surprise lasts less than a second, he can almost hear her brain whirring. “Okay. So this isn’t a social call, is it? You’re ringing to see if I’ll take the case, if I’ll defend your wife.” There’s a space, less than a second, no time for him to say anything, and she replies to his unasked question herself. “Yeah, okay. Yeah. I’ll do it.” He wonders at her quick-fire decision making; she’s had no time to consult either her diary or her PA.

Even over the phone he can tell that he’s made the right decision, calling her. In the same way that Peter understood the strategies they should take to minimise the legal consequences, Manon understands right away all the possibilities of what is now destined to be a criminal case, is certain about what’s happening, what could happen, and what needs to happen. She fires questions and orders at him, doesn’t wait for him to respond, assumes that he’ll do as he’s told. Which he will, of course, who wouldn’t? “Well, you’ve

obviously known this was a strong possibility, and I expect you've got your solicitor working on this already. But you were right to ring me. This really has the potential to be very, very serious. As serious as it gets. It looks like we've got a couple of months, but I think it might be best if I fly up as soon as I can. I have court today and tomorrow, but I'll be finished by three or so. I'll get my PA to arrange an afternoon flight. In the meantime email anything – everything – you have. And I think you need to take an absolute no comment approach to the media from now on. Don't speak to anyone about the case. And I mean no one. Not your friends, not your colleagues, not even your mother. I'll email you my flight time, organise a car. I'll come straight to your office. Just you – it would be better I think. You can fill me in. I don't want to talk to Jodie. Not yet."

She hangs up abruptly, without saying good-bye, without warning. And later when Angus thinks about their first conversation, when he recalls this unexpected, unsignalled end, it will occur to him that it was all there, the pattern of their relationship – all present in that first conversation. He will never be able to take her full measure, will never know what she is going to do next, where she's heading, what she wants. Will never get used to her instantaneity – the way she decides and then does, without hesitation. Manon is like no other woman he's ever met, and his carefully-honed diplomatic skills are no defence, provide no protection against her absolute self-regard, her eccentricity, her utter lack of interest in observing conventional social forms and practices.

This first conversation is only the first skirmish in what will become a complete and irrevocable ambush. He's not lost, not yet – but even now, the phone dangling, buzzing sharply in his ear, he's left wondering, left anticipating her arrival with some excitement, in a state some where between annoyance and anticipation.

Their first meeting is tense. Manon's flight is delayed, and she doesn't arrive until late, after dark, it's blustery and wet – and in Arding, which is a good ten degrees colder than Sydney at this time of year – it's cold. She has driven a hire car in from the airport and found it difficult to locate the office in the dark, the streets are badly lit, numbers impossible to read and when he first notices her, looking up from his work, Manon is

standing at the door to his office, scowling. This scowl will become his most potent physical impression of her – her brow creased, dark brows beetling across her forehead, her thin lips tight – the look that he will remember, that he will treasure, regard as belonging to him alone.

“I’m here.” She speaks without any expression, but slumps heavily against his doorway, in a movement that’s either ironic, or exhausted, or angry; it’s impossible to tell.

“Hi.” They survey one another for a long curious moment.

She’s small and dark, good looking in an inner-city way that he doesn’t usually find appealing, finds intimidating, a look that shouts feminist, intellectual: dark spiky hair, pale face, her mouth a narrow red slash, glasses that make her look stern and clever and sexy, all in black. She is wearing layers – some sort of clingy tunic, a vest, shirt, long cardigan, tights, heels – expensively chic, but provocative too somehow, the shirt’s neckline plunging dangerously, exposing a still firm cleavage, unlined chest. Her style is eccentric in a town where most respectable middle-aged women keep their hair bobbed, their shirts buttoned, their skirts just below the knee, wear sensible flat shoes.

Angus doesn’t like to think about what she might be seeing. What’s left of a once-curly head of hair is grey, thinning; he imagines he stoops a little, though his shoulders are still broad; beneath his plain white shirt, the muscle has become slightly fleshy. Ordinarily he wouldn’t give much consideration to his appearance, but he’s oddly uncomfortable under her gaze, aware of and embarrassed by his shortcomings as he hasn’t been since a teenager, painfully aware of the impression of dull rural respectability that he knows he must be making.

He gets to his feet, suddenly conscious of the oddness, the impossibly drawn-out nature of their silence. He takes her luggage, her coat, offers her a seat.

“Do you want tea, coffee? Something to eat? There’s a Thai restaurant down the street that’s probably still –”

“Actually,” she sinks wearily down onto the seat. “What I’d really like is a drink. I had a

couple of thimblefuls on the flight up, but it wasn't quite enough. And Sweet Jesus, I needed it."

"Was the flight okay? Those little Dash-8s are usually very –"

"It was a fucking nightmare." She gives an eloquent shudder. "Why didn't someone warn me they'd have bloody propellers. It was like something out of a World War One movie. I kept waiting for some flapper to start Charleston-ing out on the wing." She takes the glass of wine Angus is proffering, gulps down half in one mouthful, holds it out for a refill. Sips again, closes her eyes, takes a deep breath. He watches in helpless fascination.

She looks up at him then, and smiles for the first time. Her mouth is small, the lips thin, but the smile is unexpectedly broad, and warm.

"Okay then, Mr Garrow, if you can point me in the direction of the bathroom, I'll freshen up. And then we can get to work."

Manon sits impassively as he tells her as much as he can. The telling isn't chronological: he starts not with Jodie's story, which she already knows, but her visit to the hospital – Hannah's broken leg, the midwife who noticed Hannah's syndactyly, then recalled Jodie from the birth, and asked about the second child. About Jodie's confused admission that the baby had been adopted, and the next day's conversation. The midwife's subsequent enquiries. Then he tells her everything that Jodie has told him about the events before and after the birth of the child: the one night stand, the hidden pregnancy, the birth, what she remembers about the adoption, the matron, the adoptees. Manon takes notes all through, but doesn't interrupt or ask questions.

"Okay. I'll be straight," she says when he's finished, tapping her pen on her teeth. "If I was the coroner I'd be making this a murder inquiry. For sure. There are too many gaps in her story – and absolutely no evidence that any of what she's told us is the truth. I can probably make her case successfully with what you've got. But probably isn't good enough, is it? If this goes further than the inquest – if the coroner refers it back to the police and Jodie's charged, and it ends up going to court – I know, I know, it's a long way down the track. But even if there's only the slimmest chance, we've got to think ahead. If

we end up with a charge, all we've got is Jodie's word. Nobody can corroborate; nobody even knew she was pregnant. We're going to need something – or someone.” Angus listens, entranced by her capacity to speak her mind so clearly, and to need no response, no validation.

“I think Peter has done a pretty good job here so far. You've done the right thing, anticipating the media, the police. Making that initial statement. That was clever. But it let the media genie out of the bottle a bit prematurely – which could work against us. I've seen what's already been happening in the media. For some reason they're mad on this story. And Jodie's not liked, is she? Unfortunate, but it just happens that way sometimes. If the coroner decides that that child died, it will get a whole lot worse. And public perceptions will make a big difference if it ever gets to a jury. Remember the Chamberlain case.” Beneath the abrupt tones of her voice she has a faint accent. Eastern European, he thinks, imagines a hint of Zsa Zsa Gabor, Hungarian or Polish, and not French, despite her name.

“So.” She leans back in the big office chair, thinking. Angus watches her in fascination – he's never seen someone think so vividly, so physically. It's as if he can see the ideas coursing through her body, like blood, in her rapid breathing, the rapid rise and fall, of her chest. And she doesn't ever stop moving: her legs jiggle, feet tap. Her eyes are half-closed, but her eyelids flicker, her closed lips twitch. Only her hands are still, twined tightly in her lap. She opens her eyes suddenly – glares straight at him. Into him. “Okay. There'll be something. I can't think what it is, but I know there'll be something, some gap we can split open. Something buried. Something nobody else has noticed. We'll read through the evidence. Tonight. Every bit of it. If there's anything there, we'll find it.”

Angus phones home, tells Jodie that he'll be hours yet, that Manon has only just arrived, that there's work to be done, they could be here all night.

“So, what does she think? Does she know what's going to happen next? How we should handle everything? Whether I'm likely to be charged?” her voice is rising hysterically, it's slightly slurred – either from drink or anxiety, maybe both.

“Jodie,” soothingly. “You need to calm down. Manon has handled this sort of thing before,

far tougher cases than yours. Remember – it’s just the inquest. Right now you need to go to bed. Okay. We’ll go over it with you in the morning. Just go on with your ordinary routine for now. Get up, get dressed, get everyone ready for school. Try not to unsettle the kids. Okay. You’ve got to take Hannah to the physio in the morning, don’t you? Well, you do that, drop her back at school and then call in here. All right? “

“Okay.” he can hear her breathing. “Angus?”

“What?”

“It is going to be okay isn’t it? I’m not going to be arrested, am I? Be sent to gaol?” Her voice is small, vulnerable, and he feels a surge of pity, of tenderness.

“It’s going to be fine, darling,” he says. “Just go to bed.”

He and Manon work through the night, reading, rereading, taking notes. They work side by side at his desk, so close that he can smell her perfume, overlaid, as the night progresses, by the slightly sour fragrance of her sweat. Manon drinks steadily, they both do – first a bottle of white wine and then several glasses of whisky, but there is no apparent diminution in the clarity of her thoughts or her speech, she shows no sign of impairment or of exhaustion, although by her own admission she has been working since five that morning.

She discards layers of clothing as she works – *I hope you don’t mind, Angus?* – first her heels, then her stockings, then an outer layer, a coat, a vest. Eventually her bra is pulled free, but there is no change that he can see – her breasts stay firm, with no evidence of droop or sag. Angus pulls off his tie, loosens his collar, rolls up his sleeves, but though he would like to, he does not undo his belt.

When they have finished, it is past three. She sits slumped for a moment on the chair, then stretches, runs her fingers through her hair, yawning luxuriously. “So. That’s done,” she says, “for now.” Before he can ask the obvious question, she volunteers the answer. “No. I haven’t found the gap. But I know it’s there. I can feel it. I’ll talk to Jodie tomorrow – see if she can help.” She shrugs. “Don’t worry. I know there’ll be ... there’ll be something we’re just not seeing. Now, if you could just drop me wherever you’ve booked me in for the night, a bed would be very welcome.” Angus leans back in his chair, his eyes closed.

He is exhausted, and though he longs for sleep, is dreading going home, fears the panic that he knows awaits him, regardless of the late hour, his mildly inebriated state. When he opens his eyes Manon is looking at him a little quizzically – as if she has noticed that he is a man and not just an automaton for the first time that evening. “D’you know what I’d like, Angus? What I really need more than anything?”

He imagines that she wants another drink, or something more substantial to eat than the bag of crisps, the peanuts that were all he has been able to provide, and racks his brain for a shop that will be open this late, but there’s nowhere – even the garages close down for the night in Arding. She gives a small inscrutable smile, then says bluntly, “What I’d really like is a good fuck, Angus. Here. Now. It’ll help me sleep better. Clear my head. You’ve been so very helpful already.” And now her smile is wide, is full of laughter, mischief, “I don’t suppose you’d oblige?”

There had been affairs since his marriage, more than a few, but none of them had been particularly memorable. Usually they had begun and ended quickly, with little thought, minimum guilt, utter discretion, and zero recriminations. None of them were passionate by any measurement – they had occurred almost as a matter of course. There had been various predictable scenarios: a few weekend flings while away at conferences with almost anonymous women in hotel bars; others had lasted longer, been closer to home – one or two clients, as nervous as Angus himself about discovery, one of his PAs, and once, an older colleague. They’d been flattered by his attention – what woman wouldn’t be? – had been available, willing to fire while the iron was, so to speak, blisteringly hot, and then had been equally happy to head off into the sunset when the affair had run its course – as they all inevitably did. These women had never wanted more than he was able to offer, which was clearly a no-strings-attached, short-lived sexual liaison. He had been lucky, he supposed, in only ever attracting women with a similarly detached approach – either contentedly married themselves or not looking for a meaningful relationship. Not with him, anyway.

Only one had been more complicated. His last affair had been years ago, not long after

Tom was born. Wanda Robinson. She had been a young solicitor he'd employed, newly graduated, who had expected serious commitment and had made it widely known – with letters to Jodie, his mother, a glass of wine flung in his face at some civic function. After the Wanda Robinson debacle, he had had to make a very public decision about where his allegiances lay, when he had to, as it were, grow up, suddenly realising, lightning-like, that he didn't want to lose his family. He had sworn, to himself and to Jodie: never again. And though opportunities had continued to come his way – after all, Angus was a good looking, increasingly powerful man in his small-pond city – he had kept his promise.

Until now.

twenty-nine

The two women go over and over Jodie's story. Manon has asked to spend the day alone with Jodie, without Peter or Angus present. "It's important that we start from the beginning. And I'd like to do it without the others – just so you don't offer the expected version of the story. I'm certain there must be something, something you haven't mentioned, or haven't remembered. Something we can use." Jodie makes them coffee, piles a plate with biscuits, and the two women sit in the sunroom, in an attempt to make the whole process as casual, as comfortable as possible – though Jodie can sense that this sharp little woman is anything but casual. Manon claims Angus's leather club seat, naturally, slips off her shoes and pulls up her slender legs, a notebook perched on top of her knees. Jodie sits across from her on the lounge, but perches on the edge, strangely awkward even in her own home. She has met Manon a few times over the years, has always felt slightly intimidated by her, sensing the other woman's mild contempt for her stay-at-home status and feeling dowdy, rustic, slow, in her company.

She makes Jodie start right at the beginning – from her meeting with the boy and go to the end. She fires questions – fast, blunt – without respite or any consideration for feelings, emotions: who was he? Where did you meet him? How many times did you fuck him? No

subject is off limits, no topic too sensitive, no wound too tender. When did you find out you were pregnant? Why did you take so long to realise? And then – with genuine feminine interest: How did you hide it? How would anyone hide a pregnancy? Manon confesses that she herself had been monstrous with Assia, her stomach and all parts of her body swelling to elephantine proportions by the sixth month. There was no way to disguise it. Jodie describes the loose garments – tracksuits, big T-shirts that were easy to stretch, the gradual all-over weight gain, the small swell of her stomach, Sharon's three month absence during the university break – which was the only time when her pregnancy was in any way evident. She had had no good friends at college, and it was easy to stay in the flat, almost completely secluded for those last few months. She had had some savings, and anyway her student allowance was more than enough to live on.

She asks about Belfield: this particular hospital – why did you choose it? Jodie explains her reasoning. The distance from home, the improbability of meeting anyone she knew, the cheap hotel where she stayed the weeks before. Mostly – the hope that she wouldn't be noticed there, that she would be just another teenage pregnancy, that an adoption would be easy to arrange at such a place.

Through all of this, Manon listens intently, her head tilted to one side, like an intelligent bird. She asks question after question, notes everything. But it is events in the hospital that engage her most concentrated attention. She sits up straight after Jodie's first rendition of the events, her feet sliding back on the ground. She stops writing, leans forward, closes her eyes as Jodie recites and then recites again each small detail of her stay there.

And then – after Jodie has told her five times, eight times, ten times, when it is only the syntax of her recitation that varies:

“Tell me again about the midwife, about this Matron O'Malley. What she said to you – about keeping you isolated, keeping the other midwives away.”

“She said something like, ‘Don't worry – I've done this before – it's easy. Just say that matron is looking after you, and the other nurses will know to steer clear.’ I mean, they're

not her exact words, obviously, but it was something like that.”

“As if it wasn’t all that unusual, like it was something she’d done before, no?” There’s a suppressed excitement in her voice; she sounds foreign, suddenly. European. Her voice as exotic as her looks.

“I suppose so. Yes.”

“That’s it then!” Manon stands up and yawns, stretches. “The matron. She’ll be your defence.”

“I don’t understand. How can she help? She’s dead.” Manon smiles down at Jodie.

“Then she should count her blessings.”

*

As soon as she sees them together, Jodie knows. When Angus gets home late that afternoon – he has taken time off, collected both the children, run them to their various activities, arrives home harried, irritable. He gives Jodie – preparing a rudimentary spaghetti bolognese – a perfunctory kiss, then rushes to the study, where Manon has set up a temporary workspace. When they come back into the kitchen together, heads bent, talking quietly, intensely, Jodie knows. And it’s not a guess, but knowledge, deep and inescapable. She can see it in the way that Angus speaks to the other woman, the awkwardness, stiffness, the slightly wary holding back. And he’s especially solicitous of her, of Jodie, asking what she needs, what he can do to help. There’s no apparent sign from the woman, though: she’s brusque, blunt, businesslike; her conversation confined to the case, her thesis, their strategy.

His first affair – or what Jodie has always assumed was his first – had come as a shock, about three years into their marriage. Angus had only been a relatively junior solicitor when the woman, Angela – who was considerably older than them, in her late thirties – had joined the firm as a partner. Hannah was only a few months old, and Jodie had been completely rapt in new motherhood – blissed out and bewildered in equal measure, stumbling through the strange new terrain as if half blind – utterly oblivious to anything much beyond the daily round of feeding, changing, sleeping. She had met Angela, of

course, at one or two company dinners, but had barely been aware of her existence, and so had been completely unprepared when Angus had admitted tearfully a few years later that the affair had run almost the entire time the woman had been in Arding – over a year – that Angela’s decision to relocate had been made only after their mutual determination to end it. There had been others since – some he’d confessed to, others she’d surmised.

After Wanda, the affair that had blown up hugely, Angus was desperate to keep Jodie, to keep their family intact, had promised that it would never happen again. He told her he loved her, over and over. And she’d believed him, trusted him.

Jodie has always forgiven him these betrayals, his remorse has always seemed genuine. Forgetting has been harder – she still feels the memory of each betrayal physically, like a sharp blow to her ribs – powerful enough to make her gasp, to leave her momentarily breathless. Even now, when everything has been pared back, when there is barely any them anymore, still the prospect of Angus leaving fills her with terror.

While on the surface everything between them seems normal, there is no physical intimacy between them now. There is no cuddling, no half-unconscious proprietary clasp of arm or shoulder, no casually slung arm around waist. They have, for some reason, not taken that final step, of sleeping separately. Why, Jodi doesn’t know. There are two spare rooms, both comfortable, one with an adjoining bathroom. So each night they lie side by side, but as far away from one another as they can. The new bed is king size, so there’s enough space for each to turn inwards or outwards without encountering the other – they don’t touch during the night, not even an accidental roll into the middle.

Sometimes she is sure, by a flicker, a look, a certain lack, that he is angry with her. That he hates her. He turns only the blindest most polite self to her now – his every word considered, every expression guarded. He smiles, he enquires after her well-being, but no more. She has only ever seen him this way with clients that he doubts or dislikes. She is not sure what it’s about, what the source of his anger is; he has said nothing, has only been loyal supportive. Surely, she thinks, it cannot be the fact of her betrayal, so many years

ago. She does not dare bring up the matter of his betrayals, of course, but she can barely restrain herself from exclaiming over the injustice of it. What ever she has done, whatever he believes she has done, Jodie knows that she has never really betrayed Angus. That she never would.

thirty

Angus is consumed.

He wonders vaguely how much it has to do with Jodie – whether unconsciously this particular betrayal is deliberate, a cruel punishment for her transgression, a just repayment for her sin. Or perhaps an outlet for his anger. For there's no escaping the fact that ever since the announcement of the inquest, and perhaps even before that, Angus is suddenly incandescently angry – and his anger drives him almost as much as his ardour. It's a fury that can only be tamped down by his affecting a distance and indifference that he doesn't quite feel.

He's not even certain, quite, what it is that he is angry about. He couldn't possibly be put out by his wife's admission that she'd had an affair, not even an affair, in those long ago days. Not when he'd been unfaithful himself. Nor could it be simply a response to her unimaginable plight: the desperate pregnancy, the lonely birth, the panic filled days that followed. How could any of this fail to produce in him sympathy, even pity for this woman he had lived with and loved, the mother of his children. Though one part of him must judge her youthful actions as stupid, irresponsible, he knows that she's a good woman now, that she was a good woman then, at worst possessed of a strange moral innocence that had much to do with her childhood, her upbringing. And even when he lets himself go to that place where he shouldn't, when he questions her story, wonders whether she is lying, whether she is in fact a cold-blooded murderer – even this is not enough to inspire anger. Disgust, yes. And perhaps dislike, though there are reserves of sympathy in him that could accommodate even that, he thinks. He is not a hypocrite, is well aware that he has

failed miserably to stick to the moral straight and narrow himself.

No, it's the mess, the hideous mess that she has made of all their lives – Hannah's, Tom's, his own, even his mother's – that keeps the flame of his anger burning so righteously. He can feel the life they have made together, their family – all the hard work, the sacrifices, so many compromises – beginning to disintegrate, dissolve, can feel the cold wind from the chasm, an intimation of the underlying chaos.

But then, perhaps this has nothing to do with his anger. Perhaps he has no excuse, no way of justifying his actions, his desires.

Though he should be concentrating on work, on the coming inquest, right now all he can think of is Manon – her voice her body her smell – even a typed sheet of paper that he knows she has touched is a reminder of his unquenched, unquenchable desire. He notices, just days into the affair, that the panic attacks have stopped, disappearing as mysteriously as they came. Manon has cured him, rescued him – made him whole again. He is no longer a sagging, balding, middle-aged has been – breathing into a paper bag at the prospect of this being all there is. It's as if his youthful self has been restored, but larger, stronger, more vital – potential conqueror of women, of worlds.

In his mind (absurd, in middle age, to become the sentimentalist he never was in youth!) he composes odes to her apricot breasts, to the soft briny petals of her cunt, to her deft muscular tongue. Manon has become the still centre of the spinning world, just at the moment when he knows he needs the world to be motionless, when he needs to see things clearly, more clearly than ever before.

Even in the depths of his madness, it is clear to Angus that Manon does not feel the same way about him. He is merely the provider of physical release, a receptacle for her lust, a vessel. The irony of this unfamiliar reversal does not escape him, but there's nothing amusing about it either. He knows there's an end coming, and soon, that the world will cease spinning, that his landing will be painful. But for now he's happy in his revolutions,

observing the world from a different, Manon-coloured perspective. Things may be falling apart – but right now he’s not at all inclined to keep them together.

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thirty-one

With the announcement of the inquest it all seems to have gotten worse: the carefully phrased questions from friends, sniggers from enemies, pitying glances from teachers all driving her spare. And the situation at home is tense, to put it mildly. She and her mother are barely speaking, and her father is completely off the air, too – the spectre of the inquest casting a grotesque shadow over them all. Even the usually bright and breezy Tom has grown quiet and moody – though it could be that he’s about to hit puberty. Hannah wants nothing more than to get away from it all.

She was in town late one afternoon, had been wandering around with Assia – shopping for supplies for their coming weekend at Cosmic, an annual folk festival in a hippy town down in the Valley. It’s not an event that she would ordinarily want to attend, but Wesley and a few of the other drama students were heading down, so she’d convinced Assia that they should go, too. She’d put it to her parents, who, distracted by everything else that was going on, had agreed easily, and without too much questioning. So they’d bought the essentials for camping out: two-minute noodles, Coke, chocolate bars, some tinned fruit, sunscreen, insect repellent, matches, a torch, then visited a cafe where they’d shared a big

bowl of dense and fatty potato wedges. It had been late when they'd left the cafe and Assia had gone one way, heading back towards school, was looking forward to a promised dinner with Manon – but Hannah had felt too full, was too loaded with shopping to make the trip up the hill home, so had decided to go to her father's office – he would undoubtedly still be there – and bludge a lift.

She hadn't understood what she was hearing, walking up the stairs to the office, had had her mind on other things, and the muffled thumps didn't resolve into anything meaningful until she actually walked through his door. Her father's secretary, (or his Office Manager as she liked to be called), Minty, had left early, the lights in the waiting room were switched off, but Hannah could see a dim light shining beneath her father's door, and there was obviously some sort of activity going on within. She knocked, opening the door just as an order to wait was shouted, had met the wild eyes of her father, his hair in disarray, tie askew, caught in a position that would have been laughably cliched had it not been her father, and therefore beyond disgusting: her father, pants down around his ankles, a woman lying prone on the desk beneath him, half naked. The woman's face was turned away, but Hannah recognised her immediately – knew that it was Manon, that it was Assia's mother, and most definitely not her own.

Hannah had turned and run through the office and down the stairs, had shut off whatever desperate imprecations her father had made, had run through the alley beside the mall and then as far as she could in the opposite direction to home, had paused only when she had to, breathless, a stitch in her side, in a deserted car park beside the car wash, bent over double and feeling sick. Had tried to wipe the memory – equal parts humiliation and revulsion – from her mind, along with the tears that were suddenly streaming down her face. She'd texted Wes, almost without thinking, and he'd arrived, barely five minutes later, and had held her while she told him what she'd seen – hesitantly at first and then in a rush. He'd sat her in his car and they'd driven up to the lookout in his rusting Datsun. He'd rolled her a spliff, and she'd taken a few puffs. They'd sat silently, holding hands, passing the joint back and forth, and eventually her mind had become calm, and then clear, purposeful. She knew exactly what she wanted, what she needed to do.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Where to? D’you want to go home? Or back to my place?”

“I mean, really get out of here. Out of town.”

“Now? You mean it?” She couldn’t see his expression in the dark car, just the white of his teeth, his eyes, gleaming.

“Oh, yeah. I mean it. Let’s go.”

“What about your olds? Won’t they freak?”

“Nah. I’ll just tell them I decided to go to Cosmic two days early. They’ll be shitty – but who cares. And by the time they find out that I didn’t go – well, it’ll be too late, won’t it?”

He grinned, laughed, she could hear the excitement now.

“Sweet, Han. But where do you want to go? You don’t really want to go down to Cosmic early? There’ll be nothing to do.”

“Let’s go for a long drive.” It was the first thing that popped into her head. “Let’s go to the coast.”

*

They drive in almost complete silence. Hannah has the seat (uncomfortably vintage, she can feel the springs just beneath the thin vinyl) wound back as far as it can go, and although it’s dark outside she has left her sunglasses on. She’s not dozing, but there’s no way he can know this. Wes has been content enough to just drive, after the first attempts at conversation petered out, just giving her the occasional quick glance. She is surprised and impressed (and glad, for once, not to fear for her life!) by his cautious driving, the way he keeps the car within its limits, considering its age and its state of decrepitude. He isn’t speeding, barely even reaches the limit, takes the corners carefully, making his gear changes smoothly. She lets her head fall back, relaxed for what seems like the first time in weeks. The breeze from the window rushes over her skin, shadows of the trees flicker over her face, dark light dark light dark. She gives in, sleeps.

They are almost at the bottom of the ranges, approaching the point where they have to

enter the highway, to decide whether they want to head north or south, when Hannah finally comes up with a destination. The boy has driven all this way in almost complete silence, has only made a single suggestion: his eldest sister lives in Coff's Harbour – they could stop there for the night. Take their time deciding where they're heading next. Adds in the laid-back way he has – “and you could give your parents a call, you know. Let them know you're okay.”

But Hannah doesn't want that. She wants to get as far away as possible from the shit fight that has become their family life and has no desire to alleviate in any way the fear she knows – and hopes – they'll be experiencing. She half wishes she could be there – a fly on the wall. Wishes she could see that arsehole who calls himself her father explain to her stricken mother the circumstances of her flight. She says none of this to Wesley, however, is all at once energised by an absolutely genius idea. “Hey,” she says, unable to keep the excitement from her voice, “I've got an idea. I know where I want to go. Head North.” He gives her a quick sideways glance, but she turns her head, doesn't want him to see the grin that she can't hold back.

“What's going on?” he asks. “What's the idea, Hannah?”

“My grandfather. Mum's dad – I've never met him, but I know where he lives.”

“Yeah?”

“It's up past Coff's somewhere. He runs this tiny little servo just off the highway. Where you turn off to Moon Bay, Moontown, Moon something or other anyway. Just past Sapphire Beach. We've been past it heaps – every time we go to Queensland. Moonee, that's it. Mum always mentions it as we go by the turn off: she ducks down in the seat just in case he sees her. It's like this stupid family joke. God, what a spin.”

“Han.”

“Yeah?” she's too excited to notice the reservation in his voice.

“Han, you don't think there might be a good reason –?”

“A good reason for what?”

“Why your mum doesn't keep in contact with her Dad. I mean maybe he's...”

“Mum says he's a prick. Of course not in so many words – she barely even mentions him actually. But Mum's such a fucking snob – he probably just drives the wrong car. She's

such a hypocrite though. She actually grew up in a housing commission place in Milton, one of her brothers is totally retarded, and the other's a crim. And Nan – well, you'd have to meet her to believe her...she's hilarious – a total crazy bitch. We barely ever see her, and no one talks about her much – I don't really know much about her. I can remember Dad saying she was a bit of a tart when she was younger – and you can tell sort of. She's in a home now. She's not all that old, but she's kinda demented, I think – probably from grog. She's really skinny, wears all this lycra – looks like a stick with make-up. Terrifying, really. Actually," her voice sharpens, "you probably saw her – everyone else in town did. She went on *A Current Affair* – totally dissed mum in front of the whole of Australia. Said she wouldn't be surprised if she'd killed the baby. I had to go to school the next day and hear all these kids talking about my baby-murdering mother and bogan grandmother."

"Nah, I didn't see it – but I heard." She can sense his sympathy. "So what makes you think that this grandfather's going to be any better?"

"I dunno. Dad's family's fucked too. I keep hoping that someone in my family's gotta be okay. And he's the only one of them who's actually got out of Arding. The only one who managed to escape. It's got to mean something, doesn't it?" She shrugs. "Anyway, it's just a destination. Somewhere to go. Oh, God. How much longer?" She's bored now, and hungry. Wishes they could pull over. She yawns, stretches her hand beyond the gear stick, runs her fingers lightly up the inside of his thigh to his groin.

He starts, catches her hand, then frowns unconvincingly. "Oi. Stop it. You want to get us killed, bitch?" He removes her hand, pats it down firmly on her thigh, clamps his own back around the steering wheel. "It's serious business, this road. I've got to concentrate if we want to make it down in one piece."

"Oh God." She yawns again. "I'll call." She says after a moment. "When we get back in range. I suppose I should let them know I'm alive, I guess. But I'm not going to tell them where I'm going though. Or when I'll be back."

She can hear the smile in his voice, the approval. "Good girl. You can tell them you're going to my sister's place, if you like. We'll have to stop there tonight, anyway." he touches her face lightly with his finger. "Why don't you go back to sleep. Won't be much

longer. I'll wake you when we're there."

Wes keeps nagging about the phone call later, when they arrive at his sister's small beach side apartment. "C'mon mate, You've punished them enough." His sister Eileen adds her gently voiced disapproval. "Look, whatever they done, it's not that bad, honey. They'll be worrying themselves sick. C'mon – you should give 'em a call."

Eileen, a single mother of two small children who is studying primary ed at the local campus, has welcomed them grandly despite the odd hour of their arrival, and the lack of warning. She looks a lot like Wesley, the same honey skin and golden hair, the same full lips, but her eyes are bright blue, and she is tiny – only just five foot – and perfectly shaped. Hannah is slightly envious of the obvious affection between the siblings – they hug fiercely, kiss, laugh, hug again. There's a barrage of questions and answers, and then family conversation, that she's happy to tune out of – and it seems to be a relationship unencumbered by any sort of resentment, or competition. Wes has told her that there had been some trouble with one of his other sisters – she was a junkie or an alcoholic, in a violent relationship – and Hannah had worried vaguely that that was where they were heading, but this sister is obviously, despite the cramped quarters, doing okay for herself.

Eileen has made them up a shared bed in the small lounge room floor, a comfy nest of cushions and quilts. Despite their best efforts at keeping their voices down, her two young children have woken up and in no time at all there's an impromptu sort of party taking place. Wes is obviously a favourite with the kids – Robert and Lola – who insist on elephant-rides, flip-overs and tickles from their energetic young uncle, who is more than willing to oblige. Hannah, who is not fond of children or small animals, hunches up on the lounge, watches with bemusement. Eileen sits down beside her with a sigh. "They'll be crappy all day tomorrow – but they'd kill me if I don't let 'em see Wes. So, have you guys been going out long? He hasn't told us anything about you." Eileen is a little less friendly away from her brother's eye, her manner is more brusque, and Hannah feels slightly, surprisingly intimidated by her frank stare, her blunt questions.

"Not that long. I mean, we're not exactly going out... We're just friends really."

“Right – you’re just friends. So do you want me to get out another bed then, mate?” she pokes at the makeshift mattress with a toe. “I can put one of the kids in with me, and you can have their bed, if you’d rather.”

“Oh. No, it’s fine. I mean it’s okay if we sleep together. It’s just that it’s not official or anything.” She hesitates again, aware of the lameness of her remark, and looks up to find Eileen grinning widely. “Hey. Don’t worry about it, mate. I’m just stirring. You’re just a kid. Having a bit of fun, eh? Been there. Done that.” She sighs. Claps her hands together. “Okay, you little buggers, you can get back to bed now. We got a big day tomorrow. C’mon Wes,” she says to her brother, who has pinned down his young nephew, and is attempting to tie him in a sheet, “you let him go, now. You’ve wound ’em up nicely – now you can put ’em to bed. Hey kids,” she gives another wicked grin, “maybe you can get Uncle Wes to read you another chapter of that book.”

The two children noisily endorse this, Wes groans pitifully, gives Hannah a comically hunted look, lets the children drag him down the short hallway and into the bedroom.

Eileen takes the cups over to the sink. Hannah sits awkwardly on the lounge, looks down at the mess of bedding despairingly, wishing she could just curl up and go to sleep, wishing she was back home. She leans back, half watching the images on the muted television, drifts.

The next thing Eileen’s shaking her gently, handing Hannah her mobile. “You should turn your phone on and make that call, girl,” she says. “Before you scare them sick. And before they get the cops onto you.” Hannah grabs her phone, shakes her head. “I will,” she promises, “but not yet.” The woman glares down at her, all her former friendliness suddenly evaporated. “You wanna make sure you do. You wouldn’t want to cause Wes any trouble would you?”

Later – it’s past two in the morning, she’s unable to sleep, Hannah takes the phone onto the verandah, braves the cold. Wes is sound asleep, curled around a pillow, snuffling softly.

He has resisted all of her efforts to get him aroused, get him to touch her. “No way. Not here,” he said, panicked. “Sis’ll hear. No way. I can’t. And what about the kids.” The night air is warmer here than at home, and there’s a faint tang of salt in the air, on her lips. She turns on her mobile. It registers more than fifty unanswered calls – most from her parents’ mobiles. There are texts, too – from her parents, from Assia, even one from Tom. She doesn’t stop to read them, clicks through the list of names, pauses over her father’s mobile, finds her home number, presses call. She lets it ring a few times, takes a deep breath, then ends the call. She turns the mobile back off, and goes back inside. She strips down to her t-shirt and undies, climbs back into bed. She wrestles the pillow away from Wes, manipulates his arms around her, snuggling as close to him as she can. His arms tighten, he gathers her up, kisses her sleepily on the forehead. “D’you ring ’em?” he murmurs. “Did you let ’em know you’re okay?”

She mutters something incomprehensible but positive sounding and he’s satisfied, drifts back to sleep. She shoves the mobile, still clenched in her fist, under the pillow, moves as near as she can to his body, tries to lose herself in his warm clean smell, closes her eyes, prays for sleep.

thirty-two

Angus’s first instinct is to chase Hannah. He jerks away from Manon abruptly, all desire immediately extinguished, and pulls up his pants, pushes his feet into his shoes. He would have run, thundered down the stairs in desperate pursuit, irregardless of any interested townsfolk, but for Manon’s restraining hand, her hissed, but certain command that he stay. He tries to shake himself free, looks down at her, perched on his desk, half undressed, slightly dishevelled, but somehow still in control, and still with that feline half smile.

“There’s no point, Angus. The damage has been done. She’s either going to run home to mama or not. You chasing after her is only going to make matters worse.”

“You don’t know Hannah – she’s ...”

“Oh – but I do know Hannah, actually. I know that she admires you – you’re her favourite

parent – currently, anyway. I know that she’s highly unlikely to tell Jodie. If you chase her, you’ll be showing a weakness that she probably doesn’t need to deal with right now. I know teenage girls. She won’t despise you for adultery, but she will despise you for begging.”

The sense of what she’s saying gradually sinks in. Manon relaxes her grip, and he sinks down on his office chair, his body numb, legs jelly.

“Fuck. Fuck.” He puts his head in his hands. “I can’t believe that just happened. Now. What a fucking nightmare.”

Manon is regarding him with undisguised amusement now.

“Angus, really – it’s not that big a deal. She knows you have affairs, surely? It’s not like I’m the first, is it?”

“No. I don’t know. But why now? This is – well, obviously this is a really bad time for this to happen.”

“Is there ever a good time?”

“Well, no ... Christ. What am I going to do?”

Manon slides down from the table, walks over to the office door and locks it. She saunters back towards him slowly, her hips swinging. She kneels down before him, cradles his face between her hands, kisses him on the forehead, eyes, nose, lips.

“I know that I’d feel so much better if you would finish what you’ve started.” Angus feels his blood move again, the heat return to his limbs. “And I think perhaps, Angus dear, that you will too. ”

When he arrives home, later that night, it’s close to eleven, the anxiety returns. But it’s manageable anxiety, this time, different to the attacks; this is anxiety with a reason, a focus. He walks slowly up the front steps, his gut churning, as he thinks of the confrontation that’s possibly awaiting him. How he will face Hannah? What will he say? Even more frightening to contemplate – what will Hannah say? He is about to turn the key in the lock, his hand shaking slightly, when the door is pulled open from inside.

“Oh, Angus. It’s you. I’d hoped it was Hannah. I can’t get on to her. You haven’t seen her have you?”

“No.” he affects a nonchalance he’s not feeling. “Have you tried her mobile?”

“That’s the thing – she must have it turned off for some reason. But that’s not like her.”

“Have you tried her friends?”

“I’ve rung everyone I can think of. Evidently she was with Assia until late this afternoon. She thought she said she was heading home, and no one’s seen her or heard from her since. I’m not sure whether to worry or not. I mean, she *is* nearly seventeen. But Angus, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen this, and it probably has nothing to do with it – I’m probably overreacting. But there’s this site, on the internet. There are so many of them. But this one – it worries me ... There are all these photos of us. It must be someone here, someone local. Look.” He follows her to the study, and she brings up a site on the computer: jodiegarrow.com. The site has no header, no text, but is simply a montage of uncaptioned thumbnail photos of Jodie, Angus, Tom and Hannah, singly and together, all candid, going about their daily business, unknowing. The snaps are recent – there is one of him, walking out of his office, Manon following close behind – that can only have been taken in the past few days.

Angus pushes past her, reaches for the phone, anxiety morphing seamlessly into fear. “I think we need to call the police.”

thirty–three

They leave early in the morning, just past eight, and before Eileen or the kids are awake. Wes insists that they tidy up their bed before they go – and they fold their blankets quietly, put the lounge back together, straighten up the room. Hannah would have liked coffee, but Wes says no, that they can get something on the way, stop at maccas, a servo. “I don’t want to wake anyone,” he whispers. “I’ll text her later, on the way.”

They travel silently, Wes absorbed in his driving, his own thoughts, Hannah anxious and weary. “So. What did they say?” Wes asks eventually.

“Who?” He’s taken her by surprise.

“Your olds. When you rang ’em last night.”

“Oh, yeah. No one picked up. I just left a message. Said I was all right, that I’d call again today.”

“Did you tell them where we’re going?”

“Nah. Wasn’t any point.”

“Right.”

The highway is virtually empty at this time, and they travel quickly, arriving at the Moonee turnoff in less than ten minutes. They’re not travelling to the town itself, just a tiny outpost at the junction of the freeway and the road that heads to a larger town which is on the coast proper. It’s not a town, not even a village, just a small clump of buildings set too close to the freeway to be comfortably habitable. It looks to Hannah as if there’s never been a point to living here, the houses are fibro, dilapidated – nothing more than shacks. There are two commercial premises, one a bait shop that looks as if it’s opened less frequently than it’s closed, and an old servo with a single petrol pump – presumably the one that’s run by her grandfather. It’s not open yet, either, and like the bait shop doesn’t look like it’s been used in a while. “So is this it?” Wes pulls up out the front. “Are you sure he lives here? At the servo?” There’s the front half of a big rigger pulled in across the road. It’s rusted, looks as if it hasn’t driven anywhere in a while, and isn’t going anywhere soon.

“I’m sure this is right. He used to drive trucks or something, and he lived up in Queensland for years. But Mum heard from someone that he was living here with his girlfriend. That was a few years ago but.” She bites on a fingernail, looking over at the derelict building doubtfully.

They climb out of the car and Wes heads across to the building, rattles on the door. Hannah stays put, watching. He swipes at the glass and peers in through the grimy window. “Nah, there’s no one there – looks like it hasn’t been used for a while. There’s just a pile of crates and tires.”

He walks slowly across to the high colorbond fence adjacent to the building, looks over the

top. “Hey, there’s an old caravan back here – it’s kinda derelict. But maybe someone’s there. Look.”

She walks to the gate reluctantly, stands on tiptoes to see over. There’s an old aluminium caravan, dinged up and rusting in parts standing in the middle of a paddock, waist deep in weeds and thistles, and surrounded by a sea of bottles, cans, fast food containers, refuse of every imaginable kind.

“Yuck. Gross. Like a castle, with a tip for a moat,” she gives an hysterical laugh.

“Yeah, but what do you think, Han? Do you think he lives there?”

What Hannah thinks is that they should get back in the car, that she should head home, run as far and as fast from this godforsaken place as she can.

“Yeah, I dunno. I guess it could be.” She shrugs, runs her hands through her hair. “Let’s find out.”

They find a gate – rusted closed, they have to climb over – and walk slowly across the damp grass. Hannah can feel her heart thumping painfully; she moves closer to Wes and takes his hand, holds tight.

They pause when they reach the caravan’s door – hesitate before climbing the metal steps. The entry is not inviting. A torn screen door hangs, its hinges broken, and the main door is open. A light flickers in the dim interior, she can hear the sound of a television faintly; it takes her a moment to process what she’s hearing, moans and pants, a rhythmic grunting – it sounds like porn. Hannah looks up at Wes, tugs on his hand desperately. “Oh, God,” she hisses, “what the fuck are we doing here? I can’t. I don’t. Let’s –”

But it’s too late. The caravan’s occupant has already heard them. There’s a growl from inside, “Who’s that?”, a thick, congested wheeze. The television goes silent, there’s a loud creak, shuffling footsteps, the caravan seems to dip in the middle, and then he’s there at the doorway glaring down at them. “Yeah? If you’re after money yez can piss off.” He’s a big

man, bald, angry, dressed in shorts and a singlet, his powerful shoulders hunched slightly as if to avoid hitting his head in the diminutive van.

“Um...” Hannah, panicked, looks at Wes, who is carefully avoiding eye contact. “Um. Sorry to disturb you, but I’m looking for—” she falters, “Are you Bob Evans?” The man says nothing for a moment. He looms above her, huge, bearlike, his expression unreadable. “What if I am? What’s it to you?”

“I’m...um.” Her voice fails her again. “I think you’re my grandfather.”

The man stares down at her for a long moment, then gives a short laugh. “Well, you’re little Jode’s daughter, eh? You could have knocked me down.”

He bustles about, making them coffee, surprisingly efficient despite his bulk, in the tiny kitchen space. Inside, the caravan is almost bare, scrupulously clean. There’s none of the mess that’s on the outside, nothing extraneous. All the surfaces are clean, if worn. There’s no evidence of dirty clothes, no unwashed plates in the sink. Just a bed, covered in a bright pink quilt and matching pillows, a television, a DVD player, a towering stack of DVDs (all wildlife documentaries and not a hint of flesh amongst them, Hannah notes, quickly reinterpreting the sounds she’d heard), a small gas stove and a tiny fridge. She and Wes have squeezed into the wall side of the eating nook at the man’s behest: “It’s a bit tight, but I sure as hell won’t fit – and there’s nowhere else. Unless you want to sit on the bed.”

He sees her looking about, coughs self-consciously. “Yeah. It’s a bit of a dump, innit? It’s just temporary, but. They’re beginning work on the garage in a week or so, and this seemed to be the cheapest thing to do while we waited. One of me old lady’s nephews was living here a year or so back – left it in a bit of a state as you can see. So we’ve had to have a bit of a cleanout. You probably saw all the shit – pardon the French – out the front. But it’s not too bad now, inside, is it? It’ll do for a few months, anyway.”

“So, you’re married? I didn’t know.” She asks the question shyly.

He puts the coffee down carefully, sits down in front of her, beaming widely. One of his front teeth is missing. “Why would you? Not like I’ve kept in contact. I’ve been married to Olga for almost five years, now. She keeps me on the straight and narrow, that’s for sure.

She's a Pole," he adds, as if that explains it. "Haven't seen Jodes since – well not since she was a kid, actually." He sounds embarrassed, if not regretful. "I was a bit of a deadshit, a hopeless father. And husband. They were well rid of me, really." This is admitted without any particular emotion, it seems to Hannah, as if it's something he's said, or at least thought, for years, until it can be stated baldly, without self-recrimination or judgement. "Water under the bridge, though, isn't it?" He gives a shrug. "And I'm sure you've heard as much as you want to hear about the bad old days, anyway."

"Well. Mum's never really said anything much, to tell you the truth. About you, I mean."

Wes gives her a funny look over the table, and it occurs to her that perhaps she could have been more diplomatic. But she knows it's nothing less than the truth – recognises a similar straightness in her own reply, wonders whether her desire to say her piece, regardless of whether it's right or wrong, and with no thought about pain inflicted, has been inherited from this man.

"Nah." He runs his fingers over his chin; the dark bristle rasps. "No, I guess she wouldn't. I didn't really have much to say to her, either. I was young and stupid. And drunk, mostly. The boys are a dead loss – take after me I suppose, though it's not like Jeannie's any better. But your mum done well for herself, didn't she? She survived. Got out. Obviously gotta few brains in her head. She married that Garrow fella, I heard. His mum was a bit of a goer. The old man was an old fucker – oh, sorry, love, it's your granddad, isn't it?" It appears that he knows nothing about her mother's current situation, and she has no desire to enlighten him.

"She done good. But no thanks to me. And you – you look like you're doing okay, too, love. A big healthy-looking girl. You don't look much like your mum, though. Not how I remember her. She was always a scrawny piece."

"No, I don't. Everyone says that."

"You do put me in mind of someone, though. Maybe Jean's mum. Old Elsa. She wasn't a bad sort when she was a girl – or so they reckon." There's a long silence, as if there's nothing more to say.

"Well, I better be getting ready. Olga'll be back shortly, and we've got to get into town to see a man about a dog." He stands up, collects their cups, looks at the clock. Hannah and Wes stand up. "I don't like to hurry you, but – well, to tell the truth, Olga doesn't know

about any of youse. She knows I was married before, but I never told her about the kids.” He dumps the cups beside the little sink, turns back. “Now, what did you say you’d called in for exactly, love?” He’s still genial, but his interest is clearly waning, and it’s plain that he’s anxious to be rid of them.

“Oh.” She searches for a plausible answer, but there isn’t one. “I don’t know really. We were just passing by – heading up the coast – weren’t we?” She grips Wes’s hand, and pulls him out of the cramped space over to the doorway.

Her grandfather turns a suddenly stern face to Wes. “And where do you hail from, young fella?” He has addressed all his comments so far to Hannah, has barely looked at Wes since their initial introduction. “You an Arding boy?”

“No. I’m from Lismore originally, but I’m at uni up there now.”

“At the university are you? More of your lot doing that these days, aren’t they? But doesn’t change things, does it? You’re still what you are – an education can’t change that.” She can see Wes’s jaw tighten, a faint flush appear along his cheeks, but his expression doesn’t change, he makes no reply.

Her grandfather looks down at Hannah, friendly again. “Well it was good to meet you, er, Heather. Now, I’d better get ready – the old girl’ll be back soon.”

She turns to follow Wes, who has already begun a brisk tramp back through the sodden grass, when it occurs to her that there is something she wants to ask this man; that he should supply her with some information to justify her visit, ease her disappointment – at the very least make up for his appalling treatment of Wes, this rather ignominious farewell. It’s an outrageous question, but it only takes her a moment to pluck up courage and ask.

“Was it something you did to her? Is that what’s wrong with her? Did you do something to Mum, when she was a kid – fuck her or something?” The words come out as bald and ugly as their meaning.

“What?” The man looks stunned.

“I mean, that’s the usual thing isn’t it? All those Catholic priests, those filthy teachers, doctors – it was like some sort of epidemic wasn’t it, back in the day? I’ll bet that’s what

happened, that's why she's so screwed." She's surprised by the harshness of her voice – and her own sudden conviction.

The old man's throat starts working, his soft face crumples, he swipes at his eyes. "Oh, Jesus," he says – and she sees that he's laughing at her, not crying, as she had initially assumed. "The things you kids come out with. You think that – Fuck me dead! Go on, on your bike, love. Your boong mate's waiting." He gives her a gentle push through the open doorway. She can see Wes, hands on hips, leaning on the gate, looking impatient, darkly angry. "Look, whatever problems your mum's got, they've got nothing to do with me, mate – I can guarantee you that. We're all masters of our own destiny you know – that's something you'll work out. The mistakes we make – they're all our own."

"So, was it worth it?" Wes hasn't looked at her since they got back in the car, he's driving too fast, his face rigid, a mask. "Did it help you clarify things, meeting that redneck fuckwit?"

She puts her hand on his forearm, strokes gently. "Wes. I'm sorry. He is a fuckwit. But there are plenty of them around." She doesn't say anything about her own disappointment. There's no point – the visit has revealed none of the things that she was looking for, has provided no clear answers, not about her own future, and not about her mother's past.

"Can you slow down, Wes? Please. Maybe pull over?" She points out a looming petrol stop. "I need to pee. Badly. And we need petrol."

While he's paying for the fuel, she goes to the bathroom, takes her phone. She turns it on for the first time that day. Now there are more than a hundred unanswered calls, messages, a long column of unread texts. She takes a deep breath, dials her home number, but can't do it, cuts off before it rings. She exits the bathroom and sees Wesley striding towards her, clutching a rolled-up newspaper. He grabs her arm, pushes her towards the car, his face

grim.

“What’s wrong?”

The words are spat, savage. “You said you’d called them. Now, look at this, you stupid, stupid little bitch. Oh, fuck. Fuck it.” Wes opens the passenger-side door and shoves her in, thrusting the newspaper into her hand. He slams the door, before stalking around to the driver’s side. She looks down at the paper – the late-morning edition of the *Coffs Coast Advocate* – and there she is: her last school photo, blown up into monstrous proportions on the front page. Her mouth closed, lips tight, eyebrows raised, her supercilious expression disguising gleaming braces. Underneath, there’s a smaller shot of the entire family, Hannah standing slightly removed from what should have been a tight and happy circle. Wesley climbs into the driver’s seat and starts the car. He pulls out onto the highway without speaking as she takes in the accompanying headline:

‘Garrow’s teenage daughter missing: Police fear for second daughter of mother at centre of missing baby case’

A search is underway for 16-year-old Hannah Garrow, who has been missing since late yesterday afternoon. Hannah is the daughter of Jodie Garrow, currently under investigation over the disappearance of her infant daughter, Elsa Mary, who has not been seen since she left Belfield Hospital with her mother three days after her birth more than 24 years ago. The coronial inquest into the fate of Miss Garrow’s half-sister is due to begin in one week.

Miss Garrow, who lives with her parents in the town of Arding in Northern NSW, was last seen late yesterday afternoon, in the company of a man described as aged 20–25, of average height and build, dark-skinned, with fair dreadlocked hair. Police say grave fears are held for her safety.

Anyone who has any information, please contact Arding Police on (02) 6770 3434

or Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000

“Oh my God, Wes. This is so fucking insane.” She thinks of her mother, at home, already overcome with anxiety, having to wait for news of Hannah, fearing not only for herself, but for her daughter. And perhaps – who knows – with the added pain and indignity of Angus’s betrayal. Her mother, who has done nothing but love her, who she knows would give her soul to save Hannah’s own. For the first time in years, it seems, Hannah feels remorse – painful, sharp – and shame. *Oh God*. What sort of a person is she, to bring this on her own mother? She thinks of that man, her grandfather, who has made good his escape, who denies any responsibility, every connection. She thinks of Jodie – of what she has made of herself, of who she has tried to be – of what she has tried to make of Hannah. Of what it means to be master of her own destiny; maker of her own mistakes.

She puts her hands over her face for a moment, as if trying to hold it all in, hold it back. She picks up the phone again, dials the number. Beside her, Wes says nothing, just drives. Takes her home.

thirty-four

The reprieve comes only four days before the inquest is due to start.

Jodie is alone in the house, her mother-in-law having braved the press contingent that has been parked on their front doorstep since Hannah’s disappearance – a flurry of flashlights greets every twitch of the curtain it seems – to collect Tom and Hannah, who she’s taking to stay with her own sister in Melbourne. Jodie and Angus are to fly down to Sydney early in the evening and will spend the days before the inquest with Manon, going over her statement yet again. Manon has assured her that she’s unlikely to be called for questioning the first day – that will be spent tracking the evidence of officials and bureaucrats – establishing that there was indeed a birth and then a disappearance. But over the following

days the questioning could be intense. Manon has warned her that the coroner's surface amiability is deceptive and that a few hours of his relentless questioning can induce incoherence and confusion in even the most seasoned of court players, so it is essential that Jodie is as well prepared, and every possible version of every possible question needs to be considered, every possible response formulated and rehearsed.

She has packed carefully, following Manon's instructions regarding her wardrobe: businessy skirts and shirts in neutral colours, conservative heels. Nothing bright or flashy, nothing frilly, nothing revealing, nothing too obviously expensive, no jewellery.

Now there is nothing to do but wait for the time to pass. It seems to her that this is what her life has come to over this past year – endless moments that need to be endured, lived through, with little respite, and no prospect of salvation. She is not nervous, not quite, but moves, as she has done for most of this year, it seems to her, in a state of absolute numbness, of unfeeling. Even her face in the mirror is oddly blank – there are no bags under her eyes, no shadows, no signs of her distress or haunting. She has, as Bridie has pointed out, not a hair out of place. She wonders if this is how prisoners feel when they face a firing squad, or take their last steps towards the gallows.

But salvation comes in the guise of a phone call.

“Jodie? It's happened!” Angus's excitement is apparent even in his greeting.

“What?”

“It's unbelievable. We've had three women contact us, just this morning. In response to the notice. Three! Manon was right. Three other women who say that Sheila O'Malley arranged their adoptions, illegally.”

“So?”

“They've agreed to make statements – and two have agreed to appear if it's necessary. This changes everything. It's amazing, Jodie. A bloody miracle.”

“Jodie? Jodie?” She can hear Angus's voice, faint, mildly alarmed, but she says nothing, can't think of anything to say.

A miracle. A bloody miracle.

It is everything she has hoped for wished for, prayed for, and yet. There is none of the jubilation she had imagined she would feel, and none of the relief. She feels flat, almost absent. And as if she is still waiting – though she doesn't know what more can happen, what more there is to come.

It's over. And her life can begin again. It will all return to normal. Surely.

thirty-five

When her parents give them the news – in a freaky reprisal of that other dreadful announcement – the formal gathering of four of them in the lounge room, the two children seated together on the lounge, though both slightly more subdued – Hannah is amazed at the intensity of her relief. It's not just emotional, but a physical release, as if some crushing weight has been lifted from her, as if she can finally move, breathe, think, without constraint.

“Oh.” She wants to say something significant, something meaningful, but doesn't know what, doesn't know where she should begin. “It's wonderful news. But what does it mean, exactly?”

“It means I don't have to go and stay with old Aunt Cranky, I mean Cathy, in Melbourne!” Now Tom is bouncing again, but this time Hannah doesn't mind, this time Hannah would like to join in.

“Well, I don't know,” Angus is laughing. “Actually, I think we should let her have you for a few weeks, straighten you out. What do you reckon, Jodie?”

“Oh, but Dad, she won't let me bring my –” Tom realises he's being teased, grins and resumes his bouncing.

Angus turns to Hannah, his face serious now. “It means that the inquest will be suspended. We'll have to turn up, but once we present this new evidence, that'll be the end of it. And it means that everything your mother has said is true. It also means that a lot of people owe your mother an apology, Hannah.” He gives her a meaningful look, and stands up.

“Come on, Tom. Let's go and get some champagne. And lemonade for you. We could get

some pizza, too. I think this news deserves a party.”

Since her return, though she has been contrite, compliant, has created no further stirs – hasn’t had as much as an argument with Tom, Hannah has avoided any unnecessary contact with her parents, staying out as much as possible, keeping to her room when she’s home. Her father has made one attempt to talk to her about what had happened, had made tentative moves to raise the subject during their weekly driving lesson, but Hannah had made it clear, through a series of wince-inducing gear changes, and unnecessarily violent braking, that this wasn’t a good time for such conversations. She knows that eventually she will have to deal with what she has seen, what it says about her father, what it adds to her picture of Manon – but right now she is trying hard to pretend that none of it ever happened. The hardest thing is not being able to discuss it with Assia, to keep her knowledge from seeping out, changing things; it’s almost impossible not to let her disgust and contempt colour any conversations that include Manon or her father.

Now, left alone with her mother, Hannah is suddenly shy. Hannah wants to take it all back – the last twelve months, the space that’s between them, that’s solidifying daily, that she knows will soon become something permanent, an immovable, insurmountable fixture. She wants her mother’s forgiveness, but more than that she just wants her mother – her real mother – back.

“Mum?”

“Hannah?” Her mother’s smile is tentative, a little sad, but unexpectedly familiar and welcoming. She moves without thinking, kneels, laying her face in her mother’s lap.

“Oh, Mummy,” she’s crying, though she’s not sure why. “I’m so sorry. It’s been so awful. I’m so sorry I’ve been such a cow. I didn’t mean to. I don’t even know why. I’m so sorry. I just want everything to be the way it was. Before.”

“Don’t apologise, Hannah. “ Her mother, strokes her hair, whispers. “We all wish we could go back. Change things. You haven’t done anything, darling. It’s all my fault. Everything.”

Aap News

‘Garrow Inquest suspended: Last minute evidence corroborates Jodie Garrow’s statement’

The state coroner, Mr Westerby, yesterday suspended a coronial inquest into the disappearance of Elsa Mary Evans.

Media have been informed that three statements had been made to police on Monday night, from women who claimed that they had also been involved in illegal adoptions arranged by the late Sheila O’Malley, former matron of the maternity wing at Belfield Hospital, where Elsa Mary was last seen alive. The women, whose names have been suppressed, are believed to have given birth to children some time between 1972 and 1995. One of the women has since been reunited with her adopted child.

The head of the state Homicide squad, who were pursuing the case of the missing child, said that the new evidence would need to be looked at carefully before any decisions were made to proceed with the matter. He said that the search is likely to continue for Elsa Mary, but that it would probably be a matter for her family and not the police.

thirty-six

She ends it, just as she does everything: lightly, ironically. Effortlessly.

It is only a few hours after the suspension of the inquest, and he has sent Jodie back to their hotel, then returned with Manon to her Broadway office to collect some paperwork. Her

office is in an old building, a nineteenth-century import warehouse that has been restored and remodelled to house various professional services. The walls are solid and obviously soundproof, and Manon's own chambers are situated well away from the receptionist or any of the other partners. Nonetheless she draws the curtains, locks the door, requests her calls be held, before they fuck. They move quickly from the desk, to the floor – complete their coupling upright, Manon shuddering against the cedar dado.

When they have finished, Manon is immediately all business, briskly tossing Angus his shirt, his tie, his trousers, replacing her own discarded clothing efficiently, without offering any conversation. Dressed, she sits behind her desk, dons her glasses, shuffles through a pile of papers, only looking up when Angus has shrugged himself into his jacket, straightened his tie, and lowered himself into the comfortable leather chair facing her.

She looks up, raises her eyebrows.

“So. It's all over. ”

“Yes. A job well done, Manon. Thank you. In fact, I can't thank you enough. We should go out, have a drink, celebrate.” He reaches out to take her hand, but she pulls it away, pushing her seat back a few inches so that she's out of reach.

“A job well done. Yes. But I'm not sure you've any real cause to celebrate, Angus.” Her voice is uncharacteristically solemn, and for once there's no teasing half-smile.

“What do you mean?”

“You've got some heavy ... shit – to sort out. You and Jodie.”

“But that's not—”

“Not my problem? You're right, it's not. I've got plenty of my own.”

“But I don't understand, I thought —”

“What? That we could keep this thing going indefinitely. That we were playing for real? For keeps? It was fun Angus, but it's like any good party – it's always sensible to leave a little before you're really ready to go.” The irrepressible laughter is back. She stands up, holds out her hand, and Angus has no choice but to follow.

“Good luck to both of you.” Manon pulls her hand free of his, convulsive, desperate, gives an unmistakably dismissive grin. “I'll send you the bill.”

Somehow Angus manages to find a taxi. He gives directions to their hotel, then changes his mind, asks to be taken to a hotel in the Rocks, an old watering place from his student days. Once there, he orders whisky, a double, neat, finds himself a secluded table. But even before he takes a sip from his first drink (and he's not planning to stop here) it occurs to him that there's no point in getting drunk. What he's feeling now is a close enough approximation of that state anyway: he can't quite recall who he is, how he arrived here – and he has no idea what he's going to do, or where he's going to go, next.

thirty-seven

A family dinner. The first they've had together – all four of them – for months, it seems.

Jodie has made Tom's favourite meal, a rich cheesy lasagne that she knows will give Angus a bad case of heartburn though this will not stop him insisting on seconds and even thirds. She has made dessert, too – Hannah's favourite, a spicy ginger pudding that had seemed an eccentric choice during childhood. The dinner has been almost unbearably normal. It could be an exact replica of that last dinner, more than a year ago now: Tom excitedly relating the outcome of various repulsive experiments he and Harry have been conducting, Angus teasing him gently, Hannah subdued, but relaxed, helpful – she had even volunteered to set the table, and had made an effort to do it properly, folding the napkins carefully, keeping the cutlery straight. After the meal, the two children lingered, and the four of them stayed seated for another half hour, just talking. Jodie feels as if she has emerged from a tunnel, as if she is taking things in properly for the first time in a long long while. As if she is catching up on her own life.

When the children go their separate ways: Tom to watch television, Hannah to see a film with Wes, Angus and Jodie clean the kitchen. They work together silently, Jodie rinsing plates, passing them to Angus to be stacked in the dishwasher, and Jodie is struck by the ease of their proximity, their efficiency, the years of companionship expressed in all the inconsequential unremarked touching – the incidental bumping of hands, grazing of hips –

though all their movements are neat and carefully contained in the small space. She is keenly aware of the moment's preciousness, and its transience, feels her eyes sting, her throat tighten, feels suddenly, unaccountably bereft.

“Jodie.” Angus clears his throat. “I think it’s time. I don’t think that we can keep this up. It’s not going to work, is it?” Sadly, gently “We have to talk.” Jodie’s movements have ceased as he speaks, mid-exchange, there is a plate suspended between them, like some grotesque offering, tragic in its banality.

On the surface, it is an innocuous enough request, but for Jodie it is charged, full of portent. “We have to talk.” She has imagined a thousand different versions of this phrase ever since she and Angus were first involved – she knows its significance, would have staved off this dreadful moment forever if she could. She has imagined too, her own response to what’s coming next – has seen herself like the wicked witch of the west, submerged in the watery terror of the moment, shrinking shrinking shrinking into nothingness.

She feels a fierce constriction in her throat, a sharp pang in her chest, the muscles in her legs begin to quake, the welling in her eyes becomes a trickle, a torrent, she takes a deep breath ... and finds herself still there. There is a rush of blood, of life, of feeling. It appears Jodie hasn’t, as she feared, dissolved: her breathing is fast but steady, her heart continues to beat, she is still herself, upright, whole, functioning. Her limbs still work – her hand moves instinctively to grasp the proffered plate, take it from his hand and place it neatly in the washer. A smile requires effort, wavering through desperately blinked back tears, but her response is unfaltering, clear: “You’re right. We need to talk.”

Part III

thirty-eight

On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, Jodie travels down to Milton to sit for Bridget. She has spent two days a week here over the past month, far more than Bridie's original estimate, but she doesn't mind. These days spent with Bridie are the best of her week – they have a lovely quiet rhythm about them, something so far removed from her own life, which is itself unimaginably transformed from what it was a year, two years ago.

Angus has taken what they're politely calling a sabbatical, but what is really a 'trial separation'. He is working for a London firm, has signed a twelve month contract, and though she is far busier than she had imagined she would be, the ease with which she has swung into life as a virtual single mother has surprised Jodie herself. Though Helen's help has been promised (in the gaps between her golfing engagements, her travelling schedule), in all honesty she doesn't need much help. The job at the hospital is only three-days-a-week, and with Hannah boarding for this final year of school and only coming home on the odd weekend, or for the occasional dinner – life is quite simple. She and Tom are less lonely than she'd imagined, doing their own thing during the day, and then reading together at night, or playing the odd game of euchre, scrabble. She is missing Angus less than she imagined too – he Skypes nearly every day, and as Tom has pointed out, they probably talk to him more than they did when he was home. Even on the little screen, blurred, the conversation sometimes lagging, distorted, she can see that Angus is less stressed, less harried. He is enjoying the work, he tells them, and has met up with a few old friends. He is looking forward to seeing Tom and Hannah in the holidays, has trips planned to Paris, Prague, Cambridge. "There's so much we can see while you're here. Pity to waste the opportunity. Though really," his face suddenly young, wistful, "all I really want to see is you."

Jodie has discovered a different self, one she had almost forgotten ever existed, at work. She is amazed to find that her professional self is still so calmly competent, had expected

nerves, anxiety, to be full of doubt, uncertainty. But she has taken the work itself in her stride, and it has quickly become routine, and the thing she has dreaded most, the daily encounters with people who know her, know her story, these too have been less difficult than she had imagined. Jodie Garrow is yesterday's news, after all.

The nights are hard, though. The cold and lonely expanse of the vast bed is uninviting, and though tired she avoids sleep – reading, watching television – for as long as she can. The nightmares come more regularly now, and have increased their intensity, leave her drained and edgy.

She is not unhappy, not precisely. There is a hollowness, though, and a melancholy wondering whether all these years of striving, of working to make something real and strong and unified have all been for nothing. Her family have been transformed out of all recognition, but she has to acknowledge that it's not all bad, that perhaps they're all stronger for it – Angus, Hannah, Jodie herself, and even Tom. She had consoled herself, once, that what she had done could not be helped, and that all things considered, it had been for the best. But now, she's not so sure.

These days with Bridie are her one real solace. Here she can breathe. There's the farmhouse itself – set picturesquely in a green valley – desperately in need of renovating, too cold, too rambling to heat properly. But so welcoming: the two exuberant labradors rushing her at the front door, the friendly disorder that a house full of small children can create, the cup of tea poured from a pot, the comfortable kitchen chair in the square of sunshine where she sits while Bridie paints. There's the smell of the paint or the linseed oil or whatever it is that she can smell, the soft jazz that Bridie has playing in the background, that doesn't quite block out the soft swish of brush on canvas.

Bridie works silently for the most part, but occasionally they chat about this and that, desultory but amiable conversations that touch lightly on many small inconsequential matters.

But today has been different. Bridie had been in a strange mood from the moment she'd arrived. Her face set, unreadable, her voice low and flat, her movements slightly abrupt, jumpy. A fight with Glenys, Jodie had assumed, after Bridie had made some catty remark about even female partners expecting too much – that they were basically no different to men in that regard. “It’s fucking unfair,” Bridie had said,” dabbing paint on the canvas more energetically than usually. “The agreement was that if I stayed home and did the kids – and they’re her kids, mind you – so she could be up at the uni whenever it was necessary, advance *her* career, there’d be no pressure on me to earn anything. That if I did all the home stuff it would be a fair exchange. Now she’s saying that the bloody paint is costing too much. Jesus. I fucking cook, clean, grow the vegies – what more does she expect?” Bridie’s voice is still flat, but it has sped up, her words tumbling out almost incoherently.

Jodie murmurs something mildly soothing – doesn’t like to suggest the first thing that comes into her head, isn’t sure enough of the politics of the situation.

Bridie keeps painting, her lips compressed, her motions becoming jerkier and jerkier. “Oh fuck it!” She throws the brush down viciously. “I can’t keep working. I’m too angry. Bloody hell.”

Jodie stands uncertainly. “I should go, then. Let you –”

“Oh, no. Don’t go. Sorry!” Bridie picks the brush up, grimaces. “I’m embarrassed. I don’t usually let it get to me, but we had the most horrible conversation. Oh, I won’t go into it – other people’s domestics are so sordid. And boring.”

“No, it’s okay.”

“Why don’t we just have morning tea. And if I calm down we can get something done after.”

Bridie boils the kettle, cuts cake, brews the tea, pours two cups. They sit at the kitchen table, huddled around the fuel stove. Their conversation stays general, light, keeps clear of this morning’s conflagration, and gradually Bridie relaxes, her voice slows down, her

movements returning to their usual fluid grace. Eventually there is nothing say, and the two women sit silently, both enjoying the uncomplicated companionship.

It's Bridie who breaks into the silence, her face serious again. "Jodie. Can I ask you something? I've been wanting to ask, but it's awkward – and it's never been the right time. There's so much stuff I feel like I know about you – don't you think that sometimes what you know about someone as a child is all you'll ever need to know in a way – but then there's other stuff, that I don't. You might think it's none of my business – and ordinarily it wouldn't be, but this is important – you know, for the painting. Kinda essential really, if I'm going to get it right."

She leaves it hanging.

"What do you want to ask? "

"It's the baby. Elsa Mary. I've been thinking about it a lot. Trying to work out what you felt about her. What it must have meant to give up a new-born like that. And then now – I wonder how you feel about it now – that baby? Do you wonder who she is, what she's doing?" She pauses for a moment, looks down at her hands. "Do you wish you'd kept her?"

It's a question that no one has ever thought to ask. A question Jodie's barely considered herself. She fumbles for an appropriate response, fails to find one.

"Well, I don't ... It's not... It really wasn't a possibility – not then –"

But Bridie's not listening, interrupts. "But that's not really what I want to ask. The thing is, I feel like I can't finish this portrait: there's something missing, something not quite true, not real, in the Jodie I'm painting. It's hard to explain. It's as if there's a part of you that's missing, and I can't think of what it might be. It sounds silly, I guess, but I have to paint what I see – and in a way what I'm seeing is a kind of blankness. And that's kind of hard to portray. I mean, you seem pretty together, considering what's going on in your life. You've never – well, frankly you've never got a hair out of place. And you should, shouldn't you? Most of us would be a complete mess in your situation. I know the sort of mess I was in after Iris died. I'm still in it, in a way. So it worries me ... your control. And I honestly don't know how to paint it."

Now Jodie knows what's coming. Sits up stiffly in her chair, looks at her friend steadily. Prepares herself.

“Well – I suppose you'd better ask your question then, Bridie.”

Bridie meets her eye, her own gaze unwavering, her voice clear and cool. But certain.

“She's dead, isn't she, Jodie? Elsa Mary. Your daughter. Dead?”

Jodie has signed statements, stat decs, spoken to so many people it seems – lawyers, police, reporters, has told the one story over and over and over until she doesn't have to think before she speaks, doesn't even really have to remember – that tale rolls off her tongue like a oft-told fairy-tale.

But the fairy-tale story – the one where the infant grows up loved, lives happily ever after, that's only one part of the story. There's another part, too – the part she hasn't told. This is the story Jodie has hidden, even from herself, for years. It's a story that should be recalled, a story that needs to be told. A story that needs to be remembered.

It is a relief to finally tell someone – someone who knew her before. Before she became Jodie Garrow. Bridie, she knows intuitively, will not judge, will understand why it happened, will understand why she has never spoken of it. Will understand too, why she has tried so hard not to remember, not to recall. Will understand Jodie's desperation to stop that sad ending – her mistake – from consuming her, defining everything she does, all that she is.

But eventually those wrong endings need to be remembered, told. Eventually there's no denying them. And there's a relief in this telling, this ultimate unravelling, now the thread can be finally pulled clear of tangle, the mess of the whole. And there, look, it's free to go on, however badly frayed, in another direction.

December, 1986

The woman – her coarse grey hair caught back in a rough bun – is waiting, as Sheila had said she would be, at the designated pickup place, the bottom of the hospital steps. It's open to the road there, in plain sight, it's not salubrious, there's a half dead gum, a bench, an overflowing garbage bin. Jodie has already made two trips to her car, the first to get rid of her bag, the second to shove the baby capsule that Debbie has insisted she take (*it's illegal to drive without one. Just bring it back when you can*) into the back seat. So she is carrying nothing but Elsa for this trip. The baby is asleep for once and peaceful, bound tightly by Debbie who has gently reminded Jodie that the blanket must be loosened before Elsa is put in the car. Babies have been known to slip out, she told her, their little limbs need to be free so that the velcro band won't slip straight off in an accident. Jodie has a bag slung across her shoulder that contains a handful of nappies and little hospital brunchcoats and singlets and a couple of the worn hospital-issue bunny rugs that the ever-helpful Debbie has snaffled and insisted she take. "They'll never notice," she had said, beaming with pleasure at her own resourcefulness, "and I imagine that you'll need them more than us."

As Jodie makes her way down the stairs she realises that the woman is not alone. She is with some fellow, he's young, thin and tall, with a straggly beard, a cigarette dangling from his bottom lip. She can see, even at this distance, that they're arguing. The man is gesticulating wildly with the cigarette – stabbing it as if to make some point. The woman's face is red, she looks as if she might be crying, and she is shaking her head, her foot grinding into the dirt in an angry sort of dance. They are a grimy looking pair, unwholesome, somehow. Not sinister, but shabby, their faces tight and pinched, their clothes unkempt, and for the first time it occurs to her that the reasons they have not been able to adopt through the proper channels, as Sheila so briskly put it, may not actually be due to the inherent unfairness of the 'system' but because of some kind of real unsuitability.

Jodie approaches slowly, clutching the baby, wishing only to hand her over, but afraid that she is going to be thwarted in her desire. She wonders briefly – a forbidden thought! – at

the child's future with this couple; if indeed these really are the people who are to be entrusted with her upbringing. Still, she steels herself – it will be nothing to her, this child's future. She has done her part; she has given her the gift of life. But from now on, whatever happens to her is – or will be – out of her hands. She has made a plan, and if her own life is to continue the way she intends, the plan must be executed.

Jodie would like to imagine that it went to plan. She would like this to be the memory. She wishes – how she wishes that she had walked down those hospital steps, the newborn held close, the bag full of baby goodies slung casually across her shoulder and walked confidently to the waiting parents: A young, happy, middle-class couple standing expectantly beneath the shady branches of a flowering coral tree, the light dappled beneath, the traffic a dim and distant rush, quiet birdsong. The young woman, a Burne-Jones style of woman, say, generously built, her hair long, skin glowing, but with a serene motherly core apparent to even the most casual of observers. And with a man – she imagines him in his late thirties perhaps, clean-shaven – his jaw square, his expression earnest and slightly melancholy (the unspoken sorrow of his own sterility, she surmises). They watch her approach – yet it is not her that they're watching, but the squirming bundle that she holds before her now – like an offering. As they watch her approach, their faces transform – move from some undefined anxiety to a radiant joy. They stand quivering with the anticipation of delight, and she rushes (but careful careful – she can not trip, not with her, their precious cargo) and the transfer is done easily, in one seamless movement from her arms to theirs. The woman takes the child to her chest with a half sigh, half moan, her expression rapturous now, the man radiating his own speechless pleasure. And her giving is without qualms, without thought – for these are the people who will love this infant as she should be loved, as all children should be loved. They will nurture her, make her life secure – give her the sort of privileged childhood that Jodie herself has only ever dreamt of.

And she – the newly unburdened Jodie (she has imagined this moment, too) all her anxiety stripped away, the heaviness of her breasts, her uterus, the ache and sting of her heart and her body, this too miraculously gone – and she is as she was: young, without care, pure. A

child herself really, with a boundless future – unsullied by regret or trauma – ahead of her.

Instead, in the other story, the real story, Jodie's steps falter as she comes closer to the couple, whose argument has become suddenly louder, more bitter.. She can hear odd disconnected words,

“No fucken ... can't expect me...”

“... be mad. I told...”

“...didn't want ... hardly...”

“...need to ... baby...”

“...fucking stupid ...”

The man, virulently accusatory, the woman supplicant, entreating, but both full of a suppressed violence – only tamped down in public with difficulty, an anger that Jodie is only too familiar with: simmering, easily triggered, volcanic, the culmination of endless grievance against the world and its treatment. She waits on the steps, hoping that they will stop, look up, that something will change – that this impossible couple will disappear and then reappear magically altered and she will be able to continue her approach with confidence, that she will be welcomed.

Elsa Mary has woken, perhaps noticing the sudden lack of movement. She is squirming in her blankets, her face crumpled, her limbs making little convulsive jerks against her bonds. She will be crying, needing feeding any moment.

Jodie cannot hand the baby over to these people. She cannot keep the baby herself. Sheila has said that she must not contact her again, that her part in the transaction is complete. It must be as if they had never met. But this will not do. These people still haven't noticed her; she can creep in the opposite direction before they see, make her way to the car.

She walks numbly across the tarmac car park – seeing her future lying in ruins. She will take the child back to the flat, there's nowhere else to go, and pray that Sharon hasn't

arrived back earlier than expected. She can ring the hospital from there, see if they'll give her Sheila's home number.

She unlocks her car – somehow amazed that she is still capable of doing something so ordinary, so everyday – and tries to work out how the capsule is meant to fit. But it's impossible to work out, something vital is missing. She puts the baby, whimpering now, into the bassinet, careful to loosen the wrappings and tighten the velcro band, then manoeuvres the basket into the front passenger seat. She anchors the bassinet as best she can, looping the seatbelt through the handle, plugging it in. It's better than nothing, she thinks. It will have to do.

She stops the car only once during the long trip home, pulls off the highway into a side street to feed the child, ravenous now and screaming. The baby resists the cool formula initially, spitting it out, but she crams the teat into her mouth, persisting even as the child cries harder. She needs changing – Jodie can see the damp patch creeping up and down her little singlet – but she leaves it. It's too awkward in the cramped space, and she doesn't want to linger. Though there is no real comfort in heading back to their flat, and even though she worries that Sharon will have arrived early, she is desperate to get back. She feels certain that once she has made some sort of return to her own life, however slight, there will be some way to sort out the mess, resolve things.

She pulls back out onto the freeway again, the baby lying contentedly, now, sated, her eyes flickering, her little mouth opening in a curiously feline yawn. Jodie doesn't think; just drives, slowly, steadily, carefully, without speeding, always conscious that the baby is not safely strapped in.

It is almost midday when she arrives. She parks outside the flat, and sits for a moment in the car, conscious of her aching body, her tiredness. Her heart is pounding too quickly, her limbs are heavy and aching, her head throbs, she is shaking. It feels like the beginnings of a flu, but with the additional dull pain coming from her breasts, which have swollen into a rocklike mass. Her breasts are hot, too – emitting a radiant heat that rises up her throat, into

her face. Debbie and Sheila both have told her that she needs to keep regularly expressing the milk, have warned that there is a possibility of infection otherwise – and that she should see a doctor, immediately, at any sign of a fever. That she would find some comfort, oddly enough, from cabbage leaves laid over the hot flesh.

The baby is sleeping contentedly in the capsule, pink-cheeked, her breaths in and out making a faint whizzing sound. It seems simplest to just leave her here, undisturbed, while Jodie unlocks, takes her bag in. She unwinds the window a little way, and pushes the door shut as quietly as she can, locking the door behind her.

Jodie collects the mail from the box on her way in, flicking through the pile quickly. There is one from Angus, she recognises his handwriting immediately, and the others are bills, mail for Sharon, her university results. Inside, the flat is cool and dark and tidy – the blinds are down, the windows closed – just as she'd left it. She calls out to make sure, but there's no answer. She flicks on the hall light, makes her way to the kitchen, which is clean – all the benches clear, the sink empty; only the same few cups she'd left drying on the draining board. She taps tentatively on Sharon's door, calling out again, before pushing it open. Sharon's room is in its usual chaotic state – clothes strewn over every surface, papers and books, makeup – just as she'd left it. As she'd hoped, expected, the house is empty – she is alone. She goes to the lounge room window, there is a clear view of the car from here. She cannot see the baby, but the street is quiet; surely nothing can happen on such a brightly sunny day.

Jodie is feeling sicker and sicker, has begun shaking uncontrollably. She needs to take something quickly, then needs to work out what she should do next. She goes to her own bedroom. It is tidy, clothes folded, the bed made neatly. She digs around in her bedside drawer, finds some aspirin, munches them down without water, wincing at their bitter lemony flavour, gagging slightly as they coat her tongue, the back of her throat.

She sits on her bed, looks at the mail. She looks longingly at Angus's letter, but tears open her university results first. She has passed all her subjects – a credit in biology, distinctions

in sociology and psych, and as she had expected, a high distinction for her first prac. She picks up Angus's letter – it is postmarked December 17th – almost two weeks, a lifetime ago. It is one of those blue airmail envelopes, the paper thin, the envelope unfolding into the letter itself, so she opens it slowly, careful not to tear the sides.

It is only a short letter, and her stomach gives an anxious twist as she begins reading.

Dear Jo,

You may have already heard – I broke the news to Mum right away, and know what the town 'grapevine' is like – but Plaice and Warbelow have offered me another three months, with double the pay and the prospect of a stint in the Hong Kong and then the Amsterdam office when I actually finish my degree, and I have decided to take them up. I know it's disappointing and we will have to cancel our skiing plans next year, but it was an offer I just couldn't refuse, as it means that my employment prospects at home will be that much more certain – and so of course, better for both of us in the long run.

I know how disappointed you will be and I'm really disappointed too, but it is only three more months – and I can learn a heap in that time.

They are working me like crazy here, but I'm finally getting the hang of it, I think! I will probably keep flatting with Martin – though our flatmate Amelia has recently gone home, so things are a little more expensive for now. We're advertising so hopefully we'll get someone else soon.

Anyway, had better get this off to you. I know you were hoping we'd be together by Christmas, but we will just have to settle for a good long (dirty?) phone call.

Love, always,

Angus xxx

She is disappointed yes, but she doesn't know why the tears should come now, when there has been so much else to cry about. They are not gentle tear drops, but like floodwaters,

her eyes streaming and her nose, spit and mucus mingling, and the sobs are coming from some deep dark place, sobs that come almost like vomit, forced and projectile-like, her body heaving and heaving, convulsively, until she can barely breathe.

When the grief has finished with her she lies spent – her head empty, barely able to see through her eyes – waiting until the choking and hiccoughing have subsided. She sits up, looks at herself in the mirror – her face puffy and red, her body slumped and misshapen – too thick in the middle, her fleshy thighs, the absurd munificence of her hard bosom. She sits up straight, tidies her hair, pulls in her stomach. Smooths out the counterpane. Thinks. She makes a decision – so easily that she gasps, wondering how it has never occurred to her before. She will use her savings, buy a ticket to London, go to Angus, stay the additional three months. She is not going to lose him. If he will not come to her, she will go to him. Soon there will be nothing to stop her, no encumbrance, nothing to put a check on her whereabouts – she will be a free agent again.

She notices, for the first time, the strength of the sun beaming in through the gaps in her venetians, there is even a bite in the filtered streams of sunlight that bisect her arms, her head, her lap. She is still warm from the fever, though the aspirin is starting to take effect, but the day is warm, too, and getting warmer.

It is time to pull herself together. She will ring Sheila now and get something arranged as quickly as possible, and if nothing can be done that way, if Sheila's unwilling to help, she'll go to the authorities, do it officially, take the risk that there will be some repercussions down the line. By then she will have cleared everything with Angus – all this will be in the past, it will *be* the past. Over. Forgotten. An old story. She goes to the bathroom and washes her face, looks at herself in the mirror, and smiles, really smiles, for what feels like the first time in months.

She stands up straight, squaring her shoulders, ready for the difficult tasks ahead. First she should get the baby out of the car; she'll probably be awake now. It's time she was fed, changed. Time Elsa was brought in out of the heat.

Artz-Biz

In a decision that has surprised many in the art world, a portrait of Jodie Garrow, the woman at the centre of a recent police investigation over the fate of her missing daughter, has won this year's \$50,000 Archibald prize. Regional artist Bridget O'Sullivan's vision of Garrow – 'True Story' – is a striking contrast to the familiar media representation. The cool, fashionably dressed, blonde-bobbed matron is nowhere in evidence. Instead, O'Sullivan's impressionistic rendering reveals a much younger version of Garrow, her face shadowed, her hair pulled back in a messy ponytail. Though the brushstrokes are bold, the palette is muted, almost sombre. The figure of Garrow is gently backlit, as if by a streetlight, an old-fashioned metal climbing frame providing the only background feature. But it is the eyes – vulnerable, haunted, yearning – that are the distinctive feature of this portrait, the viewer compelled to meet the subject's sorrowful gaze.

O'Sullivan, who has been an Archibald finalist twice, says that she hopes the painting will act as a reminder of the complexity of the human condition. Garrow, who attended the opening with her husband and two children, declined to speak to the media, but was happy to be photographed beside the winning portrait. (see left)

The portrait has been purchased, for an undisclosed sum, by the National Portrait Gallery.

