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Let it be what it is: fact and fiction in Helen Garner's Monkey Grip and The Spare Room & Deepwater

Alexandra McLeavy
University of Wollongong

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Let it be what it is:

fact and fiction in Helen Garner's Monkey Grip and The Spare Room

&

Deepwater

Master of Creative Arts

(Creative Writing)

at the University of Wollongong

Alexandra McLeavy (BA Hons.)

School of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2015

Certification

I, Alexandra McLeavy, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a Master of Creative Arts, in the School of Law, Humanities and the Arts at the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Alexandra McLeavy

15 August, 2015

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Abstract

In literature, the line between fiction and real life is often seductively thin. Taking the example of Helen Garner's autobiographical fictions in her first novel, *Monkey Grip* (1977), and her last, *The Spare Room* (2008), the theoretical component of my Masters project examines how the first person narratives are vivified by their connection to the author's life. The thirty-one years separating the novels' publication saw distinct changes in the critical landscape, and I argue that while *Monkey Grip* was condemned for its likeness to a journal, *The Spare Room* capitalised on its correlation with reality. This dynamic constructs an extra-textual 'real' life for Garner's novels which acts as a diegetic device, magnifying the gravity of the narratives.

The creative component of my project, my short novel *Deepwater*, was inspired by personal experience. However, finding the strictures of reality a restraint the story I'd envisioned as an autobiographical fiction grew into a work of pure fiction. The extra-textual 'real' life of the novel remained my entry point to the narrative, with small truths providing the flint to my imagination, but unlike in Garner's examples the 'I' of personal narrative was a hindrance rather than a portal.

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Let it be what it is:

truth and fiction in Helen Garner's

Monkey Grip and The Spare Room

Introduction

Helen Garner is an author to whom the epithets “truthful”, “accurate” and “honest” have often been applied, but despite her reputation for candour the uncertain relationship between reality and invention characterises Garner’s fiction. The first person narrator, who appears and reappears in her novels, short stories and non-fiction and shares conspicuous autobiographical traits with the author, invests the “I” with an authenticity that maddens and beguiles the reader: it is a seductive notion, after all, that we might know an author through a text or vice versa, know a text through its author. Garner ostensibly resists the idea of her textual availability, stating “(I)n order to write intimately - in order to write at *all* - one has to invent an “I”” (2002, p. 41) but in truth, the insinuation of the author’s self inevitably animates her writings and the narrators who occupy them.

In 1976, Garner approached McPhee Gribble with the manuscript for her first book, *Monkey Grip*, and “rather diffidently,” to Hilary McPhee’s recollection, suggested “that she thought she might have written a novel” (2001, p. 142). When the book was published a year later this designation was compromised by certain influential reviewers who insisted the book was a thinly veiled memoir and therein devoid of literary merit. Peter Corris, for example, notably condemned Garner for having “published her personal journal rather than written a novel” (1977, p. 12) in the *Weekend Australian*, a criticism which like many others (S. Edgar 1978; I. Dunn 1977; P. Rowe 1978; R. Conway 1978) was predicated on Corris’ unwillingness to divide the novel’s narrator from Garner.

As Kevin Brophy (1992) and Kerryn Goldsworthy (1996) argue in their insightful studies of Garner’s literary persona, reading the novel as a woman’s diary and focussing on the transgressive and romantic subject matter allowed reviewers to pass over the literary potential of *Monkey Grip* which, as Brophy contends, could have been read “as a strange new structure in the overwhelming presence of realism’s conventional architecture in Australian fiction” (1992, p. 275). Far from being overlooked, this critical infamy facilitated *Monkey Grip’s* canonisation as an expedient artefact of a progressive era: the novel subverted institutional

censure by proving enormously popular with readers, winning the National Book Council Award of 1978 and being memorialised, so to speak, as a film in 1982.

Garner responded to the exposure following *Monkey Grip's* release with a varied and prolific output, publishing short stories, screenplays, non-fiction, an acclaimed novella and a novel. All of her writing, from the domestic drama of *The Children's Bach* to the polemical reportage of *The First Stone*, was inspired by personal experience and told from an intimate point of view, bolstering Garner's reputation for authenticity. In the 2002 essay "I", published in *Meanjin*, Garner reflected on Corris' critique of *Monkey Grip*, remembering, "I went around for years after that in a lather of defensiveness: 'it's a *novel* thank you very much'" before going on to declare "I might as well come clean. I *did* publish my diary. That's *exactly* what I did" (p. 40).

The *Meanjin* essay marks a turning point in Garner's persona, indicating she has etched a space for herself in the literary sphere and confidently, even defiantly, speaks for herself. The tone of the piece is intimate, but Garner still insists that writing the "I" necessitates an act of removal on the author's behalf: "(O)nly a very naïve reader would

suppose that the 'I'... is exactly, precisely and totally identical with the Helen Garner you might see before you, in her purple stockings and sensible shoes" (p. 41) she writes.

Thirty-one years after *Monkey Grip* was published and six years after "I" appeared, *The Spare Room* was published in 2008. Garner was instrumental in promoting the book as a novel whilst simultaneously affirming it was based on the three harrowing weeks she'd spent nursing a friend who was dying of cancer. Despite the autobiographical exactitude of *The Spare Room*, the most glaring element of which is a narrator called Helen, she maintained that the book was "morally" (Burns 2011, p. 28) a novel, given the liberties and inventions she'd used to shape the narrative. Naming the character Helen was a "stamp of authenticity" (Wyndham 2008, p. 26) Garner explained, for to name her otherwise seemed "a bit slithery" given the violent rage she felt towards her dying friend. The critical response to the novel was largely positive and though some reviewers took issue with its classification as fiction and others professed to boredom, none reduced her raw and often unflattering emotional candour to a moral deficiency, nor did they challenge the book's literary standing on account of its factual origins. Unlike *Monkey Grip*, which suffered the imposition of reality as a denunciation, I will argue that *The*

Spare Room assimilates the implication of extra-textual reality as a narrative device that lends gravity, scope and depth to the story.

The changing way in which Helen Garner represents her personal life in her fiction writing and persona in the public sphere underpin my research project. In this thesis I will argue that although Garner's public character was manipulated by critics at the beginning of her career, her later work actually predicated itself upon the reader's familiarity with her history, and the tantalising, illusory familiarity of the author herself. The critical responses to *The Spare Room* illuminate a shift in Australian literary culture that honours Garner's right, as a woman and as an experienced author, to speak for herself directly to her reader, making the authoritarian model of critique to which *Monkey Grip* was subjected redundant. In particular, my study will examine how actual realities, from the experience of nursing a dying friend to the fact of her public visibility, might be interiorised by the narrative of *The Spare Room* to elaborate Garner's storytelling. Over three chapters, I will examine the development of Garner's fiction practice as it weaves truth, accuracy and honesty with an ambiguous breed of fiction, ending with a reflection on how her work has informed my own approach to creative writing.

In Chapter One, "Helen, as herself", I will examine the way an extant reality magnifies the narrative of *The Spare Room* through a close examination of the first person narrator who tells the story. Introduced as Nora in *Monkey Grip*, and continually reappearing in Garner's fiction and non-fiction before culminating in the Helen of *The Spare Room*, the "I" is a recurrent voice who implies an inventory of the author/narrator's previous works, most of which are closely and famously connected with the author's real life. This evolving agency in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* embodies progression, exemplifying the "I's" differences: where Nora's telling is characterised by naivety, spontaneity and openness, the older, wizened Helen of *The Spare Room* is distinguished by her worldliness, selectivity and caution. This is evident from the outset of the books, for when contrasted Nora's opening lines have an inclusive, expansive and jolly energy whereas Helen's are exclusive, stunted and rather fraught.

Though Garner claims that naming the character eponymously is a way of ethically owning the "primal and ugly" (Steger 2008, p. 24) feelings she experienced while tending to her friend, her choice inevitably pervades and shapes one's reading of the novel. It is impossible to forget that the author's name is also Helen; she is a character who exists dually

as a living, breathing person appearing regularly in magazines, on the radio and as a drawcard at writer's festival and in this way she corroborates the story beyond its paper pages. This Helen is a seductive illusion for, as Garner attests, the extant "I" is really only another projection of the self, another inscribed layer compounding the author's perceived transparency to something increasingly, irretrievably opaque. The first person narrator facilitates empathic and active readings, for the point of the "I" seems to be the reciprocal "you", the reader who willingly enters into an imaginatively engaged dialogue with the novel. In promotional interviews Garner constantly expressed her intention to enable such a discourse through *The Spare Room*: she believes that readers want to find "a space opened up by the author where they can linger and compare their experiences, thoughts and emotions with those of the author" (Steger 2008, p. 24). Garner, perhaps unknowingly, reiterates the physicality of this metaphor again and again in her commentary. This is significant, given that it resonates stylistically with the immanence of the author in the fictionalised Helen's account and sustains the understanding that the story has actually occurred in an extant space.

In Chapter Two, "From share houses to the spare room", I will further develop the narrative function of reality and spatiality

underpinning Garner's fiction by examining the literal and metaphorical significance of the places in which *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* are set, and comparing and contrasting the ways in which the narrators navigate them. Both novels begin with memorable lines that locate them within a distinct domestic space: in *Monkey Grip*, Nora sets the scene "(I)n the old brown house on the corner, a mile from the middle of the city, we ate bacon for breakfast every morning of our lives" (p. 1) whilst Helen tells us "(F)irst, in my spare room, I swivelled the bed on to a north-south axis" (p. 1). The respective openings are indicative of the stories that follow and the nature of the "I" who informs their physical trajectory: where Nora defines herself as part of a larger collective, located in a lively and open home, Helen's independence is distilled in the contained and claustrophobic spare room. The latter dynamic, I propose, exhibits Nicola's incapacitation and Garner's refined consciousness of literary technique and the vulnerability of exposure; that is to say, the "I" of *Monkey Grip* was ingenuous and unguarded but the "I" of *The Spare Room* has assimilated her lessons and is disciplined in her representation of the story and self.

Michel Foucault's imagination of the heterotopia strikes me as a particularly appropriate metaphor for architecturally and imaginatively

framing *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*. Described as an approximation of a utopia, the heterotopic “countersite” (Foucault 1967/1986, p. 24) vivifies both the actual and illusory sites in autobiographical fiction, for if the conventionally fictional novel embodies a utopic site, in that the narrative exists purely as an idealised and abstract fantasy, then autobiographical fiction like Garner’s, with its recurring characters and recognisable landmarks, constitutes an heterotopic other world. The example of the mirror as a heterotopic site is especially pertinent to the relationship between the Helen Garner we recognise as a public figure and the Helen who narrates *The Spare Room*: to appropriate Foucault’s terminology, the author has ‘reconstituted’ herself in a transient space of exchange between the self and the image of the self, a self that is “at once absolutely real... and absolutely unreal” (1967/1986, p. 24). The self-consciousness of Garner’s projected “I” in *The Spare Room* implies a sophisticated negotiation of the self that is simultaneously real and unreal, the implication of which is a fictional space “as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged” as the actual space is “messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (Foucault 1967/1986, p. 27) .

In Chapter Three, “I, you, we, she”, I will reflect on how my study of Garner’s evolving fiction practice informs my own creative work,

Deepwater. Although our situations and works are vastly different, my novel incorporates personal memories of people, events and places. As such, I need to resituate myself as a writer narrativising a story rather than simply relaying events. Finding a confident narrative voice with which to tell my story - one that's both intimate enough to magnify details and removed enough to place these details in perspective - will be a critical part of this process and I intend to draw on the carefully protected, constructed and projected narrator of *The Spare Room* to do this. In this way, I am appropriating the figurative space where Garner reaches her readers as a space where she might similarly reach other writers. The idea of 'home' will be an important and contested site in my novel, a literal heterotopia for the reason that it proffers the plausible but perpetually deferred possibility of belonging. This is the space in which I desire to reconstitute myself: an inscribed landscape that agitates the romantic promise of home whilst acknowledging the impossibility and inadequacy of its complete restoration.

The second component of my thesis is my creative work, the novel titled *Deepwater* I've mentioned. As I noted above, the story draws on my personal experiences through childhood and adolescence. At the outset, I anticipated it would be an autobiographical fiction analogous to Garner's

work, featuring a first person narrator as the thinly veiled “I” but this was not to be. As my theoretical and creative writing gained momentum, I discovered that in order to craft a narrative from the raw material of personal experience I needed to remove myself in order to gain perspective. The first step was to assume the third person narrator, and from there invention trumped recital. In this sense, I recognise stronger similarities between my work and *The Spare Room* rather than *Monkey Grip*, it being more tightly controlled and contrived although I’d anticipated the opposite. In *Deepwater*, there are serendipitous surface connections between my novel and *Monkey Grip*, beginning with the metaphorical warning “acqua profonda” - which translates as deep water. This image opens Garner’s debut when Nora meets Javo at the Fitzroy Baths and echoes through the story, as his dangerous allure draws the narrator out of her depth; similarly in my creative work, the deepwater of the title refers to the river as a place and to my protagonist, Jessie, dabbling in a romance with a character who draws her into dangerous territory.

Chapter One: Helen as herself

Monkey Grip and *The Spare Room* are the only two of Helen Garner's four sparsely published novels to be told entirely in the first person. Given the highly publicised autobiographical nature of these fictions and the critical anxieties that surround their designation thus, it's not surprising that they are also the two of her works most animated by their resonance with Garner's life: the narrators have a particular seduction, for the "I" is notionally a living being. The Nora of *Monkey Grip* and Helen of *The Spare Room* are connected by their many similarities, all of which hinge on their likeness to Garner and chart a narrative of her life from the young magazine writer and single mother living in Melbourne in the 1970s to the sage and respected author living next-door to her daughter in the same city sometime in the 2000s.

In this chapter I will examine the “I” of the respective novels, demonstrating that, despite the continuity that connects them, Helen is distinguished by her past experiences as a writer and this imbues her narration with an artifice diametrically opposed to Nora’s disarmingly open account. Further, I will argue that Garner’s notoriety for drawing on her own life for literary fodder acts as an ironic narrative device in which the eponymously named “I” is in fact the biggest fiction of all.

From the first, the openings of *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* bring the distinctions between their narrators into perspective. In the former, Nora immediately reveals herself as part of a collective, writing “[I]n the old brown house on the corner, a mile from the middle of the city, we ate bacon for breakfast every morning of our lives” (Garner 1977, p. 1). By way of an introduction, Nora sweeps the reader into the bustle of breakfast in her communal household with the openness and inclusivity that characterises her narration. The plural pronouns “we”, “our” and “us” proliferate before she asserts her individuality towards the end of the paragraph with a wistful “I was happy then” (p. 1). Helen, on the other hand, opens *The Spare Room* with the comparatively clinical statement “[F]irst, in my spare room, I swivelled the bed on a north-south axis” (Garner 2008, p.1). The singular first person “I” dominates the

opening scene, posing a number of rhetorical questions to the “she” who will soon be sleeping in said-bed. The anonymous, binary arrangement of the pronouns pits the “I” and “she” in opposition to one another and the effect is instantly prickly, illuminating by contrast a distinct change in Garner’s first person narrator and presaging the difficult relationship that will unfold between the primary characters.

In both novels, the character-driven plot focuses on an emotionally exhausting and consuming relationship between the narrator and one other, the irresolvable nature of which seems to provide the impetus for writing. Nora’s relationship with the unreliable junkie called Javo in *Monkey Grip* is frustratingly fractious and repetitive, but her emotional default is to infatuation and even self-recrimination: Javo rebuffs her, betrays her and robs her but ‘Nor’, as he calls her, accepts these faults with placid idealism and defers her compliance into the act of writing. In fact, as Kerry Goldsworthy points out, this literary compulsion runs through *Monkey Grip*, with characters constantly communicating via notes, letters, postcards, poems and snoopied-upon diary entries (1996, p. 37). A vivid example occurs early on when, having entertained violent fantasises after Javo ignores her at a party, Nora writes “[I]nstead, I dropped the knife and wrote him a letter” (Garner 1977, p. 20). Hence, the written word takes up

where the spoken word falls short, and in this way the novel itself might be read as an extended, narrative gesture from one individual to another, particularly given Garner's later admissions that *Monkey Grip* drew heavily on her contemporary journals¹.

In *The Spare Room*, Helen's often fraught relationship with her terminally ill friend, Nicola, is the focal point of the story, and here the nickname 'Hel' grates condescendingly like 'Nor' before her. Her first person narration is immediate and comparatively forceful, impelled by active verbs that give the prose a taut, brusque pace. Helen's narration, unlike Nora's, seethes with rage that's directed both at those who exploit Nicola's vulnerability and at Nicola herself, whose inability to face the fact of her imminent death fills Helen with monstrous fury. The writer and the character called Helen crave the transparency that Nicola outwardly denies, feeling that the repudiation of one's mortality "injects poison into friendship, and makes a mockery of love" (p. 89). Under duress, she confesses to a number of shockingly violent desires, such as "I wanted to smash the car into a post, but for only her to die - I would leave the keys in the ignition, grab my backpack, and run for my life" (p. 184). There lingers, however, the inference that despite Nicola's apparent oblivion she

¹ There are many places in which Garner talks about this: see, for example, the essay "I".

in fact seeks Helen's honesty on an unconscious level. Wondering to a friend why Nicola has chosen to stay with her, Helen is told "Maybe she wants you to be the one.... to tell her she's going to die" (p. 9). Similarly, taking advice from her sister in a later scene, Helen deduces "You mean I have to say so and yet not say so?" (p. 98).

In this way, *The Spare Room* is analogous with *Monkey Grip*, making up the shortcomings of a face-to-face exchange by situating the reader as a sympathetic listener, Nicola's situation having quashed the possibility of a second person dialogue between the "I" and the "you". *The Spare Room* pursues, uncovers and inscribes the heavy truths of death and anger that burden the women's friendship, therein allowing Helen not only the resolution that comes with sincerity but also the posthumous opportunity to "say so and yet not say so" in a final "act of love and truthfulness", as Garner herself avowed in an interview at the 2008 Sydney Writer's Festival with Caroline Baum (2008).

Naming the first person narrator Helen has all kinds of interior and exterior narrative implications for one's reading of *The Spare Room*. Inevitably, the author and the character each feed into our understanding of the other, blurring their delineations so that the textual Helen is

embellished by the public one and the public Helen is embellished by the textual one. As such, the character assumes an extra-textual aspect, meaning that she is notionally susceptible to developments that occur outside the text and therein available to the reader in ways that an ink-and-paper construct is not. As Jonathan Wilson writes in an essay about eponymously-named characters in autobiographical fiction, “[W]hether wittingly or unwittingly, authors who name characters after themselves, or heavily imply themselves, end up reminding the reader of the whole range of projections, fantasies, fictions, and transferences that we construct around characters in novels, the authors who create them, and people in life” (1988, p. 391). Inevitably, the character is traced back to the author, whose public profile corroborates the Helen of the novel through appearances like the aforementioned interview with Caroline Baum, as through her previous fiction and non-fiction work. The fictional Helen shares numerous recognisable traits with her creator: both live in Melbourne, next-door to their daughter and her family and write for a living; further, Garner made their likeness very clear in interviews promoting the book. As such, the informed reader remains acutely conscious of the reflexive nature of Helen’s account throughout and the narrator assumes an authenticity which, whether intentionally or

unintentionally, amplifies one's reading of *The Spare Room* by offering a kind of proof of the text in the form of the author herself.

By Garner's own admission, the first person narrators of *The Spare Room* and *Monkey Grip* share their genesis in the life of the author, making it very tempting to read Helen as a natural progression from her predecessor, Nora. However, despite the commensurability of the women, the circumstances under which their resemblance to Garner was revealed was quite antithetical and in this regard their stories depart. Upon its release in 1977, *Monkey Grip* was branded as autobiography by reviewers such as Peter Corris, who asserted from his influential post at *The Australian* that the "I" was "indisputably the author herself" (1977, p. 12). This was a morally-loaded criticism, and though Garner would later concede that Nora's story was in fact fashioned from the raw material of her diary she did not promote the book with such transparency: unlike Corris, she did not then have a platform to broadcast from and the edict was forced upon her.

As Kevin Brophy contends in "Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip*: the construction of an author and her work", Garner was "constructed" in the image of her narrator by her critics and proponents alike following *Monkey*

Grip's release, and it seems that through her career she has worked prolifically to reclaim the right to speak for herself. In "I" she certainly does, writing with candour about "the man I called Javo in my first novel" (p. 40) and subterfuge, too. "[I]n order to write intimately - in order to write *at all* - one has to invent an 'I'" (p. 41) she teases, veiling her intimate, first person accounts with the enigmatic notion that she cannot, in fact, be consummately known. It was this Garner, the seasoned one who wrote essays for literary journals and appeared at literary festivals, who published *The Spare Room* in 2008; it was she who identified her experiences in the narrative and explained to journalists she'd named the narrator after herself in order to own the ugly emotional turmoil of nursing a dying friend (C. Baum 2008; R. Koval 2008; J. Steger 2008).

By publicising her likeness to the experiences of the Helen of *The Spare Room*, Garner is not only making a moral admission about the shocking rage she felt towards her dying friend: she is also, whether purposefully or incidentally, conferring on the narrator and the novel an extra dimension of reality. The interspersing of fiction and reality actually compounds drama in the story and in authenticating the plot by confirming the events were based on real life, Garner amplified the scope and gravity of the story. Ultimately, the reader of *The Spare Room* faces the

bare and brutal fact of mortality through Nicola's death: there is simply no escaping it, given Garner's vociferous and widely publicised commentary on the book. This realisation of fiction acts as an ironic narrative device for, as Shannon Burns suggested to Garner in a 2011 interview, "[I]n order to make death 'realistic' in a work of fiction, you probably *need* to give the reader a sense that the story *isn't* fiction" (p. 132). Garner herself was inclined to this idea in retrospect and in answering the question, she admitted to Burns that "a lot of the book's rage was actually the rage at knowing that I also have to die" (p. 132). The grand and confronting universality of death exemplifies the complexities inherent in combining elements of fiction and non-fiction, with the good reason that it operates on an infinitely reproducible and subjective scale. Death is not a fantasy that affects only the characters in the book, or even just the author in real life. We all face death and as such, the reader is implicit in the tragedy, and perhaps vulnerable to Garner's confessions of fear and fury in the face of her mortality.

Though the personable and candid nature of Garner's public persona infers availability and transparency to the onlooker, the persona in fact adds another layer of fantasy to her characterisation as an author and extant narrator. Garner's contemporary stature lends her a curious

authority in effecting the reading of her novels, and especially the intimate first person narration of *The Spare Room*, but it has been hard-won and perhaps anchored more in the realm of fiction than the voyeuristic reader would like to imagine: as a writer whose prominence was founded on a work of autobiographical fiction will invoke an inscribed and endlessly referential idea of her identity. In his seminal essay “Autobiography as de-facement” the theorist Paul de Man takes autobiography itself to be a kind of fiction, and from this basis writes:

[W]e assume that life produces the autobiography as an act *produces* its consequences, but can we not suggest, with equal justice, that the autobiographical project may itself produce and determine the life and that whatever the writer *does* is in fact governed by the technical demands of self-portraiture and thus determined... by the resources of his² medium? (1979, p. 920)

Certainly Garner situates herself in a state of heightened awareness, a writer by trade with her pen always in arm’s reach. By her own assertion, she has been a compulsive journal keeper since childhood and this comes through in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*, where the narrators use their diaries as tools for expression and verification respectively. Nora, for example, turns to her diary as a confidante, and snoops on Javo’s when she feels the need to breach the distance between them; for Helen, the notebook is not a means of communication but an

² De Man uses the example of Rousseau’s *Confessions* to make this point.

essential truth-getting tool. She uses writing to ward off falsehood, especially when it comes to the exploitative Theodore Institute, where Nicola seeks alternative treatment for her cancer: sitting in on a doctor's spiel, Helen writes "his discourse had a stupefying effect.... This was not the moment to zone out. I pushed my chair back a few feet and sneaked the notebook and pen out of my bag" (2008, p. 34).

Helen's reflex to her pen and paper is analogous to Garner's, like Nora's before her, and her impulse to writing infiltrates the narrative as a strategy for making sense of distressing experiences, to "shape things so that I can make them bearable or comprehensible to myself" (Grenville and Woolfe 1993, p. 71) as she once said herself. In this way, the novel itself serves as a textual truth when Nicola cannot bear the prospect of her death, and Helen cannot bear the intensity of her rage. At the beginning of *The Spare Room*, Helen actually likens Nicola's imminent arrival to the peculiarly subjective pressure she feels as a wordsmith: "I woke at six with the sense of something looming, the same anxiety I felt before a writing deadline: the inescapable requirement to find something new in myself" (Garner 2008, p. 9) she explains. This passage resonates distinctly with Garner's sentiment in the essay "I" where she ruminates on how she adopts the first person narrative voice and determines that it is a process

of discovery , “the crystallisation of a persona” (2002, p. 41), and therein suggesting the “I” is a contrivance of an intrinsic self.

The Spare Room itself contains a proliferation of instances that, if not verifiably fictitious, at least exhibit a self-consciousness that suggests the narrator is doing more than simply relaying events: she is adjusting, embellishing and structuring them to achieve a particular effect. An example of this is when Helen’s son-in-law brings a friend who’s recently invested in the healing magnet business to visit. The skeptical narrator is won over by his demonstration and buys herself a pair of insoles, but ends the scene succinctly with the lines “I looked up and saw with surprise that outside it was already dark. They had been entertaining us for two hours” (Garner 2008, p. 112). This observation refashions the men’s entrancing visit as a performance, underscored on reflection by a number of asides that infer a kind of exaggeration of reality, such as her granddaughter’s exclamation “[T]hat should go in a magic show!” (Garner 2008, p. 111) and Nicola’s comment “[I]t’s like watching a cartoon” (p. 111). On a textual level, Helen’s observation also refashions her narration as performance that moulds our reading: she conveniently notices the dark, fallen like a curtain at show’s end, and has the self-awareness throughout the proceedings to record her own beguilement and

eventual realisation of the fantasy. Helen is a considered storyteller quite unlike the spontaneous, passionate and often repetitive Nora of *Monkey Grip*. Where Nora is governed by emotion Helen is hyper-aware of the story that's unfolding, exercising discernment and elaboration in a way that engineers a cohesive narrative account.

The Spare Room engendered a vastly different critical response from the sensationalist judgments *Monkey Grip* faced, and though some readers felt that the woman on whom Nicola was based had been exploited, reviewers tended to sympathy with the difficult subject matter. Where *Monkey Grip* was often reduced by continual recourse to its little-known creator, a single mother living on the fringes of society, *The Spare Room* was reputed for its honesty, courage and finesse, all qualities that were ultimately attributed to the respected and recognisable persona of the author and her non-fiction writing. *The Spare Room* won a number of literary fiction awards and was actively promoted by the author at festivals and in print, a visibility afforded to the established writer and implicit in assuring the novel's reception. Geoffrey Lehmann, writing for the *Weekend Australian* thirty-one years after Peter Corris, specifically commended Garner's return to fiction: for him, the sense of resolution not feasible in her nonfiction works *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque's Consolation*

came together in the *The Spare Room*, affording a rounded sense of hope and closure.

Those critics who resisted the designation of fiction and argued that *The Spare Room* was nonfiction generally put forth their issues in a thoughtful manner without reducing the book's literariness or its creator in doing so. Rachel Buchanan, writing for *The Age* for example, noted that she found "the static created by the author's backstory" (2008, p. 25) distracting. Robert Dessaix's memorable review in *The Monthly* described Garner's fiction works as "innovative" and "works of art" (2008, p.58); he even wrote that the truthful tone of *The Spare Room* is a "performance" (p. 60) largely affected by syntax. But in Dessaix's eyes they are, categorically, "not novels" (p. 58): though the descriptors he employs infer a creative intervention we generally associate with fiction he classifies Garner's purported novels as "literary approaches to non-fiction" (p. 58). For Dessaix, himself a noted author of fiction and non-fiction, the distinction matters and he contextualises it as a question of subjectivity. Unlike earlier detractors his criticism isn't reductive and he doesn't attempt to trivialise or sensationalise the subject by way of sabotaging her, rather arguing that in order to be a novel the book needs to expand its subjective range and take into account Nicola's experience. Dessaix's reasoning places empathy

at the crux of the novelist's purpose and a more varied interior perspective as a prerequisite for enabling this dynamic with the reader: "*The Spare Room* tells us what it feels like to be Helen, not Nicola" (p. 60) he protests. Ultimately, however, the engaged nature of Dessaix's quandaries aren't intended to undermine Garner's status nor the quality of her prose and he instead unequivocally describes her as "not just a writer, but one of our most gifted" (p. 58).

At the other end of the spectrum, Garner is not without her detractors and even following the largely positive reception of *The Spare Room* she has continued to inspire vehement criticism from some corners. Peter Hayes, for example, was so passionately outraged by the contemporary recognition she received as a woman of letters after the novel's publication that he colourfully likened finding faults in her work "not a matter of cherry-picking - it's spitting the seeds out of a mouthful of watermelon" (2009, p. 86). The following year, in 2010, Hayes persisted in this rant with a rather sarcastically titled article, "The Incredible Helen Garner". In this instance he rails against the inaccuracies in her non-fiction work, listing each of the incorrect details and dates he can identify. The zealous nature of such petty criticism paired with Hayes' vitriolic tone reads more like the exclamations of a spurned lover than the considered

argument of a serious intellectual. This example impresses the persistent prevalence of emotional reactions to Garner's work and perpetuates Kerry Goldsworthy's observation from years earlier: in 1996, she wrote "Garner is someone whose work elicits strong feelings... and people who dislike her work are profoundly irritated by those who think she is one of the best writers in the country" (p. 20).

The controversy surrounding *The First Stone: some questions about sex and power* bears mentioning at this point; indeed, Goldsworthy is partly referring to its reception in her observation. As Garner's first book-length foray into non-fiction, *The First Stone* reported on a sexual harassment case at Ormond College in Melbourne from the writer's first person point of view. The complainants refused to be interviewed and as such the work was criticised for a bias towards the accused, who allowed himself to be interviewed and was sketched in an arguably sympathetic light. The critics were fierce: Jenna Mead, an academic who supported the two girls at the centre of the case, even published a book titled *Body Jamming* two years after *The First Stone* appeared, which compiled essays condemning Garner's book.³ Critics opposed the work's presentation as a piece of journalism and contended that it was closer to a work of fiction, a notable

³ For other examples of the criticism directed towards *The First Stone* see Marion Halligan's article "That's my story and I'm sticking to it: truth in fiction, lies in fact", Kath Gelber's review "Sexual harassment: Helen Garner's book: an attack on feminism" and Virginia Trioli's book *Generation F*.

reversal of the questions surrounding *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*. As such Garner's persona was compromised: once an icon of liberalism and feminism, her openness to the alleged harasser's side of the story was read as a betrayal and Garner as a traitor. Although it's not within the scope of this thesis to address questions about the classification of Garner's non-fiction, the fact that anxieties surround both her fictional and journalistic works is worth noting, particularly because it reflects on and actively shapes Garner's identity as a writer and public figure.

Compounding the allure of the author, a great many significant social, cultural and even technological shifts had occurred in the thirty-one years separating the publication of *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* that enabled and even required Garner to contribute commentary on her own work. To put it concisely, second wave feminism, poststructuralist thinking, political liberalism and the retrofitted zeitgeist of 1970s Melbourne were all factors, and the exponential sophistication of the media and communication industries expedited these changes. Literarily speaking, some mention must go to the contemporaneous diversification of literary genre, and particularly the recent rise of creative nonfiction. The heterogeneous model of narrative seeks subjective rather than objective veracity by vivifying knowable history, and not coincidentally it tends to

serve the narratives of minority subjects whose stories stand outside the dominant ideology. The reader and writer enter into a relationship in which both are contributing meaning to the text, bringing personal histories, emotions and past experience to the fore. At its best, the relationship evokes a particular intimacy, for as Curtis Hart contends “creative nonfiction, especially as it relates to narratives focused on illness and suffering... compel(s) attention and reflection on the part of the reader” (2009, p. 218) and thus facilitates the “potential for a shared epiphany” (p. 218). In the case of *The Spare Room*, the reader enters a particularly dynamic relationship that is informed by the apparent availability of the author and her inscribed history, and therein, the notional existence of the “I” whose name is Helen.

In this chapter, I’ve shown how Helen Garner’s familiar persona infiltrates and magnifies the identity who narrates the only two of her novels written entirely in the first person. From the autobiographical fiction of *Monkey Grip* to that of *The Spare Room*, Garner’s “I” charts an implied lifetime from Nora to the eponymous Helen. In both, writing is the protagonists’ way of dealing with a difficult intimate relationship. In the earlier *Monkey Grip*, Nora writes to Javo and to friends and of course, keeps her famous journal. In the *The Spare Room*, the character Helen is an

established author and her namesake writes to the reader with an acuity for both the situations she writes about and the craft of engineering a meaningful narrative. The latter novel was not a spontaneous transcript of Garner's journals as the first had been, but a considered reflection on real life in which adaptation, fabrication, compression and embellishment of the events came in to play. *The Spare Room's* reception differed vastly from *Monkey Grip's*, for the literary paradigm shifted in the intervening decades to appreciate a new breed hybrid of creative non-fiction that celebrated subjective over objective truth. Garner herself had a hand in carving this niche, for her career has negotiated a crossover of fiction and nonfiction. Ironically then, the "I" of *The Spare Room* is the most seductive of allusions to the writer's self, suggesting to the reader an intimate dialogue amid a controlled narrative architecture that cloisters and protects Garner's true exposure.

Chapter Two: From share houses to the spare room

A narrator who exists both physically and imaginatively must be situated accordingly and as such, Nora and Helen inhabit spaces that provide physical and imaginative grounding for the respective novels. *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* are set distinctly in Melbourne, as is almost all of Garner's writing: this familiarity vivifies the city with a personal history inscribed by her previous work so that even I, a northerner, am vicariously nostalgic for the city streets she navigated by bicycle in the seventies. As a narrator and as an author, Garner is synonymous with inner-city Melbourne and her three-decade long writing career charts her changing experience of the changing urban environment in a way that reflects the evolution of both the self and the locale. Likewise, the topologies of *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* are distinguished by the narrators' different experiences of the domestic and their narrative representations of these spaces. The nature of home and the narrator's navigation thereof

reveals much of Nora and Helen's characters, the stories they tell and the writer whose eye is at the heart of the prose. It seems that the domestic space is a structure as porous as fiction itself, infiltrated by and affecting the story and narrator reciprocally.

As I've shown in the previous chapter, the opening lines of *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* give a telling introduction to the two narrators and their respective stories, and in each case the "I" is brought into immediate focus by their experience of the domestic setting. These spaces resonate with the tone of their accounts, indicating that the narrators are both affecting and affected by their surroundings. Nora begins *Monkey Grip* in the bustling kitchen of a communal household as breakfast is in full swing, locating herself as a social being enmeshed in a wider network: the house she lives in is a communal space where people come and go, it's fluid and open and the boundaries are easily traversed. She takes numerous trips away - within a couple of pages, for example, she goes north to Disaster Bay and camps on the beach with her friends, and later visits Hobart and Sydney among other places; she spends time at friends' houses, at parties and at venues such as the local pool and the Pram Factory Theatre; she takes great joy in the free feeling of tearing around town on her bicycle. Nora actively resists the claustrophobia of the home,

both as a feminist wary of the political construct and on a personal level, as a friend afraid of her housemate's personal struggle: "trapped there in the tiny, beautiful house with Rita and her battle," she remembers, "[A]ll I could think of was escape" (Garner 1977, p.262). Escape Nora does, despite being wracked with guilt, to a different house with a different set of people.

The Spare Room, on the other hand, begins with Helen alone, preparing her spare room for an unnamed visitor with yellowing skin and "a famous feel for colour" (Garner 2008, p.1). Although it's not until page six that we learn Nicola has cancer, it's immediately obvious that something is terribly wrong: anxiety and apprehension imbue the scene and this is emphasised by the closed, claustrophobic space in which it takes place. Here, the narrator is contained in the spare room which is contained in her house, and from the very beginning of the story the demarcation is clear for the view from the window of the room is of an impassable "old grey paling fence" (p.2). With Nicola's arrival, the narrative's sense of claustrophobia increases: when she enters the room for the first time, frail and shivering, Helen recounts "I banged down the window and switched on the oil heater" (p.13). Debilitating illness makes Nicola's confinement a logistical necessity, and the narrator, with a duty of

care towards her friend, is accordingly physically, socially and emotionally confined in her own house - even her granddaughter Bessie is banished with a runny nose (p. 25). The only other recurring setting in the novel is the Theodore Institute where Nicola receives treatment. With its fluorescent lights, narrow halls and static, cavernous waiting room, it's a space which is dramatically terminal in atmosphere - perhaps more so than the eponymous spare room.

In *The Spare Room*, claustrophobia diminishes the narrator's sense of physical and emotional perspective with detrimental effects. For Helen, whose determinedly stubborn hunt for the truth the reader experiences so clearly in *The First Stone* and *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, being trapped in the fantasy world of a sick woman's making is devastating, for it compromises both her own identity and her friendship: the narrowness of her experience is enacted in the constraint of the spare room, whose four walls bear down on the narrator and stifle transparency. Yet the semantic duplicity of the word "spare", a simultaneously positive and negative adjective in that it indicates both an empty space and a surplus entity, may accord with Nicola's contrary intent. Though she seems outwardly to deny her impending death and Helen's struggles with the immanence and implications of mortality, the suggestion that Nicola actually craves

Helen's blunt honesty and common sense bubbles up between the fabric of the narrative. By crafting a novel, Garner is able to give voice to the feelings she suppressed in deference to Nicola's proximity - to regain perspective, so to speak, in a fictional landscape. Here, she can finally write the emotional truths that Nicola seems to both covet and refuse, which is perhaps why she described the book as "an act of love and truthfulness" (Baum 2008) in retrospect.

The Spare Room is characterised by its restrictive setting where in *Monkey Grip* the parameters of domesticity were easily negotiated, owing the youthful sexual, familial and political transgressions of its characters: the narrator's agency has shifted with age and circumstance, and by a seemingly centripetal force she is trapped and isolated in her own house with the prospect of her own mortality dangerously immanent. The narrative landscape of the later novel maps Helen's situation in a way that is diametrically unlike Nora's phenomenological joy: it is restricted, restrained and exemplified by the morgue-like space of the spare room. The brevity of the book embodies this, for where *Monkey Grip* lingers and circles around its subject, *The Spare Room* is condensed into three concise weeks, driven briskly by active verbs and a taut, prudent sense of diminishing time. The absence of a substantial sub-plot or supporting cast

in the latter novel adds to this sparseness, focussing the reader's attention squarely and relentlessly on Nicola's sickness and the women's strained friendship. This gives *The Spare Room* the superficial appearance of an unadulterated, no-frills version of the truth seemingly in keeping with conventional non-fiction rather than storytelling, yet this sparseness is more probably an effect of the author's craft - of the cutting, leaping, trimming and sharpening (Garner 1996, p.5) with which she shapes experience into fiction. Taking this idea a step further, implying reality is itself a wile of Garner's fiction that capitalises not only on the reputation of the author and her stylistic nuances but her notional location in the brick-and-mortar city of Melbourne too.

In *Monkey Grip*, Nora visits real places recognisable to people who are familiar with Melbourne: the streets, clubs and theatres add to the verisimilitude of the story, and bolster the credulity of the narrator by associating her with a knowable place. Time has witnessed the expiration of many of these landmarks, but as proof of Garner's literary standing and the canonisation of the novel those that stand are now vivified by their literary other-life,⁴ a status that refigures them as relics of a bygone era.

⁴ In 2011, for example, Property Observer website published a story beginning "A Fitzroy North house that has links to Helen Garner's late 1970s novel *Monkey Grip* sold at weekend auction for \$3,185,000" (Chancellor). It was in fact the house where the novel was written rather than set, but the implication of the novel's cultural worth is implicit.

The Spare Room similarly evokes the Melbourne of its narrator's experience, albeit this time she is more likely to travel by tram than bicycle and has, perhaps, a more calculated approach to her descriptions of place. The novel intones an urgency and immediacy at odds with the wistful nostalgia of *Monkey Grip*: grammatically and narratively it is insistently present and as such, we have the strange sense that the places Helen refers to are actually co-ordinates for her whereabouts, from Flinders Street Station to the Epworth Pharmacy, and the Waiter's Club to her little house itself. It is as if the action could be occurring at the very moment we read it and ironically, though this is categorically impossible, *The Spare Room* cultivates credulity by capitalising on the plausible existence of its narrator-on-site- most likely with her pen in hand.

For Helen, it's no coincident that her rare moments of emotional and psychological relief exist outside of the strict physical and temporal parameters engendered by the literal and metaphorical claustrophobia of the spare room. Here, the writer-narrator subverts the possibility of being discovered by placing herself beyond the scope of the novel, and it is under these circumstances that transcendence is made possible. Physically speaking, the most memorable instance comes when the women reach a rare moment of true sympathy with one another as they picnic in the

Botanic Gardens. Outside of the suffocating confines of the spare room on a bright spring day, Nicola finally concedes her frippery with the grave acknowledgement, “This whole thing’s hard on you, Helen, isn’t it” (Garner 2008, p. 104). In this scene, the spacious perspective enables honesty and the women are able to make admissions and communicate with a freedom that is otherwise stifled by their enclosure. Notably, the exchange unfolds with the two sitting side by side, not in confrontation, or mutual observation, but in solidarity. In order to allow Helen to respond to her openly, Nicola first “shifted so we were sitting side by side, facing in the same direction” and then “let her gaze rove over the soft, well-kept lawn that sloped all the way down to the lake” (Garner 2008, p. 104).

Temporally speaking, the narrator transgresses the restraints of time towards the end of the novel in order to narrate the circumstances of Nicola’s death, which occurs in the not-too-distant future. Garner uses the unconventional future tense to do this and almost every paragraph begins with an oddly deferential assertion from the narrator’s present position, such as “I didn’t know then” (2008, p. 189), “I could not imagine” (p. 190) and “I did not foresee” (p. 191). Having explained that the realisation she could make this technical determination was something of an epiphany (Burns 2011, p.32), one is reminded that the fiction is rooted in the author’s

actual experience: the future tense conveys a self-evident consciousness of this fact, placing the instance of Nicola's death outside of the narrative proper and into an aspect of actuality. Yet as real as Garner makes this seem, and as unaccountable for her character's death as the removal to real life renders her, the implication of actual events culminating in Nicola's passing is perhaps the greatest fiction in *The Spare Room*: as Shannon Burns suggested to Garner in an interview about the book, "[I]n order to make death 'realistic' in a work of fiction you probably need to give the reader a sense that the story *isn't* fiction" (2011, p. 32).

The unfixed narrative of *The Spare Room* corresponds with Michel Foucault's embryonic notion of the heterotopic "countersite" (1967/1986, p. 24) , an architectural imagination of space that exists in the exchange between an idea and its external manifestation. In Foucault's formulation, the heterotopia is necessarily anchored by its actual existence, and in the case of Garner's autobiographical fiction this is evinced by reference to the reality of both the verifiable narrator and the space in which she exists; simultaneously, the heterotopia acts as a space in which these actual places are "represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault 1967/1986, p. 24). *Monkey Grip* and, to a greater extent, *The Spare Room* fashion from the shapelessness of real-life and human relationships - from the

disappointments and misunderstandings, the trivialities, fallacies and regrets - an other or parallel terrain that substantiates the author's experience through narrativisation. In the latter case, the "countersite" is one in which Helen gives the incommensurable passions of death, rage and love a harmonious voice and it is this unlikely facilitation that implies the possibility of actual transcendence.

Foucault's primary example of the heterotopia was the mirror, an image perfectly suited to illustrating Garner's manifestation as the narrator in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*. As Foucault writes of the qualitatively transient experience,

I begin to direct my eyes towards myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real... and absolutely unreal (1967/1986, p. 24).

To think of Garner's fictional incarnations as a 'reconstitution' of the actual self is a particularly appropriate notion, because it implies that the image of the self is somehow shaped, contrived and made to appear whole in a way that the immediate, subjective experience of self does not allow. This is not to say that Garner perfects herself in fiction, for she is, in fact, quite unforgiving of her own shortcomings, but to suggest that the considered projection of the actual self in a novel is essentially and elementally a

fictional animation. The advantage of this contrivance is that the author is able to construct a spatially implied and intimately inscribed “I” with whom the reader engages sympathetically, whilst protecting herself from the compromises of self-exposure: as Garner wrote in “I”, “I don’t feel exposed... the “I” in the story is never completely *me*” (2002, p. 42). In response to *The Spare Room*, critical and promotional materials emphasised the empathic potential of the text, and fascinatingly, numerous examples used spatial and physical metaphors in order to illuminate this point: in this way, the text became a literal heterotopia in which the reader was implicated. Rachel Buchanan, for example, reported in *The Age* that “[T]he novel opened a spare room in my mind” (2008, p. 25), and Garner herself explained that a story based on the writer’s experience should “open up an enormous space behind their own experience, where all the rest of the world can flood in, and everyone else’s experience, too” (Wyndham 2008, p. 26).⁵

In this chapter, I’ve demonstrated how the distinct settings of *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* are inscribed in the texts according to the experiences of their narrators and the writer’s narrative intent. Following from the recognisability of Garner herself, these are notionally knowable

⁵ See also Jason Steger’s interview with Garner for a similar spatial analogy.

yet uniquely fictionalised places, for both the homes and the city of Melbourne are spaces that Garner vivifies in all her writing and makes her own. Both accounts interiorise the “I”’s perspective and engender the spaces they encounter with attributes appropriate to the characters’ experience. As I’ve shown, Nora in *Monkey Grip* navigates as an open, communal space that’s resonant in the spontaneous prose whilst Helen in *The Spare Room* inhabits a closed, sequestered space and a tightly controlled narrative. These subjective, perspectival infiltrations could suggest the narrators’ proximity as in *Monkey Grip*, where immediacy and naivety impart the sense of authenticity. In *The Spare Room*, the narrator’s pervasion of space has the opposite affect according to the intention of the agency directing it, and the affect is a highly orchestrated, considered story. In this way, the narratives proffer a dually real and imagined landscape that’s illustrated by Foucault’s notion of heterotopia: Garner’s fictional sites are at once physically verified and figuratively negotiated, just like the author herself. The transgression of preconceived boundaries and the otherwise inconceivable prospect of true and open communication is permitted in this other space, made possible by the conjuring and evocation of the written word.

Chapter Three: I, you, we, she

In this final chapter, I examine and reflect on the creative process of writing my novel, *Deepwater*, which is my first extended piece of creative writing. By comparing and contrasting the issues I anticipated with those I faced, I will clarify and resolve my expectations by drawing on both my creative and theoretical research. In Chapters One and Two of this thesis, I looked at the way Helen Garner represented her life and self in her two works of autobiographical fiction by focussing on the narrator and how the “I” relates to the unique spaces it is inscribed in. In Chapter Three, I now consider how I have represented my own life and self in my work of fiction by focussing on the narrative agency and the significance of the settings my protagonist inhabits. When I began writing the story I sought guidance from Garner’s example: she’d famously written about two real, intimate and fraught relationships in her books and I admired the intensity and proximity of these narratives. In writing however, I

quickly realised that imitation - both of Garner's style and of my younger, other self in the position of "I" - was an impossibility. In this Chapter I will draw parallels between my novel and Garner's precedents and consider their distinctions, examining the ways in which my decisions to diverge from her example were informed by the interplay of my theoretical and creative findings.

Reading Helen Garner's autobiographical fiction showed me a way into writing my own creative work. As I've shown, *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* draw heavily on the author's personal life, offering the reader the possibility of immersion in her world. Proximity is drawn through blithely recounted domestic events and sensory details that conjure both a sense of immediacy and perpetuity and an attention. In *Monkey Grip*, "we ate bacon for breakfast every morning of our lives" (p. 1) is a prominent example and on the first page of *The Spare Room*, the bed is swivelled on to the correct axis, just ironed sheets and pillows are specially selected and the windows are thrown open to circulate fresh air. Though my novel has a less domestic perspective, home plays an important figurative and physical part. Appropriating Garner's example, I used my recollections of small details - sounds, smells, actions, and associations - to evoke real life events both in my memory as in my story. In the first passages of my work

the inventories of flora illustrate this: the colour of jacaranda and the scents of honeysuckle, eucalypts and lantana are all vivid sensory images connected to my childhood and they allowed me a literal and figurative entry to the story along the walking track that traces Deepwater Estate to the house my central character, Jessie, calls home.

Deepwater is inspired by personal experience, from the places I've lived to people I've known. Although I knew from the outset that my narrative would not incorporate personal elements as transparently as Garner's, nor would my persona influence or impress readings of my work with the weight of hers, I looked to her examples in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* for direction. Ethical concerns aside, my interest was in the way these novels were drawn from real life and narrated by an author who was at once inside the story, as the "I", and outside of the story, as the narrative's architect. In *Deepwater*, I wanted to craft an account that balanced my personal memories with a narrative that was vivified in the reader's imagination, and not simply a self-perpetuating recital of events. Though the attraction of Garner's autobiographical fiction is its availability, which implicates the author as a living being, the power lies in the figurative, literary animation of these material entities. As Elizabeth Jolley mused, herself famed for writing fiction inspired by real life,

For the reader... the remembered thing, the memory, is not so interesting as the created thing so I think it is necessary to use the memory, the suggestion, the idea, and, with feeling and imagination and humour, make something from the remembered thing (1992, p.177).

In this way, it is Garner's prerogative as a writer, even her obligation, to embellish, adapt and transform the recollections she narrativises.

The two elements of Garner's autobiographical fiction I've discussed already in my thesis - that is, the first person voice who narrates the stories and their situation in the inscribed literary landscapes - formed the basis of my interest in the creative structures of *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*. I began writing my novel in the first person, anticipating that the story I intended to write would be an autobiographical fiction and therein naturally suited to the first person narrator: the "I" was the default mode for telling a story inspired by my personal experiences. Yet the more I wrote the more difficult and strained the first person voice became: it was inflexible and limited, and demanded inward attention that distracted from the story I wanted it to tell. Voice is particularly problematic in the first person because it necessitates an act of transformation from the author to the subject which often goes unseen. As Garner herself asserts, "[T]here can be no writing without the creation of a persona. In order to

write intimately—in order to write at all—one has to invent an ‘I’” (2010, p.133).

Following experimentation, I found the third person voice resituated my perspective and allowed the story to flow more easily, allowing me freedom to invent, elaborate and adapt the events and people I was writing about, including the protagonist. As de Man points out, the subject plays a pivotal stylistic role that shapes readings of a story, for it “remains endowed with a function that is not grammatical but rhetorical” (1973, p. 33), whether the pronoun is “I” or “she”. Distancing my point of view from that of the subject meant that I could separate my agenda from the protagonist, allowing us both a kind of freedom from the narrative’s self-consciousness.

In retrospect, I see pivotal differences between Garner’s undertakings in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* and my project which illuminate the unfeasibility of my writing in the first person. Writing about the self from a temporally close, first person perspective as an adult as Garner does suggests a need to understand, critically assess and take responsibility for one’s actions in complex circumstances. Garner, through Nora, writes in order to illuminate her romantic devotion to the troubled

Javo; Helen, as herself, writes to understand her fraught loyalty to the terminally-ill Nicola. In both instances, questions about the often inexplicable conduct of the self are front and fore and Garner takes these quandaries on with brutal self-reflection. In *Monkey Grip*, the first person narrative is located in the present, for as Garner herself admits, it was essentially transcribed from her personal journals. In *The Spare Room*, the first person narrative is again proximate to the events it examines. In contrast, my novel begins approximately twenty years ago, in my distant childhood, creating an irreconcilable gap between myself as the writer and myself as the story's agent. The time lag is simply too long to write about the "I" as anything other than an allegory, and lacks in energy because of this. As such, the impulse to account critically for my behaviour was reflexive, facile and rather redundant - an unnecessary hindrance to the narrative - where Garner's meticulous self-interrogations are revealing and insightful.

By resituating the protagonist I named Jessie as a character rather than a narrator I was able to 'see' her rather than 'see through' her. Assuming the third person meant my novel was liberated from narratorial mimesis, the verisimilitude of my own experiences, the tyranny of self-regulation and the tedium of introspection. Jessie eased my righteous

accountability and, by shifting the focus of narration, she allowed the story to take its own course and explore diverse territory. Most importantly, the third person point of view enabled an omniscience not available in the first person. As a twelve year old girl, Jessie is on the brink of understanding grown up things like sex, relationships and the self, meaning that writing in the first person allowed only a limited view of the story. Third person narration enabled a more holistic view, and the capacity to shade and colour her grasp of the elusive and sometimes sinister things that happen around her, intimating her scope of understanding and her lack thereof. The tension between knowing and not knowing is at the heart of the my novel, for Jessie senses her friend Len's troubles even though she never admits this: she is able, and perhaps negligently chooses, not to know. The third person allowed me to imply her immature awareness in the narrative without declaring it definitively, an insinuation that remains subtle and to a degree, unresolved.

In *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*, small, domestic items often open up to larger truths, from the "bacon for breakfast" (1977, p. 1) in *Monkey Grip* to turning "the bed" (2008, p.1) in *The Spare Room*. When I began writing my novel, I presumed these anecdotes and objects were exclusive to autobiographical fiction for they often seemed such small,

superficial truths, so personal in their realisation of routine. However the more I wrote, the more I realised these small truths could be distilled from imagination just as they could be gathered from memory. Household objects and family recipes, gossip, anecdotes and redolent summer smells: each was a way into a scene and sparked a kind of alchemy that encouraged creative invention. Starting with small, seemingly inconsequential details is categorically Garnersian, but the details in my novel were unique to my characters, setting and experience. Writing them down and recontextualising them in my story was a process of empirical understanding, possible only through my own practice and the proverbial pen to paper.

Ironically, the more I viewed my novel as a piece of fiction, the more I felt compelled to include actual artefacts of experience along with fabrications, as if they were a kind of discreet evidence signalling larger personal truths. A sniffle, the lyrics to a song that seemed so important in 1996; trivial details took on disproportionate significance, allowing recourse to the immediate perspective of the first person I'd relinquished to the third. They were a reclamation of the story, a possessive marker where the "I" bubbled up through the narrative structure without ever manifesting in a grammatical form. As my creative work gained in scale

and momentum, the fragments of veracity hindered the narrative and read as forced, affected and unconvincing insertions amidst more natural prose. Alternately, making things up allowed the story to flow freely rather than being steered between markers of autobiography that had diminishing currency in the fiction I was crafting. The more I wrote, the more I trusted the story's trajectory to fiction but I included accuracies even when I knew they were superfluous and followed my intuition to tell everything. Although such detail was often edited out, it was part of my writing process.

The setting of the first third of the eponymously named *Deepwater* is one significant autobiographical reality I retained. Although I never mention the river by name, I lived up to the age of twelve on Deepwater Estate, Woronora River, a set of thirty or so houses strung along the river bank and accessible only by foot or by boat. It is a place that can be identified and my story features references to a number of landmarks that locals know, including the Needles and Jockey's Cap. I initially resisted the question of whether to name, rename or not name Woronora and wrote of it only as "the river". As it happened the title "the river" lent an enigma and a familiarity to the story that suits the narrative very well. I described the journey up and down the river as I remembered it, from the

succession of houses and occupants to the distinct seasonal flora, and included notable events, from the impromptu parties to Santa Claus' annual Christmas visit. Having moved away to the country as a teenager, just like Jessie, the lapse in time and distance gave me a broader narratorial perspective of the river than I had as a small child living there. My memories tended to snag on the most vivid, exotic and striking of details, which in turn effected the most lyrical and potent images in writing and in these details of place I was able to anchor the precious reality of my childhood.

Nevertheless, I made a number of blatant inventions in the setting of the narrative. In *Deepwater*, the most significant involved houses: the house at number three, where I grew up and which I bequeathed to Jessie, moved to number one and the house in which Morton lives was moved from high up on the mountain behind Deepwater Estate to the other side of the river. Originally these alterations were made to acknowledge that the characters I'm writing about are fictitious, or fictitious riffs on real people. I didn't want the people or places I was writing about to be answerable to real life in the reader's mind, nor did I want a moral responsibility to their rendition. As the story went on, my fabrications increased exponentially and layers upon layers of creation were calcified

beneath the inscribed surface. Though these modifications were made for practical reasons, they ended up influencing the storyline of my novel and directing its metaphorical and narrative trajectory steering *Deepwater* further and further away from memoir. For example, Jessie's growing up at number one Deepwater Estate deflects the reality of where I personally grew up. Her situation is a convenient narrative affectation, for living at the end of the Estate puts Jessie at the literal and symbolic edge of the community, closer to the pull and danger of the bush and privy to things which happen in that mysterious space.

The Woronora River, and especially Deepwater Estate, was a very special community to grow up in. As a writer, the environment and cloistered social dynamic struck me increasingly as a singular and rather magical setting for a story. It was an unusual and beautiful place, but it was also a place for misfits and dark secrets. Though the river seemed an idyllic, peaceful place to my child's eye, I came to understand as an adult that it had some very sinister undercurrents: shady characters, persistent and disturbing rumours, abandoned homes and even corpses found floating downstream. Ergo, this murky atmosphere appealed to my writer's eyes, but I was also seduced by a personal inclination to untangle and make sense of memories that troubled me in retrospect. As it turned

out, the imaginative approach of fiction allowed me to do this, for though I knew the river as a physical place, the understanding of its darker aspects and undertow only made itself available to me through writing. As Elizabeth Jolley once wrote in reflection on the incidents that moulded her as a writer, “[S]ometimes what is most important after infancy is the experience which finds expression only in writing” (1992, p. 6). This is to say that act of writing is itself a kind of original and self-perpetuating encounter that itself enables its own kinds of discovery.

My novel moves from the characters’ seemingly idyllic childhood on the river to a rough, inner-city Sydney locale in part two, a dramatic shift that affected the tone, narrative and characterisation. The similarities between the grungy, subculture setting in *Deepwater* and that in which *Monkey Grip* takes place are rather overt: in both, drug use is rife, living spaces are fluid, communal and haphazard, and alternative music, performance and art are all at the fore. Similarly, the love interests - Javo in *Monkey Grip* and Len in *Deepwater*, both of whom are ensconced in these scenes - share a tendency to self-destructive behaviours, overindulging in drugs, drink, nightlife and general hedonism. In retrospect, I think I was unconsciously drawn to Garner’s focus on fringe culture and the characters found in there, because there are few popular fictions who do

so. At the outset, I saw *Monkey Grip* as a model of autobiographical fiction but later I realised Garner's sketch of Melbourne's bohemia in the 1970s had thematic parallels with the post-punk scene I was familiar with, giving a language and a narrative to a culture not widely explored in literature. The troubled, dysfunctional relationship Nora has with Javo in *Monkey Grip* has certain likenesses to Jessie's relationship with Len in *Deepwater*, not least because they develop outside of conventional romance tropes.

There are many illuminating differences between *Monkey Grip* and *Deepwater*, however. Underscoring the generational shift, the consciousness of AIDS is prevalent in my novel where it is non-existent in Garner's: sharing needles is a matter for concern and sex is no longer a "free" thing (though this owes in part to my characters' particular sensitivities rather than an extensive cultural shift). The drugs of choice are different, with ecstasy and MDMA being the most commonly used drugs in *Deepwater*; though heroin remains a ghastly spectre across the ages and in both my work and Garner's it represents a darkness in the lover that neither Jessie nor Nora can approach or understand. Len and Javo share a number of common traits, as I've suggested, but they are very different young men. Len identifies himself as a feminist and his sexual behaviour

is puritanical and fiercely faithful where Javo takes multiple partners and can be rather chauvinistic in his sexual attitudes to women. Len exemplifies a societal change in gender relations, if radically, because his life experiences demand it: reacting to the examples of his father's generation and his abuser, Len rejects any version of sexuality that is inherently predatory. Of course, this doesn't mean he's not capable of harming Jessie: he is, and in the same capacity he is capable of harming himself. For Jessie and Nora, the loved one's self-destructive impulse is an unresolvable enigma that's both seductive and terribly isolating, and this is probably where my greatest empathy with her writing lay.

Garner's autobiographical fiction inspired me to begin writing about vivid personal recollections, but the more I wrote the less autobiographical my creative work became. Narrative fabrication built upon fabrication, ironically effecting a natural rhythm and cadence. *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* were both subjected to varying degrees of interrogation about their status as a fiction. With the former, the question "is it fiction or is it non-fiction?" was political and loaded with resistance to new ways of writing in a revolutionary era. The question as it was applied to the later example of *The Spare Room*, and in which I'm more interested, was narrative based, a question of how the interaction of fiction

and what we know to be truths about the author's life interact to fuel and fortify the story. For my novel this intersection is subjective rather than overt and visible, but the flint of reality sparked my entry into creative territory and allowed me recourse to the river of my childhood. This was the space, calculated as writer and desired on a personal level, I wanted to return to. By modifying and amplifying the space and my memories and using the third person narrator to gain a broader perspective, I approached writing as I did the river track, and as it turned out creative invention was my one way in and one way out.

Thus, I conclude Chapter Three with the observation that my representation of myself, or a form of myself in my creative work, significantly diverges from Garner's example in her works of autobiographical fiction. This is exemplified by the designation of the narrator, who in *Deepwater* is the third person where in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* she is the first. Following from my examination of Garner's subjects in their familiar environments in my previous chapters - that is, the "I" of Nora and Helen in the author's stomping ground of inner-city Melbourne - I've looked at my protagonist, Jessie, and her situation on the reimagined Woronora River where I grew up. In all, the subject's belonging in the space related to the writer's belonging, and this sense of

intimacy was important to the success of the narrative and the writer's cathartic pursuit of resolution, but in my novel the immediacy of the "I" was inappropriate. Unable to reconstitute myself in the place in which I grew up, my only option was to reconstitute my experiences in a landscape that came into being through narrative: departing from the Garnersian style of recording small details and fleeting memories, I embellished, adapted and invented real events to create a self-perpetuating fiction sparked from the flint of reality.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I've examined the enticing first person narrators of Helen Garner's fiction and considered the changing ways in which she uses these intimate agencies to represent real life in her writing in divergent ways. The irresolvable relationship between reality and invention has distinguished Garner's career; thus, an awareness of this interplay infiltrates and informs readings of her novels. In *Monkey Grip* and later in *The Spare Room*, the reader engages with the "I" narrator who is notionally knowable and locatable through the referent of the author. Critical reviews, media commentary, interviews, appearances and even the author's own assertions coalesce to enforce an image of Helen Garner. But as the woman herself writes, "the 'I' in the story is never completely me" (2010, p. 133): voice is an embodiment of fiction, a reinvention that reflects the aesthetically realised and impossibly whole actualisation of the "I" in a way that serves the story being told.

When *Monkey Grip* was published in 1977, the little known author was castigated by critics for publishing her personal journal and calling it fiction, but despite this, the novel went on to enjoy great success and came to retrospective acclaim. Garner's succeeding work bolstered the interplay between reality and invention, through short stories and non-fiction that creatively narrativised fact. Thirty-one years later she published *The Spare Room*, asserting that it was a novel whilst maintaining the account was based on real life. As I've shown, by 2008 Garner's persona had grown in status such that she was able to authoritatively designate this questionable label, and the rational, considered critical response evidenced an evolution of the fiction paradigm, a broadening of accepted idea about what a novel might be and the material it might contain. Moreover, this ostensibly political effect functions as a narrative ploy: the extra-textual life of the narrator, the extant locations and the insinuation of lived experience conspire to reinforce the drama and attraction of the story. Love, heartbreak, betrayal and death have acute power when we know they have really occurred because they are at once the most private and universal of experiences, and resonate with the reader's life.

In Chapter One, I examined the trajectory of the first person narrator introduced in *Monkey Grip* and traced to *The Spare Room*. Taking from the observation that the eponymous Helen is a much more controlled character and narrator, I considered her restraint as both a natural effect of maturation and a narrative function. Where Nora in *Monkey Grip* was candid and compulsive, both traits that spilled over into her raw, unvarnished narration and probably triggered the harsh criticisms it received, Helen tells a carefully crafted story in *The Spare Room* which provides the author with protection. Despite the provocative naming of the narrator in this later novel, the author is secure in the fabric of her own fictions. Her apparent immanence is a contrivance of self-preservation that ironically creates a sense of intimacy with the reader, who assumes they know who she is. As de Man contends, the designation autobiography is not a genre but an adjective of sorts, describing an instance of understanding: in his figuration, “[T]he autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading” (1979, p. 921). In this way, the referent who asks empathy of the reader by engaging them in a text with a familiar, first person narrator knowingly - but not reductively, nor sacrificially - offers the reader some part of themselves.

In Chapter Two, I considered how the physical spaces inscribed in *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room* acted as a verification of the narrator's being through familiar and identifiable terrain. I looked at the ways Nora and Helen experience their surroundings in distinctly different ways which illustrate the availability or lack thereof of the narrator, and determine the trajectory of the narrative. Specifically, where Nora navigates open spaces in a carefree way, Helen is bounded and guarded in a contained environment and these physical conditions and experiences filter through the narrator's conscious and impact the prose. Despite the lure of Nora's energy in *Monkey Grip*, the latter novel offers a salient example of narrative architecture for writing about personal experience in fiction. Through a process of omission and elaboration, *The Spare Room* recounts truths in an orchestrated, engineered way that gives life to the story being told.

In Chapter Two, I also drew on Michel Foucault's conception of the "heterotopia" as an adjunct to my study of place in Helen Garner's autobiographical fictions. Described as a space that's "at once absolutely real... and absolutely unreal" (1967/86, p. 24), the notion of a heterotopia could be applied to many narrative landscapes but is particularly appropriate in the cases of *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*, which imply

through fiction actual events that happened to the actual author in actual places. By reconstituting the self as the “I” in narrative, just as Foucault imagines the self reconstituted in a mirror, Garner constructs an other world where the possibility of resolution is made available in writing. There mightn’t be a traditionally happy end in either novels - one closes with the lovers separated, the other with death - but by writing the “I” the narrator settles, finally, in a space where she’s regained a sense of self and dignity. This is summarised in each case with a single sentence that intimates the return to a previous state: in *Monkey Grip*, Nora writes “[T]ime to go home” (p. 374) and in *The Spare Room*, Helen finishes with the words “[I]t was the end of my watch, and I handed her over” (p. 195).

Chapter Three offered me the opportunity to reflect on what I’d gleaned from Garner’s developing style of ambiguous, personal fiction and how my findings effected my creative work, my novel *Deepwater*. Although my personal predilection for *Monkey Grip* endures, I recognised that the contrived style of *The Spare Room* offered a more effective literary example for turning realities into story-lines: the shaping and moulding of the projected narrator/protagonist made for a shaped and moulded narrative that enunciated personal truths through a discourse that melded fact and fabrication. As I’ve shown, the subtext of authenticity which

substantiates Garner's autobiographical fiction cultivates an empathic, intimate dialogue between the reader and the writer, or in my case, the reader-writer and writer.

My response to Garner's work was determined by my finding, through the process of creative writing, that neither the autobiographical model nor the first person narrator was appropriate to my novel. Though *Deepwater* was, like *Monkey Grip* and *The Spare Room*, based on certain personal experiences, I found a surprising freedom in diverging from reality and adopting a removed third person narrator, meaning that my creative work is fiction. A number of contextual considerations influenced this decision, but the fact that the "you" to each of Garner's "I's" was either redundant or expired (Javo in *Monkey Grip* being wasted on junk and Nicola in *The Spare Room* having died before the book was published) justifies my distance. In my novel, the implied "you" - that is, Len - is quite present in a corporeal sense and in order to imagine my creative work as a discourse - that is, to write it - it was necessary to assume a definitively fictional perspective. By doing this, I implicitly concede that the story and the trauma at the core of my story, is not mine alone to tell.

Taking from the realisation that my personal relationships have affected my decision to write my novel as a fiction from the third person point of view, I must also acknowledge that political significance of my narration pales in comparison to Helen Garner's. Not only I am an unknown and inexperienced writer, and therefore of little consequence in readings of my novel, my protagonist speaks from a privileged point of view that Nora does not. When *Monkey Grip* was published in the late seventies, it rode the second wave of feminist thought in which the personal was so famously situated as the political. Though dominant mid-century New Criticism tried to sever the author and the work, arguing the author could only show a mask to the public,⁶ the narratives and testimonies of experience written by traditionally marginalised peoples, including women like Nora, were of great importance. Helen acts a kind of natural continuation of her predecessor, and in *The Spare Room* suffering in the face of death - even though it's not her own death - constitutes a great difficulty. For my protagonist Jessie, the obstacle that hinders resolution in her relationship with Len is not an outside force but an interior one: she struggles to admit what she knows about his troubles. The "I", being then subconsciously distorted, is not an agency that can

⁶ See, for example, the arguments of critics such as see William K Wimsatt Jr and Monroe C Beardsley.

rigorously, closely or satisfyingly examine the full breadth of itself and in lieu of a stunted narrative I assumed the omniscient third person narrator.

My critical study of Helen Garner's autobiographical fictions and subsequent reflection on my creative work has shown that the first person narrator has its place in a particular kind, or kinds, of fiction, the intent of which should be personally rather critically determined. As Paul de Man notes, the autobiography is an alignment between two subjects and in this way it is the prerogative of the writer and the willing reader to accede. For my part, writing a novel inspired rather than constituted by personal truths did not suit the specular perspective and rhetorical function of the writing "I". This thesis has allowed me to investigate why and I've found a number of reasons with narrative and ethical consequences. Narratively speaking, the large expanse of time separating me from the events I recount problematised my immanence and the accuracy of memory. Because of this distance I chose to fictionalise said memories and make significant alterations to events, creating a sculpted and effective narrative. From an ethical point of view, which had narrative impact in that it determined my placement with regards to the story, relating sensitive personal material about living people who remain in my affections displaced the "I". Writing the main character, Jessie, as "she" instead of "I"

was a truer way of imparting deep personal truths. It gave me the rhetorical privilege of balancing her knowing with her oblivion and in effect, this made Jessie accountable not to the reader, or the you, but to me as the writer.

In conclusion, the creative process of writing my novel and my critical perspective on this process helped me understand my situation as a writer with regards to recounting and narrativising my personal experiences and relationships. Despite the assumption that the first person narrator acts as the most intimate type of narrator, I've found that in my case it was not the most narratively effective, ethical or truly revelatory choice. The vehicle of the unbounded, selective third person narrator proved the best point of access to my personal narrative by offering the possibility of an entirely fictional resolution that was not tethered to a false resolution of the self.

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Deepwater

Part I

There were two ways into the houses on Deepwater Estate and neither was by road. There was the river, running glassy between the steep slopes on either side, or the walking track, crossing front yards and back all the way home. The way home was by boat or on foot and no matter which way you took, green saturated the valley. From the towering eucalypts that rose up and up into the sky to the water, stretched green and bottle-deep from the eastern bank to the west, green meant belonging. In direct sunshine every leaf in the canopy - every banksia and melaleuca and gum - shone its own iridescent shade of green: a tessellated pattern of khaki, emerald and grass hues. In shadow, they melded into a dull, olive-coloured sheet.

Weathered fibro cottages and crooked timber tree houses ran along the shore. Great precipices of terracotta sandstone jutted from the vegetation like books about to tumble from the shelf. The river itself was transformed by tides and currents, by sun and clouds, by a breeze sailing across the placid surface; it was dark and viridescent, golden, topaz or even mauve tinted, the surface scattered with silver shards of light as pieces of glass. Like a familiar face, the green committed to memory was never the green you saw, but still it was green that knitted everything together.

The river was Jessie's world. She was born to the house at number one Deepwater Estate, which, contrarily stood at the very end of the walking track where old growth bush cast elongated shadows over the buffalo grass lawn. Green was her everyday but she chose blue as her favourite colour: baby blue, kingfisher blue, marine blue. At twelve years old, barefoot with knotted hair and salty skin and the briny river coursing in her blood, blue was the promise of vast oceans and distant skies, of dreams, futures and fantasies.

At the public jetty where the road ended, people transferred groceries and garden supplies from their cars to their tinnies whilst others set off on the track, their shopping in backpacks. Here, and all the way along the track, people exchanged observations about the tides and impending weather and traded gossip about who's partner was moving out and whose was moving in for in such a close community it was important to know other people's business whether they were friend, family or foe.

The first houses along the access track were attributed to Prince Edward Park Road, the walk home being very short. Hills Hoists pegged with threadbare Stubbies and floral knickers hung in front yards for all to see, for though the river was wide and shallow and showed swathes of sea

grass at low tide, the inhabitable space jammed into escarpment was narrow there and backyards were few.

Deepwater Estate carried on a little way down the walking track, a row of thirty or so homes strung along the eastern bank. In certain places the track skirted behind people's properties; in others it inclined to the very limits. Halfway down, a narrow curve in the river meant it deepened dramatically and every house had a pontoon bobbing in front. Coming off the bend past the vacant lot choked with honeysuckle and black-eyed Susans, the nook of the river Jessie knew best opened out like a basin before her.

From a distance she saw Ms Kennett's little white holiday cottage at number 3 and Connie's place at number 2, the sprawling Jacaranda obscuring the house and a rickety jetty reaching out into the water. Furthest of all, a kilometre from the public pier, with its red-cedar panelling, floor to ceiling windows and wraparound verandah, was Jessie's home. A peppercorn wept into the river and creeping grevillea cascaded over the retaining wall. The lawn was scattered with sun-beds and bicycles; the porch with sarongs and odd shoes. It was a place well-acquainted with the patter of footsteps and "hi-hos!".

On special occasions Jessie's parents wrenched the twelve horsepower engine on the tinny to life. In preparation for Christmas they

loaded the boat with boxes of mangoes, legs of ham, litres of fizzy drink. On Christmas day her dad sped down to the jetty and returned at a putter with aunts and uncles and cousins weighing the vessel to within inches of foundering.

Her mum said the boat wasted their legs. Jessie and her little sister Erin argued that none of the other children had to lug their backpacks in and out every day: they were deposited on the rocks directly outside the river school each morning. But once Jessie and Erin set off, their complaints were forgotten. They flew down up stairs and raced down pathways. They knew every person by sight and every cat by its strut; which dogs would roll over and which would snap. They left tokens in mailboxes along the way for the other children, scavenged treasures of feathers, fish bones and burnished washers.

Walking the track of a morning took sixteen brisk minutes. But on summer evenings, coming home with black cockies squalling and a tinnitus of cicada ringing all around as the sun set, those minutes could stretch to hours. Champagne corks popped and beers were opened as impromptu get-togethers struck up on porches and patios. Platters of cabanossi, cubed cheese and Jatz were set out; wicker armchairs and upturned milk crates were dragged into circles. The adults laughed and

spilled wine, leaving the children to run wild, making trouble and fun as they pleased. Often it was early morning by the time they arrived home.

A fire trail took over where the track left off, a rough, untended trail that wound on up into the suburbs and gave the Bush Fire Brigade access in case of emergency. It wound from Jessie's lawn through the eucalypt forest, forking at the base of the mountain a couple of kilometres on. From there you could veer off on a path choked by bracken to the dilapidated Church House camp downstream or else ascend the mountain to the trail's beginning in a dead end street in a blonde brick suburb.

The trail was a contingency, craggy in disrepair and rarely used for its intended means. Kids pocketing joints and shady types looking to dispose of contraband were its most common visitors, for in the thickest bush transgressions were secreted and untold evidence decayed. It wasn't a thoroughfare, not really. Even when bush fires threatened the valley one scorching summer night, the brigades arrived by boat rather than in trucks. Sirens wailed and red lights splashed across the water's surface as they charged up the river, though of the calamity itself nothing more than an ominous band of smoke hanging on the brow of the mountain ever appeared.

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One evening early in Jessie's last year at primary school, there was a get-together at number 1. Her mum walked the track inviting everyone she saw: everybody else was always holding these soirees and it was about time she returned their hospitality, she insisted. She had plenty of cheese and olives, she said, but perhaps they could bring another bottle of wine?

The chalky dusk lingered as the first guests climbed the verandah steps. People giggled and gossiped or drifted into the kitchen to help Louise arrange food and drinks. Boisterous laughter, the sliding and slamming of doors, the barbecue sparking up: conviviality echoed around the valley, an open invitation to whoever heard, for everybody was as welcome as they made themselves.

"We've gone and bought another property," Jessie overheard her dad telling Sam from number 8, passing him an open beer.

"What do you mean mate?"

"An investment property - for now anyway - just out of Cooma on the way to the snow," he explained.

Talk of this new property bored Jessie. It was just an empty field filled with Patterson's curse and broke-down fences.

The children gathered, chattering and poking and niggling one another like siblings more than neighbours. In summer, the sweltering demountable classrooms sent them loony and they itched for the evening,

to be outside, running feral together. Jessie and her best friend Clare hung their arms around one another's necks, the mingled scents of Vanilla Kisses and saltwater imperceptible to their accustomed noses.

Clare's mum Kim arrived, followed by Erin's best friend Leta, her mum Lori and her older brother Dane, whose presence made Clare blush. Everybody arrived or drifted quickly into groups except Len's mum Pam, a singular figure brooding in the shadows with a West Coast Cooler folded to her chest.

"Where's Len?" Jessie demanded.

"Who knows. Says he's comin'."

Pam wasn't like the other adults. She was younger in years and greyer in spirit with a weariness that fascinated Jessie.

"Did you hear?" Lucinda the post woman whispered loudly across the table. "They found a headless body in Loftus Creek!"

"I heard it but didn't believe it," said Lori, whose brass bangles jingled and jangled up and down her wrists.

Who was it? Did they have all their fingers? How'd they die? the children asked, clambering about her.

"I heard he was a pirate," Lucinda began. "A sailor astray. I heard he had tattoos all over his arms and his chest."

"And a wooden leg," some one added.

The little ones shrieked with horror but the older kids rolled their eyes.

“They’ve been finding dead bodies in this bloody river since I married Alf in 1938,” said Connie from next door. A stalwart of the river, much loved and respected, she never needed more than a hot cup of herbal tea to keep her going till midnight.

“Tell me, what was it like coming here as a young woman?” Louise asked.

“Different. Deserted. It was an adventure and a challenge getting everything down here in that little wooden boat of Alf’s.”

“But how did you feel?” she pressed.

People tittered, for Louise had a tendency to deepen idle chatter with a pointed question. The children began to fidget.

“Let’s play hide and seek,” Dane suggested. At fourteen, he was the oldest and the children scattered as he began to countdown. “Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven...”

Jessie and Clare shot down the lawn and parted beneath the peppercorn. It was a strategical error to hide as a pair, though the little girls always did. Jessie leapt onto the beach and swerved right: she’d hide in number 4’s boat shed. Only Len and Dane ever dared hide there, because ghosts were supposed to haunt the empty house. She crossed the

threshold gingerly and stood near the entrance, her back pressed up against the cool stone wall. It was dark and creepy as a cave. The river washed against the shore. The adults' laughter was a distant echo. Jessie shivered: she'd win if she could only wait it out.

But there were footfalls too soon on the sand. She held her breath, half in fear of the living dead and half against discovery, but the silhouette who moved into the entryway, stark against the moon-blue river, wasn't one she'd expected.

"Jessie?" Len hissed. "I know you're in there. I followed you."

"Shhhhhh! I'm here."

He moved towards her and when he was close enough, she stretched out her hand to guide him in the dark.

"Hey."

"Shhh. I'm gonna win."

He smiled, though Jessie couldn't see it, and she smiled too. There was joy in the small secrets they made together and kept even from their best friends.

"Let's ride to the Boatshed tomorrow," he whispered.

"Okay."

"Get Gaytimes. Check out the creek."

"Okay! Shhhhhh!"

Children squealed. Discovered, someone shrieked "That's not fair!" at the top of their lungs.

"That's the rules, mate," was Dane's reply.

Jessie and Len were still as voices circled and drifted away then drew closer again. There was silence, thickening the air with anticipation. Dane's lanky frame loomed in the entrance. "Oi!" he called.

Len covered Jessie's mouth with his hand and held her hard against the wall. She tried not to struggle against him, though she wanted to.

"Got yas!" Dane yelled. "Jessie! Len! I can see yas. Are you kissing?"

The children who'd gathered behind him fell into uproarious laughter.

"We won," Len replied.

"Jessie won. You weren't playing."

"Yes! I won!" she cried.

Later, Jessie and Clare sat on the steps and watched Erin and Leta turn broken cartwheels in the sand.

"You didn't, did you?" asked Clare.

"What?"

"Kiss Leonard?"

"No. Yuck!"

"Then what were you doing in there?"

"Hiding!"

"But don't you think...."

"What?" she asked.

"He's just so gross. I mean, he's such a boyish-boy gross..."

"No more than Nathan." Clare nodded, because her brother was very gross. "Or Dane," Jessie ventured.

"Dane is different," she said.

"Well, I don't think so. I think he's totally gross. I bet he picks his nose and wipes it on his shorts.

"Ew!"

"Grossness is in the eye of the beholder."

"So you do have a crush on Len!" Clare exclaimed.

"No!"

"But you know I love Dane!"

"No, no no!" Jessie fell against Clare's shoulder and tickled her to fill the gap between the actual truth and the truth she wanted to tell.

"Jessie and Len - sitting in a tree - K I S S I N G!" chanted the little girls.

"Okay, okay!" Clare cried, dragging herself away and shooting down to the shore. "I'll show you two how it's done!"

She threw her arms high above her head and turned a perfect circle in the air, chain anklets flashing like stars against the river that was indigo like the night.

Clare slept over, and though it was past midnight by the time they slipped into bed they were both too excited for sleep.

“I’m not tired,” Jessie whispered.

“Me neither.”

“What should we do?”

“Don’t know. What do you want to do?”

They both knew what the don’t-knowing meant. It was a new thing, a game of sorts.

“We could - K - I -”

“S -S.”

So they closed their eyes tight and rolled towards each other. In the darkness they kissed: secret, chaste kisses with their bodies pressed close together and their hands on one another’s arms. Afterwards, they lay close in collusion and thought they might never fall asleep but in the morning they woke with their heads turned to one another on the pillow, Clare’s wrist still in Jessie’s grip.



In the daylight, the children played a game called 'cubbies' in the bush beyond the track. They built homes using pieces of hairy bark as makeshift roofs and piles of young bracken as beds. They dusted and swept with brooms fashioned from upended twigs and rolled cut tree stumps inside for seats. They arranged chipped crockery in stacks and filled jam jars with wildflowers. They made herbal teas from twigs and saltwater and seasoned imaginary meals with flaked gum leaves.

That Saturday, Jessie and Clare tidied their little home beneath the tea trees at the edge of the bank. There wasn't much to do once everything was in order but take a dip in the river. Afterwards they stretched out on the sand in their underwear and let their t-shirts dry in the overhanging branches.

A low wolf whistle alerted them to the boys' presence up on the crumbling bank.

"Did youse go swimming in your clothes again?" asked Len.

"So what!"

"Why don't you go skinny dipping and then put them back on?"

"What if someone comes past when we're in the water?" Jessie returned.

"You're underwater! Besides, what are you gonna do now that we're here and you're topless and your clothes are in the tree?"

It was true of course, but Dane was enough of a gentleman to toss them down after a moment's hesitation. Once, the boys had built forts and ambushed the girls, hunted for witchetty grubs and wild boars, but now they were at high school they preferred ollieing fallen tree trunks and smoking cigarettes. Deep in the bush, they'd discovered a casuarina-bordered clearing perfect for their transgressions, where pages from an old Penthouse magazine rotted in the dirt. Jessie and Clare thought it a disgusting place, but they were fascinated, too, by the eerie desolation. Sometimes they followed the boys up the rangy creek to the edge of the world to share a cigarette and loosen pictures of bare-breasted women from the starved earth. The only sound that reached there was the echo of gunfire from the artillery range miles away, and sometimes the carol of an ice cream truck up in the suburbs.

"Youse coming with us?" Len asked as they pulled on their t-shirts and shorts.

"Not today," Clare said. "It's too nice in the sun."

"Nah, we're going out the back of Connie's place to do some painting," Dane said.

It was something new, so they agreed. Behind the last houses on the Estate, a couple of acres belonging to Connie opened out. She and Alf had cultivated chrysanthemums and sweet corn back in their day. The garden

was long gone but the dilapidated remnants remained: a creaking windmill, some raised concrete plots, water tanks pockmarked with rust and a sagging corrugated iron shed.

Len forced the padlock from the doors of the shed. They ached open and the boys disappeared into the shadows, reemerging with tins of teal marine paint and thick brushes. Len adored Connie and she adored him but she was too old to come out and rouse on them, and even if she did she'd probably smile archly and tell him he was very, very, very naughty.

In rapid, rust-flecked streaks Dane scrawled "PARADISE CITY". "Mongoloid" wrote Len in his careful hand. Dane began a Stussy sign with three parallel lines; Len painted a four petalled flower on a long stem. He didn't go with the grain and knew that beauty was its own kind of rebellion.

Later, as thunderclouds rolled over the valley and grumbled in the distance they raced along Connie's jetty and leapt into the water. The water was always glorious before a summer storm: glassy and cool, a relief from the humidity. Sparse, fat raindrops began to fall around them, and they splashed and squealed as the downpour came heavier and faster. Louise yelled for them to come inside; Lori beckoned with exaggerated

waves from her pontoon. They waited until the first strike of lightning before they submitted and dashed up the beach for cover.

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On the other side, though it was impossible to make out behind the torrential rain, all that remained of the wartime dwellings known as Shackel's Estate was a ruin of cracked concrete slabs covered in lantana and morning glory. A little way downstream, hidden by the towering rock known as Jockey's Cap, was a single standing house. It was grubby and grey and shrunk into the cover of encroaching brush, glimpsed only from an odd angle at the far end of Jessie's verandah.

A mysterious, pale speck of an old man known as Morton lived alone there with his little black dog. He was sometimes spotted pruning the camellias in his front yard or hobbling up and down the stairs to the beach. Once, famously, Dane had spotted him clearing out the gutters: clambering bald on the roof in nothing but a pair of Speedos. But mostly he haunted the children's imagination and all they were told was that he lived there because the council was crooked and he had connections in the right places: under no circumstances were they to accept treats, speak to or even look at him. He was the one person on the river who was never to be acknowledged.

In the last weeks of April, when Autumn passed its tipping point and the long afternoon shadows had an icy chill, Jessie and Erin found themselves travelling home alone after school. Usually they traipsed home in a scattered tribe, for even the kids who were dropped off by boat in the morning walked home of an afternoon; but that day, it was just the two of them. Erin walked sideways all the way from the school gates, across the footbridge and down Prince Edward Park Road before admitting she was desperate to use the loo.

“Cara 4 Phil. Who’s Phil?” she mused from the public toilet at the jetty.

“Don’t know,” Jessie replied. She stood on the big stone outside with her backpack sagging on her bum and beat the brick wall impatiently with a stick. “Here’s the Sutho bus. You can ask Len and Dane. Hurry up!”

But the teenage boys who usually catapulted from the back seat down the stairs weren’t to be seen: the bus doors wheezed open and it was Morton who struggled out. Everything was still in the car park. There wasn’t another soul to be seen. The sound of Erin humming seemed miles distant and the stick went limp in Jessie’s grip. Morton kept his head down as he crunched across the litter of casuarinas towards the jetty. Jessie’s chest clenched as he neared, but he showed not the faintest

awareness of her as he passed by and continued on to his boat. It was the third time in her whole life she'd seen him up close.

"What did he smell like?" Erin demanded afterwards, appalled her sister had encountered Morton alone. "Did he smell awful?"

"I don't know."

"Did he smell like grandma?"

Jessie shook her head.

"Did he say anything or give you any looks or anything?"

"Nothing Erin!"

Morton's proximity unsettled her, but not in the way she'd expected. Remembering his blunt cut toupee and the navy sheen of his polyester suit she realised he was frail and mundane, this monster. His shopping bags were filled with Black & Gold groceries. His flaking skin, cowed posture and white knuckles were just old, not menacing. He'd conditioned himself to ignore people as they'd been conditioned to ignore him. He'd given her a chill as he passed, it was true, but Jessie wasn't sure that chill wasn't of her own making.

"Creep," was what Len had to say about Jessie's encounter. Jessie was on her way to Clare's. They stood at the bottom of his steps.

"Where were you guys?"

“My dad took us up to Miranda. He bought me a bass guitar and an amp.”

“Oh yeah?”

He nodded, but his joy was suppressed. He kicked at the path, sending loose stones skidding in all directions. “You better not have talked to him?”

“No way would I talk to him!”

“Or looked at him?”

“No!”

“He’s a fucker,” Len hissed. Looking up at her, his rigid expression immediately softened to concern. “Don’t ever let him near you.”

Later that day, Jessie and Clare scampered back up the track for a swim. It was nicer in the water at Jessie’s end, especially when the tide wasn’t high, because there was beach and sand was cleaner. Down on the beach a little way along, Dane squatted on a fallen tree trunk in his boardies. He held his straggly blonde head steady between clenched fists.

“Hey!” Clare called.

He bounced up looking harried. It was then Jessie noticed a dash of red up on Jockey’s Cap: someone in red shorts, not a Gynea lily.

“Len!”

He waved, his hand high and tiny.

"It's not even high tide! What's he doing?" Jessie demanded.

Dane shrugged. "I told him, don't be a dick. We swam across, poked around where the Smith's place used to be, you know. Then he wanted to go to Morton's and throw shit at the house so I came back. And then, maybe to prove I'm a wimp or something, he's gonna jump."

"But you're not a wimp!" Clare cried.

"Yeah, well, it's Len. I don't care what he says. He's got a fucken death wish."

"It's idiotic," said Clare.

"Exactly."

"Len!" Jessie yelled, but he padded out of sight to the back of the rock.

She felt sick. Down the bottom, jagged sandstone teeth protruded from the bank. Len reappeared at a sprint and flew from the lip of the rock as far as he could horizontally before the plummet began. They watched his falling body descend in slow motion, frozen mid-stride; then the "thwack" as he collided with the river's surface and broke through. They held their breath; his head bobbed up, and he shook it to loosen the water from his hair and ears, turning to grin at them jubilantly.

"My feet hit the sand!" he yelled. "I think there was an eel too!"

Len had never been afraid of the river. Through recklessness or courage, he trusted his life to it. People doubted his future but nobody doubted his affinity with the water. He held his breath under water for a minute at a time. He fished in the worst conditions and brought home bucket loads of bream. He disappeared for days into the bush, alone. Sometimes, he suffered a scrape but nothing more. The valley was where he belonged.

But then, it was the only place he wanted to belong. Len lived with his mum in the falling down weatherboard house his father had inherited from some mad uncle or other. Their divorce left Pam with a roof over her head and days too spacious to take a purposeful shape. She kept the place dim and the curtains drawn to soothe her head, the shadows a numb blue in the glare of the television. She dozed for hours on the couch, her dizzy blonde hair secured by the type of scrunchie that was fashionable when she was nineteen, pregnant and engaged to be married.

She rebuked her son for looking like his father.

“You’ve got the Weiss nose,” she’d say, though Len was nothing like his dad. He held heavy things in his hands without knowing the pain it could inflict.

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For Jessie, the point where the sand dropped off in a slippery, silty brim of sea grass was the point where fear took hold. She imagined big, terrible things slithering and starving in the depths of the river. She swam a careful, horizontal breast-stroke in the middle, floating safe on the surface where shafts of sunlight criss-crossed her wrists. She resisted paranoia, perhaps not very well, but she sensed there must be something to be afraid of down there: the deep water, with its great mysteries and dark beauties, held so many unknowns.

At home, Jessie wanted for nothing except a pony. The world she woke up to was bright and alive, and on summer mornings her bedroom was flooded with sunshine. A doe-eyed palomino gazed down from a poster on the wall, bleached around the corners after years on watch.

Ever since she'd been trail riding in the National Park Jessie had adored the grassy, comforting smell of horses. She loved the way they listened, twitching their ears in consideration, and the way they let her ruffle their forelocks and stroke their long faces, nuzzling and nibbling with loose lips. She pored over pictures of different breeds and special equipment at the library: she learned the difference between an Arab and a quarter horse, between a snaffle and a gag bit. She made lists of the foods her pony would eat: pellets, molasses and lucerne.

The infatuation might have come to nothing, the practical reasons why not so readily outweighing the reasons why. But Jessie's dad was fond of animals. He'd rescued the cat called Queenie from a construction site and nursed broken-winged native birds and injured marsupials in the laundry sink.

When Jessie asked "Please can I have a pony?" he never committed to a yes or a no. He just ruffled her hair and told her about the big old Clydesdale with a penchant for tattie scones who belonged to his granny's circus back in Glasgow.

One drizzly day after ballet lessons, Jessie and Erin were surprised to find their dad waiting at the car park. It had been raining all week and still they'd trudged in and out every day. They had their gumboots on over pink seamed stockings in preparation.

"Are we going home in the boat?" they asked hopefully.

"Aye."

He grinned. Their mother looked on with a lenient smile. On board, the girls sat up front on a big white bag and tried not to notice that it was labelled OATEN CHAFF. A headwind streamed around them. The trip went on forever. The minute the tinny lodged in the sand, Erin sprang out and raced into the backyard. Jessie didn't dare move. She waited heart-in-mouth until Erin's blood-curdling shriek rang through the valley, then she

flew up the sandstone steps, along the side passage and into the yard. There, beneath the apple tree that had never born edible fruit, was a speckled grey pony. Without missing a mouthful, it raised its head to survey the sisters.

“Can we call it Harriet Hats, Jessie?” Erin begged. “Or Harry Hats? Can we, can we?”

“She came with a name,” said their father behind them. “She’s called Misty. You’re to share her.”

Misty was a sensation on the river. Everybody wanted to ride her and stroke her and they crowded on the shore when, one mild day just before winter set in, Jessie led her into the water, climbed on bareback and clung to her mane for dear life as the pony churned her way across the river.

She loved Misty immutably from the first, but the best times were those spent together in the backyard when nobody was around. Jessie groomed her from head to hoof and said out loud things she couldn’t say to anybody else. Silly things. Impossible things. What would it be like inside someone else’s head, for example, and what did it mean to be stuck inside the head she’d been born to? Would she get bored of it one day? Was she trapped?

Jessie was a cautious rider and directed Misty in figure-of-eights on Connie's plot out the back. Sometimes they rode down the fire trail to the Church House camp, where disadvantaged children had once taken charitable holidays. There was a large clearing out the front they used as an arena. When Misty pig-rooted her father yelled, "Hang on!" When she refused to canter he called, "Show her who's boss!" Jessie clung to the saddle and hoped she wouldn't fall off.

When Erin took her turn, Misty bolted in circles until she could bolt no more, the hair on her haunches soaked black with sweat. Erin always grinned with exhilaration and asked to have another go.

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The sisters were doing their homework at the kitchen table one afternoon when Erin yelled, "Look! Len's got a dead bat! Look!"

There he was, standing on the verandah outside holding the tips of the creature's wings wide across his chest.

"Oh God!" their mum cried out as Erin rushed out the door for a closer inspection. "Leonard!"

"Must've got electrocuted," he said.

"Poor guy!" Louise lamented.

“Ew mum, it’s all hairy and gross! I think it’s got nits,” Erin reported.

“Okay, Len. I want you to put it back in the bush where you found it and come immediately back here to wash your hands.”

He nodded and asked Jessie, “Are you finished yet?”

Len hurled the bat as far as he could into the bracken and they walked up the track to his place. Near the clump of pampas grass outside the deserted shack at number 4, Len said “I saw a red-belly here before.”

“Liar,” she replied, but she quickened her pace anyway.

“Did you hear I’m going to court?” he asked.

“What?”

“You can’t tell anyone.” Jessie drew two fingers over her lips.

“Ages ago I found a knife in the mangroves. Mum and I took it to the police and it turned out it was part of some murder or kidnapping or something, not here, up in Illawong or Liverpool.” He shrugged: what and where was immaterial. “I just gotta say, ‘I, Leonard Weiss, found this knife in a swamp on the Western bank of the river on January 22, 1998.”

“Far out! January?”

“Yeah, I was sworn to secrecy. I wanted to tell you but.”

“Geez.”

“Yeah. Well, mum reckons I’ll get a reward: a thousand or two thousand dollars, I dunno - so much I can’t have it till I’m 18.”

Jessie was impressed by the money, the prospect of court, and most of all by the secret he’d kept. They kicked along shoulder to shoulder on the sandstone, jostling to lead when the path was slim. Sam sat drinking beer on the porch with a couple of mates.

“Youse going fishing?” Len asked, eyeing the pile of rods and tackle at their feet.

“Looks like you’re too busy charming Miss Fletcher to join us,” Sam chuckled.

Len frowned. “Your only chance is bream, dickheads. Chuck the lures and go dig up some blood worms.”

“Whatever kid.”

“Who won the last weigh-in?” he countered. “It’s low tide. It’s your only chance.”

At Len’s they sat up on the verandah railing and listened to a cassette of songs he’d taped from the radio and his dad’s CD collection: the Rolling Stones and Nirvana, John Lennon and Devo. He tapped his legs with nervous excitement.

“I’m gonna learn to play drums too, Jessie. My uncle’s gonna give me his old kit.”

“Cool,” she replied. “How’s the bass going?”

“Good.”

He looked pleased with himself. Distracted as Len was in the composite classrooms they’d shared - making origami of his grid books, lobbing everyone’s rubbers into the rubbish bin and once even tumbling backwards out a window during a stranger danger video presentation - he was more driven than anyone else she knew when he wanted to be. He’d long ago taught himself to play the guitar, but that was Dane’s dominion and they wanted to start a band.

“Gotta feed the cat,” he said, and Jessie followed him inside.

“Where’s your mum?” Jessie asked.

“She’s got a new boyfriend.”

“Oh.”

“She came home with a scarf tied around her neck the other night. I didn’t ask.”

The tabby wound around Len’s legs as he scooped its meal into a bowl. Standing up, he took a spoonful of cat food from the can, put it in his mouth and began to chew.

“Oh my God, you’re disgusting!” Jessie shrieked.

He scooped out another spoonful and held it towards her. She pushed him away but he persisted, the spoon closer and closer to her

sealed lips, until the pantry door handle jammed in the small of her back. She shoved him hard and he stumbled against the opposite cupboards: the cat fled as the spoon clattered to the tiled floor. They regarded one another a moment and then he rushed at her, pressed his splayed hands against her chest and her back flat against the slatted door.

“Gee you stink!” Jessie said to guard against whatever was happening. He softened and fell away.

“It’s so fucken dark in this house.”

Outside, it was black. The river tinkled and its silver scales glimmered beneath the moon.

On the eve of school holidays, Jessie rolled a bottle of Fuzzy Peach Bath and Shower Gel into her nightie.

“Be back by nine o’clock tomorrow. No later,” her mother warned as she dashed out the door. “We’re leaving at ten.”

She hit the track running and didn’t stop until she reached Clare’s back door, which was wrenched open before Jessie even had a chance to knock.

“Mum’s out. Won’t be back till nine,” Clare said. “And Nathan said if we annoy him he’ll give me tissues filled with boogies for my birthday. So it’s just us!”

“What are we going to do?”

“Let’s get dressed up and hang out on the pontoon. The whompers will come past this arvo.”

Clare pulled on the pink lace dress she’d chosen for the Year 6 farewell and Jessie wore Clare’s favourite blue sundress, all puckered with floral embroidery. They dashed downstairs at the drone of a two-stroke but it was Len at the helm not the anonymous high-schoolers they’d expected. They couldn’t get back inside fast enough.

Clare cackled. Jessie laughed with relief that he hadn’t seen them. When the engine died away they made their way gingerly down to the pontoon and dangled their toes in the icy water. The hair on their forearms stood on end.

“Truth or dare?” asked Clare.

“You first. Truth.”

“I want to be a dancer.”

“That does not count!”

“Okay, I want to kiss Dane!” She kicked her heel against the water’s surface.

“Ooooh!”

They nudged shoulders, for though Jessie knew this too it was bold enough an admission to count.

"I dare you. I dare you to go for a swim!" Clare grabbed Jessie's arms from behind and gave her a sudden, measured jolt. On impulse, Jessie jolted Clare's arms in response and the next thing she knew a ball of pink material tumbled forwards and hit the water with a mighty splash.

"Oh! Clarey! I'm sorry -"

She swam for the stone wall, her blonde hair clinging black to her scalp, and clambered up the mossy stairs into Jessie's open arms, convulsing with laughter. "Oh Jess you're so silly! We'll be in so much trouble!"

Later, when they'd secreted the two rinsed-out dresses to drip dry in the spare room, the girls lay side by side in Clare's little bed. A dog barked. Clare twisted Jessie's wrist and hissed "It's an axe-murderer."

"But what if it is?" Jessie whispered.

"Then we'll *die* tonight!"

"Clare! Can I tell you something?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't want to go to the farm tomorrow. I hate it there. I want to have holidays here, even if it's cold and we can't go swimming."

"I went swimming today," she reminded Jessie. "You can go horse-riding!"

"I know."

“You’ve got Misty!”

“But it’s no fun without you. Mum and dad and Erin love it but I spend the whole time wishing I was home. It makes me homesick, being away from the river, even when my family’s around.”

“Maybe you should stay here with us instead.”

“I wish!” said Jessie. A neon constellation of sticker stars glowed on Clare’s ceiling. “I didn’t think I’d feel sad when I got older, you know? I thought I’d have more...”

“What?”

“More of what I want. More control.”

“Of feelings?”

“Of everything.”

~~~

It was lonely in Cooma, just the four Fletchers in an old caravan in the middle of a paddock. In the mornings they splashed icy water on their faces and ate baked beans warmed on the gas stove. They worked to get the property in order, dragging refuse onto the bonfire, marking fence lines and cutting back tangles of blackberry bush.

Jessie and Erin groomed Misty, adding braids to her mane and bows to her tail and took turns riding her in circles around a rough

track. In the afternoons they walked the perimeter searching for the perfect location for the holiday house.

“Right here,” Louise said, standing on the north-facing slope at the front of the property with her arms crossed decidedly and her feet planted wide apart. It overlooked the neighbour’s lake which gleamed beautifully like a big black opal in the sunlight. Jessie didn’t want this house at all.

The horizon was distant and unlike home, with ridges bleached the colour of hay undulating against a too-blue sky. A thin moon hung sentinel until midday. Sunshine shone from every angle. A breeze ruffled the overgrown grass, reminding Jessie how the river glistened beneath the sweep of a light wind. She knew that life must go on there without her. Things must happen. Things must change. She wouldn’t be there to witness them and she couldn’t have the time back that she spent away.

On the eighth day in the caravan, Jessie woke Erin early and together they crossed the paddock to the dam with Misty on a lead rope. They skimmed stones across the dam’s surface, shattering the frill of ice around its edges. The river no longer dragged at Jessie’s heart, because by then she was looking forward to going home.

Somewhere on the Hume Highway homeward bound, Jessie’s parents announced they had something important to tell the girls. Casting glances

via the rear-vision mirror, they skipped over the ends of one another's sentences to explain they were all moving to the farm in the new year.

Erin looked dubiously at Jessie, who caught her mother's eye in the mirror. "You're saying we're all going to live in a leaky caravan in the middle of nowhere? All on our own?" asked Jessie.

"Jessie," her father said. "You're the one who begged for a pony."

"Your father is going to build us a beautiful house."

"We'll get our own horses and go riding with Jessie and Misty," he carried on merrily.

"Can I call my pony Lucy Lemonada?" asked Erin.

"What a wonderful name, darling."

Outside Jessie's open window the dry plains rolled by, acre after endless acre of yellowing paddock and blue sky stretching to the edges of the world. A languorous haze warped the vista. The landmarks were few and far between, dead and broken all of them: a dilapidated church smothered in weeds, the lifeless trunk of a tree grey against the grass, the shell of a corroded Torana. It wasn't possible for Jessie to imagine life in this landscape where there was no one. It was monotonous and empty and she could not be herself in it.

She walked the track alone. Her dad went first with Misty and her mum and Erin took the boat with all their luggage. Everything seemed so quaint, so picturesque and she saw a million things she'd never noticed before. Halfway down the track Jessie let herself into Clare's backyard. She'd love Jessie's new dress: it was short with long sleeves and little white flowers all over the dark green material. Clare would ask to borrow it. Jessie would say yes. Then she would give her the bad news.

Maybe Clare would want that, too: the pony, the adventure, the ever-present dad. Steeling herself against tears, Jessie knew in her deepest heart that Clare would never feel the terrible envy that Jessie felt now.

She knocked. No answer. She knocked again.

"Jess! You're home!" called Tania from next door, a laundry basket on her hip and a tin of beer in her hand. "Kim an' Clarey have gone up to Sutho for the groceries, love. Back a bit later. How's the farm?"

Jessie shrugged. "Boring Tan."

"Ain't much fun at your age with no boys an' girls around," she laughed.

Jessie dawdled home, kicking the toes of her shoes in the indentations left by Misty's hooves. She thought of taking a long detour through the bush, but the idea of snakes checked her. She thought of her father's smile in the rear-vision mirror and her mother's optimistic eyes.

She thought of Erin's glee and the checked skirt of the high-school uniform she would never wear. Passing through the thick of lantana at number 13 she tore a handful of the bright purple flowers and scattered them in her path. By the time she noticed a pair of legs blocking her way at number 12 she was only centimetres from him.

"Len! You scared me!"

"You're home."

"You're wet!"

Water streamed from his shoulder and his saturated t-shirt clung to his chest, showing the rapid rise and fall of his breath. A puddle gathered at his bare feet.

"You're wearing all your clothes! What happened?"

He shrugged.

"It's freezing! You always tell me "Don't swim in your-""

"Pretty dress Jessie."

"Thanks." She brushed her hands over her waist coyly and resumed the interrogation. "Where have you been?"

"Cross the river. For a swim."

"In your clothes?"

"Yeah."

"It's too cold for that!"



He looked at her, squinting to place the significance of her words.

“Len?”

“How was your holiday?”

“Actually it was terrible. We’re moving there.” Her voice cracked.

“To the farm.”

“You’re moving? Away?” His eyes slipped past her. “Jessie,” he murmured, taking up her hands. She let her fingers fall through his and for a moment it was the sweetest thing. “Jessie I gotta go.”

There was a split second of hesitance, of what might have been; then he tore away. He bounded up the side passage and slipped inside through the laundry without looking back. In his absence, it suddenly struck her that there’d been something very wrong about him: his posture, his response; none if it was quite right. Len was full of mysteries and mischief, but there’d been something darker there, something less triumphant than injured.

Later, she watched Misty meander around the dusty backyard while her family unpacked. Misty was the reason they were moving but Misty hadn’t betrayed her trust. Jessie breathed wreaths of vapour into the crisp air and told herself she’d runaway before she moved to the country.

The sound of grass scratching against corrugated iron at the bottom of the yard seized her. Misty froze and raised her head. The semi-circle of floodlight suddenly seemed very paltry: it was pitch black out there. She stood up.

"Hello?" A shiver ran down her spine. A truncated body stepped into the light, and then a familiar face.

"Len!"

"D'I scare you?"

"Ever heard of the front door?"

He shrugged. "Not when there's a girl and a horse out back."

He drew a handful of lattice biscuits from the pocket of his shorts.

"Dinner," he explained, and ate them in two mouthfuls as he watched Misty munch. He dusted his hands and wiped his nose on the shoulder of his shirt. "Sorry for being a dick before," he said, still facing the yard. "I don't want you to go."

"I know."

"I wanted to tell you that. Just, before, when you saw me, I was -"

"You were wet -" Jessie prompted.

His breath thinned and quickened. Whatever he'd been doing was a secret: he mustn't want to tell her. She wished she hadn't asked and

hated the belittling feeling of rejection, the awkwardness. They stood side by side.

“We’re moving too, me and mum. Into some little brick unit in Sutho,” he said.

“No!”

“I don’t care, not if you’re gone. It’s one of those suburban boxes where people live boring lives, but that’s what my mum wants. It’s what she always wanted. Maybe she’ll be happy there.”

“What about Dane?”

“I’ll see him every day at school.”

“And the river?”

“I can visit any time.”

“What about fishing? You love fishing.”

“We’re only moving two minutes up the mountain.”

“Things are ending,” Jessie sighed.

“Yeah.”

“You know, it makes me feel better to know you won’t be here either.”

“I’d let you stay and leave myself if I could.”

Misty had drifted away into the cover of night.

“Don’t you ever get afraid? Of the dark?”

“It’s not scary,” he shrugged. “I’ve been at my dad’s the last few days. That’s scary.”

“I had a dream your dad went to live in a glass house on another river somewhere,” Jessie ventured. “It was in the middle of the city and it looked just like our river but it wasn’t. He took us canoeing down what looked like Thorpe Creek.”

Len tapped his fingers thoughtfully against his thigh. “Well, it’s not like that. There’s no river and no glass house. We went driving and he threw eggs at people’s houses - people he went to school with. I had to hold the steering wheel for him so he could pull a cone.” He kicked at the earth, sending a plume of dust into the air. “Anyway fuck him. I’ll never be like him. Not like that fat bastard Murray Whatever-his-name-was who used to live next door to me.”

“Westlin?”

“Yeah, he wanted be a prison guard. Just like his asshole father,” Len sneered, his lip curled up. “Following in his father’s footsteps.”

Jessie remembered them vaguely: a large family, in size and number, who kept to themselves. She remembered their unpleasant odour and weary eyes. She couldn’t recall exactly what Murray looked like. The’d moved away from the river when she was little.

“You’re lucky you know,” he told her.

“I know.”

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Jessie and Clare wove friendship bracelets and wrote secret pacts. It was only October and the move was distant, but the prospect of it was enough to move them to action, especially when a Century21 “For Sale” sign was hammered into the lawn down near the peppercorn. It was obnoxious. It made Jessie feel as if she no longer quite belonged.

At the end of the month, a light evening drizzle turned into a heavy downpour. The river flooded overnight. They woke up to submerged retaining walls and gardens underwater and too-hastily secured boats, saplings and aluminium rubbish bins speeding downstream like silver bullets on a belt of silt. Everybody was housebound. Jessie and Erin watched *The NeverEnding Story* three times and the rain clattered down and down.

A woolly sky lingered over the valley the following day. Smoke rose from the chimneys and drifted upwards from the brown gauze sealing the river’s surface. People emerged from their houses to inspect the damage: letterboxes uprooted, stone walls collapsed, grass and flowerbeds sodden with mud. The “For Sale” sign stood on one leg at an awkward angle.

Later, when the garbage boat came along to make its weekly collection, the children gathered outside in their blue and white checked uniforms. They watched the huge motors churning and weighed up who'd experienced the most destruction. A battalion of man-o-wars who'd drifted upriver in the aftermath were fatally entwined in the spinning blades.

"Do you know what a dead body looks like?" Len asked Jessie. They stood on Dane and Leta's pontoon, watching the carnage below.

"No."

"Like jelly, if it's left for a very very long time. All melted and watery."

"Ew!" Jessie squealed. "You're trying to gross me out!"

Len came upon her as she lay in the hammock one warm November day after daylight savings began.

"Hey!"

Jessie jumped.

"Hey."

"Wanna come for a walk up the trail with me? Mum's out. Seeing a movie with her boyfriend or something."

"Okay."

She climbed out of the hammock and pattered down the steps and they traipsed along the wide path. The eucalypts threw solid shadows across the grey sand and streaks of golden light glimmered through the leaves. They turned off on a narrow path just before the little bridge, through the scrub down to the river where a narrow, secluded beach extended back towards the houses. Jessie had ridden Misty along it once or twice. Fosters cans and abandoned campfires up in the wiry grass on the bank suggested others used it too.

“What’re we doing?” Jessie asked, kicking off her shoes to wriggle her toes in the sand.

“I’m gonna show you something,” he answered.

“What?”

Len pulled his t-shirt over his head and his shorts to his ankles and tossed them onto the bank.

“What’re you doing? It’s too cold!”

“It’s not that cold you wuss. It’s daylight savings. C’mon, we’re going swimming.”

“Why?”

“You’ll see.”

Knowing it was foolish, Jessie followed his lead. She stood there on the beach in her undies, arms crossed over her chest self-consciously. Len

didn't even look twice. He was preoccupied, and besides he'd seen her naked too many times before to care very much how she looked in her underwear right now. He took her hand and dragged her into the water, falling into a languid paddle when the water became too deep to walk. Jessie followed closely and when he reached the point where he could stand, Len turned and caught her. Jessie felt the sand with her tiptoes, the water throwing rings from around her neck.

"Quiet now," he whispered. "You can go on my back."

He ducked underwater and hoisted her onto his shoulders. She clung to his sopping curls, palms pressed to his temples as he strode back up the river towards the houses. Morton's place came into view.

"Where're we going?" she hissed.

"I said you gotta wait and see."

"Tell me!"

She took a fistful of his hair and tugged. He sank beneath the water's surface and eased her down. They could only be a hundred metres from Morton's place. Here, the mangroves were thick and the sulphurous stench filled Jessie's nostrils. Len nodded towards the house. Out the front, the tinny strained on its chain, pulled taut by the lowering tide.

"No. Oh no. We're close enough."

"Come on."

“Len?”

He looked at her with an innocent, wide-eyed determination.

“Are you mad?”

He shook his head. He was so calm! The water lapped at their chests.

“I wanna go home.” He would have to take her home. She couldn’t go alone, not being creeped out like this, not after he’d carried her all this way. He’d have to carry her back. He’d have to take her home.

“Jessie, trust me. Do you trust me?” He grabbed her hand under the water. “He’s not there. I know his boat’s there, but *I know* he’s not there. C’mon. You’ll see. It’s fucken crazy.”

“You’ve been there before!”

He nodded and led her to the shore. This was how much she trusted him. This. Jesus. She was more frightened than she’d ever been in her whole life, but in the shadows of the mangrove trees real life seemed a million away.

There was no fence to mark Morton’s property. It was just a rectangle of overgrown grass bounded by the bush. The house was grimy up close, not so white as beige, with cobwebs in the corner of every peeling window frame. The yard was deathly still, pregnant with menace. She turned to check Morton wasn’t creeping up behind them with a sharp

knife or a looped rope. Len bent down, grabbed a decent looking branch and hurled it at the nearest window. The glass shattered: a clear crack followed by a shower of jagged fragments. Jessie made to run but Len grabbed her wrist and held tight so that she could only wrench against him.

“Wait.”

Her heart was pounding. She’d missed the rush of adrenaline that could carry her away. She couldn’t move now even if she had to. There was a hole in the window but the yard and the house remained still. It occurred to Jessie that even Morton’s dog hadn’t made an appearance.

“See? He’s gone.”

She stared at the house, searching for the missing piece of the puzzle. Something was wrong. Something was missing. Her clothes, for one. At the thought of her nakedness she gave a loud sob.

“Jessie?”

“Okay. I believe you.”

Len broke from the lee of trees and stepped into the yard. He made his way to the back door which was hidden from Jessie’s view by an outhouse. She took a step and faltered.

“C’mon,” he called.

He was walking around on a pedophile's property in a pair of blue underpants. It was ludicrous! But Jesus, she didn't want to be left alone. She ran to catch him. The place was dark and dismal. There was no washing on the line, no discarded coffee mugs, nowhere to sit and soak up the sun. It was lifeless, just a cracked concrete path leading to an incinerator. Along the back of the house industrial shelves lined with jars - hundreds of jars - extended above Len's head. He selected one and held it out to her. Jessie drew closer. The jar contained a thick, stagnant green liquid. Inside, like a shadow, hung a familiar shape. She knew the outline, the contour.

"I reckon this one's a heart," Len said, replacing it and retrieving another larger jar. He brandished it in both hands. This apparition was clearer: it had a head and hands and its tiny body was folded in a foetal curve with the tail coiled in a curlicue against the glass. "Possum."

"He killed it!"

"Nah, this one never made it out of the pouch."

A chill shot down Jessie's spine. Len lifted the jar over his head and pitched it against the concrete. With a shriek of surprise she jumped back to avoid the splatter. The marsupial lay flat and splayed at their feet, its wide eyes now so obviously, horribly dead. Len picked up two smaller jars and threw them against the concrete too. And then another two.

“Stop!”

He grinned as if he’d been waiting for her intervention.

“I’m going in,” he announced.

The door was wide open. She watched him lope down the hall and when he disappeared she scrutinised the pinnacle of darkness for his reappearance. She looked away so that time would move again: it was jamming up in the hallway. The treetops shifted mournfully. A carapace of decaying fur slumped against the door of the outhouse. It was the little dog who’d danced at Morton’s feet. Now, it lay flat like the little possum. Hearts and livers and kidneys lay about her feet. She was freezing cold and her teeth chattered uncontrollably and the bloodless body parts swelled and rushed up at her.

“Len!” she screamed.

He bolted down the hallway and landed against her, muffling her voice, hand over her mouth.

“Jessie, hush!” He was too placid, too controlled. It was all wrong. She kept on screaming into his palm, though it only sounded like a whimper. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward the bush, scrambling through the undergrowth, not loosening his grip nor stopping until they were deep in the dreary mangrove swamp. She collapsed

against a warped trunk and gasped for breath. Her feet hurt, scratched by sticks and bruised by stumps.

“Jessie.”

“What?” She refused to look at him. “What was that!”

“Jess!”

“Was he there?”

“No.”

“The dog. The little dog -”

“Was dead?”

“Yeah.” Tears dribbled down her cheeks. A wave of confusion. Mud around her ankles. Freezing cold, bare skin goose-pimpled. She just wanted him to explain death away. “Just... fur. I never even saw it up close alive. Where *was* he?”

Len’s face reflected hers. He was lost, too; he was using her fear to guide his response. “I don’t know what happened Jessie.”

“But you *knew* he wasn’t there?”

“Yes.”

This had to be enough, no matter what doubts crept on her mind, no matter what unanswerable questions bubbled over. The secret couldn’t be recovered, like stitches swallowed by a scar. What was it? Death?

Loneliness? Something more? He put his arms around her and she wiped her nose on his shoulder.

They retraced their way in silence and he left her at the bottom of the garden.

“I swear you were never in danger. I’d never let anything happen to you.”

Pam sat at the kitchen table miserably nursing a mug as Louise stirred and chattered at the stove.

“You little urchin! Swimming at this time of year!” she scoffed as Jessie came through the door, too distracted by her determination to cheer up Pam than to be angry. “You’re blue! Go and have a bath and warm yourself up. Wash your hair. And find Erin and get her in too!”

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November was unseasonably cold: even Connie, who’d spent fifty-nine Novembers on the river, said she’d known nothing like it.

“My garden should be purple by now,” she told Louise through the chicken wire fence, pulling a heavy dressing gown across her chest. “That jacaranda should be in bloom.”

By Remembrance Day lilac flowers scattered far and wide, all over Connie’s lawn and the Fletchers’ too. Coming around the bend at Lori’s

place on the walk home, the familiar flowery cloud welcomed Jessie home. The tree went ten months of the year in anonymity but when it bloomed it was essential.

“They’re everywhere in the Shire because Sutherland hospital used to a sapling home with mothers of every new born,” her father reported. “I heard it on the radio.”

“Where’s Connie’s baby?” Erin asked, but he couldn’t answer that.

When the jacaranda came to life, the cumquat tree beneath Jessie’s bedroom window dropped its leaves and died and Jessie knew it was haunted. It’d never been right, just a spindly stick with a tuft of waxy green leaves and a handful of tiny fruit that went putrid before harvest. She convinced herself there was something buried beneath it, something small and foetal, and night after night begged Erin to sleep beside her in the darkness.

Their grandfather arrived at Deepwater Estate one evening with a small suitcase. He stayed a couple of weeks, teaching them to play chess and telling stories about his time in the merchant navy, where unlikely adventures involving pirates, leper colonies and sea monsters had befallen him. Their parents scurried from real estate to bank, transacting the important business that Jessie was sure she would never understand well enough to be a real adult.

“Why aren’t you at Sunday school?” their grandfather demanded at the table one morning, doling out helpings of a breakfast they dared not refuse: mashed potatoes and cutlets of fried salmon. Erin looked alarmed. Jessie was confused. He guffawed at his private joke. “Don’t look at me like that! I’m sure as hell not taking you!”

Clare took to coming over early, delicately requesting vegemite toast.

“It’s all she eats,” Erin confirmed. “Vegemite on toast, or sometimes on a bread roll.”

“Can you do the trick where you pull the penny out of your ear again, Uncle Harry?” Clare asked, and so he did.

On the last day of school, Jessie’s mother took them up the river in the boat. It was the last shebang. The big send-off.

Halfway there, as they passed the last houses on Deepwater Estate and neared the public jetty, Jessie was overcome with regret. She’d rather have taken the track. She would never, ever again walk the track to school. The finality of it was tragic but it was too late to turn back. She watched the houses pass by too fast on the shore.



Queenie left a dying magpie lark on the doormat before breakfast on the first day of the school holidays. Its little wings twitched helplessly and its eyes rolled back in its skull. Jessie sobbed, and once the sobs started they would not stop.

“Jessica Louise!” Her mother shook her shoulders. “This *is* awful but you’re over-reacting! Calm down!”

But Jessie only wailed louder, and Erin, watching with round eyes, began to sob into her bowl of soggy cereal. They buried the bird at the bottom of the garden and arranged an ellipse of smooth stones on the earth to mark its resting place. Jessie refused to eat or look at Queenie for the entire day. She was disgusted by the cat, who sat preening herself at the top of the verandah steps.

On the second day, Clare arrived at Jessie’s early in the morning with the tinny full of sliced leg ham, Dolly magazines and beach towels.

“Where’re you going?” Erin and Leta wanted to know.

“The Needles,” Clare answered.

“Can we come?”

Jessie and Clare conferred with silent looks.

“Hats? Sunscreen? You better check with mum first,” Jessie said.

They were ready in minutes, barrelling down the stairs and into the boat wearing bulky life jackets, rash shirts and wide-brimmed hats.

“Leta, where’s Dane?” Clare asked casually, as Jessie pushed off and they drifted back into the river.

“Cleaning kayaks at the Boatshed for two dollars each.”

All the way down the river cicadas thrummed. The bush was emerald, thick on both slopes with greenery scaling its way into the blue sky. Silver light splintered through the foliage, momentarily blinding them. The summer smells of petrol, saltwater, sunscreen and gums melded. Out of range around the second bend, Clare picked up speed and they held their hats down against the headwind.

“Wacko!” Erin yelled.

On their side of the river, the only notable structure was the old abandoned Church House. A breach in the trees revealed the ghostly green building, two stories high with rows of broken windows, the blame for which fell on Len. On the other side, further down, were a handful of houses right on the edge of the river. Rope swings dangled above the water. The girls waved to people sitting on the porches with tea pots and newspapers spread across their laps.

Clare slowed the boat, navigating cautiously as the river narrowed and the great hunks of rock for which the Needles were named jutted above the surface. The riverbed was visible, sandy and scattered with

stones of all sizes. Schools of tiny fish and transparent prawns darted through the water which lapped gently against the side of the boat.

“Big foot lives here, you know,” breathed Clare.

“Shut up!” whispered Leta.

“I remember when I was little they found a man floating facedown in the water here,” Jessie added. “Only, it was weird because they said he was hairy, not like a normal hairy person but really, really hairy.”

“Stop it Jessie!” howled Erin. “You’re lying!”

“Maybe I am, maybe not.”

Jessie tied the boat to the sturdy branches of a low hanging banksia. They traced the river’s course to where it dammed against a sandstone ledge, which opened onto a wide platform scattered with sticks and shallow pools and further on, a weir. But the girls preferred the river and retraced their steps. Jessie and Clare spread their towels on two large adjacent stones. Resting their chins on their fists they listened to Erin and Leta splash, shrieking and bossing one another about with glee.

“This is it,” Jessie murmured.

“Huh?”

“This is the end.”

“The river’s just a trickle after this.”

They flipped through Dolly and scored mango cheeks, sucking cubes from the skin and slipping into the river to rinse the stickiness away. They stretched out until their skin was taut and smelled like sunshine. Jessie dreamed lightly of water and waves and woke to a soft “plop” close by. Her eyes fluttered open. She scanned the Needles for Erin and Leta but they were nowhere to be seen. Lifting herself to her elbows, Jessie turned to look behind her. A smattering of tiny stones hit her back and rolled into the water around her.

“Hey!” she yelled.

“What?” Clare mumbled drowsily.

Len stood among the tree trunks in a pair of fluoro yellow shorts. With four nimble steps he made his way to the stone beside hers.

“Hey,” he replied.

“That hurt!” She rubbed her back to show him.

“Sorry. Hey, reckon Clare’d give me a lift back?”

“You mean you walked here?”

“Yeah.”

“How is that even possible?” He grinned, pleased by her incredulity. “Geez. Leta and Erin. Where’s Leta and Erin?”

“Back up a little bit, collecting gum nuts or something. You know those real big ones?”

“What are you doing here?” Clare murmured.

Len answered with a shrug. “What are you guys doing?” he asked.

“Sun baking, swimming, stuff,” Jessie answered.

He nodded and stepped onto her stone, toes clinging to the rough surface. “Can I share?”

“Not if you’re going to throw cockroaches at us or whip us with skipping ropes,” Clare replied, these being the crimes she could not forgive him.

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said, squatting close to Jessie.

“I heard someone set a bush fire out the back of Connie’s last week,” Clare said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” She was buoyed by his complacency. “Know anything about it? I heard your dad got in trouble once for setting a fire, before he left.”

“My dad?”

“That’s what I heard.”

“My dad was a cunt. He set lots of fires. Mostly in his bong. But I think the time your mum’s talking about was the time he lit a barbecue on a fire ban day. I still remember the fire brigade boats coming down the river.”

“Whatever,” said Clare, pulling her hat over her eyes.

“Not as friendly as they are on Christmas morning.”

“Why are you smiling Jessie?” demanded Clare.

Her cheeks burned. “I just remember,” she replied. “It was kind of funny.”

The frantic squeal of the little girls deflected Clare’s attention. They stood on the bank with wide, frightened eyes, motioning and jabbering.

“Calm down!” ordered Jessie. “Deep breath! Tell me.”

Erin sucked in a lungful of air and glanced at Leta. “We saw a shark. We saw a shark’s fin.”

“No kidding!” insisted Leta.

“It was definitely a shark!”

“Woronora means “river of no sharks”,” said Clare.

“No,” said Len. “Woronora means “black rock”. Burnum Burnum said so. He’d know.”

“There’s no sharks in this river.”

“We saw one!” the girls cried.

“I’ve heard it before Clarey,” Jessie said. “Especially at high tide. Remember Mike from the beginning of the track? He reckons he saw a little nurse shark circling his ankles once when he was fishing in the shallows.”

“You’ve seen Port Jackson shells on the beach,” added Len.

“As if I’m going to listen to you, Leonard.”

“I guess there’s only one way to settle this,” he sighed, standing up and pulling his t-shirt over his head.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Clare.

“Len...”

“If I get eaten, I’m right. If I don’t, I’m *maybe* wrong.”

He launched himself gracelessly into the river, all arms and legs. Clare jumped to her feet. On the shore, Erin and Leta shrieked wildly. Jessie scanned the water for unwelcome shadows on the sandy bottom. The dark bodies of submerged stones distorted beneath the rippling water, ferocious one minute and lifeless the next. Len surfaced and gulped air.

“Get out now!” Clare yelled.

“Don’t be silly!” Jessie echoed.

He smiled at the girls and rolled over, blithely backstroking away before turning on his belly and breaststroking back. He clung to Jessie’s rock, lifting his dripping shoulders to rest on folded arms. She offered an outstretched hand. He smiled and ignored it and snatched her ankle instead, yanking so she fell on her bottom. Jessie lifted herself to avoid grazing, making it easy for him to drag her into river. The other girls screamed but by the time the water reached her waist, Jessie loosened and

shook with laughter. She fell against him and they went under together, sending bubbles of laughter back to the surface.

As soon as Jessie surfaced, Clare scooped her underarms and scrambled to lift her out. Salt water stung in her nose and in her eyes and her hair wrapped in tangles about her head. Len dragged himself to her side.

“Jessie, you’re mad!” fumed Clare.

“You could’ve died!” screeched Leta.

“Stop laughing!” screamed Erin.

“And you!” Clare accused Len. “You are very immature!”

By the time they were dry, the sun had fallen behind the trees. A languorous mauve sunset hung in the scalloped ridge. It cast a coloured reflection on the river face so the mountain slope and its reflection stretched in a dark, concave band along the shore.

“So can I get a lift? I mean, please can I get a lift?” Len asked.

Clare shrugged. “Yeah. Get in.”

The ride back was quiet. Even the cicadas had nothing to say.

~~~

Christmas began with the blare of bush fire brigade sirens, as it always did. Santa Claus sailed up the river on the stern of a big red fire boat.

“Ho ho ho and Merrrrry Christmas!” he hollered, waving his arms in exaggerated greeting.

In their bright new swimming costumes the children gathered on the beach out the front of Connie’s. They boasted about the gifts they’d received and did star jumps as Santa idled to shore. Each child waded into the water to receive their show bag and whisper a hurried “Merry Christmas” in return.

Back on the lawn beneath the jacaranda, they sifted through the litter of fire safety paraphernalia - pamphlets and fridge magnets and stickers - to find two Fantaes at the very bottom. Len put both in his mouth at once, folded up the bag and deposited it inside Jessie’s with a grin.

“Thanks.”

“Any time.”

Before they went their separate ways, some to poolside barbecues in the Western suburbs, others to waterside brunches on Kogarah Bay, they all swam together. It seemed every Christmas was sunny and the tide high and inviting. They made a delirious mass of tangled bodies, splashing and paddling and gliding through the water.

Jessie swam to the middle and summersaulted twice. She turned on her back to watch them there in the shallows, spreading her hands wide

on the surface. The deep water circled her thighs and flooded over her belly. She liked the pull of it, the secret in its depth. Len had disappeared. Parents tapped their watch faces.

“I’ll see you the day after tomorrow!” Clare called from the beach. Jessie waved and blew kisses in return.

She turned languidly in the water. Soon her aunts and uncles and cousins would arrive and the house would be full of stories and thick Glaswegian accents. They’d splash in the shallows and eat prawns in their wet cossies on the beach. The children would swim from one side of the river to the other and take turns being towed behind the boat on a boogie board. But for now it was hers.

The days after Christmas raced towards New Year, and as Jessie watched her future diminishing the pleasures of normal life sharpened with devastating vividness. A New Years Eve party was planned at Lori’s place, where a stone platform with a sweeping view of the basin made a perfect spot for entertaining. The house itself was perched on the mountain, up 26 steep stairs leading from the track through tousled gums. Lori spent most of her time in one of the rattan chairs on the sandstone outcrop with books about spiritual healing at hand.

As the sun set, Jessie and Clare wandered up in their salt-stained sundresses. People milled about with glasses of wine and little girls in fairy outfits wove around their knees. Perfume mingled with the scents of citronella and charred sausages.

“Don’t break my heart, my achy-breaky heart!” Lori sang, her glass of wine sloshing.

Dane, sitting with his legs dangling over the water, rolled his eyes.

“My mum’ll be up there with her in no time,” Clare assured him.

“And then my mum will start doing some kind of weird Egyptian dancing,” Jessie added.

They sat beside him looking out over a river serene and unruffled by the prospect of a new year.

“You’re sunburned,” Dane noticed, pressing a finger against Clare’s shoulder. “Do you want me to put some aloe on it?”

Clare nodded and he broke a stalk from one of Lori’s spiky potted succulents, rubbing the gel into Clare’s skin, and dabbing a little on Jessie’s shoulders too.

“Where’s Len?” she asked Dane.

“Listening to some weird music. He started playing this one song over and over again and I just wanted a skate so I let him do his thing. You know how he is. I nicked a six pack of beer from the fridge,” he added.

At Len's, the lights were out and the house was still.

"Oi!"

"Len?"

They were answered by the crash of a door closing or a piece of furniture falling, then footsteps. Len burst through the front door, gasping for breath.

"What the hell were you doing?" Dane asked.

Len shrugged.

On the lower tier of Len's front lawn they sat in a tight circle, hidden from passersby. They each took a beer.

"Are you guys gonna miss me?" Jessie asked.

"Are you kidding?" Clare said. "It's not going to feel like home until you come back for holidays."

"Yeah," Dane agreed.

She looked to Len for reassurance but in the dusk his expression was veiled.

"Wanna hear this whack song I've been listening to?" Len asked.

"The one you listened to 45 times before lunch?"

"Yeah man." He raced up to the house and returned with a tape deck and a packet of cigarettes. Jessie had expected white noise or

impossible feedback but the music was mystical with an incantation in a foreign language.

“It’s like something your mum would listen to Dane,” Clare giggled.

“Yeah right. Listen carefully,” Dane said. “‘Cunt’, that’s what the lyrics are: cunt, cunt, cunts cunts -”

“That’s disgusting!” Clare shrieked.

“Len!”

“What? It’s mind-blowing. This album is mind-blowing.”

“Cunts?”

“Not with a ‘c’ and an ‘s’. With a ‘k’ and a ‘z’.”

“Dude, Jessie just asked you if you were gonna miss her and you come out with this?” Dane said.

“It’s between me and Jessie,” he replied. “Let’s walk down the river and have a smoke.”

So they walked along the beach, past Jessie’s and on until the party was just a tinkle in the distance. They settled on the fallen tree trunk opposite Morton’s place, which was defiantly dark in the face of celebration. Laying on the sand they gazed at the silver stars hanging overhead, like chain mail strung in the sky. Beside Jessie, Len lay with his hands crossed neatly over his ribs.

“What’re you doing tomorrow?”

“I don’t know. Clare’s going on holidays.”

“Come up the mountain with me. We’ll climb the fire trail. I’ll buy you an ice-cream.”

“Okay. But no dead animals.” He laughed. “I’m serious Len. No blood, no body parts.”

“Promise. I - I want to tell you something, Jessie.”

“What?”

“I wanna explain. Tomorrow. When it’s just you and me.”

Later, when the countdown the party had petered out, Jessie and Clare stood nose to nose out the front of Dane’s.

“I can’t believe you won’t be here when I get back,” Clare said.

“It doesn’t feel real.”

“Check your letter box,” Clare whispered.

Inside Jessie found a pink envelope with her name on it. There was a long love letter on matching paper and a poem, too.

Roses are red

Violets are blue

Best friends are forever

I will always love you

Jessie woke to cartoons chattering on the TV downstairs. The clock beside her bed read 7.49. She reached for Clare's letter and read it again. Erin burst through the door with wide, alarmed eyes.

"Jessie, the Water Police went past before. There were *heaps* of policemen and they stopped outside Morton's and they all went inside!"

"What?"

"The police Jessie, the police!"

"The MSB isn't like the real police."

"Not the MSB Jessie, the police. It says 'Police' on the boat. Maybe he killed somebody."

"I don't think so Erin."

"Come *on!*"

Jessie followed Erin to the shore and they hid in the shadow of Connie's jetty. The tide was low. Erin was right: the boat was a Police boat, far too big to get back down the river until the water rose again. She counted six people circling the house. They scribbled on notepads and pointed and conferred.

A dead dog. A smashed window. Broken jars.

"What'd he do Jessie?" Erin whispered. "Something really bad?"

But Jessie said nothing. She held her breath and watched the police move about methodically. They'd test for fingerprints. Find footprints.

They'd door-knock every house in the valley. There'd be some way of proving she and Len had been there. Jessie retraced her steps up the beach, trying to appear calm and casual.

"Jessie do you think Morton was a little boy once?" Erin asked, close behind her.

"Of course, dummy." They settled on the top step to the deck.

"No, but really?"

"Yes."

"Do you think he ever murdered anyone?"

"No."

"Hurt little children?"

The answer was "yes". Though she'd never been told as much she knew- perhaps she'd always known- that was what he'd done.

"Len!" Erin yelled. He came from the fire trail not the track. He'd been in the bush. Jessie stood up.

"Where've you been?"

"In the cubby. Watching that." He indicated Morton's place with his thumb. "Did you see the body get carried out?"

"No," Erin said, horrified.

"About fifteen minutes ago, covered in a white sheet. It's on the boat now."

"I'm going to get mum and dad!" Erin yelled.

"He's dead?" Jessie murmured.

Len nodded. She tried to muster a response. A demand. Something like "did you know?" But a cloud hung in her head and the words would not come together. The patch of grass Len stood on blurred, a bilious green.

"I'm going to my dad's this morning Jess." He was only thing in her field of view that had any perspective; he was also the thing causing everything to warp and wane about him. "Last minute plans. Mum's going to Dick-I-mean-Richard's tonight."

"So we're not going up the mountain?"

"Sorry. I'd rather, but not today."

She looked into his hard brown eyes: so unapologetic, so defiant. The screen door rolled open.

"Morning Lou!"

"Morning Len. Morning Jessie," she mumbled, bleary-eyed, as Erin dragged her down towards the sand.

"Hey Jessie? I never lied to you," Len said, and then he was gone.

Blue and white uniforms flickered about the bank on the other side of the river. The melancholy caw of magpies dragged through the valley. The bush behind Morton's was privet, Jessie realised: glossy, noxious,

funnel web-breeding privet. Its tight constellations of tiny white flowers would be in bloom now, heady with their sweet, malignant odour.

~~~

On the farm Jessie learned about emptiness. Keeping watch over the undulating paddocks, she saw it was possible for nothing at all to happen even in vast spaces, the only movement a shifting of light from day break to end. She learned that claustrophobia could be cultivated in wide open spaces: once it took to seed the pastures propagated sameness. The endless impossibility was suffocating. She kept a sharp razor blade in her jewellery box for when the anxiety grew too big to control.

Her dad built a huge shed and the caravan was moved inside, extended with office partitioning where another a bedroom, a bathroom and a kitchen were installed. Jessie shared the caravan with Erin, sticking pictures of Kurt Cobain and Hole all over the dim veneer walls. She wrote mournful poems and took photographs of dead insects, experimented with smoky eye makeup and read all the Bronte novels.

Erin took to country life. She made friends. She planned to make her barrel-shaped chestnut pony called Bindi a dressage champion, though the two of them usually just tore around the paddock at a gallop.

The passive solar house remained a sketch that was rolled out on the kitchen table every night. By year 10, Jessie knew she'd never live in the house. Dinner would be microwaved. Sleep would be interrupted by her dad's snoring. She wouldn't ever invite anybody from school to hang out at her place.

At school, she drifted towards the kids who broke rules. They called her the "city girl" and she didn't correct them. The river was her secret, it was all her own. She wanted rid of innocence. On the river she'd known that would involve boats and beer and it would happen as a matter of course but here, she wasn't quite sure. It'd be uglier and more anonymous. Still, she gravitated towards the kids who got stoned and drank bourbon; who did laps of the main street in their utes and compared the firearms they stashed beneath their driver's seats.

Red necks, she said to herself. It was surprising how such small words made her feel so much better.

Len replied to a letter she sent to his new address in Sutherland. It filled her with defiance which felt a lot like strength. His words were a promise that important parts of her were safeguarded elsewhere.

*Jessie,*

*If you were the Queen of the Hive you would lay 1200 eggs a day for 5 years and then you would die. If you were a Queen Bee you would not really know me. I would be a mere drone, impregnating you anonymously on one wild night of raucous group sex and then crawling back into my little cell to be 'spoon fed' life by your other (female) subjects.*

*I'm glad you're a girl rather than a Queen Bee. Although I appreciate the superiority of a society in which sex-mad males are reduced to the status of robotic impregnators. But I would rather you lived in this world, where you could be my Queen.*

*I'm sorry for using such a grotesque metaphor. It's cowardly and indirect. I'm always searching for the perfect image to sum up the way I feel, so that I can describe it to you and at least imagine that you see exactly what I imagine. It's a fantasy of understanding, I know. The best things usually are. Except you. I know you're not a fantasy. You are the most certain thing in my whole life.*

*I decided I hate the electric guitar. It's just a penis extension, a stupid mojo tool that turns people ON. (Unless it's used as a snare or played by Sonic Youth. In which case it's ok.) The problem is that Dane loves the guitar and we are supposed to be in a band. So what am I to do? Get over myself, I guess. Make Dane listen to more Kraftwerk.*

*My mum and sister are alive. Dad bought a milkshake maker. I promised to go there and make milkshakes at his depressing red brick bachelor pad. I said I wanted*

*to make chocolate-caramel milkshakes but all I really want to combine in a milkshake maker is me and you. Which would be gory. There I go with the dumb metaphor stuff again.*

*I haven't been down to the river in ages. It's kind of weird to see strangers living in my old house and yours. It makes the 'Glory Days' seem so long ago.*

*Write back to me. Tell me anything. Just give me something to hang off.*

*From Len PS:*

xxxxxxx                    xxxxxxxX  
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xxxxxxxxxxx  
xxx

She wrote back, words that slavered from her pen and sounded sentimental and embarrassingly teenaged. He didn't respond. She let it be, but she held onto his letter like an armour against anybody who tried to confine her.

~~~

She could've stayed on the river every school holidays if she'd wanted to but being there was discomfiting. It made her ache with the life she wasn't living, itch with the sense of not belonging. There was another family in number one and another child lay claim to her beach. A young couple was renting Len's place. So Jessie and Clare settled on a tradition of her staying one week every Christmas holidays. They planned it meticulously, reviving their boat trips to the Needles and spending whole days sun baking.

The summer going into year nine, Jessie and Clare wheeled their bicycles around the corner out the back of Mrs Sharp's and walked into Len. It was the first time Jessie had seen him in two years. Face to face without warning, he grinned so gladly that Jessie knew - despite the silence - nothing had changed.

"Hey," he said, his hands falling to his sides.

Jessie dropped her bike against the chicken wire fence and wrapped her arms around his neck. He was a taller and skinnier but absolutely familiar and tucked himself into her embrace, seeking the same comfort the smell of him gave her.

"How are you?" she asked.

"So-so," he smiled.

“What are you doing here?”

“I’m going to Dane’s.”

“Oh!”

“I just found out mum’s having another baby.”

“No!”

“A baby!” bubbled Clare, but Len stared her down blankly.

“I walked all the way down. Through the cemetery, down the old track. It’s revolting up there, all baby boy names and fucken booties, so I’m staying at Dane’s.”

“We’re gonna get Splices from the Boatshed.”

“Cool.”

“Don’t go without saying goodbye,” Jessie instructed.

He reached for her hand and squeezed. His gaze gave Jessie the peculiar privilege of seeing inside him, as if he were showing her the answer to a question she wasn’t sure she’d asked. “No way. Hey, please, let’s hang out before you go? Before I go.”

“Let’s.”

“See ya,” singsonged Clare, disappearing around the corner. Jessie pushed off without saying goodbye and he watched as she went.

The clink-clink-clink of stones hitting glass roused Jessie from a light, expectant sleep.

“Murderer?” murmured Clare.

The silhouette, solid black in the dark backyard, waved.

“No: Len.” She knelt, kissed Clare’s temple. “I’m gonna go see him.”

“Don’t get pash rash.”

Jessie sailed down the stairs and out the sliding door to him. Wordlessly she and Len crossed to the gate, waiting until they were way out of earshot before looking at one another. Jessie giggled with relief and Len gave her an exuberant smile.

“What are we doing?” she asked.

“I dunno.”

“You got beer or music or something to tell me?”

“Yeah, I got something to tell you.” Solemnly he stepped towards her, taking her wrists in his hands, securing her gaze with his. They were so close their lips brushed. He smelled buttery, and faintly of tobacco. “I missed you.”

“I missed you too.”

“I missed you like a fucking arm. Or a leg. Like a body part, something you have to learn to live without but can’t believe is gone.”

Cicadas thrummed, frogs croaked and she wished she had some words to match his.

“C’mon.” He set off up the trail that scaled the mountain behind Clare’s, leading to the back of Dane’s place, and then diverged into the bush.

“Where’re we going?”

“Somewhere special.”

He stopped. A sandstone enclave reared like a wave from the knots of banksia root, it’s pallid underside shining like whitewash in the moonlight.

“I used to come here when I was little, out the laundry door and up the hill.”

“What’s here?”

“A midden. Some marks on the rocks- maybe real drawings.”

They sat against the rock with the murmur of nocturnal creatures closing around them and the warm, eucalypt thick air clinging on their skin. He lit a cigarette, offered her a drag.

“Len, that day, when they found Morton?”

“Mmm.”

“We were gonna go up the mountain.”

“Mmm.”

“You were gonna tell me something.”

He tapped two fingers against his knee.

“You don’t remember?”

“Maybe I don’t wanna remember,” he admitted. They passed the cigarette between them. “Remember that day you told me you were leaving?”

“Yes. Dripping all over the path.”

“I’d been at Morton’s. I used to go there. I don’t even know why. Just to cause trouble, or find quiet, or something.” Static buzzed in Jessie’s ears: insects, or fear. “I know we weren’t supposed to go there. Morton was evil. But I knew.”

“Knew what?”

“I knew before everyone else. I knew there was no reason to be afraid, that day I took you there.”

“But he was dead!” Her mind blanked. She knew he was focussed on her, waiting for the pieces to come together, for her to see what he was saying. “You knew he was dead.”

He nodded. She gave a little whimper. He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and she wept against his chest, confused at first, and then because because she didn’t want the embrace to end. Hesitantly he slipped his hand beneath the collar of her shirt and over her shoulder, his fingers

moving near her breasts. Her skin was taut, expectant. She turned and kissed him softly, then greedily, to fill the gaping spaces in time and understanding.

He breathed against her ear and she felt the murmur run down her spine. "Can we? Please?"

She was afraid so she kissed him again, clasped him against her, feeling his body through her thin clothes, and lay down in the gritty refuse. They sought one another's bare skin, kissed messily as if for air. Gumnuts, twigs, stone grazed her back but it didn't hurt like she'd feared. In those minutes, or seconds, all she knew was what it felt like to be as close to him as she could possibly be.

Afterwards he whispered, "Are you okay?"

He was curled in a ball, his head against her shoulder. She nodded and stroked his head to reassure him. In the blue moonlight he picked leaves from her hair and dusted down her clothes.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No." She shook her head, his ecstasy being contentment enough.

Over Vegemite toast at the kitchen counter, Clare avoided Jessie's eyes. They washed the dishes like Kim had asked, and hung out the whites too.

"Aren't you going to ask me?" Jessie asked.

“Are you going to tell me?” Clare countered.

“Well, we did... it.”

Clare giggled and fumbled for Jessie’s hands. “What was it like?”

“It happened so fast.” She shrugged. “There was a tiny bit of blood on my undies, when I went to the loo. That’s how I know for sure.”

Clare caught her breath. “Did it hurt?”

“Not really. A bit.”

Dane came down the track alone and waved from the other side of the gate without entering.

“Come in!” Clare invited, but he shook his head.

“Gotta get the bus up to Sutho. Jessie, this is from Len.” He pushed a square of tightly folded paper through one of the wire diamonds.

“He’s gone?” Clare bristled.

“Sorry Jessie. Bye.”

Clare took Jessie’s hand in her own. “He mightn’t be my favourite person in the world Jess, but I know how much he cares about you. He just doesn’t get it, how to say it, how to show it in a way other people understand.”

Jessie burned with shame. She feigned a smile and strangled the letter in her fist until she was alone to read it.

I'm sorry Jessie. For everything I've ever done that ever did, but never meant, to hurt you.

I'm sorry for being a loser. I'm sorry for being brutal. I'm sorry for being a 'man'.

Mostly I'm just sorry for being my sorry self.

Remember, no matter what I do or how I act, You are my reason.

Len

PS: please keep this safe for me.

Can we be alive

Can we be nothing

Can we be aborted

Can we be children

When Jessie went back to the farm, she lived for the beep-beep of text messages, long distance calls and heavy envelopes from Clare. In the miles between them they imagined their future together, all cocktails and high heels, record stores and party dresses. One Saturday morning an SMS arrived from Clare: *r u awake!!!!*

Jessie called immediately.

"Dane and I kissed!" Clare whispered. "He kissed me. He was a little tipsy, and I was too, but Jessie!"

"This has been forever in the making!"

"It was at Allira's party. We're never at the same parties but he's friends with her brother so..."

"It was his chance, to kiss you!"

"Maybe."

"Um, definitely!"

"He's just so sweet and cute and we held hands for the rest of the night."

"So are you going out now?"

"Not officially."

"Did Len kiss anyone?"

Clare hesitated, caught off guard, but then she laughed incredulously. "God no, Jess. It's kinda like- he's not interested in that like other boys. There's even some girls who try but he just doesn't get it. He was drunk, dancing this thing he called 'the cockroach' upside down on his back. I don't think he like the music."

Jessie was appeased. "You and Dane are meant for each other."

Afterwards, Jessie rode Misty out to the furthest corner of the furthest paddock. She squatted among the stones and serrated tussock and unfolded Len's worn letter.

Can we be children?

She longed for him unendurably every day, but it would be years before she heard from him again.

Part II

The Christmas after Jessie finished year 12, her family gathered around her grandfather's sick bed at his terrace in Annandale. He had lung cancer and only months to live. They balanced plates of plum pudding on their knees in a semi-circle around him. He balanced a Winfield on his lips and lit it irreverently.

"What are you doing with your life now, young lady?" he demanded.

"I got into Arts at Sydney," Jessie replied. "I just have to find a place to stay."

"Joe, the shed out back - it's no bloody use to me anymore. You can get that into a habitable state can't you? Drag a bed in from the house and put a lock on the door."

Her dad nodded. Jessie knew they'd already discussed it.

"It yours Jessica, if you want it," explained her so-called Aunt Marion.

"Really?"

"Would we offer if we didn't mean it?" her grandfather countered, a smile seeping into his gaunt cheeks.

The studio was cleared and furnished by Boxing Day. There was no need for Jessie to go back to the farm: her mother would pack up her

bedroom and bring everything in a carload the week after New Year. She had clothes and toiletries to last.

“Give Misty a kiss for me,” she told Erin. “And a sugar cube too.”

The next day, Jessie waited beneath the clock at Central Station and watched Clare thread through the sparse crowd towards her. They cuddled and kissed, and wandered down to Chinatown.

“How’s Dane?”

“He’s good. Really good.”

Jessie’s smile was sanguine but she said, “That’s beautiful, Clarey.”

“They’re playing in a band together, you know. Dane and Len. They’re called Calypso! Calypso! with exclamations after each Calypso.”

“Cool.”

“Dane keeps telling me, ‘we’re called Calypso! Calypso! but we play garage punk’- and I’m like, ‘can you play a cover of Chynna Phillips already?’”

They giggled. ““You touch my hand-”” sang Jessie.

““I live for you’,” Clare followed.

““And in your eyes they understand-””

““I live for you.””

“But you know that music Jessie, that alternative stuff.”

“There’s always a place in my heart for the music we used to do our dance routines to,” she replied. “Where does Len live now?”

“In Redfern, in a share house with some guys from school. Dane goes there once a week for practice but Len never comes our way, not since he finished school.”

“How’s he going?”

“He drinks, he parties,” she shrugged. “I dunno. I hardly saw him after he moved to Sutho. Only when we were at school or when we were both with Dane. There were rumours about him all through school - that his mum had an AVO out against him, that he started those big bush fires, serious stuff.”

“That’s bullshit. You know that. Everybody always blamed everything on him.”

There was nothing more she could say in his defence. They wandered through the Friendship Garden and Jessie felt as if she were trespassing in a photograph. She realised her loyalty must seem a pathetic thing to Clare, given Len’s inability to return it.

“It doesn’t matter about boys,” Clare conceded gently. She turned her hand palm side up and Jessie clasped it firmly.

At Paddy’s Markets they bought two-for-one eyeshadows and a bag of sugared peanuts to share. Clare oohed and ahed at the little studio

back in Annandale and they spent the night there forehead to forehead, dreaming up the future.

In the city, summer smelled lush with opportunity in ways the empty paddocks never had. The perfume of jasmine and gardenias drifted from garden to garden; even the fumes and roasting coffee and fetid drains had their place. Jessie walked the streets without a destination and drank the newness of it in. At an internet cafe in Newtown she bought fifteen minutes on the web. She noted down the important dates for uni and set up a MySpace account. She friended some people from school and searched for Len but the only matches were strangers from far flung places. The final 10 seconds counted down at the bottom of the screen. Out on King Street the evening was neon and alive, all coloured reflections and anonymous laughter. For the life of her, Jessie couldn't recall Len's face. Pieces of it flitted through her head without adhering.

The next day, at an internet cafe near Central, she logged on to find a friend request from Leon Weiss. She knew those unyielding eyes. They spoke to her in silence.

20 years old

Redfern

Sydney

AUSTRALIA

Last login: 28.12.2004.

Leon's blurbs

About me: It's in the whites of my eyes.

Who I'd like to meet: Punks, weirdos, artists, junkies. Nina Hagen. Someone who has a bass synth.

His profile presented exactly as Leon Weiss' would: enigmatic, aloof and carefully curated. A little sordid, a little starved. But this image was meant for strangers and acquaintances, not somebody he loved, or had loved, or was loved by. Jessie wrote,

Len,

As soon as I saw the photo I knew it was you!

How's life? I just moved to Sydney, to my Grandad's place in Annandale.

Clare told me you live in Redfern and play in a band called Calypso Calypso?

Write back!!!

J

She looked up the lyrics to the Chynna Phillips song Clare loved, just for the distraction, and when she checked back into MySpace he'd already replied.

i knew it was you straight away. those blue eyes, your pretty face and lovely smile. sorry if i sound like a total sleaze. just, so you know, you were always the honey to my bee.

i would luv (like totally hysterically gigantically love) to see u. come to the city with me and we can walk around the mca! check out yoko and mike parr! buy a cream bun and take a picnic at bondi! come see me play! the band is going really well! i know it's egoistical to say but I reckon we're really cool. we're gonna rewrite the rules.

tell me more, more, more about you!!!! or meet me on n.y.e. and tell it to my ear??? please???

my phone number is 0417 593 248

l {-[xxx]-}

ps- the 'o' is silent. pretentious, right?

i'll call you xxx she replied.

When her grandfather and Marion had gone to bed Jessie slipped in to the house. In the kitchen, she took the cordless phone and dialled Len's number.

"Hello?" He was chewing.

"Hey. It's me. I mean it's Jessie?"

"Hey!" He was glad, and she was reassured immediately. "Where are you?"

"Annandale. My grandfather's. You remember him, right?"

"Course. What're you doing?"

"Now, or- just being with him. He's dying."

"Oh, man."

"Cancer."

"It sucks. My pop died a couple of years back, same thing."

"I'm so sorry Len."

"Hey, can I see you? Tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Meet me at Town Hall steps, about four?"

"Okay."

"Jessie? I can't wait to see you."

"Me neither."

She laid the phone down and pressed her cheek to the granite counter top . Cool bliss. The sound of his voice filled every empty space.

~~~

He was waiting at Town Hall when the bus pulled in, hands deep in the pockets of his faded black jeans. Their eyes fixed through the glass. Her instinct was to smile but his solemnity stopped her. They cut across the grain of traffic on the footpath towards one another.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Perhaps she’d expected he’d lift her hand or kiss her tenderly, but he didn’t. He shrank a little into the brace of his shoulders and she blushed.

“Wanna get a coffee?”

“Okay.”

“How was your day?” Jessie asked.

“Pretty shit. Work is mind-numbing. All the usual hospitality shit. Try not to sniff me,” he warned. “I smell like I’ve been deep-fried.”

“Like a fisherman’s basket? A prawn cutlet?”

“Hey, that could be a cool name for a band. Prawn Cutlet: a kinda surf-but-not-surfie band.”



"I could play the triangle."

"Or the glockenspiel."

"The kazoo?"

"We could play Manson covers. Charles not Marilyn," he said.

"Dreamy serial killer surf tunes."

They bought longnecks of VB instead of coffee and continued on to Hyde Park, where they settled cross-legged on the grass. Len handed her an open beer.

"So tell me everything. What's happened since I saw you last?" He seemed a little embarrassed. "What was it like living in Sutho?"

"Pretty crap. We lived in one of those units with asbestos all over the ceiling. Mum and her jerk husband had a brand new baby girl called Anastasia. I spent a lot of time staring at the bubbly ceiling and then I moved in with Nan and Pop for a couple of years before moving to the city. But you know that."

"Most of it. Last time I saw you your mum was just pregnant. You came down the river." She wanted to see what it meant, that tangling of their bodies that seemed a lot like love. But he wore a glazed-on expression she couldn't break through. He didn't blink. The tension had a fragility, a volatility. "I was 14 and you would've been 15. The year 2000."

“That would’ve been the year he fucked my mother. 2000.” She felt the violence of the word like a smack. “I always wished he’d hit her you know, so I could belt him, but he never did. Just verbal and psychological shit. My dad’s an idiot but he’s not malicious. Dick’s nasty. And Anastasia - I know I should feel something for her. She’s helpless. She’s only three. But I don’t.”

He swigged his beer and his eyes slipped away.

“Fuck him,” was all Jessie could think to say. She lit two cigarettes and handed him one. “What about your band?”

“It’s good,” he grinned. “Really good. We recorded a four-track.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll make you a copy. It’s got two songs I wrote and two covers. I want us to get our shit together and get some shows happening.”

“You play drums?”

“Yeah. And I sing at the same time. It’s pretty sweaty.”

Later, as they wandered back to Central, Jessie reached for his hand and he threaded his fingers through hers.

“I missed you. I missed the river.”

“I missed *you*,” he replied gently. “Come with me on New Year’s? Me and you and Dane and Clare!”

“That’d be so great!”

At the bus stop he leaned close and kissed her cheek timidly, as if he expected her to push him away. Blood, heartbeat, hair, sweat, prickly skin so close, so real and alive

He rang the next day.

“I want to see you right now,” he said. “But I’m at my dad’s place in Heathcote. It’s a hell hole but I need cash and he needs some company.”

“Tomorrow.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Me neither.”

Jessie examined herself in the mirror. She didn’t move too close, to find faults to pick at or chastise. She was a whole other person in her reflection: one Len seemed to think was special.

Later, on Myspace, his status read “Here there and everywhere”.

There was a message, too.

*Dearest,*

*I just got off the phone to you and already I miss the sound of the way you say ‘so’.*

*So: When you join a cult. There are sacrifices you must make. You must give up one or any number of the following: your language, your virginity, your first born; pleasure, the ability to see in colour, your god / s.*

*When you are born into a cult. You never get to make the choice. You live without the things others must give up and you don't even miss them until you realise later you lived a life of penance.*

*I was determined to rebel. I never looked back at the light. The moth never looked back at the goose looking back at the gander.*

*Anyway.*

*It may be just a cliché-fool but I Love You Jessie Fletcher. You are my Reason.*

*Because: I have this very faint memory of you wading in the shallows of the river at low tide as a little girl. You are wearing a shiny swimming costume- the one you tell me you loved the best with the slices of watermelon and pineapple plastered on your belly. You look up at me and smile. Fruit Salad Baby.*

*Sometimes I think it's a fantasy because the boy looking on is not a child - he's me now. Anyway, the point is that I had a realisation the other day. I will not call it 'profound' because only desperate people who are looking for answers use words like 'profound' but here it is: The only world I know is the world in which you live. The only world I know is the world in which I Love You. And I think you feel the same but I'll never believe it until I hear your voice reassuring me it's so...*

*Love always from Leonard*

~~~

Teetering in their high heels, Jessie and Clare sipped glasses of champagne at an overflowing pub on Pitt Street while they waited for the boys to call.

“Where are they?”

“They’re on their way,” Jessie assured her.

Sometime after nine they finally called and arranged to meet beneath the Queen Victoria statue at ten. They watched the two familiar heads bob towards them through the masses.

“Hey,” Len purred, taking up Jessie’s hand.

“Hey.”

A spell hovered over them. Time went on and on, but never long enough. The down on her cheeks prickled beneath his breath.

“I want you to know everything I say is the truth. The uninhibited truth.” Fireworks ricocheted somewhere in the sky. “But I also have to tell you I took a pill. It could be smacky but right now I just feel all the love I always felt for you rolling over me like honey being poured through my veins.” He closed his eyes. “Sweet and heavy.”

Jessie pressed his cheeks in her hands. “I love you, too.”

He opened his glassy, dilated eyes to her, the pupils hanging like oil on their surface. “I know.”

“Love,” she repeated, just for the sound of the word. He lifted her hands above her head exultantly and dropped his arms around her waist, wrapping her up, spinning her around.

“Oh Je-ssie!” Clare called.

She held to Len a second longer before turning.

“Hey mate,” Dane laughed.

“Hey!” He grinned and took a deep breath. “You’re high too?”

Dane nodded sheepishly. “But seriously, seriously: I’m really happy for you two.”

“Yeah. It’s everything.”

They stuck together all night amid the clamour of bodies and the midnight fireworks, that ripped through the sky and scattered over the harbour. Afterwards the four of them walked through Hyde Park towards Oxford Street. On the steps leading up to the War Memorial they rested, Jessie between Len’s legs.

“Us four,” mused Clare. “Who’d’ve thought?”

“We gonna try calling this Keith guy?” Dane asked. “Those Red Mitsubishis’ll do if they’re cheap.”

Len shrugged. “I’m easy man. I’ll call him for you if you want.”

“You’re finished?”

“I could go back to 42 Douglas. Listen to Air, or something French, smoke a bit.”

“Not even a little amyl? A little nitrous?” he teased. Len shrugged indifferently. “Jimmy isn’t gonna be impressed.”

“Fuck Jimmy. I got my girl.” He squeezed her shoulders between his knees and explained, “Jimmy’s my roommate.”

Nearing five, as night lifted and the morning cast an ashen, overcast light in the streets, they arrived at the house in Redfern. Pillows and pizza boxes covered the living room floor. A hookah pipe and empty tobacco pouches were scattered on the coffee table. The walls were covered with posters: “Hairway to Steven” read one, and a life-size photocopy of a man, naked but for a watch and a leather mask, stared down on them.

“Is that *you*?” Clare had dismissed the mess with a cursory glance but her eyes stuck to the image.

“Yeah. Jimmy made it,” Len explained. “He’s a kind of radical. It suits me.”

“You know our Len, babe,” Dane laughed. “We call it “Portrait of the artist as a gimp.””

They listened to some dreamy music and drank tea with glugs of whiskey. Talk meandered into fitful, distracted sleep. Jessie woke at one

point to Len's peaceful face resting close to hers. He started and quivered convulsively, his eyes springing open.

"Hello," she whispered. "Bad dream?"

He blinked. "Don't know." He touched her cheek with the tips of his fingers to feel if she was real. "But I'm here now."

Later, when Clare and Dane had gone, they lay together on his narrow mattress upstairs.

"Clare doesn't get me," said Len.

"She's trying," said Jessie.

"I know. I'm trying too."

She rested her head on his arm and traced the words FUTURE SHOCK, printed in jagged black letters across his t-shirt.

Sometime in the evening, Jessie woke to slamming doors and raucous laughter. Her tongue felt as thick as industrial carpet. She was starving. The sky was a grainy navy blue now.

There were footsteps on the stairs and the door was flung open. A tall boy wearing genie pants, an open shearling vest and sunglasses with iridescent purple shades tumbled in, all arms and legs.

"I bring you riches!" he hollered. Then, noticing Jessie, he froze and grinned. "Shit. Sorry."

“Man,” Len groaned.

“You’re not in a state to do introductions, I presume? I’m Jimmy,” he said, leaning down and offering his hand with a flourish.

“Jessie.”

“I’ve heard plenty about you. And it may be the thing that everyone says but it’s all been beautiful. Sickeningly beautiful, in fact.”

“You’re talking really loud, man,” said Len.

“Oh shut up you old codger! Where the hell’d you go last night? ‘Meet me at Arq at 2’ my ass. There I am with four thousand gay men and a bare chest and you’re a no show.”

“You’ve got a lot to say.”

“Look.” Jimmy stubbed out his cigarette in an open cassette case. He bent down and retrieved a baggie from a backpack on the floor. Jessie realised the pile of blankets and pillows strewn beside Len’s mattress was Jimmy’s bed. “Come on downstairs. We’ve got Xanax and a bit of dope.”

“Yeah?”

“We need someone to pick music for us.” Jimmy lowered his voice conspiratorially and hissed through his teeth, “If I leave it to those bozos we’ll be listening to Limp Bizkit all night. Do you want that?”

“You’ve been smoking ice.”

Jimmy answered with a grin that bared his gums, all pearly and white as teeth. He backed out of the room.

“Do you want to?” Len asked, lifting himself upright.

“I don’t mind. If he-”

“He doesn’t come into it.” Len rolled his eyes. “I’d rather be with you.”

She kneeled and kissed him and he kissed her back, very gently. His fragility intoxicated her: it made her powerful. She held drew his hands to her breasts and he watched as if they were someone else’s hands other than his own. He made no excuses and no advance but he raised his hands to her face and stroked her cheekbone with his thumb to reassure her. “I do love you.”

The days following New Year slid into one another. Tomorrow they would part: always tomorrow. Nobody had to work and Jessie lost count of the sunsets outside Len’s window. Had there been three or four? They listened to strange music and kissed and smoked joints and drank endless cups of instant coffee.

“We’ve gotta get out of this place,” Len announced one afternoon, when lumps of sour milk bobbed to the top the coffees. “It’s doing my head in.”

“Mum’s coming this arvo with my stuff,” Jessie said by way of agreement.

He was waiting on the footpath beside her when her mother pulled up.

“Leonard darling.”

“Hi Lou.”

He nodded respectfully and she hugged him enthusiastically. Look at you!” she clucked. “Such a handsome young man.”

Jessie blushed and Len shifted his weight from foot to foot, awkward with pleasure.

In the sitting room, Marion poured tea for the five of them.

“What do you do with yourself boy?” Jessie’s grandfather demanded as he loosened a cigarette from the pack on his chest.

“I play in a band,” Len replied. “I’m the drummer. And the singer. And I write the songs. We’re pretty good.”

“At your age I was at sea, drinking rum. Lots of it.” Len nodded sagely. “Louise was a babe, waiting here at port with her long-suffering mama for her drunken papa to come home. Do you know what came of that?”

“What?”

“Two more babies and a long overdue divorce.” He laughed. “So drink rum and play your drums while you can.”

Louise asked Len about his mum and his dad before starting on the profound questions: how did he feel about his parents’ divorce, speaking as someone who’d experienced it herself? And what about his little sister? He answered every one of her questions willingly: he let her dig deeper than Jessie, but he answered her in less detail.

“You haven’t changed, Lou,” he grinned.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve got a reputation for this.”

“For the deep-and-meaningfuls,” Jessie explained.

Early in the morning in the little lane way out the back, he told her how lucky she was.

“Your family: your parents, your grandparents. They’re still in love with each other. It’s the best thing.”

~~~

While Len slaved in the cafe and Clare perfected creme patisserie in the bakery where she’d begun an apprenticeship, Jessie walked from one side of the city to the other. All she needed she carried on her: water, rollies, a couple of dollars to buy nuts or a roll for lunch. She walked from the inner

west to the east and over the bridge to North Sydney, the harbour brooding beneath her.

“You’ve always been a walker,” said Clare on the telephone. “Even here on the river! Remember mum and I use to wave, trekking down the track on the way to school?”

But Jessie hadn’t walked so far or so meditatively since childhood. In the country there was too much space, too much of nothing. The endless stretches of yellowing grass were unforgiving. In the city, the landscape altered from street to street. She could pass through quaint avenues lined with Edwardian mansions and art deco apartments into suburbs packed shoulder to shoulder with wobbly, weather-beaten terraces and red brick bungalows, lawns replete with fallen frangipani flowers. She liked to imagine the lives lived in each home.

In the afternoons she sat with her grandfather and listened to the stories she hadn’t heard since childhood. She drank up the melody of his voice, the intonation, the accent. “You, my petal, are to have my Minolta,” he said. “It’s yours.”

From then on she packed the Minolta along with water, rollies and change. She photographed her feet and the opera house, and a whole roll of decaying flowers trodden into a footpath.

In the evenings she took shots of Len and Jimmy and the other boys who hung around Redfern, the prints veiled by cigarette smoke and the dim shadows of too-short exposures. She watched Calypso! Calypso! practise. They played some covers and made a lot of noise.

“This one’s mine. It’s called ‘The ascent’,” Len told her. And to Jimmy, “It’s A then E. Ready?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” but he poked the synth’s keys with a furrowed brow.

The song was upbeat, powy and brutal with a chorus you could dance to. He leaned into the kit, low with his cheek close to the snare and his arms rearing like wings behind him. He played with lightness and ease, centred and still like centrifuge.

They played another four songs in quick succession and Jessie snapped away, pictures that would probably be blurred with energy and exhilaration. Len dropped his drumsticks abruptly when he’d had enough and bounced over the snare, sweat gathering on his brows. His red t-shirt was crimson where it clung to his body. He pulled it off and slid down the wall to sit beside Jessie.

“Roll us one,” Len called after Dane and Jimmy, who’d walked outside with the tobacco.

“You were amazing! You look like you’ve run a marathon!” Jessie said.

He grinned and pressed her hands together, lowering his forehead to them as if accepting her blessing. “We got a gig at Spectrum. In two months time.”

“Really?!”

“Really!”

“The Big Day Out’s for red necks,” he said. “Guys wearing Aussie flags and girls getting called ‘bitch’.” So he bought them tickets to see Le Tigre at the Gaelic Club instead. They watched Kathleen Hanna jump around the stage with her high ponytail and heavy fringe bouncing. She was buoyant and girlish and vehement, tightly wound in a coil of defiance with neon makeup spread like warpaint on her cheeks.

“I’m a feminist,” he announced as they burst onto the footpath.

“A riot grrl?”

“Totally.”

Afterwards, they took two bottles of cheap champagne to the base of a big palm in the park near Central Station and drank from the brown paper bags. The hum of insects competed with the roar of traffic. The sat

forward and the rich summer smell of the earth soaked in through their open pores.

“I want to make music,” he said. “I want to make things.”

“Same,” Jessie agreed. “I just want to make things.”

“Pictures?”

“Maybe. Maybe words.”

“Maybe both. I love to see you dream.”

They smiled together in camaraderie and sipped champagne.

“I’d love to go down to the river too. Walk the track. See Kim and Connie.” She shrugged. Trains streamed on beyond the fence in a flicker of light and silhouettes crossed the park, hands in pockets or around another’s shoulders. “We could just go down the fire trail, secretly, and swim at the Church House.”

“I don’t want to break your heart,” he said very softly.

“Don’t then.”

“I know how much that river means to you. I don’t want to steal that away.”

“You can’t, you’re part of that. A huge part.”

“But...”

“But what?”



He dropped his shoulders, deflated. "Jessie, Jessie, Jessie. Your river was not my river."

"Meaning?"

"Your river was a good place. Your family, your horse, the sunshine. Your memory is beautiful. Mine's different. You were the best thing about it, you and Dane."

"But?"

"My family, for one," he sighed. "My dad used to beat my mum and my mum used to play the victim. My dad and my mum got divorced and I lived there with her in this wasteland of depression. The river isn't such a happy place for me."

"I'm sorry. I understand." She'd known this in a way: perhaps not allowing herself to know it, but enough that she was now filled with shame for her obliviousness.

He set his bottle aside and turned to her, pressing her hands in his own. "I need you to know that I will never, never hurt you."

She nodded.

"You have to believe me when I say that, have faith in me. I will never lift a finger to you. I'm not like my father. Or my mother. I'm not like them."

"I know," she assured him, turning their fingers so his were clasped in hers. "I'm so proud of you. I can't tell you how proud."

His eyes shone were as wide and clear and brown as she remembered them from childhood.

~~~

"Guess what?" Clare asked over the phone.

"What?"

"Dane and I are moving in together. To Newtown!"

"No way!"

"Yes way! I'm so excited- we'll be able to walk to one another's houses again! Ride our bikes! Go shopping and eat ice cream and go swimming. I guess there's a pool somewhere close by."

"Oh Clarey I can't wait!"

Sprawled on her bed in the studio, Len smiled indulgently when she told him the news. "Yeah, Dane said."

"Aren't you excited?"

"I guess. It'll make practice easier. And you'll be happy to have Clare around. Yeah, I'm excited."

They swam in one another, in the sultry pulse of songs drawn out with longing. They kissed until their mouths dissolved and they felt as if

they were melting into the other; they held one another as if they would never let go. But though kissing the way they did felt close to everything it never went any further: they were never undressed. Jessie sensed there was a boundary Len wasn't comfortable crossing.

They slept on the covers and woke to a gossamer morning light, their arms entwined and their legs like latticework.

Every day Len had something enormous to tell Jessie. The size of his love, the lengths he would go to just to be with her. He measured all the sacrifices he would make, confided his deepest secrets and made promises that grew bigger and grander with every breath. He always had a new way of saying how much he loved her.

"I'd give up my drum kit," he said. "I'd run away with you and leave it to rot."

And, "You're my family."

"I'd give up my eyesight for you," he said.

And, "I will never leave you behind."

He wrote her letters and called her on the phone and if she didn't answer he just kept on ringing until she picked up. Once, having taken a shower, the screen notified her of thirty-six missed calls.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

“I just wanted to hear your voice,” he explained.

Jessie got a job waiting tables at the cafe across the way from her grandad’s. On the morning of her first shift he woke her with four soft taps on the boarded up wooden door that fronted the lane. She slipped out through the adjacent garage into the lane. His brow was clammy and his breath jagged.

“Running for love,” he said. “I being running just to see you. I could run a million miles for you.”

He called her baby and it didn’t matter that “baby” was a cliché. He breathed the word in her ear and she breathed it back and it was theirs, all theirs.

“You’re so soft, like a cloud,” he said. “Not like me with my sharp body.”

At the house on Douglas Street he closed his bedroom door to shut out the Rolling Stones. He played the Beatles, Revolver and Rubber Soul, and they kissed until it was dark.

“Paul and Linda never spent a night apart,” he said.

The next morning he left a cigarette and a purple envelope addressed to “The Jessie Fletcher Fan Club” on her drawstring bag.

From Leonard

Ok. I may as well just come straight out and say it because if I don't then this whole letter will just end up being a pathetic attempt at diverting my subconscious. Jessie, the truth is I haven't brushed my teeth in three days now. Because I haven't seen you in three days (now, when I'm writing). At this point it feels as if I'm carrying a small short-haired animal in my mouth.

Ok, ok, ok. I know what you're thinking to yourself. You're thinking 'Gee, this guy has a really fucked up way of beginning love letters and love affairs, too' and you're right, he does. I mean, why doesn't he just brush his teeth? Or tell a white lie? What the fuck is his problem?

Jessie, the truth is that your beauty frightens me. I've been thinking about this lately. Not just your beautiful face and your beautiful hands and your beautiful handwriting but your beautiful outlook on life that is so much more forgiving and patient and loving than mine. You don't display the kinds of faults that other people / girls do i.e.. wastefulness, bitchiness, greed, a ridiculous preoccupation with Cleo magazine's Bachelor of the Year etc. etc. Sometimes I think I love you because I want to learn to be more like you but my love is complicated by the irrefutable fact of my inferiority. Which you will call my 'lack of self-esteem' because that's just how you see things but I'm not beautiful like you. I'm inferior. My teeth are filthy and for some unknowable reason I am still unable to make myself clean them. Also, today I stole some beef jerky from the convenience store even though I had enough money to buy it and the guy at the counter was some

poor Indian guy who just wanted to feed his family and not harm anyone. I'm a creep.

I think about undressing you all the time. I see your naked body when I shut my eyes. Sorry.

What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry for being an asshole. But we're young and I want you to be here with me always. If that's what you want too. Say it is. Say how you feel. Be fearless. Be who you would like to be. Please wait for me.

Dearest Jessie

PS: Jimmy says that when you dream about your teeth falling out it foreshadows death. What a load of shite. What do you think?

~~~

At uni, Jessie struggled to find sense in the 1001 courses she'd selected. She focussed on art history and theory and English because they interested her, not really seeing how they could build her future. Len overshadowed them all. He made the Romantics seem prosaic.

The clutter of lecture theatres bursting with bodies and biros made Jessie wonder. Everybody seemed so industrious, so certain of their place, whether behind a lectern or a Notebook or just shoulder to shoulder with their friends. She distrusted the atmosphere of compliance and the way everybody copied everything down.

In the second week, after a lecture on Modernism, she moved with the tide through the big iron gates onto City Road. On the other side Len bobbed eagerly beneath the traffic lights, springing onto the road the instant they turned red. He clipped the bonnet of a Barina and the car's horn blared for three outraged seconds but he was impervious, eyes fixed on Jessie, and didn't give it so much as a glance. They wrapped their arms around one another, and island amid the strangers.

"You almost lost your foot."

They walked toward Newtown to hunt for books at Gould's, but halfway there Jessie's phone buzzed.

"Hi Marion."

"Darling, hello. It's your grandfather- he's really not well at all today- I think you should come home."

"What's wrong? Sorry- What do you-"

"Darling, it might be the last time. I think you should come and be with him."

"Okay."

She let the phone slip from her ear.

"It's grandad," she explained. "Marion said to come - I think he's going -"

At the house in Annandale, Jessie's mother and Marion sat by her grandfather and took turns to lean forward, pressing his thin crepe hands and whispering reassurance. Jessie watched from the end of the bed. Even without speech, sentience or movement he held court. When her grandfather's chest stilled for the last time, her mother fell forwards and sobbed against his chest. They each took time alone with him. It was late in the afternoon and the sun was low, casting slats of treacly light over the bedspread. Jessie stroked his hand. He was dead, but she did not really understand what it meant.

Marion prepared tea and they drank together: to Harry, who'd brought them the gladness and laughter that lingered even now.

~~~

In the days following the funeral, Marion drifted in a cloud of bewilderment. She hung in reverie at the top of the stairs. She scudded across the floor boards overhead, soft and frayed like roving wool. Jessie discovered her frozen, her hands submerged in a bucket of bubbles in the laundry.

"Marion?" she said very gently. Marion started violently, bringing the blue fisherman's jersey her grandad had lived and died in above the surface for an instant.

“I thought I was...” she began. “I shouldn’t...”

“Move in with me,” said Len. She’d told him about Marion’s sadness, about the immensity of her grief. Besides, Marion’s daughter was coming to stay and what use would Jessie be? “It’s perfect timing. I mean, sorry, it’s not all great.”

“It’s okay.”

“We’re getting kicked out of Redfern and Jimmy knows a guy who knows about a really cool space. It’s huge and it’s right behind Central Station and really cool people live in the building.”

“Yeah?”

“It means band practice anytime we want, and parties and cool neighbours!”

They walked to Strawberry Hills to see it, Len brimming over with plans for partitioning and mural painting and concept parties punk bands with names like S.C.A.B.. He smiled at anyone who was young and dressed in a certain way: boys in ripped jeans and parkas; girls with pink hair and piercings.

“Do you know her?”

“She just looks cool,” he answered. Jessie could’ve been jealous but she wasn’t: he was too earnest.

Looking up from Elizabeth Street, the sage grey building reached into an overcast sky. Rows of bay windows wrapped around the facade, each sheet of dark glass inlaid with rectangles of lead. The foyer was wide open, covered in graffiti both considered and spontaneously scrawled: a huge, comic art portrait of Superwoman was defaced with the words "Howard aborted my baby". The faintly tropical reek of decay and concrete and urine hung over them in the humidity.

"You get used to it," Len assured her.

"I'm not going in that lift," Jessie said.

They climbed the staircase with peeling walls that led to labyrinth passageways and padlocked gates; along steel walkways looking down into greasy piles of garbage; through corridors to boarded-up doors. It was like an Escher drawing: stark, all up and up and up - or maybe down - without orientation. They could be in the bladder of the building or the brains but no matter how high they climbed the atmosphere remained subterranean and out-of-time. Finally, they came to a light-glazed landing that opened onto a courtyard facing the heavily tinted windows of other giants and office blocks.

Anarchy symbols splashed red across the concrete walls. A knackered floral couch was strewn with detritus - a sling shot, a glue gun, an empty bottle of Jim Beam. There was something faintly apocalyptic

about the scene: the emptiness marked by remnants of life. They'd seen no one in the building, though the distant throttle of heavy metal and power tools told them there were people nearby. Side by side they crossed to the edge and leaned over the balustrade. People, bikes, cars, buses coasted silently below: only a belligerent horn reached them. At the sound of footsteps behind her Jessie spun around.

"Jesus Jimmy!"

"Hey!" He bounded towards them, a guy with a solid jaw and tattoos creeping up his hairless scalp beside him. He was older and wore a cool, worldly smile. "This is Minty."

"Hey."

"You're the new neighbours," Minty observed, holding out his hand. His voice was both softer and more authoritative than Jessie had assumed it would be. "How's it going?"

"Yeah, good," replied Len.

"Mind if we do a little business?" Minty asked, throwing a spray can to Jimmy. They shrugged. "Daffy Duck," he instructed.

"Just black?"

"Yeah, black. I've got a show coming up and a fuckload to produce and Jimmy here reckons he can help me."

“You painted that creepy Ronald McDonald with the little boy sitting in his lap, right?” Len asked.

“That was my finest hour,” Minty grinned. “They wanted to sue. The story got in the papers. People started calling. Now I’ve got a website and more commissions than I ever dreamed of. I need an apprentice.”

“He’s good,” Len confirmed.

Up high, close to the clouds, darkness was delayed. Wan, dusky lingered as the sky blossomed in all its hues of pink. Particles of paint drifted in a coral current against the sunset and Minty breathed deeply, as if for fresh air.

“I need colours,” Jimmy complained, stepping back. “But there’s an outline.”

“Not bad. Nice.”

“So I got the job?”

“I’ll give you a go.” Minty clapped Jimmy’s back.

“Give us a smoke then boss.”

On their first night in Hibernian they ate tinned spaghetti in sheaths of white bread for dinner. Len bought nine longnecks from the Aurora Hotel downstairs. Jimmy brandished a packet of Ritalin. The three girls who lived in the next suite came over and they all huddled on the crimson

velvet couch Jimmy had snaffled from his parents. It was the only real piece of furniture in the open expanse at front of the space, though boxes, crates and canvasses were stacked against the walls at either end and beneath the bay windows that looked onto Elizabeth Street. Along the back wall, four makeshift rooms with large windows looked onto the common area, including one containing a claw foot bath tub on a platform.

“If the toilet doesn’t flush, try the one downstairs,” advised Lila, because the toilets were shared. Her hair was long and knotted, a mauve-tinted blond wrangled into a ponytail secured with a rag. “And if that doesn’t work don’t bother complaining. Just go and use the one at the pub.”

“Down five flights of stairs just for a piss?” asked Jimmy.

“Yep.”

“And I know what you’re thinking: don’t piss in a fucking bottle,” added Minnie, whose hair was pixie-short and electric blue. “You’re living with a lady now.”

“Men,” cussed the third girl, Sharon, with a laugh. Her hair was brown and angular.

Lila full of earnest, enthusiastic questions: where did Jessie grow up? Did she ride horses? How far had they lived from the nearest shop? Did she love Kate Bush, too? How did she meet Len?

“Len and I grew up together.”

“Yeah.” He held her gaze. “She’s my earliest memory.”

“We lived on a river. It was kind of special. There were no cars, see. No road. We had to walk or take a boat home. It was very tight-knit.”

Len nodded. “Real tight-knit. People fucked one another’s husbands -”

“Very tight-knit,” agreed Jimmy.

“And other people beat up their wives. Cos you know, what-happens-here-stays-here and all that.”

Jessie stared at him. He tapped his cigarette carefully, ash dropping into the empty bottle.

“What about you? Where’d you grow up?” she asked Lila, to plaster over her confusion.

“Randwick! My parents still live in the house I grew up in,” she laughed. “It’s a model home of heterosexual normality and I’m a raging dyke. At school I shaved off all my hair and started an all girl band. Still, they’re cool. They’re cool with it.”

“What’d you play, in the band?” Len asked.

“Bass. I was pretty bad, but I was good at dancing around and making a fool of myself.”

Len nodded thoughtfully. Jimmy, who was having a star-shaped tonsure shaved onto the the back of his head by Sharon, was oblivious.

“Man Ray style,” she grinned, stepping back.

“Radical haircuts are the future,” agreed Len.

In their creaky single bed, Jessie rolled towards Len and they lay in contrite silence. She felt injured, battered, but she laid a hand on his chest and breathed him in: if this was all he could give back it would be enough. The night seemed inky and starless, though from where they lay it might only be the ceiling, or the building opposite, she could see.

Eventually he covered her hand and said, “I’m sorry for what I said, baby. I’m very sorry.”

She closed a fistful of his t-shirt in her grip and held tighter to him. He stroked the small of her back, brushing his thumb up and down until her spine felt bruised by the soft, repetitive sweep. It gave her a validating, surrogate pleasure, that small pain and she slept lightly, the smell of salt dredging up shapeless memories. It was the closeness of his body that reminded her of the river, the continuous, murmuring pull underneath the surface that asked an irresolvable question.

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On the days when they weren't working and Jessie had no classes they walked around the city, flicking through records in dusty stores, lying entwined in the grass at the Domain, scouring the Botanical Gardens for plants they'd never seen before. The fernery, with its lush unfurling fists of bracken was Jessie's favourite.

On an unusually warm day in autumn they found themselves outside the MCA. Hanging over the railings they looked into the dark shallows, laced with polystyrene cups and the foam of pollution. Further out the harbour heaved and sparkled under the sun's glare. It reminded Jessie of happiness: of childhood, of summer, of the river flashing metallic.

Inside, they stopped in a room bound with a panorama photograph of a surreal desert-scape, dotted with boats parading brightly coloured sails. Jessie was drawn to artworks by women: self-portraits of imperfect bodies and colourful textile crafts. Len tended to the black and white images, the sketches and charcoal drawings and grainy films.

"Probably because I'm colour blind," he explained.

It was raining when they came outside. The ferries moved across the harbour like ghosts, obscured behind a veil. They caught a bus home, soaked to the bone, pressed close together so their skin tingled. In the



falling dark, the road rippled beneath raindrops, refracting neon signs and red lights in its glistening surface.

Their door was wide open but Jimmy was nowhere to be seen. It was sweet to be alone together, holding close against the shadowy, dark room. They moved together slowly, a slow waltz to the distant patter of rain. When they peeled themselves apart she was timid to see the pink tip of his penis above the waistband of his pants; but he was tranquil, his eyes disarming.

“This is just one of the ways I can show you how I love you,” he said.

When Jessie woke the next morning he’d left for work. There was an envelope on the window sill inside their room with her name on it.

*Dear Bonnie,*

*There are things which boyfriends do to their girlfriends that I have not yet done to you.*

*For reasons which I have not yet explained these things are difficult for me to do, no matter how much I want to do them to you.*

*I am a twenty-year-old virgin (how pathetic).*

*I really, really want you.*

*Please do not doubt it. Or me. Please do not lose patience.*

*I want you so bad that I dream about undressing you while climbing blank walls.*

*Maybe have a frontal lobe lobotomy. Or not.*

*From Clyde*

Another mysterious clue. A riddle she couldn't solve. An important message in which all the significant words were left out: names, places, actions, dates.

So she asked him, "Why don't you just tell me?"

The kettle boiled beside them. Some psychedelic music hummed from Jimmy's room.

"Jessie..." His eyes filled with remorse, so reserved and unlike the eyes he'd given her the night before.

"You guys coming out to Frequency Lab tonight?" Jimmy asked from the doorway to his room. He stretched as if he'd just woken up. "Or are you staying here to spoon food each other noodles?"

"What do you reckon baby?"

"Would you two please think of another misnomer! 'Baby' is so boring! It's all I fucking hear!"

"We're coming," Jessie answered. "How about 'sweetie'? 'Honey'? 'Darlin'?"

“Anything,” Jimmy said and offered them a line of speed. Len called the radio to request a song while he cut up.

“Yeah,” he answered the announcer. “I wanna hear ‘Sorted out for E’s and wizz?’ by Pulp. It’s for my girlfriend. She’s called Jessie and she’s the best.”

“Love song dedication,” Jimmy chuckled.

They each snorted their share, turned the volume up and danced around the room. Jessie twirled in circles beneath Jimmy’s arm as Len stalked around with exaggerated struts, casting his shadow against the bare wall.

“It’s called ‘the Nosferatu’,” he decided.

“How’d you guys feel if Lila moved in to the other room?” Jimmy asked as the song fluttered to its end.

“Yeah man, she’s a babe,” Len agreed. Jessie nodded. That was that.

The world outside paled in comparison to Hibernian, always more sterile and anonymous, conservative, muted, unimaginative. At Hibernian, it was all mess and colour, all making and creation and experimentation. They lived among freaks and punks, among people who wore so much costume it was impossible to know who they were without it, or else so little their stories seemed legible on their bare skin. There were people

with sexual perversions and failed pop careers; people others lived in three way relationships and kept pet pythons in their rafters. They guy Jimmy bought drugs from was an agoraphobic who lived in a gimp suit, though he couldn't confirm if it was true he was a deposed state premier from the 1980s.

Every night there was something to see, from shadow puppetry and magic shows to hardcore thrash metal and performance art. It didn't take Jessie long to see that the audiences were mostly consisted of the building's resident's: one night's star was the next night's fan. A burlesque artist frolicked to dark metal; tattooists exhibited installation pieces; painters fronted irreverent funk bands. There was little difference between a party and a show though sometimes a gold coin donation was requested.

"We could totally put something on, man," suggested Jimmy. "We could make a bit of cash out of it."

"Totally," Len agreed.

On Friday nights, an informal party congregated in the courtyard level below them. The space adjoined on of the largest apartment, home to an underground band and their extensive hanging garden of lush green palms, maiden hair ferns and colourful succulents in old cooking pots and

pans. There were sofas and 44 gallon drums and fairy lights dangling from above.

“That’s one of the girls who lives here: she’s the drummer,” Len whispered as a girl with a comet’s tail of strawberry blonde hair took a running leap onto a guy’s back. “That’s her ex-boyfriend: he’s the singer, he plays guitar. And that chic she just kissed is his new girlfriend: she’s the gardener and she lives here, too.”

“So they all live here together?”

“Yeah.”

Jessie watched the party swill around her. She recognised lots of the faces already: the way they smiled, the ways they looked sad. But she was on the outer here, observing and understanding, looking in, always part of the audience and never the performance. She wasn’t part of the history or privy to the building’s secrets and belonging involved some kind of relinquishing of Jessie wasn’t willing to exact.

“Seriously? You’re going to live here?” was what Clare said when she stepped into the loft for the first time. In her brand new denim jacket and slick ponytail she looked contrary in the grimy door frame. “I will never, ever use your toilet. Or stay overnight. Or even eat a Cheezel from your kitchen.”

“Clare!” warned Dane.

“What?” she demanded. Her revulsion was acute. “Are you happy here?”

“Yes,” Jessie answered. It was true: she was. Len was here. It was all so brand new, so exciting.

But Clare’s narrowed, incredulous eyes made more sense to Jessie than this place ever would. They followed her when she bathed by candlelight and lay awake listening to the structure creak and ache in the early hours of morning; they widened when she came across a mangy rat in the toilet cubicle, fetish porn being filmed in a cage on level four, a stranger with glazed-over eyes slumped unconscious in the stairwell. Jessie already had a place of home, and its tides were never sterile, never anonymous; never conservative or muted or unimaginative. It was beautiful, exceedingly so, and she held onto it because she missed it, and loyalty kept it close.

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In the quaint green semi Clare and Dane had moved to just off Missendon Road, the girls embraced at the wrought iron gate. The boys and their new band mate Lila were practising at the recording studio where she worked.

“Welcome to our abode!”

“It’s so cute!”

“Isn’t it? Come in, come in! Dane just left on my bike with his guitar balanced on the handlebars. He insisted he was too late to get there any other way.”

“Well, Len left our place with Lila on his handlebars and a bass guitar strapped to his back.”

They laughed together.

“Isn’t Jimmy gonna be pissed?” Clare asked.

Jessie shrugged a ‘probably’. They spent the day rearranging furniture until Clare deemed it just right.

“Positive energy. A positive flow. Can you feel that, Jess?”

Jessie nodded. It must be Lori’s influence that made her sensitive to energies and flows. They drank sweet tea on the back steps.

“Can I tell you something?” Jessie asked.

“Course you can silly. You’ve been spending too much time with boys. Tell me everything! Tell me about your bowel movements. Make me all queasy!”

“Gross.”

“Come on Jessie, girls talk about that stuff. So?”

“So.” She blew a thread of smoke up into the sky.

“You’re not pregnant, are you? Promise me that if you ever find out you’re pregnant tell me first. He’ll make you keep it.”

Jessie looked at her blankly. "No he wouldn't!"

"He's obsessed with you. He'd the baby so he could keep you forever."

"You're wrong."

"So what is it?"

"I'm definitely not pregnant because we haven't had sex."

"But you did. That night, on the river -"

"Then, but never again. It's like he's afraid to. Like he doesn't feel comfortable."

"Weird."

"And he won't talk about that night. We kiss and everything but nothing more. And I know he wants to - I can feel he wants to - but we just don't."

"Have you asked him?"

Jessie shrugged. "I'm afraid to."

The band clattered in, dropping broken-stringed guitars and drum sticks and snares that needed reskinning in the hallway, chattering deliriously about a new song they'd started working on and how, even with a bass guitar rather than a synth, they sounded better already.

"Nice place, man. Real homely," Len approved.

They settled on milk crates and against fence posts in the little courtyard, clinking beers in self-congratulation. Jimmy traipsed in behind them and leant in the doorframe.

“How’d you go, loopy Lila lollipop-legs?” he asked from behind his dark sunglasses.

“Good.”

“She’s pretty much Sid Vicious except she’s a feminist and she’s better at bass,” added Len.

“Fuck you,” Jimmy levelled.

“Come on man. You didn’t even like playing music. You’re a painter. You know that. Are you gonna design the cover for our EP or what?”

Jimmy lowered his glasses. “Totes.”

The band played their first show at Spectrum, opening for an electro-punk group from London who were camping on Minty’s floor. At ten, they took the stage with glasses of free beer and raced through eight exhilarated songs, back to back. Jessie and Clare danced in front of the stage and as the set went on, others drifted from the peripheries to floor to jump about.

“Thanks, um, we’re Calypso! Calypso!” Len yelled before tumbling off stage. He fell into Jessie’s arms and turned her in circles, mad with the thrill of performing, high as a kite on the applause of strangers.

“That was amazing, amazing, incredible!” Jessie yelled.

“Did you see me drop my drum stick?”

“Missed it!”

“And Lila almost falling off the stage about three songs through?”

“I must’ve been watching you.”

He nodded and kissed her suddenly, decisively. Drawing away, he looked her in the eyes and they both knew it didn’t matter about the clamour around them because they could say everything without words. Someone bought pills and they snorted them in the toilets before setting out, nostrils burning despite the chill autumn night. Oxford Street was electric in technicolour neon lights. On William Street, a constellation of street lamps glittered down the dip. They took the stairs underground to a darkened club and danced all night. Even Clare forgot the toilets didn’t flush and flung off her shoes to dance to Joy Division and the Smiths.

Dawn diluted the darkness as they ambled back to Hibernian. Clare and Dane stayed, clinging tight on the skinny velour lounge, oblivious to the tawny light streaming around them. Jessie and Len lay nose to nose in their little bed and smiled at one another, defiant against the comedown.

“Jessie?”

“Mmm?”

“I love you madly even when I feel like this.”

“Like you’re experiencing your own little apocalypse?”

“Mmm.”

She lay there thinking about death: her parents dying, Erin dying, Clare dying. It was a bleak way to drift into asleep but she dreamed nothing, such was the desolation.

Then there was a hand on her shoulder, shaking her awake, and an echo that sounded like rolling waves.

“Jess! Jess!” the voice was familiar, strained and urgent. “Wake up!”

She opened her eyes to Clare hovering over her and sat bolt upright. “What is it? A rat? Is there a rat or something?”

“What? No.” Clare looked confused. She was pale, tears welling in her eyes. “Connie died last night. Mum just called to tell me.”

Jessie wrapped her leaden, heavy arms around Clare’s heaving shoulders and was unsure she could feel sincere sadness. “Shhhh,” she soothed. “Shhhh.”

Len reached for Jessie’s waist and grumbled “What’s wrong?” and she leaned down, smoothed the wiry curls on his temple and whispered “It’s Connie.” His eyes flew open. Dane wandered in and sat on the bed.

“What about Connie?”

“She died. Last night,” Dane explained.

The words evoked a fresh flush of sobbing from Clare. She wailed, clung to him and sobbed against his chest.

“Dear old Connie,” Len mused.

“She’s dead!” shrieked Clare. Len raised his eyebrows. “She was dying and we were all off our faces!”

So Dane took Clare home to sleep her sadness off. He promised to call later if they heard anything more: where she’d been, if she’d been sick, when the funeral was. But it was Clare who called.

“She wanted her ashes to be scattered on the river, Jessie. Isn’t that beautiful?”

“That’s very, very beautiful.”

“You’ll come, won’t you?”

“Of course.”

On the morning of the funeral Jessie pulled her hair into a low bun. In Cooma she’d been called a goth because she always wore dark clothes, but the piles of strewn across the floor were all pastels and florals and she had to dig to find something suitable: black work pants, a navy cardigan and ballet slippers it was.

"Is this okay?" she asked, standing before Len.

He nodded. He was wearing black jeans with the letters "SS" white-outed on the knee and a frayed, crimson woollen jumper. "I'm not coming."

"Yes you are."

"No, I'm not. I can't, Jessie."

"Yes you can."

He shook his head resolutely.

"But you were Connie's favourite! Of all of us. Just come!"

"Then they'll expect me to go to the wake and I'm not going, I can't. Besides the fucking Cemetery is pretty much the river. I'm not going."

"Please."

He averted his eyes, perhaps with disappointment. And she knew that she couldn't go to the river, either.

At the chapel Jessie paid her respects and was glad to see familiar faces, for the reassurance of their arms around her shoulders. People laughed remembering her blunt way of speaking, spritely stride and wicked humour. She was sadder for Len's absence than for Connie's passing, regretting only that it'd been two years since the last time she and Clare sat on Connie's verandah sipping iced pineapple cordial. After the service Jessie found herself alone with Pam. They spoke requisite words

about Connie and awkwardly about the weather. Jessie bristled as she listened to the mother's effusive apologies for the son's inadequacies.

"He should bloody well be here," she huffed, readjusting the handbag slung over her shoulder. "Annie's gone to get an immunisation needle and *I'm* here!"

"Jess, Dane and I are leaving," Clare intervened. "You coming with us or Pam?"

"Actually I gotta go home. I've got uni work to do."

"What?"

"Okay," Dane nodded. "But Jessie, I don't believe that you should let his needs influence yours."

She looked up at them, flushed pink. "I've got work to do. I'll get the train." Clare turned and clip-clopped away in her shiny black high heels.

When Jessie let herself back in that evening, the place was dark but for a fountain of candlelight that flickered and wavered on the coffee table. Len lay prostrate on the lounge with an open book against his thighs.

"Hey," he ventured, searching her face for some way in.

"Hi."

“Look, I got all these to show you.” He gestured to a stack of exercise books beside him. “They’re my journals. I want you to read them so you can understand me and my fucked up ways.”

“So this is some kind of altar, is it?”

She let her satchel fall to the floor and perched on the edge of the couch near his feet, dropping clasped hands between her knees. The idea of reading them exhausted her, and still she wanted to devour them, all of them, over and over again. She shrugged defeatedly.

“Jess!” He sat up and cupped a hand over her shoulder. “Sorry, sorry! How was it? How was today? Was is beautiful? Was there a beautiful picture of Connie when she nineteen years old?”

She drew a breath that almost cracked with grief. “Yes. She had those pretty perfect curls in her hair and red lips-“

“Red lips!”

“She was very beautiful.”

They sat quietly a moment in their shared affection. Jessie nodded to the journals.

“Is it more riddles? Riddles and cryptic poems and symbolic sketches? I can’t deal with anymore of that!”

“There’s a lot of that.” He sighed as if he was more frustrated with himself than Jessie could ever be. “And a lot of ‘Jessie used to say this’ and

'I wonder what Jessie's doing now' and 'All I want in the whole wide world is to kiss Jessie's lips and I'll die happy'."

She looked at him sideways. He grinned and her residual anger collapsed.

"Tell me. If there's something there I need to know just tell me straight out."

Joy fell from his face. In the candlelight his eyes grew large and solemn, the whites glowing warm and orange as the flame. "I'm afraid of the river. Sometimes I think I hate the river." She watched him silently, to show she had nothing to go on: no knowing, no inkling, no reason to sympathise. But she was patient. She could wait. He said, "I was molested. There. On the river."

It came against her like a wave. She felt a fury so immense it alloyed immediately, a steely determination he should never know the brutality of it, only the outer expression of love. She half fell, half dragged him to her chest and clutched him at an improbable angle against the cushions, holding him there in suspense, in tension, in that nowhere space.

"I love you," was all she could say, over and over again, tearless, resolute.

There was a composure about her words, her body, her response that belied oblivion. The tears that dribbled down her cheeks felt like

remorse more than shock, sorry more than surprise. She'd never imagined him forming those particular words, and yet, and yet; now they were said they'd taken hold in the way of an established and immutable truth. The roots belied their youth. The high, swaying eucalypts. The desolate backyard. The glass jars, smashed against licheny concrete. "Morton."

"No, not Morton."

"But if not Morton?" She shook. She looked around, grasping for co-ordinates, some certainty in this big cavernous strange space that would give her bearings. But she couldn't even dredge up what she wanted to know. "Who? Who? W-when?"

"I'm not sure exactly, I was about seven or eight." His spoke gently, with a practised, detached resignation. "Mum used to leave me next door. To be like, babysat. You remember Murray?"

"That fat guy who smelled like old food and - pimples and - he wore a belt around his paunch?"

"Yeah."

"He hurt you?"

"Yeah. I'd like to fucking kill him," he hissed the words venomously, but still they sounded rehearsed, controlled. "I know he's probably just a victim himself. A repulsive and pathetic Homo sapien, blind to beauty."

“And all those times you swam over to the other side of the river?”

He shrugged. “To get away. Cause trouble. I mean, I hope Morton died a slow and painful death but he never touched me. Never even looked at me.”

“What about your mum?”

“I told her. She was just a little girl, really. She said, ‘Leonard, don’t tell lies. Don’t tell your father that or he’ll walk out on us’.” He glanced up at her from beneath his eyelashes, so close he didn’t need to hold her gaze.

“‘He’ll think you’re a fag’,” he mimicked.

“What?” Cold rushed to the tips of Jessie’s fingers. Rage froze her blood, anger calcified in her bones. This was hate: this white ice sharpness that made her bigger and stronger than she had ever been before.

“I know she’s an idiot,” Len conceded. “But he’s the one who took it away from me, not her.”

She held his body against hers, still at that awkward, desperate angle. Now she could cry with devastation and shock, and she bleated and blubbered hoarse nothings in his ear, the only word that sounded fully formed being ‘love’. She crossed her arms over his back and held him as tight as she could, needing comfort from him just as much as he needed it from her.

In the little bed they drew closer.

“I never told anybody else,” he said.

The room was tiny and cold but they filled it up, their breath fogging the brisk air warm and thick, the interior windows frosted with condensation. With her eyes closed Jessie saw blue, the deep blue of the ocean. She was immersed in the enormity of it, and it swallowed her, a cool, aqueous current dragging determinedly from the feverish surface of skin, lips and kissing. Further and further and further down. Relief, seduction, and something darker.

He turned on the bedside lamp and hovered over her, looked her in the eye. It was awkward, all of it, from the taking off of clothes to the putting on of protection and the fumbling for body parts, but awkwardness didn't matter. They were what they were. They loved as they did. The rest of it - the act of it - came after. The look that passed between them was everything.

It only lasted moments. He whispered “Sorry,” feeling he'd taken more than he'd given but her heart and her body were full with gladness. She felt as if she were shimmering in the darkness.

“It was beautiful,” she told him. “Now go to sleep.”

She woke to the crisp, cold light of morning and him sleeping on top of her, his dark curls splayed across her pale, prickled skin.

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After that night they made love - and always called it love, because it was sacrosanct in comparison to sex - all the time. Awake and asleep, in the morning and the evening; in their bed and in the bath, when they were alone and when they weren't and just couldn't resist.

"Speaking as a hermaphrodite, I want you to know I'm traumatised," Jimmy announced one morning as he heaped instant coffee and Milo into a mug and mixed it with boiling water. The night before they'd swigged a lot of tequila straight from the bottle. People stayed over, filling the bedrooms, and they'd all fallen asleep on the sofa with Jimmy at the other end. "I was trying to sleep, just there, at your feet."

"You could've moved," countered Len.

"There were people passed out in every room and every chair!"

"Jesus, calm down." Len tossed him the first rollie.

"A consolation prize?"

Len shrugged.

He and Lila went to band practice later on and Jessie neatened their little bedroom. She pulled the bedsheets taut and stacked their books up against the wall. She dusted down the sills and stuffed all the clothes that needed washing in a garbage bag. She poked an incense stick in the little

cactus she'd been given by the kids who lived in the hanging garden and, searching for a lighter, unzipped the top pocket of Len's backpack. The words "SEX MAD I KILL YOU" were scrawled on the front. Silver cent pieces and stray wisps of tobacco, a blue cigarette lighter and a tied up condom. She zipped the pocket up and fell back on the bed, thrilled and repelled by the abject sentimentality of commemoration. It was indecent; but then, desire often was.

Jessie read every one of Len's notebooks. She smoked as she flipped through, daylight dissolving into dark on the pages. She laughed a lot. She cried. Sometimes she touched the paper tenderly, like it was his skin. Sometimes he was beside her, cutting pictures from a fetish magazine to glue into a booklet from the Jehovah's Witnesses. The juxtaposition and subversion of images carried on from his journals.

She read compulsively, wading through dense metaphor in search of something: not a line or a word or even an answer exactly, but a narrative that made sense of all the little pieces. His poems were lyrics. Some were about his parents and many were about her, and many of them just confused her.

*Nobody had seen the threads in the head until JFK's assassination.*

*Then we saw them splattered on the TV screen.*

*You're tangled in my head, I'm tangled up in threads.*

*One thing is certain: I will never be able nor will I want to untangle you*

*And: the man who made this bloody mess will pay.*

He'd fallen asleep early in the evening, curled in the bed with his fists bunched against his face like a baby. Jessie lay down behind him, knees in the indent of his, and drew circles on his back. She wanted to feel close. More: she wanted to be part of him. He stirred and rolled towards her and she lay her hand on his hip. After a little while he opened his eyes wide and in them she saw herself, but it wasn't gratifying: it made her hungry. They wriggled out of their jeans and t-shirts and the nakedness was almost enough. They emptied themselves through the open pores of one another's skin.

"What are those?" he asked afterwards, tracing the puckered skin in the dip of her waist. "And these?" He turned her arm over roughly and ran his finger over the pink scars on the inside.

She wanted to tell him about the enormous loneliness she felt in the middle of those empty paddocks. About the sadness, the uselessness, the grief. That some of those lines spelled *LW*. But she sensed his disgust and

disapproval and longed to wrench her arm away, for a jumper to wrap her cuts up, to hide away.

“Why did you do that?”

“I’m an idiot.” She drew her arm away apologetically and he stared at her. “I was just so sad!”

“Don’t ever do it again,” he said. “Don’t ever hurt yourself, Jessie. Don’t pick or squeeze. Don’t ever cut yourself again. I’d love you if you were covered in pimples or you had fucking - leprosy! If you were the size of a house! I’d love you more and more every day. Promise me.”

“I promise.”

“You could be queen.”

He wrote Jessie a note on a Post-it, sliding down beside her on the sofa and sticking it over the page she was reading: ‘Little Birds’ by Anais Nin. Jimmy sketched on the table amidst the clutter of weed and tobacco pouches and CDs. Lila sewed patches on her backpack.

*It’s not just your cell you hurt: it’s my cell, too*

The words were laboriously inscribed, inky black and immutable on the throwaway paper.

~~~

Len, Jimmy and Lila organised a show in their space. They got a band passing through from London called the Scare to headline. They set up a drum kit and borrowed amps. They photocopied posters and pasted them all over Hibernian and down Elizabeth Street. Calypso! Calypso! were listed first and the Scare came second.

“It’s our show,” Len shrugged. “Besides, they’re in the middle, you know. The eye goes straight there.”

People arrived with open beers in brown paper bags and filled the room, sprawled on couches and cross-legged against the walls until the music started and the wild dancing began. Someone brought a German Shepherd and it lay docile and patient by the door. In the dim light Jessie shot a roll of film, all halogen glow and streaked bodies and faces spangled gold and red.

Calypso! Calypso!’s set ended with Dane’s guitar skidding halfway across the room and Lila on her back, legs cycling the air. They celebrated with lines of speed from a shaving mirror, all squished in the bath tub.

“Where’s Clare?” Jessie asked, squeezing her eyes shut against the burn.

“She’s pissed at me,” Dane shrugged, taking up the twenty dollar note and running it along the glass.

“Why?”

“Don’t know.”

“I miss her!” Jessie exclaimed, for the sake of acceleration, which was what the drugs wanted. But in a tiny, quiet corner in her head she regretted knowing nothing about Clare’s absence. She’d call tomorrow when she wasn’t so obnoxiously high.

As it was, Jimmy rolled a joint after every able body went home and they slipped into a dreamy repose on the sofa, broken by fits of hysterical laughter. Despite the frosty temperature, Len ended up in nothing but Jessie’s oldest pair of underpants and, sitting cross-legged on the carmine velvet like some spiritual guru, announced he’d written a song.

“It just came to me,” he said.

“Have you been wearing them all night?” Lila asked.

“Yeah.”

“They’re pink! And lacy! God I love you!” she cried.

“Anyway, it’s called GG Allin’s Dick.” He hummed the brutal melody, thrashing his head in time.

They laughed monstrously, the boys much louder than the girls, and Jessie couldn’t tell if her tears came from giggling or weeping. In the end, Jessie, Len and Dane ended up sprawled listlessly in their little bed.

“Remember how Connie used to let us jump off her jetty at high tide?” Jessie asked. Piercing the river’s surface the cold claimed your body, reawakening every nerve and cell. The pleasure of free-falling with the water streaming all over your skin had an infinite expanse, even as the ascent began.

“And the rope swing on the Jacaranda?” added Dane.

“Connie,” murmured Len. He was safe in these memories when Dane was around.

“Man, what I wouldn’t give for a dip right now,” Dane said.

“Jess?” Down the line, Clare’s voice sounded small and feeble. “Dane and I are having a break.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“He says he needs some space,” she wailed.

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the bathroom. He’s out there, packing a bag.”

“I’m coming over.”

“He’s leaving!”

“I’m coming.”

“No!” Jessie heard Clare draw herself up, as if she’d been slumped on the toilet and was now standing straight. “No, I’m not moping.”

"I'll be half an hour."

"Meet me at the Marlborough. The beer garden. Help me drown my sorrows." A sob escaped her, then a little laugh.

"Sure."

Clare had a bottle of wine in a bucket and a pack of cigarettes at her elbow when Jessie arrived. Amid the palms she looked waifish, her eyes wild and distant. She was wearing a tight, metallic purple dress with a wool cardigan and a beaded choker and looked ready to go clubbing at some bar or other down on Darling Harbour. Jessie wrapped her parka clad arms around Clare's cowed shoulders.

"I thought we were gonna get married," she wept into Jessie's neck.

"Shhhh. Since when did you smoke?"

"Since my boyfriend - the love of my life - left," she snorted.

"I'm not convinced."

"You should be.

"What happened, really?"

"We had a fight. He called me judgmental. He called me a princess."

"That's unacceptable."

"It was *not* a nice thing to say, not at the time. And then we yelled about other stuff - his friends and my friends and how he doesn't understand me and I don't 'understand' him."

"But you do!"

"There's only one thing to understand," Clare said. "I love him."

"Did you tell him that?"

She looked offended by Jessie's question. "I said a lot of mean things. I told him "just go". And he did. He just went."

They sat side by side and chain-smoked. The bottle was gone in what seemed like minutes.

"I miss knowing everyone on the river. Never thought I would," murmured Clare.

"I miss Christmas day, and swimming at high tide, and the hot smell of eucalypts - you know, the special smell that's only there."

"I miss Connie, just knowing she's around."

They leant against one another's shoulders in quiet contemplation, both knowing what the other was feeling, the desire for things past.

"We always sit like this," Jessie noticed. "Shoulder to shoulder, right at this point."

"Do we?"

"Like Siamese twins, conjoining again."

Len stepped into the courtyard. An uncertain smile that could have been misconstrued as smug played on his lips.

“Hey, I’m so sorry,” he said, pulling up a chair to face the girls. He placed a small white box on the table and opened the lid. “I bought you some cakes from work, see. Leftover but really nice. Fairy cakes, friand, raspberry tart.” He pointed them out, all pink and carefully quartered.

“Thanks,” Clare choked, sitting up and wrapping her arms around herself.

“Hey I’ll get you more wine,” he exclaimed. The chair screeched against the tiles as he stood up.

“You called Len?” Clare asked disbelievingly.

“Just to tell him where I’d be. I didn’t now he’d come.”

“And now he’s here!”

“He’s my boyfriend. Look, he *knows* Dane. He’s probably on his way to meet him.”

“To help him,” Clare scoffed. She sat forward, clearing space on the sticky table before her. A wineglass toppled and Jessie caught it as it rolled from the table, but Clare was oblivious. “Let me just say this: Len is the last person I want to see right now.”

“Clare!”

“I respect your relationship,” she insisted. “But right now? After the argument - the specific argument - I just had with Dane. He’s the last person I wanted to see.”

They sat stony in silence. A school friend of Clare’s called to find out what had happened and when Clare suggested they meet up for a cocktail Jessie didn’t persuade her otherwise.

So later that night she found herself at Spectrum to see some no wave punk bands Len adored.

“Kiosk! Naked on the Vague!” he’d told them.

While he networked at the bar, Jessie found herself in a cubicle with Dane and a line of something. The rickety sonic assault came in waves through the swinging toilet door. He’d hadn’t mentioned Clare, other than to ask if he could stay at Hibernian because he needed breathing space, and Jessie didn’t mention her.

“Hey! You’re the best thing in the world for Len.”

“So are you!”

“I mean it Jess. Never let him go, okay?”

She leaned forward and pressed his shoulders back against the graffiti smeared wall. She looked him in the eyes and kissed him on the lips, because he was higher than her and it felt good to have a friend who was as dependable as him.

“Promise, mate. Never never ever!”

He grinned as if her words were a caress, soothing him with sweetness, and closed his eyes to slip beneath the surface of the music that pulsed, hypnotised, demolished.

~~~

On the morning of Len’s birthday he sat cross-legged and slowly peeled back the sticky tape on the gifts Jessie gave him, taking care not to rip the wrapping paper. Inside, there was a black bangle to match her own and *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle*, because he liked Murakami. He put the bangle on his wrist and weighed the book in his hands: everything was precious.

“This is the first brand new book I’ve ever owned,” he said.

Jimmy tossed a bag of capsules onto the table.

“Happy birthday,” he said. “Pure MDMA. It’s good stuff.”

“Thanks man. I don’t think I ever had a real birthday party, either.”

“Tonight you will.”

They caught the bus to Bondi with a bunch of kids and swallowed the drugs walking down Campbell Parade. Some of them wanted to go to the North Rocks. Jimmy wanted to invade Icebergs. Len wanted to sit in the sand and stare out at the open ocean as its smooth teal surface sailed from the far-off horizon. The drugs were heavy and came on like concrete

pouring, languorous, enveloping, quicksand-slow smothering. Jessie lay back and felt the wet sand seeping through her t-shirt in the blooming way of a bruise; Len's hand wrapped around her wrist; the squall of the boys, and Lila's laughter ringing clear. And the murmuring waves, and the murmuring waves, and the murmuring waves.

It seemed like the next time she opened her eyes the night was near deep blue-black and everything was loud but sounded far away, including her own voice.

"Blue night baby," she said, turning to him still there beside her. "The colour of the river. A different blue at every time of the day."

"It was always green to me," Len returned softly. "Olive green, forest green, emerald green."

They lay soldered together. He sighed. He said, "This stuff is making me feel stoned." And then, "I want you to be the mother of my child. You would be the most amazing mother."

Jessie felt a kick inside. An emptiness. A promise. Her womb. She'd thought, perhaps, he was too radical to ever want a child, that it was her weakness alone. But as soon as he said destiny was shaped and it brought joy to a space in her body.

She vomited the second capsule: her sight began to lag, like a video showing every second frame. He held her hair back, stroked her spine,



waited even when Jimmy hollered for him. Later, feeling empty while the rest of them were electric, Jessie sat with her ankles deep in the sand and pulled a cardigan around her shoulders. She'd lost her shoes somewhere. Len squatted beside her and offered her his cigarette.

"Come for a dip?"

"Okay."

She wriggled out of her clothes and they waded out through the breakers hand in hand, the whitewash roiling about their ankles, calves, knees, hips, thighs. When it reached their waists they stopped and turned in to the other, holding tight. The feeling of immersion was enough, the pull of the water a secondary pleasure. He scooped a palmful of water and poured it over Jessie's shoulder, so cold against her dry skin that she tensed with something like pleasure. He leant in and whispered through the curtain of hair that fell about her ears, "Blue is colour of dreaming".

Words like a silver thread. Legs like lead. Lila was yelling at them from the shallows.

"If this isn't a dream then I don't know what it is," Jessie murmured.

"I want to fuck you but I'm afraid I can't," he said.

The sound of his voice was soft with longing and there was nothing brutal about the word now, no shame.

He called his mum late the next afternoon. Jessie tucked herself close to him on the couch and painted her nails pastel blue.

“I’m on my way to work,” was the way Pam answered the phone.

He nodded, he didn’t reply. “Happy birthday for yesterday.”

“Thanks.”

“I s’pose you got wasted and ran amuck?”

He shrugged. Jessie tensed and blew against her fingernails distractedly. “Mum, you should come visit us. We could go out for dinner - Thai or something.”

“I’ll ask Richard,” she replied softly. “We’ve only got the one car.”

“Come on the train.”

“I’ll ask Richard,” she repeated.

“Fuck him.”

“It’s not that simple. It’s a long way. And there’s Anastasia to look after.”

“Mum?” Len picked at his little toe nail, working the cuticle down into his skin. “I love you.”

A door slammed at the other end. “Darlin’ I gotta go! Try to be a good boy and don’t drink too much. See ya later?” He was silent, patient.

“Hey?”

“Bye.”

The line went dead. Jessie stroked his arm compulsively, alarmed and confused.

“She loves you, of course she does. Why wouldn’t she say so?”

She wanted the reassurance that there’d been some mistake: she’d misheard or missed a whole chunk of the conversation. But her question didn’t touch him: he turned the terrible taut smile on her and continued it determinedly from a far away place. “She never has Jessie. Not when I was a little child, not now. The worst thing is that I *know* she does. If she could say ‘love’ ...”

“What?”

“She might find some kind of freedom.”

“From what?”

“From feeling something other than obligation.”

She nodded, but she didn’t really understand. Her hand strayed, seeking his skin beneath the worn t-shirt and then lower, beneath the waistband of his shorts. He exhaled, lips parting so that the awful smile softened, and closed his eyes. It was partly the feeling of power he gave her that made her want him so much; partly protectiveness, partly possession. She wanted disgraceful things. She wanted to strip him, own him, become him.

“I love you,” she whispered, climbing into his lap so her body anchored itself in his.

~~~

The day before Christmas Eve, Jessie gathered all the coinage she could find, packed a satchel with a underwear, a book and some clothing and kissed Lila and Jimmy goodbye. Len raced out the door and down the stairs with her, the bag slung across his back. On the platform they shared a cigarette as the seconds ticked away and just as Jessie exhaled the last of the smoke, Len grabbed her hand.

“I’m coming too. I’ve got this show tonight but I’ll get on tomorrow’s train, same time. Do you reckon your mum’ll mind?”

She grinned and smothered him in kisses. They held tight, body to body, to make up for the night spent apart and at the last moment Jessie darted onto the carriage. She waved to him through the glass as the train pulled away. She wanted him to come but hadn’t dared ask, thinking he always knew what she wanted, assuring herself that he always gave her exactly what she needed if treated with patience and faith.

Knowing he would come soon made the expanse of empty paddocks easier to travel through. Outside the window they rolled endlessly to the horizon and Jessie sensed they must be going somewhere,

that something must exist beyond the downy, flaxen ridges that melded with the heavy clouds hanging low in the sky.

But he missed the next day's train and called from the station on Christmas night, by which time those paddocks had all but swallowed her up.

"Where were you? I tried calling but your phone didn't even ring."

"Yeah, um... Come get me? I'll explain."

She was hurt and humiliated so she pressed him, hating the righteous disapproval she heard in her voice. "Where were you?"

"Okay, look, I fucked up. I was gonna go to the show and then go home to sleep but Minty and Jimmy were going to this party and I wasn't even gonna drink, just have a beer, but then it ended up being really wild - that Canadian guy who plays in Gerling was there - so I.... I woke up on someone's couch at 2 o'clock in the afternoon feeling like there was a ferret in my mouth, knowing I'd missed it and I didn't want to call you and tell you I was in Sydney cos I wanted to call you when I got here."

"Well my dad is irate."

"Baby, I'm sorry--"

"And I had the worst fucking day of my life."

He whimpered in response. "I'm so sorry, I'm an idiot, please forgive me. Please!" She heard him smash something in the phone booth: his fist against the ledge or his shoe against metal.

"Stop it! I'm coming."

He was lying on a bench at the bus terminal when she arrived, wearing a soiled Young Ones t-shirt and sunglasses despite the dusk. He stood up and grinned at her sheepishly. There was no point in anger, she saw, and she rushed to him. He nuzzled her, dug his head into the crook of her neck. They bought ice creams from a servo that supplied ski hire gear in winter and sat out the front to eat them, watching utes amble up and down the wide main street.

"So this is where you went to high school."

"It's a shithole," she answered, because that's what people said.

"What happens here at night?"

She shrugged. "Fistfights. Drag races. Drinking Bundy rum. People do this thing called a maino, where they drive up and down the street and play really bad music really loud." He nodded thoughtfully. She laughed.

"That's about it."

Back at the farm, Jessie's mum welcomed Len with an apology about the cramped quarters. Erin gave him an awkward, teenaged hug.

Jessie's dad shook his hand. They sat around the tiny dining table and made themselves queasy drinking brandy Alexanders.

"I'm really sorry for not being here yesterday," Len confessed when he'd finished his second drink.

"You're here now, that what's important!" crooned her mum.

They walked around the perimeter of the property the next morning with the sun beating down on their shoulders and the smell of dry grass fragrant in their nostrils. The sky was infinite, a billowing blue secured by the surrounding embankment which stood distinct and parched yellow against the cobalt sky. Things came closer and seemed more real with Len by her side: she noticed a particular grey-green moss that festered over the old fence palings, a bush covered in millions of tiny, tight white wildflowers, even a shallow dam she didn't remember. They fed Misty carrots from the flats of their hands and made love, breathlessly, desperately, dirtily squatting between a pair of rocks whose solid, well-postured countenance had a kind of voyeurism.

Len hung quietly on the outer that evening, though Jessie tried to draw him. She saw him as part of their family. But he resisted, and lying nose to nose in the fold down bed in the old caravan that night, she saw a shadow slide across his face. There remained parts of him that were unreachable. Still, every curve and corner of his face was beloved. This

new mystery seemed like a discovery: a new thing to learn, a new part of him to love. And that was the way she forgave him, because it seemed a gift to be given the feeling of desire.

~~~

“What are you doing for New Years?” Jessie asked Clare over the phone.

“Dunno.”

“Come to ours. We’re going up on the roof top to drink cocktail punch and watch the fireworks!”

“And Dane’s going to be there? And all those punk kids?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Clare sighed unapologetically. “Look, the girls from school are going to Darling Harbour. I know it’ll be hectic but at least they’ll get dressed up in dresses and drink out of real champagne glasses.”

“I’m gonna wear my shiniest pair of Docs.”

“Good on you.”

“And a pretty pink slip.”

“Sounds very lady like.”

“What’s your problem? Why are you acting so jealous?”

“Jealous! Are you kidding? You want to spend New Years with Dane instead of me and you want to know what *my* problem is?”



"I do not want to spend it with Dane. Especially. Over you."

"News flash: you are."

"I want to spend it with Len." Jessie composed herself, quiet with anger. "I want to spend it with the people I love."

"Look, it just hurts, okay?"

"It's our anniversary."

Clare sighed again, too proud to say sorry.

"Bye."

"You shouldn't get so upset about little things, baby," Len said when she told him they'd argued. "She's your best friend."

Later, on the rooftop, dancing to some music she didn't know with a lather of bodies packed around, Jessie held Dane's hands and said Clare's name.

"You know I love her," he yelled confidentially above the noise. "But she's so - grown up. She's got all these ideas about saving money and house rules and I just want to have fun."

Jessie nodded. "I get it."

"She gets so upset with me for not putting the paper in the recycling or forgetting to rinse the dishes in hot water after I wash them."

"Len forgets to do the dishes for days at a time. Once I caught him throwing plates in the bin because the food was just too baked on!"

They laughed affectionately as he approached and wrapped their arms around his waist, swaying together out of time.

At midnight, Jimmy climbed onto the concrete balustrade and danced along it with his hands thrown high in the air, howling as the sky lit up with the flint and rocketing of fireworks. Everybody held their breath. If he'd been afraid he'd have fallen to his death, but he was irreverent and immune to self-doubt.

Clare sent a message: *happy ny, i love u xxx*. Jessie ignored it.

In the morning, coming down like a brick falling through water, anxiety took hold. Beside her Len rested peacefully, his face light and open in repose. Dane curled in a ball at her feet. She imagined her parents dying. She imagined Clare dying. She thought her heart would stop.

The only relief she could summon was an image of the river running on, never stopping, its silky skin slithering teal-green beneath the dazzling sun. She shivered. Even that pleasure was tainted by an undertow of loss. In the cool, blue light an insistent tolling told her life was going on without her, going on somewhere she was not, leaving her behind. It swelled in her heart, a bruise ballooning in her chest. And yet he was here in this bed, so how could that be?

Calypso! Calypso! played more and more gigs at clubs and indie festivals and in people's backyards. Out the back of a ramshackle terrace in the inner west they set up their gear on a tattered Persian rug beneath the shade of an fat fig tree, the fence behind them crawling with the mauve blue blossoms of morning glory. Planes rumbled overhead. They opened with seven hard, fast songs, breaking briefly between each to give an awkward "Thanks" and swig their longnecks.

Jessie sat directly before them and took twelve photographs, knowing each time that the moment she'd tried to capture had escaped the falling shutter. Putting the Minolta down, she realised that everybody was watching them. Their energy was entrancing: it moved forward without the crowd, self-sustaining and elusive. She got up and danced with everyone else, realising she knew every lyric to every song and even the places in each where they might deviate from the norm.

"You know he's a really good drummer, don't you?" asked a guy called Doug outside the toilet. His seven-piece band had a practice space in Hibernian and she knew him in passing. "He's tight. He's a hard hitter. He's got it, if he doesn't self-implode."

She found Len in the far corner of the yard sitting knee to knee with three other kids she didn't recognise and was pretty sure he didn't know either. He leaned forward and drew heavily on his cigarette.

“It was a nurse in a hospital for me,” said a boy who had a flannel shirt wrapped around him despite the heat. Len nodded. “I broke my arm, I think - I was only six or something. I knew that fucker’s face cos we lived in a small town, and he used to say hello to my mum in the supermarket and on the street. Even afterwards he used to say hello, like nothing’d happened. I still don’t know how she knew him.”

“It was my next door neighbour,” Len said when it was his turn. “When I think about it now I know he wasn’t even that much older than me but at the time he seemed like a grown up. He used to babysit me. Make me take baths with him. I’d like to fucking kill him sometimes. But then I know that he’s got to live a lifetime in the wasteland of himself. Maybe that’s punishment enough.”

The others nodded. Jessie knelt and ran her hand down his back and turned to give her a small smile.

“Hey man, wanna smoke a pipe?”

“Sure,” Len shrugged.

Jessie stood and wandered away to find Dane. She walked through the yard, scanning faces in the dull light, through the kitchen where glasses of white wine were being poured from a cask and down the hall, checking in the dark cornered, high-ceilinged rooms scattered with salvaged furniture that attracted the golden tones from the last shafts of

sunshine. People played Scrabble, plaited one another's hair, kissed passionately, as if they were alone.

In the open doorway the rectangular promise of dusky light beckoned. She sat down on the curb and rolled a cigarette. A black cat slipped from underneath a car and brushed its lithe torso along her leg. She felt betrayed. Because he was telling strangers at parties a secret he'd kept from her so many years. And she was ashamed, too, knowing she was jealous of their sympathy. A couple coming down the street shifted into focus: it was Dane and a girl she'd never seen before, tough-looking and jovial in high-waisted jeans, black sneakers and tattoos.

"Hey Jessie, this is Neve," Dane said. They hadn't been touching but he distanced himself from her in a way that said he was conscious of their proximity.

"Hi Neve."

"Hi Jessie!" she carolled, and went inside.

"She was at the station and I thought I'd go and pick her up, walk her over, you know," Dane explained, sitting down.

"Gentlemanly."

"Is that bad? Are you pissed at me?"

She should be, on principle, but she wasn't. He was an ally beside her. "Nah," she shrugged.

He took the pouch of tobacco from her lap and rolled a cigarette.

“Hey listen, Len told me.” She looked at him. “About Murray fucking Westlin, the cocksucker. How do you feel? About it?”

The question called up a great grief in Jessie, and a great relief, and she sobbed against her knees. “Angry. Really angry. I’m really, really angry. Mostly with Pam.”

“Yeah.”

“What do you reckon?”

“Same as you. I can’t believe we never knew. How the fuck does anyone keep a secret like that?” He wrung his hands and shook his head in disbelief.

“I know.”

“I feel like such a shit when I think about how close I was that whole time, and how I knew nothing. I mean, maybe I wanted to know nothing?”

“Yeah.”

“And when I think about all the normal expectations I’ve ever had of him- the “Len you should think about a proper career” or “Len man, you should brush your teeth more” or “Len you shouldn’t dance like such an attention seeking freak” you know? I feel like such an asshole.”

“I know, exactly, I feel exactly like that.”

“I actually said that to him once at Purple Sneakers. He called it the ‘Pasta’s not Italian’ dance and it got us kicked out but, fuck! Who am I to say what’s normal and what’s not?”

“Yeah. It changes everything, all the normals and the standards you ever had. Purple Sneakers sucks anyway.”

Dane took a long, quieting drag.

“It’s kind of why I needed space. From Clare, you know.”

“Why?”

“I couldn’t deal with her not getting him anymore.”

Jessie nodded. They sat in collusion, watching the black cat slink between cars on the opposite side of the road. “Can I ask you a question? Do you miss the river?”

“Fuck yes. So much. I dream about it all the time. I dream about being in the water. Or in the bush. I’m always a child. And even knowing what I know now about Len - in the dream I always feel content. And innocent.”

“I’m guilty of that too.”

“Hey youse!” Arms linked around their necks tightly. Jessie turned to kiss him, her eyelashes were damp against Len’s skin. “Baby, what are you doing out here? Wanna come dance? Come on! Come on!”

He shot up on the toes of his Vans and twirled around once on the footpath, light as a leaf.

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Jessie joined Clare's friends at a bar on King Street for birthday cocktails. They bought Cosmopolitans and Margaritas and smoked Marlboro Lights and though Jessie dressed up in a satin navy dress and high-heeled sandals she drank beer and rolled her own cigarettes. Shifts at the cafe had been sparse over the Christmas break.

"Can we hang out this week?" Clare slurred as Jessie was leaving.

"Yeah. We need to talk don't we?" Clare nodded. "I was really pissed at you," Jessie said.

"I was really pissed at *you*."

"But I miss you too much to stay mad."

They gazed at each other. Clare said, "I just wish you weren't hanging around with Dane all the time. It makes me so - ugh!"

"I'm not hanging out with him, he's just there. I'm sorry. But I don't see what I can do."

Clare shrugged. "You look really pretty tonight by the way. I love your dress. Is it from Dotti?"

"By way of Vinnies."

She walked all the way home, down City Road, Cleveland, onto Elizabeth and saw the world through a screen. Their door was wide open when she arrived, and the sound of Jim Morrison whispering over a pattering keyboard drifted into the open. From the threshold she saw Jimmy slumped against the couch, smoking the hookah pipe in the dim red glow of a lava lamp.

“Hey Jessie.” He beckoned amid the thick cumulus of apple-scented smoke with his free hand.

“Hey.”

“Wanna smoke?”

“Sure.”

She crossed the room and placed her glomesh purse on the table between the sticky coffee cups and chop bowls.

“You’re all dressed up.”

“I had cocktails with the girls.”

“How fancy.”

Jessie looked to the table. She tried not to care about his sardonic tone, his apathy and indifference. A teaspoon, a tourniquet and a hypodermic lay idly beside the pipe. They were quiet: maybe he’d followed her line of vision, maybe he hadn’t. In any case he wasn’t explaining.

“What are you doing here, Jessie?” he murmured. “Really? You’ve got it so ‘together’. Uni, a job, those high heels. And we so obviously don’t.”

It stung, his insinuation. His not understanding her relationship with Len. His not seeing that it was with him she belonged, and could belong anywhere.

“Fuck you.”

“I’m just asking sister.”

“You think I’m boring.”

“No, I think you’ve got it together.”

“You know why I’m here?”

“Why?”

“Because I love him. I love Len.”

Len’s voice echoed from the landing. She stood up and flicked on a light. When the boys came in with Lila hanging on Dane’s back she smiled breezily.

“Did Clare have fun?” Dane wanted to know.

“I think so. She probably still is.”

The girls stretched on beach towels by the pool at Victoria Park. Voices and footsteps wove around them but they didn’t talk, not about Len or

Dane or the 'tiff', as Clare called it. There seemed nothing to say: to lie in the sunshine together was conciliation enough, a kind of nostalgia even. Childhood wheeled back on them, and mingled with now - with the sugary Calippos on their lips, the tingle of sunburn, the fragrance of sunscreen. Clare hummed a Merrill Bainbridge song.

"Under the Water?"

"Uh-huh."

"Swim?"

"Uh-huh."

Jessie clung to the blue-tiled edge of the pool with her toes and watched Clare dive in and sail along the bottom, her long blonde hair trailing beneath the ripples and glitter on the water's surface. She followed Clare with less grace. The water was cool on her skin but it was clear and chlorine crisp, not the briny river she'd invoked.

"We should go down to the river for a swim," Clare suggested, surfacing. "Stay overnight at mums? Go down to the Needles in or something."

"Let's!"

"So you want to go?"

"Yes, so much!"

“I wondered why you never asked. You always ignored it when I suggested it.”

The time for acquiescence was through.

Back at Hibernian Jessie checked her email and MySpace accounts on Jimmy’s computer. Len’s update read “shooting up the whites of my eyes”.

Sunlight stretched low across their tiny room, casting slats of shadow and light against the far wall. They lay in the bed and wrapped their clammy legs around one another’s. He stroked her arm, turned it over to inspect the pale scars. She did not want to do the same to his.

Len said, “Paul and Linda never spent a night apart.”

“You said that once before.”

“I did?”

“Besides, we have. At Christmas.”

“That was a mistake.”

A bee buzzed about the room, dipping in and out of the shade.

“What about John and Yoko?”

“They were different.”

“Linda died, anyway.”

He swatted the bee away with a t-shirt. Quiet. He kissed behind her ear and she felt him hard against her bum, and her resistance fell away.

Later, they drank red wine with Jimmy.

“What are we doing?” he asked.

“How about Lanfranchi’s?” Len suggested. “There’s a show on called Chooch-a-bahn. Five bucks entry. The kids putting it on are really cool. It’ll probably be free if you’ve got no cash.”

“Wanna get high first?”

Len looked at Jessie and shrugged. She shrugged too. “I was hoping you’d agree. Here we are. I jumped the gun.” Jimmy drew a bag from the top pocket of his paisley shirt. Acid. They passed it around. Jimmy disappeared to his room and came back with another bag, a spoon and a fit.

“Be better if we just -” He slapped the crook of his elbow with two fingers. Jessie shrugged again. “You can be first Jess. Then Len, then me. That’s safest.”

She watched Jimmy work with a precision others would apply to baking or chemistry experiments. Len chattered excitedly about the venue and the artists and what it might be like to watch their shadows sliding and deforming on the old factory walls.

“Okay.” Jimmy patted the couch beside him and Jessie moved closer, baring her arm for him to wrap up with rough confidence. She breathed in deeply and out as the tip drove into her skin. The bruising pressure intensified as the front door opened and Lila walked in.

“Fuck, you guys! What are you doing!” Len waved merrily and Jimmy ignored her. Jessie bit her lip against the wave of release. She exhaled. “Jessie? Even I wouldn’t do that shit.”

“Shush Lila,” Jimmy hissed. Jessie nodded. Positivity was key. Rosebushes, rivers, babies she thought; rosebushes, rivers, babies.

“I’m coming with you, wherever you’re going.” Lila climbed over the back of the couch and slid down beside her. For the sake of transparency Jessie opened her mouth and lifted her tongue. Her head rolled indulgently, feeling its limits. Lila shook her head. “Oi, Jimmy mate, gimme one of those.”

“Twenty?”

“Ten you greedy git.”

In the stairwell the sound of a hissing snake turned out to be a tap turned on nearby, the phantom yellow eyes of that little dead dog only another rat. Elizabeth Street was anonymous and alive with the spangled lights on cars, neon signs, streetlights, glowsticks. Slipping into the dim entry of the dilapidated building on Cleveland, Jessie fell forward on the

bottom step, pressing her palms open against the oily, well-trodden wood. Her heart was thumping towards implosion: the more it accelerated up, up, up, the more she melted down, down, down. With his arms crossed over her chest Len dragged Jessie up to stand.

“Come on baby.”

“Is she okay?” asked a stranger’s voice. Jessie realised Lila had bounced upstairs already: she was paralytic, alone with two boys.

“Yeah, man,” answered Len. “We’re coming upstairs, we’re not, like, taking her anywhere.”

Jessie nodded and the heaviness gave way to a flight of euphoria, still thick and dense but lighter, buoyant. Colourful lights up above like stars. Flickering, gilt, ruby red. The drone of music pouring down: all somnambulant and aqueous though her electric veins. All night Jessie had to fight to stay above the menace that dragged heavier and heavier. The drugs. The music and the drugs. They sucked her under, suffocated her; she was gossamer against the pull.

Len watched the bands transfixed, cross-legged on the floorboards. Jessie managed to lever herself out of a cut-copy position and she and Lila wandered up to the mezzanine level where a bathroom was set among the rafters. They talked and smoked on the stairs and Len joined them,

climbing to the top step to slip in behind Jessie. His body was hard. He rested his head between her shoulder blades.

“I’m so hot. I think I’m dying. I think I’m turning into jelly,” he said.

“It’s summer,” Lila pointed out.

“It never feels like summer to me without the river,” Jessie said.

He didn’t move, he didn’t flinch, but she felt a film come between them: a division that marked where she ended and he began.

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“So, I’m going down the river for mum’s birthday. Want to come?” Clare asked.

“I’d love to but we’re going out tonight.”

“No, not tonight. Saturday night silly! Mum’s birthday’s Sunday.”

The cigarette lighter Jessie was tossing in the air missed her hand and hit the floor. “Oh. Saturday night we’re doing something too.”

“What? Like drinking beer out of a paper bag while watching a punk band play songs about fucking communism and vaginas?”

“Communism and vaginas?” Jessie laughed.

“Whatever. I thought you wanted to come, but if you don’t it’s fine.”



"I do."

"But you won't." Jessie answered with a sigh. "It's okay. But you should know Jess: I'm thinking about moving back down there with mum when the lease runs out. Lots of my friends still live in Sutho, and it's cheaper."

"I'd miss you so much," Jessie whispered, her voice thin with honesty.

"I'd miss you too. But without Dane here... You know."

"I know."

But that Saturday night Jessie couldn't bring herself to go out. It meant she'd lied to Clare, but the lie seemed somehow more genuine than going along. Perhaps it was self-inflicted punishment. Or a misguided stab at loyalty. As Len and Lila bounced out the door he said, not noticing her thin-lipped smile, "I'll be back by like one at the latest. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

She shook her head.

At midnight, she put down the book she'd been finding it impossible to concentrate on and lay down in their bed. She pushed the covers to Len's side and stared into the black ceiling and couldn't close her eyes, let alone sleep. At three, she tried calling him. His phone was off. She

called Lila: the only answer was the forgotten phone ringing through the thin wall.

Jessie thought about how the world could end without warning, right now or in the second, and her chest contracted with fear. She did not want to be alone when it did, but she felt stranded, so far from everything and everyone that would give her comfort.

Light was just breaking when he came. He slipped into the bedroom, a silhouettes on the grey wall, and climbed into bed. She waited for him to explain, to give her some words of reason, any words! An acknowledgement! Nothing.

The little room was a hothouse. She was boiling with rage and confusion. She threw off the covers. He lay rigid beside her. Her arm struck out and hand slammed down on his chest. He wheezed with shock. She did it again.

“Stop it!”

“Do you think I’m asleep?”

“I know you’re not, now!”

“What are you doing just lying there?!”

“I dunno.”

“You just don’t want to face me.”

“I’m sorry.”

"You don't want to see me!"

"Baby that's not true!"

"It is."

"No."

"You disappeared, you didn't answer your phone! You tried to pretend nothing happened."

"I hoped you were asleep?"

Dawn sifted the darkness with a melancholy mauve.

"I should've gone with Clare."

"Where? Why didn't you?"

"To the river. She asked me to go with her and I said no. And I wanted to, I meant to, but I said no."

He was winded. He was torn between the words he wanted to say - "you should do anything you want to!" - and those he felt — "please don't abandon me! Please don't go without me!" She realised his happiness stood in the way of hers. But how could that be, when they loved one another? It wasn't right. It wasn't fair.

"Next time I just will," she decided. "I'll just go."

"Okay. That's fair."

They lay side by side with the blanket like a body between them. At least if the world ended she could hold onto him, she reasoned; and yet she felt lonelier now than she ever had.

“Jessie?” She was quiet. Behind her closed eyes she watched a shower of sharp silver fragments fall towards her. “I’m an idiot. I know you’re the only thing that will ever make me really happy.”

The next day he was ill, sweaty and feverish. Exhausted, Jessie lay looking at head resting fitfully on the pillow. She searched for the little boy she knew so well but the closer she looked, the stranger and less familiar the shape of his face seemed. His cheeks were angular and gaunt, peppered with stubble. He looked hard in a way that made no sense to her. When he opened his sleepy eyes an easy, transparent smile lighted across his lips and he reached for her, touched his knowing hand to her cheek, and she felt ill for wanting anything else.

Later, when they woke properly, his soft eyes dissolved her. Jessie saw his disappointment clearly: his uncertainty, his sadness and knew she was to blame for it as much as he. Taking a furious handful of his dirty curls in her fist, she pressed his forehead to hers and sobbed with remorse. They made love, a defeated, blank kind of collapse into the other, but she could not to find her way inside him without surrendering herself and

feeling her resistance he could not find himself inside her either. He came on her belly, on her bare skin.

He cried and cried and cried. He called himself horrible names. He begged for forgiveness.

“It’s okay,” she consoled him. His tears brought tears to her eyes. “It’s not that bad! You’re preoccupied with purity. You find it hard to see yourself in -”

“Yes! You got it Jessie! Purity. I’m a puritan. I’m fucking puritanical.”

In his mouth, it seemed just another word he could use to put himself down.

They went to Gordon’s Bay and dove from the south rocks in through a crystalline, teal-blue surface. They swam into the middle, sloughing away exhaustion and confusion with every stroke. Tension fell away, and the water licked them clean of any uncertainty, and it felt like a return to something: not innocence, but a raw, fragile sense of peace.

Sitting high on the outcrop afterwards with the sun blazing down on their slick skin, he said “That was the best!”

“We should come swimming more often. It’s nice here, gentle, no waves.”

“Just like the river.”

He gazed over the water rolling across the bay. The sound of it, lapping against the sandstone below, seemed a lullaby. Jessie ran a hand down his arm in gratitude, in gladness. He’d given her a gift: this knot of a treasured memory that tied them together, lifted them out of time and space, that seemed somehow more real for its being transcendent.

Later, they went to an exhibition opening for a photographer friend of Minty’s. People spilled onto the sidewalk holding plastic cups of beer. Len waved or smiled or bowed slightly in greeting to everybody they passed. Inside the tiny gallery huge images of plush toys were hung high around them. Camouflaged in dioramas that echoed the garish, unnatural colours of their fur, there was fetishistic about the inert, complicit balls of fluff.

“This is perverse!” Len enthused when they were introduced to the artist.

“Totally!” Jessie nodded.

The woman, whose rigid, triangular hairstyle and fluoro pink kimono-come-superhero cape gave her a sculptural, immovable presence, grinned. She seemed satisfied by the compliment though her attitude was too aloof to read.

A guy from the community radio station introduced himself to Len and asked him to drop off a demo. "I've been watching your band man, and I like it. You're tight when you're not trashed."

"Yeah, cool man. That's awesome. Hey, this is my girlfriend Jessie."

"Hey. You guys should come along to my place later, just off Devonshire. Nothing fancy, just my flatmates and some guys who work at the station."

"Oh yeah?" He wanted to. He wanted not too. He said what he hoped would make Jessie happy: "Maybe next time, hey? We're kind of busy tonight."

They wandered home when the party began to disperse. The evening was redolent with jasmine, the streets still tame and civilised. They linked fingers loosely, at ease, and it felt as if they'd found a new way to go forward, side by side.

"I met this girl," Lila told them. "She's really strong, really cool. She's got amazing bleached blonde hair."

"What's this?" Len asked, prodding the light brown puree Lila had set on the table with a carrot stick.

"It's hummus. Anyway, she's vegan. She's really into Bikini Kill and human rights and snakes and all this other cool stuff."

“Oh yeah?” Len grinned.

“Yeah. She’s beautiful.”

“Lila you’ve got a crush on her, don’t you?” Jessie laughed.

“I can’t stop thinking about her.” Jessie tickled her playfully. “Her shoulders, her shoulders and her neck and the way she walks.”

“What’s her name?”

“Trish.”

“You should ask her out. To a show, or the park, or a protest,” said Jessie.

Lila sighed. “I just love the way you guys are so in love. It’s kind of, like, the dream.”

“Yeah,” Len agreed.

“We’re not as perfect as you think,” Jessie said quietly.

The words had come too quickly, too honestly, on impulse. Because she loved Lila, and Lila was so good-hearted, and it seemed deceitful to Jessie to let her believe they were something more than Lila, or more than they were. Lila cocked her head and drew the hair away from Jessie’s eyes to see better what she meant. She could feel Len watching her, wondering, but she could not bear knowing the betrayal in his eyes, all shiny and teary and of her doing, so held Lila’s gaze instead and felt herself to be a puzzle that even she could not put together.



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He was there every minute of the day, every day of the week, every time she wanted or needed him, even when the tingle of being close became an itch, the itch a friction; until he wasn't. After helping Clare pack up the house in Newtown, Jessie arrived home to an empty loft. A note left in the indent on her pillow read:

Baby

Gone to all ages show in Sydney park.

Day time thing. Be back soon/later

I love you

Len

He'd drawn puckered lips beside his name. They made her smile. Space seemed a luxury, limited as it was by his imminent return. She poured herself a glass of wine and lit a candle. She lay out long on the rug with a tattered copy of *Nine Stories* by J. D. Salinger. Every time she finished a story she put the book down and poured herself more wine, expecting him to arrive. But he didn't. So she picked it up again and again

until she reached the end. And when she did, the only remnant of the nine stories that came back to her was the bananafish.

She thought: his love, so grandly proclaimed, fell victim to immediate charms, the kind that glittered and faded. A line of coke or free beer or somebody's passing adoration, somebody who was not her. She thought bitterly, without forming thoughts: resentment simply condensed and hung over her, a heavy raincloud waiting to burst. His phone would be out of battery or switched off. She called it anyway: the static, nonsensical Messagebank recording filled her head.

Jessie drifted into a wayward, tidal sleep and woke - perhaps only moments later - to her heart beating so wildly in her chest that her first was she was dead, or racing towards death. Then she realised she'd had a nightmare. The bedside clock read 5 a.m. and she was alone.

She'd made assumptions: about what he meant when he said "love". She'd thought it an implicit promise. She'd assumed, perhaps because they knew each other inside out, or perhaps because of the nature of the word, that she understood what he meant when he said it, but she didn't.

There were things he wouldn't do - cheat on her, break up with her, beat her - but what did they matter? They were besides the point. The pain he inflicted was his absence. He withheld himself out of negligence, or

fear, or maybe resentment and of the wide, gaping space he left she could make no sense, make nothing. The worst part was how it surrounded her, suffocating, isolating, leaving her adrift on a little island in the middle of a vast ocean. How by nighttime on the next day she was still alone and couldn't summon the energy or confidence to go anywhere or call anyone but him.

She phoned him again. Fuzz: screeching, tormenting, nothing. And again. And again, until her blood - from boiling - turned cold and icy. She stood up, grabbed his bass guitar by the neck and hurled it against the dresser mirror: the glass fractured, cracked through and dropped, the savagely shiny fragments raining down and tinkling lightly where they hit the floor. What was left in the frame protruded like jagged, silver incisors. A puddle of glass shimmered at Jessie's feet. She leant down and picked up a long, triangular shard, pressing it between two fingers. There was only one thing to do. She pressed a corner firmly to the skin on the inside of her arm and drew it down. Little balloons of blood rushed to the surface, rupturing as they bloomed big and burst against one another. Jessie watched it stream into the crook of her elbow and drip to the ground. She was satisfied, exhausted, relieved. At least now she might rest a little.

Lila came home at some point that evening to get changed for work.

“I’m still drunk!” she giggled, standing in the doorway, struggling into a pair of denim overalls. And then, noticing the broken mirror “What the fuck happened?”

Jessie shook her head and uttered a deep sob.

“It’s okay,” Lila soothed. “Where’s Len? I thought they’d come home? They said they were, like late last night or early this morning. Hey, I’ll be back soon okay?”

But the boys came home first. She heard them fumbling with keys and sat up, wide awake. The sparse whir of traffic outside told her it was very early in the morning. She got up silently and locked the bedroom door from the inside. She listened to them whispering. Someone dropped something. Then footsteps. He turned the door handle to no avail: turned it again.

“Jess!” he hissed.

She was silent. He slammed his fist against the door and she thought spitefully, yes, that he could hurt her. The idea was vindicating. Let him be angry. Let him be violent. See how he liked that. But she heard him give up almost immediately, his body sliding down the door to the ground. She closed her eyes, squeezed them shut. She wanted fireworks,

some kind of climax, not resignation. Standing up, Jessie yanked open the door. He sprawled backwards into their bedroom and the skateboard he'd been sitting on sped in the opposite direction. He stared up at her with frightened eyes. He'd shaved his head.

"I hate you!"

With difficulty he dragged himself off the ground and sat in a broken posture, facing her. He looked trampled, dirty and bruised in the dim shadows. She struck out at his chest and he fell backwards against the open door.

"Stop it!" he yelled.

"I hate you," she said again, hating herself more. "Where have you been?"

"Out!"

"Out?"

"Yes."

"For two days?"

"Yes!"

"Fucking someone else?"

He looked at her, disgusted that she could even say such words.

"No. That's fucked u--"

"Well what?"

He levelled with her. He sat up a little straighter.

“You want to know where I’ve been? You want to know where I was last night?”

“And the night before last when you told Lila you were coming home.”

“I was shooting smack. Straight into my fucking arm, with Jimmy, with gear we bought off the street. That’s why I didn’t come home. And this is why I didn’t tell you, and this is why we didn’t come home - ‘cause I knew you’d disapprove and I’m sick of your disapproval. Everything I do is wrong and I know it. I don’t need your sad eyes to remind me!”

She seized his upper arms, crushed them as hard as she could and his eyes - even now, his eyes touched her - they pleaded with her for peace. But Jessie was long past peace: she wanted violence and brutality, she wanted something more to show for how much she was hurt. She threw her fists against his body as hard and as fast and as much as she could and how it ended was that she found herself pressed flat backed against the door, his hands around her neck, her tiptoes reaching for the floor.

She was helpless, and victorious, and his pupils shone black with horror. She felt peace for a moment, but then she gasped for breath and he let go.

They lived in a truce, in the shadows of one another. They were close without tenderness, maybe closer in this terrible peace than ever before.

“I love you,” he could say, and so could she, and they could even feel the weight of it - but not weightlessness, not the rapture.

What Jessie really wanted was debasement. She wanted despair to blossom and moulder evidently, to be punished, held captive in her secret world. She wore a skivvy to secret the purple print of his hand that wrapped around her neck. It gratified her to know it was hidden there.

“What in the world are you wearing that for?” Clare laughed when they met for milkshakes in the city. She shrugged. “You’re taking this anti-fashion thing a bit far aren’t you? I’m sweltering!”

On Jimmy’s brand new iMac Jessie checked her uni timetable. A thumbnail on the desktop caught her attention: “sex baby you and me”. She double clicked and the image appeared: it was Len, larger than life, glowering back at her. He held his upper arm up to the camera and twisted the skin around to show a blackened, purple bruise stark against his milky inner flesh. He’d shown Jimmy.

She was alone. She cherished her bruise beneath the ugly prickle of acrylic in the middle of summer. He'd broadcast his, allowed it to be immortalised. He'd confided in Jimmy, of all people.

Len wrote a song called "The Future." At practice, only Lila danced along. Dane hung over his guitar and Len sat poised behind his drum kit hitting harder than ever. He hammered the skins with contained strength: none of the thrashing and wild flailing he generally used. He wailed the refrain, stretching the words until his voice warbled: "Kill you. Kill you. Kill - me."

His face turned red with the intensity of it. When they finished Lila bobbed around plucking the strings of her bass guitar. The boys avoided one another's eyes.

"This song is too depressing," Dane said.

"But it's fucking good," Len insisted.

Despite its being an awful song even Jessie felt it had the simmering energy of an anthem. It built up to something distended and hopeless and tragic.

On the way to Spectrum, Jessie recognised Len in a series of larger-than-life photocopies wheat pasted along Wentworth Avenue. He was shirtless. Eyes closed. Tongue extended towards his underarms. There

were fat swastikas painted on his chest. She knew better than to tell herself it was a gesture towards Buddhism. She was sickened: not because she thought he'd transformed into a neo-Nazi skinhead but because he wanted to alienate whoever didn't understand what they were looking at; he wanted their loathing in some sick kind of sympathy, to match something in the way he saw himself.

"This song's called 'The Future'," he announced to the packed room.

Somebody knocked against Jessie. Somebody kissed her cheek. Somebody pushed a longneck into her hands. But the only person she saw was him, the devilish red cast of the light and his face, radiant despite the song.

Kill you, kill you, kill me.

She saw that he was looking for a word stronger than love, and the word was not hate after all: the word was kill.

Len and Jimmy slipped quietly in through the door together.

"Where've you guys been?" Jessie asked from the floor, where she lay arranging a set of grainy photographs she'd taken of the sunset over Coogee.

"Redfern?" Len replied.

“Hey where’s Dane been?”

“Um.”

“That girl,” Jimmy smirked. “What’s her name? Neve. She got pregnant.”

“What?”

“You know Dane, he’s doing the right thing. He doesn’t wanna get together with her but he’s supporting her through the... process.”

“Of what! Becoming a dad?”

“No Jessie. They’re not having the baby.”

“Oh.”

Jessie glared at Len. He slunk against the greasy wall with an uneasy smile, hovering, ready to dart out the open door to avoid her. Scabs of peach coloured paint peeled from the wall around him.

“Kay. I’m gonna go get ready,” Jimmy said.

Instead of escaping, Len lumbered towards Jessie uncertainly. He sat down cross-legged in front of her and picked up an image, an unfocussed blur of blues and pinks in the late sky. She plucked it from his hand.

“Don’t be angry.”

“What am I supposed to be?” she asked.

He shrugged. “*Please* don’t be angry?”

“And what am I supposed to do with knowing this - that -”

“Well that’s exactly why I didn’t tell you!” She sighed, feeling defeated. “Hey, we’re on the same side,” he reminded her.

“There are no sides.”

“I dunno. I feel like I’m always on your side. I’m on your team.”

She was ashamed. She’d wanted to be right just so she wasn’t wrong, so she wasn’t reproachable, and what he wanted was her. He covered her hand in the shell of his own. Safe inside there must always be another world where they existed together beyond damage.

Jimmy leaned in his doorway with the Velvet Underground playing on his computer.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Look....” Len looked up and caught Jessie’s eyes. He looked down again. “I wanna tell you everything okay? Truth is, before, where we were before was at the Block. Buying heroin. Anyway. We came back here cos I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“Where else would I be?”

“It’s the middle of the day so. Uni or work or something.” He shrugged. “Do you want some?”

The early afternoon light filled the room with a rich, golden decadence which seemed as good a reason as any to say yes. She felt a dull

kind of anger: because he hadn't told her about Dane and Neve, or because of the heroin, or because Jimmy seemed to have taken the place at the centre of his orbit. But the pleasure she'd heard them talking about was seductive and she wanted to resign herself to the softness, the nothingness. Jimmy didn't object. In his bedroom he steadied her wrist with practised hands.

"Not too much," she said.

"You're gonna feel sick," he warned.

Her fingertips tingled. Her palms itched. Len caught her body in his arms and the last thing she heard as she fell into the cloud of something like sleep was his voice saying, "I'll use hers. We've already shared enough saliva to give each other AIDS."

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Light danced over Jessie's in the afterglow. She was weightless, even reckless. She called Clare.

"I love you so much," she said, among other deep and dedicated things. She was no longer weightless: what she knew that Clare didn't weighed heavily now on her heart.

"What's gotten into you?" Clare laughed

"I miss you."

She heard Kim in the background. "Mum wants to know when you're coming to stay?"

"Soon."

At the markets on Crown Street Jessie bought a silk scarf covered with roses. Lila tied it around her head and turned her towards a shop window: among the display of hand-spun bowls she didn't recognise herself, pale as the ceramic.

"The truth is," she said softly to Len as they walked down Foveaux Street later that evening.

"The truth is?"

"I'd love to live on the river someday. Not now, not even in five years, but when I want to... Settle. Down."

He drifted apart from her: physically, it was nothing but she felt him stray and she couldn't hold on. He was like a balloon, floating up, up and away to freedom in the ether. He said nothing. Jessie followed him: silent on the stairs, silent as he passed through the doorway. She went to the kitchen to make tea and he went straight to the stereo and put some savage, lacerating band that she guessed was probably called Black Pus or Aborted or Yes Nukes or something. He hung over the speaker, beating his head against the air.

She brought him a mug and offered it to him but he ignored it.

“Talk to me,” she said, as the music clamoured. He plucked a cigarette from his packet and lit it. “Len?”

He answered her with a look of rebuke and turned the music right down. “Talk? What do you want me to say? I’m not gonna say what you wanna hear.”

“I just want to know how you feel!” Even as she said it she knew it was a whiney, useless plea.

“You’re so fucking tragic Jessie!” He looked away from her, worried the cigarette butt with his thumb. Ash fluttered to the floor.

“And you? You’re not tragic?”

“I’m trying! I’m trying to make something good!”

“So am I!”

“You don’t see how good you’ve got it. You come from something good - at least, at least accept it’s different for me.”

“I do accept it,” she insisted. “But it doesn’t stop me feeling the way I feel or wanting the things I want.”

“The river.”

“The river.”

It was endgame.

“Sometimes I think the only reason you want me is because I’m impossible, and if all you want is me and I’m impossible then you don’t

have to try very hard," he murmured. "But I know Jessie. I know you could be queen."

"What does that even mean?"

He shrugged. "You've got all the words. I don't have the words."

By which he meant, no more: no more arguing.

"I don't know what you fucking mean or fucking want!" she screamed. All her words were gone: she was powerless. All she had was rage and tears pouring down her burning cheeks.

He came closer. Maybe he would hurt her. Maybe, she thought, he would wrap his hands around her throat, bruise her, break her bones. But he said, across the little distance between them that was just enough to build up force and inflict pain, "I raped you."

She gave a dry, confused sob. "Raped?" That was not what he was meant to say.

He drew on his cigarette, looking at the ground, as she looked at him. "That night when you were staying at Clare's. When you were fourteen. When I stole your virginity."

"Stole! We lost our virginity -"

"Me?" he shrugged. "I was never a virgin."

"You slept with someone else?"

"No! No! Nobody but you, ever! But I was disgusting."

She felt dizzy, seeing he believed it. "This is nonsense." Her head filled with static and white light and the shape of something in the distance, the bright but indecipherable reason he was wrong. If she came too close the thing would disappear and she would never know the shape of it. Everything was too close, too loud, too bright.

"It's not nonsense."

"You're talking complete crap."

"I held you down. I was stronger than you."

"You! You were not stronger than me!"

"You never said yes."

"I never said no!"

"You never said yes. " As if that settled it.

He believed it. She looked at him with wide eyes, alarmed and her lowered his in meekness, in humility. She put her hand to his forehead: it was burning. He'd let her do anything to him right now. Have anything. And she wanted to fuck, depraved and polluted as she was.

But she said, sweetly, "That memory is precious beyond anything to me." And he lifted his eyes to her with doubtful disappointment.



She woke to find him curled against her, his cheeks pressed against his bunched up fists. The hair on his head was velvet-like beneath her palm. He opened his eyes and looked at her, wonderingly.

“Why are you doing this Jessie?”

“Because I love you.”

Nodding as if to say, “I thought as much,” he closed them again.

Later, he stuffed rollies, *Crime and Punishment* and a fistful of bungers in his backpack and zipped it up.

“Where’re you going?”

“To work.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll be back,” he promised softly. “Here.”

He pressed a note into her hands and kissed her cheek peremptorily, backing out the door.

*Jessie,*

*By now, you have seen all my ‘colours’ and somehow you still put up with me.*

*I’d like to tell you that you are amazing on this account but actually I wonder if you are delusional.*

*I mean, this friend you had growing up on the pretty river seems like such a nice little boy. It sounds like you had so much fun together. It sounds like a joyful place. He sounds like a jolly lad.*

*I do not know this boy or this place.*

*It strikes me that there is only one way this person could have existed: you must have imagined him.*

*The great thing about imaginary friends is that they are what you want them to be. They do, say and think whatever you want them to. You have complete control over them. And the things that they have done to you. In fact, I think I will create my own imaginary friend who will eat, sleep, sing and shop exactly the way I want it to.*

*The thing is: I thought I'd learned from you what love is. And feminism too. But if love and feminism are what you think they are then I do not know what either means.*

*Len*

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She didn't take water, cigarettes or even a book: only a handful of coins in an otherwise empty purse. Horns, bodies, cabs, buses. Down the escalator into the underground where commuters crowded the platform, the

burning rubber filling her nostrils. It was peak hour but she was out of place and out of time.

When the train approached Como Bridge, Jessie held her breath as the trees cleaved and the river - her river - opened out and rushed by on both sides. Her body shimmered like its shimmering surface, scattered with sunlight and ruffled beneath the breeze. She imagined falling into the water; how in the falling she would leave behind her anxieties and in the water lose her distinction; how in the river she would become whole and discover something she had once been.

The train passed through Sutherland and she got off at Engadine. Without knowing the way she rambled along suburban streets lined with bottlebrush and scribbly gums in the general direction of the valley. The roads sloped down. A newer development of blonde brick houses hemmed the suburb: on the outer edge, dense bush lined the road. She was close. She walked along until she came to a steep incline that lead down to the padlocked gate where the fire trail began. It was marked with a faded sign barely reading "Trespassers will be prosecuted".

On she went, down the mountain, less alone in the bush that rustled with wind filling empty spaces than in the little bed she shared with him. Coming off tarmac onto the rough incline, jagged and rough with stones wedged into the clay, she stumbled down the trail. Flannel

flowers, Illawarra lilies, banksias, melaleucas. She stuck to the high embankment on the left, grabbing handfuls of dead bracken to steady her.

The smell of it was relief: the eucalypts, dry and rich, and the sweet floral mingling of grevillea, hake and other wildflowers.

There was a plateau halfway down the mountain that afforded glimpses of the river. Jessie walked to edge of the bedrock. Through the tousled green canopy the water, a lustrous, deep green, shone through. She was still now, anchored. She was free from the disorder, the chaos, the senselessness. She sat with grains of stone sticking to her bare thighs. Birds tolled and squawked above her head and the foliage swayed in its drunken, leisurely way.

At the wooden bridge, she turned left and followed the little creek down to the beach. The river was tranquil, dark and glossy green before her. A coo-ee echoed across the valley. She remembered being here with him, being children on the brink of something ominous. She could see Morton's place, dilapidated and overgrown and far away as it was. She knew he'd watched the house from here, on his own as well, for whatever reason that she could never grasp.

Jessie slipped out of her clothes and stepped into the shallows. The water climbed her skin, a cool, tender reception. She sank into it and swam into the middle, blowing bubbles on the brackish surface. An

outboard motor reverberated downstream. She lay on a patch of spindly grass to dry in the sun.

The rest of the trail was wide and sandy. It would be trickier to remain anonymous on the track but not impossible: she hardly knew anyone who still lived here anyway. She passed by number one. A couple sitting on Connie's porch smiled inquisitively and she waved. Just before Lori's she took the overgrown passage beside a disused boat shed. She scrambled up the slope without looking back: twigs scratching her arms, stones grazing her knees.

Up behind the houses the gums grew tall from the rocky floor. She picked her way through the refuse of bark and browning leaves until she came to the stone Len had brought her to the night when she was fourteen and he was fifteen. In the light of day it was less grand than she remembered. Still it loomed, haunted by the uncanny presence of spaces immortalised by memory. She sat beneath it and knew for certain that everything he'd said and everything he'd told himself was wrong. The only terrible thing in this place was his absence.

She fell asleep in the stone's shelter and woke to find the sky smoky-blue and the night dark. She wasn't even afraid: she was peaceful in everything she knew to be true and even in those things she couldn't

understand. Towards dawn she slept lightly and with the sun she rose, picking her way down the steep path to Clare's.

Letting herself in the latched gate, Jessie crossed the yard to the backdoor. She almost expected Clare to rush out and meet her halfway as when they were girls. She knocked; no answer. She rounded the side of the house to the splayed branches of the dormant jacaranda and the sound of laughter on the narrow verandah.

"Mum!" Clare giggled "You're a hus - Jessie?" Standing up, she pushed the table away and ran to the bottom of the stairs, pressing Jessie's face between her hands. "God. What the fuck?"

She felt like a child: vulnerable, bare, needing the love of somebody who understood where she came from. Clare held her. The tighter her clasp the more Jessie cried, and more Jessie cried the tighter the arms around her shoulders.

"Clare I can't breathe!"

She relaxed her hold a little. "Where have you been?"

Jessie couldn't say.

"Len called me. Len called me! About ten times. Sick with worry. I assured him you'd gotten on a train to Cooma, got stranded in Canberra overnight, so your mum couldn't know you were -"

"Here," she nodded.

“Why didn’t you take your phone? Or anything?”

Again, she couldn’t say. And Clare understood, and despite everything she wanted to know she wrapped Jessie up in her arms and didn’t ask anything else.

It was Clare who held out the phone to Jessie and told her Len was on the line.

“Hello?” he searched. “Baby?”

“You know I love you more than I love myself, right?”

“Baby,” he breathed.

“But I hate you more too. And I trust you with my soul and my life.” She heard his deflated intake of breath mashed up with tears. “But I can’t trust you with my day to day.”

After bathing Jessie and feeding her and telling her about a drunk who’d run their tinny straight under a jetty last night and somehow survived with his head intact, Clare settled Jessie in the hammock on the balcony.

“Dane wants to talk to me,” she said.

“Go. I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“It’s kind of blissful. Like coming down in heaven.”

“You might have a visitor.”

Cicadas thrummed and a dog yapped somewhere; an engine throttled and died.

Jessie watched the water. An old rope swing grazed the silver surface on the other side. A cormorant poked its black head out of the water and looked about. A boat left a gash of whitewash trailing in its wake.

He came up the stairs without a word, sat by her feet and rested a shoulder against her leg. They said nothing. It was enough just to touch. There were no words to shape this, where they'd ended up. It was all too old, too deeply etched, too complicated and there was such disappointment, too, and neither of them wanted to make that real with words.

Following her gaze to the water, he exhaled and slumped against her leg. She looked at the top of his head: the strange, prickly unfamiliar hair and chalky scalp, and ran her palm over it. He turned and ventured a weak, uncertain smile.

“Are you afraid?”

He shrugged and she saw that fear wasn't the point. “I would've been afraid if I spent all last night in the bush by myself. The tables have turned.”

"Do you hate it here?"

"No. I just feel this lump of nothing. Of what could've been - in my childhood. This anger. This huge anger."

"I know. So do I, for you." She kept on stroking his head. "You know, I realised you were right. The river is green, everything's green - the water, the bush. Blue is my fantasy."

"No. Blue is your eyes and the sky. It's the ocean."

Slipping down beside him, she said "I'm sorry for everything I ever did that hurt you."

"No! Baby, I'm sorry."

"I don't know, though," she said and, knowing, tears sprung to his eyes. "I have to be allowed to be here, even in my imagination."

"You are. And I am."

He took her hand in his own and mashed it determinedly, holding tight for life. Jessie felt the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, the smell of him, the warmth of his skin and the prickle of his beard. And she felt the way she always felt when they were close: that she'd come back to the beginning of herself, rounded off the circle that made sense of the path she'd walked.

Side by side they watched the river flowing downstream. For all its motion and renewal, its shimmering, dazzling surface that glided ever

onwards, the river didn't fundamentally change. Dying light and winds and rising tides transformed its appearance but they were part and parcel and their affects on the whole grand, slithering skin of it were shallow. The currents coursed and pulled and wound downstream but the river never changed. There was no end to it, not really. It was immutable, the water forever flooded back on itself and tumbled in the depths and swallowed its own past up with the future.

Epilogue

On the first anniversary of Connie's death, Len let Jessie take his hand to lead him where she wanted to go. They walked the track together with the green river moving beside them, tarnished beneath the dull, cloudy sky.

At Lori's they drank tea on the stone platform in cane chairs, on tartan picnic blankets with old neighbours and strangers alike.

"Let's go for a walk," Len said when he was tired of explaining to people how he fitted in.

So they went further downstream, past number 1 and onto the fire trail and without speaking of it they knew where they were going. Jessie followed Len as he clambered through overgrown tea trees and banksia once colonised by the cubbies to the bracken-bound bank, where black earth bared tiny white threads of root systems crumbling away to the stained sand below.

"It's gone," he said. Across the river where Morton's house had been there was just a space cleared in front of the trees and three concrete steps leading up from the beach to nowhere. Only the remnants of the weatherboard cottage, collapsed like chalky bones in an abandoned heap, confirmed it had ever even existed.

“It was there! Two months ago I saw it!” Jessie insisted. Len turned to her and smiled with a dark, vindicated rapture lighting his eyes. It was some kind of freedom, some kind of end.

“Did you kill him?” she asked, only because she’d never asked the question. It wasn’t a matter of knowing: she already knew.

“No. No, not me.”