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## A new map of the universe : A novel and accompanying essay

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# A New Map of the Universe

*A Novel and Accompanying Essay*

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY  
LIBRARY

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BA (Hons.)

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*Thesis submitted for the award of  
PhD in English (Creative Writing)*

*Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences*

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## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

## Abstract

This thesis comprises a novel entitled *A New Map of the Universe* and an accompanying essay. The novel tells the story of a young architect named Grace Darlowe, who is struggling with her very first project: the design of a house for her lover, Michael. Grace struggles partly because she is uncertain about the future of her relationship with Michael, but her insecurities are more deeply rooted in her troubled relationship with her mother, Madeleine. Embittered by grief, Madeleine blames Grace for her husband Peter's death and resents Grace's choice to follow her father in becoming an architect. Grace is debilitated by her mother's attitude and is unable to begin her career as an architect because she feels overshadowed by her father's unfulfilled potential.

In order to overcome her insecurities Grace embarks on a process of trying to understand and come to terms with the events that changed Madeleine. The novel traces this process by telling the stories of Madeleine and Peter's early lives. The novel is written in four books: the first book begins Grace's story, books two and three detail the lives of Peter and Madeleine respectively and in book four, Grace's story is concluded. Though all four books are written in the third person, each character's story has a different narrative voice.

*A New Map of the Universe* is constructed around an architectural motif and the ways in which the characters relate to various constructed spaces signifies their quest for belonging. The novel also contains a strong thematic thread which deals with the notion of the unspeakable.

The accompanying essay begins with an account of the process of writing *A New Map of the Universe* and engages with some of the debates surrounding the fiction/autobiography dichotomy. This is followed by an analysis of how the theme of secrets and silence manifests itself in *A New Map of the Universe*, as well as a brief exploration of other contemporary Australian texts in which the unspeakable is also a central thematic concern – in particular, Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*. The essay concludes with an examination of the significance of the architectural motif deployed in *A New Map of the Universe* and a range of contemporary texts including Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet* and Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*.

## ***Declaration***

*I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:*

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*Signed:*



*Annabel Smith*

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# **A New Map of the Universe**

**“I know how Columbus felt, finding another world”**

**George & Ira Gershwin**

***How Long Has This Been Going On?***

# **A New Map of the Universe**

**Book One: Grace**

**Book Two: Peter**

**Book Three: Madeleine**

**Book Four: Grace**

# **Book One: Grace**

## Perth, 1998

### a new taste

It begins with Orion, a constellation that he gives her as a gift before she even knows his name.

It is a tiny balcony, too small for two strangers, but Grace doesn't see him out there until she has switched on the light and then it is too late.

Come and have a look, he says, before she can dive back inside. But turn out the light will you? We'll see better then.

Grace leans on the rail beside him because there is nowhere else to go. She is tired of the party, of smiling and jostling and holding up her drink. It feels like another world out here. There is no moon, no cloud. The ocean is oily in the dark night and Grace breathes it in slowly with the cold air.

What a night, she says. Look at the Milky Way.

The Aborigines call it *Milnguya*, the celestial river.

Milnguya. Grace tries out the strange word. That's beautiful. I'd like to go fishing in the sky.

He laughs. What do you think you might catch?

She can feel that he is looking at her now and she shrugs, keeping her eyes on the sea.

There's a little boat for you, out there.

She has to lean in to him to see where he is pointing and when he speaks again, close to her ear, she feels the blood speed up in her veins.

You probably know it as Orion, the Hunter, that's what the Greeks called it. The Aborigines call it Julpan, the canoe. He points out the two brightest stars: one at the front of the long boat and one at the back. In between them three stars sit side by side. Those are the fishermen, he tells her, and he names them: Biribiru, Jardirngala and Nuruwilpin. And then he shows her the faint stars that hang like fish beneath the canoe: still trailing on their lines. As he tells Grace the ancient story he looks from the sky to her face and back again, his dark eyes moving slowly like the sea.

It's your constellation, he says and Grace listens carefully and tries to remember, so that later, she can write the story down.

What's that very bright one there? she asks him, pointing.

That's Sirius. People call it the Dog Star. It's a binary – a double star.

What does that mean?

To the naked eye it appears to be one star but with a telescope you can see that it has a companion spinning around it and the two stars share a gravitational pull – they hold each other in orbit.

Grace looks at him. How do you know all this?

Let's go somewhere for dinner and I'll tell you.

And as they leave the party, weaving their way through the crush of bodies, Grace is conscious of his hand at her elbow, the heat of his skin through the sleeve of her dress.

Michael is an anthropologist. He studies the myths of the stars, researching how people throughout the world, across the centuries have divided up the sky in a myriad of different ways, endlessly reinterpreting the same stars. He tells Grace this over dinner in a small Italian restaurant off Bulwer Street, a place Grace has driven past hundreds of times without noticing.

Take the Hyades for example, and he finds a pencil in the pocket of his jacket and draws the V-shaped constellation on the butcher's paper at their table.

To the Greeks this was the head of Taurus, the bull. But there were ancient Germanic tribes who looked up at the same stars and saw a wolf's jaw. The New Guineans thought it was a crocodile skull and to certain tribes in Celebes, these stars were simply nutcrackers. And all of these peoples had their own story, their own way of explaining how these objects came to be suspended in the air above them.

He speaks softly but there is an excitement in his warm, dry voice which Grace finds infectious. She likes the careful way he uses words, the way he leans forward to hear her questions and stops to think before answering. And she loves the stories, keeps pressing him for more.

No one tells you stories once you're grown up, she says. I hadn't realised how much I miss it.

What about you, Grace? What do you do?

I'm afraid my job's not as interesting as yours. I work at the State Library.

She can see he is waiting for something more.

You know what libraries are like. I do a lot of shuffling books from one shelf to another, trying to maintain some kind of order within the chaos.

You don't like it.

It is a statement, not a question and the way he says it, as though it matters to him, undoes something in her.

I wanted to be an architect, she begins and then immediately regrets it, leans back in her chair, away from his eyes.

I studied architecture.

You didn't finish?

Yes, I finished, she says miserably.

She does not know how to explain it to him, or even to herself.

Change of heart? he offers.

She nods her head gratefully.

Yes, she says and nods again, as if making up her mind.

She wants to lean over and touch his face, his mouth but she does not trust herself to stop at that so instead she reaches across the table and takes his hand, pressing it tightly as she asks him to tell her another story.

Grace undresses herself. Michael does not move to help her though his eyes never leave her body. He seems to look without blinking and his eyes say so much that she cannot look at them. She looks instead at his hands, his arms. She loves the strong, lean shape of them where his sleeves are pushed up to his elbows. She imagines the way he will touch her.

She is naked and he is fully dressed, holding in his hands her bottle of silver eye-liner and its tiny brush. She is afraid that if she looks right at him her glance will catch against his and the two of them will become locked there, unable to move. So she closes her eyes as she lies on the rug and does not see the way he looks at her small face as he kneels down beside her.

She thinks that he will touch her now: space out the canvas of her body with his hands. But he gauges it with his eye, pulls from memory as cleanly as a sheet of paper, a map of the night sky, and transposes it, in his imagination, onto her pale skin.

He knows, without touching her, how soft her skin will feel and he tries not to think of that as he dips the brush into the eye-liner. He chooses one constellation from the cluster of stars in his mind and begins his picture beneath the arch of her ribs. He paints with the rhythm of her breath, one star between each rise and fall of her diaphragm.

She feels his certainty with each touch of the brush, every point of light, neat and steady, perfectly distanced from the last. Yet he brushes her body so gently, so slightly, that sometimes she thinks she is only imagining that he kneels beside her, sprinkling her with light.

He paints the Pleiades, Orion's Belt, the Southern Cross. He tracks the stars across her ribs, into the curve of each shoulder, over the flat plain of her breast bone.

She loses track of time. She cannot tell if he is working very fast, or very slowly and she drifts, half dreaming while he unfolds the stories of the sky, in silver, on her body.

As he works his way back downwards he begins to linger. The sight of her body, adorned with stars makes him falter. Now his hand is so unsteady that he cannot control the shaking and in the curve of her right hip, he stumbles, trails a clumsy streak between two stars.

Damn.

The sound of his voice rouses her. She opens her eyes to see him bending his head towards the place where the brush slipped, smudging the stars. Then she feels his tongue on the skin that stretches across her hipbone. She gasps as he licks her slowly, once, twice, three times, clearing a space between the stars.

Now he puts down the eye-liner, steadies her at last with his touch. He fits one hand against each of her hips, strong fingers curving around the horizons of her body, thumbs pointing upwards to the star-covered canvas of her skin.

With his tongue he traces his way around the constellations he has painted, lighting each star in turn. She is glittering and burning in his hands and in his mouth and she cannot stop shaking until his body covers hers and she is pulling at his clothes and twisting and moving against him until all the constellations have been reconfigured, shared between his body and hers.

Later she discovers traces of silver on his lips, and on the inside of his thumbs, where he pressed them against her. And she finds on his body an afterimage, faint circles with trails of silver smudged behind them, like shooting stars, where his skin first touched hers.

She wakes alone but she can hear him in the kitchen, bare feet on wooden boards, cutlery restless, as a drawer slides out and in. She looks around the room, his room, and then he is at the doorway and next to her on the bed with a grapefruit on a clean, white plate.

Grace does not eat grapefruit. Warned, as a child, of its sourness, she has never even tried it. But today she wants a new taste, something sharp, that won't blur the edges of this memory, a flavour that will always now bring this moment back to her, this moment of Michael sitting beside her cutting the round fruit into two perfect halves.

She is glad to eat this sour fruit, glad of its wetness on her tongue, its tart taste cutting her throat. She loves the weight of it in her hand, its colour, like new skin that grows after you have been burned. She eats every bit of its pink flesh while she sits up in bed with him, her body still scattered with stars.



Painted with his brush and his tongue, imprinted with his myths, her skin feels different.  
She examines it, like a new tattoo.

## the first lie

After work on Monday Grace catches the bus along Mounts Bay Road to the university. Curving around the old Swan Brewery the smell of the river is in the air, the afternoon sun glinting like mercury on the water, the Winthrop clocktower up ahead among the trees. Grace hasn't been here since she graduated and as she gets off the bus she feels something like nostalgia, remembering the hope she had felt when she was studying, the feeling that she could prove her mother wrong.

She crosses the lawn to the clock tower, taking off her sandals to feel the cool grass under her feet. She carries them in her right hand as she climbs the stairs to Michael's office, holding her breath as she knocks. The room is so small he can open the door while sitting at the desk but when he sees it is Grace he stands up to let her in, closing the door behind her without speaking.

She looks at the neat piles of paper on his desk; the jar of pencil sharpenings; the photocopied diagrams of constellations pinned to the noticeboard and it feels so intimate, so full of him that she cannot meet his eye. She stands and stares at an open notebook, filled with his handwriting until he turns her around to face him, takes the shoes out of her hand and kisses her and kisses her until there is nothing left except her lips and her mad heart. She sinks back against the wall, pulling him down on top of her as she slides to the floor and they make love soundlessly in the narrow space between the desk and the window. Afterwards they lie in the darkening room, watching the lights from the cars on Hackett Drive reflected on the ceiling.

From the night they meet until the day Michael leaves there is not a night they do not spend together so there is always a new constellation and a new story. They escape the city, where it is too easy for the stars to hide amongst the bright lights. They seek out stretches of darkness on the beach or by the river, where the constellations are clear.

On the nights when the stars are blanketed with clouds, or their light is eclipsed by the moon, Michael makes sketches to accompany his stories, depicting for Grace the outlines of constellations which have already risen and fallen, or those that will not appear in the southern sky until later in the year. In the beginning, the names that Michael is so sure of are unfamiliar and difficult to Grace. But as she comes to know the shapes and stories of each constellation, their names become easier and she begins to love the sounds of them: Serpens, Cassiopeia, Eridanus.

Michael draws their shapes in lead pencil on thick, black paper, writing the name of each star beside the speck of silver that marks its place in the sky. He makes these pictures in the same neat, careful way he does everything and she is perhaps as absorbed by watching him draw as she is by the pictures themselves.

She glues the drawings into her diary, writing the myths Michael tells her alongside them. Somewhere between the words and the pictures their own story resides and when Michael is gone Grace will reread it, to bring back the sound of his voice and the way their heads were so close together in the telling. For though he told her the myth of Julpan on the first night they met, Grace has learned that he does not share the stories lightly. He guards them like ancient secrets and when he does tell them, it is in a voice so soft it is barely a whisper and Grace must lean very close to catch them.

Not all of Michael's stories are new to Grace. From the Greek myths there are fragments that are familiar to her, though at first she cannot place them. When she is alone she turns them over in her mind, hears them retold, not in Michael's voice but in a voice she knows just as well. It takes her some time to realise it is her mother's voice she is hearing, only softer, more kind. It is the way her mother used to sound when Grace's father was still alive, a time so impossibly distant Grace thought she had forgotten it. Yet here it is, returned to her through Michael's stories, a memory so unlikely Grace hardly dares to believe in it: she remembers, or thinks she remembers her mother reading these stories to her, before bed.

Grace does not ask her mother about her own childhood as other people do. She cannot check her memories against her mother's because she doesn't trust Madeleine to tell her the truth. What to do then, with this memory? She must trust herself, or else disregard it entirely and this she cannot do, she will not do. For beneath this first scrap of memory there lies another, more deeply buried, far more precious: her father sitting on her bed on top of the doona with the small blue flowers; Grace tucked inside, clean after her bath, wearing a long nightdress with frilly sleeves that makes her feel like a princess. Her legs only reach halfway down the bed and she wriggles down inside the covers to press her bare feet against her dad's legs.

He does not read to her from the books on the shelf above her bed: *Aesop's Fables*; *Myths and Legends*; *101 Stories for Girls*. Instead he makes stories up, tales that seem as strange and exotic to Grace now as they did when she was five years old: a church bell, struck by lightning; a tower with a hidden staircase and a trapdoor to the sky; a cathedral that floats above a city.

Grace doesn't tell anyone about these memories of her father. She hoards them like a fearful secret, believing that if she reveals them they will be taken away from her. She does not even share them with Michael. When he asks her about her father she tells him the first lie: I can't remember. It is what she has been telling people all her life, only before, it was true.

## her father's memory

For Grace, studying architecture was a way of honouring her father's memory. She had thought the choice would please her mother but Madeleine seemed to be set against it.

It's very hard work, she had said at first. Do you really think you have the discipline to work that hard?

In her first year Grace had worked harder than anyone. She had come top of her class, impressing her tutors and earning respect from the fourth and fifth year students for being the first to arrive, the last to leave; the only first year who would put in an all-nighter weeks before her folio was due.

You won't be able to keep this up, her mother said. Five years is a very long time.

But Grace would not give up architecture. She had chosen it because of her father, that was true. But she found she had a gift for it. In the ordered world of her scale drawings and models she felt content. She found a part time job at the State Library and moved into her own flat, a tiny place on Walcott Street: a hovel, Madeleine called it but it was a place where Grace could study in peace, where she did not have to justify herself any more.

Before her graduation, Grace had to remind herself that it was not in her mother's nature to apologise, or even admit to making a mistake. She knew that she should not expect her mother to say she was happy for Grace, or proud of her, or sorry for making things difficult. It was better to expect nothing from her and that way she could not be disappointed.

Grace had told herself that she did not need Madeleine's congratulations; that it was enough that her mother was there. But after the ceremony, as she watched the other graduates being greeted by their families with shrieks of excitement, kisses, applause, she found that it was not true. She allowed herself to be hurt by the fact that Madeleine had not even met her in the foyer, but had gone outside to smoke a cigarette, waiting for Grace to find her.

As Grace came through the French doors three boys ran past her onto the lawn, whooping and laughing as they tossed a mortarboard back and forth like a frisbee, their gowns flaring out behind them. Grace had wished she could kick off her high heels and run across the grass in her stockings to join in. Instead she had gone to meet her mother, had stood beside her, lining up the toes of her shoes against the square edges of the pond, steeling herself against what her mother was bound to say, waiting for her criticism.

You should have seen your father's drawings, Madeleine had said.

Grace thought she must have misheard. Madeleine never spoke of Grace's father; as a child Grace had been smacked for asking about him.

He had so many plans, such beautiful designs.

It felt like a gift, a sign that her mother had relented at last, that after all this time she had finally accepted Grace's decision to become an architect.

She should have known better than to think that her mother could ever change. But as she had walked across the stage to collect her degree, Grace had felt so proud it had seemed that anything was possible. She had been thrilled even by the certificate, the gown and her happiness had made her foolish.

Your father was a real architect, Madeleine had said. He didn't need a degree to prove it. You don't have half the talent he had. You'll never be what he could have been.

Grace felt like she'd been slapped. She turned and ran, down the steps, through the archway, across the lawn towards the Octagon Theatre. By the Somerville Auditorium she tripped and twisted her ankle but she did not stop; she kept running, past the floodlit tennis courts, over Hackett Drive, across the grass and down to the river.

Standing by the water, breathing hard, she had wrenched her degree certificate out of its folder and torn it roughly in half, then in half again, tearing and tearing, feeling the anger run through her arms, her fingers. She had stood for a long time in the darkness, not thinking, just watching the lights across the bay and then she had crouched down in the muddy grass and begun to pick up the scraps of paper, scrunching them up and putting them in the pockets of her gown. On her way back to the car park she had thrown the pieces of paper into a rubbish bin, turning out her pockets to make sure there was nothing left. She had not let herself cry; not then, not in the weeks that followed, as she had watched the people she studied with take the jobs that she would not apply for.

## a house of words

It is past noon when they arrive at Michael's block. Grace gets out of the car and flings her arms wide to take in the space. She rushes to the land's edge, breathing in great gulps, inhaling the expanse of sea and sky.

It's beautiful! she says, I can't believe you own this.

Well, there was a trade-off, he says quietly.

Grace looks at him.

I bought it with the money my dad left me. It's exactly what he wanted, a block by the ocean, to build a house for his retirement. Didn't make it that far though.

When did this happen? Grace asks.

It'll be three years this winter. A stroke. He was fifty-eight.

Grace says nothing, thinking of her own father, knowing there is nothing to say.

I wish he could see it, Michael says.

Grace puts her arm through his.

What are you going to do with it? she asks.

I want to build a place if I can ever decide on a design. What kind of house would you build here? he asks, turning to face her, if you could build anything at all?

And as the pale winter sun moves towards the sea, Grace builds him a house with words.

It is a tree house, she begins, a house with roots that go deeper than the trees themselves can reach. It is a house that breathes, that draws life from the soil in which it is planted, that turns its leaves to catch the rain. It is a changing house: naked in winter, blossoming suddenly in the spring. In summer its flowers become fruits, ripening and swelling in the heat until they drop to the ground and split open. It is a house that whispers in resistance and then bends in the wind. Its stories are held in rings within its trunk but you could only read them if you split the house open.

Or it is a boathouse, a house that floats, that rises and falls with the tide. It is sometimes anchored, sometimes unmoored: a house that drifts with the current, raises its sails to catch the wind, rides the heaving waves to shore.

It has church windows, lead-light archways filled with coloured stories. It is a house of worship. Or it has the small round windows of a submarine. It is submerged, aquatic, and you can swim through its portals like a fish.

Perhaps it is all windows, a greenhouse, flooded with light, absorbing the heat of the sun. Inside you breathe like the plants, photosynthesising, changing the air. It is brittle, transparent, with panes of glass that rattle in the wind and looking outwards, the world is all around you, divided into squares. It is a moist house, smelling of soil and of the green tomatoes that hang from the vines. It is a place for digging and planting, a place where if you wait long enough you can watch things grow and change colour before your eyes.

Grace has dreamed up houses like these before. But this is the first time she has flung open their doors and invited someone else inside. Lying beside her on the grass, Michael follows her into the wilderness of her imagination, into the dreamlike dwellings in which land and sea and sky are fused. As Grace talks, walls collapse around him and are rebuilt, the surfaces he feels beneath his fingertips become rough, then smooth, then rough again and the floors on which he stands disintegrate. He gazes through huge curving windows framing waves or clouds or the tops of trees. He runs his hands over smooth coloured tiles, arranged in patterns on the walls of a room in which a river runs beneath a glass floor. He clammers from day into night, up a winding staircase to a tower in which a skylight is filled with stars.

Driving home, Michael reaches over and claims Grace's hand, feeling his way across her knuckles, along the small bones of her fingers, letting go only to change gears. And all the way home he tells her stories so that afterwards she hardly remembers the scenery; the towns they passed through. She remembers only the names of the constellations, the sound of Michael's voice, how close they were inside the small car.



Will you build a house for me Grace?

Lying beside him in bed she laughs.

*I'm serious. I want you to build a house like the one we talked about at the block.*

That was just crazy talk, she says. You couldn't really build a house like that.

*I thought that's exactly what architects did.*

An architect is not the same as a magician Michael. Anyway, I'm not really an architect.

What do you mean by that?

I mean I've never built a house. I haven't even designed one really, not since I graduated.

*But you have these amazing ideas Grace. You're wasted at the library, and you don't even like it there.*

Grace sighs. Hasn't she longed for him to ask this of her? Haven't there been moments, days at a time even, when she has allowed herself to dream of the house she might build for him, for the two of them? But what if she tries and fails? She can't bear the thought that her mother might have been right all along. She will not ever allow her the satisfaction of saying, I told you so.

I'm sure someone else will be able to design something you'll like. I'll make a list of some good firms for you.

But they'd never see it the way you do. It's your vision I want.

I don't want to be an architect Michael. I told you that.

She hears the sharpness in her own voice and is sorry for it but she cannot help herself. It's the way she has always been: deflecting difficult questions with hard words, sealing herself up against people's curiosity.

I don't understand Grace, Michael says after a while. He speaks carefully trying to find a way around her anger. I don't understand why you'd study for all that time and then just give it away.

Grace thinks of all the friends and lovers who have turned away from her, tired of being closed out. She sees with a terrible clarity how like her mother she has become.

I wish I could build a house for you, she says finally. I wouldn't know where to begin.

We've already begun. I know you could do it.

How do you know? she asks him.

He moves towards her in the dark, loops his arms around her back, pulls her close to him so their faces are almost touching. They lie like this for a long time, taking in each other's breath and Grace cannot look at his eyes.

I'll do it, she says and he holds her tighter. I'll do it.

When they drive to the block for the second time it is Michael who leaps from the car and rushes towards the ocean. Grace does not follow him. She sits and looks and looks again at the colours and the light in this place he has chosen to live, and when he comes back to the car she cannot meet his gaze.

What's wrong? he says, opening the car door and kneeling on the grass beside her.

I'm afraid Michael. What if I change it and you don't like it?

He grasps her awkwardly, reaching around to clasp his hands at the small of her back, resting his face in her lap. Grace leans down to meet him and pressing her face into his spine she can hear him murmuring, I trust you. I trust you.

They walk the land together, wading through the long grass beneath the trees, making their way across the cliffs and back again. They do not talk much. Grace is taking measurements.

She does not measure with tapes and rules and calculators. She cannot reduce this space to a series of lines and figures. With her feet she traces out the parameters of Michael's land until she knows the length of each of its boundaries. She paces from one side to the other to gauge its width; from top to bottom to feel its depth. She stands at the very edge of the cliffs, soaking up the sensation of being balanced between the sky and the ocean.

You have to carry a space in your head for a long time before you can begin to think of changing it. You have to know how the sunlight falls across it at different times of the day; the ways it changes when the sea breeze rushes over it. You have to walk it and walk it until your feet come to know its undulations: its slopes and ridges and hollows. You need to understand its ways before you can imagine how you will reshape it; before you begin to draw and redraw the lines that will divide it; that will decide which parts become inside, and which outside.

Grace walks until she has absorbed the dimensions of this landscape, until its shape is imprinted in her mind. She takes it home with her, knowing it is only the beginning.

## **a stone inside her heart**

Grace lies inside the curve of Michael's body, her back against his chest. She feels his slow breath on her neck, slower still as he falls asleep. She cannot sleep. For tonight Michael has told her that he is going away. She will not let herself imagine living without him. She tries instead to think of the three weeks they still have left together, of the ways they might spend that time. Grace understands how important this trip is for Michael's research; how much it means to him to be able to collect these stories for himself. Lying awake beside him she reminds herself of this; of the fact that he planned the trip months ago; booked and paid for it before they even met. But none of these thoughts comfort her. She wants to press her face into his chest and sob.

Since the night they met on the balcony they have curled together every night, fallen asleep with their warm skins touching. Grace has woken sometimes, in the early morning light, to find that they have moved apart and are lying side by side, flat on their backs like children. But in the morning, her limbs are tangled with his and he stirs, and speaks suddenly, pulling her out of sleep.

There have been three weeks since the beginning and already she has begun to take these things for granted. Now she knows he is leaving, that has changed. From this moment she will be more careful; hold things tighter; remember more.

She must retrace her steps, back to where it began, gather up this time they have shared. She must search through the pockets of clothes, ransack cupboards and drawers, scramble on her hands and knees beneath the bed.

The smell of Michael's scalp; the shape of his mouth; the way he says her name: she imagines laying these things like seeds between the yellowing sheets of blotting paper and the layers of corrugated cardboard in her flower press. She will tighten the screws until the seeds are flattened, and push them under her bed. As they dry they will exhale the memories they hold, memories that will drift upwards and become lodged in the springs of her mattress. When Michael is gone, these memories will find their way into Grace's dreams as she moves restlessly in her empty bed.

In the mornings Michael gets up first and Grace crawls over to his side of the bed, absorbing the warmth he has left there. She burrows into the cocoon of his sleep, half-dreaming while she listens to him move around the flat in his quiet morning routine. When he sits on the

end of the bed to put his shoes on his weight wakes her fully and sitting up she can smell the shampoo in his wet hair. Five months without this, she thinks.

She becomes acutely aware of time. Her eyes flicker constantly back and forth to her wristwatch, monitoring the movements of its two tiny hands. Their pace, which has always been so steady, seems suddenly inconsistent, out of control. Sometimes the hands seem to leap forward when she is not paying attention so that half an hour or more escapes her, lost forever. Grace suspects that when she looks away those two hands dare each other to move a little faster, race each other even, so that she must be vigilant, keep her eye on them always.

Sometimes, in the night, she jerks awake guiltily as though she should have been keeping watch. Michael's night face is smaller, more freckled, opened on the pillow like a book. In his last moments of sleep his eyelashes move almost imperceptibly before the alarm rings and the day claims him from her.

They rush away from other things to meet, embracing each other like long-lost friends who have been separated for decades by family secrets, by war. They talk late into the night. Sleep matters less than searching each other's bodies for places where the skin is scored and darkened, leached of pigment or too soon wrinkled. With gentle fingertips they touch these scars, feeling for the stories which are embedded even in tissue long since healed.

They ask questions. They ask them again and again in different ways. Some answers come cautiously, a little at a time. They draw them out of each other like splinters. Half-asleep they make love and on waking, imagine they must have dreamed the smooth closeness of their bodies, rocking like boats moored on a slow river.

They say, this afternoon, tonight, tomorrow. They talk their way right up to the point of Michael's leaving but never a moment beyond it. His departure is like a secret that they both know and pretend not to know. Grace pictures it like a vast wall that lies ahead of them, stretching the length of the horizon. She feels as though they are hurtling towards it with no way of slowing down and she fears the impact. Every day the wall is closer and the question of what lies beyond it is the only one Grace cannot ask.

She carries the weight of the question alone. It is a stone inside her heart, blocking the valves, slowing the blood flow to her brain. When she thinks of it lying there, hard and heavy, Grace feels dizzy.

Grace always sleeps on the same side of the bed and Michael has hidden the present under her pillow, so he can't stop grinning while she's undressing, although he won't tell her

why. But when she feels it hard and flat and unyielding beneath her head she begins to laugh herself, before she even knows what it is.

He has wrapped it in layers and layers of tissue paper and as she tears them away, one at a time, the tiny cut-out stars that he has sprinkled between the layers fall out onto her lap. Before she has finished unwrapping it, Grace can feel from its weight and shape that it is a book and she sighs when at last she reaches it: *The Photographic Atlas of the Stars*.

There are maps, like the ones Michael has drawn for Grace, only in these maps the stars are black dots on sleek, white pages and there are black lines drawn between the stars to show how they have been joined into constellations. Beside the maps are lustrous photographs, in which the stars appear yellow or white against the blueblack skies and in the photographs you must imagine for yourself the lines that link the stars together.

So you can look for yourself, while I'm away.

Thank you, she says and thank you again as she lifts the shining dust-jacket to feel its hard cover, holds it close to her face to breathe in the smell of its glossy pages.

## the ways she knows him

By the time Grace gets home from the airport, Michael is already several hundred miles away from her. Yet the air in her flat still feels charged with his presence. And in her bedroom his smell makes her tight-throated and unsteady. She has the urge to shut the door, to make it last a little longer. She knows that within hours the smell will begin to fade. By tomorrow she will not be able to recall the scent that she breathed with her cheek on the ridge of his shoulder, her mouth against his neck. So that after only a day, one of the ways that she knows him will already be lost.

Her room seems full of spaces. She can see a hollow in the mattress where he slept; a curve where his head lay on the pillow. She thinks she will sleep without moving, so as not to disturb this space that was filled with his body. She wants to keep her bed in the shape that he left it, as though he has only just got up. It will comfort her, this pretence, when she wakes in the night without him.

She lies down now and rests her hand on the outline of his form. She imagines a heat emanating there and she cannot get up. It is eleven o' clock in the morning and she pulls the doona up over her head. She does not know how else to fill this empty day.

The flowers are dying. It is the day after Michael's leaving and when she wakes in the empty bed the wilting flowers are the first thing she sees. He bought them for her a week earlier and their glossy buds were tight and new: they had not even begun to open.

She's been given flowers before: bouquets crammed with colour and shape, each blossom jostling for her attention. But she's never had a slender handful like this, in which each flower is both the same and different. She can't remember ever seeing these tall, graceful stalks with their blossoms still hiding in the tight-closed buds. She does not even know their name until he tells her.

They're gladioli, he says, surprised, and she loves their name on her tongue, fluttering against the roof of her mouth.

He had been out all morning and she was glad to fill her empty hands with his flowers; to busy herself cutting the stalks and arranging them in a heavy vase. She worked quickly to cover up her excitement at seeing him, talking fast so he would not know how flat and slow the hours had been without him.

I missed you this morning, he had said.

And then she could come out of hiding, still her hands and press her face against his neck, knowing that his hours had been as long as hers.

These gladioli were not like other flowers. Their smooth, bare stems split open halfway up, revealing bud after bud: little green mouths opening slowly, with blossoms poking out like tongues at first and then unpleating, shaking out frilled petals, pale against their stems, like girls in skirts the colour of apricots on a green lawn. Grace thought that if she could play the harp, she would have coaxed those little flowers away from their stalks to dance and spin on the glass table. But they are torn and drooping now, edged with brown like long skirts that have been trailed through mud.

There are two flower shops on Beaufort Street. Grace walks past the one on the corner because she likes the man at the second one, whose family is always sitting at a table in the room you can see through the back door of the shop. He is a kind, unhurried Vietnamese man who greets Grace by name and when she asks, he tells her the names of the flowers she is buying. Sometimes a tiny child comes out of the back room and the man, whose name is Lam, introduces him to Grace. He is Lam's son, or perhaps even his grandson: a dark, beautiful boy with a round face and he hides behind Lam's legs, too small and shy to say hello.

In the summer, on the really hot days, the flowers wilt outside. Then Lam brings them in where they can hold their heads up again in the air-conditioning and when you walk through the door the air is heavy with their fresh, green scent.

Today the flowers are outside in their yellow, plastic buckets and though the bright look of them cheers Grace a little, she doesn't spend a long time looking: she already knows which ones she wants. Her gladioli are right beside the door and as she goes in to pay for them, dripping water across the lino floor, it is a relief to hear Lam speak her name, and to answer him as he wraps the flowers in translucent paper. It means nothing, really, their conversation, but Grace realises it is the first time she has spoken in more than twenty-four hours. Thinking that, she realises too that she is still measuring Michael's absence in portions as small as an hour.

She knows that soon, his distance from her in time will be measured in days and then weeks and that eventually she will count only the months since she has seen him. Later, she will find other ways of gauging Michael's remoteness. With a globe in front of her she will count the borders she would have to cross, the oceans she would sail to reach him. With the help of an atlas she will calculate Michael's distance from her in miles and then kilometres. And

lying awake at night, knowing that it is daytime where he is, she will count the time zones that divide them.

But for now she thinks only that it is a whole day since she has seen him and that until her conversation with Lam, she has been silent since the time they said goodbye.

We're good for each other, Michael had said, and then kissed her one more time before he walked down the corridor that led to the plane.

She had not looked to see if he turned back to wave when he reached the corner. She could not. She did not look at the row of small windows and try to guess against which one he might be pressing his face. And she did not watch through the vast windows when the plane took off ten minutes later. She was rooted to the spot at which he had left her, replaying his last words over and over again.

She can hardly remember driving home but she brought his words with her, carried them through sleep and back into waking. Then at last she wrote them down, so they could not be lost, and put the paper in a jar as if to preserve it.

Now, just holding the flowers in her hands as she walks home brings back to her that morning last week, which already seems so long ago. Grace had been on the telephone to her mother when Michael came into the kitchen and kissed the back of her neck. He had put the gladioli in her free hand while she was still talking and her mother had said, What's happened? Your voice has changed.



## **when he returns**

In the weeks following Michael's departure, Grace finds herself crying all the time. She cries at night when she goes out into the garden to look at the stars and again in the mornings when she wakes alone. She cries at the library, locked in a cubicle in the staff toilets; sometimes she even cries on the bus on the way home, hiding her face in her hands.

At work she is vague and distracted. She misplaces books, comes across them days later, incorrectly shelved or tucked in obscure places. She finds herself staring blankly at the string of numbers on the spine label of a book as if the Dewey decimal system is a foreign language which she once knew how to read and has somehow forgotten. Several times she is late, having slept through her alarm or fallen back to sleep. On the very bad days she doesn't make it to work at all. She lies in bed and dreams of the house she will build and of Michael coming home to live in it.

When he returns she will be doing the dishes. She will be at the sink in her pyjamas and she will turn sharply when she hears him at the door. He will be thinner, his eyes darker and she will wipe the tea towel round and round the rim of a wineglass. He will look at her and look at her and when he says her name she will break the stem of the glass between her fingers. She will drop the pieces on the tiles and they will crack under his shoes as he stands in front of her, licking the blood from her fingers, kissing her eyes to stop the tears.

When he returns she will be sleeping. She will wake to find him lying beside her, fully dressed, on top of the blankets. He will be curled up awkwardly as though he has tried to lie down without disturbing her.

She will not dare to touch him. She will think she is dreaming and if she reaches out to him he will dissolve in her hands. She will get up gently so as not to bump herself awake and kneel on the floor beside him, watching him breathe. She will want to get closer, to feel against her face the air from his warm mouth, his throat, his lungs. But she will be afraid to disturb him. Watching his eyelids flicker, she will know that she inhabits his dream as he does hers, and if either of them wake the spell will be broken.

In her dream she will sit for a long time watching him breathe and then she will go into the study to work on her model of the house. She likes this dream in which she cuts out panels of cardboard, curves them and glues them in place. And while they dry she can go back and sit beside her lover and watch him and watch him.

All morning he will sleep and she will work and the work will be slow because each time she returns to him there is more to look at. She cannot open her eyes wide enough to take it all in.

She will spend hours telling herself that he is not really there, that she is only dreaming him as she has a hundred thousand times before. It is not until she cuts herself on the blade of the Stanley knife and licks her hand clean that she will begin to doubt herself, suspecting that the warm, dark taste of blood cannot be dreamed.

And this time when she goes back to his sleeping body, she will lie beside him, curling around the shell of his back, inching towards the bare place on his neck between his shirt collar and his hair. She will press her face against him, draw her breath from his skin. And she will know then that he is real. Because memory might give her back a sound, a sight. But she cannot dream the smell of her lover's body. And she will grasp at his waist, the point at which he begins to curve away from her. She will rub her face against his clothes, and as he stirs in his sleep, she will reach up to cradle his skull in her hands.

When he returns she will be painting on the rough walls opposite the door. It will be early morning and she will be wearing a long, white dress, a clean streak breaking up the rich colours of her mural. She will see him in the doorway, turn back and carry on painting. She will not believe he is there. Her unsteady brush will lick back and forth at the same patch of wall and out of the corner of her eye she will watch him move towards her.

They will be on opposite sides of a circle and he could reach her in eight strides, cut the room in half with his strong legs. But he will come the long way round, inching along the slow curve of the big room. He will work his way around the wall, following with his hands the path she has laid in the plaster, feeling pebbles, coins, tiles, pieces of smooth glass.

When she feels him getting close to her she will begin to move the other way, so that they are circling like crabs inside the round house she has built for him. Then he will come to the place where she was standing and feel the fresh paint, cold on his fingertips. He will rush to where she leans against the wall, still clutching the paintbrush, hold her face in his paint-smear hands and say her name again and again.

## the shape of her name

Once she has got used to the idea of designing a house for Michael, Grace finds that she is looking forward to getting started. She thinks that if it goes well she might try to get other commissions, perhaps even set up her own business. She has not allowed herself these daydreams since she made the decision to give up architecture but the pleasure it gives her to contemplate such things makes her realise how much she has missed it.

Grace had intended to begin her plans for Michael's house as soon as he left. She remembers working on designs at university, becoming so absorbed that three or four hours could pass without her noticing and only the cramp in her neck or her wrist would stop her. She thinks it would help her now to focus on something practical, something so intricate and precise that it would require all her concentration, and her thoughts of Michael, her longing for him would be pushed to one side to make space for angles and equations, measurements and calculations.

When Michael was with her, the idea of designing a house seemed, not easy but by no means impossible. But after he leaves Grace's doubts resurface. It is not just her own ability she feels uncertain of, it is also the feeling that she doesn't really know what Michael wants. Thinking back over their conversations about the house she realises that they didn't make any real decisions. She doesn't know the most basic things, such as how many bedrooms Michael wants, or even whether he wants one storey or two.

Grace remembers only silly ideas they had, impossible suggestions that she had thought of as jokes.

I could put a skylight in every room, she had said to him once, so that wherever you are you'll be able to look up and see the stars.

I've got a better idea, Michael had said. Why not make the entire roof out of glass?

When she had pressed him for something more real he had said, you're the architect Gracie, you decide.

You're the one who's got to live there Michael. I want to make sure you'll like it.

*I'm happy to leave the decision to you. You know what I like.*

And though it had been less than two months since they met, Grace had felt that she did know him, that apart from her mother there was no-one she had ever known better. But now he is gone she is not so sure. She feels unwilling to make choices on his behalf, afraid that she will make the wrong choices and it will become obvious that she doesn't really know him at all.

I'll write first, Michael had said. I'll find out the best place for you to send your letters and I'll write with the address.

So instead of beginning the plans, Grace makes a list of questions that she will send in her letter to Michael, once he writes to her. *If* he writes to her.

No-one else had ever called her Gracie. She loved the sound of her name in his mouth, on his breath, the way he stretched it out like a song. When he called her by name she was renamed, plunged again beneath the water, emerging clean and new.

When his letter arrives, her name is remade once more, transformed by his hands, from a sound into a shape. She loves his handwriting, the way his lean fingers mould the familiar letters of their alphabet.

His are tall, curling characters; long-tailed; leaning to one side with their arms linked together. He has joined them in neat rows to spell out the name of her street, the place where she lives: a place that he came to, and changed, and left; a place that weeks after his leaving is still heavy with his absence.

Her name and address in his handwriting: she reads them again and again like a poem.

He has not written her last name. It is the name that holds her history, her family, a wealth of stories she has not yet told him. Perhaps he is waiting to be offered these before he will use that name.

She finds his name on the back of the letter, in the top left-hand corner, above his return address. Her Michael is a Porter, one who carries, who moves her heart from place to place as he goes. Porter, Porter she says to herself, tracing her finger along the shallow V of the slim, white envelope, the line he has sealed with his tongue.

She is afraid to break that seal. She has never had a letter like this before, where the feelings might be pinned in the careful folds of the paper, as much as in the words themselves. And to break it open, to unfold it, might dissipate the energy of this small, rectangular package.

Grace keeps the letter for a whole afternoon. She comes back to it and comes back to it, feels her way around its sharp edges, imagining the way he will catch his thoughts on paper. And at last she slits it open, her hands shaking, sliding out a single sheet of thick, textured paper.

Though he writes to her almost every night, the Egyptian postal service is notoriously unreliable and sometimes Grace will go for several days without a letter. Then she has a thirst which cannot be quenched, though she drinks and drinks until she thinks she will drown. She

moves slowly, as if through water, her thoughts diluted, senses afloat. When at last the letters arrive Grace tears them open, drinks them with her eyes, in one long draught. She would swallow them whole if she thought it would slake her thirst.

On other days, better days, two or three letters will arrive at once. Then Grace plays a game with herself to see how long she can make them last. Sometimes she can string them out all day. She'll keep a letter with her, stored somewhere in her clothing. She can hear it crackling as she walks around the library; she likes to slide her hand into her pocket and feel it lying there, crisp and slim and full of promise.

When she finally opens it she'll read just one paragraph at a time, dig among the roots of each word for a richer meaning. She'll read those lines until they have become indelible and their pattern on the page is fixed in her memory. Then the words are freed, released from the paper and she can imagine Michael speaking them aloud. They are filled by the sound of his voice like sails in the wind and she can follow their billowing movement.

Michael had explained, before he left, how the stars and planets appear to change places as the earth turns, so that in the northern sky, the stories that lie amongst the stars are not the same as those found in the southern hemisphere. These tales are the ones Michael shares with Grace now: different stories from a different sky. He sends her new versions of familiar myths: the girl, chained naked to a rock to be devoured by a sea monster as punishment for her own mother's boasts about her beauty; known to the Greeks as Andromeda, in Arabian mythology she is Al Mar'ah al Musalsalah, the woman in chains. Michael gives Grace the Arabian names not only for the constellations themselves, but for the stars that make up these constellations. They are ancient, beautiful names that Grace swirls around her mouth, whispers to the night sky, holds like jewels beneath her tongue: Rasalmothallah, Hamal, Nair al Butain.

In Michael's letters each character is long and full and regular, the careful words he has chosen lying easy on the page. Her own are restless, painful letters, in which the feelings come at her in rushes, the ink thick and then thin, the flooding of certain pen strokes betraying the points at which she has paused, to slow her unsteady heart.

Grace spends days composing her replies. She gathers thoughts and incidents, chooses words for their shape or colour, gripping their stalks in her palm like flowers, adding and discarding and rearranging. Yet when she takes up a pen she loses this careful harmony of elements. Words, phrases are scattered and she scrabbles desperately amongst them, writing in a frenzy. She cries without wiping her face, smears ink and feelings across the page that is gripped by a longing so intense that her words can't hold it. She thinks she should be writing in

blood. Or sending pages blank, except for her tears: a watermarked map of her sadness. Then he could taste her loss, see its outline on a page like one of his constellations.

Sometimes she scoops wildly at the air around her, catching fragments of thoughts, daydreams, words she has murmured in sleep. She tips them onto sheets of paper, pins and glues and presses them down, twisting and folding the paper so they cannot escape. She does not send these letters.

Grace likes to carry Michael's letters with her. Sometimes she rereads them but mostly she finds that just holding them in her hand gives her as much pleasure. The physical reality of the letters is reassuring to her: the texture of the paper, the colour of the ink, the sharp creases Michael makes when he folds the paper. The letters give Grace something solid to lean against and at first, just the fact that he is writing is enough for her.

She loves to read the myths he tells her; the stories of the Nile, a river without bridges; his descriptions of the desert, of a sky so densely packed with stars that he has to seek out each constellation one star at a time. But after a while Grace begins to feel that there is something missing from the letters, that reading them does not bring him closer to her as she had thought it would. She does not expect him to write, *my darling, my only one*. They had not spoken to each other that way. They had not needed to. When they were together, Michael said everything he needed to say in the way he touched the back of her neck; the way when he kissed her, he held her face in both his hands. Michael had never told Grace he loved her but she thought she knew it.

Only now, she doubts it, for there is nothing in his letters to show it. He could send the exact same letters to his mother or brother, his PhD supervisor even, and he wouldn't have to change a word. To read the letters you would never believe that only weeks ago they were sharing every hour; sleeping skin to skin; two stars caught in each other's orbit. Michael writes neither of their past, nor their future.

Grace had believed that what Michael wanted and what she dreamed of was the same thing: to live in the house together when he returned. She had never dared to put this into words. She had hoped that in a letter it might be easier to say but she finds that, in fact, it is more difficult. There are so many questions Grace needs to ask Michael. But the thought of committing them to paper and sending them away, and then waiting and waiting for a response, the thought of this makes her feel sick. So she does not ask, *do you miss me as I miss you?* Instead she writes, *which rooms should face the ocean?* And the real questions remain unasked and unanswered.

## spanning the abyss

Grace dreams a story her father once told her, of a bright picnic in a field with very long grass. She lies on a rug with Michael, or they are walking and he is holding her hand so that it feels small inside his. In this dream that is like an old movie, Dean Martin is singing *Volare*:

*No wonder my happy heart sings*

*Your love has given me wings*

Then the sound of a car starting wakes her, and she is at home, in bed on a cold morning. Michael is still there in the field and she cannot find her way back to him.

They are contrary things, dreams, she thinks. The ones that you want to last are always lost too soon, and when you want to escape early you cannot.

Sometimes they are walking at night in the rain. She is wobbling in stilettos and he is going too fast for her. She is shouting at him and crying. She hates this dream, and those shoes in which she can't walk. She doesn't know where it comes from but it returns to her, over and over again and she comes to know her part, like being in a play.

She dreams him every night the same, his eyes with the bright look of morning. Or she dreams him every night differently. It looks like him but his voice is wrong. Sometimes he is there but he looks like someone else and she does not recognise him. Or he does not know her, turns away when she speaks to him. She wakes up aching.

Some nights they are climbing through the sky. The stars are shining pegs hammered into the dark night and he names them as he rests his feet upon them or grips them with his hands. He knows his way around the southern sky; the distances between the stars. He carries the map in his mind. It tells him which way to reach; when he must let go and leap.

She moves more slowly. She is afraid to lose her foothold, to span the abyss from one constellation to the next and he is impatient, climbs up beyond her, so high she can't see him any more. She can't move up or down. She hangs there, stretched over the Southern Cross until her arms are too tired to cling. She drops with a thud back to earth and lies stunned, her eyes roaming the heavens for a glimpse of him.

Halfway between sleeping and waking she imagines his words like fish, green scales shimmering in the white sea of his letters. They are flicking their tails, swimming to the edges of the pages, and over and she has no net to catch them with, and they are lost. Though the letters disappoint her, they are the only tangible connection Grace has with Michael; the only thing that keeps her from thinking she imagined him.

She has committed each one to memory as resolutely as a poem you learn by heart for school. But she is still afraid to lose them and she reaches for them as soon as she wakes.

They hold his words as they did when she last looked at them, and are not, as she feared, the blank pages of her dream. Yet she senses a restlessness in the words that she has not noticed before and she feels a need to trap them now, so they will not escape her.

She captures the letters at the beginnings and the ends of the lines, seizing them by their arms or their tails, and pinning them down to stop them moving. She joins two sheets of paper at a time with these columns of pins and then begins to join the pairs of pages into rows, so that the words are hemmed in on both sides, unable to move either left or right. She uses pins with coloured baubles on the ends, so that when she is finished the baubles are like buoys. They bob at the sides of the pages, with strings of words tethered to them, floating out across the pale ocean of the paper.

Yet Grace wants something more permanent to anchor these words. She chooses a dark, green thread to match Michael's ink, a long thick needle, blunt-ended with a big eye. And she begins to sew along the seams she has pinned.

When she holds the needle she is the needle, with her feet locked together and the thread looped through the gap between her ankles and her knees. She stretches her arms above her head like a diver, hands pointing, so that she will not fracture his words with splayed fingers as she breaks the surface of the paper. She dives again and again through what he has written, towing behind her the thread that is the same colour as his thoughts. It marks her path, shows the size of the breaths she takes before she plunges under. She swims between the fronts and the backs of his letters, weaving under and over his words, disrupting the order of his thoughts. Sometimes, in the spaces between the lines she rests, floating between what he has said, and what he is yet to say.

She likes the push of the needle puncturing the paper, the sound of the thread being drawn through the hole. When she has finished, each page is framed by two neat rows of stitches. They mark out the shoreline of his letters and his words are tied to them like boats in a harbour, so they cannot drift out to sea.

By joining the letters in long rows, Grace finds that she has not only captured them: she has transformed them. Where once, each letter was a closed capsule, now each is connected to those it lies beside. There is a larger narrative for her to read, and the continuity of Michael's story has been disturbed. Trains of thought crash into one another as she moves from halfway through one letter to the beginning of another.



She tries to carry the threads of each tale with her as she reads, but sometimes she won't find the ends until she reaches the other side and by then her threads have become tangled: Michael's stories inseparable from each other. So that in her mind, even his path through Egypt becomes confused and the map on which she marks his trail is a mass of back tracks and diversions and loops, taking him back to where he has already been.

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## the names on his lips

Grace has no photos of Michael, nothing to anchor the picture of him in her mind. Sometimes she cannot recall his face at all and she ransacks her memory in a state of panic. She might lose him in this way for days, and then in a dream he will be restored to her. But each time he returns he is a little fainter, his features slightly less sharp and after some time she begins to wonder if the picture she holds in her mind is true. She fears that he will come back and she will not recognise him, that she will pass him in the street without knowing.

They had talked about phoning each other, about fixing days and times, taking turns, reversing charges. In the end they had decided it would be better not to speak on the telephone. He had his work, she had hers and Michael had thought it was better, *healthier*, he had said, to focus on these things – the research, the house – rather than on each other's absence.

It does not seem possible to Grace now that she could have agreed to this plan. Her need to hear his voice is like a sickness. If she could, she would break their agreement in a minute. But now she does not know how to find him.

Grace had seen Michael's itinerary. He had finalised it a week before he left, printed it out just before he came to meet her for lunch and she could tell he had been looking at it as he walked over to the library; that all the way through the train station and over the Roe Street Bridge he had been thinking about the places he was to visit, savouring the beauty of the names. By the time he came into the library he had put the itinerary away but the names were still on his lips, the excitement coming off him like an electrical charge.

Apart from the night when Michael first told Grace about his trip, they had hardly spoken about him going away. Even though she knew how important it was to him, Grace had not wanted to look at Michael's itinerary. She had not wanted to see anything so concrete as a list of dates and place names because then she would have to admit to herself, on this day Michael won't have lunch with me or meet me after work; he won't walk with me to the bus stop or kiss me goodnight. I will not hold his hand or touch his face or say his name, for on this day he will be somewhere else, in a town I have never heard of, a place so foreign and distant I cannot even begin to imagine it.

But that day they had taken the lift to the third floor of the library, Michael had spread his itinerary out on the table and Grace had helped him to search through atlas after atlas for the places he was travelling to. There were the places whose names were written in capital letters, in bold print; those mystic cities whose photos can be found in history books, encyclopedias,

travel brochures. Then there were the towns without pyramids; without relics of the Pharaohs; places that tourists and archaeologists leave alone. There were towns that Grace had never heard of, whose names she did not know how to pronounce. And in between these were towns and villages so small, so insignificant that they were deemed unworthy of inclusion, even on the most detailed map Grace could find. These were the places Michael most wanted to visit.

Michael had told Grace that the Egyptians were believed to be the first people to give shapes and names to groups of stars and that these ancient stories have been preserved, held in trust for centuries by scientists and scholars. But those myths that were carved into tablets of stone, written in hieroglyphs on papyrus scrolls, these were only part of what Michael was hoping to find in Egypt. What was more important to him was to find the local variations of these age old stories, those that had never been written down, only told and retold a hundred thousand times so that as they passed from family to family, from village to village, the stories changed. Michael had believed that it was in the places too small to appear on the maps that these stories were waiting to be found.

Michael had glued the itinerary into the travel notebook Grace had bought for him, a beautiful moleskin book with soft corners, yellowed pages. She had wanted to write an inscription but she had been afraid that if she began to write her feelings for him she would fill the entire book herself. So instead she had written a quote she had found in a book about star names: *Thou canst not know how much we Arabs depend upon the stars. We borrow their names in gratitude and give them in love.* At the bottom of the page, in much smaller script, she had written, *with all my love, Grace.*

Michael had stuck the itinerary on the inside cover and alongside it he had written the names and telephone numbers of his contacts in Egypt: anthropologists and archaeologists and astronomers he had been corresponding with for months, the people who would help him to find translators and guides, places to stay; who would open for him collections of rare documents held by the museums and libraries and universities; who would help him track the histories of these myths that were thousands of years old.

Now Grace regrets that she did not pay more attention to the details of Michael's trip. She wishes she had made copies of the maps, reprinted the itinerary and folded it away somewhere.

Needing something else to occupy her in the empty evenings Grace returns to her plans for the house. She has made notes from Michael's responses to her lists of questions about the house; she knows enough to lay down a rough plan. Yet when she begins, she finds fault with

every line she draws; tearing page after page from her notebook, unable to capture her vision on paper.

## conceived in a dream

In the first dream the house is gleaming like a mirage against the backdrop of sky and sea, its walls undulant as water, patterned and textured like shells. There are openings in its smooth surface, coloured portals that beckon to Grace. Their invitations are whispered in the dry grass, carried towards her on the breeze that rises from the ocean. In her excitement Grace begins to run. But as she nears the house she slows uneasily. For the doors that she has imagined herself passing through have no handles; the windows which she has yearned to gaze into are dull and opaque. They are merely painted impressions of doors and windows: illusions on the façade of a house that she may never enter.

The next time she dreams her way inside. There is glass in the windows, glinting in the sunlight as she approaches and she reaches out to feel it hard and flat beneath her fingers. Moving around the walls she clutches at the door handle, grasping it fiercely, as though it is a fish she has caught with her bare hands; as though it will wriggle away. It is a wooden doorknob, large and round, smooth against her skin. She turns it carefully, pushing her way inside. She is waiting to be cheated again, half-expecting the house to disintegrate as she crosses the threshold. She is shaking when she steps over the sill and stands at last inside a space that until now, she has been unable to grasp hold of.

Her eyes are drawn to the window facing west. She has pictured the view from this window again and again: the expanse of grass leading to the land's edge, the water, the sky. But now she is here the scene is all wrong. She sees nothing but ocean through the glass, as though the house sits right on the edge of the cliffs. And then she feels it shift beneath her and lurch seawards and she knows it is true.

She wakes up to find herself lying on her back with her arms locked stiff above her body as if to break her fall. Her muscles ache as though she has been poised there for hours. And the house is gone. She cannot recall its shape or colour. She cannot even remember what it felt like to stand inside it.

Sometimes the house seems to waste away as Grace approaches. Though it appears sturdy from a distance, by the time she is standing beside it, it is paper-thin. When the breeze rushes through the grass it is lifted from the ground, teeters restlessly above her head, until a sudden gust of wind tears it open and blows it away.

Occasionally the house resists these winds. It flutters and creaks and sways but it does not leave the ground. Then the rain comes. Grace sees it darken the horizon and sweep across the water towards her and she races to the trees for shelter. These are huge raindrops, bursting

open as they hit her face and body, drumming on the ground around her as she runs. The rain comes down in sheets. The long grass cowers, the trees bow down in the deluge and Grace is drenched, sodden, watching the house she has built as it is pounded to the ground.

These dreams all begin the same way. Grace is walking out from under the trees that lie to the north east of the block, between the house and the gravel road. The land slopes down from there towards the sea and from that distance the house always looks the same. Grace has come to know its curving shape and the way the golden stone is broken up by the coloured windows. Each time she enters the dream she recalls these things. Yet she approaches the house cautiously. For there is always a flaw in her creation, that she cannot detect until she is very close to the house or sometimes even inside it. And though she has come to expect this, she is never prepared for it and often the shock wakes her.

In the dream she fears the most, the house is barely recognisable. It is crouched low on the land, hunched over and twisted in on itself. Its smooth shell has cracked open, making space for strange, twisting growths to sprout from the fissures in its golden walls. It has a seething, malevolent presence which makes Grace want to run away. Yet when she turns her back it seems to grow wilder, more disfigured and she steels herself to face it, to peer through its small, mean windows to the dark, cramped spaces within. For this monstrous thing, she thinks, is what I have created.

Grace is waiting. She thinks that once, just once, she will dream the house exactly as she wants it to be. There will be no tricks this time. She will see the house before her, perfect in every detail. She will walk through it undisturbed and it will not fade or crumble or distort before her eyes. Only then, Grace believes, will she be able to carry the house with her out of sleep, and transfer it to paper.

For now, though she visits the house almost every night, she cannot return to her waking life with its image intact. In daylight its form eludes her. From each dream she brings back only fragments: the pattern of tiles in a mosaic pool; the corner of a rooftop garden; the first few steps of a winding staircase. She cannot fit these elements together. She does not see them as part of a whole.

The art shop is at the quiet end of Hay Street, on the opposite side of town to the library. It's a good long walk past the theatre and all the little cafes and lunch bars and then the row of shops selling sheet music and guitars. All the way there Grace is talking to herself, not out loud, not so anyone else would know, just quietly, in her head. You're an architect, she is

saying. You build houses the way other architects do, the way you were trained to. You work from the ground up. You start with lines and numbers on a page. You work in black and white.

Last night in her dreams, the house had grown upwards and outwards until its smooth walls resembled those of a fortress. Only the vast windows broke the surface, their beautiful stained-glass images stretched to distortion. The house seemed to push at the boundaries of the land; to encroach upon the ocean so that it shied away from the cliffs; even perhaps to threaten the sky. Though she feared that the house was continuing to grow, that it would engulf her as she walked, Grace circled it endlessly and when she woke, she felt the exhaustion of it in her aching legs. She thought she would write to Michael that day, tell him about the dreams, explain that she couldn't carry on. Then looking in the mirror, she slapped her own face until it was red, heard herself saying, in a voice that sounded like her mother's, pull yourself together, Grace.

When she reaches the art shop she remembers the way the supplies are crammed into the small space, shelves high up the walls piled with notebooks and sketchbooks; trays of paper stacked one on top of the other; boxes of paint and glue, pencils and pens on the floor, under the tables, behind the counter. Grace feels overwhelmed by the array, filled with a sense of possibility that makes her dizzy.

She's never really looked around before, though she's seen people in there sometimes buying rich-coloured paints in pots or tubes; wooden-handled brushes with soft, blonde bristles; felt tipped pens with thick, moist nibs that hiss as they move across a page. Instead of buying plain sketchbooks there are people who buy their paper by the sheet: heavy, white paper with feathery ridges; metallic paper that leaves gold dust on your fingers; tracing paper with patterns of waves or clouds as fine as breath. In her mind she labels these people 'artists'. She thinks of them as separate from herself.

She has always thought of architecture as more ordered than art, bound by angles and algebraic formulae and the limitations of its materials: stone, concrete, wood and steel. Grace's tools are pencils with hard, grey leads, set squares, pens that produce lines so thin you can barely see them; geometrical lines, formed by leaning these sharp nibs against the flat edges of rulers.

This morning Grace convinced herself that she could trap the vision that torments her with the rigid, unyielding tools of maths and science. And yet, the sight of their hard edges numbs her. As she holds them in her hands even the vague shadow of the house which hovers, almost imperceptibly just beyond sight, becomes formless; begins to diminish.

Grace fights the urge to put them down. This is what you came for, she tells herself fiercely. Yet all of her senses are telling her that these unseeing, unfeeling implements cannot help her to capture the blueprint of a house conceived in a dream.

For the architectural plans she has been taught to draw; the computer programs she has learnt to use might show the scale of the house, its depth, width and height. But they will leave out its colour; the rhythm of its shape; the way it is changed by light. She could draw straight, flat lines to delineate walls, floors, ceilings: the structures that contain space. But they will tell her nothing about the space itself, how she will feel when at last she stands inside it.

The house that haunts her is a living, breathing thing. To diminish it to a line drawing, to rob it of colour would be to deprive it of life. It would be like drawing the human body without the heart and the lungs, without the organs that make it live.

Grace puts the tools down. She realises now that these instruments will only drive the house further away from her. She is drawn instead to a rack of pencils in a corner of the shop. There are coloured pencils in sets of twelve or twenty-four or forty-eight, arranged by colour, from dark to light in their flat tins. Or there are pencils you can buy separately, selecting from a slotted box in which each shade has its own space. Grace remembers the woody smell of sharpening pencils, the flakes of coloured lead, the fragile shavings with their frills scalloped like choirboys' collars. She chooses them by their names: deep vermilion, lemon cadmium, copper beech and crimson lake.

Walking back to the car Grace wonders what she has done. With her coloured pencils in her hand she feels like running, or shouting. And yet she feels the urge to turn back, as though she has left something behind. Her new sketchbook seems like the only relic from her past; its clean smell of order, of routine, of a nine o' clock class, of meaning and purpose. Its weight under her arm is a comfort, a forgotten familiarity, an anchor.



## a paper house

Driving home Grace has to admit to herself that she has lost her way; come to a dead end; fallen like Alice, down a deep hole, to find herself in a corridor full of doors which are closed to her. There are keys, and the little cakes labelled *Eat Me*, which will transform her in such a way that she will pass easily through these doors which now block her path. But the keys and the cakes, the secret passwords and combinations are all at the very beginning. So the only way to go on is first to go back.

She has lost contact with the land, misplaced her sense of its atmosphere, the way it is framed by sea and sky. She knows now that is why the form of the house evades her. For you cannot design a house in a vacuum, with no feeling for the space which will surround it.

She stops at a hardware shop to buy a small axe, gathers her sleeping bag and pillow, packs clothes and food, a torch, her new sketchbook and pencils. And in a large cardboard box she stacks the bundles of the letters she has sewn into rows, throws in pins, darning needles and a bale of dark green wool.

Loading the car, driving out of the city, Grace feels the tight spring inside her begin to uncoil, her stomach muscles relaxing, lungs expanding as her breathing slows and she knows she is moving in the right direction.

It's a clear day, warm and sunny, worlds away from the wintry journeys she made with Michael. She thinks back to that first drive when all of it was new: his voice, his stories about the stars, the way he gripped her hand. She had known him for less than twenty-four hours then and already everything had changed.

When Grace pulls up at the block she gets that feeling you have when you arrive home after being on holiday. It is the wonderful comfort of a place you know well, a space that feels like your own. And yet it is not her own. But even the smell is familiar, though she had not known she carried in her head its peculiar scent of grass and salt.

She parks her car in the cool shade of the trees and walks out towards the ocean. It is dazzling in the afternoon light and coming to its edge she leans over to hear it lapping against the cliffs, tastes the salt on her lips.

With her belly and face in the grass she draws its smell through her nostrils, into her throat and imagines that she can feel it growing beneath her. Perhaps the imprint of the house is already there, in the earth, in the sky. If she surrenders herself to the space it will guide her, reveal the shape to her.

Grace sits beneath the trees with her box of letters and threads a darning needle with the dark green wool. Unfolding a row of letters she reveals the neat columns of stitches which join one page to the next. She lays it out on the grass and spreads another row of letters above it, adjusting them carefully until the top of the first line is overlapped by the bottom of the second. She pins them together like this and begins to sew, rereading them as she works, stopping now and then to stretch her neck and look out over the water.

Grace passes again and again beneath Michael's signature: his name in his own writing loosened, freed to take its natural form. Each time she wants to pause beneath it, put down her needle and run the tip of her finger around the loops and lines of that familiar and beloved shape. Sometimes she does. Mostly she resists the urge, sees the sun drawing closer to the horizon and sews a little faster.

Stiff-fingered, she comes to the end of the last row, ties off the thread at the corner of a vast sheet upon which each of Michael's separate stories has been transformed, melded into one great, seamless narrative. His ink, her thread: green markings on an expanse of white, spread like a quilt beneath the darkening sky.

Grace is woken early by the light, or perhaps it is the birds, their frantic morning songs puncturing her quiet dreams. Exhausted, she had gone to bed almost as soon as it was dark. Lying in her sleeping bag in the back seat of the car, the night sky was framed by the window and Grace watched familiar stars appearing in the square of glass, lulled herself to sleep murmuring their names.

It is a clear day and cool enough in the shade for Grace to wear a thick jumper while she moves beneath the trees. She leaves her sleepiness behind her as she picks among the branches that have fallen in the winter storms and her vision, that was at first so vague, becomes clear as she begins to find what she is looking for. She chooses long, straight, slender branches, taller than her own body when she holds them up against herself. Dragging them out from under the trees she strips them of twigs and foliage and she is sweating as she flays the last branch, her jumper discarded now, the sun all the way up above her head.

Grace is hungry again by then and she stops to eat lunch, resting her back against a tree and looking out across the rippling grass to where the house will one day stand. She knows she is nearer to catching hold of it here, feels that the work she is doing today will draw it closer still, within her grasp at last.

After lunch she grabs the axe from the boot and works at the branches one by one, hacking the end of each into a sharp point. It is hard work and she is tired afterwards, feeling

the weight of the axe in the length of her arms; in muscles that she rarely uses. But she feels close to the end now, her vision almost realised and she doesn't want to wait until tomorrow and sleep another night in the car.

So she hardly stops before she is up again, pushing the pointed ends of the sticks into the ground, driving them deep with the weight of her own body. She had thought of how she would make the tepee while she ate her lunch and she doesn't have to think now, can use all her energy in the labour, arranging the sticks in a circle, slanting inwards so that their unburied ends are almost meeting in the centre. She binds them together with the rough twine she bought, chafing her fingers as she loops it around each stick in turn, pulling them in one by one to nestle against each other, tying knot after knot to hold them fast.

Late in the afternoon Grace at last unfolds the sheet she has made out of Michael's letters and wraps it, like a cloak around the frame. Then her vision is complete: sticks like bones forming the conical skeleton; Michael's letters stretched like a skin across it, making it live. She secures the fragile membrane by wrapping twine round and round the top of the frame where the paper is bunched up against the sticks; by gathering stones to weigh down the edges of the vast sheet, where it lies on the ground, outside the circle of sticks.

Where one end of the sheet overlaps the other there is a flap, like a doorway and Grace peels it back now and crawls inside the first house she has ever built.

The thick, white paper has become translucent in the afternoon sun and Grace finds herself inside a cone of light, its surface rippled by thousands of words. In the spaces between the branches of the frame Grace can see both sides of the letters at once, the script on the outside of the tepee merging with that on the inside so that in one final transformation Michael's letters have become unintelligible: their meaning can only be remembered, or imagined now.

Grace sleeps with her sketchbook beside her. In the mornings the sun illuminates the paper shell that surrounds her and she begins to record her dreams as soon as she wakes, her usually neat writing loosened by sleep and by her urgency to write as much as she can remember before the dream fades. She has given up on fixing an image of the house in her mind, and dragging it from night into morning. She writes instead of the colour of the sky when it is clear overhead, or of the sparse cloud smeared across it; of the sound of the wind in the grass, or the ocean murmuring to the cliffs. She writes about the glossy leaves on the trees, or their bare branches creaking, creaking. Now the house is just one part of the dream and she writes about the ways it changes and how she feels, always how she feels.

Later, when Grace rereads her dreamscapes she finds inside them a tiny portal through which she can pass, a passageway back towards her dreams. She cannot return to the dreams themselves: once dreamed they are like sealed rooms which she may never re-enter. But she comes to a place that is just outside them, a kind of antechamber. And here, one morning she finds a remnant of the house she visited the night before.

It is a small, round window, a submarine portal just like the one she described to Michael that first day they spent at the block. It is a window that overlooks the ocean and in Grace's dream the ocean rose above it so that looking out she felt that she lived beneath the sea. The house became aquatic, flooded with light filtered first through the water and then through the coloured glass, and the window opened both ways so that you could invite the ocean in or swim out to meet it. Inside her tepee, Grace still holds the fragile image of it in her mind: a leadlight pattern of two fishes, representing the constellation of Pisces, in yellow and red and orange, moving like flames or like the sun through water that is blue glass. This is the first time she draws something tangible from her dream life and after this time, each of her dreams yields a fragment of her house.

Grace spends the days roaming the block. She walks and walks, or sometimes she sits and tries to imagine the house that is just beginning to take root. Alongside her written accounts she draws pictures of the things she has retrieved from her dreams. She keeps her coloured pencils in a cigar box which she carries everywhere and her book fills gradually with images of doorways and windows, archways and mosaic panels, alcoves, skylights and staircases. At first these elements seem to float in space, unrelated, with nothing to bind them to each other. And then Grace comes to think of designing the house as being like solving a jigsaw puzzle: she must first collect all the pieces and only then can she begin to work out how she will fit them all together.

After five days Grace's sketchbook is filled with descriptions and images of the house. The land is feeding her vision, giving it a tangible form, and Grace is once again able to believe that one day the house might really exist. But she is lonely, aching to hear word of Michael. Not knowing how long she would be away for, she has asked her neighbour to collect her mail, imagining a stack of Michael's neat letters waiting to be opened when she returns. One of those letters, she thinks, could be the one she has been holding out for, the letter that will say all the words she longs to read. So on the sixth day she empties the tepee, reloads her car and heads for home.

## **all that she hopes for**

Having come so close to giving up, the unexpected progress on the ideas for the house renews Grace's hope. On the drive back to Perth she allows herself to imagine that amongst the usual letters filled with ancient history will be one letter which is different; a letter in which Michael writes not of the past but of the future, their future; a letter in which, having sensed Grace's doubts, he will somehow answer every one of her questions without her needing to ask. She can't wait to find this letter, to pick it out from amidst the bank statements and bills and takeaway pizza menus; she can't wait to hold it in her hands and read it again and again.

But when she arrives home, her neighbour is not in. Impatient for the letters, Grace tears a page from her sketchbook and writes a note, asking her to phone Grace when she arrives home.

Mrs Graves does not phone. Instead she brings the mail round herself and when Grace opens the door she sees one of Michael's letters on the top of the pile, the clean, plain envelope; the neat handwriting as familiar as her own reflection.

Thank you so much, Grace says, reaching over for the sheaf of letters but Mrs Graves holds onto them and Grace drops her hands awkwardly while her neighbour, a virtual stranger, waves Michael's letter in the air.

*Egypt eh? Very exotic! Expecting something from there, were you? Michael Porter, it says here on the back, is that it?*

Grace smiles in a way that she hopes is non-committal, thinking of the quiet man who lives in the apartment on the other side, whose name she does not know, wondering why she did not ask him to collect her mail instead.

Is that the fellow you introduced me to in the car park that day? His name was Michael if I remember rightly, used to come round here a lot. I wondered why I hadn't seen him, lately, off to Egypt, that explains it.

Grace nods vaguely, her attention on the pile of letters, trying to see how many of them are from Michael. She is only half listening to Mrs Graves and it takes her by surprise when she says, I thought he must be your boyfriend, serious is it?

No, Grace says abruptly, feeling that her neighbour already knows far too much. Then she thinks of the letter she is hoping for, thinks that it might be the very letter Mrs Graves is holding in her hand and so she says, yes, it's serious. But hearing herself say it she is full of doubt again and feeling a heat in her face she finally says, well, not really.

Mrs Graves laughs. No, yes, no, yes, you young people can't make up your minds. My niece is the same with her boyfriend, on again, off again, I can't keep up. Still, I can't say I blame you, with him so far away, you can bet your life he's not waiting by the mailbox!

Grace closes her eyes. When she opens them again, Mrs Graves has stopped talking and the mail is on the bench, Michael's letter still on top and Grace rests her fingers on it and breathes deeply as if drawing strength from it. She closes the door and looks through the pile of papers once, twice and a third time before she can believe what she sees: that in six days only one letter from Michael has arrived. And when she opens it to read exactly what she has read in every other letter, no more, no less, she thinks again of Mrs Graves' question and crumpling the letter in her hand she says to the back of the door, no, it's not serious.

For six weeks she saw him every day and slept with him every night and in that time he lit the skies around her as he retold the ancient stories of the stars. He gave her a new map of the universe and then he left her to navigate her way through it alone.

All the way back to the block Grace thinks it over, sifting through her memories one last time to find something she has missed before, to search for the clue that will tell her, finally, how Michael feels. But the beginning has become blurred with time, clouded by dreams and imaginings and tricks of memory and Grace can no longer tell what is real and what is not.

From inside the tepee Grace wrenches the sticks from the ground, one by one. The hard, dry earth resists her, doesn't want to let them go, but she kicks and pulls at them, scrabbles with her fingers until they come loose. Crawling out into the fresh air again she shoves at the tepee until it topples over. But even lying on its side it keeps its shape, billowing up like a hooped skirt. Grace throws herself on top of it, crushes it with the weight of her body, tramples it until she hears the branches snapping inside their paper skin.

She grabs it at the top, where the sticks are tied together, and pulls it out from under the trees, into the sun and wind. At the sight of its wrecked shape she starts to cry, though she hates herself for it. She has to turn around, tow it behind her. She cannot bear to watch this thing she built torn to shreds as she drags it through the grass.

Grace hauls the bundle of sticks and paper to the edge of the cliffs. Here the grass peters out and she lays the ruined tepee on the rocky ground. Kneeling beside it in the gravel she holds a flap of paper gently in her hand, reads the words she has treasured one last time before she puts the match to them. She watches the thin flame hover at the edge of the page and leaning forward she fans it with her breath, feels the heat of her pain sear her throat, breathes it out like a dragon.

The flames lick at the paper like the long, pink tongue of a dog. They take the words first, suck them right off the page before they devour it. Letters Grace has read so often that she carries them in her blood, now blaze crimson, amber. The flames stretch in the wind, their flickering tips reaching out to consume pages Grace has folded and unfolded until she knows their creases better than the lines on her own hand.

Sometimes the letters made Grace cry. She had thought of throwing them away, tearing them to pieces. There were letters she kept hidden, tucked inside the book she was reading; those she carried for days in her bag, her pocket; wore against her heart like a breastplate. In the fire they are all the same: thin, dry sheets that flare up like a fever; they are lit with colour and then they are gone.

For weeks and weeks these letters have shaped Grace's life. Michael's turn of phrase; particular expressions he uses; the way he forms certain letters of the alphabet; his neatness; his attention to detail; his spaces and his silences have been the means by which Grace defines herself. Now she feels a sense of panic at their destruction. She had not expected them to burn so quickly. She is shocked by the fire, afraid of its ferocious appetite, the way it hisses and spits as it draws in great lungfuls of air. Even the wood offers no resistance. The branches she cut her hands to gather, crackle and split in surrender as the flames surround them.

The heat is intense. It shimmers on the ground, laps at Grace's feet, shins, thighs. Afraid of igniting herself, she steps away. But even from a distance she feels her cheeks glowing and though the tears stream from her eyes, they do not cool her hot face.

The flames leap up as if to catch hold of the clouds and the wind smudges the smoke across the clean, blue sheet of the sky. Its dry black smell clogs Grace's nostrils, coats her tongue and she chokes.

She had woken up thirsty one night, got up quietly to get a drink. When she came back Michael's arm was across her pillow, stretched out like a cat's paw. When she pressed her lips in the hollow of his palm he curled his fingers in, as if to catch hold of the kiss, but he did not wake.

Remembering this now, she crouches on the grass, clutching herself, pressing her hands against her eyes to stop the tears. But she cannot stop them, they are warm and wet against her hands, salt in her throat. She lies face down in the grass and gives in to them, howls and moans as they rise in her throat, pummels her fists against the earth.

She lies there for a long time and when she stands up the fire is dead. This patch of charred earth is the only sign of all that she felt for Michael, all that she hoped for. Walking

across the grass, away from the cliffs, she does not turn back to look at it. She gets in her car and drives away.



## **Book Two: Peter**

## **Granston, 1944**

### **the song of church bells**

There is no word that can capture the song of church bells, no phrase that conveys its depth, its richness, its capacity to sound both hollow and full at once. The sound moves through your body like an electrical charge, only slower, warmer, more gentle.

This is the sound that wakes the people of Granston on Sunday mornings; the sound that woke their fathers and mothers; their grandparents and great-grandparents: a melody both joyful and solemn, unchanged for centuries, calling the villagers to prayer.

The belltower at St Mary's houses a chime of eight bells. Three parts copper, one part tin, each is tuned to a different pitch. The heaviest bell holds the lowest note, humming solemnly beneath the smaller, lighter bells as they climb through one octave of a musical scale. For seven hundred years the bellringers have gathered every Sunday in the vestry of the tiny church. Week after week, year after year they have heaved rhythmically at the great, thick ropes, swinging the clappers back and forth, back and forth until with a clang, they strike the sides. It is a circular sound, echoing round and round inside the vast copper cups until it spills from their lips and spreads over the village like a velvet cloak.

On the last Sunday of a wet February in 1944, the villagers hear this song for the last time. This Sunday begins like any other, except perhaps a little darker, a little wetter. People shuffle into the church beneath umbrellas, their feet cold inside wet shoes. In the afternoon they dry out in their homes, feet tucked into slippers until at six o' clock the bells ring once again, for Evensong.

Every week the same people ring the bells. They know their parts without thinking now, the coarse feel of the rope in their hands, the dank smell of the vestry. Later they will try to think of how it felt to ring the bells that rainy evening. They will search their minds for something that was different, among so many things that were always the same. With hindsight, some will perhaps say that the ropes were heavier than usual, as if weighed down by sadness. Others will imagine that the song of the bells was a little flat, less joyful somehow. In reality, when they ring the bells on that particular Sunday, the ringers feel much the same as they always do, for they do not know then that they will never ring the bells again.

In 1944 Britain is at war. By night every city and town and village is cloaked in darkness, every window covered, every doorframe sealed to stop light seeping out. But there are no air raid sirens tonight. In the village of Granston the only sound is that of the rain. It is

drumming on the roofs of the houses, rushing down the empty lanes that slope towards the church. By midnight the church is surrounded by water, like a castle with a moat.

It is almost as if the rain conspired with the lightning, to draw a circle of water around the church that would gleam when lit from above. Sure enough, as the clock nears one the sky is split open: a bolt of lightning lashes at the church, striking every bell at once so that they ring for the last time all together, out of tune.

Early on Monday morning a crowd gathers. The priest, the bellringers, the members of the choir, all those who sat in the church only yesterday now gape silently at the ruined belltower, the flooded vestry. Even those who have never set foot inside St Mary's are hushed by the sight of a church cracked open by lightning.

The same morning, Betty Darlowe, of 2 Church Road, receives a telegram. Her husband Wally, twenty-five years old, dark and tall and wiry, smart and funny: killed in action.

For Betty, widowed at twenty-four, left alone to bring up her son Peter, the death of her husband and the final tolling of the church bells are inextricably linked. And though those bells will never ring over Granston again, their last dissonant note will wake her every night for the rest of her life, and sitting bolt upright in bed she will say to herself, my husband is dead, Wally is dead. Emptied out by grief, her body becomes a hollow chamber which holds the long, sad echo of that black night, that black day.

Peter grows up in a dark and silent house. He learns to do everything quietly, moves like a shadow through rooms where the blinds are always pulled down against the light. From the other cottages in Church Road he hears conversation, laughter, even singing. His own mother barely speaks. Most days she just sits in the front room for hours on end.

When the belltower is rebuilt after the war, the chime is replaced by a single bell, vast and heavy, playing the same solitary note over and over. Peter wakes to this sound every Sunday but his mother never takes him to church. Everything he knows about the church he learns at school, overhearing things from the other children. There are hymnbooks like the ones they have at school, only the church ones have more than five hundred songs in them, all with different words but more or less the same tune. They are kept in a pile by the door and everyone who is old enough to read is given one when they arrive. A wooden board hangs at the front of the church and each week someone slides cardboard numbers into the wooden runners so you know which hymn to sing. After the singing comes the sermon. This is when the vicar talks on and on about God and Jesus and stories from the bible and he stands in a tower to get a bird's

eye view, so he can make sure everyone is listening. This sounds to Peter like the worst part. He pictures the vicar circling above the congregation like a hawk.

Peter feels glad that he does not have to go to church, until Christine Linford tells him he will go to hell for it, and his mother too. By all accounts hell is a place so hot it would melt your eyeballs in their sockets and Peter is afraid to go there. He does not like to bother his mother. But he has no-one else to ask and one night the words fly out of his mouth as she is tucking him into bed. He is shocked to hear her laugh sharply.

We're already in hell, Peter.

But what about God?

There is no God, Peter. There's only us.

When the church bell rings on cold winter mornings Peter burrows deeper under his blankets. Sometimes he watches people on their way to church, standing at the bedroom window until his feet get too cold. He sees them huddled inside hats and scarves, their breath turning to steam in the sharp air, and he feels lucky that he can stay tucked inside his warm bed. There are not many things Peter feels lucky about and he savours this one, sucks on it like a sweet. He can conjure it up at any time, just by imagining the long, low tone of the bell.

For Peter, the ringing of the church bell becomes a treasured sound, measuring out the beginning and end of a singular period of liberty for him. For while everyone else is inside the church, sealed in by the heavy door, the streets of Granston are deserted. Peter has only one hour to move freely in the village and he doesn't want to waste a minute. On fine days he is up at the first sound of the bell, dressing in a hurry, waiting by the front door for its last chime.

He goes, in that treasured hour, to the places the other children go every day. Alone, he plays the games he has watched them play: making huts out of sticks at the edge of White Wood; climbing the great oak trees at the top of Tempsford Hill. Early in the spring he squelches down the muddy track at the bottom of Church End to collect frogspawn in a jar from the pond. And in the autumn he scours Seward's field for conkers, breaks the thick, prickly shells with his heel and fills his pockets with the shining, brown fruit so that they click against each other as he walks home. He does not tie them on strings for conker fights with the other boys. Instead he polishes them with a handkerchief and lines them up along his windowsill. By the time the morning service is over he is safe at home, another week to wait until the village is his own again.

There is only one day a year when Peter wishes he could go to church. It is the day all the children look forward to, the day that makes up for the drudgery of every other Sunday: the

festival of Christingle. On this day every child that goes to church is given an orange with a red ribbon tied around it and cocktail sticks with raisins and sultanas stuck in the sides. There is a small, white candle pushed into the top of the orange and when the candles are all lit the children carry them slowly around the church. Afterwards they can take them home and eat them.

The thought of dried fruit on sticks and the sharp, sweet smell of the oranges make Peter's mouth water. He pictures this procession of fruit and light, passing through the dark, sombre church. He imagines the incandescent parade weaving its way out of the church and up the street to his own front door. There, the vivid colour of the orange skins and the glow from the candles would light up his mother's face.

He would like to do something to surprise her, to make her smile, to draw her out of the chair where she sits murmuring or crying, holding a photograph in her lap.

Peter has looked at this photograph many times. When his mother is asleep he creeps downstairs and holds it up to the window, where he can see it in the light from the street lamp. It is a photograph of his mother and a man in uniform. His mother is wearing a white suit and hat. Her face looks more round than it is now and she is holding onto the man's arm and laughing. Even in black and white Peter can tell that she is wearing lipstick. It is dark against her white teeth. Peter has never seen his mother in lipstick, never seen her laughing like this. She is beautiful, he thinks.

But it is the man in the photograph that he scrutinises most carefully. For a long time Peter does not know who this man is. He is afraid to ask questions about the photograph that makes his mother cry. He is seven years old before he discovers that the man in the photograph is his father, a man who he will never meet, who died when he was four years old.

## stories waiting to be told

Once a week, on a Saturday morning, Betty goes out to do her shopping. She walks up the High Street, gripping Peter's hand tightly, her eyes fixed on the pavement. Sometimes they pass people whose faces Peter recognises but whose names he does not know. But he notices that when they say, hello Betty, hello Peter, they say it in a way that is different to the way they greet each other. It is the same kind of voice he has heard people use when they tell a dog to sit or heel, as though it won't understand. From his mother he has learnt to nod his head at these people and keep walking.

The lady who runs the village shop is called Lily Nunn. She is always leaning on the counter when they get there, laughing and gossiping with the other women who are doing their shopping. While his mother fills her basket, Peter stands at the till and listens. Because his mother does not speak, people seem to imagine that she is deaf. Peter too is somehow enveloped in her silence. So although the women are standing right next to him, they speak about him as though he cannot hear. In this way he learns everything he knows about himself.

Poor little bugger, they say. She was so different when Wally was around.

Peter gazes at the jars of sweets, practising keeping his face as blank and empty as his mother's. Even on the day when he learns that his father was killed in the war he gives away nothing.

Blown to bits, he hears the women say, and Peter stores the phrase away, forms the words soundlessly in his mouth as he walks home with his mother.

That night when Betty is asleep he looks at the photograph again. He whispers to himself as he has heard his mother do. My father died in the war, he whispers and waits for the tears to come. He hopes to feel a sense of loss, or grief like a pain in his chest. He has heard it described that way. He thinks that if he could cry he could share the weight of sadness that his mother carries. But his eyes are dry. He feels nothing but curiosity. He wonders if the uniform his father is wearing in the photograph is the same one he was wearing when he died.

At school Peter is the odd one out. Too awkward and grave to join in the games of running and jumping and shouting he keeps to himself at playtime, sitting hunched up on the benches outside the classroom, or wandering back and forth at the edge of the playground, scuffing the toes of his leather shoes on the bitumen.

Sitting alone in the playground day after day, Peter begins to talk to his father. He pretends that the war hasn't ended after all and that his father is still away fighting. In his head,

he writes him imaginary letters. Watching the other children he describes their games as though he is playing them himself, writes himself into the stories he has heard them tell, of tree climbing, and conker fights, and building camps in the woods. He talks about his mother too, not the way she is now but the way he thinks she was before. Looking at the other children's mothers he steals images of dresses and hairstyles and transposes them onto his mental picture of his mother, as though she is a paper doll.

Most of the kids in the village walk to school and back with their friends. In twos or threes they are brave enough to take the short cut through Green Lane. Peter has heard it said that the lane is haunted. Some children claim to have seen shapes moving behind the leaves of the tall, thick hedges that border the gravel track. Walking alone, he goes the long way round, along the High Street and down Church Road.

One afternoon as he leaves school Peter notices three boys following him. He knows at once who they are, without needing to turn and look at their faces. At first they walk a few feet behind him, but as soon as the school is out of sight Peter hears their footsteps quicken and then they are right behind him, so close that the toes of one of the boys shoes clip against Peter's heel as he walks.

Who were you talking to in the playground, Darlowe?

It is Nigel speaking, the leader of the gang.

Saw your mouth moving, but no-one was there.

The other boys titter. Peter feels his stomach turn over. He holds his breath, as though by not breathing he could make himself disappear.

What's the matter Darlowe? Not so chatty now are you?

Peter keeps his eyes on his feet, concentrates on keeping them moving, one after the other.

You're a loony Darlowe, just like your mother.

Nigel shoves him suddenly, his hands hard against Peter's back. Peter begins to run, his satchel slapping against his leg, the boys so close behind him he can hear them breathing.

In fear and panic he turns off the High Street and into Green Lane, thinking that perhaps there will be other children there, someone who can help him. But the lane is empty. Dark hedges rise eight feet or more on either side of him and Peter knows if they catch him here they could do anything: no-one would see, no-one would stop them. But he's tall for his age and his fear propels him much faster than the other boys can run. Still, the lane goes on and on, his breath short and fast, his legs like rubber, until at last he's at the corner and the lane opens out,

the tall hedge replaced by the low stone walls of the churchyard. The boys are still only a few feet behind and Peter leaps the wall before he can think twice, weaves amongst the headstones, feet sliding on the gravel. At the corner he turns, and momentarily hidden from view, he shoves open the heavy wooden door and rushes inside the church, where he drops to the stone floor and rolls beneath a bench. Flattening himself against its wooden back he hears the door creak open. He crosses his arms over his chest to stop the pounding, clamps his lips together to silence the great gasping breaths.

There is a sudden hush. And then a low voice, echoing, come in boys.

Peter hears them shuffling and whispering but they do not move from the doorway.

There's nothing to be afraid of in here. We are all welcome in God's house.

And there are footsteps, slow and heavy, moving with the voice towards where Peter is lying.

He saw me, Peter thinks, he's going to tell them. But the footsteps go past him, towards the door. It is Nigel who speaks now, all the jeering confidence gone from his voice.

We're just looking for someone.

Who would that be, son?

It's Darlowe, Peter Darlowe, he's hiding in here.

And Peter waits for the voice to say, he's right here, under this bench, come and have a look. But instead the man laughs.

You cannot hide in the house of the Lord, you boys should know that. You must have made a mistake.

And he ushers them out of the church and pushes the door behind them.

Peter pushes his fists into his eyes to stop the tears from running down his face. And then the voice speaks again, very close this time.

You must be Peter.

Peter opens his eyes to see a long, thin face looking right at him. He knows the face. He has seen the man walking in the village in the long, black robe that looks like a dress.

I'm Frank, the man says, Frank Sawfleet, the vicar here. Are you hurt?

Peter shakes his head.

Three against one, they gave you a fright I suppose.

Peter only nods, not trusting himself to speak.

Well they won't bother you anymore, I'll make sure of that.

Peter nods again but he does not move.



Peter's a biblical name, did you know that? Why don't you come out from under there and I'll tell you some stories about another Peter who lived a long time ago.

Over the years, Peter has built a picture of the church in his mind and now, when he crawls out from beneath the wooden bench he is stunned. In the cottage where he lives with his mother; in the schoolhouse and in Lily Nunn's shop, the ceilings are so low he could touch them just by standing on a chair. He has never seen a ceiling soar up as this one does, arching its way into the sky, a ceiling that snatches your voice from your mouth as you speak, and lifts it up to float in the air above you.

Peter stares up at the windows in which the lives of the saints and apostles are outlined in lead, detailed in glass stained blue, green, yellow and red, colouring the light that filters in from outside. In time he will come to know their names and their stories by heart. But for today each picture is a story still waiting to be told.

He trails behind the vicar to the far end of the church where there is a window so vast, so flooded with light that it hurts his eyes to look at it. Instead he kneels down and places his hands in the coloured sunlight that lies in warm pools on the cold flagstones.

While he sits there the vicar begins to talk. He tells the story of a fisherman called Simon, who kept his small boat on a vast lake, known as the Sea of Galilee:

This lake was thirteen miles long and seven miles wide. The River Jordan ran through it and there were many fish that lived within its waters. Yet one night, no matter how many times Simon cast his net, he could not catch a single fish. When the dawn came he brought his boat back to the shores of the lake and began to clean his empty nets. A man named Jesus was watching Simon, and he climbed into his boat and told him to go back into the deep water and cast his net one last time. Simon did not believe the man could help him, yet he did as he was asked. And when he tried to pull the net in, it was so full of fish that it broke. He called his friends in other boats to help him, until their boats were weighed down with the fish and they began to sink. After this miracle Simon gave up everything he owned to follow Jesus. And Jesus renamed him Peter, a name which means 'the rock', and told him, 'You are the foundation upon which I will build my church'.

Peter tries to imagine himself rock like, crouched on the ground, every muscle in his body braced against the weight of the great stone church. He is reminded of another story he heard, a long time ago, perhaps in his first year of school, of a small turtle who carried the

whole world on his back. Peter feels too small, too weak for such a task. He wonders aloud, if the other Peter was strong enough.

That's a good question, Peter. Some people might say that he was, and others might say he wasn't. Why don't you read the rest of the story and make up your own mind?

And Frank shows Peter a huge book on a wooden stand. It is the biggest book Peter has ever seen and it does not contain a single picture. The printed letters are more ornate than in the books he reads at school. They have curling tails and plumages as though they are dressed up for a special occasion and each letter is as big as his fingertip. The book has over a thousand pages. Fine as a dragonfly's wings, they whisper to Peter as he turns them, and their fragile edges are dipped in gold, so that when the book is closed and each page is pressed against the next, they form a swathe of gold between the dark leather covers of the book.

Peter loses himself inside that book. He forgets about the boys who chased him, his terrible fear. He is enthralled by the strange magic of the stories: by the water that is turned to wine, by the feeding of five thousand people on only two loaves of bread and five fish. When he comes to the story of the girl who Jesus raises from the dead, he rereads the verses over and over again. If only Jesus was a soldier, he thinks, he could have brought my father back to life. How different things would be then. They would come to church like all the other families and his mother would wear lipstick again.

Thinking of his mother, Peter looks up with a start to see that it is getting dark outside. The vicar is lighting candles on the altar.

I have to go now, he says reluctantly, not wanting to worry his mother.

Thank you for showing me the stories.

And then he remembers why he came into the church and he feels awkward again.

I'm sorry I came in here to hide.

Don't be sorry. When I told those other boys you couldn't hide in here I meant that you couldn't hide from God. What you were doing is taking shelter and you're welcome to do that anytime.

That night Peter has strange dreams in which scenes from the stories he read in the bible run through his mind like the moving pictures he has heard about. The next day at school he hardly listens to his teacher. He can't stop thinking about the hour he spent in the church. The warmth and colour and light there; the miracles he read about in the bible, make his own existence seem painfully bare and empty.

When the afternoon bell rings Peter grabs his satchel and races out of the school gates before the other kids have even put on their coats. At the entrance to the church he stops to catch his breath. He does not want to arrive panting and gasping as he did yesterday. Reaching for the iron latch he has a moment of panic, thinking perhaps the church will be locked. But the door gives way as he pushes, and the vicar is standing on the other side as though he's been waiting.

I thought you might be back, he says. Come on in.

From that day on, Peter goes straight from school to church every afternoon. He cannot explain the feeling but when he opens the church door he feels like he has come home.

Sometimes if Frank is busy he leaves the big iron key under a stone outside and Peter lets himself in, listening for the clack of the old lock as he turns the key. On those days he stands at the lectern and reads from the bible until his legs ache.

At first, he just opens it at random and begins to read, never knowing what he will find. He stumbles across stories of terrible cruelty, an ancient brutality that shocks him. He cannot shut out the image of the head of John the Baptist, served to Salome on a platter. There are tales that thrill him with their mysticism: a man's strength shorn away with his hair; an ocean parting to create an escape route to a promised land. Some of the stories terrify him, make the hair on his arms and legs stand on end as he reads, and he is reluctant to turn the page for fear of what may happen next.

There are sixty-six books in the bible. Their names are like exotic fruits in Peter's mouth: Genesis, Nehemiah, Deuteronomy. Eventually certain books will become his favourites, and once he knows his way around he will return to the same stories time after time.

He never tires of reading the bible. It seems to him to contain every possible thought or action, whether good or bad; every story that ever has been or could be told. He feels that his past, his future, every moment he lives is already written there and he only has to look to find it.

## a forbidden space

Usually, Frank is already at the church when Peter arrives and the first thing they do is kneel together in prayer. Peter does not have to be taught to pray. He has had years of practice at talking to someone he cannot see, someone whose answers he cannot hear. Kneeling in the church is no different to sitting in the school yard or lying in his own bed. Only now he feels sure that he is being heard.

After their prayers, Frank and Peter take turns to read aloud. Peter always stands at the lectern to read but Frank prefers to sit and read from his own bible, a battered, cloth-bound book, dog-eared and filled with scraps of newspaper that he uses as bookmarks. It is marked all over with pencil and different coloured pens: there are underlinings and notes in the margin, and occasionally, he pauses while reading to add something new.

One afternoon when Peter stands up to read he finds, lying on the open pages of the huge bible, a rectangular package wrapped in brown paper. He can count on one hand the number of gifts he has received in his life and though the parcel has his name on it, he is afraid to pick it up, handles it nervously as if convinced it is meant for someone else.

Finally assured, he resists Frank's urging to open it, wanting to draw out the pleasure. He tucks it carefully inside his satchel and all afternoon and evening the thought of it makes him flushed.

He waits until he is alone in bed before he at last unties the string and folds back the thick brown paper. The book is not much bigger than Peter's hand, bound in dark green leather, and stamped in gold with the words *Holy Bible*. It is one of those bibles that is closed off, sealed on three sides with a zip, and Peter holds his breath as he unzips it, to find red-tinged pages and a thin red ribbon for a bookmark. Inside the letters are tiny. The paper is so thin it is almost translucent, wrinkling under Peter's fingers. But everything is there: the Old Testament and the New; every one of the sixty-six books; every chapter and verse of each. Peter lifts the book up to his face, to inhale the scent of leather, ink and paper. Though the bible looks new, it smells old, like the church, and Peter cannot believe it is his own.

Inside the front cover he finds a bookplate, with old-fashioned writing, in crimson ink: *Presented to Reverend Frank Sawfleet, on the occasion of his being ordained into the Church of England, April 1922*. Peter feels his heart constrict. The gift is too much. He will have to return it.

He runs his hand across the soft pages, rubs them gently between finger and thumb to feel the fineness of the paper. He strokes the front of the book like a blind man, letting his

fingertips find the place where the leather is indented, tracing his way across the golden letters. He wants to memorise every detail of this book, so that he can recall how it felt to call it his own, just for one night. He grasps the book in both his hands and sits, just holding it, for a long time, as though somehow its essence might infuse through the pale skin on the palms of his hands and into his bloodstream. And then he zips it up, rewraps it in the brown paper, puts it back inside his satchel and turns out the light.

The next afternoon, Peter waits until Frank disappears into the vestry and then he tucks the book into the leather case Frank always carries, hides it amongst the books and pamphlets and pages of Frank's notes.

But the following day, the bible is back where it began, small and plain in its brown wrapping, beside the splendour of the big church bible on the lectern. Peter tries to protest but Frank hushes him.

It's too late, I've already inscribed it for you. And Peter unwraps it for the second time and opens the cover to see Frank's sloping handwriting on the flyleaf, opposite the bookplate.

*God has plans for everyone, Frank has written, and when one expects from God, God will give sincerely, exceedingly and abundantly. "My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Jesus Christ." Philippians 4:19*

Peter reads the bible every night before he goes to sleep and if he wakes early, he reads it in the mornings too. He keeps it like a secret, beneath his pillow and on Mondays, when his mother changes his sheets, he hides it beneath his socks and underpants at the bottom of his chest of drawers.

Most of the time a plain, white cloth covers the altar but for special festivals in the church calendar it is adorned with wide strips of coloured fabric to match the special vestments Frank wears over his black robe. Mrs Potter, who lives in the cottage opposite the church, takes the used cloths home to wash and iron and fold and then stores them in pristine piles in a cupboard in the vestry until they are needed again. Sometimes Peter helps Frank put the new cloths on. Stiff with starch, they unfold like a concertina might and Frank and Peter smooth their ridges, until they lie flat upon the altar.

Once a month Peter helps Frank to polish the brass candlesticks. They gather them up from around the church, pull out the long candles and lay them on the floor. Peter wears an apron so he won't stain his school uniform with the Brasso, and they each have two sets of cloths: one for putting the Brasso on, and one for taking it off. Putting it on is the easy part. Frank tips some of the milky, frothy liquid into a bowl, and Peter dips his cloth in again and

again, smearing it over the brass. Taking it off is harder. It dries green and cloudy on the surface of the candlesticks and you have to rub and rub until the shine comes back. By the time they are finished Peter's arms are aching, but it's worth it, to see the sheen of the yellow metal when the candles are relit.

One of Peter's favourite jobs is to trim the wicks of the candles so they won't smoke when they are lit for the Sunday services. When the wax cylinders become too small and start to drip, Peter replaces them with new candles from the boxes in the vestry and Frank lets him take the stubs home. He hides them from his mother, inside the pockets of his trousers, where they are folded in his drawers. Sometimes at night, he lights one on his windowsill and says a prayer for his father. He prays for his mother too, and sometimes for himself. But he only ever lights a candle for his father.

At first, he lights the candles so his father will know that Peter has not forgotten him. Later, when Frank tells Peter about the importance of a Christian burial, he makes these illuminated prayers to save his father's soul. He thinks about those women at Lily Nunn's and what they said about his father being blown to bits. He worries constantly, that scattered in pieces as it was, his father's body could not be recovered and shipped back to England to be laid to rest in sacred ground, as the bodies of other soldiers were. Peter imagines his father's ghost, bloody and mutilated, roaming the bombed-out cities of Europe, looking for a place to rest. And he lights these candles to show him the way home.

Late one Friday afternoon, when Peter is just about to leave, Frank stops him at the door.

Why don't you come to the service this Sunday, Peter? I think you'd enjoy it.

Peter hesitates. He looks away from Frank's searching face.

I can't come on Sundays.

Though she has never said as much, Peter thinks of the church as a forbidden space: believes that he is disobeying his mother's wishes by going there. His afternoons at the church are a secret he guards carefully, although it is becoming easier to conceal things from his mother.

Now that he no longer needs her help in the mornings, Betty stays in bed while he gets ready for school and more and more often now, she is still there when he returns home. Peter has lost hope that she will recover from her grief. He has even given up on asking for God's help. She is beyond prayer, retreating deeper into silence by the day. But still he feels that if he went to a Sunday service, if he worshipped publicly in the church, sang hymns and prayed in

front of everyone else, it would be like announcing his faith out loud: his mother would be sure to find out.

He cannot explain any of this to Frank. Instead he tries to make up for it by demonstrating his faith in other ways. He learns certain verses from the bible and recounts them to Frank by heart. He prays more intensely, performs his duties around the church with meticulous attention: every wick he trims; every candlestick he polishes, a chance to prove his zeal.

So as not to arouse his mother's suspicions, Peter keeps the same Sunday morning routine he has always kept. When the weather is fine he waits, as usual, for the bell to stop ringing and then roams the village for an hour. But what was once a privilege, an almost illicit pleasure, now seems more like a punishment. The places he used to yearn to visit all week have lost their appeal. He feels shut out of the one place he longs to be. He meanders aimlessly, hardly noticing where he is. His mind is in the church, imagining the candles lit, the benches filled, heads bowed peacefully in prayer. He is almost glad if the weather is grim and he has an excuse to stay in bed and read the bible. It is the only thing that can fill the gap of his longing, his wishing for Monday afternoon.

## beyond the reach of memory

Often Frank is the only person Peter talks to all day. Forty years his senior, he is Peter's first friend. At first they talk mostly about the bible, examining the verses they have read to find God's message. Frank draws Peter into these conversations, asking for his own interpretation, his own understanding of what a story means. Peter is not used to being asked for his opinions. Having had nowhere to express them he has learnt not to have them, or to lock them away. But he loves to talk about what he reads and he begins to answer Frank, haltingly at first, but gaining confidence as Frank persists.

Listening to Peter talk about the stories, Frank finds chinks in the armour of his shyness and he worries at them, stretches and pulls at them with questions and talk of other things, until at last, through these gaps, he begins to coax out Peter's thoughts and feelings.

They come slowly, cautiously at first, for Peter is unused to expressing himself openly. From his earliest childhood he has been taught to be a keeper of secrets, to reveal nothing. But he finds there is a relief that comes from talking to Frank, from unwinding the fears that have coiled in his gut for so many years. At last he can seek answers to the questions he thought he would never even be able to ask.

When Peter is helping Frank around the church, he often goes to the vestry to look for things. It is a small room, tucked away at the back of the church, behind the last row of pews, sealed off by a thick, velvet curtain. On Sundays, Frank tells him, the curtain is drawn so that people can't see inside, but during the week when Peter is there, it is nearly always open and they can move freely in and out. Peter likes the idea that he is going behind the scenes, that he has unrestricted access to a part of the church that other people don't see.

In the vestry, Peter is released from the feeling of reverence that grips him in the rest of the church. The velvet curtain is like the border of a different land and he notices his mood change as soon as he passes through it. He thinks of this room as a sort of non-sacred pocket, within a sacred space. There are no candles, or coloured leadlight windows here. The light streams unbroken through the clear glass, or in the dark, winter afternoons, radiates from the bald light globes mounted on the walls. In the vestry there is nothing of the dim glowing atmosphere which pervades the space on the other side of the curtain. It is really just a store room, housing boxes of new candles; Mrs Potter's mop and bucket and dusters; spare hymnbooks stacked on shelves and the choir robes, hanging on pegs.



One afternoon when Peter is fossicking in the cupboard for a purple altar cloth, his eyes are drawn to a long, velvet curtain, hanging against the wall in the north-east corner of the vestry. This curtain must have always been there but Peter has never noticed it before. Suddenly curious, he pulls it back to discover a small, wooden door, the kind of door, he thinks, that you would find at the bottom of a lonely tower, in a fairy story, such as Rapunzel or Rumpelstiltskin. Now, as though he has just begun to inhabit such a story, Peter turns the door handle, excited as to where it might lead him. But the game is over before it begins. The door is locked and though Peter ransacks the vestry, he cannot find a key.

It's the door to the belltower, Frank tells him matter-of-factly, when he asks, and there is no invitation in his voice. Peter is too shy to ask to see it. Instead he tries to talk himself out of his intrigue. Perhaps Frank does not have a key, he thinks. Perhaps it was lost a long time ago and no-one has been up there since. But his curiosity is piqued. He steals a look behind the curtain every time he is in the vestry; keeps his eyes peeled for a key that might fit; tries the door on the off-chance it has unlocked itself, as if by magic.

Late in the spring, when the evenings are starting to stretch out, Peter arrives at the church one afternoon, to find that though the door is unlocked, Frank is not there. St Mary's is not a large church. Standing in the central aisle Peter can take in the entire space and he can see at a glance that the place is empty. Wandering into the vestry Peter sees that the velvet curtain is pulled back and the small, wooden door is ajar. The opportunity which has eluded him for months has opened suddenly like a book, only darker, more mysterious than any book Peter has read before.

The doorway is both enticing and forbidding. Peter feels he should not enter without Frank's permission. But the open door, he reasons, is as good as an invitation.

He pushes gently and it opens, as he has imagined it would, with a long, low creak. He shuffles into the darkness, breathes the smells of old wood, damp stone, stale dusty air. In the half-light from the doorway he can see that he is at the bottom of a narrow stairwell. Around the walls a spiral staircase curves up and up into blackness. Although he would never admit it, even to Frank, for he feels that he should have outgrown it by now, Peter is a little scared of the dark. So before he goes any further he finds a box of matches from out in the vestry and lights a small, thick candle which he holds above his head like a torch when he ducks back through the small door.

In the candlelight the stairs look surprisingly worn, their stones indented by hundreds of years of different feet. Peter treads in the recesses that others have hollowed out before him.

Hoping that Frank will answer him, he calls a querying hello. His question echoes strangely in the tower, climbs the stairs and comes back down to meet him unanswered.

Round and round he goes, keeping his eyes on the stairs, steadying himself against the wall with his left hand, holding the candle with his right. He expects the tower to become lighter as he climbs but after twenty, thirty, forty steps it is still as black as pitch. Holding the candle up as high as he can he sees that there is a wooden ceiling, blocking the light from above. But at the top of the stone staircase is a trapdoor, propped open, beckoning him further. He pokes his head through the hatch to find that the tower has opened out onto a wooden platform, above which the lone church bell is suspended.

For so many years the church was an enigma to Peter. The only secret that escaped from within was the sound of the church bell. Twice every Sunday it encircled the village, measured out Peter's freedom chime by chime. The mysterious ceremonies, the hymns sung and prayers uttered were all encrypted in its solemn tone and Peter could not separate its sound from his notion of the church itself. To him it was as if the long notes emanated from the actual building, from the very stones that made up its walls.

Peter has held this idea in his mind for years, without even really knowing he holds it. It has been a half-thought, carried since childhood and never examined.

So he is astonished now by the sight of the bell, its size and shape, its physical reality. It fills the room, curving down from the ceiling, swelling out to the edges of the tower. The iron clapper hangs down like a long, thick tongue and the platform is cut away beneath it so that Peter can see the bell-pull snaking its way down to the bottom of the vestry. He feels like laughing, or crying, as though a curtain has been pulled away, exposing a conjurer at his tricks. He cannot connect that mystical sound with this mechanical instrument.

In order to believe in it he needs to hear it chime while he is standing right beside it. He tries to imagine the clang of iron against copper, a sharp metallic sound, softening inside the upturned cup, spinning to warm itself, expanding like hot air until it surges from the lip of the bell and rises in rings through the bell tower. The force of the sound would thrust him back against the cold stone walls; press on his eardrums; weigh his tongue down in his mouth; squeeze the air from his lungs. His heart and stomach, his liver and kidney would hum in sympathy, his whole body suspended by sound, vibrating like a tuning fork.

The copper rim of the bell is inches thick, cold to the touch. Peter strikes it hard with his knuckles, longing for just an echo of its sound. A faint hum swells inside it and dies away again. Above Peter's head there is a restless movement and holding his candle up high he gasps to see a huddle of bats hanging upside down from the rafters, shuffling their leathery wings. He

crouches in fear, or perhaps his knees give way at the insistence of his thudding heart. And then a familiar voice like a rope, a lifebuoy, thrown down to save him.

Is that you Peter?

But the voice comes from above his head and he is afraid to look back up there.

Peter?

He cannot answer, fearing that any sound he makes might disturb the bats.

Peter?

He waits. There is a slow, thudding descent, heavy feet on creaking wood and then Frank's long face appears from around the other side of the bell, glowing strangely in the candlelight.

There you are. I thought you'd find me. Come up and see the view.

Peter doesn't move and it takes Frank a moment to understand.

Don't be scared of the bats, he says, they're tame as anything.

But they're moving, Peter says at last.

Just dreaming, Frank laughs. I bet you move in your sleep.

And to prove it he reaches up and runs his fingertips down one of the bat's wings. It flutters a little, the way a sleeping dog might twitch off a fly, and then it is still again. Peter is reassured. He feels the bones come back into his legs. He edges around the rim of the bell to the other side of the platform, where above him, at the top of a wooden step ladder, he can see a square of sky.

Emerging from the tower onto the roof he squints against the light but once his eyes have adjusted the village is laid out before him like a felt-board picture. Roads and houses and parks are neatened, simplified, reduced to blocks of colour, round or square or rectangular. Only the trees move. The people are like specks of dust, too small to notice. Peter feels that he could pick things up and move them, rearrange them exactly as he wanted.

Neither Frank nor Peter speaks while they stand on the roof of the tower. They are each lost in thought. But when the afternoon light begins to fade and they climb back down the ladder, Frank begins to tell Peter a story.

Peter's eyes are on the staircase but if he is watching cautiously where he treads, he is not aware of it, for his attention is focused entirely on Frank's story. He unwinds it slowly as he descends in circles and the echo of his voice fills the tower.

Frank describes a tower holding eight bells, smaller and finer than the bell they have just seen, their tone clearer, higher-pitched. He speaks of a vestry full of people reaching and

bending in a dance carefully choreographed to set the bells in motion, to ring out a rhythmic, melodious invitation to the people of Granston.

All his life, Peter has heard nothing except that one lonely note and he finds it hard to imagine the song of the bells that Frank describes, harder still to think that it rang through the village in his own lifetime: only eight years ago, but still beyond the reach of his own memory.

Peter knows of course, that the tower was destroyed by lightning, and then rebuilt after the war. He has heard the story before. But the way Frank tells it is different. He is a builder of suspense: a trick learned from years of delivering sermons. He builds up slowly: the dark night, the blackout, the rain. His voice is low, his footsteps steady on the stairs. Peter wants to push him, to rush him to the end but Frank will not be hurried. First there is the wind, the thunder, the creaking of the trees. They are almost at the bottom of the tower when he raises his voice suddenly and then there is lightning breaking open the sky, obliterating the tower. The bells make their clanging, crashing descent, cracking the flagstones, filling the air with the dissonant echo of their swan song. But that is not the end of the story.

Frank describes how shock waves radiated out from the church, uprooting trees; dislocating headstones that had stood undisturbed for centuries; loosening the stones in the churchyard wall; sending a shuddering thrill through the skeletons that lay in the trembling earth.

All through the village people woke to the cacophony of the bells, felt the tremors run beneath their homes; pass through their own bodies, vibrating in their bowels. Lying in his bed, Frank felt the walls of the vicarage quiver and shake from the impact.

Even in the rain he would have gone out to see what had happened. He could have lit a lantern, put on wellington boots, thrown a coat over his pyjamas. But it was wartime. He could not carry a light through the darkness, no matter how small. He sensed it was the church that had been damaged but he had to wait until morning to see it with his own eyes. He could not sleep. He passed the long night in prayer, accompanied by the incessant rain.

Just before dawn the rain stopped. Frank got dressed in the half-light and walked down Green Lane, dreading what he might find. When the church came into view the sight of the ruined tower snatched the air from his lungs and he had to stop a long minute, leaning against Seward's gate before he could get his breath back. His eyes could hardly take in the chaos of the churchyard: the limbs and trunks of trees, scattered by the storm; the skewed headstones; the great stones from the walls of the tower heaped and broken on the ground. Picking his way through the debris he could see into the wreckage of the vestry, the great bells twisted and

crippled by their impact with the flagstones; what was left of the walls, charred and blackened by the heat of the lightning.

By half past seven a crowd had gathered. They stood in silence, awed by the extent of the destruction. Here Frank's voice softens and Peter feels the story drawing to a close.

Your mother was there that morning, Frank says. That was the last time she ever came to the church.

The room begins to spin. Frank's words circle inside Peter's head like frantic, flapping birds. He cannot hold them still. His mother, at the church. Blood surges into his head and floods out again and he is dizzy, disorientated. Somewhere beneath the confusion he feels shame spread across his body like a crimson stain, disgraced by his mother's turning away.

He cannot face Frank. He rushes from the church, out into the street: his heart, his breath, everything going too fast. His legs are shaky but his rage propels him, lurching unsteadily up Church Road towards home. Beneath his violent heartbeats he hears a low moan, a painful constricted sound, broken up by the heavy whisper of his lungs hauling air. Putting his hand to his throat he feels the sound vibrating there, surging up from inside him and he opens his mouth wider to let it out, allows it to take over him, rising in pitch and volume until it is almost a roar.

He will bellow at his mother in this new voice, shout out every question he has ever wanted to ask, the endless questions he has folded away since he was five years old, pressed down beneath his tongue, held in his mouth like pebbles: he will beat the answers out of her if he has to. Anger tightens his fists, he holds them before him as weapons as he kicks open the garden gate.

But the moment he opens the front door his rage subsides. Sadness hangs like a fog inside the house, presses a hand to his mouth, quells his desire to shout. It smothers his fury like a blanket thrown over a fire. Peter suddenly feels very tired. He drags himself up the narrow staircase, quietly so as not to disturb his mother. And then, though it is only five o' clock in the afternoon he takes off his shoes and climbs into bed.

## floating on the music

Peter sees now that there is no room for him in this space which he calls home. Nothing can shift or change in this atmosphere in which every thought and feeling is stifled, every word you might utter is choked back or held in. He cannot grow here. He feels smothered, as though the air is snatched from his lungs almost before he can inhale it, as though he must struggle for breath.

In the church he can breathe easily. He can fill his chest with huge lungfuls of air. In the church he has the space to stretch himself. In the months since he first went there he has opened like a flower. He has found his own voice and spoken for the first time.

He wants to blame his mother for the years he wasted, locked in aloneness. He cannot understand how she could have denied him what she partook of herself: the magic of story; the solace of prayer; the sense of communion.

He prays night and day for the strength to forgive her. And at last he finds the gift in his plight. It is his test, his challenge: he must draw his mother back to the church with the strength of his own faith.

Once he knows what he has to do he can hardly wait to begin. Saturday goes on forever. Peter waits until his mother has gone to bed and then he cleans his shoes at the kitchen sink, one stiff brush to put the polish on, another to take it off. He rubs at the leather until it shines, carries the shoes upstairs and puts them beside his bed.

He nearly always wakes before the church bells start ringing but this Sunday he can't leave anything to chance. So before he goes to sleep he sets his alarm clock, sliding it under his pillow to muffle the sound.

He is wide awake as soon as it rings, jittery with nerves and excitement as he puts on his clothes. He has watched from his window enough times to know what he should wear. All the boys dress more or less the same: long-sleeved shirt and tie, school blazer, their best trousers pressed into sharp creases.

By the time he is ready the bell has started ringing. He pauses on the landing to say a prayer and then he pushes open the door to his mother's room. As she turns to look at him he can see the confusion on her face, sense the unspoken question that hangs in the air. He pushes his hands into his pockets to stop them shaking, draws a sharp breath.

I'm going to church, he says.

He feels his mouth form the words but no sounds come out. Betty is frowning at him, bewildered. He tries again but it is barely a mumble, drowned out by the chiming of the bell.

His mother sighs. Peter tries one last time, steeling himself against her reaction. In his awkwardness he forces the words out so hard that they emerge as a yell, too loud, too angry. Betty closes her eyes and turns her face to the wall. Peter stands red-faced, trying to think of something to say. A part of him wants to say sorry. But when he feels the word struggling to get out he bites down on it sharply, clamps it between his teeth. His anger flares up again. It is she who should be sorry, it is her fault.

And yet he feels heavy-hearted as he goes downstairs. He never meant to shout at her. At the front door he stops, unsure now. He had envisaged the two of them walking to church together. It was not meant to be like this. But the church bell is insistent. Alone or not, he must go.

As soon as he is out of the house his guilt is replaced by elation. He is so excited it is hard not to run to the church. He has to force himself to slow down, to keep pace with the other churchgoers. Even when he notices people staring, turning right around to look at him he keeps the same plodding tread. He hears the surprise in people's voices when they greet him. Out of habit he nods politely and keeps his eyes low, feeling proud and embarrassed at the same time.

At the church door he realises that he does not know what to do, or even where to sit. His eyes scan the church, looking for Frank's familiar face. But Frank is up at the altar, preparing for the service and Peter has to decide on his own.

He grabs a hymnbook and heads for the back of the church, behind the font. There he is hidden from the rest of the congregation, released from their scrutiny. They do not turn their heads now. Their eyes are trained devoutly on the altar. It is Peter's turn to examine them. He knows almost all of the villagers by sight. Even from the back he can identify nearly everyone, by the shape of their necks, the tilt of their shoulders, the colour of their hair. He is fascinated by the stillness that has overtaken them inside the church. The rowdy boys and chattering girls from school; the farmhands who snigger and carry on outside the pub; even the prattling women, they are all quiet now, hushed and expectant as the last chime of the bell fades out.

Frank steps forward to address the congregation. Peter has never seen him dressed for a sermon. He wears a white robe over his plain black vestments, a gold robe over the white. He looks like an emperor: bigger, grander, more imposing. And when he speaks his voice has a depth, a richness Peter has never heard before. His words fill the church.

The Lord be with you.

A chorus of voices respond, And also with you.

Peter is enthralled. His heart is hammering furiously and when they stand to sing the hymn his legs are trembling. The sound of the organ rises up through his body, unpins him. He

is dizzy, flooded, floating on the music and when the people lift up their voices in song, tears run down his face.



## a thirteenth grave

If the weather is clear and not too cold, and Frank doesn't need him for anything Peter spends the afternoons in the churchyard. He walks carefully among the graves, stopping at each one in turn to read the words chiselled into the stone. Mostly they bear just names and dates, occasionally a verse from the bible. Some of the surnames appear over and over: generation after generation of a single family, living and dying in the same place, buried in the same ground. Husbands and wives; children, parents and grandparents. Peter likes the idea that they are all together here, reunited after decades or centuries have separated them.

The oldest graves are on the west side of the church. They are placed haphazardly, headstones facing every which way. These are the graves of people who were buried in the beginning, when the church was new and the graveyard was empty. They have lain here for so many years that their stone tablets are dull and lichen now; their hard edges softened with age; inscriptions that were carved to remind us worn away by time. Their names are erased, forgotten, there is no-one left to remember, those that mourned them long since dead.

Behind the church the graves are less ancient, placed in orderly rows, their epitaphs still visible, resisting the passage of time. Row by row, grave by grave the stones become less worn, the inscriptions clearer, until in the north-east corner of the yard Peter reaches the newest graves, those that have been dug and marked in his own lifetime.

There is a tree here, known as a punch tree because of its thick, spongy bark, soft beneath the heel of your hand. Beside the punch tree there is a row of twelve identical graves, each with the same headstone, the same marble slab. *William Gurney, 1924—1942, Edward Bickerdike, 1919—1939, John Marsden, 1922—1945.* These plaques bear the names of the men and boys who died in World War II, fathers of children he goes to school with, slaughtered in the muddy, bloodied cities of Europe. Peter knows every one of the inscriptions by heart, murmurs them like a prayer, a mantra, while he stands at the graves.

Peter's mother doesn't buy the newspaper. But the local paper is delivered free to every household, pushed through the letter box once a week while Peter is eating his breakfast on a Tuesday morning. *The Biggleswade Chronicle* doesn't have much real news: its pages are filled with accounts of local football matches and village fetes; births, deaths and marriages; reports from the county council. Peter usually throws it in the bin without even flicking through it. But one morning his attention is caught by the headline, *Memorial to our Lost Soldiers.* The article describes a monument which is to be built in Bedford, commemorating the local soldiers who

died in the Second World War. According to the report, this type of monument is called a cenotaph, a Greek name meaning empty tomb.

There is an intricate sketch in the paper, an artist's impression of how the completed memorial will look. And underneath in very small print it says, *Turn to page 3 for a list of soldiers from Biggleswade and surrounding villages who will be honoured in the memorial.* Peter feels his stomach twist. He fumbles at the edge of the page, trying to turn it over. He scans the list anxiously. In his panic he misses the name the first time. Unwilling to believe it is not there he checks the list again and finds it. *Walter Darlowe, 1917—1944.* He lets his breath out slowly. At last his father will have a resting place, a plaque bearing his name for all the world to see. Peter feels ecstatic. His candle-lit vigils have worked; his prayers have been answered.

Even in the face of his mother's grief Peter has retained a sliver of doubt about his father's death. Thin and brittle as a dried leaf, he has preserved this doubt by sliding it beneath the inner soles of his shoes. It goes everywhere that he goes, providing a sort of insulation, keeping his feet warm in the winter.

Now that he has seen his father's name in the paper, Peter can no longer deny the truth. And yet the certainty of his father's death makes him more, not less substantial. The public acknowledgment of his existence makes him seem more real to Peter than he ever has.

That night he dreams the cenotaph, bigger and grander than in his waking imaginings, a vast monument of smooth, grey stone into which the names of the lost soldiers are carved. In the dream Peter is trying to search for his father's name but there is another man at the monument who is distracting his attention. Peter feels uncomfortable sharing his search with a stranger. He does not want to be witnessed in his moment of discovery. It is to be a private moment, between himself and his father. He walks around the cenotaph, hoping to find a space where he can continue his search alone. But on the other side he finds a young woman leaning against it, pressing her cheek and the palms of her hands into the carved stone. Peter can see her body shaking. It distresses him. Again he moves away, but even when she is out of sight, the sound of her crying intrudes on his concentration.

Peter closes his eyes for a minute, clamps his hands over his ears, praying for the strength to shut out these distractions, to do what he came here for. But when he opens his eyes he sees several more people working their way around the monument towards him, hears other voices adding their cries to those of the first woman.

He looks at the cenotaph desperately, hoping that his father's name will somehow stand out from the others. Instead, the names seem to blur together, merging into a great meaningless mass of letters. And still more people are coming. They are all looking for something, for someone. Moaning and gasping they fill the pathway, swarm up the stairs, jostling and pushing to get to the front. Peter is surrounded, hemmed in by grief and the wailing has reached fever pitch. Panicking, he pushes his way out of the crush, stumbles down the staircase and rushes away.

The idea comes to him a few days later. He will make his own cenotaph, a thirteenth grave in the row, a place for his father alongside the other soldiers, a place where he can mourn in solitude.

After school he puts on his Wellington boots and walks down to White Wood to gather stones from the stream. He knows the kind he wants, he has seen them half-buried on the bed of the stream, round brown stones that will fit in the cup of his hand, worn smooth by the passage of water. He digs them out of the mud with a stick and washes them clean in the water, holding them under until his hands are red with cold. When they are dry he fills his pockets with them and walks back slowly, feeling their weight tugging at his trousers. At the church he stops, looking around to make sure he is alone before he goes through the back gate into the graveyard. He empties his pockets underneath the punch tree, piles the cool stones against the churchyard wall and hides them with twigs and handfuls of long grass.

Three afternoons in a row he walks past the church with his pockets empty, comes back with them full, his knees muddy, his fingers stiff with cold. On the fourth day his work can begin.

He has already chosen a place for his cenotaph, a quiet, shaded space between the twelfth soldier and the churchyard wall, sheltered from the wind and rain, obscured from view by the overhanging branches of the punch tree. There he arranges his stones to mark out the parameters of his father's grave. He gives it the same dimensions as the graves of the other soldiers to show that it is part of their group, but he likes its difference, the way the brown stones stand out on the short grass.

At home Peter cannot mourn his dead father. His mother's grief absorbs every inch of space. But standing by his father's grave Peter lets the loss overtake him. Hidden by the branches and leaves of the punch tree he pummels at the trunk until his hands are numb.

## a song of praise

Years later, Peter will come to see the creation of his father's grave as the turning point. Looking back he will realise that from the day he hammered that wooden cross into the ground, his mother's decline, which had, until that moment, been taking place in minute increments, suddenly picked up speed. She could not have known about the grave. But it was as if she sensed it. As if by creating a space for his own grief, Peter had enabled her to let go.

At the time it seems to Peter that Betty has always been sick, or at least that she has never been well. For as long as he can remember she has been tired: too tired to read to him, to play with him, and later, too tired even to talk to him. Whatever he asked for, her answer would always be the same.

Not now Peter, I'm resting.

The phrase is etched in his memory, the flattened tone of her voice. As she began to edge towards silence she gave up saying it. She would demonstrate her exhaustion instead, collapsing into her chair and exhaling a long, slow breath.

When Peter was too young to understand her grief he thought she might be less tired if he could help her around the house. He imagined that if he could do enough she would have some energy left for him. So when he was only six or seven years old he was already washing the dishes; laying the fire; carrying the shopping home from Lily Nunn's. The older he got, the more he did, carefully following a list of instructions that Betty left on the kitchen table for him.<sup>16</sup>

At the age of thirteen he is running the house. He no longer needs Betty's instructions. He shops and cooks and cleans, collects the pension and pays the bills. By now he knows that no matter how much he does it will never be enough. Day by day his mother grows stiller, quieter, more distanced. Nine years of mourning have sapped the life from her.

Occasionally Peter thinks he remembers a time when she was different; a time when she was quick and playful; when she would sing to him; throw him into the air and catch him in strong arms. This image sits just at the edge of his memory and he wonders if it is perhaps only a dream he once had, a wishful vision of what might have been.

Frank goes alone to the cottage in Church Road. Peter does not want to go back. He waits for Frank at the church. Beside the altar he kneels to pray. But for once it does not comfort him. He wants to give thanks but it does not seem right. He is unsure of how he should feel, what he should say.

Restless, he goes out into the churchyard and sits down at his father's grave. It occurs to him that he ought to tell his father what has happened. After nine years he might have got used to being alone. Betty has never got used to it. She has spent every minute since Walter died preparing herself for this day. She has been moving towards it, day by day, month by month ever since Peter can remember. She must be happy, he thinks. She looked happy. There was a smile on her still, pale face.

Now the thought of her face shocks him. He feels like he is going to cry. He hasn't cried for a long time. He is afraid that if he starts he will not be able to stop and his grief will drain him away as it did his mother. He thinks about singing a hymn instead. The thought surprises him. Week after week he has listened to the congregation, followed the words on the pages of his hymnbook until there are many that he knows by heart. But not once has he joined in. Often, when he is alone he hears the tunes in his head but he has never tried them in his own voice. He does not know what makes him think of it now. But the idea cheers him up, pushes away the image of his mother's face.

He thinks through all the hymns he knows, trying to imagine which of them his mother would have liked. Looking around him nervously he begins to sing:

*Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war*

*With the cross of Jesus going on before*

His voice is shaky and he struggles for the tune: a little flat, a little sharp; never quite hitting the notes in the centre; losing the melody as he veers from high to low; sliding from one key to the next until at last he finds the right pitch.

Then the sensation is dizzying, he lets himself go, the air moving fast in his lungs and his throat, the notes rising up from his chest, the thin, reedy sound of his own voice. His head is so full of the music he forgets the words. He begins the hymn again, singing the chorus over and over, waiting for the verses to come back to him. With each repetition his voice becomes stronger, the tune more sure but still the rest of the words elude him and eventually he begins to feel foolish, ashamed of his attempt. Finally he gets up and goes into the church to get a hymnbook.

Sitting at his father's grave with the hymnbook beside him he decides to start at the first page and work his way through the book from front to back, stopping to sing whenever he finds a hymn he knows. He concentrates on the words, letting them crowd out every other thought. But when he hears Frank's footsteps on the gravel path he snaps the book shut and scrambles out from underneath the punch tree, his face solemn as he waits for Frank to confirm what he already knows.

Peter cannot go back to the cottage while his mother lies stock still in bed, her hair tangled; her body tilted awkwardly to one side; all the colour drained from her face. Mrs Potter goes to fetch what he needs and he waits with Frank in the vicarage kitchen, watching through the window as she walks down the driveway with a white pillowcase which she carries like a sack.

Just a few things, she says brightly, you can get the rest after the funeral.

Peter empties the pillowcase on the big, high bed in the spare room, spreads out socks, shirts and underpants, his toothbrush, his hairbrush and a wash cloth. He wishes for his bible, the comforting weight of it in his hands, its familiar smell. Instead he opens the hymnbook he brought with him from the church, turns the pages until he finds a hymn he knows and begins to sing.

Peter chooses the hymn for his mother's funeral, slides the cardboard numbers into the wooden runners himself. When the organ sounds he is the first to stand and his voice seems to stride out ahead of the other voices, urging them on, quickening the sombre pace:

*At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow*

*Every tongue confess Him, King of Glory now*

Holding the hymnbook his hands are shaking. But it is not grief that moves him. For beneath a layer of sadness he is full of exaltation. He has sensed it these last few days, felt it approach and retreat, approach and retreat like a tide. And now as he opens his mouth in song it surges like a great wave, a tsunami, flooding the wrecked landscape of his heart.

His mother is saved. Inside her coffin she is dressed up, coloured in; her hair curled; her lips painted. She looks nothing like the woman Peter knows as his mother, the woman he found dead the day before yesterday. She looks like the Betty in the photograph, standing outside the church on her wedding day. In death she has returned to God, Peter is sure of it. And so her dying has saved them both. For this moment of standing before the congregation and singing aloud for the first time: this is Peter's Confirmation; his taking of vows; a final step across the threshold of the church that he felt forbidden to make while his mother was alive. His is a song of praise, a cry of Hallelujah.

## nights with the saints

It is Peter's idea to use the wheelbarrow. For neither he nor his mother had ever needed a suitcase and Frank's old trunk is too big for them to carry. Frank helps him to line the barrow with brown paper. They fold and tear it to cover the mud-caked surfaces and then they gather pebbles from the vicarage driveway to stop the paper from flying away. Peter is still singing as he pushes the wheelbarrow down Green Lane, tilting it from side to side so that the pebbles slide back and forth in time to his song and the edges of the paper flap in the wind like a round of applause.

As they near the cottage Peter's song fades. Even with his mother gone he feels a hush come over him the moment he opens the front door and he and Frank climb the stairs to his bedroom in silence. Then, like a magician conjuring white doves from a top hat, Peter slides his bible out from underneath his mattress; pulls candle-stubs out of trouser pockets and balled-up socks. Sensing Frank's surprise Peter turns away, busying himself in the wardrobe so as to avoid Frank's eyes. He takes shirts and trousers from their hangers and folds them on the bed. He empties his drawers of jumpers and underwear and Frank piles them up and carries them downstairs to load into the barrow. Then there are only his slippers and dressing gown left, and the conkers on the windowsill which he scoops up and drops into his pockets. He stops for a moment at the door of his mother's room but looking around he sees that there is nothing he wants there, nothing that she treasured except the photo of her wedding day, which he picks up carefully and presses against his chest as he walks down the stairs and out of the house for the last time.

At Peter's request, Frank arranges for Betty's headstone to bear Wally's name beneath her own. He knows this would have pleased his mother. Beneath the names Peter adds the words, *Together at last in God's care*, an inscription of his own devising, of which he is very proud. Once the headstone is erected Peter dismantles the soldier's grave he made for his father. One by one he carries the stones that he gathered from the stream in White Wood to the grave that his mother and father now share. Every day he visits the grave to pray or sing hymns or just to tell his parents things, and on the days when he cannot think of anything to say he sits beside their headstone and arranges the stones in patterns on the new grass.

The other people who visit the churchyard usually come on Saturday afternoons, so that the graves will look their best on Sunday morning. They arrive with bright bouquets wrapped in

cellophane and tissue paper and ribbon, fresh from the florist in the nearby town. Peter has seen them cutting the grass with shears, scrubbing at the marble with scrunched-up newspaper and water from the rusty can that sits beneath the outside tap. Then they arrange the flowers, kneeling on the grass and poking them through the holes in the tin cup which sits at the base of the headstone. Sometimes people bring flowers cut from their own gardens: sheaves of purple and white foxgloves; pink and red roses with their stems still covered in thorns. After the last sharp frost there are tulips, hot globes of colour on cool, green stalks, and just before Easter, daffodils, frilled trumpets of yellow, heralding spring.

Peter does not like to pick the flowers in the vicarage garden. Instead he adorns his parents' grave with wild flowers. All through the summer he gathers dandelions, buttercups and daisies from the fields and hedgerows around the village. At the end of winter he plucks a handful of the first snowdrops, the flowers that give White Wood its name, their petals like pale earlobes. And in the spring there are bluebells, a rippling velvet carpet beneath the trees.

In the first few weeks after his mother's death Peter does not leave Frank alone. He goes out into the village with him when he has errands to run and he hovers around when Frank is opening the mail or speaking on the telephone, searching his face for signs of bad news. Though he has prayed to God to prevent this, he fears that someone will come to claim him, some long-lost aunt or uncle, a perfect stranger who will appear out of the blue and take him away. There is no danger from his mother's side, Peter is sure of that. He knows Betty was an only child and both her parents were killed in an accident when she was nineteen, a train crash, she had told him. But his father's side of the family is a source of great anxiety to Peter. His mother barely spoke of them but Peter thinks he remembers talk of Wally having brothers and perhaps at least one sister.

It is not until years later that he will find out the truth. Sorting through Frank's papers after his death, Peter will come across the notes on his own family, which Frank gathered that summer Betty died. There is a typewritten list of names from both his mother's and his father's families, followed, in Frank's handwriting, by details of births and deaths, so many deaths that Peter can hardly bear to read it: stillbirths and fires; farm accidents and drownings; a history of loss that stretches back much further than his own life.

And so there is no-one to claim him, no-one except Frank, who has signed the adoption papers by the time Peter returns to school in the autumn.



Frank keeps the big wooden kitchen table in the sitting room so the study desk becomes Peter's and they drag an armchair out into the kitchen to make room for it. They set it up beneath the window so that when Peter is sitting in the high-backed chair he can look out over the vicarage garden. He keeps his bible there, and the photograph of his mother and father, and along the far edge of the desk he arranges his conkers in a line, from smallest to largest.

The sitting room shelves are already crammed with books but every so often a parcel of new ones arrives in the post. Frank waits for Peter to get home from school and they open these packages together, tearing through layers and layers of brown paper to examine the books, drinking in the smells of ink and new paper. There are always fat paperbacks with thin, dry pages: letters and diaries, biographies and histories. The ones Peter likes best are the hard-covered art books with their thick, glossy pages full of illustrations of paintings and sculptures and stained-glass windows. Frank keeps the new books in a pile by his armchair and after dinner, while Peter does his homework, Frank sits and reads. The room is almost silent but if he listens hard, Peter can hear Frank rubbing the edge of a page between his thumb and forefinger. The sound comforts him. While he can hear it, he does not need to keep turning around to check that Frank is still there.

After he has finished his homework Peter sits with Frank in the other big armchair and they take turns to read aloud. They always start with Frank's *Book of Days*, in which a different saint is commemorated on each page: one saint for every day of the year. Though the spine of the book is cracked and the pages are loose and yellowing, the pictures are still beautiful, their lines clear, their colours vibrant. Peter pores over them, looking for something more than that which is revealed in the text. He is looking for signs of their passion, the element that makes their hearts flare and their eyes burn. He is amazed by the detail in the pictures of the stained-glass windows, the hopes and griefs captured by these fragments of glass.

But it is Frank who really brings the saints to life for Peter. He will cross his study to find a copy of a journal kept by the saint, a biography or a collection of letters. The passages he loves most will be underlined, the pages marked with scraps of paper and he will flip through the books excitedly, reading phrases or sometimes whole chapters aloud.

For Peter, Frank's system of organising his library appears to be completely random. Even when he has lived at the vicarage for several years he cannot find his way around the bookshelves. He only ever takes down one book at a time and he leaves a sheet of rolled-up newspaper as a marker so that he can be sure to replace the book in the same spot. Frank can always pinpoint the exact location of what he is looking for and no matter how many books he accumulates he still seems to know the contents of each by heart.

Of all the saints in the Book of Days, Peter is drawn to those who perform miracles: St Marcian of Constantinople, who in the fifth century saved his church from fire with tears and prayers; St Raymond of Pennafort, who, when forbidden by King James to leave the island of Majorca, simply spread his cloak upon the water, tied one corner to his staff for a sail and floated across the ocean, back to Barcelona. It is always Peter who reads out the stories of the miracles. Frank does not believe in them, not literally. He offers Peter rational explanations: the fire retreated because the wind changed; the tide was out and St Raymond spread his cloak on a sand bank.

Frank's favourite saint is Teresa of Avila, whose feast day falls on his birthday, October 15<sup>th</sup>. She is a saint of poverty and hardship, but also of common sense; a saint who wore a coarse habit made of wool that she had spun with her own hands. Frank has volumes of books about her life. He has read each of them so many times that their covers have softened in his hands.

Sometimes Frank is temporarily lured away from Teresa by Peter's enthusiasm for some other saint. Night after night they are lost in the life of St Peter Nolasco, to whom as a baby, God sent a swarm of bees to build a honeycomb on his right hand, to stop him from crying in his cradle. And for one whole summer they are absorbed by Catherine del Ricci, the saint who is reported to have passed out at midday on Thursday, every week for twelve years, and then proceeded to re-enact the scenes which led to Christ's death on the cross, before she returned to full consciousness on Friday afternoon.

But no other saint can hold Frank's attention for long. He has been devoted to Teresa for too many years: he will not switch allegiance now. The book that means more to him than any other is her autobiography, *The Way of Perfection*. When he reads to Peter from this book he rubs his hands together as you would rub two sticks against each other to start a fire. He wants the sparks of his own passion to ignite in Peter's soul. But no matter how Frank extols her virtues; no matter how many stories of her purity and practicality he hears, Peter remains indifferent to Teresa of Avila. He admires her, yes, but she does not move him. And he wants to be moved. He wants to be thrilled. He favours the stuttering, shrieking, fainting saints, the saints whose fervour makes their eyes roll back in their heads. Compared with these, Teresa seems a little dry; without much feeling. It takes the story of her childhood to finally persuade Peter otherwise.

The first time God called Teresa she was just a little girl. She tempted her younger brother with talk of camels and exotic spices and together they ran away from home, heading for Morocco where they hoped to die as martyrs. But that was before her mother died. Her

mother's death changed everything. Teresa was fourteen years old and she tried to bury her grief beneath earthly pleasures. Frivolity rushed through her body like a disease, raising her blood pressure and making her head swim. God called to her and called to her but she would not answer. For six years she thought of nothing but fashion and perfume. She spent hours in front of the mirror, brushing her hair and dreaming of romance. She imagined the day when love would find her and her heart would burst into flames.

Finally God sent an angel to win Teresa over. She dreamed this angel standing before her carrying a golden spear with a tip of fire. Three times he pierced her heart with the burning spear and she was set alight with love for God: this was the love she had waited for.

Sixty-three years after her death Gianlorenzo Bernini built a sculpture in her honour in the Cornaro Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. He worked on the sculpture for seven years and when at last it was finished people gasped at its sensuality. For Teresa is floating bare-footed on a cloud; her head thrown back, her eyes closed, her body tilted in an attitude of abandonment before the angel whose arrow is poised above her heart.

Those who were shocked by the sculpture could see only one side to Teresa. They saw a saint renowned for a life of prayer and contemplation; a saint represented by the symbol of a white dove. They forgot that her other emblem was a fiery arrow. They did not care to think that before she was a saint, Teresa was a woman and that her conversion was nothing less than a seduction: she came to God as a lover, quivering with passion.

And in the end it is this that makes Peter fall for her; this and her six wild years. For though he is happy living with Frank, happier than he has ever been, he feels an ache inside him sometimes, a longing for something more: for a heat, an energy, a sense of something wilder and stronger than his own small life.

Frank starts learning Spanish in the September that Peter begins his 'A' levels. While Peter sits at his desk writing essays Frank compiles lists of vocabulary and writes out verbs in every imaginable tense. He practises the exercises in his study guide until he knows the rules of Spanish grammar by heart and the sentence structure begins to make sense to him. Then the real work can begin.

He wants to read Teresa's autobiography exactly the way it was written: not in translation, not re-interpreted by someone else, but in Teresa's own words. With his Spanish/English dictionary in his lap he struggles though one line at a time and though it is the slowest work he has ever done the pleasure it brings him is palpable: as he forms the strange

words with his lips and teeth and tongue he imagines he feels flames licking at the roof of his mouth.

On the wall above his desk Frank keeps a framed postcard of Avila, a photograph taken as the sun is setting. The walled city seems to glow with light as it stands on the winter green plains, quite alone except for the stark mountain range that huddles, snow-covered on the horizon.

It is Frank's dream to go one day to Avila, to walk the cobbled streets Teresa walked in her thin leather sandals; to climb the city walls and gaze out on the plains, breathing the dry air she breathed. Frank's lungs will shrivel up and collapse before that day ever comes and it is Peter who will go to Avila in Frank's place. But now, in the autumn of 1956 Frank shows no symptoms of the disease that has taken root inside his body and it seems to Peter that their nights with the saints will go on forever.

Frank is not a heavy smoker but he likes to smoke a pipe after dinner and the dry brown smell of his tobacco is as much a part of their evenings in the sitting room as the books themselves. Ever since Peter has lived in the vicarage Frank has kept his tobacco in the same scratched old tin. Once upon a time it used to contain shoe polish but the rich oily odour of the polish has long since faded and the painted brand name is completely worn away so that you can see the tin has held tobacco far longer than it ever held shoe polish.

Peter enjoys the ritual of filling the pipe. He inhales as he opens the tin and pulls out a clump of the-curling fibres, packing them into the wooden bowl of the pipe, not too tightly, not too loose, just the way Frank has showed him. You're a natural, Frank says, smiling as he lights it up.

At the end of the following summer, as Peter is preparing to go back to school for his final year, Frank packs the pipe and tobacco tin away. It has started to make him cough, a rough, hacking cough that shakes his whole body and leaves him breathless. Frank thinks it is the tobacco irritating his throat but the cough continues long after he has given up smoking.

Frank tries to ignore it and will not hear of calling the doctor. He carries on with his reading and the long slow work of his translation but he is always tired, and more than once Peter has arrived home from school to find him asleep at his desk, slumped over his papers. In November, when Peter finds Frank's handkerchief darkened with patches of dried blood, he calls the doctor himself.

Dr Patterson is at the vicarage within two hours, a small, bristling red-faced man with brusque, hurried gestures. He asks Frank a series of short, sharp questions and as he pokes and prods and probes him his face becomes redder and redder.

You have a severe lung infection, Reverend Sawfleet.

He pronounces his verdict as solemnly as a judge.

You must rest, he says, emphasising each word, and then he looks at Peter.

I'm counting on you, young man.

After he is gone Frank and Peter joke about his strange manner but Peter's laughter cannot cover his anxiety and later that night, when he takes up Frank's dinner on a tray, they are both subdued.

Most afternoons Mrs Potter comes to the vicarage to help Peter out, just to keep things running smoothly, she tells him.

She cooks and cleans and does the washing and once a week she helps Frank into his dressing gown and sits him in the wicker chair while she changes the sheets on his bed. Peter takes on extra duties at the church. Night after night he runs up and down Green Lane to change the altar cloths; to unlock the church for choir practice; to pay the man who mows the grass in the churchyard. On Sunday mornings he prepares the church for the visiting ministers who come to take the service in Frank's place.

At home he tries, as much as possible, to maintain the routine that they have always kept. He props Frank up with pillows to eat his dinner, balancing his own plate on his knees as he sits in the chair beside him. He carries piles of books from the sitting room up to Frank's bedroom and stacks them on top of the chest of drawers so that after dinner he can read to Frank. He even reads to him from *The Way of Perfection*, in the halting Spanish he has learned at school. But their reading is interrupted again and again by Frank's bouts of coughing and often Frank is half-dozing anyway, too tired to concentrate on what Peter is reading.

In the new year Frank's condition worsens. Dr Patterson arranges for a nurse to take care of Frank while Peter is at school. Peter doesn't care about school. He would rather stay at home and look after Frank. He doesn't want to go to university anyway. The thought of moving away from Frank and living amongst strangers makes Peter feel sick with fear. His life is in Granston, helping Frank out at the vicarage and in the church. The only thing Peter wants, what he prays for night and day, is for Frank to get better and for their lives to go back to the way they have always been, ever since Peter first came to live at the vicarage. But no matter how sick Frank becomes he is insistent on Peter going to school.

You must finish your 'A' levels, Peter. You might change your mind about university.

Later, Peter will realise that Frank knows he is dying when he says this, knows that the future Peter envisages for himself is already falling apart. Frank wants to make sure Peter has other options.

All this becomes clear after he dies. Going through his papers it is obvious to Peter that, months before the end, Frank already knew he was not going to recover. He did not need the doctor to tell him that. Long before the cancer was diagnosed he could feel for himself that his lungs were being eaten away, that his own body had turned against him.

Yet in the midst of his own fear and pain, all his concern had been for Peter. The nurse had helped him to get things in order so that Peter would not have to worry about anything. Peter finds dozens of sheets of her small, neat script, letters Frank must have dictated slowly and painfully; his will; even instructions for his funeral. He had thought of everything. His signature loosened by sickness, he signed his life over to Peter.

## **a trumpet fanfare in the blood**

When Frank dies even his dreams fall to Peter, and that is how, at the end of July, only two weeks after the funeral, Peter finds himself on his way to Avila. Afterwards he has no recollection of how he comes to be on the train to Gatwick Airport. As the train lurches out of Hitchin Station he starts, as if waking from a very deep sleep, and is astonished to find himself in motion, an unfamiliar landscape flickering past the train windows. At his feet there is a suitcase that he does not remember packing and he clutches in his hands a large brown envelope containing a return ticket to Madrid, a sheaf of traveller's cheques and a passport. All of these things surprise him, but what shocks him the most is the sight of himself in his passport photograph. For on his face is an expression that is sickeningly familiar, the same, pale dazed look his mother wore every day, from the time that Wally died until her own death, nine years later. Shaking, Peter snaps the passport shut, stuffs it back into the envelope and rushes along the carriage to the toilet, where kneeling on the floor beside the bowl he vomits again and again. After a long time he stands up and turns to look at himself in the small mirror above the hand basin. He dashes his forehead against the mirror and tears at his own hair, crying and moaning until he exhausts himself and then he sinks back onto the floor and begins to pray.

He does not know what to do or where to go from here and he prays for God to show him. He places himself in the hands of the God he first knew, the God of the Old Testament, a God of plagues and miracles. He is not surprised when his flight is rerouted to Barcelona because of an electrical storm in Madrid. In the delirium of his grief he takes it to be a sign. He imagines that God has intervened on his behalf, has laid a path for him to follow.

In his hotel room Peter finds another sign. Inside the tourism brochure on his bedside table, there is a photograph of an incredible church which towers above the city skyline, lit from within, glowing turquoise against the dark blue Barcelona night.

The next morning Peter does not catch the train to Avila. Instead he takes the metro to the north of the city, to Antoni Gaudi's unfinished masterpiece, La Sagrada Familia. This monument to the holy family is unlike any church Peter has ever seen. It is a building conceived in a dream: a hymn, a prayer, a miracle.

Gaudi began work on the building when he was still a young man. Such was the scope of his vision that when he died in 1926, at the age of seventy-three, the cathedral was not even close to completion. Peter has never come across such a powerful image of the glory of God. Gaudi's fervour is evident in every detail of the church; his passion is infectious.

Standing at the East transept, before La Puerta de la Esperanza, The Door of Hope, Peter feels electrified, heady with excitement. Above him, the four towers built to celebrate the birth of Christ stretch towards the heavens. Gaudi envisaged tubular bells suspended inside each of the towers, around which the staircases would curve. He had the walls of the towers punctuated with louvres so that the song of the bells would float out over the city, and hearing the sound, people would stop what they were doing and turn to look at the church.

As the towers climb they explode into colour, adorned with a sumptuous mosaic of ceramic and glass fragments. At their peak they are decorated with small white tiles arranged to spell the words Hosanna and Excelsis, exclamations of adoration which can be seen from several blocks away. Gaudi's faith in his vision was so strong that he designed the cathedral to hold a congregation of thirteen hundred people, believing that when it was at last complete its combination of colour and light, sound and silence would be irresistible to the people of Barcelona.

Though the tubular bells have never been hung inside the towers of the nativity façade, they have left the louvres open so that as you climb the spiral stairs you can breathe the salty air that blows across the city from the port, hear the traffic from the streets below. Standing at the very top of one of the towers Peter feels as though he is part of the sky. He is dizzy but it is not a fear of heights which is causing this vertigo. It is an idea that has come to him, an idea that is like a trumpet fanfare in his blood. Three hundred and fifty feet from the ground Peter dares to dream that he might move people the way Gaudi's cathedral has moved him. I will build churches, he thinks to himself. I will draw people to God with the beauty of architecture.

Peter spends five days in Barcelona. He visits La Sagrada Familia every day. When he emerges from the metro to see the spires of the cathedral above him he feels the blood rush into his head. He has to grip the stair rail to steady himself. Even after he leaves the church the dazed, ecstatic feeling stays with him, carries him through the day, a heat in his bones.

Peter's head is swollen with visions of the churches he will build. He imagines churches so beautiful that people will faint at the sight of them. And yet when he tries to picture these churches in the landscape he knows, his vision falters. The images in his mind are too startling to fit into an unassuming village like Granston; too beautiful to be squeezed amongst offices and factories in an overcrowded city. They need space around them, a place where they will have room to breathe. Peter does not know of such a place and he asks God's help in guiding him there.

Following the signs for La Biblioteca de Catalunya, Peter walks along La Rambla, a road which was once a stream, skirting the city walls on its way to the sea. Inside the library



Peter searches amongst the dictionaries and encyclopedias for an atlas. In the privacy of a narrow corridor between two rows of bookshelves he sits down on the floor.

There is nothing left for him in England. He reminds himself of this one final time before he closes his eyes and flips open the book. He notices then how quiet the library is. It is as if, when he opened the atlas, everyone in the library stopped reading, or writing intently in their notebooks, stopped everything and held their breath. Feeling the weight of the atlas in his lap Peter has a sense that even outside the world is quiet, that all over the city people have stopped what they are doing, their lungs tight with anticipation while they wait to see what will happen. Peter feels their impatience. His new life is spread open on his lap and he is afraid to open his eyes and look at it.

He says a prayer. He lifts his eyelids just a fraction so that he can make out the shape of the country he has chosen without being able to read its name. Through the curtain of his eyelashes he can see patches of colour. He follows the blue ocean to the edge of each page. Like the place where he has come from his new home is an island. He opens his eyes all the way and lifts his thumb to read the name *Melbourne*, printed in neat, bold capital letters in the bottom right hand corner of the map. Melbourne, Australia. He thinks back through years of geography and history, through everything he learned from Frank. He cannot recall ever hearing a single thing about Melbourne.

This city that God has chosen for him is nothing more than a name. He has no story of any kind that he can attach to this place. It is a blank canvas in his mind. He imagines it neat, symmetrical, spaced out evenly like the letters of its name on the map in front of him. He pictures it hugging the curve of the land, licked clean by the waters of Port Phillip Bay. Onto this canvas he paints an image of his churches growing like exotic plants, rising up from the sandy soil, spreading their roots beneath the streets and houses until they reach the sea.

## **a place he has already left behind**

The new vicar will not arrive in Granston until the end of August so Peter has a month's grace, four weeks to pack away his childhood and prepare for his new life. He goes back and forth to London on the train, sorting out his passage to Australia and his immigration papers and in between he works his way through the house, deciding what to take and what to leave behind. He tackles one room at a time, emptying cupboards and chests of drawers and he does not let himself think of Frank or of any part of his past. He puts most of the household items back into the cupboards for the new vicar and the rest goes straight out to the rubbish bin. Other than his books Frank did not set much store by material possessions and Peter finds that discarding them is easier than he had thought it would be.

Anything that Frank really valued he kept in the study and Peter leaves this room until last, knowing it will be the hardest. For there, every book is a memory and sorting through them Peter relives his life with Frank, shelf by shelf. Time and time again Peter comes across the scraps of paper Frank used as bookmarks and he cannot resist turning to the pages Frank has marked, rereading the passages he loved. Sometimes when he comes across a section that is familiar he can almost hear Frank reading it to him in the same low, deliberate voice he used for giving sermons, and then grief tightens Peter's chest, howls behind his eyes.

Peter spends his last day walking around Granston, revisiting parts of the village that he used to go to when he was a young boy, on those Sunday mornings before God found him. This late in the summer the fields behind the churchyard are thick with corn and the clean dusty smell fills his head as he walks along the hedgerow towards White Wood. It is a hot day but beneath the trees the air is cool and the water in the stream, though barely running at this time of year, is still cool to the touch. In the mud on the dried-up bank Peter sees a round pebble, like the ones he used to outline his father's grave, all those years ago. As he crouches down to pick it up he is hit by a wave of memory and he feels the pain of his father's death as though it were still new. Stunned by grief, he sits on the damp earth beside the stream turning the smooth stone over in his hand and then turning it again and when he blinks his way out of the woods back into the hot, bright day he is carrying the memory stone in his pocket. He can feel the weight of it, its roundness against his leg as he walks the length of the High Street, all the way from Lily Nunn's to the school and then up and down the cobbled lanes that fan out from the church. He walks every street of this village that is the only home he has ever known and he feels no sadness to think that he may be walking these streets for the last time, for every place he visits feels like a place he has already left behind.

The sun is low in the sky when Peter reaches the graveyard. He walks the path behind the church that leads to the grave of his mother and father and now also to Frank's grave, where the earth is still fresh from the digging and the words Peter chose from Isaiah stand out on the new headstone: *You have been a refuge for the needy, in their distress*. He sits first at one grave and then at the other, reading the inscriptions again and again, concentrating hard as if to memorise the words that are already engraved on his heart. Though he sits there until the daylight has almost faded he cannot think of any way to say a final goodbye, or to take his leave of the church itself, which has been as much of a home to him as the vicarage has.

Tonight he finds no comfort in reading the bible, or even in prayer. The sound of the key turning in the lock, the lighting of the candles – the familiarity of these rituals makes Peter ache. He moves restlessly about the church, searching for something, a definitive gesture that will allow him to close the wooden door behind him and walk away.

In the vestry he finds what he is looking for: the bell that chimes out every birth and death and marriage will ring him now into his new life. He grasps the rope and heaves at it with all his strength: one long, deep note tolling his farewell. It echoes around him as he blows out the candles one by one and when he locks the church door and walks down the path to the gate the sound of the bell is heavy in the air around him. He does not turn back to see the church silhouetted against the indigo sky but as he walks down Green Lane for the last time he sees it in his mind's eye and his heart feels old.

## **Melbourne, 1958**

### **beginning again**

Peter wakes at the same time each day, when the first tram rattles along Carlisle Street past his window. He has been living at the boarding house for a month now and it still pleases him to wake to that sound because it is a sound that is completely unconnected to his past and it reminds him of nothing, except that his new life has begun. And though there is not a single day that passes when he does not think of Frank, and though his sadness underlies everything he does or says, he thanks God for giving him this chance to begin again.

Every morning he dresses in his new suit and catches the tram along St Kilda Road to the Royce Building where he works as an architectural clerk at the office of Robert Smart and Partners. His landlord, Jack Campbell, had helped him get the job.

Jack and his wife Margaret had taken to Peter right from the start. They had been shocked to hear that he had come all the way from England on his own and had gone out of their way to make him feel welcome in the boarding house. Every time Peter had passed Margaret in the hall or on the upstairs landing she had invited him to come to the kitchen for a cup of tea, and after a week of making excuses he had finally accepted, fearing that another refusal may offend her. He had not wanted to go, partly because he dreaded the inevitable questions about family, questions he was not ready to answer.

Perhaps Jack and Margaret sensed this. In any case, the first few times he went to sit with them in the kitchen they did not ask him any questions at all. Instead they told him about their lives and about their daughter Madeleine who worked on a sheep station in northern New South Wales.

To his surprise Peter found that he enjoyed their company. The jokey, easy way they spoke to each other and to him made him laugh and forget his awkwardness. It became his habit to have tea with them every afternoon while Margaret was preparing the dinner and though he had thought he would be unable to share his life with them the way they had shared theirs with him, one afternoon he found himself telling them everything, all the way back from the night the church was struck by lightning until the moment when he conceived the dream of his future as he floated above Barcelona.

Several days later Jack had stopped Peter on the stairs.

I've been thinking about what you said, about building churches and all that. I can't promise anything but I've got an old friend in the business and if you want me to have a word, you never know, he might be able to help you out.

Robert Smart, or Bob as he liked to be called, was a tall, energetic man with an easy smile on his weather beaten face.

Churches eh? he said at the interview and Peter saw at once that he had made a mistake in speaking of his dreams; realised too late that Bob was a man of facts and figures, that he did not deal in dreams.

Churches! he said again, and laughed, though not unkindly.

Not too much in the way of churches here son. Offices are what we do.

Still, he had offered Peter the job and Peter had accepted, for although it was not exactly what he was looking for, it was at least a step in the right direction.

He had thought it would bore him, the architecture of office buildings. He had seen it only as a stepping stone, something that must be got through before he could begin to do what he really wanted.

But once he knows what he is doing, there is no aspect of his job that he does not enjoy. He learns all the jargon; the systems of measurement; the different tools of the trade. It is a hard, dry kind of architecture, worlds away from the fanciful churches he dreams of building, but Peter knows that the skills he masters here will be the basis for everything he does later and so he determines to learn as much as he can. He listens to everything the architects say and once he becomes more confident he begins to ask questions. He studies all the plans he files away and he makes notes in a green leather bound journal that Frank bought him as a gift for his eighteenth birthday.

Peter did not bring any furniture with him from England. The ships were overcrowded as it was and there was only room enough in the cargo hold for personal possessions. Compared to the comfort of the vicarage his room at the boarding house is rather bare, furnished with only the narrow bed and the chest of drawers that were there when he arrived. He has unpacked all his clothes, and on top of the chest of drawers he has arranged the photograph of his mother and father, Frank's framed postcard of Avila, the memory stone from White Wood, and of course, his bible. But he knows that the room won't really feel like home until it is filled with his books. He packed them in such a haze of grief that as soon as the tea chests were sealed he could

hardly remember what was in them. Now they have been six weeks at sea, six weeks stacked in the corner of his room and Peter is impatient to get at them.

He spends his first month's pay on a second-hand bookcase and an old desk from a junk shop in St Kilda. The man who owns the shop gives him a ride home in the cab of the truck, his new furniture tied down on the back and when they've unloaded it Jack helps him carry it upstairs to his room. He spends the rest of the weekend unpacking, savouring the pleasure of arranging, and then rearranging the books on the shelves, opening them one by one and rediscovering the memories that are pressed between their pages.

Peter's diligence does not go unnoticed at Robert Smart and Partners. It is not too long before he is moved to a larger desk, overlooking Fawkner Park, where he begins to learn to draw and plan, to draft the blueprints of new buildings. Keen to improve his skills further, he starts night school, enrolling himself in a course in architectural design at a college in the city. He comes to love the materials of architecture: the thick, translucent paper, the narrow-nibbed pens. He feels a quickening in his blood whenever he unrolls a fresh sheaf of paper to begin a new commission. When he is drawing he thinks of nothing else. He can look out over the park and his head is so full of lines and angles that he does not even see the people walking their dogs along the colonnades of trees.

At the boarding house he has his desk under the window like it was at the vicarage, but now instead of a garden he looks out over Carlisle Street. All night there are people getting on and off the tram, walking home from work or down to the pub on the corner of Inkerman Street. But Peter hardly notices them. He fills page after page of his journal, making sketches of churches and taking notes from the architecture books he lugs home from the library.

There were two Church of England ministers on board the Arcadia and every Sunday morning a church service was held in the cinema lounge. Peter had gone to this service only once. He had been so distracted by the plush seating, the red velvet curtains and the carpeted floor that he had hardly heard a word the minister said. He knew that if Frank were there they would have laughed about it together but without Frank he could not see the funny side. And he could not feel close to God in a room which had been filled, only the night before, with an entirely different audience, oohing and aahing or laughing gaily at the latest film. And so, on board the ship, Peter had got into the habit of worshipping alone, snatching a half-hour here and there, whenever the three men he shared with were out of the cabin. There he could close his

eyes and imagine himself back at St Mary's and in that familiar and beloved space he could find solace.

Since he has been in Melbourne Peter has thought, many times, of going to church; he misses the singing and receiving communion, the sense of a faith shared. But he cannot imagine church without Frank: Frank has always been a part of it, right from the beginning and Peter cannot think of taking part in a service without him.

Once Peter gets to know Jack and Margaret better he starts going with them on Sunday mornings to St Bede's church in Carlisle Street. It is much smaller and newer than St Mary's and the atmosphere is more informal, not as sacred, Peter thinks. Still, he likes the minister and it feels good to be part of a congregation once again, and being there with Jack and Margaret makes his longing for Frank's companionship a little less acute.

After the service Peter sits in the kitchen while Margaret makes him a cut lunch. He packs it into a small, canvas bag with his notebook and pen and goes out into the streets to look for inspiration. He begins in his own neighbourhood, following the grid pattern of the streets, walking all the main roads, from east to west and then from north to south. He stops at every church he comes across, regardless of denomination. He sketches the outside first and then, if the church is open, he explores the interior. He makes floor plans, draws diagrams which show the shape of the roof, the arrangement of the windows and the layout of altar, pulpit, pews. Though his sketches are minutely detailed there are times when Peter knows that the pictures he has drawn do not capture the atmosphere of the church, and then he falls back on words, writing furiously in an attempt to describe the feeling of the space in which he stands.

By mid-December Peter has sketches of every church and synagogue in East St Kilda. He buys a big, hard covered sketchbook to replace the journal which is already full and Margaret lends him a street directory, in which every church in Melbourne is marked on the map by a small symbol of the cross. Now Peter can cover more ground in a shorter space of time, and he widens his search to take in Prahran, Caulfield, Elsternwick or the churches on the other side of the city in Carlton and Fitzroy.

Through his explorations Peter soon comes to know his way around Melbourne. He grows to love the city he has chosen as his new home. It is a city of endless movement: of department stores and frantic streets; of palm trees and beaches; of parks and gardens and a dirty, narrow river and he loves every part of it.

Sometimes he catches the tram down to the port and sits at the edge of the wharf where the ship that carried him from England had finally docked after six weeks at sea. Sitting there he sees the city as he saw it for the very first time, on board the deck of the Arcadia, and in

those moments he knows with absolute certainty that coming here was the only thing for him to do.

A week before Christmas Peter arrives home from work one afternoon to find Margaret and Jack in a state of great excitement, after receiving a telegram from Madeleine to say that she will be home the following day. Just one year younger than Peter, Madeleine is Jack and Margaret's only child, and Peter has heard a lot about her in those afternoons in the kitchen. The news that she is coming home for Christmas causes quite a stir in the boarding house, especially amongst the other young men, some of whom have been living there since before Madeleine went to work up north. She is, by all accounts, a great beauty and that night at dinner she is all the young men can talk about.

But nothing that Peter hears about Madeleine prepares him for the moment when he meets her for the first time. When she says hello in her low, clear voice and puts out her hand, boldly, like a man, Peter feels something lurch and topple inside him. He looks at her clean hands and short nails and he wants to hide his ink-stained fingers behind his back. But she holds her hand there insistently, until he takes it and later he will be glad he did, touching his hand and remembering with a rush of pleasure the way the small, fine bones of her fingers were clasped around his.

On Christmas Eve Jack uncovers the piano and rolls it out from the corner of the dining room for Madeleine to play Christmas carols. She plays without music, and at first she watches her hands with great concentration as if struggling to remember the notes. Once she has warmed up she shakes her pale hair away from her face to join in the singing and Peter lowers his voice, in order to hear hers. She sings just as she speaks, in a low, sweet tone which seems always on the brink of laughter. Margaret stands beside her at the piano, flushed with pride and from time to time Madeleine looks up at her mother and smiles.

At Midnight Mass he finds himself standing beside her, distracted from the service by the smell of her hair. It is the smell of clean air; of green corn growing in the fields, early in the summer; of the churchyard after the grass has been cut. It is the smell of Granston; the smell of Peter's childhood. He looks at her green eyes and her wide, straight teeth and her beauty is like a pain inside him.



## **Book Three: Madeleine**

## **Melbourne, 1941**

### **the life she imagined**

Madeleine loves to hear the story of her birth, the way she slid from her mother's womb like a bruised mango. As a child she asks her mother to tell it time and time again until it becomes a kind of family myth, better than any other story because it is all about her. And though, as she grows up, there are times when she feels lonely, she never wishes for a brother or sister because the existence of either would take away her status as a gift from God, a miracle child.

When her parents first met, Margaret was working as a nurse on the maternity ward at The Alfred hospital. By the time she married Jack in 1933 she was hankering for a baby of her own but Jack thought it better to wait a year or two, until they were more secure financially. In their third year of marriage they both felt that the time was right but Margaret did not fall pregnant that year, nor the year after. After three years of trying, Margaret gave up her job at the hospital. It broke her heart to deliver babies for so many other women and to know that she would never share their joy.

To Madeleine, this part of the story is sad but she doesn't mind because she knows it has a happy ending. And it pleases her to think how much her mother had longed for her, how the waiting had made her even more precious.

What her mother does not tell her is that after she left the hospital she became very depressed. A life without children seemed to her to be an empty life and she could not resign herself to it. Jack had felt that if she had something else to occupy her she would get used to the idea eventually. And that was why, after Jack's father died and left them an unexpected inheritance, they decided to buy the boarding house.

It was in a mess when they took it over, the yard full of junk; the rooms filthy dirty and desperate for a lick of paint. Jack and Margaret had agreed that Jack should stay on as foreman at the engineering company, to keep a steady wage coming in, and Margaret would be responsible for getting the boarding house in order.

It is not until Madeleine is much older that Margaret tells her how in the beginning there were days when she could hardly drag herself out of bed and even if she made it to the house she might not get anything done. Some days she would just move from room to room in a kind of daze and when Jack came to pick her up she could not have told him where the hours had gone. But at the weekends they worked on the house together and later Margaret admitted

it was the best thing for her. By the time they hung the *Vacancies* sign out the front in June 1939, she was back to her old self and though it was not the life she had imagined for herself she was happy enough.

When she discovered she was pregnant, just over a year later, it came as a shock to both her and Jack. And here is the part of the story Madeleine likes best of all, the part she never tires of hearing, no matter how many times her mother tells it: for the first few weeks after Madeleine was born, Margaret would cry every time she held her, and even as her tears dripped onto her daughter's tiny red face she could not believe this baby was her own.

## reaching into the past

For as long as she can remember Madeleine has wanted to live in the country, her heart pulling back towards the place where her mother grew up. Madeleine still remembers the summers at her grandparents' farm, stomping through paddocks where the grass grew taller than her own head, watching for sleepy snakes the way her grandfather had taught her. She remembers standing bare-footed on the verandah in the long, dark evenings, watching for shooting stars with the shrill music of the cicadas vibrating in her ears. And she remembers too, the long drive back to Melbourne, crying herself to sleep in the back seat of her parents' Holden.

The year her grandfather died Madeleine was seven. She begged Jack and Margaret to move to Red Hill and take over the farm but instead the farm was sold and her grandmother came to live with them at the boarding house. Nanna Rose was unhappy in East St Kilda. She could not get used to the traffic noise or the thick, grey smell of the air. She was only fifty-four but her grief made her frail and easily tired and though, in the beginning, she tried to help Margaret in the kitchen she was exhausted by the comings and goings of the boarding house. As the months passed she spent more and more time in her bedroom, eventually coming down only for her meals and to go to church on Sundays.

On their walk home from school in the afternoons Madeleine would tell her mother everything she had learned that day, and then, sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of milk and a scone or an Anzac biscuit, she would begin all over again for her father.

After Nanna Rose came to live with them Margaret would urge Madeleine to share these stories with her.

I'm sure Nanna Rose would love to hear about your day, she would say. It would cheer her right up. Before long it became Madeleine's habit to go up and see her grandmother every day and Margaret would get a tray ready as soon as Madeleine got home, with milk for Madeleine and a cup of tea for Rose. At first Margaret would deliver the afternoon tea but after a lot of practice up and down the hallway Madeleine announced that she was now ready to carry the tray herself. Although there were a few mishaps early on Madeleine was not to be deterred and if one of the boarders offered to help as they passed her on the stairs she would shake her head and carry on, very slowly and carefully and proudly, by herself.

Sometimes Madeleine would work on the scarf she was knitting, passing it back to her grandmother whenever she dropped a stitch. Otherwise they might do a jigsaw puzzle together

or play Snap! One afternoon, while she was rummaging through Rose's knitting basket for a smaller pair of needles, Madeleine came across a photograph album, packed amongst the balls of wool for safekeeping during the move from Red Hill, and since forgotten. Madeleine loved photographs, especially from 'the olden days' which, in her book, included anything that happened before she was born. Excited, she lifted the album onto the bed and she and her grandmother sat side by side, close together, turning the pages.

The first pictures were from her Nanna and Grandad's wedding. Madeleine had never tried to imagine how they would have looked all those years ago but when she saw them in the photos she felt pleased and proud to find that when they were young they were as beautiful and handsome as she had hoped they would be.

After the wedding photos there were snapshots of Edward and Rose in Adelaide and Sydney, Brisbane, Cairns and even Perth. It seemed to Madeleine that there was nowhere in Australia her grandparents hadn't been.

Grandad and I loved to travel then, Nanna Rose told her. When we were first married we spent all our spare money on holidays. Whenever we had the chance we'd hop on a bus or train and see how far we could get. After your mother was born we didn't get around quite so much, only to Lorne or Apollo Bay every now and then. And then just after the war ended we bought the farm, and after that there was never time to go away.

Edward and Rose bought the farm in 1919, the same year Margaret started school. It was more than twenty-five years later when Margaret and Jack first brought Madeleine to visit and the farm had changed a lot by then. But the steep-roofed farmhouse and the slope of the fields always remained the same and when the farm began to appear in the photos Madeleine recognised it at once and it hollowed out her stomach, to see it and to know that she would never go there again.

All the way through the album Madeleine was asking her grandmother questions: about her mother's childhood; about the lives of the other people in the photos; the places they visited; the changes they made to the farm. And as Nanna Rose reached back into the past to find the answers to these questions, her voice seemed to change, to become soft and distant, as if she were talking in her sleep.

After that first afternoon Nanna Rose kept the photograph album in her top drawer and Madeleine would often take it out for them to look at. She would rack her brains for different questions to ask so that Rose could dredge up new stories about her years on the farm with Edward. When her grandmother was telling her about the dances they used to have in the sheds

after harvest; about the storms and the frosts and the droughts; all the dogs and cats and ponies that came and went over the years, Madeleine would close her eyes and imagine herself there.

She still missed the farm and when her grandmother spoke of it, it was as if the life she had lost came back to her, just for a little while. After these conversations Rose would sigh and say to Madeleine, You're a country girl at heart, just like me.

Madeleine never forgot that. She was fifteen when Nanna Rose died and after years of hearing the same stories time and time again Madeleine discovered that her grandmother's memories had become her own.

So when the letter came from her uncle saying that they needed a governess on their sheep station, Madeleine had not hesitated. She had felt that by going to live in the country she would be honouring her grandmother's memory, picking up the thread of her life.

## wishful thinking

Madeleine does have a second reason for wanting to go to the station, a reason that she would never admit to, that she hardly even admits to herself. What she hopes for, secretly, is that on her uncle's station she might meet a boy she can marry.

There is a part of Madeleine that realises this is foolish. She knows there are a hundred times more men in the city than there will be on a remote station in northern New South Wales. But she does not seem to have any luck with the men she meets in Melbourne.

It is not that they don't like her. Quite the opposite. Since she was thirteen or fourteen she has been conscious of men looking at her, stopping what they're doing to watch her walking past. One day in the boarding house Madeleine had overheard a young woman called Lorna saying to another boarder, I could feel him undressing me with his eyes, and Madeleine had known at once what Lorna meant. She had never been comfortable with the attention she received from men but as she got older she had learned ways of deflecting it. When she was alone in public she wore an expression of impatience, which, despite her girlish appearance made her seem quite unapproachable. And when she was walking, she had developed a brisk, almost masculine stride to discourage men from stopping her in the street to make conversation.

At the bank however she was unable to employ these tactics. She looked older than her sixteen years and in a very short time she had a number of customers who were quite obviously infatuated with her. On one flimsy pretext or another they would come into the bank two or three times a week and would always wait for Madeleine to serve them. If another teller became available first they would rummage in their briefcases as if they were not quite ready to be served. To her embarrassment, Madeleine's 'admirers' became something of a joke amongst the staff, and perhaps, she feared, a point of resentment for some of the other young women.

She was much happier on the switchboard at David Jones. When she spoke to men there they treated her in the same way that they treated everyone else because they could not see her. She liked the girls there too: they were younger and livelier than the people Madeleine had worked with at the bank and on the quiet days when not many calls came through they passed the time easily in talking and laughing.

On Saturday nights they often went to the dances in St Kilda and after Madeleine had been working with them for a few weeks they invited her to join them. She went shopping for a new dress and Margaret helped her straighten her hair and pile it in waves on the top of her head. But the dance turned out to be a great disappointment and she did not go again.

In the beginning she had enjoyed herself. The girls had sat together drinking shandy at the little low tables near the bar and Madeleine had got up to dance whenever she was asked, which was often. Madeleine was not a bad dancer but some of her partners were much better than her and she had let them lead, swaying and spinning and twisting until she was out of breath. But as the night went on some of the men became drunk. Madeleine could smell the liquor on their breath when they came up to talk to her and though she did not want to dance with these men, all the other girls were on the dance floor by then and she felt uncomfortable sitting alone. When the music started the men would hold her close and Madeleine could feel their hands starting to wander and she would pray for the next song to be a fast one so that she could pull away without giving offence. Late in the evening Madeleine thought her luck had finally changed when a young man asked her to go out on the balcony where the music was softer, so that they could talk more easily. But once her eyes had adjusted to the dimmer lighting she could see nothing but couples necking all around her and she felt stupid for not realising what he had really brought her out there for.

Then there were the dates she went on with men who wanted nothing more than to put their hands up her skirt in the back seats of their cars. Madeleine could only conclude that the men in the city had lost the art of courtship. For some time she refused to go on dates of any kind and ignored all the men who tried to attract her attention. She spent her time reading and going to the cinema and on Friday and Saturday nights she would go over to her friend Janine's house and they would sit in Janine's bedroom playing Scrabble and looking at magazines and listening to the same records over and over again. Margaret was concerned about her.

You're too young to be staying at home reading books all the time, she would say. You should be out having fun.

But she needn't have worried. Madeleine was an incurable romantic. She had spent too many hours sighing and swooning over love scenes in the velveteen chairs of Melbourne's cinemas, to give up on romance for very long.

She had got it into her head that country boys would be different: honest and simple and old-fashioned and therefore more gallant, more chivalrous, more like the leading men in romantic films. Madeleine could not have said where she had got this idea. Perhaps it was only wishful thinking, still, once she had come up with it she couldn't shake it off and the job on her uncle's farm seemed too good an opportunity to refuse.



## the first goodbye

The first goodbye is the hardest. Two weeks before she leaves Madeleine catches her mother crying, hiding in the kitchen with tears running down her face while Madeleine plays the piano in the dining room.

She's a big girl now, love, her father says and he winks at Madeleine over her mother's head.

Madeleine has imagined the moment of her departure many times, relishing the romantic drama of the overcrowded platform, the tearful farewell. She has pictured herself kneeling on the scratchy seat, leaning dangerously out of the window, just as she has seen people doing in old films. In her right hand she will hold a white handkerchief which she will wave frantically as the train pulls out of the station. She will keep waving it long after the people on the platform are out of sight and then she will use it to dry her eyes, dabbing delicately so as not to smudge her make-up.

In reality the tears are already running down Madeleine's face and she is wiping them away with the back of her hand, the way a Hollywood starlet would never dream of doing. Standing on the platform her father has his right arm, his waving arm, wrapped around her mother and he is waving awkwardly with his other arm. Madeleine can see him smiling but his smile looks glued on and she can tell that he wants to cry. Her mother is not even trying to smile. She has been crying all day, on and off and since they left for the station she hasn't stopped, sobbing until her eyes are blood shot, her face red and swollen. As the train moves off Madeleine can barely see her parents through her tears but she does not try to wipe them away or reach up to the luggage rack to rummage in her bag for a handkerchief. She sits with her back towards the future, watching the city slip away and she cries until she feels dry and hollow all through.

In between the tin-pot stations of Victoria's country towns Madeleine watches the trees and fields rushing at her through the window. She wants to be awake when the train crosses the border into New South Wales but once dusk has fallen there is nothing to look at except her own reflection and Madeleine is soon asleep. All night as the train noses its way through the darkness she dozes and stirs and dozes again and by the time the first grey light pries her from her sleep Sydney is only two hours away.

She had wanted to rush out into the streets as soon as she arrived in Sydney, had thought of hailing a cab to take her across the Harbour Bridge. But with only an hour between trains she is under strict instructions from Margaret not to leave the station, and she passes the

time by going to the traveller's lounge to eat breakfast and wash away the stiff smudged feeling that her restless sleep has left her with.

Pulling out of Central Station Madeleine looks from one side of the train to the other, hoping for a view of the glittering towers that shape the inner city but all she can see through the windows are the backs of the shabby houses and shops that butt up against the railway line. Disappointed, she opens her book and the next time she looks up they are out of the last straggling suburb, curving their way through banks of rough hewn rock that is dark and light and dark and light in layers, the moisture on its cracked surface making it glint like precious metal. When the rock falls away the railway runs beside a wide, green river where thousands of trees jostle for space on the steep banks and the lucky ones growing close to the edge can lean over into the water. For miles and miles the train follows the river's snaking path, running right along the bank until the river changes course and then the train turns away abruptly and begins to climb and they are passing once more through narrow tunnels of rock.

As the railway line draws further and further from Sydney the landscape seems to open out and stretch itself so that in the late afternoon, when they enter the Tablelands the view from Madeleine's window is dominated by the gaping expanse of sky. The train tracks streak through meadows where the thick blonde grass stands on end like spiky hair and as the bulky shadow of the train leans out against the grassy banks the drifts of sheep and cattle grazing by the railway line flee in fear across the fields. The bald yellow hills draw near and then retreat again, the only break in the terrain the freshly ploughed paddocks whose rich dark earth comes as a surprise now that her eyes have adjusted to the muted colours of the grasslands.

From the dining room at Moree Madeleine watches the sky darken over an unfamiliar landscape for the second time since leaving home. Melbourne lies a whole night and day behind her, Inverell just four hours ahead. Restless and exhausted, she has longed for the travelling to be over but now that her destination is drawing near she wants to hold back, slow down, delay the moment of her arrival. For that is the moment when her new life will really begin.

And as she boards the train for the last leg of her journey she realises that she knows almost nothing about the place she is hurtling towards, nothing but a list of names: the name of her father's cousin and his wife; the name of their station and of the nearest town; the names of the children she has come to teach. Distracted by her dreams of romance she has waved away any doubts with the word 'family', no matter that her father has not seen his cousin Tom in nearly ten years; has never even met his wife or children. Madeleine's head is suddenly filled with questions that she knows she should have asked before this moment, questions about the place that is to be her home, the people with whom she is to live. As she scrabbles through her

mind for answers and finds that she has none she feels sick with anxiety. She feels as she thinks Fanny Price must have felt, in *Mansfield Park*, as she rattled across England in a stagecoach, into an unknown future. She wishes she was a little girl again and she could curl up against her mother with a coat over her and not wake up until she was back home, tucked up in her own bed.

Stepping onto the platform at Inverell, Madeleine recognises Tom at once. Though he is much younger he has her father's deep-set eyes, the same freckled skin and gingery hair. When he sees Madeleine waving he breaks into a grin and strides to meet her, lifting her off the floor in his embrace. Madeleine smiles weakly, too tired to speak and afraid that if she opens her mouth she will begin to sob.

You poor old thing, her uncle says. You're about to collapse standing up, let's get you home.

In the car Madeleine leans her head against the window, closing her eyes against the fog that presses close around the vehicle, against the emptiness of the dark. And when at last she is lying in the unfamiliar bed that is now her own, she cries herself to sleep, counting all the days and nights until she can go back home.

## **Delungra, 1959**

### **part of the family**

Madeleine wakes to a knock at the door, sits up in bed and gazes in confusion around the strange room. When she remembers where she is she sinks back down, the weight of her despair like silt in her veins, slowing her blood. She does not want to face this new day, hopes that if she can lie still and quiet enough it will leave her alone. But the knocking is insistent: she cannot shut it out and eventually she gets up to see who it is.

Standing in the corridor there are two children, a little girl with glasses and long dark hair in plaits and a boy, slightly taller, with Tom's carrot hair. It must have been the boy who was knocking for he draws back guiltily when Madeleine opens the door and will not meet her eye as he tells her that breakfast is ready. Madeleine knows that these must be the oldest two but she is still half-asleep and cannot think of their names and she stands there awkwardly for a minute before managing to say, I'll be there in a minute, and closing the door on them.

All three children are sitting at the table with their mother when Madeleine comes into the kitchen. Jonathon, Anthony, Melissa, Madeleine reminds herself, silently.

Dear Madeleine, I've been so looking forward to meeting you.

Elaine stands up and hugs her warmly. Madeleine likes her at once.

Sorry the kids woke you, she says as Madeleine sits down. You can't imagine how excited they've been. They wanted to stay up last night but I thought you'd be too tired and I told them they'd have to wait until this morning. I said you could have breakfast later but they couldn't stand the suspense another minute.

Melissa looks shyly at her plate as if she is ashamed to have been exposed but the two boys are grinning at Madeleine and she cannot help smiling back.

So you've met John and Missy, anyway. And this is Anthony.

We call him 'the ant', Jonathon says, because he's the smallest.

Elaine laughs. Everyone's name gets shortened here. You'll be Maddy before you know it.

Melissa looks up now, her eyes serious behind her glasses.

Maddy, she nods her head solemnly. That's what I'm going to call you, and she smiles proudly, as if she has made it up herself.

Outside the fog has lifted and though the air is cool the sun is warm and the sky is pale and clear. There is not another farmhouse in sight, only trees and fences and paddocks full of

sheep as far as the eye can see. In the daylight the emptiness of the space is not so oppressive as it was in the dark the night before. In the early morning light the sloping fields are soft with dew, the whole landscape smudged like a watercolour and Madeleine is already seduced.

The children have planned a tour of the farm for Madeleine, a haphazard, looping journey which takes in all of the small paddocks surrounding the homestead. John leads the way, rushing ahead on his long legs, calling, Hurry up! Come on! wanting to show off everything at once. Anthony waddles after him excitedly but Missy will not be rushed. Though John is the tallest by several inches, at six, Melissa is older, fourteen months ahead, she likes to tell people. As the oldest she feels responsible for making sure that Madeleine will like the farm and she treats this job of showing her around as a sacred duty, explaining how things work with a seriousness that makes Madeleine want to laugh. She holds tightly to Madeleine's hand and ignoring John's urgings she points out the veggie patch and the chicken coop, the wool shed, the feed barn and the rainwater tank. For Madeleine's benefit she names the pieces of machinery in the shed; the birds; the trees and even the paddocks.

John is impatient to show Madeleine the animals and after endless pleas for the girls to hurry up, he finally runs back to where they are standing, grabs Madeleine's hand and starts dragging her towards the top paddock. Giving in, Missy takes Anthony's hand and breaks into a run and then all four of them are scrambling up the hill in an awkward line, giggling and jerking at each other's arms in their race to get to the top.

Most of the cattle graze on the wooded land at the back end of the property but the calves are penned up close to the homestead until they get used to being around people. They look up from their troughs as Madeleine and the kids approach, chewing warily, watching them. Madeleine can smell their sweat and dung, their grassy breath. Though she knows that they are probably more frightened than her, she is intimidated by the way they crowd together; the bulk of their bodies and their great staring eyes. When the children reach through the fence posts to stroke the calves' muddy coats, Madeleine hangs back, unsure of herself.

She is more confident with the poddy calf, who grazes with the young sheep, by the creek. Hearing the children's voices he lifts up his head to look around for them and when the nervous sheep lope away he stands waiting, his eyes soft. He is a pretty roan coloured calf, much smaller than the cattle in the top paddock. He stands placidly while the children pet him and when Madeleine kneels down to stroke his small, trusting face he puts out his thick tongue and licks her hand.

After lunch Tom takes Madeleine out in the Austin truck to show her the rest of the farm. He swings Missy into the cab first and once Madeleine has climbed in he passes up the

Ant, to sit on her lap. John is last, determined to scramble up on his own, only holding onto Madeleine's arm when he leans out to pull the door shut. The truck smells of dust and oil and the old rope that is coiled and tangled on the floor. The children wriggle and bounce on the seat as they take off, lurching and bumping along the gravel track. Whenever they come to the edge of a paddock John hops down to open the gate, closing it behind them after the truck has passed through so that the sheep won't escape. Once they are past the Halfway Paddock there are no more gates and the sheep are free to wander about amongst the thickets of trees. The land is more hilly here, the ground less even and the track seems to have disappeared altogether. John and Anthony are cheering and laughing as they jerk and jolt over the dips and bumps which are hidden by the long grass. Missy sits close to her father, watching intently as he works through the gears. When they reach the creek the children beg their father to stop so that they can paddle, screaming with delight when they first touch the icy water, squelching their bare toes in the mud until their feet are raw with cold.

Further along the creek's deep enough to swim, John tells Madeleine.

It's a natural pool, Tom says, but it's too cold now, isn't it kids?

They're building a swimming pool in Inverell, Missy adds excitedly. When it's finished we're going to get real bathing suits and it's going to be heated so we can swim there when the creek's too cold.

They cross the winding creek fourteen times before they reach the pinnacle and there on the small, flat summit they get out of the truck to look at the view. It is the highest hill for miles around and Tom points out the towns that surround them and all the farms in between. From up there it is easier to see where one paddock ends and the next begins, the gravel tracks like lines drawn to delineate the boundaries. Madeleine can follow the path that they took from the farmhouse up the Silo Paddock and from there she can see the creek, narrow then wide, then narrow again, snaking its way in and out of the trees. The shape of the station is easy to make out from above, one and a half miles wide and five miles long, stretched out like an old sock, Tom jokes.

Madeleine won't start teaching John and Missy until September when the school year officially begins but she arrives at the farm a month early, to help Elaine through the shearing. The men are due any day and the first sheep have already been penned up, to keep their coats dry. All winter they've been thickening them up against the cold and now the shearers will strip them bare, reveal the pink and scrawny truth of their bodies.

The children are desperate to go down to the shed as soon as the shearing begins but Elaine says they'll have to wait until the afternoon, so that the men can get into a rhythm.

Otherwise you'll distract them, she explains, they might get mixed up and start shearing you kids by accident.

They all giggle at this but it is a long morning for Madeleine, trying to keep them entertained and she is soon tired of them pestering her to ask their mother, is it time yet? Can we go soon? Madeleine is relieved when Elaine finally gives the go-ahead and they walk across the paddock together, the children racing ahead.

Though it is cold outside, the shed is warm and the men are sweating, their shirt sleeves rolled up. It looks like hard work, holding the frightened beast still as they feel beneath the wool for its pelt; working their sharp blades deftly around the neck and legs and belly to remove the fleece in one piece. The rouseabout picks up the fleeces once they are cut loose and keeps the sheep moving through the shed so that the shearers are never empty handed. It is like a production line, Madeleine thinks and she watches fascinated as the sheep are hauled in from the holding pens, bulky with wool and then shunted, naked, out the other side.

The children are standing as close as they can, their faces flushed with excitement. Madeleine hangs back, a little intimidated by the shearers: by the smell of their sweat; the thick cords of muscle in their strong arms; their skill and speed with the shears. Tom is working on the wool table, skirting and grading the fleeces, ready for baling. Beneath their muddy outer layer the wool is surprisingly clean, soft to touch and still warm, heated by the animal's fear.

Madeleine can see why the children wanted so badly to come down to the shed: there is something thrilling about the atmosphere there, an adrenaline running through the place with the intensity of the men working, the anxiety of the animals. But when she watches the sheep emerge from the shed, bleating and bleeding where the shears have nicked their skin, it upsets her to see the distress on their dumb faces and after that first day she stays away from the wool shed.

The children spend a lot of time down there in the first week of shearing and the men don't seem to mind as long as they stay out of the way. Once the novelty of shearing has worn off they are wanting Madeleine to go digging for treasure in the gravel pit with them; to help them climb up on the old tractor in the corner paddock or to take them down to the creek to squelch and poke about in the mud. But Elaine needs Madeleine's help at the house and the children have to make their own fun, playing close to the homestead where Elaine and Madeleine can keep an eye on them.

They've got their work cut out for them just keeping the men fed, not to mention milking the cows and making the butter, or the laundry and cleaning that always need doing. The shearers are there for breakfast, lunch and dinner and Elaine takes their morning and afternoon tea down to the shed so it seems to Madeleine that the minute they finish clearing up one meal they start preparing the next one. Though she's used to helping Margaret cook for the boarding house Madeleine cannot get over how much these five men eat.

They're a hungry mob alright, Elaine laughs, I think they eat more than the cattle.

The shearers eat on the closed-in verandah, which used to be their sleep-out, Elaine tells Madeleine, before Tom built the bunkhouse next to the wool shed.

They're better off down there, Elaine says. They can do their carousing without bothering us and as long as they get up in the morning and do what we're paying them for, the rest is their business.

She tells Madeleine these things while they stand side by side at the sink, watching through the window as the children chase each other around the top paddock.

When they've worn themselves out and are bored of playing in the shed, or swinging on the tyre that hangs from the gum tree they come into the house looking for something to do. Then Madeleine sets them up at the kitchen table with crayons and colouring books and she and Elaine work around them, peeling spuds and chopping beef for a stew, shuffling the children's drawings to one side to roll out a circle of pastry.

They feed the children in the kitchen, before the men come in, and then Missy, and sometimes even John, will help to set the table on the verandah, moving back and forth through the lounge room with the plates and glasses and knives and forks. If there is hot food Madeleine or Elaine carry it themselves, though Madeleine hates to do so, resenting the way the men never thank her, just start shovelling the food onto their plates the minute she puts it on the table.

I might as well scrape it into a trough, and they could go at it like pigs, she complains.

You'll get used to it, Elaine says. They're not a bad mob. We've had a lot worse, anyway. Madeleine cannot imagine that there could be any men rougher and dirtier than these, though she does not say so to Elaine. They disgust her, sitting at the table, reeking of sweat. Though they never talk to her she can feel their oily eyes sliding over her body and it makes her feel sick. On the still evenings the noise carries across the paddock from the bunkhouse where they stay up late, drinking and playing cards. Some nights Madeleine can hear them so clearly it seems as though they are sitting underneath her window, cursing and telling dirty jokes. She can hear their leery laughter, can even hear them clearing their throats and spitting. And in the mornings, when she serves them breakfast, she can smell the stale alcohol on their breath.



But she enjoys her days in the kitchen with Elaine, the children traipsing in when they are hungry, or have scraped their knees, or need their mother to resolve a squabble. If it is raining there are toys and dolls and jigsaw puzzles to play with. Or sometimes Madeleine will get out the box of Tom and Elaine's old clothes and the children will play dress-ups, shuffling into the kitchen in oversized shoes when they need help with a belt or a safety pin to hold up a skirt or a pair of trousers three times their size.

Missy asks if Madeleine can put them to bed while they're shearing and though she is already tired by then and the children are sometimes hard to quieten down, Madeleine is glad to be excused from serving the men their dinner; from clearing the table and washing the dishes for a third time. She is happier to follow the children from their bedrooms to the bathroom and back again, helping Anthony to put on his pyjamas; making sure John cleans his teeth. They take turns choosing the story but they always read it in the boys' room, all three of them wriggling under the blankets together while Madeleine sits on the end of the Ant's bed, feeling their little feet squirming against her leg as she turns the book at the end of each page to show them the pictures.

The night she arrived at Myall Downs Madeleine had wondered how she would get through her first few months. She had envisaged endless miserable days, night after night of crying herself to sleep. But while they are shearing she is too busy to be homesick and when she goes to bed at night she is so tired that she falls asleep without thinking of home.

Of course, there are moments when she thinks of her mother, or of the boarding house, or even just of Melbourne. But these thoughts come to her without the sadness she had expected to feel. Sometimes she wonders if the sense of distance, the feeling of missing things, will hit her once shearing is over, when things have settled down. But by then nearly a month has passed and Madeleine already feels like part of the family. She has got used to the smell of the air; the emptiness of the sky; the quiet that is broken only by the raucous croaking of the silver-crested cockatoos or the squeaking of the galahs. In those weeks of endless activity: of chopping and washing and milking and cleaning, Madeleine has adjusted to the rhythm of life on the station.

## a new face

Three times a week the mail comes from Delungra, delivered with fresh bread from the bakery and a box of groceries from the general store. For everything else they have to go to Inverell. Usually either Tom or Elaine make the hour-long trip every Saturday but during shearing they are too busy and it is over a month before Madeleine goes into town. Because it's been so long they all want to go and Madeleine has to squeeze into the back seat of the station wagon with the three children.

When they are almost in Inverell Missy and John start holding their noses and nudging each other, the Ant copying them as he always does. Madeleine knows the reason why when the abattoir appears up ahead and the thick stench of it hits her. She holds her own nose and they all start to giggle, making a show of it, groaning and gasping for air all the way into town.

Tom or Elaine always put in their order at Cansdal's first thing and then when they've finished the banking and the rest of the shopping their groceries are waiting for them, tallied up and packed into boxes, ready for loading into the car.

Madeleine goes into Inverell whenever she has the chance, the movement and activity there a welcome change from the quiet routine of the station. Sometimes she looks at the shops but mostly she spends her time at the library. Huddled into two rooms in the Town hall annexe, it has gleaming linoleum floors, meticulously ordered shelves and two creaking wicker chairs, wedged into the corners beside the disused fireplace, where Madeleine likes to sit and begin reading the books she has chosen.

During the shearing everyone's too busy for visiting but when it's over, when the sheep are back in their paddocks and the shearers have moved on, the bunkhouse swept out and aired, Elaine organises a get-together so that Madeleine can meet the neighbours, Doug and Vera Doherty, who have owned the property beside Myall Downs since Tom was a child.

They're good neighbours, Elaine says. We don't usually see that much of them socially, but their daughter's about your age and I thought it might be nice for you to meet some other young people.

Carol is a giggler, a friendly vivacious girl, tall and pretty with a tanned face and a mass of brown curls. She greets the children exuberantly, pretending to have forgotten their names; sits down and talks to Madeleine as easily as if they've been friends all their lives.

Will we see you at church tomorrow? she asks as they are leaving.

You ought to go with Carol to the picnic, Vera says to Madeleine. It'd be nice for you to meet the other young ones from the church fellowship. They're a nice crowd, good fun and Sam could drop you home afterwards.

While they are washing the dishes, Elaine tells Madeleine about the church fellowship, about the picnics and dances, the cricket matches and excursions; what it was like when she was young, before she married Tom. And jokingly she tells Madeleine about the boys she will meet there, which of them would make good husbands, which of them to steer clear of. Madeleine laughs as though it doesn't matter to her but later she tries to remember the names of the boys Elaine mentioned, storing away the things she said.

About a mile from the church at Delungra there is a fork in the river where a narrow creek has cut its own path cross country, away from the old Moree Road. It meanders half-heartedly through the paddocks for about half a mile, then amidst a clump of pepper trees it gives up on itself and turns back abruptly to rejoin the river. At the place where it changes its mind the creek forms an almost perfect right angle and the passage of water has created a natural pool that flows deep and slow beneath the trees, a place the locals call Dead Man's Corner.

Walking there after church, Carol's friend Vivien tells Madeleine the story behind the name, that whenever there is a drought so bad that the crops fail and the livestock die in droves, men come there in shame and desperation, to drown themselves.

Supposedly, there's a ghost, a girl called Marion says, and if you come down here on a full moon you'll see someone floating face down in the water.

There are twelve of them at the picnic, young men and women about Madeleine's age and every last one of them was born in the area, has never lived more than thirty miles from where they sit now. Having known each other all their lives they're glad to see a new face and they're all friendly to Madeleine, going out of their way to make her feel welcome.

Why on earth would you leave Melbourne to come here? one of the girls asks her. There's absolutely nothing to do; nothing to look at except the sheep; the same trees, the same paddocks, everywhere you go the same faces, and worst of all, everybody already knows who they're going to marry.

So who are you going to marry, Pam? Marion teases.

They all look over at the boys mucking about by the creek. Pam rolls her eyes.

None of them. I'm officially handing over my rights to Madeleine.

The girls laugh.

Which one do you want, Madeleine?

You better tell me who's taken first, Madeleine says. I don't want to tread on anyone's toes.

Sam's available, Carol says, but personally I wouldn't recommend him.

Sam is Carol's brother, tall and wiry with the same tanned face and green eyes. Madeleine had noticed him immediately. At the picnic he doesn't say much but when he drops Madeleine home he is more talkative, happy to answer her questions; to tell her what he knows of the local history. Madeleine likes the sound of his voice, his broad accent, his directness. Listening to him talk, watching his big hands on the steering wheel, he seems older than his twenty years, more a man than a boy and Madeleine is glad to know he's not taken.

Most of the people from the church fellowship live too far away from Myall Downs for Grace to see them regularly but the Doherty's farmstead is only two miles, as the crow flies, so Grace and Carol often walk over to see each other. And when the evenings get lighter Madeleine sometimes rides over on Elaine's old bike, after the kids have finished their lessons for the day. In the summer, the girls plan to play doubles tennis so they spend hours practising their serves; hitting ball after ball against the back wall of the Doherty's shed.

Madeleine is also learning to horse ride. Tom takes her out whenever he has time and though she is afraid at first, sitting up so high, and the reins feel strange and awkward in her hands, slowly she learns to use her body to control the horse and she comes to trust the old mare she rides. In the afternoons she brings Minnow a handful of carrots and walks her up to the top paddock to ride back and forth, back and forth, practising rising to the trot the way Tom has taught her. Sometimes Elaine brings the kids up to watch her lessons and they sit on the fence calling out encouragement, laughing at the look on Madeleine's face the first time Minnow breaks into a canter.

In the weeks following the picnic Madeleine is disappointed to find that she hardly sees Sam at all. He is at church every Sunday but afterwards he always seems to disappear before she gets a chance to talk to him. And though she spends hours on end at the Doherty's, she rarely sees him there. Whenever she's around he always seems to be out in the sheds tinkering with machinery or working in the paddocks with his father. Occasionally, if the weather is warm the girls take the kids up to paddle in the creek and they might walk through one of the paddocks where the men are planting or mending the fences. Then Sam and Doug will look up and wave and Sam will smile at Madeleine with that quick broad grin he has but they are

usually too busy to stop and talk and Madeleine knows better than to interrupt their work without good reason.

So she is excited when she hears about the upcoming ball at Inverell, thinking that there she might have a chance to get to know him better. One Saturday morning some of the girls go into Inverell to look for fabric and patterns and Madeleine and Carol spend the rest of the weekend cutting and pinning and sewing the dresses together on Elaine's machine.

Missy is enthralled by the idea of the ball. For weeks beforehand it is all she can talk about.

You're going to be the prettiest one, she says proudly, when Madeleine tries on the dress to show her.

She is dismayed to hear that no-one has invited Madeleine, though she tries to pretend it doesn't matter.

Everyone's going to wish they asked you, she says to reassure her. They're all going to want to dance with you, just like in a fairy story.

But the fact of Madeleine having no partner obviously bothers her and the following Sunday at church Missy rushes up to Sam straight after the service to ask him who he's taking.

Who do you think I should take? he asks.

He never teases Missy; he meets her seriousness with his own and she adores him for it.

I think you should ask Madeleine, she announces. She doesn't have anyone to go with.

Missy! Madeleine feels herself flushing.

To tell you the truth, I'm not much of a dancer, Sam says to Missy. I'm not sure if Madeleine would want to go with me.

He looks at Madeleine and winks.

He doesn't want to take me, she thinks and it feels like the whole night has been spoilt before it's even begun.

It doesn't matter, she says. Missy's only being silly. There are lots of people going without partners. I'm happy to go with Carol and Pam.

Right then, John rushes up to grab Missy for Sunday school and Madeleine and Sam are left standing awkwardly, trying not to look at each other.

Sorry about that, she says eventually.

Don't be sorry. Missy's right. It's a good idea. I should have thought to ask you before.

Madeleine shakes her head.

You don't have to, honestly.

Sam coughs, looking down at his feet, then grins at her in that quick shy way.

I'd like to.

He coughs again.

If you want to.

Madeleine had hoped that Sam might ask her to the ball. But the way it had turned out she would rather have gone on her own. She had wanted Sam to choose her, not to ask her as a favour because she didn't have anyone else to go with.

I could kill Missy, she says to Carol later that afternoon.

They are lying in the long grass on the Doherty's top paddock and Carol is giggling uncontrollably at the story.

It could be worse, she says. Missy could have picked someone truly awful to ask. Sam's not the best dancer, she starts to laugh again, as if picturing it. In fact, he's pretty dreadful in that department, but at least you know him a little bit.

It's not that, Madeleine says. It's more that...I don't think he wanted to take me but he didn't know how to say no.

I wouldn't worry about that. I think Missy did him a favour, actually.

What do you mean?

Oh, you know. Sam probably wanted to take you but was too scared to ask in case you said no.

Madeleine looks doubtfully at Carol.

Really, I think he's keen on you.

Don't be mad. Madeleine rolls over to lie on her back so that Carol won't be able to see her face. He hardly knows me. He never even talks to me.

Exactly! Carol says. She sounds pleased with herself. I mean, Sam will talk to anyone. But whenever you're around he slinks away like he's embarrassed or something.

Madeleine hopes that Carol isn't looking at her. She tries to think of how to answer without giving herself away.

That's ridiculous, she says eventually,

I should know. He's my brother. But don't worry about it Mad, he won't bother you or anything. Once we get there you don't even have to talk to him if you don't want to. Everyone dances with everyone else anyway, and there'll be lots of other boys there.

Madeleine couldn't care less about other boys. She closes her eyes and thinks of Sam's arms around her, her face against his shoulder.

Sam wasn't lying when he said to Missy that he couldn't dance. Madeleine has never seen anyone so uncomfortable on a dance floor. He grips onto her like a drowning man, staring down at his feet, his face tight with concentration. Madeleine thinks of his confidence at the wheel of a car, the easy way he has with nervous sheep or stubborn cattle. After all her daydreaming, she feels awkward in his arms, like some tree stump he is trying to wrestle out of his way in a paddock. She is relieved when, after a few numbers, his friend Ian cuts in, saying, Fair go mate! I know she's your partner and all but you can't keep her to yourself all night.

Though she would never admit it, Madeleine is an incurable romantic. She wants to feel the kind of fainting, swooning love she has seen in old black and white films. Secretly, she imagines that when at last she meets the love of her life she will know at once: her heart will send out a frantic message in the form of a wild beating; a desperate rush of blood to the head.

She knows that it shouldn't really matter that Sam can't dance. But even when they are just sitting and talking, Madeleine doesn't feel the way she thought she would. Perhaps it is just that Sam is out of his element but she notices how serious he seems and she finds she has more fun with the other boys. She won't get up to dance if it will leave Sam sitting alone, but mostly the Delungra group are sitting together and there's nearly always someone there for him to talk to. So she dances with the boys she knows from church and anyone else who is bold enough to come over and introduce himself.

Tall and thin and short and stocky; freckled and sunburnt; handsome and plain, the boys she dances with are unlike any Madeleine has ever known. They are boys who have been driving cars since they were big enough to reach the pedals; working with their fathers from the age of ten; boys who would shoot a rabbit and skin it without blinking, and Madeleine is fascinated by the stories they tell her.

None of them are drunk or leering as the men at the dances in St Kilda were. They handle Madeleine gently like some rare flower and it makes her feel beautiful. She forgets to be disappointed that Sam turned out to be less than she imagined. She sees how foolish it was to pin her dreams on the first boy she met when there are so many others to choose from. As she is passed from one to another she feels giddy with possibility and she says to herself again and again, this might be the one.

## right on her doorstep

As it turns out, when Madeleine does meet the love of her life she doesn't feel any of the things she expected to feel. There are no heart-stopping glances, no violins playing. In fact, when Madeleine meets Peter for the first time he makes no impression on her at all. She has been in Delungra almost five months and that Christmas when she comes back from the station for the first time, she is so excited to be home that although she sees Peter around the boarding house almost every day, she barely notices him.

Later, when it becomes important to her, she will trawl back through her memories of those two weeks she spent in Melbourne, hoping to dredge up an image of Peter; a fragment of conversation; a moment shared. But she will find nothing. And they will both laugh then, to think that she travelled two thousand miles looking for the man of her dreams when he was right on her doorstep all the time, just waiting for her to open her eyes.

But all that is yet to unfold. That first Christmas, though she is happy to see her parents and to catch up with Janine, Madeleine isn't thinking about coming back to Melbourne for a long time. She loves station life and though she hasn't yet met the right man, she is still dreaming of becoming a farmer's wife. It is not until a year later, when he buys her the book, that Madeleine begins to take notice of Peter. And even then, nothing would have changed if it hadn't been for the storm.

It begins to rain on a Wednesday afternoon, late in January, a heavy unseasonal rain that is still pounding on the roof when they go to bed on Thursday. By Friday morning the creek has burst its banks, the road is impassable. There will be no trip to Inverell that weekend. Kept inside by the wet weather Madeleine has already finished her library books and has long since worked her way through the meagre collection in Tom and Elaine's bookcase.

Sitting restlessly in her room she suddenly remembers her gift from Peter: *The Way of Perfection*, by Saint Teresa of Avila. Madeleine reads all kinds of books: mysteries and romances, adventure stories and historical novels but she is not the least bit interested in the lives of the saints and she hasn't looked at the book since she opened it on Christmas morning.

She had been surprised to receive a gift from Peter, and slightly embarrassed because she had nothing to give him in return. But she had not expected to exchange gifts with him. To her, he was just one of many boarding house guests and though as a child she'd had favourites – those who were never too busy to hear her news, who would always keep treats in their pocket for her – as she'd got older she'd learnt that people came and went and she didn't try so hard to get to know them any more. She had not realised how close her parents had become to



Peter while she had been away. Margaret had mentioned him in her letters but Madeleine had skimmed over what she wrote, forgetting it at once as you do when you hear news of a person you hardly know.

Though the title sounds dull, once she begins reading Madeleine is completely absorbed by the life of Teresa. She reads it in one sitting, leaning into the light of her bedside lamp long after Tom and Elaine have gone to bed. She wonders how he could have known that she would like it and his choosing it for her makes her curious about him.

The following day she digs out her mother's letters from a shoe box under her bed and rereads them, scanning for details of Peter's life. Piecing together the sad story letter by letter, Madeleine feels a rush of affection for this awkward stranger. That afternoon, when she is writing to her parents, she decides to put in a note for Peter, thanking him for the book. She finds the note surprisingly hard to write. To her mother and Janine she writes chatty, informal letters, with progress reports on her horse riding or tennis; funny stories about the kids. Since she hardly knows Peter it seems inappropriate to write him a letter like that. She thinks she will just tell him how much she enjoyed the book. But that only takes a paragraph and it seems a waste of time to send such a short, empty-looking letter so she fills the page by describing her life on the farm. Reading it over she knows it is not a very good letter but by then the weather has cleared and she wants to ride over to the Doherty's so it goes into the envelope as it is.

In the weeks that follow, Madeleine is busy preparing material for the new school term and she soon forgets all about the letter she wrote during the storm. So she is pleasantly surprised when an envelope arrives, addressed with unfamiliar handwriting, and she opens it to find a letter from Peter, a warm, enthusiastic reply to her own.

From the little contact she has had with Peter, Madeleine remembers him being particularly shy and quiet. Mostly he had avoided talking to her altogether, and on the rare occasions when they did speak, he had talked to the air around her, blushing furiously when he met her eye. Thinking back on this, Madeleine finds it difficult to reconcile the Peter she met with the Peter who writes to her. On paper she finds nothing of the awkwardness he exhibits in person. His letter is lively and engaging and she is touched by his interest in her life, his questions about the station. Over the next few months Madeleine occasionally puts a note for Peter in with her letters to her parents and though he never writes of his own accord, he always replies promptly to her letters, filling a couple of pages with his neat, careful hand.

In the winter months, when it is dark early and the cold, wet weather keeps everyone inside, Madeleine begins to write to Peter more often. As the months pass their letters to each other become longer and more open and Madeleine stops enclosing them with her letters to her

parents, feeling suddenly private about them. She finds herself looking forward to writing to him; thinking carefully about what she is going to say; watching the mail; waiting impatiently for his replies.

Even when the spring comes and Madeleine becomes busy with the church fellowship again, she still makes time to write to Peter regularly and she finds herself thinking for the first time that perhaps she won't stay in Delungra after all. As the year draws to a close and Madeleine makes her plans to return to Melbourne for Christmas, she thinks more and more about Peter and the thought of spending time with him makes her both excited and nervous.

So she is shocked when she arrives home to find that he is not there.

You just missed him love, her mother says when Madeleine asks. He left this morning on one of his tours, Bendigo, Ballarat, out that way, looking at all the old churches. You two have been writing haven't you? I thought he would have told you.

Madeleine had known about the tour. Peter had mentioned it many times in his letters. But he had always said he wasn't heading off until the new year, and she can't understand why he would have changed his mind at the last minute, without even letting her know.

Though he had never said as much, Madeleine had assumed that Peter would be looking forward to them spending time together as much as she was. Knowing that she only visits once a year, she feels hurt that he would choose that very time to leave Melbourne; disappointed to think that all the things they have shared in their letters mean nothing to him.

He could have done his church tour any time, she says to Janine, turning it over in her mind for the hundredth time.

I don't understand why you're so upset about it, Janine says. Anyone would think you were in love with him, the way you're carrying on.

It's not like that, Madeleine says. But she is surprised to realise how much it matters to her. Choosing a tree with her father; helping her mother to make mince pies; going Christmas shopping in the city with Janine; all these things which usually bring her so much pleasure are coloured by her disappointment about Peter.

Misunderstanding Peter's behaviour, Madeleine does not open the present he has left for her. Wanting to hurt him, she slides it under his bedroom door, still in its Christmas paper and before she leaves Melbourne she tears the wrapping from the book she had chosen so carefully for him and puts it in a charity box at church. When she returns to Delungra she gets rid of all his letters, tearing them up before she can change her mind. And when a letter arrives from him in early February, she throws it away unopened. She misses writing to him; misses

his letters to her but she will not admit it. She does not even allow herself to ask her mother for news of him.

Instead she throws herself into life at Delungra, disguising her sadness with frantic activity. Ant is five by then and she has begun to teach him as well, working hard all day on the children's lessons and afterwards playing cricket with them or taking them up to the creek to splash about and dive from the rocks. She volunteers for the fundraising committee at the church fellowship and spends hours every weekend organising charity cricket matches and jumble sales and fancy dress parades for the kids.

Through her work on the committee, Madeleine begins to see a lot of Ian Fowler, an old friend of Carol and Sam's who she has known for some time. Ian is an easygoing, energetic person, not really Madeleine's type, but handsome in a sturdy, rugged sort of way. She has known for a long time that Ian is interested in her and after spending so much time together it seems easy and comfortable when they drift into a relationship. There are no fireworks, on her part at least, but Ian is good to her and she thinks perhaps the other feelings will come in time.

Everyone tells Madeleine what a good catch Ian is: handy with machinery; good with animals; not a scholar but smart enough. Madeleine can see all these things and she is sure Ian would make a fine husband. But she knows she cannot keep lying to herself. For although it is Ian who is teaching her to drive, sitting patiently beside her while she lurches up and down the driveway, working through the gears; though it is Ian who holds her hand at the cinema, who drives her home and kisses her goodnight, when she is alone it is not Ian she thinks of. Even after all these months it is still Peter she longs for, always Peter and in the end, though it hurts him, she has to tell Ian that her heart is not in it, that she cannot envisage a future with him when her thoughts are with someone else.

## saying goodbye

Madeleine has never had a telegram before and when it arrives she knows it must be bad news so Tom opens it for her, breathing out slowly as he reads it and reads it again to make sure.

She's alright, he says. Your mother's had a heart attack but she's alright. What day is it? Elaine asks, already looking in the bureau drawer for the train timetable. There's one this afternoon, she says. Tom can drive you to Inverell. Come on, I'll give you a hand packing.

I'll send a telegram ahead to let them know what time you're arriving, Tom says as he helps her into the carriage.

Those hours on the train feel like the longest hours of Madeleine's life. Sick with anxiety she cannot read her book or even enjoy the scenery, can only go in and out of restless sleep, worrying about what awaits her.

Not thinking clearly, she expects that it will be her father who comes to pick her up from the station, as usual, and it is him that she looks for as the train pulls in at Spencer Street. But Jack is at the hospital with her mother and it is Peter who has come to meet her, calling out her name as she steps down from the carriage.

In her panic about her mother Madeleine has forgotten all about Peter. It's been eighteen months since she last saw him and in that time he has been so much in her thoughts that it is a shock to see him in the flesh. She hasn't cried at all since Tom told her the news but after travelling all night and all day she feels suddenly overwhelmed by everything and putting down her bags she bursts into tears.

She's going to be fine, Peter says softly. She's doing really well.

Madeleine doesn't want to cry in front of Peter. She puts her hands over her face. Peter moves closer as if to put his arm around her and then stops himself.

Madeleine, he says helplessly.

She has never heard him say her name before though she has imagined it many times. Now he stands a foot away from her, saying it again and again because he doesn't know what else to say.

Finding her handkerchief she presses it against her eyes, takes a deep breath.

I'm alright, she says, bending down to pick up her bags.

Let me take those, he says.

Madeleine looks at him. She has known this moment must come, when she has to face Peter again. Though it is not in her nature to be cruel she has wanted to be cold to him, to make it absolutely clear that he is not forgiven. But now that he is standing in front of her, Madeleine is finding it hard to remember what it is that she can't forgive him for. She hands him the bags.

Thank you, she says.

Margaret is asleep when Madeleine arrives at the hospital, Jack dozing in a chair beside her bed. Her mother looks much better than Madeleine expects and according to the doctors the heart attack hasn't done any serious long term damage.

She's been overdoing it, haven't you love? Jack says, squeezing Margaret's hand.

I'm alright. Give me a few weeks and I'll be right as rain.

She can't do anything too strenuous, Jack tells Madeleine. She'll need a lot of help from you especially when she first comes home from the hospital.

What about you dad? You look worse than mum does.

You tell him love. Margaret laughs weakly. He hasn't left the hospital since they brought me in. I keep telling him to go home but he won't listen to me.

It was Peter who found Margaret unconscious in the kitchen and called the ambulance. And while her father has been at the hospital it is Peter who has taken charge of the boarding house, organising someone to take over the cooking and cleaning; keeping the boarders up to date; driving back and forth between the hospital and the house with food and clothes; taking notes from Jack so that he can keep things running smoothly.

He's been a godsend, that boy, Margaret says. I don't know what we would have done without him.

When he comes back to the hospital to pick Madeleine up she feels so relieved that her mother is alright, so grateful for Peter's help that it seems absurd to stay angry with him over something that happened so long ago. Seeing his concern for her family, Madeleine is reminded of how Peter's letters had given her the sense that he was a person of strong love, deep loyalty. Her anger had made her forget these things. For six months she has chosen to believe that Peter had abandoned their friendship causally, that it had meant nothing to him. She has thought of him as a person who was careless with feelings. But the more time she spends with him the harder she finds it to hold onto this belief. Everything he says and everything he does tells her otherwise. She begins to think that there must have been a good reason for him to leave Melbourne when he did and she wonders why she did not simply ask him for an explanation.

Now the gap between them seems too wide to bridge. Though Peter is always polite to Madeleine, he is wary of her; she can sense it. He says her name carefully, as though he is

afraid to use it. And though they talk every day about the business of the boarding house, the rest of his life remains closed to her. He does not speak of it and she does not ask.

Margaret is home by the end of July and once she is settled in Madeleine makes the long journey back to the station once again. While she's been in Melbourne Tom and Elaine have tried to get someone else to fill her position but they haven't had any luck yet and Madeleine doesn't want to leave them in the lurch at the busiest time of the year. So she'll go up to help them out through the shearing and if they haven't found a replacement by then Carol's agreed to take over in the short term.

When Madeleine goes to church on her first Sunday back everyone wants to know about her stay in Melbourne. She is touched by people's concern for her mother, by the sadness they express at her going away. In that last month the knowledge that she is leaving makes her appreciate the beauty of the place all over again. Every day there seems to be an opportunity that may never come again and though she is often tired out by the long days helping Elaine cook for the shearers Madeleine still manages to cram in one last tennis match with Elaine; one last swim in the creek; one last picnic at Dead Man's Corner.

In Madeleine's final week, Tom and Elaine organise a going away party. They book a Country and Western band from Inverell to play in the shed and set up a lamb roast on a spit out in the yard. Most of their friends and neighbours come and after they have devoured the food they fill up the shed and the dancing begins in earnest. Everyone wants a dance with the 'guest of honour' and Madeleine dances until her legs ache. She is almost relieved when the band goes home at midnight but a lot of people stay on even after that, talking and drinking until the small hours before they finally say their goodbyes.

The day before she leaves, Madeleine saddles Minnow up for one final ride around this place which has become a second home to her. She knows it will be a long time before she comes back again and as she rides past the church and the post office, the tennis court and the cricket pitch and the footy oval, she tries to fix an image of each place in her mind so that she won't forget the times she has spent there. Finally, she rides the length of the station one last time, counting each crossing of the creek as a way of saying goodbye.

All the kids want to come to the station to see Madeleine off and though Elaine tries, they will not be talked out of it. With Madeleine's trunk in the boot they all have to squeeze into the back seat of the station wagon as they did on Madeleine's first trip to Inverell two years earlier. Though she had seen them the night before, Sam and Carol turn up at the station too so it ends up being quite a send-off. Missy is the first to start crying and she sets off Carol and the Ant.

John is trying to be brave but once the train arrives and the luggage is loaded they're all howling. Madeleine knows there are parts of life in Delungra she'll miss. But her heart is already back in Melbourne and as the train pulls out of the station she cannot help but feel glad to be going home.

## **Melbourne, 1961**

### **the long way round**

While Madeleine has been in Delungra her mother's friend Doris has come every day to cook and clean and Jack's been paying someone to change the bed linen and do the other heavy work. But by the time Madeleine gets back to Melbourne, Margaret is well and truly on the mend and between the two of them they can run the house without any extra help. Jack wants Doris to carry on coming once or twice a week to give Margaret a break, but Margaret is adamant that they can manage without her and Madeleine is careful not to let her mother overdo it.

It's a quiet life but Madeleine feels content and though she often goes to visit Janine and the two of them sometimes go out to see a film, mostly she is happy to stay around the house, watching television with her parents or lying around reading. She says that she likes to be around in case her mother needs her but the real reason she likes to stay at home is that she doesn't want to miss an opportunity to see Peter. Now that her mother is better and life at the boarding house has gone back to normal, Peter has no good reason to speak to her at length and their conversation has dwindled to a polite hello when they pass each other in the hall or on the stairs. Madeleine tries to think of some pretext for keeping him talking but he has gone back to being shy and formal with her and she does not know how to restore his trust in her, or if she ever can. She looks forward to Sundays when she sometimes sits beside him at church and in the evening she joins the card games he plays with her parents at the kitchen table: Gin Rummy and Canasta and sometimes Newmarket, betting with matches instead of money.

Usually it is Margaret who makes breakfast and then Madeleine clears the dining room and washes the dishes. But one morning when her mother is feeling worn out, Madeleine gets up early to prepare the breakfast and while she is at the stove scrambling the eggs Peter comes into the kitchen. Expecting Margaret, he stops short when he finds Madeleine there instead.

Mum's a bit tired, she's having a lie in. Madeleine speaks quickly, to fill the gap.

Will I be in your way if I make my lunch? he asks.

Does mum usually make it for you? I can do it if you want.

Oh no, I do it every day.

Madeleine knows Peter's routine almost as well as her own. She knows that he leaves for work straight after breakfast and returns home about six. She knows that on Tuesday nights



he takes a class in architectural design in the city and that afterwards he often goes for a drink with his friends from college. But here is something that she did not know: every morning he comes into the kitchen to make himself lunch.

From then on Madeleine makes breakfast every day, glad of an excuse to spend some time alone with Peter. She knows better than to flirt with him, that would only embarrass him. But she thinks if she can get him talking he'll eventually loosen up with her.

Madeleine has been doing the breakfast for three weeks and every day Peter has come to make his lunch at the same time. When he doesn't come one day it makes her anxious. She tells herself that he might be sick; that he might have a function at lunchtime; that he had an early meeting but what she fears is that he has changed his routine to avoid seeing her. It is less than five minutes that they spend together in the kitchen and often still they hardly speak during that time. Even when they do talk they rarely move beyond anything more daring than the weather or something they have heard on the radio. Yet Madeleine has felt that she is making progress; that Peter is perhaps less awkward with her than he has been; that he no longer blushes or frowns every time she asks him a question.

No lunch today? she asks when she sees him at the breakfast table.

I'm running late, he explains. I forgot to wind my alarm clock.

Back in the kitchen Madeleine cuts four thick slices from a loaf of bread and lays them out on the bench.

They're only sandwiches, she says to herself but her making them for Peter seems to Madeleine a daring act, some bold step towards him.

Ham and tomato, that's right isn't it? she says, holding out the package, wrapped in greaseproof paper. She knows it is right. She has watched him enough times to know that he has the same every day, buttering the bread evenly all the way to the edge; cutting the sandwiches very precisely, on the diagonal.

You didn't have to, Peter says and Madeleine thinks for a minute that he isn't going to take them.

Thank you, he says. And then he surprises Madeleine by holding her gaze and smiling at her, not the quick nervous tight-lipped smile she is so familiar with but a real smile that opens up his face.

From then on, Madeleine makes lunch for Peter every day and though at first he seems embarrassed by it and offers repeatedly to do it himself, after a while he accepts it. It is a tiny

thing, to make his lunch but it pleases Madeleine to do it and the fact that he allows her to seem to her to represent a turning point in their relationship.

Madeleine is sure that when she stopped writing to Peter, she hurt him just as much as he hurt her. Sometimes she thinks if they could talk about what happened that Christmas it would ease things between them. But she doesn't know how to explain her side of the story without giving away her feelings and so she has to take the long way round, winning Peter's trust back bit by bit, with small gestures, careful conversations.

By Christmas Peter has become much more open and relaxed with Madeleine than he was when she first returned from the station and though they are not even close to the intimacy that they shared in their letters Madeleine feels that they have become friends of sorts. But on New Year's Eve when they both go with Jack and Margaret to a party at Janine's parents', Madeleine finds that outside the familiar routine of boarding house life, she does not know how to act with Peter. She had imagined that they might sit on the verandah and talk or even dance together. Instead she avoids him all night, staying just close enough to keep an eye on him but never joining his circle. It is only at the end of the night, after three different people have commented on her new dress and the champagne has made her feel reckless, that she sees him standing on his own in the kitchen and finally goes over to talk to him.

Happy New Year, she says brightly and he raises his glass to hers and smiles quickly, one of his real smiles which gives her the confidence to go on.

Do you think I could come with you one day when you go out to look at the churches?

Peter appears confused by this question, coming out of the blue as it does. He looks away from Madeleine, scratches his wrist.

Well, I'm working really, when I go to a church.

I know that, Madeleine says. I won't disturb you. But I'm interested. I'd like to see what you do.

Peter rolls the stem of his wine glass between his palms.

When would you want to come?

What about this Sunday?

This coming Sunday?

He sounds panicked, as though he needs more time to prepare for this.

The next one then.

He exhales slowly.

Next Sunday, alright then.

Shake on it? Madeleine asks.

He laughs as if caught out, but he takes her hand and shakes it and it is not a kiss or anything close but it is a beginning.

What kind of a date is that? Janine asks when Madeleine tells her. Why didn't you go bowling or something? Why would a man ask you on a date and then take you to look at some boring old church?

It wasn't a date, Madeleine insists. And anyway, I asked him.

I can't believe he does that every week! What a dull way to waste a good day.

It wasn't dull at all, Madeleine says defensively.

She feels closer to Peter after spending the day with him; protective of his hobby. She wishes she hadn't told Janine.

Peter had been quiet on the way to Brighton and Madeleine thought she had made a mistake in asking to accompany him. But once they were inside the church his awkwardness subsided. Madeleine sat down in one of the side pews, anxious to keep out of his way and Peter walked around the church, looking at things intently, squatting down to run his hand over the carvings at the base of the pulpit. Madeleine was fascinated by watching him work. When he was hunched over his sketchbook, drawing or writing furiously she could see his lips moving as if they were untangling his ideas before he caught them on the page. For long stretches he seemed to forget that Madeleine was there and then he would stand up, rubbing his neck and remembering, he would look around for her.

Afterwards when they had gone to the beach to sit and eat their sandwiches he had told her about his trip to Barcelona, his revelation inside Gaudi's cathedral. Despite her feelings for Peter Madeleine had always thought him plain. But when he told her this story he spoke so passionately that he seemed to give off light, like a candle burning inside a brown paper bag, and in that moment he became beautiful to her.

After a few weeks it becomes a given that Madeleine will accompany Peter when he goes to look at churches. Once he gets used to her being there he begins to share his work with her, calling her over to look at discoveries he has made; explaining the diagrams in his notebooks. Madeleine would not have thought the architecture of churches could hold her interest for very long but she is inspired by Peter's excitement; honoured that he would take the time to teach her what he knows. When he talks about architecture – about angles and weights and beams and buttresses – he becomes the unselfconscious person Madeleine remembers from

his letters to her. Looking through Peter's eyes she sees things in a new way. She begins to look carefully, not only at churches but at all the buildings around her and she starts to notice elements she has been blind to before. She is hesitant to share her observations with Peter, conscious now of her ignorance of the history of architecture; its styles and eras. But Peter tells her that those things aren't important at all.

The only thing that matters, he says, is the way the space makes you feel.

They spend hours talking. Madeleine tells Peter things that she would not say to her mother or to Janine. And she loves to hear about his life, which has been so different to her own. They talk about their childhoods, about living in the country; about church and school and work. They talk about the future, about the things they would like to do. It seems to Madeleine that they talk about everything except the one thing that matters most: their feelings for each other.

Madeleine is convinced now that Peter feels as much for her as she feels for him. She can see it in the way he looks around for her when he enters a room; the way he studies her when he thinks her attention is elsewhere. She waits for him to grab hold of her hand one day, or ask her on a real date. Several times she catches him looking at her intently as if poised to speak but he says nothing and the moment passes.

Janine tells Madeleine to ask him out herself.

You've done it before, she says.

Tell him how you feel! Carol writes in her letter and underlines it twice for good measure.

One Friday Margaret is in the kitchen making scones for the church bazaar when Peter comes in to get his sandwiches. Catching Madeleine staring after him, Margaret takes the tongs out of her hand and turns the bacon herself.

I think you'll have to make the first move cherub, she says and goes back to flouring the scones.

Madeleine thinks about it all day. She is lying on her bed trying to read when Peter comes in from work. When she hears him go upstairs and unlock the door to his room she jumps up and runs after him.

Madeleine! What's wrong?

Nothing, she says. I just wondered...if you wanted...if you weren't busy...if you might like to see a film tomorrow night?

Tomorrow night? he says frowning.

He hasn't blushed in front of Madeleine for a long time but now she can see the heat rising in his neck and his cheeks.

What did you want to see?

I couldn't care less what we see, Madeleine feels like saying. I just want to sit with you in the dark, close enough for you to put your arm around me.

But instead she says, Why don't you surprise me? And resisting the urge to slide down the banister she walks downstairs, leaving Peter standing at the door of his room, scratching his wrist.

But going to the cinema doesn't change anything between them, though it quickly becomes their habit to go almost every Friday night. And though they walk to the library together and lend each other books; though they sit beside each other in church and at meals; though they spend almost every spare minute in each other's company, Peter never says or does one thing to indicate that they are anything more than friends.

When they are together, Madeleine is acutely aware of Peter's physical presence; the way he moves; his smell. Sometimes her longing to touch him is like a fever. But she notices that no matter how close she gets to him, he avoids touching her. She can count on her hands the number of times they have had physical contact and she feels frustrated by the situation, tired of waiting for Peter to show his hand.

On a Saturday afternoon in August they are in St Kilda walking along the pier when it begins to rain. Peter opens his umbrella and hands it to Madeleine, who has forgotten hers.

We can share, she says, giving it back and moving closer to him.

But the umbrella is small and Peter is so anxious to avoid touching her that less than half his body is under the umbrella, the rest getting steadily wetter. In exasperation Madeleine wrenches the umbrella out of his hand and flings it off the pier and into the water and while Peter stands in shock she pushes him against the railing and kisses him, pressing her body against his. By now the rain is pelting down and everyone has left the pier except the two of them, who lean against each other and kiss until they are soaked to the bone.

## Grace

Peter and Madeleine marry exactly seven months later and Madeleine feels that their wedding day could not have been happier if they'd had ten years to plan it. Margaret's friend Doris makes Madeleine's dress and when she tries it on for the first time Doris shakes her head.

Poor Peter, she says, he's going to pass out when he sees you.

Madeleine asks Janine and Carol to be her bridesmaids and Janine's mother drags her sewing machine down from the attic to make their dresses, cursing the girls for choosing such a complicated pattern. Margaret is in her element, organising the flowers and the food and the sleeping arrangements. Tom and Elaine drive down two days before the ceremony, arriving close to midnight with all three kids fast asleep on the back seat of the station wagon. Carol comes on the train the following morning and with a bit of reshuffling they manage to find beds for everyone.

They have the ceremony at St Bede's, the same church where Madeleine was christened, and afterwards the guests walk back to the boarding house where Jack and Tom have set up a marquee in the garden for the reception. Madeleine and Peter lead the procession along Carlisle Street where all the cars slow down to have a look, tooting their horns when they see the bridal party at the front and all the pedestrians and even the people on the tram wave at them as they go by.

After the tables have been cleared and the speeches made the dancing begins and two hours later, when the taxi arrives to take Peter and Madeleine to their hotel, the party is still in full swing. The Ant is asleep across two chairs with a tablecloth draped over him but almost everyone else, including John and Missy, is on the dance floor enjoying the band. It seems to Madeleine to take forever to move around the circle and say goodbye to every guest but at last they are in the taxi, alone together and sitting beside Peter, holding his hand tightly, Madeleine feels a happiness that is too huge to name.

When they return from their honeymoon in Lorne Peter and Madeleine move into a small flat with an even smaller courtyard in a street which opens onto a beautiful park. Their new home is only a mile or so from the boarding house and Madeleine can walk to work in less than ten minutes. In the mornings she leaves home first so that she can be at the boarding house early enough to do the breakfast and she stays until about half past five, helping Margaret to get the dinner started. Peter still catches the same tram from Balaclava Road into the city for work

and on his way home he gets off a couple of stops early to drop into the boarding house and pick Madeleine up.

They walk the last two blocks home together and often after dinner they walk through the park at the end of their street or sit on a bench watching the sky darken over the old Moreton Bay Fig trees. They don't have a television so they sometimes play cards or listen to the radio but what Madeleine likes best is to lie on the couch with her head in Peter's lap and listen to him read to her.

Though Peter is grateful for the start it gave him, after five years at Robert Smart and Partners he has had enough of office buildings. When he finishes his diploma he finds a new position where the work is more varied and the pay is better. With the extra money coming in Peter and Madeleine take out a loan on a second-hand car, an old brown Holden that they name Charlie. They go back to their old habit of visiting churches on Sunday afternoons, only now they can go much further afield. Madeleine packs a picnic and they go to the first service at St Bede's so that they can get an early start, driving out of Melbourne to look at the churches in the small country towns, finding a spot to eat their lunch on the way.

Looking back, Madeleine remembers that she was perfectly happy in those years and that it was not until she fell pregnant that things started to go badly for them. She suffers from morning sickness right from the start and it makes her tired and moody, irritable with Peter and with her parents.

Why do they call it morning sickness? she complains to her mother. I feel sick all day every day.

It gets better in the second trimester, Margaret tells her.

But Madeleine doesn't make it to the second trimester. She miscarries the baby in the eleventh week and it takes her months to recover, months when she cries every day as soon as she wakes up and remembers; when she cries herself to sleep night after night while Peter holds her and strokes her hair.

It is over a year before Madeleine becomes pregnant again and this time Margaret wants her to stop working straight away. Though he does not say so, Madeleine knows that Peter is just as worried about the pregnancy as her mother and would much rather she stayed at home. To please him she agrees to give up the early mornings and to come home for a rest in the afternoon if she needs it. But at her three month check-up the doctor says her blood pressure is dangerously high and that she should not be working at all, so the decision is made for her.

One of the reasons Madeleine is reluctant to give up work is that she knows that Margaret can't manage the boarding house without her. In the short term her parents hire

someone else to help out, as they did after Margaret's heart attack. But in the end they decide to sell up and move on.

We're getting too old for it anyway, Margaret says.

Having spent most of her life there, Madeleine is sad about the place being sold. She finds it impossible to imagine her parents living anywhere else. But once the decision is made Jack and Margaret seem excited at the prospect of leading a different life.

We've had twenty-five good years there, Jack tells her. I reckon we're due for a change.

They move when Madeleine is seven months pregnant, to a Californian bungalow in Caulfield which is still within walking distance of Madeleine and Peter. By this time Madeleine is so exhausted that most days she does little more than move from the bed to the couch and back again. Peter is putting in long hours at work, trying for a promotion and with so much free time on her hands Margaret comes over most afternoons to keep Madeleine company, doing the shopping for her and putting the dinner on for when Peter gets home. Madeleine can't get used to her mother running around after her.

I can do that, mum, she says, when Margaret is vacuuming or mopping the kitchen floor.

No you can't, Margaret says emphatically. You know what the doctor said. You can't do anything that's going to put this baby at risk.

When Peter gets home he is worn out from the long days but he is never too tired to do things for Madeleine, rubbing her feet or running a bath for her, or sometimes just sitting beside her on the couch, his hands on her swollen belly, feeling the baby kick inside her.

Two weeks and five days before the baby is due Madeleine faints on her way to the bathroom and when she comes to her underpants feel warm and wet and she sits up to find she is bleeding through the crutch of her trousers and onto the beige carpet. She tries to call Peter at work but three times she gets the wrong number and she is too frightened to stand up and go into the lounge room to look it up in the phone book. So she calls the ambulance instead and then she lies on the carpet in the hallway, gripping the receiver in both hands until it comes.

By the time the baby is delivered Madeleine has lost almost half the blood in her body and as soon as the umbilical cord is cut she is rushed off for a transfusion. When she wakes up she does not know where she is or what has happened to her. All she remembers is the pain and the blood; the blood and the pain. Peter is sitting beside her bed, squeezing her hand and smiling nervously in the old way. His face looks blotchy as though he has been crying.

Is the baby dead? Madeleine asks.

The voice that speaks is flat and lifeless and she does not recognise it as her own.



She's alive and well, Madeleine.

It is a nurse who is speaking to her although until that moment Madeleine had not even known she was in the room.

Why don't I go and get her for you?

When she comes back Peter lets go of Madeleine's hand to take the baby from her and holding it up for Madeleine to see he says, here she is, here's our Grace.

Grace, Madeleine repeats.

She has no recollection of choosing this name.

Do you want to hold her? Peter asks.

Madeleine looks at the tiny red-faced bundle and shakes her head. She doesn't want to hold it. She wants somebody to take it away so that she and Peter can be alone together like they were before.

Don't cry, Peter says to her, please don't cry.

She'll be alright, the nurse says. Her body's still recovering from the shock, it'll take her a few days to get on top of things.

She pats Madeleine's arm as if she is a little girl, lowers the headrest on her bed.

You go to sleep now, she says, you'll feel better when you wake up.

But Madeleine doesn't feel better when she wakes up. And she doesn't feel better when she comes home from the hospital with Grace ten days later. She does all the things she is supposed to do: breastfeeding her at four hour intervals; bathing her every day; putting her down at the same time each night but she feels blank and empty, disconnected from her own life. When Peter leaves for work she feels a sense of panic at being left alone and sometimes when Grace is screaming Madeleine lies down on the floor beside her cot and cries with her, too exhausted to pick her up and comfort her. She resents Peter's freedom, his ability to go off to work and forget about Grace for eight hours at a stretch. Yet when he comes home he asks about Grace before anything else, sits for hours holding her and talking to her and Madeleine resents this too, his being a good father when she feels like such a bad mother.

Madeleine hears the pride in Peter's voice when he says, *my daughter Grace*. He says it in the street and at the shops and at the park, to friends and neighbours and complete strangers, this is my daughter Grace. Madeleine is scolded by Margaret for referring to Grace as 'the baby'. But even the name sounds strange to Madeleine's ears. She mutters it to herself, trying to get used to it.

When Grace is three months old and Madeleine is feeling no better Peter insists on taking her to the doctor. In the waiting room, when Grace cries Madeleine starts crying too, closing her eyes and letting the tears run down her face, waiting for Peter to wipe them away with his handkerchief. The doctor gives them the details of a local mothers' group.

It might help her to meet some other young mums, the doctor says to Peter, as though Madeleine isn't there.

There are six women in the group, all first time mothers with babies ranging in age from one month to one year. Madeleine doesn't want to sit in a room full of mothers, drinking tea and playing happy families. The first time she goes she doesn't speak at all except to introduce herself. When she gets home and Peter asks her about it she can't remember the names of any of the women, or their children. But after a few weeks the women start to open up to each other.

Sometimes when Jemima cries, I feel like screaming, a woman called Maria says one day. I go into the kitchen and turn the radio all the way up to drown out the sound of it.

I hated breastfeeding, Karen admits. Everyone talked about how it was the most wonderful natural thing but it repulsed me. I felt as though Craig was literally sucking the life out of me.

Madeleine is shocked by these revelations: shocked and also relieved to realise she is not alone in her feelings. She starts to look forward to the mothers' group. Each week they meet at a different house, taking turns to bring a cake and they exchange stories of their babies, their husbands, their doctors and mothers-in-law.

Madeleine becomes particularly good friends with Eve, a flamboyant woman with a dry, cynical sense of humour who is a few years older than the other women in the group.

She's a straight shooter, isn't she? Peter says when he meets her.

But Madeleine admires Eve for her outspokenness. It is Eve's honesty about her own life that clears a space for Madeleine to admit how difficult she finds motherhood. And it is Eve's advice that eventually helps to draw Madeleine out of her depression.

You need something else in your life, Eve tells her, a part-time job, a hobby, something that's just for you.

Madeleine thinks about this for a long time and after she weans Grace she applies for a job at St Kilda library. Eve looks after Grace on Tuesdays while Madeleine is at work and in exchange Madeleine takes Dominic two afternoons a week so that Eve can go to painting classes.

Madeleine loves her work at the library. She loves to leave the house without Grace, to walk alone down Carlisle Street alone, to have one whole day when she doesn't have to think

about Grace at all. On Tuesday mornings she wakes up happy, thinking of the library's quiet routines, the rhythmic monotony of sorting and shelving. When, after six months, they offer her three days a week, Madeleine doesn't hesitate to accept. Margaret is pleased to look after Grace on the days when Eve can't have her and Peter doesn't mind as long as Madeleine is happy.

Madeleine's job at the library helps her to get back on an even keel and she finds that motherhood gets easier as Grace grows up. She starts to enjoy the things they do as a family: Sunday picnics at the Botanical Gardens; day trips to the Mornington Peninsula, and a week's holiday at Easter in a rented house opposite the beach at Wye River, when she and Peter stay up long after Grace has gone to sleep, drinking wine and watching the possums slink about in the trees.

Grace is five when Peter wins the commission to build the new church in Prahran. For the best part of a year he has spent most of his evenings and weekends working on the tender and Madeleine organises a small party on a Sunday afternoon to celebrate. Janine and Eve help Madeleine make finger food and Jack brings a carton of his homemade beer, to get things started, he says. Madeleine invites some of Peter's colleagues, those friends from college he has remained in touch with and a few of their neighbours, as well as all the women from the mothers' group and their families. With so many guests it is too crowded in their tiny flat and after they have eaten they grab blankets and deckchairs and move the party down to the park at the end of the street. After one too many beers, Jack is moved to make a speech about Peter's achievement which has both Madeleine and Margaret in tears. Peter and Grace show off their party trick where Peter picks her up by one arm and one leg and spins her around until they are both dizzy and put of breath. Later, they play cricket until it is almost dark and when Grace asks why they don't have parties more often, Madeleine promises that from now on they will.

It takes Madeleine a long time to get used to sharing Peter with Grace. But in those months after Peter wins the commission Madeleine feels as secure and happy as she did when they were first married. So she finds it almost impossible to comprehend how her life could turn around so quickly; how on a perfectly ordinary Sunday afternoon Peter could take Grace to the park and never return.

They had been gone a long time and when the doorbell rang she expected to find the two of them there, laughing and dishevelled as they always were after they had been playing at the park. Instead she opened the front door to meet the straight, tight faces of two police

officers. One of the men was holding Grace like a baby, though she was almost six years old and when Madeleine looked at her she saw the shock on her little face and she knew, she knew.

A massive heart attack, one of the policemen told her.

No, Madeleine said, no.

And leaving Grace in the kitchen with the policemen she ran down to the park to look for herself. But Peter was not there. He was already dead, laid out on a hospital bed with a sheet over his plain, beautiful face and Madeleine would never see him again.

## **Book Four: Grace**

## **Perth, 1998**

### **shedding a skin**

Grace leaves Perth on a Wednesday morning. She packs the car in the cold, pale light of six a.m. and she is out of the city and into the foothills of the Darling Scarp before the rush hour begins. It is a good road, winding and climbing through the trees and the clumps of wildflowers in blue and orange, passing in a blur. She has the radio turned up loud, the chatter and noise leaving no space in her mind for thought. There will be time for that later, whole days in which she won't pick up a single radio signal, in which there will be nothing to look at, nothing to do, only her thoughts streaming out for hundreds of miles so that she can see them in an unbroken line in her rear-vision mirror, and ahead of her through the windscreen, stretching all the way to the horizon. There will be time enough then to think about what she is doing, what she is travelling towards. But for now, while she is still close enough to change her mind, to turn back, she will push these thoughts out of her mind.

Where the road is new her car travels quietly, and then she feels it change beneath her, feels the car's resistance on the rough stretches. She has heard about the way it can hypnotise you, this dark road on which you can drive for one hundred and fifty kilometres without turning the steering wheel. So she searches the horizon to keep herself awake: forcing herself to look at the blown-out tyres and the mangled, bloody corpses of the kangaroos, lying in the dirt which becomes redder and redder the further inland she drives.

When the road trains loom towards her she grips the wheel with both hands, bracing herself against the rush of air as they roar past. The rest of the time she drives with only one hand on the wheel and she waves at every car that passes so she will not feel quite so alone.

Sometimes Grace talks to herself. Out of habit she talks to Michael too, meandering conversations which she rehearses, line by line until she is word perfect. In the past it has comforted her, recalling the quiet way he listened when she spoke, imagining his responses to her thoughts and feelings. Today when she catches herself she feels guilty, treacherous, as though she has broken a promise. For this is what she is driving away from, what she hoped to leave behind in Perth. She is tired of a life only half-lived, of storing all her best away for an imagined future which might never unfold.

Yet still the words she wants to say to Michael rise up from inside her: soft and round they hide beneath her tongue, stick to the roof of her mouth; sharp and small they catch between her teeth. She feels them, like pebbles or like flints, each with a different texture, a

different taste. She feels the weight and shape of each one before she opens her mouth and spits them out of the window, leaves them lying amongst the animal carcasses on the side of the endless road.

Grace ends her first day's travel at Coolgardie. For beyond the goldfields signs of human life peter out. The Great Eastern Highway turns towards the south coast, a single line of resistance in an otherwise untamed landscape. There are no towns to speak of: the places marked on Grace's map are little more than names on signposts.

Coolgardie is at the edge of the land that has been settled: claimed and tamed by years of habitation. In the madness of the gold rush it was said that if you stood on Coolgardie's main street and turned your face to the sky, gold dust would fall on your cheeks and eyelashes. People came in droves. Main Street was widened and lengthened and lengthened again. They built a school, a police station, a jail. They could not build fast enough. People lived in makeshift huts, in tents. The township swelled, spilled out into the surrounding desert.

Now the desert is reclaiming the land. The wind blows sand beneath the sagging doors and cracked window frames of houses that were abandoned when the gold ran out. Grace walks the length of Main Street, reading the town's story on a series of small billboards that line the pavements, marking the places where historic buildings once stood.

Opposite the jail is the Ben Priory Park, crammed with eerie sculptures, a scrap metal cemetery. There are people on horseback, or kneeling in prayer: Ned Kelly lurks beside the fence brandishing a crude tin gun. Rusty and hollow, their eyeless gazes unnerve Grace. She turns her back on them and crosses the street to the motel.

When Grace wakes the next day Coolgardie is still wrapped in the hush of sleep. This early in the morning the silence is so complete it would be easy for Grace to believe she was the only living soul in the whole town. Even the birds have not yet begun to sing. The sculptures in the park across the street are her only company, regarding her gravely as she packs the car. And as she pulls out of the motel car park her rear-vision mirror frames an image of a stiff-backed man who stares towards the end of the wide road, his left arm pointing endlessly to where the town gives way to the wilderness.

Once upon a time the minerals in the soil caused the illusion that the earth in the goldfields was shimmering like a lake. In reality it has always been a parched, barren land. Seven hundred kilometres from the warm waters of the Indian Ocean, after a long, dry journey

inland, the highway has a sudden hankering for water. From Coolgardie it leads Grace south towards the cold, dark expanse of the Great Southern Ocean.

At Norseman the Eyre Highway takes over, turning East again towards the state border. Now the places on her map begin to stretch further and further apart. Painted posts at the edge of the highway display the distance to the next petrol station. Keeping her eye on the mileage dial, Grace counts down. After one hundred and eighty kilometres alone on the road, she toots her horn exuberantly at the sign reading *Emu Bitter, 10kms*; pulls in at the Balladonia Roadhouse as if she has waited all her life to come here. At Caiguna she puts her watch forward forty-five minutes. Lying behind her in another time zone Perth begins to feel very far away.

That afternoon Grace enters the Nullarbor Plain. She has dreaded this part of the journey, picturing it flat, completely desolate. She is surprised by the hills, the long upward strain and the coasting beyond, and by the scrubby bush that nestles beside the road.

She keeps a steady course due east. The highway no longer pulls towards the ocean. Instead, the ocean reaches out for the highway. From Esperance to Port Lincoln it has eaten away at the coastline year by year, grain by grain until at the border of Western Australia the water laps at the edge of the Plain.

Now and again Grace can smell the sea, sometimes as close as ten or twenty kilometres away. Suddenly she is consumed by a desire to taste salt on her tongue. Thinking of Michael's block she turns off the main road onto a rough track leading to the cliffs. Out of the car the wind is ferocious. It makes her eyes run; paints white ruffles on the dark blue water, far below.

This is how Grace thinks of it, standing there on the cliffs. It has become second nature now for her to translate her experiences straight into words. Sometimes she begins to describe things in her head even before her senses have finished taking them in. She thinks she can trap the feelings inside the words so that reading them, Michael will feel them too. Only more often than not Grace will never write them down at all. They will remain in her head, caught like fish in a rock pool when the tide has gone out. They will circle endlessly, flapping their tails, rising to the surface and sinking again.

Grace has become used to them filling her mind, crowding her thoughts. But remembering now that she will not be writing to Michael any more; that she must unlearn this practice of gathering words and hoarding them for him, she is suddenly aware that her storehouse is overfilled. All the letters she plans to write, the words she longs to say are clogging her up so that she can barely think. She feels the pressure mounting, clutches her head in her hands, staggers and slips on the gravel as something gives way inside her.



Blood rushes, floods both nostrils, dripping through her fingers and seeping darkly into the pale sand. In the old days, when people believed in putting butter on burns, they used to tell you to tip your head back when you had a nose bleed, to stop the blood from coming out. Nowadays they say you should lean forward, let it flow, let it run its course. But this is no ordinary nose bleed. Kneeling blood-smearred on the gravel, Grace gasps for breath, sucks the hard, dirty taste of it into her lungs, sees the sky tilt, the ocean turn over.

When she comes to, the bleeding has stopped. Opening her eyes she sees that the ocean and the sky are back where they belong, their edges pressed together on the horizon. The blood is drying stiff and dark on her hands, her lips, her chin; its bitter residue lines her throat. But she is not hurt, and sitting up slowly she finds that her head feels absolutely clear. She sits sideways in the driver's seat, feet in the sand, gargling and spitting out the bloody taste. Then she crouches beside the car, looking at her reflection in the wing mirror as she cleans the blood from her face.

All afternoon the ocean and the road draw closer together until finally, at Eucla, they meet. Grace arrives just before the sun sets. Beneath her window, the shrubs they have planted to anchor the coastline cower from the savage wind. By eight o' clock it is pitch black outside. The sky, hardened by cold, is rich with stars. Grace cannot escape them and she is surprised to find she does not want to. Here at the bottom edge of Australia the constellations are clearer than Grace has ever seen them, shining like newly minted coins, polished by the wind that blows across the ocean from Antarctica.

At dawn the wind is still blowing, urging the waves against the cliffs again and again. It is the first sound Grace hears when she wakes the next morning at five forty-five. She hurries a little, the wind urging her on. She has twelve hundred kilometres to drive that day and three kilometres away at the South Australian border it is already six thirty. For the line painted across the highway divides time as well as space. They are arbitrary, such boundaries, Grace knows that. But changing her watch for a second time, driving across that line, feels to her like shedding a skin.

All that day Grace travels away from the water and then towards it again. From Eucla the highway clings to the cliffs for one hundred and forty kilometres, one lookout after another signposted beside the road. The last lookout is just past the Nullarbor Roadhouse, twelve kilometres on a gravel track to the Head of the Great Australian Bight. From there the undulating line of the coast spins out east and west as far as the eye can reach, and the dark,

barnacled bulk of the Southern Right Whale, *Eubalena australis*, rolls slowly in the turquoise water.

Back on the main road the highway breaks away from the coast, veering inland to Nundroo as it works its way down the eastern edge of the Bight. Grace can see on her map that even from fifty kilometres or more the ocean still holds sway. Vast and powerful it moulds the coastline for its own purposes and the road still follows its slanting shape. So that even in the dried up towns of Bookabie and Penong Grace cannot forget the image of that blank, cold expanse of water, like a reach of sky, uninhabited by stars.

Beneath the stark, towering cliffs of the Bight the ocean makes its own rules. No one swims there or sails a zigzag course through its rocks and rips and heaving swell: inaccessible, uncontrollable, it is as wild and barren as the land above it.

But as the land descends to meet it, its power is diminished. Lying at sea-level, the town of Ceduna has tamed the ocean. Held in check by man-made harbours, infiltrated by jetties and piers, cluttered with boats and buoys and craypots, the waters here are as mild and obedient as an old Labrador.

Where the highway cuts across the Eyre Peninsula the towns edge closer together, fill out, become real places again. There are traffic lights, wheat silos, a snaking railway line running along beside the road and the price of petrol falls as steadily as it rose on the other side of the desert. Other roads cross the highway now, offering different routes, alternative destinations.

But Grace knows exactly where she's going now. She no longer needs to look at the map and she drives across two states without resting, stopping only to refuel and to buy food and water. She drives all through the night and through the next day, no longer measuring distances, the towns she passes through nothing more than names. When she feels tired she opens the window and leans her head out into the rushing air and the miles flow through her so fast that the journey's end seems to come upon her quite suddenly, the office blocks and cranes and apartment buildings looming up out of the blank highways, taking her by surprise.

She has driven almost four thousand kilometres to reach this place where she spent seven years of her life and when she arrives Grace does not recognise a thing. Pulling onto the Westgate Bridge, seeing the city spread out beneath her, lit up in the half dark, Grace feels like she is seeing Melbourne for the first time.

## Melbourne, 1998

### lost history

The day after she arrives in Melbourne, Grace walks down Nicholson Street into the city and wanders the pedestrian malls and laneways hoping to find a place that seems familiar, something that might coax out a memory of her life here, twenty-three years before. All around her she sees evidence of development: angular buildings of glass and metal sheeting beside sandstone council buildings; bluestone churches; tile-fronted art deco office blocks. She sees that even if she could remember, in twenty years a city like this could change beyond all recognition so that the streets she walks through today are not the same streets she walked through as a child; not the same streets her mother and father walked through before she was born.

In the state library, Grace photocopies and enlarges the names and telephone numbers of every Kelly listed in the White Pages for Victoria. The telephone at the youth hostel doesn't take phone cards so Grace gets twenty dollars' worth of change from the girl at reception and stacks the coins on top of the telephone in piles, like casino chips. She sits down on the narrow wooden bench with her photocopied list on her lap, takes a deep breath and dials the first number.

Sorry to bother you, she begins. I'm hoping to track down an estranged family member. Are you any relation to a Madeleine Kelly, born in 1941?

She says the same speech to every person who answers the telephone; the speech that she wrote down on a scrap of paper in the library and rehearsed until she knew it by heart. Usually it takes less than thirty seconds to establish that this particular Kelly is no relation of her mother's and then Grace rules a line through their number with a black biro. If there is no answer she highlights the number in green and if she comes across an answering machine she highlights in yellow and hangs up without leaving a message. At first she expects that people might question her about why she wants to know but after a few calls she ceases to be surprised by people's lack of curiosity.

No Madeleine here, people say to her, or, I can't help you there love.

She crosses out and highlights, crosses out and highlights down the page.

By the time she has used up all her coins she is beginning to lose hope. Exchanging another twenty dollar note she gives up saying, thanks for your time at the end of each call, tired of repeating the same phrase over and over again. When she dials the number for M Kelly

of Elmhurst Road, Caulfield, she is on autopilot, expecting to hear the exact same things she has heard before.

It is a woman who answers the phone and she pauses after Grace's speech, asks her to repeat the question. Grace doesn't take this as a sign: almost everyone she has talked to has asked her to repeat the question.

Are you any relation to a Madeleine Kelly, born in 1941? she asks again.

Who is this? the woman asks.

I'm Madeleine Kelly's daughter, Grace says. I'm hoping to find out if my mother has any living relatives.

Grace?

Grace feels her heart constrict. It is a shock to find that this stranger knows her name.

Is that you Grace?

Yes. I'm Grace, Grace Darlowe. Who is this? Who am I speaking to?

I'm Madeleine's mother, the woman says, your grandmother, Margaret.

Grace does not know what to say to this. She can hear that the woman is crying and now she starts crying too.

Is she alright? the woman asks, her voice shaking. Is Madeleine alright?

Yes. She's alright, Grace says and then she can't think of anything else to say. She does not know how to begin describing her mother to this woman, this stranger.

Where are you calling from?

Grace tells her.

You're in Melbourne?

She sounds unbelieving.

Is Madeleine with you?

No, no, I came on my own. Mum's in Perth. That's where we live.

The woman has stopped crying and now there is a long silence.

Why don't you come over here? she says eventually.

To your house? Grace asks.

Yes. Why don't you come and see me? Catch a taxi, I'll pay for it.

Now? You mean right now? Tonight?

Grace looks at her watch. It is nearly nine o'clock. The woman is crying again now.

I've waited twenty-three years, Grace, she says. Please come.

Grace doesn't want to go. She needs some time to digest this information, to get over the shock. But when the woman says, please come, Grace can hear in her voice how much it means to her .

Alright, she says, trying to breathe slowly, to still her heart.

Will you come straight away?

Yes, Grace says, scooping up her change and putting it in the pockets of her jeans.

But as soon as she is in the taxi she begins to have doubts. She is afraid to meet her grandmother, afraid of what she might say to Grace, or might not say. This is what Grace has come to Melbourne for. But now the moment has arrived she does not feel ready; she wants to turn back. She is on the verge of telling the taxi driver to take her back to the hostel; of ringing her grandmother back and saying that she needs some time to think about it, that she might come tomorrow or the next day. But then Grace thinks about the longing in her voice and she knows that she cannot let her down.

On the mantelpiece in her grandmother's front room there is a framed photograph of a young couple standing in a garden with a skinny-legged girl in a sailor dress. This is the first photograph of her family Grace has ever seen. She picks it up, holding it close to her face to see the detail. Her mother looks very young, younger than Grace is now. Her long straight hair is loose around her shoulders and she is wearing a pink sundress with patch pockets. She is looking straight at the camera, her mouth wide open as though she is laughing. Grace has never seen a photo of her mother as a young woman and looking at her now, she can see that she was very beautiful. The girl in the photo is squinting into the sun, her hand up to shade her eyes. Grace does not recognise this child as herself. And she does not recognise the man who stands beside her with his hand on her shoulder. He is not a handsome man, her father. But Grace is touched by the expression on his face, the way he is turned away from the camera towards her mother. Now that she has the photo in her hand, she doesn't want to put it back. She turns to Margaret, trying to think of a way to ask if she can keep it.

I've got lots more photos, Margaret says. She takes a photo album from a bureau in the hallway and brings it back into the front room. You can start without me, she says putting the album on Grace's lap. I'll make us a cup of tea.

Grace rushes through the album the first time, gorging herself on images of her mother, her father, herself as a child. She turns the pages hurriedly, wanting to see everything at once, to drink in her lost history in one draught. She is so absorbed that she does not even look up when her grandmother comes back into the room, carrying a tea set on a silver tray. She knows

it is rude to just sit there, turning the pages, ignoring her grandmother, but she cannot bring herself to look away from the album until she has seen every single photograph.

The second time she goes more slowly, studying each photo carefully, trying to find something within the pictures, to recover what has been lost. Most of all, it is the photos of her father she wants to look at, as if by filling her head with images of him, she might discover something about this man she knows so little of.

Your mother loved looking at old photos, Margaret says, when Grace has finished. When she was a little girl she used to sit for hours with my mum – your great grandmother Rose – going through her photo albums, asking to hear the same stories again and again.

Grace is surprised to hear this. Her mother hadn't kept any photos at home, not in frames, not in albums, not even in an old shoe box. She had not taken photos of Grace's birthday parties or tap dancing concerts or in her new uniform on the first day of high school, as other parents did. As far as Grace knew, her mother had never even owned a camera.

She doesn't like photos any more, Grace says.

Margaret nods her head, looking at Grace carefully as if deciding whether or not to tell her something.

She changed so much after your father died, Margaret begins. She didn't want anything that reminded her of him, she wanted to start again, to wipe the slate clean she said, that's why she moved to Perth. I suppose she told you that though.

Grace shakes her head.

Mental torture, her mother had said, they put me through mental torture.

Grace was twelve years old when her mother told her that and she has never forgotten her words; the look on her face when she said it. She never asked about her grandparents again. If other people questioned Grace about her family, she told them her grandparents were dead, that they had all died before she was born. It had been easier to lie than to try to explain something she herself did not understand.

She said it was because of you that we left, Grace says tentatively, because of the way you treated her, something you did, after dad died.

When Grace says this, she sees all the colour drain from Margaret's face.

We made a mistake, Margaret says. At the time it seemed like the right thing to do but it turned out to be a terrible mistake. Your grandfather never forgave himself. The guilt killed him. It ate away at him until he had no will to live.

What did you do, Grace asks quietly. What did you do to her?

We had her admitted to a mental hospital. They advised us that she should have ECT.

Shock therapy? Grace is incredulous.

Her grandmother nods. It seems barbaric now. But it was common in those days. They used it a lot to treat depression.

How could you do that to her? For the first time in her life Grace feels sorry for her mother.

Don't be angry Grace, please don't be angry. We would never knowingly have done anything to hurt Madeleine. She was our only daughter, our only child.

She is crying now but she goes on, twisting her hands in her lap as she speaks.

After Peter died she was a changed person. You won't remember this, you were too young probably but she was...Margaret hesitates. She was very hard on you, she wouldn't comfort you. She said... she said it was your fault he was dead. I tried to understand. I knew she wasn't herself, that it was just the grief talking. She wanted someone to blame. It didn't make any sense, only that you were there, you were with him when it happened...her grandmother trails off. She's never told you, has she?

Grace shakes her head. She can feel herself trembling. She is pressing the photo album against her chest, holding it so tightly that she can feel the hard edge digging into her stomach. Her mother has never told her how her father died. When Grace was growing up, this was one of the questions that she did not dare to ask. When she was very young she had thought that her mother might tell her when she was older. But in fact, the older she got, the less her mother told her. Grace reached a point where she felt that there were certain questions whose answers she would never know and she thought she had accepted this. But now she has the chance, her need to know is like a physical pain, something immense and sharp lodged in her chest making it hard for her to breathe. She leans forward, looking at her grandmother, forcing herself to listen to every word she says.

Do you remember the park at the end of your street? Your dad took you down there nearly every day and you used to play on the swings or kick a football around with the Wilson boys from next door. But best of all you liked to play this game you called 'Aeroplane', where he would pick you up by one arm and one leg and swing you around. 'Let's do the aeroplane daddy', you would say. You'd be giggling and squealing and screaming for him to go faster. That's the game you were playing when he had the heart attack. Tom Wilson was right there in the park when it happened; he saw your dad drop you and fall down. He was a good boy Tom. He ran straight home to get help but it was too late. By the time the ambulance arrived your father was already dead.

Grace covers her face with her hands. She doesn't want to know any more. She feels dizzy, swollen with grief. Still clutching the photo album she tips sideways on the couch, drawing up her legs, pushing her hot face into the cushions. She hears her grandmother get up out of her armchair and come over to the couch, standing there for a long minute as if she is expecting Grace to rouse herself. But Grace stays exactly where she is. She does not lift her head or even open her eyes. If her grandmother has something else to tell her, she does not want to know. She has already heard too much tonight. All those years of silence and then everything at once, all the death and loss and sadness, it is too much.

Her grandmother sits on the couch beside her and resting her hand on the back of Grace's head she says, I'm sorry Grace, I'm so sorry. These small words; the weight of her grandmother's hand, they comfort Grace, slow her breath; calm her ragged heart. Grace lies like that for a long time, gathering the strength to get up.

I should go now, she says eventually, pushing herself upright.

I made up the spare bed, her grandmother says, looking at her hopefully.

Grace is so tired, too tired to argue. She follows her grandmother down the hall into a tiny, cosy room with a single bed and a miniature rocking chair. The bed is covered with a crochet rug and the flannelette sheets have been turned down ready.

This is the room you always slept in, her grandmother says. I suppose it's a bit old-fashioned now but I didn't want to change anything, I know that's silly.

She looks apologetic. Grace sits down on the bed. She doesn't think it's silly at all. Looking around the room she feels happy to think that it looks the same now as it did the last time she slept in it, more than twenty years ago. And as she lies down in the low bed with the sheets tucked tightly around her, she begins to think it seems familiar, that in this house, in this room she is touching the fragile edge of a memory.



## swimming against the tide

This is the season when gardens are brushed with mauve: pansies flowering quietly in their beds, agapanthus bobbing on slender stalks, dense clumps of lavender scenting the air. The hot wind tugs at the branches of the jacaranda trees, urging them to drop their lilac blooms, to spread a pastel carpet on the hard roads so that those who walk there may pad quietly through these sultry afternoons, lingering in the patches of shade beneath the stretched-out arms of old trees.

The afternoons smell of cut grass and children walking home from school stop to pick flowers out of other people's gardens while drowsy flies tickle their faces and their bare knees.

It is hot and grey the day that Grace goes to find Greenmeadow Gardens. Following her grandmother's instructions, she walks along Balaclava Road, reading the street signs, counting the intersections. The odd car passes her, otherwise the streets are empty. The sky is dark. People are inside their cool houses, switching on lights, waiting for a storm. Her mouth dry in the heat Grace hears a fountain, water running and splashing behind a stone wall covered with creepers. She feels weak, old, like the tired walls she has passed which tilt towards green lawns, succumbing to gravity.

Grace has been staying with her grandmother for two weeks, sleeping in a child's bed with her feet sticking out at the bottom. With Margaret's help she has gone back through her own past and her mother's, back as far as her father's childhood in England, filling in the gaps in her mother's stories, sorting out the lies from the truths. She has been to look at the boarding house they all lived in for so many years, now part of a private hospital. She has attended a service at the church where her parents and grandparents worshipped. She has visited the site where her father's church should have stood; a different church now standing in its place. Now there is only one place left for her to go: the street where they lived; the place where her father died.

Beneath the street sign Grace stops. Lempriere Avenue. It is not a long road or a very wide one but it is tree-lined, the way an avenue should be and they are old trees, thick with leaves, leaning across the road to meet each other. Grace can see all the way down the tunnel of green to an iron railing: the place where the street ends and the park begins.

When at last she begins to move towards it she finds that her body has turned against her, nerve-cells stopping short of synapses, failing to pass on orders from her brain; muscles refusing to co-operate with bones. She moves mechanically, heavily, as though she is wading through thick mud, every step an intense labour. She feels as though there is a rope tied around

her, pulled taut as she strains against it. She thinks that if she turned her head now and looked behind she would see her mother behind her, pulling at the other end, clinging for dear life, still trying to hold her back. Grace hears her voice now, as though she is right beside her, the same old lies, What you don't know won't hurt you. But she doesn't listen. She pulls harder on the rope using her arms now too to drag her body forward, swimming against the tide.

Just before the rain comes she hears the wind pick up the dry leaves, dragging them across the bitumen so that they rattle and rasp around her feet. When she feels the first wet drops on her face Grace breaks into a run. She runs full-pelt down the deserted street, past the house she used to live in, through the open gate and into the park.

She sits on a bench under the big old trees with the rain splashing her shoulders and bare arms and she thinks that perhaps she can remember. She thinks she can remember a day when she was flying, safe in her father's hands, the world spinning around her and then he let her go. He let her land hard on the grass, all the breath shaken out of her and when she cried he did not come to her. And even when she crawled towards him, her knees bruised, her hands grazed, the taste of blood in her mouth; even when she lay down beside him and screamed for help he did not comfort her, nor even open his eyes to look at her.

Grace thinks she can remember this and she tries to forgive him for letting her go, for letting them all go.

In the bottom drawer of the chest in the room that has become her own again, Grace finds all the cards and presents her grandmother bought her after she moved with Madeleine to Perth. Every year on her birthday and at Christmas Margaret picked out colouring books and Barbie clothes and secret diaries with locks and miniature keys; presents she thought were suitable for a seven year old, a nine year old, a teenager. She chose cards with fairies and ballerinas and ponies and inside she wrote messages to *my darling grand-daughter* and *my special Grace*. Every year she wrapped the presents and sent them off, hoping that Madeleine might have softened and every year they were returned to her unopened. Laying them out on her bed, Grace cries over these gifts; a tiny museum of her lost childhood. She returns them to their drawer reverently, awed by her grandmother's persistence, her endless faith.

The day before Grace returns to Perth, Margaret gives her a small cardboard box full of her father's things.

Your mother burnt everything else, her grandmother tells her, all the books he loved, his diaries. She even burnt his plans for the church, 'so that they couldn't change anything', she said. If they couldn't build it right, if they couldn't make it exactly the way Peter dreamed it, it

was better not to build it at all, that's what she thought. Your grandfather saved this lot. It was all that was left. He thought that one day Madeleine would realise her mistake, that she'd be glad to have some of Peter's things. But he'd be pleased for you to have it Grace, he'd want you to.

There are books in the box and some of Peter's notebooks: pages of his careful sketches; his handwriting neat, then loose and hurried, then neat again. There is a bundle of letters from her mother, written in 1960, when she was living on a sheep station in northern New South Wales; letters in which Madeleine seems like an entirely different person to the woman Grace knows as her mother.

Grace had thought at first that she would talk to her mother about the things Margaret had told her. She had tried to understand how her mother must have felt after Peter died, how in her grief she had imagined that even her own parents had turned against her. She had been glad, at last, to have an explanation for her mother's behaviour, had seen how what began as a coping mechanism had turned into a lifetime pattern.

Grace had hoped that if she could say to her mother, I know what happened, I know what they did and what you did, I know all of it; if she could release her mother from the burden of having to tell it herself, perhaps she could find a way through to the person her mother was before, the daughter Jack and Margaret knew, the hopeful young woman who had married her father.

But when she thinks about that drawer full of gifts and adds up the years in which Madeleine resisted her mother's gestures of reconciliation, Grace knows it is too late, that nothing she can say or do will change the person her mother has become. So this journey has not given her what she came for. But it has yielded something else, something unexpected. It has given her back something of her history and through that, a means of remembering her father. And it has restored her grandmother to her, a woman who has been as good as dead, now a part of Grace's life. And Grace finds that though these things are not what she came to Melbourne in search of, they are more than enough for her, more than she could have hoped for.

Packing her car, Grace puts her father's box on the passenger seat beside her and after fourteen hours of driving, she falls asleep reading his notebooks, her head tilting sideways against the wood veneer headboards of motel rooms in Port Augusta and Eucla and finally, Coolgardie. Three and a half thousand kilometres she drives, back the way she came and all the

way she thinks of her father's vision, his passion, his belief in his work. By the time she arrives home she has reached a decision.

Back in her own bed Grace sleeps for eighteen hours without even turning over. When she wakes up she sits down to write one last letter to Michael, her father's notebook on the table beside her to remind her of her decision, to keep her strong. This time, she does not map out the letter in her head before she begins. She does not pick out a careful path, wending her way between the things she cannot say. For the first time she writes without holding anything back, all her doubts and fears and questions let loose on the page. *I have spent too much of my life only knowing half the story*, she writes. *I don't want to live like that any more. I cannot build a house for you Michael. A house will not stand on such unsteady foundations as ours. I need something more certain to build my life around, something I can put my faith in.* Grace seals the letter and posts it that day, before she can change her mind.

She spends the next week writing application letters. She applies to every architecture firm she can find in the Yellow Pages. And then she waits. She sleeps late and eats standing up at the kitchen bench, slices of toast with marmalade; crackers and cheese. She has put away her Atlas of the Stars, has given up looking at the night sky: it only serves to remind her of yet another thing she has lost. Instead she watches videos which she rents by the dozen from the video shop on Beaufort Street: Hitchcock classics and old black and white musicals and ridiculous Kung Fu movies without plots. She speaks to her grandmother almost every day. Christmas and new year come and go, the same as any other day.

Then, in the first week of January, the package arrives. She recognises the handwriting at once. Inside there is a bundle of the envelopes which are so familiar. They are all sealed and addressed to her, some of them even have stamps. On the top is an unsealed envelope which says, *read this first.*

*Dear Grace*, she reads. *I hardly know where to begin with this letter. I wanted to write 'my Gracie' but you are not that any more. I was shocked by your letter Grace. I was not surprised that you wanted to end things between us – I had expected that after so many weeks without hearing from you. What surprised me was your reason for ending it: that you doubted my feelings for you, that things between us were too murky, too undefined.*

*Grace, if there is one thing you can be certain of it is my feelings for you. After two years of planning, this trip has not held the pleasure for me that I hoped it would. As soon as I got here I wondered why I had not asked you to share this with me. The thought of five months without you was so painful; it seemed an impossibly long time to wait. The day after I arrived I*

*wrote a letter to you, asking you to come here, to travel with me. But before I had a chance to post it I received a letter from you. And that letter was so dry, so cold that I lost my nerve. It was as though all the time we spent together had dissolved for you the moment I left. You did not write anything of your feelings for me, just a list of questions about the house. I began to fear that I had misinterpreted what we shared before I left, that it had not meant to you what it meant to me. And every letter you wrote confirmed this, page after page of nothing but the house, the house, the house.*

*I want you to know that I couldn't care less about the house. It doesn't matter to me that you don't want to build it. Things happened so quickly between us, it was too much to ask, I see that now. But I care about you Grace, I care about us.*

*It seems like madness to think that for all this time we've both been feeling the same doubt, the same confusion and yet neither of us have spoken of it, not a single word. Looking back I can see that it was the same even when we were together – that there were questions I could not ask you, parts of your life that were out of bounds to me. I felt closed out by your silence, afraid to challenge it. I wrote letter after letter that I did not send. I am sending them now so that you will know the things I feel for you and have not dared to say.*

*I'll be at this hotel for the next three weeks. If I don't hear from you by then I will understand that it's too late, that your decision is already made. But if you think you can find in my letters something strong enough to build your life around, we'll start again and this time we'll tell each other everything. For without you Grace, even the stars have lost their meaning.*

There are eleven letters in the package, one for every week that Michael has been away. Grace reads them in one breathless sitting, her heart leaping inside her. For these letters are nothing like the ones Michael did send, the letters she burnt. After so many months of waiting, these are the letters she has longed to read, the things she has needed so badly to hear. Reading them, Grace acknowledges for the first time, her unwillingness to speak about difficult things; realises that the silence had started with her, an unwelcome legacy from her mother.

Grace rereads Michael's letter dated December 28<sup>th</sup>. *Please write to me and I'll come back straight away.* She thinks of his excitement before he left, how important it had been to him. She does not want him to cut his trip short for her. She looks at the calendar on her fridge. It is only a week since he wrote the letter. That gives her two weeks before he moves on; two weeks to get from Perth to Egypt.

Singapore Airlines fly via Dubai to Cairo three times a week but Grace cannot book a seat on a flight until the end of the following week. She will arrive in Cairo on January 18<sup>th</sup>, exactly twenty days from the date on the letter. She wanted to be there sooner. She hates to think of Michael waiting to hear from her, asking every day if a letter has come for him, losing hope as time runs out. But she knows he won't leave Cairo early. If he said three weeks, he'll stay three weeks. She knows his precision in these things. She is counting on this.

The night before she leaves for Cairo Grace drives to Leighton Beach to look at the southern sky one last time. Searching for the clusters of stars she has come to know so well she notices how much the sky has changed in the months since she first looked at it through Michael's eyes. All of the constellations have shifted positions, following their own pathway as the earth turns. And far out on the horizon she watches a ship moving through the dark water, blazing like a new constellation, outpacing the ancient stars.

# **A New Map of the Universe**

*An Accompanying Essay*

## Introduction

When I began this thesis I knew only that I wanted to write a novel. Though I had been writing creatively for several years by then, I had never attempted a project of this scale and was unsure of how my writing process would evolve. I did not have a plan for the novel; there was no plot mapped out in my mind, no definitive list of characters and settings. In the beginning, all I had was a single character: a female architect at the end of her career, planning her last building, one by which she would thereafter be defined.

Initially I had thought that I would work simultaneously on the creative and critical components of the thesis. It had seemed that it would be beneficial for the novel to inform its accompanying exegesis and vice versa. However, early in the writing of this thesis, I made the decision that I would complete *A New Map of the Universe* in its entirety before beginning to write or even read for the critical essay.

This decision stemmed from the realisation that my writing process was organic and somewhat unsystematic. The text seemed to have a life of its own and often my writing took me by surprise. I enjoyed this process and it became important to me that the novel should be allowed to evolve in its own way rather than being restricted through its relationship to the exegesis. I feared that once I began working on a critical essay and developing an argument around some of the ideas or themes in my novel, I might, subconsciously or otherwise, change my novel in order to fit my argument, rather than changing my argument to fit my novel.

Thus, the ideas presented in this essay are ideas I have developed since completing the manuscript of *A New Map of the Universe*. All of the theoretical reading which has informed this essay has taken place after the writing of the novel. Of the other novels I have engaged with in this essay, all of them were read before or during the writing process. However, I did not read them with the exegesis in mind. At the time, I read them for pleasure and it was only retrospectively that I drew thematic connections between these novels and my own and at that point I revisited them to explore those connections further.

My essay begins with a short exploration of the writing process of *A New Map of the Universe*. In the first section of Part One, I have retrospectively considered my novel in relation to the terms “fiction” and “autobiography”, attempting to situate it within one genre or the other. After identifying those elements of my text which I believe to be distinctly



autobiographical I have briefly engaged with some of the debates surrounding the fiction/autobiography dichotomy and in so doing I have discovered the difficulties of drawing a clear boundary between two such categories.

One of the unexpected difficulties I encountered when writing *A New Map of the Universe* was the large number of characters who were required to die during the course of the novel. The nature of the text and the demands of the plot required that each death be different to those which had gone before, yet at the same time each had also to be somehow commonplace and of course, plausible. Because of the incidental way the novel developed I had not anticipated such an outcome and I have briefly explored the challenges inherent in killing off a series of characters.

The third section of Part One is a cursory account of how the two central thematic elements of the plot developed. I have explained how I began writing with the architectural motif in mind and I have compared this to the evolution of the other thematic strand – that of secrets and silence or the notion of the unspeakable – which emerged far less consciously, yet equally insistently during the writing process.

In part two of this essay, I have engaged in a more detailed analysis of how this theme of secrets and silence manifests itself in *A New Map of the Universe*. Having identified other contemporary Australian texts in which this is also a central thematic concern – in particular, Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy* – I have compared the treatment of the unspeakable in these texts to the way I have written about the unspeakable in my own novel. I begin by looking at how the unspeakable becomes defined for different characters in different texts and have gone on to explore the connection between silence and access to language, as well as examining the ways in which silence is inherited in fictional texts and how patterns of silence can be broken.

The final part of this essay is concerned with the architectural motif in *A New Map of the Universe*. I have attempted to place my novel within the context of the literary tradition in which houses and other constructed spaces function as metaphors for the body/and or the self. Elizabeth Ferrier's 1987 essay "From Pleasure Domes to Bark Huts: Architectural Metaphors in Recent Australian Fiction," provided a springboard for the ideas developed in this section of my essay, though I chose to look at different texts to those examined in Ferrier's early paper. Using as a starting point Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs reworking of Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, I have focused on how the ways in

which fictional characters relate to constructed spaces can be read as signs of a quest for belonging. Firstly, I have explored this notion in relation to my own text and then I have examined the manifestation of similar themes in three contemporary Australian novels: Kate Grenville's *The Idea of Perfection*, Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* and Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*.

It should be made clear that this is to be primarily a text-based essay with my own novel providing the major focus throughout. My aim was not to provide a close analysis of any other writers' work: instead I have chosen to look at the ways in which several other contemporary works of fiction intersect thematically with my own.

## Part One

### Writing *A New Map of the Universe*

#### I. Autobiography or Fiction?

**autobiography** *n.* 1. a personal account of one's own life, esp. for publication.

**fiction** *n.* 1. an invented idea or statement or narrative; an imaginary thing. 2. literature, esp. novels, describing imaginary events and people. (Allen, 1990)

Prior to beginning *A New Map of the Universe*, I had written several short stories which were based directly on my own experiences, and for my Honours thesis, a long story entitled *Blue Places on the Maps*, which contained elements of the fantastic and bore little resemblance to my own life. I drew a clear line between my short stories, which I saw as autobiographical, and my longer piece which I considered to be fiction, and from this limited experience I concluded that autobiography and fiction were two easily separable realms and that furthermore, whichever of the two you chose to write, your choice was a conscious thing, a decision made before the writing began. Now, having completed a novel, as I reflect on the writing process I find that the distinction between autobiography and fiction has become blurred for me; that the line between the two is not as clear as I had imagined.

When I began writing the novel which became *A New Map of the Universe*, I intended to write a fictionalised account of the life of the Spanish architect, Antoni Gaudi. I had become interested in his life when I visited Barcelona in 1995. Prior to that, I had seen many buildings which I found beautiful or impressive in some way, but Gaudi's were the first structures which moved me, which seemed to have something to say to me. In particular, Gaudi's monumental cathedral, *La Sagrada Familia*, haunted me and I became fascinated by the stories surrounding both the cathedral itself and its architect. In the end, however, this proliferation of stories deterred me from embarking on my intended project. I felt that there was already too much written, too many myths surrounding Gaudi for me to succeed in persuading a reader of my own version of events.

Staying with the architectural theme, I decided to create an entirely fictional character who might however, exhibit some of the aspects of Gaudi's personality which

fascinated me. In the beginning this character was a female architect at the end of her career, working on a building which she hoped would embody her distinctive architectural style and at the same time somehow represent her own life. This was a character with whom I had almost nothing in common and I was excited by the challenge of this; looking forward to the opportunity to flex my fictional muscle. However, by a process which I am unable now to explain, during the very early stages of writing the novel this character metamorphosed into a young woman, at the beginning of her career in architecture. Perhaps it was difficult for me to get a grip on a character whose life was so different to my own. Perhaps my imagination could not stretch that far and so I ended up creating a character with whom I could identify, a character that, in some ways, was nothing more than a thinly disguised version of myself.

How else can I explain the defensiveness I felt when readers criticised Grace? Though her story is not my own, her feelings were based on mine. When readers said to me, *She's very neurotic, isn't she?* Or, *Why is she so emotional?* I felt compelled to defend her, to explain her, to make her behaviour seem more reasonable. I felt in some ways disappointed that I had set out to write a fiction and had been somehow sucked back into autobiography.

Eventually, however, it was Grace's neurosis which pulled her away from me and turned her into her own person, for it was these aspects of her character – her intensity, her emotional struggle – which drove the plot. The novel became not, as I had imagined, the story of a young woman building a house for her lover, but instead an explanation of why she was unable to do this, how she became the person she was.

The evolution of the novel in this new direction necessitated the development of other characters that were strong enough to carry the narrative, whose stories needed to be told in order to fill in the gaps in Grace's own story, providing an explanation for the parts of her life which she could not account for. Thus, Peter was created and later, the character of Madeleine was expanded to take up another thread of the narrative. Though the entire novel is narrated in the third person, there are three distinct voices in the novel and I believe I was successful in creating the notion that each of the characters was the narrator of their own story.

I have read of writers who scorn the idea that a novel "writes itself" but in the case of Peter and Madeleine, this is how it felt for me. They were by no means autobiographical "scarecrows", patched together from scraps of people I have met or known but born in my

mind as fully rounded characters, with ways of thinking and speaking and acting which I had no sense of having consciously created. Thus, writing Peter and Madeleine's stories was not so much a process of creating their characters as of getting to know them. They assumed the same density in my mind as living, breathing people to the extent that when Peter died – or perhaps I should say, when I killed him – I cried. I felt a sense of loss. When working through certain issues in the plotting of the novel, readers sometimes made suggestions for what might happen which I found myself rejecting on the grounds that *Peter/Madeleine wouldn't do that*.

Examining my characters from within the fiction/autobiography dichotomy, Grace emerges as a hybrid who begins as a fictional character, moves dangerously close to becoming autobiographical and in the end becomes her own person, whereas Peter and Madeleine, and the cast of supporting characters have always been invented, imaginary people.

The settings of the novel, however, are almost entirely autobiographical; the places where the three main characters lived mirror the places I myself have lived. Though the name Granston is invented, the village itself is an exact replica of the village in England in which I grew up, down to the names and the layout of the streets. The church of St Mary's is a real church and the story of the destruction of the belltower is a true one though the lightning struck not in 1944 but in 1975, in my own lifetime. Lily Nunn was the name of the woman who ran the village shop although in my own childhood Lily Nunn was already an old woman and no one in the village bought groceries at the tiny shop – it was only the children of the village who went there to buy sweets and ice creams. The recreation of this village for the novel was one of the most enjoyable and surprising aspects of the writing process as the further I progressed the more I was able to remember, drawing memories from my childhood I would have thought were lost forever.

At the age of thirteen I moved from England to Perth, Western Australia, thus Grace's life in Perth reflects that period of my own life, living in a flat on Walcott Street, attending the University of Western Australia, buying flowers from the deli on Beaufort Street. During the writing of the novel I moved from Perth to Melbourne, choosing to drive rather than to fly across Australia and Grace's journey across the Nullarbor is an account of how I experienced that journey myself.

One key setting which was not drawn from my own life was the sheep station in northern New South Wales where Madeleine spends a couple of years. In order to write this

part of the novel I travelled to northern New South Wales, making the last leg of the journey, from Sydney to Moree by train, as Madeleine would have done and I stayed for four days on a sheep station there. Most of the details of the station in the novel are based on this station where I stayed, including its name: Myall Downs.

Finally, though I consider the plot to be largely fictional, the milestone journeys of the characters do mirror the milestone journeys of my own life, and the canvas upon which the events of the novel are painted is a canvas woven from the feelings, moments and details drawn from my own life.

In the 1971 edition of MH Abrams *Glossary of Literary Terms*, the genre of autobiography is not considered significant enough to warrant its own entry; it is merely incorporated in the entry on biography. Six years later, in his *Dictionary Of Literary Terms*, JA Cuddon defines autobiography as “an account of a *man’s* life by *himself*” [italics added] (Cuddon, 1977, p.61). Cuddon omits to say whether an account of a *woman’s* life by *herself* should be known by a different term or whether perhaps there is no such thing! He does state that “an autobiography may be largely fictional” (Cuddon, 1977, p.62), in which case my own text would seem to fit his definition although he goes on to say, rather dismissively, that fiction is a “vague and general term for an imaginative work, usually in prose” (Cuddon, 1977, p.185).

The emergence of certain literary theories has led to the interrogation of terms such as “fiction” and “autobiography” with the result that contemporary critics would find these terms a great deal more difficult to define than Cuddon and Abrams did in the 1970s. In the 1997 edition of her *Glossary of Literary Terms*, Kerry Stewart comments on how “modernism has increased the awareness in writers *and readers* of the fragility of this boundary between fiction and non-fiction” [italics added] (Stewart, 1997, p.56). I am interested to note that Stewart refers to readers as well as writers in her definition, for although critics – and probably writers too – embrace the “fragility of this boundary,” it seems to me that some readers are not comfortable with this blurring of the lines between genres, that many readers would feel more at ease with tighter definitions of these terms.

From my own point of view, as a writer I prefer not to have to qualify the genre I am working in but as a reader I find that the notion of fact or fiction affects my interpretation of a text. For example, when reading Louis Nowra’s *Abaza*, (2001) my belief that I was reading fiction made the over-the-top violence and depravity in the text

humorous. If however this same text had been presented to me as non-fiction, I would have found it unreadable.

Carmel Bird comments on the reader's position in her essay "Fact or Fiction: Who knows, Who cares?":

We want clear categories, shelves marked FACT and shelves marked FICTION. A box for fact, a box for fiction. We grow bewildered and even angry when we suspect writers are chucking bits from one box into another, especially if they dump some fiction into the fact pile. (Bird, 1993, p.10)

While clearer, more separate genre categories may make it easier for the reader, in her essay "Dancing on Hot Bricks," Ann Oakley asserts that for the writer, particularly the autobiographer, positioning oneself in relation to the terms "fact" or "fiction" is not a simple matter:

Anyone who's ever done it knows that the writing of autobiography is not the mere and simple description of the truth of what happened. In setting down certain 'facts' about one's life, one is telling a story. In order to tell a story you need to tell some facts rather than others. The facts that get selected are the ones that fit the story one wants to tell. (Oakley, 1993, p.4)

In this sense, my novel does fit the description of an autobiography. I have selected certain "facts" from my life – places I have lived, journeys I have undertaken – in order to tell a story, though the story itself is not fact.

As editor of a collection of essays on autobiography entitled *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation*, Robert Folkenflik comments that "the definition of autobiography has proved elusive" (Folkenflik, 1993, p.13). This observation however, does not prevent him from attempting his own definition, a definition which includes confusing and largely unqualified remarks such as "autobiographies may be ostensibly fiction" (Folkenflik, 1993, p.14). Folkenflik perceives that the genre of autobiography has "norms but not rules" (Folkenflik, 1993, p.13). One of the "norms" he identifies is that "Autobiography is usually written in old age, or at least in mid-life...but it

may be written by the young” (Folkenflik, 1993, p.14). This vague and unhelpful statement suggests that when it comes to autobiography, there are no norms.

In his cleverly titled book *Autobiography: the Self Made Text*, James Goodwin provides a far more helpful way of looking at autobiography, by interrogating the etymology of the parts that make up the term:

The combining stem *auto* means self, self-acting or self-caused. *Bio* derives from the root meaning in Greek: ‘mode of living’ or, simply, ‘life.’ *Graphy* is another combining form; in English this is derived from Greek, with the root meaning ‘to write’. By definition then, autobiography brings into direct association self, life and writing, with each component in dynamic, reflexive relationship to the other two. (Goodwin, 1993, p.3)

Goodwin’s is a loose definition, one which seems to leave the classification of a text up to the writer and/or the reader. Some critics have adopted a more radical viewpoint, attempting to debunk the idea that autobiography and fiction can be separated. In his book *The Changing Nature of the Self: A Critical Study of the Autobiographic Discourse*, Robert Elbaz argues that “autobiography can only be a fiction. Indeed autobiography is fiction and fiction is autobiography: both are narrative arrangements of reality” (Elbaz, 1988, p.1).

Working within a similar framework, Anna Johnston explores the way some contemporary autobiographies exhibit a self-consciousness about their genre, interrogating the idea of autobiography whilst working within that genre. In her essay “Australian Autobiography: The Politics of Making Postcolonial Space,” Johnston comments on how:

The self-reflexive nature of the autobiographical genre continually calls into question the suitability or capability of the form to hold the story of a life. In contemporary autobiographies, this meta-autobiographical questioning has almost become an essential, structural (or more cynically, a gestural) part of writing autobiography. (Johnston, 1995, p.131)

Johnston cites as an example Robert Dessaix’s *A Mother’s Disgrace* which contains the epigraph ‘I’m telling you stories. Trust me,’ from Jeanette Winterson’s novel *The Passion*. (Johnston, 1995, p.131)



In relation to Johnston's ideas, my own novel is not positioned as an autobiography and contains none of the self-reflexive aspects of which Johnston writes. Upon reflection, I would say that the *A New Map of the Universe* could not clearly be described as either fiction or autobiography but as both: a fictional autobiography or perhaps more accurately, an autobiographical fiction. By this I mean that though the story of *A New Map of the Universe* is not the story of my own life, there are so many elements of my life embedded in the text it is difficult for me to separate where autobiography ends and fiction begins.

## **II. Five counts of murder.**

I did not begin *A New Map of the Universe* with a plot mapped out. The character of Grace came first and the plot sprung up around her as she developed. After some time it became clear that her own story needed a background; that the stories of her mother's and father's lives needed to be told. So the novel was not written in chronological order. I began with Grace in the present day and then went back in time to write Peter and Madeleine's stories. Working backwards in this way meant that there were unexpected turns in the plot which were sometimes challenging to write: one of the most difficult of these challenges was in the number of characters I had to kill off.

This was not, after all, intended to be a crime fiction, my pages strewn with dead bodies. But as the novel progressed it transpired that one character after another needed to die. This was most problematic in Peter's story, when first his father, then his mother and finally his guardian Frank all had to die in relatively quick succession in order for him to leave England and move to Melbourne. More deaths were required in order to explain why there were no family members he could live with after being orphaned:

It is not until years later that he will find out the truth. Sorting through Frank's papers after his death, Peter will come across the notes on his own family, which Frank gathered that summer Betty died. There is a typewritten list of names from both his mother's and his father's families, followed, in Frank's handwriting, by details of births and deaths, so many deaths that Peter can hardly bear to read it: stillbirths and fires; farm accidents and drownings; a history of loss that stretches back much further than his own life.

(*A New Map*, pp. 86)

In everyday life it seems believable, even likely, that several members of one family might die from the same cause, particularly if that cause were, for example, cancer or heart disease. Even people who are not related by blood, such as husband and wife, might feasibly die from the same illness and in real life this would be perceived as some kind of gruesome coincidence, a trick of fate. In fiction, however, there is no such luxury as having several characters die by the same means. In fiction, such “coincidence” would be implausible, might be read merely as laziness on the part of the writer.

Not counting Michael’s father, who is not named, or Madeleine’s grandparents, Edward and Rose, who were already old and whose deaths therefore needed no explanation, I had, in total, four central characters to get rid of. In order for Peter’s father, Wally, to die I pulled the narrative back in time so that he might be killed in action in the Second World War. It seemed a natural progression then for his wife Betty, to die slowly of grief. In the novel Wally’s death is sudden but this is acceptable because the reader does not know him. Betty is a character who gradually fades from the narrative until her death seems almost inevitable and since Peter does not grieve for her in any deep or lasting way, I believe it is easy for the reader to quickly forget Betty and move on.

It was Frank’s death which demanded the most thorough exposition since Peter’s life with Frank was recorded in such detail. In addition, I wanted the reader to feel Frank’s death as Peter did, to mourn his passing and to create a sense of accumulated grief, to feel, through Frank’s death, everything that Peter had lost. Thus Frank’s death had to happen slowly, in front of the reader’s eyes. Lung cancer seemed to fulfil my requirements: the reader had to go through it with Peter, the coughing, the blood, the gradual decline.

I knew how Peter would die a long time before it happened. I worked backwards from Grace’s character to create this element of the plot: *Why is Grace neurotic? Because she has a troubled relationship with her mother, Madeleine; what is the cause of the tension in their relationship? Madeleine blames Grace for Peter’s death.* Thus Peter’s death needed to be sudden, unexpected and to happen in a way in which Grace might be considered to be to blame: thus, a heart attack while Peter and Grace are playing at the park.

The challenge in writing Peter’s death was remaining unsentimental. I should perhaps admit that, though Grace is the character I most identify with, Peter is my favourite. I was therefore keenly aware of the danger of infusing his death scene with my own grief, my own reluctance to let him go. I was inspired in this by the final pages of *Bel*

*Canto* in which Ann Patchett, in clean, spare prose, without sentimentality, kills half the novel's main characters in one fell swoop:

With a shot Benjamin was down, the bullet catching him squarely in the side of his head. In one shot he lost both his life and the life of his brother, Luis, who would soon be taken from prison and executed for conspiracy. General Alfredo had already fallen. Humberto, Ignacio, Guadalupe, dead .... General Hector started to put up his hands but he was shot before they had passed his chest. (Patchett, 2001, p.311)

### **III. Architecture and the unspeakable.**

Having *A New Map* revolve around an architectural motif was a conscious decision in my writing process: it was my starting point, my cornerstone. And though the plot did not pivot on the design and construction of Michael's house, as I had originally imagined, the idea of the house, the architectural metaphor, remained central to the text. This motif was strengthened by my decision to have Peter, as well as Grace, become an architect. Through Peter, I even managed to weave in something of my original idea – a fictionalised account of the life of Antoni Gaudi – in my description of his cathedral, *La Sagrada Familia*. I read widely, if randomly, anything I could find about architecture: theory, history, sociological interpretations. I read about light, about the properties of different building materials, about movement and flow, the creation of space. I submerged myself in the discourse of architecture and I hope that this is reflected within the novel.

The novel's other pervasive theme – that of silence – was a much less conscious theme, one which emerged almost without my noticing and gradually infiltrated the entire novel. It was only in hindsight, when considering a topic for this exegesis, that I noticed the prevalence of this silence, the recurrence of the notion of something unspoken which creates barriers between the characters.

I first wrote about silence or the notion of the unspeakable in an autobiographical story entitled *Chamber for Treasures and Secrets* and later, while writing a novella for my honour's thesis, entitled *Blue Places on the Maps*, I found myself once more exploring the theme of secrets and silences in family life, this time in the lives of a fictional mother and daughter, Clara and Marina. Reflecting upon the recurrence of this theme in my work I realised my preoccupation stems from the tension between my father's side of the family,

whose history seems filled with shameful secrets, suppressed and obscured, and my mother's side of the family in which everything is brought out into the open. The stories I have written, including my novel, reflect this tension in that their narratives are filled with secrets and the characters are undergoing the process of uncovering these secrets, of speaking the unspeakable and in doing so, becoming whole.

In this part of the essay I have chosen to focus on only three aspects of writing *A New Map of The Universe*. My selection is not intended to suggest that there are no other elements of the writing process which are worthy of consideration. Given the scope, some of the issues I would have liked to explore include the development of a novel structured in four books, with three distinct narrative voices, the editing process and the influence that factors such as where I wrote and when I wrote had on my output. Though undertaking a more detailed examination of the writing process would have been appealing to me, possibly the other elements of this essay – such as situating the novel within the context of other literary works – provide a more useful insight into my work than such a description would have afforded. For perhaps, at the end of the day, an account of the writing process is only that; a writer can never really make any objective observations or draw any definite conclusions about their own work.

## Part Two

### Speaking the Unspeakable: Secrets and Silence in Family Life

**Unspeakable** *adj* **1.** that cannot be expressed in words. **2.** indescribably bad or objectionable. (Allen, 1990)

In *A New Map of the Universe*, many of the characters struggle to express themselves, or to articulate their feelings about particular circumstances. There are patterns of silence running through the novel and these patterns influence the way the characters relate to one another. I am interested in exploring the notion of the unspeakable in my own novel and comparing this to the treatment of silence and the unspeakable in other contemporary texts including Richard Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* and Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*. Within these texts as well as my own, I would like to examine how the unspeakable becomes defined; how what is considered unspeakable varies from person to person depending on factors such as their gender, age and culture; the era and even the family they are born into. I also intend to explore the connection between silence and access to language and to look at the ways in which silence can be inherited, how people collude in each other's silences and how patterns of silence can be broken.

#### I. Defining the unspeakable.

In *A New Map of the Universe*, the very first time Grace meets Michael and he asks her about her reasons for giving up architecture, she is unable to give him an honest answer. It is not that she deliberately lies to him, more that "she does not know how to explain it to him, or even to herself" (*A New Map*, p.13). Grace is unwilling to enter into a discussion about abandoning architecture because she knows such a conversation will inevitably lead into a topic which is even more difficult for her to speak about – her relationship with her mother. The central issue with her mother is their inability to speak about the death of Grace's father – Madeleine's husband, Peter. Thus, at the root of Grace's silence is death. In our society, people feel uncomfortable speaking openly about death; we have invented euphemisms such as "passed away" to avoid facing it directly. It is therefore not surprising that when looking at a range of contemporary texts by Australian writers, the unspeakable nature of death – and its corollary, grief – emerges as something of a preoccupation.

In Richard Flanagan's novel, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, Bojan Buloh's wife, Maria, hangs herself, no longer able to bear the weight of her past, including her rape by SS soldiers as a twelve-year-old girl. Bojan never speaks about his wife's death, not to his daughter, nor his friends, believing there is nothing to say. In *A New Map*, Madeleine refuses to discuss Grace's father, Peter, to the point where "as a child Grace had been smacked for asking about him" (*A New Map*, p.19). But it is not only Madeleine and Grace who are unable to speak about death. Peter's mother Betty also retreats into silence when faced with the death of her husband Wally, in the Second World War. Though death is commonplace in the sense that it happens to all of us eventually, on an individual level, every death might be defined by someone as "indescribably bad."

I have found it useful to look at silence from a psychoanalytic point of view, drawing on the groundbreaking work of Sigmund Freud. Based on his clinical observations, Freud redefined the unconscious as a realm which not only houses our biographical memories but also functions as a cache of unresolved psychological issues. Maria's suicide, Peter's death by heart attack and Wally's death in the war could all be classed as unresolved psychological issues, residing in the unconscious minds of Bojan in *One Hand Clapping*, and Madeleine and Betty in *A New Map*.

Reinterpreting Freud's work on the unconscious to take into account structuralist and post-structuralist theories, Jacques Lacan applied Freud's ideas to the study of language, describing the unconscious as "that discourse of the Other where the subject receives his own forgotten message" (Lacan, 1977, p.439). In her essay, "The Self, The Other and the Text: Psychoanalytic Criticism," Jill Barker summarises one of Lacan's central concepts about language:

Language is not needed unless something is absent but nevertheless imaginable. Following from that...is the important subsidiary perception: a being that uses language is constructed out of loss and loss in turn is inextricably linked with desire. (Barker, 2001, p.99)

If engaging with language means engaging with lack or loss, one might argue that to refuse to speak of something is a means of denying loss. Thus, Madeleine's silence about the death of her husband Peter, Betty's silence about Wally's death and Bojan's silence about Maria's suicide are strategies for refusing to acknowledge what has been lost.

In 1914 Sigmund Freud delivered a paper entitled, “On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement,” in which he states that “The theory of repression is the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests” (Freud, 1953–1973, Vol. XIV, p.16). In his 1915 essay “Repression,” Freud goes on to explain that “the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the unconscious” (Freud, 1953–1973, Vol. XIV, p.161). Looking at the behaviour of Bojan, Betty and Madeleine from a psychoanalytic point of view it appears that their silence is an act of repression.

## **II. Inheriting silence.**

When death and the accompanying grief manifest as unspeakable, this silence is not contained by those who have defined it. Silence is contagious, impacting on the lives of others. This becomes evident when examining the lives of Grace and Peter in *A New Map*, and of Bojan’s daughter, Sonja, in *One Hand Clapping*. Though Grace is only six when her father dies, Peter four when Wally is killed and Sonja younger still when her mother dies, these deaths affect them; they are impacted heavily by not knowing anything about their deceased parents, by being unable to speak of their own grief, their own sense of loss. Their memories of their dead parents haunt them and they subsequently inherit their living parents’ notions of what is unspeakable, and thus patterns of silence are established.

Peter’s childhood resembles Grace’s childhood in the sense that his home life is saturated by his mother’s grief about the death of her husband. “Peter grows up in a dark and silent house. He learns to do everything quietly, moves like a shadow through rooms where the blinds are always pulled down against the light” (*A New Map*, p.57). Unlike Madeleine’s silence, which relates specifically to Peter’s death and the events that followed, Betty’s silence is more general and eventually becomes complete – she retreats into muteness, unwilling or unable to speak at all.

Her behaviour has a profound impact on Peter’s life. At the village shop he is conscious of the way the other women respond to him and his mother:

Because his mother does not speak, people seem to imagine that she is deaf. Peter, too, is somehow enveloped in her silence. So although the women are standing right next to him, they speak about him as though he cannot hear. (*A New Map*, p.60)

In her thesis, “The Skeleton of a Mermaid: Writing *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*,” Danielle Wood asserts that there is sometimes power in such silence, citing as evidence the words of various mute fictional characters such as Adah in Barbara Kingsolver’s novel *The Poisonwood Bible*: “Silence has many advantages. When you do not speak, other people presume you to be deaf or feeble-minded and promptly make a show of their own limitations” (Wood, 2003a, p.217).

In Wood’s own novel, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, the character of Essie expresses a similar sentiment, perceiving that silence “could render people powerless, or it could make them talk, rushing to fill the vacuum with the sound of their own voices” (Wood, 2003b, p.45). However, in *A New Map*, Peter has not chosen silence for himself; he has merely been implicated in his mother’s silence which is not empowering but in fact has the opposite effect, setting him apart from the other villagers, even the children of his own age. Wood acknowledges that “the withdrawal of speech is the withdrawal of connection, of relationship” (Wood, 2003a, p. 218), and this is true in Peter’s case. By withdrawing her connection from him, Betty impacts on Peter’s ability to connect with others.

Bojan’s silence has a similar effect on his daughter, Sonja. Even as a very small child, Sonja has the attitude that “no matter how bad you feel, you never cry”(Flanagan, 1997, p.134), as though to express your feelings is something weak and shameful. After a childhood marked so deeply with silence and lies, Sonja eventually convinces herself that this is the best way to live, expressing to her friend Helvi that “The truth is rarely worth knowing...It hurts. Lies are easier” (Flanagan, 1997, p.139).

Grace has also inherited a pattern of lying and withholding from Madeleine. “Grace does not ask her mother about her own childhood as other people do. She cannot check her memories against her mother’s because she doesn’t trust Madeleine to tell her the truth” (*A New Map*, p.17). As a result of this, Grace establishes a pattern of holding back from expressing herself in her relationships with others. This is evident from the very beginning of her relationship with Michael. When Michael attempts to challenge Grace’s behaviour by asking her about her dead father, Peter, Grace cements the pattern by lying to him:

Grace doesn't tell anyone about [her] memories of her father. She hoards them like a fearful secret, believing that if she reveals them



they will be taken away from her. She does not even share them with Michael. When he asks her about her father she tells him the first lie: I can't remember. It is what she has been telling people all her life, only before, it was true. (*A New Map*, p.18)

Even when Michael talks about his own father's death, Grace does not reciprocate by sharing her story. She "says nothing...knowing there is nothing to say" (*A New Map*, p.21).

Though Grace is aware of her mother's pattern of silence, at the beginning of the novel she does not yet see it in her own behaviour. It is only through her relationship with Michael that she becomes aware of it in herself. This realisation begins when Michael asks her to design a house for him. Unwilling, or unable to explain that she is terrified of trying and failing, she becomes defensive. "She hears the sharpness in her own voice and is sorry for it but she cannot help herself. It's the way she has always been: deflecting difficult questions with hard words, sealing herself up against people's curiosity" (*A New Map*, p.23). But Michael persists where perhaps others have given up and this brings about a shift in Grace, a recognition of the way she is behaving: "Grace thinks of all the friends and lovers who have turned away from her, tired of being closed out. She sees with a terrible clarity how like her mother she has become" (*A New Map*, p.23).

This recognition, however, does not lead to an immediate change in Grace's behaviour. Learned from childhood, her pattern of silence is deeply entrenched and difficult to break. Her relationship with Michael begins with her inability to talk about her past and as it continues it becomes evident that talking about their future is equally difficult for Grace:

They talk their way right up to the point of Michael's leaving but never a moment beyond it. His departure is like a secret that they both know and pretend not to know. Grace pictures it like a vast wall that lies ahead of them, stretching the length of the horizon. She feels as though they are hurtling towards it with no way of slowing down and she fears the impact. Every day the wall is closer and the question of what lies beyond it is the only one Grace cannot ask. (*A New Map*, pp.26)

In order for their relationship to function, Michael gives up questioning Grace about her past and maintains his own silence about their future, though he must have the

same questions as she does. In this way he colludes in Grace's silence. This becomes clear when he writes to her and she sees that "He has not written her last name. It is the name that holds her history, her family, a wealth of stories she has not yet told him. Perhaps he is waiting to be offered these before he will use that name" (*A New Map*, p.34).

Thus, Grace's definition of the unspeakable can be seen to have expanded to encompass not only her father's death but anything which seems difficult to face. Grace's feelings for Michael are unspeakable because she fears that they may not be reciprocated. Speaking of them may lead to rejection so she maintains silence and projects onto Michael the responsibility for initiating a discussion about their relationship, by writing "a letter in which, having sensed Grace's doubts, he will somehow answer every one of her questions without her needing to ask" (*A New Map*, p.51).

In his essay "'Wild' Psycho-Analysis," Freud refers to the idea that a psychoanalyst "must sometimes resign himself to accepting responsibility, by a kind of projection, for the buried repressed wishes of his nervous patients" (Freud, 1953–1973, Vol. XI, p.222). In *Fact and Fantasy in Freudian Theory*, Paul Kline explains projection more broadly as "the attribution of one's own unacceptable impulses and ideas onto others" (Kline, 1972, p.153). Grace becomes frustrated when she senses that Michael is holding back in his letters to her. Though she has entire letters that she does not send because they express too much, far more than she is comfortable expressing, she expects Michael's letters to her to be different. It is almost as if she wants him to express what she does not dare to.

Ignorant of her own part in creating the dynamic of silence between them, she interprets that it is in fact Michael who has set the tone for their relationship: "Michael's turn of phrase; particular expressions he uses; the way he forms certain letters of the alphabet; his neatness; his attention to detail; his spaces and silences have been the means by which Grace defines herself" (*A New Map*, p.53).

Angry with him for failing to break the silence; unable to see that she has failed equally, Grace eventually rejects Michael, through the symbolic gesture of burning the letters which have so disappointed her.

If Grace's pattern of silence is inherited from her mother, it might follow that Madeleine's sense of the unspeakable is also inherited. In fact, the atmosphere of Madeleine's childhood is the opposite of Grace's; Madeleine's relationship with her parents Jack and Margaret is completely different in the sense that Madeleine grows up in a house where there are no secrets or silences – everything is told, every story is shared.

This is illustrated in the way that Madeleine's narrative begins with the story of her own birth. "As a child she asks her mother to tell it time and time again until it becomes a kind of family myth, better than any other story because it is all about her" (*A New Map*, p.104).

Madeleine's pattern of silence begins when she perceives that she has been rejected by Peter. There are strong parallels between Madeleine's relationship with Peter and Grace's relationship with Michael. Like Grace's feelings for Michael, Madeleine's feelings for Peter are unspeakable because she fears that they are not reciprocated. And as Michael does with Grace, Peter too colludes in Madeleine's silence, no more able than Madeleine to express his love for her. Furthermore, as Grace does after her, Madeleine chooses to reject Peter, breaking all contact with him and destroying his letters, this time by tearing them up, rather than making herself vulnerable by admitting to him how she feels.

Later, Madeleine regrets this behaviour, aware that her inability to speak of her feelings has damaged their relationship:

Madeleine is sure that when she stopped writing to Peter, she hurt him just as much as he hurt her. Sometimes she thinks if they could talk about what happened that Christmas it would ease things between them. But she doesn't know how to explain her side of the story without giving away her feelings and so she has to take the long way round, winning Peter's trust back bit by bit, with small gestures, careful conversations. (*A New Map*, p.136)

Eventually Madeleine changes the dynamic between herself and Peter, however it is notable that she does this through a gesture, rather than through words, by throwing Peter's umbrella off the pier so that she can kiss him.

Madeleine's pattern of silence emerges again after Grace is born and she suffers with post-natal depression. Madeleine is unable to speak to Peter about her feelings; once again, they are manifested through her gestures: "...sometimes when Grace is screaming Madeleine lies down on the floor beside her cot and cries with her" (*A New Map*, p.143). The treatment for this depression is decided upon by her husband and her doctor, without Madeleine being consulted: "It might help her to meet some other young mums, the doctor says to Peter, as though Madeleine isn't there" (*A New Map*, p.144).

Madeleine maintains her silence, refusing to partake in this "treatment": "The first time she goes [to the mother's group] she doesn't speak at all, except to introduce herself"

(*A New Map*, p.144). However it is the mother's group that eventually helps Madeleine to break her silence, by showing her that other women are experiencing the same feelings as her. In particular, a woman called Eve acts as a catalyst for Madeleine's recovery from her depression:

She's a straight shooter, isn't she? Peter says when he meets her.  
But Madeleine admires Eve for her outspokenness. It is Eve's honesty about her own life that clears a space for Madeleine to admit how difficult she finds motherhood. (*A New Map*, p.144)

Spending time with someone who is "outspoken", who is not constrained by society's restrictions on which feelings are acceptable and which are not, liberates Madeleine to speak the unspeakable and thus work through it.

### **III. Breaking the silence.**

Having inherited their parents' notions of the unspeakable, and adopted their patterns of silence, there comes a time both for Flanagan's character Sonja, and for Peter and Grace in my own novel, when the pattern of silence needs to be broken. For Sonja, the catalyst for this decision is finding out that she is pregnant. Perhaps she does not wish to pass on her inherited silence to her own child and it is this which brings her back to Tasmania after so many years away: a yearning for the truth, a desire to confront the past, to speak the unspeakable.

This is not an easy process, for it demands that others, too, express what they have hitherto considered inexpressible. A good example is found in Helvi, who was a friend of Bojan and Maria:

Helvi thought about all the things she could tell Sonja about her mother and then all the reasons why she couldn't tell her any of it...But Sonja didn't really want to know, any more than Helvi wanted to tell her...Helvi was no chronicler...but only an old woman...who breathed in shallow gulps and understood only the unspeakable nature of it. (Flanagan, 1997, p.177)

By far the biggest challenge for Sonja is in encouraging her father to break his silence. Silence is, in one sense, the cornerstone of their relationship; it is what joins them, even while it divides them:

It wasn't the things that were said but the growing mountain of things that were unsaid, the way the silence between them which had once bound them together like hoops of steel had now reformed into an ever widening abyss. (Flanagan, 1997, p. 314)

And though when she first returns to Tasmania, it seems that her father does not wish to confront the unspeakable, that he would rather continue to hide in his silence, over time there is a change in his behaviour which leads to a shift in their relationship.

And it wasn't so much that he talked differently, but that he talked at all. Admittedly, about little of consequence...but it was *that* he talked and the *way* he talked that mattered. (Flanagan, 1997, p. 360)

In the end though, he is still more comfortable expressing himself physically and his change of heart is exemplified not so much by anything he says, as by the work he does on Sonja's new home.

In *A New Map of the Universe*, Grace also reaches a point where it becomes necessary for her to deal with the silence she has inherited from her mother. Unlike Sonja, she does not choose to do this by confronting her mother directly but by filling the gaps of her mother's silences through other means. Having learnt the truth about her father's death and the events that followed through re-establishing a relationship with her grandmother, Grace is no longer willing to remain silent about what matters to her. She writes a letter to Michael, in which "For the first time she writes without holding anything back, all her doubts and fears and questions let loose on the page" (*A New Map*, P. 162). This act results in Michael also breaking his silence and sending Grace the letters containing all the things he has been afraid to say. And though at the end of the novel, Grace has not yet confronted her mother and attempted to break the silence between them, after the arrival of Michael's letters there is a sense of possibility, a suggestion that other aspects of Grace's life will begin to change as a result of her breaking her pattern of silence.

Peter is aided in breaking his pattern of silence by his relationship with the village priest, Frank:

From his earliest childhood he has been taught to be a keeper of secrets, to reveal nothing. But he finds there is a relief that comes from talking to Frank, from unwinding the fears that have coiled in his gut for so many years. (*A New Map*, p.70)

Encouraged by Frank's attentions, when he discovers that his mother used to go to church Peter is determined to confront her about depriving him of this solace. When he arrives home, however, he loses his resolve. Betty's grief is so pervasive, her silence so entrenched it is almost palpable: "Sadness hangs like a fog inside the house, presses a hand to his mouth, quells his desire to shout. It smothers his fury like a blanket thrown over a fire" (*A New Map*, p.75).

Though he does not succeed in breaking through his mother's silence while she is alive, he manages to avoid taking on this silence for himself. This becomes clear when he emigrates to Melbourne and shares the story of his life and his grief with Jack and Margaret in a way that his mother would never have been able to.

#### **IV. Language and silence.**

As discussed earlier, Jacques Lacan has incorporated Freud's ideas of the unconscious into a study of language. In *Ecrits*, Lacan states that "it is precisely because desire is articulated that it is not articulable" (Lacan, 1977, p.302). Lacan is referring here to the ambiguity of language, the impossible task of saying exactly what we mean, and furthermore, of having that utterance understood by our listener the way we wish them to understand it.

The notion of the unspeakable is often affected by access to language. For if, as Lacan suggests, communication is already fraught with complications, surely this problem is compounded when one is speaking a foreign language.

Like the character of Bojan Buloh in *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* both of Lily Brett's parents, of whom she writes in her collection of essays *In Full View*, witnessed and personally experienced acts of great violence and cruelty before and during the Second World War. Brett's parents were Polish Jews who each lost almost every member of their entire families at the hands of the Nazis. Similarly, the fictional character of Bojan

witnessed at close range the atrocities committed by German soldiers in Slovenia during the war.

Lily Brett writes at length about her childhood in a house where so many things were considered unspeakable:

I knew that I couldn't ask my mother too many questions, but I was desperate to know what had happened, and desperate to know what was happening now. There were so many unsaid things in our house. Small explosive pockets dotted the air. Pockets of shame, degradation, bitterness and guilt. They were secret pockets, never talked about. So many secrets. They seemed to spill out of cupboards and drawers. Nothing was what it seemed. (Brett, 1997, p. 331)

Neither Brett's parents, nor Bojan Buloh in Flanagan's novel, were able to discuss what they had seen or experienced, perhaps partly because they literally did not have the words to describe it. In her essay on death, Brett writes of her mother, "When I was young, she wouldn't say anything at all, in English, if she was not sure of exactly how to say it" (Brett, 1997, p.256). To convey the horror in one's own language would be difficult enough; to attempt to express it in a foreign tongue, an unfamiliar language would be close to impossible.

When Bojan Buloh's daughter Sonja tells him, "There are things that matter more than words" (Flanagan, 1997, p.39), Bojan voices his frustration with his lack of access to language: "Perhaps you say this because you have plenty of words... You find a language. But I lose mine. And I never had enough words to tell people what I think, what I feel." (Flanagan, 1997, p.39)

Bojan is forced to express himself in a language "he [knows] little of and [finds] harsh" (Flanagan, 1997, p.45). Little wonder that he is unable to speak of the atrocities he witnessed in war torn Europe; that he is drawn to men whom he knows have experienced similar horrors, but like him, do not speak of them:

Bojan's friendships now, such as they were, were with strangers who without being told, knew the horror of each other's story, who demanded no explanation and gave no justification for their own bad behaviour. (Flanagan, 1997, p.109)

Unable to speak of the memories which torment him, Bojan expresses himself physically, through his labour. In his *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud explains that an accumulation of repressed conflicts results in a build up of psychological pressure. This pressure can be alleviated by a process Freud calls “sublimation” – that is by individuals diverting the energies associated with their inappropriate desires into socially sanctioned channels. (Freud, 1953–1973, Vol. IX, p.189) Thus, Bojan’s frantic labour might be read as an attempt to sublimate what he has repressed.

With a sledge hammer he broke stone as if it were his own mind.  
His hammer rose and fell as if it were a drumstick pounding out a  
crazed, cracked rhythm on the valley stone and his extraordinary  
labour was watched by all around the dam site with wonder, as  
boulders crumbled to gravel beneath his blows. (Flanagan, 1997,  
p.66)

However, Bojan’s attempt to sublimate what he finds unspeakable through his work is not successful. He still feels frustrated and tormented by all the things he is unable to say and he projects this feeling onto his daughter Sonja, expecting her to express what he cannot. It is for this reason that he beats her, in an attempt to force her into expression:

*So I hit her, belt her real hard and with each backhander I ask her  
the most gentle question: Sonja, say something. Please, I say with  
each blow, please say something.* (Flanagan, 1997, p.279)

Sonja has access to language in a way that her father does not, however she has inherited from him a mistrust of language. She is unwilling rather than unable to tell the truth about her own life:

Sonja never tried to explain herself, nor did she believe there was  
much virtue in talking things out. She found words interesting,  
even powerful, but never reliable, far less trustworthy, particularly  
when it came to charting the unknown country of the heart.  
(Flanagan, 1997, p.97)



In Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, a fictionalised biography of her mother's life, Poppy expresses a similar mistrust of expressing herself definitively through words, which frustrates her daughter Lalage:

During the summer we knew would be her last, Poppy and I began a conversation which lasted a month and was still incomplete when I left. Nothing she said amounted to the definitive answers I was hoping for, and now that I try to give an account of it...I find myself slipping into the uncertainty of recall and memory. (Modjeska, 1990, p.8)

The fact that she uses the word "incomplete" suggests that Lalage envisages a different kind of conversation, a "complete" conversation, one in which nothing is held back, everything is expressed, everything revealed. Lalage views her mother's unwillingness to speak about certain issues or experiences with frustration, unable to understand the reasons for her mother's assertion that "not everything needs to be told" (Modjeska, 1990, p.101).

In her essay, "Re-citing, Re-siting and Re-sighting Likeness: Reading the Family Archive in Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, Donna Williams' *Nobody Nowhere*, and Sally Morgan's *My Place*," Sidonie Smith interprets Poppy's silence differently:

Not a spiteful gesture of maternal withholding but a gift of imaginative license, an imaginative license that sanctions another way of knowing. Released from the necessity of securing her mother's version of her own story, the daughter can fashion her own narrative. (Smith, 1994, p.517)

Unlike Lalage, in *A New Map of the Universe*, Grace does not even attempt to seek answers from her mother. Whereas Poppy's silence is selective, Madeleine's seems all pervasive. Lalage knows far more about Poppy's life than Grace knows about Madeleine's. For Lalage, the narrative of her mother's life is "incomplete"; for Grace, it is almost non-existent. Lalage knows enough to "fashion her own narrative" as Sidonie Smith suggests. Grace would not even know where to begin.

## V. Society and silence.

The things deemed unspeakable by Poppy are very different to the things deemed unspeakable by Bojan Buloh and her reasons for not speaking of them are also different. Poppy has a desire to protect her family and as such, she chooses not to tell them things which she believes will hurt them or upset them. One of these things, which is eventually revealed, is that her second daughter May, was her favourite: "...I want you to understand what it is that all our lives we've colluded to deny, telling you that we loved you equally. Of course we all knew it wasn't true." (Modjeska, 1990, p.298) An almost identical sentiment is expressed by the character Oriel in Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, who tells her son, Quick, "people say they don't have favourites when it comes to children, but you know, son, it's a lie we tell to protect the others" (Winton, 1991, pp.266-267).

It is not only Poppy who has things of which she will not speak. Her husband, Richard, has his own secrets, closer to those of Bojan Buloh – they are the events of war, experiences which are "indescribably bad." So though his definition of what is unspeakable is different, his motivation for not speaking of these things is the same. He keeps these secrets as Poppy keeps hers – to protect those he loves:

Did he tell her that...the man running next to him had trodden on a mine and none of the parts that settled could be identified? When he looked at her [on their wedding] day and drank to their future, he kept his secrets well. The war had taught him that. And dreams are not to be contaminated, so he kept his thoughts to himself and did not draw attention to his memories. (Modjeska, 1990, p.63)

Lalage's interpretation is that Poppy's reluctance to express certain things is partly generational: "Born to Edwardian mothers, mothers to feminist daughters, Poppy's generation slips out in silence" (Modjeska, 1990, p.90). In his essay "Observations on Psychoanalysis and Modern Literature," Erich Heller supports this idea, arguing that Freud's analyses of repression were too individual, that he failed to take into account that "what individuals repress has to do with the historical epoch they live in" (Heller, 1983, p.68).

However, Lalage believes that Poppy's repression is also personal, a result of her unhappy childhood, in which she learns to be silent in order to protect herself from her father Jack's psychological abuse. Her refusal to respond to his verbal aggression enrages

Jack and thus gives Poppy a sense of power in a situation in which she would otherwise be entirely powerless. As an adult looking back on her childhood, Poppy sees this clearly, writing in her diary, “silence ... [was] my only weapon” (Modjeska, 1990, p.19).

But what begins as a means of self protection becomes her undoing; in adult life her coping mechanism becomes a neurosis:

Her silence, practised to an art in childhood, infected the marriage. It was not that she was veiled. On the contrary she was wide open, with nothing hidden, but the messages that came from her were literally unspeakable. (Modjeska, 1990, p.49)

What was unspeakable for Poppy was a sense of being trapped by her own family, by the pressure – partly self-imposed – to be a perfect wife and mother and her feeling of having somehow failed in these roles. Her experience – which is not comparable to that which Bojan Buloh or even Richard had endured – was unspeakable not because it was “indescribably bad” but because it went against the family values espoused in 1950s Britain: “it was impossible for anyone to admit that Poppy’s despair and confusion...were reasonable, without dismantling the edifice of the family by which we all lived” (Modjeska, 1990, p.85).

Poppy’s experience is not dissimilar to what Madeleine goes through in *A New Map of the Universe*. After a traumatic labour, Madeleine’s immediate response is to reject Grace: “She doesn’t want to hold it. She wants somebody to take it away so that she and Peter can be alone together like they were before.” (*A New Map*, p.143) Suffering from post-natal depression Madeleine is unable to express her feelings of despair and resentment to Peter, or to her own mother. Meeting Eve helps her to understand that though her feelings might be deemed unacceptable, they are not unreasonable and certainly not abnormal, as her experience in the mothers’ group shows her:

Sometimes when Jemima cries, I feel like screaming, a woman called Maria says one day. I go into the kitchen and turn the radio all the way up to drown out the sound of it.

I hated breastfeeding, Karen admits. Everyone talked about how it was the most wonderful, natural thing but it repulsed me. I felt as

though Craig was literally sucking the life out of me. (*A New Map*, p.144)

In her book *Real Relations*, Susan Lever argues that *Poppy* “suggests that the problem lies in the concept of family itself” (Lever, 2000, p.143). This does indeed seem to be the conclusion that Lalage reaches, fuelled in part by her research into the expectations placed on women in the 1950s. Not only were there societal concerns about re-establishing family life following the war; there was also an emergence of new theories on the importance of a mother’s role in terms of a child’s psychological wellbeing.

[Lalage] proposes that Poppy’s madness is reasonable, given the historical conditions in which she lived, while other relatives (using the logic of the time) argue that her madness is particular, a direct result of her own mother’s failure to nurture. (Lever, 2000, p.144)

Unlike Poppy, Madeleine’s depression and mental illness in *A New Map* cannot be blamed on her “mother’s failure to nurture.” Until Peter’s death and Madeleine’s subsequent breakdown, Madeleine has a close and loving relationship with her mother, Margaret. Madeleine’s breakdown cannot be attributed a single cause but to a combination of factors: a miscarriage followed by a difficult birth, societal pressures resulting in post-natal depression and then the trauma of her husband’s death. Once she understood these circumstances, Grace might have concluded, as Lalage did, that her mother’s madness was “reasonable”: “She had been glad, at last, to have an explanation for her mother’s behaviour” (*A New Map*, p161). However, whereas in Modjeska’s text, Poppy seems to recover from her breakdown and eventually resume relatively normal relationships with her family members, Madeleine never seems to recover from her mental illness and seems unable to forgive her mother or let go of her resentment towards Grace: “When she thinks about that drawer full of gifts and adds up the years in which Madeleine resisted her mother’s gestures of reconciliation, Grace knows it is too late, that nothing she can say or do will change the person her mother has become” (*A New Map*, p.161).

Unable to express their feelings, both Madeleine and Poppy suffer from nervous breakdowns in which one of the primary symptoms is a retreat into silence. It is significant

that for Poppy, what was a form of power now becomes a weakness; what has been an act of will becomes an involuntary response to the situation in which Poppy finds herself.

Perhaps as a means of distancing herself from the emotional aspects of her mother's breakdown and the impact it had on her own childhood, Lalage examines this paradox through a theoretical framework of feminism and psychoanalysis:

From Freud we know that hysteria is the manifestation in the body of psychic conflicts that cannot be expressed in language...And we know the power of desires that are read as perverse and cannot be spoken or recognised. Was Poppy saying with her body what she couldn't say with words, what couldn't be said with words? Perhaps she lost control of herself, of her body, when she lost control of the sense we depend on language to provide for us. It was not that she would not speak, but that she could not. Her silence was a symptom and a cause. Words literally failed her. The voice she needed hadn't been invented. (Modjeska, 1990, p.83)

In her essay "Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*: The Feminist Quest," Helen Thomson examines the issue of voice from a feminist viewpoint:

Lalage makes the finding of a voice a crucial point in her mother's life and her own writing of her biography. Poppy, the constant singer of songs, is silent, metaphorically, totally so while she is incarcerated in the insane asylum, until her recovery. Finding her voice does not occur overnight, but it significantly happens only after her marriage has broken up, and she is liberated by feminism. (Thomson, 1994, p.25)

In order to find this voice, to find her way out of silence, Poppy has to make new friends, people outside her family, people to whom her feelings are not considered unspeakable. To Richard, she cannot tell the truth. But with the Catholic priest Father Marcus, she feels understood. "I could talk to him and he knew what I was saying"(Modjeska, 1990, p.126). Thomson concludes that "Poppy must drop...the socially constructed roles of daughter, wife, mother, before she can speak" (Thomson, 1994, p.25).

As discussed earlier, in her essay “The Skeleton of a Mermaid,” Danielle Wood explores the notion of silence in her novel, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark*, alongside a number of other texts which contain mute or silent female characters:

It is useful to look at the silences within *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* from a theoretical position at the intersection of feminism and post-colonialism. Across the range of texts explored here, it’s possible to read silence as a kind of resistance to imperialism. In choosing not to speak, or being rendered unable to speak, these characters may be seen to be aligned with those who are silenced by their marginalisation. (Wood, 2003a, p.181)

One of the texts explored by Wood is Jane Campion’s film, *The Piano*, whose central character, Ada, has been mute since childhood. Denied an adequate explanation for Ada’s muteness, some commentators have attempted to guess at its cause. ““Did her mother die then? Did some other dreadful event take place?” asks Carmel Bird” (Wood, 2003a, p.222). However, according to Wood’s interpretation, Ada’s “muteness is an act of will. Her refusal to speak is the passive-aggressive defence of the powerless” (Wood, 2003a, p.222). Ada’s silence represents both

the restrictions placed upon her as a Victorian woman...and her resistance to her plight. To speak in this situation would not be to conquer her situation, but to acquiesce further. In refusing to give the husband, Stewart, her voice, Ada refuses him herself. To possess one’s own voice then is to be self-possessed. (Wood, 2003a, p.222)

Ironically, Poppy’s relationship with Marcus eventually requires another kind of silence from her, this time a silence that is not of her own choosing but one that is imposed upon her by the restrictions of the life Marcus has chosen, by the code of laws that apply to the life of a priest: “Theirs was a love affair formed in secrecy...in the passion that becomes possible between necessary silence and the voices lovers give each other” (Modjeska, 1990, p.178).

So whilst Marcus helped her find her voice, in another sense he took a voice away from her and though Poppy sometimes resented this and struggled against it, largely she accepted it, so that even at his funeral her role in his life was ignored:

although by then there were many who knew, knowing meant only a limited acknowledgment and carefully preserved proprieties, a British compromise, seeing but not speaking, so that a satisfactory situation could be maintained...no one wished for scandal or upset.  
(Modjeska, 1990, p.181)

One of the things I find most interesting about *Poppy* is that it was not initially intended to be a fiction. Modjeska had, in fact, set out to write a biography of her mother's life. Once she began, however, she discovered that "when it came to the daily detail I needed to write I found that all I had were glimpses and hints. Nothing was consistent, there were huge gaps and silences" (Modjeska, 1989, p.32). The fictionalising process was the means by which Modjeska filled these gaps but her need to do this forced her to examine the reason for the existence of these gaps. It is not surprising then that silence and the notion of the unspeakable became a major theme of the work, a means by which Modjeska could explain to herself why it was not possible to write her mother's biography.

For me, the problem which Modjeska faced highlights the question of whether it is possible to write the life of any person, whether fictional or otherwise, without addressing the issue of the unspeakable. The "gaps and silences" between Bojan and Sonja are central to Flanagan's text. And though, as I stated in my introduction, when writing *A New Map of the Universe*, it was not my intention to foreground the notion of the unspeakable, it is the "gaps and silences" between the characters in *A New Map of the Universe* which provide the dramatic tension in the novel. After examining Modjeska's *Poppy* and Flanagan's *The Sound of One Hand Clapping* as well as my own novel, I am convinced that if we look closely, we will find that there are "huge gaps and silences" in every life.

## Part Three

# *Heimlich/Unheimlich: Architecture as Metaphor In Contemporary Australian Fiction*

When I began writing the novel which became *A New Map of the Universe*, I intended, as stated earlier, to write a fictionalised account of the life of the Spanish architect, Antoni Gaudi. Instead, my novel became the story of two architects, a father and daughter: Peter, whose promising career is cut short by his premature death, and Grace, whose career has not yet begun. In particular, the novel focuses on Grace's attempt to design a house for her lover, Michael and her ultimate rejection of this project.

The literary device of the house as metaphor or microcosm has a long tradition. Within this tradition there is a substantial body of work in which fictional houses – and other constructed spaces such as castles – are read as metaphors for the body and/or the self. This is found particularly in the criticism of Gothic literature such as the work of Edgar Allan Poe. In his essay “Poe's Raven: Influence, Alienation and Art,” Bertram Wyatt-Brown asserts that “the room where the student is seated is, *of course*, really the poet's own body” [italics added] (Wyatt-Brown, 1999, p. 2). Similarly, in Poe's story “The Fall of the House of Usher”:

The stress upon Roderick's emaciation, the appearance of the mansion itself as a human skull, with its “vacant, eye-like windows,” underline the starved nature of the narrator's own depleted soul. (Wyatt-Brown, 1999, p. 6)

Since *A New Map* revolves around an architectural motif, I would like to explore this notion of constructed space as a metaphor for the self in relation to my own work as well as using it as a starting point for an examination of several contemporary Australian novels in which a house or constructed space is central to the text.

In her essay “From Pleasure Domes to Bark Huts: Architectural Metaphors in Recent Australian Fiction,” Elizabeth Ferrier notes that though “literary critics and cultural historians have recognized the symbolic significance of the landscape in Australian



literature...there have been few studies of the way the built environment is represented in Australian literature” (Ferrier, 1987, p.40).

In examining the ways in which the characters in *A New Map* – as well as those in the other texts I am considering – relate to the constructed environments in their lives, a theme seems to emerge, that of a confusion about one’s sense of place, a quest to find a “home”, a striving towards belonging.

Ferrier believes that “In a colonial culture, feeling at home may be held as an ideal which indicates cultural adjustment” (Ferrier, 1987, p.40). This yearning for a place to belong may well be a corollary of a world in which so many people, through choice or through necessity, leave the place of their birth or their childhood and move to other environments, other cities or even other countries. In the face of this movement people experience an anxiety, a need to make the unfamiliar familiar, to create a “home away from home.”

In *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation*, Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs draw on Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny: “Freud elaborates ‘the uncanny’ by way of two German words... *heimlich*, which Freud glosses as ‘home’, a familiar or accessible place; and *unheimlich*, which is unfamiliar, strange, inaccessible, unhomely” (Gelder & Jacobs, 1998, p.23).

In the context of their work on the Aboriginal sacred, Gelder and Jacobs look at the uncanny through a postcolonial framework, examining the ways in which “at a moment of decolonisation...the familiar is becoming strange” (Gelder & Jacobs, 1998, p.23). In the novels I am exploring, as well as in my own work, the characters are faced with the opposite process – that of making the strange familiar.

In his 1954 essay “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” Martin Heidegger examines the etymology of the world “build” in relation to identity:

What does it mean to build? The old German word for build was *BUAN* which means to dwell...The word *BIN* (meaning ‘am’, ‘Ich bin’) came from the old word to build, so that ‘I am’, ‘you are’ means ‘I dwell, you dwell’...Dwelling is the basic principle of existence. (Heidegger, 1971, p.154)

In such a framework the quest for a “dwelling” is also the quest for a sense of identity. Tim Bowers explores the connection between belonging and identity in his essay “Dwelling

Within: Identity and Home in Contemporary Australian Autobiography,” Bowers’ essay focuses on autobiographical texts, but as he himself admits, “Autobiographers...use narrative structures similar to [those of] fiction writers” (Bowers, 1998, p.217). Bowers examines the ways in which the protagonists in a number of autobiographies are linked metonymically with certain places or spaces and the description of these spaces helps to configure the identities of the protagonists. Bowers goes on to say, “If, as I suggest, our conceptions of space reflect our conception of self, then one’s sense of belonging – or of not belonging – is integral to the creation of self in narrative” (Bowers, 1998, p. 217).

I will examine how several contemporary Australian novels, including my own, employ an architectural motif and how the way that the characters are defined in relation to that motif serves to elucidate their quest for belonging and therefore of finding a sense of self. In this discussion I will begin by focusing on the architectural metaphors in *A New Map* and then proceed to examine a number of other literary works which employ architectural metaphors, including Peter Carey’s *Oscar and Lucinda* and Tim Winton’s *Cloudstreet*. I will be exploring the ways in which constructed spaces can function as metaphors for character and also as a device for defining the relationships between characters.

### **I. The house as metaphor in *A New Map of the Universe*.**

In *A New Map of the Universe*, shortly after Grace meets Michael, she reveals to him that though she has completed her studies in architecture, she has never worked as an architect. She is unable to admit that she has been discouraged from pursuing a career as an architect by her mother, Madeleine, a woman who has become embittered by her husband’s death. Madeleine opposes Grace’s goal of becoming an architect because it hurts Madeleine to be reminded of her husband’s unfulfilled potential. “Your father was a real architect, Madeleine had said [at Grace’s graduation]. He didn’t need a degree to prove it. You don’t have half the talent he had. You’ll never be what he could have been” (*A New Map*, p.20).

Fearing that her mother may turn out to be right, Grace gives up her dreams of working as an architect. Her resolve weakens however when Michael asks her to build a house for him: “Hasn’t she longed for him to ask this of her? Haven’t there been moments, days at a time even, when she has allowed herself to dream of the house she might build for him, for the two of them?” (*A New Map*, p.23)

Eventually, Grace agrees to design the house for Michael and initially she feels positive about the decision. But when Michael leaves for Egypt for the purposes of research, “Grace's doubts resurface. It is not just her own ability she is uncertain of, it is also the feeling that she doesn't really know what Michael wants” (*A New Map*, p.33). Paralysed by insecurity, Grace is unable to get started on the design. She descends into a depression in which she is tormented by nightmares about the house, nightmares in which the various manifestations of the house are representations of her fragile mental state:

In the first dream the house is gleaming like a mirage against a backdrop of sea and sky, its walls undulant as water, patterned and textured like shells. There are openings in its smooth surface, coloured portals that beckon to Grace. (*A New Map*, p.43)

As the dream progresses, Grace finds that she cannot enter the house. It appears to be perfect yet is inaccessible to her. Grace is a character who is afraid to express herself, who keeps her feelings locked inside. Thus, this first house she dreams may be seen to represent the part of her which holds these feelings, a space she has created and then shut herself out of, something which is inside her and yet impenetrable to her.

In a second dream, she enters the house only to find that it is perched on the edge of a cliff; misplaced, unstable, which is exactly the way she herself feels after Michael leaves.

Ferrier explains that “houses and other structures we inhabit put up boundaries around the self and give protection from the environment” (Ferrier, 1987, p.40). When Grace dreams that her house is blown away by the wind or pounded into the grass by the rain, it illustrates that she feels at the mercy of the elements: weak, insubstantial, easily brought down. These oneiric houses, which fail to fulfil their primary function, that is to provide shelter, expose Grace’s feelings of vulnerability.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard explores human experience of intimate spaces. In an essay entitled, “The House. From Cellar to Garret. The Significance of the Hut,” Bachelard asserts that “in the life of a man, the house thrusts aside contingencies...without it, man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of heaven and through those of life” (Bachelard, 1964, p.7). Grace is indeed a dispersed being, and her perception of the house as a series of fragments, reflects this:

doorways and windows, archways, alcoves, skylights and staircases. At first these elements seem to float in space, unrelated, with nothing to bind them to each other. And then Grace comes to think of designing the house as being like solving a jigsaw puzzle: she must first collect all the pieces and only then can she begin to work out how she will fit them all together. (*A New Map*, p.50)

This image of the jigsaw puzzle is an apt metaphor for Grace's sense of self. She must collect all the fragments of herself in order to become whole and this is the work she begins when she sets off for Melbourne.

## **II. The church as metaphor in *A New Map of the Universe*.**

According to Ferrier, "the space of the house is familiar, ordered, inscribed with cultural meaning; it can be home...Although "home" is an abstract concept, it is conceived of in particular spatial terms and is often associated metonymically with the house" (Ferrier, 1987, p.40). The term "to feel at home," suggests a space in which one feels comfortable, at ease, safe, welcome. For most people, such a place is indeed their own house.

However, in *A New Map*, for Peter, "home" is not the house in which he spends his early childhood, but his local church: St Mary's. His own house possesses none of the qualities one would hope to find in a home, having been taken over by his mother's grief at her husband's death. Consequently, "Peter grows up in a dark and silent house. He learns to do everything quietly, moves like a shadow through rooms where the blinds are always pulled down against the light" (*A New Map*, p.57).

Unlike the children he goes to school with, Peter does not attend church. Having never been inside St Mary's, Peter imagines it as a "dark, sombre" space. (*A New Map*, p.50) In fact, when at last he enters the church, he finds it to be very different to what he had imagined:

In the cottage where he lives with his mother, in the schoolhouse and in Lily Nunn's shop, the ceilings are so low he could touch them just by standing on a chair. He has never seen a ceiling soar up as this one does, arching its way into the sky, a ceiling that

snatches your voice from your mouth as you speak, and lifts it up to float in the air above you. (*A New Map*, p.63)

When Peter enters St Mary's for the first time, it is an architectonic moment. It is perhaps the moment when the seeds are sown for his future dreams of becoming an architect, and more specifically, an architect who designs churches. He not only notices the visual differences between this building and others he has known – “he has never seen a ceiling soar up as this one does” – he also *experiences* the space differently, noticing how it changes even the way your voice might sound. Intuitively he senses the meaning of the space, a structure which, by “arching its way into the sky,” draws its inhabitants closer to heaven.

His experience in St Mary's makes Peter acutely aware that there is something missing in his “home”: “the warmth and colour and light [in the church]; the miracles he read about in the bible, make his own existence seem painfully bare and empty” (*A New Map*, p.64). Over time, Peter experiences the church as a space filled with treasures: candles, stained glass windows, a bible whose “names are like exotic fruits in Peter's mouth” (*A New Map*, p.65). By contrast, Peter's own house contains almost nothing which he values. This becomes evident after his mother dies and he returns to the house, to collect his belongings. Other than everyday necessities, there is nothing he wishes to take with him, “nothing that [his mother] treasured except the photo of her wedding day, which he picks up carefully and presses against his chest as he walks down the stairs and out of the house for the last time” (*A New Map*, p.85).

Furthermore, the church is the domain in which Peter's relationship with Frank develops, thus it becomes a space associated with companionship. Most children would associate companionship with their own homes or with school, but Peter has always felt lonely both in his own house and at school. It is therefore not surprising that “when he opens the church door he feels like he has come home” (*A New Map*, p.65). As I noted in my introduction, Ferrier writes that “feeling at home may be held as an ideal which indicates cultural adjustment” (Ferrier, 1987, p.40), and in Peter's case this would appear to be true. Something of a misfit in his community, ill at ease even in his own house, the church is the first place where Peter feels “at home”.

St Mary's also furnishes Peter with other elements missing from his childhood, such as a sense of mystery. An example of this is the door to the belltower which Peter discovers in the vestry:

A small wooden door, the kind of door, he thinks, that you would find at the bottom of a lonely tower, in a fairy story, such as Rapunzel or Rumpelstiltskin. Now, as though he has just begun to inhabit such a story, Peter turns the door handle, excited as to where it might lead him. (*A New Map*, p.71)

For Gaston Bachelard, the tower is “the abode of a soul that believes in heaven...on the keyboard of the vast literature devoted to the function of inhabiting, the tower sends a note of immense dreams” (Bachelard, 1964, p.25). Building on the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung, Bachelard establishes a binary opposition between cellar and tower. According to Jung's framework, the cellar signifies the unconscious: “darkness prevails both day and night, and even when we are carrying a lighted candle, we see shadows dancing on the dark walls” (Bachelard, 1964, p.19). By contrast, the tower represents intimacy, “not happiness, but pre-happiness” (Bachelard, 1964, p.25).

For Peter, the belltower contains both light and dark. Initially, the doorway conjures images of a “lonely” tower, thus it is “both enticing and forbidding” (*A New Map*, p.71). Inside, “a spiral staircase curves up and up into blackness” (*A New Map*, p.71), which is frightening for Peter, who fears the dark. And at the first landing, where the bell hangs, he is terrified by the bats. Peter has to push through his fear to reach the top of the belltower and emerge into the open air. There he finds the real treasure of the tower – perspective:

the village is laid out before him like a felt-board picture. Roads and houses and parks are neatened, simplified, reduced to blocks of colour, round or square or rectangular. Only the trees move. The people are like specks of dust. Peter feels that he could pick things up and move them, rearrange them exactly as he wanted. (*A New Map*, p.73)

Along with this gift of perspective, however, the tower also leads Peter to an unwelcome truth about his mother – Frank's story reveals that she had once been part of

the congregation at St Mary's and had turned away. This is worse for Peter than if she had never been to church at all. "He cannot understand how she could have denied him what she partook of herself: the magic of story; the solace of prayer; the sense of communion" (*A New Map*, p.76).

When he attends a church service for the first time the experience of hearing the congregation sing together moves Peter to tears. The church is the place Peter associates with a sense of belonging, whereas his house is associated with grief, silence and repression; a place where "sadness hangs like a fog" (*A New Map*, p.75). As he grows older and more self-aware, the contrast between the church and his house becomes more acute, until Peter reaches the point where he feels "that there is no room for him in this space which he calls home" (*A New Map*, p.76).

The sense that the church has been his true home is reiterated when Peter leaves Granston to begin a new life in Melbourne. Walking the streets for the last time he does not even pause at the house where he lived with his mother. The only place he lingers is St Mary's, where his grief makes it difficult to take his leave. This parting is so painful for him that Peter cannot even look at the church as he walks away: "he does not turn back to see the church silhouetted against the indigo sky but as he walks down Green Lane for the last time he sees it in his mind's eye and his heart feels old" (*A New Map*, p.97).

Since the church has represented "home" for Peter; since St Mary's was the first space in which he felt that he belonged, it is no surprise that it is another church – Gaudi's cathedral *La Sagrada Familia* – that awakens Peter's desire to be an architect:

Standing at the very top of one of the towers Peter feels as though he is part of the sky. He is dizzy but it is not a fear of heights which is causing this vertigo. It is an idea that has come to him, an idea that is like a trumpet fanfare in his blood. Three hundred and fifty feet from the ground Peter dares to dream that he might move people the way Gaudi's cathedral has moved him. I will build churches, he thinks to himself. I will draw people to God with the beauty of architecture. (*A New Map*, p.94)

Entering St Mary's for the first time and visiting *La Sagrada Familia* are the two formative experiences which define Peter's approach to architecture. Later, he explains this to Madeleine: "The only thing that matters, he says, is the way the space makes you feel"

(*A New Map*, p.138). That is why, on board the *Arcadia*, he is unable to worship, for the church services are held in the cinema lounge, a space which does not feel sacred to Peter.

Though in his apprenticeship he is prepared to design other kinds of buildings in order to acquire the skills he needs to realise his ambition, he never loses sight of his original goal. He works tirelessly towards his dream, becoming frustrated with himself when his skills do not keep pace with his vision:

Though his sketches are minutely detailed there are times when Peter knows that the pictures he has drawn do not capture the atmosphere of the church and then he falls back on words, writing furiously in an attempt to describe the feeling of the space in which he stands. (*A New Map*, p.101)

Having uprooted himself by moving from Granston to Melbourne, building churches is a means by which Peter may recreate a sense of home. It is his way of familiarising the unfamiliar and thus achieving a sense of belonging.

On a smaller scale we see this process in action every time Peter moves. Despite the fact that his mother fails to create an atmosphere of home in the house in which Peter grows up, it is still a space which is familiar to him and therefore represents home. After his mother dies and the vicarage becomes his home Peter puts on his desk “the photograph of his mother and father, and ...arranges his conkers in a line, from smallest to largest” (*A New Map*, p.87), exactly as they had been arranged on the windowsill of his bedroom at his mother’s house. He brings these familiar objects into an unfamiliar space thereby making it more homely. He repeats this procedure when he moves to Melbourne:

On top of the chest of drawers he has arranged the photograph of his mother and father, Frank’s framed postcard of Avila, the memory stone from White Wood, and of course, his bible. But he knows that the room won’t really feel like home until it is filled with his books. (*A New Map*, p.99)

The Oxford dictionary defines “belongings” as “One’s moveable possessions or luggage” (Allen, 1990). Peter does not have many belongings but those that he does have help to create a feeling of “belonging” when he moves from place to place. Within Freud’s framework, Peter uses his belongings to change the *unheimlich* to *heimlich*.



Seen from this point of view, Peter's desire to become an architect makes perfect sense: if he is able to design his own churches then he is able to create a home for himself, a place where he belongs, no matter where he goes.

### **III. Tents and other “in between zones.”**

Though she is concerned with designing a house, rather than a church, Grace takes after her father in the sense that she feels that plans or sketches cannot always adequately capture a sense of space:

The house that haunts her is a living, breathing thing. To diminish it to a line drawing, to rob it of colour would be to deprive it of life. It would be like drawing the human body without the heart and lungs, without the organs that make it live. (*A New Map*, p.46)

Struggling with her design, Grace attempts to force herself into taking a more traditional approach to producing the plans. Eventually, however, she realises that she cannot work that way – her approach to architecture has always been more intuitive. This is evidenced by her method of mapping out Michael's block:

She does not measure with tapes and rulers and calculators. She cannot reduce this space to a series of lines and figures. With her feet she traces out the parameters of Michael's land until she knows the length of each of its boundaries. She paces from one side to the other to gauge its width; from top to bottom to feel its depth. She stands at the very edge of the cliffs, soaking up the sensation of being balanced between the sky and the ocean. (*A New Map*, p.24)

Like Peter, Grace finds it easier to convey a sense of space through words, rather than pictures. When she goes with Michael to his block for the first time and describes the fantastic, surreal houses of her imagination, in many ways these seem more real, easier to visualise, than the real house she is attempting to design.

According to Ferrier, “in fiction, the house as an image of closure and integration, is often associated with impossible ideals such as permanence, fixed identity, unity. It represents a complete and knowable imaginary world which contrasts with the changing,

fragmented, unthinkable totality of social existence” (Ferrier, 1987, p.45). Interestingly, many of the houses Grace imagines seem to be structures which exist in a state of flux. The first is a tree house, which changes with the seasons; the second, a boathouse, “a house that floats, that rises and falls with the tide...unmoored: a house that drifts with the current” (*A New Map*, p.21). Another of these imagined spaces is a greenhouse, a transparent structure within which everything is changing and growing. These shifting spaces might be read as metaphors for the inconstancy of Grace’s self-identity, the way in which she seems to be at the mercy of her own feelings, unstable, unable to clearly define herself or her relationships with others.

When it comes to designing a house for Michael, something fixed and immutable, Grace is unable to get a grip on her vision. It seems symbolic that the only “home” she succeeds in creating in the novel is a tent. A tent is, by definition, an impermanent structure and this particular manifestation is even less substantial than an ordinary tent, for its walls are constructed, not of hard-wearing fabric, designed to resist the elements, but of paper. Thus, like the houses in her dreams, Grace’s tent could be torn apart by strong winds, would disintegrate in the first heavy rainfall.

The tent is an important metaphor in David Malouf’s *Harland’s Half Acre* (Malouf, 1984). Throughout the novel Frank Harland yearns for settlement, for a place where he can belong, but in fact, the houses he inhabits bring him nothing but unhappiness and he eventually finds contentment living in a tent in the bush. Reading *Harland’s Half Acre* as part of a group of texts in which “settlement is represented as an important but problematic ideal” (Ferrier, 1987, p. 44) Ferrier argues that the tent “has the mysterious quality of being an in between zone; it is neither inside nor out...Such an area ...escapes the poles or binary patterns that dominate our understanding of the world. Structuralists call these areas ‘anomalous zones’” (Ferrier, 1987, p.50).

Grace’s tent then, is perhaps a means of negotiating a space within her own problematic situation: a way of inhabiting Michael’s land without admitting to herself that this is what she wants to do, a strategy for creating a house without going back on her decision not to pursue a career in architecture.

As I originally conceived it, the narrative of *A New Map* was to revolve around the construction of the house Grace was to design. In this incarnation of the book, the development of the physical structure of the house would represent the evolution of Grace’s relationship with Michael. What has transpired is that Michael’s house is never

built. In the course of the novel as it now exists, the building of the house does not even commence.

Where originally, the house was to be the central metaphor of the novel, it is, in fact, the absence of the house which has become the central metaphor. Grace's inability to bring the house into existence, and the gap created by this failure, represents all the absence in her life: the absence of her father; her mother's emotional absence; Michael's absence and Grace's emotional absence in her relationship with Michael.

#### **IV. The quest for a home.**

In his examination of Henri Bosco's novel *L'Antiquaire* (The Antique Dealer), Gaston Bachelard explores the notion of an organic house. Bachelard describes the house in the novel as "a house with cosmic roots. This house with cosmic roots will appear to us as a stone plant growing out of the rock" (Bachelard, 1964, p.23). The house contains "a labyrinth of corridors carved into the rock...a body of murky water" (Bachelard, 1964, p.22). Bachelard draws a connection between the subterranean water which nourishes the plant/house and a sense of dreaming without limits. Returning to Jung's ideas, this subterranean water may represent the collective unconscious – an endless source from which one may draw one's dreams.

In *The Poetics of Space* the notion of one's cosmos is central to Bachelard's thesis: "Our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard, 1964, p.4). Thus, when Bachelard describes the house in Bosco's novel as "a house with cosmic roots," he implies that the image of this house leads back to an image of the first house, the first cosmos.

After his epiphany at *La Sagrada Familia*, Peter has a vision of his churches "growing like exotic plants, rising up from the sandy soil, spreading their roots beneath the streets and houses until they reach the sea" (*A New Map*, p.95). This image of a building as an organic entity, with roots, connects Peter not to his first house, but to his first home: the church at Granston.

What then, of Grace's imaginary house, "a house with roots that go deeper than the trees themselves can reach" (*A New Map*, p.21)? Can this image be connected to an image of Grace's first home? Grace's childhood home is, in fact, never mentioned in her own narrative. All we know of it is what we learn from Madeleine's story: it is "a small flat

with an even smaller courtyard in a street which opens onto a beautiful park” (*A New Map*, p.140).

Grace is “uprooted” from this home when her father dies, and taken by Madeleine to live in Perth. Though it is never described, it can be imagined that Grace’s new house is much like Peter’s childhood home, in that the space is dominated by Madeleine’s grief. When Grace moves out of her mother’s house it is into “a tiny place on Walcott Street: a hovel, Madeleine called it, but it was a place where Grace could study in peace” (*A New Map*, p.19). There is no sense that Grace feels any connection to these places in which she lives and even when she returns to Melbourne, she does not feel that she has come home: she finds nothing which seems familiar to her and though she revisits the street in which she lived as a child, she does not stop to explore the house itself, not even from the outside.

Though Grace hopes that the house she designs for Michael may one day become her own home, she is unable to inhabit these structures, even in her dreams, which might suggest that she struggles with the notion of home. Taken from her true home – the house in Melbourne in which she grew up – there is no sense in the novel that the place where she lives with her mother in Perth becomes a new home for her.

Thus, there is a sense in which Grace is “homeless” and her attempts to design a house for Michael take on an added significance with her feeling that in this house she may also be creating a “home” for herself. For “Grace had believed that what Michael wanted and what she dreamed of was the same thing: to live in the house together when he returned” (*A New Map*, p.36). In fact, Grace already feels a sense of belonging on Michael’s land. The third time she goes to the block “she gets that feeling you have when you arrive home after being on holiday. It is the wonderful comfort of a place you know well, a space that feels like her own. And yet it is not her own” (*A New Map*, p.47). Ironically, Grace has never had this feeling in a space which *is* her own. The closest she comes is when she stays at her grandmother’s house, sleeping in the same room she slept in as a child. Grace’s problem is therefore a paradoxical one: she cannot design a home because she has never known one.

## **V. The bridge as metaphor in *The Idea of Perfection*.**

As I have argued previously, the house which Grace is designing for Michael in *A New Map* functions as a metaphor for their troubled relationship. Kate Grenville’s novel

*The Idea of Perfection* is another text in which an architectural metaphor is employed as a device for defining the relationships between characters.

In Grenville's text, the central metaphor is not a house or a church but a bridge. A construction designed specifically for the purpose of connecting, a bridge might be thought to be a potent symbol of unity. However, in *The Idea of Perfection*, the bridge has been damaged and consequently condemned by the council and the fate of the bridge has divided the town of Karakarook. One group of citizens, led by Coralie Henderson, is determined to preserve the Bent Bridge for the sake of "heritage," believing that the bridge may attract tourism to the dying town. A second group, headed by Coralie's husband Chook, perceives the bridge as a "danger to life and limb" (Grenville, 1999, p.55). Thus, due to its damage, the bridge has come to represent disharmony and divisiveness, rather than unity.

In the same way that Grace's preoccupation with impermanent, fragmented houses reflects her sense of self in *A New Map*, in Grenville's novel the way the central characters perceive the bridge reveals a great deal about how they see themselves or the way others perceive them. To Douglas Cheeseman, the engineer who has been sent from Sydney to oversee the demolition of the Bent Bridge and the construction of a new concrete bridge, it is a "tinpot little bridge" (Grenville, 1999, p.185). The size of the bridge is significant because it reflects Douglas's status as an engineer and thus his self-esteem. He acknowledges that his vertigo has hampered his engineering career, that he is a "small-job man" (Grenville, 1999, p.189). And though, in a physical sense, Grenville creates the impression of a large man, Douglas's self-confidence has been diminished as a result of his disappointing career. He knows he will never be "striding around in a hard hat on a big job, with a hundred men waiting for him to point his ruler" (Grenville, 1999, p.185). Thus the size of the bridge, the scale of the project he has been assigned, reflects Douglas's self-perception.

In addition, Douglas apprehends the "innocent, clumsy structure" (Grenville, 1999, p.62) of the bridge. The words "innocent" and "clumsy" would very likely be the exact words one would use to describe Douglas himself. He is aware that since childhood he has been "clumsy, jug-eared...awkward" (Grenville, 1999, p.214), and the bridge is a physical manifestation of his sense of inadequacy. At one point, Douglas consciously identifies himself with the bridge: "His back was stiff, his shoulders tense. He felt hunched like the bridge" (Grenville, 1999, p.193) and he compares his idea for repairing rather than

replacing the bridge as being like the repair work he has had done to his teeth. This explains why Douglas feels an empathy with the old bridge and a reluctance to destroy it.

One of Douglas's strengths as a character is his ability to move beyond appearances, to ascertain what lies beneath the surface: "Now the bridge looked weak, but it was not. It had been damaged, but the damage was the very thing that made it strong" (Grenville, 1999, p.62).

This perception of the bridge provides an insight into the way Douglas thinks of other people. Harley Savage, an outsider like him, has come to Karakarook to help set up the Heritage museum. Douglas's first impression of Harley is that "it was a long time since she'd been young and it was unlikely that she'd ever been lovely" (Grenville, 1999, p.2). Thus it is not her beauty which attracts him to Harley. He is able to look beyond the physical, to see that she has been damaged but like the bridge, the damage has strengthened her.

Though Harley sees the bridge in a different way to Douglas, the bridge still functions as a metaphor for her sense of self. On a physical level, she identifies herself as "large and plain" (Grenville, 1999, p.8), the bridge as "coarse and clumsy" (Grenville, 1999, p.82). More significantly, what she particularly notices about the bridge is the way the parts fit together – the relationship between the components. She describes the timber joints as being like "two people holding hands" (Grenville, 1999, p.82).

This perception reflects Harley's preoccupation with relationships: her three failed marriages, in particular, her last marriage which ended in her husband's suicide, her relationships with her sons, even the way she relates to strangers. She sees herself as a person who is "never at ease" (Grenville, 1999, p.12), in direct contrast to a woman like Coralie who "found other people easy to like" (Grenville, 1999, p.11). Harley is self-conscious when relating to others, feeling that her tone of voice, her choice of words, her gestures or facial expressions are always somehow inadequate or inappropriate. Because of this she always feels like an outsider; she never has a feeling that she belongs.

Similarly, in *A New Map* there is a strong sense that Grace is a loner; that she alienates others with her silences, her unwillingness to speak about her feelings: "It's the way she has always been: deflecting difficult questions with hard words, sealing herself up against people's curiosity" (*A New Map*, p. 23).

In *The Idea of Perfection* it is not only Harley who has difficulty fitting in. Douglas also struggles with the notion of belonging. "He was good at working out the buttons on a

gear stick and he knew a great deal about Portland cement and other related subjects but it seemed that he was no good with people” (Grenville, 1999, p.52). Separated from his wife, like Harley he seems to be a loner, someone who has resigned himself to not fitting in, though it still bothers him. This is evidenced by his self-consciousness with his work crew. “He seemed part of the circle of men, but he was not, not really...they had no problems understanding each other, but to Douglas it was like a foreign language of which he could only catch the odd phrase” (Grenville, 1999, p.184). The bridge, which is what brings both Harley and Douglas to Karakarook, brings into relief their failure to belong. Douglas conceives a solution to the problem of the Bent Bridge which would satisfy both factions, preserving the character and heritage of the bridge whilst making it safe enough to comply with council requirements. Thus, just as the bridge is designed to join the two banks of the river, Douglas has the potential to reconcile the opposing parties of Karakarook. The bridge is therefore a metaphor for the role that Douglas plays in the novel, an entity for unifying what would otherwise be separated.

However, Douglas does not perceive himself as possessing the power to forge this link. This is illustrated by the structural metaphors he uses when describing himself and Harley:

He was flimsy, trussed around, bolted stiffly together into an ugly rigid muddle of members to disguise the basic weakness of the structure. But she had both the strength of the concrete and the flexibility of the reinforcement. The greater the load, the stronger she would get, standing planted solidly in bedrock. She would be able to stretch under tension. She was not brittle. She was flesh and bone together, bending without breaking. (Grenville, 1999, pp.333-334)

Since Douglas is the engineer appointed to lead a local team in demolishing the bridge and Harley is in Karakarook for the sake of preserving heritage, these two characters appear to be in opposite camps. Yet paradoxically, when they come together they form a metaphorical bridge and thus save the actual Bent Bridge. For although Douglas has the idea for retaining the bridge’s character while strengthening it with concrete as soon as he sees the bridge, he is afraid to make this recommendation to Head Office until his relationship with Harley develops. Both outsiders in Karakarook, both struggling with their failure to really belong anywhere,

Harley and Douglas finally find a sense of belonging in each other. Grenville sums this up with the quote from that Leonardo da Vinci that prefaces the novel: “An arch is two weaknesses which together make a strength.”

## **VI. The glass church as metaphor in *Oscar and Lucinda*.**

As noted previously, churches are an important symbol in *A New Map of the Universe*, particularly in relation to the character of Peter. The church of St Mary’s plays a crucial part in his early development and his experience in *La Sagrada Familia* is a watershed moment in his decision to become an architect. However, Peter dies before realising his ambition of completing a design for a church and in her grief, Madeleine destroys his plans so that the church he has begun to design will never be built.

Peter Carey’s novel *Oscar and Lucinda* also revolves around an architectural motif. However, where in *A New Map* no church is ever actually constructed, the climax of Carey’s text involves the erection of a glass church, ostensibly a gift of love from Lucinda to her friend, the Reverend Dennis Hasset, but in fact, a symbol of the love between Oscar and Lucinda. The glass church reflects the characteristics of the two central characters as well as functioning as a metaphor for their relationship with each other. The connection between Oscar and Lucinda is established metaphorically through the language used to describe the church.

Like Peter in *A New Map*, Oscar has never had a strong attachment to a single house which he might call home. In his original home he is alienated by his father’s evangelical religious beliefs and he forces himself to leave this first home when he rejects these beliefs. And though it is his own choice to live with the Strattons, “He did not like the Stratton’s house. He did not like its damp, its mould, its sour smell of rotting thatch which became confused, in his later memory, with the idea of failure and disappointment” (Carey, 1988, p.69).

Wardley-Fish notices that in Oscar’s room at Oxford “there was nothing familiar, nothing one would expect at home” (Carey, 1988, p.105). Wardley-Fish’s perspective however, is not quite accurate. For in his room at Oxford, Oscar has displayed on the mantel the tray containing his mother’s buttons, a tray he has had since he was a child. Thus, like Peter in *A New Map*, Oscar has taken something which is familiar and beloved – *heimlich* – and he has brought it into a space which is *unheimlich* or strange, in an attempt to familiarise the space. From Wardley-Fish’s point of view, Oscar has failed to make his



room feel homely but what is homely for Wardley-Fish is quite different to what conveys a sense of home to Oscar. Perhaps for Oscar, this tray of buttons is enough to make him feel at home anywhere.

Though he may succeed in feeling at home within the space he inhabits, like both Douglas and Harley in *The Idea of Perfection*, in a larger sense, Oscar exhibits a failure to belong. However, unlike Grenville's characters, Oscar has a naivete about himself, a failure to perceive his real place in the world. Exasperated by his lack of self-awareness Wardley-Fish is driven to explain to Oscar, "'You belong no more here than you belong anywhere. Odd Bod, you must realize, you do not fit.'" (Carey, 1988, p.187) Oscar does not see this. Nevertheless, his incessant movement might be read as a sub-conscious drive to find a place where he belongs, a yearning for "somewhere good and dry" (Carey, 1988, p.64), a place that recaptures the sense of belonging he felt in the cottage where he lived with his father, before he rejected his father's beliefs.

Throughout the novel, Oscar loses his home again and again. Leaving England for Australia, everything Oscar encounters is *unheimlich* and though he tries, he fails to find a place in Sydney where he belongs, a place he can call home. He loses his living at Randwick and moves into a "run-down boarding house...cut adrift from those who loved him" (Carey, 1988, p.325). Finally he goes to stay with Lucinda, a place which might have become home if he had not made the journey to Bellingen.

Lucinda can also be read as a character who is searching for a place to call home. Her true home is the farm at Mitchell's creek where she grows up but after the death of both her parents the farm is sold, against her will and from that moment on she never really belongs anywhere. In *Liars: Australian New Novelists*, Helen Daniel asserts that "Lucinda is alienated from colonial society by her dress, her spinsterhood, her aloofness, her gambling – and her dreams" (Daniel, 1988, p.179). She moves to Sydney, to London and then back to Sydney, never quite fitting in, never finding the home she is looking for. Even the glassworks, which she likes to think of as home, is a place where she is not really welcome:

She did not yet realize that she was not welcome in her own works.  
She imagined this dry, brick-floored factory to be her home...In  
winter her own house was cold...she could no longer bear to be  
there. (Carey, 1988, pp.289-290)

Lucinda goes through the same process as Oscar in her quest for a home. Arriving in Sydney, a place in which everything is strange and frightening – *unheimlich* – Lucinda makes the decision to buy the Prince Rupert’s Glassworks. For there is something in these glassworks which represents home for her – something *heimlich* – in the reminder of the Prince Rupert’s drops she explodes with her father and mother in the only true home she ever knows. For Lucinda, glass becomes associated with ideas of home. Thus it is perhaps not surprising that in her failure to recapture a sense of home in the places she lives, she is drawn to creating glass structures, which, although not designed for habitation, may fulfil her yearning for belonging by their association with her childhood memories of glass.

In the absence of a true home, Oscar, like Peter, has always felt more at home in a space which reflects his strong religious faith. It is fitting then, that the building which becomes of crucial importance in his life is a church. Furthermore, both in its architectural style and in the material from which it is constructed, Oscar and Lucinda’s church is unlike other churches. Like Oscar himself, the church is “unique.”

The church is also reflective of Oscar’s character in the sense that it is an impractical structure, that despite its beauty it does not take into account the purpose for which it was designed. As Mr Ahearn points out:

‘Where will the vicar change into his vestments? ...Where will he blow his nose in private? When he is late he will be on show like a fish in an aquarium. And what will you do about the heat?...It is this which makes this church impossible...The Australian sun will scorch your congregation as though they were in hell itself.’  
(Carey, 1988, p.429)

Throughout the novel Oscar displays a distinct lack of pragmatism, making a series of ill-thought out and often unrealistic decisions which are driven by his passion rather than a sense of what might be practical, for example his resolution to make a voyage to Australia by sea, despite his acute phobia of water or his decision to play cards with Lucinda at the vicarage, disregarding the Christian edict against gambling.

Though in general, Oscar is depicted as a character who is unaware of his idiosyncrasies, he does acknowledge his lack of practicality, saying to Lucinda, “‘Practical... is the word they use in Sydney when they wish to do something damaging to the spirit.’” (Carey,

1988, p.389) It appears then that practicality is not a quality Oscar aspires to, but in fact one that he eschews, perceiving it to be at odds with passion or faith:

‘But would you say it was “practical” to sing hymns, to give glory to God, to pray, to fast? And what is the practical purpose of a church? For if it is only to provide shelter to Christians...then it is better to have your congregation gather in cobbler’s rooms. But if your church, no matter how small, is also a celebration of God, then I would say I was the most practical man you have spoken to all year.’ (Carey, 1988, p.389)

As well as reflecting aspects of Oscar’s personality, the church can also be seen as a manifestation of Oscar’s physical characteristics. Early in the novel Oscar is described as “delicate, light, airy...frail...clean and unprotected” (Carey, 1988, p.13), all words which could be applied to the glass church. In addition there is a transparency to Oscar, noted by the Stratton’s housekeeper: “His face showed his feelings like a pond that wrinkles in the slightest breeze” (Carey, 1988, p.66). Thus it is apt that Oscar is represented by a transparent structure, a building made from glass in which nothing can be hidden; everything is on display.

The fact that the church is made from glass is also significant when looking at the character of Lucinda. Since witnessing the explosion of a Prince Rupert’s drop as a young girl, glass has always been a substance of beauty and wonder to Lucinda and when she purchased the glass works:

...[she] knew already the lovely contradictory nature of glass and she did not have to be told...that glass is a thing in disguise, an actor, is not solid at all, but a liquid, that an old sheet of glass...will reveal its true liquid nature by having grown fatter at the bottom and thinner at the top, and that even while it is as frail as the ice on Parramatta puddle, it is stronger under compression than Sydney sandstone, that it is invisible, solid, in short, a joyous and paradoxical thing, as good a material as any to build a life from. (Carey, 1988, p.135)

It is its paradoxical nature which makes glass such an appropriate representation of Lucinda’s character. For Lucinda is a character riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies, tortured by aspects of her nature which pull her in opposite directions. The

first sign of this element to her character is revealed in her childhood desire to at once be neat and at the same time to rebel against neatness, resenting the constrictions it brings. Later, she has paradoxical feelings about her inheritance “which she wished fiercely, passionately to keep, even while she tried to give it away” (Carey, 1988, p.127). Throughout the novel she exhibits responses to situations which contradict each other. She is simultaneously “disturbed” and “delighted” (Carey, 1988, p.262) by Oscar’s attitude to gambling; “both enchanted and appalled by his innocence” (Carey, 1988, p.302); “shaken” and yet also “proud” (Carey, 1988, p.277) of killing the sick kitten at the abandoned glassworks.

At their first meeting, Dennis Hasset finds himself “held by the strength and touched by the frailty” (Carey, 1988, p.146) in Lucinda. The glass church is a manifestation of these aspects of Lucinda’s nature, being simultaneously strong and frail: its strength is to be found in its cast-iron rods, its frailty in its glass panels.

The construction of the church is also paradoxical in the sense that Lucinda’s real motive for building the church is the opposite of the one she admits to. In her own mind, the church is a representation of her love for Oscar. However the impression that she creates, and the one that Oscar believes, is that the church is a symbol of her love for the Reverend Dennis Hasset. Furthermore, the fact that Oscar and Lucinda choose to construct a religious rather than a secular building to represent their feelings, adds another element to the puzzle. For there is a pretence that the real purpose of this building is a representation of a love for God. Thus there is a great confusion within the characters as to what the glass church truly stands for:

[Oscar] hardly knew what he intended. That he be a perfect friend to her...that he help her assemble this flawless thing, that he possess it in some way, that he be permitted to be a party to the manufacture of a prism, a prayer to God, that the prayer be made from glass and she would, therefore, because of it, love him. (Carey, 1988, p.388)

Later Lucinda acknowledges that “she had not cared about the church. The church had been conceived in a fever. It was not a celebration of sacred love but of their own” (Carey, 1988, p.450). After his arrival in Bellingham Oscar, too is forced to revise his perception of the church. “All he could think was that the glass church was the devil’s

work, that it had been the agent of murder and fornication” (Carey, 1988, p.505). In the essay, “Narrative Navel Gazing, or How to Recognise a Metafiction When You See One,” Wenche Ommundsen perceives that:

Oscar’s defeat can at least partly be related to his inability to read the complexity of signs, to recognise, for example, that glass, to him a token of love and beauty, can come to carry the more sinister connotations of pride and death. (Ommundsen, 1989, p.272)

The fact that both Oscar and Lucinda hide their feelings for each other and consequently obscure their perceptions of what the church truly represents, render the glass church an ambiguous structure and it seems symbolic that it is a building designed without foundations. Moreover, the church arrives in Bellingen on a raft, constructed of two lighters, one of which leaks: it is floating, unstable.

The instability of the church is a metaphor for the fact that Oscar and Lucinda have not acknowledged their love for each other and therefore have no foundations on which to build a relationship. Their position is similar to the position Grace finds herself in at the end of *A New Map*, the situation she acknowledges in her letter: “*I cannot build a house for you Michael. A house will not stand on such unsteady foundations as ours*” (*A New Map*, p. 177). However, whereas Grace realises that her relationship with Michael lacks foundations, Oscar and Lucinda are swept away by their vision, believing that the successful delivery of the church will lay the foundations for their relationship. The destruction of the church, and Oscar’s death occur as a direct result of this instability: thus, Oscar and Lucinda’s relationship, built upon something beautiful but impractical, something frail and unstable is easily destroyed.

In a particular sympathetic reading, Anthony Hassall concludes that “the lovely dream of the glass church almost invites the disaster that, with tragic inevitability, overtakes it. Like [Oscar and Lucinda’s] love, it is too fine for its squalid setting in a brutal and crudely pragmatic colonial society, and it traps them both” (Hassall, pp.119-120).

Published in 1988, the year of the Australian “Bicentennial”, *Oscar and Lucinda* could not avoid being read in the light of issues surrounding Australia’s colonial history. Using a post-colonial framework to interpret the text, critics such as Bruce Woodcock see the glass church as a metaphor for the invasion of Australia by the colonising white man:

The glass church is a grand idea whose implementation becomes...a horrendous and destructive obsession. It costs Oscar his life as he goes down trapped in the church...and enacts his own worst nightmare of drowning. But it is more than personally destructive: it is emblematic of the whole imperial venture, the conquest of Australia itself, the land and the people, by a seemingly transparent but ultimately destructive material invasion of people and culture (Woodcock, 1996, pp.84-85).

### **VII. The quest for a home in *Cloudstreet*.**

In the examination of architectural metaphors in fiction, texts in which only one or two characters operate in relation to an architectural structure lend themselves more readily to the process of drawing parallels between that structure and those characters. For example, as discussed, Grace's construction of a tent fabricated from Michael's letters in *A New Map of the Universe* can be seen to represent her sense that her relationship with Michael is weak and impermanent, not built to last. Similarly, the structure of the glass church in Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda* functions as a metaphor for the fanciful, impractical natures of the two main characters.

In Tim Winton's novel *Cloudstreet*, the house on Cloud Street after which the book is named, is inhabited not by one or two characters but by two entire families, the Lambs and the Pickles. Thus Winton provides the reader with a myriad of characters who interact with and respond to the house. Their own perceptions of Cloudstreet as well as their relationships with its other inhabitants are central to our understanding of these characters. However, I am interested in looking at the ways in which in Winton's novel the house functions as a metaphor not for individual characters, but for the characters as a group and the ways in which they relate to each other.

The house, which becomes known to the locals as "Cloudstreet," and thus functions as a metonym for the street on which it stands, has a very strong presence in the text. Some critics have interpreted the house almost as a character in its own right and it is indeed personified by Winton throughout the novel, a structure which not only "creaks" but also "breathes" and "moans," "sighs" and "cracks its knuckles" (Winton, 1991).

Left to Sam Pickles in his brother's will, the house is too big for one small family and too expensive to maintain. Sam subdivides the house, symbolically letting "the sunny

side” (Winton, 1991, p.44) to the Lambs, a god fearing open-hearted family in comparison to the Pickles, who, with their hostile silences and secrets, are more aptly represented by the dark half of the house.

In his essay “Figures, Doors and Passages,” Robin Evans examines the impact of the arrangement of domestic spaces on those who inhabit them. Evans argues convincingly that the evolution of corridors as a means of linking rooms within houses was an architectural development which resulted in reduced interaction within the domestic sphere. The rationale behind this development was the notion that “all accidental encounters caused friction and therefore threatened the smooth running of the domestic machine: a delicately balanced and sensitive device...always on the edge of malfunction” (Evans, 1978, p.276).

According to the terms of Sam’s subdivision, each family gets “half the house, half the yard...The corridors are no man’s land, same as the stairs” (Winton, 1991, p.49). Sam’s arrangement is designed to minimise contact between the two families thereby reducing the potential for tension. Winton creates the sense that the house itself is unhappy at being divided. The fence made of tin signs which divides the yard, the corridors which separate the two sides of the house, are physical representations of the emotional barriers between the Lambs and the Pickles.

When Rose and Quick marry, thus joining the two families, they move into the library, the one room of the house which belongs to neither side, a room they refer to as “No Man’s Land” like the stairs and corridors. Rose and Quick’s occupation of this room changes it from a space which divides the two families into a space which joins them. The birth of their son Harry cements this process, forging a blood link between the Lambs and the Pickles and providing a reason for the members of the two families to enter each others’ space. The removal of the fence at the end of the book symbolises this breaking down of barriers.

When the barriers between them finally come down, “the house breathes its first painless breath in half a century” (Winton, 1991, p.385). There is a shift in the atmosphere of the house and consequently in the way its inhabitants feel. Living side by side yet divided for twenty years, neither family feels completely at home in the house. It is only when the two families are united that all its inhabitants can finally accept Cloudstreet as their home:

But I have got used to it here you know, [Oriel] said. You might say I've come to love this awful old house...It never made it easy for us – and I tell youse, there's times I've thought the place has been trying to itch us out – but I reckon we've made our mark on it now, like it's not the house it was. We're halfway to belongin [sic] here...This place has been good to me. (Winton, 1991, p.411)

More than once, Winton uses the metaphor of a ship to describe the house, suggesting it is a structure which is not fixed, but is affected by the tides, the winds. Like Grace's imaginary boathouse, this aspect of Cloudstreet represents the changing dynamics of the house, the comings and goings of its inhabitants which affect their relationships with those who remain. For example, when Dolly is found, close to death and Rose goes to visit her, "the whole house went quiet till it was just grinding on its stumps, like a ship at anchor" (Winton, 1991, p.352). This image reflects the stagnation of the relationship between mother and daughter. Later, after Harry is born and there is a sense of forward movement for the inhabitants of the house, "Cloudstreet sweetened up like a ship under full sail" (Winton, 1991, p.394).

Though Cloudstreet is the central metaphor in the novel, there are other domestic spaces which also serve as metaphors for the characters who inhabit them. One such example is the bedsit where Rose and Quick live after Rose has a miscarriage: "cramped and cheerless, perfect for the hard feeling that had come on her" (Winton, 1991, p.345). In this example there is a clear connection between the physical space Rose inhabits and her state of mind. Similarly, Rose's yearning to live in a brand new house reflects her desire to leave her past behind, to begin again in a place without history. She envisages a "clean, orderly separate place with fences and heavy curtains. Their own world" (Winton, 1991, p.360). Like the fence at Cloudstreet, these "fences and heavy curtains" of which Rose dreams represent her need to distance herself from her family, to put up barriers between her present and her past. Though as a young man Quick feels unhappy at Cloudstreet, later he grows to like living there and he does not share Rose's enthusiasm for their new house, "a brick box with its red tile roof, same as all the other half-finished houses in the street. It looked empty and he'd lost his way with it somewhere" (Winton, 1991, p.339). Unlike Rose, Quick would prefer a house with history, a space that will remind him of his family,



his connection to others. Their eventual decision to give up their new house and return to live at Cloudstreet signifies Rose's new willingness to accept her family and her history.

Another important structure in *Cloudstreet* is Oriel's tent. Like the tent Grace constructs in *A New Map of the Universe*, Oriel's tent represents her sense of uncertainty which develops as a result of the childhood accident which leaves her favourite son, Fish, brain damaged. And as a structure which exists in relation to Cloudstreet yet is not quite a part of it, the tent symbolises Oriel's failure to belong. For most of the novel, Oriel does not feel at home in Cloudstreet, whereas by contrast the tent provides her with a space that feels her own, a sanctuary. She conveys this one night when she is talking to Lester: "I wish I could lace it up an [sic] never come out, she says" (Winton, 1991, p.232).

Elizabeth Ferrier notes that often in Australian fiction "the house is an anomalous ideal, associated with confinement and claustrophobia as much as it is linked with identity and security" (Ferrier, 1987, p.46) and this is consistent with Oriel's ambivalence towards Cloudstreet. Ferrier examines a number of texts by Australian authors in which the characters have a troubled relationship with the spaces they inhabit. She identifies a three-stage pattern in these texts: "first, estrangement from a house, then possession of a house which fails to accommodate adequately, and finally the movement away from closure towards some open structure" (Ferrier, 1987, p.46). To an extent, Oriel's situation conforms to this motif. Firstly, she and Lester are forced to leave their farm at Margaret River, then she lives at Cloudstreet for some time but feeling dissatisfied she moves out into the tent in the garden. However, in Winton's text, unlike the other texts which Ferrier analyses, there is a final stage to Oriel's struggle to find a domestic space which she can call home, in which she packs up the tent and returns to live in Cloudstreet, having finally achieved a sense of belonging.

Oriel's articulation of a feeling that she finally belongs demonstrates that the Lambs and the Pickles, like the characters in the other novels I have examined, have been engaged in a quest for belonging. As with Oscar and Lucinda in Carey's novel, and with Peter and Grace in *A New Map of the Universe*, the characters in Winton's novel have been uprooted; have left their homes and then struggled to put down roots, to feel that they truly belong in the new place they have chosen to live. However, whereas in *Oscar and Lucinda* the quest for belonging is never realised by either of the protagonists, Winton offers a sense of hope in *Cloudstreet*, a suggestion that the house in which the Lambs and the Pickles live reluctantly for so many years has become a true home for them. In *A New Map of the*

*Universe* Grace's quest for a home remains unresolved. There is a possibility but no certainty that she will succeed in creating a home with Michael. As she writes in her last letter to him, "*I need something...certain to build my life around, something I can put my faith in*" (*A New Map*, p.162).

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