

My Rosalind: A Novel and Critical Commentary

By Simon Dylan Jones

This PhD is dedicated with love to my wife Kirsten.

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Acknowledgments:

Many thanks to my supervisor, Matthew Francis, for his help and guidance, and again to my wife, Kirsten McClellan, for her patience. Thanks also to my first readers for their support which kept me going.

My Rosalind

‘But you love me, no?’ Chloe asked.

‘Of course I do.’

‘Then why — why are you not serious about this? I came here for you, to be with you. What have you done for me? I need you. So tell me, do you want to be with me? Yes or no?’

‘We’re still young, young enough to take the time. We can plan, rationalise.’

‘We are not that young.’

‘No. I guess not.’

‘So here, take my hand. I want you to think, that is all.’

And that was all. She was right, I couldn’t take her for granted. But there was still something sitting in my chest. Something stopping me from going further. Maybe it was a reaction to the idea of following a course of action for the simple reason that it was what was expected of me. Maybe it was something else. I took her hand, but I wanted nothing more than to let it drop, to leave that place. I felt my life constricting. There was nowhere left to go. It felt like we were flying through a storm at night in a small plane – the lightning flashing close and the rain streaming across the window and the plane shuddering and being buffeted by the wind. And all the while all we could do was sit and wait and hope. I squeezed her hand and looked out the café window to the narrow street below. An elderly couple was walking slowly by, their shared umbrella barely raised over their heads; the good-will shop and the bakery across the way both empty of customers; the rain was pattering down on the grey asphalt. A car drove by spraying the couple with a thin film of water. They didn’t seem to notice – kept on at their creeping pace towards some destination outside my world.

We drove back to our apartment along the narrow, winding country road. Lush fields extended past the horizon on either side. The car was cold. We sat in silence. I concentrated

on the sound of the rain as it lashed the windscreen. This was the place where I had chosen and sitting beside me was the person, I had decided to spend my life with. I should have been happy, but I wasn't. I felt an encroaching lethargy. I was bloated but empty. It was Sunday afternoon.

We were in a small town in northern Essex. I had wanted to escape somewhere out into the countryside, to go somewhere that would feel like home. Somewhere where I could get out and walk for hours across fields on little dirt tracks, where I could look up and see the kestrels hanging, motionless, above the dark treeline. I had wanted a pub where I could go to at the end of the day and stand with an elbow on the bar. In that town of 400 people, there were two. I'd found an apartment, made a decision, and had congratulated myself on the money I was saving by not living in London. But I hadn't accounted for winter. I spent my first six months cursing the rain, the cold, the lack of sun. My days were spent inside cramped rooms. My long walks in the countryside became another forgotten daydream.

A month after arriving back in England I had lunch with my father in London. He wore a Saville Row suit and spent the hour alternately looking at his watch and the door. I moved on with my life. And now it was Sunday afternoon. Chloe was with me. We were settled. In the morning I would take the train down to London and try to feel like I was achieving something concrete, but for now it was Sunday afternoon and all I felt was overwhelming nothingness. I pulled a beer out of the fridge and sat at the kitchen table. Chloe was reading on the couch by the window. She looked beautiful in the evening light.

We met in a youth hostel. Her name was Chloe Dupont. It was the first spring after my move back to England and I needed to travel somewhere, anywhere. An old friend was travelling in France. He emailed and asked me to join him and we made plans to meet in Paris. It felt good to travel. The air was cold and clean and the sky seemed to sit higher than it did in England.

It was our third night in Paris. We had mostly spent drinking and smoking in small cafés and bars around Montmartre. I pretended I was Hemingway; he liked the taste of beer. We returned to our hostel to rest and sleep but were stopped short in the doorway by a fug of smoke and drink and laughter. She was the only Frenchwoman in a crowd of Argentinians, Spaniards, Americans, and Australians; foreigners who came to the city to drink and party and meet other foreigners and call it adventure. We sat in a corner whilst her friends and mine laughed raucously around us. The night wound on and I found myself captivated by her beauty: her figure, her soft blonde hair, her eyes the colour of good Scotch. She spoke clearly, over-enunciating words and never quite bringing herself to use contractions in her speech. She would start to speak in short, clipped sentences and then, feeling her confidence mount, would continue in long rushes of breathless and excited descriptions. I was moved by the way she said my name; feeling a tingle down my spine as her full lips separated over the vowels and then met again in a delicate moue.

Later, in a room in the hostel, we were interrupted by a knock at the door. We kept to ourselves, lost in our own world, but the knocking continued. I opened the door to find my roommate on the ground, his head bumping softly against the wooden doorframe. I tried to help him up. Having failed I turned to find that Chloe had dressed herself. She smiled at me as she stepped over his recumbent body and then was down the dark stairwell. I cursed him as I lifted him into his bed. Only then did I realise that I was still naked.

In the morning we left the hostel. I felt a sadness knowing that I'd never see her again. But that was the way of it. That night would be something to remember and romanticise, a fleeting moment that would last a lifetime.

She called me two weeks later.

'Hello,' she said softly and then fell into silence.

'Yes?'

'I wanted to hear your voice,' I breathed out heavily, 'and I wanted to see you again.'

She had convinced the desk clerk to give her my number. She had waited to see whether she had really wanted to call. We talked for a while after that, deciding that we would meet in Florence. It seemed the right thing to do. I left my friend behind in Paris.

I arrived by train, watching as the mist dissipated and the landscape changed from green to grey. The apartment I had taken sat above a busy restaurant. The sound of conversation reached it in a soft buzz. It was in a small street a few blocks away from the Piazza del Duomo. The rooms were small and comfortable and full of light. I stood on the small balcony that adjoined the bedroom, my hands resting on the lattice bannister which had been warmed by a day in the Tuscan sun. Below me ran an uneven, cobbled street, and off to the right rose the Duomo, its visible tip glowing a brilliant gold in the evening sun.

I met Chloe at the train station. Her thick head of hair was easy to spot in the disembarking crowd. We hugged and walked self-consciously back to the apartment. It wasn't what I had pictured: the easy reunion of two people who had seen each other naked. There was a silence that neither of us were able to fill. She seemed shyer than when I had seen her last, more a person, less of a concept. She was startlingly real. We stopped at the restaurant below the apartment and talked over large glasses of beer. She sipped hers slowly; we were both putting off the time when we would climb the stone steps and would be faced with the small bedroom and the clean, white linens of the queen-sized bed. I called for

another beer. We began to talk more freely. We felt the romance of the city, the warmth of the night, the musical cadence of the language being spoken around us. I took her hand and we went upstairs, finding that the bed had lost its disquieting quality. Afterwards she smiled at me and I saw that I had been right to trust myself to her. That night and the next day we stayed in the little apartment telling each other of our lives. We fucked and drank and felt comfortable in each other's presence. Without anxiety or difficulty of thought.

On the night of the second day we stood on the balcony listening to the diners below. They laughed roughly and clinked their glasses.

'I had a friend who stayed with me in a city like this once,' she said, 'She was a happy girl, always smiling. We spent a few days in the city, looking at the sights and the monuments. And then when it was time to leave, when we were to meet at the train station to go back home, she did not show up. I searched for nearly two days, looking everywhere. I went to the police station but they told me I had to wait another two days before I could file a report. And how could I wait like that? I went to the cafés for the internet and to the hospitals. Finally, I found her in a bar with an American man named Kyle. But I was so scared. She had gone missing and I could not find her. She had gone missing. Just like that.' She lapsed into silence. I waited to see if she would go on.

'Did she give you a reason why?' I asked.

'No, and that does not matter. What matters is that she left. She was gone and I did not know why. It was like that. And I am now scared that it will happen again.'

I was confused as to what she was trying to tell me. I understood how the fear of loss can freeze and capture you. I wanted to say that I would not leave her, that I could not, but I knew that that was not true. Instead I wrapped my arm around her and pulled her to me.

‘We’ll go out tomorrow. See the city.’ Her head moved against my chest as she nodded. The night was warm and subdued and we spoke more softly to one another in the still air.

We left the apartment early the next day and walked through the near empty streets. We looked up in wonder at the structural impossibility of the Duomo, at the grandeur that seemed to exist as a window to another time. We stopped for a coffee. The cobbled piazza slowly filled. The counterfeit artists selling mass-produced drawings of the city were setting up their stalls. The tourists began to flock to the cathedral doors. The pickpockets slipped their way through the crowd. In the Piazza della Signoria we walked slowly around the great statuary. We paced in front of the copy of Michelangelo’s David, stopping in front of the Medici Lions at the Loggia del Lanza. We held hands in silence and saw, not so much the history that the city represented but rather ourselves in relation to it; we were diminished by the beauty of our surroundings and at the same time bolstered by it. We drifted through the corridors of the Uffizi gallery. I found myself lost, sinking in the ocean of artistry, unable to breathe, drowning in the beauty presented there. Down the end of a long corridor I saw a painting of a woman that reminded me of Rosalind. Serene and faintly supercilious. She looked down at me with the same large eyes, the same dusky complexion and for a moment I felt a tug in my chest. *All the pictures fairest lined are but black to Rosalind. Let no face be kept in mind but the fair of Rosalind.* I sighed and moved on to the impressionists.

It was late afternoon when we left and the sun wallowed heavily in a deep, cloud speckled sky. We found a small restaurant on the hill, dark and intimate, where we ate squid-ink linguini and drank a dark, rich Chianti. In the Boboli gardens we found a bench on which to sit and look down on the terracotta city.

‘It is a city you can fall in love with,’ she said. I nodded but said nothing. It was true. I had fallen under the spell of it. I filled my lungs with the heady air; breathed in the location,

the atmosphere, the bustle. And under such a charm I had fallen in love with Chloe. She became linked with an escape, a re-imagining, a re-birth into something other.

We held hands as we walked down the hill and back to our apartment, stopping only to pick up a few bottles of good wine and some cheese, bread, and dried meats. In the light of the dying sun we picnicked on the bedroom floor in our underwear and I asked her to live with me.

‘Where?’

‘England.’

‘How will it be?’

‘I don’t know.’

She sat up on the bed, cradling her glass of wine and looking down at me. Her eyes set and her mouth broke into a joyous grin.

‘Yes,’ she said. I pulled her down to me. I felt as if a cavern had opened up in my chest and a wave of fear and joy and expectation had come rushing in, creating in me a feeling of apartness, of expectant confusion. We re-filled our glasses and laughed at a decision that had been made in the space of a few words, but which, now uttered, could not be taken back. It was a decision that changed our lives.

We travelled by train, passing from the open, green fields of Tuscany to the mountains further north. Chloe read silently. I stared out at the changing landscape. Her parents lived to the east, where France met Italy and Switzerland. It was there that we were heading, purportedly so that I could meet her parents, but also for a reason we didn’t openly acknowledge: for her to say goodbye. It had become clear that for Chloe, as well as for me, our relationship had become a way to break clear of past lives, to re-establish ourselves in a new location and in a new way of living. We were running away. I understood the impulse,

but a part of me was also resentful, jealous. Was I not enough? Was it only escapism that had pushed Chloe to abandon her old life for a new one with me? Was she leaving because she needed me or because I was useful to her? I couldn't right it in my mind so instead I let it go. The idea floated out of the window into the foreign vista.

The world changed outside the train. It became hemmed in as the Alps rose to create grey and white walls against the sky. None of it felt real. I saw myself flying beside the train looking down as it ran into the future.

We switched to a bus in Aosta. We were allowed to walk out in the shade under the looming presence of the mountains. Ahead there was nothing but a steep incline that went up until it reached the sky, disappearing into the clouds and beyond imagination. The curtailment of snow and ice showed the size of the world rather than limiting it. It hinted at something other. It was another boundary that could be traversed, confronted and defeated, scaled and overcome.

I squeezed Chloe's hand as we travelled through the darkness under Mont-Blanc and into the valley of Chamonix. It was a sudden beauty; a city-town cut off from the world by its topography but made magnificent because of it. Under the white peaks lay high slopes of forest. Below them, haphazardly strewn, were buildings built of rough-hewn wood. Seeing that town from the station where we were dropped off, I felt something strange and quite alien; I felt that I was home.

Chloe's parents met us at the door of their chalet. It was high in the valley at the upper edge of the town of Les Praz. He was a small, intense looking Frenchman with a prominent forehead and a heavy grey moustache, she was a plump, smiling woman with clipped grey hair, dressed in an oversized track suit. Their voices were low and monotone. They were courteous to me as they let me in and showed me their home, but I felt some reservation as I walked behind them. It was as if I were not who they had expected. Her mother cooked and

poured large glasses of wine. We sat and made difficult conversation at the dining room table. My inability to speak French kept me at a distance from them. I reached out to the bottle of wine to re-fill my glass but withdrew when I saw Chloe shake her head.

After dinner her father, a retired engineer, presented me with logic problems as Chloe and her mother did dishes. He would shake his head and tut when I could not give the answer in a satisfactory time or manner.

‘So you will take our Chloe away,’ he said. He was watching me intently. His gaze was set and unblinking. I waited to see if he was joking, whether his rigid lips would break into a smile. They didn’t. I said that I wasn’t taking her so much as it was she who was following me. He snorted.

‘If that is what you think,’ he said and fell silent. We sat waiting for the two women to return.

I was relieved when Chloe’s parents retired early to their bedroom. They were still speaking softly in a French I couldn’t understand.

We spent the next few days out of the chalet. We drank tea in small cafes in the centre of town and took to hiking high up on the mountain trails. Chloe grew more silent with each passing day. I wondered, whether she had come to learn more about me as a person and disliked what she had learnt. Had she grown bored of me? I tried to ask her, on the third day, as we walked along a soft trail amongst the evergreens high above the valley floor.

‘Chloe, is there something you’re not telling me?’ She pursed her lips and kept walking forward. She stopped and turned. She began to say something and then closed her mouth and shrugged. Her thin shoulders moved in an exaggerated movement, which made her seem somehow small and fragile. I was quiet. We reached a gulley, a thin scar of sharp rocks dug into the hillside where no trees grew. Scree had fallen recently and there was no clear path. Chloe walked confidently, her steps measured and precise.

I wanted to stop her, to pull her to me, but I couldn't. Instead I followed a little way behind her. I took care not to disturb the thin layer of rubble under my feet. The stones looked all too ready to tumble and fall. Above sat great boulders and rising from them a sheer and dark cliff face. It would only take a little disturbance and it would all come down. It would take us with it.

Chloe was still several metres ahead when we heard the whistling sound. I turned and felt the crash. Then the rocks against my cheek. I was up and running, scrambling to Chloe. She was still standing on a steep incline up ahead. Her eyes were opened wide, her mouth hung partially open. I followed her gaze and saw the black and red object. It was a few hundred metres down the rocky slope. It resolved itself into the shape of a body. A man wrapped in a wing-suit. Ten metres or so above us the rocks had been shifted and thrown where he had first hit the rubble. There was a thick smear of blood. Dark and sticky-black. Chloe began to move. She half ran half fell towards the body. I was just able to catch her, to grab her arm and pull her to a huge boulder.

'There's no helping him,' I said. 'Stay here.'

Her hand was shaking. I left her and scrambled down the rest of the way. His legs were lying at unnatural angles. Only half of his face was left. The rest was a thick, oozing red and grey. I felt it in my stomach. The skin of my own face tightened. He looked to be about my own age, dark haired, pale. It was still a human face, someone I could have met, someone I could have known. Any one of the young Frenchmen at the cafés in town. The tatters of his suit fluttered slightly in the breeze. I edged closer. He was alien but also unremarkable; as if it was completely normal that he would be lying there. There was a moment when I felt something, but I couldn't tell what it was. The feeling disappeared into the clear mountain air. After it had passed, I moved quickly; I covered him with my woollen jumper and called Mountain Rescue, I looked up to make sure that Chloe was still sitting safely above us. The

woman at the end of the line understood my English and spoke in a thick, reassuring, accent. When she hung up, I put the phone back into my pocket and looked past Chloe, up the gully, up past the trees and the cliff-face to the cable-car station perched high above. He had jumped from there. He had taken that cable car up, seen his flight down the mountain, mapped his way down gullies and over trees, and jumped. He had wanted to soar, getting as close to the mountain slope and pine trees as he could before swooping out into the valley floor. Instead a pocket of air, a wobble of his arms; he hit the unyielding ground.

By the time I got back to her Chloe was weeping heavily. Her face was turned away from me, her body shook silently. I pulled into my chest and we waited, without speaking, for the helicopter to arrive.

At the chalet Chloe walked past the surprised and worried faces of her parents. She did not speak. She walked down the hallway and took refuge in her childhood room. I stayed behind and tried as best I could to explain what had happened. Chloe's mother was shocked. She wanted to go speak with Chloe, but her husband took her arm. The small man pulled her to his side and then pointed me down the corridor.

'You go,' he said. His eyes were dark and small.

She was lying in her single bed facing the wall. Her back was facing me. I took off my blood-stained clothes and lay down behind her. She stayed silent but made the space for me. I patted her hair and pulled her to me, feeling her shake against my chest. We found sleep that way, the two of us curled up tight against the wall, my bulk wrapped closely around her small body. At some point in the early morning I found that she had turned herself. Her face was nestled under my chin. Her breath was steady and warm against my neck.

'He looked like you.'

'I didn't think so.'

‘Young like you. And impulsive. What stops you being like him?’

‘I’m not going to jump off any cliffs.’

‘You know that is not what I mean.’

‘I know. But I won’t leave you, not that way or any other.’

‘Okay, good,’ she said and burrowed herself in closer to me. Her hair smelt of pine needles.

We spent the next days preparing for the move. A week later we were on a plane headed for London. We landed and spent two days in the city before travelling up to my apartment in the small town by the train tracks. From then on we were Vonnegut’s nation of two, relying on no-one else for entertainment, stimulus, or distraction. I think that’s where we went wrong. It was too much. How could we support something so big if one of us was cracked?

Chloe put her book down and rose from the couch. She stopped when she passed where I sat at the kitchen table and kissed my cheek. I thought how lucky I was to have her in my life. There was a glass of whisky in my hand. I refilled it and moved to the couch. Then I turned on the TV. I couldn’t remember how long I had been sitting there. Eventually I was no longer seeing the shapes moving on the screen. There was no whisky left in my glass. I stumbled into the bedroom. Into our queen-sized bed. The yellow light of the train-station stabbed in from around the shades. Chloe turned herself towards me and I could feel the warmth of her breath against my neck. She mumbled something unintelligible in her sleep and I moved myself closer to her.

She's wearing a light red dress, her hair swept back against her shoulders. The sun is shining dark overhead. I feel an immense longing that fills me completely. We are on a cobbled street of some European city. A suspicion of a cutting smile as she turns back to me. Her face is shifting and insubstantial. I recognise her from the painting in the French museum. She runs forward and I try to follow, but she is so much faster than I am.

Now she stops again. Behind her is the ocean. The waves are reaching high above her head. I try to move forward again, to step forward and catch her, to turn her to me, but my legs don't move. They are trapped by the sand. It has swallowed my feet. The sun is too bright, it has washed out everything around us.

All I can see is her face and her wide eyes that grow larger and larger. She extends an impossibly long arm out to me. I force my legs to move forward.

Almost. I almost make it. My hand reaches out to touch her. The smile disappears. Now she is angry. She's surrounded by a pressing crowd.

She disappears. There is nothing left but an empty space.

A desperate sense of loss.

The next day I woke feeling groggy and tired—I felt the suffocating guilt of a hangover. My gut was heavy. I found some comfort in Chloe; she laughed as I nestled into her and made me coffee to drink in bed as she got dressed. Then she kissed me. Her lips were soft and forgiving. When I left the apartment, it was still the thought of her warmth that was foremost

in my mind. But I couldn't shake the image I had of that dream smile, and the horrible feeling of loss. The train arrived and soon I was on my way into London. Outside the fields moved green across the unmoving horizon. I opened my computer on the small plastic table of the juddering car. I tried to work but I couldn't. I stared at the blank subject line of my email. The sun had only just risen and outside the window of the train the landscape was still covered in a slight shimmer of frost. The carriage, now just a couple stops from Liverpool Street, was made warm by the press of the morning commute. Beside and around me men and women sat and stood crowded together, careful not to catch each other's' eyes.

The train slowed and eventually came to a stop. I found myself in line waiting to alight, being pushed from behind. I pressed in my heels and pushed back. Fuck you. A moment longer and then I slipped forward through the door and out into the station. The streets were crowded. All of London was crowded. The pace was brisk. Around there is only glass and concrete. High above is the Shard, stern and soulless. I headed for the river.

My destination was the offices of a travel magazine. One of the last print magazines left in an internet-dominated field. I didn't know how long it would last – the readership was rapidly declining. I didn't know anyone who actually read magazines anymore. Just look it up on your phone. It's easy. I worked for a place that shouldn't exist anymore. I was doing an archaic job, hoping to do the kind of writing which would never be read. In reality, I was an odd-job man, writing small pieces; the magazine needed holding together. It was somewhere to belong.

I'd gone there off the back of something I had written. When I'd finished with my Masters. An article on the New South Wales' southern beaches. It didn't seem to matter that I had never been to the places I was describing; I could see them vividly enough. Each time I closed my eyes I saw the ocean extending into the infinite and always, at the forefront of the image, Rosalind. My career, as with for everything else, I owed to Rosalind. Her stories, what

she had told me of her childhood, had coloured that article, had made the descriptions come alive. I had realised, then, when I first started, that by writing about Rosalind I could share a part of myself. I could express how I felt at that time, in a certain moment. In writing I could dissipate some of the clouds of uncertainty that had always lain so over the world as I saw it. Maybe that's why I'm writing this now. Just to say that the writing was easy. When I was done the article was accepted for publication by an Englishman named O'Brian. And, with its publication, a job offer.

So now I sat in a small office on the other side of the world, trouble shooting and responding to emails. I was writing for a blog that — when I had arrived — had been a jumble of pop-ups and graphic mistakes. With a minimal amount of work, I had cleaned the site into something more-or-less well-presented which generated almost as much revenue as the print magazine itself.

That day passed slowly. I couldn't shake the feeling of lethargy that pervaded every one of my actions. It was with an undeniable relief that I sent my last email and was able to grab my coat and slide out of the office. By the time I reached the train station I was back to thinking about the dream. I would reach out. That much I knew. I would let Rosalind know that I was there to listen to her. I would also open myself to her. There had been a connection between us that I couldn't deny; something still lingered. It was Rosalind, always Rosalind.

I just didn't know what to do. All I knew was that if I didn't keep the connection alive, then my life would become nothing — an unremarkable nothing. I would become like my few co-workers who lived for the time each day when he could head out to the pub, not thinking, not feeling anything larger than a small desire to be respected. My life would carry on into the future in a perfectly straight line with only the few predictable stops along the way: marriage, pregnancy, a beer gut, retirement, and death. In Rosalind there was the something other.

The train shuddered to a halt. I walked off the platform. Took the short-cut across a construction site.

‘Hello darling,’ Chloe said when I opened the door. She stood at the stove in a light grey sweater, and when she turned, I saw happiness in the flick of her hand. I pulled her to me. There was a smell of cooking in the room; of grilled onion sautéed in butter.

‘That smells wonderful.’

‘We are celebrating,’ she said. There was a bottle of wine and a lit candle on the table. Chloe twisted herself free of my hug.

‘What is it?’

‘I was accepted. To the PhD. Is that not wonderful?’

‘It is,’ I said. I grabbed her again, picking her up; feeling how light she was in my arms.

‘And this way I can stay in the country. You won’t even have to marry me.’

I threw my head back and laughed and then placed her gently down. She was wearing white socks. I opened the bottle of wine and poured two glasses, making sure that my back faced her. She did not see my expression change. Cambridge. She would be further from me than ever.

‘I’m happy,’ I said and handed her a glass ‘congratulations.’

Again, I was sitting alone. Again, I had a drink in my hand. Chloe knew that there was work that I needed to do — and maybe, had I not drunk too much, I might have done work — but when I opened my laptop I stopped. We’d had the expensive bottle of wine and another less expensive after it. There was another email to send. At that moment making sure that Rosalind could understand even a part of who I now was had become more important than anything else. It had become more important than the apartment and everything in it.

That was the beginning of the end. It came as I was sitting in cramped kitchen, lit only by a single overhead bulb, while Chloe sat reading in the other room. What I wrote to Rosalind wasn't important. It was the feeling of it that mattered. The connection that was reinforced by the act of communication. It seemed the right thing to do. Or if not the right thing then the necessary thing. The email was long. I tried to reach back into our shared past, tried to put this new iteration of our relationship in some kind of context. Then I stopped thinking so much about what I wanted Rosalind to read and just wrote. The email showed something of what I hadn't up until then allowed myself to see. Through it I came to some understanding a little of the life I had built. *'It was the dream that did it. I find myself contemplating a future which reaches forward into the infinite, narrowing further and further until it no longer holds scope or meaning. I should be happy; there are all the elements in my life needed to make me happy, to make anyone happy, but still I feel a distance. I feel a distance from everyone and everything. I feel nothing but distance. Do you ever feel that way? As if there is something missing from yourself? Do you ever feel a disconnected from life? From the people around you?*

It hurts, sometimes. To feel distant from the things and people you should love.

I know that this won't mean much to you, but still it feels important to tell you. You were important to my life Rosalind, you still are. Please write back. I want to know of your life.'

In that moment I knew that I still needed Rosalind, needed her deep in my bones, needed her so badly — so heroin-junky-much — that I couldn't think about Chloe or England or anything at all but only her, Rosalind ; her face, her body, her taste, and the relief that her touch brought.

‘And how is the French girl?’

‘Chloe? She’s good,’ I said.

‘She’s too good for you. I don’t even know the girl, but I can tell that she’s too good for you.’

He laughed. He tapped his fork on the edge of his plate.

‘You have it too good. You don’t know what life really is yet. Keep it that way.’

O’Brian sat opposite me at the small table. He seemed to take up the space of two people. He looked over my shoulder at something happening at the table behind me. The sleeve of his jacket lay across the table, had smeared a small puddle of soy sauce. The travel writer. Obviously obsolete. Consummate liar, pompous beyond belief. Maybe my mentor. In his massive, immaculately dressed frame I saw what my future might be.

‘In my time, before things became so unreal, so digital, we learnt about life much earlier. We had experiences. For the most part uncomfortable. But we did learn. I suppose that being sheltered is progress. As a society we appear to have decided that the object in life is to be comfortable.’

I didn’t reply. O’Brian’s conversation always came back to how much better life had been in the past that existed only in his memory. He had published a handful of self-aggrandising books and was respected in his field, he had built the magazine to the height of its success and was now watching its slow, inevitable decline with a stoic passivity. It hadn’t been my choice to go lunch. To hear the endless anecdotes about O’Brian’s days as a courageous young man, making his in the world by sheer bloody-minded determination. But O’Brian wanted to celebrate. He had finished an important article for the next edition. I listened to the stories that no longer held any relevance and in exchange I got a good lunch. What I really wanted was to drink alone, to have time to think. Instead I was watching his red-tinged jowls quiver as he spoke.

He'd had ordered a crisp, dry white wine that went well with the fish. The owner of the sushi restaurant, a small middle-aged man with a long drooping moustache had told him it was a good choice. His smile disappeared as he turned away.

There was playfulness in O'Brian's sharp blue eyes as the bottle arrived.

'Not on the menu. They keep it for me. From the Basque region in Northern Spain.

Have you been?'

'No.'

'You should.'

'I can't afford to.'

'Piss-poor excuse. You could if you wanted to. It was a lot more difficult to travel when I was your age, but somehow I managed. Write it up well enough and the trip will pay for itself. Hell, I might go with you, if only for that damn good fish. You wouldn't believe the taste.'

I didn't argue. No matter what I said O'Brian would have a reply ready. Instead I picked up sliver of salmon and chewed it slowly.

'I have felt some dissatisfaction with my life lately.'

I thought of telling him about Rosalind, about the email, but I let the sentence hang in the air between us without an explanation. I knew that he wouldn't understand, or that he would understand too well. If he did he would find a way of restating things in a way which made me seem small and insignificant. I swallowed the fish.

'How can you be dissatisfied?' he said, finally.

'You think that I have no right to be?'

'No, you're too young. You've never done anything, never experienced anything. What should your dissatisfaction matter? You aren't even able to feel anything, not in any real context. Go and do something. Anything. And then you can complain.'

‘I’ve done enough.’

‘Why don’t I believe you?’

We ate in silence. Then O’Brian began on a story about his most recent Kenyan safari. There had been hippopotami in the river outside his tent. That was enough for a story. He threw back his head to mimick the roaring, grunting noises that would wake him in the morning.

‘GRRROOUUUUUUUHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH...’

Heads turned to look at us. I looked down at the table. O’Brian laughed raucously and ordered another bottle of wine. We sat and waited as the waiter poured. Then he turned to me.

‘Look, you’re a good kid. You’ve shown promise. I wanted to let you know that I want to help you. Your writing is good, and I want to see more of it, but it’s too florid. It’s so fucking purple that if it were a steak, I’d send it back.’

Good advice. Thrown out over lunch like it wasn’t much. I just couldn’t recognise it at the time. I would later. Later I would learn to write.

‘But don’t our readers want emotion? Want to know how a place can make them feel? I think that nowadays people want you to put yourself in the story, let them know that they’re seeing something real, through your eyes.’

‘I used to go in for that kind of thing, but it’s done. What you have to do now is sell holidays. It’s the only way. Strip it all back and write about what matters: where the beaches are, where the restaurants are, where the punters can get shit-faced for cheap. And make sure the details are right too. Your article on Jervis Bay—good stuff and all—but you go on about the sun-kissed yellow sand. Well when I was walking along that beach a couple years ago with a beautiful young Australian girl, well I could have sworn the sand was very fine and white. You have to get those small details right.’

‘Right. Maybe I got a bit carried away—’

‘Like I said, you have to live, go out and experience things first-hand. Take advantage of your life damn it. When I was your age I was already on the trajectory towards where I am now. But I realise that for you, for the people in your generation, things are different. You need more time to come to terms with what it is you want out of life. But just get over it and decide, okay? Because, like I said, you have promise. Do you understand?’

I took another drink.

‘So if I pitch you a story, one that just sells the landscape. Would the magazine pay for it? So that I can experience it first-hand?’

‘Sure, but it’d have to be a damn good pitch. The piece would have to bring in money.’

‘I think I can manage that.’

‘Is this conversation over?’ he said.

‘Sure.’ I said.

‘Right. So, one night the baboons were howling, there was a leopard out in the bush across the river...’

O’Brian signed for the bill. He seemed contented; some problem had been resolved. I left feeling the effects of the wine and O’Brian’s speech. He had already moved on from our lunch. From the look in his eyes I could see that he was back at work.

‘Look, take the rest of the afternoon off. I’m feeling generous. Think about what I’ve said,’ he said. It was generous. I knew him well enough to know that he expected something in return. I didn’t care but walked out into the sun happy to not have to return to the claustrophobic atmosphere of the office.

There was a pub on the way back to the station. I ordered a gin and watched the pedestrians walking by the window. They knew where they were going and what they were

doing, but none of them looked happy. At the table behind mine a man and a woman were whispering to each other in a language I couldn't recognise. Their conversation sounded like water gushing from a rain gutter. I felt a vague longing, a pull towards something other. I felt the need to change something, anything.

It wasn't that I didn't love Chloe, or the life that we shared. It was just that there, at the window of some pub, I had become aware of the enormity of what I might have been missing. I finished my drink and left.

I resolved to ask Chloe to go away with me. Somewhere far from the life we knew, where we could once again re-invent ourselves. Maybe somewhere where we could discover more of who we were.

She wasn't there when I got home. I got out a beer and my laptop. There was a message. From Rosalind. And in the message bar my name. A response that I hadn't been expecting. At least not so soon. Before reading it I had to scroll upwards on the page to see just what I had sent the night before. In the light of day my email read as slightly maudlin. It was a romanticised version of my feelings. But it was still truthful. She had taken time out of her day to think of me and write a message. I read the email. Then I re-read it. Her response was bleak. It spoke not so much of us, but of the life Rosalind was now living. It was a life I couldn't quite understand. I noted every comma, every period; I felt some joy at the sight of the single semi-colon. What I had wanted was a rush of emotion, an outpouring of feeling, a sense of communion between us, but the more times I read it the message the more times I realised how disappointingly straight-forward it really was. It was only at the end of the message, in the final sentences, that I felt that Rosalind was truly speaking to me, reaching out to me on the other side of the world and therefore allowing me to see a part of her. *'...I'm*

worried about you, Richard. Are you okay? You write as if there is something that you're looking for. Remember there are people that care about you. I'll try to help if I can.

You should try to find what makes you happy in life and seek it out. My work here is challenging, but, ultimately, it gives me purpose. You should find something to care about; it might do you some good. But you can always email. Rose.'

Had I shared too much? Somehow she had been aware, in a way that I couldn't quite understand but that went further than just my e-mail, that there was something missing from my life. *You should try to find what makes you happy in life and seek it out.* Wasn't that the exact thought that I had been struggling with?

I imagined how she would have written that email. It would have been evening — I didn't know this for sure, but I felt it must have been — the light growing dim, a dappled light filtering through the wide leaves of the tropical plant outside her window. She would have been alone, as she most often was when I knew her. Her day would have been long but she would still have had energy. She would have been partially undressed. I saw her sitting up perfectly straight, that thin smile curving her lips as she thought of me.

I pictured myself with her. My imagination blurred the details of the room but she was clear. More real than anything I was actually seeing. She was at her computer writing out the message, wearing nothing but an oversized shirt and white cotton underwear. She gets up, having finished the email, not looking at me — I am lying outstretched on a small bed, my hand sweeping over fresh white linen. It is hot, no — more than hot — it is sweltering in that room. My brow is glistening with sweat. Finally, Rosalind turns and looked directly at me. She climbs onto the bed, definite in all her movements.

But there the fantasy ended. Because it wasn't a sexual fantasy. It was the depiction of another life, of something other. The person I was in that fantasy was different as well. It was who I would be with Rosalind. Someone better.

When Chloe returned home, I was sitting in the dark with an unopened book in my lap and an empty beer bottle by my hand.

‘I am back,’ she said softly. I looked up into her wide eyes and saw — what? I rose quickly to hug her.

‘Have you been drinking long?’ she asked.

I shook my head. ‘O’Brian took me out. He likes a glass of wine with lunch.’

‘So do you.’

She began by picking up the empty beer bottles.

‘No. Look. I’ll do that,’ I said, rising to stop her cleaning.

I wanted to sit back down. To clear my head of everything. But there were the two of us. I hugged her from behind. She stopped pacing.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, though I didn’t know what it was I was apologising for. ‘Let’s order dinner. Tell me about your day.’

Our lives continued on the same trajectory for months. Chloe settled down in her studies. We found a routine that worked. We shared our responsibilities, finding time for each other each evening. On the weekends we would visit museums. Occasionally we would go to the theatre. To an outsider it would seem as if we were perfectly happy. Maybe we were.

But still I wanted something else and I couldn’t bring myself to tell her. It kept me awake at night; the idea that I might be causing Chloe pain. I tried to make myself believe that I was happy, that we were building a solid foundation, one on which our future together could be built. I could almost believe it. But then something would happen — some little nothing — and I would be looking to escape.

Then I would read Rosalind's emails. Straightforward messages that hinted at something more.

The idea grew. It was a little niggling thing that sat at the back of my thoughts. Each day it grew larger and larger. Only when it was fully formed did the idea arise from the shadows of my subconscious and present itself to me in full, brash form. It was simply the idea of seeing Rosalind, of experiencing more of life, of testing whether there was something more.

I'd been reading. Making my way through all of Hemingway's novels again. Halfway through *To Have and Have Not*. There was such meaning there. Such uncompromised prose. As an author he had made himself into the embodiment of what his writing represented. I could do the same. I'd done it once. I could write something as I lived Hemingway's lifestyle. It was the sort of thing that O'Brian would want. I could start at the Hemingway house in Key West. Key West was just a few hours south of where Rosalind lived. I could travel there, invite Rosalind to join me, and transform my self-image. It could work.

Because it was becoming more and more clear that Rosalind was the key to my transformation. She was in a way a destination, an attachment to a world that was becoming more real as my own became more and more insubstantial. What would happen once I reached Florida was unforeseeable. All I knew is that something would happen, as a result of which my life would be forever altered. Maybe I would re-commit myself to Chloe; maybe we would discover that our life in England really was the best choice for us. Maybe not.

'I've pitched an idea to O'Brian. He likes it.'

We were in the apartment. We were having dinner. I had wanted to do something special, and so had spent the afternoon cooking. Now I sat in a clean, white shirt, sitting just to the right of Chloe.

‘That is fantastic, Richard. What is the idea?’

‘It’s an article for the magazine. Hemingway’s influence on tourism. If the first article is a success it could be a series. O’Brian is paying for the trip. For both of us. It could be something.’

I smiled a cheerful smile. Hoping to convince her that this was something worth celebrating. Chloe’s eyes shone and then dropped to her plate. Finally, she said:

‘You want to leave?’

‘Yes, to go to Florida. For the Hemingway house there, and the beautiful landscapes. It seems the best place to start.’

‘The United States? If we go anywhere, we should go back to France. I need to see my family, and it is much closer. You could write about that. No?’

‘You don’t understand, this is for work. It’ll be wonderful, you’ll see. There’s history, sun, adventure, romance.’

‘There is romance here. We have romance wherever we go.’

‘That’s not what I mean.’

‘Then what do you mean?’

‘I don’t know. Just do this for us okay?’

‘Of course I will. And it might be nice, a *voyage* for the two of us.’

I took hold of her hand and squeezed it. Her smile seemed fragile. For a moment I wondered if she saw the omissions in my words. I could have gone alone. Without Chloe. But if Chloe was not there, I would have had to face my justifications. I would have had to admit that the trip was just a reason to see Rosalind.

We made plans. We packed. Chloe could take some time away from her studies. Underneath her smiles she might have been confused, perhaps hurt. But she didn’t know.

How could she? I tried to harden myself against the feelings of guilt and remorse that were building up in my chest.

We lay in bed. I took my computer out. I wrote quickly and then lowered myself down beside Chloe. We lay away from each other that night; I reached out a hand to touch her thigh and then pulled back. Hours passed before I heard Chloe's breathing steady itself into the slow rhythm of sleep.

'I want to see you. I'm heading to Key West for work. Come down. We'll drink rum and talk about the things that matter.'

'You're coming to Florida? How did that happen? Will you be alone? I'll be busy but I should have time to come down to see you. It might be nice to talk about the past. Rose.'

And that was it. I would see her again.

But there was that question. *Will you be alone?* Had I told her about Chloe? I couldn't remember. I tried to remember my emails. But I already knew the answer: no. Not once had I mentioned Chloe.

It was too late. The next night I drank heavily, letting myself sink into those deep waters. When Chloe arrived home I was already gone, feeling no impulse to swim back to the surface.

All through the train journey Richard is quiet. Chloe tries to tell herself it is the stress of travel, that there is nothing in his manner to worry her. She is happy in England, happy living in their small town in Essex. She has begun her studies at the University of Cambridge — a university she has dreamt of attending but to which she never believed she would be accepted — and attends her classes and meetings with an unreserved joy that has made her a favourite amongst the history faculty and the other students. For the first time in her life

Chloe feels that she has a purpose. But after a meeting with his boss, after time on his computer that she tried not to notice, Richard decided that they should go. That was it. They have no money and no time, but they are leaving anyway. Good. Chloe would no more stand in the way of Richard's dreams than strike her own mother.

At Gatwick they check their luggage, go through customs, find a café to sit at, and wait for the boarding of their flight. Chloe sees Richard's movements as mechanical; it is as if he is not experiencing his actions. Yes darling. Of course darling. Just as you say darling. His replies are formulaic and dismissive. On the flight he drinks whisky when the stewardess brings it, smiles and answers Chloe's few questions, but she knows he is not really there. Eventually she gives up and turns to the window, pushing herself into an uncomfortable, semi-supported position. She sleeps, waiting for the time when Richard will be once more himself.

They arrive in Miami and Richard disappears to locate the car he has hired. Chloe finds herself alone outside the grey, block-like airport, sweating slightly in the oppressive heat. She watches the people in bright clothes and deep tans, wondering at what they are doing, where they are coming from and who they are meeting. There are family members and friends, shouting out to one another; there are lovers meeting with long kisses. To her right a young black couple hold onto each other as if they are afraid that any distance between them would cause them to lose each other forever. The conversations fill her ears, she is surprised by the volume and enthusiasm of the voices, by the facility for communication that these Americans have amongst themselves.

Richard arrives in a large convertible car that flits like a bright fish among the airport taxis. He is even more handsome in that foreign place; his sunglasses are pushed up over his thick brown hair. He parks and leaps out of the car with élan and smiles at Chloe — a large unreserved smile that makes her feel joy once again.

He drives them south along wide grey highways and Chloe looks out at a landscape covered in a heavy smog. After an hour of driving they reach the Keys and marvel at the thin grey bridges that rise out over the water like sea-snakes, sewing the islands together. Richard comes alive at the sight of the water, his eyes shining as he speaks of the quality of light and the depth of the colour. Chloe feels a deep warmth open within her to hear him and she wonders if here they will be happy again.

The rental house he has chosen is too expensive, but it is beautiful; its walls are a soft-coloured cream, its doors huge, and it has an inner courtyard that is light and full of leafy, green plants. Chloe lets herself think that he has chosen this place for her. She walks through the high-ceilinged rooms in a happy daze, not feeling the oppressive heat of the afternoon, just an exhausted form of euphoria. She walks through a sliding glass door to an area behind the house. Here there is a patio that abuts onto a canal lined with small boats. In the deep blue water small schools of fish swim, darting back and forth in quick jerks of silver.

Richard emerges behind her in nothing but his underwear. He smiles as he walks past her and dives into the water in a rushing movement. Chloe is just able to see his muscled torso now slim and lithe under the deep blue water.

He laughs when she calls to him, first gesturing her to join him in the water and then, seeing her resistance, swimming in long practiced strokes back to the edge of the canal. She looks directly down at him and sees his eyes respond to her. Then he heaves himself up and takes Chloe in his arms so that she, too, is soaked by the chill water. She laughs at his impulsiveness and feels an irresistible need to shout her joy. Instead she shrugs out of his grip and pushes him so that he falls back into the canal with a sharp truncated shout.

Their room is cool and dark with a fan that spins above the bed making a comforting squeaking with each revolution. The light reflected from the canal causes a flickering on the walls. Chloe feels her happiness increase, finding joy in Richard's revival. He has showered

and is towelling off his hair as he walks around the room. Chloe sits on the bed thinking of their time in Florence, when, on a small balcony over a restaurant, she first fell for him.

There had been such beauty there. She is glad she did not break up with him, as she was going to, in France. She shakes her head and looks down at her bare feet, blaming the long flight, the exhaustion, and the foreignness of their surroundings for her sudden urge to cry.

Afterward Chloe moves through the room slowly, dressing item by item, moving through the space without thought, slowly waking up to the realisation that soon there will be a third person to contend with, another factor in her equation of happiness. They have bought food and alcohol on the drive, there is nothing left but to make themselves presentable and wait.

'So who is she, this friend of yours?'

'Just someone I knew. The girlfriend of an old friend. She's a few hours north. Happens to be down here at the same time as us. I thought it rude not to invite her.'

'Yes, but who is she?'

'She's a good person. Nice. She's driving down this evening.'

Chloe stops trying to draw Richard into conversation. There is a reason that he doesn't want to talk but for the moment she needs to hold onto the happiness that she is feeling, hold onto the secluded space they have created for themselves within the walls of this bedroom.

Early in their relationship Richard told her about his time in Sydney, mentioned the friends he'd had back in Australia, but Chloe dismissed them as something of the past.

Richard made it seem like that time hadn't meant much to him, and so she was comfortable believing that they would not be important to the life they were embarking on together. He never mentioned this Rosalind who was now coming to visit them.

Now Chloe looks down at Richard who sits on the edge of the bed in a tailored white shirt, his cuffs undone. She takes his head into her hands and presses it to her. She wants, in this moment, to keep him and heal him and show him that his happiness, that their happiness, lies here in this room, with the two of them. She doesn't feel the need for any outpouring of emotion — just an acknowledgment that they are the most important people in each other's lives, and that no one will break in on their intimacy.

'I know, we could tell her that I am sick. Then she won't come. Then we could drink wine and picnic here in the bedroom without these clothes. Just the two of us.' She feels his hair between her fingers and tries to send the warmth of her emotion through her hands into him. She wants to make him realise how happy they are and how little else they need. But she feels guilty trying to push him to this realisation.

'You know we can't do that.' He does not look up but shakes her off his arm and begins to thread his cufflinks.

'Do you remember Florence?'

'Of course I do,' he says rising to his feet. *'But we can't cancel now.'* He folds her in his arms and holds her with surprising delicacy; his bulk presses gently against her body, and for a moment Chloe believes what he says. Then he pushes her gently away and moves toward the door.

She sees Rosalind standing in the driveway next to her car. Chloe is standing at the window of their room looking down. The woman below is petite and delicate and wears a simple white dress that accentuates the lush darkness of her hair and skin. She takes a step up the driveway then half-turns back to the car. Maybe she is wondering whether she should get back into the car and drive back home. Maybe she thinks it would be better not to see

Richard, to save herself that effort. Chloe watches Rosalind's indecision and hopes. She is uneasy seeing this young woman, this stranger; she feels a heaviness in her stomach.

Again, the woman moves back to her car as if to leave and in her mind Chloe begs her to go. But then she turns and walks quickly up to the front door. There is a ringing and then a soft murmur, then Richard's voice booms through the house.

He and Rosalind are hugging when Chloe reaches the bottom of the steps. She coughs, feeling for an instant that she is breaking up an intimate moment. Richard seems to be holding onto Rosalind with a strange intensity. Then Rosalind raises her eyes and her eyelids flutter and for a moment Chloe imagines that she sees a look of confusion cover the woman's features. Richard pulls away.

'Sorry. Sorry. Chloe, Rosalind. Rosalind, Chloe.'

'Please, call me Rose.'

Chloe steps forward and, forcing a wide smile, pulls Rose to her, kissing her twice, once on each cheek as she would have done in France. A France that she now, desperately, misses. She is surprised that Rose is smaller than she is, surprised that she is not quite as beautiful as she looked from above. There is that slightly crooked nose, and she has an intense and piercing gaze. There is a bead of sweat on the downy softness above her lip. Chloe stands back as Rose and Richard walk past her into the living room.

They sit at a small round table on the patio and wait in silence as Richard mixes too-strong cocktails. The thin glasses are cool; beads of condensation pearl on Chloe's fingers.

Richard's wide shoulders are slightly hunched as he twirls the swizzle stick in sharp clinking circles. Rose looks out at the canal.

'I'm glad to see you happy,' she finally says, 'you both seem happy.'

And perhaps she really believes that, Chloe thinks. As the sun begins to set the light on the canal sparkles brightly. Low music is playing in the living room.

'This place is beautiful; I should have come here sooner. It isn't that far from where I am.'

'Why do you not? I think I would always travel in this part of the world, if I could,'
Chloe says.

'It's just the way things are. I have to work. I've got a small apartment and some fish. Fred and Bob.'

'You do not miss them?' Chloe says. She is surprised at the bite in her words, and she hopes Rose does not recognise the mockery. If she does, she does not show it. Rose continues to speak as if it had been any other nicety.

'No, not for just a few days. They're being fed by a mechanical wheel. They're used to being alone though. Like me in that respect. People also think that I'm a bit cold and distant.'

'You just need some getting used to,' Richard says. And then: 'Another drink?'

Chloe wants to say no, she wants to take Richard by the hand and lead him up to their room to where they could be alone. She wants to make him love her completely again.

'Yes, why not?' she says, feeling the warmth of his smile as he turns it to her. Yet there is something about the drinking, about the need for alcohol that makes Chloe uncomfortable. Yes, Richard drinks too much, but he also makes too much of drinking. It is a religion to him, the dogma and importance of which Chloe cannot grasp. There is self-loathing there, as if to drink is to sink low and to destroy oneself. A drink for Chloe is a thing of joy, something to round off a meal, something that allows for freedom of discussion. But to Richard, and evidently to this Rose, it is a way to destroy any desire other than the desire for more drink. The two drink quickly, each putting their glasses down the table long before Chloe is halfway finished with hers.

'Why not take advantage of these things while we can?' Richard asks, as if in response to Chloe's thoughts.

They continue to sit and talk as the warm darkness of the evening envelops them. They have not yet seen any of the Keys, have not moved beyond the house in which they are staying, have barely seen their rooms. Richard and Rose speak quickly to each other, urgently, each finding some solace in the other that is foreign to Chloe. She blames herself that she cannot be this person to Richard. Perhaps he does not think that she would understand. Perhaps he does not recognise in Chloe's questions anything but the surface layer, does not see the depths of her attempts to communicate.

'...It's a corrupt system, the demagogical politicians whipping the population into a state of constant fear. Nothing I'm doing can be any help in the long-run, but I need to try.'

Chloe looks across at Rose. She wonders how a stranger can make her feel such self-doubt. Rose's words spill forth quickly in staccato bursts and Chloe feels dumb because of them. Even after living so long with Richard, whose speech is always quick and whose sentences are rattled off with speed, she still feels self-conscious of her ability to speak in English. To Chloe the words she speaks sound clumsy and false. When she speaks English, she feels like she is holding rocks on her tongue, letting them drop slowly, one by one, to the floor. Then when enough have fallen there is the outpouring and Chloe cannot help but speak at length, trying to make herself understood. She is used to seeing the expressions of those she is speaking to go blank as they fail to follow what she is saying. There is so much that she wants to say at once, and she is always afraid that someone will eventually stop her, tell her that she has spoken enough, ask why she thinks she is worth listening to.

'So why did you move here. Why did you travel here from Australia?' Chloe asks, trying to do something to make herself a part of the conversation. She wants to feel like she matters in that place, she is worried that she does not. Richard looks at her as if she is crazy

to ask and Chloe tries to remember if this has already been said, if she has committed a social gaffe.

‘That’s a fair question. Not many people would come to work for the Public Defenders. I studied as a lawyer in Sydney, I wanted to get some experience... it seemed like here I could do something useful. They’re still sentencing kids to death here. Maybe I needed to get some perspective. But I’m not sure I know what I want.’

‘You’ve always known what you wanted,’ Richard says. His expression stops Chloe from saying anything more. It is so still; he is so certain. What could she say?’

But it does not matter what is said. The night wears on. Richard becomes more and more lost. Eventually Chloe gives up, she stops trying to insert herself in the conversation and lets it wash over her like water. She stands, says goodnight, and leaves Richard and Rose to solidify whatever connection they formed years before. Rose apologises while Richard smiles a half-smile from his seated position. He wishes her a good night. Chloe is not worried, not really. She knows that whatever Richard has felt in the past for this woman, it cannot touch the honesty of their relationship. Still as she walks back up the stairs, she finds herself hungry and tired and also somehow desperately sad. She slips into the empty bed and eventually finds sleep.

Chloe dreams that she is drowning in the lake near her parent’s chalet, frantically and splashing her arms while Richard watches from the shore. His eyes are black rocks. She wakes to him stumbling into the room. Richard is being careful not to make noise and so makes more than he needs to. Chloe turns over and pretends not to have woken. In her half sleeping state she wonders, if Rose had asked him into her bed that night, whether Richard would have said yes.

The next morning as Richard and Rose sleep Chloe tiptoes down to the kitchen. She sees a line of water — puddles and then droplets of spray— running from the canal, through the kitchen, to the door of Rose's room. She has been swimming. Without a towel. And probably without a swimsuit.

Chloe breakfasts alone in a small café, watching the boats rise and fall with the soft lapping of the canal. On the broad street two old men speak softly, cigars in hand, their shirts pulled up to show their swollen, brown bellies. The air is warm and still, and it is as though all the troubles in the world are still sleeping. She drinks her rich, sweet coffee and is almost content in her solitude.

Walking back along the canal she sees the two of them speaking at the patio table. Their heads are held close together. He seems angry somehow; his brow is furrowed, his normally golden eyes turned dark, almost black in the morning sun. Chloe remembers her dream. She wonders what they can be discussing with such intensity. With a dropping sensation in her stomach she sees that he already has a drink in his hand.

'Chloe,' Rose says when she sees her. There is a shared look between them. Chloe sits but after a short while spent in idle conversation, she takes his hand in hers and leads him back up to their room. They leave Rose alone with the sounds of the water splashing against the side of the boats and the cars driving past behind the house.

This other house, when they reach it, is surprisingly beautiful — a large two-storied wooden building blocked from the house by a row of tall trees. The drive down was too long and uncomfortable. She is happy to be walking in the shade. The three join a short line of tourists waiting at the gate. Chloe feels warm, she is starting to sweat. She waits for some resolution, for something to happen to lift the oppressive tension from the group. Richard speaks hurriedly as they wait. She only half-listens to his softly spoken phrases. In her mind he

sounds like a supplicant, with Hemingway's house the altar. She turns away from him as soon as she can, distancing herself from the pair as soon as they make their way through the heavy, metal-lattice gates.

Inside photographs of the writer and his fishing trophies hang in otherwise ordinary rooms. The walls are cream coloured, the window blinds a lemon-yellow. It is a nice house, but still just a house. Richard's obsession with the man leaves Chloe confused and worried. Worried because it is another layer between them, a gap that she can't bring herself to bridge.

'I'm going for a walk,' she says after a few long moments.

'Are you sure?' He asks. He does not seem sad to see her leave. Chloe leaves them to peer out of the dead writer's windows.

There is beauty in the garden — the bright green of the leaves, the stretch of the lawns. Chloe finds an empty blue swimming pool and next to it a delicate metal-framed rocking chair. She sits and a moment later a cat appears and presses its forehead to her extended hand. She falls back into an idle reverie. She is at home, with her parents and her childhood cat. They sit on the lawn drinking fruit-infused tea and speaking to each other in French.

After a short while, Richard and Rose come walking down the grass slope towards her; each look perfectly at ease, perfectly suited to their surroundings; he is wearing his white-linen shirt and she a delicate red dress.

'You're not going to look at the house?'

'A house is a house to me,' Chloe says, 'you are the one that is interested.'

'Yes, I guess so, and this is a nice garden.'

'I do think I could live like this. The pool and the sun. Even the cats are kind,' Rose says.

'There used to be money in writing,' Richard says. There is a note of complaint in his voice.

'Well for Hemingway at least, it looks like. He certainly made a name for himself. Good branding.'

'I do not know what you mean.'

'Rosalind's right. As an author he knew how to sell an image of himself.' There is something in the way he says her name. Rosalind. Rose has not called herself by that name and yet he says it easily, almost proprietorially. 'I'll tell you a story. It's one Hemingway used to tell. He'd be entertaining his friends, either here or not that far away in Cuba, and he'd casually let slip that he'd slept with Mata Hari.'

'The spy?' Chloe asks.

'Yeah. Very well-known seductress. Well they'd be all questions, these men and women from another era and he'd go on to say: "I fucked her very well."'

'I'm guessing that to Hemingway he fucked them all well.'

'Did he? With the spy?'

'That's the punchline. She was killed in 1917 and Papa didn't leave the United States until 1918. There's no way it could be true.'

'So he is a liar?'

'Well that's not the point. It was a good story. And it was his stories that made him. The truth didn't matter.'

'His wife did not mind?'

'That's difficult to say. Look here there are some photos over here.' He stood to the side and pointed out a row of black and white photographs on the wall of the pool patio.

'Most are of Martha. But you see there Mary and there Pauline.'

'And there?' Rose says pointing to a small photograph set to the side of the others. It shows a woman with short-cropped hair holding on to the hand of a small boy.

'That is Hadley. And their son, who they called Bumby. She was his first wife.'

'What happened?'

'What always happens. He fell in love with her because he saw something in her. But she wasn't that something. She was something else. So he left her for the next woman who had something he wanted.'

'You don't make much of marriage.'

'It was Hemingway. He needed that turbulence, that passion for his art. The rest of us — normal people — I think we'll be alright.'

'Well I want to go look at the house. Chloe do you want to come with me?' Rose says. She smiles as she asks— she genuinely wants Chloe to go with her.

'No thank you, I think I will stay here for now.'

'I'll go with you,' Richard says, 'I've got to take some notes anyway. I keep on forgetting that I'm here to work.'

They walk back up towards the house, close to each other. They look so much like a couple that Chloe finds herself expecting him to take Rose's hand in his. But she knows it is unfair of her to doubt him. She scolds herself for being so jealous, so unreasonable. Men can be friends with women after all. It is just that Rose is so... so...

Chloe is happy sitting in the sun, drifting in her thoughts. It is only when she is woken by an American man's laugh that she realises that she has been sleeping.

She walks up towards the big house still not fully awake. There is a gift shop with books and photographs, and she wonders whether she should buy Richard something. She is still trying to get her thoughts in order when from above she hears his distinctive voice. He is speaking softly and insistently. There is something foreign about his tone.

'What do you mean?'

'It's okay. This doesn't need to matter.'

'But it does matter.'

'No, it doesn't. Don't make too much of these things. It's just the way things are.'

'There's more to it than that.'

'Sure, there is,' says Rose.

Chloe doesn't want to hear anymore; each word is a deepening of the rift that exists between her and Richard. Hearing any more will tear her in two. She turns and walks quickly back the way she has come. The wide lawn and the coolness of the empty swimming pool act as a refuge. She gathers her sundress underneath her and sits at the edge of the pool, letting her feet swing gently in its emptiness. She sits like that, like a child enjoying the sun, for a long while. Her mind is blank. Then a shadow extends over her. She sees it spread against the bottom of the pool, its arms down by its side its legs spread.

'Here you are. Are you ready to go?' Richard says.

'I am. Did you do everything you wanted to do?'

On his downturned face there is a smile she recognises, and for a moment Chloe thinks that everything is okay, that she has imagined that voice and its implications, that their lives would be happy.

'Yeah I saw everything. Come on, let's get back. Rosalind might be waiting.'

That night they drink too much at a restaurant that serves overcooked fish and sweet wine. A band plays energetically, and a few couples dance nervously on an open section of the veranda. They stay seated as the light grows dark, lethargic in the heavy, evening air. Eventually the dancers retreat to their tables. Rose is less joyful than she has been, her movements less deft, less precise. Chloe wonders whether or not she should be a better host.

Maybe she should try to make more of a connection, to get to know her better. She could try to alleviate whatever gloom Rose is feeling. But she stays quiet, seeing Rose as an opponent, though she knows that it isn't Rose's fault that Richard eyes fall on her quite so often.

Richard is happy and that makes lively attempts at conversation. He has on his wide smile and drinks his wine with pleasure; he laughs and tells jokes that Chloe has not heard before. His joy is contagious and soon Chloe is happy again and Rose, too, cannot help but smile her thin smile.

The next day Chloe cooks for Richard in their rented home. Rose has left sometime earlier. She looked tired, getting behind the wheel of her car, as if she knew that there was no rest for her anytime soon. Chloe is glad to be alone with Richard again. She wants to be comforted. And to rest.

'Are we going to be happy in our lives, Richard?'

'What do you mean?'

'I want to know that you will try to be happy, you won't make yourself miserable for the sake of being dramatic.'

Chloe sees no problem in these questions. For her it is better to talk openly. She believes that the best way to be in a relationship is to be honest, without pretences or facades.

'Oh, I see,' Richard says. 'Yes, yes, of course. As long as we're together I'll be happy.'

'You would not rather be with her?'

'No, no, of course not. Our future belongs to us. Just the two of us.'

He hugs her then and pulls her close, as if to satisfy her questions with the action. As Chloe rests her head on his chest, she knows that he is lying. But she has decided not to care.

Later that evening, when Richard asks her to marry him — quickly and without fuss — Chloe has no choice but to say yes. This way she can keep him for herself, so that they can enjoy the solitude that they create away from the world without interruption. Maybe Rose has something to do with Chloe's willingness to throw herself wholeheartedly into marriage. Maybe Chloe takes the new proposal as a sign that she has been chosen over Rose. Either way the outcome is the same. Chloe knows that Richard needs her in his life. Maybe that is why she forgives him, enables him, ignores his weaknesses. Maybe she is the one at fault.

The rest of their time in Florida passes quickly. They eat good meals in crowded restaurants and read in the sun on the verandas of small cafés. They smile often. Laugh often. Sleep together often. On their last day they take a boat out into open water and it seems as if, once again, they are happy.

'So no more brooding?' Chloe asks.

'No, just you and me now. Us against the world.'

The flight home is long, but Richard talks enthusiastically about the article he will write. Soon they are back in their small apartment. Chloe goes back to her studies; life continues. They make plans for their future, talk long into the night. One night, after too many bottles of wine, they decided to make a change. It is not, perhaps, what Chloe wants, but she is too wrapped up in him to notice. Richard is again the man she loves, and his enthusiasm means that there is little she will not do for him.

We had been drinking, the three of us, as friends. We'd arrived at the house after too long travelling. Chloe had been worn out by the trip. Her fatigue made her loving and biting in

equal measure. She would kiss my cheek and hug me one moment and then storm out of the room the next. The heat was almost unbearable.

After a late lunch Chloe went to rest in our bedroom upstairs and I was left alone in the foyer. It was a lovely room, full of light and space. The floor was stone. As I paced my shoes made little thudding sounds that marked the excruciating passage of time.

Rosalind rang the doorbell.

The sound, even though I was waiting for it, was desperate for it, surprised me. I felt a frisson run the length of my body. My movements became mechanical. It was as if I was no longer controlling my body; I was floating next to it. I moved to the door. She was on the other side. In a moment I would see her lips curve up into a smile, feel her skin against mine.

When I opened the door, she did smile. That same sharp smile she'd always had. In the instant before either of us spoke I saw the girl that had captivated me those years ago. She was still dangerously beautiful; her dark eyes betraying a hunger for experience and for joy. But there was also a tiredness there that I had not seen before. She was undeniably older. She stepped forward.

I pulled her into a hug and recognised her perfume. A smell of lavender and bergamot that brought me back in time. To when we had sat opposite each other on my unmade bed and she had said:

'I wanted to know.'

'Know what?'

'Whether you'd kiss me.'

Now I took her into my arms and held her tightly. It felt natural for me to hold her. She fitted perfectly in my arms, her hair against my cheek. I noticed how thin she'd become; it was as if the years had diminished her. I heard Chloe coming down the stairs. I pulled back from the hug a little too abruptly. What would Chloe read in that movement? Or Rosalind? It

was brought back to me that this was their first meeting. Maybe Chloe would realise that there was more here than what I had explicitly told her, an emotional depth that I had not shared. What would see in each other? Still, there we were. It was enough to see Rosalind. So that I could know, finally, what we were to each other.

In some way I think we all understood the importance of that evening. It was reflected in the way we drank, too much and too quickly.

Is it strange that there has always been alcohol in my story? Perhaps we needed the drink to allow for the situation, to feel the depth of our emotions. Maybe we needed to feel less. We were trying to drown out the questions and the intrusive thoughts, the idea that perhaps what we were doing wasn't quite right. Drinking was something to do during the telling pauses and averted glances.

I mixed the drinks. They sat, looking out to the canal, admiring the beauty of this place that I had chosen. The roads that snaked their way around the archipelago were a light grey. They contrasted sharply with the green of the trees and grass. The deep blue of the water in the beating sun. It was a lovingly maintained beauty. The trees rose straight and tall from low shrubbery. The landscape was almost unreasonably beautiful. An iguana ran along the far side of the canal. It was a vivid green. The air was tranquil.

Rosalind turned to look up at me.

'I'm glad to see you happy,' she said. Her eyes were barely open; there was a folding of the skin to the side of her eyes. I stopped making the drinks. The sun was just beginning to dip and burn a bright pink on the horizon.

'Yeah, we are. I think,' I said.

'I am glad you think so, Richard.,' Chloe said.

I smiled again and turned back to the drinks. I wanted to tell Rosalind that my smile was a pretence, that her being there was excruciating to me.

As it was, all I could do was stir and hope that I could show her a little of what I truly felt at some later time. There was a silence. Chloe was watching me. I thought of that scene in Anna Karenina where Konstantin Levin writes out the letters ‘w,y,s,i,i,w,i,i,t,o,a,’ in chalk at the family card-table, hoping that his love, Princess Ekaterina can decipher them. Somehow, impossibly, Kitty knows the letter to mean: ‘When you said, “It is impossible,” was it impossible then, or always?’ She lets Levin know that now, finally, they can be together. All his dreams come true.

I thought of writing down the letters ‘w,i,w,t,a,’ on a paper towel. I could slip it to Rosalind. But it was impossible to hope that she would be able to see in them, *What If We Tried Again?* Tolstoy’s story just wasn’t believable. And, anyway, Chloe had read Anna Karenina.

Instead I waited. When I could I managed to say:

‘Why not take advantage of these things while we can?’

And I hoped that she understood.

If she did she didn’t show it then. She spoke of her time working on death row cases in Florida, going into detail about her daily work. I had trouble picturing her there with those people. It wasn’t like when she told me stories of her childhood. The work was difficult and emotionally taxing and I could see that it was tearing her apart at the seams.

I told her about how Chloe and I had met, hinted at how small our lives had become. Chloe was content to sit and listen, lost to the significance of what was said. She watched the sun disappear. The final glimmering specks of light on the water. Finally Chloe stood up.

‘Stay, talk,’ she said, ‘I will see you later. Try not to wake me when you come in.’

It was almost completely dark now. I had trouble seeing Rosalind’s face. Our drinks, classic daquiris, were strong and good and our lips pregnant with unasked questions.

‘And what happened to the boy?’

‘The boy?’ she asked. She shook her head as if to help her understand.

‘The one you were talking about. The schizophrenic kid you were defending.’

‘Oh. Him. They’re going to execute him. I don’t want to talk about it,’ she said. Her tone was dull, defeatist.

‘Right.’

‘I’m thinking of leaving. It’s good to try, but I think it’s had the better of me. I’m not sure I can go on.’

‘You’ve done your part,’

‘No, no I haven’t. I’ve been too lucky. But I’m just tired. Too tired not to give in.’

My eyes had adjusted to the dark. I could see a dark eye under an arched eyebrow. Her expression was one that I recognised, but it was informed by the years that had passed. There was a knowingness there. Suddenly I felt the need to touch her skin, to lay my hand on hers. I needed to see if Rosalind was still the woman that she had been.

‘You should have told me,’ she said.

‘Should have told you?’

‘About Chloe. You should have told me. I like her, but she came as a shock.’

‘I wanted to, but every time I tried, I felt myself somehow unable to.’

‘I think I can understand why.’

I got up to fix us some more drinks. Classic daiquiris: lime juice, simple syrup, and rum. It was a drink that suited that place and the nostalgia that hung heavy in the evening air. There was something important about their sharp bite; there was a beauty in the intoxication they brought.

‘I guess you have a good life in England. You did always want to travel,’ she said.

‘Did I?’

‘Well as far as I can remember. Nowhere you actually were was good enough for you. You were always looking to somewhere else to be more exciting, more real. It’s like you never really saw the places around you, just what you imagined others were like.’

‘That’s strange,’ I said, ‘I could have said the same about you.’ There was a pause as we drank. I extended my leg and touched Rosalind’s naked foot with my loafer.

‘Did you ever find it?’ I asked.

‘Did I ever find it?’

‘The place. The place where you get to be the person you want to be. It’s what you told me when you were leaving Sydney, when you left my life.’

‘I don’t remember every saying something like that. Could I have been so dramatic?’

‘Not dramatic, just truthful.’

‘I don’t think I did ever find anything like that, I don’t think it’s possible to. I’d just be setting myself up for disappointment if I demanded of a single place or thing to fix me, to make me whole. I was traveling, I came here to help others in a way that I could. And I wanted a change from the life that I was living — but I didn’t need to change myself. You can’t deny your past. I didn’t come to Florida to be someone else. Just to try and grow.’

It was strange how Rosalind could forget these important moments, moments that had shaped us and our relationship. I set my drink down carefully.

The Hemingway home sat at the end of a small cobbled back street of Key West, shaded by walls of lush trees. The house itself was beautiful. Arching banisters and pastel colours and the whole overrun by half-feral six-toed cats. It was a house that filled me with desire. I could see myself living there, standing on the wrapping balcony in the early evening with a cool drink in my hand while a slim figure behind me slipped her hands around my waist.

I wanted to picture myself in that house as Hemingway. I wanted to sit at his table and imagine myself writing something real, something honest. Chloe and then Rosalind peeled off towards the lawns and I followed. We passed the cock-fighting pit and stopped to look at a sign with a black and white photograph of Hemingway, handsome in his thick moustache, his hair swept back from his forehead. Underneath the sign it was written that he'd once bet 300 dollars that no one in Key West could go three rounds with him in a boxing match. He'd beaten all those who took him up on the offer. I didn't believe it. I wondered what it would have been like to box with Hemingway. He drank and boasted too much to be a really good fighter.

We continued walking. I stopped to look through the windows of the house. The living room I saw was a normal enough, exotic only for the head of a Greater Kudu hanging on the wall above a low bookshelf. Chloe had gone on ahead and that I was alone with Rosalind. She looked back at me with a slight frown.

We found Chloe next to an empty blue pool. Even empty it looked good and cool, the sides painted a dark blue. It had had been, for a while, the only pool between there and Cuba, 90 miles away. I could see myself swimming in it, under the Banyan trees, drinking dark rum with Hemingway and Hotchner, discussing writing and bullfighting.

'I do think I could live like this.' Rosalind said. I thought about the life we might have. The three of us talked idly. Chloe decided to stay in the sun by the empty pool. Rosalind and I went back to the house together, walking quietly side by side, not needing to speak as we looked around the rooms with unseeing eyes.

After leaving the house Chloe wanted to walk down to dock and look at the boats. Rosalind said she would join her. I told them that there was something else I wanted to see, and we turned away from each other. I had a whisky standing at the bar of *Sloppy Joe's*. The room was gloomy and dark after the bright morning sunshine. Dozens of bras of different

colours hung from the ceiling. Drunken American frat boys in tank tops shouted at each other over vivid plastic cups. It was different to how I imagined it. Not at all how Hemingway described. If his ghost was in Key West, it certainly wasn't in that bar.

'Are you happy Richard?'

'What do you mean? Here?'

'No I mean are you happy?'

Rosalind had driven away that morning, walking to the car as if nothing at all had changed. As if she had just spent a weekend with an old friend and his girlfriend and nothing more. She had stuck her left arm out of the window and waved once before turning off at the crossroad. She hadn't looked back.

Chloe and I were in the kitchen of that big house, alone with nothing but the echoes of our insipid conversation to fill the silence that Rosalind had left. My face must have been drawn; it must have shown that that I was thinking about her. Chloe took my hand in hers. I remember the feeling of warmth; it had made me want to envelope her in a hug and hold her to me.

I suppose that would have been the time. The time to tell Chloe the truth of the thing. I should have told Chloe that it wasn't that I wasn't happy, but that I was monumentally, irreparably conflicted.

'Yes, yes, of course I'm happy,' I said.

It was a decision made and saying it out loud almost made it true. I got up to open another bottle of wine, returning Chloe's smile as I struggled with the corkscrew.

I became more and more certain that this was the only course of action left for me. I looked at Chloe with her hopeful smile and thought how much I needed her in my life. There was something there that was right. Chloe made sense. Rosalind had left.

‘Why don’t we get married?’ I asked later as we sat together on the couch, her legs on mine. I hadn’t planned to propose that night, but it felt right as I said it. I did want to be married to Chloe. That was the right choice. She would support me, love me. Chloe was there for me.

‘Are you asking me to marry you?’

‘Sure. We’re as good as married anyway. There’s nothing getting in the way. We should do it soon. A civil ceremony. I can’t stand the idea of not being married to you.’

‘I love you Richard. If you want me to marry you tomorrow I will. Are you asking me?’

‘Yes, yes I’m asking. Come on let’s do it. As soon as we get back to England.’

Later that night, when Chloe was brushing her teeth in the bathroom, I took out my laptop. I thought of writing to Rosalind. I opened up my email. I could have told her that she’d been wrong. That there had been something there. Or I could have mentioned the engagement. Maybe she would have responded then. But I couldn’t bring myself to start typing and the subject line stayed blank.

I closed the computer.

But I’m getting ahead of the story. It was years before. It was evening.

I was in a small apartment off-campus, finishing my master’s thesis. The friends I’d made at university had mostly drifted away. To the point that I’d looked around one day and found myself almost unbearably isolated. I don’t remember much from that time that I could recount now with any clarity; I’d begun drinking in a way that seemed no longer for pleasure but to emanate from a desire to extinguish myself completely.

Then one evening doorbell rang. I opened the door and found Mark standing there, with a broad smile and the devil in his face. There was a girl by his side. She was maybe nineteen. She was holding a near-empty bottle of wine.

‘We want to be entertained,’ he said.

It is an image I can still see clearly when I close my eyes: a familiar stranger leaning on my door frame. She wore a Bruce Springsteen t-shirt and a tight-lipped smile. It was a smile that stuck in my throat.

‘I’m Richard,’ I said.

‘I know,’ she said.

To everyone else in her life, to Mark, Alexis, and Chloe, she was Rose or occasionally Rosie. But to me she was always Rosalind. It was a name that defined her, that encapsulated everything she was to me. I loved her for it.

‘Make yourselves at home,’ I said.

I moved the books off my small kitchen table to make space. Mark slumped into a seat. Rosalind stood perfectly upright; her sharp eyes bright in the evening light. I felt conscious of the mess; the empty bottles on the kitchen counter, the clothes lying on the floor.

‘Well give us a drink,’ Mark said. I nodded.

There was silence as I opened beer bottles. Then abruptly we were talking quickly and earnestly. After a while I reached for the bottle of whisky I kept in a cupboard above the stove.

‘So this is how it’s going to be?’ she said. This was later, after the sun had gone down and we sat in a pool of light cast by the naked bulb above the table.

‘This is how it’s going to be,’ I said. Mark laughed, took a drink and shuffled, getting ready to deal another hand.

I asked how they had met, how they had become so close.

‘Rosie is something special. I thought you two would get along.’ Mark’s long arms extending to place each card down with a snap at our hands. I looked at him, at his dishevelled black hair, his impish grin and blue eyes and wondered whether he would change, whether he already had.

She was finishing a law degree. Mark was still studying something. He had found a sheltered place in academia and refused to leave it. When they met, he had been drinking gin and soda out of a plastic cup under the shade of a jacaranda tree. Blue-purple blossoms would have been hanging over his head. Then he had seen her walk by. The sight of her had floored him. There was something about this girl that had made him want to know her, to talk to her, to make her laugh.

‘I just had to meet her,’ he said.

She’d smiled her tight-lipped smile when he said this. I re-filled our glasses.

She had ignored him when he had asked her to join him for a drink but made it a habit to walk by the jacaranda tree. Even when it wasn’t the quickest way to class. He made it a habit to always be there, watching the students walking by, waiting for a glimpse of her. He had persisted, had spoken skilfully in his lilting, playful way and finally she had stopped.

By the next week she was skipping class and was instead sitting with Mark on the grass as he spoke and laughed and gently played his fingers over her hand.

He finished the story with a heavy laugh. We sat at the cheap round plywood table in my kitchen and continued to drink. We talked and drank until we could no longer keep drinking. Then we fell asleep and woke in the morning and started drinking again. We talked about anything we found interesting, knowing that nothing we said could possibly matter.

For the next few weeks we enjoyed the freedom of doing nothing as the world moved around us. I told myself that I was still learning. We were discovering what was enjoyable, what was worthwhile, determining how to be ourselves. Then one night like all the other nights Mark fell asleep earlier than usual. Rosalind and I sat on my bed speaking quietly to one another. I remember feeling that something had changed, that somehow our words had meaning again, that we risked arriving somewhere dangerous.

‘You’re very loyal to him,’ she said.

‘To who?’

‘To Mark. You’re very loyal to him.’

‘He’s my friend,’ I said. I waited for her to explain. I turned my glass and looked at what was left of the vodka.

‘He doesn’t speak so well of you.’

‘I don’t believe that.’

‘It’s true.’

‘Well whatever he says when I’m not around is none of my business.’

‘There are none so blind...’

‘Why are you telling me this?’ I wanted her to stop. She seemed to be tearing apart the place we had created, destroying it, seemingly for the pleasure of being able to do so.

‘Because I like you, you remind me of someone. I thought you should know.’

‘You’re the one sleeping with him.’

‘I don’t deserve better.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘You think I deserve better?’

‘Why are we talking like this?’

‘I wanted to know.’

‘Know what?’

‘Whether you’d kiss me,’ she said as I looked at her and saw for the first time something vulnerable in her eyes. I was sure that I knew her then, in that moment. She was a reflection of who I was. She had the same needs, the same desires but the confidence to acknowledge them. She became something more to me as she continued to look at me, unspeaking unblinking, her body barely moving. The silence was total. Through the door I almost felt I could just hear Mark’s breathing. I shifted my weight, trying to restrain myself from grabbing onto her, from pulling her into me with all my strength. I had become nothing but desire, not just for physical contact but also for Rosalind to understand me completely, to justify my being. Eventually I gave in. I wrapped my arm around her waist. There was the surprising heat of her body. For a moment I teetered on the brink of understanding. And then I knew that there was nothing else in the world I wanted to do more than what she asked. But still I waited.

We sat locked in a half-embrace looking at each other. Her words echoed silently in my mind. Even sitting with her back straight she seemed small and delicate. In her chestnut-brown eyes there was something hard and calculating. She was beautiful, undoubtedly so; her poise, her control, the way her dark hair fell down over her shoulders. Mostly though it was the way she acted, the confidence that she knew not only her thoughts and desires, but yours as well.

‘Yes, I’ll kiss you,’ I finally said. I leant into her and felt her lips against mine, the warmth of her as she curled into me. I pushed my hand against her leg. I knew I should have felt something at this point, some form of regret or guilt, but I didn’t. Perhaps I was self-regarding. Perhaps I was lacking in compassion, but for me, being there in that embrace, giving something of myself to this woman was more important than anything else, any false morals I could feel. I thought for a moment of Mark, passed out in the next room. He

wouldn't feel anything until the next day when he would wake with a pain in his head and a sickening feeling in his stomach. He would want a drink, would fish two overlooked beers out of the fridge and wake me with one of them, not knowing what had happened after he had fallen asleep, maybe not caring either. I would take the beer and drink. I wouldn't say anything but would enjoy the cool of the drink and the promise it would deliver. Then Rosalind ran her fingers along my arm and I was back, feeling nothing but the pressure of her against me and the warmth of her skin.

I want to believe I was a different person then, that if I had the opportunity to do it all again I would do it differently. I wouldn't have been so self-involved. Maybe I would have been able to read the people around me. But we can't go back and the decisions I made then are mine. Of course, if I have changed, if I am a different man today, I think it's probably because of Rosalind, because of what she's given me and what she's taken away.

I let myself fall into her. I allowed her to take control of me, allowed her to tear me into a thousand pieces and re-build me again into someone other, someone completely different and infinitely better.

The next day, feeling the guilt of my betrayal sitting heavily in my chest, I pulled myself away from her. Mark wasn't awake. He didn't offer me a beer and a chance to talk until the guilt disappeared. I left them both where they slept. She in my bed and he on my couch. I went to the gym. I strapped my hands and put on my sixteen-ounce gloves. I spent an hour hitting the heavy bags that dangled like full body bags in the back room. *Jab. Jab, Cross. Jab, Cross, Hook.* I tried not to think about her. About the taste of her. The smell of her. The way she made me feel. *Jab, Cross, Body, Body, Hook.* Her smile, those sharp white teeth. I concentrated on the bag. The way that it bent when I hit it right, turning my hips in. The sway and swing of it. The stomp of my foot on the rubber floor. The clink of the chain. Rosalind

faded from my mind. There was nothing left but the satisfying thud as my hands made contact.

It was hard to train properly with the drinking that we had been doing. But I needed to be, to sweat, to clear my head. Soon my arms were shaking, and I couldn't hit the bag anymore. I unstrapped my hands and left.

When I got back, I found Mark sitting on my doorstep holding a beer. He was alone. He hadn't moved more than the few steps from the couch to the front door. He seemed as permanent a fixture there as the grey pavement beneath his feet. His eyes stayed fixed on some unseen point as I approached and I found myself wondering if I could just step over him, if I could just leave him there to stare out into nothingness.

'Hey.' He looked tired. He looked as if he hadn't slept in a week.

I dropped my things and sat down next to him. We watched as an elderly lady walked by on the other side of the street. She was pulling a canvas shopping bag on small plastic wheels. There was a teddy bear tied to the bag, staring at us with one glassy eye. Mark tipped his beer to the woman when she looked over. She shook her head and continued her slow way towards the dip in the street where the government houses stood, squat and squalid and grey.

'What's going on?'

'Just wanted to talk, you know. That's all.'

I got up again and opened the door, Mark followed me inside. He finished his beer and took another two out of the fridge. I took the one he offered. It felt cool against my hand.

'I've never felt this.'

'How?'

‘With Rosie. I never thought I would be that guy. I mean with my parents, well it was pretty much contractual. I thought the real feeling, well that was all bullshit. But fuck it if I don’t feel something now.’

I had a sip of my drink. It was good and cold. I placed my gym gear on the floor and took a seat next to Mark.

‘Okay. So what now?’

‘Now I make sure I keep her. I make sure I don’t fuck this up.’

‘Okay.’

I did want to help him.

‘I don’t know, maybe I shouldn’t drink so much.’ He got up and got himself another beer. There was something in his voice that I hadn’t heard before, as if he knew that what he was saying was useless, that just by feeling the way he did he had already brought about the end for him and Rosalind. That by recognising that he had found something that was good he had created the possibility that it could be taken away.

‘It’s funny...’

‘What is?’

‘Her sleeping in the bedroom. And me out here. I get it, though. The couch isn’t so comfortable. It’s just something I thought when I awoke this morning and she had climbed onto the couch behind me. You know? She said she’d been there all night, but I knew that she wasn’t. But like I said, I get it.’

‘Yeah.’ I finished my beer and left it on the floor. I went to have a shower. Mark was gone when I returned. I tried to do some work then but couldn’t concentrate so instead went to a bar around the corner with a book and drank until the lines on the page blurred into each other.

‘This can’t go on,’ I said. Rosalind and I were sitting at the bar. We weren’t touching but I could think of nothing else but the feel of her skin and the warmth of her breath.

‘Why not?’

‘You know why.’

‘There’s nothing wrong in wanting to spend time with someone, wanting to know someone. But if that’s how you feel then fine.’ She got up as if to walk out but a moment later she sat back down.

‘I don’t have anywhere to go.’

I ordered us drinks. Then we went back to my apartment. I put on some music and we talked. I asked her about herself she told me a little more of her story, a little about her childhood in a town that was only a two-hour drive south of where we were. It seemed to me so far away.

I pulled her onto my lap, tried to kiss her.

‘No, you were right.’

I didn’t say anything but let her get up, let her re-arrange her clothing.

‘I’m leaving.’

‘Where?’ I asked.

‘Somewhere new.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it’s not here. I thought it might be, but it’s not here that I get to be the person I want to be. I thought that things might be different in this city, going to university, but as it turns out it’s all the same. I’m always just going to be stuck with who I am. I guess I just have to accept that.’

I tried to think of a way to stop her but I couldn't think of the words that were big enough for what was happening. I knew that this thing, whatever it was, had to end, but still I needed Rosalind. A part of me, the part of me that lived in stories — in literature and film — knew that this was the most important thing. Next to Rosalind everything in my life was background. I sat on the couch, without saying a word, as my life slipped away. Rosalind stopped and looked down at me, as if giving me the opportunity to say something, to make myself worthwhile, and in a moment of cowardice I looked down at my feet. I would always regret that moment. Then the door slammed shut and I was alone in a small room with only the sound of Bruce Springsteen singing sweetly from the speakers.

I saw her once more. I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her. So — still feeling the guilt sitting heavily in my chest— I called her. We met at a coffeeshop this time, a place on King Street full of noises and students. She was waiting for me outside, under the café's black sign. Her hair was pinned up. I couldn't see her eyes behind her dark sunglasses. As I approached, I saw the turn of her head; her lips pulled out into a tight smile. We hugged and abruptly I felt awkward, a child pretending at being grown. An emaciated man in a white baseball cap walked towards us. His eyes were stuck to the pavement.

'Should we go in?' I asked.

'Up to you.'

She followed me to a table at the window. The addict was still shuffling past outside. He stopped to pick up the nub of cigarette from the sidewalk and placed it into his mouth.

'So what did you want to talk to me about?'

And that was it. What could I say? There was so much I felt I needed to know, so much I wanted her to understand. I was dumb.

'I just wanted to see you,' I said eventually.

‘Okay.’

‘Want a drink?’

‘Sure. Order me a coffee.’

‘Just that?’

‘Yeah.’

I caught the eye of the waitress and gave the order. Two long blacks. Ten minutes to drink. To find my words.

‘I’ve invited Mark, he’ll join us after he’s finished at work.’

I paused. She had invited him. To our date? I felt we were playing a chess game that I was losing. Each move I made she had a counter. My pieces were being lost one by one, leaving me exposed. Almost defeated.

‘Sure. Good. How is he?’

‘He’s good. I think he misses you.’

‘Right.’

I wondered whether I should touch her hand; it was lying on the table. Her nails were manicured a soft white colour. I moved my arm a little and then pulled it back. Had I ever held her hand? I couldn’t remember. I thought that I had, but now I wasn’t sure. The waitress arrived with our drinks. She smiled as if to say: *isn’t this cute?* I wanted to shout, to tell her that this moment was more important than that, than whatever she was thinking. I was losing everything.

‘You didn’t tell me what you wanted to talk about.’

‘I just wanted to see you.’

‘You said that already.’

‘Right.’

I took a sip of the coffee. Too hot. Bitter. There didn't seem anything I could say. I felt foolish, weak. But there was nothing I could do.

'Tell me more. About growing up on the coast. I want to hear all of it.'

'Are you writing a book?' she asked.

I shook my head. 'I just want to know, is all.'

She smiled and shrugged. Her shoulders reached sharp peaks underneath her shirt.

'If that's what you want,' she said. She spoke as if what she was saying didn't really matter. I memorised every word.

After a little while I looked up and Mark was there beside us, a wide smile on his face. He patted my shoulder and bent over to kiss Rosalind on the lips. He ordered himself a drink and we spoke noncommittally for a while. When they finally left, walking side by side, his arm around her waist, I felt lost. I still felt that I had missed out on something, something huge. I just didn't know what it was yet.

This is the story Rosalind told me. I need to write it. To have down in writing the sequence of events that made her who she is. I'll hold onto her in these pages, at least.

She was raised in a Federation house. It had a green corrugated iron roof and a peeling white wood facade. It was surrounded by Blackbutt trees and overgrown Lantana. There was a low green metal fence surrounding the house block. Inside the house the walls were papered a fading yellow and the antique furniture was all in shades of brown. And it was five minutes' walk up from the beach.

It was a small town on the eastern coast of Australia, about two hours' drive south of Sydney. There she was able to run barefoot, rollicking unchecked and unsupervised. She was filled with the bittersweet joy of that freedom. She had the ocean. Its expanse carried the promise of endless beauty and excitement. She would pick a book from one of the dusty bookshelves and wind her way down the pot-holed road and the dappled shade of the gum trees and Norfolk pines, through a narrow strip of brush, to the sand dunes. It was a secret place of hers, somewhere where no-one but the occasional seabird or sniffing dog would break the peace. She was happy in her solitude. She would lie down in the warm sand and read and occasionally run to the water and throw herself in.

'You were happy on your own?' I asked

'Yes, of course.'

Sometimes there were dolphins. There out beyond and across the breakers. Their dark fins breaching the surface as they swam and rolled and surfed the back waves. She would stand and watch from the crest of a dune. She would see herself among them. I think she drew strength from the sight. Or maybe not. It could have been that she just liked the warmth of the sand and the way the sun glinted off the water.

Later she was sent to the big brick school the next town. She was engulfed by routine and study. She wore the cheap uniform and the wide-brimmed hat and sat alone on the near-empty bus. She didn't really care for her loud, gossipy, schoolmates and found herself alone more often than not. There were those of them that were drawn to her but she always rebuffed their advances of friendship.

But there was an excitement for her in learning. Miss Ivette, her English teacher, a spinster of uncertain years whose occasional, fleeting smile betrayed an allure faded by thwarted ambition, alcohol, and cigarettes, nurtured her love of reading. With her encouragement, good writing began to seem like a means to an end, not just as a distraction;

as an art form that could elevate and inform her thoughts and actions. She became more discerning in her reading. She picked subjects and authors rather than taking books off shelves at random. There was a focus, a drive that became visible in her movements.

Her father noticed the change in her first. He saw her blooming intelligence and curiosity and, I think, became frightened by it. Maybe he saw his burgeoning teenage daughter as an intellectual rival, and so, as with all his rivals, he found her weakness — her love for him— and exploited it.

He waited in the living room when she came home from school. He wore an old tweed jacket. The sleeves were too short for his long arms; the sleeves of his shirt were yellow where it met his skin.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ he asked. It was how he would always begin his lectures. She didn’t answer. She stood looking up at him, her mouth slightly open, and a half-formed smile on her lips. He stepped closer. Her mouth closed. She tried to block her nose to the smell of him, of beer, sweat, and pipe tobacco. She looked past his shoulder to the window and the grey ridged trees. She could just see the blue of the ocean reaching up to meet the sky.

‘Answer me when I’m talking to you,’ he said.

He feigned solicitousness. He commented on her sandy clothes and windswept hair. But there was laughter in his voice. She turned her head again. On the bookshelf behind him were a few teaching manuals and twenty copies of his only published book. His frustration mounted. Soon he was shouting at her, trying to cause some reaction. She stood whilst her father directed these words at her, unmoving, jaw clenched.

‘Are you fucking listening to me, Rosalind?’

His face twisted in frustration. His voice rose. Still she didn't react. When the frustration was too much for him, he slapped her across the face with his open hand. Even then she was quiet. She lay on the ground, or on the sofa, and stared up at her father. In the kitchen her mother was preparing dinner, humming softly. He walked past her and took a beer from the fridge. Then he walked back into the living room and sat down in the old leather armchair near. She was still lying motionless. His long body slumped further down into the armchair and his feet splay out on the carpet. Outside the window a Kookaburra cackled.

For the rest of the evening he ignored her as completely as if she didn't exist. At dinner she watched as he turned his words and violence on her mother. He railed at the outside world and its multitude of hurts and insufficiencies.

She hardened herself against him. The man who had given her her name. The loss of a father hurt her, altered her in a way that couldn't be restored. Because it was not only that her father was trying to hurt her, to demean and belittle her; he had also shown himself as human, and fallible. He was an unhealthy man, worn down by time and the knowledge that he was not intelligent enough to make it on any stage bigger than that of his small town.

After that she no longer trusted others. She never gave herself to them completely. There was a part of her holding back, observing. This was the person that I would know, though it didn't become apparent for quite some time.

By the time she was thirteen, her father's evening berating had become commonplace. She left the house early in the morning and didn't come home until late at night. She knew that her parents' concern would be minimal. It was summer and she had the beach. She was in her

sanctuary among the sand dunes, re-reading a worn and sandy copy of *Pride and Prejudice* she had borrowed from the local library and never returned. She turned a page. Looking beyond the book she noticed a shape on the closest crest of sand. It teetered for a moment and came sliding down towards her. The puppy was six months old, a mix of oversized paws and ears and smiles. It half-ran, half-fell towards her. When it reached her legs, it pounced on her extended right foot. She lifted herself up onto her elbows and the puppy jumped back. It snuffled at the sand again and then leapt on her toes. She sat up; the dog was now too busy with her legs to react. She put the book down and reached out her hand to pat the dog, and, when it didn't shy away, pulled it into her lap. The dog cocked its head and looked up at her. Its crimson tongue lolled out of the side of its mouth.

'Who do you belong to?' she said. As if in reply shout came from down the beach.

'Fred!'

'Frederick!'

'Come 'ere Fred,' the voice called. Soon she saw a thick blonde head of hair and then a boy, perhaps a few years older than her, rose into view.

He stopped at the top of the sandbank. There was a small, anxious smile on his lips.

'Hi,' she said.

'Hi.'

'You found Frederick.'

'Frederick?' She looked down at the ball of fur and muscle in her lap. It was gnawing persistently at her thumb. She pulled her hand away.

'Frederick Altamont Cornwallis Twistleton, Fifth Earl of Ickenham,' the boy said.

There was satisfaction in his voice.

'Uncle Fred!' Her smile widened. 'Wodehouse?'

'Of course.'

Up until this point in her life the novels she read had been her private escape. Reading was a secret habit she shared with a few adults, but no-one else. She picked up the dog and placed it down on the sand beside her. She ignored its head-butts against her leg. The boy smiled again, more widely this time.

‘It’s okay, you can pat him. He’s just a boofhead.’

He skidded down the sand towards her, his uncontrollable energy mirroring the dog’s. She laughed at his enthusiasm. He sat down in front of her, nervous now he was close to her. He watched attentively as she played with the dog.

‘I’m Alexis.’

‘Rosalind.’

‘Rosalind?’

‘Rose.’

‘As you like it.’ He laughed a barking laugh — sharp and loud. Then he lunged forward, pulling the little dog on to his chest. She watched as he played. She felt herself drawn to the sheer unselfconsciousness of his movements.

They met often after that. They spent their days walking Frederick. Occasionally they would try, half-heartedly, to train him before becoming listless at the effort. They would walk to the end of the beach where the ocean broke itself on jagged rocks in great, sonorous rushes. Barefoot, they would make their way over these sharp outcrops out to the farthest point. Then they’d wait for the water to swell. They jumped just as the wave was breaking and feel themselves rushed into the deep water. There they would splutter and laugh, holding each other tightly before swimming back to the shore.

They grew tan and lithe in the sun. The cicadas called them in each evening. Even separated, she carried Alexis back home with her and felt protected. His presence in her life protected her. He kept her safe. Against her loneliness, against her father’s assaults, against

her mother's internal absence. At home she would eat quickly and hurry to her bedroom. There she would read and sleep and wait for the time that she could head out to the beach. Alexis and Frederick would be waiting for her on the sand.

I always liked that part of the story. It had been hard won. At first Rosalind had wanted to skip over it, but then she told me, and I was glad. There was a spark in her eye when she spoke of Alexis that made me jealous.

Before the summer ended two things happened. The first was that Alexis' older brother took Frederick away. He had bought the dog but had abandoned him to his kid brother when he found out that his university accommodation didn't allow pets. Now he had dropped out and was squatting with some friends in a disused hospital. There he decided that a big dog could come in useful and had driven back into town and taken Fred away. Fred had sniffed his new quarters and had run out into the night. They never saw him again.

Alexis told her a week later. His face was blank and impassive. She had been excited to see him, had been eager to tell him about her day, but she fell silent. Alexis couldn't hide the welling of his tears. They sat in silence on a bench by the beach. She held him in her arms as he cried and watched the ocean. She told him that Fred might make his way back to them.

They walked slowly back through the quiet backstreets. The smell of Jasmine lay heavy in the still air. Then the second thing happened. Not wanting to lose anything more, she pulled him to her and kissed him hard against the mouth. She felt a flutter inside herself; a strength of feeling she was not aware she was capable of. Something true. He pulled away. He looked at her with wide eyes. Then he turned and ran back home. After that she wandered

slowly back to the beach. She sat on the sand and watched the moonlight reflect off of the crests of the waves. The light formed glittering lines across the black-blue water.

School started again. Alexis went to an expensive, single-sex school. He was older, had more demands on his time. She was working part time work as a waitress at a small café in town. Her boss was an old, balding man who made her stay on after her shifts were done. He sat behind a thin counter while she worked and watched her from the corner of his eye. But she still found time to sit at the beach with her novels. She hoped to see Alexis' beach-blond hair come bobbing up from behind the closest sand-dune. More often than not she would just find herself waiting until the light dimmed too far to read. She would walk slowly back home, tired and alone.

They didn't kiss again, not for a long time after. They didn't speak of it. But she was okay. As long as he was there with her, she felt safe, she felt happy.

They were walking along the dirt parking in front of the beach. Alexis was kicking at stones; she was looking up at the mist descending over the escarpment above them. With a rush of sound, a Ute pulled up beside them. The car pulled forward and then skidded in a tight semi-circle. A close-cropped head appeared out of the passenger side window.

'Oi, cunt!'

She turned to Alexis who shook his head.

'From school, don't worry about them.' He walked out to the beach.

'Hey fag!' The boy shouted. She turned back to the car. There was a metallic taste in her mouth. Her hands shook.

'Fuck off,' she said. Alexis pulled at her shirt. He tried to get her to the beach.

The car reversed quickly. Three boys spilled from the doors. The Ute was left idling. The one with the close-cropped blond hair grabbed at Alexis.

‘You’ve got girls defending you now?’ He sniggered. His face was wide and flat. There was a sheen to his skin which made him seem faintly ill. Another of them, smaller than the other two, pushed her. She took a step backward. Alexis stepped forward and threw a punch. It didn’t land. They fell on him then. She heard the thud of the punches against his body. He collapsed under the weight of them. They kicked him hard and repeatedly. With wild courage she pulled her way in. She stood between them and Alexis. She held her ground. Finally, they stepped back, panting. The boys looked at her once more before turning and walked back to the Ute. The blond one stopped before he got back in.

‘Fucking bitch,’ he said.

She ran straight for them then, any pretence of restraint gone. The back wheels spun and smoked leaving long black rubber marks as the Ute careened violently away. She watched it go with dry, staring eyes. Then she turned and walked slowly back to where Alexis lay huddled on the grass beside the road. She sat down beside him and held him as he cried.

After that they spent more time together. It was as if the beating had cleared the tension between them. He pushed her to study harder at school. He knew that she would have to work harder than him; he was born male, white, and of wealthy parents. She responded to having someone in her life who, for the first time, wanted her to succeed only for herself. She began to study tirelessly. She outstripped her classmates in almost every subject. She and Alexis would spend hours sitting on the beach after school. She would read and he would look out over the ocean, lost in thought.

They grew this way, together, lives were now inextricably intertwined. They leaned on and supporting each other. This way they formed, if not their adult personalities, then at a presage of them. She began to write, first just scribbles of passing thoughts and then, as time

progressed, fully formed stories. The stories were about the world she saw around her. They were about the world she wanted to know. Of course, she hid her writing. She hid them even from Alexis, though she wished that he would ask to see them. But Alexis did not have the time to wear her down to the point where she felt able to share that part of herself. He had discovered the theatre, and with it a way of expressing himself. He found Oscar Wilde. For the first time since they had met four years ago, he came close to matching her reading. When they sat together, he would occasionally turn to her and quote a line. She laughed at his seriousness. At the mask he was trying to wear. He would laugh his barking laugh rang and roll over. They held each other as they regained breath.

Alexis performed in plays. Gravitating towards the female parts in his school's productions. He found strength in an ability to hide himself in plain sight. One day his drama teacher, with whom he'd formed a close rapport, told him that the school had commissioned a play. It was going to be written by the Sydney playwright Tommy Lachlan. When he saw her next Alexis met her with a smile that cracked his face in two. He lifted her up in his arms, before slowly dropping her down until they were face to face. They kissed. It was a moment that was gone in an instant but, to her, lasted forever. She took him by the hand and led him to a spot in the brush behind the beach. There she lay down and pulled him to her. It was his first time and he was nervous and gentle. She guided him between her legs and they were together. It was her first time too, as far as I know. She just made sure to tell me that it was his first time as well. Afterwards they lay looking up at the early stars. She held him to her, knowing in herself that he was already drifting away. She breathed the moment into herself; it expanded in her and filled her with joy.

That night she stayed up late and wrote a story. It was of her life, of who she was. She put her pen down and thought of Alexis. Her notebook slide off the edge of the bed.

'And the story?' I asked.

'He found it.'

'Who, Alexis?'

'No, my father.'

He was holding the notebook when she got home from school. It hung from his fingers like something spoiled. He had been looking for a pen, he said. Instead he had found this, this, thing.

'Are you going to apologise?'

'No.'

'No? That's it? Nothing to say about this?' He brought his face down to hers. She could smell his stale breath. It was warm across her cheek.

'You make me seem like a monster. How did you come up with this shit? Do you know what would happen if someone read this? They might believe that you were being serious. That these things actually happened. Do you know what they could do to me?'

'No.'

'No, of course not. You only think of yourself.' He turned himself so he could look down into her eyes. His were bloodshot. They had yellowed around the edges. She tried to look away but he took hold of her chin and held it up to him.

'It's only a story.'

'No it fucking well isn't. I'm in here, and your faggot boyfriend too. That makes it real.' He took a step back and began to tear pages out of the notebook. They fell slowly to the living room floor. She stepped forward to try and stop him but as she did, he hit her across the face with the book. From the floor she watched as he destroyed her efforts, her work, her escape. He shouted as he ripped the pages. She couldn't hear his words. His face was strained, his hands shaking.

She didn't cry after he had left. When he had worn himself out and had left the room without a backward glance. She was silent as she slowly gathered the crumpled pages and stood up. She carried them to the kitchen and threw them in the rubbish, pushing the paper down into the bag with the palm of her hand. She left the house that evening knowing that she would never to write again.

'Never?'

'Never.'

If Alexis noticed her mood or the darker colouring on the right side of her face, he made no mention of it. She told him that she had been swimming and had been dumped by a set of waves early that morning and he had nodded and accepted the explanation. He was too engrossed in his own life to notice the change in her. The actors selected for the play had been given time with the author. It was all that he could think about. Alexis was entranced by the idea of performing in front of a Sydney audience.

'Can you imagine? When the play is printed it will always have my name in it as the actor who played Mrs. Travers.'

'But don't you think that could be a problem? What about the boys at school?'

'Fuck them! This is art. They'll have to understand and so will you.'

'I do, Alexis, but...'

'But nothing. This is the most important thing I could do. We're performing in Sydney. Sydney! I have to do this. You know that.'

'I do.'

When the time finally came, on a Friday morning, she travelled with Alexis and Max – a friend of Alexis' who was playing the role of Mrs Travers' abusive husband. She was

skipping school, knowing that she wouldn't be missed. They were driving to Sydney in Max's car, an old Holden Commodore filled with take-out containers and loose script pages. The trip was long but exciting and Rosalind remembered it as a time that she felt sincerely happy. She smiled as they listened to music and argued and only stopped smiling when they pulled into the parking lot behind the theatre. Max and Alexis were going in for a last-minute costume fitting and rehearsal and she wasn't allowed in. She was left alone in a city she did not know and that seemed terrifyingly foreign. They were going to be spending the night at Alexis' brother's squat, but even if she wanted to go there, she had no idea where it was. Alexis told her that they would catch up later, after the performance, and then he and Max disappeared.

'Good luck!' she shouted after them. Then she turned and walked quickly away.

She wandered along the unfamiliar streets trying to find something that would make her feel comfortable. As if she belonged. Nothing did. She turned at random and found herself on a wide pedestrian avenue. It was lined by rows of carefully spaced plane trees. The pathway was made of cobbled grey stone. All along it young people, only a few years older than her, drifted in groups. Their voices raised in animated conversation. It was like nothing she knew. She found a map welded to a pylon and discovered that she had wandered onto a university campus. There were imposing buildings discreetly hidden behind native trees. Students rested on benches and lay on the manicured patches of grass. She tried to picture herself as one of them, of being back there in a year's time. The idea filled her with happiness. She wanted the self-assurance of these people, their aura of control and invincibility. She wanted to be one of them.

She really did see the world this way. As something to be taken on, something to challenge and to be challenged by. She was so determined. She knew what she wanted.

She found a small a café and ordered a flat white. Then she pretended to read the book she had brought (‘*What book?*’ ‘*Maya Angelou, what does it matter?*’). Really, she was looking around at those around her that were drinking, talking, and reading, trying to guess at their lives; their futures as well as their pasts. After some time, she got up and walked further through the campus.

She made it back to the theatre just in time. The audience had already taken their seats. The usher waved her in. He mimed at her to keep silent. She found a seat at the end of a row at the back of the theatre. From up there she saw the top of the actor’s heads as they came onto the stage. The play started slowly and left her cold, unfeeling. The language was stilted, forced. To her, the actors were just boys pretending to be something other than themselves. So instead of watching them she looked around at the audience. There were parents of the actors but also more university-aged men and women who were there, not out of some sense of obligation, but because they wanted to see the performance. The smiling parents made her feel something, but she couldn’t recognise what it was/.

Then she saw Alexis onstage. He was wearing a white, sleeveless blouse, dark eyeshadow, and a wig — but it was clearly him. He spoke softly and well. She began to believe in his character. Soon she couldn’t see him or the woman that he played but rather a combination of the two. He had become a separate identity which spoke only to her. She watched and marvelled at the transformation. At Alexis’ success. He had managed to do what it was he wanted to do. She watched and saw the audience through his eyes. She waited until the play was over so that she could see him and talk to him and tell him that she wanted to come live in this city with him. There they could both be the people that they wanted to be.

She waited outside for a long time. She watched the audience and then the other members of the cast leave in groups and then pairs and then alone. It was dark. It had started to get cold and she only had a light jacket. She didn’t know what to do or where to go. She

thought she saw Alexis and Max but realised that it wasn't them, just a skinny young man in a white shirt and his angry looking friend whispering furtively to each other. She went to the car to wait. Eventually she saw them, holding hands as they walked slowly through the darkened parking lot. When they saw her, they dropped their hands to their sides, but they kept smiling and laughing. Alexis didn't look up at her until they were right up to the car.

'Where have you been?' she asked. Alexis raised an eyebrow but didn't say anything. Max looked at her, unsure of what to say.

'Come on, let's go celebrate. I know a place not too far away.'

In the car Alexis and Max talked about the performance. She sat silently in the back seat. She wanted to join in their celebration. She wanted to tell them how remarkable they had been, but she couldn't bring herself to. Instead she wrapped her arms around herself and watched the city lights flash by in oranges and yellows.

They parked down a dark back street. The boys' voices were shrill and excited in the sudden stillness of the residential neighbourhood.

'Are you sure? Shouldn't we just go back?'

'And miss out on a night in the city? No, come on.'

They walked until they reached Oxford Street. It was a wide road bustling with people and closed in on either side by night clubs and boutique restaurants. The bar Max wanted to go to was a little way down towards the city centre. As they spoke she watched the passers-by. There were men in mesh tank tops holding each other's hands, women in tight dresses balanced on five-inch heels. They all wandered in groups, shouting out to each other and enjoying themselves in a way that she couldn't quite understand.

They reached what must have been the bar, a dark doorway in a block-like and building. A few idle smokers stood around the entrance. She half-hoped the bouncer at the

door would stop them, ask for their ID's and tell them to go home, but he didn't; he looked them over and lent forward.

'You know what this is?' he asked.

'Yeah we're locals,' Max said. He pushed his way inside.

Through the door it was crowded and dark. She felt stifled, claustrophobic. She couldn't see anything but bright flashing lights and dark shadows. She couldn't hear anything over the bass beating deep between her ears. She felt as if her senses had been taken away and tampered with. It was as if she were suddenly seeing and hearing everything differently. She was drowning, sinking deeper and deeper into the unknown. She wanted to leave, to head straight back to the door and go walk out in the cold city night but she knew that she needed to stay with Alexis. She had to follow him wherever he led.

They stood at the bar and ordered drinks. Alexis tapped his foot. His head turned quickly back and forth. He stopped and looked around. Max was talking with a group of three men on the outskirts of the dancefloor. They were laughing and touching each other's arms. They were happy to be in that place together. She ordered more drinks, keeping Alexis with her for a few more moments with each one. She lifted her head to try to talk to him but didn't know if he would hear her over the music.

'Are you having fun?' he asked. She nodded her head. She kept a tight grip on her glass.

'I thought you were amazing tonight.'

'What?'

'You were good. In the play.'

'Thanks.'

'Let's have another drink.'

'I really don't know. We have another two performances tomorrow.'

‘Just one more.’

‘Okay.’

They stood silently. They looked out at the eddies of bodies drifting around the crowded room. Alexis turned in his frustration and shook his head violently. Then he walked away from her. She watched as he jumped up onto Max’s back and then pulled him out onto the dance floor. A man in a tight black shirt and carefully groomed beard came up to stand next to her.

‘Hey darl’. Whatcha doin’ here?’

‘Out with friends.’

‘Yeah me too. Wanna go out somewhere quiet?’ She looked at him, trying to guess his intention.

‘Fuck off, mate,’ she said when she understood.

‘What?’

‘I said fuck off.’

‘Bitch.’

She had another drink and then wondered what she was doing there. She smiled nervously at the bouncer on the way out. She wanted to go somewhere, anywhere, but she had nowhere to go. She wanted to sleep, to be at home, to be warm, but most of all she wanted Alexis to be there with her. Then it wouldn’t matter where she was.

Eventually he came out, looking around. He was frustrated at being outside away from the music and people. He saw her sitting on a short brick wall a little way down the street. He wanted to yell, or at least find some way of ridding himself of her. He slowed as he approached.

‘You okay?’

‘Yeah.’

‘You want to come back inside?’

‘No.’

‘Look, this is who I am.’

‘I know.’

‘Well if you can’t deal with it.’

‘That’s not it, I just —’

‘Just what? You don’t want me to be me.’

‘Don’t shout. I just think you’re forgetting about me.’

‘It’s not always about you.’

‘Oh fuck off.’ She got up, wanting to leave but also wanting to throw her arms around him and pull him to her. She began to walk away.

‘Where are you going? You don’t know how to get back.’ She looked at him for a long time. He was alone in a crowd of people. His expression was a mixture of irritation and confusion. She saw him as he was then but also as the boy that she had first met, with a wide smile and bright eyes and all the things his friendship promised. She turned then and walked quickly away. She ignored his shouts. She kept on moving, trying not to think or feel. Eventually she asked an older man walking by in a dark suit the way to the water.

‘The water?’

‘The beach.’

‘Right. That way,’ he said and pointed.

‘Thanks,’ she said and walked in the direction he had shown. He must have watched her as she left. Maybe he wondered about who she was, what she was doing; she clearly wasn’t from around there. Or maybe not. Maybe he just looked at her and felt a pang of lust drive itself through him before he turned and fell back into himself. I’m just guessing. But I did try to imagine myself as that man, showing my Rosalind the way to the water.

She walked for what seemed like hours through the city. Finally, she reached a rise and beyond it a long slope to where she could see the inky sheen of the ocean. She hurried down towards it, climbing over a fence and through parkland. Then she was on the sand. She kicked off her shoes and felt it cold and damp beneath her feet. She walked until she was standing in the water. The coldness wrapped around her ankles and legs. She felt like crying but couldn't bring herself to. Instead she looked around trying to find a spot out of the wind where she could sit and wait for dawn. There were some rocks up to her right. Above them a road curved in front of a row of large, expensive buildings. She wondered who lived in them and what their lives were like but couldn't picture it. Instead, she walked into the lee of the dark rocks and dug a shallow hole in the sand. She sat down in it and wrapped her jacket around herself and stared out at the ocean. After a while she lay down and closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than to be anywhere but there. She slept.

She woke to the grey light of dawn. She heard the susurrantion of water on sand. She checked her phone: five missed calls, one voice mail. *Serves him right.* She got up, sweeping the sand off her and out of her hair. The phone rang. She took a deep breath before answering.

'Rosalind?' he asked. She knew something was wrong as soon as she heard the voice. It wasn't Alexis. Max had used her full name.

'Where are you?'

'Rose, something happened.'

She looked out to sea. The sun had risen over the horizon and was casting itself out over the water. It was burning the mist from the sand.

'What is it?' But she didn't want to know. She wanted to drop the phone to the sand. She wanted to run out into the water and splash and cry out at the coolness of it. She wanted to come back out, dripping and alive. She wanted to know that she would go meet Alexis and

Max and they would drive back home together, their trip a success, their lives full of the promise of joy.

‘Something happened last night.’ It was so matter of fact. That’s what she remembered. It was if Max was reading from a script. This is what you say. This is how you say it. She didn’t say anything, just kept the phone to her ear, waiting for him to go on.

‘He was on the phone, trying to call you. He’d been drinking. He wanted to talk to you.’ She could hear that he was trying not to cry. He wanted her to know exactly how it had happened.

‘He stepped out onto the road. He was smiling almost. It was a car. I didn’t have time to say anything. He just went. The car was just there. And the noise. And him there, thrown over. It just happened.’ Max did start crying then. Sobbing into the phone. He pulled himself together.

‘Where are you?’

‘The beach. Bondi.’

‘Okay, I’m coming to get you.’

They rode in silence to the hospital. People bustled around them. They were led to a private room where he lay. She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. Then Alexis’ parents were there. They had been in the audience at the play, in the front row. She stepped back as they walked past her. His mother looked down at him and began to sob. His father put his arm around his wife. She walked out into the corridor. Her movements felt unreal. She was in someone else’s body. She sat down on a bench and waited, there was nothing more she could do. She sat and waited and wished that she could be anywhere but there. She wished that she could get away and hated herself for it.

His parents came out and told them to leave. They spoke in soft even voices. She and Max drove back to Gerringong. Neither spoke for the length of the trip. She sat staring out the window, trying not to think.

'How did you feel?'

'I didn't feel anything.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing.'

The funeral was the following week. Max called her, told her where and when. She was dropped off by her father in a newly bought black dress and a borrowed pair of her mother's shoes. She stood apart from the crowd that had gathered outside the church. Mostly they were adults, friends of the family. There were some boys from his class she recognised and a few of the other actors in the play. She said her hellos and wrote 'Rosalind' and then, in brackets, 'Rose' on the clipboard being passed around. She was relieved when they were called inside the church. She took a seat on one of the back pews.

It was her first Catholic service. She sat in silence as the priest said his words. She rose when she was told to rise and sat when she was told to sit. She waited as those who took communion lined themselves up. She watched the heaving backs of those silently crying.

She had expected to go with them to the cemetery after the ceremony. To bury Alexis. But Max had come and found her and told her in soft tones that it would only be family and *really* close friends. He was going, of course, but just because he was, you know, there. He patted her on her shoulder. She watched as he made his way back up to where the family was standing in a huddle around the priest. Their heads were bowed. Their bodies were clad in black.

It was only when she saw the hearse leaving from the front of the church that she finally felt the pressure beneath her eyes become too much, felt the first gulp force its way

into her throat, felt the warm rivulets of tears begin to flow down her face. She slipped out behind the crowd. Then she was running towards the beach. She stripped out of her shoes and her dress. She ran until she was waist deep and then plunged into the cool, deep water. She came up spluttering and shaking. Then she turned and walked herself out. She sat down on the damp sand and waited.

But nothing happened. She didn't feel any better. She felt tired and angry and alone. Alone in a way which she had never felt before. She shifted herself onto her hands and knees. She didn't care if there was anyone there to see her. She beat down at the beach. Her blows created short, shallow cuts in the sand. She screamed. The foreign, animalistic sound of pain and suffering surprised her. Then she hiked herself up and ran from the beach and the water.

She had lost her friend. She had lost the comfort of the ocean. She had lost everything she loved and by extension her ability to love or understand others. That was her childhood. Those were the experiences that formed the woman I knew. I'm telling you this not to make you feel pity for Rosalind, not to justify her actions, but rather as a way of allowing myself to understand her. To understand how she was able to hurt me. How she was able to break me down the way she did.

She left a few months after having told me the story. It was after her graduation. I don't know what she told Mark, or how it ended between them. When I asked where she was going, she said she didn't know. She would know it when she found it. It would have been hard not to believe her. What I didn't realise then was that a part of my life would be leaving too. I would spend years trying to recapture the idea of myself that left with her. Of course, it's impossible to see the moments that change your life until after they've passed.

I studied hard after that. Turned my energy to reading textbooks and writing papers. Then I graduated and turned away from the university. It seemed time to start my real life.

I still saw Mark on occasion. After Rosalind left he tried to get his life on track. He quit the university and began working full time for the Sydney branch of a mining company. He stopped drinking. He found himself a girl who liked his position in life and the stability that he could provide and the spark of mischievousness in his eyes that had not yet been extinguished. They spent their evenings on the couch watching TV. On the weekend they went to brunch and then back home where he would play video games and she would read cooking articles on her phone. They seemed happy enough and so I left them to it. To that life that would eventually become so constricting, so tunnel-like that it would break them both. I just knew that I no longer had any ties to that place other than the memories that played on a loop through my mind until they diminished and closed in on themselves and became only Rosalind sitting across from me on the bed, her eyes bright slits, her lips tightly pressed together in an abstract smile.

I'd been offered an opportunity in London and, realising that there was nothing left tying me to Australia, I packed my bags and left.

That was as far as I got. This was the writing I did after Florida. This was my trying to get down Rosalind on the page. Before I was forced to re-evaluate everything. What I wouldn't give to be back writing this story. But there is so much left to tell.

'It's too damn sentimental. You have to cut it down,' O'Brian said.

He was holding my article in his hands. The draft printed on a few pages of A4. He put them down so that they lay in the puddle of beer at his elbow. I couldn't tell if it was purposeful. There was something mocking in his expression.

Through the window I could see men and women in suits walking quickly by. I was holding a pint of ale which was too warm and too watery to enjoy. O'Brian sat with his stomach pushing against the low wooden table. He drank quickly. He gulped at his beer. His suit that day was from Anderson Sheppard. Suddenly I wanted nothing but sun and open spaces. I was sick of London with its grey clouds and grey buildings and grey people. I'd been proud of what I'd written. I knew that it was good, that people would enjoy reading it.

O'Brian leant forward.

'Look Richard, I've told you before, writing isn't what it used to be. Hell, even back in my day there wasn't the need for this kind of thing. Sure, your descriptions are good, but you overlay them with too many fucking feelings. It's too much about the writing and not about the place. I don't give a crap about you trying to be Hemingway. Just write down what he did, how the place looks, where the punters can get drunk... you know, the regular stuff. And, blast-it, you have to make it accurate! This bit here about the yellow window blinds... I looked up the house online and damn if the photo I saw didn't have green shutters.'

'Yes —

'— have they painted it recently? I wouldn't know. I would say probably not with an historic house, but who knows. All I'm saying is that you have to get these things right.

'And as for the rest, well, I'm not saying the writing isn't good. It's just I can't see the damn place because all I can see is you. You in every line. That gonzo shit won't work. You can drink and enjoy yourself and feel whatever you want to feel, but that happens afterward, after the writing. It's just a job, Richard.'

‘So you’re not going to print it?’ I said. I was sick of his berating. Sick of his sun-red face. Of his bloated self-importance. I wanted to leave but I couldn’t. Instead I forced myself to focus on the purple splotch on the tip of his nose and the slight quiver of his jowls as he spoke.

‘I’m not saying that. I’ll use it. But it’ll need to be reworked. Quite a bit. Leave it to me. You go back to the blog, get those website hits up. Then we’ll talk about your next one.’

‘So I have to change the way I write.’

‘For this line of work, yeah. Fuck. Yes. But I don’t know, maybe you can write a novel or something. There’s a medium where this sort of romance is appreciated. Hell, it’s cultivated.’

Eventually we left and I caught the train back to our apartment, back to Chloe. As we approached the station, I felt the guilt settle in my stomach. I dreaded walking across the construction site to our red-brick building. I would have to open the door and force a bright, fake smile. Anything less and Chloe would ask what was wrong. And I couldn’t bring myself to answer that. We were getting married and that was the end of it.

At first — in Florida — I’d felt nothing but elation. But now a different emotion had settled in my stomach. Guilt I suppose. No, it was more than that. Loss. I think Chloe realised what I was feeling, in a way. I would catch her looking at me with an odd expression on her face. It was as if she were trying to read my thoughts.

‘How was your day, my love?’ she said as I came in. I smiled the wide smile and hugged her. She smelt of rose hips that mingled with the onion she was cooking.

‘The same as usual. Dull — utterly, unbelievably, undeniably dull.’

‘Did O’Brian like your article?’

‘Oh that. Yes. Sure. He said it was great. It’ll run in the next edition. With a big picture of me next to it.’

‘That is wonderful Richard! I am proud of you. I knew that your hard work would pay off. Now you can relax. You do not need to look so thoughtful all the time.’

‘No I guess not.’

‘We will celebrate. How is Rose by the way? I wanted to send her a message to say thank you for visiting us, but I do not have her email.’

‘Oh yeah I think she’s good. I haven’t heard from her recently.’

‘Well, it does not matter. Come here, we are going to celebrate you tonight. Open a bottle of wine.’

The article ran in the next edition of the magazine. It was the main piece, spanning the centre pages and surrounded by ads for sunscreen and EasyJet flights. Above the writing was a large photograph of a sailboat, white against the pristine blue of the water with the sun shining unbelievably bright above. And a few pages on, below the text, a photo of O’Brian. The photograph was several years old. It showed him smiling at the camera. He looked almost thin and deeply tanned. Next to the photos was the blurb:

Markus O’Brian, author of ‘What Happened to the Colonies?’ and winner of the ‘Some Prize in Travel Writing.’

The article wasn’t all that different to the one I’d first submitted. Some of my reactions to the places had been taken out. There was more emphasis on places to go and things to see. Hemingway’s home was treated as a tourist attraction. But it was mine.

I hadn’t known he had stolen it until the party. It was called a party, but it was just the few of us that were still holding on drinking cheap wine in the conference room. As the magazine was distributed, I saw my co-workers’ faces. They averted their eyes. They chuckled quietly. After a while I excused myself and stood in the fire escape. I imagined what they were saying to each other behind their sneers.

'Did you see. O'Brian took another one. From the internet guy this time.'

'Wasn't it supposed to be his break?'

'Him? No. He was never going to make it.'

'He can go back to writing the "10 best dive-bars in Glasgow" lists.'

'It's better coming from O'Brian anyway. He's got the reputation. Good for sales.'

'Who does he think he is?'

I hurried down the stairs and out into the street. I could see Rosalind shaking her head. I pictured her as she was, that night in Florida with her dark hair throwing a shadow across her face.

'You're going to do something big. You could write something great if you just believed in yourself. Maybe you'll even write something about me,' she'd said.

At the time it had been like a realisation. Rosalind was giving me not only the permission but also the encouragement to write something real. To write something meaningful. This can't have been what she'd meant.

They stand in a small, wood panelled room at the back of the Registrar's Office. They are near Liverpool Street station. It is not the wedding that she had envisaged for herself; there aren't the smiling faces, the cheering friends, the crying family — she is handing herself to Richard in a quiet, desperate elopement that she will revisit in her memory each day for the rest of her life. It is a day of happiness and a day of profound sadness; Chloe is betting a lifetime of happiness on one unspectacular role of the dice.

Chloe is beautiful in her light pink dress, her skin holding a slight pallor from her apprehensive and fitful sleep. The creases at the edge of her mouth are raised in a half-smirk and her eyes flash so clear and joyfully that each of the other train passengers who look at her can't help but smile for a quick moment before they return to the seclusion of their private introspection. Richard sits beside her looking forward in the direction of travel, his back perfectly straight, the grey suit he is wearing making him look slightly older than he has ever seemed to her before. He has the appearance of someone perfectly composed but he remains also distant. Chloe wonders if it is this aloofness that had kept others from seeing him truly, seeing him as she sees him now. She takes his hand in hers and smiles a little more fully, glad that she is marrying this handsome man beside her despite the pain that he has and —she knows — will, put her through. She has decided to ignore the doubts that linger in her mind and memory and instead focus on the man that she can see, the good and tender man struggling to get out. She looks around herself — she is now holding his hand desperately —and wonders what the other passengers on the train are thinking, the bankers and lawyers and other professionals. Could they guess where it is that she and Richard are going, what their destination is? Chloe laughs to herself at their secret and an older man across the aisle smiles involuntarily with her before looking back down to his book.

It is Monday the 12th of July.

They are still holding hands as they walk down the busy sidewalk. Richard points with a regretful gesture to the couple waiting for them. The two witnesses stand under the grey building of the Registrar's without speaking; he is focused on something across the street, she is looking down at her phone, frowning slightly as if she is not quite sure what she is looking at. As Chloe and Richard approach the man begins pacing up and down the length of the sidewalk, occasionally looking about him with quick, unseeing movements. The first thing Chloe notices about her is her dress, which is off-white and shows too much cleavage. She is

swaying softly in the light breeze on burnished pink high heels. She makes Chloe think of toy dogs, plastic smiles, and loud giggles — she is what Chloe's mother would call chichi. The man, still pacing like a worried city pigeon, is small and chubby with short-cut dark hair and weak, watery eyes. He wears a three-piece suit that is, to Chloe, too dark and too formal — more suited to a funeral than to this wedding. He is clearly impatient at having been made to wait so long. Looking at him Chloe thinks of the loud, drunken Englishmen she once saw in Ibiza. They had been sunburnt and aggressive. She wonders why Richard chose these two — she can tell from first glance that she would not understand or even like them — whether there was no-one else more appropriate for the day.

Chloe wanted her friend Patricia to be her witness, to be her maid of honour. She has come to know Patricia well at university — they drink coffee together in the mornings and speak quietly and earnestly of their work amongst the books in the library. Patricia had agreed — when Chloe timidly brought the subject up — to be the maid of honour, but the day before her husband called to tell Chloe that Patricia would not be attending the wedding. In a gruff voice he explained that his wife was suffering from tonsillitis.

It hurt Chloe to not have Patricia. It hurt her more that her family was not there. It was not what she had imagined for herself. She wanted her mother's presence, for the day to be made wonderful by her smile. She wanted her father standing next to her looking grave — his moustache would have been well combed and there would have been a slight twitch of his lips that spoke of unshed tears. Chloe wanted to be married in the small church just down the road from her parents' house, and she wanted to wear a pure white dress. Most of all she wanted the service to be spoken in French.

Instead she is introduced to these two strangers who will witness the signing of a document. There will be only a few curt, English words spoken. Why is she doing it? Why

has she given up on her dreams? She is doing it for Richard — to be with the man that she does, desperately, love.

Here is the small man, extending a soft and clammy hand. His name is Jeremy. Her name is Carol. She kisses the air next to Chloe's cheek with an exaggerated mwah.

'I know, it's like such a boring name. But what can I do? It's all I have.' She speaks in a soft, high-pitched voice that rises unexpectedly at the end of each clipped sentence.

The two met at a pub only a few weeks previously, they tell Chloe. Jeremy's smile lifts lecherously as he describes the night: the pints of lager, the tired innuendos, the brief fumbling in the taxi that became under-skirt groping in front of Carol's door. Jeremy stops short of narrating the positions in which they copulated or Carol's disappointed expression when he reached his goal far too early.

'It was, like, so funny. He was funny. Isn't this funny? Such a, like, interesting date,' Carol says.

But back to Chloe. Beautiful Chloe. Lost Chloe. Chloe who is about to make the biggest mistake of her life. She stands awkwardly on the sidewalk; she is the closest to the traffic. She looks from one face to another. She is surprised that no-one had yet mentioned why they four are standing there in the heavy morning air. For all the small talk this could be a chance encounter. No one had looked up at the dark, impersonal building that stood in the middle of the bustling and impersonal city.

Well,' Richard finally says, 'shall we go in?'

'Are you quite sure you're ready?'

Chloe leans forward on her toes — which already hurt in her sensible low-heeled shoes — she needs to hear his answer. She is worried that Richard will suddenly shake his head and whisper some form of apology and then run off down the street, his coat flapping behind him. He could so easily disappear into the throng of London commuters, leaving

Chloe with these two strangers. What if Richard is hiding something from her? What if he wants someone like Carol, who could worship his intellect and find him just so wonderfully 'funny?'

'Let's go in.' Richard says again. *There is a pause as he looks Chloe up and down.*

'Where is your bouquet?' he asks.

Chloe looks down and feels a sinking in the depth of her stomach. Her hands, that should have been holding the flowers that they chose together, are empty. She can see them back at the apartment, sitting on the big shelf of their refrigerator. She has let down Richard, and in front of his friends.

'Oh well, can't be helped,' Richard says. *But Chloe can read the disappointment in his voice. She feels the heat of her embarrassment as it storms her cheeks.*

'Shall we,' he says directing her to the door. *Chloe walks ahead empty-handed; looking down again she is aware of a loose thread on the sleeve of her dress. She tries to tuck it surreptitiously into her sleeve. The doorman smiles when he sees her and points them to down a narrow corridor to a room where the four wait in silence. After a moment Chloe giggles nervously, twisting slightly so her dress rises up. She lowers her gaze again when she sees Richard's expression.*

The officiant is brisk and efficient and enters the room without looking at any of them. She goes directly to the small desk in the back corner of the room and places there a stack of papers. Chloe likes her immediately for her bustle and her complete, unashamed lack of charm. She can tell that this woman takes pride in her work and does it well. Chloe wants to go speak to her, to tell her that she is happy to have her there, that she, Chloe, is happy to be there, and that no matter how biting and surly Richard seems, he is still a good man.

'Are you okay?' the officiant asks when Chloe comes near.

'Yes, yes I mean of course I am. This is what I want —'

'I meant are you ready to start?'

'Oh yes. Sorry,' Chloe says. She takes a step back.

'Good. You and he go back through that door. Come back in and we'll begin.'

That is the extent of it. The ceremony of the day distilled into that one short directive.

Chloe hates herself for the hurt that she feels and turns quickly so that the Officiant can't see her face. Richard follows her out into the corridor.

They stand together, Chloe and Richard, staring at dark wood of the door. Richard takes her hand and squeezes it. She looks up and sees him confident and happy, as though he has been ready for this moment all his life. Chloe knows then that everything is going to be okay, that no matter how it happens, it is a good thing that they are getting married. She squeezes his hand back. Still she can't stop herself from asking:

'Are you sure?'

Richard looks down at her in surprise.

'Of course I am. There's nothing I want more. You know that.'

'Because after this, there is no going back,' Chloe says. There is a finality to her words; she knows this to be the truth.

On the other side of the door the light whispering stops. A sharp laugh and then silence — a silence that fills Chloe's universe. The door opens and she sees the Officiant standing beside her small table. She remembers to breathe.

'Ladies and gentlemen, can I ask everyone who is able to be upstanding for the arrival of the bridal party.'

'Well that was something,' Jeremy says afterward.

Chloe sees Richard's expression change. A tightening of his eyes that makes her realise that Richard doesn't actually like Jeremy at all. His witness and best man. She feels

that she should have been surprised but she is not. She has in that moment become conscious of something she had always known — that Richard does not need other people in the way she does, in the way that she considers normal. He uses people when he needs them — when he needs a witness or someone interesting for his writing — and then he forgets about them. But she knows that she is the exception.

‘That was really nice, thank you for, like, letting me be a part of that,’ Carol says. She is standing with her hands held behind her back, swaying slightly, as if buffeted by the light breeze. Behind her the traffic has stalled, there is the sounds of horns and people shouting. Chloe is taken aback; it was an unexpectedly sweet thing to say. She feels suddenly horrible for the mean and petty things she has thought about Carol, is sorry that she hasn’t made more of an effort to reach out to her. Chloe looks searchingly at the Carol; she looks young, like a child in her off-white dress. Is it possible that Carol is just acting? Is this how she thinks she needs to present to the world?

‘So, are we getting pissed or what? Worth a drink to celebrate, eh?’ Jeremy says. The mundanity of the impulse behind his words breaks into Chloe’s thoughts and they dissipate into the heat of the day.

‘No, I don’t think so. I think we just want to get home,’ she says. She feels strong to push herself forward. She is making herself heard. She does not want to be rude, but she does not know these people. She wants to be rid of them and to be alone with Richard to start their new, transformed existence, an existence that she knows will make her happier than she has ever been.

‘That’s so cute. You want to start your married lives,’ Carol says. Chloe smiles at her, surprised all over again that this woman seemed to know exactly what she is thinking. Carol returns the smile with a slight turn and a flounce of her dress; there is a simple assuredness

to the movement that makes Chloe feel scared, scared that she would never manage anything so unselfconsciously expressive.

'You mean they want to start the wedding night. Look at them, can't wait to get back to their bedroom. What position do you think they're going to go for? I'm joking, just joking. No, no we need to have a drink. I took a sick day for this. They have time for one ... or ten.'
There is a gleam in Jeremy's small, bright eyes, a slight rise at the corner of his borderless lips.

Chloe waits for Richard to say something, to make it so that they can leave. To make it so she does not have to see this man anymore. Instead Richard turns to her and she can see the question in his raised eyebrows. She wonders if he wants to get drunk. Does he really need a drink so much? Chloe tries to think of something to say, something that would make everything okay, that would not sound like she is trying to control him. Instead she shrugs her shoulders. One small gesture of defeat. Maybe this is a way of marking the occasion, showing it is a day worth celebrating.

'Come on, I know a place around the corner.'

'Jeremy knows a place around every corner,' Carol says. There is no judgment in the statement, she seems proud.

Chloe tries to match Carol's steps. She wants her to feel included. But Carol is walking slowly and soon the two are left far behind the men so that Chloe is scared she will lose them in the crowds or around the next corner. The city scares her, it is foreign and incomprehensible. In Paris she felt comfortable and at home. She knew what to say and how to get help. Here she is lost. She finds herself walking closer to Carol and feels a small sense of relief when she feels Carol's fingers graze her forearm.

'They're like children, really. Always after their next toy. Whatever they think will make them happy. A lot of the time that's the pub. But sometimes it's fun to go along for the ride.' Carol smiles.

'Yes, I suppose.'

'You really do love him don't you? You're lucky, he is handsome. We should have gotten more photos. You could have put them up on Instagram. You would have gotten so many likes. Sometimes I think that's the main benefit of a wedding — everyone paying attention to you.'

They walk in silence for a while. Chloe feels stronger walking next to Carol; when a group of men walk towards her she does not move out of the way as she normally does, standing meekly to the side even if it means she has to come to a complete stop, but instead she walks straight forward and is happy and surprised to see the men make way for her.

Finally, they reach the street corner where Richard and Jeremy are waiting. They are outside an ancient, soot-covered pub. Jeremy makes a show of looking at his watch, the leather band of which is dark and glossy against his pale skin. The watch's face shows the interlocking cogs of the clockwork. Later he will take the watch off and show Chloe and make her guess the price.

'It's beer o'clock, let's get a move on,' he says.

The heat hits her as they walk in; the air of the pub is heavy and stale against her skin. A bead of sweat begins to form on her face and she grimaces uncomfortably. It is strange for her to think of herself as a bride; she never imagined brides sweating. Carol pulls at her arm and Chloe finds herself sitting at the far end of a table by the window. Richard and Jeremy have gone to the bar.

'Was it everything you wanted?' Carol asks solicitously. She senses Chloe's hesitation because she does not give her time to respond but instead continues to speak in her quick, clipped voice:

'I mean the important thing is that you're going to be together. For, like, the rest of your life. I mean it's no more loneliness for you. That'd be something.' She pauses. *'Who knows, maybe Jeremy and I will do the same thing when the time comes. You can always have the big fun party afterward, can't you?'*

'You think you will marry Jeremy?' Chloe asks. She wants to divert the conversation, to make it about something other than herself.

'Well I...I don't know do I? I'm sorry, I mean it's just hard to... Yeah, I might. I mean he does seem to like me. Doesn't he? He's let me stay over two nights in a row now. And the important thing is to get married, isn't it?'

Chloe is saved from having to answer by the men returning. Richard's face is flushed; Chloe can tell that he has had a couple of quick drinks while at the bar. Whisky probably. Or rum. In his hand he holds a bottle of champagne and on his face he wears a self-deprecating smile. Jeremy hands out glasses and Richard fills them in a series of slow, precise movements.

'Jeremy made me buy it,' he whispers as he fills Chloe's glass. Her smile vanishes at the confession. She is confused that he thinks he needs to justify himself to her, is hurt that he did not buy the bottle out of his own joy and exuberance. The champagne is too sharp and has the goût-de-bouchon, but Chloe forces herself to smile a wide smile and thanks them all for being there with her. Under the table Richard pushes his hand roughly up her thigh.

They are still sitting there when the after-work crowds start trickling into the pub. Now there are glasses spread over the wooden table — champagne glasses and wine glasses and pint

*glasses. Spilt beer makes the surface sticky and Chloe has already ruined the sleeve of her dress. She is trapped in the corner, hemmed in on one side by Richard and the other by Carol. Though she knows that even if she had a clear path to the door she could not leave. Jeremy, opposite, is loud and coarse, his face red with drink, and Carol is laughing at everything said. She laughs loudest and longest at Richard's jokes, though she sometimes misses or pretends to miss those at her expense. Chloe tries again to catch Richard's eye; she feels tired, worn out, as though every nerve of her body has become incredibly sensitive. Her mind is burning up so that it is difficult to think. The pub is too loud, the few lights bright against the dark corner they sit in. She wants to be alone with her husband. Just the thought of that word makes her feel strange. Her husband. Her **husband**. The man sitting next to her who now has his back against the wall, who is not saying anything but who occasionally nods his head to something said. Soon the whole table is pinned in by the crowd. The windows are fogged up and Chloe can no longer see the people walking home outside. Through the haze of drink and the press of people images swarm and change; blurred scenes crystallise into snapshots. Chloe sees them flashing by: Richard's eyes slowly closing; Carol laughing, her head thrown back, with a strange man; Jeremy's bright pink face shining as he walks back to the table, a pint of beer clutched in each of his hands. Then the dash, the stumble, the spray of beer. Jeremy looking down at the broken glass.*

'Where'd it go?' He asks his hands. The man in his tight button-up shirt turning, tattoos crawling out from under his sleeves. A skull staring up with empty sockets from the bony ridges of his right hand.

'Oi pal, you spilled your fuckin' drink on me.'

Jeremy saying plaintively: 'You shoved me,' and looking up into the man's face.

'And how the fuck could I've done that; I wasn't fucking moving.'

'Have a little respect, this is a wedding party, innit?'

'What you four are a wedding party? Not much of one is it?

'Yeah it was a bit rushed,' Jeremy leaning towards the man 'I'm thinking she might be up the duff.'

Then Richard standing and grabbing Jeremy with his left arm and throwing his weight behind his right. Jeremy crumpled at on the beer-soaked floor and Carol screaming. The tattooed man looking quizzically at Richard.

'Wasn't he your friend?'

'He's just a cunt.'

Now Chloe feels pressure on her wrist and then she is out in the beautiful, cool evening air. Richard pulling her hurriedly away from the pub. She reaches out to find his hand and squeeze it, feeling for the first time that day a weight lift from her chest. Richard smiles and she smiles back. Then they start to run, Chloe letting out a short happy laugh as they dodge the confused pedestrians, and are finally, finally on their way back home. She feels like a child and runs faster. Married. My husband. Chloe is married and absolutely, unbelievably happy at the fact.

'Ladies and gentlemen, can I ask everyone who is able to be upstanding for the arrival of the bridal party.'

Just a few paces and we were standing in front of the Registrar. A scowl. Pursed lips. Jeremy smiling a fat, cherubic grin. And the impossible girl he'd brought. Her legs were crossed like a child's and she was looking down at her phone. Her bleach-blonde hair cascaded over her face.

It was sobering to realise that they were the only two people I could get. Jeremy plus one — all that I could manage on short notice. I had tried to avoid having anyone there at all,

but witnesses were a necessary part of getting married. I'd thought of inviting O'Brian, but it was only a passing notion. Jeremy was innocuous. He worked for the magazine. I occasionally had a drink with him. Sometimes I played chess against him in his small apartment in Wapping. While Chloe was studying at the library or out with her friends.

Jeremy would sit hunched over his pieces with a glass of lager on the sideboard. He would stare intently at the rough wooden board. Then after many seemingly interminable minutes he would carefully and invariably make a mistake. Leave a piece unguarded or a wide gap in his defence. I almost felt bad when he would finally — but too late — realise his mistake. After each game he would say something about being tired. How he would beat me next time. Then he'd open a beer with an expression that said: 'I deserve this.'

I don't know when he thought we had become friends. At what point he thought that I owed him something. It was a slow thing. But I soon realised that this man believed that there was a connection between us. That in some way we were in conspiring together against some outside and indeterminate force.

It was after one of these games. I was feeling a little tipsy from the three fingers of gin I had drunk to keep the play interesting. I had leant forward and asked him to be a witness. His reaction was embarrassing to watch. He stood and demanded to shake my hand. He hugged me. He was too excited to question the rush of the thing. He didn't think to ask why we were getting married at the Registrar's. I was glad. I hadn't wanted to lie to him.

At least they had made it to the ceremony. There was someone there to sign the document. Chloe's friend's sudden illness seemed too much of an excuse to be genuine. I had worried that she was lodging some sort of protest *in absentia*. Could she have suspected that a quick wedding to me wasn't the best thing for Chloe? It didn't matter. In half an hour or so it would be over.

‘Good morning. We are here to celebrate the union of Chloe Dupont and Richard Hunt in marriage.’

Chloe’s hand warm in mine. One last chance to wonder whether I was being selfish in marrying her.

Still, I felt like I was doing the right thing. I had decided to do whatever it took to make Chloe happy. I was turning my back on my dreams of Rosalind. Embracing the practicalities of married life. And I did believe that binding commitment was the best way. I was prepared to erase my own existence in favour of my wife. In favour of Chloe. It was a decision that I planned to uphold for the rest of my life.

Because Rosalind had made it clear that that was what she wanted.

It was on our second day in Florida, at the Hemingway house. We were alone. We were hidden in a small alcove off the second-floor balcony. We had left Chloe enjoying the sun by the pool and finally I felt that I could speak openly.

‘We should talk.’ I said.

‘What could there possibly be to say?’

‘We could run away together. Start again.’

Rosalind said, ‘That’s a suggestion. And Chloe in this movie of yours?’

‘Chloe will survive. She’ll take the plane on Monday only this time there’ll be an empty seat next to her. Shouldn’t we be selfish this once?’

‘People are always selfish. You especially. But you don’t need to be. You can still make things better. Try to make Chloe happy.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘It’s okay. This doesn’t need to matter.’

‘But it does matter.’

‘No, it doesn’t. Don’t make too much of it. You want to romanticise your life, but don’t you dare use me for it. You’ll only end up hurting us both. I know you Richard, there’s too much risk.’

‘There’s more to it than that.’

‘Sure, there is,’ said Rosalind, ‘But I can forget it. Can’t you too?’

‘I don’t think I can.’

‘Look, Richard. Look. I’m going back to Australia. I want to go home; I need a fresh start. I wanted to do something bigger than myself, to help someone outside of who I am, but I couldn’t. I just, I need something for me. I need to get back to me. To focus on what will make me happy. Do you understand that? Does that make sense? I’m going to go back and get a job in some small firm that deals with small cases and have a life outside my work. So this, this thing, can stay here, in this part of the world. I’m leaving it behind.’

In that conversation the future that I imagined was cut away from me. I saw the resolve in her eyes. It had only taken five minutes to tear my life in two. Rosalind was sacrificing our happiness for Chloe’s ignorance. For her innocence. Did I protest? Did I explain the enormity of her mistake? No. I stood dumbly on the balcony. I felt the Floridian sun on my face. My hands holding the wood that Hemingway too, must once have held. I couldn’t think of a single thing to say. There were a few moments of silence before Rosalind turned and walked back inside. I found myself more alone than I had ever been before. I looked at the trees that arched over the street and saw the dappling of light on the asphalt. A child below called out to her mother. In the distance I could hear a siren wail.

‘Chloe and Richard before you are joined in marriage it is my duty to remind you of the binding character of the vows you are about to make. Are you both ready to make your vows and declarations?’

We nodded. Jeremy was smiling widely again. Even Carol had her eyes fixed on us. There was a perplexed look on her face. Time had slowed. A black cab crawled past the window.

‘Could you please face each other and join hands?’

Chloe’s soft, brown eyes were wide and questioning. I saw in them the reason I was there. And while I stood in that wood-panelled back room I was also in a loud, smoky hostel in Paris looking at her for the first time. I felt the same excitement when she smiled, the same shiver as she mouthed my name.

There was more dry speech-making from the dour, efficient Registrar. The signing of the documents. Jeremy looked smug and sweaty as he bent over the table. Finally, it was done. Chloe and I looked at each other for a moment in a sort of semi-seclusion. Then we realised the Registrar was speaking again.

‘...all to stand up and congratulate a very special couple as they make their exit.’

Jeremy and Carol stood awkwardly to the side. I twisted my new gold ring; it felt foreign and constrictive on my finger. Carol took a photo. She gave the Registrar her phone and asked for another of all of us. Chloe held my hand tightly. The Registrar returned Carol’s phone. She stared pointedly until I pulled Chloe’s hand. We left the room together.

I waited outside the bathroom door for her. I saw the smile reappear on her face as she emerged. I was happy then. Truly.

We stood huddled out on the street. Jeremy demanded we go to the pub to drink and to talk. He let out a short sharp laugh. A single exclamation. It seemed to say: I have you now, you owe me. His friendship was a noxious thing. It was a compact stumbled into unwittingly. We went to find a place.

At the bar there was a long bout of drinking. At first I drank for Jeremy. At first I drank for the act. I drank to pretend it was a real wedding party. Then in the drink there was a

reason to drink further. The drink was good. Whisky with Jeremy at the bar and then a Champagne bottle. The most expensive the pub had. Back at the table we smiled and laughed and pretended. The drink felt right, and I drank to feel something more. Time passed quickly. It leapt forward and suddenly it was clear that Jeremy and Carol were drunk. Even Chloe's cheeks were red with the lingering effects of the champagne.

It had to be done. He'd been asking for it all day. And when he said that about Chloe. Well. It was what a writer did. What Hemingway would have done. It did hurt though. I lay my hand against the cool glass of the train window, pressing just a little to feel the dull throb in my knuckles.

It would probably be difficult to explain at work. I was taking a few days off. Jeremy could decide how he wanted to play it. After all he couldn't deny that he had it coming. His slurred sentence. It was so easy to step forward and bring my fist around. Lights trailed past in the darkness outside the window. Chloe's head was on my shoulder. She was sleeping. She hadn't seemed shaken about what had happened. She had almost seemed to enjoy it. Maybe she didn't really understand. She'd had much more to drink than she usually did.

The other passengers on the train were avoiding looking at us. They could tell we'd been drinking; our cheeks were ruddy, our clothes in were in disarray. We'd been running and laughing as we boarded the train just before the final call of: *doors closing*. Or maybe they weren't looking at us because they never looked at anyone on a train. Each passenger was shielded by an opaque bubble of old-world courtesy. Probably weren't thinking about us at all. An old woman in the seat opposite ours slowly unrolled a sweet and pushed it slowly into her mouth.

The trip seemed longer than usual. Oddly calm. It was like that moment in time before a leap, when you've finally decided to jump off the cliff into the water and you feel nothing at all and can only think *there's no going back*. We were married. We were married.

It had been surprisingly easy. There had been forms and waiting and red tape. But only a month had passed between the time we had arrived back from Florida and the day we had booked to have the ceremony. No one had objected. Who was there to object? We had told Chloe's parents two days before. Her father had threatened to fly over, but I think her mother understood. I hadn't told my own father yet. Better to present it as a *fait accompli*. There had been no prenup. Neither of us had anything to divide.

I shook Chloe gently and she yawned and squeezed my arm. We stood aside to let an old man shuffle past. He held a water bottle out ahead of him. There was no-one there to reach out to him. Then we were out in the cool air again, holding hands, walking back to the shared home. A home that no-longer felt like much of anything. It was a place to pass the nights until we were ready to move on again.

Inside Chloe turned and kissed me and then went to prepare herself for bed. I lay next to her and lay my hand on her shoulder. Chloe fell back asleep almost immediately. I looked up into the dark and realised that our wedding night was done. I was glad of it. I got up and went to get a beer and then sat naked in the kitchen, listening to the sounds of the last trains as they rolled past.

After a moment I reached out and pulled my laptop to me. I turned it on, taking a long drink as I waited and then opened up a blank document.

I wondered what Rosalind would have said in that moment.

I hadn't heard from her since she drove away from our house in Florida. It was like she no longer existed. I hadn't received a reply to the email I wrote.

But in that month Rosalind had become, to me, more defined, more definite in her outline and the depth of her being. I had internalised her; I had started thinking about her more often, picturing her constantly as she had been in Australia when we first met. She would stand in the brightness of a summer day, her lips curved upward in a cutting smile. Her presence lent weight to my actions and thoughts. I would see her reacting to the things I said, smiling when I made a joke. She was the invisible spectator to all my conversations, watching and assessing me as I spoke. I made sure that whatever I did, whatever I said, would please the image I held of her.

Later, much later, I asked her why she'd left. We were standing in the kitchen of her house. Her house that felt so much like a home with its children's toys and its throw pillows, that was so foreign to anything I had pictured. My hands were shaking as I asked. I was worried I'd spill the wine that I was drinking. I ended up staring down at my shoes. They were nice, stiff brown leather, but they suddenly felt like a pretence, just another costume I was wearing. And from that thought I asked her what had happened.

'What do you mean?' she said. Her eyes opened a little; they were still a beautiful chestnut colour, though now there were a few thin lines running from their edges. Years of laughter that I'd missed.

'Why did you leave?' I asked. Rosalind looked at me as though I had said something completely unexpected. Incomprehensible. I took a sip of wine. It tasted oddly metallic.

'I didn't leave. I thought you knew that. You just thought it was a big thing. The biggest thing in the world. And I couldn't be that. It was just that you wanted something more and I couldn't do it. I thought you understood that, Richard. At least if you had understood I could have begun to forgive you.'

'Forgive me?'

‘For what you did.’

I closed the computer and went back to bed. Chloe rolled over with and lay her arm over me.

‘Where have you been?’ She said in a low husky voice. She might have been talking in her sleep.

‘I couldn’t sleep,’ I said. Chloe wriggled in closer to me so that her warmth enveloped me.

‘Good, good. My husband,’ she said. She rolled over.

The soft light of sunrise had slipped through our blinds before I finally fell asleep.

‘Don’t be a fucking idiot, you don’t want to quit.’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘Because of the article? You wanted credit? We’re not in the business of your ego, Richard. I rewrote it, I made it worth reading. It’s more mine than yours now.’

‘No, it’s not that. Okay, it’s a little bit that. But for the most part it’s what you said. I’m a writer. I shouldn’t be bullshitting for your blog. I’ve got to make some changes in my life. And for that I have to leave here.’

‘You’re a writer? First I’ve heard. Where are you going to go? You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.’

‘Hemingway said that.’

‘Don’t try to be smart, it’s not a good look on you. Look, write another article. I can’t stand to see you throwing your life away. What about that French girl of yours?’

‘I married her. You know that.’

‘And did that solve anything? Listen here, Richard. I gave you a break when Jeremy came to me and tried to grass you up about some altercation at the pub. I told him: “what does it have to do with me?” and I meant it. If a punch is thrown in a pub that should be it. It should stay there. If you ask me people these days are far too eager to air their dirty laundry, and whine and bitch. In fact, and this is just between me and you, the fact that you gave Jeremy a good one just made me like you more. But you have to work with me. You do.’

‘No, I don’t.’

He looked at me for a long while then. His thick eyebrows bunched together. His blue eyes were cold.

‘Fine. You can leave. But trust me, things are never going to be easy for you.’

‘I’ve got to give it a go. I know there’s no chance of me being the writer I want to be if I stay here.’

I did mean it. At least I think I did. But that wasn’t the only reason for my leaving. In the back of my mind, I knew that the real reason I was leaving was to give me an excuse to take my new wife back to Australia. I was going to find Rosalind.

Husband and wife emerge from the gate into the heat of the day. The air is still and in it hangs the smell of eucalyptus, heavy and pungent in the breathless air. Chloe takes a deep breath, smells the foreignness of it all. She feels the sweat on her skin, the clamminess of her clothes. Around her, in the greeting area just past customs, groups of men and women greet each other joyously, speaking in unfamiliar accents; their words rise in soft and uncertain musicality.

This is Australia, a country she had never visited, that she has never really imagined that she would one day see. She has trouble picturing the country beyond a jumble of clichéd stereotypes — red soil, wide brimmed hats, and men in short tan shorts. But now it is to be her home. It is a thought which she can't fully understand. She is too unbelievably tired. She feels like she is underwater; the noises are slightly muted, the images just a little blurred. She stumbles and pitches into a tall white-haired man.

'Oh, I am so sorry,' she says. The man waves away the apology with a smile. There are wrinkles at the edges of his eyes. Chloe almost cries at his understanding.

Now Richard is taking her elbow and marching her through the crowd — their bags wheel haphazardly behind them. At the taxi rank Richard speaks in curt commanding tones to first one man and then another. They are pointed towards a taxi.

'There that one is yours, third in line.'

The driver comes out fat and sweaty and angry. He takes Chloe's bag without acknowledging her and once again she feels small and insignificant. He turns to Richard.

'Where you coming in from? Oh is that right? That's a bloody long way.'

She slides into the car after her husband, happy to be sitting again. The car jolts as it swerves out into the road. Chloe looks out the window unseeing at the traffic, the roads, the buildings on either side of them. She is trapped by the heat and the confusion, the noise and the unfamiliar smells. Soon her head falls back and she is asleep.

Time passed in waves. Great crashes of change. Stolid monotony. Our move to Australia was a swell of frantic rush and excitement, but behind it lay the tedium of routine, of settling in, of finding our feet, and all the boredom that those clichés signal. For a while this was a good

thing. After the difficult process of leaving England and the hassle of relocation it was comforting to settle back in Sydney. I felt that I had returned to a life I understood.

Chloe and I were living in a small apartment in the Inner-West. It was what we could afford and there was a park and good cafés nearby. The apartment was mostly one large room with an unwallled bedroom reached by a set of wooden steps. There was a small study. The ceilings were high. It got the morning sun. We were happy.

Chloe showed less excitement for the move than could have been expected. She did not appear to understand the magnitude of what we had done. I wanted to show her the beauty of the country but was met with a distance. She almost seemed angry. After our first few weeks she began to thaw, but still something was different. There were times when we were cooking together, brought close by the open kitchen. Then I would think to myself that here, here is the real thing. Later I would say the wrong thing and there would be a look in her eyes that would break me down.

She had managed, despite her initial reservations, and with only a few months lost work, to transfer to Sydney University. Her work there filled her days, and in the routine of it she seemed to find fulfilment. For this I was glad. If I had not known that she had something outside of the apartment, outside of our time together, then I would have felt more guilt. I'm not sure how much more I could handle. I wanted Chloe to be happy.

Money was an issue. I was still working part-time and the few articles and short stories that were being published didn't bring in anything much. I thought of getting a job behind a bar or at a café. If nothing else, it would give me something more to write about. But I didn't. Besides, we were not desperate yet. I had some money my grandfather had left me. Chloe didn't know about the money I had borrowed from her parents. It had happened naturally, a few emails written, and for me the money didn't matter. They were wealthy. What was important, the only indispensable need I had, was to write and write well.

Eventually I would pay the money back, and if I didn't, then what was the harm? It was for Chloe either way.

And Rosalind?

I had told Chloe that we had come to Sydney because it was the city I grew up in, the city which felt most like home. It wasn't just that. I needed to be close to Rosalind. I knew that when she returned to Australia she would end up in Sydney. She would never be far from its beaches and hills. It was of Sydney that she had dreamed when she was thinking of escaping the confines of her small town, it was in Sydney where she had found some solace. It was in Sydney that Alexis had died. She would never leave that city for long.

But I still couldn't find her.

I tried not to at first. I tried not to think about her. I tried to move on. But the truth was that even though by the time I started searching two years had passed since we had seen each other in Florida, she was never far from my thoughts.

I looked through Facebook, Instagram, every social media site that I knew how to navigate. She wasn't there. What photos I could find of her were old. One day when I was avoiding writing a story that would have found some small publication and which would have built up my confidence slightly, I found a photo of the two of us. It was just the silhouettes of our bodies in the night and our faces in sharp relief. She was looking up at me with a genuine smile on her features. I had roared in happiness at the camera.

I liked that photo. I put it on a USB and printed it out at a shop down the road from our apartment, along with a few others. There was even a couple of the wedding. Chloe and I standing arm in arm, her in her pink dress, me in my ordinary suit. Probably taken by Jeremy or his girlfriend. There was another of the four of us. We all looked happy. But it had been a false happiness. I wondered for a moment, standing on the pavement outside the shop,

whether the two of them were still together. I hadn't heard from them since that day. Had Carol felt pity when I punched him? Or had seeing him lying in a heap on the sticky pub floor stripped him of what little charm he had in her eyes?

When I got back to the apartment I left the wedding photos on the kitchen counter for Chloe to find. I imagined she would feel a rush of joy at my thoughtfulness. Perhaps she would be forgiving — at least for a few days — of my distance.

I kept the photo of Rosalind. I went into the study and placed it behind the cover of a copy of Olivia King's *It's Not Dark Yet*, an Australian novel Chloe had bought for me but which I hadn't yet brought myself to open.

It was enough to know that the photo was there. To know that I could look at her if I wanted to.

Meanwhile I had decided to concentrate on writing, on writing well. I started to have the occasional short story published with a magazine. Most were online. A couple were in print. I was working to make myself something more than a part-time travel writer. But I had finally admitted to myself that to write well, I needed help. I was proficient enough in my non-fiction, my descriptions of landscapes were fitting and well worded. Nothing was overwritten. No word wasted. But I didn't yet understand how to put down my ideas, my feelings, in a way that would translate properly without the context of travel. I needed to become a novelist. I had given myself five years to write one good thing. What I wanted was a mentor, someone who would guide my steps as I began to write real fiction. Stein to Hemingway. Pound to Eliot. But the days of such relationships had passed.

Instead I enrolled in a writing workshop at the University. It seemed as good a way as any to make contacts in that world. I needed some kind of structure. Left to myself I would wallow in introspection; I would find my thoughts returning again and again to Rosalind.

Chloe sits in a room of the library with a book open in front of her and a small stack next to her elbow. She is no longer reading the historian's lines but looks, unseeing, at the wall of books to her right. It is late afternoon and all the other students have left this section of the library; they have gone to eat and drink together, or to go home to their loved ones. The only sound is of a book-trolley being wheeled down the corridor outside.

Chloe wakes from her half-reverie and realises that, despite the silence, despite her solitude, she is happy. At least in this moment she is happy. She has found a security at the University and looks forward each morning to a day spent on that campus of sandstone and red-brick buildings. She loves the green lawns, the hidden gardens, and the smell of jasmine and jacaranda that hangs in the air.

When she first arrived in Sydney, she was nervous. The first day at her new university she had to convince herself that she belonged. She got lost on the huge modern campus, between the Psychology buildings and the History department. A woman just younger than her saw her distress and asked her if she needed help and showed her where she needed to be. Now Chloe knows where every building is, every café. The woman at the front desk of the library always has a smile for her, a word of greeting.

Of course, there are modules to re-do and a cohort of new people to meet. But she is satisfied to be continuing her studies. Even though she no longer really believes in the thesis she is writing and the justifications behind her arguments.

'You still here darl?'

The librarian has stopped pushing her trolley and is standing half in the room. She wears loose, baggy clothing and a crooked smile. Chloe cannot help but feel a tenderness towards this overweight woman, so clearly happy at her work.

'Yes I must finish a bit more work today.' Chloe says. *She wonders why she has tried to justify herself. There is no more work for her to do, and she is not getting any done by sitting there looking at the books on the shelves.*

'Well watch you don't tire yourself out. You should be out having fun, not stuck in here at all hours of the day.'

'No I will not. I mean I will try not to.'

She hears the sound of the trolley wheels scraping at the floor as the librarian moves on. Chloe wishes she had been able to think of something more to say, had asked the woman something about herself. She turns back to her book.

'The British are notoriously incapable of recognising democracy in any country unless it wears an English garb or expresses itself in terms intelligible to the English mind.'

She reads the sentence again. Was she 'intelligible to the English mind?' Chloe realises that in the interruption she has lost her sense of bien-être. It is true that she will have to go home soon, back to the apartment Richard has rented. Most likely it will be empty. Richard has been spending more and more time away, at his writing workshops or elsewhere. For a second she finds herself thinking of the apartment as a cage, and not a home. She is angry at him for trapping her. Angry at herself for letting him. Then she shakes her head; it is not fair to Richard to think this. She thinks of the photographs he left on the kitchen counter for her to find, those that showed them both so happy. But she is unused to being alone so often, has not made enough of an effort to make friends amongst her colleagues and neighbours.

It is a nice apartment and she will be happy when Richard comes home and folds her in his arms. But again the thought creeping in that she can be alone even when Richard is there.

Chloe closes her book and packs it into her bag with the others. She stands and walks out of the library and into the quiet evening.

The writing workshops were in a small, grey-walled, and windowless room in a new extension of the university. Not for us the sandstone beauty of the historic buildings. Writing didn't hold the same sway as the real subjects: Law, Chemistry, English Literature. There we met, first gathering in the narrow corridor and then spilling into the room to be pent up for the two-hour sessions. Would-be, all of us.

The students were an eclectic mix. Their age varied between that of one young girl sitting near the front of the room who looked about nineteen and whose coy blue eyes scanned the other students apprehensively, and a man of about eighty in a tweed jacket and tobacco stained moustache. Seeing them en masse, that first session, I was filled with a sense of despair and hopelessness. I thought of turning and heading back out, back to the apartment and to a drink, but instead I took a seat on one of the fragile plastic chairs in the far back corner of the room and waited.

There was no-one there that would be successful. No-one who would have genuine talent. I saw that from the first. I was the only one who had been published and paid for his work. These people were deluded, could not see themselves as they truly were. The woman sitting next to me had purple dreadlocks and smelled of slowly decaying vegetation. The man beyond her was mumbling to himself. He was pulling at the collar of his t-shirt, inspecting his chest hair; taking a good look for who knows what reason. These people saw the glamour of writing and thought that because they were superficially eccentric, because they felt themselves misunderstood, that they could be artists. They were wrong.

The professor came in late. She was short and round and smiled too much to be taken seriously. She looked around the classroom as if we were all familiar, firm friends and not the melange of strangers we were. She was the author of two books of short fiction, one of which I'd read as preparation for the class. It had read quickly and easily; her stories were decent but lacked any depth or seriousness. Still, she was published. I was hopeful.

'Right. Well let's get started. Who can tell me what the key components of a story are?'

My eyes closed. That bland question. As if we were going to, in the first twenty minutes, unlock the secrets of storytelling. A few students tried to answer. Their responses were vague and repetitive. The class dragged on. There was no structure to what we were doing and soon the comments devolved into a half-hearted discussion with nothing being addressed and no-one mentioning anything that could produce even the slightest intellectual response. I was almost happy when the professor broke in. By now she, too, seemed more tired. There was no longer a smile on her face.

'I'll give you thirty minutes to write the start of a story. Then you will finish it over the week. Those of you who are willing, and I strongly suggest you all do this, can email the class with their finished work. We'll critique those in the next class.'

We scribbled in silence for half an hour. When the professor finally called time I was depressed and in need of a drink. I was at the door before she had finished speaking.

'But why would you not go back?' Chloe said.

'It's a waste to try to learn anything there. Anyway, you can't learn to write, not really. It's only by being courageous in my writing that I'll find the truth of the thing.'

'But if you do not write?' I looked at her then. She wore a half smile, as she seemed always to these days. Her eyes held a glint that said that this didn't matter, not really. I felt

for an instant that there was something she was keeping from me. But it made me happy to see her this way. A little more like she was when we first met. When she still had that aspect of wild recklessness that had drawn me to her. I resolved to go to the next class, if only to be able to tell Chloe how useless the classes really were.

The next session was remarkably like the first except that the room was now filled with faint, but unmistakable buzz of anticipation. The man who had, that first session, been studying his chest hair was now sitting forward at the edge of his seat. His foot tapped lightly under the thin wooden desk. When the professor came in a few of the younger students sat up expectantly.

‘Okay thank you those that sent in their work. I hope you all had a chance to read them.’ There was less of a smile of greeting this time. She wanted to get the class moving. She knew how painful the next few hours would be. The professor pointed at an older woman sitting at the far side of the room. ‘We’ll start with your story, Agnes.’

The woman began talking, though not about her story, which I hadn’t read. She seemed to think that her work needed contextual background. She didn’t trust it to stand by itself. I paid just enough attention to hear that her children were attending a university in some other state, that she had found herself suddenly and uncomfortably alone. She had taken up writing as a hobby to fill the void in her life. Nothing real could come of it.

‘Thank you, Agnes. Why don’t you read what you’ve got, so that everyone is on the same page?’ the professor said.

I’m not going to try to remember exactly what this woman wrote. Just to say that it was enough to make me embarrassed for her. She read in a high, projected voice. It couldn’t rightly be called a story because the voice of it was exactly this woman’s voice, she had done nothing to disguise herself in the prose. What she read out was a rambling litany of half-

hearted complaints relevant only to someone of her exact age, background, and experience. I knew when she was done that I was right: there was nothing to be learnt in that class. When she finally finished, a few desultory remarks were made. Some students wanted their voices heard. Mostly the things that were said were positive. The class moved on.

For another hour a few students took turns reading their writing. Then a few others would take turns lying about the merits of the piece. There were transparently self-serving attacks. Most of the prose was unbearably florid, anachronistic. Rip-offs of far better writers. Time slowed.

Someone else was called upon. A woman began to read. Something about the first few sentences drew my attention to what she was saying so that I had raised my eyes, looking her over more carefully. She was a few years older than me, maybe in her early thirties. She was attractive in her way, with a smooth oval face and slightly too-broad shoulders. But the way that she read, the frankness of her quiet but clear voice, drew me to her. Her story was confronting — a self-contained narrative about a woman raped by her father's friend — but it was written in a way that invited, not disgust, but a tender pity. The brutal honesty of the writing tore at me as she read and left the classroom in a silence for a few moments after she had finished. I wanted to clap.

A first-year university student sitting two chairs down leaned forward on his chair and cleared his throat slightly. One of his legs was pulled over the other. He was wearing dark socks with Edgar Allan Poe's face printed on them. I could hear his voice before he spoke: high and whining and supercilious.

He said, 'It just doesn't seem realistic.' His tone said there could be no argument. It was his considered opinion that the story was bad. The woman sitting next to him nodded.

'I don't understand what her motivation is,' she said. Then when no one contradicted her: 'Why did the character allow this to happen to her?'

The professor stood up from her chair. She was hardly any taller standing than sitting. On her face was a small smile that could have either been gleeful or compassionate. Perhaps she was finally enjoying herself. She took a step back towards the empty whiteboard behind her and sighed.

‘Sarah don’t be discouraged. The story has merit. But you must remember, we’re not here to shock.’

This was the final pronouncement. The woman, Sarah, looked down at her desk and grimaced. I wanted to slap her on the back. We ran out of time. We rose from our seats.

On the way out I made sure to be walking in line with her. Sarah was more attractive up-close. There was a crookedness to her smile that made me think that here could be someone interesting.

‘I liked what you wrote.’

‘Thanks. But I’m not sure I believe you. No one else did.’

‘Yes, but that’s a good thing,’ I said. I gestured at the dreadlocked hippie who stood in front of us. She was tying a bright pink ribbon into her hair. Sarah laughed. Her laugh was deep and surprisingly melodic. Like the rush of waves on the beach.

‘I guess we can always use them as characters in our writing.’

‘But who would believe them as real?’

I decided to continue attending the classes. There was some good there after all.

Chloe was happy to see me when I got home.

The next class I sat next to Sarah. The one after that she sat next to me. I felt a rush of joy when she smiled at me and slid gracefully into the vacant chair. Her presence made the hours in that small room bearable. We whispered to each other or else traded unnecessarily petty notes. One was to something written by the student in the Edgar Allen Poe socks. A *new and*

avant-gard literary style, he forces himself to write only in clichés. Genius! I tried to suppress a laugh. I scribbled something in return. The professor was looking at me with a mild reproach. It felt good. Like I was a child in a school again.

Afterwards we went to a nearby bar for a drink. We talked about writing, real writing. We made up for how little of value had been said in class. She could be critical. Which is far more difficult to do than to praise. She could bring herself to attack insipid prose, even the names that are now considered great. Sometimes we would miss the class altogether and instead would meet at the bar and drink beers and read in silence. When the beer made it impossible to read any more, we'd talk about writing, about what we were trying to do. I felt too old to be acting like a student, but still it felt real. It was more than escape. She made the classes seem worthwhile. She was a writer, had a writer's outlook. She was direct and honest. While everything was clear and above-board no one could be hurt.

'So are you trying to fuck me?' she had asked. This was one of the first times we had drunk together.

'Not in the real sense of that word. Does that bother you?'

'No. I care about my boyfriend. But I've never had an affair with a married man. It's something I might be able to write about. You're interesting.'

'That's something.'

'It should be.'

'Yeah, I know.'

I didn't know whether she was being serious. I know that I was being honest. I had thought about sleeping with her. I gave her my address, telling her she should come have a drink there sometime. I thought about inviting her back to the apartment at a time that I knew Chloe would be out. Chloe had found a part-time position at the university bookstore, had told me she needed to feel useful. I wanted to take something for myself, to feel something

real and then drink naked on an unmade bed. But I couldn't. And I realised when I gave it some thought, that I didn't hold back because I would feel guilty. If we did have sex it wouldn't be a betrayal of Chloe. I didn't because it would mean that whatever might happen with Rosalind in the future would be diminished. That was the truth of it.

It was a refreshing to be honest with Sarah. I even considered telling her about Rosalind. Something in her expression when I first tried made me stop. Our relationship was writing. And true writing, real writing, requires the suppression of the aspects of our lives we hold most personal. I wanted Sarah to think of me as an observer, as someone who could take snapshots of reality and transform them into narrative. If I tried to explain the complexities of Rosalind, I would lose all objectivity, and in doing so lose all authority as a storyteller.

Coming home from the bar one evening I stopped a florist and picked up some flowers for Chloe. Six red and yellow tulips. She laughed when she saw them, and I felt happy. For a moment I had taken away the lingering sadness and resentment that seemed to have come to live in her eyes. We were happy to be together that night. We sat on the couch and watched M.A.S.H. re-runs. I would give nearly all of it to be back there now, with Chloe's hand in mine, a bottle of wine open on the sideboard. There was joy in that room.

One afternoon I woke from a nap to a banging at the front door. I found Sarah on the other side looking wild eyed. She was shaking her head from side to side and looking up and down the corridor as if she thought she had been followed.

'I had a fight with my boyfriend. Fuck do I need a drink.' She looked down the length of my body to the towel I had wrapped around myself before going to answer the door. 'You're testing me. Are you sure you don't want to fuck?'

I didn't reply. Sarah shook her head and walked past me into the apartment. I closed the door behind her and followed her down the corridor. I was very aware that I was naked.

But it had felt good to be objectified, to feel virile. I was glad that despite the drinking my abdominals were still clearly defined. I was still getting to the gym, still boxing and lifting weights. I took two beers from the fridge, opened them, and handed her one. I was reminded of the days of drinking with Mark. Here, too, something was happening.

As if reading my thoughts Sarah said, ‘I need something new to write about. And you’re supposed to get all those experiences out of the way when you’re still kind of young so that you can keep writing about it when you’re old and nobody wants you.’

Sarah’s eyes were no longer on me. She was looking around the apartment, at the bare walls and the furniture, but mostly she was looking at all the reminders of Chloe’s presence in the room: the flowers in a high vase on the counter, the history textbooks next to the sofa, the framed picture-poster of some snow-capped French alps.

‘I’ve decided I’d like to meet her.’

‘Who?’ I asked, knowing the answer.

‘Your wife. I want to know her.’

‘For your writing?’

‘What else? What’s through here?’ she said pointing at the door to my study. Without waiting she opened it and disappeared through into the room. I was still not awake. Her energy was baffling.

The room I called my study was not much bigger than a closet. There was a single window overlooking the street below. Sarah stood at its centre in her short shorts and light sleeveless top. The light from the window highlighted her cheekbones, the tip of her slightly too-large nose, her freckled shoulders. Her long, muscled leg twitched, she bounced on the ball of her right foot. Her body in that moment was a pool that I wanted to dive into. She looked beautiful, and for a moment I wanted to fall in love with her. But I knew I couldn’t.

My computer was open. It wasn't password protected. I took a quick step forward and then stopped. I was naked. Too naked to be taken seriously.

'Another beer?' I said.

'I've barely started this one. Tell me about travel writing.'

'Travel writing is something else. You look around you write what you see, but it's about places not people. It's not important.' I was trying to deflect the conversation. I didn't really believe what I was saying. There was no use trying to explain.

'Places are important. If that's the way you think I can see why you switched. You want to be a *real* writer. Yeah, don't we all.'

She was looking around the room not really talking to me. She was whispering to herself as though she were trying to settle something inside herself. Not for the first time I thought that she was putting too much emphasis on the act of writing. It seemed almost conceited. As if there were something magical about being able to type words onto a page. I left to put some clothes on and to get another drink. The beer gave to the afternoon an otherness, a disconnection from reality that made me feel more aware of what we were doing.

When I returned I saw her quick eyes scanning the books, the papers on the desk, the open computer. She didn't look at me. She focused on a small pile of books, bending over slightly to better read the titles.

'Beer?' I asked again.

She shook her head slightly. The light shone on her hair.

'I need something to read,' she said.

'Right,' I said. The beer tasted good and I drank quickly. Sarah had picked up a book, had it open to about a quarter of the way through. She was sampling the lines, the sentence structure. She was falling in love with the prose. It had a red cover though I couldn't see which it was.

'It's Not Dark Yet' she said. She didn't look up. 'Have you read it?' I thought about lying, telling her I had, but Sarah knew too much, would catch me in the lie.

'No, not yet,' I said. I tried to make it clear in my tone that I was going to read it, just as soon as I had time.

'It's by an Australian. Olivia King. I want to be her. She writes so beautifully. It's so that you can't tell the effort that went into it. You just see the book as a complete story — so that when you read it you don't think about the writing but just read. When I read it, it was like I was a child again, I was reading just for the joy of it.'

'She's that good?'

'She's the real thing.'

'Do you think we'll ever manage it?'

'I don't know,' she said. She was looking up at me with her head tilted slightly to the side. 'No, probably not.' She shook her head. Whether it was in commiseration or something else, I couldn't tell. She went back to reading. I felt the beginnings of a hatred for this Olivia King. She already occupied more space in Sarah's head than I ever would. She was occupying space in so many minds. Perhaps Rosalind had read her book too. Knowing that I was envious didn't help.

'By the way who's this?' Sarah brought her hand up. She was holding something in her left hand. I recognised it as the photograph of Rosalind. I had forgotten that I'd left it in the book, hidden between the first few pages. The photograph was creased and shone in the afternoon light.

'Just a girl I knew. Rosalind.'

'Yeah?' she said. She wasn't looking at the book anymore. She was looking at me. I took another drink of beer, placing hers on the desk next to my computer. 'There's something in the way she's looking up at you. Why is it in a book you haven't read?'

I walked out of the room and back to the bedroom. I got onto the bed and sat up on it with my back against the wall and my legs spread out on the covers. Sarah followed and sat down next to me. She was still holding the book in one hand, her beer in the other. I couldn't see if she still had the photograph. It was intimate, sitting like that on the bed. I hadn't expected her to follow me. I told her about Rosalind. About her growing up in down the coast, about our time at university. I told her about Florida and made sure not to look at her face as I spoke. After I finished there was a long silence. It was broken only by the soft sound of our breathing and the distant sound of traffic.

'You've made her into something.'

'She is something.'

'No. I mean the way you talk about her. The story you've made of her. It's like you've taken her and made her into something else, into something that's yours. You've got a muse. Good for writing. I'm not sure how good it is in real life though. I mean she is a real person, right?'

I didn't say anything. Sarah was sitting up, her head against the white wall. Her thick hair spread out around her. A wisp of it lay across my shoulder. She smelled floral, of a sweet-smelling shampoo.

'You've got to write about her. Write her down, so that then there'll be two people: the one on the paper, the one that was in your head, and the real thing. You should write her if you ever want to be free of her. And so that she can be free of you.'

'Why would I want to be free of her?' Her eyebrows were raised. She looked as if I had said something incomprehensible. The look made me feel cold and I hardened against her.

'Okay we don't have to talk about it. But you should write about it. About her. You should write it for class. You haven't given them anything yet. Then you can give it to the

others and not keep her locked up in there,' she said. She tapped my chest with a finger and then pulled back.

'For that limpid pool of mediocrity to dissect?'

Sarah shrugged and swept her legs off the bed.

'You should work on that image. Whatever,' she said, 'we don't need to talk about it. Just a thought. Might make for something real.'

I watched as she fidgeted with her top. She ran her fingers through her hair. I stood up, thinking of getting something more to drink and asking her to go to bed with me. To really go to bed with me. Maybe it *would* be good for our writing. Then I pictured Rosalind and looked over her head at the blank wall. A fly had landed there, was walking in a quick circle; a black dot against the white of the paint.

'You're leaving?' I asked.

'Yeah I have to get back to Joe.'

It was the first time that she'd used her boyfriend's name. It sounded too ordinary. Joe. I hadn't really thought of him until then. Now I pictured a dull, insipid man, someone who worked hard but didn't look any further than his own small life.

She was standing looking over me with something that could have been pity. I still wasn't wearing a shirt. I sat down on the edge of the bed and she leant over me and gave me a peck on the cheek.

'Bye,' she said, 'Write the story. And don't forget I want to meet your wife. We can go out for drinks. Set it up, will you?'

I looked down at my feet, at the carpet. I heard her footsteps. Then the door closing heavily. I stood slowly and looked around the bedroom, at the mess of the sheets and my clothes on the floor. I went to the study and saw that she had taken the Olivia King book. Presumably also the photo of Rosalind. I cleaned up the beer bottles and had a shower.

The first anniversary of their wedding passes quickly. Chloe does not mind this. She does not want to be reminded of the time that has gone by, not because she does not love being married to Richard, she truly does, but because of everything else that she has been missing in her life. It has been over a year since she has been to France, over a year since she has seen her parents. Richard said that they would have time to visit after the wedding, before going to Australia, but there had been so much to do, so much to pack up and they decided that Chloe would be able to visit later, take a trip back to Europe once they were settled. But it has been almost a year in that place and still nothing feels settled.

On the night of the anniversary, Richard takes her to a restaurant. It is a French restaurant and for a moment Chloe no longer feels homesick. Richard is courteous, he is understanding of her. Chloe sees again that aspect of him that first drew her to him: his charm, his intelligence— but also the brokenness, his need to be loved.

The evening ends and they go, as they always do, home to their small apartment. She gives him his present, a book that the bookseller at the local bookstore had recommended. Paper for the first anniversary. He looks devastated by the neatly wrapped parcel, pitifully sad, and says that he did not realise that they were doing presents, that he would get her one the next day. She hugs him and says she does not care, as long as they are together.

But now that the night is over, now that it has become a marker of the passage of time, Chloe feels lost. She wishes she could see her mother. Talking on Skype, talking into a computer, it is not the same. On the computer she sees her mother's smile and her father's eyes but it is not the same as holding them in her arms or being able to say, without words, just with a few movements, exactly what she is feeling.

She thinks about the historical time periods she is researching for her dissertation, a dissertation that is becoming stuck in small details. Back during the worst of the colonisation of the world people would have to write letters to their family back home. These would take weeks or more to deliver. Sometimes it took months to learn of a birth or a death. But she thinks that some things might have been easier to say in a letter. She had even found herself at times unconsciously writing the one in her mind:

‘Maman, je me sens seule. Je me sens triste. Tu me manques tellement...’

But she puts the thought out of her head. She should not complain of this life. Richard was perfect tonight. It is just the sadness of time passing, after all. Tomorrow she would feel better.

It wasn't difficult to write the story. The one that Sarah had told me to write. All I had to do was take the image I had of Rosalind and give her a new name. Cat, short for Catherine. I needed a narrator and I gave him a voice. I gave him something to work towards – a music career. Something esoteric, not over-written; he was a hip-hop artist. Then I needed some sort of drama, some climax to build towards. A realisation of disillusionment, a drunken fight, the police bringing him in. But the truth of the story wasn't in any of the details, the truth of it was in the yearning, the promise of something more that Catherine evoked. I finished it in two days and sent it to the professor. I got a short reply telling me that she was glad that I was finally applying myself.

It might make for something real. That's why I did it, at least that's the reason I gave myself for typing up those few pages and sending them to the class. Because of what Sarah had said. When I arrived at the next session, a little earlier this time, the professor looked up

from the sheets she was reading and had said: 'Ah, Mr. Hunt, I'm glad you felt you could send us something. I look forward to the discussion.' I get it. I fucking get it.

I nodded and walked to the back of the class. The old man I had noticed at the first session sat next to me. The classroom began to fill. He smelled of stale cigar smoke and there was a yellowness to the eye closest to me. The chair on the other side of me was taken and I felt a sinking in my stomach. There was a buzz of conversation. The class was more relaxed now that we were nearing the end of the course. There was less excitement or expectation regarding the pieces that were sent in. Sarah walked in late. She put her bag down on the table closest to the door. I tried to catch her eye but she did not look up as she got her books ready. Soon the professor called out in an overly relaxed way for everyone to settle down. The class had started. The professor spoke about character, about plot, then introduced the pieces being discussed. This time there were only two: mine and one written by the old man next to me. I hadn't read his work. I'd skipped over the email like all the others. Now I wondered what he could have produced. Why he was there at all. I looked over and had a better look at him. I tried to rid myself of the prejudice I felt against him because of his age. Still I couldn't help wondering who he was.

He was well dressed. He wore a crumpled white linen shirt and thick-lensed glasses. He looked a little like a grandfather I half-remembered on my mother's side. He hadn't spoken much in class but what he had said had always been well said and to the point. He gave a half-grunt and I realised that the professor had finished speaking. The man, with slightly shaking hands reached into the satchel he had placed by his legs and pulled out a sheaf of papers. There was a half-empty bottle of vodka in his bag.

He looked up at the professor who was handing out copies of the stories. After a pause to allow for the finding of his first page, he began to read. He did not need to raise his

voice or fight against the whispers and noises that normally filled the room. He was able to bring us all to complete silence from his first sentence. His voice was soft and melodious.

‘There was a time when things were not the way they are now...’ he began. The story was short and beautifully written. With its final sentence an unmanly fear gripped me. There would be a short period of praise for this man’s work. Then, somehow, I would have to bring myself to read out my own story.

‘Choosing perspective: who is telling the story and how does that affect its impact? What do we think in this case?’

Good. The professor was being analytical. Standing at the front of the class in her jeans and scuffed sneakers. Using the same tropes and phrases used on bad tv shows. She wasn’t smiling now. Her lips were thin and drawn out to the side of her face. I looked again at the old man by my side. The thumb of his right hand was drumming a soft tattoo on the desk. He shook his head slightly, sadly, to each comment that was made. There had not been the outpour of compliments, the expressions of awe I had anticipated. Then his soft, well-bred voice broke out again. ‘I don’t think you understand... That’s not what I had wanted to say... I mean, not the way you seem to suggest that I...’ He grew silent. He looked intently at the papers in his hands. Then he put them down and his left hand twitched towards his bag. The class spoke for a few minutes longer about the story’s themes and structures but the man beside me, who had written something beautiful, was beaten. His eyes were still looking down when the professor finally called the discussion to a close.

‘Well if that’s all we have,’ she said. She sighed hugely. Her lips were raised now to the side. ‘Richard why don’t you go ahead and read your piece.’

Now they were all looking at me. All those faces that I had barely registered. I looked across and caught Sarah’s eye. She gave me a small wave of encouragement. I picked up a copy of my story that had made its way to me. Then I coughed. There was the squeak as

someone adjusted themselves in their chair. A cough. I looked down. How did it start again?

Oh, right.

‘It started with Cat. With Catherine. But it was more than just her. It was about the music too...’

‘I thought they were pretty harsh,’ Sarah said. I’d found her sitting alone on a low wall. Her feet were swinging and bumping the stone. She must have been waiting for me. I thought of passing her by, pretending not to have seen her. I sat down next to her.

‘You weren’t too positive yourself.’

‘I thought there were some things you needed to hear. It seemed better to say them in class. That way you couldn’t think I was being personal.’

‘It’ll always be personal. When they attacked the narrator in there, they were using him as a stand in for me.’

‘Only if you were doing the same.’

I didn’t know what to say. We sat in silence in the dark.

‘Okay let’s go for that drink. Call your wife.’

‘Tonight?’

‘Yeah, I want to meet her. Tonight, more than ever.’

An hour later we were in a dimly lit bar. The same one I had once met Rosalind at what felt like a lifetime ago. I was surprised when Chloe agreed so readily to meet us. She had asked who Sarah was and I had told her. A friend from class. When she arrived, she had stood in the doorway looking around with eyes still adjusting to the light. She’d looked more beautiful than I had seen her in a long time. I had enjoyed imagining what it was Sarah was thinking.

Now she and Sarah were talking quickly to each other in a whisper I could barely make out. It was as if they were trying to cut me out of the conversation, hold out against me. My right hand gripped my whisky.

‘We’re going to be great friends. I insist on it. Have another drink.’

Chloe shook her head at this suggestion but her cheeks were flushed with the compliment. I tried to catch her eye.

‘I am so happy to get to meet you. It is good to meet someone from Richard’s life. I want to know all about him.’

‘I’m sure you already know everything there is to know. With us, in class he just comes over as the great *artiste*. I’m sure he can’t do that at home, you know him too well.’ Sarah’s expression was questioning. I couldn’t understand what she wanted from this. I leant forward in my seat.

‘Let’s talk about something else okay?’ I said. Sarah gave me the look again. Chloe shook her head.

‘No, no I want to hear more. How have the classes been? Do they very much like his writing? Or has he not shown any of it yet?’

‘He didn’t tell you? He presented a piece today.’

‘And?’

‘And it was shit,’ I said. I wanted to be off the subject. To drink and relax. I didn’t like these two worlds coming together. ‘They hated it.’

‘That’s not true, they just didn’t quite get it,’ Sarah said in a motherly sort of way. It infuriated me that she was trying to protect me. She was protecting my feelings and reputation. ‘Richard wrote a story about a woman. Our classmates were more interested in the narrator, the man telling the story.’

‘Yeah, they hated it.’

The conversation changed. Sarah asked about Chloe. She seemed interested in her life, in her experiences at the University. I finished my drink and then went to the bar to order another. When I returned they were whispering again. I didn't try to join the conversation. I was too busy thinking of Rosalind.

That night in Florida should have changed everything for the better. It seemed the start of something real. Instead it left three people broken and alone and lost to one another.

Nothing is as real to me as those memories. As I write this now, I can still conjure every detail: the dim lights that shone through the window, the feel of sheets against my legs, the smell of that woman in my arms.

Chloe had gone to bed and we were left in the soft evening with just the lilting buzz of insects in the foliage and the utter stillness of the air. You could almost feel the breath of Cuba in the air, of salsa and rum and cigars. The island was just ninety miles away. I allowed myself the fantasy, that night, that we might escape there. Rent some villa overlooking the ocean or stay in a room at Ambos Mundos.

The real thing, the true thing started with a question. It was something I had been steeling myself to ask. I did.

'Have you ever thought of what could have been? About what our lives might have been like if I had been more forceful, if we'd really been together?'

Rosalind looked at me then. Her eyes were questioning. She had raised a single, delicate eyebrow.

'Everyone wonders about the past. For us there wasn't too much to wonder about,' she said. I moved my head to the side.

'I know I'll spend my life wondering,' I said. There was honesty in what I said.

Her eyes became thin, as though she were making a decision. She walked to the edge of the canal and slipped off her dress. She stood on one leg, unselfconscious in just her underwear. Then she turned and dove silently into the dark water. Ripples spread out along its surface. I watched the boats that danced softly and the dying light that burnished the surface of the water. Rosalind swam, completely submerged, plunging deeper and deeper until I was scared that she would never come up, but would drown — beautiful and untouched — and be lost to me forever. There was the bottle of rum on the table. I took it before going to sit on the edge of the water, watching, as in a dream, as Rosalind came spluttering to the surface.

‘I just feel a little sorry for her.’

‘What does that mean? You were the one who wanted to have an affair. And she has her own life. She’s a grown woman.’

‘And your wife. I just think you need to stop thinking about this Rosalind person.’

‘That has nothing to do with it.’

We had finished our last class. We had submitted our final pieces. We had nothing to show for the work we had put in. I’d felt nothing leaving that classroom, hadn’t felt the need to nod my head at any of the other students. The professor had smiled in a wan sort of way when I caught her eye at the door. ‘I hope you keep writing, Richard,’ she’d said. As if I could stop. Now I was sitting with Sarah on a bench in one of the small campus parks. I wanted to go out and get drunk. She wanted me to go home to Chloe.

‘I’ve had a story accepted for publication. *Overland*,’ she said.

‘Good magazine. Congratulations.’

‘Thanks. I want you to read it when it comes out.’

‘Okay. Though it doesn’t sound like I’ll be happy about it.’

‘Would you ever be happy about someone else’s work?’

‘Maybe yours. I might not be too envious.’ She sat in silence. The finger of my hand brushed hers and she pulled away. Eventually Sarah stood up. She said she needed to get back to Joe.

‘But we’ll keep in touch. Even though the class is done.’

‘Yeah, I’m sure we will.’

I waited until she I couldn’t see her outline anymore as she walked down the street. Then I stood and began walking home to Chloe.

I drank more. Stayed out more. Found my thoughts, more and more often, being dragged back to an earlier time in that city. Back to Rosalind. Sarah and I lost touch. She had her boyfriend, her work. I had ...

I would, when taking breaks from my writing, walk through the old campus. I would remember when Rosalind and I studied there. The buildings were the same. The people looked the same. If I tried hard enough, I could imagine we were still in that time. Afterwards I would meet Chloe for a coffee. We would walk together through small courtyards and across the grass of the University lawns. When enough time had passed, she would pull at my hand to tell me that she needed to get back. I would leave her to her study or to the bookstore and wander away. I’d head through the back streets to my old apartment. It was still as it was then. More decrepit. The paint on the walls was peeling. Thin cracks running through the building’s foundations. I thought about Mark sitting on the step of the apartment, confused and alone and thinking of Rosalind. And before that we had been drunk and happy. There we had created a space for ourselves and kept the future at bay. After looking at the building, I’d go to the nearest pub. I’d try, in the taste of cheap beer, to capture the magic of Proust’s madeleine. I would think about the past and how easy things had seemed then. Usually I’d be

left feeling nothing. Maybe a bittersweet melancholy. Then I'd drink more. I didn't write much on those days.

I wasn't successful in trying to forget Rosalind. In those first few years. While I was trying to be a writer. But without her the resentment grew. I resented my small life. I resented Chloe. I resented the solitude I always felt.

Not to say that my relationship to Chloe had become stale. I was no John Dowell. I cared for Chloe, cooked for her, made her feel at home. Still, we were just missing a true connection. We were sharing an apartment and a last name but not too much else.

Of course, I see my fault now. I hadn't given my all to her. I was hiding a part of myself. Maybe she knew. Maybe she was resentful. How could I expect devotion in return?

The phone call came about an hour ago. She was getting ready to go to the University, to work at the library. Now Chloe is sitting at the kitchen counter of the apartment. She holds a mug of green tea in her hands. Outside there is the sound of construction and traffic. She takes a sip of the tea and realises that it has grown cold. She is happy, wonderfully, calmly happy. Here is a thing that will give them both joy, that will bring them together.

It is true that it will come with difficulties; she will not have so much time for her studies. There will be so many changes to their lives. But if it is the two of them together, what else can happen?

The doctor's voice when he called; it was so calm, soothing. This was a call he made often, a natural thing. He quickly dispelled her misgivings. She was right to think what she had thought. She was right to go see him and place herself in his hands.

Maybe she should have told Richard before she had gone to see this doctor. When she was late and felt the difference in her body. But no, it would be better to tell him now that she is certain. Now that it is real. There would be no anger this way.

She takes another drink of the cool tea, not noticing its bitter taste from too long steeping, and thinks about how he will smile, how he will lift her in his arms and then swing her around the room, before realising and putting her gently back on the ground as if she were something fragile, something made of porcelain. Maybe they will stay up all night discussing the possibilities. That first night they could choose a name.

Chloe puts down the mug. She does this carefully, so that there is only the smallest clink of the ceramic against the counter. This is conjecture. How could she know what Richard would really think? It is just as possible that he will be angry, or at least show that this thing is an inconvenience to him. What if he does not smile when she tells him? What if instead he frowns and takes a beer from the fridge before speaking in a low voice and considering 'options?'

Chloe stands up and walks over to where her book-bag lays on the floor where she dropped it. She pulls it from the ground and onto her shoulder. She decides in that moment not to tell Richard. At least not yet. She is sure that he will be happy, but there is a part of her that must wait. The mug of green tea is left on the kitchen counter.

I stood in the living room of the apartment. The room was filled with an orange glow from the neon sign of the hotel on the other side of the street. Chloe had gone to bed. I was drinking whisky.

I had just decided, in that moment, to find that other person who held fast in all my memories of a time when we drank in the smaller, darker apartment. I needed to find Mark. I needed to see who he had become. It was strange — I see that now — to acknowledge that he had dated Rosalind, had held her, had tasted her, had gone to bed with her not once but again and again. They had shared a connection that I wasn't privy to. They had had intimate moments that were theirs and theirs alone.

But if there was a chance that he knew where she was?

A stumble into the study. A book there. The other that Chloe had given me. For our anniversary. No time to think of that now. I opened the computer.

He wasn't difficult to find. He had Facebook. Like anyone our age he didn't have any recent photos. He had let his social-media presence lapse. He was keeping connected enough only to leave the possibility for connection open. I sent him a message. He was in town. He lived down the coast. He would meet me at a bar. We could reminisce and pretend that we were somehow more than strangers who had once shared a drinking habit.

I almost let him walk past me when he arrived. I hadn't recognised in the almost middle-aged man the quick-witted friend who had shown me how good it felt to drink in the sun. How freeing it was to ignore everything in life but those fleeting pleasures. But there was something in his face that made me look again. I reached out my hand to grab him.

'Is that you mate? Didn't even recognise you. Wait let me get a couple of drinks and I'll join you.'

I couldn't help but notice the round shape of his gut straining his polo shirt, the hair receding away from a glistening forehead. That same impish smile, though now with a tiredness behind the eyes. It is strange how in an instant someone can go from being a memory to a dull and ordinary human being. Mark was the hundreds of people I passed in the

street each day. He was a background character. I fixed up my smile as he returned carrying two pints.

‘Nah, but it’s good to see you. I hadn’t expected it, eh. For some reason I thought you were in Europe or something. How are you? What’s been doing?’

I told him about my life. Tried to distil the essence of myself into a few short sentences. He seemed satisfied with what I said.

‘Is that right? Well good on you. Anything you’ve written that I would have read? Right never mind, there’s still some time ahead of us, though we have grown a bit older, but? Some lines on the old face, eh? Not quite as debonair as we once were.’

I asked him about himself. He talked of a woman he lived with. From the time frame it was probably the same girl who had convinced him to settle down after his break-up with Rosalind. I couldn’t bring myself to ask. I didn’t need to know more. Was she to blame for this insipid man sitting beside me? He gulped at his beer. Foam ran down his chin. What had happened to the person who had bared his soul to me on the steps of my apartment. Even though he should have been angry. Maybe he should have hit me then. Then we both would have been more. We could have found way through in physical courage and violence. Could Rosalind and I have been together, if Mark and I had fought? We could have left the underhandedness and the uncertainty and the secrecy on the pavement in a few speckles of blood and spit.

‘...we’ve got a little one, would you believe. A girl. Just gone one, and she’s the most adorable little ball of fat you’ll ever lay eyes on.’

He had a child. A human being for whom he was responsible. A child, that in his eyes, gave his life some meaning. A child that would grow up to be witty, happy, who would always have a smile on her face. She would be adored by all, lead a good life that would span far into the future. After both Mark and I were dead she would always, always remember her

good old father with a sense of warmth and devotion. Though that was not the only option. The child could grow up tough and sharp. She could be scouted by some lecherous gym teacher or priest. She could be groomed. Could be brought into their world and do degrading things to her in a sordid back room. Her life could become barriers and attempts at amnesia with the help of increasingly illicit drugs that would bring her emotional and intellectual growth to a standstill. What would Mark do then? Or worse, what if the child was dull, deadly dull, just a plump parasitic entity living for McDonalds and YouTube videos? What then?

‘You must be pretty happy,’ I said. For want of anything better.

‘Yeah, you should come down and visit. I’m sure we’d all be happy to see you.’

I told him that I’d try, that. Yes, I’d bring Chloe. The girls could talk. His implication that women and men could only have separate interests. I finished my beer. Another round. I felt the need to get drunk. I needed to get monumentally stupendously drunk. But when I put this to Mark, he just shook his head a little sadly. Was there a hint of pity there?

‘Nah mate, it’s not like that anymore. You go, but. I’ve got to be getting going soon.’

I should have asked him about Rosalind. But I knew how he would react. A questioning frown, a shake of the head. He had a child. What did Rosalind matter to him? We made a little more small talk. I let my thoughts fall into my beer.

Mark left, a shadow passing across his face.

‘Well I guess I’ll be seeing you,’ he said. He spoke a little sadly. He whistled a bar of music as he walked out the door. As he passed the window, I saw that he was smiling again.

I ordered another drink and watched the passers-by. How often had I done that? I thought of opening the book I’d brought but couldn’t stomach the idea of reading someone else’s work. If it was bad I would be angry, if it was good I would feel shame. Much better to drink.

I was further from Rosalind than ever. The bar began to blur. It seemed that the young couple next to me were looking over too often. The bartender wore a scowl when she served me. It seemed that my whole life was mixed into the confusion of that evening. Perhaps I was finally breaking down. My mind was slipping into nothingness.

After I left, I saw her long brown hair. Her smile. I'd found her! Finally. She was in a group of young women. They turned when I called out. The lines disappeared. Her hair was lighter, curlier. The knowing smile turned into a wide vacuous grin. It wasn't her. It wasn't Rosalind. Just a quite pretty first-year university student. Surrounded by her friends. Young and innocent and happy. They laughed. One scowled. They turned away from me.

'Just another drunk,' the prettiest of them said.

I put my head down and walked back to the apartment. I didn't say anything to Chloe when I got back. I forced a smile and went to bed.

We spent most of the next day together but even sitting next to her, typing on my laptop, I felt a distance between us. That evening she said she was going out with friends. When she was gone I walked in circles around the apartment.

Later. I took my coat and caught a bus. Got off at Bondi Junction. I walked over the hill and down the long stretch of Bondi Road until I saw the ocean. It was dark and huge against the lights of the strip. I made it down to the Icebreakers swim club and leant on the white-wooden fence, overlooking the salt-water swimming pool. The tide was up and wind swept the waves of the ocean. They rose and crashed over the sides of the pool. I walked down the steps to the sand. Three backpackers drank, shouting raucously to one another. They were huddled around a bright bonfire. I thought of asking to join them but knew that all the happiness and joy on their faces would disappear and turn to suspicion the moment I approached. I turned to the dark cliff-face on my right and walked to a sheltered spot. This

was where I imagined Rosalind had spent the night all those years ago. Funny that I hadn't done this before. I needed to see what it would have been for her. Lost and absolutely alone waiting for a dawn that would be marred by shock and heartache.

I sat in the cold sand and waited. Dusk fell more heavily. The lights of the arcing street beyond the beach seemed to dull and flicker. The bonfire smouldered into a hot, cherry red. The backpackers were leaving in a slow procession. They were laughing and shouting as they stumbled up the beach. The ocean was a black sheen that lay out across the infinite.

The water had been just as dark in Florida. When Rosalind was swimming in the canal and I was standing on the edge with a bottle of rum in my hand. We were in a secluded world. It was just the two of us in the perfect night air. I could see her as she was then: A dark shape in the water, turning slowly. Her hair was laid flat against her head.

She swam a lazy crawl back to the canal side. I sat down next to her and let my feet sink into the water. I felt the warmth of the water. Her body pressing against my leg. She held out her hand and I passed her the rum. She drank deeply. She was holding the bottle in one hand and the concrete with the other.

'So,' she said, when she had finished drinking, and I recognised the invitation in the syllable. I pulled off my shirt and slid into the water. I let it engulf me. I was still wearing my white linen pants. It was only after we had met and embraced, our legs kicking, struggling against each other, that I thought to look up at the window of our room. Chloe's and my room. The lights were out. I didn't even have time to feel relief before I turned back to Rosalind. We sunk into each other's arms, heads spinning with drink, the danger of our actions, and the anticipation of what was still to come.

Chloe tries not to cry. She is sitting behind the bed in the bedroom with her back rounded and pressed against the wall. Her knees are up close to her chest. She had been alone in the apartment when it happened. When it started and she knew that she was losing everything. She had gone by herself to the doctor, had sat in the waiting room with those other women and had been alone in his office when he spoke in those same soft tones and told her the reality of it.

She is glad now that she did not tell him about the baby. He did not have the chance to get excited about what could have been, what will now never be. She thinks about the idea she held of this other thing in their life and the tears begin to press on her again.

She knows that Richard will be home soon and she doesn't want him to find her like this, she doesn't want to him to see her, so she hides behind the bed and tries to stop the tears from breaking her down, from showing her weakness.

Then the sound of the door opening and his heavy step in the corridor that ran beside the bedroom. There is no time left to hide.

'Hey darling. Clo? Chloe, are you there?' His voice is loud and jarring. He does not know that the world has crumbled, that it has been destroyed, broken into a million fragmented pieces. She wants to save him that pain and decides in that moment not to tell him any of it.

She hears his footsteps as he marches down to the kitchen. Then a pause and they move back toward her.

'Where are you?' he says. His voice is thick and slightly distorted, and she knows that he has been drinking. He has been out with a friend of his. Or maybe he got drunk alone. Chloe does not know what time it is but realises that it must be late. She does not want him to see her, begs him to turn around and walk back to the kitchen.

'Damn it Chloe, where are you?'

She pulls her head up, trying to speak in a clear voice.

'Yes, yes I am here. I'm just reading. Why don't you watch a movie?' she says.

'Because I want to talk to you.'

There is nothing more she can think to say so she lets him walk into the bedroom. The apartment is small, he finds her easily. She sees his boots first, around the edge of the bed. Again he has not taken them off, has not left them near the door. But she is just distracting herself to think like this. Then he is standing over her. He does not say anything, does not bend down to comfort her either. He stands over her with a strange expression on his face. Chloe sees herself as a prisoner with this man who is standing over her. Then Richard bends down and holds her shoulder and asks what is wrong. There is confusion in his voice. Chloe feels guilty that he has come home to find his wife on the floor. He probably wants to talk about his day and his writing and instead he has to see her like that.

But what could she say to him? It is as if she is living with a stranger — a man she loves and who loves her but who is completely separate from her. That he can stand over her like this as if there was nothing between them. She sees then what he has become: a silent, closed man at odds with everything around him. No, no it is wrong to think this way.

'Chloe, what's wrong?'

'Rien, c'est rien,' she says, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. She smiles up at him weakly as if laughing at the silliness of her tears.

'Look I'm not blind, I can see something's wrong. What is it?'

Chloe tries again to stop but the tears push at the back of her eyes. She can picture herself grimacing, a distortion of who she really is — made ugly and red by the crying.

'Chloe what do you want me to do? Tell me what's wrong.'

She can see that he does want to help. There is that much. For a moment she wants to tell him everything, then she looks at his boots and cannot.

'Look I can't stand here all night. Tell me what it is and I can deal with it.'

Chloe shakes her head and continues to cry, quietly now, without looking up. He grows silent. He must realise that it is all useless. Useless. His confusion has turned to anger and he scowls down at her.

'Okay don't fucking tell me, but I'm not going to stand here all night,' he says eventually.

'It's nothing, Richard. Really it is not,' she says. She tries to smile again, gasping for air a little as she does. She sees the hardness behind his eyes. There is stubble on his chin. Chloe notices without meaning to the weight he has put on around the neck. He looks unhealthy and white from her position on the floor.

How could she tell him what was wrong?

'I am just habituating myself to living here. Here in Australia. I have had a long day. Really it is nothing.'

She wonders for a moment why she cannot tell him the truth. Why she cannot confide in her husband, the only other person in her life. But what does it matter now? He shakes his head a little, but then turns. Before he leaves the room, he says:

'I'm hungry. I'm going to cook something. Let me know when you want to eat.'

Chloe looks down at her empty hands. The sobbing continues in waves. It is like being sick, like Chloe is trying to vomit out all the poison inside. But there was no end to the sadness and emptiness inside her.

Phone ringing. An infuriating noise. Who calls these days? Who picks up the phone and expects to talk to you? They couldn't text or email? A moment to find the phone. It was on the kitchen counter. It had been months since anyone had actually called. Caller ID. *Fuck.*

'Hey mate.'

'Hello.'

'It's Mark.'

'Sure. Hey. How are you?'

'Yeah. I'm okay. Listen, what are you up to next weekend?'

'I don't know. At the moment. Not much, I guess. Why?'

'We're having a little get together and thought you might be able to make it. You and Chloe.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, mate. It'd be great to talk about the old days and that. But look if you're busy...'

'No, no. We'll try and make it. I'll ask Chloe. But listen, are you sure your wife wants us there? She hasn't even met Chloe.'

'No, really? She told me that they met in Florida. Remember? Richard? Dick? You still there?'

I feel rather detached about this now. It was so obvious. You probably saw it coming. But at the time it came as a shock. I stood silent. The phone pressed against my ear. I felt an overwhelming blankness as I began to understand. Like a sudden fugue. I waited for my processing abilities to kick back in.

'... Rosalind. Of course, you remember.'

‘Yeah, of course. Sure I do. Next weekend? We’ll be free,’ I said. Monotonous even tone. You wouldn’t have guessed that I was having trouble breathing.

‘Great, I’ll send you the details. Richard? You there? Okay then. I’ll send you the details. We’re looking forward to it. See you then.’

‘Right. See you then.’

I stood still after he hung up, my phone weighing down my hand. Outside the sun had risen. It had begun to warm the apartment. There were soft footsteps behind me.

‘Who was that?’ Chloe said. She yawned and pushed the hair from her forehead. ‘Have you made coffee?’

I pointed to the pot of coffee and continued to stare out the window.

‘So, who was it?’ Chloe asked again. She held her cup between both hands.

‘Mark.’

‘Your friend? Why is he calling so early?’

‘He wanted to invite us to a party. Next weekend.’

‘That is nice. Are we going?’

‘Yeah, if you’d like. It’s down the coast a bit. We could make it a get-away.’

‘I would like that. What is this party for?’

‘I don’t really know. A housewarming, maybe. But he’s having it with his wife. Rosalind. He’s married to Rosalind. Who we met in Florida. Remember?’

‘No, but really? Why did you not tell me?’

‘I didn’t know until just now.’

‘That is so strange.’

‘Not so strange. Lots of people go back to their first love.’

‘Oui, t’as raison. C’est comme ça parfois. Mais j’espère que t’es pas trop triste.’

‘I have always wanted to see those beaches.’

Chloe turned and went back to the bedroom. She came back in a light dress. She seemed so fresh and young. Then she kissed me. She told me that she loved me and left. She was going to the university and I was staying at home.

I tried to work. I couldn't. I went and got a beer and sat on the couch, looking out the window at the blue sky beyond the nearest buildings. What would happen to us?

We had pulled ourselves out when we could no longer bear the frustration of fighting the water to stay afloat. She disentangled herself first. She swam quickly, smoothly to the edge of the canal. With a movement she was out. Away from me. I watched her as she stood, in the cooling night air, backlit by the warm kitchen light. Then I swam to her. I heaved myself up. Then I was, running, stumbling, towards her. Before I could reach her, she had turned. Taking her white dress in her hand. Then she was through the door.

She ran silently through the house with only the balls of her feet touching the slick, stone floors. We were dripping and heaving. I wanted to call out and tell her to slow down, to be careful. But knew that if I opened my mouth, if I made a sound, I would break the spell we were both under and the reality of our situation would come rushing back in to drown us.

Rosalind's room was on the ground floor, close to the kitchen. It had a wide window overlooking the canal and a large ensuite decked out in sand-coloured stone. She disappeared inside. For a heart-stopping moment I thought that she would close the door. But the door stayed open and I made it through just in time to see her step through to the bathroom.

I was at the threshold. She hadn't turned on the light. She stood in the sandstone shower facing away from me. Her hair was dark and slick. She stood with her legs crossed. Her right arm was outstretched to the shower head. She was childlike in her movements. There was nothing but wet underwear covering her tanned, dark skin. I couldn't hold myself back any longer. I flicked the light switch and stepped through. Her eyes widened as she

looked up at me. I wrapped my arms around her, bringing her face to mine. Her eyes were darker than I had remembered. For a moment she seemed to have trouble focusing. She looked over my shoulder.

‘No...Chloe?’ she said in a hurried whisper. The protestation was too soft to be real, a mechanical appeal to conventionality.

I spoke in a whisper, earnestly trying to put my now muddled thoughts into coherent phrases. My role was to reframe our actions so that it became clear that there was no other path than forward to an end that had been inevitable from the first night that I saw her standing at my door in a Bruce Springsteen t-shirt.

‘I need you Rosalind. I should have given in to you all those years ago.’

‘And Chloe?’

‘Chloe will be okay. Like you knew Mark would be.’

She looked up at me in silence. Then I saw the faint, breath-taking, world-changing nod of her head. Droplets of water continued to fall from her hair. They dripped down on our feet. Suddenly we were cold. We were shivering against each other and I reached out to turn on the water. Gently, delicately I helped her out of her wet underwear. They fell onto the stone with a soft noise. The water pooled around them so that they floated slightly and were pushed in that small tide toward the drain. There they lay in a soggy white pile. I pulled her hand. We stumbled, still wet, to the bedroom and her bed.

And so, after all that time, after all those years, I made up for that first mistake. This time there was no wavering, no indecision. I took advantage of the moment. This time both of our intentions were clear.

I circled behind her. Placing her between me and the bed. Then I pushed her so that she fell onto her back. I stood over her. Her body lay extended. Her arms were raised above her head. I wish now I had taken the time to look at her. I would have memorised the lines of

her, the shadows and the colour. Instead I fell on her. Our mouths met in a deep kiss. I moved myself down to her breasts, to her stomach, to her waist. She lay with her eyes looking up to the ceiling. When the time came, I pulled myself up to kiss her again. It was a good, strong kiss and from it I directed myself into her. She sighed softly, moving under me in a way that made me more alive. Hungrier. Her eyes were fixed over my shoulder. In them I read a sacred truth; I was lost to their depth.

Afterward there was peace. A deep silence that filled the room. There wasn't anything to say. Then the darkness closed in and it was as if we both realised the lateness of the hour and the risk of our staying together so long.

Rosalind turned and pushed me. Both her hands against my ribs.

'Go,' she said.

I pushed myself up. I drank from the bottle of rum. I rested my other hand on her leg. Her skin was still wet against mine.

'Go,' she said again, pulling her leg away. I understood that she wanted to me to go back to Chloe. I thought I knew why.

But there was a look on her face. The ready smile was no longer there. Instead Rosalind looked questioning.

I knew that I should have felt guilt, but I felt none. The realisation that Rosalind and I had been together was enough. It masked any feelings of remorse. It was natural for me to assume that it was the same for her. I stood and bent down to give her a kiss. This time she didn't look at me.

I had thought the deception necessary, in fact it hadn't crossed my mind that it could be otherwise. Being in that place with Rosalind had felt like the first real, concrete, thing I had ever done. There, finally, was the truth of the thing. For me there was no doubt that from here on out it was me and Rosalind against the world. Richard and Rosalind *contra mundum*,

as poor Sebastian would say. I was leaving to keep up appearances, so that when Rosalind and I did decide to tell Chloe, it would be on our own terms.

I walked out of the room without looking back at the woman lying extended on the bed. Knowing that if I wavered for a moment I would never leave. I ran silently upstairs to what I now thought of as Chloe's room and pulled the door open quietly. In the dark I could just see Chloe laid out on the white blankets. One naked leg extended toward me. A twitch. I stumbled a little on a pillow that was lying on the floor and then stumbled some more. I exaggerated my actions. If Chloe did wake, I wanted her to think it was because I was drunk, that I had spent the last few hours doing nothing more compromising than getting chastely and absolutely wasted, trashed, fucked, with an old friend. I debated having a shower. Instead I dropped myself onto the bed. A part of me hoped that she would smell Rosalind on me. I wanted to unburden myself — not for the sake of easing my conscience, from which I had felt not a twinge — but to open the path for us to finally be together.

Just before I sunk into unconsciousness, I thought of the life that might now be open to us. We could fly anywhere in the world. Disappear from our old lives and then... then...

I slept.

In the morning it was as if nothing at all had happened. As if the world had not changed. Chloe hugged me and smiled as she woke. As time passed, she seemed more distant but there was never anything said. I left her in bed. Rosalind was sitting outside looking at the canal. I found a beer and sat down next to her. I smiled. She didn't smile back. She didn't want to speak, not about what had happened. I felt a sinking in my stomach.

We only had one night together in Florida, a single night that fused our bodies and our souls, bringing together the lines of our separate lives and entwining them inseparably. But Rosalind had refused to see it that way. The few times I found her alone before she'd left, I'd been met with the same rebuff, the same arguments.

But I knew that I would see her again. I just didn't know that it would be like this. Chloe and I driving south to see her and her child and her husband. I would see her again.

Chloe watches as Richard's expression changes. At first there is that familiar frustration — his indignation at having to answer the phone, his irritation at having to interrupt his writing. His words are curt, his sentences short.

He is using her to get out of some commitment. She is his excuse. Chloe is about to walk into the room, to wave hello to her husband and quietly make herself coffee when she sees the change in him. His face becomes a mask, his skin tightening across his cheekbones and at the edges of his eyes. Chloe knows that whatever is being said at the other end of the line has affected him deeply. She wonders what it could be to cause a reaction in her husband who is usually so passive.

'Yeah, of course. Sure I do. Next weekend? We'll be free.'

He has agreed to something. But what? What could possibly have caused him to change his mind so quickly? And for Richard to accept an invitation somewhere — Chloe barely registers that he has accepted on her behalf as well.

She waits in the corridor like a trespasser in her home, watching her husband as he stands rigid and tense in the morning light. For a moment she thinks that she has always been looking at Richard like this, from a distance and from the outside.

It seems an age until Richard puts the phone down, placing it not in his pocket but gently on the kitchen counter. Chloe takes a breath and walks slowly into the living room, feigning sleep-blurriness. She doesn't want to deceive him but knows that if she seems too interested, if she betrays her curiosity, he will close up and all that she would learn would be a distorted version of the truth.

'Who were you talking to?'

But Richard does not look up to his wife, instead he is looking down at his feet, and at the carpet.

Chloe changes her question, asks instead if there is coffee and Richard points to the French-press on the counter. It is near his phone and after Chloe has poured her cup of coffee, she makes a play of seeing it and asks again who he was talking to. She tries to make it seem that she is only mildly curious. But the way his face changed; she needs to know who it was.

Richard looks up finally. As if for the first time hearing Chloe's question.

'Oh that, it was just Mark.' Again, he grows silent.

Mark. Chloe does not know much about this man. He and Richard went to University together. He dated Rose, she knows this, though his name was not spoken often when she and Richard spoke so intently in Florida those years ago. Rose knows that like all of Richard's friends Mark drifted away and Richard made no effort to keep in touch. No, that was not quite true. Several months ago Richard went out for drinks with Mark and came back drunk. Around when... At that time Chloe did not have the emotional capacity to find out what happened. She left it as another aspect of Richard's life that she was not invited into. What did Mark say?

'Oh yes. What did he say?' Chloe asks. What could Mark say to make Richard react like that, when he never reacted to her. Not even when... no... no she will not think of that now. It was not his fault.

'...But he's having it with his wife. Rosalind. He's married to Rosalind. Who we met in Florida. Remember?'

Chloe hears the end of the sentence. Married to Rose. So that was the change. Now she understands. Rose is married to Mark and Richard cannot believe it. So now they are both going to a party because two almost-strangers are married.

Richard tries to be careless in the way he tells Chloe, his movements regain some of their normal slow deliberation. He finds his repose. Still his shoulders are hunched forward, and from the tensing of his jaw Chloe can see that he is still bewildered and hurt.

Of course she knows that she should feel jealous. Even she should be angry. Maybe she does feel that way, a little. But she knows Richard, knows that he is flawed and romantic. She knows him too well to let herself suffer from this infatuation. He loved Rose as a boy at university. And it is only that at sometime in his life he forgets that real life is not like it is in literature; just because you love someone once — it is not everything.

Chloe spends the morning trying to lighten his mood. She brings him coffee and asks him about his work. When it becomes clear that nothing will change his feelings of self-pity she falls back into French.

‘Oui, t’as raison. C’est comme ça parfois. Mais j’espère que t’es pas trop triste.’

Then she walks back to the bedroom to get ready for her day. She knows that it will be impossible to try and speak to him now. Instead Chloe dresses carefully — picking out a neat blue dress that Richard once complimented — and readies her books. When she walks back to the living room she finds him sitting on the couch staring at the wall as though he would find some measure of comfort there. He turns and for a moment looks so pitifully miserable that she wants to hug him. But when she approaches his face grows hard again.

‘I love you, Richard. Try to have a nice day.’

He will need time to be sad. Need time to mourn whatever lost dreams he has clung to. In the evening, Chloe thinks, he will feel better. Then they can continue their lives; they can finally move forward into the future.

The door slams behind Chloe and for a second she smiles. Then she straightens herself and walks quickly down the corridor.

I rented a car. A white Subaru Outback. The girl at the desk smiled just enough to make me wonder. I was feeling good and drove quickly. I parked down a side alley and ran up the stairs to the apartment. Chloe was home and I pulled her to me and then laid her out on the bed. We were packed and ready to leave two hours later.

The joy, the happiness stayed with me as we navigated the traffic along the Princes Highway. An exodus from the city. Cars merged haphazardly. Horns blared. I turned the music up. Chloe smiled. I turned the music up higher. It was so loud that we couldn't hear each other. When Chloe tried to say something, I shouted 'What?' at the top of my voice. She smiled a wide smile and I turned down the music.

The traffic began to flow smoothly, and we were left with a near empty road. The sun shone bright. I opened the window. The breeze whipped through the car. I could smell the ocean in the fresh breeze.

I'd rented a house down near Gerringong. I would see the places I had only imagined up until now. Had we asked Mark and Rosalind would likely have let us stay with them, but I wanted the freedom of our own place. It was another Airbnb and cost too much, but it was worth it. I was willing to spend more of our money for this weekend. This weekend was important. Beside me in the car Chloe was singing. She sang well. Her accent fitted the words.

For a long while, almost to Gerringong, I was happy. Maybe I should have been sad. I wasn't. This, this here, was an adventure. This was a contrast to the dull, stolid life that we

had been living. There would be time to drink and relax and to take stock. I caught glints of the water in the distance to our left.

That thought of happiness made me think of Rosalind. I tried to visualise what it would be like to see her again. How would she look? How would she smell? How would she stand? What would her lips taste like when we kissed?

I tried to listen to the music. I tried to lose myself in the moment again.

He would be there too. Mark. They would be living together in a house with fresh sea air. Both of them in their happiness, each finding something in each other that acted as a rudder. Rosalind had chosen stolid comfort over passion.

They had met again when she moved back to Australia. First in Sydney of course. Maybe he had been walking down King Street. He would have recognised her on the crowded footpath. He had seen her eyes, her smile, and when he came closer, he would have caught the sweet smell of her. For him she was the symbol of a simpler past. A past without worry or stress, of drinking and bravado. He would have smiled widely and folded her into a hug, not quite bringing himself to press his face into her hair.

And what would she see? An old flame. Somebody that she used to know. Maybe she would have seen me standing over his shoulder. I want to think so. She would see more than him. That at least is sure. There would be a complexity of emotion there.

They would have talked awkwardly for a while as pedestrians pushed past them. Then he would have suggested getting a coffee. They would have ended up at his house. He would have finally leant in to kiss her. After all it was Rosalind. She was standing in front of him. She had always meant something to him.

When they slept together again after all those years he was filled with happiness. She pictured the old apartment where we used to drink. The two of us sitting in bed.

‘I was wondering...’

I took the turn. Toward Gerringong. That much closer.

Then later:

‘What are you thinking’ Chloe asked. I could not tell her. I shook my head. Then I turned down the music. I was tired from driving. I was glad that we were nearly there. It confused me that they had decided to move down the coast. It was something I could ask later that night.

The house I had rented stood in a row of detached but identical copies; each was low with a dark, softly sloping roof and white painted walls. Ours had a dark blue door. I parked and we walked to it. The afternoon was still warm.

‘It is nice,’ Chloe said. She was looking to me for affirmation. Her comment was not quite a question, not quite a statement. She wanted to draw me out. I shook my head and smiled, pulling her to me into a hug.

I said, ‘Yes it’s wonderful. We’ll be happy here tonight. Just you and I.’ I meant it. There was a lightness in me. Chloe smiled up at me and for a moment I thought of turning back to the car, of taking her anywhere else. Instead I unlocked the door. Inside it was spacious and clean. A true beach cottage. Bright and filled with light.

We took in the space, felt the joy that it would bring. I opened a pair of sliding glass doors. I could see the ocean in the distance. I found Chloe and held her to me.

We dressed quickly. I went and stood at the open window and looked out. There was a street with some parked cars and then some bushes. A bottlebrush bloomed red and vivid in the early evening light. Beyond was the ocean.

Rosalind, I was coming for you. After everything we had experienced together. After those long years apart. I would see you again

The car lurched over the shoulder and then began to roll quickly down the steep driveway. I pressed the brake and the car slowed. We pulled up to the crowded packed-dirt parking area in front of the garage. The house was a single storey beach shack done in white-painted wooden slats with a blue front door. Why always these reminders of the ocean? A fence of tall, thin trees encircled the property. At their base a thick brush of foliage. I opened my door and waited for Chloe to do the same. From around the back of the house came a raised voice and the sound of laughter.

‘We do not have to go in,’ Chloe said. Her voice was timorous.

I said, ‘Well we’re here now. Might as well.’

I knew that there was no chance of my leaving. Whatever happened. I had to see her again. It seemed that my whole life I had been looking for explanations from Rosalind. That first kiss. Why she had wanted me in the first place. Our affair in Florida. Her distance. Always her distance.

Chloe finally pushed herself out of the car and circled it. She was pretty in the early evening light. Objectively attractive. She would be on my arm and might even cause jealousy. How would Rosalind react?

Chloe followed me to the door. The voices from the back were more distinct now. I could hear Mark and another male voice, but not Rosalind.

A dog came around the side of the house. A heavy-set Rottweiler with big paws and a large, block-like, head. It sniffed at a drainpipe and then looked up at us. Its red tongue lolled out of the side of its mouth. I extended my hand towards it and it backed away. It turned and ran back around the side of the house. Here was another link pulling me back into Rosalind’s past.

I knocked on the door. Chloe turned to me with a nervous smile.

‘It’ll be okay. Just in and out,’ I said.

‘Yes. It will be fun.’

In the moment before the door opened a lightness filled my chest. My breathing became quick and desperate. My thinking became clouded. I could see Rosalind standing in the doorway. She was opening her mouth but did not speak. Then the door opened. Mark stood in front of us. He was holding a small, pale, child in his arms.

‘Richard. Glad you could make it. And this must be Chloe. I’ve heard so much about you. Come on in. Don’t mind this stuff. We’re out back.’

‘Thank you for inviting us,’ Chloe said.

‘Ah no worries. It’s great to have you here. I know Rosie was looking forward to seeing you again.’

‘Is that your child?’

‘This little thing? Yeah she’s our monster. Fucking terror, she is. Come in, come in.’

We followed him down a narrow hallway. On the walls were framed photos of the child, of Mark with a surfboard, and there, with Mark’s arm wrapped around her, a photo of Rosalind. Black and white. She looked happy. Sincerely happy. I wondered at the honesty of them, could they be so real as that?

‘So why the party?’ I asked.

‘He doesn’t mean...Don’t be rude Richard,’ Chloe said. She looked across at me sharply. Her golden-brown eyes glittered beautifully.

‘No worries. It’s just a housewarming party. Good of you to come,’ Mark said. He stopped walking and turned to us. Suddenly we were very close in the small corridor. He looked me in the eyes and I looked away. ‘Well I guess we just wanted to see our old friends. Time to move forward with our lives. It seemed as good a time as any to see the people that got us here.’

‘Yeah?’ I said. There was a taste in my mouth that I didn’t understand. What was the real reason? Had the real invitation come from Rosalind? Was she giving herself a lifeline?

‘It’s just a party,’ Mark said. He turned and led us into a dining room. The room had a lived-in feel; it was cluttered and disordered. I felt already drunk, not quite able to grasp the reality of my surroundings.

This house was real. Mark here walking in front of us was real. In all I had imagined I had never brought myself to believe the truth of it. That their marriage could be so real. So depressing. This kind of domesticity was something from another generation. Still, she had invited me here. I had to see her. Desperately now.

Mark took us through a sliding glass door to a wooden deck. A dozen or so people were standing, holding beer bottles and wine glasses. They were smiling or speaking in earnest voices to one another. The smile had returned to his face. There was a small pool surrounded by granite in the garden down from the deck. It looked cool and inviting. A few unfamiliar faces turned when we came through the door.

‘Everyone, everyone this is Richard and Chloe. Richard’s an old uni mate, we used to get pissed together back in the day.’

A few laughs. Some waves and indistinct hellos. Mark turned his smile on us.

‘There are some people I want you to meet,’ he said.

He directed us to where a man and a woman were talking.

‘This is Olivia and Brett. Richard is a writer and Chloe is pursuing her doctorate. You’ll get along famously.’

Mark turned. I put my hand on his shoulder.

‘Where’s Rosalind?’ I asked. He looked back at me.

‘She’s just in the kitchen. She’ll meet up with you guys later.’

‘Right. Thanks mate.’

‘For what?’

‘For this, for inviting us.’

‘Hey, no big deal. We’ll talk later.’

Then he was gone. Chloe was already talking to Brett. He had a receding hairline and half-moon glasses. He spoke with a crooked smile and punctuated his sentences with a low, guttural clearing of his throat.

The dog was back, pushing his head into my leg. The heft and push of him was significant. I patted the top of its head. His tail made thumping noises against the wooden table.

‘He’s a very well named dog,’ Olivia said.

‘I’m sorry?’ I said. I took a moment to look at her. She was a small dark-skinned woman, with short-cut curled black hair and thick glasses. There was a seriousness there. But she was also attractive. Without really meaning to I tried to picture her naked. A small body, with only a few flaws that would emphasise her beauty rather than detract from it.

‘The dog. Do you know him?’

‘We haven’t been formally introduced,’ I said.

‘His name is Fred. Short for Frederick Altmont Cornwallis Twistleton. From Wodehouse.’

‘I’ve heard the name before.’

‘I bet. Mark says you’re a writer?’

‘Of sorts. Not really. Trying to be. It’s tough. I’m not sure I can explain.’

‘I can imagine,’ she said.

‘No, no I’m not sure you can,’ I said. I was looking around, not paying attention to her anymore. I didn’t mean to be rude but the idea of trying to explain. The same questions,

the same tired explanations. There was just too much of real importance on my mind. I scanned the faces around me — still no sign of Rosalind.

‘If you say so,’ Olivia said. From her half-formed smile I could tell that she didn’t believe me. No matter.

‘So, what kind of things do you write, Richard?’ Brett said. He was leaning into our conversation. I tried to dismiss the question with a shrug, but Brett wouldn’t leave it. Olivia continued to smile.

‘Mostly travel writing. But I’m trying to branch out a little more at the moment, write something more significant. I don’t pretend to be the writer of our generation. I don’t think like Norman Mailer or any of that generation. They all had to think they were the best. I have to be a bit more realistic.’

I was surprised by my answer. Though I knew that they would not understand, I found myself wanting to explain to this Brett the importance of my work. There was a superciliousness in his gaze that I wanted to erase.

‘That’s not to say that I’m not good,’ I said. I laughed a little to show that the remark was in fun. Chloe nodded her head slightly.

‘Hmm. Sounds interesting,’ Brett said. Then he dismissed me from his mind. He turned his attention back to Chloe.

‘And what do you study Chloe?’ Chloe a small step backwards. There was a look of small confusion on her face.

‘I study history. A PhD.’

‘Where do you study?’

‘Sydney University. I started at Cambridge, but when we moved here...’

‘That’s a step down. You don’t mind the sacrifice?’

Sacrifice? What did the bastard mean? I shifted my weight. Chloe didn't respond. She looked down at her feet.

'And are you happy here?' said Olivia.

'We are happy to be in Australia. But it is difficult to travel.'

'That's not quite what I meant.'

'What did you mean?'

I said, 'She is happy. We are happy.' Chloe squeezed my hand.

'Of course, it is always easier when you find friends in the new country,' said Brett.

He seemed oblivious to the tension of the conversation. I fought back an urge to hit him.

Mark was with us again. He wore a buttoned-down shirt and shorts. Too relaxed even for this party.

'Ah excellent, everyone's getting along. Get you all anything. No, all good? Right.

Olivia have you spoken to Richard about the new book?'

Then he was gone. He picked his way between small groups of his friends, inevitably greeted with a smile or a slap on the back.

'A new book? You're a writer?'

'I guess. Have you ever heard of *It's Not Dark Yet?*'

'Sure. You're Olivia King.' *It's Not Dark Yet*. Bright red cover. Olivia King. Standing there as if she was just an ordinary person. How could they be so casual? After Sarah I had bought another copy. All you had to do was walk into a bookstore and you would find it straight away. Most often placed on a small table just inside the door.

'That's me. What I'm best known for.'

'You didn't say you were a writer.'

'Well you didn't think I would understand.'

She stood on one leg, holding a beer. The left side of her mouth was pulled up in another half-smile. She was dressed casually. She looked about my age. But she had written a real novel. She had written something which was undeniably brilliant. She had spoken, telepathically, to thousands of readers. She had influenced their thoughts, imparted her views. Which made her someone of consequence. A novel that spoke the truth of its subject well and without excess flair. This woman had achieved everything I had ever wanted to achieve. And she had deceived me. Had made me feel like a fool, for having bragged about my far smaller successes. It didn't seem right that she could be so ordinary. She was laughing at the dog. Fred had turned his attention to her hand. He was nuzzling against it like a cat.

'I enjoyed it.'

'Thanks.'

'How did you do it?'

'What do you mean? How did I write the book? I just sat down and wrote. It's just writing you know? Anything is more interesting than talking about the mechanics of it. You know that.'

'Right.' I was learning to hate her with her too easy confidence and her quantifiable success.

'So how did you and Chloe meet?'

I told her. She nodded slightly and her smile said that she knew the story was polished and fake. There was a silence. What could I say? We turned and listened to Brett tell a long story about university politics. Chloe and Olivia both leant forward with interest. I looked away.

There at the edge of the party, behind a young couple. Rosalind was walking along the edge of the garden. She was walking towards where Mark now stood talking to a fat man in a too-tight collared shirt. In the stillness of the evening air I heard the hawk of a cockatoo.

She looked different than I remembered. She walked differently. It was difficult to reconcile the woman I held in my head with the woman who stood there. Speaking to her husband and the stranger.

She scanned the crowd. She was making sure that everything was running smoothly. Being a good host. I raised a finger as her eyes flitted past us. She smiled faintly. A sharp smile. I was reminded again of that painting I had once seen in Florence. The swarthy complexion and wide, intelligent eyes. More importantly an undeniable and inexpressible internal beauty. She waved once and then turned back to Mark. She had mouthed some words I could not understand. Behind her the eucalyptus trees swayed in the evening breeze.

I excused myself. I made a loop around the other guests, grabbing a beer from an open cooler as I passed. There was a knife lying next to the barbecue and I picked it up to hinge the cap off the beer. I replaced the knife and walked inside. It was a nice house. It was also a home. There were children toys on the floor of the living room and a single bookcase of dark wood filled with well-worn paperbacks. In the middle of the shelf stood Olivia's book. The same edition; a deep red cover and the lettering of the title in thick black letters. Had Rosalind read it? Mostly likely. Mark was never much of a reader.

I turned and walked back into the entrance hall corridor. There was a wooden door. I opened it and went through. It was a study. On a small desk next to the window a few law books were piled up. On some loose paper were notes scribbled out in a handwriting I recognised. Nothing interesting. No photographs on the desk. No revelations either. A bottle of whisky on the floor next to the desk. On the wall was a small painting of a seascape: a length of bright sand lining a dark blue sea. A small bird flew in the top right-hand corner of the painting. I walked back into the corridor. The next door led into a small bathroom.

I stood at the sink and looked at myself in the mirror. There was a face looking back at me. It wasn't one I recognised. It looked old and worn. There were deep lines in its

forehead. This stranger's eyes had sunk into his skull and deep pockets of dark skin sagged underneath them. The beard he wore was not a manly affirmation but an indication of all the time that had passed and had been wasted. But I knew that if I shaved it the flesh under my chin would show drooping and flabby. Even my lips looked strange, crooked. When I couldn't stand to look any more, I left the bathroom and wandered back along the corridor towards the sounds of people. The door at the far end of the corridor opened up to the kitchen.

Rosalind was standing at the counter of a kitchen island. There was a glass of wine in her hand. I couldn't bring myself to believe that she was really there. After all this time. She was looking at a spot just over the refrigerator. To her right was a platter of vegetables and a bottle of white wine.

'Hi Richard,' she said.

'Hi Rosalind.'

'Glass of wine?'

'Sure.'

She took a glass from a high cupboard and turned, pouring a glass from the bottle. I took the glass from her and looked at her for a moment.

'What is it?'

'Just strange seeing you again like this. Where's Mark?'

'He's outside with the other guests.'

'Right. Should I go?'

'You can stay if you like. I'll only be a moment. How's Chloe?'

'She's good. We got married.'

'I heard. Congratulations.'

'And to you. When did it happen?'

‘With Mark? We met up when I got back to Australia. It was just nice, finding that happiness again.’

‘Again?’

‘Sure. We were happy once. Don’t you remember?’

‘I remember you saying you didn’t deserve better.’

She didn’t speak for a moment. When she looked at me I had to look away.

‘What are you trying to do Richard?’

‘Nothing. It doesn’t matter. I’m glad you’re happy. Really I am.’

‘Good. Me too. I like Chloe. Why don’t you go out to the party? She’s got to be wondering where you are.’

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t think that she actually wanted me to leave. Instead I looked down at my shoes.

‘So what happened to us?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Why did you leave?’

‘There was nothing to leave. We weren’t anything. You just thought it was a big thing. The biggest thing in the world. And I couldn’t be that. It was just that you wanted something more and I couldn’t do it. I thought you understood that, Richard. At least if you had understood I could have begun to forgive you.’

‘Forgive me?’

‘For what you did.’

‘You’re not making sense.’

‘Look I don’t want to get into it. Just enjoy the party. I’ve got to go back out.’

She took the vegetable platter and left me there in that kitchen. I looked around at the lived-in mess of it, the pots and pans and the few pieces of cutlery left out on the counter. I

finished my glass of wine and poured another. It was good, clean and dry. It drank easily. I stayed there for a while trying to understand what she had said. Then I moved out into the corridor and back through the living room to where the people were still standing, chatting. They were still oblivious to the small lives they were leading and the inconsequence of their conversations.

Chloe was talking to Brett. Olivia had disappeared. I felt a something, seeing the two of them with their heads in close to each other smiling as they spoke. As I reached them, I realised that they were speaking in French; Brett was comfortable enough with the language to make jokes that sent wide smiles to play across Chloe's features.

'Ah Richard,' Brett said with a thick, affected, French accent. 'What is the matter?'

'Nothing. Nothing. What are you two whispering about?'

'Chloe was just telling me about her family. They sound wonderful.'

'Really?'

'Yes, but I don't need to tell you.' He smiled his wide shit-kicker's grin. I couldn't make out whether he was being facetious. Did he know that I knew almost nothing about Chloe's family? Did he know that I never asked about them? His grin froze and he stood with his high forehead and bad clothes and small, round gut.

'Right. Well you two have fun. I'll go mingle.'

I could see Rosalind speaking to Olivia. They were out near the pool. The dog Fred was sniffing the grass around their feet. He looked up and barked once, sharply. He wanted Rosalind's attention.

'Wait Richard, you do not have to go,' Chloe said.

'No, it's okay, you two talk.'

I left them to their conversation. Chloe looking just disappointed enough to make me angry. Brett slipped back into French. I found another beer and walked over to where Mark was standing with the fat man in the collared shirt.

‘Hey Mate. This is Colin.’

‘Hey.’

‘How’s it goin’?’

Colin spoke with a thick country accent. He had played professional rugby. He didn’t play rugby anymore. Now he was lost. There was muscle under the fat in his arm. We talked while I thought about other things. This party, in its pleasant surroundings, this proof of an idyllic life had destroyed me, taken me apart and rendered me hollow. Now I was just a mind in a body, untethered from any understanding of the world.

Mark, here, smiling with his friend. Looking up at a beautiful house filled with close friends, a dog, and the woman he loves. Happiness. I couldn’t understand. All my life I’d been chasing romance. But I could have been happy. With Chloe.

Olivia smiled at Colin and Mark as she walked past. Beyond, Rosalind was standing by herself again with the dog by her side. That dog was a remembrance. His name proved that. If I lived looking back to the past, then so did Rosalind.

‘I’m just going to see how Rosie’s doing,’ Mark said.

‘I’ll go,’ I said quickly. He looked at me and then nodded. He turned back to Colin. I walked across the grass to the pool. The stones around it were dark and beautiful in the fading evening light. Through the trees the yellow of the streetlights shone a little brighter.

‘Hey.’

‘Hey.’

Then nothing. What was there to say?

‘Look Rosalind I need to talk to you.’

‘Don’t. Not if it’s about what happened. We’ve said everything that needs to be said.
Just leave it alone, Richard.’

‘I just want to understand.’

‘There’s nothing to understand. There’s nothing to talk about.’

‘Then what am I doing here? If you didn’t want to talk.’

‘You’re here for the party. Go. Enjoy it. Talk to Olivia over there. She’s a writer, you
could learn from her.’

‘No, I’m not leaving yet. If you invited me, it was because you wanted to talk.’

‘Leave it Richard.’

‘No, you owe me that much.’

Her eyes were bright. There was anger there. Not just the reticence that I had been
expecting. Open hostility. I was too confused, too frustrated to confront the emotion.

‘I don’t owe you anything’, she said. ‘We invited you, both of you, because Mark felt
sorry for you.’

‘He felt sorry for me?’

‘Yes, and for Chloe too. Will you leave it now?’

‘You think it has nothing to do with us? With what we’ve experienced together.’

‘What us? There is no us.’

‘Of course there damn well is. You know there is,’ I said.

‘Don’t raise your voice like that. We’re at a party.’

‘What does that matter? This matters.’

She looked up and around at her garden. The trappings of her new life. Then down at
the dog who was lying by her feet snapping at blades of grass. Mark was watching us from
the porch with Colin. I couldn’t find Chloe and Brett in the crowd.

‘Okay, come with me,’ she said. We walked down to the bottom of the garden to where the grass turned into a litter of twigs and dead leaves. Through the trees there was a small path that led onto the nearest street. We walked in silence down the pavement and to another path that cut through thick brush of the undergrowth. Then it opened and we were among the dunes. There was soft white sand under our feet. For a moment I wondered at it and then bent over to unlace my shoes. When I stood up Rosalind was gone. There was nothing but the dunes and the long grasses and the sound of the ocean. I followed the sea breeze and the smell of the salt and arrived at a beach that opened up into the distance on both sides. There were buildings far off on the south side of the beach but here, and into the distance on my right, there was nothing but open sand hemmed in by brush-capped dunes. There was Rosalind and behind her an expanse of angry ocean. The waves created a high roil of whitewash. The white spray mounted and cresting over valleys of blue black water.

Rosalind stood looking down the beach. Fred was sniffing at the sand. A crab snapped out and then shuttled quickly away before disappearing again into a pinprick hole. She wrapped her arms around herself. The wind was fluttering her hair so that it rose from her head. She had grown older again. But it was still Rosalind. I walked quickly down to her. The sand had lost the warmth of the sun and was cold underfoot. She looked surprised to see me there; her anger had turned to something else. There was a distant sort of melancholy there. She took a step away from me as I reached her.

‘Maybe this was a bad idea,’ she said. And then: ‘But you’re still Richard. I thought of you as my friend.’

‘I am your friend, Rosalind,’ I said.

‘No one calls me Rosalind.’

‘You’ve always been Rosalind to me,’ I said.

‘I chose to be Rose.’

She looked away. I wanted to say something meaningful. Then I wanted to say anything at all. I looked across the deserted beach to the small town in the distance. I remembered the painting in the study.

‘This beach is beautiful. Is this why you live here? You did always love the water.’

‘Did I? You have a better recollection of what I’ve always done.’

Again, it was as if she were attacking something. Finding weaknesses in my words. She was protecting herself from what I said. I took another step forward.

‘You’re slipping away from me.’

She took some time to look out at the water. Then she started walking down the beach towards Frederick. I caught up to her. Our feet threw up the soft sand.

‘I was never yours. That’s what you’re not seeing,’ she said.

Beyond her the waves crashed. A seabird called out. Fred barked once in reply. Rosalind crouched down to pick up a seashell. When she rose, she let it drop back onto the sand.

‘We had our time together,’ I said.

‘We shared a kiss when we were young.’

‘And Florida.’

‘We don’t need to talk about Florida.’

Now she had stopped. It was getting dark. The water had become ink-like. The wind played on our clothes and swayed the tall grass over the dunes.

‘Why?’

‘Don’t you feel remorse?’

‘For Chloe? No. I don’t. What happened needed to happen. We needed to know. It was more important than what I have with Chloe.’

‘Is that how she feels?’

‘It doesn’t matter. It would have mattered. But you didn’t realise what was at stake.’

‘Don’t you feel remorse for what you did to me?’

This time I stopped. I watched her back and her short dark legs as she walked away from me down the beach. When she saw that I was no longer in step with her she stopped and looked back. There was condescension in her expression.

‘What did I ever do to you? Except love you?’ My voice was loud. To cover the distance between us. The words fell into the wind. Her eyes, bright in the dying light, became thin. Then she began walking back towards me. She passed me quickly. She headed back the way we’d come. She walked in the soft sand up close to the dunes.

‘Some things are worse than pain. You took away from who I was,’ she said when I caught up to her. She spoke out ahead, not looking at me. I grabbed hold of her arm to stop her from getting too far away. I was so close to getting an answer.

‘What are you talking about?’ I said.

‘You know.’

‘I don’t. Is this still about Chloe?’

A look of incomprehension crossed her face. She shook herself out of my grasp. She opened her mouth. Then closed it again. When she did speak, she spoke slowly, monotonously. Her voice rose as she continued.

‘You fucked me. I said no but you fucked me anyway. Do you remember that? Me saying no? How can you still expect something from me after that? I was drunk, so drunk and all I have, all I had for days, for weeks, for months was the image of you following me into the shower after I said no.’

I took hold of her hand. She pulled back sharply. Fred who had noticed that we were no longer following him came running back towards us. He was trying to understand what was happening.

‘Get off me. This is my arm. I’m not yours to take.’

‘What are you saying Rosalind? That night was something beautiful,’ I said. My voice was soft. I felt broken by what she was saying. Still uncomprehending.

‘I’m saying that we can pretend to be friends, up there at the party. But I need you to know that you’re nothing to me. I tried to be nice. After that night. That was a mistake. I see that now. But I’m not yours. I never was.’

‘No, you’re married to Mark.’

‘That has nothing to do with it. I married Mark because I love him. We have a child together. That’s real. Not whatever you think we had. You don’t own me. I’m mine. You had no right to do what you did.’

There was a lightness in the air. My legs were weak, planted in the sand. I reached at what I could.

‘Is it because of your father?’

‘Shut up! Just shut up. I can’t explain to you. Why would you even think that? I don’t feel the way I feel because of him, or Mark, or you. I feel what I feel because it’s how I feel. You got me drunk and then you fucked me. I couldn’t tell Mark and so he invited you here. So now I have to have you here. And I took you away from the party so that you wouldn’t ruin our housewarming, because I have a life. A good life. A life that you don’t factor into. And now I’m regretting not telling Mark and I’m regretting bringing you out here. So I’m going to make this clear. If you try to get any closer, I will hurt you. If you shout, I will scream. So just stay where you are and try to understand.’

‘Okay, okay. I wouldn’t do anything like that.’

‘Don’t patronise me. You already have,’ she said. There was real anger in her voice. What had happened to the woman I had known? What had turned her into this?

‘You’ve been following me my entire life. Always anxious to be the one I confide in. Always pretending to be a friend. I didn’t realise until Florida how broken you were, how dangerous you are. The extent of your entitlement...that you could do something like that.’

‘But you wanted me to.’

‘Maybe. For a moment. You were good looking and I thought you were nice. Yes, I kissed you when we were young. And yes, maybe it was wrong for me to take my clothes off in Florida. I can’t remember much of that. But you dived after me and gave me the choice between kissing you and drowning.’

Darkness had truly fallen. The moon had risen and its light was reflecting on the water in a distant silver coin. Rosalind was a shadow against the light sand. She was still half-turned towards the path and the party.

‘What can I say Rosalind?’

‘Don’t call me that.’

I looked out to the water again. I thought of taking off my clothes and walking out into the waves, pushing forward until I couldn’t touch the bottom and then swimming further and further into the distance.

‘I’m going back up to the house. My dog is coming with me,’ she said.

‘Frederick,’ I said.

‘Yes, Fred,’ she said. ‘I don’t want you following me. When you do come back you can stay at the party. But then you leave, and I never have to see or talk to you again. You’ve got a life with Chloe. Try to be good to her. Try.’

Then she walked back up the beach. Towards the path that led up to the house. She whistled and Fred went bounding up after her. She slipped a little in the sand and for a moment I saw how small she was. I looked back at the ocean. When I turned she was gone.

I don't know how long I stayed on the beach. The crash of the waves, the shrieking of birds, the cold of the sand underfoot, the wind whipping at my clothes. I heard and felt them but didn't notice. I stood still, unable to understand. All that I knew was that Rosalind, Rose lived in a different world to mine. In those moments I tried to come to terms with the knowledge that those two worlds would never overlap.

Finally, the cold made its presence known in my bones and the waves pushed me back away from the water. I walked back up towards the dunes. My shoes were lying in an empty patch of sand. The leather looked black in the moonlight. On each side the grasses turned to thick dark brush. I sat on a hillock to lace the shoes. The loose sand in my socks felt rough against my feet. I stood and walked back to the lights and the sounds of the party.

It was all how we left it. The people talking, laughing, holding their drinks tightly. The lights were a bit brighter still and the laughter a little louder. A few shouts broke the calm. From the road I could hear the sounds of a car shifting gear to get up the hill and away from the beach.

I saw Rosalind standing near the pool. She was with Colin, the ex-rugby player. She was laughing. Happy again. It was as if nothing had happened. I walked around the other side of the garden to the house. Mark offered me another beer when he saw me. I felt the coolness of it against my palm. Water from the icebox slipped over my knuckles.

'What's the matter?' Mark said.

I felt the sudden urge to tell him everything. Everything of what had happened when we were at university, what had happened in Florida. I wanted someone to understand.

'Nothing. Nothing. I'm having a good time. Thank for having us,' I said.

'You've said that already.'

'Sure sorry.'

Mark finished with the drinks. He stood next to me looking out at the garden and at the people.

‘I’m glad I have friends around me,’ he said. ‘I’m a lucky man.’

‘Sure,’ I said. Then: ‘Is Rosalind happy too?’

He turned. His smile was slightly rigid. One eyebrow was raised. I had gone too far. I smiled widely again and took a long drink of beer.

‘It just looks too perfect,’ I said. I smiled to show him I’d been joking. He looked at me for a moment more and then smiled in return. I drank more beer and he handed me another bottle. Rosalind was still talking to Colin. Olivia was with them. The three were all happy — smiling, successful. They held their drinks but only occasionally drank from them. I thanked Mark and went back inside.

The living room. There were now a few people talking inside, retreating from the cool evening air. I squinted my eyes as I passed. I remembered the whisky in the study. The corridor was empty. I went to the kitchen first. I needed a glass.

The sound of voices as I opened the door. There was Chloe. And Brett. She was smiling, a smile that faded from her lips as she saw me. He was turned away looking into a cupboard. One of his hands was on the door of the cupboard, the other was resting on Chloe’s hip.

‘Richard,’ she said softly. ‘Where have you been? I’ve been worried.’

Brett turned. His hands dropping to his side.

‘Have you?’ I said. She did seem worried. Or scared. ‘I’ve been around. Don’t mind me.’ The glasses were in the open cupboard. I reached past Brett to take one. He took a step back. Chloe took my hand. I squeezed hers and pulled away.

‘I’m glad you two are having fun,’ I said. I left them as they were and walked back along the corridor and into the study. I took the bottle of scotch and sat at the desk. I looked

at the painting of the beach. I drank, enjoying the taste of the whisky and the solitude of the room.

After a while I heard the sound of people leaving. I stood up slowly. There was difficulty in the action. My thoughts had disappeared. My focus had diminished. There was the door and I lunged for it. Then to the kitchen. Empty. Outside groups, strangers, still talking, still laughing. They were happy. Their worlds were light. Removed from my own. I found Chloe sitting on the stoop with Olivia. The author's face tightened when she saw me. The antipathy I felt for myself was mirrored in her eyes.

'Chloe I think we should go, it's getting late.' I said.

'Yes okay. Let me just say goodbye.'

'No let's get out of here.'

'Let her be,' Olivia said. Chloe's eyes, when she turned, were red.

'Right,' I said and took a step back. Olivia stood taking my arm as she did.

'I don't know what you're doing to that girl but you'd better quit it okay?'

'I haven't done anything,' I said. I hated the plaintive quaver in my voice. That wasn't masculine. It wasn't a writer's voice.

Olivia said, 'Yeah right.' I left them and went to say goodbye to Mark and Rosalind. Mark was with Colin down by the pool

'Hey mate, you off?' Mark said when I approached.

'Yeah. Wanted to say goodbye. Thanks for everything.'

'No worries. See you next time.'

'Right. I'd better say goodbye to Rosalind.'

'Rosie? No. I'll thank her for you. All good mate.'

'No, but really, you don't understand. I have to talk to her.'

‘See you mate,’ Colin said. He put a heavy hand on my shoulder. There was nothing but anger now. A bigger man with his hand on my shoulder.

‘Fuck off,’ I said. I shifted my weight and pushed. He laughed a short sharp laugh and swung me so that I was off balance and suddenly falling, falling into the water. Underwater and dizzy with no sight. I surfaced to hear Colin laughing.

‘Get out of here, mate,’ he said when I’d pulled myself out of the pool. My clothes were heavy and cold against my skin. I brought my hands up. Mark took a step forward and put his hand on my chest.

‘Thanks for coming Richard. See you.’ There was a look of pity in his eyes. I wanted to cry seeing it there. I’d lost everything. Even those memories of drinking in an apartment in Sydney would be lost.

I left them and walked back up to the house. I didn’t see the faces of the other people. I found Chloe in the kitchen with Olivia.

‘Richard—

‘I fell, come on. Let’s go.’

I took her hand. I was drenched in water and shame. We walked quickly out to the front of the house. I got into the car and Chloe followed. As I started the engine I looked up at the house once more and thought I saw Rosalind’s face through the window of the study. She was staring out at us. Her expression was blank and remorseless.

She can’t stop smiling as they drive out of Sydney. The traffic, the heat, the noise, it all adds to her mood of giddy elation. She has been looking forward to the party. The excitement of having somewhere to go, a reason to travel, it evokes a sense of anticipation in her that

outweighs any apprehension she might feel. She doesn't think of the night, or who they will meet, she just feels a wonderful sense of adventure; the movement of the car, the breeze blowing through the partly opened window, the scenes flashing by outside — all of these things fuel her excitement.

They listen to old songs while he drives. She begins to sing along and soon he joins her; their singing is loud and off-key. They laugh at the sound they make and she screams out the window so as not to burst with the pure joy of it. The road opens up before them and he presses his foot down on the accelerator, skipping past other cars as a stone across water. Soon they turn off the highway and he points the car towards Gerringong. Beyond them the landscape dips; bright grassy expanses lead down to a blue sea. Richard smiles, his lips pulling high on one side. She sees the smile and feels again buoyed. She knows that he loves her. She knows that. And she is so full of love that she feels she is going to float out the window and across the landscape to the sea.

But she knows that this voyage has a destination, an end. She is aware in a way that that end is Rose. But she is able to keep the knowledge from her thoughts. She can even stop herself from feeling what it will be like for Richard to see her again. She has convinced herself that all that has passed, that her marriage to Richard and that Rosalind's marriage to Mark mean that they have started again.

She also knows that she is a beggar when it comes to friends and even hopes in some way to make a connection with someone at this party.

Chloe is ready to forget and be happy in the new lives that they have created.

The happiness stays with her as they drive up to their rental home; it is again beautiful — and too expensive — filled with air and fresh sea breezes. Chloe walks through the rooms and cannot wait to be back that night so that the two of them can laugh and make love and delight in the solitude of those empty rooms. But for now they shower and change.

Their movements as they pass by each other are slow and controlled. Chloe is trying to make those last moments last as long as possible; she takes time choosing a dress, she loses an earring — now she is filled with a dull ache, a feeling of worry that lodges itself in her sternum. She looks to Richard trying to see the joy that was there in his broad features, but all she sees is unmasked determination. Looking at himself in the mirror is a man who is no longer hers but is foreign and cold.

His smile returns briefly as they drive along the beach; dusk is just starting to creep in on the horizon and the air is breathlessly still. But Richard takes a wrong turn, he loses his way, and by the time they are back on track he is biting and cruel. Finally, they turn into a steep driveway towards another house that is beautiful and white, a delicate wooden structure that sits too perfectly in its patch of overly green lawn. Beyond is the beach, kept at bay by a wall of high thin trees and thick flowering bushes. As the car rolls down the drive Chloe sees Richard's expression change. A look of desperate hunger paints itself on his features. She senses an importance in the moment that she had not anticipated and can't quite grasp. His manner, too, is different, he is ill at ease, distant, as though he is already elsewhere in his mind, has drifted away into this beautiful house leaving her alone again on the outside of it all.

Mark answers the doorbell. He is tall and happy and holds a beautiful child in his arms that softly rolls and coos to itself. Richard is curt, almost rude and it makes Chloe feel ashamed to be standing next to him. Mark shows them in and Richard's eyes look everywhere but at his wife and friend. Chloe just has time to think that she should take him by the hand and convince him to get back in the car and drive away before they move forward into the house. When she emerges from her reverie, she realises that Mark is speaking:

'Yeah, but it was good of you two to come, I know it was a long way and all. Shh you, quit it. Sorry. Yeah, like I was saying, I hope you enjoy yourselves. There are a couple of people I reckon you should meet.'

Richard could have gotten drunk at the house they had rented. He could have had fun there, too. But it is too late, they are suddenly outside and there are other people there, strangers whom they are introduced to, with whom they have to make polite conversation.

Richard almost instantly is speaking of his writing to a pretty woman. He is putting on a show, presenting himself as an artist and intellectual to these strangers. Chloe sees the woman's eyes narrow and then notices just the smallest twitch of her lips as if she is trying not to laugh. She turns herself away and finds herself speaking to a small man with thick glasses and long, sharp front teeth. The man tells her that he is an academic at Wollongong University, a history professor. He seems aware of his unattractiveness but happy despite it. He is kind to Chloe and she finds him interesting; he does not patronise her but shows a genuine interest in what she says. She lets herself fall into conversation, enjoying the unfamiliar freedom of talking to new and interesting people. She laughs a little too readily at his half-witty, self-deprecatory jokes. She sips a little too quickly at the white wine that she has been offered. When she looks up and around she sees that Richard is no longer there with her. The other woman, Olivia, has excused herself as well.

'It looks like it's just you and me now,' Brett says. There is a glint in his dark brown eyes that Chloe ignores. When Brett asks her more specific questions about her studies it is with a sincere interest, and Chloe feels joy at being able to speak intelligently on a topic that she cares about. She tries to interest this man in the varying outcomes of colonial rule, emphasising the importance and differences between the individual powers. Brett nods his understanding but laughs at her struggle to explain more difficult concepts, at the gesticulation of her hands.

'Would you prefer we spoke in French?' he asks. Chloe feels an outpouring of relief and gratitude at the suggestion.

'If that is okay for you.'

Brett speaks with a thick Australian accent and has trouble finding the words he wants, but when he does not grasp them another takes its place. To Chloe it is just a wonder to be, this once, the one who speaks well, who does not need time to choose her words, to ponder on whether or not she will be understood. In French she finds herself more intelligent, more confident, more herself than she has been in a long time. The party going on around them is ignored, Chloe is happy to have made a friend.

Brett asks her about herself and she finds herself telling him things that she had kept from even Richard. She speaks at length about her parents and their generosity; Chloe tells Brett about her grandmother during the war and what stories made it down to her. It makes her feel connected to the world to explain her family, to find someone willing to listen, and so she speaks too long and too passionately, becoming too engrossed and in doing so forgetting to look at the face of the man she is talking to.

She is interrupted when Richard returns and she is happy to see him but feels a twinge of guilt at having shared too much with a stranger, feels guilt at wanting to continue the conversation.

As Richard stands, cold and unmoving, Brett leans in conspiratorially.

'So Richard, why are you not having any fun?' he says, with a thick, affected accent. He smiles cloyingly, his face made ugly by the distortion. There is a tension between the two men that Chloe cannot understand. She wants to whisper Richard, to tell him to stay and that it was only a joke, but she sees that it will just make him angrier. The way he stands, the irritated snort, each movement tells her that he does not want to be there, that he wants to get away.

'You two are having enough fun for everyone,' he says, and his words are like a slap to Chloe. How can Richard be angry that she is having a conversation with a man?

'We're just making conversation,' Brett says but his tone is not conciliatory.

'Right well, I'll leave you to it.' Chloe tries to catch his eye, to make him see that it was just easier for her to speak in French, that they weren't excluding him, but Richard has turned and moved away.

'I didn't mean to offend him,' Brett says. Chloe begins to try to explain that no, no it was just that Richard...but then she realises that Brett would not listen and does not mean his statement to be taken seriously. His demeanour has changed, his face more commanding, he looks as though he has won an argument. Around them are people that Chloe does not recognise, and for a moment she feels lost and alone. She tries to find Richard but can no longer see him, just the faces and bodies of strangers laughing in the dying Australian light.

Then Chloe sees him through a gap in the press of bodies. He is standing with his wide back turned to her, his hands stuffed deeply into his pockets. Mark is next to him speaking animatedly. She watches to see whether Richard will smile at Mark, whether he will ingratiate himself to his host. Instead Richard looks down at his shoes, then he looks up and to the side and Chloe can see that the hungry look has returned to his face. There, a little way down the garden, is Rosalind.

She looks different than Chloe remembers, not so young, not so filled with energy. But she is still beautiful; her skin is dark, a deep copper-brown, her eyes are wide and intelligent. She is wearing a simple white dress that hangs perfectly off of her thin limbs and dances with each small movement she makes. As Chloe watches Mark and Richard turn and begin to walk down to Rosalind. There is a sudden sharp knotting in her stomach.

'What are you so intent about?'

'Rien, c'est rien,' Chloe says.

Brett takes a bottle of wine from a table next to them and fills her glass until it is almost completely full. He does not take any for himself. She smiles a tight-lipped smile and nods in agreement with what he say. She is still thinking of Richard. He has disappeared from sight again, is completely lost to her.

Chloe told Richard when they were in Florence, when they first met, the story of her friend who had gone missing. It was a true story, one of those occurrences in her life that left a lasting and indelible mark on her, and by telling it to Richard she had tried to convey a part of herself, to show herself to him in a way that would open up an honest line of communication. She wanted Richard to know how scared she was that he, too, would disappear, that she was frightened that he would get bored or even hurt himself and be lost that way. But now she knows that it was already too late; Richard had always been absent in himself, and he was using Rose to show her the truth.

'Come on let's go inside. It's too crowded out here,' Brett says. She nods and, leaving her glass of wine on the table, follows him as he leads her back into the beautiful house, away from the safety of the crowd.

'I would never tell Rosie this, but her décor is a disaster.'

'What do you mean?'

'What with all these kitsch knickknacks? It's all rather homey isn't it? There's no sense of taste, of discernment. Don't you think?' His voice is calm and ordered. Everything about the man is ordered. Again there is something there, in this man's judgments. Chloe couldn't understand what he meant. The unfamiliar words but also the strange, angry feeling behind them.

'I think it is nice. It feels lived in, loved. I would like to have a house like this,' she thinks. But she does not say it out loud. She does not want to contradict the man who now walks away from her, examining the room with distaste.

'God it's all so damn dull, isn't it? The perfect life, the marriage, the child. It's all just so...so... predictable. I just know that I couldn't do it. Lovely kid, but I'd rather my freedom.' He waits for a reply. When none comes, he turns and stares at her long and hard, looking into her eyes with a piercing intent. For a moment she thinks about stepping back, running out into the crowd of strangers but she realises how crazy that would be.

'I don't agree,' she says finally in a small voice. Brett laughs a big laugh that reminds her in some indefinable way of Richard. It was the same laugh that says that it is adorable that she disagrees but that he is still right — she has not changed his mind. Again, she wants to turn and leave but she can't think of where else she could go. The only other people she knows are busy in conversation that she can't break into. Richard and Rose have disappeared completely.

Brett has turned away and is looking at the photos on the wall. Chloe can see that the bald spot on the back of his head is tinged red from the sun. She wonders if it hurts him. He follows the photographs on the wall and stops in front of a piece of artwork — a painting of an Australia farm — and shakes his head as if in despair. He kicks at a stuffed toy lying on the ground as he moves towards the door.

'Fucking pastoral scenes. Come on, let's see if the kitchen is any better. At least there'll be more booze in there.'

'How do you know Rose and Mark?' Chloe asks. They are in the kitchen and Brett is looking through the cupboards; he leaves them open as he moves from one to the next.

'My wife used to work with Rosie... She is brilliant you know. It's not just a façade. You'd think it was, the way she is — but no, she is everything she seems. Still I can't envy Mark this stifling existence... Well maybe a little.'

'You're married?'

'Sure. Same as you. Though of course it's complicated. The idea that two people can commit to each other for the rest of their lives. Well it is a little ridiculous when you think of it. So, every now and then I have to look outside the marriage. Just to make sure that there isn't anything I'm missing.'

They were no longer speaking French. Chloe understands that she was again having to reconsider the person standing in front of her; it is a strange thing. When she was young, a girl, Chloe believed that people were a constant, that they did not change and that if they appeared nice then they stayed that way. She did not think of herself as naïve, she just believed that that was how the world worked. Now, more and more she is surprised by the people in her life — when in some action or opinion they show themselves to be something other than who she thought them to be. She finds herself hating this Brett who, just half an hour before, was an interesting and compassionate man, an oasis of safety and calm. She needs to get away from him. She feels an almost a physical repulsion.

Brett, meanwhile, has found a bottle of wine and is pouring it into two delicate crystal glasses that were in a high cupboard, now hanging open. Chloe takes the glass he offers but is careful not to touch his short white fingers. The glass makes a sharp clink sound when she places it down on the counter. There is a noise and Chloe turns. A young woman is standing in the open door unsure of whether to come in.

'Oh, I'm sorry...'

'No. no. It's not. I mean —'

'No worries. Just come in. Can I get you anything?' Brett says.

The pretty girl stands undecided for a moment and then laughs a bright laugh and walks past Chloe toward Brett.

'Don't mind me. I'm just looking for a corkscrew.'

'Here. I'm sure I saw one around. Let me find it.'

Brett turns and begins rifling through the drawers at his waist. Chloe tries to discern whether he was trying to find the corkscrew to please the pretty girl, to get her out of the way, or because it is the nice thing to do. The girl smiles at her, the corners of her lips lifted high enough so that the flesh of her cheeks bunch and dimple. Chloe does not return the smile but instead turns her face down in embarrassment and pretends for a moment that she, too, is looking for the corkscrew.

'Here it is,' Brett finally says. He produces a bright silver something with a flourish. He beams at the girl and then at Chloe, seemingly proud of his accomplishment and asking their approval. The girl smiles in response, thanks him quickly and then disappears, leaving the two alone again.

'At least she's gone. They're getting younger, aren't they?'

'Who?'

'Never mind. At least now it's just us. Far from the madding crowd.'

He steps closer to her so that she can hear his heavy nasal breathing and feel the warmth of his body. She's disgusted by the way his thin lips wrap themselves around the rim of his wine glass; he drinks greedily, making slight slurping noises that fill the still air of the room. Then he turns and reaches out his hand.

'No.' Chloe says. She says the word loudly and with force. Her wine glass slips from her hand and crashes to the floor. Wine has spilled across her shoes and makes a puddle on the kitchen floor. Brett shies back, careful of his shoes and trousers and then, with an expression that is not quite a smile, he says:

'You're clumsy, aren't you? Well no matter. It's not our problem. Let them deal with it.

'No, it is not. I mean. I did not mean to break it.'

Chloe looks down at the broken glass that a moment ago had been so delicately beautiful and feels an overwhelming sadness. She wants to apologise to Mark and Rose for breaking the glass which was clearly not for the guests of the party. Most of all she wants to get out of that room, find Richard and with him get as far away from the house as possible. She begins to bend to pick up the glinting shards of glass but realises that this would mean bending over, leaving herself exposed in front of Brett. She feels powerless and small and had a sudden urge to cry.

'Well just leave it. I'll get you another one. Don't look so fucking sad,' Brett says. He turns and opens the cupboard behind him and when he turns back Chloe feels that he has reached his hand out again and it is now resting on her hip. At first, she is too overwhelmed to move, too shocked and uncomprehending.

Before she can act the door opens again and Richard is standing there looking in. Chloe's first reaction is to feel shame, to feel that she has been caught in the act. Richard's expression is a mask, completely rigid; only a hardness in his eyes betray his anger. He doesn't speak and the silence begins to feel, for Chloe, immeasurable, each second unbearable in its length. When she finally speaks it is in a quiet and apologetic voice.

'Richard,' she says. Her voice is almost pleading. 'Where have you been? I have been worried.' Even as she says it, she hates herself for the blame she has shifted to Richard. But she wants him to know that she needs him, that this horrible situation would not have happened if he had been there. She felt a lightness as Brett lifts his hand of her.

'Have you,' Richard says. Then: 'I've been around.' He speaks guardedly, reserving his anger. The indifference in his tone is like a blow to Chloe. She feels dizzy at it, at the thought that he does not care. If Richard had yelled, if he had stormed his way in and hit Brett as he had hit Jeremy for something less, then she would have at least felt acknowledged. As it is all she feels is a sinking feeling and she drops her eyes to the floor.

Richard steps forward, he does not look at either of them but pushes past Brett to the open cupboard. He reaches out his arm in a slow and controlled movement and takes a glass. Brett smiles a crooked smile when he realises that there will be no repercussions to his action; he is safe. Chloe opens her mouth when she sees that Richard is going to leave her alone in that room with the man. She reaches out in one desperate gesture and takes Richard's hand in hers as he passes, as a drowning man clutches at a life-preserver. Richard presses the hand quickly, automatically and lets it fall. Then he is gone.

Olivia finds Chloe sitting on the steps by the side of the house, her arms folded over her knees.

'Do you want to talk about it?' she finally asks.

'No. I am sorry, it is silly of me I know.'

'No, I'm sure it's not.' Olivia does not press her or force her to talk, instead she sits down next to Chloe and waits. They both sit in silence and watch the night grow darker and listen to the soft droning of the insects in the trees. Finally, they hear a voice behind them:

'Chloe let's go it's getting late,' Richard says. Chloe half-turns and sees that his expression is still impassive. She nods her head slightly.

Chloe turns to Olivia to try and thank her for her help, for just sitting with her without demanding anything else, but she can't find the words. Olivia squeezes her hand and Chloe feels like crying again.

'Yes okay. Let me just say goodbye.'

'No let's get out of here.' Richard's voice is that of a spoiled child and he taps his foot impatiently.

'Let her be,' Olivia says. Chloe is grateful for those words. They make her feel seen. Olivia takes Richard by arm and they walk a little distance away. The conversation and laughter of the remaining guests fill Chloe's world as she drops her head down on her arms.

Chloe is in the kitchen when Richard appears again some time later. He is dazed and dripping wet. Olivia lets out a brief laugh at the sight of him and he stiffens at the sound. He is awkward and proud in the low doorway; the water is falling from him and pooling onto the smooth floor. There is no-one with him, no one running to help or to get him a towel.

'Richard. What happened to you?'

He stands without speaking for another moment, looking at the two women.

'I fell, come on. Let's go,' he finally says. There is a note of blame in the words, as if whatever had happened had been somehow caused by Chloe. He jerks his head back to the door. It is enough for Chloe to see his eyes to know that there will be no argument. Olivia puts her hand on Chloe's arm, but she smiles and shakes it off, walking to her husband ready to lead him outside to the car.

'But Richard, what has happened?' she asks again when it is just them in the open driveway. Richard shivers in the cool air.

'I fell.'

Two words. Had it been anywhere else, anyone else, the story would be told with a wide smile and a laugh. 'You would not believe it; I fell in the pool!' Then shared laughter. Instead Richard scowls and pulls open the driver's seat door.

'Maybe I should drive,' Chloe says.

'Don't be stupid,' he says and throws himself into the seat. There is anger and brashness in his actions. Chloe circles the car and gets into the passenger side.

Chloe looks back at the house as the car starts. She sees Olivia's worried face in one of the windows. Chloe wishes in that moment that she can speak to her, that she can tell her that it is okay. Then she remembers that she has not been able to say thank you to Mark. And still there is the thought of Rose, on the outskirts of her own party, perfectly in control.

She doesn't speak but makes herself as small as possible in the passenger seat, shuffling down until she feels she that she is disappearing into the creases of the leather. She waits for Richard to say something, willing him to speak, to acknowledge her in some way. Even if he shouted at her she would be happy; it would mean that he cared enough and she would know what to do. But Richard drives in silence — his knuckles on the steering wheel are white. Water drips from his face, from his hair, from his clothes.

It should have been funny. They should be laughing. Instead Chloe makes herself as small as possible and waits. Outside the car the high foreign trees cast long shadows across the road. There is none of the warmth of the forests of Europe with their solid oaks and pines. As the car slows Chloe can see the ocean, huge and dark and menacing. She sees it now as a danger, something waiting to swallow her whole. She is aware of how remote this country is, how far they are from everything that is comforting to her. It will be hours of driving to be back in Sydney, days of travel to fly back to Europe. Packed roads, crowded airports, the stress and anger of travel. Chloe feels the weight of her isolation and, even though her husband is sitting next to her, she feels completely alone.

A large drop of water forms on Richard's brow, at the point where his hair lies slick against his temple. It wells up and falls onto the steering wheel with a splash that seems as if in slow motion. The water leaps and hits his fingers. Richard's eyes narrow and his anger deepens. Another barrier is built between them.

They veer around a corner. Richard changes gear violently, bringing the car back under control. He is too drunk, too angry, to be driving safely. Chloe doesn't say anything. Instead she sits in silence and tries to make herself as small as possible. She can see beneath the surface, beneath his impassive expression; Richard's dark beard, his reticence, they do nothing to hide his emotions and it hurts her to see him so clearly.

'Do you still love her?' Chloe asked.

'I don't even know her. What do you mean love her?'

This was back at the house. The one we could have been happy in. The wet clothes which were now in a soggy pile in the ensuite. When I returned to the living room, I found Chloe standing at the sliding doors that led into the garden, looking out. There was nothing to see other than her reflection. Outside there were no points of light, just the dark of night. The isolation felt complete. When she turned, I saw that there was something different about her expression, she seemed more self-possessed, more in control. In the distance I could hear the waves sloughing on beach. The room we stood in was large and wooden floored. The furniture was tasteful. The décor was Scandinavian. There were good glass tumblers in a glass-fronted sideboard. I poured a full glass of the scotch. I straightened and looked at Chloe again. She hadn't moved. Her eyes were narrowed and searching. I saw in her expression that she didn't understand. Instead of trying to explain, I turned away from her. There was no taste to the whisky. No burn, no warmth. I was beyond the point of pretending to value the drink, pretending that I drank for any other reason than to get drunk. For a moment I felt steady and then the blankness, the glaze set in. I held back for as long as I could and then gave

in to the rage that had slowly come to fill me to overflowing. As I spoke, I tried to feel something of what I said.

‘What do I know about if I love her? I don’t even fucking know her, do I? Isn’t that right? You heard that much. I didn’t even know her, not at all.’

‘Do not shout Richard.’

‘I’m not fucking shouting. You can’t take a drop of emotion, can you? Let me try to feel something.’ I couldn’t much tell what I was saying, whether there was any value to it.

‘But Richard?’

‘What but Richard. Talk properly won’t you. Let bloody contractions into your life.’

‘Richard.’

‘Richard. Richard. I’m sick of being called that.’

Then I did begin to realise what I was. I was nothing but pain and anger and false justifications. I knew nothing about myself, nothing about Rosalind, nothing of life. I knew nothing of nothing. And in the face of this revelation, of having been stripped down to my core and finding nothing there, I felt a pressure inside of me that I could not control. My hand shook. The room wobbled and sank. I pushed in on myself and found a way up, a way to stop myself drowning. I swung my arm and threw the tumbler as hard as I could. I felt such a sense of relief when the heavy glass left my hand. I knew the window would break. But there was a bigger crash than I had expected. A noise that split the silence of the night. The flat heavy base of the tumbler had hit the pane of glass at an angle. There was a hole in the window, a neat triangle of nothing. Thick, fractured lines spider-webbed from it. But no scream. Not even a whimper from Chloe. I tried to find her. Her face white and pulled up at the sides. There was fear there. Down on the floor shards sparkled brightly. Somehow the glass had all fallen inward. Small pieces of it littered the glazed wooden floorboards. Chloe was slightly hunched with her hands thrown up to cover herself. I stepped forward to get to

her, to hug her and demand forgiveness but stumbled and had to put my hand down on the back of the couch for balance. It was a steely grey, soft under the palm of my hand. The kind of sofa I had always wanted.

Chloe, still bent over, ran to the window and began picking up the shards of glass in her hands. Her face no longer showed any emotion. It was as though she had shut down completely. I saw the reproach in the emptiness of her expression and ran forward.

'No, I'll get that. Damn it. Damn it!'

'No. It is fine. It's fine. I will do it.'

'Chloe! It's my fault. Let me. Let. Let me, won't you!'

Again, though I tried to keep calm, the anger pushed at me, made me full to burst. I tried to stop her from picking at the glass shards that lay in a shimmering pool on the hardwood floor. The alcohol was preventing me from seeing the extent of the damage. The damage I had done to the window, the glass, and to our marriage. I pulled at Chloe's arm, knowing only that I had to stop her. I had to get her to bed so that I could take care of everything and make sure that, in the morning, our lives could return to some semblance of normal. I hadn't yet realised that that was no longer possible. She twisted and reached out to regain her balance.

Her soft sigh as she fell forward. I pulled at her shoulder. I followed her gaze to her hand and saw the red line passing down from her index finger and across the heel of her right hand to her wrist. Then her hands were covered in blood. I ran to the kitchen. There hanging from the oven was a white hand-towel. It was coarse and thick. When I returned, Chloe was crouched over in the same position, looking at the ground a few feet in front of her. There was more blood than there should have been.

'Richard, Richard, Richard,' she was whispering softly.

She let me take her hand and I saw the small gush as the pressure lessened. Then I wrapped the towel tightly around the cut. It seemed to be containing the worst of it. She was breathing quickly in short sharp exhalations.

‘Call an ambulance, please.’

‘There isn’t time. We’ve got to drive.’

‘No, you have been drinking.’

‘Yes but the ambulance will be at least twenty minutes and then another twenty minutes back. There isn’t time. We have to go now.’

She nodded her head slightly and I was able to hold her arm and walk her down to the car. It was parked in the street, white and box-like. There was an unbearable silence to the night. Then passenger side door swung open and Chloe slid in. I ran around to the driver’s side, tripping slightly on the curb. The adrenaline had taken the worst of the drink, but I still had trouble finding the keys in my pocket, finding the ignition, getting the car into gear. Chloe didn’t make a sound.

The hospital was twenty minutes away— I’d seen it on the drive in, its comforting red sign — but the roads were empty, and I knew I could get there sooner. The street we’d parked in had been illuminated by a strong streetlight. Maybe I forgot to turn on the headlights. When we got off the suburban road to the highway I could no longer see. It felt like tunnel vision. I was drunk. I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to worry Chloe, who by now looked on the verge of fainting. I accelerated. I was saving a life. This was my moment. That’s what I was thinking to myself. I was saving her life. I stared directly ahead into the darkness, not looking across at my wife and the blood soaking through the cloth on her hand and pooling on her lap.

There is no pain. Just a deep throbbing in her hand. She holds it to her and stares fixedly on the road. She isn't wearing a seatbelt, has been unable to get it to work with her hands held out in front of her. Richard hasn't checked. Blood seeps from under the towel, dripping between her legs and onto the car seat. There is a pool of it on her crotch.

She can't see the road, not anymore. There is nothing but the sound of Richard's monotone as he tells her again and again that it's all going to be alright. She wants to be home. Home. She thinks about the church at the end of the street near her parents' chalet. How comforting it would be to be there now. He is taking her to the hospital, at the hospital someone will help. It was not his fault. She wanted just to help. To put the glass back. If she could put the glass back then maybe she could put it all back. All back as it was. That would be nice. The grass out front of the church, so green in the summer, but covered in snow in the winter. Harder to think. Where was she? She is sitting up. Someone is next to her. Richard. Richard? Tree branches. It is so dark. Does he love me? Did he ever love me?

Thinking back I wish I could remember more of that drive. But all I have are the images of the branches of huge and dark trees rushing past. And Chloe's presence beside to me.

Wordless fear. I didn't know what was on our right or left. Just the white lines of the road.

We were going around 100 kph when we reached the crossroad. Nothing after that.

And then waking in a white room. A hospital room. A heavysset nurse with a kind, pitying expression bending over me. Pink scrubs.

She sighed when she saw that I was awake.

It was a sigh that I'd get to know well as the months passed. At the time I thought the sigh was for me and wondered. What had happened? Was I paralysed? All that I could feel was a dull ache that suffused me. I didn't know whether the ache was physical or

psychological. I wondered at not feeling more. I had survived whatever had happened. The nurse saw the question in my look and shook her head slightly. Then the sigh again. The sigh wasn't for me. It was for the widower that I'd become.

Chloe had died instantly. The doctor told me later in the soft tones she reserved for this part of her work. She was tall, and severe in her appearance — direct and professional. She hadn't looked away when she walked through the door. She refrained from sighing. Instead she stared at the clipboard and spoke in short sentences. I only heard the one. Chloe had died instantly. But I was unscathed. A cut over my right eye and some bruising across my body — the extent of my physical injuries.

The doctor stopped mid-sentence. As if she realised I was no longer listening. Her expression turned hard. Maybe she knew more than she said. I didn't ask for more details. I didn't want to picture Chloe lying broken on the road. A cracked hole in the windshield glass. Or battered in a lump against the car door. Her skin torn like that of the wing-glider in the Alps. It was enough to know that she was gone. That I would never be able to see her again. That I could never apologise. That was the realisation that I had to face in the hospital. When the doctor whose professionalism couldn't mask her contempt had turned and walked out the door. It wasn't just her death.

I was left with my thoughts, though there weren't many of those. I tried to focus on the sounds of the hospital. Sneakers on the linoleum floor, a female voice raised in laughter. A car alarm and the sound of traffic coming from outside. I closed my eyes and fell asleep.

When I awoke there was a uniformed police officer standing in the small room, filling the small space with an aura of perfunctory obligation. He was fat and listless. He looked around

himself without seeing the room. I watched him and felt nothing. I was beyond emotion.

Empty, hollow.

‘Name?’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I need your name for the report.’

‘Oh,’ There was a pause. ‘Richard Hunt.’ He looked at me over his notebook.

‘Really? The kids must have done something with that at school. Not very lucky, are you?’

‘No.’

‘No, I guess not. Sorry for your loss. I saw the scene, wasn’t pretty. Happens more than you think, those roads are dangerous. Especially at night. People should know that.’

‘What happened?’ I said. I tried to cut across his heavy, nasal drone. The man was too matter of fact, too humdrum. Coastal and uneducated. I looked away from him and felt a pain run through the muscles of my neck.

‘Some young bloke driving recklessly. Always the way. Can’t change the way they are, always causing havoc. Boys will be boys, eh?’

‘What happened?’

He looked at me as if not sure whether I was joking.

‘You were in a crash. Someone hit you.’

‘Who?’

The officer flicked through his notebook.

‘Jacob Mannerly. Nineteen. Intoxicated.’

I lay back and a sigh escaped me. I tried to picture the scene.

A nineteen-year-old with a neck tattoo. Juvie record. Driving his green Holden Colorado. There were three others in the cab shouting, laughing. They were passing a joint.

The radio was turned all the way up. They'd been at a party a few streets away and were on the way to get more beer. Jacob swore he hadn't seen anything. That he'd turned his head to tell the others to shut up and had turned back and seen something white appear on the road. They rammed into the front left-hand side of the car. I tried to picture him, probably lying in the same hospital talking to the same officer. Mate, what were the fuckin' chances that there was another car on the road? It's always fuckin' empty. But It must have been me, it's always fuckin' me.

He'd been drinking. He didn't have a valid licence. He had driven past a stop sign. It wasn't much of a mystery what had happened. The police had tested their blood-alcohol levels. And apart from a broken collar bone and a few broken ribs they had come out unscathed. The only one who had been badly hurt was Chloe.

Jacob got three years on the inside. I hope he reads this someday and knows that I've forgiven him. I don't bear any ill-will. Not anymore.

'Did I get a blood-test?' I asked the cop. He shook his head slowly. His eyes looked out of the window. They were utterly vacant.

'Nah, mate. No need. It was the kid's fault.'

'Yeah?' I said.

'Only a couple more questions and I can leave you be,' he said. He seemed tired now, he'd moved on to his next task. 'You were driving to the hospital, yeah? Why was that?'

'My wife had cut herself.'

'Badly?' He looked over his notepad at me. His pen had stopped moving. The vacant expression had not left him. Funny how misleading that expression can be. I thought again about Chloe, about how her body must have looked after the crash, how damaged it would have been. The constriction tightened in my chest.

'No,' I answered. 'It was just a small cut. We just wanted to be safe.'

‘Yeah, no luck there. Sorry mate,’ he said. He closed his notebook. I tried not to look away as he gazed at me. Surprisingly he extended a round hand and grasped mine. He raised it above the sheets of the bed and shook it once, heavily. His skin was surprisingly soft and pink; red downy hair grew just under his knuckles. He dropped my hand and looked out the window. ‘Well I think we have a pretty good idea of what happened. I hope you can get over this.’

I nodded. He looked at me again and then turned and trudged out through the door. The room felt very empty without him.

He had taken the news well. Or at least had maintained the composure of his voice as we spoke, briefly, on the phone. I made the call from the hospital room. There was still a landline phone on the bedside. Yellow-white and boxlike. It felt strange in my hand.

‘Something happened last night,’ I said. Strange that I had already written that line. Maybe I was hiding behind those words, I knew they were what could be said.

‘Yes?’ Was it accusation I heard? Pre-emptive. He had known he could never trust her to me.

‘A car crash. Here in Australia. I was driving.’ In the background I heard a soft moan and then the steady noise of a woman sobbing. He must have had me on speakerphone. Eventually he was back on the line.

‘And what are you doing about it? No. No. There can be only two reasons that you are so calm. The good or the bad. Which is it?’

‘She’s dead. She died. I mean she’s gone. The doctor told me she died instantly.’ Again the long pause. In the background the sobbing became less distinct. I could picture

Chloe's mother now lying on the floor, curled into a half-ball, Mr. Dupont, standing stoically at the phone.

'I do not want to know any more. You will call me later. I must go. Goodbye Hunt.'

After the next call there was nothing left for me to do. Only to attend the funeral. It was to take place in France. Chloe's father had made all the arrangements. He had organised for the body to be shipped back. There were no more commitments on my time. Everything had been swept away in a flood of meaninglessness. After a few days I was released from the hospital. Mark took me back to Sydney. He walked me out of the hospital in silence. Stood aside as I completed some paperwork at the front desk. I didn't ask him about Rosalind, where she was, I just followed him out to his car and slid into the passenger side. I saw the outside of the hospital for the first time. It was a squat oblong building, just like any other. A nurse was smoking next to the rubbish bins.

'We'll go straight back to Sydney,' Mark said. 'Let me know if you need to stop somewhere.' I nodded. I thought about the house I'd rented. There was no going back there now.

We didn't speak during the drive. He parked outside of my building and we walked up together. We stood for a moment outside the apartment door while I tried to remember where the keys were. There was a spare set under the mat. He asked whether I wanted him to stay and I told him no.

'Are you going to be okay?'

'No,' I said.

'Yeah, that's fair.' He stood, not saying anything for a while, the silence hung heavy between us.

‘Look, you and Rosalind...’ he started. Then he stopped. ‘Well I guess it doesn’t matter now.’

He turned to the door. He wanted to be angry at me but couldn’t. Not with what I had gone through. I wanted to grab him. To tell him to say it. Then I could hit him. Pull him down the corridor and throw him down the stairs. But I didn’t say anything. I put the keys in the lock and pushed the door open. Mark seemed as if he were going to say something but then he shook his head. I left him standing there and stepped inside. After the door closed, I listened for his footsteps. They came a few minutes later — slow plodding steps that reverberated down the corridor.

The next day I took a flight to Geneva. I can’t remember much of it. I think I was upgraded. The other passengers looked at me strangely. I wondered what guilt they saw there before remembering the bruising of my face.

I’d thought of quitting drinking, when I lying in the hospital bed. It wasn’t the hangover, —I’d been on a saline drip that ensured that I didn’t have one — it just seemed like the next step. In movies and novels, the first thing the protagonist does, after something like this happens, is he quits drinking. Then it turns out that it wasn’t them to blame— it was just the drink. If I quit drinking then I could pretend it wasn’t me.

But I hadn’t changed. So I didn’t stop drinking, not even for a day. Quitting alcohol would have been a way of condemning something other than myself. But I wanted to wallow in my self-loathing. No twelve steps program. I was the poison. When the flight attendant asked me if there was anything he could bring me I told him whisky. They had Ballantine’s. He brought it in a small plastic cup and refilled it often. The taste was good though slightly muted, and it didn’t change a thing. Eventually I slept.

Chloe's parents didn't ask me to stay with them. Perhaps had I made the suggestion they would have invited me into their home, but neither of us wanted that. Instead I walked to the nearest hotel from the bus station and asked for something cheap. The desk clerk apologised for the size of the room. The single bed was all I needed. I didn't even take my clothes off.

The funeral took place at the small church down the road from her parent's house. The church Chloe loved. That she hadn't seen since we left it after that other accident, before we moved to England. I had convinced her that there was always time to go back.

I arrived early and stood near the door. Around me the mountains rose sheer in walls of green and white. I tried to pick where we had been hiking, but the green forest covered slopes all looked the same. Around the church cars revved their engine, their drivers anxious to get to some unknown destination. On a nearby terrace a few Frenchmen were having coffee. Their voices were loud and persistent. I sat down on a stone bench.

Her father, in a tight black suit, his moustache thick and glistening with oil, appeared next to me. I stood. He took my hand unexpectedly and looked me in the eye. His grip was tight and spoke of something else that I couldn't quite understand.

'Good. You made it.'

'Yes,' I said. I tried to think of something more.

'Do you remember what I said to you the last time we met?'

He looked at me intently. He looked older, frailer than when I'd seen him last. There was no expression to distort his features. I thought about how he had intimidated me. There was no fear left, just shame and pity. I said the words.

'You said that I was taking your daughter away.'

'And you, you told me that she was going of her own free will. This is true. She was. She followed you willingly. I was wrong.'

'Maybe you weren't.'

‘No. This is not about you. We remember Chloe. My daughter.’ His expression changed slightly. It was no longer impassive. He turned and walked quickly toward the wooden church doors.

The service went more quickly than I imagined. It was subdued. I’m not sure how many people Chloe’s parents told. She had gone to school in another city. There were around two dozen people, mostly around Chloe’s parents age. A few were younger. I sat in the second row of pews, no one seemed to look at me. I thought about Alexis’s funeral. About how Rosalind would have felt then. I could only finish writing that scene having witnessed this one.

Chloe’s mother tried to speak but couldn’t. Instead a younger man I didn’t know read a poem in French. I thought of asking the elderly lady sitting next to me to let me out so that I could walk up to that dais and say something. Instead I sat in silence, with very little understanding of what was being said. My French was still far from perfect. Though I have tried to learn.

By now you must have guessed that Chloe did not write any of this manuscript. It was always me. Those sections that were from her, those sections in the present tense, were my attempt at imagining what it would have been like for her. I stood outside of myself and looked at the relationship again. And each second of it was agony. I was trying to give her a semblance of voice after I had, for so many years, silenced hers. I needed to try to imagine what it was like.

I hated myself as I wrote those chapters. They made me understand.

I tried hard. I worked at the writing. But I didn’t get it right. Because I didn’t know Chloe. I knew her speech patterns, her mannerisms, but at most I guessed what she was feeling. I wrote things like *chichi* and never shortening it is to it’s.

How could I go up there and, in front of these people who didn't even know me, and explain? I could no more do her eulogy than bring her back to life. So I sat still and waited. After a while the priest stopped speaking and Chloe's mother and father stood. He held her hand as she sobbed silently into a handkerchief. Then the others in the room stood and began to file past them — shaking his hand and speaking soft words to her. I stayed seated in the row behind them and so then they must have known. A few of the younger ones — thin in their black clothes — smiled sadly at me. One old man reached out and took my hand in his. Looking into his lined face, I asked myself how many funerals he had been to. His hand was soft and clammy but I felt the honesty in the gesture. For a moment I felt as if I understood. Then he hobbled on. A few of the older women looked at me with derision. Perhaps I wasn't doing it right. It seemed impossible that I wasn't crying. But none of it felt real and I sat while they walked by, their gazes sliding off me as they moved to the front door. Eventually there were only the three of us left. The priest had disappeared sometime previously.

The older couple shuffled slowly out. Neither looked at me as I left. Perhaps they were respecting my grief. Perhaps they couldn't stand to look at me. I stood after a few more minutes had elapsed. The silence of the church was suffocating.

'Fuck,' I said softly. I felt the tears rise and held them back. The sun hurt my eyes as I stepped outside.

Chloe's father was speaking to another couple. Her mother stood looking blankly at the mountains, her hand on her husband's shoulder. I stood looking at the warmth of the stone under my feet and then walked to her. Haltingly, awkwardly, I stumbled out the sentence that I had been repeating over and over to myself.

'Je suis désolé,' I said.

I didn't wait to hear what she would say — or shout — but walked quickly away down towards the road. Some of the other mourners were gathered in groups on the pavement

and I walked out onto the road to avoid them. When I did turn I could see Chloe's mother walking towards me, her hands partially outstretched, her dumpy form almost comical in her tight-fitting black suit.

'Richard...Richard...' she said.

I stepped back — one awkward step — and then turned again and hurried away.

I wasn't staying for the internment. I couldn't bear it anymore. I was a coward.

Instead I walked all the way back to the hotel, gathered up my bag, paid the confused clerk and caught the first bus back to the airport. I argued to myself that Chloe was not that body that was being lowered to the ground. I did feel sorry for Chloe's parents, but I couldn't be beholden to them. It was my pain as well. Being there for the ostentatious mourning would have been a lie, a performance put on for the benefit of a few detached and uncomprehending lookers-on. I couldn't make myself believe it.

At the airport there was a decision to make. I had no attachments in the world. All I knew was that it would be impossible for me to fly the thirty-plus hours back to Sydney. There was nothing left for me in that city. For a moment I thought about flying to Cuba or back to Florida; somewhere warm where I could wallow in my self-pity, but the idea of drinking in the sun no longer drew me.

So I chose what was easiest and flew the hour and a half back to London. It was raining when I landed at Gatwick airport.

From the terminal I thought of calling my father. Instead I sent a message to O'Brian.

'No, I bloody well won't hear of it. You can come stay with me.' He had received the message and had called. I was sitting in Costa Coffee in the airport terminal.

'I'll just get a room somewhere,' I said. On my table was an untouched stale croissant and a cup of burnt black coffee.

‘Fuck off you will. Stay where you are, I’ll come get you.’

O’Brian arrived half an hour later, a little sweaty in a three-piece suit.

‘I was so sorry to hear what happened,’ he said laying a hand on my right shoulder. I looked down and noticed the thickness of his red fingers and the dull gold of his wedding ring. I couldn’t feel mine and looked down to see if it was still on my finger.

‘Thanks,’ I said. I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

‘Not something you expect from young people these days. People dying everywhere, all the time, for so many different reasons, but really no one thinks it’s going to happen to them. Still this isn’t the place to talk about it. Come along.’

He’d parked his hatchback in a back-alley. A homeless man was sleeping next to the passenger-side door. Inside there was a faint smell of mould that stayed with us for the long drive into the city. His apartment was in Mayfair, the fronting of which looked impressively ornate. Inside it was a warren of tight corridors and dingy rooms covered with old clothes, worn magazines, and a thin layer of dust. There were paperback copies of his books piled up in all available spaces. I squeezed past a hanger of drying clothes.

‘Can be a bit of a shock to look behind the curtain. No much left of the writer’s mystique.’

‘It’s fine.’

‘No it isn’t, but that doesn’t matter. Shower, change. Leave your bag. We’re going around the corner.’

I did as he said and soon we were back out in the wet London evening. He led me down the road and around the corner. The buildings became larger and more ornamented as we walked. We passed a leafy green park fenced in by a black metal paling. Soon we reached a roundabout and a hotel. Outside the wooden revolving door stood a doorman who tipped his hat when he saw O’Brian.

‘The Connaught Hotel. One of the few institutions left. Last bastion for the writing drunks.’

Though the lobby and two sets of dark doors and we were in a dimly lit bar, fully fitted out in chrome with waitresses that looked, and had the professional detachment, of models. They spoke in soothing eastern European accents.

‘Just this way, sir,’ the tallest of them said as she led us to a small round table in a corner. O’Brian sat looking out at the bar and the other drinkers.

‘Martinis. That’s the ticket. And don’t worry I’ll pay. Not every day you console a man who lost his wife.’

The waitress came back rolling a cart. Then the barman appeared in his shirtsleeves and a vest. The dark black stubble of his beard sunk his cheeks and made him look faintly ill, cadaverous. O’Brian spoke to him about gins and Sicilian olives while I sat at the seclusion of the table, one step away from the bustle. This was everything I had once wanted: to drink good drinks served by beautiful people while feeling strong and worthwhile emotion. But O’Brian was just a lonely raging man and the smile the waitresses wore was fake. I tried to imagine what it would be like to sleep with her. Objectively it would be good because she was beautiful, but still I couldn’t feel a thing. Not even the slightest rise from my flaccid cock. If there wasn’t the sex, or the drink, or the stories, then what was there?

The barman spoke eloquently as he mixed. The gin was British. The olives Sicilian. Then he stood back, in a showman’s pose, pouring at arm length into a glass. This was the thing. Gin and vermouth, but made something more by the history of the drink, it’s connotations of wealth and class. I held the proffered glass awkwardly as I waited.

Eventually the cart disappeared and the barman and waitress withdrew to where their stations behind and next to the bar — as much part of the decor as the chrome foot-rail or the small muted table lights.

We drank. And when the glasses were empty we were mixed more martinis and we drank again. O'Brian nodded to acquaintances, held small conversations, the bar filled with men and women in expensive clothing. Through it I sat mostly dumb — jet-lagged, hungover, drained of everything except for a dull buzz that permeated my being.

The world, my perceptions, all had been taken away from me. There was nothing left.

'Look I can't exactly tell you to cheer up. But...'

'Right.'

'Joy is as legitimate an emotion as sorrow.'

'Don't you think it's a bit early for that?'

'You can't change what's been done.'

We'd been drinking for a while now and the room had begun to change so that I no longer saw the people but just O'Brian, huge and red-faced. He was leaning towards me, one last gulp still held in his martini. He wanted only for me to confide in him. He wanted details of Chloe's death. He wanted to know how I felt. He was mining me for stories. He wanted to wallow in the depth of my grief so as to appropriate a small amount of it for himself, either for his writing or because he could no longer feel anything at all himself. What a cynic I've become.

I overheard the conversation as I returned from the restroom. O'Brian was at the bar speaking to a tall slim man in a bright blue suit. The man was straining to keep a fake smile plastered on his face, a smile that only receded when he was ordering a drink at the bar or turning to speak to O'Brian.

'Did you happen to see the young man I'm drinking with?'

'Sure. Doesn't seem all that happy to be here. Same as my client really. Look at her over there. *Cheer up you dour bitch.*'

'Well he has reason to look unhappy. His wife just died.'

‘Really?’

‘Absolutely. And he was driving. Drunk if you ask me.’

‘And so you’ve taken him out drinking?’

‘What else? Got to get him out of himself.’

‘Well that’s something. There’s a book there if he’s able to write. Does he have an agent?’

‘Of course not. He’s barely a writer. But he is interesting. At least he is now.’

‘You are an unbelievable cunt O’Brian.’

‘Sure. Who said I wasn’t? I’ll hit anyone that calls me nice. I’d rather be dead than dull. It takes courage to be a cunt.’

‘Just get me a drink will you.’

I walked past them to the table. Across the room the blue suited man’s client sipped at a tall drink through a straw. She was small and thin and did look unbearably dour. O’Brian returned to the table a few minutes later holding two large glasses.

‘G and T’s now I think.’

‘Thanks. Who’s that?’

‘Just an agent. Old friend. His client over there is Emily Hoffangraffer. She’s writing the *modernised* interpretations of Roald Dahl’s children’s stories. You know giving the kids iPhones and all that. Absolute shit but she’s going to make a fortune.’

‘Right.’

‘Look I can’t exactly tell you to cheer up. But you know...’

I allowed the alcohol to take hold of me and felt myself slipping slowly into inebriation. I’d felt the click, had had enough of the stuff to make me peaceful. I had time to reflect, in the certain clarity that alcohol sometimes gives you that now I had everything I had ever dreamed of.

In the morning I sat at the table in O'Brian's kitchen. I'd logged onto his computer and had opened a message from Sarah. Sarah. She seemed so distant then. But there was a link in her message, a link to the story of hers that had been published. I read it carefully, trying to understand the fullness of it. There was a part of me in that story; it was about a man chasing the idea of a woman while his wife stayed neglected at home alone. Then the man is saved by another, beautiful woman who sleeps with him and shows him how wrong he has been. I laughed as I finish reading, thinking how little Sarah really thought of me, wondering how she thought I'd take it. I told myself that I would email her the next day and congratulate her on the piece. Then I sat back and opened a word document. I took a deep breath, and — surrounded by unsold copies of O'Brian's books — I began to write. I wrote Chloe and in writing her tried desperately to feel something of who she was. The writing was slow and hard. But in a few hours, by the time I heard O'Brian moving in the next room, I had a chapter. Eventually I'd have another.

There's a book there if he's able to write.

Rosalind continued to live as she always had, her life completely separate from my own. That's what I finally understood, writing this elegy for Chloe.

All our relationship I had been thinking of Rosalind; I had held onto this idea of her. But it wasn't really her. It was just who I thought she was. Who I felt she needed to be.

What I know about Rosalind's life now, I know from social media. From friends. Some I just know.

Rosalind and Mark stayed married for another ten years and then drifted apart. This wasn't because of a romantic ideal that they fell short of — it was just that they were happier apart than together. There were no affairs that I know of, nothing to indicate any yearning on her part for something intangibly other.

She stayed in Gerringong with her daughter and a new baby boy. Mark bought an apartment in the city. Her mother had died a year before Chloe's death, her father a couple of years after. The ghost of their presence, if she felt it at all, was minimal.

Rosalind continued to work as a solicitor in a small firm, but the work didn't define her. She was happy to have a steady routine, her children near, and a few close friends.

Eventually her daughter Elizabeth, the child I had met, moved out of the house. She works in a hair salon not far from where Rosalind grew up. The beaches remain beautiful, though now, as the Sydney commuters move further and further south, they aren't as secluded as they once were. On weekends the white sand is peppered with towels, barking dogs, and deeply tanned sunbathers. Rosalind can no longer find an isolated place to read. The dunes are long gone. Instead, she prefers to sit on a bench closer to the carpark. She has a dog. She has gained some weight and suffers from mild arthritis.

An uninspiring life. But, I think, a relatively happy one.

There was no Rosalind. There was only ever Rose. And there was Chloe, Chloe whose vitality I was never be able to comprehend or capture.

Still I hold a picture in my mind of a girl on the beach. She stands on the verge of running into the water. Out in front of her there is a line of whitecaps and beyond them the blue of the ocean expands into the infinite.

**Being (a) Dick: The Ethics of Identity Appropriation
in the Novel *My Rosalind***

Introduction

Roland Barthes, in discussing the interpretation of authorial intention in literature, wrote that ‘history will never tell us what is happening inside an author at the moment he is writing.’¹ In this commentary, however, I have a chance to come as close as possible to explaining the thought processes behind the writing of my novel, *My Rosalind*. For this reason, this text will be an explanation of the manner of writing as well as a discussion of the perceived reception of the novel. James Wood writes of this form of essay that it ‘involves not just pointing at something, but pointing at it while re-describing it.’² In this paper I intend not only to bear witness to the experience of reading and writing *My Rosalind*, but to place the novel into a larger literary and historical context.

My Rosalind exists as a product of its time. It is a response to a generalised societal questioning of assumed notions of romance. The #MeToo movement, particularly, has engendered an increased discussion revolving around subjects such as consent, the abuse of power in relationships, and the entrenched inequality prevalent in patriarchal structures. As Ashwini Tambe asserts, ‘#MeToo has tilted public sympathy in favour of survivors by changing the default response to belief, rather than suspicion; the hashtag has revealed how widespread sexual coercion is.’³ As a society we have reached a better understanding of how prevalent these issues are and therefore have become more willing to question previously unexamined gender dynamics. *My Rosalind*, under the guise of a strict romance – and while relying heavily on 20th century writing techniques and ideas – seeks to discuss and re-evaluate our understanding of what is acceptable behaviour in modern relationships. I have

¹ Roland Barthes, *On Racine*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), p. 156.

² James Wood, *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage Books, 2019), p. 7.

³ Ashwini Tambe, ‘Reckoning with the Silences of #MeToo’, *Feminist Studies*, 44.1 (2018), 197–203 (p. 198).

attempted this through the use of metafictional techniques and the creation of a morally corrupt unreliable narrator, Richard, who uses the act of writing to justify his actions.

My Rosalind is a novel which deals with the act of writing and the issue of appropriation inherent in literature. In it, Richard frames his narrative so as to control not only the story of his life but also that of two women, his wife, Chloe, and the object of his obsession, Rosalind. As such the novel presents certain difficulties, chief among which is the fact that some readers may not see the contextual clues present in the novel and interpret it as condoning the behaviours of the narrator. This poses an ethical dilemma as such a reading would see me, as author, also appropriating female voices rather than showing the mindset and behaviours of a fictional character who does. Therefore, this discussion will clarify the acts of appropriation and the manipulation of the narrator Richard, it will underline the metafictional techniques used in the creation of the novel, and it will examine previous novels which have faced similar difficulties and explore their reception. In doing so I hope to demonstrate how *My Rosalind* undermines and illuminates insidious misogynistic tropes present in literature rather than perpetuating them.

Chapter 1 – The Unreliable Masculine Perspective

If there is an ethical imperative to novel writing it is to create, if not a sense of understanding, then an ability to inhabit another person (be they fictional or real). For a novel to be comprehensible the novelist must teach the reader the internal logic and consistency present within the piece.⁴ This element of truthfulness within a narrative allows the reader to develop understanding and therefore empathy with its characters. *My Rosalind* does not deal in absolutes; Richard the narrator causes pain to those around him, but I have tried to demonstrate that his actions stem from a deep-seated insecurity and flawed understanding of his world. It was my intention in writing to illustrate his misconceptions and to show how they were shielded and even fostered through his interpretation of modern literature. I agree with Wayne C. Booth, who posits that: ‘*Stories* are our major moral teachers.’⁵ There is an ethical didacticism present within all novels. Sometimes, however, novels may have negative moral impacts. My aim in writing was to demonstrate to the reader the, often overlooked, ethical responsibilities of a storyteller. As Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe write: ‘If readers of narratives are faced with ethical challenges that require them to make choices regarding the way they read, those who compose narratives are confronted by comparable responsibilities.’⁶

In *My Rosalind* Richard, an oftentimes sympathetic but ultimately flawed character, uses his narrative to justify his actions and viewpoints to his implied audience. He is a representation of a certain form of masculinity, one defined by societal expectations yet

⁴ George Saunders, *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* (New York: Random House, 2021), p. 277.

⁵ Wayne C. Booth, ‘Why Ethical Criticism Can Never Be Simple’, *Style*, 32.2 (1998), 351–64 (p. 20).

⁶ Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe, ‘Introduction: The Ethical (Re)Turn’, in *Narrative Ethics* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), p. 8.

caged by them. He is compelled to carry on patriarchal dominance of the women in his life in order to achieve a status that he considers will bring him respect, although it never does.

It is the perspective from which the story is told which will determine to a large extent the efficacy of the narrative. Booth asks: 'Is *The Great Gatsby* the same novel it would have been if, in place of the deeply involved Nick, it were narrated by an omniscient narrator?'⁷ That the story is told from the perspective of a narrator so attached to the subject of his narration informs all aspects of the novel. For example, we can look at this passage for the sheer sentimentality of Nick's narrative:

But his heart was in constant, turbulent riot. The most grotesque and fantastic conceits haunted him in his bed at night. A universe of ineffable gaudiness spun itself out in his brain while the clock ticked on the washstand and the moon soaked with wet light his tangled clothes upon the floor. Each night he added to the pattern of his fancies until drowsiness closed down upon some vivid scene with an oblivious embrace. For a while these reveries provided an outlet for his imagination; they were a satisfactory hint of the unreality of reality, a promise that the rock of the world was founded securely on a fairy's wing.⁸

There is a love-song lyric quality to this description of the inner workings of Gatsby's mind. Nick, however, could not have been privy to these innermost thoughts and so the reader must determine how much of it is Gatsby and how much is Nick overlaying his own sickly-sweet emotionality on the passage. Whose were the 'fantastic conceits?' Whose image was that of a world 'founded securely on a fairy's wing?' Through Fitzgerald's chosen perspective *The*

⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Second Edition (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 346.

⁸ F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), p. 105.

Great Gatsby becomes larger than just Nick's experiences or Gatsby's life. There is an intermingling of the characters which adds depth and meaning to an otherwise straightforward story. Though Nick is not a notably biased observer there will always be an aspect of his interpretation injected into the narrative – as seen by his utter devotion to the morally questionable Gatsby.

If we compare that section to one of Richard discussing Rosalind's childhood in *My Rosalind* we see how similar they are. Richard's prose is more spare and more self-consciously devoid of literary flourishes, but the romanticising of someone else's life is still there. Richard writes of Rosalind's childhood home:

There she was able to run barefoot, rollicking unchecked and unsupervised. She was filled with the bittersweet joy of that freedom. She had the ocean. Its expanse carried the promise of endless beauty and excitement. She would pick a book from one of the dusty bookshelves and wind her way down the pot-holed road and the dappled shade of the gum trees and Norfolk pines, through a narrow strip of brush, to the sand dunes. It was a secret place of hers, somewhere where no-one but the occasional seabird or sniffing dog would break the peace. She was happy in her solitude.⁹

The reader knows that Rosalind has told Richard 'a little about her childhood in a town that was only a two-hour drive south,' but it would seem far-fetched that she would convey so much detail or attach so much importance to the mundanity of her childhood.¹⁰ We see in both these passages and books that there is a juxtaposition between the observer's world and

⁹ Simon Jones, *My Rosalind*, p. 67.

¹⁰ Jones, p. 63.

that of the observed, a depiction of two, sometimes antithetical, views which adds depth and complexity to the narrative. Or as Adam Kelly writes:

The two-person narrative structure, through an extended contrast of differing personalities channelled through the representing consciousness of one, allows for a correlative contrast between worldviews, which can be taken as exemplary on a wider scale than simply the lives of individuals.¹¹

In other words, the choice of perspective and the nature of the narrator influence the reading and understanding of a novel. The very best narrators create an implied gap in the narrative which the reader is able to fill with outside understanding. For *My Rosalind* that narrator is Richard. It is the gap between the narrative he presents and the world as the reader recognises it which informs the novel.

My Rosalind is a self-begetting novel, or an 'account usually first person, of the development of a character to a point at which he is able to take up and compose the novel we have finished reading.'¹² The term was devised by Steven G. Kellman in 1976 to discuss novels which project 'the illusion of art creating itself.'¹³ *My Rosalind* tells the story of Richard's life up until the point where he begins writing it. Therefore, everything that occurs, every piece of information that is given to his audience and therefore to the reader has been filtered through Richard's consciousness. As Helen Dunmore writes: 'The narrator has control, and can shape, omit distort, deceive.'¹⁴ The choice to present this narrative in the first person and

¹¹ Adam Kelly, 'Moments of Decision in Contemporary American Fiction: Roth, Auster, Eugenides', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 51.4 (2010), 313–32 (p. 317).

¹² Steven G. Kellman, 'The Fiction of Self-Begetting', *MLN*, 91.6 (1976), 1243–56 (p. 1245).

¹³ Kellman, p. 1245.

¹⁴ Helen Dunmore, 'Introduction', in *Rebecca*, by Du Maurier (London: The Folio Society, 2017), p.ix.

specifically from Richard's perspective was the single most important decision in writing *My Rosalind*.

It is important to an understanding of *My Rosalind* to discuss Richard's character and to be able to identify his flaws, if only to be able to notice those areas in the narrative where he might not be recounting events truthfully. Reading *My Rosalind* is to inhabit his consciousness and so, for a true reading, his consciousness must be, at least partially, understood. Richard is a particularly insidious narrator, because he uses the romantic ideals of literature to justify and cloak his behaviour, either involuntarily or wilfully misremembering reality in the telling of his own, Rosalind's, and his wife's narrative. Like John Dowell of *The Good Soldier*, he aims to justify the behaviour of others and himself through a personal historical narrative.¹⁵

A cursory or surface level reading of *My Rosalind*, one in which the reader does not question Richard, might mark it as a romantic story. The reader might side with Richard, might believe every one of his justifications and root for him to somehow both reconnect with Rosalind and find happiness with Chloe. They may feel pity for him in the loss of his wife and applaud him for finally trying to understand her by writing her sections of narrative. I, as the author, cannot force the reader to interpret *My Rosalind* as I wish. As Harlan Ellison writes of his own work:

That is the nature of the tragedy: the work is only mine when it is being done.

Thereafter it must be remanded to the custody of the readers, and the writer can only hope for intelligence, patience, and tender mercies.¹⁶

¹⁵ Michael Levenson, 'Character in *The Good Soldier*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 30.4 (1984), 373–87 (p. 375).

¹⁶ Harlan Ellison, *Strange Wine* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2014), p. 13.

However, a more sophisticated reader might question why Richard is telling the story in this particular way, why he leaves in the sections he does and leaves out others. They may find it more likely that he is trying to create a narrative that gives him worth and importance to the detriment of the women in his life. At one point in the narrative he writes: ‘At the time it had been like a realisation. Rosalind was giving me not only the permission but also the encouragement to write something real. To write something meaningful.’¹⁷ The reader might interpret these justifications as being too self-aggrandising to be genuine.

This reading is perhaps best exemplified through an examination of Daphne du Maurier’s novel *Rebecca*. This novel too, can be read as a simple love story or as something much darker and more complex.¹⁸ Du Maurier manages this through the use of an unnamed narrator who distorts the moral perspective of her story.¹⁹ Everything that we, as readers, find out (or ‘know’) is presented from the perspective of this naïve, infatuated, and insecure narrator. And almost all of the information she receives comes from her husband, Maxim de Winter, a man she idolises but who has also murdered his first wife, Rebecca. Yet he is a character who many readers end up rooting for. Through her narrator ‘Daphne du Maurier shows how easily the moral focus of the narrative shifts and may be manipulated.’²⁰

Dunmore asks us to ‘[i]magine a novel about a middle-aged man in a position of great wealth and privilege who kills his wife [...] who is defenceless and whom he believes to be pregnant.’²¹ That is the novel simply put, divorced of the narrator’s particular perspective. Yet du Maurier makes it very easy to ignore this fact. Late in the novel the narrator describes Favell, who is the only character trying to find justice for the murdered Rebecca. She thinks

¹⁷ Jones, p. 92.

¹⁸ Sally Beauman, ‘Afterword’, in *Rebecca*, by Daphne Du Maurier (London: Virago, 2015), p. 437.

¹⁹ Dunmore, p. xiv.

²⁰ Dunmore, p. xiii.

²¹ Dunmore, p. x.

to herself: 'Thank god for Favell's laugh [...]. Because it made Colonel Julyan antagonistic, it put him on our side.'²² Here Du Maurier spells out to the reader how she has managed to make the reader sympathetic to a murderer and his new wife. She has made all those who might show another perspective to the narrator's (and therefore de Winter's) narrative, Favell, Danvers, and Rebecca, as opposites to what is good and right. These characters become morally corrupt and therefore somehow culpable. Favell cannot find justice and is stymied at every turn. When he says: 'Yes it's been a stroke of luck for you, Max, hasn't it?'²³ he is telling the complete truth. Maxim de Winter has not had to account for his actions. He protected himself by living within the strict confines of the patriarchally accepted behaviours while his wives had to capitulate to his 'asexual male power (and social standing).'²⁴

The strength of *Rebecca*, then, is the conflicting understandings which arise between the narrator's understanding of the world she inhabits and that which the reader might divine. Du Maurier has layered clues within the text that indicate that the 'prejudices of narrative must be questioned.'²⁵ For example, a meticulous reader might realise that it is Max de Winter withholding of key information and his manipulation that pushes his young wife to the point of despair. Early in the narrative, when the couple are in a self-imposed exile, the narrator tells us: 'We have no secrets now from another. All things are shared.'²⁶ This is an important line because, as the reader learns, her husband seems to do nothing but withhold information from her. To the point where, encouraged by the housekeeper Mrs Danvers (a vilified female voice defending her ex-mistress), she contemplates suicide. 'It would soon be

²² Daphne Du Maurier, *Rebecca* (London: The Folio Society, 2017), p. 359.

²³ Du Maurier, p. 401.

²⁴ Janet Harbord, 'Between Identification and Desire: Rereading "Rebecca"', *Feminist Review*, 53, 1996, 95–107 (p. 102).

²⁵ Dunmore, p. xiii.

²⁶ Du Maurier, p. 8.

over. And Maxim did not love me. Maxim wanted to be alone, with Rebecca.²⁷ The reader may deduce that De Winter psychologically tortured both his wives. De Winter kills Rebecca because she rebels against his ruling masculine force and threatens his standing as master of Manderley. Rebecca tells him: ‘We could make you look so foolish that no one would believe you Max, nobody at all.’²⁸ After this, his only chance at maintaining his position and not losing his property to her, alleged, bastard child, is to kill her. He later states that: ‘When I killed her she was smiling still. I fired at her heart. The bullet passed right through.’²⁹ He murdered Rebecca and (he believed) her child in cold blood. This act is later seemingly retroactively justified when it is revealed that Rebecca had cancer (this is the information that causes Favell to call De Winter lucky). Rebecca becomes then somehow complicit in her own murder and blamed for it. “‘I believe,” said Maxim, “that Rebecca lied to me on purpose. The last supreme bluff. She wanted me to kill her.”³⁰ In the narrator’s story (and De Winter’s) Rebecca – even though she was killed – is culpable; ‘her [...] Rebecca is villain, not victim.’³¹ Rebecca, after all, is not given a voice. Like Rosalind in *My Rosalind*, ‘Rebecca never tells her own story.’³² She never gets to present her version of events and therefore is subsumed within another’s narrative.

Because the helpless narrator, who we, as readers feel a connection to, believes Maxim, we, as readers, feels compelled to as well. As Dunmore writes: ‘We are very subtly manipulated into wanting the evidence to be hidden, and Maxim to be set free, whatever the cost to justice or morality.’³³ Therefore *Rebecca* demonstrates how an unreliable narrator and a collusion with the reader may create a complex and layered narrative. Du Maurier also

²⁷ Du Maurier, p. 269.

²⁸ Du Maurier, p. 303.

²⁹ Du Maurier, p. 304.

³⁰ Du Maurier, p. 45.

³¹ Dunmore, p. xi.

³² Dunmore, p. xii.

³³ Dunmore, p. xii.

gives us the opportunity to become a ‘resistant reader,’ to question the moral narrative being presented.³⁴ *Rebecca* demonstrates how those in positions of power may use their privilege (by dominating the narrative and silencing opposing voices) for personal gain.

In both *Rebecca* and *My Rosalind*, it is the use of the unreliable narrator that creates a questioning in the involved reader, and which allows for a complex discussion of entrenched societal structures. David Lodge writes of unreliable narrators that they are, ‘invariably invented characters who are part of the stories they tell.’³⁵ That Richard is unreliable is indicated with asides which indicate a complicity with his audience and the reader. Early on he writes: ‘But I’m getting ahead of the story. It was years before. It was evening.’³⁶ With this line Richard is showing his hand; he is consciously inserting himself into the story – allowing the reader to observe that this narrative is intrinsically self-reflective and, therefore implicitly, self-serving. Wayne C. Booth first coined the term ‘unreliable narrator’ in 1961. He considered ‘a narrator *reliable* when he speaks or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), unreliable when he does not.’³⁷ In other words a narrator is unreliable if the reader has reason to suspect that the implied action taking place does not occur as the narrator describes.

This is a difficult form of writing to successfully achieve as the narrator’s is the dominant voice of a novel and is most often uncontested. Differing points of view can be presented through dialogue or a switch of narrative perspective, but more often the reader must rely on clues presented within the narrator’s story. As Wood states of successful unreliable narrators: ‘A process of authorial flagging is going on; the novel teaches us how to read its narrator.’³⁸ The reader must work with the author to come to an understanding of the

³⁴ Hawthorn and Lothe, p. 6.

³⁵ David Lodge, *The Art of Fiction* (London: Vintage Books, 2011), p. 154.

³⁶ Jones, p. 55.

³⁷ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, pp. 158–59.

³⁸ James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Picador, 2018), p. 3.

novel. This is especially important as readers traditionally side with the character telling the story; the assumption being, because of traditional storytelling tropes, that they will be impartial in their recounting.³⁹ My intention, through the reversal of this expectation, is to encourage the reader to question, not only Richard's narration, asking whether events actually unfolded the way he describes, but also the act of narration and the biases inherent within. In order to achieve this level of successful unreliable narration, I had to be very careful to present the reader with two intermingling narratives, that of the narrator and that of the implied 'real world' behind the narration. Sentences such as: 'I asked her about herself she told me a little more of her story, a little about her childhood in a town that was only a two-hour drive south of where we were,' will hopefully signal to the reader that all the information presented has been filtered through Richard's consciousness.⁴⁰

Richard's understanding and presentation of his world should be at odds with the larger narrative of the novel. Importantly, also, for Richard's unreliable narration to be successful, a connection has to be formed between his character and the reader, so that the reader, while noticing the flaws in his version of events, still feels a connection to the story. The purpose of the unreliable narrator is not to completely alienate the reader but to demonstrate how a narrative can be slanted and show how often this may occur. Or as Lodge notes:

The point of using an unreliable narrator is indeed to reveal in an interesting way the gap between appearance and reality, and to show how human beings distort or conceal the latter.⁴¹

³⁹ 'This form of artificial authority has been present in most narrative until recent times.' Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Jones, p. 63.

⁴¹ Lodge, p. 155.

Richard does need to be interesting in order to demonstrate how he distorts his own narrative and conceals the pain he causes to Rosalind and Chloe (more on this later). It is his unreliability which fascinates. Or, as Lodge writes of *Pale Fire*'s narrator Charles Kinbote: 'If he had been reliable, the effect would, of course, have been incredibly boring.'⁴² Richard is not as brilliant and psychologically troubled as the dangerous protagonist Charles Kinbote but he is intrinsically self-serving, self-deluded, narcissistic and image conscious and it is his attempts to conceal these facts which render the narrative important.⁴³

My Rosalind, therefore, could only be written from the perspective of the unreliable narrator. Had I decided to use an omniscient point of view, the reader would not have questioned the veracity of the story and would not have to have held two narratives in his/her mind: the one that is being told and the other, unseen, reality behind it. There would have been no way of showing the workings of Richard's deception and self-justification. The dichotomy between the story as Richard believes it to be and the reality of the situation which the reader grasps at is what gives wider meaning to the text. Because Richard is unreliable and inherently a flawed storyteller the reader is able to see, behind the former, the shadow of the latter. It is the realisation that Richard's presented world is at odds with the 'real' world of the novel which makes this text worthwhile, the importance being the hermeneutic questioning that Richard's perspective creates in the reader. I would even argue that the use of the classic unreliable narrator makes the narrative a didactic one, as readers will learn to recognise the manipulation inherent in Richard's behaviour and extend that understanding to the real world.

⁴² Lodge, p. 157.

⁴³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Penguin Classics, 2016).

The readers may even be more likely to internalise the message if they feel they came to it themselves, as they slowly recognise the extent to which Richard is an unreliable narrator.

The mythology of the masculine writer

It is not unnatural that the best writers are liars. A major part of their trade is to lie or invent and they will lie when they are drunk, or to themselves, or to strangers. They often lie unconsciously and then remember their lies with deep remorse.⁴⁴

Richard, as an unreliable narrator, is not truthfully recounting his story but rewriting his life to align with the idealised image of himself and his idea of romance. He lies to himself, to the people in his life, to his implied audience, and, by extension, to the reader. This is a form of control, the most important aspect of which manifests itself in the rewriting of his, Rosalind's, and Chloe's story. Richard shapes their narrative, adding to and subtracting from it as he does, deciding what information to include and what to leave out. He decides how the story is told and how he wishes to portray himself; in writing his novel he is influencing how his implied audience perceives him, courting sympathy and approval. However, Richard has a flawed perception of himself which is most clearly seen in his near obsessive mimicking of the writing style and lifestyles of male 20th century writers. This is especially apparent in his mirroring of Ernest Hemingway. We can take as an example the scene after his marriage to Chloe when Richard punches his best man. He justifies his action, thinking to himself:

⁴⁴ Ernest Hemingway, in Jacqueline Tavernier-Courbin, 'The Mystery of the Ritz-Hotel Papers', *College Literature*, 7.3 (1980), 289–303 (p. 301).

It was what a writer did. What Hemingway would have done. It did hurt though. I lay my hand against the cool glass of the train window, pressing just a little to feel the dull throb in my knuckles.⁴⁵

This is one of many examples in the novel where Richard tries to align himself with his literary idol, not only in terms of his writing style but also his manner of living. Hemingway ‘constantly wanted to prove himself in hazardous situations, testing his manliness.’⁴⁶ He created a persona for himself as ‘a mythic “macho writer.”’⁴⁷ This is the persona which Richard tries to emulate, as he believes it will bring him direction and make him an interesting writer. Hemingway’s artistic method can be described as ‘inventing from experience,’ and that is the method Richard is trying to follow.⁴⁸ Richard, therefore, tries to live the same exciting, dangerous lifestyle as an ‘object of artistic self-direction,’ creating through his actions material for his book.⁴⁹

When visiting Hemingway’s Key West house Richard wonders, ‘what it would have been like to box with Hemingway. He drank and boasted too much to be a really good fighter.’⁵⁰

Of course, Richard is not the first writer to imitate Hemingway. Norman Mailer, another of Richard’s influences writes: ‘Every American writer who takes himself to be both major and macho must sooner or later give *a faena* which borrows from the self-love of a

⁴⁵ Jones, p. 108.

⁴⁶ Cor Hermans, ‘Bohemian and Bauer’, in *Interbellum Literature, Writing in a Season of Nihilism* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), p. 333.

⁴⁷ Hermans, p. 331.

⁴⁸ Sandra Spanier and Ernest Hemingway, ‘General Editor’s Introduction’, in *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway: Volume 2, 1923-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. xvi.

⁴⁹ Hermans, p. 330.

⁵⁰ Jones, p. 53.

Hemingway style.⁵¹ These writers see themselves as strong masculine figures, though the surface of Richard's machismo is tinged with self-doubt.

Because he is so influenced by these hypermasculine writers and the characters in their writing, Richard sees himself as owed a degree of mastery, especially over the women in his life. He believes the myths of masculine dominance present in their texts. Richard idealises the kind of writers featured in *Playboy*, for whom sexual liberation was a liberation of male sexuality more than female.⁵² He equates sex with success, as demonstrated when he debates sleeping with Sarah another writer who acts as a female mirroring to Richard. In fact they both flirt with the idea of sleeping together for the sake of their writing.

I stood up, thinking of getting something more to drink and asking her to go to bed with me. To really go to bed with me. Maybe it *would* be good for our writing.⁵³

Sex here can be seen as another accomplishment which he feels bolsters his position as a writer. Because of this warped view of social interaction, he does not understand certain destructive social paradigms which are reflected in his behaviour. He is confused when Rosalind does not act in the manner he expects from her; she refuses to be the prize that he has been conditioned to believe is his right. He is a reflection of the unacknowledged 'birthright priority whereby males rule females,' and an example of 'interior colonisation' of this concept.⁵⁴ The literature Richard lives by often hides misogynistic views which he has

⁵¹ Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 19.

⁵² Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Foreword', in *Sexual Politics*, by Kate Millett (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. xiii.

⁵³ Jones, p. 130.

⁵⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 25.

internalised, as reflected in his actions. Therefore, his life is a battle between the image he has of himself of a Hemingway hero and the pain he sees himself cause.

Of course, there was a moral issue creating such a flawed character and choosing to present his perspective. There is the paradox of this novel to contend with: that it aims to explore the suppression of female voices while the narrator successfully suppresses the voices of two female characters, Chloe and Rosalind. However, I would argue that is a didactic decision to show Richard's thought process and how he is ultimately able to mask and justify his behaviour. As Millett argues: 'The adventure of literary criticism [...] is capable of seizing upon the larger insights which literature affords into the life it describes, or interprets, or even distorts.'⁵⁵ Richard's story represents how the masculine viewpoint is taken as the de facto perspective in literature, to the point where biases and worldviews go unquestioned by readers.⁵⁶ Here we can turn to Wood again, who states that '[i]n fiction we have the great privilege of seeing how people make themselves up – how they construct themselves out of fictions and fantasies and then choose to repress or forget that element of themselves.'⁵⁷ Throughout *My Rosalind* Richard both consciously and unconsciously tries to align himself with what he considers to be the ideal of his gender. For this he needs to assert himself to the point of almost being oblivious to others and to reality.

Richard is not quite the brute of Jean Genet's Armand (from *The Thief's Journal*), but similarly to him much of what he has learned through shallow readings of masculine writers has 'taught him to identify "masculine" with force, cruelty, indifference, egotism, and property.'⁵⁸ He has been conditioned to believe that he has to be forceful and dominant,

⁵⁵ Millett, p. xxx.

⁵⁶ Caroline Criado Perez, *Invisible Women; Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. (London: Vintage, 2020), p. 12.

⁵⁷ Wood, *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays*, p. 67.

⁵⁸ Millett, p. 20.

particularly in his interactions with women. To Richard – who defines himself as a writer – the act of writing is god-like, it is the act of creation which gives life meaning, which would allow him, like Hemingway, to be someone who ‘flaunts his prejudices, hostilities and resentments.’⁵⁹ However, Richard also seems to have a pathological need to be regarded as interesting, out of the ordinary, and intelligent. As already stated, readers can feel empathy for Richard, there is a complexity to him that creates a dichotomy of feeling. This can be seen again in his relationship with Sarah.

I was very aware that I was naked. But it had felt good to be objectified, to feel virile. I was glad that despite the drinking my abdominals were still clearly defined. I was still getting to the gym, still boxing and lifting weights. I took two beers from the fridge, opened them, and handed her one. I was reminded of the days of drinking with Mark. Here, too, something was happening.⁶⁰

Here we see his need to be sexually appealing as well as his belief that drinking makes his life more interesting. Later Richard’s need to be seen as an accomplished writer can be seen in his envy of one of the few successful writers in the novel, Olivia King. Richard writes:

I felt the beginnings of a hatred for this Olivia King. She already occupied more space in Sarah’s head than I ever would. She was occupying space in so many minds. Perhaps Rosalind had read her book too.⁶¹

⁵⁹ J. Gerald Kennedy, ‘Introduction to the Volume’, in *The Letters of Ernest Hemingway: Volume 2, 1923-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. xlix–lix (p.li).

⁶⁰ Jones, pp. 125-126.

⁶¹ Jones, p. 128.

Richard hates Olivia because she is what he wants to be. He needs to be present in the interior lives of others, has a need to insert himself into their consciousness.

Perhaps the most apparent signal (to the reader) that Richard is influenced by 20th century writers is in his writing. Richard's style of composition is staunchly modernist and heavily influenced by the spare 'modern classic' writing of Chekhov, Hemingway, and Carver, where the very ordinariness of the language and what is left unsaid allows the reader to better realise and feel the deep beauty in everyday situations.⁶² He expresses himself in short, clipped sentences which often belie a deeper meaning. His prose is straightforward and without ornamentation. When he describes the meeting of his wife, he simply writes: 'We met in a youth hostel. Her name was Chloe Dupont.'⁶³ Here he aligns himself with Hemingway's declaration that: 'Prose is architecture, not interior decoration, and the Baroque is over.'⁶⁴ The sentence, '[i]t was our third night there which we had mostly spent drinking and smoking in different small cafés and bars around Montmartre,' is painfully reminiscent of Hemingway's Paris novels and short stories.⁶⁵ This is particularly clear in such sentences as: 'The air was cold and clean and the sky seemed to sit higher than it ever did in England.'⁶⁶ When compared to Hemingway's line in *A Moveable Feast*, '[w]hen we came back to Paris it was clear and cold and lovely,' it should become apparent that Richard has based his writing style, and therefore the image he is trying to construct, on Hemingway's own.⁶⁷ Richard often uses three adjectives separated by two 'and's, as Hemingway did in the previous quote. He

⁶² Charles E. May, 'Introduction', in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. xv–xxxvi.(p.xxiv)

⁶³ Jones, p. 8.

⁶⁴ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* (London: Vintage Books, 2000), p. 168.

⁶⁵ Jones, p. 8.

⁶⁶ Jones, p. 8.

⁶⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Arrow Books, 2010), p. 21.

writes of rented apartment in Florence that: 'The rooms were small and comfortable and full of light.'⁶⁸

Moreover, Richard is shown throughout the novel as obsessed with the idea of hedonism and escapism as a means of fulfilment. His attempts to blindly adhere to traditionally masculine ideologies can be seen throughout the novel in his relationship with alcohol and, as previously mentioned, sex. His sybaritic lifestyle is fuelled, again, by his conception of himself as a writer. He spends much of the action of the novel following the footsteps of his idol, attempting to emulate him through his excesses as well as through his writing. When in Paris, before meeting Chloe he writes: 'I pretended I was Hemingway; he liked the taste of beer.'⁶⁹ Here his companion becomes a background character while Richard brings himself into focus. Richard wants to feel himself like a character in novels such as *The Sun Also Rises*, and, unconsciously, he is able to capture a certain of the distance and apathy presented there. His egocentrism and obliviousness allow him to resemble the expatriates in Hemingway's novel who:

are either largely unaware of the potentially larger historical contexts surrounding their activities or blithely indifferent to them. Theirs is a world of a near-perpetual present with some infrequent nostalgia for the past.⁷⁰

These characters seemingly exist to 'have 'such a damned good time.'⁷¹ Richard, too, is willingly indifferent to larger contexts. His emulation of Hemingway is arguably surface level, without an understanding of more nuanced interpretations of his idol's work. In

⁶⁸ Jones, p. 9.

⁶⁹ Jones, p. 8.

⁷⁰ William Cloonan, 'The Expatriate Idyll: The Sun Also Rises', in *Frères Ennemis, The French in American Literature, Americans in French Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 98–125 (p. 114).

⁷¹ Ernest Hemingway, *Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises* (London: Arrow Books, 2004), p. 216.

Florida, visiting the Hemingway house Richard writes: 'I wanted to see if I could picture myself in that house as Hemingway. I wanted to sit at his table and imagine myself writing something real, something honest.'⁷² His imaginings go beyond adulation to the attempt of finding meaning but that attempt is oftentimes superficial, finding expression in acts of self-destruction.

In Richard's interpretation it is chiefly the act of drinking that is masculine and significant. Richard spends much of his time drinking or drunk and his narrative often focuses with self-consciousness and loving delight on the act of drinking.

Is it strange that there has always been alcohol in my story? Perhaps we needed the drink to allow for the situation, to feel the depth of our emotions. We were trying to drown out the questions and the intrusive thoughts, the idea that perhaps what we were doing wasn't quite right. Drinking was something to do during the telling pauses and averted glances.⁷³

This is a particularly revealing moment in the novel because it comes at a time when Richard is desperately trying to imbue his narrative with romance that he believes to be necessary to give his life meaning. He is in Florida to write about Hemingway for a travel magazine and again imposing much of the hyper-masculine legend of the writer on himself.

Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast*, that, 'In Europe then we thought of wine as something as healthy and normal as food and also as a great giver of happiness and well-being and delight.'⁷⁴ This is perhaps an understatement in regard to his alcohol consumption.

Olivia Laing adds that:

⁷² Jones, p. 53.

⁷³ Jones, p. 49.

⁷⁴ Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 142.

right to the end of his life, when he was keeling under the combined weight of depression and alcoholism and a string of head injuries, the complex inheritance of a life lived at full tilt, he maintained an unshakeable belief in alcohol's essential beneficence, its ability to nourish and uplift.⁷⁵

Even Richard's choice of alcoholic beverage is reminiscent of Hemingway. He writes: 'Our drinks, classic daquiris, were strong and good and our lips pregnant with unasked questions.'⁷⁶ The astute reader might question whether he is drinking the daquiri particularly because of its association with Hemingway. Hotchner, Hemingway's biographer, recounts Hemingway's boast that he 'made a run of sixteen' daquiris in a single night at La Florida in Havana.⁷⁷ Richard, would of course be familiar with this story as he makes direct reference to Hotchner, writing, 'I could see myself swimming in it, under the Banyan trees, drinking dark rum with Hemingway and Hotchner, discussing writing and bullfighting.'⁷⁸

It is Richard's drinking, too, that allows him to romanticise this evening when he later thinks back on it, constantly revisiting his revised editions of the night. Perhaps more importantly it is the alcohol that is consumed that allows for the situation in which Richard can believe that he and Rosalind are having consensual sex (the physical expression of the history that they shared and the feelings of romance that he cultivated) while Rosalind comes away knowing that she has been sexually assaulted. The alcohol in this scene and throughout the novel is a stand in for what Richard considers necessary to be a successful, masculine writer. The writers he reads and idealises are drunks, and so Richard must feel, at least

⁷⁵ Olivia Laing, *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2014), p. 88.

⁷⁶ Jones, p. 50.

⁷⁷ A. E. Hotchner, *Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 2004), pp. 6–7.

⁷⁸ Jones, p. 53.

subconsciously, that in order to write well he has to drink heavily and put himself in these situations where he holds power over women.

From this we can see that, antithetically, Richard has both become a traditionally masculine character but also that he undermines gender identity in that he portrays the posturing and surface level qualities of the masculine ideal. This contradiction is reflected in the works that Richard bases his life upon. As Bryce Traister notes of Richard's hero:

Hemingway's readers desire a masculinity his texts in fact problematize, which is to say that the desire for gender knowledge or identity operative in a readerly imagination is of a fundamentally different kind than that revealed in Hemingway's fiction.⁷⁹

In other words, Hemingway's texts often illuminate the problems inherent in a devotion to masculinity. By becoming caricatures of masculinity his characters sometimes lose their veneer so that we can see certain of them 'essentially as immature poseurs' who trade in affectations of psychological damage for social standing.⁸⁰ Richard, also, and despite his efforts, ends up losing all style that he may have possessed as it becomes clear that he is an unremarkable person. Like the characters of *The Sun Also Rises* whose corruption – despite how they might want to seem – 'is not some sort of philosophical disillusionment with the state of the world,' Richard's drinking is oftentimes prosaic.⁸¹ Much of his conflicting emotions arise from his realisation (though perhaps this is not conscious) that his life is not the romance that he expects it should be – his drinking does not bring depth, his stoicism is

⁷⁹ Bryce Traister, 'Academic Viagra: The Rise of American Masculinity Studies', *American Quarterly*, 52.2 (2000), 274–304 (p. 286).

⁸⁰ Cloonan, p. 101.

⁸¹ Cloonan, p. 117.

not a stand in for strength. It is his mediocrity that makes him most dangerous, as he will do whatever necessary to try to reach the position in society that he thinks is owed to him.

Richard is an unpleasant but not always unpalatable protagonist. He can be compared to John Updike's Harold Angstrom, a protagonist whom he most certainly idolises, as Harry was able to find some sense of meaning in leaving his wife and chasing after another woman.

Richard's actions, like those of Harry, are clearly selfish but he still manages to evoke a certain sense of pity in the reader.⁸² 'Rabbit' Angstrom is a character whose purpose is to witness the change of an era, whose mediocrity defines a series of novels, who is looking for any escape possible from the reality in which he finds himself. He is also primarily characterised in terms of how he treats women. Rabbit's 'relations with the opposite sex appear to have two main aspects, the paternal and erotic...'⁸³ It is this contrast that makes him both despicable and redeemable. Richard's relations with women are mainly sexual but this aspect is outweighed by a secondary drive – the need for someone to complete the literary, romantic image he compulsively needs to create for himself. He is a victim of societal values, though instead of confronting these he transfers any suffering on to the women in the novel.

More problematic is another character with whom Richard could be compared: Norman Mailer's Stephen Rojack. Rojack, who appears in Mailer's *An American Dream* is a man who has had all the advantages of being a war hero, TV personality, writer, and having a wealthy wife, but who still feels oppressed by his position. He kills his wife and, instead of feeling any remorse, feels 'weary with a most honourable fatigue.'⁸⁴ He is a 'caricature who ends by vindicating American virility.'⁸⁵

⁸² John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006).

⁸³ John Updike, 'Afterward by the Author', in *Rabbit, Run* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006), p. 279.

⁸⁴ Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. 28.

⁸⁵ Millett, p. 322.

As previously mentioned, Mailer was also influenced by Hemingway, ‘aping the master’s stolid martial airs,’ though it could be argued that he rejected the subtlety apparent in much of Hemingway’s work.⁸⁶ In *Advertisements for Myself* Mailer tells his reader that:

I have come finally to have great sympathy for The Master’s [Hemingway’s] irrepressible tantrum that he is the champion writer of his time, and of all time, and that if anyone can pin Tolstoy, it is Ernest H.⁸⁷

Even his imagery here is derived from a form of fighting, Mailer imagines Hemingway wrestling Tolstoy and perhaps coming out victorious.

In fact, Mailer might be considered the apotheosis of the caricaturised masculine writer, this in part due to ‘his enormous ambition to exert a direct effect on the consciousness of his time.’⁸⁸ Mailer who could write, seemingly unironically, that:

The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time. Whether rightly or wrongly, it is then obvious that I would go so far as to think it is my present and future work which will have the deepest influence of any work being done by an American novelist in these years.⁸⁹

Mailer, like Richard, aimed to validate his existence through his writing, gaining status through a reaffirmation of traditionally masculine stereotypes. Mailer’s characters join ‘the

⁸⁶ Millett, p. 320.

⁸⁷ Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*, p. 19.

⁸⁸ Millett, p. 314.

⁸⁹ Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*, p. 17.

ranks of the Hemingway cult,' in that they find beauty and fulfilment in violence.⁹⁰ Of *An American Dream*, Kate Millet argues that: 'Mailer transparently identifies with his hero, who has little motive for the killing beyond the fact that he is unable to "master" his mate by any means short of murder.'⁹¹ This form of frustrated masculinity leading to violence has already been discussed in relation to Rebecca, as: 'Maxim de Winter kills his first wife on the premise that she ought to die not only because she is sexually provocative and promiscuous, but because she cannot be controlled.'⁹² It can also be argued that it is Richard's frustration at Rosalind's and Chloe's unwillingness to submit fully to his will which leads him to injure and finally kill Chloe.

Though I could not say whether Mailer does in fact identify with Rojack, he has allowed his character catharsis through murder. Richard too may be seen to have benefited through the death of his wife, as he was able to reach an emotional liberation which finally allowed him to start writing his novel. Millet again states that 'Mailer's *An American Dream* is an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after.'⁹³ This too can be said for Richard. He is never punished for causing the death of his wife but renews himself as a Mailerian man through the violence. However, I would argue that the effect of the two deaths are reversed. While Rojack 'is surely the first hero as homicide to rejoice in his crime and never really lose his creator's support,'⁹⁴ Richard becomes, in my view (and hopefully in the reader's), smaller and more pathetic.

Of course, some contemporary interpretations of Mailer have become more nuanced than Kate Millett's frontal attacks, arguing that the almost caricatured nature of violence in

⁹⁰ Millett, p. 321.

⁹¹ Millett, p. 10.

⁹² Dunmore, p. xiv.

⁹³ Millett, p. 15.

⁹⁴ Millett, p. 15.

his novel does not deny sexism and the fetishism of violence but rather surpasses and undercuts them. Kevin Power notes:

To attempt to grasp Mailer's metaphysics as the shaping element of his oeuvre is not to deny that the work thus shaped is often troubling, particularly in its essentialist approach to questions of gender and race and in its sometimes fetishistic approach to the depiction of violence.⁹⁵

So, while we can acknowledge Mailer's problematic writing, we may still find worth in his work. For example, it may be argued that *Rojack* and *An American Dream* are sui generis and non-mimetic and as such still useful in understanding the era and social instance for which they were written. They may be exemplifying and illuminating a dangerous obsession with masculinity without rejecting it, as: 'critics...have tended to read Mailer less as an exemplary instance of macho sensibility than as the embodiment of the crises and anxieties of that masculinity.'⁹⁶ It is impossible to know exactly what Mailer's intention was, but in the writing of *My Rosalind* my aim was for Richard to harm rather than bolster archaic masculine sensibilities.

Richard, while attempting to gain the position of masculine power reserved for Mailer's, Hemingway's, and Updike's characters has undermined the concept by showcasing the posturing and vanity involved.

Moreover, while I do share some characteristics with Richard, being a male aspiring writer, I do not identify with him or support him. In the creation of the novel I have tried to

⁹⁵ Kevin Power, 'The Underground Frontier: Norman Mailer's *An American Dream*', *IJAS Online*, 8, 2018, 34–49 (p. 36).

⁹⁶ Scott Duguid, 'The Addiction of Masculinity: Norman Mailer's "Tough Guys Don't Dance" and the Cultural Politics of Reaganism', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 30.1 (2006), 23–30 (p. 23).

free myself as much as possible from the patriarchal ideology which Richard unconsciously incorporates into his understanding of his world. By making the link to his idols I have attempted to demonstrate the danger of masculine posturing rather than glorifying it. It was always my intention as the writer of *My Rosalind* that the reader question Richard's role as the masculine storyteller. It is that questioning – made possible because of narrative perspective (as discussed in the proceeding section) – that informs the novel and allows the reader to empathise with Richard and see him for what he is, the product of a society with unhealthy views of gender roles. But as much as we may sympathise with Richard, perhaps even identify with him, there is no getting away from the fact that he causes incontrovertible harm to the women in his life. Richard must cause harm in order that the novel might critique patriarchal ideologies and traditional societal expectations.

Chapter 2 – The Appropriation of Female Voices

The substance of my novel, as reflected in the title, hinges around the character of Rosalind. Nevertheless, her voice is not heard outside of dialogue and her character is seldom examined. The novel, therefore, acts not only as a device to tell her story but to scrutinise how her story is told. Specifically, it examines Richard's attempt to appropriate Rosalind's voice and subsume her into his narrative.

It is immediately apparent from Richard's narrative, that the reader is not hearing Rosalind's voice, but rather is observing her through the eyes of another. 'This is the story Rosalind told me. I need to write it. To have down in writing the sequence of events that made her who she is. I'll hold onto her in these pages, at least.'⁹⁷

She is not afforded her own perspective. A tragedy of the novel, then, is that Rosalind's life has been seized by another, by Richard. Rosalind acts as the focal point of Richard's narrative gaze, someone on whom he can overlay all of his romantic notions. She is not her own person but rather someone to be idealised and thus reduced. The character Sarah, may have recognised this when she tells Richard:

'You've made her into something.'

'She is something.'

'No. I mean the way you talk about her. The story you've made of her. It's like you've taken her and made her into something else, into something that's yours.'

⁹⁷ Jones, p. 66.

You've got a muse. Good for writing. I'm not sure how good it is in real life though. I mean she is a real person, right?'⁹⁸

E. M Forster, in his treatise *Aspects of the Novel* argues that each narrative contains both 'round' and 'flat' characters.⁹⁹ Round characters having depth and complex motivations, are of central importance to the story while flat characters are background, filler people, used as plot devices and for tone. If we use this theory as a framework and apply it to *My Rosalind*, we would necessarily categorise Richard as a 'round' character. Conversely, Rosalind, for all her central importance to the novel, could be considered 'flat' or two-dimensional; she can, as Forster explains 'be expressed in a single sentence.'¹⁰⁰ Rosalind, in Richard's narrative is simply 'Richard's muse'. This is a simplistic conceptual framework, but it is effective in getting us to think about how the characters are framed in Richard's narrative. As in the case of another overlooked victim, the titular character in *Rebecca*, Rosalind represents 'a sort of absent centre of desire, the imaginary lack.'¹⁰¹ She is more defined in the narrative by what we don't know about her than what we do. There is a reason why Rosalind does not feel like a 'round' character, and that is because in Richard's eyes she is not her own person. She is a thing to be won, kept, and eventually immortalised in his novel.

Richard knows enough about literature to understand the power of romanticised writing that calls back to a shared youth. Like Humbert Humbert in Nabokov's *Lolita*, Richard is transforming the object of his passion through his biased narrative. Rosalind does not have her character expressed by Richard's narrative but rather she is dehumanised by it, as she is not allowed any of the fallibility which makes us human.

⁹⁸ Jones, p. 129.

⁹⁹ E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, ed. by Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 73.

¹⁰⁰ Forster, p. 73.

¹⁰¹ Janet Harbord, 'Between Identification and Desire: Rereading "Rebecca"', *Feminist Review*, 53, 1996, 95–107 (p. 100).

This concept of dehumanisation through worship is illustrated in the iterations of Rosalind's name – a telling leitmotif. Names are the most obvious source of identity, and when someone takes possession of another's name, they are, in essence, attempting control over that person. This is why writers such as Dickens have so often given character's names which have reflected their key characteristics — the name in literature being so often a stand-in for character definition. When he was finally given a name, late in the writing of the novel, it became clear that the narrator had to be called Richard. Or, as Stephen King puts it: 'We'll call the guy Dick; it's the world's most Freudian name.'¹⁰²

Richard never calls Rosalind by the name she chose for herself, Rose. In fact, he states outright that:

To everyone else in her life, to Mark, Alexis, and Chloe, she was Rose or occasionally Rosie. But to me she was always Rosalind. It was a name that defined her, that encapsulated everything she was to me. I loved her for it.¹⁰³

Yet the reader knows through the way Rosalind introduces herself to others, that she has rejected the name Rosalind and prefers to go by Rose. When she meets Alexis there is this interaction:

'I'm Alexis.'

'Rosalind.'

'Rosalind?'

'Rose.'

¹⁰² Stephen King, *On Writing* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012), p. 198.

¹⁰³ Jones, p. 56.

‘As you like it.’¹⁰⁴

Rose is the name that Rosalind chose, the one that represents her identity as she knows it. The reader can assume that it was her abusive father that named her Rosalind. When shouting at her he says: ‘Are you fucking listening to me, Rosalind?’¹⁰⁵ She has received both her first and surname from him (it seems unlikely that her mother, who is shown as withdrawn and self-effacing, chose the name). Rosalind’s identity, therefore, is first portrayed as an extension of her father’s. Later, she is able to break free through her relationship with the ocean and with Alexis and by choosing her own name. When Rosalind begins to develop a certain independence through her academic pursuits her father abuses her both verbally and physically in an attempt to belittle her and therefore allow him to hold her into a fitting version of a daughter in his own narrative: he ‘destroyed her efforts, her work, her escape.’¹⁰⁶ This becomes particularly important in light of the more complex themes of the novel. Here we see another example of doubling or mirroring, an important technique used throughout the novel. Richard is a double, or replacement of Rosalind’s father. He should seem frightening both to Rosalind and to the more attentive reader because he is familiar and yet changed, other.¹⁰⁷ Her father is overtly controlling while Richard is more insidious in the manner in which he appropriates Rosalind’s life. He has consciously decided to only call Rosalind by her given name, changing her to fit his vision of the story.¹⁰⁸ When Richard thinks of the conceptual Rosalind of his imagination and narrative, he always calls her the name her father gave her, Rosalind.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, p. 71.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, p. 68.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, p. 76.

¹⁰⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 124.

¹⁰⁸ In this essay I have continued to use the name Rosalind as opposed to Rose for clarity; Rosalind is in the title of the novel and it is how Richard conceives of her. However, I hope that when discussing the novel readers may, in the future, use her chosen name, Rose.

‘I am your friend, Rosalind,’ I said.

‘No one calls me Rosalind.’

‘You’ve always been Rosalind to me,’ I said.

‘I chose to be Rose.’¹⁰⁹

In this exchange we get a reflection of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys’ feminist reimagination of *Jane Eyre*, in which the character of Mr. Rochester reduces Antoinette’s character by refusing call her by her true name: ‘Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that’s obeh too.’¹¹⁰ Richard has made his intentions clear – whether consciously or not – he is trying to force Rosalind to become someone other, someone who he is able to own.

Richard’s attempt at appropriation is most explicitly explored in the sexual interaction that occurs between Richard and Rosalind in Florida. While Richard and Rosalind did have some form of entanglement when they were at university, it is the sexual encounter that occurs later which Richard points to as the most important. He writes:

And so after all that time, after all those years, I made up for that first mistake. This time there was no wavering, no indecision. I took advantage of the moment.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Jones, p. 175.

¹¹⁰ Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, ed. by Angela Smith (London: Penguin Classics, 2016), p. 94.

¹¹¹ Jones, p. 153.

Here he is explicitly telling his audience that this is the moment when he took control and regains a sense of masculinity by sexually asserting himself. How the evening unfolded seems inconsequential to his sense of pride.

Kate Millett argues in *Sexual Politics* that sex is often a political act, an act of ownership. She writes of ‘sexual congress as a paradigm of power over other human beings.’¹¹² If we read Richard’s text as a means of owning Rosalind then it is with this sexual act that he believes he succeeds in capturing her. It is the supreme example of her (in his estimation) ‘giving herself’ to him. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, speaking of the implicit viewpoints of such Victorian writers as Gerard Manley Hopkins, argue that: ‘male sexuality...is not just analogically but actually the essence of literary power.’¹¹³ This is especially pertinent to Richard’s mindset as his ability to write is intimately entwined with his sense of self.

If this were an earlier work, of the kind written by Richard’s literary heroes, then this sexual act would be just what Richard sees: a conquest. His achievement would be an underpinning to the importance of his narrative and himself. However, as this is a post-#MeToo novel, there is a more nuanced reading to be made. I have tried to present a conflicting perspective to Richard’s own, hopefully allowing for a layered reading to the sexual encounter. This was done, most evidently, by presenting Rosalind’s view of the act, which differed wildly from Richard’s.

When Richard finally does track Rosalind down in the small town where she grew up, after having followed her around the globe, a confrontation occurs which allows for Rosalind’s perspective of what happened that evening. On the beach, secluded from the protection of her party Rosalind tells Richard:

¹¹² Millett, p. 22.

¹¹³ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 4.

Some things are worse than pain. You took away from who I was... You fucked me. I said no but you fucked me anyway. Do you remember that? Me saying no? How can you still expect something from me after that? I was drunk, so drunk and all I have, all I had for days, for weeks, for months was the image of you following me into the shower after I said no.¹¹⁴

In her speech Rosalind is finally able to give her perspective of the events and confront Richard about his abuse. Richard is told that the night that he kept revisiting throughout his narrative was, in all likelihood, a criminal act.

The idea that the pinnacle of Richard's obsessive quest to find and dominate Rosalind was actually a sexual crime baffles Richard as it undermines his view of himself as the dominant and deserving male. This is in line with Millet's argument that: 'In rape, the emotions of aggression, hatred, contempt, and the desire to break or violate personality, take a form consummately appropriate to sexual politics.'¹¹⁵ In other words the sexual assault is a synecdoche of Rosalind's suffering as the focus of Richard's interest and narrative. The fact that he may have been truly unaware that it was sexual assault and not consensual sex reinforces his worldview (influenced by a patriarchal society and masculine-centric literature) that his acts of subjugation are acts of literature, are positive, rather than destructive.

How Richard was able to portray a non-consensual sexual encounter as consensual acts as an exploration of narrative perspective. However, after having read Rosalind's revelation it is easy for the reader to reread the scenes between Rosalind and Richard with an entirely different understanding. There are contextual clues that point to the two characters

¹¹⁴ Jones, p. 177.

¹¹⁵ Millett, p. 44.

not seeing eye to eye. Here, then, we can analyse how Richard has manipulated his audience. For example, Rosalind's revelation of sexual assault is in stark contrast to Richard's telling of the evening. He includes this remembrance:

I flicked the light switch and stepped through. She turned. Her eyes widened as she looked up at me. I wrapped my arms around her, bringing her face to mine. Her eyes were darker than I had remembered. For a moment she seemed to have trouble focusing. She looked over my shoulder.

'No...Chloe?' she said in a hurried whisper, the protestation too soft to be real, a mechanical appeal to conventionality.

I spoke in a whisper, earnestly trying to put my now muddled thoughts into coherent phrases. My role was to reframe our actions so that it became clear that there was no other path than forward to an end that had been inevitable from the first night that I saw her standing at my door in a Bruce Springsteen t-shirt.¹¹⁶

The reader can interpret this scene in two ways. Rosalind's eyes widening may have been, for Richard, an indication of excitement while, for Rosalind it was surprise at his being there. Her 'trouble focusing' may have been a sign of intense emotion but was more probably because of her level of intoxication.¹¹⁷ When she says 'no' he interprets it as 'a mechanical appeal to conventionality' whereas it was really Rosalind telling him that he did not have her consent.¹¹⁸ To Richard her protestations were a pretence. In his mind – afflicted as he was by a narrow conception of romance – when she said no it was a symbolic protestation, as reflected in his narrative.

¹¹⁶ Jones, p. 153.

¹¹⁷ Jones, p. 153.

¹¹⁸ Jones, p. 153.

Rosalind's emails, her dialogue, her actions, all can be interpreted on at least two levels. They can be interpreted as a reciprocation of his emotions and Richard's yearning, that for some reason Rosalind is denying, or as Rosalind being civil to an old friend with whom she had a fleeting romantic experience.

It will perhaps be impossible for the reader to determine whether Richard was aware of the predatory nature of his obsession. There is the possibility allowed for in the text that his narrative is a true mirror of his experiences. There is also the possibility that he is attempting to influence his audience and the reader by feigning ignorance. This judgment I have left to the reader's interpretation. Whichever way it is viewed, Richard's narrative demonstrates the justifications surrounding sexual assault and how men can pre-empt accusations by reframing the situation with theirs as the dominant voice.

The 'Mad' wife

Rosalind, while a necessary character in her own right – representing an overt attempt at appropriation through romantic and sexual obsession – also serves as a distraction from Richard's other victim: Chloe Dupont. The reader is asked to focus on Rosalind, thereby making it all the more powerful when the viewpoint of the novel shifts, allowing for an understanding of Chloe's suffering. Again, as Harbord explains of *Rebecca*: 'the textual strategy... demands that the reader collude with characters in their fascination with the past, with Rebecca.'¹¹⁹ In this way Du Maurier ensures that the reader is able to comprehend how the narrator becomes so physically and emotionally isolated. In *My Rosalind* the reader should be swept along with Richard's fascination with Rosalind – she diverts both Richard and the reader from Chloe's suffering.

¹¹⁹ Harbord, p. 100.

Chloe, similarly to the unnamed narrator of *Rebecca*, lessens herself for her husband. She is seen to blame herself for his failings. 'Chloe knows that Richard needs her in his life. Maybe that is why she forgives him, enables him, ignores his weaknesses. Maybe she is the one at fault.'¹²⁰ Because of this she is essentially ignored by Richard for the large part of the novel and perhaps by the reader too. However, she, like Rosalind is a victim of Richard's behaviour.

Chloe's narrative lies in the realm of domestic realism. She is not obsessed over, nor does she do anything drastic or incredible beyond the bounds of the recognisable. Hers is the story of a woman who is neglected and belittled by her husband and who is kept at a distance from her parents and friends. Richard holds his wife captive not through force but through the patriarchal expectations of the family unit.

Chloe, therefore, should be read through a feminist lens. She can be compared to similar characters in classic feminist novels such as Rochester's 'Mad' wife Bertha, in *Jane Eyre* (and by extension in Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*) and to Bluebeard's wife – specifically in Angela Carter's retelling of the classic fairy tale, *The Bloody Chamber*. She is kept prisoner by her husband while his attention is focused elsewhere.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that *Jane Eyre*'s 'rebellious feminism' is in part due to 'the heroine's refusal to submit to her social destiny.'¹²¹ In *My Rosalind*, Rosalind refuses to submit to Richard's romantic expectations by not allowing herself to be subsumed into his narrative. She is therefore not submitting to the implied destiny of romantic literature. However, in *Jane Eyre*, there is a reflection of the eponymous character in 'Mad' Bertha, the wife kept locked in the attic: 'Bertha, in other words is Jane's truest and darkest double.'¹²² Chloe is another double – of Rosalind – and an expression of the more private and isolated

¹²⁰ Jones, p. 47.

¹²¹ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 338.

¹²² Gilbert and Gubar, p. 360.

suffering. Rosalind might see in Chloe the fate reserved for her had she chosen to link her lot to Richard. While Rosalind is finally able to escape Richard's pervasive influence, Chloe is not; her suffering is more commonplace and therefore inexorable. In *Jane Eyre*, Bertha is, to Jane, 'in a sense her own self.'¹²³ It can be argued, therefore, that the 'confrontation, not with Rochester but with Rochester's mad wife Bertha, is the book's central confrontation.'¹²⁴ In *My Rosalind* the central revelation is that of Chloe's suffering, which only becomes truly apparent after Rosalind has firmly rejected Richard.

Jean Rhys' radical retelling of *Jane Eyre*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, shifts Jane's perspective to that of Bertha (in the novel given the true name of Antoinette), thereby illuminating Rochester's level of control and manipulation. Like Richard with Chloe, Rochester is controlling his wife and trying to transform her into someone that supports his male-centric worldview. Angela Smith notes of Rochester and Antoinette (Bertha) that: 'The uncanny control he exercises over her derives from his power as a patriarchal Victorian who has stopped listening to the island voices.'¹²⁵

The word 'uncanny' here is interesting as it signposts the gothic undertones of these three novels (*My Rosalind*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, and *Jane Eyre*). Freud writes of the concept of the uncanny as 'that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.'¹²⁶ Though there is no clear definition, the 'uncanny' 'belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread.'¹²⁷

Rosalind did originate as a ghost story. The breakthrough in writing the novel was the decision to change it to a piece of literary fiction; I did retain gothic aspects that fit the narrator's melodramatic perception of events, though it now exists in the recognisable realm

¹²³ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 348.

¹²⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, p. 339.

¹²⁵ Angela Smith, 'Introduction', in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin Classics, 2016), p. xii.

¹²⁶ Freud, p. 124.

¹²⁷ Freud, p. 123.

of 'reality'. There remains, however, the motif of physical injury standing in for emotional injury – for example Chloe's cutting open of her hand on the glass that Richard has broken in the scene where their relationship truly breaks down – as well as a preoccupation with the untamed aspects of nature, namely water, which can be seen as both tantalising and to threaten to engulf the characters throughout the novel. Moreover there are the instances of doubling already mentioned (Richard and Rosalind's father, Richard and Sarah, Rosalind and Chloe), which Freud links to the 'uncanny'.¹²⁸ *My Rosalind* also remains ghostly in the way all literature is ghostly: in that it reflects reality in a way distorted but recognisable and open to multiple interpretations; it is familiar but also somehow different.¹²⁹ Bennet and Royle argue that 'the greater the literary work, the more ghostly it is.'¹³⁰ *My Rosalind* does strive to evoke in the reader a sense of wonder and distrust, a sense that all is not what it seems. In this way the use of the 'uncanny' brings the reader's attention to the fact that there is something unsettling and otherworldly about how human beings try to distort and acquire a narrative.

Jean Rhys successfully illustrated a woman cut off from the things that make her feel at home. Antoinette is manipulated by Rochester into losing all sense of identity: 'her displacement makes her more conscious of what she is not than of what she is; she envies the ex-slaves their sense of self-definition.'¹³¹ He cuts her off from any sense of security, tormenting a woman who already felt a lack of identity due to her social, national standing to the point where she would believably become the 'mad' pyromaniac woman in the attic. Richard's power over Chloe derives from his status as the narrator of this novel, and from the act of distancing her from her family. Chloe finds a large amount of comfort in her parents, and it is telling that the time she comes closest to breaking up with Richard is when she is

¹²⁸ Freud, p. 142.

¹²⁹ Freud, p. 124.

¹³⁰ Andrew Bennet and Nicholas Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 186.

¹³¹ Smith, p. xviii.

staying with them, before their lives are fused together by the witnessing of a violent death in the mountains. Richard notes that: 'She began to say something and then closed her mouth and shrugged.'¹³²

After this sequence, either knowingly or unknowingly, Richard separates Chloe from this source of strength – her home and her family – creating a distance that lessens her ability to properly protect herself from him. He takes her to England where she is cut off from any sense of familiarity. When she begins to adjust to this life, Richard changes their location again, this time taking them to Australia, a country known to him, but which is unbearably isolated and foreign to her. Like Antoinette, Chloe loses her sense of self and breaks down because of it.

Here, then, we can look at another feminist text, Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, a retelling of the fairy tale Bluebeard. In the same manner that *My Rosalind* borrows from the structure and techniques of 20th century novels, *The Bloody Chamber* utilises the classic fairy tale, layering it with new meaning. As Meria Mekin notes:

Carter's tales do not simply 'rewrite' the old tales by fixing roles of active sexuality for their female protagonists - they 're-write' them by playing with and upon (if not preying upon) the earlier misogynistic version.¹³³

This new version allows for the visceral understanding of the manipulation of the husband and his level of control over his young French wife. Carter chooses to tell the tale from the perspective of the wife and recounts how she was taken from her mother and brought to his castle. Early on she describes how: 'when he put the gold band on my finger, I had, in some

¹³² Jones, p. 14.

¹³³ Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality', *Feminist Review*, 42, 1992, 2–15 (p. 5).

way, ceased to be her child in becoming his wife.¹³⁴ In the same manner Chloe, when in Australia, 'wishes she could see her mother,' to tell her in her native tongue: '*Maman, je me sens seule et triste. Tu me manques tellement...*'¹³⁵

Moreover, when Richard plans the trip to Florida, a section reads: 'They have no money and no time, but they are leaving anyway. Good. Chloe would no more stand in the way of Richard's dreams than strike her own mother.'¹³⁶ In these lines we learn about Chloe's deference to her husband's whims. The 'good' is a direct translation of the common French pronouncement '*bon*', a far more resigned statement than the more encouraging English counterpart. That Chloe's first thought is of her mother when asserting that she would not run contrary to her husband's wishes underlines the importance of both relationships.

Chloe is introduced on the first page of the novel and it is clear that she and Richard are in a serious, longstanding relationship. Yet it is also apparent from their dialogue that there is a disconnect between the two. Chloe is looking to Richard for reassurance, for some sense of reciprocated love. The first line of the novel is: 'But you love me, no?' This is followed by the lines:

Why — why are you not serious about this? I came here for you, to be with you.

What have you done for me? I need you. So tell me, do you want to be with me? Yes or no?¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015), p. 1.

¹³⁵ Jones, p. 132.

¹³⁶ Jones, p. 33.

¹³⁷ Jones, p. 6.

From her introduction, then, the reader receives the impression of a woman trying to decipher her husband's intentions. The narrator in *The Bloody Chamber* recounts of her husband:

And sometimes that face...seemed to me like a mask, as if his real face, the face that truly reflected all the life he had led in the world before he met me, before, even, I was born, as though that face lay underneath this mask.¹³⁸

She, like the unnamed narrator of *Rebecca*, has been put into a precarious subordinate position to her husband because he refuses to share his thoughts with her. His impassivity is a means of manipulation, a form of power used to dominate as important as his wealth.

Similarly, when Richard is on the phone later in the novel, Chloe looks on and wonders about what he is thinking: 'For a moment she thinks that she has always been looking at Richard like this, from a distance and from the outside.'¹³⁹

There is a disconnect between the characters in which Chloe finds herself lost and helpless. This leads to perhaps the most confrontational experience of her solitude; in which Chloe has had a miscarriage and has not been able to share the experience with anyone but an impersonal doctor.

She is glad now that she did not tell him about the baby. He did not have the chance to get excited about what could have been, what will now never be. She thinks about the idea she held of this other thing in their life and the tears begin to press on her again.

¹³⁸ Carter, p. 3.

¹³⁹ Jones, p. 156.

She knows that Richard will be home soon and she doesn't want him to find her like this, she doesn't want to him to see her, so she hides behind the bed and tries to stop the tears from breaking her down, from showing her weakness.¹⁴⁰

Chloe has not been able to share anything of the experience with her husband, the man on whom she should be able to rely the most, because of the physical and emotional situation she finds herself in – one which he devised. 'She wonders for a moment why she cannot tell him the truth. Why she cannot confide in her husband, the only other person in her life.'¹⁴¹

Richard has taken her away from her parents (in a section just prior to this one Chloe imagines writing emails to her mother, emails she will never send), her country and language, her university of choice, and her friends. She is now completely alone, dependant on him, waiting while he pursues the idea of a woman who only exists in his mind.

Chloe looks down at her empty hands. The sobbing continues in waves. It is like being sick, like Chloe is trying to vomit out all the poison inside. But there was no end to the sadness and emptiness inside her.¹⁴²

By this time in the narrative it is clear that Chloe is the true victim of Richard's infatuation with Rosalind. She has dedicated herself to him while he is free to chase Rosalind, as he protects himself through the idea that he is on a romantic and literary quest. Chloe has begged for Richard to show his true intentions and has suffered because of it. Correspondingly, in *The Bloody Chamber*, the wife is led to her suffering by an attempt to understand her husband; 'The young bride interprets the key to the forbidden chamber as the key to her

¹⁴⁰ Jones, p. 147.

¹⁴¹ Jones, p. 149.

¹⁴² Jones, p. 149.

husband's heart.'¹⁴³ She is shown as transgressive to the masculine sensibility for asserting herself as a curious human being. However, in Carter's novella the wife survives, as:

The puppet master, open-mouthed, wide-eyed, impotent at the last, saw his dolls break free of their stings, abandon the rituals he had ordained for them since time began and start to live for themselves; the king aghast witnesses the revolt of his pawns.¹⁴⁴

In the story, then, the lesson is clear. Female boldness is celebrated rather than suppressed. Finally: 'Bluebeard's victimization of women is overturned and he himself is vanquished by the mother and daughter.'¹⁴⁵

However, in *My Rosalind*, Chloe is never reunited with her mother and does not survive her husband. She suffers at Richard's hands and he never receives punishment. Therefore, it is important to ask, can Chloe be considered a feminist character without the feminist context? I would argue that the interpretation of Chloe's character is dependent on the reader and that a complex reading would illuminate and undercut traditional gender dynamics rather than strengthening them. Feminist texts have allowed for readings of classic literature which go against the apparent didacticism of novels. So that a book which seemingly lauds masculine power over women, can actually be read as a warning as to how these ideas are slipped into the public consciousness. Novels such as *My Rosalind* and *Lolita* (more on *Lolita* later) utilise this heuristic method to portray the thought-processes of villainous characters while revealing their motives and manner of manipulation. The fact that

¹⁴³ Kari E. Lokke, "'Bluebeard' and 'The Bloody Chamber': The Grotesque of Self-Parody and Self-Assertion', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 10.1 (1988), 7–12 (p. 10).

¹⁴⁴ Carter, p. 43.

¹⁴⁵ Makinen, p. 10.

Chloe is not rescued but dies in Richard's care should be indicative of real-life suffering rather than excusing it.

Chapter 3 – The Metafictional Novel: Writing About Writers Who Write About Writing

David Lodge describes Metafiction as ‘fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures.’¹⁴⁶ This is a broad but essentially correct view of the term. However, while it describes the superficial aspect of metafictional novels it does not address the why of metafiction, or what purpose it serves. In this chapter I will be discussing the literary form of metafiction, specifically in relation to *My Rosalind*.

Metafiction developed in order to fulfil the need to express something that was otherwise inexpressible; writers began utilising certain styles and techniques which allowed their work to exist as viable artistic pieces in the face of widespread cultural change. *My Rosalind* is a novel about a fictional writer who uses the act of writing to create a narrative which is so constructed as to cast everything written in doubt. The novel, therefore, as Lodge claimed, signals the author’s hand behind the narrative. In doing so it challenges the notion that there is such thing as an objective reality by displaying to the reader the inherent subjectivity of all narratives.

Metafiction, as a literary movement, does have its fair share of critics, many citing a lack of seriousness. The playful aspect specifically seems to jar with authors and readers who expect literature to be severe and respectable. Tom Wolfe, particularly, is cited as a major dissenter, having argued that metafiction is ‘symptomatic of a decadent, narcissistic literary culture.’¹⁴⁷ To which the argument stands that what can be taken as self-absorption is actually a complex and significant re-evaluation on the role of literature. As Patricia Waugh states:

¹⁴⁶ Lodge, p. 206.

¹⁴⁷ Lodge, p. 208.

Metafiction, then, does not abandon ‘the real world’ for the narcissistic pleasures of the imagination. What it does is to re-examine the conventions of realism in order to discover – through its own self-reflection – a fictional form that is culturally relevant and comprehensible to contemporary readers.¹⁴⁸

Here we address metafiction in its specific theoretical sense – allowing for a recontextualization of our understanding of the novel – a term which is far more complex and more rooted in literary history than its common understanding (which is that a work need only be slightly self-referential to be metafictional). Metafiction and metafictional novels are by nature difficult to define. The grouping of techniques used within the umbrella term of metafiction embody ‘aspects of a broader shift in thought and practice whereby reality has increasingly come to be seen as a construction.’¹⁴⁹ These literary tools – be they a playfulness, self-consciousness about language and the construction of story through language, or a parody of earlier writing traditions – must still remain within the broad structure of a recognisable novel, in order to question the nature of reality. Again, from Waugh:

In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the fictional text.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 18.

¹⁴⁹ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 48.

¹⁵⁰ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 2.

Metafiction, to be more specific, examines the language by which its own narrative is created and in doing so reflects on the subjective nature of reality. For example, in James Salter's *A Sport and a Pastime* the narrator tells the reader that he is not being honest in his recounting of his narrative: 'I am not telling the truth about Dean, I am inventing him. I am creating him out of my own inadequacies, you must always remember that.'¹⁵¹ We see from this passage that the narrator is challenging himself and his narration, signalling to the reader that the narrative is something made-up, that there is a disconnect between the *discours* and the *histoire*.¹⁵² By creating a narrative that the reader forms a connection with and then purposely questioning its reality, Salter is pushing us to evaluate the subjective nature of the remembrances and to apply that understanding to our conception of relationships external to those found in literature. This is the push to a wider questioning that *My Rosalind* attempts to achieve. Metafiction is arguably a step forward in literary practice – a manner by which literature may continue to stay relevant, in questioning the entrenched social structures of our society. John Barth famously wrote that 'an artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and the means for work.'¹⁵³ Here he references the resilience of novelists who create new viable forms of expression out of apparent redundancy. This is a way of playing on old systems of writing in order to create something new and to challenge old systems of thought.

Importantly the expansion and modern categorisation of metafiction is closely linked to post-modernism, which arose from modernism.¹⁵⁴ Both modernism and post-modernism were a form of push-back against entrenched belief-systems and loss of faith (modernism

¹⁵¹ James Salter, *A Sport and a Pastime* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 81.

¹⁵² Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 152.

¹⁵³ John Barth, 'The Literature of Exhaustion', in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Non-Fiction* (London: The John Hopkins University, 1984), p. 71.

¹⁵⁴ Though there were arguably several examples of metafictional novels ranging back as far as *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*.

arising, it can be argued, at least in part due to the sense of disillusionment following the First World War, postmodernism following the rapid changes of understanding brought on by technological advances) however, where modernism set out to represent the mundanity and often meaninglessness of life and of 'exploring pure consciousness,' postmodernism looks to challenge the framework of traditional literature by calling attention to the techniques used in the creation of fictional narratives.¹⁵⁵ Metafiction is a manner of writing in opposition to past fictions which represented a reality which was believed to be constant and unassailable. As Lodge again states:

It is a mode that many contemporary writers find particularly appealing, weighed down, as they are, by their awareness of their literary antecedents, oppressed by the fear that whatever they might have to say has been said before, and condemned to self-consciousness by the climate of modern culture.¹⁵⁶

A misunderstanding of this fact and the objectives of metafiction may then account for the backlash that arises against metafiction, that it represents in some way the 'death of the novel', revelling in a decadence and narcissism that serves no purpose other than to appeal to the intellectualism of the author.¹⁵⁷ I would posit, however, that metafiction is more than a knee-jerk reaction to past literature but an example of how knowledge of past techniques can add to the complexity of literary expression in a time where our understanding of reality has become more and more uncertain.

¹⁵⁵ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 27.

¹⁵⁶ Lodge, p. 207.

¹⁵⁷ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 9.

Metafictional writing has become increasingly common in the past few decades as it the perceived reality of the world contemporary novelists inhabit becomes more and more confused.¹⁵⁸

Metafiction reflects the confusion that the complexities of modern life have engendered, mimicking the subjective nature of reality in prose.

Playfulness and Parody

Returning to *My Rosalind*, therefore, we can see that the text is not only postmodern but metafictional; it playfully uses the disparity between realism, modernism, and postmodernism already outlined in order to further the divide between them (playfulness being, as mentioned earlier, one of the aspects of metafiction frowned upon by detractors of the movement).¹⁵⁹

Richard, as a writer, is modernist. We have already discussed how much Richard seems to consciously or unconsciously model himself on the masculine writers of the 20th century. His texts are sparse and devoid of overt didacticism and they do not follow a strict chronology (he often opens his chapters *in medias res* and compulsively revisits certain scenes, giving more detail and a slightly different conception of the event each time) but they do not, within the confines of his fictitious narrative, question the boundaries of their own language.

Richard does not challenge himself, but despite his naïve prose the reader should be savvy enough to see the outline of the stencil that he is using. There remains clear within the narrative the framing technique which disrupts the reality of his narrative. Richard's writing

¹⁵⁸ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ The irony being that playfulness in metafiction is often used for serious purposes. In *Rosalind* I use play to demonstrate how modernist fiction often silences the voices of women and other typically underrepresented characters.

is so much a reflection of entrenched views of what writing should be, that his self-conscious narrative becomes a parody of recognisably sparse modernist writing.

Going even further, it can be argued that Richard uses this mimicry to shape the narrative and therefore its reception by the reader. He uses stylised writing which the reader has been conditioned to respond to positively to try to enlist the tacit approval of the reader. In those sections of Richard's narrative that he believes are most emotionally relevant, there is always some flourish of language to underpin the momentous nature of the happening. For example, after it is finally revealed how Rosalind rejected Richard in Florida, he describes the following scene:

No. I stood dumbly on the balcony, feeling the Floridian sun on my face, my hands holding the wood that Hemingway too, must once have held. There was not a single word that I could think to say. After a few moments of silence Rosalind turned and walked back inside, and I found myself more alone than I had ever been before. I looked at the trees that arched over the street and saw the dappling of light on the grey asphalt. A child below called out to her mother. In the distance I could hear a siren wail.¹⁶⁰

This is, to a certain extent, an example of a parody of a certain style of modern writing. We can note the short-clipped sentences and the sparsity of language characteristic of some modernist writers. There are also the carefully selected details which seem almost random but are in fact carefully curated. It is a style of writing that reaches back through Carver, Hemingway, to Chekhov. Richard's is trying to imbue his narrative with meaning through his 'choice of seemingly trivial details and his organisation of them into a unified pattern that

¹⁶⁰ Jones, p. 106.

lyricises the story and makes it seem natural and realistic even as it resonates with meaning.’¹⁶¹ If we compare the passage to Chekhov’s ‘The Lady with the Dog,’ we see an unmistakable similarity. In Chekhov’s story, after Dmitri Dmitritch Gurov and Anna Sergeyevna have finally succumbed to their passion, Anna Sergeyevna submits to an emotional self-flagellation to which Gurov turns his back. Chekhov then writes that: ‘there was a water-melon on the table. Gurov cut himself a slice and began eating it without haste. There followed at least half an hour of silence.’¹⁶²

As in Richard’s description we note the self-conscious recording of the passage of time. Emotion is conveyed through the description mundane actions and carefully chosen, specific details. Later in the short story, after Anna Sergeyevna has left Gurov, Chekhov again focuses on Gurov’s emotional disconnection from what is occurring; he writes:

Left alone on the platform, and gazing into the dark distance, Gurov listened to the chirrup of the grasshoppers and the hum of telegraph wires, feeling as though he had only just waked [sic] up.’¹⁶³

Again, the reader’s attention is called to the passage of time. There is importance added to those moments of silence between each curated noise. Richard is mimicking this manner of writing. The small, realist details – the child calling to its mother, the sound of the telegraph wires – are present in both texts, but whereas Chekhov was discovering a new way of expressing repressed emotion, Richard is looking back on literary history (we know he is well read, he wants to be a writer) and using it to romanticise and cloud his narrative. As such his

¹⁶¹ Charles E. May, ‘Chekhov and the Modern Short Story’, in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 199–217 (p. 201).

¹⁶² Anton Chekhov, ‘The Lady with the Dog’, in *That Glimpse of Truth: 100 of the Finest Short Stories Ever Written*, ed. by David Miller (London: Head of Zeus Ltd., 2017), p. 149.

¹⁶³ Chekhov, p. 151.

passage becomes a muted reflection, a parody of Chekhov's that speaks to an attempted manipulation of the reader.

Self-Begetting and Frame Breaking

My Rosalind, as previously mentioned, is a 'self-begetting' novel.¹⁶⁴ Richard, it is discovered at the end of the novel, has written everything previously recorded, including the sections purportedly from Chloe's point of view. This, in itself, makes *My Rosalind* a metafictional novel (metafiction, as previously noted, is a term which covers a wide range of techniques), though 'self-begetting' novels remain closely linked to traditional realism and as such are not far along on the spectrum of metafiction.¹⁶⁵ *My Rosalind* questions the structure of its own narrative by being so clearly a constructed text. Richard is writing a novel which becomes the novel that I, Simon, wrote. However, *My Rosalind* goes further than merely existing as 'self-begetting.' The sections from Chloe's POV are written in a close third person in the present tense, the reader, then, is led to believe that there is an omniscient writer involved in the narrative and that those sections at least (as they are not from the perspective of the unreliable narrator, Richard) are factual. However, there is a point of 'frame breaking' towards the end of the novel when Richard tells the reader that he imagined those sections. When the conception of the Chloe as a character is withdrawn the reader is forced to realise that there is no trustworthy source of information in this narrative, that like the outside world of 'reality' our understanding is severely limited.

While the reader sees that Chloe suffers in her relationship with Richard, for the most part of the novel she is still viewed as a secondary character. It is only after her death, after it

¹⁶⁴ Kellman.

¹⁶⁵ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 28.

is revealed that Richard had, in fact, written all of the sections which were ostensibly only Chloe's, that we discover that she is in fact the true centre of the narrative. Here is the turn:

By now you must have guessed that Chloe did not write any of this manuscript. Those sections that were from her, this sections in the present tense, were my attempt at imagining what it would have been like for her. I stood outside of myself and looked at the relationship again. And each second of it was agony. I was trying to give her a semblance of voice after I had, for so many years, silenced hers. I needed to try to imagine what it was like. I hated myself as I wrote those chapters. They made me understand.¹⁶⁶

This is the section that re-writes the novel, that gives it the depth necessary to be considered an important work. It is also a section which humanises Richard and makes the reader wonder whether he is now acting selflessly – imagining Chloe's torment – or whether he is being more subtly manipulative in appropriating her story. After these few lines the novel not only speaks to perspective but also ties in the act of writing to the appropriation of narrative. The questions evoked are not easy to answer. Is Richard better or worse for having placed himself in Chloe's position? Is he demonstrating empathy or re-writing history? Is there any truth in the sections written from Chloe's perspective?

It might be considered that the revelation that Rosalind believes that Richard raped her in Florida is the 'twist' in the novel. That is an important section of the novel as it demonstrates to what lengths Richard went to try to control Rosalind. But this section, where Richard admits to trying to recapture Chloe's voice, pulls the novel further off the track of straightforward narratives, further from the promise of the novel's title. The whole is now an

¹⁶⁶ Jones, p. 209.

elegy to Chloe, though whether for good or bad can only be decided by each individual reader.

Therefore, on page 208 of a 217-page novel, the reader must go back and re-evaluate the harrowing section detailing Chloe's miscarriage, already mentioned above. Nowhere in the text is it detailed that Richard found out about the miscarriage. The importance of the section up until this point was the psychological distance between the wife and her husband. Now, in this new light, the reader has to decide whether Richard found out about the miscarriage in some way (maybe Chloe told him about it afterward, maybe he heard from the doctor), and has put himself through the ordeal of trying to imagine precisely what his wife would have felt, or whether the miscarriage might never have actually happened – in which case Richard is shown as even more manipulative than he already is as he is trying to place the blame of his wife's obvious unhappiness, at least partly, on something outside of himself. Having no certain grasp of what is 'true' might detract from the overall narrative, but as with all metafictional techniques it serves a purpose; one of the major concerns of the novel is the subjective nature of truth, it was necessary to represent this in the writing.

In *My Rosalind* I have tried to make it clear that reading is always an act of re-reading, re-evaluating. To come to a conclusion and then never waver from it is the antithesis of art. The reading of *My Rosalind* becomes a process or re-assessing. Or as Light states:

Reading is never simply a linear con-job but a process of interaction, and not just between text and reader, but between reader and reader, text and text. It is a process which helps to query as well as endorse social meaning and one which therefore remains dynamic and open to change.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁷ Alison Light, "'Returning to Manderley": Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review*, 16, 1984, 7–25 (p. 9).

The revelation that Chloe has not actually had any part in the writing of the narrative causes a questioning, a sense of confusion about the true author of a text. It serves the novel in that it causes a re-evaluation, not only of the characters and the relationship of the characters, but of the process of writing and of reading.

Therefore, Richard's self-writing of the novel is a technique in line with contemporary metafiction, 'examining frame procedures in the construction of the real world and of novels.'¹⁶⁸ Through our questioning of Richard's narrative we look consciously at how fictions are created and how narratives are perpetuated in the world outside fiction. In Nabokov's *Pale Fire* we see another example of this through the pedantic analysis of a poem by the character Charles Kinbote, whose writing becomes more and more detached from any semblance of actuality – therefore expressing a disconnect between expression and reality. There is a metafictional contradiction between the narrative as told by the fictional narrator and the trappings of the novel's textual surroundings. Similar techniques are used in *Lolita* and Iris Murdoch's *The Black Prince* (I will speak further on these novels later) in which framing techniques are employed in the form of fictionalised introductions which both bolster and antithetically undercut the perceived 'reality' of the narrative. These techniques go a long way in underlining the confusion which the authors see in the world they inhabit. The uncertainty evoked in the writing reflects an uncertainty resultant from the increasing complexities of the modern world. As Waugh states:

¹⁶⁸ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 28.

Contemporary metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to an even more thoroughgoing sense that reality or history are provisional: no longer a world of eternal verities but a series of constructions, artifices, impermanent structures.¹⁶⁹

In these cases, the reader is being invited into the writing of the narrative by the fictional narrator. This allows for the comprehension that the narrative itself is a fiction. Indications of this are given in all of these novels (which of course ties in with the earlier discussion of unreliable narrators). For example, in *The Black Prince* when the narrator Bradley Pearson changes the tense of his narrative unexpectedly in times of stress. When Pearson's ex-wife returns and he is told she will try to contact him he goes from past tense, through dialogue without any tense indicators, to the present. This lasts for about a page before the past tense is suddenly reinstated.

The telephone rings again. I take it off and lay it down on the table. It bubbles remotely. Priscilla calls out in a shrill voice, 'Bradley!'

'Don't touch that,' I said to Arnold, pointing at the telephone. I went to Priscilla.¹⁷⁰

It is as though Pearson forgets that he is writing a narrative in the past tense. And, as he forgets, the reader, antithetically, sees clearly the act of creation behind the narrative, the choices made that allowed for the appearance of factuality in a subjective story. We have an indication that Pearson is telling the story, and through this detail we understand that Pearson himself is being created by Iris Murdoch. Later Pearson recounts:

¹⁶⁹ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 7.

¹⁷⁰ Iris Murdoch, *The Black Prince* (London: Vintage, 2019), p. 97.

As blackness fell for a moment I saw the Post Office Tower, haloed with blue sky, aslant and looking at the window. (This was impossible, actually, since the next house blocks any possible view of the tower.¹⁷¹

This passage is again an indicator that Pearson is an unreliable narrator, but it also causes the reader to notice Pearson as a construct, to question him as a narrator and therefore the reality both of his narrative and the world outside the novel.

If we apply this understanding to *My Rosalind*, we see that it is Richard and his role as narrator which imparts the largest layer of metafiction to the text. His telling of the story informs the story itself and the reader's understanding of the subjective reality of his narrative. As Waugh states: 'it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed.'¹⁷² Richard's telling of the story changes the reality of what is described. He is weaving a narrative, the truth of which is uncertain. He problematizes the idea that there is such thing as a subjective narrative.

This is reflected in the novel through the idea of consent and the sexual assault previously discussed. When Richard recounts his perspective of the night in Florida where he and Rosalind have sex, the reader is inclined to believe, as he does, that the acts which took place were desired by both people involved. However, as the narrative progresses Richard's perspective is called into question and so is the reader's understanding of what happened. It is signalled that there is a disconnect. Most blatantly in this case as Rosalind is given the opportunity later in the text to openly accuse him of sexual assault.

¹⁷¹ Murdoch, p. 156.

¹⁷² Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 3.

This representation of differing interpretations of a sexual encounter acts as a response and opposition to the long-held belief that consent is a simple concept. As Ashwini Tambe writes: ‘We need, in this moment, a broader lens to understand coercion beyond the liberal understanding of verbal consent.’¹⁷³ Through the novel I have tried to show how ideas of consent can be confused.

As the reader comes to understand that the narrative is not written in the format of realism, that there is no objective truth to the narrative, they question the society of which the novel is a representation. ‘Metafiction thus converts what it sees as the negative values of outworn literary conventions into the basis of a potentially constructive social criticism.’¹⁷⁴

Richard’s narrative, therefore, stands in for the manner in which the male perspective has become so entrenched within our society that it is accepted without question. This leads us to what is perhaps the most relevant quote pertaining to literary theory and its application to *My Rosalind*. Again, from Waugh:

So, in metafiction, a convention is undermined, or laid bare, in order to show its historical provisionality; to show, for example, that the use of an implicitly male omniscient author in popular continuations of realism is tied to a specific ideological world-view which continues insidiously to pass itself off as ‘neutral’ or ‘eternal’ or ‘objective’, and which has its historical roots in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.¹⁷⁵

By highlighting, and constantly bringing attention to, Richard’s bias in the creation of his narrative *My Rosalind* is able to bring to light the danger and ubiquity of such narratives. The

¹⁷³ Tambe, p. 200.

¹⁷⁴ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 11.

¹⁷⁵ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 67.

male perspective has, for centuries gone unexamined. By using metafictional techniques to present a particular obviously unexamined but flawed narrative, *My Rosalind* is able to call attention to the historical assumptions that cloak potentially harmful narratives of self-justification.

Viewed through this lens Chloe's sections become a representation of the buried female voice. In *My Rosalind* even when a woman (and victim) is given a voice, this voice is appropriated by the fictional male narrator so that even the basic assumptions of her suffering are brought into question. After the death of her character, it is revealed that her sections were (within the construct of the narrative) written by Richard and therefore represent a fictional male writer's idea of the female voice. This explains why Chloe may be perceived as being one-dimensional and without outward autonomy, as she never seems to stand up to Richard or fight for her own happiness. What the reader will hopefully realize is that this version of Chloe is the one solely represented by Richard's narrative and that her insular nature is a reflection of how he perceives his wife and not necessarily who she is. Here again is a playfulness surrounding perspective typical of metafictional constructs. When the omniscient narrator is discarded there is left nothing but subjectivity. This is illustrated in Richard's subjective view and recoding of the happenings of the story. Richard is creating his image of Chloe, an image which, whether subconsciously or consciously (if these terms can be applied to a fictional character) serves his purpose. It becomes very clear, then, that there is no impartial voice, no single source of information that the reader can trust. This then becomes a statement on appropriation. Particularly it speaks to who is most likely to have their story appropriated.

Those excluded from or marginalized by the dominant culture – for reasons of class, gender, race, belief, appearance, or whatever – those Others ... may *never* have experienced a sense of full subjectivity in the first place.¹⁷⁶

There exists within the narrative no sense of voice for the female characters. All there is, in this case, is Richard's voice. Chloe then must be deprived of a voice in order to illustrate how easily, in our larger reality, marginalised people are unheard.

The 'Reality' of Literary Text

It is important to note, also, that the ontological status of reality in fiction has been debated within the context of metafictional theory. What is most commonly agreed upon is that the reality present in a fictional text is different than that experienced outside of it. We are putting to the side for the moment the argument that there is only one reality and that it exists outside of fiction. The understanding of metafiction as literary theory demands that there is a reality within fiction as well as without. Fiction creates a reality which is recognisable and understandable to the reader. Umberto Eco writes: 'To make his text communicative, the author has to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by the possible reader.'¹⁷⁷ Therefore, each text must create a recognisable universe, using a recognisable framework. As Waugh puts it: 'All literary fiction has to construct a 'context' at the same time that it constructs a 'text', through entirely *verbal* processes.'¹⁷⁸ Writers of metafiction for the most part acknowledge that they are creating worlds that are as real as that

¹⁷⁶ Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London & New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 2.

¹⁷⁷ Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 7.

¹⁷⁸ Waugh, *Metafiction*, p. 88.

outside of the text, though separate. Metafictional writers signal this by treating their characters as separate entities from themselves. John Fowles in his famously metafictional novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* goes so far as to transfer autonomy of a character to their own creation. Of a minor character introduced at the end of the novel he writes:

I did not want to introduce him; but since he is the sort of man who cannot bear to be left out of the limelight...he has got himself in – or as he would put it, has got himself in *as he really is*.¹⁷⁹

This interjection can be taken two ways: either Fowles is asserting that the world of his novel is completely separate from his own, or he is antithetically showing his hand in its creation, and in doing so exhibiting it as something separate, something 'other'. I would posit that it is the second that is the most rational. By denying his own hand in the creation of his character Fowles brings even more attention to his part in the creation of a separate reality. This leads us to the ethical nature of writing. To what extent are a character's actions their own? Where does this leave the author?

Here, then, would be an appropriate place to discuss Roland Barthes' famous declaration: 'the birth of the reader must come at the cost of the death of the author.'¹⁸⁰ In essence Barthes suggests that whatever 'message' the author has tried to impart has no significance, and that the true meaning of a novel rests in that given to it by its reader. This is an important issue and one particularly apt in the light of the themes previously presented. *My Rosalind* can be categorised as what Umberto Eco describes as an 'open' text, in that it involves the reader (or

¹⁷⁹ John Fowles, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 464.

¹⁸⁰ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 148.

‘addressee’) in its production.¹⁸¹ How important are my intentions as author, then, and to what extent will they inform the reception on the novel? This question is made more complex by the fact that there are two authors to account for in this discussion, Simon Jones, the ‘real’ author, and Richard, the ‘implied’ author. The novel itself then becomes an intertwining of the narratives of these two, creating both subtle complexities as well as certain limitations to interpretation. There is no one given line of argument, but multiple facets of understanding codified and woven into the novel. This idea of the novel aligns with something Barthes says in the same essay: ‘a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning[...]but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.’¹⁸² Simply, there is the meaning that Richard attempts to create and the much wider exploration of meaning of my, overall, novel. Richard’s aim is to have the reader feel empathy with him and understanding of his actions. He is not opening up his story to interpretation, but through the coding of his language asking his reader to follow to his set conclusion. I, meanwhile, am asking the reader to consider Richard’s biases and to come to a more nuanced understanding of the characters presented within the text – the blend and clash of understandings thus benefits my aims (though whether my aims must be discounted completely must be further explored).

Richard, as previously discussed, is a modernist writer intent on mimicking his literary idol, Ernest Hemingway. Barthes’ declaration, therefore, would most likely appal him. As Jeffrey Herlihy states: ‘The long and rich tradition of Hemingway scholarship has tended to weave issues from his personal life into study of his fiction, and continues to do so, thus somewhat challenging Roland Barthes’ assertions about the “death” of the author.’¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Eco, p. 8.

¹⁸² Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, p. 146.

¹⁸³ Jeffrey Herlihy, *In Paris or Paname: Hemingway’s Expatriate Nationalism* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi), p. 2.

This is consistent with Barthes' view of the author as essentially 'modern figure,' someone who benefits from the 'prestige of the individual.'¹⁸⁴ Richard lives his life in emulation of Hemingway, hoping that by acting a certain way, and recording his experiences to align with certain masculine tenets will bring him this same 'prestige' as that of the great author.

Therefore, the idea of reducing himself in favour of his implied reader would be anathema to Richard. His narrative is one which lionises his status as author, it does not efface it.

However, to continue with Barthes' argument: 'to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.'¹⁸⁵ Richard's text (which is the entirety of the novel but also less than it) is indeed lessened by his clear presence within it. It is clear to the reader what the aim of that text is and how misguided it is.

However, there is the secondary, overall author, whose presence gives the text the complex meaning already alluded to. Therefore, Barthes' arguments do align with the novel, though they do point to the fact that ultimately 'a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.'¹⁸⁶ Or that it will be the reader who ultimately dictates meaning in this text. My readers will not approach the novel exactly as I wrote it. 'In the process of communication, a text is frequently interpreted against the background of codes different from those intended by the author.'¹⁸⁷ Therefore they may very well find meaning in the work that differs from that intended.

This leaves certain ethical questions. *My Rosalind* is a novel about the appropriation of female voices by a male narrator and it was also written by a male writer. Therefore, I must ask myself whether I, as author, am appropriating the female voice? Will the reader see that the novel is intended to undermine rather than glorify abusive masculine narratives? If

¹⁸⁴ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', pp. 142–43.

¹⁸⁵ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 147.

¹⁸⁶ Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', p. 148.

¹⁸⁷ Eco, p. 8.

we agree that *My Rosalind* exists as a construct separate to my own world, we must come to the conclusion that in some ways I, as author of the novel, am appropriating a female voice. I have exploited female suffering and appropriated feminist theory for the sake of the writing of a novel which will further my academic status. However, by using metafictional techniques to show the creation of the text I hope to have done enough to highlight the dangers inherent in its creation, therefore transitioning the text from an artefact of victimhood to a discussion on the insidious manipulation inherent in masculine narratives.

Chapter 4 – Consent and Perspective Within a Contemporary Context

My Rosalind is not a conventional ‘rape novel’ in that the instance of sexual assault acts as an extension of Richard’s perspective and attempts at appropriation and is not the defining aspect of the novel (the aftermath is not dealt with in detail neither are the consequences to the victim – the novel focuses instead on the perpetrator and his other victim, Chloe).¹⁸⁸

However, the novel is undeniably a product of the post-MeToo era and because it depicts a non-consensual sexual occurrence any discussion of the novel must include a discussion of consent, sexual assault, and the representation of both in contemporary culture.¹⁸⁹

One of the major difficulties with the writing of *My Rosalind*, as already alluded to, was how to enter into the current feminist conversation, particularly in relation to sexual assault and consent, as a cisgender male. Could I morally add another male perspective to a cultural discussion already oversaturated with the male voice? Would it not be better to stay silent in the hopes of allowing more female authors the space to add their voices to the growing clamour, thus hopefully making a too-often silenced perspective more visible? As Caroline Criado Perez notes of our historically patriarchal society:

¹⁸⁸ Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett, ‘Introduction: Literary Studies as Literary Activism’, in *#MeToo and Literary Studies: Reading, Writing, and Teaching about Sexual Violence and Rape Culture*, ed. by Mary K. Holland and Heather Hewett (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), pp. 1–28 (p. 4).

¹⁸⁹ In this chapter I have chosen to use the term ‘sexual assault’, which covers a wide range of criminal offences and can be used as a blanket term to encompass a multitude of intimate, difficult to define experiences. I have chosen to not use the term ‘rape’ which has specific legal connotation in some countries and does not exist at all as a legal definition in the country in which I am writing this. I have included this reference because of the fluidity of language surrounding this issue.

The result of this deeply male-dominated culture is that the male experience, the male perspective, has come to be seen as universal, while the female perspective – that is half the global population, after all – is seen as, well, niche.¹⁹⁰

Having taken these arguments into account, I decided to continue writing the novel as a male writer and from the perspective of a male narrator for two reasons. The first is that to in order to combat sexual abuse the first step is to make it visible. The MeToo movement was especially powerful because it showed many (mostly men) how prevalent sexual abuse actually is. I decided that anything added to the conversation, as long as it was written for the right reasons, would help address and not cloud the issue. The second, perhaps more important, reason I wrote this novel was to highlight the narratives that male abusers tell themselves and the world, so that these narratives can be seen for what they are – false justifications – and so that they can be more easily opposed and dismissed in the future. Scholar and essayist Mary Beard said it best when she wrote:

Power means many things in the world of MeToo. It certainly means empowering women to tell their stories fearlessly. But it also signifies our power to challenge, and to change, the stories that have offered these men their alibis – which many of them, let's face it, probably believe. Our aim is surely not just to bring the guilty to punishment, but – more important for the future – to ensure that such self-serving stories no longer seem plausible, even to those who tell them, to themselves.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Criado Perez, p. 12.

¹⁹¹ Mary Beard, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (London: Profile Books, 2018), pp. 108–9.

Richard's novel is a long act of self-justification, by the end of which the reader should, hopefully, have learnt how he rationalises his actions to himself and to his implied readers. One of the aims of the novel, therefore, is to allow readers to see through Richard's real-life counterparts: the day-to-day reflections of Weinstein, Epstein, and Trump; self-deluding and manipulative abusers who will use their voice to drown out those of their victims.

My Rosalind must be shown to add to the literary landscape and conversation on sexual assault, in the way which other novels (most often written by female novelist) do. For example, Kate Walbert in the novel *His Favourites* illustrates how abusers take advantage of past and present circumstances to exert coercive control of their victims.¹⁹² In the novel, a teacher at a prestigious boarding school, tellingly referred to only as 'Master,' preys upon several of the children in his care without, seemingly, facing any sort of repercussion. He uses his position of power as teacher, as well as his knowledge of the narrator's (a fifteen-year-old girl) past trauma in order to coerce her into sexual acts she is not comfortable with. When she tries to report his abuse the narrator is told: 'You will ruin a man's career'¹⁹³ The Master's career is shown to be more important than her sexual assault and by extension his life is shown to hold more value in the eyes of society than hers. A common theme in MeToo novels, therefore, is that women will not be believed, will have their voices spoken over. What literature has the opportunity of doing, and what *His Favourites* does, is force the reader to listen to a voice, a story. It underlines the ubiquity of sexual assault.

What differentiates this novel most starkly from *My Rosalind* is that it is written from the perspective of the victim, so the audience is more prepared to believe her testimony. The narrator does question why she uses the first person and not the, even more, 'reliable' 3rd

¹⁹² Kate Walbert, *His Favorites* (New York: Scribner, 2019).

¹⁹³ Walbert, p. 110.

person omniscient but realises the importance of having her voice heard.¹⁹⁴ By contrast, *My Rosalind* is solely from the perspective of the aggressor. They, therefore, achieve different emphasises; *His Favourites* examines the suffering of the victim whilst *My Rosalind* explores the justifications of the abuser, though both go some way to study the issues of the other. For example the narrator of *His Favourites* briefly imagines her aggressor's perspective: 'He never forced himself on anyone, he says, and if there was involuntary consent it was consent nonetheless, in a manner of speaking.'¹⁹⁵ Though she then has the opportunity of countering his imagined argument with the incredibly strong declaration: 'No, I say. In no moral universe would this not be a crime, I say.'¹⁹⁶

His Favourites becomes about corroboration when the reader realises that the novel is being written to be used in some legal action against the Master. It becomes about the weight of many women's perspectives/stories and the change that that may allow. The novel becomes a call to arms, the final line being: 'O, the weight of them. The weight of us.'¹⁹⁷ In writing *My Rosalind* I am trying to add what weight I can from my own perspective, as best as I can, reflecting on the ubiquity of sexual assault in contemporary culture.

Consent

The MeToo movement, which began in 2006 in Selma, Alabama, became an international cultural phenomenon in 2017 when the hashtag was used to support the women accusing Harvey Weinstein of sexual crimes and subsequently for a large portion of the population to share their own experiences of sexual assault.¹⁹⁸ The movement, though it does have

¹⁹⁴ Walbert, p. 144.

¹⁹⁵ Walbert, p. 146.

¹⁹⁶ Walbert, p. 146.

¹⁹⁷ Walbert, p. 146.

¹⁹⁸ Holland and Hewett, p. 1.

limitations (its focus has been largely on the experiences of white privileged women and has ignored other disenfranchised groups), has done much to highlight the ubiquity of sexual assault in modern society.¹⁹⁹ It has also affected popular culture which has, to a certain extent, increased its portrayal of ‘aspects of misogyny and sexual abuse that had long been largely confined to activist spaces, academic journals, and select college classrooms.’²⁰⁰ A cultural space had been made for stories of sexual assault to be told. Movies such as *Promising Young Woman* or deeply affecting TV shows such as *I May Destroy You* have begun showing, not only the aftermath and violence of sexual assault but also its intricacies and facets, making what used to be a too easily dismissed crime highly visible.²⁰¹²⁰² A conversation has begun in contemporary culture which revolves around the sexual abuse and, more specifically, the grey areas of consent.

Importantly in regard to *My Rosalind*, the discussion has become even more widespread in literature, both in novel form and short fiction. One of the best contemporary examples is Kristen Roupenian’s *New Yorker* short story, ‘Cat Person,’ not because of any particularly explosive content in terms of subject or style, but because of the widespread reaction it caused.²⁰³ The story deals with the short-lived relationship between twenty-year-old Margot and the much older Robert and contains a realistic depiction of an ethically problematic sexual encounter between the two and the subsequent aftermath. In doing so ‘Cat Person,’ seemed to reflect a common if underdiscussed experience; it quickly went viral and was shared widely on social media as an important reflection of modern dating.²⁰⁴ The story itself exists in the notion that current societal expectations can create a situation in which a

¹⁹⁹ Tambe, p. 199.

²⁰⁰ Holland and Hewett, p. 2.

²⁰¹ Emerald Fennell, *Promising Young Woman* (Universal Pictures, 2020).

²⁰² Michaela Coel and Sam Miller, *I May Destroy You* (BBC Studios, 2020).

²⁰³ Kristen Roupenian, “‘Cat Person’ | The New Yorker”
<<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person>>.

²⁰⁴ Kate Manne, *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), p. 56.

woman feels impelled to continue a sexual encounter she does not enjoy – while it still remains traditionally consensual.

The importance of the story rests in the fact that the sexual encounter is monumentally bad – reflecting a deep disconnect between Margot and Robert. There is no use of force or coercion depicted in the encounter, but it remains deeply troubling, ‘due to subtler factors.’²⁰⁵ Margot thinks that ‘she really might not be able to go through with it at all.’²⁰⁶ However, she feels an internal pressure to stop, feeling that ‘the thought of what it would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming,’ and that ‘insisting that they stop now, after everything she’d done to push this forward, would make her seem spoiled and capricious.’²⁰⁷ Of course, Margot’s desire to ‘push forward’ had been partly based on a false perception of Robert, fed by Robert himself. He presents himself, for example, as being more worldly and confident than he actually is. He also tells Margot that he has two cats, something which the pair bond over, though it is strongly implied later that these cats are fictitious and are another ploy created by Robert to make himself seem more appealing, caring, and relatable. However, Robert does not apply untoward pressure, but does suffer a lack of awareness which ‘derives from patriarchal social scripts and the prevalent sense of male sexual entitlement.’²⁰⁸ Margot, then, feels compelled to continue an unwanted sexual act, while Robert feels it is owed to him. Strangely enough, both participants later feel victimised.

This antithetical notion appears to stem from the narratives and perceived expectations of both participants. Margot, the more self-aware of the two parties, states after the sexual encounter: ‘It was Robert she missed, not the real Robert but the Robert she’d

²⁰⁵ Manne, p. 56.

²⁰⁶ Roupelian.

²⁰⁷ Roupelian.

²⁰⁸ Manne, p. 58.

imagined on the other end of all those text messages during break.²⁰⁹ She allowed the relationship to develop past the point she felt comfortable with because she believed that Robert was something more than a creep (this may have been in part because of her naïveté and youth, which Robert either knowingly or unwittingly preys upon). This then allows for a situation in which Robert can be a potentially uncomprehending aggressor. As Margot reflects: ‘Perhaps she was being unfair to Robert, who really had done nothing wrong, except like her, and be bad in bed.’²¹⁰

However, Robert did not check in on Margot during the sexual act and either did not notice or did not care that she was not happy. This in turn seems to stem from his own internal narrative, a narrative which may be considered far more dangerous as it is backed by patriarchal expectations. Amia Srinivasan writes, a little facetiously:

The implication seems to be that, until very recently, men had been subject to a totalising patriarchal ideology, one that made it impossible for many of them to tell the difference between flirtation and harassment, coquettishness and refusal, sex and rape.²¹¹

There is some truth in the statement: Robert does expect sex and as a result is not able to see Margot’s discomfort. Margot notes that his feelings towards her come ‘out of nowhere.’²¹² This is because they are, most likely, an inorganic creation, a facsimile of real emotions which exist outside of the relationship. This is shown in the simplistic fantasy Robert creates for Margot where he imagines her going back to a high-school boyfriend in her university

²⁰⁹ Roupenian.

²¹⁰ Roupenian.

²¹¹ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p. 20.

²¹² Roupenian.

break (the reality is far more complicated). In fact, ‘an entire secret drama had played out in his head.’²¹³ This situation underlines the thirty-four-year old’s sense of ownership over the twenty-year-old. Speaking of her imagined affair he says: ‘I should have trusted you’ (at that point the relationship was mostly confined to texting and one peck on the forehead).²¹⁴ The narrative Robert creates around the relationship inevitably affects the sex. The reader is told that he had ‘thrown her around as if they were in a porno,’ and that, directly after, ‘out of nowhere, he started talking about his feelings for her.’²¹⁵ His view of the sex is at a disconnect with her own.

This then is extremely relevant to Richard’s narrative in *My Rosalind*. Richard’s same sense of entitlement and his interior narrative (which he is weaving in the writing of his novel) can be used to explain how he was able to construe Rosalind’s ‘no’ to be a feeble pretence, and not Rosalind refusing consent. “He’s a nice guy, sort of,” Margot said, and she wondered how true that was.’²¹⁶ This is something which it would be very easy to imagine Rosalind thinking of Richard before the sexual assault. Richard, as previously discussed, does feel that if he frames his obsession in a certain, romantic manner, and if he acts a certain way, he is owed sex and ownership over Rosalind. The fact that this is evidently not the case confuses him and leaves him feeling victimised, exactly as Robert feels in ‘Cat Person.’ Both are men who are ‘aggrieved, crestfallen, and disappointed, either by life in general or by women’s reactions to them in particular.’²¹⁷ This feeling of victimisation is the link not only between these characters but to the famous men now facing accusations of sexual assault.

Richard’s views of the evening are clearly coded in the novel as being completely different from Rosalind’s. The reader is forced to endure his musing about *War and Peace*

²¹³ Roupenian.

²¹⁴ Roupenian.

²¹⁵ Roupenian.

²¹⁶ Roupenian.

²¹⁷ Manne, p. 69.

and the romance of slipping a note to Rosalind, while she is discussing the soul-crushing nature of her work in Florida. When Richard does ask her about the schizophrenic young man she is defending Rosalind replies: 'Oh. Him. They're going to execute him. I don't want to talk about it.'²¹⁸ He notes that: 'her tone was dull, defeatist.'²¹⁹ However, as soon as it is told to him, Richard dismisses this information, though the astute reader can imagine that that is why Rosalind is drinking so heavily, and why she indulges in self-destructive behaviours; she is leaving her job, she is completely alone in a foreign country (except for her fish), and she is drinking to escape. Richard takes no notice of this because it does not fit in with his story and therefore do not matter to him.

Whatever distance Richard feels between himself and Rosalind emanates, for him, from a coy refusal. It is just another romantic hurdle to be easily overcome. A narrative test as depicted in countless romantic comedies. As he writes, when addressing Rosalind's resistance to the sexual act:

My role was to reframe our actions so that it became clear that there was no other path than forward to an end that had been inevitable from the first night that I saw her standing at my door in a Bruce Springsteen t-shirt.²²⁰

This begs the question: can Richard be blamed for believing that this is the way he is supposed to act? After all it is clear that he is, to a certain extent, a victim of the psychosocial structures that: 'make [men] feel that it's their job to overcome a woman's resistance.'²²¹ This may be why he reads so much into certain aspects of the evening that feed the accepted

²¹⁸ Jones, *My Rosalind*, p. 51.

²¹⁹ Jones, *My Rosalind*, p. 51.

²²⁰ Jones, *My Rosalind*, p. 153.

²²¹ Srinivasan, p. 29.

narrative he holds, such as ‘the faint, breath-taking, world-changing nod of her head’²²² and completely dismisses other, more uncomfortable signs that Rosalind is not happy to be in this situation. At this point in the novel, before Rosalind has told Richard that he sexually assaulted her, the reader might still believe that this was a sexual occurrence. However, as in ‘Cat Person,’ the sex is objectively bad. Richard recounts:

Then I pushed her so that she fell onto her back. I stood over her. Her body lay extended. Her arms were raised above her head. I wish now I had taken the time to look at her. I would have memorised the lines of her, the shadows and the colour. Instead I fell on her. Our mouths met in a deep kiss. I moved myself down to her breasts, to her stomach, to her waist. She lay with her eyes looking up to the ceiling.²²³

All of the impetus arises from Richard’s actions while Rosalind does nothing but submit to them. This becomes an indicator that she, like Margot, is merely allowing the sex act to continue because of implied pressures, the pressure to not seem rude, to finish what she may have – inadvertently – started, and, of course, coercion and the implication of violence.

Similarly, in J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*, David Lurie describes the sex he has with his student, Melanie: ‘She does not resist. All she does is avert herself: avert her lips, avert her eyes[...]. Not rape, not quite that, but undesired nonetheless, undesired to the core.’²²⁴ These are morally disgusting sexual acts that do not appear immediately to be non-consensual.

Richard does not check in with Rosalind, as Robert does not with Margot, and David does not with Melanie. All are either too narcissistic to notice their partner’s unwillingness, or they

²²² Jones, *My Rosalind*, p. 153.

²²³ Jones, *My Rosalind*, pp. 153–54.

²²⁴ J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: The Folio Society, 2011), p. 24.

simply do not care. Of course, the reader later learns, when Rosalind is able to confront Richard that this instance was sexual assault, however until that point it is very easy to understand why Richard was not able to see it as such.

What then would have happened if Rosalind had been more forceful in her protestations? If she had made it undeniably clear (even to Richard) that she was being sexually assaulted? The same could be asked of Margot and Robert. 'Cat Person' ends, after a series of messages that started off politely and became more and more aggressive, with the single word 'Whore.'²²⁵ In this word Robert finally reveals himself for what he really is: an entitled and dangerous man. Richard also recognised this male impulse to insult and attempt to diminish women who don't do what they want. In recounting Rosalind's childhood, he reports a scene in a nightclub where Rosalind rejects a man. The man, who up until this point had been seemingly polite, suddenly calls her 'bitch.'²²⁶ Both Richard and Rosalind were aware of how men could react to being rejected.

It is not beyond the realm of imagination to believe that Richard, stripped of the narrative which says to him that he is entitled to sex with Rosalind, would become violent. Rosalind may have known this; she had already been trapped by him in her shower.

Afterward she distances herself from Richard. Where and who would she report to and what could she say to undo what had already been done to her?²²⁷ The reader is told later that she does not tell her husband, Mark, one of Richard's only friends, what has happened. This makes it all the more terrifying when Richard follows her to Australia and eventually traps her at her own housewarming party because he believes he is entitled to more from her.

²²⁵ Roupenian.

²²⁶ Jones, *My Rosalind*, p. 82.

²²⁷ Criado Perez, p. 57.

In July 2021 *Slate* published an essay by Alexis Nowicki in which she alleges that details from her life were used by Roupenian in the writing of the short story.²²⁸ This essay was a mature and thoughtful response to ‘Cat Person’ and rather than be accusatory of Roupenian, Nowicki spoke to the difficulties faced by all involved and largely defended the real-life counterpart to Roupenian’s Robert, a man Nowicki calls ‘Charles.’²²⁹ While the essay seems to confirm that the details that Roupenian used were the ones least important to the issues of the story (Nowicki tells us that she had a healthy relationship with Charles and that he was not abusive), it still underlines the ethical dilemma of writers memorialising the lives of others in their work. For example, Nowicki writes: ‘We are all unreliable narrators. Sometimes, to my own disappointment, I find myself inclined to trust Roupenian over myself.’²³⁰ She began wondering whether the Charles she knew was a creep, and whether she was too naïve to notice. This goes to show the distorting power of narratives and how much of a violation it really is, in *My Rosalind*, for Richard to re-tell Rosalind’s story for his own benefit. The difference being that he, unlike Roupenian, wrote with the objective of appropriating and controlling Rosalind. He blurs the line between what is fiction and what is real to further his own ends.

Nowicki goes on to state that: ‘what’s difficult about having your relationship rewritten and memorialized [...] is the sensation that millions of people now know that relationship as described by a stranger.’²³¹ Continuing: ‘meanwhile I’m alone with my memories of what really happened.’²³² Which begs the question, what would Rosalind have felt to have read Richard’s book? Would she have recognised herself? It was important that

²²⁸ Alexis Nowicki, ‘“Cat Person” and Me’ <<https://slate.com/human-interest/2021/07/cat-person-kristen-roupenian-viral-story-about-me.html>> [accessed 24 December 2021].

²²⁹ Importantly, we learn that Charles died suddenly, making the essay in-part a eulogy to a real man whose life was intertwined with the fictional Robert’s.

²³⁰ Nowicki.

²³¹ Nowicki.

²³² Nowicki.

Richard be a writer to show just how destructive his entitlement and his obsession really is. He sexually assaulted Rosalind, and attempted to take control of her body, but he also tried to gain ownership of her life and sense of self.

So, while in the end there was not much to the Nowicki – Roupenian controversy (beyond the obvious conclusion that Roupenian should have done more to change the specific details which tied Nowicki to the fictional Margot), it would be easy to imagine a quite different situation and response. One in which Nowicki railed against Roupenian taking her life and transmuting it into something other, in the same way which Richard is attempting to do with Rosalind's.

The 'Nice' Guy

One of the aspects of Richard that makes him truly a contemporary character is the very fact that he is unremarkable; that on the surface layer he is a nice, intelligent man, who is perhaps a little too infatuated with seeing himself as a masculine writer. After all the one of the defining traits of contemporary cultural depictions of sexual assault (in 'Cat Person,' *Promising Young Woman*, *I May Destroy You*, and many more) is that it is often a seemingly 'nice' man who can be the most sexually manipulative and subtly dangerous. The MeToo movement has allowed women to reevaluate encounters with all men, not just the remarkable few. It is not always the powerful movie producers or the clear-cut monsters who commit sexual assault but also the ordinary men who believe that sex is owed to them. As Kate Manne notes:

It's not just hyperprivileged men who can wield this kind of power, either[...]a woman may experience intense guilt and shame for saying no to the men who feel entitled not just to sex but to her eager consent and participation.²³³

This problematic behaviour has already been described in 'Cat Person,' but is true of any depiction of the needy, wheedling man. It is this more subtle form of aggression which also differentiates *My Rosalind* from previous novels with unreliable narrators written by men. *The Collector* by John Fowles, for example, is on the surface very similar to *My Rosalind*. Both feature obsessive unreliable male narrators who fixate on particular women. In both the narrator attempts to capture them in some way (in *The Collector* this is a physical kidnapping whereas in *My Rosalind* it is more figurative appropriation). The difference between the novels, however, is that the narrator of the former is an immediately apparent criminal, a kidnapper and eventual murderer, while that of the later is far more ordinary and insidious.²³⁴ The same can be said of *Lolita*, *American Psycho*, and *A Clockwork Orange* and that of multiple other novels written with unreliable and obviously criminal male narrators (including paedophiles, murderers, and sociopaths).²³⁵²³⁶²³⁷ In each of these examples there is violence and abuse against women, but all depict the inner workings of men who would be easily recognised by society as criminals. These novels speak to the lies that criminal outcasts tell themselves and others and as such are important works that can be built on. In the post-MeToo world, where the issues surrounding consent are better known, it was important to create a more understated form of unreliable narrator to address the grey issues of consent and sexual assault already mentioned.

²³³ Manne, pp. 67–68.

²³⁴ John Fowles, *The Collector* (London: Vintage Books).

²³⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Penguin Books, 1995).

²³⁶ Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 2012).

²³⁷ Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

The Collector (first published in 1963, only eight years after *Lolita* and long before the MeToo movement), does present the perspective of the female victim in the second section of the novel (in epistolary form). In doing so, Fowles, undermines the male narrator's sense of entitlement and dissects the banality of his wretched motivations. The sophisticated reader would see that it does nothing to glorify male obsession posing as romantic longing, but undercuts the rationalisations presented by the narrator. It shows the disconnect between what Frederick believes (that Miranda will eventually come to love him) and the truth (that she never could). It is a novel that deals with the sense of male entitlement inherent within patriarchal society. In this way *My Rosalind* is an addition to the argument, existing within a literary framework and building onto it.

More precisely, we must acknowledge the specifics concerning sexual assault are common to these novels. In both *My Rosalind* and *The Collector*, for example, there is some sense of ownership felt by the over the object of obsession. Richard feels the need to own and control Rosalind, so does Frederick need to capture Miranda. It is this sense of ownership that allows these narrators to act in transgressive and abusive ways without seeming caring as to the effects of their pursuit. This absurd sense of ownership is well-expressed in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, in which Maurice Bendrix hires a private detective to follow his ex-lover. However, where Bendrix (who is far more aware of the destructive nature of his actions) hires a private detective to follow the object of his passion, Richard sexually assaults Rosalind and fixes her down in his writing, sharing his biased view of her past and present in an attempt to hold her captive. These novels portray aspects of obsessive love (though *My Rosalind* initially appears to present a more traditionally romantic version than *The Collector*).

The difficulty is that to truly represent the more subtle forms of abuse underlined by the MeToo movement it was necessary to write Richard as uncomprehending of the extent of

his crimes and also unapologetic. And to further reflect perceived reality, it was important that he suffer no real ramifications for his actions. As Srinivasan notes: ‘What is striking about the high-profile men exposed by #MeToo is just how uninterested they are, on the whole, in being better men.’²³⁸ He does not actually place much weight on Rosalind’s accusations because to him they are ultimately unimportant. It is his quest to be for his own gratification as a man and as a writer which takes priority.

My Rosalind, therefore, while it acknowledges and builds on earlier novels written by men and dealing with assaults on women, is more aligned with the contemporary pieces of literature written by women, like ‘Cat Person,’ or *His Favourites*, while retaining the male perspective. It seeks not to glorify but to undermine the male narrative. My novel answers the question of what Robert might specifically have been thinking during his relationship with Margot in ‘Cat Person.’ Richard’s perspective gives a more in-depth view of the male rationalisation and sense of entitlement. A perspective and narrative which must be understood and then dismantled. A man might commit sexual assault and still not recognise himself as an abuser. Until Rosalind confronts him with the truth Richard does not believe that there has been anything morally objectionable to his actions. He acted in a way which was, to his mind, romantic and literary. And until the MeToo movement shone a spotlight on variations of the same abuse (and on the overwhelmingly grey areas of consent), his actions would probably have been deemed normal and acceptable by the majority of readers (that is until Rosalind makes it clear that they were not). It is, therefore, this specific narrative which constitutes my contribution to the current global conversation on sexual assault.

I will therefore return to Mary Beard who writes of her rapist: ‘I have also started to wonder what kind of stories he told himself [...] Did he convert the whole seedy encounter, like I

²³⁸ Srinivasan, p. 30.

occasionally had, into a ‘glamorous’ zipless fuck?’²³⁹ She then goes on to ask rhetorically: ‘Would he recognise *my* story, in which he appears as a rapist?’²⁴⁰ In *My Rosalind* I posit that he would not. Richard is confused and hurt – he even feels victimised – when Rosalind confronts him with his abuse. The novel attempts to answer another question: how do these men explain to themselves, what they have done? My answer is that they create a narrative, of which they are at the centre, in which their actions make them more masculine and more important, and in which the experiences of their victims mean little or nothing at all. It is this narrative, which I have attempted to deconstruct, which shield abusers from the knowledge of what they have done. So, we may understand Richard, we may even at times feel some pity for him, but we should never be able to forgive him, and allow his narrative to continue to stand as a shield, not only for himself but for those who identify with him.

²³⁹ Beard, p. 107.

²⁴⁰ Beard, p. 107.

Chapter 5 – The Ethics of My Rosalind: The Novel as a Response to Vladimir Nabokov’s

Lolita

‘A painful birth, a difficult baby.’²⁴¹

Lolita and the Reader

My Rosalind would certainly not be the novel it is now had I not read Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* prior to writing. Humbert Humbert, the supremely unreliable narrator and his narrative allowed me to develop a character that could be persuasive and still morally bankrupt; he demonstrates that the justifications a narrator presents might highlight the maliciousness of his actions rather than hide it.

Lolita tells the story of a bookish and cultured European paedophile, his encountering of the twelve-year-old Dolores Haze, the death of her mother, and his subsequent and repeated sexual assault of the child. Based on this description, it would be understandable to think of this novel as a clichéd exploitation of true-life abuse barely masking the author’s morbid fascination. However, Nabokov formed the prose in such a way as to make this horrifying subject matter, if not acceptable, at least fascinating. This feat is in large part successful because of Nabokov’s use of perspective; the most appealing aspect of this novel being the character of Humbert Humbert whose wit and writing ability is ultimately seductive not only to the characters in the novel but to the reader. Humbert is able to present his own narrative in such a way that his acts seem, if not justified, then at least understandable.

²⁴¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2012), p. 43.

Richard, as previously discussed, is also unreliable and uses a carefully crafted narrative to defend his actions to his implied audience. His narrative is designed to shield from his audience the dangers of his obsession with Rosalind and the emotional manipulation of his wife through the use of romantic tropes and literary language. Richard attempts to manipulate his readers in a less spectacular manner than Humbert Humbert but he is still attempting to minimise his perceived faults. His existence is a response to Humbert Humbert and another example of the insidious prevarication that can be hiding behind a literary narrative. Richard, being a far more subtle predator, both in his actions and his desires, is a monster for the post #MeToo era; he is a representation of a more insidious form of aggression and manipulation the prevalence of which is becoming more apparent.

These novels speak to morality in literature; we need to ask whether writing about a subject, in essence profiting from it, is in an act of appropriation and whether writing about unethical behaviour is ethically justified. More specifically whether presenting rationalisations for certain behaviours lessens their perceived harm. *Lolita*, as already noted, can be viewed as an example of the exploitation of abuse as well as, paradoxically, being an indictment of the mindset of abusers. In *Lolita* Nabokov is using very real suffering – the sexual abuse of children – to create art. Within this context I must ask myself whether in giving Richard a platform to justify his behaviour I am in a way condoning it. Am I benefiting from patterns of abuse and appropriation that are currently being highlighted in our society and even (through Richard) mitigating their existence?

To better understand this issue, it is necessary to discuss how Nabokov coded his novel to show Humbert for what he was, a very clever and well-spoken predator. Notably we must come to an understanding of how certain readers could fall for his posturing while others see through the veneer of his narrative. As Booth writes:

His most skilful and mature readers, it is true will have repudiated Humbert's blandishments from the beginning; the clues are numerous, the style is a dead giveaway throughout – *if* one happens to see it as such. One of the major delights of this delightful, profound book is that of watching Humbert *almost* make a case for himself. But Nabokov has insured that many, perhaps most, of his readers will be unsuccessful, in that they will identify Humbert with the author more than Nabokov intends.²⁴²

Here Booth pinpoints the dilemma of this novel – that it presents the convincing justifications of a predator. He has divided the readership of *Lolita* into two categories: those that discern the intricacies of the unreliable narrator and its working in the novel, and those that fall for Humbert's literary grandiosity and therefore believe Nabokov himself to have penned a defence of paedophilia. The fact that these two readings may exist side-by-side show the powerful effect of the unreliable narrator and how it may be used to undermine an argument that it antithetically seems to bolster. How the character is viewed, therefore, is largely up to the discernment of the reader. This understanding then begs the question: is Nabokov morally responsible for both interpretations? Would I, as author of *My Rosalind*, be responsible for a reading that applauded Richard? As previously discussed in relation to *Rebecca*, there may be certain readers of *My Rosalind* who side with Richard and don't see the harm that he causes throughout the novel.

In the case of *Lolita* many readers have been unable to see past Humbert's adept use of language and wit. Sarah Weinman, in her book *The Real Lolita*, explains how certain readers fall in love with Humbert's language and how damaging this can be. She points to a real case of a kidnapped child as the potential basis of a part of Nabokov's narrative and

²⁴² Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 391.

makes the argument that incidents like it are forgotten, as they are overshadowed by narratives that seemingly excuse the abuse. Of Humbert's narrative she writes:

The whole book relies upon the mounting tension between what Humbert Humbert wants the reader to know and what the reader can discern. It is all too easy to be seduced by his sophisticated narration, his panoramic descriptions of America, circa 1947, and his observations of the girl he nicknames Lolita.²⁴³

It is true that *Lolita's* reader is moved to bond with Humbert Humbert because of his adept use of language and ready wit – apparent from the very first page and the very first sentence of his narrative (coming after the fictitious forward by John Ray, Jr.). Even those who have not read the novel are familiar with the first line: 'Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.'²⁴⁴ The beautiful use of alliteration and onomatopoeia – a sophisticated use of language is key to Nabokov's writing style – exists to illuminate Humbert's perverse obsession while also, antithetically, encouraging the reader to form a connection with him. Nabokov, in his tongue-in-cheek manner points directly to this paradox when he writes the famous darkly comic line: 'you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style'.²⁴⁵ The phrase is wittily disingenuous; murderers are certainly not known for being extravagant writers. The comedy inherent in this declaration makes the audience connect with Humbert, or at least appreciate his intellect. However, an ethical reading demands that the reader be conscious of the difference between what it is Humbert is trying to achieve in his writing and Nabokov's larger narrative. Humbert's use of language, stripped of Nabokov's

²⁴³ Sarah Weinman, *The Real Lolita* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2018), p. 6.

²⁴⁴ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 9.

²⁴⁵ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 7.

authorial intent, ‘plays with the ideas that the murder is less important than the style or that the style is compensation for the murder.’²⁴⁶ Therefore the line above can either be interpreted by readers as a way to bond with Humbert or a clue that he is manipulating his implied audience.

It is this aspect of being drawn to a narrator with his own agenda, who is clearly despicable and self-serving, which makes the narrative – as achieved through the use of an unreliable narrator – so distinctive. It is also the form of writing which can so easily, as Weinman puts it, make ‘moral mincemeat out of the novel’s wider readership.’²⁴⁷ If the wider readership were unable to differentiate the narrative created by Humbert Humbert which ‘displays a remarkable blend of exposition, self-analysis, self-castigation, and self-justification,’²⁴⁸ from that of Nabokov, they could easily come to view the novel as glorifying the narrator’s perversions. This (as previously noted) is the risk of *My Rosalind*; some readers might align me with Richard, thinking that his views are my own. This often occurred with Nabokov’s novel, and there have always been those that viewed the author with suspicion. Even ‘Nabokov’s new publisher had mistaken the author for his creation, thinking Nabokov drew upon some perverse experience.’²⁴⁹ Nabokov has gifted Humbert his wit and the literary genius to be used to excuse his behaviour, knowing how his audience would perceive him if he recounted the facts in a more straightforward matter. As Julian Connolly writes of Humbert: ‘the narrator shapes his monologue in anticipation of the audience’s response, and he moves restlessly between postures of supplication and defiance, self-accusation and self-defence.’²⁵⁰ Humbert is doing his best, throughout the novel, to defend his indefensible actions, and it does take a thorough reading to mitigate how effective his manipulation is on the reader. This being

²⁴⁶ James Phelan, ‘Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of “Lolita”’, *Narrative*, 15.2 (2007), 222–38 (p. 233).

²⁴⁷ Weinman, p. 53.

²⁴⁸ Julian W. Connolly, ‘The Precursors of Lolita’, in *A Reader’s Guide to Nabokov’s ‘Lolita’* (Academic Studies Press, 2009), pp. 9–28 (p. 18).

²⁴⁹ Weinman, p. 210.

²⁵⁰ Connolly, ‘The Precursors of Lolita’, p. 18.

said, there is a difference between Humbert's narrative and Nabokov's, one which becomes more and more apparent through a close reading of the text. Or, as James Phelan states:

Humbert is very much aware of his agency and purpose as a writer, yet he has a limited ability to achieve the effects and purposes he seeks, since those purposes are ultimately quite different from Nabokov's.²⁵¹

As with Richard, Humbert Humbert has mitigated the extent to which his implied audience can see how much suffering he has perpetrated. The reader (as represented by critics) is often blinded. However, to those readers that can look past his justifications, Humbert cannot be excused for his actions. Humbert Humbert, without his intellect and wit, becomes the run of the mill, ordinary, and pathetic paedophile. As Millett argues:

Lolita is as much a matter of kidnap, rape, and coercion as the terrible passion of a lost enamoured soul who has followed his culture's blandishment of a child-wife to its literal conclusion.²⁵²

The importance of Humbert's narrative strategies is reflected and distorted in Anne Enright's short story 'Felix,' in which she uses Humbert's phrasing and mocking, calculated tone to create a storyline that mimics Humbert's while concomitantly showing the cracks in his posturing. The similarities between the story and the novel are apparent from the first sentence of the story: 'Felix, my secret, my angel boy, my dark felicity. Felix the sibilant hiss of the final x a teasing breath on the tip of the tongue.'²⁵³

²⁵¹ Phelan, p. 233.

²⁵² Millett, p. 336.

²⁵³ Anne Enright, 'Felix', in *First Fictions: Introduction 10* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 124–35 (p. 124).

Here we see the reflection of the famous opening line quoted above, though with the added switch that it is now a middle-aged woman who has abused a young boy. Through this gender swap, and by following the same structure as the novel, Enright demonstrates firstly how female characters are not accorded even the same justifications as their male counterparts, and, on the back of this, how visible the trauma inherent in *Lolita* becomes when Humbert's rationalisations no longer hold.

After attempting to find the root of her obsession in childhood (in the same manner as Humbert) the unnamed narrator of this story dismisses the importance of her literary styling (a thing Humbert never does) revealing how little it does to mask or account for her behaviour. Speaking to her predilections she writes: 'Old women are never perverts... Their lust is a form of maimed vanity, if it exists at all. It is not the great sweeping torment of the poet.'²⁵⁴

Another contemporary text dealing with this form of sexual abuse is Zoë Heller's *Notes on a Scandal*, the narration of which is unreliable twice over, as it is told from the perspective of a matronly woman justifying the actions of a younger friend and co-worker with whom she is obsessed. In it are the same justifications we see in *Lolita*, as the narrator tends to blame the victim beginning the sexual relationship, stating that: '[Young Victims] possess some instinct, some natural talent, for sexual power play.'²⁵⁵ She goes on to write that: '[...] any honest assessment of their relationship would have to acknowledge not only that Connolly was acting of his own volition, but that he actually wielded more power in the relationship.'²⁵⁶ The irony of this is that the statement is anything but a 'honest assessment' but rather another justification similar to H.H.'s theory of 'nymphets.' However, like the narrator of 'Felix' that of *Notes on a Scandal* notes how gender influences society's views on

²⁵⁴ Enright, p. 127.

²⁵⁵ Zoë Heller, *Notes on a Scandal* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 83.

²⁵⁶ Heller, p. 84.

sexual assault: 'In the end, I suspect, being female will do nothing for Sheba, except deny her the grandeur of genuine villainy.'²⁵⁷

Both 'Felix' and *Notes on a Scandal* speak to the feminist understanding that in our patriarchal society women are not afforded the same romantic liberties as men, but also to the fact that literary language can be used as a smokescreen to blind an audience from mundane perversions. Without the use of a carefully crafted narrative, abuse becomes just abuse. This is perhaps why, in Enright's story the narrator – who is arguably more self-aware than Humbert, or at least more willing to admit her monstrosity – is writing a suicide note rather than a memoir. Richard, arguably, is not so self-aware, though those readers who come to the novel with a knowledge of *Lolita* may see, in relation to that text, the flimsiness of his justifications.

Bonding Unreliability

How can we approach a novel which contains such paradoxical notions? James Phelan addresses this problem by creating and making a distinction between two terms: 'estranging unreliability' and 'bonding unreliability.'²⁵⁸ These terms are invaluable in a discussion of *Lolita* as they can be used to help explain how Humbert is *almost* able to make a case for himself, and how Nabokov presents two separate narratives within the novel. Phelan skips over the attempted categorisation of unreliable narrators and instead focuses on the reader's interpretation of the text. He posits that 'estranging unreliability' relates to an unreliability in the narrator which distances the authorial audience from the narrator, which causes the reader to feel at odds with the narrative. 'Bonding unreliability,' meanwhile, is described as a form of unreliability which causes the audience to connect with the narrator, to feel empathy for them, therefore making the narrative all the more powerful.

²⁵⁷ Heller, p. 86.

²⁵⁸ Phelan, pp. 225–26.

Humbert, though admitting from the first page of his narrative that he is a paedophile, does cause the reader to become interested by his story. He uses language which masks the monstrosity of his urges and which charms rather than repels the reader ('about as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer').²⁵⁹ Later in the narrative Humbert's stratagems become more obvious, but, as Phelan notes: 'on the whole, Nabokov's strategy is to encourage our initial bonding with Humbert.'²⁶⁰ This is the first portion of the equation and the reason why many readers are unable to see the true toll of Humbert's abuse.

The Black Prince by Iris Murdoch bears such a striking resemblance to *Lolita* that it can also be viewed as a direct response to that novel. Both books feature aging erudite academics who believe that their literary and academic potential has been thwarted by a shallow and thoughtless society. Both their unreliable narrators are accused of murder and justify their actions as resulting from the pure love of a young girl. The similarities are immediately apparent. As such *The Black Prince* illuminates, as *Felix* did, the efficacy of Nabokov's style.

The novels, as well as being self-begetting for the majority of their narrative, are further bookmarked by introductions written by fictional editors (John Ray Jr., Ph.D., for *Lolita* and P. A. Loxias for *The Black Prince*). These introductions serve to show how narratives are sold and act as neat shortcuts into the story, they allow the reader an early understanding or even bond with the pedantic, literary, and (possibly, in the case of *The Black Prince*) criminal narrators. As previously mentioned, they also give weight and credibility to the narrators, acting as a way of examining the construction of novels and by extension the real world they reflect. The reader questions who John Ray Jr. and P. A. Loxias are, and as such have to come to the conclusion that they are no-one, they are representational

²⁵⁹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 9.

²⁶⁰ Phelan, p. 234.

devices, marks on a page and their auras of gravitas and authority are an easy construct, as is that of many such authority figures in the world the reader inhabits. *The Black Prince*, which was written after the more famous *Lolita*, breaks new ground in that the main narrative told by the narrator Bradley Pearson suddenly gives way to four post-scripts written from the perspective four of the other characters in the book which throw the veracity of the entire text in doubt. This has the added value of bringing the veracity of Pearson's narrative further in doubt and leaving the entire narrative unresolved. In *Lolita* (apart from the fictional foreword by John Ray, Jr.) and *My Rosalind* we only have the narrators' point of view and, consequently, the reader is tasked with questioning their biases based solely on the coded language of the narrative.

It is important to examine, therefore, how the narrators of these novels approximately justify their actions and their (flawed) worldview. As the fictional P. A. Loxias writes in the 'editor's forward' of *The Black Prince*: 'That art gives charm to terrible things is perhaps its glory, perhaps its curse.'²⁶¹ It is this view of art which Humbert relies on through which he imagines that he will be vindicated: 'I am thinking of aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art. And this is the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita.'²⁶²

The level of confidentiality which is created in *Lolita* between the narrator and his implied audience (and by extension, the reader) is perhaps best exemplified by the numerous examples of direct appeal. Humbert addresses the audience directly twenty-nine times, 'drawing him into one trap after another.'²⁶³ These are clear examples of 'bonding unreliability.' Humbert Humbert assumes (perhaps facetiously) a level of comprehension and insight which even the reader may not, in fact, have. He is playing to his audience's sense of

²⁶¹ Murdoch, p. 2.

²⁶² Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 348.

²⁶³ Alfred Appel, Jr., 'Introduction', in *The Annotated Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. lvii–lviii.

vanity. He is also allowing his audience to step into his narrative, perhaps hoping that they forget that everything there is of his design ('I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay').²⁶⁴ There is a bond created between the narrator and the reader which gives a deeper significance to the work. This bond is often essential to the effectiveness of Humbert's narrative; as Booth notes: 'many of the works in the unreliable mode depend for their effects on ironic collusion between the author and his readers.'²⁶⁵ This tactic is most clearly apparent when he tells the implied audience that they have probably already anticipated the revelation he is about to make. In *Lolita*, when Humbert, having lost Dolores seemingly forever to the clutches of a shadowy nemesis, finally finds her again, he describes this scene:

And softly, confidentially, arching her thin eyebrows and puckering her parched lips, she emitted, a little mockingly, somewhat fastidiously, not untenderly, in a kind of muted whistle, the name the astute reader has guessed long ago.²⁶⁶

Humbert, in his incomparably and malevolently charming way, is also crediting his audience with insight beyond his own. In the narrative he has demonstrated again and again his intelligence and perception so by implying that his audience could have divined something he could not see, he flatters them and strengthens the bond now shared. Moreover, by telling his audience (and the reader) that they should have anticipated these revelations, Humbert ensures that the revelations hold some of the emotional significance which it did for him.

Similarly, in *The Black Prince* Pearson states:

²⁶⁴ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 57.

²⁶⁵ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 391.

²⁶⁶ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 314.

What it was that happened the percipient reader will not need to be told. (Doubtless he saw it coming a mile off. I did not. This is art, but I was out there in life.)²⁶⁷

Pearson credits the reader of his testimony with the clairvoyance necessary to see that he had fallen in love with his friend's daughter, Julian. To have made this leap would have been almost inconceivable with only his narrative for context, yet by allowing for its existence Pearson credits his audience with wisdom and understanding and therefore deepens the bond he shares with the reader.

This brings us back to Richard's narration in *My Rosalind*, and the instances of bonding unreliability present there. The key revelation occurs, as already mentioned, not as might be suspected when Rosalind accuses Richard of sexual assault, but when Richard admits that Chloe played no part in the creation of the narrative being read, that he wrote all the sections that were, seemingly, from her point of view. This admission is reminiscent of both Humbert's and Pearson's appeals and can be compared to them.

Richard's implied audience and the reader is told that he had imagined all of Chloe's inner thoughts. By suggesting that the process was 'agony' and that he 'hated' himself Richard invites the sympathy of his audience.²⁶⁸ Therefore, an admission which should make Richard seem even more like a monster (Richard assumed his deceased wife's voice, using her memory to lessen his guilt), acts to make him seem more sympathetic. This, if considered with the knowledge that Richard would have almost certainly read *Lolita*, shows him as either naïve or even more deeply manipulative than previously thought. I would suggest the latter, although here too we circle back to the ethical dilemma which troubled Booth in regard to *Lolita*, that a certain number of readers will not be able to discern Richard's manipulation and will therefore

²⁶⁷ Murdoch, p. 231.

²⁶⁸ Jones, p. 209.

view him as a positive character. Though the hints are there, for those that can read them. Here we turn again to Booth who writes: 'In short the author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it.'²⁶⁹ Richard like Humbert is using a form of 'bonding unreliability' to cause his audience to partially forgive him for his actions.

Estranging Unreliability

The 'estranging unreliability' in Humbert Humbert's text are instances where Nabokov uses complex coding to signal what Humbert truly is, a predator. These instances highlight how little he cares for and how much harm he is doing to Lolita, a child that he purportedly loves. However, these instances are often restrained and, as Elizabeth Patnoe notes: 'while the text offers evidence to indict Humbert, it is so subtle that many readers overlook its critique of the misogyny illustrated in and purveyed by the rest of the text.'²⁷⁰ Therefore, it is important that the reader be able to recognise the signals Nabokov uses. It is this manner of writing which allows the reader to almost, but not quite fall for Humbert's stylistic ploys.

Notably, there is the context Humbert Humbert creates in order to humanise himself, the use of literary allusions to romanticise his past. This may seem like a form of 'bonding unreliability' but is actually estranging in the case of a sophisticated reading. One important example is the 'initial girl-child'²⁷¹ that came before Dolores, who Humbert Humbert first had a sexual encounter with before she passed away of typhus four months later and who Humbert gives as a reason for his obsession with his proclaimed 'nymphets.' The girl,

²⁶⁹ Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, p. 20.

²⁷⁰ Elizabeth Patnoe, 'Lolita Misrepresented, Lolita Reclaimed: Disclosing the Doubles', *College Literature*, 22.2 (1995), 81–104 (p. 83).

²⁷¹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 9.

Annabel Leigh, is named for Edgar Allan Poe's poem 'Annabel Lee' (his original working title for the novel *The Kingdom by the Sea* is a quote from the same poem).²⁷²

The 'estranging unreliability' at work here is three-fold. Firstly, the astute reader will notice the attempted manipulation on Humbert's part, that he is using a stylised story to justify his predilections (in the way that the unnamed narrator begins to and then decides against doing in Enright's 'Felix') and therefore feel at odds with Humbert.

Secondly there are the implications of the specific choice of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe is the most important literary figure Humbert alludes to; his work is referred to over twenty times in the text.²⁷³ As Julian Connolly notes:

This web of allusions offers a good example of the way in which Humbert's conscious reference to a literary figure or theme might have a very different purpose than Nabokov's intention for that same reference. Whereas Humbert seeks to bolster the legitimacy of his behaviour by invoking a distinguished genealogy, Nabokov expects his readers to scrutinize this association with more scepticism.²⁷⁴

The association relies on the reader's knowledge that Poe married his own 'child-bride,' his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm, when he was 27. Interestingly, Nabokov first wanted to call Dolores 'Virginia' and name the novel *Ginny*.²⁷⁵ Moreover, on the night when he first rapes Lolita, Humbert registers at the hotel as 'Edgar.' There is a clear link where Nabokov plays with the literary figure's history.

²⁷² Weinman, p. 54.

²⁷³ Alfred Appel, Jr., 'Notes', in *The Annotated Lolita* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 330.

²⁷⁴ Connolly, 'The Precursors of Lolita', p. 22.

²⁷⁵ Appel, Jr., 'Notes', pp. 357–58.

Thirdly, the use of allusion and a previous lover, suggests that in Humbert's eyes Dolores is unimportant as a person but only filling in for a romanticised notion Humbert has of a 'nymphet'. The fact that he, Humbert Humbert, gave the child the name of 'Annabel Leigh,' shows the extent to which he is creating a storybook narrative and points to Lolita being 'a literary or verbal creation, a product of the creative imagination, and not an animate sentient being with a consciousness, a will, or indeed a life of her own.'²⁷⁶ This is perhaps the most important example of Nabokov's use of 'estranging unreliability,' one that becomes stronger throughout the narrative; the showing of how little Humbert cares for the child. In his story she goes from being Dolores Haze, a child with her own agenda, to 'Lolita', an object on which to focus his lust and his art. Humbert's aim is not to create this narrative as a love-note to Lolita, but rather: 'to fix once for all the perilous magic of nymphets.'²⁷⁷ In other words he is using Lolita to justify his predatory behaviour. Humbert Humbert uses Dolores, appropriates her body and also her narrative, for his sexual pleasure as well as a means to attain some 'immortality.' The idea of defeating death through art is key to Poe's poem and may be the reason for Humbert Humbert's narrative.²⁷⁸ Crucially to Humbert, Dolores the child does not matter, rather it is his fictionalised Lolita who brings him joy. 'In Humbert Humbert's eyes, the girl named Dolores Haze is a canvas blank enough to project whatever he, and by virtue of his narration, the reader sees or desires.'²⁷⁹

Here we can return to *My Rosalind*, specifically to Richard's use of Rosalind's given name. In calling her 'Rosalind' and not 'Rose' or 'Rosie,' Richard is not only denying her her chosen identity, but he is also dehumanising her to the reader. Similarly, in *Lolita*:

²⁷⁶ Connolly, 'The Precursors of Lolita', p. 25.

²⁷⁷ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 154.

²⁷⁸ Gary R. Dyer, 'Humbert Humbert's Use of Catullus 58 in *Lolita*', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 34.1 (1988), 1-15 (p. 12).

²⁷⁹ Weinman, p. 30.

Humbert's attempt to rename the little girl 'Lolita' exemplifies the way in which his unreliable first-person narration, for much of the novel, prevents readers from identifying with her or even understanding how she might differ from his description.²⁸⁰

The reiteration on the importance of Rosalind's name, as well as being a form of appropriation, is a direct allusion to Nabokov's novel. It reflects the transformation that occurs that changes the innocent girl Dolores Haze into the 'Lolita' who exists only in Humbert Humbert's mind, in his narrative, and subsequently in the reader's consciousness. Richard indulges in the same celebration of name as Humbert Humbert does when he uses the possessive descriptions: 'She was Lo, plain Lo in the morning, standing four foot ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita.'²⁸¹ By emphasising a specific variation of the subject's name (Lolita, Rosalind) the unreliable narrator of these two novels picks a specific aspect of his subject to portray, thus reducing and discarding the others.

Moreover, like Humbert Humbert, Richard is taking possession of his subject through lyrical phrasing. Although his corruption is not as complete as Humbert's, it remains subversive; the aim of his text is to justify his actions through his 'bonding unreliability'. However, the reader should be able to pick up on the clues present in the text which reveal Richard's manipulation. In his florid prose we find him making assumptions about Rosalind that are never verified. Does Richard really know so much about Rosalind's childhood? Does he know that for Rosalind the ocean 'carried the promise of endless beauty and

²⁸⁰ Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, 'Lolita, I Presume; On a Character Entitled "Lolita"', *Miranda.*, 3, 2010, p. 2.

²⁸¹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 7.

excitement?’²⁸² It seems more likely that Richard is finding phrases that please his ear, that make him feel like a real writer, a key aspect of his artificial identity. Later he states that ‘I think she drew strength from the sight. Or maybe not. It could have been that she just liked the warmth of the sand and the way the sun glinted off the water.’²⁸³ As in the case of Humbert and his ‘fancy prose style,’ Richard is adding flare to his telling of her story in order to encourage the reader to form a connection with him. Rosalind is made wonderful by his words, but by being made wonderful she loses that part of herself which makes her human, makes her her *own* self. Similarly, Dolores Haze loses her identity in Humbert’s narrative; she becomes subsumed into the fictionalised version of herself he wishes to portray, the version where she is a seductress and not his victim. Or as Weinman puts it: ‘she is never allowed to be herself. Not in Humbert’s telling.’²⁸⁴ Both Richard and Humbert are using their victims for the sake of their art, their writing. They attempt to achieve immortality not for their victims, as implied by their texts, but rather they use their victims to attempt to achieve immortality for themselves.

The Ethics of Appropriation

Elizabeth Patnoe argues that in early and even contemporary writings, critics tend to analyse Humbert’s unreliability, but that many are still blinded to the extent of damage that his narrative causes.²⁸⁵ It is clear that while readers and critics grapple with Humbert Humbert, few are aware of the full loss Dolores Haze faces, and even fewer of the wider reaching issue of real-life children being sexualised as a result of misreadings of the text. She states of the response to *Lolita*:

²⁸² Jones, p. 67.

²⁸³ Jones, p. 67.

²⁸⁴ Weinman, p. 30.

²⁸⁵ Patnoe, p. 87.

While a few critics have expressed charged sympathy for Lolita's trauma, most neglect to confront the trauma Humbert inflicts on Lolita, and none contend with the trauma the book inflicts on readers.²⁸⁶

Véra Nabokov even went so far as to write in her diary after *Lolita* was first published: 'I wish, though, somebody would notice the tender description of the child's helplessness, her pathetic dependence on monstrous HH, and her heartrending courage all along.'²⁸⁷ This has been an issue with the novel's reception since its first publication, that many critics and readers see the abuse which Humbert inflicts but do not see past it to the child being abused. Azar Nafisi makes a similar argument in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, stating: 'the desperate truth of Lolita's story is *not* the rape of a twelve-year-old by a dirty old man but the *confiscation of one individual's life by another*.'²⁸⁸ As with Richard appropriating Rosalind's and Chloe's identities for his narrative, Humbert has appropriated Dolores Haze so effectively that many readers can no longer see the girl there once was. It is important that we see through Humbert's literary manipulation to the child Dolores, so as not to allow her to be dehumanised.

Moreover, *Lolita's* complex and paradoxical narrative creates certain problems that extend beyond the literary world. Vitally, there is the fact that Humbert Humbert has defended his actions and the actions of others, by claiming the existence of 'nymphets,' a term that quickly entered common usage. These 'nymphets' are children who (Humbert posits) at a young age 'reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic.'²⁸⁹ In other words, Humbert has shifted the blame from himself to the children who he wishes to abuse. And while

²⁸⁶ Patnoe, p. 87.

²⁸⁷ Weinman, p. 182.

²⁸⁸ Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 33.

²⁸⁹ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 18.

most readers will see through this imaginative ploy as Humbert's 'elaborate rationalization of pederasty, even if he is not fully aware that he is rationalizing,'²⁹⁰ there may be those who do not understand the extent and insidiousness of the argument. The concept of the seductive child is so persuasively rendered in *Lolita* that some readers fall for the classic paedophilic rhetoric and think that Dolores Haze was able to understand and initiate sexual intercourse with Humbert. 'Many readers still don't see through Humbert Humbert's vile perversions, and still blame Dolores Haze for her behavior, as if she had the will to resist, and chose not to.'²⁹¹ Humbert Humbert makes his argument explicit when he writes, before his description of his first penetrative sexual act with Lolita: 'I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me.'²⁹² Here, Humbert is arguing that Dolores instigated the sexual contact, despite the power he held over her and the reluctance that might be read into her actions. He states that he 'had her have her way – at least while I could still bear it.'²⁹³ Another reading of this line, however, could be that she made some movements which he interpreted as sexual and that he then forced the sexual act. As Weinman states of this episode 'a variety of textual signals suggest that Lolita and Humbert are not seeing eye-to-eye throughout the event.'²⁹⁴ Even if *Lolita* did instigate the sexual act, this would only be a symptom of the conditioning and grooming which she had undergone at Humbert's hands and which negate valid consent. Similarly, in *My Rosalind*, in the sexual assault scene the issue is validity of any implied consent. Rosalind says no after he follows her into her bedroom and bathroom, but to Richard it is a symbolic protestation. However, even if this were true, her consent is never given.

Humbert never allows for Dolores' point of view in his narrative, though the reader knows enough about the power imbalance to know that the acts were always rape. Nabokov

²⁹⁰ Phelan, p. 235.

²⁹¹ Weinman, p. 241.

²⁹² Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 152.

²⁹³ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 153.

²⁹⁴ Patnoe, p. 90.

makes the situation particularly clear in the scene where Humbert tells Dolores that her mother is dead. He recounts that: ‘At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.’²⁹⁵ Any argument that Humbert makes claiming that the rapes were in any way consensual are completely undermined by this one paragraph (as it is in *My Rosalind* when Rosalind tells Richard that her saying no was not symbolic but her voicing her non-consent). Dolores was a victim who lost not only her mother and her childhood, but control of her narrative. Adding to this the fact that Dolores cried every night when she thought Humbert was asleep, and the discerning reader can see the flaws in Humbert’s narrative.

Nevertheless, because of the subtlety of Nabokov’s coding, Dolores’ trauma has oftentimes been ignored. This is the reason that although Nabokov’s novel ‘deplores the abuse of little girls, the name he popularized has become indelibly associated with licentiousness and young women.’²⁹⁶ ‘Lolita’ has come to mean something completely other than an abused child. As Patnoe asks ‘why isn’t the definition of “Lolita” “a molested adolescent girl” instead of a “seductive” one?’²⁹⁷ The most obvious answer to this argument is that Humbert Humbert was too persuasive in his justifications. Perhaps Humbert has manipulated generations of readers. Was Nabokov, then, too subtle in his approach?

Left, then, is the question: why did Nabokov not make his moral position clearer? Patnoe argues that perhaps he:

²⁹⁵ Nabokov, *Lolita*, p. 163.

²⁹⁶ Julian W. Connolly, ‘Lolita’s Afterlife: Critical and Cultural Responses’, in *A Reader’s Guide to Nabokov’s ‘Lolita’* (Academic Studies Press, 2009), pp. 141–74 (p. 170).

²⁹⁷ Patnoe, p. 83.

minimized such signals in order to merge the novel's form and characterization with his attempt to illustrate and thematize what happens when an allegedly charming, clearly powerful character wreaks his egocentricity on a weaker one.²⁹⁸

This is why in *My Rosalind*, Richard's manipulation is not overt. I felt it necessary to show how even a very ordinary man may use his position to emotionally manipulate and abuse the women in his life. The fact that the behaviour seems initially harmless or even romantic should signal how prevalent these behaviours may be in reality.

Therefore, I would argue that *Lolita* has taught us how to read complex and morally fraught narratives. Its existence demonstrates that subtlety in the signalling of ethically culpable reasoning may be effective in illustrating the prevalence of these justifications in society. However, *Lolita* has also signalled to future authors the risks and pitfalls of interpretation they might run into writing easily misinterpreted novels. Based on the reception of *Lolita* it is possible that many readers will not see past Richard's manipulations and that, therefore, the novel will achieve the opposite effect to that intended; it will condone rather than illuminate and condemn his behaviour. I will have to bear partial responsibility for this interpretation. As Phelan writes: 'Nabokov and his readers bear some responsibility for the misreadings, just as both bear some responsibility for the more successful communication.'²⁹⁹ However, I would argue that the coded language in *Lolita* and *My Rosalind* allows for an understanding of how predators operate and that, properly read, these novels become deeply didactic. The risks, then, of misreading is outweighed by the positive outcome of a collusion between author and reader.

²⁹⁸ Patnoe, p. 83.

²⁹⁹ Phelan, p. 236.

Conclusion

As argued above, the novel *My Rosalind* is an effort to tell a story which reflects my understanding of reality as well as widespread changing social mores. In this analysis I have attempted to explain how the novel *My Rosalind* was written, paying specific attention to the use of the unreliable narrator. This choice of perspective turned a seemingly straightforward narrative into an exploration of the glorification of a certain characterisation of masculinity and the appropriation of female voices in literature. The novel now goes some way to stressing the dangers of romanticising literary tropes such as that of the muse and the stoic male writer.

However, this approach did present some risks. The subtlety and complexity which I felt was necessary to make turn this narrative into an accurate likeness of the moral ambiguities of modern life opens the novel to the risk of misinterpretation. It raises the question of the ethical implications of giving a voice to morally corrupt narrators. As noted, there is a potential for the work to be seen as excusing the narrator's actions rather than undermining them. For this I must find myself liable. Nevertheless, the risk seems worthwhile. As in the case of numerous existing novels, there is the potential of a successful communication of ideas between the author and the reader which would fully justify the narrative. As author, I just have to hope that the reader sees beyond Richard's blustering and justifications to the very real characters of Chloe and Rosalind.

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