

The Actress and the Look of the Other

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(BA, BJourn, Grad Dip Ed, MA)

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I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Abstract

This thesis, titled *The Actress and the Look of the Other*, comprises a novella and a dissertation. The thesis consists of a work of fiction and a critically-based literary dissertation, with the two complementing each other. That is, this is not a practice-based exegesis where an analysis of a creative component is undertaken. The dissertation analyses two novelistic representations of actresses—Regina in Simone de Beauvoir’s *All Men Are Mortal* (1946) and Sibyl Vane in Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)—through relevant aspects of Existentialism. The application of de Beauvoir’s ideas about female “transcendence” and acting in *The Second Sex*, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist philosophy of the other’s look, draws out and illuminates themes of objectivation and alienation in the novels, in relation to these hitherto neglected characters. The thesis addresses the previous neglect of these two figures in literary analyses and illustrates their relevance to the often inexplicit use of Existentialism in celebrity studies. It answers the research question: to what extent does Existentialism inform the actress characters in *All Men Are Mortal* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*? Further, to what extent has Existentialism informed interpretations of the actor in celebrity studies?

The research question also informs the creative component of the thesis, which is titled *As Though Floating*. Engaging with de Beauvoir’s ideas about acting, “transcendence”, gender and fame, and Sartre’s ideas about self-estrangement in the other’s look, the novella explores how these existentialist themes relate to mortality, insignificance, fame and the acting craft. The novella explores a female actor’s unhappy pursuit of fame and her realisation that fulfilment may lie elsewhere. Fen is dissatisfied in her career as an understudy in London’s West End theatres, and is so preoccupied

with recognition and success that she forgets her love of acting itself. When she returns home to Perth for a former lover's funeral, Fen works through her memories and grief. In doing so, she reconciles with family and friends, and with her past treatment of the former lover whose celebrity and death play a key role in the novel.

Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ix
Novella: <i>As Though Floating</i>	1
Dissertation: Existentialism and the Actress in Simone de Beauvoir’s <i>All Men Are Mortal</i> and Oscar Wilde’s <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	195
Introduction	197
Literature Review: The Actress in Victorian culture and fiction	205
Chapter One: Regina and the “Ageless Gaze”.....	211
Literature Review: Contemporary criticism of <i>All Men Are Mortal</i>	214
De Beauvoir’s “Actress” figure	218
The problem of gallantry.....	226
The trap of narcissism	230
Narcissism and the thwarted “Unique”	233
Sartre’s philosophy of the look of the “Other”	238
Conclusion	246
Chapter Two: Sibyl Vane and Dorian’s Look	247
Literature Review: Contemporary criticism of <i>The Picture of Dorian Gray</i>	249
De Beauvoir’s “Actress” figure	255
The concept of persona and Sartre’s “Other”	265
Conclusion	269
Chapter Three: Existentialism, “the Actress” and celebrity theory	270
Objects of worship	271
Celebrity theory and ontological duality.....	273
The look of the other and the trap of fame	278
Existential anguish and “decentralization” in the look of the other.....	280
Conclusion	284
Bibliography	289

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Novella:

As Though Floating

One

It was a balmy Friday evening in June. Fen's dress of delicate gold silk hung loosely against her skin; she felt it slide across her belly as she stepped back to check her readiness in the mirror. Her face looked pale, but she found solace in the neatly plucked arcs of her eyebrows and her grey-blue eyes, outlined with kohl. Her dark hair, thick, like her mum's, framed her face, made it elegant.

It had become something of a ritual, studying her reflection in this way. She sought regular communion with the image in the glass, as though it were the source of all her power, her humming core. She found it best not to stand too close though, especially in the harsh light, otherwise she might fixate on the tiny creases and shadows in her skin, or the gentle sag of her upper eyelids; she might search for signs of illness or death creeping through her body, cell by unseen cell; might even find another coarse silver hair, standing straight up, like a direct line to a burnt-out God. She preferred to avoid those small, disquieting tastes of a future in which that image no longer gave her power but sapped it.

The magazine she'd bought that morning was still poking out of her bag near the front door. She'd bought it because Zach Matthews was on the cover, photographed back home in Australia. He'd left Los Angeles three weeks earlier, to escape paparazzi scrutiny over his publicly fraying marriage. But it seemed he'd failed because there he was on the cover, wet from the sea on Cottesloe beach, surfboard under one arm; back home, but still under close surveillance.

Fen pictured him sitting on the balcony of one of those commanding architectural marvels in Cottesloe, gazing out to sea, playing his guitar. But then, if he'd

been doing much of that, within such easy reach of all those lenses, there would have been evidence of it splashed across the tabloid in her hands. No, she thought, he would be doing his contemplating indoors, in what little privacy he had left.

Fen checked her watch; she was still early. Fetching scissors from the kitchen, she took the magazine to her room. She had quite a collection of clippings now; it was the next best thing to staying in touch. She cut out the wetsuit snaps, but didn't bother with the old picture of him and his estranged wife, June Berry, looking inseparable in the first weeks of their relationship. She already had that one. It was entrancing, though, the way Zach smiled down at June's fine, upturned face, his dark curls in striking contrast to her platinum bouffant. Fen envied the unthinking way they draped their arms around each other. It made her ache for that familiarity again, the knowing that purred between the bodies of lovers.

But it had been fleeting between Zach and June, the intensity of the highs matched by the despair of the lows, all of which had been forensically dissected by the press. Anyway, Fen no longer wanted to belong to one of those sylph-like pairings wandering around the city. She had trained herself to see only what they would become one day, just the ghosts of lovers, haunting their crumbling coupledoms, barely exchanging words much less glances across the table, and never touching one another except by awkward accident. What could be worse than that kind of loneliness?

Reaching to the top of her wardrobe, Fen pulled a shoebox down and spilled its contents out on to her rumpled sheets. She loved this stash of Zach clippings. Adding to it, poring over it, was like running her fingers over a scar, skin thick and raised, old pain distilled into a faint itch. It was the same when she lay in bed at night sometimes, imagining Zach's heartbeat, remembering the muffled throb of it close to her ear. Did he know she was in London, mediocrity personified, while he lit up screens all over the

world with his bohemian charisma? Did he remember how fiercely he'd once denounced celebrity? Shallow and absurd, he'd called it; absurdity itself.

Fen picked up a clipping she'd cut from 'Vanity Fair': *Matthews has been through it all: heartbreak, addiction, despair and low self-esteem. So what helps him get out of bed in the morning? As Steph Holloway writes, the answer may lie in the Australian actor's aspirations, which include branching out into writing and directing, and the promise of a break in his busy schedule, so that he can visit home sometime soon. 'I keep my eyes on the horizon,' he told Vanity Fair, 'I never look back.'*

Fen had kept that one because it was empathetic and insightful, giving Zach the space to reveal what he wanted to reveal. It was a comforting counterpoint to the more salacious articles, the celebrations of his reckless moments, the shallow attempts to find meaning in his escapist habits. In Fen's mind, these fragments of him melded together into a man who was out of synch with his world, enacting some kind of rebellion that extended from his professional to his personal life, judging by the abundance of failed relationships he'd racked up. At least five 'It' girls had hung from his arm at various times, and he'd drawn several unknowns into the fray as well, two of whom had gone on to have respectable acting careers. Opportunists, Fen had branded them. He hadn't loved any of them. There had always been distance in his eyes when he'd been with them, a desire to be elsewhere.

But that distance seemed to have folded in on itself when he was with June Berry. Until, that was, the public arguments and rumours of a miscarriage. There had been repeated denials of a rift and then, about five months ago, the murmur of speculation had escalated and they'd conceded their separation. It had played out like such a cliché that Fen had been almost disappointed in Zach, except that part of her had been selfishly, childishly elated. So much so, that she'd contemplated flying home; she'd even browsed flights online. But she'd talked herself out of it, because what

would she have done if she'd found him? Would he have said, 'Hello, Fenella,' just like that, breathing life back into her old name? Or would he have turned and walked away? Would she have called out to him then, demanding forgiveness?

She brushed her hand over the clippings. There was the benign but manly romantic comedy physique, followed by the action-man brawn he'd cultivated, and then, during his extended period in career limbo, a slackening of muscle into flab. There was a series of pictures showing him stumbling out of nightclubs, looking dishevelled and trapped. They showed so much, these pictures, and yet they gave Fen so little of what she really wanted; she wanted a stronger sense of his being in the world; she wanted the sound of his voice. What they did give her was a gateway to nostalgia, a portal to an imaginary realm, where their glowing connection had never been severed. And that had to be enough.

She picked up one of her favourites, taken on the streets of Los Angeles. He was wearing headphones and watching his feet as he walked, looking happy and unself-conscious. Fen wondered what he'd been listening to, what soundtrack he might have been trying to lay over his life. Rage Against the Machine probably, or Pearl Jam; maybe The Pixies. She used to love seeing him dance to Rage, slamming his body around as though between invisible walls. His body had known the fury of that music, known it in a primal way that probably he hadn't even understood. Where had she watched him doing that? Maybe that crazy night in a warehouse nightclub in the city. She'd never been there before, but Zach had been no stranger there, judging by how many people had acknowledged him with a raised chin, a nod, a lifted eyebrow. Fen wasn't sure now, looking back, how much of her memory of the place was real. They'd taken magic mushrooms that night, so it was possible she'd conjured for herself—out of something less gothic—the vast space she now remembered, with its dark retreating

ceiling, the rain outside, streaming silently down a sweep of windowpanes, muted by the otherworldly loudness of the music.

They'd stopped laughing at the madness of everything and were dancing in a vertical writhe of bodies on the dance floor, the light swinging above their heads making shadows come to life all around them. It was 'Golgotha tenement blues' they were dancing to, a slow but driving song that built up then dropped back, then built again. So loud, it took possession of them. When Fenella closed her eyes, the drug took her away to some other place, into a darkness that turned from a vast embrace to a scream. She opened them again, to find him, so that he could bring her back, and there he was, dancing with her, smiling his wasted smile. *Streets of gold*, he mouthed along with the song. *I am the chosen one*, Fenella mouthed back, smiling a smile that started on her face but travelled down over her body, like warm wax moving slowly over her skin. He came closer. *Yes you are*, he whispered in her ear, the warmth of his breath like a light source on some other plane of consciousness, spreading waves of colour through every cell of her body, or so it felt as he drew her hands up and placed the tips of his fingers on the tips of hers.

She hadn't done hallucinogens after that night. She'd tried other things, but nothing mind-bending. The unearthly rapture of it had been too frightening, laced with moments of dispossession that hinted at a bottomless, unnameable horror from which she might never surface. Zach, on the other hand, if the tabloids were to be believed, couldn't get enough of that kind of madness.

Fen shivered and sought anchorage in the full-length mirror across the room. As a child, she'd resented her slight build, staring mournfully into the mirror, wishing away her wild black hair, feeling small and peculiar compared to the strapping blonde ideal. But Zach had replaced *small* and *peculiar* in her mind with *feline*, and *exotic*. That had helped. Some of the things he'd said hadn't helped, but those had come later, towards

the end. She was a traitor in his eyes by then, a disappointment. She had worked hard to shake that look, to drown it in lighter memories, but somehow, his contempt always resurfaced.

Two

Fen stepped out into the warm evening, shutting the door on her tiny two-roomed flat. It was a good little place in Camden, with a floor plan like a capsule cut in half to make a large bedroom and a living area with a small kitchen. Fen was fond of it, despite its tiny bathroom and the traces everywhere of a shabby renovation done on the cheap. She'd been lucky to find anything affordable this close to her work in West End theatres.

Striding beneath a graceful sweep of leafy trees, approaching the intersection of Agar and Randolph, Fen enjoyed the smiles and bare skin of the people around her, released at last from winter. Something about the pink and purple hair she passed, and the piercings and quirky hats, reminded her of her friend Pete; it was probably the hats.

Walking beside the towering red-brick walls, under the train overpass and on to the hum of life on Camden Road, she was relieved not to have to be at the theatre for a change. It was good not to have to pass the Cambridge Theatre with its arched doors and glitzy *Chicago* façade; good not to feel that familiar stab of resentment when glancing up at the poster, knowing she could play Roxie Hart in her sleep, even though it would involve too many itchy hours in a blonde wig and the role of Velma Kelly would probably suit her better. Either way, the last time they'd held auditions it had been for the chorus, and she hadn't heard about them until it had been too late anyway. Not surprising really. Auditions came and went, and her agent apologised for failing to tell her about them. It was time for another serious chat, she decided, though it wasn't likely to do much good. Tim was too skilled at deflecting her carefully rehearsed attempts to sack him. Besides which, she'd recently begun to wonder whether her failure to make a splash on the musical theatre scene had less to do with Tim's

shortcomings and more to do with her own as a performer; maybe, after all, she lacked that certain something. Or, if she'd ever had it—even a small bit of it—it had withered away in the shadows of others who had it in spades.

Her life in London was shaping up to be so different to the way she'd imagined it. In that fantasy version, things had fallen easily into place. Her talent had parted the waters to greatness, or had at least made it possible for her to find her niche. Then again, she thought, maybe 'eternal understudy' was her niche. Maybe she just wasn't leading-lady material, not in a West-End-musical sense, at any rate. But she loved being on stage, feeling the nerves and self-consciousness fall away, to return as something else, something good and sweet; a strange stage alchemy. So she just kept on going, singing in her understudy voice, hoping that somebody would see or hear more than that, would spot a potential Julie Andrews or Denise van Outen in her stage presence. They weren't in the business of potential though, in the West End; they were in the business of accomplishment. Maybe she should have gone into film, gone to LA, as Zach had done. Maybe if she'd done that, she would have been a star by now too, instead of spending her life lining up for auditions and feigning enthusiasm for bit-parts and understudy gigs.

Reaching the station, Fen stopped to admire the late afternoon sunlight, the way it caught the gleaming ox-blood tiles. Once, she would have taken out her sketchbook and tried to capture the mesmerising contrast between the fine shadows and curves of the arched windows and the simple glare of the iconic underground sign. Somewhere along the way, though, she had shed that desire. Probably for the best, she thought, as she descended into the otherworldly web of tunnels and stale air.

Three

Fen found the underground unsettling. Once, she'd loved that buzzing network with its promise of adventures and its posters and its strange winds from far-off places, but now she had to talk herself down the escalators and along the eerily lit tunnels, and deeper still, to find her place among the others on the platform, waiting for lights to appear out of the gloom. It had been nearly four years since the bombs had gone off, the deepest of them thirty metres down, and she was still haunted by thoughts of the people who had died down there, their last moments lost in darkness and smoke and screaming. Hurling through the blackness with that hot tunnel wind snaking through the carriages, the eerie drag of steel on steel, she could too easily imagine herself trapped in airless panic with them.

She was glad to step off at Charing Cross and be drawn into the surge of people, heading through the white-tiled labyrinth of tunnels and stairs, making for the sweet relief of open sky.

Inside the wine bar where she was due to meet them, Fen saw Sam and Gina, laughing like the harmless hedonists they were, draped across the gleaming ebony bar as though part of the design concept. Ivy, by contrast, looked cold and distracted, yawning into her hand stripped of its usual false nails. Her fiancé, Drew, was making little secret of scoping out the talent around him, all the talent but Ivy's.

Fen tried to remember when last she'd seen Ivy laughing and sure of herself. Surely it couldn't have been as long ago as when they'd lived with Henrietta, when Fen had been new in London, before her so-called big break in the West End? They'd served pints and flirted for tips, spending them on whiskey after closing time, and Ivy had been the loudest of them all, hollering and singing and stirring up trouble as they'd strutted and staggered their way back to their shabby sty of peeling paint and stained ceilings.

They'd shared the flat with six or seven other expats, and it had been cramped, with a tiny kitchen overlooking a wasteland of weeds out the back. Only Henrietta had ever lamented the state of the kitchen. The rest of them had hardly known it was even there, except as the place where the fridge was.

Sam and Gina yelled 'Fen!' and drew her close into their scents of vanilla and tequila. Ivy gave her a quick hug, and Drew raised his glass in what he no doubt supposed was manly enigma. Gina stooped to kiss Fen's cheek again. 'Long time no see,' she chastised, 'a drink? A drink! Sam, my love, a margarita please... nay, two!' Sam took out his wallet and turned to the bar with mock resignation.

The clientele was noisy, riding on a wave of elation fuelled by conspicuous wealth and expensive liquor. Henrietta, Louisa and Pete arrived in time for the next round, and then they all meandered down to the pier where the *London Belle* awaited them. The drinks had smoothed the initial clusters into a merry band, and there was laughter and singing as they boarded the boat.

The glow of the London Eye was close, and reflected lights stretched and sparkled along the river's smooth skin. The water seemed an eternity of lapping darkness as the boat pulled away from the pier. Fen looked away from the growing band of black water between boat and shore and imagined Zach at the party, standing apart from the others. Sam and Gina laughed as Henrietta and Louisa distributed beers from the bar, chain-gang style. Only Zach, leaning against the railing, was looking at Fen. He drew on a joint in his hand, smiled through the smoke, and held it out towards her.

'Just have a bloody drink,' Drew hissed at Ivy. Drew was a film producer, tall and well-built, sporting the perpetually rosy cheeks of the almost-always intoxicated. Ivy took the glass of champagne, and Fen looked away, over the water. She didn't like Drew much, not since walking into a bedroom at a party once, looking for the bathroom, to find him doing a line of cocaine on the bedside table. He'd been a little too

welcoming, offering her a line, standing close, making no secret of his appreciation of what he called her assets, her *shapes*. He said he wanted to put her in a movie, had just the thing to make her a star, but she would have to make it worth his while. She'd smiled coyly and left, never to mention it again, but to her shame, there had been times when she'd felt so bleak about the stagnation of her career that her finger had hovered over his number on her phone. And she'd found ways to rationalise guilt away: Ivy deserved better anyway, and she would be better off if someone did something to show her Drew was a scoundrel before she tied herself to him for better or worse. Fen decided she should say something to her about it, but not tonight; tonight, she would be hitting the booze to distract herself from her steady march toward old age and a life of no consequence.

Like a mind-reader, Pete approached, carrying two glasses of champagne. He'd left his unicycle and satchel leaning against the bar, and Fen could smell the kerosene he used to light his juggling torches; he must have come straight from the Covent Garden piazza.

'Fen-star!' he said, handing her a glass, 'Happy birthday!' His hair was tied back with a green shoelace, and he still wore his hounds-tooth hat.

'Thanks Pete,' Fen said, 'so far so good. Been performing?'

'Certainly have,' he said, resting a hand against the railing and glancing at the lights on the far shore. 'Ironic, right?' he smiled, 'I spend a lifetime at drama school, only to wind up moonlighting as a performing monkey for small change.' He said moonlighting because his main job was as a dancer in the West End. Like Fen, he had a string of chorus credits to his name. He looked back over the water, 'What price adoration, eh?'

Fen laughed. Pete liked to pretend he was bitter about having to take his craft to the streets, but she'd seen him at the piazza, revelling in the game of rounding people

up. Pouring kerosene into a small tin and laying his torches in a row on the ground, he'd winked at a woman whose lingering betrayed her as a tourist. 'Ever seen a madman, Madame?' he'd flirted, tipping off his hat with a flourish and twirling it to the ground. 'That's right, a sad crazy Londoner with nothing better to do than make your flaming day!' Astride the unicycle, he'd begun tossing the unlit torches into the air, one after the other, until he'd had them in a fluid juggle.

'Go on, you love it,' Fen said, mimicking his spiel: 'Roll up folks! In just a moment I will light these babies, and then you'll see just how long I can juggle them before I set myself on fire and go roaring down the street like Tom-Tom the piper's son, only on fire and without the stolen pig.'

'You nailed that, accent and all; you should be on the stage.'

'Oh, don't get me started.'

'I don't know,' Pete said. 'It sounds pretty sweet to me, this understudy business. You complain, but to be fair, you get paid while the lovely Gwynn does all the work.'

'You can't imagine how hard it is, learning lines, rehearsing like a demon, only to face an audience disappointed you're not the star they paid to see.'

'Come now, it's only a matter of time before someone notices how good you are.'

'Well, I'm glad my contract is up on this one; saves me having to break it.'

In fact, she was still waiting to hear from Tim whether the producers wanted to renew it, and wondering what she'd say if they did.

'Not bitter at all then?'

'Pete, you mock, but you don't know what it's like. You're out there every night, doing your thing, getting the love, while I'm stuck in the dressing room listening to the distant strains of music and laughter.'

‘Yeah, the *love*,’ he snorted.

‘Just be glad you’re out there, on stage. The air in my dressing room’s about a hundred years old. And it’s bloody small. I’m a reject in a cage—three steps, swivel, three steps, swivel. Torture.’

She took a swig of the cold champagne.

‘They *should* put you in a cage,’ Pete teased, ‘in the foyer or something at interval; get their money’s worth.’

‘Anything to avoid sitting backstage watching re-runs of *Seinfeld*, imagining what else I could be doing with my life.’

‘Anyway,’ Pete nodded at her glass, ‘drown your languishing blues in the rest of that, and spare a thought for me; I must have ‘chorus candy’ tattooed on my forehead.’

Fen ran a finger down the condensation beading up the glass.

‘Well,’ she said, holding it up, ‘here’s to West End mediocrity.’

‘Here’s to escaping it.’

‘Hear, hear.’

‘Speaking of which,’ he said, ‘I have something to show you. Not tonight, but soon.’

‘Go on then, what is it?’

‘It’s a script for a play.’

‘I didn’t know you were writing,’ Fen said, though it made sense; she had often seen him, backstage, scratching a stump of a pencil on a scrappy notebook.

‘I’ve only been at it for five years. I want to take it to Edinburgh Festival ... and I think you should be in it.’

‘Really?’ she smiled.

‘Of course; you’re perfect for the crone character in Act III.’

‘Right, the crone.’

‘I’m joking, love. I have you in mind for the stunningly witty but deeply flawed Anna. I’d love you to read it and tell me if you’re even just the tiniest bit interested.’

‘Well, naturally I’m more than a tiny bit interested in reading what you’ve spent five years writing.’

‘That’s a relief. Otherwise I’d have to throw myself off this boat. Or you.’

‘What does this Anna character get up to then?’

‘You’ll find out if you read it. I would have brought it with me tonight—I considered wrapping it up with a bow, like a gift—but then I thought you might think I was dedicating it to you, which might be awkward, since I’m not. Plus, I didn’t feel like lugging it around all day. It’s a fat slab of work.’ He mimed slapping it down in front of her. ‘Anyway, I’ll drop it round, tomorrow maybe?’

‘I feel privileged.’

‘And so you should.’

Fen made a little stage bow, which Pete mirrored, adding extra hand flourishes.

‘So,’ he said after they’d stopped giggling, ‘do you think you might be up for it? Touring the fringe circuit, maybe if we’re lucky winding up somewhere like the Donmar? I could write in a nude scene if you like, à la Nicole Kidman.’

‘I don’t know. What if it’s a backward step, doing fringe stuff again?’ She recalled the low-brow pub tours, the odours of old beer and tobacco, the technical hitches, the heckling. But there had been lots of laughs too, not to mention actually being in front of an audience and meeting, even surpassing, their expectations. She imagined being on the road with Pete and crew, a van and a convoy of props and energy. It might be fun. If nothing else, it would be a change from feeling not quite good enough. And maybe something more could develop between her and Pete; maybe he could keep her interested. She traced a mental line through the string of lukewarm relationships she’d had in London. All of them echoed the frolic and gloss of her life in

West End theatres: shiny and upbeat on the surface, but on the inside, in the end, profoundly disappointing.

‘I’m honoured, Pete, really. I’ll have to think about it though. God knows I’m over the understudy business, but what if there’s a lead role just around the corner, and I’m up in Scotland enjoying myself?’

‘God, imagine that, enjoying yourself.’

She smiled. ‘Another drink?’

‘Absolutely. So, when is the karaoke starting? Wasn’t this supposed to be a karaoke party?’

‘Any moment now, I imagine, if it’s up to Henrietta there.’ Henrietta had a microphone in her hand and was fiddling with her laptop. She’d downloaded some new karaoke software and had convinced Fen that flooding the night sky over the river Thames with karaoke magic would be a good way to celebrate her thirty-three years on the planet.

Watching the barman fill another two champagne flutes, Fen wondered what Zach would say about her returning to the fringe. She pictured him on the boat again, but he wasn’t looking at her now; he’d slipped into his own world, gazing out over the water.

Four

Opening the door and taking in the entrance hall of her flat, Fen felt her mood plummet. At night, the place revealed its true nature. It was just a small, borrowed sliver of the city, and its damp winter smell had lingered all through spring.

Fen dropped her bag, pressed play on her answering machine and decided to cook an omelette. Chopping garlic, basil and thyme, taking extra drunken care, she breathed in deeply, thinking maybe she should take a holiday, head over to France again for a few weeks, or Italy this time. Maybe Henrietta would want to get away from Aaron for a bit, join her on a road-trip. Probably not; they were joined at the hip, those two.

She wondered what Drew was working on. She'd never dared look at the scripts he'd emailed her over the years; she couldn't afford to be tempted. And yet, she still had his number in her phone.

As she chopped, listening to a birthday message from her cousin, the rich blend of fragrances triggered in her a longing for her mum that surprised her; she was accustomed to a numbness bordering on contempt when she thought of Carmela. To combat the longing, she focused on Carmela's negativity. But it didn't silence her mother's mesmeric voice in her head, singing as she prepared tiramisu or home-made pasta, or rolled out pizza bases to freeze, or as she boiled, preserved and bottled everything she'd managed to coax out of the ground. Fen reminded herself that her mum had never come to London, had never seen her on a West End stage. Instead, she was content to fritter away her time in her rammed-earth house down south, far away from people in general, and Fen in particular. She tended the small farm of fruit and

herbs, vegetables and dogs and sheep, exactly where Fen had left her, and where Frank had left them both when Fenella was six.

If ever there had been tenderness between her parents, Fen had never seen it. By the time she'd been old enough to notice, they'd already been a couple in serious decline. Fen remembered Carmela bristling at Frank's conciliatory touch, looking at him witheringly as he tried to liven things up with some music; Frank Zappa, usually, or Pink Floyd. If Carmela was in a sour mood, he would try Chris de Burgh, but then he would roll his eyes conspicuously at Fenella, which would send Carmela off in anger. Fen would have left the marriage too, if she'd been in Frank's shoes. Who could live like that? No, she'd blamed her mother entirely when he left; blamed Carmela for the feeling that her life had imploded, like a house swallowed by a sinkhole. Days had passed without Frank's coming home; days, then weeks, swelling into years, and all because her mother couldn't get over herself. *Get over yourself*, Fen remembered sneering as her mum pleaded with her to care about her future, her education. *I do care Mum, and that's why I want to get away from you.*

Tim's voice sang out on the answering machine: 'Have I got a birthday present for you, Fenelope. Are you listening? Brace yourself.'

Her knife hovered over a small green mound of herbs as Tim continued, 'Not only does David want to renew your contract, but a certain director of a certain casting agency, involved in a certain production you've always wanted to be in, was blown away by you in one of your matinees, and she wants you to please audition for a certain role. Have I got your attention, birthday girl? Happy birthday by the way.'

Fen could feel the blood pulsing in her temple. The message had run out, but Tim's voice returned in the next one. 'Why do you never answer your mobile, Fenugreek? This landline nonsense is so nineteen-ninety-four. Anyway, the audition is

tomorrow at eleven o' clock. Give me a call. Bye bye! Oh, and it's only for Elphaba, baby! Yes! Happy birthday!

Elphaba: the lead in *Wicked*. She'd have to paint her face green every day if she got the part, but she'd be in *Wicked*. And she'd been invited to audition. Knife in the air, she did a little dance, dropping bits of basil on the floor. Maybe her time in purgatory was nearly over and she was about to ascend to some kind of performer heaven. God, she hoped so, but she knew she had to temper that hope. The more she fed it, the more it hurt when it was crushed. And it had been crushed many, many times.

Eating her late-night omelette on the couch, with Facebook for company, she read the birthday messages left by friends on her wall, acknowledging each of them with a 'like'. After trawling through status updates while she ate, idly reading comments, she paid a visit to one of Zach's fan pages. There were many of them, some automatically generated, others made by fans, but Fen preferred the official one. It seemed like a real online presence, even if it was most likely put together by his public relations people. She knew it was stupid, and probably a little tragic that she persisted with this ritual, but it was difficult to stop. Looking at his pictures, especially the early publicity shots and stills, helped her remember him, and herself too, the person she was when he looked at her the way he now looked out of the frames she scrolled through.

'Elphaba, Zacharoo,' she whispered.

There were still way too many pictures of June Berry there; June and Zach in black and white, sharing a milkshake, Zach looking at June backstage after one of her shows, June basking in his gaze. Fen wondered when he would get his people to take them down and restore his status as eligible god.

A text came through from Frank: *Happy birthday Fenella! Hope you've given it horns. Hard to believe it was 33 years ago you came into our lives. Lotsa love, Dad.*

Flowers would probably arrive in the morning. Or next week. He always remembered at the last minute.

'Thanks Dad, horns were given! X'

She bypassed Twitter. Zach seldom tweeted, especially now that he was in hiding in Perth. She shivered to think that he was there, and she was here.

Shut up fool, she told herself, closing her laptop. She sat a while in the semi-dark, too tired to move, until at last she went to bed, leaving the dishes to soak till the morning.

Five

Fen woke late on Saturday morning. There was a light drizzle, but the day felt warm. As she made her breakfast of coffee and porridge, she imagined croissants and melting butter and glistening jam. She preferred porridge, she reminded herself, and besides, there was always a price to pay for pastry joy. Aside from gradual waist expansion, there was the more immediate threat of her audition being marred by indigestion.

Settling into the couch, she reached for the remote and turned on the TV. After flicking through reruns and talk shows, she settled on the 24-hour news channel and its exposé on a politician who was still hotly denying any involvement in a white collar fraud syndicate.

‘Busted,’ Fen muttered, reaching for her coffee as the reporter delivered a searing conclusion before throwing back to the sombre anchorwoman.

In breaking news, the entertainment world is reeling at news of the death of well-known Hollywood actor Zach Matthews.

Fen spilled coffee on the table cloth. As though from a distance, she watched the dark liquid spreading through floral swirls. She heard herself breathing, saw her hands reach for tissues to mop it up.

The Perth-born actor, best known for his Oscar-winning role in British director Andrew Stewart’s ‘In for a Penny’, was found dead in his Cottesloe home yesterday morning. There are no details yet as to what killed the 35-year-old star, but police are not treating his death as suspicious. Recent reports have detailed his impending divorce and suggested he struggled with alcohol, drugs and depression.

Memories rushed in like floodwaters; his voice, his skin, the smell of him; the coldness in his eyes just before Fen saw him for the last time.

‘I can’t believe it,’ she said to the empty room as the news reader moved on to the next story, snatching away the file photo of Zach.

Fen was glad they hadn’t shown any images of him on his legendary benders. They would drag them out of the archives soon enough, no doubt, after a so-called decent interval, but for now Fen was glad not to have to see them again. Not that she could avoid them parading through her mind anyway, images of him looking brazenly high on the red carpet, or drunk and angry late at night somewhere. In at least one regrettably candid interview, he’d said that insomnia was behind his alcohol problem, though Fen couldn’t remember him having any trouble sleeping when she knew him. They had just drifted off together, night after night, sleeping late into the next morning. Or at least she had, and she’d always assumed he had too, but maybe she’d been wrong. Maybe he’d lain awake, turning things over and over in his mind, in the dark; tormented, just like in *Down Town*. She could see him now, slumped against a corrugated fence, the camera pulling in for an unflinching close-up of the desolation on his face.

She stood up. Her legs felt weak, but she felt light, as though she were floating above her body. She needed to be outside.

In the glare of daylight, the membrane of disbelief burst, a silent bursting, silent as the tears that streamed down her face. She walked, taking corners as they came, knowing she looked a mess, but not caring. People stared, one even offered her a tissue, but she kept moving, aware only that the drizzle had lifted, and Zach was dead.

A church, set back from the street, drew her in. She’d never seen it before, though it must have been there forever. It was empty, with an ancient silence. She sat in

a pew, looking up at the distant curve of the ceiling overhead and the stained-glass windows with their tiny, pure fragments of colour.

§

It was Amy who met Zach first. She found him busking in Fremantle and brought him home to the rental she shared with Fenella. It was a low, old house in Swanbourne, and they could only afford it because it was east of the highway and crying out for demolition.

Fenella was in the kitchen, making papier mâché glue to make masks for a contemporised version of *Antigone*. Amy stopped at the door and leant against the frame. Her face was flushed and her hands seemed unusually restless, playing with her bag strap and twining her hair around a finger.

‘Hi Nella,’ she said, ‘how’s the costume?’

Zach appeared behind her, his loose dark curls falling across his face, a guitar strapped to his back. Fenella had seen him on campus once or twice, although not recently.

‘Pretty good, I think,’ she said, wishing she’d brushed her hair, or at least changed out of her pyjamas. ‘I’ve got the glue mix right, at least.’

‘Zach and I are going to have a bit of a jam. This is Zach, by the way. Found him selling his soul in Freo.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Fenella said. ‘Any luck with the soul-peddling?’

‘I made about fifty bucks.’

‘Not bad.’

‘Souls like mine don’t come cheap.’

A dimple creased his left cheek.

‘Well,’ Amy said, ‘good luck with the mask. We’ll just be in my room.’

Zach followed Amy through the kitchen. ‘Cool name,’ he said, smiling, ‘Fenella.’

Fenella didn’t hear much music from Amy’s room as she shredded a newspaper and blew up balloons. But as she began the paper-layering process, she heard a few chords, and then they launched into a rough version of Sinead O’Connor’s ‘Nothing Compares to You’. Amy had been playing around with it recently, hoping to expand her set-list. One guitar lagged behind the other on the changes. After that, they gave a Nirvana track a go. It was more coherent, but they stopped before it was finished and everything went quiet. Amy came into the kitchen and grabbed a couple of drinks from the fridge. She gave Fenella a wink and went back to her room.

Fenella finished her mask and put it out to dry in the breezy evening sunlight while she had a shower and got dressed. She was on the sofa putting purple polish on her toenails when they emerged.

‘Good jam?’ she asked.

‘Not bad,’ Amy said.

‘Different influences and stuff,’ Zach said, ‘but it was fun. We might do it again.’

Amy nodded then flinched, looking at her watch. ‘Shit, I’d better get going. I’ve got a gig tonight at Mojoes, open mic. You guys fancy coming along, for moral support?’

The barman at Mojoes seemed to know Zach; he stowed his guitar behind the bar for him and shouted them the first round. They drank and played pool and drank some more, watching Amy’s band gear up for the first set.

Amy curled her fingers around the microphone and closed her eyes while the drummer thudded a slow pulse for the bass guitar to echo. The lead guitar melody slipped over them both like silk, and when Amy opened her mouth to sing, the whooping and stamping of feet fell away, leaving nothing but the caress of her voice. Amy herself seemed transformed by it, as though she was channelling it from some other realm. Fenella saw a sheath of goose bumps spread over her skin, making the backlit hairs on her arms stand on end, and she wondered if she could do it too, stand on a stage and sing. She'd love to weave that kind of spell. But she didn't think she could get so naked in public. Acting was much safer.

The next band was setting up as Zach lowered another jug of beer on to the table and took out his rollies. 'Hey,' he said, sitting down, 'what are you guys doing tomorrow afternoon? I'm going to an audition at Murdoch Uni. You should come along, it's an open audition.'

'I have to work,' Amy said. 'Can I bum one of those?'

'Sure thing,' he said, working the tobacco into the paper groove.

'I can be there,' Fenella said.

'Cool,' he said, smiling.

§

The church had become a cold place, suddenly too quiet, but Fen's tears were gone, and she headed home through the quiet streets.

There was a parcel on the steps outside her door. It was Pete's script, with a note saying he'd waited a while but had to get back to work. Inside, Fen sat down and pulled it out of the envelope, glancing at its cover before putting it down on the coffee table. After staring at it for a while, reading its title *The End* over and over, she got up and

washed the dishes. Drying her hands, she flicked the kettle on. It groaned and creaked to life, and she stared at it, her eyes becoming glazed, until it dawned on her that her *Wicked* audition had been and gone; she'd missed it.

Six

Tim was flustered when Fen told him she'd missed the audition, though he managed sympathy when she told him why. He said he'd do his best to talk the casting agent into giving her another chance. He also offered to explain the situation to Dave, who was pushing for an answer about the contract.

'Thanks, Tim,' Fen said, trying to run her fingers through her knotted hair. 'I might go away for a while, but I'll stay in touch.'

She went to bed with her laptop after that and booked a ticket to Perth. She'd had no real claim on Zach, she knew that, but even so, his death had torn open that old scar, and the wound was deep and raw, dragging her into itself like a black hole in deep space. She had to go home. She wanted to be at Zach's funeral; she wanted just to exist, for a while, in the place where he'd spent his last months. It was pitiful, but there it was.

She paid online for a week at the Cottesloe Beach Hotel then shut down the computer. Lying back on her bed, she stared up at the ceiling. It would be early winter in Perth; not too cold, she imagined, probably just cold enough for a light coat.

Rolling on to her side, she traced with her eyes the familiar outline of her bedside table lamp, and checked the dim figures on her digital clock radio. It was past midnight, but sleep felt far away.

§

The audition Zach had invited her to was in a rehearsal space next to the Murdoch campus gym; it had a high ceiling and massive black drapes hiding stored props and

costumes. About fifteen girls were huddled in small groups or wandering around the room, finding focus. There were eight or nine guys there too. Zach waved at Fenella and smiled an easy smile as he ambled over, hands loose by his sides.

‘Hey, you made it.’

‘Yeah, wasn’t too hard to find. Seems like a cool campus.’

‘I’ve got a few friends studying here. The tavern’s miles away, but you get that.’

‘I forgot to ask what the play is.’

‘Some kind of myth story, I think, about Narcissus. Not a lot of parts going.’

A tall girl with red hair emerged from a door at the back of the room, a clipboard in her hand. Clearing her throat, she waited until everyone was quiet and all eyes were on her.

‘Thanks, all of you, for coming. For those who don’t know, I’m Lara, a Masters student here at Murdoch Uni, and I’ve written an adaptation of Ovid’s myth of Narcissus and Echo, which is what these auditions are for. I’d like to see your monologues first, and then I’ll get you to pair up and perform a bit of dialogue from the script.’

She gave a pile of hand-outs to the guy nearest her, saying, ‘take one, pass it on. Rod will call your number.’

‘What’s your piece?’ Zach asked Fenella.

‘Titania in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. And yours?’

‘Vladimir’s monologue, from *Waiting for Godot*. We put it on last year as our final year production: “The air is full of our cries... but habit is a great deadener.” Do you know it?’

‘No. It’s Beckett though, right?’

‘Yeah, you can borrow it if you like. It’s well-thumbed, and I’ve made notes all over it, but it’s readable. Just.’

‘Sure you can bear to be parted from it?’

‘For you... maybe.’

He smiled, and held up the dialogue, which had just reached him.

‘You want to pair up for this?’ he asked.

‘Sure.’

They went outside, where it was quieter, and read through it together a few times before Zach’s number was called. Fenella stayed outside to warm up further and find the zone. When her number was called, she was ready.

In the darkened theatre, she closed her eyes to anchor herself, breathing away nerves and claiming her space on the small stage. She wore a white dress of cotton, layered over with softened tulle, and a crown she’d fashioned out of native wisteria. They helped her become the fairy queen. When she opened her eyes again, she was there, in the strange magic of portrayal. The forest was lush and humid, and there was the audacious Oberon, ill met by moonlight, slinging insults her way and demanding she hand over the changeling boy. The words came freely; she *was* Titania, queen of the fairies, pinning epic climatic evils on Oberon’s jealousy.

She removed her crown for the dialogue scene with Zach, but the dress suited the role well enough, so she kept it on. Lara and Rod had set up a couple of benches on-stage, one representing the interior of a train, the other, a station. Now, Fenella was Echo, seated beside Narcissus, waiting for a train.

NARCISSUS looks at his watch, confused. He stands up, and ECHO follows him as he walks along the platform. Oblivious to her presence, he presses the information button.

DISEMBODIED VOICE: Your next train departs in 17 minutes.

N: (Mutters) Idiot.

E: (Fondly) Idiot.

N: (Noticing her) I'm sorry?

E: (Sprung) Sorry...

Raising his eyebrows, but smiling a little, NARCISSUS goes back to his seat and takes out his phone. ECHO sits down nearby and takes out her phone too. After a while, NARCISSUS puts his away.

N: Got off at the wrong station as well?

E: Well...

N: (After a moment's awkward silence, laughs) Is that a yes or a no?

E: A... no.

NARCISSUS raises his eyebrows again and looks away, not sure what to make of her. He is intrigued, but wary. They sit in silence a while, ECHO stealing glances at NARCISSUS.

N: So, what are you up to tonight?

E: Tonight?

N: Yeah, you got any plans?

E: (Shakes her head) You got any plans?

N: I'm supposed to be meeting my mates at the next stop. Got off too soon. They're waiting for me there though, which is cool.

E: Cool.

N: Come out with us if you like.

E: (Smiles) If you like.

Being on stage with Zach was like being underwater with him, as though she could feel his every movement brushing against her in waves.

‘Thanks, guys,’ Lara said. ‘That was fantastic. Would you mind running through another scene?’ She brought it down to them. ‘It’s a picnic, later in the play. Take your time,’ she smiled at Zach. ‘Have a read-through first, if you like.’

IN THE WOODS, a sign reads: ‘Sculptures in the Trees: An Exhibition’. There are a number of unusual sculptures that play with light and sound. Some of them are on stage, while others, including a fawn surrounded by centaurs, and a giant twisting curve of stainless steel, are depicted on a backdrop.

NARCISSUS and ECHO wander around, studying the sculptures, one of which is a large concrete cylinder, on its side, like a storm water drain.

ECHO spreads out a picnic blanket. NARCISSUS pours wine, feeds ECHO cheese, but he seems bored. When ECHO tries to take his face in her hands, NARCISSUS stands and wanders around, looking idly at the sculptures and plants. ECHO shadows him, and when he stops she comes closer, not quite touching him. Her hands trace the outline of his shoulders. He picks a flower, puts it behind her ear and considers her briefly before slowly taking her by the hips. They stand like that for a moment, ECHO hardly breathing.

N: You know I don’t love you.

E: (Whispers, touching his face) ... love you.

N: Though I like the way you touch me.

E: (Closing her eyes as N puts his hand over hers) Touch me.

N: (Removing her hand from his cheek) I wish you wouldn’t do that.

E: Do that?

N: That. Repeat everything. It doesn’t make for great conversation.

E: (Trying a coy look) Conversation?

‘Okay, thanks guys,’ Lara said, smiling again. ‘That was perfect; I’ll be in touch.’

Fenella waited a few days before telling Amy she’d won the part of Echo. Amy seemed happy for her, but she looked a little surprised as well, giving her a sideways look later that Fenella chose not to analyse too closely.

Fenella was early for the first rehearsal. She loved the creaking, haphazard logic of the Blue Room theatre, the slash of steel steps outside, leading up the eastern wall. Standing on the tiny landing, near the back entrance through the old diner, she watched Zach come clanging up those steps, the dark chasm of a construction site between him and the city lights.

Lara hadn’t arrived yet; they were locked out. Zach sat on the top step and pulled a tobacco pouch from his pocket. ‘Smoke?’

‘Won’t say no,’ Fenella said, sitting down next to him. She watched his fingers as he worked the tobacco fibres, forming an elongated clump in the crease of paper and rolling it up with practised precision. He held it up for her, a perfect specimen. ‘Thanks,’ she said, leaning close to catch the flame he offered. Things she might say drifted through her mind while he worked on his own cigarette: things about the play, about Amy’s band, about getting the hell out of Perth. But she said nothing, just smoked and enjoyed the warmth of his body so nearly touching hers. He looked up at her as he licked the glue strip, in his eyes the hint of a smile.

Lara arrived and led them inside, through the bar and the black drapes and into the dark, windowless theatre. Then she retreated with her script to the back row, leaving the two of them alone in the dim light of the stage. They were so close to each other that Fenella could hear Zach breathing and smell the sea on his skin, mingled with sweat and tobacco. It was easy for her to be at his mercy, as scripted.

Fen rolled on to her back again and looked up at the ceiling, at the glowing plastic stars left up there by the previous tenants. She knew it wouldn't be easy getting on a plane after all this time avoiding it. That was why she'd booked a flight that left early the next day. It was like ripping off a band aid: the sooner she boarded the plane, the less time she'd have to think about it.

Seven

Fen was nervous at take-off. She felt too much of it in her body, the unnatural pressure, the feeling that the whole unlikely contraption was going to explode. She closed her eyes and chewed her gum, gripping the arm rests until the plane had levelled out. After that, there were magazines to read, people to look at; ways to forget she was 30,000 feet in the air.

After a while, she felt calm enough to draw up the blind and look out. The clouds cast shadows on the sea far below. She'd never noticed them before, those dark echoes on the ocean's skin.

London was slipping away behind her, and already she missed its architecture, silent backdrop to so much noise and colour. It was a magnificent place, and so full of possibilities, even if most of them she had yet to realise. For example, she hadn't yet had to lunch behind the stained-glass windows of *The Ivy* in order to escape the stares and startling shouts of fans. She had never gone to one of the after-parties rumoured to take place at a certain pub she'd never found, attended only by big stars in the know. The disappointment was acute, especially now that she was flying home with so little to show for her time away except a vague sense of failure where once the promise of greatness had thudded away like a second pulse.

She wondered if Tim had called that casting agent yet.

The drinks trolley reached her. She asked for red wine, and ejected her gum on to a scrap of paper. Fortunately there was no one meeting her at the airport; no one to smile sympathetically and say things like, at least you're working, or, at least you escaped Dullsville. She'd made sure she would arrive alone and have a chance to gather

herself together before seeing anyone she knew, and that included her parents. It wasn't about them anyway, this trip. They were as peripheral to her life now as guardians could get, and she liked it that way.

The red wine in its plastic cup made her grimace. She sipped it slowly as she checked the movie guide, propelled by an unnerving certainty that she would find one of Zach's films in there. And there were two: the romantic comedy that had made him famous and a less successful one made during his low period, when the booze and drugs had taken a serious toll. She couldn't watch *Down Town* again, not now; couldn't bear the defeat and despair in the heaviness of his shoulders, in the smallness of his smile. It suited the character, but Fen suspected there'd been more to it than that; she suspected the darkness in that performance had been Zach's own. He'd worked hard to keep it in check when he was with her, to wash it away with jokes and another round of whatever it was they were drinking, but sometimes he'd failed. Like the evening they spent drinking bourbon and cola at Bathers' Beach in Fremantle, at the mouth of the old Whaler's Tunnel.

'People try to beautify death,' Zach said, and the word *death* made Fenella's stomach lurch. 'They make it all pretty with flowers and cards and gentle music,' he ground his heel into the sand, 'or they just ignore it. But I see it everywhere. Decay, futility; face after face of it. Everything's just hollow, really. Don't you think?'

Fen watched the air hostess demonstrate safety procedures and wondered what had made Zach so sad, so prone to addiction and self-sabotage. She wondered why his success hadn't lifted that darkness. Maybe it was the roles he kept landing. He'd always talked about making Arthouse films, directing as well as acting in them, and yet he'd settled for lucrative mass appeal. Maybe he'd ruined himself to undermine that a little, to win back some credibility, only to find that being the object of mass lust was preferable to being the object of scorn or pity.

No, Fen decided, as she finished her wine; she wasn't up for tormented Zach. But she could probably handle *In for a Penny*, she thought, looking at the still of him, used for the poster, the light tracing the beautiful line of his half-turned face.

She pulled on her headphones and lay back against the pillow. The opening scene had him reading a book on a park bench. The camera drew in on his face, almost of its own accord, as though answering its own desire to be closer to him, maybe to catch a hint of his ocean smell.

The plane was momentarily a plaything to turbulence, but in that moment it was sadness, not fear, that constricted Fen's throat.

His love interest appeared on screen, jogging, in Central Park, as did every female lead in surely every Hollywood film in the early nineties. She was gorgeous, implausibly so, and it was painful to Fen even to anticipate the love scenes that she knew were soon to unfold on the screen. And yet she watched, because she knew she'd be seeing a hand that was an echo of her own, tracing the line of Zach's jaw in a kiss and fumbling with the button on his jeans. He'd never lifted her off the ground so she could wrap her legs around his waist, in that other tired cinematic tradition not overlooked in this film, but he had kissed her neck as he kissed the imposter's on the screen. And he'd looked at her with those same eyes, eyes that really saw her, and really wanted to see more.

The polish of the film was a world away from his first feature, a small-budget student film, made in Melbourne and only screened in a handful of cinemas after he became famous. He'd played a Greek teenager in suburban Melbourne, a boy really, with a wild imagination kept in check by his strict Orthodox parents and elders. He'd made it shortly after moving there, late in the same year that Fenella had tried her luck in that cold, sad city of adventure and culture and lost souls. She'd calculated once that he must have arrived only a few months after she'd left. She liked to imagine that he'd

followed her there, to tell her all was forgiven, and they could be the love cats again, taking Melbourne by storm, together. It made sense, because he'd always talked about going to Sydney, not Melbourne; why would he have tried his luck in the city of *her* dreams, not his own, if he hadn't been looking for her? She'd spent many hours imagining what might have happened if he'd found her; so many hours, in fact, that it was almost a memory in its own right.

But he hadn't found her, hadn't called her name as she walked down an old narrow street with walls covered in posters and drawings plastered over one another in peeling layers of artful graffiti. They hadn't sat down and faced each other across a tiny table under an outdoor gas heater so that he could take her hands and tell her he forgave her, that he accepted his portion of the blame, and that they could still be together. Melbourne would not have been so cold if those things had really happened, if they had found a place together, waited for trams together, wrapped up in each other's coats; if they had stayed in, some nights, in front of the heater, drinking wine and coffee, reading and drawing each other, as before.

But it had been cold there, bitterly, bone-achingly cold, and she'd been depressed by the desperate homeless, the doomed kids on the streets, and the junkies down St Kilda way. In the six months she'd endured it, she'd done some minor plays and a short student film, but she'd grown tired of waiting in the wind straight off some icecap somewhere for trams that took forever to appear on the horizon then took forever again to approach, stop by stop by creaking stop. She'd grown tired of waiting for Zach to materialise, or for some other miracle to happen. So she'd pressed her dad for the money to give it a go in London instead. If she was going to freeze to death, she'd thought, it might as well be somewhere significant.

It was only later, when she'd found out that Zach had arrived so soon after she'd left, that regret had set in and tainted her glorious escape.

And now he was dead. He was no longer a man whose moments of darkness could lift at the sight of a full moon or a brush of colour in the sky, who could surrender his nihilism to a spread of goose bumps as Fenella's fingers dragged slowly, lightly, along his skin.

Turbulence rocked the plane again, and it dropped through the air like a morbid ride at a funfair. For a moment Fen didn't care. She willed the skies to take hold of it and throw it at the ground, because Zach was dead. His meaning could no longer unfold; his existence was fixed now between his birth and his unalterable death. But the plane was not thrown from the sky. The turbulence subsided, and the film rolled on.

Eight

Stepping out of the airport's limbo after a harrowing descent, Fen found herself under a West Australian sky that was dark and heavy. Rain was in the air, and it was cold.

Stretching her back while the taxi driver put her luggage in the boot, she watched as cars trawled past idle taxis, their wheels hissing on the gleaming wet tarmac as the drivers did slow one-way laps to avoid paying for parking.

'How was your flight?' the driver asked, catching her eye in the rear view mirror.

'A little hairy at the end.'

'Not surprised. Hell of a storm here over the weekend. Roofs off, trees and power down, you name it. More of it coming in tonight, and tomorrow.'

The smooth motion and impersonal interior of the taxi made her sleepy as they cruised towards the Graham Farmer tunnel, heading west.

At last they reached Cottesloe and the rise of Grant Street, Fen's first view of the ocean. She'd forgotten how magnificent it was, the vast expanse, all grey and choppy and streaked with white.

Flanked by glass-walled mansions, they approached the coast and turned south on to the promenade. Fen wanted to ask the driver if he knew which house was Zach's, but she didn't want to sound like a groupie. Besides, she didn't think she could say his name without crying; couldn't even think it without her eyes fogging over. They cruised along Marine Parade, past the Ocean Beach Hotel, through slow-points and pedestrian crossings, until they pulled up outside the Cottesloe Beach Hotel with its muted yellow Art Deco façade.

At the far end of an airless passage, Fen wrestled open the door to her room on the hotel's upper north-west corner. It was a tired, old space, dark and stuffy, but it felt luxurious all the same, just to be alone after twenty-plus hours in transit.

She threw her bag on the bed, opened the curtains and wrestled the rickety windows open. The French doors were more cooperative and she stepped out on to the awkwardly curved balcony. A chipped ashtray, and a plastic table and chairs, seemed careless and grubby there, unworthy of the view of the Norfolk pines and the grand teahouse overlooking the ragged sigh of water.

Usually, she'd expect to see people eating picnics and ice cream on the grass down below, or a half-hearted game of cricket going on between swigs of beer and banter. But today, there were just a few windswept people, taking advantage of the rain having eased off for a bit. Fen leaned over the chrome railing and breathed in the wet, briny air, the great sweep of moody light and space so unlike London.

Yawning, she stretched her weary body, but it was too early to sleep yet. She'd shower, dress warmly and join the lonely souls out there, if the weather held. Then she'd try to eat something for dinner, maybe dip a toe in the water. She wouldn't go to bed until it was dark, or she'd be up before dawn.

In the bathroom, she turned on the shower then went back out to switch on the wall-mounted TV while the water warmed up. She found nothing worth watching, but left it on anyway, listening for more of the accent she hadn't realise she'd missed.

The hot water was magic, and in the shower she sang *I dreamed a dream*, enjoying the resonance of her voice and the steady backdrop of water pelting against the glass. It was an effort to turn it off and step out, but the towel was thick and soft in consolation. The whir of the fan was loud as she wiped the condensation off the mirror and studied her face in the regathering mist. 'I love you,' she murmured, looking into

her eyes; an old trick from her first acting workshop. It had felt so irreverent that first time, saying it to herself in a studio with wall-to-wall mirrors on the upper storey of the Camelot theatre. She'd felt pathetic, in the beginning, trying to act; a mere plaything of her nerves. Her voice had seemed a feeble rasp. But the rhythmic focus games and ice-breaking silliness had worked her body free of its neurotic clench, and after a few classes, the sound of her own voice filling the room had no longer made her cringe. At her first performance, with a sea of rapt faces on the periphery of her awareness, she'd felt like a shaman, captivating her tribe with the strange and wonderful magic of the underworld.

Wrapping the towel around herself, she left the bathroom with its curling steam and many shades of white. The weather hadn't held after all. The rain was coming down steadily now, and the ocean, not to be outdone, looked dark and severe.

Stretching out on the bed, Fen was glad to be horizontal at last. The blare of television ads washed over her exhausted body and she began to drift off, only to be jarred awake by the bombast of a news bulletin. The news reader drew her in with a voice rich and oozing concern.

'Good Evening. Tonight: Stormy weather: Scenes of devastation across Perth as some 17,000 homes lose power.'

There was footage of trees tossed by the wind against a backdrop of heavy skies; then more trees, uprooted and draped over homes, cars, fences and power lines across the city. A windswept reporter, with several dark ships on the horizon behind him, shouted that big seas and high winds meant Fremantle port had suspended work until morning.

The climatic drama unfolding beyond her small balcony gave Fen a subtle thrill, but it was melancholy weather, and she felt like Rapunzel in her tower, hiding from

loneliness blowing in on the wind. At least there was TV, she thought, turning up the volume.

Stay safe, the newsreader urged, sustaining her sombre tone as she moved on to the next piece: *And now, an update on the Zach Matthews story.*

Zach's face filled the screen, unsmiling, caught off-guard by one of those photographers who waited until the posed smile faded, or said something cruel to make sure it did. Zach wore a malevolent expression. Fen knew it well, that look, recognised it from the last time she saw him. She hadn't been able to talk her way out of it then, any more than she could look away from it now.

There was a woman with him, though she'd been cropped out of the frame. It was June Berry. You could still see her shoulder and a sliver of green satin, and the cherry blossom tattoo on her neck.

'The Perth-born actor, whose death on Friday shocked fans around the world, is believed to have been found dead in his bath, according to a police statement made late today. Police have refused to release the name of the man who found the body, but have confirmed that he is not suspected of any involvement in the death.'

File footage followed of Zach on the red carpet, stopping and smiling, serving himself up to the cameras and the hordes behind them. He posed like the professional he'd become, giving each lens its due.

'Police have refused to respond to speculation that alcohol or drugs may have been a factor in the drowning death. Although he claimed recently to have been sober for nineteen months, the actor had faced a public battle with alcohol and narcotics, attending rehabilitation clinics no fewer than five times in the past three years.'

Next was a montage of publicity shots, all archetypal poses: the lover, the warrior, the beautiful boy.

'Mr Matthews' parents have yet to come forward to make a statement regarding his death or plans for a funeral, but bereaved Perth fans have held a vigil outside his Cottesloe home since news of his death broke last week. They paid a spontaneous sunset tribute to him last night on the beach below the residence. A spokesperson for the group said Matthews would be remembered long after his death as an actor of tremendous talent and empathy. His estranged widow, singer June Berry, 24, has declined to respond to media enquiries.'

The news reader moved on, and Fen found the off switch, pressed it with a trembling hand. Pulling back the heavy bedding, she dropped her hotel robe to the floor and climbed in between the cool sheets. She had no appetite for fish and chips anyway.

Wide-eyed, she lay in the fading light, listening to the steady downpour. Zach had drowned. He'd slid down the ceramic curve of his designer bath and drowned, just like that, his brain probably too numbed by alcohol and who knew what else to notice the cessation of air. She imagined him, just below the surface of the water, as though floating. He was perfectly still with the hint of a smile, his hair swirling at first, then not anymore.

Such silence, all around him, and within. No blood rush in his ears, just a water-logged hush, for who knew how long?

His sleep face, that's the face Fen gave him there, in the water. She'd loved that face, gazed at it on those rare occasions when she'd woken up first, trying not to breathe in case he moved, but at the same time hoping he would open his eyes and pull her in warm against him and his dreams.

Nine

The next morning, Fen sat on the balcony and watched the greys of rain and sky merge with the sulking sea. Hunger sent her back in, but she unpacked before going down to breakfast. She hated living out of a bag, with the endless rummaging it entailed.

Pete's script looked sullen on the dresser. The front page was still curled from being rolled up in her hand-luggage too long, and the ink of the title was slightly smudged. She promised herself she would read it soon. But first, breakfast.

Leaving behind the shabby elegance of her room, she headed downstairs. The restaurant was almost empty, though many of the tables were still cluttered with evidence of the breakfast rush. Fen chose a table next to the window, for the view, even if it was just of cars gliding past, obscured by rain streaking down the glass. She ordered coffee and a croissant with butter and jam. Ah, pastry, she thought: eat your heart out, Gwynn Ellis.

Someone had left a newspaper on the table. Zach's face was on the cover of the weekend supplement; inside was a reprint of an interview he'd done recently, promoting his last film. His answers read as though they'd been written by his publicist.

After the buttery sweetness and coffee, Fen wondered how to spend the morning. The rain wasn't going to let up any time soon, by the look of it. She decided to brave it, just to get near the ocean. She hadn't packed a raincoat, but there was a clutch of umbrellas looking forlorn in a stand in the lobby. Taking the biggest one, she stepped outside, hunching her shoulders against the cold wind.

The iconic pines stood dark and moaning against the heavy sky. Fighting the wind gusts that tried to push her off course, Fen headed down the steep path to the sand

and made for the shelter of the stately clubhouse. Framed by the dark arches above her head, rain and white horses jagged across the sea. It seemed fitting that the glare and glitter of the Cottesloe she remembered had given way to this mournful landscape, as though the elements too were angry that Zach had gone. She wanted to go out there and drench herself in it, be part of the fury, but she was cold already, and she hadn't brought many warm things from London. Instead, she stayed where it was relatively dry. She tried to spot Rottnest Island on the horizon, but it was hidden by the sky's swathes of grey.

§

Fenella watched from the bed as Zach pushed a towel into his bag. 'I don't see why Amy and I can't come with you to Rotto,' she said. 'You'll get plenty of time away from us when you're surfing.'

'It's just not the way these trips are meant to go. We're meant to be Spartan, noble in our manly discomfort. If you guys are there tending the fire, fluffing up pillows and satisfying our most basic urges...'

'You wish.'

He put his arms around her and rested his forehead on hers. 'You're so sweet when you're sulking.'

'I'm not sulking. I just think Amy and I could give your trip an added dimension of awesomeness.'

'I'm sure you would, too, but we like the dimensions as they are. Come on, you know I spend more time with you than I do with Ant these days.' He jabbed her gently in the ribs.

'Okay, stop it!' she laughed, 'I'll stop hassling you.'

Anthony was waiting on his parents' driveway when they pulled up. As Zach opened the boot, Fenella heard him tell Anthony that she was only there to drive his car home.

'Don't worry, Ant, I won't spoil your homo weekend,' she called through the open hatchback.

'That's good,' Zach said, with a wink.

They laughed, but then Fenella started to wonder. She looked at Anthony in the rearview mirror. He never seemed to have a girlfriend. Their eyes snagged a few awkward times in the mirror on the way.

When they arrived at the ferry terminal and Zach got out to open the boot, Anthony leaned forward and said, 'I am into girls, by the way.'

Fenella turned to look at him. 'I was only joking,' she said. She hadn't really looked at him before, had only been aware of him in a peripheral way as a lanky guy with too much hair. She noticed then that he had green-brown eyes and a scattering of freckles, and a salty smell a bit like Zach's, only mingled with cologne and a faint trace of last night's beer.

'Come on, brother,' Zach said, 'let's get moving.'

While Anthony got his bag and board, Zach dropped the car keys into Fenella's outstretched palm.

'You can drive, can't you?' He scanned the horizon, as though hoping a valet driver would materialize and spare him the risk of leaving the car in Fenella's hands.

'Of course I can. But if you'd rather pay a million dollars in parking fees to leave it here in the sun and through the night for vandals, for three whole nights, I'm happy to take the train.'

'No no, I trust you.'

'All right then. Have fun, boys.'

‘Not too much fun though, right?’ he said, kissing her goodbye. His smell was better than Anthony’s, undiluted by cologne. ‘I’ll miss you.’

‘You will not,’ she smiled.

Anthony was ahead, near the terminal already. He shouted back to Zach over his shoulder, ‘Rottnest will float away before we get there at this rate.’

‘Oh yes I will,’ Zach said, hoisting his bag on to his shoulder and picking up his board ‘and you’d better miss me.’

He smiled and walked away, wind-whipped into the glare.

§

The rain showed no sign of lifting, so Fen headed back up to the hotel. She stepped into the road and didn’t notice a dark car sloshing towards her, without its lights on. When she looked up, it was almost upon her, and she froze, aware that she should step back before the heap of metal could mow into her and toss her into the air like a flimsy doll, her white cotton shirt and jacket flailing.

As though in a dream, she stepped back, out of the way.

The driver hooted and cruised on through the wet.

She stood on the kerb, heart thumping, rain pelting on the umbrella above her head. A second longer and there would have been a quiet thump, then a dense crack of body on windscreen, a thud of skull on tarmac. She could see the borrowed umbrella, twisted and broken, sticking out from under a motionless tyre: a morbid still life, depicting a small, avoidable death.

The rain started to come in sideways. Checking the road was clear, she headed across to the hotel. Inside the unattended lobby, she shook off the umbrella and slipped it back into the stand with the others.

In her room, Fen removed her wet clothes, her heart still thumping, her hands still trembling. She collapsed on to her bed. After a while, her breathing slowed and she sank into a fitful sleep heavy with murky dreams. In one of them, a woman narrated a documentary about Atlantis, using words like *apocalyptic* and *cataclysmic*, somewhat cheerfully. In another, Fen was awake but unable to move, though there were people in her room, potentially dangerous people, moving around, taking things.

She woke with a headache and a stiff neck. It was early afternoon, and still raining. Taking Pete's script outside on to the balcony, she sat down and contemplated the title page: *The End*. Some reference to *The Doors*? Fen didn't know, and she couldn't seem to turn the page to find out.

Ten

The wind took the morning's heavy clouds and spread them thin across a blue sky. Fen set off for a walk on the beach, planning to find Zach's house.

At the bottom of the ramp, she removed her sandals and sank her feet into the cool, soft sand. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been barefoot, outside, but it felt as though her feet had been aching for this feeling ever since.

All morning, she'd been seeing that car approaching in the rain. She'd pictured herself in a hospital bed, possibly unconscious, her body hopelessly broken. No one there would have had any idea who she was.

There was a briny chill in the air, and as she trudged toward the water's edge, she felt Zach there with her. He was in the solitude, in the sounds of far-off voices, in the heavy grey glare of the sky. He was there, and yet she couldn't touch him, just like in the early days, before she'd been able to take it for granted that she could.

§

In rehearsals, Lara had asked them to get to know each other better. 'You need to be comfortable around each other,' she'd said. 'The audience needs to believe you're lovers, or could be. Go out, do something together, something unrelated to the play.'

And so there they were, in the park, traipsing through the long grass, trouser hems soaking up the wet. There'd been a rare thunderstorm and the sky was a dark wash of grey above white-barked trees; smooth-skinned benevolent creatures, watching. Fenella looked up, her eyes drawn by a pulse of lightning, far off to the west, probably

over the sea. Her hand felt cold and stiff, clutching her beer in its brown paper bag. She changed hands and put her cold fingers in her pocket.

They hadn't spoken much since leaving the bottle shop, but the silence was spacious, like the night. The last bird had gone quiet; in its wake, a choir of insects took up the song, accompanied by a steady drub of frogs.

They sat near a low-walled fountain under one of the park's aged fig trees, their backs to the bulging mass of trunk. Zach opened his beer using his lighter, slipped the top into his jacket pocket then offered to open Fenella's.

'Thanks,' she said, passing it to him, watching him lever it open. He handed it back, wet with condensation and still icy cold.

'So,' Fenella said, running her hair behind her ear. 'Too polite with each other, are we?'

Zach smiled, 'Apparently so.'

Their eyes met for a moment, until Fenella looked away. She tore at a few blades of grass, then wiped her hand on her jeans and drank some more. The beer was beginning to filter through her, making her feel vast and free.

'So, how come you want to be an actor?' Zach asked. 'Did you always want to?'

'I think so,' she said. 'I just didn't think I could, until quite recently.'

'What happened recently?'

'I moved up from Nannup a couple of years ago to live with my dad.'

She stopped, not wanting to bore him, but he was looking at her, as though he were interested.

'I didn't know anyone,' she continued, 'and no one knew me, so when I saw an ad for an acting workshop, I thought, what the hell? Why not? I was so far out of my comfort zone already. After that I stacked shelves for a while, and then I auditioned for WAAPA and got in, amazingly enough. And that's about the story so far.'

He nodded.

‘What about you?’

‘I just always knew I wanted to do it.’

Fenella was glad he was looking away so she could watch him, the dimple coming and going from his left cheek as he talked.

‘My parents were all for it,’ he said. ‘They sent me to classes and workshops and took me to auditions from when I was really young. I was in a few ads, which hopefully you never saw.’

‘We didn’t have a telly back then.’

‘Phew. That’s the problem with starting so young, you have no idea. You’ll do anything, even *DryNites* ads... and then really come to regret it. Not that I did one of them or anything.’

‘Wish I’d seen that.’

‘No you don’t. Trust me.’ Another long pause, then he continued. ‘So, ask me something.’

‘Like what?’

‘Anything. We’re meant to be getting to know each other.’

‘Um,’ Fenella said, ‘okay. Where did you grow up?’

‘Here. Perth. Yawn.’

‘And what’s your favourite season?’

‘Summer. Or any time the surf’s good.’

‘Really? I wouldn’t have picked you for a surfer type.’

‘I don’t do types. Next.’

‘What’s your ideal role?’

‘Stage or screen?’

‘Either. Both.’

‘Wow, okay, how long have you got? There’s Hamlet, of course, and I’d love to do Vladimir from *Waiting for Godot* again, but in a better production than the one we threw together last year. And don’t tell anyone, but I wouldn’t mind being Danny from *Grease*, with all the leather and hair gel.’

‘And film?’

‘Well, there’s Travis from *Taxi Driver*, especially if I could do it opposite Cybill Shepherd. Then there’s Sam in *Dogs in Space*, and *Edward Scissorhands*, obviously.’

He sucked in his cheeks and looked mournfully at his hands.

Fenella laughed. ‘I detect a bit of a “zany hair” theme.’

‘What about you?’

‘Well, I see your Danny and raise you a Sandy, or even a *Pygmalion*, but that’s also off the record. Otherwise, any Shakespeare would be good, or maybe turning my hand to something like Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.’

‘Martha, hey? Pretty dark stuff.’

‘Challenging, I guess.’

‘Speaking of Martha, how’s your drink?’

‘Nearly gone.’

‘Mine too,’ he said, standing up, ‘and my arse is frigging freezing. This grass is wet.’

Fenella laughed at his grimace.

‘The question is,’ he said, slipping his lighter back in his pocket, ‘now what?’

‘Home, I guess.’

‘Oh come on, the night is young, and life is short. Let’s go somewhere.’

He held out his hand to pull her up. It was warm and dry, the same hand she’d held at rehearsals, and yet not the same at all.

‘Come on,’ he said, not letting go, and Fenella ran behind him, her bag thumping against her hip and the dregs of her beer sloshing around in its bottle. The air was fresh and damp on her cheeks like ocean spray.

§

Fen had made her way quite far north along the beach. Observation City hotel was visible in the distance, and she could see the Swanbourne lifesaving club just to her right. She headed up, past tall grasses bending in the wind, and rinsed her feet under the tap before joining walkers and cyclists on the path.

Any one of the sea-facing mansions she passed could have been Zach’s. She studied them all as she went. There was Tuscan architecture, some overgrown Art Deco, and lots of brutal modernism, but she could find no sign that Zach’s place was among them; no wreaths or huddled fans, no passers-by taking pictures.

She continued south, sure that she would encounter a vigil at any moment, but before too long she reached the main drag’s pine trees and the tower of the OBH, having seen nothing. She would have to press on, past the golf course, though she recalled only blocks of holiday apartments and heritage dumps down that way.

Cars crawled past apartments and kids ran amok on the beach playground. There was the surf shop she had walked past countless times, without ever going in. Momentarily tempted by the fish and chip shop, she kept going, not wanting to lose momentum. She got some water and frozen yoghurt at the gelato shop instead.

The golf course seemed to go on forever. Crossing back to the beach side of the road, she caught her first sight of the cranes of the Fremantle port up ahead. The ground fell away sharply to the right, and there were signs strung up on the grey wooden fence,

warning of unstable slopes. The sea seemed wilder down here, freer. There were fewer rocky groynes, and just one windswept walker on the beach.

She passed a retirement village, then a vacant block advertising the last of its narrow subdivisions. There were the units she had expected, a mysterious ramshackle building, and some humble double-storey houses. It was more subdued than the northern part of the suburb, much less ostentatious. It started to make sense that Zach would choose to have a house here.

She was just about to give up though, when she spotted a pile of wilting roses and wreaths and plastic-wrapped lilies propped up against a gate. A group of teenagers sat next to it, playing with their phones, and a small media contingent was camped on the far side of the road. As Fen got closer she saw that three amateurish portraits of Zach had been taped to the whitewashed wall. They flapped in the wind next to what looked like poetry scrawled on paper torn from a notepad.

Behind the wall, the house was tall and narrow, also painted white. Fen didn't venture over the road to it, but sat on the grass beside the footpath, watching the reflected sky move across its silent windows. She stayed, trying to imagine the interior, willing her mind to conjure up an image of Zach on the balcony for her, or returning from a swim, making wet footprints on the path. But it yielded a memory of his other place instead, the apartment he'd been renting when Fenella had first met him. They'd had time to kill between a matinee and an evening performance, and he'd lived just around the corner from the Blue Room theatre; it had made sense to go there.

§

Walking behind him along the open corridor to his door, Fenella barely noticed the early moon or the swirling swallows, or the pot plants that beautified the red-brick

surroundings, because as usual she was thinking about their onstage kiss. It was always there, in her mind; the closeness of him. It was such a heady moment that she was not really performing loss when he, as Narcissus, pulled away.

Zach's place was small, with all four rooms leading off a tiny entrance hall. He closed the door to his bedroom, but not before Fenella had noticed how sparsely it was furnished. There seemed to be little more than a large mattress in the middle of the room, covered by a sheet and a sleeping bag.

There was more going on in the lounge room though; two low sofas, a guitar on a stand, a CD player, and some Escher posters on the walls.

'Have a seat,' he said, opening French doors on to the tiny balcony overlooking the car park below. The branches of nearby trees brushed against the railings.

Fenella sank into one of the sofas.

'Tea or coffee? Water?'

'Got any herbal tea? I can't do caffeine before a show.'

'Me neither,' he said from the kitchen, as he flicked on the kettle, 'and I won't roll a spliff either, although I'm tempted. Throws me right off.' He stuck his head around the doorframe. 'Hope that doesn't shock you?'

'Oh, no, not at all,' Fenella said, leaning back and closing her eyes. She wondered if he ever thought about the kiss.

'So, what to do,' he said, handing her a chamomile tea, 'we have two hours.'

'I could probably sleep,' she said, though she didn't want to; she might snore or drool all over his sofa.

'Feel free.'

She sipped her tea. He'd put honey in it; good for the voice.

Life was loud outside; cars, laughter, sudden pulses of music. Zach got his guitar and started playing a few chords, nothing Fenella recognised. When she realised she

wasn't expected to listen, she pulled her feet up and closed her eyes. The music merged with the sounds of the city and the cacophony of birds gathering on the tree to mark the approach of dusk.

When she woke up, it was dark. Zach was on the balcony, talking on the phone. 'She's here, with me. Chill out. No, of course we haven't... you're paranoid. Just relax, ok? We'll be there soon.'

§

The wind had picked up, and Fen noticed the teenagers and reporters over the road zipping up coats and wrapping scarves around their necks. Fen thought she should leave, but couldn't. Not yet. His house wouldn't let her.

A reporter crossed the street and introduced himself, asking her if she wanted to share her thoughts on Zach's death or talent. For a moment, she was tempted; she wanted everyone to know that he'd been hers, some small part of him. But she shook her head and he left. Only when the sun had gone, leaving her cold, did she head back to the hotel, promising herself she'd come back with flowers. Nasturtiums, if she could find any. Zach had liked nasturtiums.

Eleven

Fen lay in bed the next morning, willing herself to get up and make the short trip down to Fremantle to visit her dad. She visualised it, hoping that would make it easier. She'd step off the train and make her way south along the coffee-strip, past the markets and then the hospital, heading for his breezy home on Douro Road. Perhaps she would stop at a café and spend an age over a cup of coffee, reading a newspaper and taking comfort in its curling musty smell. She'd gaze at the empty block over the road, where the trees would shift and rustle like seaweed under slow-moving water, and she'd remind herself that he was only her dad, that there was no reason to be nervous. Outside his house, she would stand for a while, listening at the door she'd long since lost the key for. Seeing herself in the glass, a pathetic creature, both hopeful and reluctant, her garish lipstick catching the light, she would struggle to lift her finger to the buzzer. Her paralysis would remind her of living there, her mind a cage-fight between resentment and need.

§

It was a mild afternoon. Fenella slung her red canvas bag over her shoulder and walked through the living room. Her dad, in the kitchen, opened the oven door to check on the roast then turned at the sound of her.

'You going out, love?'

'Yup. Amy's'

'Staying over?'

'Yes.'

'You don't want any of my spectacular roast lamb first?'

‘No thanks.’ It smelled good, but she knew he was cooking it for someone else. Frank ran boat tours of the Swan River, and was always bringing home leggy women with fresh tans and foreign accents. They always admired his place, these women; no doubt they were more accustomed to having their affairs in hostels or in unkempt bachelor pads, where clothes accumulated, unwashed, and things went bad in the fridge. Not Frank’s style. He had bought the place for its character and careful renovations, and he had a weekly cleaning lady in to do it justice. Fenella loved its quirky angles and timber finishes, and the effect of the vaulted ceiling; it was so spacious after living in her mum’s nest down south, where Fenella had grown up dreaming of being rescued by Daddy, big brown Daddy with his sea-salt hair and eyes always on the horizon.

That’s how she’d always pictured him, though it must have been a fabrication, a collage of longing pieced together from memory fragments and the single photograph he had sent her of himself standing on his boat, leaning on its handrail and gazing out over the water. When that picture had arrived, Fenella had gone to the town library and taken out a book on sailing knots. She’d learned as many as she could by heart. For hours at a time, she’d practised them, imagining how one day he would marvel at her skill. She’d wished she’d been the one to have taken the photograph of him; a quick snapshot before a trip out to sea; father and daughter, what a team.

As soon as she came to live at his house, though, the word ‘Daddy’ died on her lips. ‘Dad’ was as much as she could manage, and even that seemed weird, confronted with the reality of him and his tentative affection. He was still brown all right, like the man she remembered—tanned like leather—and his hair looked as salty as the next ageing surfer, but she wasn’t his ‘little darling’ anymore. She couldn’t cling to him and wet his neck with tears as she’d done the day he left. He’d held her tightly that day, as if he’d be gone forever, though he said over and over that he’d be back, he’d see her soon. He loved her so, so much, he’d said, and Fenella had consoled herself with that

memory, night after suffocating night, when her mother had grown melancholy and put on her old records, drinking neat gin and singing along in her rich, alto voice. Sometimes Carmela had danced around the room, eyes half shut, as though she'd forgotten Fenella was there. And some nights, Fenella had watched her, admiring her extended feet and her poise. Usually, though, she'd slipped off to her room, to dream of escape, only to find her solitude even more depressing than her mother's grief.

She felt freer now, living with Frank at last, away from the gnawing, drowning feeling that had persisted all through school, a feeling she still couldn't disentangle from thoughts of her mum and her life down south. But now, she was studying at the performing arts academy, and at last her life could take its proper shape.

Still, there were limits to her relief; among them, her dad's date nights. She lived in her own wing in the house, but even so she had overheard many drawn-out seductions and endured many awkward run-ins with the girlish women, who were always gushing and nervous and wanting to be friends.

'You're welcome to join us for dinner,' Frank said, stirring the gravy. 'You haven't met Angie yet, have you?'

'Last one I met was Suzie.'

'Oh, Suzie, she was gold. Had to go back to New Zealand, more's the pity. Sure you won't join us?'

'No, thanks. I have plans.'

'Okay, have fun.' He kissed her on the cheek, shrouding her in scents of rosemary and wine.

Outside, Fenella breathed in the balmy evening air and walked, admiring her new boots: snug blue leather to mid-calf. She'd paired them with her silk dress, that slip of gold sliding against her skin. It was her mum's dress actually, smuggled out of a box

in the attic. Fenella had shoved it into her suitcase just before she left, knowing Carmela wouldn't miss it.

In her jacket pocket she found the cigarettes she'd lifted from her dad's carton. She paused to slip one out and light it up, whipping the match against the air and dropping it, charred and twisted, on the pavement.

Amy rolled the gold fabric between two fingers and widened her eyes.

'Sek-sy.'

'Tell me about it,' Fenella said, cocking one hip and batting her eyelids.

'You're such a dag,' Amy laughed. 'Can I have your boots?'

'No chance.'

They found a table and Amy ordered coffee while Fenella took out her overdue essay and tried to make sense of it. They were going drinking tonight, and the essay was due in the morning; it was her last chance to make it half-decent. Amy sat opposite with a newspaper open to the real estate section.

'Hey,' she said, looking up at Fenella, 'I've been thinking. You live with your dad, right, and I live with my mum, and what's that about? I mean, we're not at school anymore. We're two sharp chicks; we've got it going on. We should totally get a place together. I'm right, aren't I?'

Fenella looked up from trying to untangle her introduction. 'How would we afford it?'

'Ever heard of Centrelink? Rent Assistance? Come on, keep up.'

Amy perused the rentals while Fenella gazed out the window and drank her coffee, half expecting Amy to change her mind. She could hardly believe Amy even liked her, much less that she wanted to live with her. Amy was so together, so charismatic, and so talented. She seemed to belong at the performing arts academy, whereas Fenella was just a girl from down south, entirely unsophisticated. She felt like

an imposter every day on campus; at any moment, she expected someone might take her outside and explain as kindly as possible that they'd made a mistake and she was not meant to be there. She'd told this to Amy, and Amy had insisted that she be more confident. Even though Fenella was a bit timid, she'd said, there was something in her, something gleaming beneath the surface, just waiting to be scraped free.

§

Fen didn't head down to her Dad's place. Instead, she had an early lunch and caught the train to Swanbourne, thinking she'd revisit the house she and Amy once shared, if it was still there. To her surprise, it was, despite everything else of its vintage having long since been pulled down. There the old place sat, stubborn and small on its large block, with the sagging look of a house built quickly and cheaply and with function miles ahead of form. The garden was green and shaded though, and it was not far from the beach, or the train station; still a gem of a rental.

On their first night there, Amy set up the hi-fi and they drank cider and danced around the place like fools in their pyjamas, finding homes for their op-shop gatherings: funny goblets, odd-shaped vases, dated posters. Amy scrubbed the kitchen and bathroom while Fenella made a relatively poor effort of cleaning the floors and windows, and they toasted their independence, and the parties that would surely rage there. Finally, as the birds had begun to warble outside, they had dragged themselves to bed.

It looked as though no one was home. There was no car in the driveway, and no windows were open, at least not at the front of the house. Fen knew she should leave, but she glanced around and walked up the driveway instead, around the side of the house, stopping only when she reached the window of her old bedroom. The curtains

were open and, as her eyes adjusted to the dim light, she was able to make out the brown built-in wardrobes and the garish carpet. For all its ugliness, that room had been the first space she'd ever called her own. She'd lain in bed and savoured her solitude, watching her flickering candles ooze wax and cast leaping shadows on the walls. Zach had lain there with her sometimes. She remembered the sound and sinew of his body in the dark, the aliveness of it.

The sun room at the back was just the same, with its deep red carpet and bare windows instead of walls. The light fell on the floor in the same way and drenched the room with warmth. The vines still grew wild outside the windows, sending their tendrils into the gaps and slowly, slowly forcing them open.

Trying the back door, Fen found that the old trick—a particular twist and pressure at the right moment—granted her access to the feel and smell of the place where she and Zach had spent so many hours together. It was so warm in there, and so familiar that she could almost see the two of them, running lines. She could see the script now, as though she was holding it there, in her hands. Her lines were highlighted in yellow, and she'd jotted Lara's notes down all over the pages.

§

NARCISSUS takes hold of ECHO'S hair, pulls her head back so that her throat and jaw are bared, like prey, and she is frozen, hardly breathing lest he should stop. He runs his face along her throat, first his cheek and then his lips. Then he takes her head in his hands and looks into her eyes.

N: Who are you?

E: You.

He releases one hand to stroke her hair off her face. The breathing is loud between them. He leans close to her face, as though he might kiss her, but then he looks away and stands back.

N: This isn't going to work. I'm sorry.

E: I'm sorry?

N: I tried. I thought maybe I could... love you...

E: I could... love you...

N: I have to go.

E: Go?

ECHO watches NARCISSUS leave, touches her neck where his lips have been, then turns to look at the picnic blanket. She picks up the bottle of wine and takes it with her to the concrete cylinder. Sitting there, she drinks from the bottle. The lights dim on her and come up on NARCISSUS on the other side of the stage.

N: Where's the bloody car? Piece of shit!

E: (Softly) Piece of shit.

N: (Flinches, then yells his exasperation)

E: (Gives a lonely moan, a soft sound that could be the trees, sighing)

Fen remembered Zach's face, caught in the stage lights as he walked between the sculptures she'd helped to make out of wire and plaster. Effortlessly, he commanded the space, holding the audience spellbound.

Looking for his car, Narcissus passed a sculpture made from broken shards of mirror hanging from the branches of a plaster tree, which had a larger mirror embedded within it. Catching sight of his fractured reflection, he became intrigued by his faint sneer. He smiled at the image, then hesitated, not sure who or which had smiled first.

He pushed the hanging shards aside and moved closer, wearing an expression the audience had not yet seen: a look of vulnerability and tenderness, even desire.

As Echo, Fenella trailed her fingers along the damp wall of the cylindrical sculpture. Humming a tune, she finished the wine, then, holding the bottle in her arms as though it might bring comfort, she lay down. An audio-track of restful, slowing breathing played through the sound system.

Narcissus leaned against the tree. Desire was a cruel master, indifferent to grief and longing.

N: Why?!

E: (Weakly) Why?

N: (Noticing that his reflection has shouted too, puts his hand to the glass)

Captured by my own reflection. There is no hope for me; I will never know love.

E: (Murmuring) No hope... no love.

A second audio-track of breathing began as Narcissus sank to the floor. When Echo's breathing stopped, Narcissus' breath slowed, until the lights dimmed and all was dark and silent.

Fenella found it a little eerie, pretending to be dead; the unflinching stillness of it. The applause always came as a relief, a kind of resuscitation.

Zach's chest was warm against her cheek as they held each other backstage afterwards, shedding the wretchedness of Echo, the coldness of Narcissus.

§

Fen wished they had done more than that one play together. But then, perhaps they hadn't wanted to find out any more about each other in that accelerated way. Perhaps they'd wanted to make the knowing unfurl more slowly.

She looked around the sunroom, noticed the paint pulling away from the walls and window frames, the wildly overgrown lawn outside; it was also in here that Amy first saw them together, after the play had finished its season.

§

Zach's toenails were blue, and he was painting Fenella's green when Amy arrived home with a casserole dish. She looked from Zach to Fenella and back to Zach, before lowering her bag to the floor.

'Have you guys eaten?' she said. 'My brother gave me some of his home-made lasagna, loads of it.'

'Sounds brilliant.'

She took it through to the kitchen, calling, 'Come and get it,' over her shoulder. After she'd spooned it on to their plates, they all went in awkward silence to the living room. Amy chose some music while Zach and Fenella sat on the floor. Then Amy asked, 'Do you think the play will run again, or is that it now?'

'I think that's it, really.'

They ate the salty, gluggy food, Fenella trying to keep the conversation turning over, the others seemingly happy to let it drag. Amy didn't ask, 'So what's he doing here then? If there's no need for any more rehearsals?' She didn't bring any more lasagna home after that either.

§

A dog barked into Fen's reverie, reminding her that there were cars driving past out there, lives going on all around her, and she was standing inside someone else's house. She didn't want to find out who was living there now, on top of her memories, trampling them into the ugly carpet. It was bad enough that the room was furnished differently, and had gone on so easily without them; that really there was nothing there of Zach at all.

On the train back to Cottesloe, just one stop, Fen watched cars travelling along the road beside the track, her mind as empty as the evening sky. As she headed west from the station, uphill toward the coast, the weather was mild, but she was glad to reach the hotel, and her room. She lay down to consider her dinner options, but sleep came quickly instead.

Twelve

In the morning, the wind picked up again. Seagulls took joyrides on it; white horses streaked across the sea. Fen strolled toward a rocky groyne, watching her coral toenails dipping in and out of the sand with each step. Cold water swirled around her feet, then pulled back to reveal tiny short-lived holes, like little gasps in the wet sand.

She climbed up on to the groyne and headed out to where fishermen were packing away their gear. At the path's end, she stood on a large chunk of limestone to look out to sea. The wind toyed with her there, caught her hair and flung it around her face. She watched a large, tanned fisherman slowly reel in his line, and realised she hadn't given much thought to whether or not she'd get a second chance at *Wicked*. In this elemental place, it all seemed a bit small and silly.

What was it that Adrienne had said to her? Adrienne was another West End actress, much older than Fen. They were sitting next to each other in a dressing room, removing their makeup, and Fen picked up a flier from a small pile on the desk. Kerry Ellis had been touring a new album, recorded with Brian May.

'See this?' Fen said, holding it up for Adrienne. 'This is what I want, just to be on a poster one day. I want to be a drawcard, you know? I'm running out of time, see?' She'd pointed to the place between her eyebrows where she'd noticed a crease forming.

'But you are so young,' Adrienne said.

'I keep hearing that, but I don't feel it.'

'Well my darling, you need to try harder, because before long you will say, why did I waste my youth feeling old? You will say that, once you actually know what it is to be old. Look at me. I was once young and slender and brilliant too. But now my body

is slow to respond to the commands of my brain. See how slowly I have to sweep off the stage, lest I trip? See how slowly I took those stairs?’

Fen laughed at the gleam in her eyes, the feigned outrage.

‘My brain wants its young body back, but it can’t have it. And I refuse to waste a moment lamenting it. Time and gravity will always win. If I waste my energy crying about that, I will have none left to get this makeup off and get down to the pub.’

It was true, and wise, and yet, looking out over the vastness of water, Fen knew she was afraid of getting old, and not just—as she had always claimed—because of what it meant for her career. She was afraid of dying; afraid there would be nothing there.

She stepped down from the rock, out of easy reach of the pushing, whipping cold. A dog cavorted on the shore to the south. A young man threw a stick into the surf for it, again and again, tugging fondly at the great folds of its neck each time it returned, dripping and wagging its whole body from the tail.

Fen headed for the path along the road this time, rather than pushing back through the sand. There, beneath the whispering pines, a rusty blue sedan was parked on the side of the road. In the back seat, a woman sat reading a story to a young girl who nibbled on a sandwich. There was a large duffel bag on the passenger seat, opened to reveal some items of clothing, and a small cooler box below it. The woman caught Fen looking, and stopped reading for a moment. The child looked up too, her eyes so like the woman’s, in both shape and uncertainty. The woman looked away quickly, smiled reassuringly at the girl, who smiled back, and they both looked back down at the book.

Thirteen

Fen's phone was ringing. The hotel room was dark. She'd been asleep, but she wasn't anymore.

'Hello?'

'Fen? How's tricks?'

'Pete?'

'Got it in one. How're you doing?'

'Not asleep anymore, but otherwise fine, thanks.'

'Lazy. What are you doing sleeping? Too much champers last night?'

'Not really.'

'Well, get up. Come have a drink. I have news.'

'Um, not possible I'm afraid.'

'Why?'

'I'm in Perth.'

'Perth, Australia? Why? Are you okay?'

'Yeah, I'm fine. It's a long story, but you're calling international, so you probably don't want me to get into it now.'

'No, you're right. Inbox me though, I'm curious.'

'Okay.'

'Have you heard about your contract yet?'

'Not yet,' she lied, too groggy for guilt.

'Shit, they're taking their sweet time. So how long will you be there for?'

'Not sure yet. Probably not all that long.'

'Good, because... drum-roll... I've got funding for the play. Brilliant or what?'

Edinburgh here we come.'

‘That’s awesome Pete, nice one.’

‘So, I need to know if you’re in or out.’

She fumbled for an answer, but her mind was too sleep-fogged.

‘Have you read it yet?’

‘Um, not yet. Sorry.’

‘You know, Fen, a fellow might start to think you’re not interested.’

‘No, it’s not that. It’s... it’s a long story.’

‘Okay, well, read it and let me know, won’t you? I’m keen to start rehearsals in a few weeks. Now, back to sleep with you.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

‘What time is it there?’

‘God knows.’

‘Sorry sugar, sweet dreams.’

Dragging herself up for a drink of water, she checked the time on her phone. Nearly four o’clock in the afternoon. Sitting back against the headboard, she gulped more water and turned on the TV, where she watched the eager host of a DIY show build a cubby house for small children. With vast tracts of enthusiasm, he announced there would be a segment on urban landscaping coming up, right after the news headlines.

‘Good afternoon. Police have yet to respond to reports that a USB thumb drive found in a laptop at the home of the late Zach Matthews may hold clues to the actor’s final moments. The contents of the drive remain a mystery.’

Fen’s heart pounded. Still fragile from her disorienting sleep, she wasn’t ready for Zach. But there he was. His face filled the screen. It was a portrait emerging as a favourite on the commercial channels, showing him relaxed, uncomplicated, casually magnetic.

‘Matthews is survived by his estranged widow, June Berry, and his parents, believed to live in the Subiaco area. They have not yet issued statements.’

The news reader went on to announce an earthquake somewhere that had left thousands dead or missing, and images of raw fear and carnage followed. Fen turned it off. She should have known better than to turn it on in the first place.

She wondered when Zach’s parents would speak up. Why the silence? They’d always been a bit of a mystery to Fenella. Aside from that time in the park, Zach had never mentioned them. When she’d asked which of them he looked like, he’d said his mum, somewhat curtly, and changed the subject. He’d had no pictures, or none he’d been prepared to show her.

She had met his grandmother once though, by accident. A tall woman, she’d approached them one evening while they were loitering in the pedestrian mall in the city. Zach had introduced her as Valerie, but had barely lifted his eyes from the pavement to greet her. Fenella, tongue-tied, hadn’t managed much more than, ‘Hello’.

§

Valerie looked at Zach and held out her hand, but he ignored it, keeping his own wedged in his pockets. ‘How are you, Zach?’

‘I’m good, thanks.’

Valerie’s rejected hand joined her other one on the handle of her bag. ‘You should come for dinner some time, both of you, if you like.’

‘We’re pretty busy at the moment.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’d better get going.’

‘Look after yourself, my boy,’ she said. ‘Lovely to meet you, Fenella.’

Fenella felt her watching them as they walked away.

‘Are you ashamed of me, Zach?’

‘What? You?’ He looked at her as though for a moment he didn’t even know who she was, or what she was doing talking to him. Then he kissed her temple. ‘I don’t do shame. Let’s eat.’

Fourteen

Fen got up. The messy bed and jabbering TV had become suffocating. After a shower and a moment on the balcony, trying to soak up the ocean's stillness, she put Pete's script in her bag and went to the restaurant over the road for an early dinner.

She read while she waited for her soup, but struggled to focus. Her mind felt shredded, and it was so much easier to just sip her wine and listen to the conversations around her. Pete had a good way with dialogue, and the opening scene was promising, but she still hadn't encountered her character, Anna, by the time her soup arrived.

The toast was rich with garlicky butter. Fen ordered more wine and, as evening approached, she watched the sun creep steadily along the floor, sliding up peoples' legs and along the skin of their faces like the slowest seduction.

She was wondering about the thumb drive found near Zach, trying to imagine what was on it, what it could possibly reveal about the last moments of his life, when someone approached her table, a woman, who said: 'Fenella?' She was tall and stooped, her bobbed hair falling across her dark eyes. Fen knew her features, her faltering voice. She'd been in that acting workshop with her at the Camelot, a pale girl with long, heavy hair and wary eyes. They'd done a series of improvisation exercises together.

'Hello,' Fen said, almost pleased to see her, thanks no doubt to the wine. She felt a smile spread across her face. 'I'm sorry, I remember you, but... what was your name again?'

'That's okay. It's been years. It's Michelle.' Michelle smelled strongly of bourbon. 'You look good.'

'Thanks, so do you.'

‘No, I look like shit. But thanks anyway!’ She laughed, a little hysterically, then silenced herself with a hand over her mouth. ‘Been drinking since lunch,’ she giggled. ‘Hey, say no if you like, but if you’re free tomorrow night, my sister’s having an Agatha Christie party. You should come. She works for Helen now. You remember Helen?’

Fen remembered Helen; a vision in pink vinyl, purple hair off-set by white horn-rimmed glasses, no lenses.

‘She’ll be there,’ Michelle continued, scrawling an address on Fen’s napkin, ‘and some of the others I reckon.’

‘Oh, great, that sounds nice. I’ll try to make it.’

‘Okay, well, see you then maybe. Just, you know; cocktail dress, furs, whatever you like, and a bottle of something for the cocktails.’

‘Okay. Thanks again.’

Michelle leaned forward, as though divulging a great secret, and said, ‘I haven’t been to even one audition since the workshop, you know? What about you?’

‘Oh, a bit. Here and there. Mostly in London now.’

‘London? Awesome. But you’re back now?’

‘Not really. I’m just visiting.’

‘Oh. Nice. No place like home’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, it’s great to catch up, but I’d better go. We’re off to the theatre tonight, so best not hang about.’

Fen watched Michelle return to her seat and lean in close to her companion, talking animatedly. I’m not going to that party, she thought, but even so she wondered whether the fancy-dress shop in Claremont was still there, and what they might have in slinky murderess numbers. She’d need one of those collapsing knives stuck in a garter, or maybe a small pistol.

Gulping wine, she checked her watch. It was still early. She'd slept most of the day away, and tonight, with the wine singing in her blood, she knew television was not going to cut the mustard. She wondered what Michelle was going to see at the theatre, and thought briefly how nice it would be to immerse herself in the audience experience again, for a change. It had been a while since she'd been part of the rustling of programs and snack wrappings, the whispering and muted laughs of people shifting in their seats. She enjoyed it, but she loved being in the wings so much more, shaking off the nerves in preparation for stepping out on stage, in character. There was such magic in that hush of audience expectation, beyond the glare of hot lights.

As the waiter refilled her glass, Fen thought about the last time she'd been in an audience in Perth.

§

The music was loud. They were sitting on the floor, as was the rest of the audience, in a community hall near the academy. Fenella looked at Zach and took his hand. He smiled at her, kissed her neck, just below the jaw. The lights and music dropped out and the audience noises went with them as a man in torn jeans walked out into the middle of the blacked-out room. He stood perfectly still as the lights lifted and intensified, catching the bare contours of his torso and illuminating his surroundings: a set furnished like an inner-city apartment using cool colours, silks and minimalist design. There was the sound of distortion, and a radio host could be heard listing a string of chilling crimes, describing them in great detail. The man on stage looked up. There was a cruel gleam in his eyes, which were ringed with black. His thick, sandy-coloured hair stood up in curls away from his face.

The radio host's voice disappeared into distortion again, and then a song entered the soundscape. The man's mouth curved into a half smile, and he began moving one leg in time to the music. Very subtly, his expression morphed from one of cruelty into one of pain. Closing his eyes, he began to dance, a strange slow, sensual dance, out of time with the music, until the music slowed to keep time with him. When he opened his eyes, he seemed to open them right on Fenella, though with the removed look of someone deeply focused on his performance. The effect was of someone looking right into her, and she couldn't look away.

The play turned out to be based on Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, with the gore detailed through radio broadcasts. The rest of it was too self-consciously experimental to be as good as those opening moments. But at the pub afterwards Fenella was only half holding Zach's hand, only half laughing with their friends. The other half was engaged in a covert tracking of the actor, Martin, who was playing pool with a group of friends, several of whom Fenella also recognised from the play. Leaning over the table, taking aim, he seemed oblivious that she and so many others in the pub had watched him reveal so much of himself on stage. He took a bow over his pool-cue arm then went to the bar while his friend began setting up the table again.

At the bar, he pulled his wallet out of his back pocket.

'Who's for a drink then?' Fenella asked Zach and the others. It was a natural inclination, she told herself, to want to see an actor up close, without his mask. Perfectly innocent.

'A round of tequila it is,' she said and worked her way to the bar. She stood next to Martin, not too close, but close enough to see his eyeliner, still there but faded and somewhat smeared. He looked at her, gave a fleeting smile and looked back at the barman taking three beers from a low fridge.

‘I saw your show,’ Fenella said, having to lean fairly close to compete with the music.

‘Like it?’ he asked, turning to her.

‘Yes, I liked the beginning, and the soundtrack.’

‘Cool,’ he nodded, smiling again. He looked stoned. ‘That was my department.’

‘Nice one.’

‘Should help me sleep better tonight, knowing you liked it.’ His voice was flat, no trace of the well-trained resonance it had on stage. Fenella smiled, suspecting sarcasm but not quick enough to counter it.

The barman, a tall guy with a dense five-o’clock shadow, came over with the beers and Martin’s change.

‘Can I buy you a tequila?’ Fenella asked Martin. ‘I’m getting a round.’

‘Hate the stuff,’ he grimaced. ‘Thanks though.’ He slid his wallet back in his pocket and gathered his beers with both hands. ‘See you around.’

‘See you.’

Served her right, Fenella thought, sure that everyone had seen the snub and was watching her put the lemon and salt in a glass and attempt to carry it with the four tequilas back to her table. Zach smiled at her then glanced in Martin’s direction with an expression Fenella didn’t recognise.

A week later, on the grass of the Fremantle Esplanade, Fenella lay in the shade reading, her head resting on her satchel. A familiar voice drew her up out of the narrative.

‘Ah, the great Jack Kerouac,’ it said.

Fenella squinted up at the tall figure of Martin, hands in pockets and hair haloed by the sunlight behind him. He sat down next to her, pulling his knees up and looping his arms around them loosely.

‘Hated that book,’ he said, looking at a group of girls sauntering past. One of them waved at him.

Fenella sat up and shut the book, using a leaf to keep her place. ‘Sounds like you hate everything I like.’

‘It’s called taste.’

Still smarting from his tequila snub, Fenella turned on him angrily, but he was smiling.

‘Jesting,’ he said, nudging her with his elbow.

‘Jesting?’ she said, refusing to smile.

‘My word of the day.’

‘Good for you. Want to hear mine?’

‘No.’

‘Dropkick.’

‘Ooh, dropkick,’ he laughed. ‘Fierce.’

She put the book in her bag, determined to leave first this time.

‘I’m off,’ he said, standing up.

‘So am I.’

They stood awkwardly under the tree.

‘My friend’s having a party tonight by the way, if you want to come,’ he said, taking a folded blue leaflet from his pocket and holding it out to her. ‘Looks like you need to unwind. Good tunes, good company, lots of alcohol. See you there.’

Fenella snorted and crumpled the invitation in her hand as he walked away, but already she was wondering what to wear, and what to tell Zach.

‘Girls’ night out tonight,’ she told him, casually. ‘I forgot all about it. You don’t mind, do you?’

‘No, not really,’ Zach said. ‘We were talking about going to that movie... but no worries.’

‘I know, sorry. I forgot I’d planned this with Amy a while back.’

The lie made her feel grimy, but she didn’t retract it. They walked to the station in silence, hand in hand. The sun was nearly gone but the evening air was still warm. Zach seemed deep in thought, and when he spoke it was more to himself than to her. ‘I haven’t seen Ant for a while. I might ring him up, see what he’s up to.’

He has no idea, Fenella thought, loving his face, loving the way he watched his feet as he walked and the lightness of his grip on her hand. She felt a strong, almost maternal desire to protect him from herself as he shifted the strap of his bag over his head and on to his other shoulder. She was dismayed by what she was doing, lying to him, but removed from it too. It was as though Martin had traced an invisible line around her and cast a voodoo spell, and she was no longer in control.

§

There was a small queue now at the entrance to the restaurant, and the layers of chatter and kitchen clamour had grown thick around her. It would be a kindness to vacate her table, but Fen ordered a coffee instead, to drink while she decided where to go next. She couldn’t face lying awake in bed, at the mercy of her memories, too scared to turn on the TV in case Zach was there too.

Fifteen

Warmed by the smooth, rich coffee, she decided to take the train down to North Fremantle. It was time she found Amy, and Mojo's Bar was as good a place as any to start looking.

Walking east from the coffee strip to the train station, through the demure suburb with its wide verges and tall trees, Fen remembered that it was usually at night that she and Zach had walked together. What had they talked about during all those accumulated hours spent going places, so many places, so many haunts? The words eluded Fen now. All that remained was the timbre of his voice in the moments he'd lapsed into quiet humming, completely relaxed.

One night as they walked, he stopped to light a cigarette, and she waited for him. He was wearing his latest op-shop acquisition, a navy trench coat, totally unsuitable for summer, and yet he made it look essential. He wore the angular collar turned up, so that it cast triangular shadows on his neck; sharp lines against his skin. Standing beside him, Fenella felt a flood of happiness so potent it scared her. It scared her, because she couldn't be sure she could keep it, and for a moment she wanted to shut it down for all the promise of loss it held.

'You never used to wait for me,' he said, irritated.

Fenella said nothing.

'Sorry,' he said after a while, reaching for her hand as they walked on, 'sorry, there's nothing wrong with waiting. I just like having to catch you up.' He was trying to soothe the sting of his words, and Fenella tried to let him. She closed her eyes, rested her cheek on his shoulder and didn't say anything, but she couldn't shake the idea that

he was going to pull himself away from her, and soon. It wouldn't be forever that his eyes would make her float above the world.

Maybe that's why she did what she did; to ensure that if anyone was going to pull away first, it would be her.

She hadn't let herself think about that night for a long time, but on the train, rocking with the motion of the carriage, she let the memory take her.

§

It was the night of the party. Fenella and Amy worked their way through a six-pack of beer, turning the music louder and louder as they drew dark lines around their eyes and sang into the mirror and raided each other's wardrobes, trying to approximate their ideal selves.

The taxi hooted out the front and Amy, ready first as usual, went outside. Fenella pulled off her black coat and grabbed her blue one, rummaged through the clothes on her desk looking for her keys, and finally, after taking one last look at herself in the bathroom mirror, ran out the door, slamming it behind her.

'Good choice,' Amy said, nodding at the coat as Fenella slid in beside her. 'The black was oh-so funereal.'

'I reckon,' Fenella said as the taxi pulled out into the empty street. 'Does he know where we're going?'

'I just said somewhere in Mount Hawthorn,' Amy shrugged. Fenella told the driver the street address, and he nodded. 'No problem.'

'No problem,' Amy mouthed, a severe look on her face. Fenella stifled a laugh.

As they drove north-east, between the train tracks and the dark, leafy Karrakatta Cemetery, Amy checked the driver's rearview mirror for his eyes and took a discreet sip

of the drink she'd smuggled into the cab. She passed it to Fenella, who took several sips and passed it back. The driver tapped his fingers on his steering wheel in time to the music and checked his blind spot before changing lanes.

The ageing share-house was on a corner block and there were cars parked on both verges, and some way down the street. Inside, the house was lit by coloured light bulbs; dull green in the kitchen, seedy red in the toilet, and blue in the lounge room, caught and scattered by a mirror ball so that it swirled around like blue snow. The kitchen was full of people, waiting to access the fridge, leaning up against the counter, talking and laughing. A boy Fenella recognised from the academy was break dancing, or attempting to—his feet kept sticking on the grubby linoleum floor. There was no sign of Martin, but Fenella reminded herself she wasn't there to see him anyway; she was just there to do something different, branch out a bit, meet some new people.

'Let's get into that vodka,' Amy shouted. 'Hope you grabbed the plastic cups. Don't like our chances of finding a clean glass in here!'

She squeezed between a couple of guys leaning against the bench top to pour the drinks, dragging Fenella in with her.

'No worries, lovelies,' one of them said, attempting sarcasm, though he could barely keep his eyes open. Still, he managed a clumsy wink when he saw the bottles emerge from Fenella's bag. 'We'll have to charge you rent. Some of that vodka will do it, though I'm being generous, aren't I, Stevo?'

'Yeah, don't mind us,' Stevo muttered into his plastic pint. He blinked several times and grabbed the countertop to steady himself, then he squinted at the remains of his drink and managed to spill it trying to finish it off. It dribbled down his bristly chin to soak the neck of his shirt. 'More beer!' he hollered, lurching away from his spot and staggering towards the scrum at the fridge.

Amy rolled her eyes. 'Give us your cup then, mate. But he's not getting any,' she said nodding in Stevo's direction. 'We don't want to be wading through his spew by the end of the night.'

Fenella focused on the pouring as Amy held the cups steady.

'Don't let him see then,' he said. 'You won't hear the end of it.' He downed his beer and slammed his cup down for the good stuff. 'Thanks girls,' he leered, reeking of yesterday's booze. Fenella wiped his spray of spittle off her cheek and put the bottles back in her bag.

'No worries,' Amy said, raising her cup over her shoulder as Fenella pulled them away.

'Like a cub's first taste of blood,' Amy said. 'Pity he's so smashed though. He wasn't bad. Not bad at all.'

'Not on my watch,' Fenella retorted. 'You can do way better.'

Outside, Fenella struggled to follow Amy's conversation, kept looking past her at the door. She'd planned on being the late one, the one waited for, but it didn't look as though Martin was there yet, if he was going to be there at all. It was pointless pretending to herself she didn't care anymore. She wanted to see him dance again, as he had done on the stage. She wanted him with his shirt off.

'So what's this all about then?' Amy asked. She was rolling them cigarettes. They were outside on the back verandah, sitting on a sofa—a sinkhole of springs and bad odours—trying not to watch a couple on a nearby chair kissing hungrily, oblivious to the squalor and witnesses. Close by, another girl sat on the verandah wall, her legs wrapped around a guy who stood holding her around the waist, whispering and nuzzling in her ear while she giggled and ran her hands through his hair.

'This is too much,' Amy said, eyeing the couples as she handed the rollie to Fenella and lit her own.

‘Yeah, I think we’re gatecrashing the smut zone.’

Amy watched Fenella light her cigarette, a bemused look on her face. Fenella pretended not to notice, until, at last, Amy spoke. ‘So?’

‘So, what?’

‘What are you up to? You’ve barely said a word, and you’ve got your searchlights on.’

‘My searchlights?’ Fenella laughed, or tried to, but the guilt caught in her throat. ‘What are you on about?’

‘Your hunting eyes. So what’s going on? Are you and Zach finished?’

Fen looked at her, but if there was hope in Amy’s heart that Zach was back on the shelf, she hid it well.

‘No, we’re not finished. I just thought it would be good to hang out with you again, just us girls.’

Amy exhaled, aiming her smoke at the couple on the chair, ‘Liar.’

‘I’m not lying,’ Fenella said, but she knew the game was up. Amy was watching her again, waiting with her eyebrows raised for a confession.

‘Okay,’ Fenella said, ‘you’re right. Something is up. But I can’t tell you.’

‘Bullshit you can’t tell me. He hasn’t done the dirty on you, has he?’

‘No,’ Fenella said, thinking how easy that would make things. She was about to divulge that she was the one with dirty leanings, thinking maybe if she told Amy then the compulsion would dissipate and she could go back to Zach with a clear conscience, but she noticed the couple on the wall had gone quiet, and the pair on the chair had their eyes open.

Amy noticed too. She took Fenella’s hand and pulled her out of the cavernous couch, dragging her out into the garden. Overgrown trees and shrubs were black against the dark grey sky. Fenella looked up at the spread of stars.

‘Withholding information is forbidden under clause five of the sisterhood code,’ Amy said.

‘You talk so much shit.’

‘It’s a fact.’

‘You know I told you I just found the flyer?’ Fenella said at last, her voice sounding alien to her as it made real the strangeness of the past few days. ‘I was lying. Someone gave it to me.’

‘No, no, no,’ Amy said, her eyes widening. If she hadn’t been holding a drink and a smoke she’d have grabbed Fenella by the shoulders. ‘Someone? Who is he? Is he here?’

‘I don’t know. He’s meant to be.’

Amy groaned, somewhat melodramatically Fenella thought, bristling.

‘No, Fenella. Tell me you’re not thinking of getting off with this guy, whoever he is. You said you and Zach aren’t finished?’

‘No, we’re still together.’

‘Well then?’

‘Well nothing. I don’t know, Amy. We’re just at a party. I haven’t done anything wrong.’

‘Does Zach know where you are?’

‘Yes. He knows I’m out with you.’

Amy groaned again.

‘Stop making such a big deal,’ Fenella said. ‘It’s nothing. I just felt like a bit of space. We’re not married or anything.’

‘Yes, honey, but there’s space, and then there’s space.’

Fenella lamented the demise of her cigarette and crushed it into the damp lawn underfoot.

‘You and Zach, Fenella,’ Amy went on. ‘Who could possibly compete with him?’

At that moment, like something scripted, Martin stepped from the door into the dull yellow light of the porch, followed by his friend carrying a guitar. They sat on the couch and one of the girls let out a hoot as Martin held up a bottle of spirits. Amy followed Fenella’s eye-line and scoffed.

‘That creep?’

‘He’s not that bad,’ Fenella said, ‘better than that piss-head loser in the kitchen.’

Amy laughed, ‘Yeah, but I’m desperate, Fenella. You have Zach. Zach’s amazing. You wouldn’t seriously risk him for that guy?’

Fenella looked at her friend and felt a sudden coldness rush in, an icy disdain for Amy’s heavy makeup and unwavering certainty on all things relating to Fenella’s life.

‘I had no idea you were so into my boyfriend, Amy.’

Amy looked at her in disbelief. Then, when she saw there was no retraction coming, anger drowned the surprise, molten anger, hot and fast, but quick to harden. It was strangely satisfying to Fenella, until her friend turned and stalked away, back across the lawn and into the throbbing house.

Martin was looking at Fenella, kept looking as she approached. He muttered something to his friend, who stood up and went inside. He patted the spot next to him, and Fenella took it.

‘So, you made it,’ he said.

She nodded. ‘I was just about to leave, actually.’

‘And then I showed up. That’s sweet.’

He made her cringe, the part of her that was thinking straight. The other part didn’t hear a word he said; felt only his arm stretch around her, and his thigh in denim, warm and firm against her own. He gave her something, a small pill, and she took it

without hesitation. His sceptical look evaporated into one of surprise and he reached again into the recesses of his jacket to get one for himself.

The awkwardness between them eased as the first wave of the drug took them under.

‘Looks to me,’ Martin said, with his slow-spreading smile, ‘like you could do with something to wash it down with.’

‘Mmmmmmm,’ she replied, and laughed, a sound that seemed to splinter in the air around her, like light through shards of glass. ‘What you got?’

‘Nectar of the gods, my dear,’ he said, passing her a beer. And so it seemed as it moved down and through her, cold and spreading. He kissed her then, just a slight brush of the lips. She closed her eyes as his fingers traced their occupation along her jaw-line and into her hair.

The next morning, Fenella’s mouth was an arid landscape that filled her head and reached into her dreams. She opened her eyes and tried to lick her lips, which were like sandpaper against her dry tongue. *Water*. The word formed in her head, drawing her attention to the vague ache behind her eyes, which was amassing an army and advancing in brutal throbbing formation.

Martin was asleep next to her, sprawled on his back, snoring gently. He looked like a smooth-skinned innocent with his sandy curls and dark lashes and the fine spread of hair on his chest. Sitting up, feeling ill, Fenella caught sight of herself in the mirror, a pale-faced girl, still naked under a mass of dark hair, smudged-black eyes wide like bleary beacons of guilt.

‘Shit,’ she muttered, dragging the sheet back and sitting on the edge of the bed where she waited for the room to stop spinning. *Water*. She found her clothes, still lying where she’d stepped out of them. They were like artefacts from another life, a life on the

other side of the great divide that was a night spent in Martin's bed, soaking up his otherness, his careless touch, his closed eyes, his sated collapse and roll away into sleep and dreams of himself.

She knew as she pulled on her boots and straightened her dress that nothing could be the same between her and Zach now. Something sank inside her, but she reminded herself that they didn't own each other, that jealousy had no place between them; those had been his words. He'd understand when she told him. He'd tease her for being so old fashioned and nervous. He'd quote Shelley again, on how love withers under constraint. And she'd be dearer to him then, more worthy of his respect; a free spirit, just like him.

Still, she hoped she was dreaming as she walked down a dim passage and into a living room she remembered stumbling through the night before. She stooped to drink at the kitchen sink, over the clutter of week-old dishes, and knew as the water cooled her throat and her hot dry skin that the morning and the night before it were anything but the safe shadowy fragments of a dream. They were as real and loathsome as the naked couple on the sleeper-couch and the comatose guy she had to step over on her way out the back door.

She confessed all to Zach in the city, at an underground gig. It should have been a glorious afternoon, starting with a swim, moving through dinner and then a night out, but Fenella spent it heavy with guilt over what now seemed a ridiculous mistake, one she couldn't make sense of. The memory of it was already hazy. She felt as though she'd walked into a fire, ignoring the shouts of bystanders and the intensity of the heat, determined to go in at any cost, just to know what it felt like. And now she knew. It felt like a death, as though she'd killed someone, and for what? Martin had turned out to be just a drunk guy who happened to have been magnetic on stage.

Of course, she could keep it from Zach. But even as she contemplated this option, she knew she couldn't do it. She couldn't pretend. Besides which, she told herself, Zach would surely respect her honesty and openness, given all their conversations about what made a love affair authentic. It was dishonesty and monogamy they sneered at, not experimentation.

They were at the bar, waiting for their drinks. Fenella nuzzled her way under Zach's arm, and he pulled her closer. 'Who are you tonight?' he asked, unaccustomed to public affection from her. 'I like you.'

They found a table outside. Fenella's heart was pounding, because when they sat down, she had to tell him. If she didn't, if she waited till after the gig, it would definitely be too late. Some line would have been crossed; some line even worse than the one she'd crossed the night before.

'I did something stupid,' she said. A bass guitar started up inside, a steady, slow beat.

'I could tell something was odd about you today.'

'Yeah, I know. It's... I'm scared you're not going to understand.'

'So am I, now. What is it?'

'Do you remember that conversation we had, when you said monogamy was a construct; oppressive, repressive, unnatural?'

He said nothing at first, just looked at her as the drummer folded his beat into the bass line. Then he said, 'Yes, I remember.'

'Well, I guess I agree.'

'I know. You agreed at the time as well, which is about when I started to change my mind.'

'You changed your mind?'

'Isn't that allowed?'

‘Well, of course it’s allowed, but... You didn’t tell me.’

‘It never came up.’

‘Well, it’s coming up now, isn’t it? Now that I’ve taken you at your word.’

He frowned at her. ‘You’ve taken me at my word?’

‘Yes,’ and she laughed, a stupid nervous laugh that sounded like it was meant to be conspiratorial. ‘I’m sorry, I’m so nervous right now. It’s ridiculous. I mean, it’s not exactly a big deal, is it? We agreed, it’s no big deal.’

He was someone else now, someone cold. ‘Who was it?’

‘That guy from *Psycho*. He just seduced me somehow. I don’t even know how. It was like black magic or something. And he gave me something as well, a pill... It was so not worth it, Zach; really not worth it.’

‘Martin Giles?’

‘Martin, yes. Giles, I guess. I’m not sure.’

Zach wouldn’t meet her eye. ‘When?’

‘Last night.’

His silence turned her nervousness into something more like fear.

‘It was a mistake, Zach, a crazy mistake. I have no idea why I went to that party. It was like I was hypnotised or something.’

‘I thought you were having a girls’ night out with Amy.’

‘I was. She was there, at the party where we... hooked up.’

‘Hooked up,’ he scoffed.

‘I’m so sorry, Zach. I wish I could undo it.’

She waited, hardly breathing, for absolution. He said nothing, just stared at his hands on the table turning a box of matches over and over.

‘You fucked him?’

‘You said we needed to give each other space, remember? We should be free to explore every impulse, as long as we’re always honest, that’s what you said.’

‘I was talking about exploring an impulse to go travelling, or buy a lame album or get a tattoo, or dye your hair purple. I never thought you’d want to explore every other guy.’

‘No you weren’t. You said you wanted there to be no rules or restrictions, on either of us.’

‘And you lied to me about where you were going. So that’s honesty ruled out right there. And you know what? I’m not hearing remorse here. In fact, it sounds to me like you’re blaming me for your inability to keep your knickers on.’

He stood up then, and walked away, down the dark road and into the drub of Murray Street. Sitting in the pub’s brick courtyard with two unfinished beers on the table in front of her, Fenella tried to contain the alarm spreading through her. She followed him, but as she emerged into the festivities that had swallowed him up, she knew she didn’t have a hope of finding him. She rode the train home alone, staring at her reflection in the window, and beyond it, at the passing shapes and shadows of the night.

§

Sixteen

Fen disembarked at North Fremantle station and walked to Mojoes. The street was dark and quiet, but for the occasional car going past.

Stepping into the familiar, dark embrace of her old favourite drinking hole, she took in the plush red stage and murals, breathed in the mingled scents of cologne, sweat and alcohol. A girl at the door took her five dollars and stamped her wrist wordlessly, then looked back at the band.

Fen half expected to see Amy up there, but the singer was a great hulk of a man, sitting down with his eyes closed and his large hands resting on his knees. His voice wove a tender melody that had the audience enthralled. Fen bought a drink and sidled as close as she could to the stage. When the song ended, the crowd thinned out a little and she was able to move closer to watch the lap-slide guitarist start up the next number, his hand moving with fluid assurance. The lead guitarist began adding his thread to the web of sound as the drummer and bass brought in a rolling rhythm, and just then Fen recognised the shape of someone she knew, up ahead. She realised who it was before he turned his head, remembered him with a clarity that surprised her. It was Zach's best friend, Anthony.

The last time she'd seen him must have been that night she went out alone, maybe two weeks after destroying her two closest relationships with the lightest touch. Unable to face being at home any longer, eating stale bread and pizza and waiting to hear from either Amy or Zach, she'd gone out and found a seedy, dimly-lit sanctuary, where she could be invisible. It was a dark place, throbbing with downbeat music. Trying to shake off her growing panic at being alone, hoping feebly that Zach might

come through the door, she drank fast, pouring shots and cheap wine down her throat until she was staggeringly drunk. She cried there at the bar, wept at the thought of what she'd become: a sad, pissed fool who couldn't stand up, who needed someone to look after her but had no one left. That was when she saw Anthony on the other side of the bar. Their eyes met, but he looked away. Fenella shouted his name, tried to stand up to go over to him, to find out if Zach was with him, or if he knew where he was, but she was too unsteady on her feet. Her head spinning, she had to grab hold of the bar and sit back down. When everything was still again, and she could see, he was gone, runaway witness to the worst moment of her life.

Fen edged forward now, until she was standing beside him. He was still lanky and slightly stooped, but his hair was a bit longer, and he seemed to be a bit broader in the shoulders. His skin had seen many more years of sun. It took a moment for him to notice her, and when he smiled, it was a stranger's looking-away smile. But he looked again and his eyes grew wide.

'Fenella?'

'Hi.'

'Wow, hello.'

'How are you?'

'What?'

'How are you?'

'Fine, yeah. Sorry, too loud.'

'Shall we go out there?' She gestured to the courtyard.

'Yeah, hang on.' He said something in the ear of the guy next to him then led the way through the crowd. The door swung closed behind them and the volume dropped, and they were alone in the vine-covered courtyard with its bistro chairs and pool table.

Anthony pulled a couple of chairs up to a table and they sat, mirroring each other, both hands gripping drinks.

‘So,’ said Fen, ‘you a fan? Of this band?’

‘Jury’s still out.’

‘They seem pretty good.’

‘Yeah, they’re not bad, but fan’s a strong word.’

‘Fair enough.’

Anthony nodded again, then, after a slightly uncomfortable pause, said, ‘It’s been how many years?’

‘About nine, I think.’

‘No shit? Wow.’

‘I know.’

‘So, how are things with you?’

‘Good. You know. I mean, I can’t complain. And you?’

‘Yeah, not bad. Not bad. Can’t complain either. Doesn’t do much good, does it?’

‘No. Apparently no one’s manning the desk.’

‘God’s day off and all that.’

‘Yeah.’

The music swelled then retreated as someone came through the door, a girl, making for the toilets.

‘No doubt you’ve heard? About Zach?’ Anthony said when she’d passed.

Fen nodded.

‘Miserable bastard,’ he shook his head and took a long drink.

‘Looked that way.’

Anthony looked at her. ‘Suicide you reckon?’

‘No, no, I don’t know. I just meant, you know, everything I read about him recently was pretty dark.’

‘Yeah, but that was mostly just tabloid bollocks.’

‘I know, but you know, where there’s smoke.’

‘Yeah.’

They listened for a while to the thuds and crooning of the band.

‘So did you see him, before he... died?’ Fen asked. ‘Did you catch up when he got here?’

‘No. He didn’t tell me he was coming; I heard via the grapevine.’

‘Oh.’

‘I think he had other things on his mind. His last email was pretty heavy. All about his marriage.’

‘Yeah?’

‘He said in the beginning she was incredible, but towards the end, after she lost the baby, all she did was cry. He blamed her, I think, for the miscarriage; said she wouldn’t settle down. He reckoned it was all getting a bit old. I wrote back, tried to impart some wisdom, as you do, but he never replied. Then the separation was in the news, and he was heading home, apparently, and I was waiting to hear from him and next thing... well, you know.’

‘Crazy,’ Fen said, shaking her head, drawing lines in the condensation on her glass. When she looked up, Anthony was looking at her with a smile.

‘*Nellybear*, he called you. Remember? I remember that.’

She’d forgotten.

Anthony let her cry, handed her a tissue and was quiet while she mopped herself up with it.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘Look at me; I hadn’t seen him for years and here I am bawling my eyes out like I’ve lost my best friend.’

‘It’s all right,’ he said quietly.

‘God, it’s so awful,’ she mumbled into the tissue, her head beginning to throb. ‘I’m just so angry, with him and with myself.’

‘Why with yourself?’

‘The whole business with Martin. Didn’t he tell you?’

‘Oh yeah, he told me about that.’

‘It was a stupid mistake and I told him straight away, but it made no difference. He was so... livid. Then he left, before we could hash it out, and I couldn’t get hold of him before I left for Melbourne. But he was always going on about freedom being the most important thing, and how bullshit rules destroyed all the finer things in a relationship.’

‘He was full of shit. He was probably talking about his own freedom, not yours. He was no saint, Fenella. Don’t be thinking you wronged the perfect man.’

‘What do you mean?’

Anthony looked towards the door, as though Zach might walk in and catch him snitching. ‘Do you want to go somewhere else?’ he said. ‘This courtyard is creeping me out.’

Seventeen

Their taxi cruised along Curtin Avenue and turned left on to Marine Parade, down past the beachfront houses, past the dark ocean to the west. Along the main drag, the heavy pedestrian traffic meant they had to slow to a crawl. A crew of teenagers ran past the cab and one beat a rhythm on their bonnet as he went, a look of cash-bought bliss on his face.

‘Just pull in here a sec, mate,’ Anthony said, turning to Fen. ‘We’ll need beer. Sit tight. I’ll be right back.’

A girl down the road shrieked, holding her strappy heels high in the air and spinning around, swirling her dress. Her friends laughed, drawing closer as they crossed a side road. The driver shifted in his seat and fiddled with his radio.

No saint, Fenella. Don’t be thinking you wronged the perfect man.

Fen hadn’t thought about it for a while—and certainly not as part of the heavily-edited show-reel scrolling through her mind since she’d heard the news—but it was true, Zach hadn’t been perfect, and he’d done his bit to erode the magic between them. She remembered the mysterious phone calls and silences, the irritability. She shivered, recalling his bitterness when she won the role of Juliet in *Shakespeare in the Park*.

§

It was a big gig for Fenella, so soon after finishing at the academy. It meant hours apart from Zach every day for rehearsals, and every night during the season, and there was very little time for anything else. And when she did see him, there was a shadow over

them, because he'd auditioned too and hadn't won a part. He hadn't congratulated her convincingly yet; hadn't come to watch her yet either.

The stage was set up in King's Park, where grassy slopes levelled out near a fountain. Every night, the show drew a large audience, sitting with picnics on blankets and low chairs. And every night, Fenella tried not to look for Zach in the crowd, or to hope she'd find him waiting for her afterwards. She couldn't afford hurt feelings, not until the season was over. It was a marathon of performing, drinking off the adrenaline afterwards and recovering in time to do it all again. She needed to stay focused.

The show was getting better and better as it reached the end of its run, and in the euphoric momentum of it all, Fenella could almost forget about Zach. Almost; but as she tried to celebrate with the cast after the second-last performance, she felt cold and detached. She couldn't be part of the mutual admiration swirling around her, because the person whose admiration she really wanted wasn't there; could be anywhere for all she knew.

She drank more than was wise, becoming sad, irrational, fixated on the injustice of Zach's desertion.

His unit was just a short stroll from the pub. Staggering up the stairs, she leaned on the door and banged heavily on it. Zach opened up and sighed as she lurched past and almost tripped over his feet in the small hallway. His sigh fanned the flames into a bonfire of fury. Fenella accused him of not caring, of being envious and insensitive and self-obsessed. He barely moved, just scratched his cheek and yawned, looking longingly at the bed she'd dragged him out of. It was three in the morning.

Her words became angrier, accusations swinging out like one wrecking ball after another, but he just sat there with his head in his hands, waiting for the savagery to run its course so that he could go back to sleep. When at last Fenella fell into his bed, having cried and yelled herself out, he didn't join her there. She waited for him to come,

to put a hand on her shoulder and tell her he was sorry, but he didn't do that; must have slept on the couch.

The next morning, he made coffee.

'I'm sorry about last night,' Fenella said, dishevelled and sheepish in her clothes from the night before. She only half remembered what it was she was sorry for. 'The season's made a monster of me.'

He shrugged, turning the blade of his indifference in the wound, which sleep had done nothing to heal.

'Still nothing to say then?' Fenella said, trying to stay calm.

'Some things are better left unsaid.'

'What things, exactly?'

'I'm not going to say them.'

'Just going to hint at them and let my imagination do the rest?'

He shrugged again and said nothing, just stirred his coffee and let Fenella get her own. He sat on the couch and ignored her meek thanks, but she felt his eyes boring into her back as she stood at the kitchen bench, looking for sugar.

'You think you can say whatever you like, don't you?' He sounded more curious than angry, as though his interest were purely scientific.

Fenella felt like a specimen on the wrong side of the lens. She realised her eye makeup would be smudged into dark circles around her eyes by now, and her hair felt matted from all the hairspray the night before. She sighed, feeling the weight of her hangover, and rummaged in her bag for her tobacco purse, vowing not to say or even think anything else until she had a cigarette smouldering between her fingers.

The sliding door to the balcony was heavy, too heavy, wouldn't budge. Fenella clutched her mug and purse with one hand and wrestled with the latch, trying not to cry or swear or do both. Zach laughed and shook his head, flicking through the TV guide.

Fenella might have laughed with him once, at making such a spectacle of herself, but this morning his laughter was enemy fire, well aimed and lethal.

At last the latch gave and she was outside, out of the stifling lounge room. She sat on a wrought iron chair and smoked, looking at the parked cars below, waiting for calm to descend, and for Zach to check she was all right. He needed to apologise, at least to acknowledge that it was not cool to show no interest in coming to her show, in even asking her about it. He was being hateful and childish.

She heard him pull on his shoes, take his keys off the hook and walk out. Bumping the table in her haste to stop him, she sent her mug flying. It shattered on the concrete floor, violent white shards in a spreading pool of coffee.

He closed the door quietly behind him.

‘Can’t you just slam the fucker?!’ Fenella shouted. She cried furious tears as she swept up the pieces of broken cup, then collapsed on the couch where her crying subsided into whimpering, and, finally, into sleep.

When she woke up, she felt like a banshee. In the bathroom, waiting for the shower to get hot, she saw a small pale creature in the mirror, looking top-heavy in the hair department and visibly dehydrated. Her head hurt. Her throat hurt. Her heart hurt.

She waited for Zach to come home, but he didn’t, and eventually it was time for her to be at the park, layering makeup over her puffy eyes, layering another self over her own tired, confused one. The play would mercifully allow her to forget the messy scene for a few hours, but it was the final night and there would be an after-party to get through afterwards, which would be bleak because once again Zach would sting her with his absence. She dreaded having to go home after that, still reeling from the intensity of lights and emotion and applause, to endure that awful post-season deflation alone.

But Zach did come.

She spotted him out there, near the front, sitting on a blanket, nursing a beer. Her focus didn't waver at the sight of him. In fact, it became purer, her performance more intense. It was as if his gaze added a magical energy to the mix, and it made even more acute the elation as she took her final bow.

Afterwards, escaping the dressing room tent's dense reek of creams and makeup and powder and sweaty nylon, she stepped outside and felt the cool brush of air against her witch-hazelled skin. Zach stood waiting next to the fountain.

'You were fantastic,' he said when she got close enough, 'beautiful.' His hug and his kiss on her temple were warm. Relief coursed through her, blending with the post-performance adrenaline, such that she took it as praise when he said, 'God, I love you on stage. You're amazing in real life, but you're even more amazing when you're someone else. What's that about?'

There were guffaws in the tent, followed by boorish shouting, and a group of unmasked actors bundled out into the night. They waved at Fenella. 'See you at the after-party, Juliet!' shouted one of them, blowing her a kiss. She blew one back and waved at them.

'I wish you'd been in it with me, Zach.'

'I got over it, did something else.'

'What did you do?'

'Just a lame ad.'

'Really?'

'Yup, final shoot was today.'

'You didn't tell me.'

'You never asked. Anyway, it seemed a bit cheap compared to Shakespeare.'

They meandered around the fountain, listening to the percussive of frogs.

'I never asked you, once,' Fenella pressed, 'what you'd been up to?'

‘No, not in the last month. Not since I got the gig. I was waiting.’

He was watching his feet on the grass, and Fenella felt that fear again, the certainty that he wouldn’t let her keep him.

‘Well,’ she said, ‘you could have told me anyway.’

‘I could have,’ he nodded, then he took her hand and they walked on.

‘So, all the time I’ve been miserable that you’ve been so selfish, you’ve been thinking the same of me?’

‘I suppose so.’

‘I’m sorry, Zach.’

‘Me too. I should have been happy for you. I tried to be, but the rejection, and the envy were like some alien life-form growing inside me. Every time I saw you wanting me to be pleased for you, they took over, made me want to hurt you instead.’

‘Well, I really wanted to hurt you too, especially this morning, if that makes you feel any better.’

‘I don’t think you could’ve hurt anybody this morning, except yourself of course, with those cigarettes. If I can quit, you bloody well can.’

‘Not smoking for two weeks doesn’t mean you’ve quit,’ Fenella muttered, groping for her cigarettes as a matter of principle. ‘And it doesn’t qualify you to get all sanctimonious about it either, if you want to know what I think.’

He laughed. ‘Don’t sulk now, Nellybear. Spoil a perfectly good evening. Speaking of which, isn’t there an after-party I need to show up at, as your adoring partner, keeping his chin up despite having to do ads to pay the rent?’

‘There is, but I’m not sure you’re invited yet.’

‘Oh, right. How do I score an invite?’

‘Give me a few minutes, I’ll think of something.’

‘I’m sure you will.’

He put his arm around her shoulders, and the rush of familiarity, now laced with hurt, felt somehow sweeter. They knew the power they had to wound each other, and the delicacy with which they would have to wield it.

‘Were you hoping I’d give up the play?’ Fenella asked as they walked to his beaten-up hatch-back.

‘I thought you could at least offer.’

‘I thought about it.’

‘I wouldn’t have let you, but it would’ve meant a lot to know you were willing.’

‘Yeah,’ Fenella said, wondering if she would ask that of him, if anyone should expect that kind of sacrifice. ‘Next time, we talk about it, yes? Instead of letting things fester.’

‘Next time, when I score the lead and you don’t, and you have to do an ad about tampons or thrush treatment, then we’ll have this chat again.’

She jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow and they sniggered, and the old joy seemed to be back. And mostly it was. But it nagged at her, what he’d said about expecting her to reject roles for him. And it troubled her how effectively he’d closed himself off when she’d confronted him. It was as though he had a numbing second skin he could just pull on and hide behind.

Three weeks later, they watched that play, *Psycho*, in which Martin moved like syrup to slow music.

§

The clamour of good times rushed into the cab as Anthony climbed in, placing a plastic bag of booze on the seat between them.

‘Let’s away,’ he said to the driver. ‘North Cott thanks, mate.’ He sat back and drummed his fingers on his knees, already impatient to free them from the confines of the cab. Fen soaked up the overflow of his enthusiasm and smiled back.

Eighteen

The driver pulled away from them into the otherwise empty street. Anthony slipped his wallet into his back pocket and Fen looked at the gently rocking lights of the ships on the horizon. So much going on out there, she thought, inside those floating shadows: so many people, working shifts and sleeping weird hours, losing all sense of time.

‘Beautiful,’ Anthony said, ‘let’s get down there.’

The steps to the beach were steep and glowing grey in the moonlight. Fen pulled off her shoes and sank her feet into the cold sand, closing her eyes to listen to the welcoming murmur of waves.

Her thoughts turned to Amy, to the logistics of tracking her down. Maybe Anthony could help, she thought, as she followed him around the curve of the limestone cliff into a sheltered area. There, he gathered a small pile of kindling and built a tiny fire. Fen watched the flames light up the satisfaction on his face. Time and responsibility fell away as she lay back on the sand and looked up at the stars.

‘I might never go home,’ Anthony said, sitting down and holding his hands out to the warmth. ‘I’ll just build a little shack right here, and no one will ever find me.’

‘Except me.’

‘Mmm, yes, I’d need to keep you on-side so you could bring me stuff; essentials, like wood and beer. Speaking of which...’

Fen sat up and brushed the sand off her hands to accept the cold bottle he held out. ‘Wood and beer to start with,’ she said, ‘but before long, who knows what you’d want?’

‘You’re right. I don’t have what it takes to be a hermit. But a man can dream.’

Fen pulled her knees up and scrunched her feet in the sand, looking at the distant lights of Rottneest.

‘Is this is your first time back since you left?’

Fen nodded.

‘Happy to be home?’

‘It’s nice to be out of London, I guess. I wouldn’t say I’m happy though, given the circumstances.’

‘No, of course. Bad choice of words.’

‘I can’t stop thinking about the way I treated him. He must have thought he meant nothing to me.’

‘You were young. I think everybody’s allowed to break one heart when they’re young.’

‘Oh, I’m not sure I broke his heart, but I’m pretty sure he hated me, last time I saw him.’ The sand felt coarse and damp between her toes.

‘Don’t be so sure.’

‘I used to think we might still be together somewhere, in a parallel universe, or that our lives would intersect somewhere down the track in this one.’ She pressed her bottle into the sand, twisting it back and forth as though to bury it. ‘Idiotic, I know.’

‘Not at all.’

She looked at his smile in the flickering light.

‘Well, either way, he’s gone now.’ Her words surprised her, the finality in them.

‘He is.’

There was nothing then but the slow pulse of the ocean, the dense smear of stars, the saline air.

‘I can’t imagine letting go of consciousness, forever,’ Fen said after a while. ‘I don’t want to.’

‘I don’t know,’ Anthony said, looking over the water. ‘Maybe it will be like a great adventure. Scary at first, like looking out from a cliff, over a vast sea of clouds, but then those clouds will part to reveal a glittering jungle of trees and water, and we’ll just shed our bodies like snake-skins and launch off, forever weightless.’

He stretched his arms wide to mime soaring through the air.

‘I like that.’

‘Anyway, what’s so great about consciousness? It comes with so much angst. Maybe there’s something better, something it’s only training us for.’

‘Like that glittering jungle.’

‘Exactly.’

It was some time before they admitted to needing sleep. Fen felt heavy and exhausted as they wandered back towards her hotel. Outside the front, they exchanged numbers, and said goodnight.

Fen watched Anthony go, then called out: ‘Hey, Ant! Do you remember Amy?’

‘Yeah,’ he said, walking back a little. ‘Zach and I hung out with her a bit after you left. Why?’

‘Do you know where she is now?’

‘No, sorry. She went off somewhere I think, a while back. I’ve still got her number, unless she’s changed it. I’ll text it to you.’

Back in her room, Fen heard Anthony’s text message come through. Amy’s number stared at her from the screen. She’d ring it first thing in the morning, she decided, but first, she needed a whole world of sleep.

Nineteen

Amy's house was in Kensington, not far from Burswood, on a surprisingly leafy street. Fen climbed the sagging steps to the plasterboard façade, took a breath and rang the doorbell.

'Hello?' The voice sounded far away, bored.

'Amy? It's Fen. Fenella.'

'It's open.'

Fen turned the handle and opened it an inch, listening a moment before opening it fully. She heard the crack of a Zippo lighter.

'In here,' Amy called. At the end of a dim passage was a high-ceilinged living room, carpeted in plush maroon and smelling of tobacco and weed. The curtains were drawn. Amy sat on a white couch of worn leather, smoking a cigarette, watching the smoke curl up and away in the dim light. Partly hidden by an ebony screen near the window sat a bucket bong on a low table.

'It's Fen now, is it?'

'Yeah.'

'Right,' Amy nodded, not smiling. She was still lean, though the muscle definition Fen had once envied was less noticeable. Her hair was dark and tied up instead of hanging down around her shoulders.

'So, here you are.'

'Yes. I'm sorry, is this a bad time?'

Amy laughed and crushed her half-smoked cigarette in an ashtray on the battered wooden coffee table. 'I think it's safe to say it's a bad time, yes. But there's hardly going to be a good one any time soon.'

Fen ventured a little closer. 'Are you okay?'

That same bitter laugh. 'No, I'm not okay,' she said. 'My boyfriend's moved out, because I'm cold, apparently, and he's right. I can hardly look at him because all I can think about is Zach dying in a bath, probably drunk, and here you are, expecting me to say something to make you feel better. Well, I can't help you.'

She shook another cigarette from its packet and lit up, massaging her temples with tight fingers.

'I'd offer you coffee,' she said, 'but we've... I've... got none, so that would be cruel.'

'That's okay. I've had heaps today.'

'I've got bourbon, if you're thirsty.'

'Why not?' Fen put her bag down on a brocaded armchair.

'Thank God. I thought we were going to have to sip tea. It's in the fridge.'

Fen went through to the kitchen, a relic of fifties' interior design. There were dishes soaking in the sink, and a stack of rinsed out tuna cans on the bench top. In the fridge were some apples, cheese, a loaf of bread and two cartons of milk. That was all, except for a door full of rum-and-cola cans.

She took two and noticed, as she closed the fridge, a framed picture on the bench top: Amy, smiling, rugged up with a man in front of snow-glazed mountains. He had black hair and spectacles which reflected the light; Fen couldn't see his eyes properly.

'Did you find them, Nella?'

Her old nickname hung in the air like something pulled from a musty chest, caught in a shaft of light.

She took the drinks out and smiled, feeling homesick and at home at the same time. Amy gave her the smallest smile then looked away, leaning towards the table to ash her cigarette. Then she stood to fetch a little green bowl from the shadow of the bucket.

‘Bet your place is pretty swish,’ she said, sitting down again and grinding leaf matter between her fingers, ‘in London.’

Fen laughed. ‘It’s pretty small actually. Bad reno job.’

‘I thought you were a West End darling.’

‘God no, who told you that? I’m a West End disappointment.’

‘This is a dive,’ Amy said, taking the drink Fen offered, ‘a dive within a dive. It’s a rental, obviously. But what can you do? Two ex-teachers who’d rather die than go back to the classroom don’t exactly bring the money rolling in.’

‘High school?’ The drink sang in Fen’s blood almost instantly.

‘Yep,’ Amy nodded, ‘went and did the old *Grad Dip Ed*. Speech and Drama. Do yourself a favour, don’t ever do it. I met Don there though, so that wasn’t bad. Mind you...’ she trailed off, crushing her cigarette, ‘he might disagree on that point.’

‘How long did you teach for?’

‘Maybe five years. I quit a few years back, when we moved in together. Been doing freelance writing for teen magazines since then. I have a pseudonym and all. How sad is that?’

‘Not very.’

‘Oh, I disagree.’

‘And Don?’

‘He quit not long after I did. Wanted more money.’

‘Where is he now?’

‘With his brother, I imagine. They’re pretty close. Don works for him, doing websites.’

For a moment, Fen felt as though she’d stepped through a portal and emerged back in 1999, granted her old wish to undo the undoable. But the moment passed. ‘You look good, by the way,’ she said. ‘You’ve hardly changed.’

Amy snorted. ‘I feel I must speak up on behalf of my former self and call bullshit.’

‘I like your hair without the dye.’

‘Yeah well, I don’t. I just got sick of doing it. I’d get it done at the hairdressers, if I could afford it.’

‘Have you done any singing lately?’

‘I haven’t sung in public for about six years. The band broke up over ye olde creative differences, and then reformed without me. Last seen doing covers at the Rosemount.’

‘That’s a shame. You should be singing.’

‘Maybe, but what can you do?’

‘I don’t know, keep at it?’

Amy shrugged. ‘Or just accept that you’re nothing special.’

‘You are though. And if you’ve got it, you’re supposed to... you know... flaunt it.’

‘Are you?’

‘Your voice is gorgeous. You should audition for *Idol* or something. Next time it comes around.’

‘Jesus, *Idol*?’

‘Why not?’

‘What’s the point of all that performing and touring and trying to make everybody love you? I sing in the shower, for myself; suits me fine. Anyway, these things don’t help much.’ She held up the cigarette, caressed it with a finger, ‘but I love them all the same, little buggers. You quit?’

‘Yup. Seven years now. Took a few goes, but I nailed it in the end.’

‘I gave up for a while, a few years back, when we thought we might try for a baby.’

Fen said nothing, unsure whether to show her interest by asking questions, or stay quiet in case she struck a nerve.

Amy stood up and rifled through her CDs, then took a disc out of its box and put it on. She stood there waiting for the music to start, one hand brushing something off the table cloth, the other gripping the cigarette and the drink like they might get away.

‘I suppose I don’t have to ask what brings you back to Perth,’ she said over her shoulder.

‘It’s a bit absurd I guess, coming all this way for the funeral of someone you hardly knew.’

‘Hardly knew?’

‘It was so long ago, I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d forgotten my name.’

‘That’s just idiotic, Fenella.’

‘I guess so.’

Amy sat back down, and both of them sank into the sofa, adrift on Hope Sandoval’s mesmeric voice.

‘What’s it been like in London?’ Amy asked between songs, grinding another cigarette into the ashtray.

‘It’s quite good fun. Maddening, being an understudy all the time, but it’s a buzz anyway. There are always galleries to visit, markets, shows. It’s fab in the summer.’

Amy smiled, 'Fab?'

Fen smiled too.

'So, when are you going back?'

'Not sure. I'm waiting to hear when Zach's funeral is.'

'It's on Tuesday.'

'Oh.'

'Tuesday afternoon.'

'How do you know?'

'Weekend *West*.'

Amy went to her room and returned with the newspaper, which she dropped on to the coffee table.

Perth-born actor Zach Matthews will be laid to rest on Tuesday morning at Claremont's Anglican Church, according to a statement made by his grandmother Valerie Matthews yesterday.

Mrs Matthews requested respect from reporters covering the event, and declined to respond to questions about Mr Matthews' family, saying she would make no further comments until after the funeral. The actor's parents, thought to live in Subiaco, have not made any public statement.

Matthews was found dead in his bath in his Cottesloe home two weeks ago. He had recently returned to his beachside property—one bought before his marriage—to escape media spotlight over his divorce proceedings. Police have refused to disclose the contents of a thumb drive found in his home.

‘I fucking hate funerals.’

‘Me too,’ Fen said. ‘God, I’m going to be a mess.’

Amy studied her a moment. ‘Are you?’

‘I have been ever since I heard.’

‘Good.’

Fen struggled to meet Amy’s eye. ‘You’re still angry?’

‘Yes, I think I am.’

‘I’m sorry. You know, about the last time we saw each other. That’s why I wanted to see you, to apologise.’

‘I was beginning to wonder. Why you’d bothered to come.’

‘I’m sorry I said you were into Zach.’

‘Is that it?’

‘No, of course not. I’m sorry about everything that happened that night. Every stupid thing.’

Amy snorted and shook her head. Outside a neighbour whistled for a dog. Fen went on, talking fast, feeling a bit foolish but wanting to get it all said. ‘I’ve wanted to apologise for years. I should have done it before I left, but I didn’t know how to get hold of you ... But you were right, of course. I was being a total idiot. Martin was a creep, like you said, and Zach was lovely. And you ... were a really good friend.’

The neighbour whistled again and the dog barked.

‘Didn’t you ever wonder why it stung so much?’ Amy asked. ‘What you said?’

‘I assumed you were pissed off because I’d doubted your loyalty.’

‘Oh come on, Fenella,’ Amy said, standing up and looking out the window, ‘that’s horseshit. I was in love with Zach from the moment I saw him, and you fucking knew that. It would have been obvious to you when I brought him home that day, and that same night you tagged along to my gig, don’t you remember? I went on and on and

on about him, how gorgeous he was, how talented, how much I hoped he liked me. When you two got together, I just assumed you'd really not been listening. Either that, or you just didn't give a shit.'

There was a long silence.

'I suppose I knew,' Fen said at last, 'but Zach ...'

'You just took him. Like it was the most natural thing in the world, and I should just step aside, no questions asked. Do you know how many hours—years—I've wasted, wishing I'd never brought him home that day, or invited you to come out with us? Wishing I'd made it to that audition instead of you? I hated you so much I even wrote a stupid song about it. And we were supposed to be friends, you and I. Jesus.'

'I was in love with him, Amy. What could I do? You would have done the same thing.'

'I would have, you're right, if he'd wanted me. And that's why I tried to just get over it. But I wouldn't have gone and fucked that asshole behind his back; that was a kick in my teeth as well as his.'

'I'm sorry. I was an idiot.'

'You're lucky you left when you did. You might have met with some form of bodily harm if you'd stuck around.'

'Might've been good for me, a bit of a beating.'

'I reckon,' Amy sat down, her hands trembling. The silence stretched on, until she continued, 'I felt entitled to nurse Zach through the whole business of your ... betrayal ... after you'd gone. I convinced myself that he had finally realised it was me he was meant to be with anyway, not you.'

'How long did you ... nurse him?'

'Three weeks and four days. It meant nothing to him. I could feel you in the room the whole time, the way he stared at the ceiling or rolled away afterwards, not

wanting to look at me, even with the lights out. I'd want to turn them on sometimes just to check you weren't there in a corner.'

Fen felt a hot stab of jealousy at the thought of Amy in Zach's apartment, in his bed. She was relieved to hear that he'd kept his distance from her, emotionally, if not physically. But faced with Amy's sorrow and bewilderment—imagining her crying, silently so Zach wouldn't know, and Zach, with his back to her, wondering when she was going to leave—Fen felt ashamed of that relief. Amy had been the first person in the world to take Fen seriously, to listen to her; she'd made her laugh so much sometimes she couldn't breathe.

'And then he left to conquer the world with his smoke and mirrors,' Amy went on. 'For the longest time I was sure he'd come back, but he never did. He just ... never did. And then he got famous, naturally, and I could not escape him. Television, film, tabloids, always gorgeous and brilliant. And that June fucking-diva Berry ... I hate her so-called music.'

'I seethed for a long, long time, and then I went away. To Asia, teaching English. And then the Dip Ed. Nail in the coffin. But Don was good, he made me happy for a while.'

Her eyes did a rapid circuit of the room then settled back on her hands. 'Christ,' she said, moving back to the window. 'I've so fucked it up with Don now. He thinks I'm hung-up on a dead man who never loved me. And I can't tell him he's wrong. But I miss him. I miss both of them.'

Fen wished she could think of something to say, but nothing helpful came to mind. She looked away, in case Amy felt her eyes digging into her back. Instead, she studied the finely carved room dividers, the paintings and guitars hung on the walls.

'I've got something for you,' Amy said after a while. She went to her dressing table and opened the bottom drawer, and from it pulled a large canvas board. 'I dug it

out of the shed when I heard he'd died. Don't know why, really; it didn't make me feel any better.'

Fen felt winded at the sight of it. It was the portrait of Zach that she'd painted the morning after their first night together.

'I found it in the sunroom when I was cleaning for the final inspection. I nearly threw it away, so many times, but every time I came close it just felt like bad karma or voodoo or something, so I didn't.'

Fen remembered the brush of Zach's hair on her face that morning, his breath on her neck. He read *Salome* while she sketched his face on the canvas with a pencil in the poor light. Somehow her unskilled hand had captured the smile he gave her when she looked up to check she'd got his eyebrows right. Maybe this would replace his unforgiving eyes in her mind, this encapsulation of what had been between them.

'Thanks Amy, I can't say what this means to me.'

'Don't need to. I've spent enough time looking at it to know what it means.'

'I thought we had an open relationship, you know. I thought that was what he wanted.'

'Did he ever say that?'

'Yes, but then he changed his mind, without telling me.'

'Typical.'

'I did love him you know. I wasn't trying to hurt you or some twisted thing like that. I just fucked it up. I was so lost without you guys.' The feeling came back again, just for a moment, that sense of being ripped from an idyll of sunshine and lush grass, and the quiet hum of bees, to be deposited in a cavernous space, a damp nothingness.

Amy sat down on one of the brocaded armchairs, and began compressing grass into the bucket bong. 'I wrote him so many letters I never sent,' she said quietly,

hesitantly, ‘once I knew he wasn’t coming back. I wanted to tell him ... I thought he should know I’d had to terminate his baby.’

‘You were pregnant?’

‘No, I terminated a pumpernickel. Yes I was fucking pregnant. Found out after he’d already left for Melbourne. To find you.’

‘Oh my god, Amy. I had no idea.’

‘You mean you’re not blessed with E.S.P. like I always thought?’

‘Jesus, Amy, could you lay off the sarcasm just for a moment.’

‘Why should I? Because you’re feeling a bit sensitive, with all the guilt you’ve been carrying around? Do you want to know about guilt? Try killing your child before it’s even had a chance to become a child, and then lie in bed wondering if that’s the reason you can’t make another one with a man who actually deserves, more than anyone in the world, to be a dad. Fuck you, Fenella. Fen. Whatever the fuck you want to be called.’

Fen felt hot, and cold. Anger and shame pulsed loudly in her temple. She could say nothing.

‘I’m sorry,’ Amy said, after a long silence, ‘I shouldn’t have sworn at you.’

‘That’s okay,’ Fen said, ‘I shouldn’t have ... done a lot of things.’

Amy nodded, put the bong nozzle down and stood up. ‘Hey listen,’ she said, brushing her hands clean on her thighs, ‘I don’t want to be rude, Fen, but this is all a bit heavy right now, you know?’

‘Do you want me to go?’

‘I thought I was handling it and everything, but I think I have to not be around you at the moment. I mean, I thought you were my friend once, but then ... and now here you are, and I’m not sure I know who you are, other than someone who turned out

not to give a shit about me. I mean, I appreciate the apology, but maybe let's just call it a night, okay?'

Fen stood and looked for her bag. Amy pointed to it. Picking it up, Fen headed down the passage, wanting to say something to make Amy change her mind, but not knowing where to start. 'Bye,' she said as Amy closed the door.

Walking down the porch steps, clutching the portrait of Zach and trying to get her bearings in the fading light, Fen heard something; a thud followed by a crash, and Amy swearing. She waited, heart pounding, in case Amy might need some help, but there was nothing. And then she heard a sound that was achingly familiar. It was Amy, playing her guitar. Fen stood there, listening. It was 'Exit Music' by Radiohead.

Twenty

In the taxi, Fen sat holding the portrait to her chest, feeling a potent blend of happiness and guilt. She had proof now of the way Zach had looked at her once, proof that she hadn't just imagined it; but she also had to face how careless she'd been with Amy, whose grief over Zach seemed heavier and more complicated even than hers.

The Swan River glinted outside the window, and King's Park loomed to the right. Chris Isaak was on the radio singing 'Wicked Game', and Fen closed her eyes, knowing she'd been the worst kind of friend to Amy. She remembered Amy's laugh, not the bitter one from tonight, but her old, easy chuckle, so contagious. She hoped that, given a few days, Amy's anger towards her might diminish, now that she'd had a chance to tell Fen where to go. Maybe Fen could send her flowers; or would she sneer at that?

The song finished on that ambiguous line, *Nobody loves no one*, and Fen wondered how Zach might have felt, had he found out about Amy's pregnancy. She wondered how many other children he'd conceived; and she wondered what she would have done, in Amy's shoes. Thinking about children was not something she allowed herself to do, as a rule. She'd always had a different kind of legacy in mind, even if it did now seem a little shaky.

A text came through on her phone, from her agent: *Elphaba audition possible next week, but no later. Let me know! David getting tetchy too ... Call me!*

At the hotel, Fen put the portrait and her bag down and ordered a salad. She would have to call Tim soon. In the meantime, she wanted to call Amy and apologise

again, check she was all right, but she resisted. Amy needed time; Fen should give her some.

There was sand on the lettuce, just a little, but the dressing was sharp enough to make up for it. Anyway, there was no time to waste quibbling with the waiter; it was time to don her hired nylon and become a murderous flapper for the evening.

Upstairs, she looked at her reflection in the window. With a headband holding her hair in a bob, and the distortion of the thick glass and darkness beyond, it was someone else who looked back, someone from another time in her feather boa and drop-waisted dress.

She checked that the plastic pistol was in her bag, next to the napkin with the address scrawled on it and the small whiskey bottle from the mini-bar. She'd soaked off the label so that it might pass for a vial of arsenic. No Agatha Christie *femme fatale* worth her salt would show up at a party without her poison. Not that Fen thought anyone there would notice.

It had been a long time since she'd gone to a party alone. The last time had been in her early days in London, trying to network, make connections. It had taken a lot of loosening up beforehand, and when the tricks of the acting trade had fallen short, she'd invariably turned to liquid courage. The portrait of Zach smiled at her from the dresser as she turned to that same kind of courage now. She wondered what it must have been like for him, having to work the room at one of those so-called A-list parties. She imagined him ordering bourbon from room service and knocking back a shot or six to settle his nerves. Then he'd have dug out his stash of something illicit, something to calm or elevate, depending on the demon of the day. He'd have snorted, smoked or swallowed it in his hotel bathroom, alone—nothing recreational about it anymore—and he would have kept going until he was able to look in the mirror and believe in what he saw there. Only then would he have been ready to take whatever that was out the door,

draped a girl or two on its arms and let it loose on the scene, to party with its own kind, prowling for affirmation.

The taxi pulled up outside a cluster of villas, opposite the grass-banked curve of a lake. The trees shuddered in the breeze beside the dark, still body of water.

There was no mistaking which villa Fen wanted. White balloons decorated the carport and low-fi jazz wended its way out through the screen door.

Michelle was in the mood-lit kitchen, arranging an army of glasses and squinting over a small book of cocktail ingredients. She moved with the music as she poured liquor into a blender full of strawberries and ice. People filled the living room, drinking martinis and bright green cocktails and spilling through French doors on to a covered outdoor area, where some tried to abandon themselves to the music.

‘Peppermint liqueur,’ Fen said over the swell of voices and laughter, passing the bottle of green syrup to Michelle, and wondering why she’d come.

‘Ooh, nice,’ Michelle replied, taking it before looking up to see who had come with it. ‘Fenella!’ she shouted, coming in for a hug made awkward by the bottle and book in her hands. ‘No date tonight?’ she asked coyly, putting the bottle carefully alongside an impressive array of others.

‘No, no. No such luck.’

‘Oh well, more cocktails for the rest of us,’ she laughed gesturing to a tray of glasses on the drinks table. ‘You missed the martinis, but help yourself to a strawberry daiquiri.’

Fen took a glass from the pink regiment and edged her way through the small crowd, through the heat and noise of bodies and music. She looked for a familiar face, or a corner vantage point. Finding neither, she leaned against the wall near the French doors and looked at the handful of people on the dance-floor. A woman nearly rigid

with nerves and lack of rhythm was trying to throw herself into the boogie, head down, hair waving. Her partner took her hands and began to spin her, faster and faster, until her smile took on a desperate edge.

Fen felt Martin's presence before she saw him; felt his eyes watching, with her, the drama unfolding on the dance floor. Slouched with one foot up against the wall and nursing a creamy green drink, he watched the partner lose his balance and stagger back, falling off the low porch on to the grass. The woman groped the air with her hands until she found a chair and sat down, mortified.

Martin pushed off from the wall and headed down the stairs to the small patch of lawn, where he bent to ask the man if he was all right. He helped him up and on to a chair and headed back up the steps. 'I'll get you a water, mate,' he said over his shoulder.

It was then he noticed Fen, and smiled that leering smile she remembered.

'Fenella,' he said, kissing her first on one cheek and then the other.

Dickhead, she thought, though the warm sweat-smell of him diluted the sentiment, just a little.

'Martin.'

'Glad to see you still remember the names of the humble folk who knew you when,' he said. 'Fancy a tequila?'

She stiffened at the reference. 'Hate the stuff.'

'Ooh, you're good.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Oh you know, keeping the masses happy.'

Fen sipped her daiquiri and looked around, hoping to find an excuse to exit, stage left.

'So,' Martin said, 'this is a bit different to the last time I saw you, eh?'

‘Yeah, just a little bit.’

‘What have you been doing with yourself?’

‘Working in the West End, in London,’ she said, straightening a little. ‘I’m looking at a new script at the moment. It’s good.’

‘Sounds like you made the right move, heading overseas. Wish I’d fucked off too, instead of martyring my career on this West-Coast pyre.’

‘It’s probably not too late. My cab might still be outside for you. You might be able to catch it, if you’re quick.’

‘Subtle, Fenella. Very subtle.’

‘It’s Fen. I don’t answer to Fenella anymore.’

‘Oh yeah? How come? Too flowery?’

‘Something like that.’

He studied her, looking amused. ‘You were Zach’s squeeze, weren’t you? When you fell prey to my charms?’

‘You knew that?’

Martin laughed. ‘He’s my cousin; *was* my cousin. I knew everything about Zach. I couldn’t escape the fucker.’

Fen was stunned but she tried not to show it; her reflex was to pretend she knew everything Martin did about Zach, and more. But it made her head spin to think they’d been cousins. It meant they’d known each other well; it meant that Martin had probably seduced Fen as part of some stupid feud between him and Zach, and she’d let him.

‘His parents couldn’t stand him either, apparently. Didn’t he tell you?’

As far as Fen had been aware, Zach’s parents had supported his acting dream. She remembered his words in the park; he’d said they’d been ‘all for it.’

‘They fucked off to Melbourne,’ Martin said, ‘leaving Zach with his nanna. *Our* nanna, though you wouldn’t think so, the way she ignored me, even though I was the

one who bought her groceries, delivered her laundry, weeded her garden, and hauled her stuff down to the bleeding charity bin. Anyway,' he snorted, 'what a fucking loser.'

His words sent the party reeling away, so that, for a moment, all Fen knew was his face, his voice, and these details about Zach she'd somehow missed. She wanted to think Martin was lying, but what he'd said made sense of Zach's refusal to take her home. And it meant that the adoring parents he'd spoken of that time in the park were just a sad little fantasy.

'Looks like little orphan boy kept you in the dark. I'm guessing you didn't catch *A Current Affair* this evening.'

'No.' Her hand was trembling.

'Never mind, I'm sure you'll be able to read all about it in the morning.'

'What will I read?'

'Let's just say I thought Australia was entitled to know the true pathetic history of our prodigal son.'

'Right.'

The music was too loud then. The cocktail taste in Fen's mouth was still there, sticky and too sweet.

'So, who's your agent?' Martin said, trying to be casual. 'Can I have his number?'

Fen put her glass on a small table nearby. 'He doesn't give it out.'

'How about you give him mine then? I could be in London within the week. And nude scenes *are* my bag, baby.'

'He doesn't take charity cases, sorry.'

Martin sneered, frustration showing through his melting bravado. 'All these years I thought you were a nice girl, Fenella.'

Fen looked at him, a dull husk of a man desperate for just a whiff of his cousin's fame. Worse than that, before he looked away, she saw herself reflected in his eyes, a woman wearing the same desperation he did, wearing it like a badge, like a tattoo on her forehead.

He recoiled from the search of her eyes.

'Think I'll get me a pink one too, to chase the green,' he said, stepping back and draining his glass. 'See you around. Or did you want me to get you another one too? Maybe I should get you plastered again, just for a laugh. For old times' sake.'

Fen acknowledged his little joke with a grimace. He pulled a business card out of his pocket and held it up in front of her face, then placed it in the hand she held out as a result of some primitive social reflex.

'I'm expected somewhere,' she muttered, and headed back inside.

The party had become too much effort all of sudden: too hot, somehow frenzied. She left, thanking Michelle, not bothering with an excuse. She could think only of little Zach, wanting his mum and dad, and then of a more grown up Zach, in the park, telling her all about them. He'd seemed so sure of himself, secure in their love, but he must have had to build that assurance for himself, like scaffolding, around his heart.

She remembered watching someone interview him once, before he'd learned to be guarded. He'd seemed to really want his audience, or at least his interviewer, to understand him. Trying to articulate something, he'd looked so disappointed by the incomprehension of the grinning, nodding interviewer. He'd shifted in his seat, found his smile and gone back to the perks of being a sex symbol, but Fen had seen the cosmic loneliness of that moment. Zach had looked to the lens to pull him out of the rip. But it couldn't do that. All it could do was drag him even further out to sea.

In the taxi, on her way back to the hotel, she pulled out her phone. After a moment's pause, she tapped a name near the top of her list.

‘Hello?’

‘Anthony?’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s Fen. Did I wake you?’

‘No, no. Yes. What time is it?’

She checked her watch. ‘Nearly midnight,’ she said, pressing the palm of her hand against her forehead.

‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes, I’m okay. Sorry, I should have checked the time.’

‘Where are you?’

‘I’m up in the northern suburbs somewhere, in a taxi, but,’ she hesitated, ‘I’m dreading the thought of my hotel.’

‘Well ...’ Anthony said, sounding as though he was sitting up in his bed. Fen thought she detected reluctance in his voice.

‘Anyway, sorry,’ she said, ‘I shouldn’t have called. You go back to sleep.’

‘No, that won’t be possible. I’ll lie awake for the next couple of hours at least.’

‘Oh, no.’

‘Yes. I’m afraid you owe it to me now to come over.’

Twenty-one

They turned down a narrow street in South Fremantle, lined with silent cars and compact houses. Several security lights flicked on and off as they passed.

Anthony's porch light revealed a yard in dire need of attention. The patch of lawn was long and unruly, filled with weeds. A small maple tree looked forlorn in the enclosure, as though conscious that its elegance was wasted there. The gate swung closed behind Fen, and she paused on the porch, listening to the sounds of the night, listening for the sea. There was laughter, distant strains of it, and a car sloshing through a puddle somewhere.

When Anthony opened the door, his hair was damp and he smelled of cologne.

'You had a shower?'

He laughed a little sheepishly. 'I had to do something. I'd finished my book, and there's almost never anything good on TV this time of night.'

She followed him in. 'Isn't this the *only* time there's anything decent on TV?'

A dog whined out back.

'That's Garçon,' Anthony said as they walked down the passage and through to the kitchen. The ageless lament stopped as they approached the back door, giving way to a single bark and the scrape of a paw. Anthony let him in. 'Relax, old boy,' he urged as the silky mop padded past him, nails muted by the kitchen laminex, then loud on the wooden floor. The old spaniel waddled over to the sofa and managed to scramble up on to it, lowering his head with an involuntary sigh.

'Coffee?' said Anthony, 'or tea?'

'I could murder a cup of tea.'

Outside, armed with steaming cups, they sat and looked out at the dark night of stars.

‘Do you still surf much?’ Fen asked.

‘I do, most mornings. Or what passes for surfing up here. I try to get down south when I can for some proper waves.’

‘And Rottnest?’

‘Haven’t been there recently, though I should, now that you mention it.’

‘I’ve never been.’

‘Never?’

‘Never.’

‘Well, I seriously suggest you get over there before you go back to London. If you’re going back?’

‘I am, I think.’

‘Yeah, well, make sure you get to Rottnest first. It’ll be good now, off-peak.’

‘Thanks, by the way, for letting me drag you out of bed. I hope you haven’t got anything planned for tomorrow that you need your sleep for?’

‘Oh just work, but I find sleep deprivation to be one of the better ways of getting through that.’

‘Really?’

‘Oh yes. You’re either hallucinating your way through a meeting, or you’re standing semi-comatose next to the coffee machine, trying to remember what you’re doing. It makes life far more interesting.’

‘I suppose so,’ Fen laughed, ‘but you do know it’s Sunday tomorrow, don’t you? Do you work Sundays?’

‘Oh, is it? No I don’t.’ He shook his head. ‘That’s excellent news.’

‘Like finding twenty bucks in an old pocket.’

‘Better. So, where have you been tonight? Some kind of show?’

‘What? Oh, this,’ she looked down at her flapper dress and the shawl with its golden tassels. ‘I forgot I was still in costume.’

‘I suppose you spend half your life that way, so it’s easy to forget.’

‘To be honest I spend more time in my trackies, wishing I were in costume. It’s the life of the serial understudy. I’m still a wannabe.’

‘Go on, I’m sure you’re great.’

‘Yeah, well, not great enough, apparently. What about you? What is this job you don’t have to be at tomorrow?’

‘I’m a journo.’

‘Really? Where?’

‘Local rag. It’s not bad, but I’m getting a bit bored with it, to be honest. You know what they say. Familiarity breeds contempt.’

Fen nodded. ‘That is what they say, isn’t it? I wonder if it’s like that for everyone: no matter what we end up doing, we come to hold it in contempt. But we just press on because what else are we going to do?’

‘Don’t you like your job?’

‘I don’t think I do at the moment.’

‘I think it probably is like that for everyone, at some point, but there’s this thing they call a career change.’

‘Smart arse,’ Fen said, and he smiled. ‘Far out,’ she continued, ‘a career change? What the hell would I do?’

‘I don’t know, but I’m still waiting for an answer to the original question.’

‘As in, what’s the meaning of life?’

‘No,’ he laughed, ‘as in, where have you been tonight?’

‘Oh that! I was just at a stupid party I should never have gone to.’

‘Oh parties, I remember those.’

‘You’ll never guess who I saw there.’

‘Ummm, Jude Law?’

‘Jude Law? In Joondalup?’

‘Oh, Joondalup. You never said you were in Joondalup. That’s different then.’

‘I saw Martin.’

‘Still around then, is he? Not dazzling the world via webcam in a bedsit somewhere?’

‘No, still hobnobbing in Perth. “Fucking sinkhole” I think he called it.’

‘Was it a pleasant reunion?’

‘I wouldn’t go that far. Illuminating; yes. Pleasant? Not very.’

‘Illuminating?’

‘It always is to see someone older. It seems somehow to explain the way they were before. And also, he told me he and Zach were cousins.’

‘Oh, yeah.’

‘I had no idea.’

‘Didn’t you? It was one of the reasons Zach was so pissed about the two of you getting it on.’

Fen shook her head. ‘He also said Zach’s parents dumped him when he was a little kid, and he grew up with his nanna.’

‘Yeah, she raised him, since he was two or three I think.’

‘He never told me. In fact, he talked about his parents as though they were behind him all the way.’

‘He did that with me too for a while, when we were kids, until one day he confessed. But then he was so embarrassed he changed the subject. We rode to the bottle-o and he conned some guy into buying us beer.’

‘Why would he have been ashamed?’

‘I guess he felt that if his mum and dad didn’t love him, how could anyone else?’

‘God, I can’t believe he didn’t tell me.’

Anthony shrugged, ‘Why would he?’

‘Well, you tell that stuff to people you love; otherwise, who do you tell?’

‘Maybe no one.’

Fen sat looking at her cup for a while, at the polish chipping off her nails, then drained the tepid remains of her tea.

‘I guess I’d better call myself another cab. It might be time to rent a car at this rate.’

‘You could crash here if you like,’ Anthony said as she fumbled in her bag for her phone.

‘You know, that would be really nice. Do you think Garçon will relinquish that couch?’

‘It’s a pretty good couch, but he’s got it even better out here. He has a canine waterbed for his aching joints.’ He took her mug. ‘I’ll just get some bedding.’

Fen sat for a moment, enjoying the silence of the little courtyard, and the small dark workshop on the other side of it. Then she followed Anthony inside. Garçon was standing stiffly next to the couch, looking stunned to be awake. Anthony was shaking the folds out of a sheet. Fen caught the far end and pulled it taut over the sofa bed.

‘This is great, thank you,’ she said as he handed her a blanket, and they stood there a moment, before he said, ‘You’re welcome.’

Fen thought she should turn away, busy herself with smoothing out the bed. But she didn’t. Anthony was so close, and he was looking at her, reluctant to move too, but equally reluctant to linger if it wasn’t what she wanted. And yet he did, because she did,

and once enough time had passed, there was no way a hearty bluff of goodnights was going to wash. But any longer, and they'd have to talk about it, so Fen stepped closer and kissed him, a slow and sensual escape from all the numbing regret and confusion.

In his room, the fold lines were still visible on his sheets. A quilt lay crumpled on the floor at the foot of the bed.

'I confess, I was sprucing up the place when you arrived,' Anthony said, 'trying to disguise my bachelor squalor.'

He looked nervous, as though, for him, this might be more than just a savouring of skin for the sake of it, more than just a ritual of forgetting.

'Ant,' Fen said, looking up at him, trying to find a way to explain. But in his sober smile, she saw she didn't need to.

Twenty-two

Fen slept on the couch. The muffled drone of a Hendrix song woke her up, sometime around dawn. It was Anthony's ring-tone.

Listening in half-sleep to the one-sided conversation down the passage, she couldn't make out any words, just the resignation in his voice. Then he went quiet. When he spoke again his tone was different—tender—by turns encouraging and consoling.

All went quiet again. After a few minutes, he came down the passage, trying in vain to walk quietly on the creaky boards. He filled a glass with water in the kitchen and was half way back through the lounge when Fen said, 'Everything all right?'

'Jesus Christ almighty,' he muttered, water spilling on to the floor, 'you gave me a fright.'

'Sorry, I thought I'd spare you the tiptoeing.'

He looked ragged in the dim light, his skin pale and his hair standing up all over his head. He looked sad.

'You okay?' she asked.

'Yeah, yeah,' he scratched his head, drying the water with one socked foot. 'No, not really.'

'You want to talk about it?'

'It's nothing new,' he said, sitting down near her feet. 'It's just so hard, hearing his voice. Worse not hearing it, of course.'

He looked cold; Fen resisted the impulse to invite him under the blanket. Instead, she asked, 'Whose voice?'

‘My son, Samuel’s. It’s been two weeks now since I last spoke to him. Two weeks and three days. At least a year since I last saw him.’

‘How old is he?’

‘Four.’

‘Wow. I didn’t know.’

‘He lives with his mum and her boyfriend, in Geelong of all places. They’re skiing in Thredbo at the moment. I’ve been waiting days for that call.’ He smiled. ‘Julie said he wouldn’t eat his breakfast this morning without talking to me first. That’s something at least. Usually she makes out he’s forgetting who I am.’

Fen put her hand cautiously on Anthony’s forearm. It felt small and inconsequential, but he reached across to hold it and they sat like that for a while, listening to the dawn birdsong grow louder. Then he stood and went back to bed.

Fen woke up much later and lay staring at the ceiling for a while, studying the cracks and curves where a layer of paint was peeling away.

‘Let’s go get breakfast,’ Anthony said when he came through, ‘I’m starving.’

‘So am I,’ Fen said, propping herself on an elbow. ‘I don’t think I had any dinner last night.’ She looked at her flapper costume on the floor. ‘Any chance you have something I could wear? I can’t bring myself to wear nylon by day.’

‘You’ll probably find this a bit tragic,’ Anthony said, ‘but I’ve still got some of Julie’s clothes. She took most of the good stuff, I’m sure, but there’s bound to be something wearable in there. It’s in Sam’s room. This way.’

Fen followed him down the passage, wrapped in the dressing gown he must have laid out on her bed while she was asleep.

‘I moved them out of our wardrobe because I couldn’t stand looking at them every day, just hanging there. But I wasn’t quite brave enough to get rid of them

altogether. In case she comes back and kicks my arse.’ He laughed. ‘Jesus, I knew I was pathetic, but saying that out loud really drives it home.’

He opened the door to the second bedroom. It was similar to his one, except that it was painted blue and green, with frog curtains and hot air balloons on the walls. The toddler bed was neatly made with a crocheted blanket, and there was a stuffed dragon sitting on a pillow with ‘SAMUEL’ stitched across it in green thread. Sunlight fell on a wicker basket, out of which hung the tail of a soft toy, and there was a low bookshelf stacked with colourful story books.

‘Ant, this is a beautiful room.’

‘Julie straightened it up before they left, which I took as a good sign, at the time.’ He tried to flatten an air balloon sticker that was peeling away from the wall, but it curled up again the moment he let it go.

‘I’m sure they’ll be back for a visit soon,’ Fen said, feeling stupid for saying it. What did she know?

‘Julie didn’t really want to discuss it this morning, but I think I’ll press her on it next time.’

‘You should. I bet Samuel misses you. Not to mention his dragon.’

‘Wagon, he calls him. My mum gave him that. Probably why Julie wouldn’t let him take it.’

He opened the wardrobe door. A fleet of little shirts and shorts filled one half, with toys and boxes piled high beneath them. The other half contained several dresses and jackets hanging over a cluster of belts, stilettos and handbags.

‘Wow,’ Fen said, looking through the dresses. ‘I don’t think I would have left this one behind, or this one, or these.’

‘She only took one suitcase.’

‘I’d like to see the things she *did* take with her.’

‘You might as well take them all. Why should I be saddled with them while she frolics in the snow?’

‘Because she might kick your arse otherwise?’

‘True. And I have a delicate arse.’

Fen chose a red dress in heavy cotton, a brown belt and a jacket.

‘Here, let me get you a towel,’ Anthony said, closing the door carefully behind them.

Walking to the cafe with Anthony, wearing Julie’s clothes and with Garçon waddling along on his leash, Fen felt as if she was trying on someone else’s cosy morning routine. It didn’t feel too bad.

‘Sorry about last night,’ she said.

‘That’s all right, no harm done.’

Anthony tied Garçon’s leash to the leg of an outside table and went to fetch a newspaper. Fen sat down as a waiter delivered menus and water.

‘Sorry, they only had the one,’ Anthony said, ‘we’ll have to share.’

Fen filled the water glasses.

‘What do you know,’ Anthony said. ‘Listen to this.’

‘Listening.’

‘Headline goes: *Zach Matthews, “pretty much an orphan”.*’

‘Oh, jeez,’ Fen said, remembering Martin’s reference to the TV interview.

Anthony cleared his throat and read:

Stories of Zach Matthews' Subiaco upbringing were yesterday proved false when the late star's paternal grandmother Valerie Matthews confirmed that she had raised him herself in Claremont.

The 72-year-old was responding to allegations made by an unnamed relative in an anonymous cash-for-comment interview televised on a commercial network last night.

"His parents didn't love him," the source claimed. "He was pretty much an orphan."

In a press release issued late yesterday, Ms Matthews said: "My son and Zach's mother were very young when Zach was born. Circumstances meant they were unable to give him the stability he needed." She added that she was privileged to raise him, and was very proud of his career, but would not comment further on his parents.

Although Matthews never spoke publicly about his childhood, media sources frequently reported that his parents had raised him in the suburb of Subiaco. Their actual whereabouts remains unknown.

Police have yet to answer media enquiries about the thumb drive found in a laptop in Matthews' home.

'Well, we know who the "unnamed relative" was,' Fen said.

'Who?'

'Martin. He boasted about it last night, didn't I tell you?'

'Cash-for-comment, what a farce.'

'I suppose it's good in a way. Zach's grandma's been able to claim him without having to spill the beans herself. And Zach comes across as noble for not trying to cash in on a difficult childhood.'

‘Yeah, but what a dickhead. Martin, I mean.’

The waiter took their order.

‘You could have broken the story yourself, couldn’t you?’ Fen said when the waiter had left. ‘You knew exactly why Zach’s parents weren’t coming forward.’

‘It did occur to me, unfortunately. I wouldn’t be a journo if it hadn’t. And I knew it was bound to come out sooner or later. But I guess some things are still sacred.’

‘Good.’

‘I haven’t told my editor I was friends with Zach either. I wouldn’t hear the end of it.’

‘What’s that thumb drive about, do you think?’

‘Who knows, maybe some dodgy photographs or films? Suicide note?’

‘I don’t think it was suicide. I think he just relapsed and overdid it.’

‘You’re probably right. I don’t know which is worse though.’

‘I do.’

When their coffee arrived, Anthony cleared his throat. Looking steadily at Fen, he spoke.

‘You know I said he didn’t talk about you much? To me?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well, I lied. Don’t ask me why, some sort of old loyalty or something.’

‘What did he say?’

‘At first it was stuff about ... you know ... your body.’

‘My body?’

He shifted in his seat and stirred his coffee. ‘He said your hair was awesome. And your legs ... he liked your legs.’

Fen remembered Zach pouring fine sand on her thighs from pinched fingers as they lay on the beach, in a sound pocket scooped out of the wind and waves. Her skin

was hot and baking in a fine salt crust, her eyes half shut against the glare. The sand was soft, landing on her skin, so soft she could barely feel it.

‘Then as he got to know you, he talked about your sense of humour and your sweetness. He also said he felt a bit insecure; said you were tidal.’

‘Really? Tidal?’

‘Yeah. One minute so tuned in to him, so present; other times, vague and distant. Secretive, he said.’

‘Secretive?’

Anthony shrugged, ‘Don’t look at me.’

After they’d eaten, Anthony said he’d walk Fen to the train station. The weather was beautifully mild, like a summer’s day in London, just cool enough for Fen to keep Julie’s jacket on. They passed the hospital on South Terrace and approached the Norfolk Hotel.

‘So, when did you and Julie separate?’

‘About eighteen months ago.’ They stopped outside the hotel and waited for the pedestrian light to go green. ‘It was probably my fault. She talked about being bored, quite a lot, wanting me to take her out dancing or to the theatre, neither of which was really my thing. Live music is about as cultured as I get. Mostly I like to be in my own space, doing my own thing.’

‘Samuel was the perfect excuse not to go out, as far as I was concerned, but Julie started going a bit feral, stuck at home. She found me infuriating, said I was like an old man. I think the final straw was when her mum gave us a voucher for a Salsa class, and I pulled out at the last minute. She went without me, took a friend of ours instead. Before I knew what was happening she’d shacked up with some guy from the class and taken Sam with her. It just took my breath away, it happened so fast.’

Fen took his arm as they crossed the road.

‘It was usually me who took him to the park,’ Anthony continued. ‘I was the one who put him down for his naps, who read to him at bedtime. I’d soothe him when he was overwrought, when Julie was just a mess of rage and guilt in the kitchen. He’d settle quickly with me. We were a little team, Sam and I.’

They walked along the café strip, past laughter and the clink of cutlery, the scents of bacon and basil.

‘He’s four, you said?’

‘Yeah. It’s his birthday next month. I thought they’d be back, but it’s not looking likely.’

‘Will you send him something?’

‘I’ve bought him so many things, but it’s like I’m paralysed or something, still in denial. I can’t decide which to send and which to hold on to for when he comes home. Some of them I want to watch him open. And there are some he might be too old for already.’

‘He’d probably be happy just to get a card, you know? Anything is better than nothing.’

‘Yeah. You’re right.’

‘Just send him whatever will fit in a box. Or better yet, take him something in person. Have you got any leave?’

‘Yeah, I never take any. I’ve got loads. I’ve thought about it, but...’

‘But what?’

‘I don’t know,’ he said, looking wounded.

‘Sorry, I don’t mean to be so aggressive.’

‘It’s okay.’

‘It’s just that my dad wasn’t around when I was little, and he didn’t write much. I would have been grateful to get his old socks in the mail, you know, just something to show he knew I was still alive.’

‘I’m sure he knew.’

‘But did he care? That’s the question.’

‘I’m sure he cared. Maybe he was just a useless git like me, in shock.’

‘Yeah, maybe. But I wish he’d just got over himself and sent me a postcard now and then.’

The station came into view.

‘You know that thing you said,’ Fen asked, ‘about my not having wronged the perfect man?’

‘Oh yes. That thing I said.’

‘You didn’t just mean it in general terms, did you?’

‘No, I suppose not.’

‘So?’

After a pause, Anthony said, ‘He had a girlfriend when he started seeing you.’

Fen stopped walking. ‘He what?’

‘For a little while he was stringing you both along. A very little while.’

‘What? Who was she?’

‘Her name was Lara. An actress, or something.’

‘Lara? The director?’

‘Maybe. Did you know her?’

Fen nodded and put her hand to her neck, pressing her fingers into knotted muscle.

‘Lara directed us in the play we did together,’ she said. ‘I had no idea...’ Those strained phone calls, the silences. ‘I wonder if she knew about me.’

‘Doubt it.’

‘The little shit.’

‘To his credit, he broke up with her a couple of weeks after the two of you started seeing each other. He said he didn’t tell you in case you thought less of him for starting up with you before finishing with her.’

‘Yeah, no shit. What a bloody hypocrite.’

‘There’s one more thing.’

‘I’m not sure I can handle any more.’

Anthony checked for traffic as they crossed the street.

‘You’d better tell me, though.’

‘There was an application form he was supposed to post for you, but he forgot. He found it under some books one time when I was over there. He was all wide-eyed and guilt-ridden, didn’t know what to do with it. It was way past the submission deadline. I think he just tossed it in the end, rather than tell you.’

‘My application to audition for NIDA?’

‘Were there any other applications you gave him to post?’

‘No, only that one. I waited and waited for a reply from them; a knock-back, anything. I asked him if he was sure he’d posted it, and he swore he had. What a coward.’

‘I’m sorry. Maybe I should’ve kept my mouth shut.’

Fen shook her head. ‘No, no. It’s better to know, I think.’

They approached the Federation-style façade of the Fremantle station.

‘I told him he should tell you. But he was adamant he couldn’t. I think he had this idea of who you wanted him to be, and he was going to be that person no matter what.’

‘Maybe he knew me better than I knew myself.’

‘He was pretty good at reading people, old Zach.’

Fen sighed. Blinking away tears, she crouched to scratch Garçon behind the ears. ‘See you old fella.’

She watched them go, the hobbling bundle of Garçon and the tall figure of Anthony, studying the ground as he walked.

Twenty-three

There was a rowdy Sunday session in the hotel bar downstairs, which pressed on late into the evening. Fen couldn't sleep. She tried watching a movie, but it was badly written and miscast, and the ad breaks came thick and fast, giving her too much time to stew over Zach and his secrets.

She kept seeing Lara, tall and toned, oozing confidence, talking to Zach about Narcissus and his motivations: 'He's desperate to know love, but he's numb inside. He's stunted. He missed his mirror stage.' Her rich-red hair had looked dyed, but it had probably just been an enhancement of her natural colour because it had suited her pale complexion.

Fen couldn't believe she hadn't noticed anything between them during the play. Except for the occasional smile, there had been no affection, no tension, nothing to suggest they'd even met before the auditions. They must have been hiding it from her, from everyone; one of those furtive relationships. Maybe Lara was ashamed of the age gap, or of the fact that she'd cast her own lover in her play.

Was that the only reason Fen had won the part, she wondered; because she'd been in the auditions with Zach? And when had he actually broken up with Lara? If what Anthony had said was true, and the relationships had overlapped for two weeks—two whole weeks of Fenella thinking she was the only girl on his mind—then it must have been after the show had finished.

Poor Lara. Her mum had been ill, and in the middle of the play's second week, she'd been rushed to hospital, so it was just Fenella and Zach having a beer at the Blue Room bar after the show. Zach ordered two shots of Sambuca as well as the beer; he

must have been just as nervous as she was. Her hand had trembled as she'd lifted that little glass of blue syrup to her lips, spilling some over her fingers, making them sticky.

Later, he'd laughed at something she'd said and put his arm around her. 'You're too much,' he'd said. 'I can't take it.'

'You can take it,' she'd said, managing to hold his gaze, emboldened by his tone, his arm around her shoulders. He'd looked away, smiling.

In another pub, against a backdrop of backpackers and draught beer and tinny music, he'd finally kissed her. It was a kiss without the subtext of cruelty that had darkened their scripted kisses, without the sense of an audience holding its collective breath just a few feet away. It was only her breath, and his.

And he'd been in the thick of another relationship at the time, Fen thought, with a girl who would have been out with them, except that her mother was desperately ill. What a guy.

Maybe he'd waited to tell Lara about Fenella because her mum had been sick. Maybe he'd just been doing his best in a tricky situation.

But then there was her NIDA application. What a dickhead; he could have just told her. She would have applied again, and who knew where that might have taken her? If she had been accepted, she would have become a better performer, with more confidence and a more impressive CV. She might have landed some lead roles in the West End early on, avoiding the whole understudy quagmire. Or maybe she'd have found a different niche—like TV or film—and become known and respected like Cate Blanchett or Nicole Kidman. She could have just swanned into London theatres, then, as a headline act. Bloody Zach.

She turned off the television and went out on to the balcony to soak up the shadowy pines and the infinite patience of the sea. The music had stopped; the Sunday

session had dwindled into the odd yell or squeal of tyres and a few stragglers waiting for cabs.

The cold briny air cooled her skin and stilled her mind, and she promised herself a walk first thing in the morning, maybe even a swim in the freezing water.

It was quiet all around, just the rustle and hush of the pines and the waves.

There was a car in the main beach car park. It was the blue sedan from the other day; Fen remembered the woman in her worn tracksuit, and her daughter. The car looked so small in the dark, like a tiny boat on a wide, black sea.

Twenty-four

The next morning, Fen woke with a headache, but she downed a glass of water and forced herself to go through with the beach walk, knowing she'd feel better for it. She noticed the blue sedan was gone, but thought it would probably be back, after dark.

She didn't get far, because of the rain, turning back at about the spot where she and Anthony had sat drinking beer. She cringed at the thought of Anthony; what had she been thinking, waking him up in the middle of night, playing games, when he clearly had far more important things to think about?

After a shower, Fen dialled her father's number, chiding herself for feeling nervous. It was only her dad, after all; unconditional love and all that.

A woman picked up. 'Hello?'

'Hello. Is that Frank Jackson's place?'

'Yes. This is Lena Jackson. Can I help you?'

Fen didn't respond for a moment, trying to process the woman's name. Her accent sounded German.

'Hello?' Lena sounded impatient now, suspicious.

'Hi, yes, sorry. This is Fen, Frank's daughter.'

'Oh, Fen? Really?'

'Yes. Is he about?'

'Yes he is. Just a moment.'

Lena put down the phone and Fen heard her walk down the passage, past the glass-doored atrium and out to the patio. A door opened and closed. There was silence, then voices and more footsteps.

‘Fenella?’

‘Hi, Dad.’

‘Darling girl! Where are you calling from?’

‘A hotel in Cottesloe.’

‘When did you fly in?’

‘Last week. It was all very short notice.’

‘But you can stay here without any notice at all.’

‘I’ll remember that next time.’

‘So what brings you back here, away from the dizzying lights of the West End, if it’s not to visit your old dad?’

‘You remember my friend Zach?’

Frank said nothing for a moment. Fen could hear him moving, probably scratching the back of his neck.

‘I think so.’

He didn’t, but fair enough, Fenella had only taken Zach home to meet him once.

‘I’ve come over for his funeral.’

‘Oh no, love. That’s terrible. Are you all right?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘I’m so sorry. He must have been quite young. Were you still close?’

‘Not lately.’

‘Come over and let us cook dinner for you. That’s me and Lena, my bride.’

Fen heard what sounded like a muffled kiss. Lena must have been standing next to him, and he’d pulled her close and kissed her.

‘You got married, Dad? Wow. I mean, that’s great. When was that?’

‘Not six months ago. I wasn’t sure you’d want to come all this way.’

‘I might have been able to get here, if I’d known about it.’

‘It wouldn’t have been worth it, love. We just had a tiny little ceremony at the registrar’s office, just us and our witnesses. But you’re going to love my little Lena, just wait till you meet her.’

‘Yeah, can’t wait. Who were the witnesses?’

‘Lena’s son, Arne. And you remember my mate, Bill?’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘Well, that was it. Very small affair, short and sweet.’

‘Sounds lovely.’

‘So how about tonight? Is that too soon?’

‘No, tonight’s good.’

Fen lowered the receiver. Lena, his bride.

She shouldn’t be so surprised; people got married all the time, and who wouldn’t want to marry Frank, given his easy charm? But if he’d been good at starting with women, he’d been terrible at staying interested. Fen remembered evenings spent indoors, with Frank holding a finger to his lips while one or other of his abandoned lovers pounded on the front door, calling him names. One of them had thrown his ornamental garden anchor through the front window. But that was years ago now. He must have seen the error of his shallow ways since then. Or maybe he’d grown a bit needy in his old age.

Fen wondered what Lena’s son Arne was like, how far he’d travelled to be a witness. It would have been a dull affair, she assured herself, a stuffy second-time-

around registry-office wedding. Not worth travelling halfway around the world for.
Certainly not worth getting upset about now.

Twenty-five

There was neither garish lipstick nor eyeliner on her reflection in the window. It was just her face, looking nervous. Her dad opened the door. Anxiety and relief mingled in her at the sight of him.

‘Fenella love, it’s bloody great to see you. Come here, give us a squeeze.’ He smelled the same, that warm blend of food and wine, but there was a new layer too, a new cologne maybe, or a different laundry detergent.

‘How are you, Dad?’

‘Ah, you know, my same old self, more or less. Although the boat’s been out of action for a while, getting fixed, so I’m champing at the bit to get out there. Driving Lena nuts, poor girl. Come and meet her.’

Fen followed him down the exposed-brick passage, past the oil paintings and dried seaweed trees she remembered so well. She felt as though she was regressing, but when they got to the living room, her déjà vu ended abruptly. Where once there’d been a cobbled-together vibe—old leather furniture and shabby textiles, bits of driftwood strung about the place—there was now a cream and brown colour scheme, with blue Moroccan carpets and tiles. Heavy urns were displayed on shelves where once shells and cuttlefish had gathered dust. The seafaring ambience was almost entirely gone, except for some of the driftwood and one or two of Frank’s old sketches.

‘Lena’s touch,’ Frank said, noticing Fen’s gaze. ‘Sometimes I think she married me just so she could redecorate the place.’

‘And other times?’ Lena emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. She was small and tanned, not much younger than Frank, with a lovely, angular face.

‘Other times I know you just plain couldn’t keep your hands off me.’

Fen recoiled as they kissed, and covered it up by stepping closer to a photo on the wall. It was Frank in a blue collared shirt and a grey suit jacket, and Lena, wearing a red dress, her sand-coloured curls tied back loosely.

‘That’s our wedding pic, Fenny. Look at us, grinning like muppets.’

‘I’m so pleased to meet you, Fenella. Or Fen, did you say, on the phone? Your father is very proud of you.’

‘I’m pleased to meet you too. Anyone who can get a ring on Dad’s finger has my greatest respect.’

‘Yes, well, they are getting a bit fat these days, it’s true,’ Frank said with a wink.

‘Ha ha,’ Lena said.

‘It is Fen, though, you’re right. I dropped the ‘ella’ when I got to London. I didn’t really feel like *Fenella* anymore.’

‘I chose Fenella, did you know that? I’m not trying to make you feel bad or anything. Just a bit of trivia.’

‘Well,’ said Lena, ‘I think both names are lovely.’

Fen held up a bottle in a paper bag. ‘Merlot, Dad. Still your favourite?’

‘Aren’t you clever to remember?’ Frank said as he pulled it out to admire the label. ‘Shall we start with some beer and save the wine for dinner?’

‘I’m on to it,’ Lena said, heading back into the kitchen.

‘Let’s sit outside,’ Frank said, leading the way. ‘You should see how Lena has transformed the yard. And it’s quite warm out there tonight. You’d never think it was winter.’

‘That’s for sure, not after so many winters in London.’

They walked through bi-fold doors out on to an extended timber deck with a small water feature and high walls covered in creepers.

‘You’ll have to tell me all about those winters,’ Frank said, pulling out a chair for her.

They drank their way through awkward questions and answers, drank enough to dilute the sense that they were strangers. Lena was quiet, as though determined to let Fen and Frank muddle their own way through. She kept the drinks and crisps coming while Frank cooked salmon on the barbeque, lighting citronella flares to keep mosquitoes away, and serving up lobsters with a dazzling salad. But when their words dried up, she just lit a cigarette or sat back with her glass and gazed at the sky with a contentment Fen envied.

When dinner was finished, Frank cleared the plates and Lena went with him to the kitchen to make Irish coffees. Fen was alone in the sanctuary of the courtyard, with the chirrup of insects and the trickle of the water feature. She began to understand the yearning to have a place of one’s own. ‘Mortgage’ had always seemed a sinking, stifling word, all about being tethered down. But seeing what Lena had done to the yard, free of the whims of a landlord, maybe the tether was worth it.

Frank came back with three glasses of chocolate mousse.

‘It’s good to have you here again, Fenella. I mean Fen. I’ve missed you.’

‘Thanks Dad. It’s good to be back, actually. I like what you’ve done with this space out here. It was a bit neglected when I was living here.’

‘Yes, we never used to come out here really, did we? Lena’s worked her magic, that’s for sure. Not much to do with me. My thumbs have never been very green, but she’s right into gardening and sustainability and all that sort of thing. I haven’t had to buy herbs since the day we met.’

‘How did you meet?’

‘She sold plants at the Sunday markets down at the high school. Seduced me with horticulture, didn’t you darling?’

‘Ha, very funny,’ Lena said, bearing teaspoons for the mousse. ‘Truth is, Fen, he wouldn’t leave me alone. He kept coming to me with questions that just got sillier and sillier, like which herb goes best with sushi, or which herbs are friends with which.’

‘You loved me from my first moronic utterance, you know you did.’

‘Yes dear, whatever you say, dear,’ Lena winked at Fen and went back inside to silence the whistling kettle.

‘She sold all kinds of beautiful stuff, herbs and shrubs, and the most gorgeous chillies, those ones over there, next to the lemongrass. After I’d hassled her enough times, she agreed to help me with my weedy dustbowl. She rocked up on my doorstep with a tray of leafy seedlings and a six-pack of beer, and I knew she was the one for me.’

‘I wish you’d told me you were getting married, Dad.’

Frank scratched the back of his neck. Fen was surprised she’d spoken so bluntly. She was about to apologise and say it wasn’t any of her business really, but she rebelled against the reflex. It *was* her business, if only a little bit.

‘I’m sorry, love. It seems obvious now, but somehow I thought you wouldn’t be interested.’

‘Indifference is your thing, Dad, not mine.’

He looked at her, surprised. She made herself look back at him. The trickle of the water feature grew loud in the silence.

‘I’ll wear that, Fen,’ Frank said at last, ‘but not because it’s true. I’ll wear it because I can see how you might have felt that way growing up. But I’m not indifferent to you, love, you have to know that. I think about you all the time. I want to call you and find out how you’re going, what you’re up to, what you’re thinking about, but I worry you’ll find me an interfering old man who’s not entitled to know.’

‘Of course you’re entitled to know. Parents are supposed to interfere.’

‘I’ll take that as permission,’ Frank said after a moment, and smiled. ‘You might come to regret it, though.’

Fen smiled too, as Lena came out with a tray of steaming mugs.

‘I hope I’ve not put too much whiskey in them,’ she said, lowering the tray to the table.

It tasted even more lethal than it smelled, but the chocolate mousse was smooth and light. Frank dragged his spoon in a circular motion, scraping each tiny morsel off the glass, looking from Fen to Lena and back again.

‘Fenella, there’s something I never told you, about your mother and me. She told me you blamed her for my leaving. I should have set you straight then, but I didn’t.’

Fen had butterflies in her belly, worse than stage fright. ‘What exactly did you do?’

‘Your mother was a gorgeous creature, just like you. She was on the stage too, once upon a time, before we moved out of the city. Did you know that? She had incredible presence, Carmela; could sing to send shivers up your spine.’

Fen remembered those nights sitting on the stairs, watching Carmela’s strong feet sweep the floor as she danced.

Frank was still scraping his spoon around his glass, though there was nothing left in it. Lena took hold of his wrist. He lowered the spoon to the table and took her hand instead.

‘I had to have her; made her marry me though she was reluctant. I promised her she’d never regret it, never be lonely. I’d adore her for the rest of her life. So she accepted. Why not? I was a catch. But the moment we stepped out of that church, everything changed. Inside me, it changed. And she could tell. I could see it when she looked at me. I started flopping on the end of the line like a mad thing, blaming her for my every mistake. I couldn’t bear to be *married*, to be pinned down—the predictability

of it all ... When she got pregnant with you, I thought things would be okay. She seemed so self-contained, serene, with you in there, and as you grew inside her, our own little magic bean, I loved her again, and I was so relieved, because it's the worst thing, when love goes. Just creeps off when your back is turned, and suddenly you look at someone, hear them talking, and think, who is this person? Do I really give a shit what she thinks?'

Fen stared at the remains of her dessert.

'When I left, I told you it was the only way forward, for any of us. I can't stay, I said. But I should have stayed, just for a few more years, for you. It wouldn't have been that hard. Your mum was ... tolerant; I had a job, friends; I had you. And I loved you, I truly did. You're magic, and I regret nothing in my life as much as I regret leaving you. I shouldn't have pushed your mum so hard to want me gone. I was an idiot. That's hindsight for you.'

Fen's stomach churned and her throat constricted. She watched Frank's hand holding Lena's, his thumb stroking her tanned skin—an unthinking, hypnotic gesture—and she was a child again, raw, on the verge of tears. Fury and grief moved inside her to hear him say what she had always refused to think: he could have bloody well stayed.

'I was an imbecile Fenny. And Carmela was so ... I made her so sad. I poured beer dregs on her herb garden, smoked bongos all day even though I didn't much like it, and I stayed out for nights at a time, coming home reeking of beer, and sex probably. I was like a child, trying to get her to throw me out so I'd be free, not only of her but of my conscience as well. And for the longest time, for your sake I think, she held out on me. I had to bring one of my other women home, let her find us on the sofa, before she finally said I could go.'

Fen stood up. She didn't need to know this; she preferred her own version. It had been part of her survival for so long. If she believed him now, then it meant her mum

wasn't to blame, hadn't come between a dashing man and his adoring child, hadn't driven him away. If her mum was the wronged party—a shining girl brought down by a reckless man—then Fen had to accept the simple, gutting truth that her father hadn't loved her enough to hang around.

He reached for her hand.

'Sit down my love, there's one more thing.'

She pulled her hand away, but sat back down. 'Why are you telling me all this?'

'You deserve to know. Your mother misses you, and believe it or not, I still care about you both.'

Fen glanced at Lena, who nodded her acceptance, sipped her coffee.

'Clearly, she never told you any of this, which only goes to show how much she loves you.'

'So,' Fen could barely speak, 'what else?'

Frank sighed, rubbed his forehead, and pressed on.

'When you were a little girl, you loved dolls. You swaddled anything that even remotely resembled a baby; shoes, rolled up shirts and pillows. I never saw your face light up the way it did when we got you your own doll.'

Fenella remembered the doll. It was in the attic at her mum's place.

'You loved that thing, but what you really wanted was a baby brother. A sister would have been okay too, but it was a brother you craved.'

She remembered.

'And you might have had one ...'

'Oh, Dad ... I don't want to know.'

'She was so excited, your mother,' he continued, too far into his unburdening now to stop. 'I think she thought it might bring me in out of the water once and for all, to have a second child. But I said she'd be on her own, with two small kids to raise, and

did she really want to go through with it. That was the night... that was the way I told her I didn't love her anymore.'

'She lost the baby?'

'I don't know when or how. I left soon after that. Honey, I'm so sorry.'

Fen stood, and he did too, pulling her close for a hug. For a moment she let herself be soothed, because it was the very thing she'd stayed awake wanting, all those long nights as a child. And then she pulled away, releasing her elbows from his grip.

'Thanks for dinner,' she said to Lena, unable to look at Frank. 'I have to go.'

'Fenella,' he called as she walked through the doors and down the passage.

'She'll be back when she's ready,' Lena said quietly.

As she walked down South Terrace, wiping at tears and hoping to spot a taxi, Fen searched for a comforting Zach memory, but none came. Instead, she remembered her mum easing the old brown Volvo down the rutted driveway, past a stretch of land where straggly grasses bore witness to so many scorching summers. They'd pull up in front of the tired-looking garage, covered in clinging native wisteria, next to the battered old water tank, and drag themselves out of the hot car. Round the back, three gnarled wooden steps led up to a rough-hewn porch where Fen would sit, gazing down the hill into the trees, listening out for the valiant trickle of the stream at the bottom of the garden. She would read or draw, or sit with her chin on her knees, dreaming up characters: friends, villains and, later, rescuers, who would drive her away to her glittering destiny in the big smoke.

Carmela had spent most of her time in the kitchen, tying herbs together or bottling sauces and pickles. The kitchen was always a bit too dark and a bit too small, strung about with drying chillies and garlic, and crammed with empty jars. The kettle had pride of place on the stove-top and there were the rows of cup-hooks sunk into

warped wooden shelves burdened with gleaming jars of dry-goods, all neatly labelled. There was usually a vinyl cloth on the dining table, and a vase of wild flowers. A piano stood in the corner with a framed black-and-white photo, mother and daughter, faded and grinning.

Carmela had had a boyfriend for a while, a quiet man with a guitar and an interest in her struggling broad beans, which Fenella had found inexplicable. She'd resented him fiercely on those late summer evenings when he and Carmela had sat on the verandah, singing and laughing together, or just listening to the vastness of the night coming in, inking out the stream and creeping up the lawn. The frogs had throbbled their song while Fenella had lain in bed, drafting her reply to the letter from her father that would surely come one day, asking her to live with him in the city. They'd croaked their layered melody, those frogs, as she'd lain there, longing for her life to start.

Twenty-six

Fen held her phone in her lap, gazing out of the window. She'd wanted to send Amy a text, to see if it was all right for her to come over, but she hadn't been able to think what to write, and then a message had come through from Pete: *Fen-bear, read it yet? Need to cast this baby! X*. She'd stared at it, unable to respond. The answer was, of course, still no. She had meant to read more of it on the train down to her dad's, but had been so nervous about seeing him again, and meeting Lena, that she'd been unable to concentrate. And because she didn't get around to replying to that message, it sat waiting on her dimmed screen, so she didn't get around to writing one to Amy either. She arrived at the house uninvited and unannounced.

Amy's place was quiet and dark, despite the porch light illuminating the greying timber of the sagging verandah. The driver said he would leave the meter running, in case there was no one home.

A cat darted across the front lawn and into the shadows as Fen walked up the steps and peered through the window at the side of the front door. A light was on deep within the house, and she saw the flickering shadows of someone moving around in there. She imagined Amy pottering around, enjoying her own company. The last thing she'd want was a knock on the door from an emotional wreck reeking of booze and lobsters.

The taxi was still there with its rear door hanging open, issuing beeps as the meter turned over; Fen's chariot, waiting to take her back to her hotel room. She took a breath and knocked.

The shadow inside stopped and approached the door.

‘Who is it?’

‘It’s Fen. Sorry, I know it’s late, and I know you wanted some space and everything ... I was going to text ...’

Amy opened the door. Her hair had been dyed and styled and she was dressed in black. Fen knew she must look a fright by comparison, nose red and eye makeup smudged from crying.

‘You look fabulous,’ Amy said, looking past her at the waiting cab.

Fen laughed then winced. ‘God, my head. Who puts whiskey in coffee anyway?’

‘You’d better come in.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You might want to pay the driver first though.’

Amy waited for her to come back in then closed the door. The house seemed so warm to Fen, so effortlessly comfortable, and Amy didn’t seem too upset to see her.

‘Sorry,’ Fen said again, looking around. The place looked tidier. ‘I hope I’m not intruding.’

‘No, Don was here, but he’s gone now.’

‘Did that go okay?’

‘Yes, actually, it wasn’t too bad. You look as though you’ve had an interesting evening. Want a coffee? I’ve got some now.’

‘Oh, yes please, and hold the whiskey.’

Amy put the kettle on and came back with a can of soft drink for Fen.

‘This might help,’ she said, then went back into the kitchen.

‘Hallelujah,’ Fen said, sitting on the sofa and cracking open the can. ‘Perfect.’ She took a long sip and sighed, ‘Fucking A.’

Amy laughed from the kitchen. ‘You’re pissed. Where have you been?’

‘Oh, here and there ... Dad’s place.’

Amy was quiet a moment then came out, plunger and spoon in her hands.

‘Your dad’s?’

‘Yeah. He’s got a new wife, did you know that? I didn’t know that. Married six months. Lena. And if I hadn’t rung him up this morning, who knows when he might have told me?’

‘Wow.’

‘She’s lovely, Lena. German, I think. He, on the other hand, is what I call a twat. Great word. Popular in London. *Twat*. Selfish, childish, asshole, prick.’ She burped and fell back into the couch with a snigger.

‘You’re such a dag,’ Amy said, shaking her head, smiling, as she went back into the kitchen. ‘Still take two sugars?’

‘Nope, no sugar. I’ve got to watch my weight, you know. Fatties don’t get lead roles.’ She pinched the small roll of flesh on her belly between thumb and forefinger. ‘Nor do I though, for that matter. Understudy this, understudy that; story of my life.’

‘Sounds like a drag. Have you got anything in the pipeline?’

‘Not really, although I’ve been asked to audition for *Wicked*... which I was quite excited about at first ... but I don’t know anymore ... And there’s this play, written by a friend of mine. Could be a great role for all I know, but I haven’t read it yet. He keeps texting.’

‘What are you waiting for?’ Amy said, putting two steaming mugs on the table. ‘Sounds like a no-brainer.’

‘I can’t concentrate. I got it just after I found out Zach died, and I’ve been dragging the script around with me ever since. The closer I get to reading it, the more impossible it seems.’

‘Because if you read it, you’ll have to decide: fringe-dweller or eternal understudy.’

Fen blew on her coffee and nodded.

Amy shrugged. 'Don't read it, just say yes. It could make you a better performer. And it might remind you why you're still acting. You seem a little jaded.'

Amy had always done that, made things simple.

'You're a legend,' Fen said, pushing her bag off the sofa to lie down. 'I'm not going to sleep by the way. I just can't sit up anymore. I'll drink my coffee in a minute. Then I'll go.' The sofa was soft and her head was spinning for only a moment before sleep came and took her away.

Much later, she drifted in and out of consciousness to the sound of rain outside. Later still, she woke under a soft fleece blanket, and the rain had stopped. Heavy curtains kept the room dark, but birdsong outside told a different story.

Putting her hands to her face, Fen moaned quietly. Amy had left water on the table for her and she willed herself to sit up and drink it. Just a little sip... but even the thought made her feel ill. Best to lie still.

After a while, she heard the toilet flush and pipes groan while Amy had a shower. She reached for the glass. The water was cold, running down her neck as much as into her mouth. She lay down again and closed her eyes, drifting off to the sounds of the shower and the cars going past. When she woke again, Amy was sitting opposite her in an armchair. The curtains were open and the sun was streaming in. Beside her glass was a box of paracetamol and a coffee.

'Morning, sunshine,' Amy said. Fen groaned and sat up, pulling the blanket up around her.

'Feeling all right there?'

'God, no.'

'You will do, soon. Just get those liquids into you.'

Fen took another long sip of water. ‘Sorry for just turning up like that,’ she said, ‘in such a state. I feel a bit ridiculous.’

‘Don’t worry about it. I’m glad you came. I’ve been feeling a bit ridiculous myself, chasing you away the other day, over something that happened so long ago.’

‘It was long ago, wasn’t it?’

‘Yeah, it was ... you were a bitch though.’

‘I know. You had every right to still be pissed off.’

‘I know.’

Fen smiled, and winced.

‘Take some of that paracetamol.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ Fen said, then realised that Amy had gestured at the tablets with a fat wad of paper in her hand. Pete’s script.

‘I hope you don’t mind,’ Amy said. ‘It was poking out of your bag, and you were so fast asleep, I couldn’t resist.’

‘Not at all,’ Fen replied, sitting up to take the painkillers. ‘How is it?’

‘It’s good. I’d definitely go for it. Which part did he offer you?’

‘Anna. Don’t tell me, she’s a neurotic loser antagonist?’

‘No, she’s quite hip, actually. Definitely a respectable protagonist. You know who is a neurotic antagonist though? Her rival, Julianne. Great part, actually.’

‘You think I should ask for that one?’

Amy dropped the script on the carpet and leant back in her seat, ‘I was thinking maybe I should.’

‘Yes! Amy, imagine. You could stay with me until the tour; my place is tiny but it’s in Camden, which I love. And then we could get a bigger place later.’

Amy laughed. ‘Hold your horses, he might have given the part to someone else, and I’ve got a lease to think about, and there’s Don ...’ she looked around the room, ‘I

mean, obviously it's an idea with some appeal, but there's all this stuff ... and I'm so out of practice.'

'You'd just fall right back into it, you know you would. Come on, time to wake that sleeping diva up.'

'Yeah, I don't know, I probably shouldn't have suggested it. I'm not sure I want to act again anyway.'

'Oh, come on Amy, it could be amazing. London is a totally different universe. Each tube stop is like a door into a new world ... and the theatres ... you'll wonder why you've never been.'

'I have been.'

'Oh, right. When?'

'A couple of years ago with Don. On our way to Europe.'

'Oh.' It was so easy to forget that Amy had had nearly a decade of living since Fen had left.

'You want some toast?'

'Yes please.'

They ate the toast spread with almond paste and honey, and drank strong chai, listening to the mellow mingling of bass and brass on the CD player.

'Shit, what's today?' Amy said.

'I think it's Tuesday.'

'Tuesday. It's Zach's funeral today.'

Twenty-seven

Outside the church, cars lined the street, double-parked and stretching on out of sight. Amy found a spot some way off. As they approached the church, Fen saw what looked like the blue sedan from the beach car park. She saw the sleeping bags inside it, the cooler box, and the duffel bag on the seat. And though there was no one in there now, in her mind's eye Fen saw the woman's face, and realised with a jolt why she'd recognised those eyes. It was Lara. Her hair wasn't red anymore, but it was her.

Walls of photographers flanked the entrance. Fen resisted an urge to bow her head, to duck from the flashing bulbs. 'Names, ladies?!' someone called from inside the mob as they slipped through the heavy doors.

Inside the church, the pews were full, and the standing room at the back was a tight squeeze already. Fen looked for Anthony. She looked for Lara. She couldn't see either of them, but she spotted several well-known personalities from the Eastern States and abroad.

As she and Amy edged their way forward, Fen noticed Zach's grandmother sitting in the front row. Beside Valerie, a nervous man fidgeted. He kept looking around and whispering in her ear, receiving the occasional murmured response. Fen could only see the back of his neck, and his profile when he turned to talk, but she thought he must be Zach's father. He looked a bit like him, only weathered, and maybe a bit shorter in the neck. And his hair was thinning.

Fen looked around for a likely candidate for Zach's mum. There were many women who could be her, age-wise, but they all looked too glamorous, too healthy to fit

the image Fen had of her. Based on what Martin had said, she'd been a selfish runaway, so Fen was expecting someone ravaged by time and hedonism.

A voice from the front intoned: 'Loving God, you alone are the source of life. May your life-giving Spirit flow through us, and fill us with compassion, one for another ...'

Someone at the front sobbed quietly throughout the prayer then whimpered as Anthony came forward to read a poem about death being only the next room.

Fen forced herself to look at the casket. It was Zach, in there, she thought; his motionless body. His name rang out in her head, over and over, as though somehow the silent chant might bring him back from wherever it was he had gone to.

When Anthony finished, the congregation stood to sing 'The Lord's my shepherd'. Fen held the program with trembling hands, but she couldn't sing. Amy sang it beautifully enough for both of them in her hypnotic voice. Blinking away tears, the best Fen could manage was to whisper the words that celebrated a serenity she was sure Zach had never felt. The Lord hadn't been his shepherd: Zach would have scorned any such offer. And he'd drowned in the still waters, far from refreshed, far from comforted by some holy rod or staff.

With Zach's father by her side for support, Valerie approached the lectern. In a trembling voice, she read from the bible: 'Everything that happens in this world happens at the time God chooses. He sets the time for birth, and the time for death, the time for planting and for pulling up, the time for killing and the time for healing, the time for tearing down and for building ... the time for making love and the time for not making love, the time for kissing and the time for not kissing ...'

'So much for spontaneity,' Amy muttered.

'Shhh,' Fen said; she'd begun to enjoy the solemn words, the rhythm of them.

When Valerie had finished, she stepped down and approached the coffin. She touched it for a moment, then rested her cheek on it while her son stood awkwardly beside her, one hand on her elbow. He touched the casket too, just once, before leading her back to their pew. There were more prayers, and another mournful hymn, and then details were read out about the wake. Fen couldn't cry anymore. More than ever she felt Zach's distance from her, his silence.

At last the priest gave the final blessing and the crowd filed out of the church, released from, and supposedly by, the ritual. Some pooled outside the door, while others hurried to cars to escape the banks of photographers. Fen moved to one side and watched for Anthony to emerge.

Martin walked slowly past the media pack, tilting his head just slightly and raising a hand. June Berry, wearing black fishnets and silk, her hair still white-blond but now with a black streak, also seemed to move in slow motion past the lenses, as though bewitched. There was no sign of Lara and the child whose sleeping bag lay bunched in the car.

Valerie and her son stepped out of the church and were immediately approached by a cluster of suited reporters with microphones. Valerie's face changed from bewilderment to indignation when she realised who they were, then relaxed a little as Anthony drew closer and turned his back on them like a shield.

'Is that Zach's Nan?' Amy asked.

'Yeah. Let's go over.'

'Hi,' Anthony said when they made it through the crowd, giving each of them a kiss on the cheek. 'This is Valerie, Zach's grandmother, and his father Paul.' Valerie's fingers were locked around the elbow of her son, whose own hands skulked in his pockets. He nodded a brief hello before letting his eyes return to their restless course between his shoes and the sky.

‘Hello,’ Amy said. ‘I’m so sorry for your loss.’

Valerie nodded. ‘Thank you.’

‘I’m so sorry about Zach,’ Fen said. ‘You must be devastated.’

‘Yes, he was very dear to us, a beautiful soul,’ Valerie glanced at Anthony, then back at Fen. ‘Haven’t I met you before?’

‘Yes. I met you with Zach, in the city.’

‘Oh yes. We didn’t really get a chance to talk, did we? Zach wasn’t overjoyed to see me, as I recall. Thank you for coming today, I’m sure it would have meant a lot to him.’

‘Thank you, I wouldn’t have missed it.’

‘I was just saying to Anthony that I’d like to have a small gathering at my house, a wake for dear Zachary. Just some tea and things. I don’t think I can face the big public wake I arranged at that restaurant by the river. All those people; I’m sure I won’t be missed. Please join us. You too, Amy, I’m sure.’

‘I’d like that very much, thank you.’

Valerie turned to Paul, then Anthony. ‘Can we go? I really must get away from all this.’

Paul nodded.

‘You know where I live, don’t you? You remember? You practically lived there too, always playing with Zachary.’ She smiled at him, placing a gentle hand on his forearm. ‘Great mates, weren’t you?’

Twenty-eight

They drove down a quiet street lined with tall trees, the dense canopies brushing against one another overhead. Anthony pulled up behind Paul's car in the driveway of an elegant old house whose white render and timber window frames looked tired. Rose bushes in the front yard were gnarled and twisted.

Inside, Valerie led them through the dark hallway into the lounge room, where the walls were covered in pictures and carved hanging sculptures. High ceilings made the grand shabby furniture look almost small. Thinning rugs covered the dark timber floorboards, which gleamed in the light let in by French doors overlooking a verandah and a large lush garden. Valerie disappeared into the kitchen to make tea, leaving the small group to contemplate their forlorn reflections in the large mirror over the fireplace. Paul sat down in an armchair and gnawed on his fingernails, breaking the spell. Amy headed out on to the verandah for a cigarette.

Fen started to follow Anthony and Valerie into the kitchen, but was snagged on her way by a collection of photographs on the hall table. There were a couple of pictures of Valerie on her wedding day, and some taken later on with her babies, a boy and a girl. There were pictures of Zach as a toddler, gazing at the camera as though it held the answers to many questions, and then as an awkward pre-teen, reluctant to be photographed. A bit older, dressed for a formal dance, he seemed to have become more at ease in his skin. He smiled that effortless smile, one arm loose around his partner's waist.

At the very back was a large photograph of him and June, looking gorgeous on their wedding day. On closer inspection, it appeared to have been cut out of a magazine.

Zach's hands cradled the small bulge of June's belly. Fen recalled June's denial that she'd maintained a lifestyle of drugs and alcohol during her brief pregnancy, and her announcement afterwards of a new album, which had come to nothing. She'd been snapped in all manner of shambolic states after that, Zach conspicuously absent. But he looked happy in that wedding picture, and for the first time, Fen wondered how June's miscarriage might have affected him. Had he longed to be a father? She felt ashamed now, recalling her relief.

There was also a small picture of Paul with a young woman and a baby. Fen picked it up to get a closer look. The baby, surely Zach, was twisting in the laughing woman's arms, his reddened face contorted in complaint. In the picture, Paul gazed at her, as Fen did now, marvelling at the symmetry and shape of her features. She was lean like Zach, her flared jeans loose on her long legs, her hair gleaming.

'That was Catherine,' Valerie said, startling Fen. She opened the top drawer of the hall table and took out a small plastic bottle of pills. 'Zach's mum. Lovely, wasn't she?'

'She was. How old is she here?'

'Nineteen, I think. I took it just before they left for Melbourne. Last time I saw her.'

She fumbled with the bottle, struggling to open it and growing agitated, until it fell from her hands to the floor. She put a trembling hand to her face, steadying the other one on the table. Fen put the picture back and bent to retrieve the tablets for Valerie, who thanked her and dragged a tissue from her sleeve.

'I'm sorry,' she said, blowing her nose, 'I go about thinking I'm all right, and then I find I'm not.'

'Of course. I understand. It comes in waves.'

‘He always thought she’d come back for him you know, when he was little.’ She was looking at the picture of Catherine again. ‘I couldn’t bring myself to tell him she was dead till he was much older.’

‘She died? I thought she had abandoned him.’

‘That’s what everyone thinks, thanks to young Martin’s appearance on that ridiculous TV show. Always envied Zach, he did, wanted everything that was his. Never mind that he had his own mum and dad, and a lot more besides. She spoiled him rotten, Martin’s mum. My daughter, Evelyn.’

She glanced at a portrait on the wall next to the passage door of a girl with long dark hair combed into a side parting.

‘Evelyn never liked Catherine. Made her feel like a dumpling I suspect. She was almost relieved when she died, I think. Poor Catherine, such a loss.’ She lowered her voice and glanced at her son, who still seemed engrossed in the workings of his hands. ‘Paul never got over it. He brought Zach home to me, just a tiny little boy. He had no idea what to do with him.’

‘So Zach went with them, to Melbourne? Martin told me they’d left him here, dumped him, he said.’

‘Martin doesn’t know what he’s talking about. It was only after his mother died in Melbourne that Zach came to live with me.’

Fen shook her head, bewildered. ‘How did Catherine die,’ she asked, ‘if you don’t mind my asking?’

‘You know, I don’t really know. Paul never told me. He said he didn’t know either, but I don’t think that’s true. They weren’t living in each other’s pockets, was all he would say. I suspect she got caught up in a bad scene over there. But Catherine loved her little boy. You can see it, in that picture. She would never knowingly have deprived

him of herself. She was just so young. Thought she was immortal, I imagine, as do the young.'

She took two of the tablets and smiled. 'Can't hold it against them, can we? We all have our vices.' She scratched her forehead, her hand still trembling, and turned back toward the kitchen. 'Speaking of which, let's have some tea.'

On the verandah, they sat around a large oak table, eating banana bread and drinking strong tea. No one seemed to know how to talk about Zach.

Valerie lowered her cup into its saucer.

'I'm sure this is not how he would have wanted it,' she said. 'It's not how I want it, anyway. I want us to talk about him, to keep him with us. I want to resurrect him with words.'

She looked around at the tired faces surrounding her.

'Ok, I'll start. When Paul brought Zach to me, I thought he was really going to cramp my style. I'd done my child rearing, and I was just starting to tackle some projects I'd been putting off. But here was this little boy, drinking up the world, all his joy, his ideas and fears and fancies. He made me laugh so much.

'But he never stopped asking where his mum was, and when she would be coming to get him. Until one day he said: *It's like you're my mum now, Nan, isn't it?* I said, *I suppose it is, darling*, and left it at that.

'Of course I let him walk all over me, so there was never much conflict. It was quite plain who was in charge. He loved playing in the garden, loved to dig and make mud and dig some more, and get himself royally filthy. And then he'd lie back and look at the trees against the sky, pointing out the shapes he saw in the clouds, telling me things as they popped into his head.

‘When he got older, it began to trouble him, thinking that his mum had left him. He would look at that picture in the hall and ask me why she had stopped loving him. He thought maybe he had done something wrong, been too naughty was how he put it. I suspected even then that it might be better for him to know she was dead, but I convinced myself that it would be better for him to think she was alive somewhere in the world, rather than to know she’d died in unknown—or unmentionable—circumstances. In hindsight, of course I should have just said she’d died, though she’d loved him unconditionally, but ... I just ... I didn’t want to disturb his equilibrium. He was around fourteen when I finally decided he was old enough to cope. How I could have been so stupid as to wait that long, I don’t know.

‘After that, he would sit for hours with the picture, crying sometimes, in his room. I couldn’t comfort him, couldn’t get him to speak to me. I thought that he would come close to me again, but he didn’t. He just grew more distant, and eventually he was even quite hostile.

‘When he moved out, he said to me, *I know it’s not your fault, Nan, but you should have told me. All those years I thought she had something better to do than hang about with me. I thought I would find her and show her that I was all right, that I was pretty fun to be around. I would make her laugh like in the picture, and she would love me again. You let me dream about something that can never, ever happen.*’

Inside the house, a clock chimed the hour.

‘He didn’t believe I didn’t know how she’d died. *You know but you won’t tell me, Nan*, he said.

‘I couldn’t bear to let him go out into the world like that, so wounded and angry. But what could I do? I had only wanted to protect him, but instead I had betrayed him. I had thought if I could just love him and cuddle him and mother him enough, he would

be all right, but he needed more than that. He needed someone he could trust to tell him the truth. And I failed him, my precious boy.'

She put a hand to her mouth and closed her eyes.

'I let him have hope,' she whispered, 'and then I took it away.'

She stopped. Tears ran over her chin and down her neck.

'Sometimes I think I can still hear his little feet kicking against the breakfast bar while he drinks cordial.'

Paul took her hand.

'At least you were here,' he said. 'At least you were around to feed him and bath him and talk to him, read him stories. I was too gutless for any of that, too gutless and too selfish.'

Valeria took a deep breath and shook her head. 'Your heart was broken, son. And you were battling addiction. You couldn't drag him into that.'

'I know, Mum, but I should have been a bigger man than that. I should have swallowed all that self-indulgent shit up and given him his dad, regardless.'

'Maybe a faraway whole dad was better than a close-up one falling apart. Maybe you did the best thing for him.'

Paul wiped a hand across his face. 'Maybe,' he said. He looked up at the others, as though seeing them for the first time. 'Most beautiful baby ever born, he was. Catherine and I had talked about getting married in some out-there, wacky kind of ceremony, nothing formal. But we'd never talked about having kids; we were way too young for that. Then suddenly we were pregnant, and there he was, this little creature with shining eyes and the busiest little mouth. He had the softest skin and hair. He was magic. Catherine was totally besotted, she couldn't believe we'd made something so perfect. I had no trouble believing it; he looked just like her.'

He was quiet a long time, biting his lip.

‘I wish ... I wish we’d never gone to Melbourne. Catherine wouldn’t have met that tosser and started shooting up. I went to bed one night, couldn’t hack it, and she stayed up partying, and in the morning when I woke up she was on the floor. My Catherine ... The little shit hadn’t even moved her to the couch, or called an ambulance. He’d just bolted.

‘I kept imagining what would have happened if Zach had found her before I did ... he was only two and a half.

‘I got him the hell out of there, took him to the neighbours, called the cops. And they just took her away. I told Zach she’d gone to the markets, then on a holiday, and eventually he stopped asking me. It was as though he’d forgotten, except late at night, he’d wake up and cry for her.’

His voice broke on the last word, and he whispered, ‘I couldn’t tell him; couldn’t hardly look at him. So I brought him home.’

‘Oh, Paul, I’m so sorry.’

Paul cleared his throat. ‘And then I fell apart, and left him to do the same.’

There was a silence, interrupted only by birds and the drone of a lawnmower somewhere.

‘I met Zach at school,’ Anthony said after a while, ‘as you all probably know. He was a bit older than me, and everyone admired him. I didn’t think I was even on his radar. But then this one time, I had just lost my biggest and best marble to this guy called Tom; a total prick. He nailed it with one shot. Zach saw the whole sorry business and caught up with me later, as I was scuffing along home. He held out his hand, and into my sweaty little palm he dropped one of the biggest, most beautiful marbles I had ever seen. *I think you dropped it*, he said, and sauntered off, broke into a run, left me standing there with my mouth hanging open, not even enough time to say thanks. After that, we just started hanging out, eating lunch together, playing marbles and stuff.’

‘He had a strong compassionate streak,’ Valerie said, ‘always had an eye for other people’s pain.’

‘That’s probably what made him such a good actor,’ Amy said.

‘Bloody good,’ Paul said, ‘made me cry just watching him. Made me think I could forgive anyone anything.’

Magpies chortled in the trees and automated sprinklers began hissing in the garden beds.

‘First time I saw him,’ Amy said, ‘he was busking in Freo, on the main drag.’

‘Oh yes, his busking days, I remember those,’ Anthony said, ‘he tried to get me to play the djembe with him, but I couldn’t get it together; couldn’t hold the beat steady.’

‘He was gorgeous to watch,’ Amy continued, ‘just mesmerising. Not so hot on the guitar, but good enough to accompany himself. He had an amazing voice. You’d never know it from the films he was in, but he could really sing. I wish I had recorded him when we jammed—all of two sessions, before it fizzled. I found the ballads too tedious, and he said my stuff was too downer for him. Besides, we both wanted to be lead singer. Funny that.

‘But that half hour I watched him play in Freo, he was beautiful, he really was. I sat on this nasty metal bench, pretending I was waiting for the bus, playing it really cool. When he finished, he came over, and I was all like: *Where’s my flaming bus?* And he said: *You mean none of the seven that have gone past was yours?* And I’m like: *Actually, I think I must be at the wrong stop.*

‘He laughed, and said: *So what do you think? Could I rival the greats? Or should I stick to acting?* And I said: *You’re an actor?* He said: *Good answer.* I told him I was also studying acting, but I was really a musician at heart and I was in a band, and I’d dig to jam with him, and he said: *Definitely. When?* So I took him home with me,

like an idiot, and introduced him to you, Fenella. I wish I'd kept him to myself just a little bit longer.'

'I'm sorry, Amy,' Fen said.

Amy nodded, folding and refolding her napkin on the table.

'I remember one conversation we had,' Fen said, 'after a movie; I can't remember which one. We were in Leederville and it was raining, so we were sheltering in the hotel, only half listening to the band. I was banging on about how sad the film was because the protagonist had died, and Zach said: *Life is short and pointless, why cling to it? Worse to me than death, he said, would be a quiet, shapeless life. Everything about us is so unlikely, it's criminal to be ordinary, to never do anything risky, to just let everything dissolve into routine.*'

No one spoke, until Amy said, 'Well, his life was certainly anything but quiet and shapeless.'

'Sounds like he was showing off, to me,' Valerie said. 'No one really thinks like that. Everyone clings to life.'

'I don't know,' Fen said, 'but if he was showing off for my benefit, it worked. I thought he was profound at the time; magnetic. He was so calm but also wild, funny, poetic.'

She looked around the table; they were all listening.

'But I only knew what he wanted me to know. Maybe if he'd told me about his mum... If I'd known he wasn't as frighteningly perfect as he seemed, maybe I wouldn't have sabotaged what we had.'

She'd never thought about it in such terms before, but as the words came out, they seemed to make sense.

Valerie looked confused, curious, but Fen couldn't say any more; her composure was dissolving.

‘Excuse me,’ she said, and found her way to the bathroom, where she splashed her face and breathed deeply, bent over the sink. When she looked up at her reflection, she saw herself, standing in a room that must have been so familiar to Zach, the small musty bathroom with its emerald green tiles and claw foot bath.

What was it Paul had said? *Made me think I could forgive anyone anything.* It was true. That was the feeling Zach gave you, when you watched him. Wasn’t that what Fen wanted to give too? Wasn’t that why she was an actor? But how could she give anything—as an understudy or otherwise—if her heart was in a clamp of resentment, beating against it, always hungry for recognition? She splashed her face again and dried it with a green towel that smelled of soap.

Stepping out into the passage, she saw that the door next to the bathroom had *Zach* scratched into its wood, in angular letters. It was unlocked, and Fen went inside, into a dim room lit only by an eerie light filtering through navy, pinstriped curtains. Several model spacecraft dangled from the ceiling, attached with nylon and drawing pins. A mural on the far wall depicted a dense green forest hung with vines. On the other walls were posters of Robert Smith, Michael Jackson, Kurt Cobain, and a teenaged Isla Fisher. There was a pine desk in the corner, covered by a map of the world and a pile of books. In another corner, a single bed was covered with a dark green bedspread. Fen imagined Zach, gazing up at his space ships, wondering about his parents, about his future. There would have been girls on his mind too, as he’d inhabited this room, other girls. Fen felt a sweep of jealousy at the thought, but also tenderness, and she had to resist an impulse to close the door, to lock herself into this place where Zach had just been Zach: no one’s icon, no one’s empty fantasy. Not even hers.

She sat on his bed, then lay back and closed her eyes, and for just a moment she could smell his smell, the way his sweat mingled with his body wash and salt from the

sea. She hoped the bedspread had been unwashed since he'd left, that in sliding her hand over its surface, she might be caressing just the tiniest fragments of him.

She could hear Valerie outside the window, reminding Anthony about some misdemeanor he and Zach had conspired in. Listening to her, Fen wondered why Zach hadn't been able to bring her here. Fair enough if he'd been embarrassed about having lied about his parents, but Fenella would have understood. She was sympathetic, wasn't she? He had trusted her, hadn't he? At first? Surely there'd been something real between them. Fen tried to remember laughing with him, but it seemed her memories were becoming buried in a strange composite of other images, moments from his films and tabloid cuttings, and others surfacing from remembered conversations with Amy and Anthony. She felt silly all of a sudden, lying on his bed. She'd hardly known him at all, and it seemed that was how he'd wanted it.

She got up and went out into the passage, closing his door quietly behind her, as though trying not to wake him.

Twenty-nine

Reaching the French doors, Fen heard a crash outside, a muttered curse, and a gate being kicked shut. There were footsteps, and then she saw Martin staggering into the garden.

He stood there swaying a moment, then slurred, ‘Thought I might find you lot here, while I’m representing the family at the tea-and-scones *soirée*.’

He flopped down on a swing seat for two, his head hanging low.

‘Fucking cheap wine,’ he muttered, before noticing the seat’s full potential and stretching out on it. ‘Don’t mind me, Nan, I’ll just die quietly here, you lot just enjoy yourselves.’

‘Silly boy,’ Valerie murmured, pouring him a glass of water and holding up his head to pour some of it into his mouth.

‘Aw, Nan,’ he said as she lowered his head again. ‘I tried to convince June to come and meet the old in-laws, but she thought I was a crazy stalker and told me to piss off. Really pretty, June Berry. Too pretty.’

‘Go to sleep, Martin.’

No one said anything until he was snoring loudly, then Fen spoke from the doorway.

‘I wish I knew what was on that thumb drive.’

Everyone looked at her, surprised, momentarily confused. But Valerie stood up. ‘We can have a look if you like. The police made a copy for me.’

‘Have you seen what’s on it?’ Fen asked.

‘No, I haven’t had the heart. But with all of you here ... Come on, the computer’s this way.’

They followed her to a small study next to the kitchen, overlooking the garden. On one wall Zach’s degree certificate hung alongside a wildflowers calendar and an ink print of Rottnest. The computer seemed to take forever to start up, but at last Valerie had the pointer hovering over the folder. Her hand was trembling.

‘Paul,’ she said, ‘I can’t do it. Can someone else? Anthony?’

Paul hesitated, so Anthony stooped and took control of the mouse. ‘Ready?’ He didn’t wait for an answer, but opened the folder and changed the view to thumbnails, revealing a word document and what looked like two columns of portraits, all of them of Zach. He opened the word document first, and a short letter popped up.

Zach,

Here they are, as requested. Please note: I retain copyright on all headshots and publicity portraits taken during the duration of your contract with my agency.

Enjoy!

Kind regards, Terrence.

Anthony set it to slideshow, then stood back with the others as headshot replaced headshot. The stillness in the room deepened as Zach’s career played out on the screen. The first images showed him in his early twenties, fresh-faced, provocative. Then he matured a bit, developed a deeper tan and filled out in the neck. His hair varied in length and style. In one shot he was oiled and buff, in another he was washed out and almost wan. The makeup seemed to grow thicker, but it couldn’t disguise the fluctuations in his weight or the waning enthusiasm in his eyes. It was as if his spirit was withering in front of them, there in the study.

Then he looked spunky again, vibrant, fit, straight out of those tabloid spreads detailing his success at rehab and his determination not to waste his talent. The story had been everywhere: Zach Matthews, back and better than ever.

The last picture showed him lying on the beach, hands behind his head, looking relaxed, tanned and sandy, smiling with his eyes closed.

‘Wasn’t he beautiful?’

‘He was, Valerie.’

‘I’m going to get the last one framed. It breaks my heart, but that’s how I want to remember him. It’s proof that he came good before he died. He’d sorted himself out, for a while at least.’

The slideshow ran through again. Nobody moved to stop it.

‘I miss him so much,’ Valerie said softly, ‘I’ve missed him for years, but it was different when I knew he was out there, in the world. This is altogether different. Where is he now? How can he just be gone?’

Outside, a crew of kids trundled past on skateboards, their wheels loud on the rough tarmac.

‘I wonder why he asked his agent for the photos,’ Amy said.

Anthony nodded. ‘Maybe he was thinking about changing agencies.’

‘Or maybe he was trying to get a hold on his persona.’

‘Maybe he just wanted something to jerk off over,’ Martin said from the doorway, leaning against the frame, scratching his head and looking glassy-eyed. ‘Maybe he couldn’t get it up for all the hot, famous chicks anymore. That’s what June was saying, just before, at the wake. Plumbing kaput, she said. She drank more than I did, made quite a scene. Tried to sing him a song, but couldn’t stand up long enough. Pity you all missed it.’

Paul stood suddenly, sending his chair crashing to the ground. 'You disrespectful little shit,' he muttered. 'You'd better leave before I make you.'

'Paul,' Valerie said. 'Don't take the bait. Martin misses Zach as much as the next person, don't you Martin?'

Martin snorted, scratched his head again, and stumbled out of the study. He flopped heavily into the leather sofa out in the living room.

'He just doesn't know how to deal with it. They were great pals when they were growing up. Like brothers. Until Zach started getting more attention from the girls than Martin did, especially Lisa, next door. Martin was dead set on taking her out, but she always came to see Zach.'

Martin sniffed in the lounge room, several times, then let out a choked sob. 'Shithead!' he shouted.

'Why do you defend that moron?' Paul asked as Valerie stood up.

'He's my grandson, Paul. He's doing the best he can.'

'With what little brain he's got.'

'Don't, Paul. You know how your sister was with him.' She went out to the lounge and the others heard her speaking softly, heard what sounded like Martin crying into her shoulder.

'I think we should make a move,' Amy said, looking at Fen and Anthony.

'I might stay a bit,' Anthony said, 'help Valerie clean up, see she's okay being alone tonight.'

'What am I?' Paul said, 'chopped liver?'

'You're going to be here?'

'Course I'm going to be here. Where the bloody hell else do you see me going?'

'Of course. Look, I didn't mean anything.'

'I know, I know. Don't mind me. It's just all been a bit much.'

‘No worries. I understand.’

‘Thanks. And look, I appreciate everything you’ve done. But maybe it’s best being just family now, yeah?’

‘Yeah, sure. Of course.’

They stood awkwardly in the hall, not wanting to interrupt Martin’s catharsis, until Anthony went over and gave Valerie a kiss on the cheek.

‘Thanks for having us,’ Fen said. ‘It was really special, seeing where Zach grew up.’

‘I do hope he thought of it as home,’ Valerie said, ‘even at the end.’

Fen pictured Zach’s seaside house in Cottesloe.

‘I’m sure he did.’

Thirty

Anthony parked across the road from Zach's place. The three of them got out and stood looking at the dark face of the house. The gate was still covered with poems and pictures flapping against the tape in the wind. They'd come to say a last farewell to Zach, but none of them knew what to do, now that they were here. His house gave them no clues either, staring past them at the water.

'I want to go in,' Amy said.

'I do too.'

Anthony shook his head, 'I don't.'

He turned and walked toward the water, over a gentle rise of dry, spiky grass. Amy and Fen followed him, past yellow beach daisies and clumps of salt bush. The hardy scrub carpet gave way to sand and they stopped on a small summit overlooking the ocean. Below them, dogs frolicked in the white water that churned over the shallow bank of rocks.

An aeroplane dragged through the blue above. There were no clouds, just a cold wind and a half day-moon hanging above the port's cranes to the south.

'Do you think he swam here?' Fen asked.

'Probably not,' Anthony said. 'Those rocks ... and the dogs. He didn't like dogs much.'

'Let's go down.'

Halfway down the patchy dune, they found a sandy pocket, sheltered by a large clump of succulent weeds. Rottnest Island was a long flat shadow on the horizon.

‘I wish I’d tracked him down when he got home,’ Anthony said, gazing out at the ships lining up in the distance for access to the port. ‘I could have helped him stay on the wagon, helped him cope with whatever drove him off it. We could have done a surfing trip or something, I don’t know.’

A motorcycle’s low growl cut through the wind’s sound-blanket.

‘I thought about sending him an email, but I held off, thinking, let the big shot come to me. Stupid; life is too short for that shit.’

Fen looked at Anthony’s frown, the sadness in him.

‘What will you do now?’ she asked.

‘I’ve decided to go east. I want to be nearer Sam. You were right. It’s bullshit not seeing him for a whole damn year, talking to him only when it suits his mum. It’s not good enough.’

‘No.’

‘Listening to Paul talk about Zach, all I could think about was Sam wondering why I’m so far away. I’m kicking myself that I’ve waited so long.’

‘Who’s Sam?’ Amy said.

‘My son.’

‘I didn’t know you had a son.’

Anthony nodded.

‘I want a son,’ Amy said, ‘or a daughter, I don’t mind.’

‘He’s amazing.’

‘What about London, Amy?’ Fen asked. ‘Getting back on stage? Have you really had enough?’

‘I think I really have, you know. I tried to muster some enthusiasm for your mate’s play, because if ever there was a play that could get me back up there, it would be something edgy like that. But I couldn’t make myself want it. What I want is to sort

my own shit out, instead of resolving scripted dilemmas night after night, or drawing on my melancholy mojo to stir up other people's repressed angst. I'm quite happy to make my music just for myself.'

Anthony nodded.

Fen wondered what that would be like, to not want that stage frisson.

'Don asked me to marry him,' Amy said, her eyes on the horizon.

Fen had never seen Amy blush before. 'Seriously?' she smiled, 'when?'

'Last night. Before you came.'

'I thought you looked a little ... different. What did you say?'

'I said I'd think about it. He's been really good to me. And *for* me. And you know, I can't imagine anything stupider than pining over Zach for the rest of my life. Not only is he dead, but he didn't exactly profess his love for me when he was alive. Don, on the other hand ...'

'Congratulations.'

'Thanks.'

'So London is definitely out.'

'For now, yeah. It's been epic having you come back and everything, Fen, but I've taken Don for granted once already and I'm not going to do it again. It's like you said, if you blink on that kind of connection, odds are you'll regret it forever.'

'Did I say that?'

'Didn't you? You should have.'

Fen laughed.

'What about you?' Amy asked. 'Definitely going back?'

'Yeah, for a bit, after I've visited Mum. There's that *Wicked* audition ... but I'm not sure I want to do it anymore. I've been so driven, for so long, I think it's worn me

out, made me despise the whole thing. And I don't want that, I want to enjoy acting again. I think Pete's play may be the way forward.'

'Yeah. Sod the West End!' Amy shouted into the wind.

Fen laughed. 'I might have to come home after that though. I mean, look at this place.'

A gentle wash of clouds had formed on the horizon. A man in a straw hat hurled a red ball into the surf for a Labrador, and a couple strode along the sand in shorts, though summer had long gone.

Amy accepted Anthony's offer of a lift back to her car at the church. Fen said she'd walk back to the hotel.

She watched them head back up the hill. They turned back to wave at her, and she shouted, 'Break legs!' through the lump in her throat. It seemed they hadn't come down here to say goodbye to Zach after all; they'd come to wish one other well, in the world after Zach. He'd become a touchstone for all of them, the measure of their dreams, and now they had to find new ways of being.

Fen thought about the little boy so wounded, swallowed up by the glamour and chaos his life became; that child who'd just loved the dirt and the sky.

Taking a deep breath, she took out her phone and texted Pete: 'I'm in.'

After that, she texted Tim. Then she deleted Drew's number, and it was as if a slab of concrete had been winched off her chest.

Then, breathing deeply, she dialled her mum's number.

Carmela sounded brisk; just home from a walk, Fen imagined, or from feeding the pigs.

'Hi, Mum?'

‘Fenella?’ she said softly, and Fen was awash with shame that she’d spent so many years resenting her, yelling at her, blaming her for driving Frank away.

‘Yes, it’s Fenella.’

There was a chill in the air, but after saying goodbye, having promised to drive down the following day, Fen felt warm. ‘You don’t have to apologise,’ Carmela had said to her. ‘You’re my baby; I forgive you even before you ask ... Don’t cry love, when will you come?’

Fen put her phone in her bag and mopped up residual tears with her sleeve. Heading back to her hotel on the footpath, being overtaken by joggers and couples and women striding with prams, she saw the blue sedan go by, heading south. Lara didn’t look her way, or didn’t seem to, but then her eyes were hidden behind sunglasses. The little girl did though, just for a moment, before looking past her.

Fen watched the car pull up next to Zach’s house. Lara stepped out, with something in her hands. It was a clump of vine-like flowers, and something else; a picture? She draped the greenery over the gate and attached the picture somehow, maybe with tape, and then she stood there a long time, looking up at those empty windows.

Then she climbed back into the car and drove away. Fen wondered where they were going, where home was.

Once they were out of sight, Fen was tempted to go to the gate and see what it was Lara had taped to it, but she didn’t. It wasn’t her business; Zach wasn’t her business anymore.

Thirty-one

Fen's hired car was parked around the corner from the hotel. She was looking forward to the hum of tyres on tarmac; couldn't wait to be dwarfed by those trees down south, tall and ghostly white, their branches twisted and contorted, like gnarled hands caught mid-gesture.

After breakfast, before checking out, she headed towards the water's edge. She was keen to get on the road, and she was fairly sure it wouldn't be nine years again before she was back, but she wanted to let watery sand swallow her feet for a while anyway before she went, to immerse herself in the vastness of the land's edge. Just in case.

After the initial shock of cold, her feet sank in and grew numb. The sky was surly after the night's rain, the air still heavy with brine. Breathing it in, she felt expansive, free; not afraid. The waves, the timid warmth of the winter sun and the briskness of the wind reminded her that maybe smallness and insignificance were not so bad after all. Pulling her feet out of the sand, she noticed a shell, an unbroken cowrie, and bent to pick it up. She rinsed it and put it in her pocket. 'I'm on my way, Mum,' she said out loud as she headed back up. 'Nearly there.'

Dissertation:

Existentialism and the Actress

in Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal*
and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Introduction

In this dissertation I argue that, as novels which engage with themes of theatre and audience, Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal* (1946) and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) demonstrate Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of objectivation by the other's "look", and de Beauvoir's ideas about "the actress" as a female archetype whose career choices may either facilitate or undermine her existential "transcendence".¹ This is significant on a number of levels. In *All Men Are Mortal*, de Beauvoir's depiction of the actress Regina supports and illustrates the themes of narcissism, fame and gallantry that she will articulate in *The Second Sex* (1988/1949) three years later.² In this light, *Dorian Gray* emerges as a possible influence on de Beauvoir's work. This is an argument supported by my analysis of the largely unstudied actress figure of Sibyl Vane.

I selected the novels and Existentialism because I was writing a novella about actors experiencing problems relating to fame. Existentialism emerged as an illuminating philosophy through which to examine representations of an actor's experience of the audience gaze. I focus on Sartre's Existentialism because he explores the impact of the look of the other in *Being and Nothingness*. In order to examine aspects of gender as they relate to acting and the other's look, I approached de Beauvoir's feminist Existentialism. Her representations of actresses in *All Men Are Mortal* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* informed my own creative writing because both Regina and Sibyl are shown experiencing existential crises relating to fame, gender and

¹ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 585. Although de Beauvoir says in her introduction to *The Second Sex* that she refers to "no archetype, no changeless essence whatever" in her use of the words "woman" and "feminine" (de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 31), her concern is to emphasise the cultural specificity of her terms. I describe de Beauvoir's "actress" as a female archetype, in the sense that de Beauvoir ascribes commonalities to the actress of her day as a female type in terms of her existentialist examination of the female condition.

² I use the term "actress" rather than "female actor" in this dissertation, for the sake of consistency with de Beauvoir's terminology, as well as that of other theorists cited herein.

objectivation in the other's look. These were the problems I wanted to explore in the creative component of the thesis.

The crisis suffered by Regina, caught in the "ageless gaze" of the immortal Raymond Fosca, reflects Sartre's argument in *Being and Nothingness* (1969/1943) that the other's look can cause a subject to experience "decentralization", that is, a power shift produced by being objectivated by the other's look, as I will discuss.³ This link between the other's look and the emotional breakdown of the actress-character makes the selected novels important to the study. I argue that a broader context for the thesis is the largely unacknowledged use of existentialist concepts in contemporary celebrity theory. I demonstrate that an existentialist analysis of the crises of Regina and Sibyl complements the existential problems identified by celebrity theorists within the field of celebrity studies.⁴

The methodology undertaken by this thesis is one of textual analysis. The thesis approaches the research questions, stated in the abstract, by defining the selected existentialist themes and applying them as lenses through which to read the selected actress characters. The aim of this application is to determine the extent to which Existentialism yields new interpretations of the characters. It also establishes Regina and Sibyl Vane as significant characters over and above their roles as functions of other characters within the novels. These new interpretations, in conjunction with the examination of the use of existentialist concepts in celebrity studies, have informed the creative component of this thesis. Fen Jackson and Zach Matthews are actors wrestling with existential anxieties and dilemmas relating to fame and the acting craft. Zach is unable to transcend the limitations of his celebrity status and persona before his death,

³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 255.

⁴ Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, 90; Goldman, *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity*, 7; Fisher, "Acting Disaster," 344.

but Fen transcends her longing for fame and significance by returning her focus to the acting craft and resolving her troubled relationships.

Although de Beauvoir and Sartre articulated their ideas more than fifty years after the publication of Wilde's novel, and the two novels are set in very different eras, *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray* are nonetheless linked through the existentialist themes of "transcendence" and "objectivation" as used by de Beauvoir and Sartre respectively. It is important to state at this point that I do not imply a direct link between de Beauvoir and Sartre's Existentialism and Wilde's intentions in his creation of Sibyl, given that de Beauvoir and Sartre articulated their ideas in 1949 and 1943 respectively.

For de Beauvoir, "transcendence" is inseparable from "liberty": "[e]very individual ... feels that his [sic] existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects."⁵ Her theory, as it is outlined in *The Second Sex*, considers the ways in which women—including "the actress" and other archetypes—pursue existential transcendence, and the ways in which their gender impacts on that pursuit.⁶ De Beauvoir describes "the actress" as a "hitherto unknown species" of woman who appeared in the seventeenth century.⁷ In *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray*, Regina and Sibyl, respectively, illustrate the dilemmas and characteristics of de Beauvoir's "actress" who walks the line between transcendence and "immanence".⁸ The latter state, according to de Beauvoir, is sustained by the narcissism of the "bad actress", or her reliance on male "gallantry".⁹

The term "objectivation" relates to Sartre's description of the look of the other as an "objectivating" presence, or the suggestion of such a presence, which creates

⁵ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 28–9.

⁶ *The Second Sex* influenced second-wave feminism, according to Claudia Card, who argues that "[t]he complexity of Beauvoir's idea of freedom is only now being taken up by feminists." (Card, *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, 38–9).

⁷ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 137.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 585, 712–3, 647.

“uneasiness” or vulnerability in the looked-at subject.¹⁰ *Being and Nothingness* is the seminal work in which Sartre expounds his existentialist ideas. Mary Warnock, in her introduction to the 1991 edition of *Being and Nothingness*, describes the work as “a model of existentialist thought” and “a text-book of [E]xistentialism itself.” In the work, Sartre examines “the nature of human life”, particularly in relation to freedom and “being in the world”.¹¹ In this context, Sartre offers an ontological description of the experience of objectivation by the other’s look, describing it as the “decentralization of the [subject’s] world.”¹² In this process, the “Other’s freedom” redefines the subject as an object for the other. This alienated object-self—“written in and by the Other’s freedom”—is a “burden” to the looked-at being, representing “the limit of [his or her] freedom.”¹³

In my Sartrean reading of *All Men Are Mortal*, Regina’s “Other” is the immortal Raymond Fosca, who—having watched Regina act—has “devoured her with his ageless gaze” (34). In *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl’s “Other” is Dorian himself, who loves watching her portray “all the great heroines of the world in one” on stage (54). In each novel, the actress-character comes to experience an emotional unravelling—catalysed by the look of an other in her audience—that is an amplification of Sartre’s “decentralization”. As I discuss in more detail below, for Sartre, such “decentralization” results in a threat to the looked-at subject’s agency, catalysing an existential problem of alienation in the subject.¹⁴

Sartre’s philosophy of alienation in the other’s look includes what David E. Cooper terms “self-estrangement”, a mode of existential “bad faith” in which an individual comes to see himself predominantly as the other does.¹⁵ Sartre’s philosophy

¹⁰ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 222–282.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, viii–ix.

¹² *Ibid.*, 255.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁵ Cooper, *Existentialism*, 116–7.

is important to this dissertation because it illuminates the role of the look of the other in the objectivation and self-estrangement of the actress-characters in these two novels. For example, Regina is self-estranged when she can no longer recognise herself in the mirror; she comes to see herself, through Fosca's eyes, as meaningless. Similarly, Sibyl is self-estranged when her identity is polarised by Dorian's look into an admired persona and a rejected self; when she is unable to reconcile the two, she commits suicide.

I suggest a direct link between de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal* and *The Second Sex*, because Regina is represented as exhibiting a number of characteristics and choices that de Beauvoir later theorises in relation to understanding the lives of women. I argue that both Regina in *All Men Are Mortal* and Sibyl in *Dorian Gray* exemplify de Beauvoir's "bad actress," a figure whose surrender to narcissism or gallantry means that, for her, "no road whatever is open to transcendence".¹⁶

The clear parallels between the actress-characters in the novels suggest that Wilde's Sibyl may have influenced de Beauvoir's characterisation of Regina.¹⁷ For example, both Sibyl and Regina announce that they are retiring from the stage after their pursuits of authenticity have failed, and both suffer for having relied on male admiration in attempting to transcend their existing states. Specifically, Sibyl desires to transcend her status as an actress by leaving the stage and marrying Dorian, while Regina desires to transcend her status as an obscure theatre actress by achieving fame as a film star under a male producer's patronage. She also aims to transcend her mortality by being loved forever by the immortal Fosca. Such methods are misguided, according to de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, because transcendence for "the actress" is only achievable

¹⁶ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 585.

¹⁷ In terms of the parallels between the novels, some may be coincidental, and some may be deliberate on de Beauvoir's part. That de Beauvoir was aware of Wilde's novel at the time of writing *The Second Sex* is evident in her discussion of the literary double. That is, she describes the double, per se, as "a dubious personage, who assassinates his original, as we see, for example, in Poe's tales and in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*." Ibid., 600.

through her craft: “A great actress ... will go beyond the given by the way she expresses it; she will be truly an artist, a creator, who gives meaning to her life by lending meaning to the world.”¹⁸

Another example of the parallels between the two characters is the tendency, in each novel, of the other in the audience to show little or no regard for the actress-character unless she is acting on stage. In *All Men Are Mortal*, the immortal Fosca says he does not know what acting well or acting badly means, but he enjoys watching Regina act because it is one of the rare moments when he feels as though he exists (69). In *Dorian Gray*, Dorian delights in Sibyl’s performances, but despises her when she renounces the stage. Additionally, Sibyl’s name “evokes the oracle of Cumae,”¹⁹ which suggests another connection between Sibyl and the death-fearing Regina. Like Regina, the Cumaean Sibyl in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* wants to transcend ordinary mortality.²⁰

As explained in more detail in Chapters One and Two, literary theorists have tended to overlook the figures of Regina and Sibyl in analyses of the two novels. Critics of *All Men Are Mortal* have focused on Raymond Fosca, the immortal character whose eternal alienation dominates the novel and interpretations of it.²¹ Most have not examined the ways in which Regina reflects aspects of de Beauvoir’s Existentialism, and it has even been suggested that the novel “does not directly reflect [de Beauvoir] or her milieu; nor, of course, at that date, feminism.”²² I argue that Regina’s destructive longing for fame and immortality reflects significant aspects of de Beauvoir’s feminism as it is outlined in *The Second Sex*. In particular, I argue that it is possible to read Regina as a fictionalisation of de Beauvoir’s ideas about female narcissism, including

¹⁸ Ibid., 712.

¹⁹ Rashkin, *Unspeakable Secrets and the Psychoanalysis of Culture*, 187.

²⁰ Rainey, *The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose*, 75–6. The connection is noteworthy despite being complicated by Sibyl Vane’s suicide.

²¹ Fallaize, *Simone de Beauvoir*; Bergoffen, “Finitude and Justice: Simone de Beauvoir’s *All Men Are Mortal*”; Moser, *Freedom and Recognition in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, 2008; Crowell, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*.

²² Duchene, “A Fabulous Freedom.”

the narcissist's reliance on her reflected image.²³ Additionally, Regina represents the problem of “servitude” that de Beauvoir suggests limits actresses when they focus on supporting their egos and pleasing men.²⁴

Similarly, in readings of *Dorian Gray*, most literary critics have focused on Dorian, only analysing Sibyl in so far as she illuminates his character.²⁵ Some theorists, however, have studied Sibyl in more depth. For example, Lynn Voskuil highlights the importance of existentialist themes when she uses Sibyl and Dorian to discuss the complex relationship between authenticity and theatricality in Victorian culture. She points out that “[t]he tortured end of their romance ... turns on a dispute over the right relationship of the theater and the actual world—that is to say, of theatricality and authenticity.”²⁶ Also drawing on an existentialist theme, Wilde scholar Heather Marcovitch argues that Sibyl is the “most telling example of the impossibility of uniting a persona in [*Dorian Gray*],” in the sense that she is:

constructed out of the performances she gives and ... [is therefore] a prism of personalities—not a single woman, but one who promises a multitude of experiences with a multiplicity of theatrical female characters.²⁷

This dissertation develops these existentialist themes of authenticity and persona as they relate to Sibyl, and contributes to interpretations of them.

The extent to which Existentialism has informed contemporary celebrity studies provides a relevant context for this dissertation. In fact, scholars of celebrity culture often draw on existentialist ideas and concepts without going into great depth.²⁸ Several critics argue that the condition of being a celebrity in today's culture is one of troubling

²³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 642–3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 647–8, 582–5, 712.

²⁵ Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. As I argue in Chapter Two, while theorists such as Michael Gillespie and Gary Schmidgall both recognise the existential themes within *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the themes they describe relate to Dorian rather than to Sibyl (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Three Stories*).

²⁶ Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 1.

²⁷ Marcovitch, *The Art of the Pose*, 128.

²⁸ Morrison, “Dorian's ‘look’: Jean-Paul Sartre and the Divided Celebrity.”

ontological duality.²⁹ Along these lines, as detailed in Chapter Three, David Giles and Jonathan Goldman link the condition of being a celebrity to existentialist themes of anguish, authenticity, objectivation and contingency.³⁰ Today's "celebrity", theorised in this way, and the fictional actress-characters I discuss, are clearly not the same. Nonetheless, my dissertation demonstrates that both are illuminated by the application of existentialist concepts, as discussed in the final chapter.

²⁹ Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*; Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*; Morin, *The Stars*; Rojek, *Celebrity*.

³⁰ Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, 90; Goldman, *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity*, 1.

Literature Review: The Actress in Victorian culture and fiction

This section provides an historical context for the study of Sibyl and Regina as representations of actresses shown to be striving for transcendence during or shortly after the Victorian era. Several theorists have addressed the role of the actress in Victorian fiction and society. The Victorian actress was a “conundrum” to society because she “embodied, in public, visible form, proof of a woman’s ability to defy Victorian conceptions of femininity; and undermined, in various ways, the mechanisms whereby society maintained power over women.”³¹ Jill R. Ehnenn argues that:

[a]s a sexed body and object of male desire [the actress] could be commodified and controlled; yet as the simultaneous locus of both potentially perfect and unruly femininity, she problematized gender expectations.³²

Her analysis complements de Beauvoir’s representation of the actress in *The Second Sex*. In de Beauvoir’s view, the actress’s social and existential precariousness stems from the social restrictions placed on her gender, and from the temptations of narcissism and dependence on men. De Beauvoir positions a discussion of “the actress” in a chapter titled “Prostitutes and Hetairas”, defining hetairas as “kept” women and arguing that, in her period, “[t]he latest incarnation of the hetaira is the movie star.”³³ De Beauvoir explains that she uses the term hetaira to designate “all women who treat not only their bodies but their entire personalities as capital to be exploited.”³⁴ Although Ehnenn refers to stage actresses and de Beauvoir to film stars, both associate actresses with prostitutes. Ehnenn suggests that “the accessibility of the actress ... blurred the boundary between the actress as proper woman and actress as prostitute, who was also

³¹ Ehnenn, *Women’s Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture*, 103.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 578.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 580.

available for sale.”³⁵ While this connection is not particularly evident in the representations of Regina and Sibyl, I raise it because it illustrates a continuity between Victorian assumptions and de Beauvoir’s ideas about film actresses.

In her discussion of the actress in Victorian culture, Tracy Davis cites de Beauvoir’s argument that actresses at this time could escape male control in ways that were not available to other women. Davis points to the unique quality of the acting profession in which “the actress alone enjoyed an element of excitement and an unequalled degree of personal and sexual freedom.”³⁶ As de Beauvoir explains, actresses were “almost the only women to maintain a concrete independence in the midst of society.”³⁷ The actress figure she describes is capable of independence and yet tempted by the security of dependence on a man. This is relevant to my analysis of *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray*, because both novels are concerned with the consequences that the actress-characters face when they choose dependence on others over dedication to their acting craft.

A number of other scholars address the roles of actresses in Victorian fiction. Julie Hankey—in her examination of Wilkie Collins’ *No Name* (1863), Geraldine Jewsbury’s *The Half-Sisters* (1848), George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* (1876), and Henry James’ *The Tragic Muse* (1890)—concludes that the actress-character in each of these works challenges the Victorian reverence for “the whole idea of the real self”.³⁸ Hankey argues that a “moral anxiety” is embedded in these fictional representations, because encoded in them is the Victorian expectation that women had to be “real”. In terms of the tension between nature and artifice, the acting profession clearly complicated that expectation. In addition, the fictional actress-character was associated with ideas about

³⁵ Ehnenn, *Women’s Literary Collaboration, Queerness, and Late-Victorian Culture*, 104.

³⁶ Davis, *Actresses as Working Women*, 18.

³⁷ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 711–2.

³⁸ Hankey, “Body Language, the Idea of the Actress, and Some Nineteenth-Century Actress-Heroines,” 229.

sexuality that came “already attached, like a flag.” According to Hankey, the actress-character is a literary figure who “illustrates with special vividness the bizarre bathos inherent in any notion of womanhood.”³⁹

With a similar focus, Lauren Chattman studies the role of the actress in the Victorian theatrical novel, which she describes as “a neglected ... sub-genre of the Victorian novel.”⁴⁰ Chattman explores “the fictional link between theatricality and the domestic ideal” in this genre which, she argues, displays better than any other “the schizophrenia of middle-class femininity.”⁴¹ According to Chattman, in Victorian novels:

[t]he actress heroine is always the woman who winds up on stage by accident rather than design, who acts unselfconsciously with no view toward the audience, and whose deepest wish is not for fame or fortune but a home in which she can more properly exercise and display her virtue.⁴²

In *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl conforms to this tradition, in the sense that she only acts because her mother needs the income, and she aspires to marriage and domesticity with Dorian. Like de Beauvoir’s Regina in *All Men Are Mortal*, Sibyl’s subsequent downfall reflects de Beauvoir’s argument that an actress’s dependence on the approval of the male other compromises her artistry and places her in a state of servitude. According to Chattman, many Victorian theatrical novels “feature actress heroines who do make a successful transition from stage to home,” such that the selflessness they are recognised for on stage—or their “evacuation[s] of self” in order to embody other characters—re-emerges as virtuous selflessness in the domestic realm.⁴³ Sibyl’s desire to make this kind of

³⁹ Ibid., 237, 229, 230, 238.

⁴⁰ Chattman, “Actresses at Home and on Stage,” 73.

⁴¹ Ibid., 73–5.

⁴² Ibid., 72. Novels included William Black’s *In Silk Attire* (1869), E.J. Burbury’s *Florence Sackville, or Self-Dependence* (1852), and George Moore’s *A Mummer’s Wife* (1882).

⁴³ Ibid.

transition and abandon her career to marry Dorian indicates her aspiration to domestic virtue and her belief that it will elude her if she continues acting.

Chattman examines Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters* and Wilkie Collins' *No Name* in order to: "show how theater novels' staging of femininity anticipates feminist theorists' use of the concept of performance to undermine stable categories of gender."⁴⁴ In her view, these representations illustrate that "domestic women's self-effacement is the kind of performance that cannot be separated from theatrical self-display," thereby recognising "gender as performance."⁴⁵ Chattman points out that these representations occurred long before contemporary feminist theory articulated the same idea: "[o]ver one hundred years before Judith Butler wrote *Gender Trouble*."⁴⁶ According to Chattman, this is significant because it shows that:

feminist theorists have discovered what Victorian novelists, dramatists, and actresses intuitively seemed to know: namely that gender does not emanate from a subject's inviolable core, but is part of an assumed identity and is performed according to culture's script.⁴⁷

What this means for this dissertation is that an analysis of the actress as a fictional character contributes to a wider cultural and feminist discussion about performance and gender. The actress-character in Victorian literature illuminates themes which de Beauvoir focuses on in *The Second Sex*. According to Butler, these themes are female agency, "choice" and "the ambiguous nature of gender identity."⁴⁸ On this basis it is significant that the theories of both de Beauvoir and Sartre inform Butler's examination and "reformulation of gender as a cultural project."⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 86.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 85.

⁴⁸ Butler, Judith, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault," 506, 505.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 506.

Another relevant study is Dennis Sullivan's examination of Marcel Proust's use of theatricality in *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927). For Sullivan, Proust's deployment of actress-characters is part of a recurring metaphor linking theatre, desire and absence.⁵⁰ He suggests that the text's protagonist comes to desire "the Actress as an absolute inaccessibility" related to the absence of his mother.⁵¹ The actress appears, symbolically and recurrently, as "the object of desire, as the figure of the other's absence," such that "[a]ny character desired by another, any character who functions as the object of desire, will be cast either literally as an Actress or assume this identity metaphorically."⁵² Just as Fosca is unable to see Regina's uniqueness, Proust's male protagonist illustrates how "desire voids ... woman of her specificity."⁵³ Another similarity is that Fosca hopes Regina can help him forget his immortality, while "[e]ach Proustian subject ... will use the Actress, the figure of an imaginary object, in a momentary escape from time."⁵⁴ Sullivan explains that one of Proust's characters desires an actress "only insofar as she is upon the stage" as "the object of the look", and this clearly references existential theory.⁵⁵ In Sullivan's view, "imaginary possession in Proust may take its primary instrument, the look, as its emblem."⁵⁶ That is, "[t]he Actress as an imaginary object, [and] the look as possession without finality ... maintain a thematic solidarity throughout the novel."⁵⁷ On this basis, Sullivan suggests—in a clear reference to Sartre's ideas about a subject's "possession" by the look of the other⁵⁸—that each actress is a "victim of an act of imaginary possession".⁵⁹ Like Proust's actresses, both Regina and Sibyl are associated either with an escape from time

⁵⁰ Sullivan, "On Theatricality in Proust: Desire and the Actress," 534.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 541.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 542.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 549.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 548–9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 544.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 547.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 548.

⁵⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 364.

⁵⁹ Sullivan, "On Theatricality in Proust: Desire and the Actress," 554.

or with an empty-vessel-like quality, for which they are admired. As Daniel Novak argues, in *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl “disappears as an eroticized body” because: “[d]esire is defined only in terms of a desire for a body that is not a body—a body that can be anything and nothing and one that can be endlessly reproduced.” Using the idea of “negative capability” in relation to Sibyl emphasises that, to Dorian, she is “only interesting when not herself”.⁶⁰

In summary, my study provides interpretations of Regina and Sibyl as actress-characters in relation to existentialist concepts, particularly those of transcendence and the other’s objectivating look. My analysis emphasises the importance of de Beauvoir’s existentialist feminism and Sartre’s theory of the look of the other in interpreting the characters. It has also informed the development of my novella titled *As Though Floating*. The novella explores the experience of an actress called Fen. In contemporary London’s West End, Fen is preoccupied with recognition and success, such that she forgets her love of acting as a craft. Her desire for recognition becomes narcissistic and it undermines her work as an actor. She remains a perpetual understudy, contemplating other career options and tempted by a relationship with a male producer—her friend’s fiancé—in order to advance her career and transcend her understudy status. Fen has also retained a famous actor and former lover’s perspective of her, which contributes to her self-estrangement. *As Though Floating* is informed by de Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s philosophy, in particular de Beauvoir’s depiction of Regina’s existential crisis as stemming from her self-estrangement and the limitations of her profession. The celebrity—Fen’s former lover—has experienced his own self-estrangement, and he dies preoccupied with his own persona, represented in the novella by photographic portraits of him.

⁶⁰ Bristow, *Oscar Wilde and Modern Culture*, 88.

Chapter One: Regina and the “Ageless Gaze”

All Men Are Mortal, 34

First published in 1946, Simone de Beauvoir’s novel *All Men are Mortal* is set just before the Second World War. In the novel, Regina is an ambitious Parisian actress, with a keen awareness of her mortality and a strong desire to escape its inevitability. While on tour, Regina meets the mysterious Raymond Fosca, who is indifferent to food and friendship and seems happy to sleep in the rain. She takes him back to Paris, hoping to “cure him” of his melancholia and to restore his passion for life (17). When she learns of his immortality, she becomes obsessed with winning his eternal love. In pursuing eternity through Fosca, Regina alienates her lover Roger and her friends Florence, Sanier and Annie. But Fosca cannot love Regina forever, because for him she is a generic woman whose mortal life is too brief to be of value. This knowledge precipitates a crisis for Regina, and she finds herself estranged from her own reflection in the mirror and unable to sustain her belief in her uniqueness. Realising that her pursuit of fame through the approval of M. Dulac—a film producer—will not change anything, she decides to retire from acting, briefly proving her agency to herself, if not to Fosca. The novel ends after Fosca details his experience of immortality to Regina in what is the largest part of the novel. When he abandons her to her crisis, he reassures her that her life, and thus her anguish, will end soon. She responds with a cry of existential despair (403).

Reading the novel through de Beauvoir’s analysis of women, acting and narcissism in *The Second Sex*, I argue that Regina emerges as a narcissistic woman with

a troubling fixation on fame and immortality that makes transcendence impossible for her.

All Men Are Mortal is one of de Beauvoir's more neglected works,⁶¹ and the character of Regina has often been overlooked in critical readings of the novel. Scholars have focused mainly on the existentialist implications of de Beauvoir's characterisation of Fosca and his narrative of immortality and eternal alienation.⁶² However, Regina is important in that she reflects many aspects of de Beauvoir's "bad actress," described in *The Second Sex* as one who has fallen into "traps ... [of] self-worship or ... gallantry," making "transcendence" or "going beyond herself" impossible.⁶³ For de Beauvoir, transcendence refers to the perpetual "expansion" or development of the self and she argues that "exploits or projects that serve as a mode of transcendence" contribute to the achievement of "liberty ... through a continual reaching out towards other liberties."⁶⁴ In *The Second Sex*, this progress towards "an indefinitely open future" is the only "justification for present existence," and the desire for a state of transcendence is innate. De Beauvoir states: "[e]very individual concerned to justify his existence feels that his existence involves an undefined need to transcend himself, to engage in freely chosen projects."⁶⁵ My argument is that Regina's crisis reflects de Beauvoir's view that when this free engagement is not achieved, "transcendence falls back into immanence, [and] stagnation":

[T]here is a degradation of existence into the '*en-soi*'—the brutish life of subjection to given conditions—and of liberty into constraint and contingency.

This downfall represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is

⁶¹ Bergoffen, "Finitude and Justice: Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal*," 116.

⁶² Fallaize, *Simone de Beauvoir*; Bergoffen, "Finitude and Justice: Simone de Beauvoir's *All Men Are Mortal*"; Moser, *Freedom and Recognition in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, 2008; Crowell, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*.

⁶³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 712–3.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28–9.

inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil.⁶⁶

De Beauvoir's aim in *The Second Sex* is to examine how transcendence and "fulfilment" are achievable for woman in a world where she is an "inessential" being, forever dependent on, and objectivated by, men.⁶⁷ In *All Men Are Mortal*, Regina embodies these ideas, in the sense that her pursuit of fulfilment through fame and male approval, instead of through her craft, results in a strong and troubling sense of inessentiality, despite her final attempt to seize control and prove her agency (74). In other words, instead of achieving transcendence and liberty through those means, she becomes further constrained and anguished by her limitations as a mortal woman. This interpretation highlights—in ways not previously recognised—the link between the novel and de Beauvoir's examination of female existence in *The Second Sex*.

To examine Regina's objectification by Fosca, I draw on Sartre's philosophy of the other's objectivating "look". In brief, for Sartre, the looked-upon self experiences "uneasiness" in the look of the other, a feeling that stems from a power shift—"a decentralization of the world"—which occurs when the self becomes the object of an other's contemplation.⁶⁸ Regina's crisis, as a result of the immortal Fosca's "look"—both as audience member and lover—reflects Sartre's "decentralization" in amplified form. This interpretation provides new insight into de Beauvoir's representation of the actress Regina, and illuminates the role of Fosca's look in Regina's crisis.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 275, 255.

Literature Review: Contemporary criticism of *All Men Are Mortal*

Elizabeth Fallaize finds that, at the time of its publication, *All Men Are Mortal* was “little understood and almost universally declared to be a disappointment.”⁶⁹ The novel’s poor reception, according to Fallaize, owed to its being “a long and demanding novel dealing with the philosophical and ethical questions raised by immortality within a dialectical view of history.”⁷⁰ Debra Bergoffen also points out that the novel’s initial reception was poor, arguing that, although it was “belatedly assessed as successful,” *All Men Are Mortal* was “[o]riginally dismissed as an inferior piece of literature” and “remains a neglected work.” This neglect, in her view, “is a mistake.”⁷¹

In her introduction to the novel’s 2003 edition, Jacqueline Rose describes Regina as “imperious, manipulative and cruel” and “the narcissistic woman *par excellence*.”⁷² An example of Regina’s narcissism is her view of her lover Roger, whom she loves for his “intelligent devotion ... as much as she could love anyone other than herself” (17). De Beauvoir’s depiction of Regina, as a woman thwarted by her own ambitious narcissism, foreshadows her subsequent argument in *The Second Sex* that “[a] stubborn narcissist will be limited in art as in love for want of the ability to give herself.”⁷³

Critics have considered the novel’s existentialist themes primarily in relation to Fosca. For example, in a chapter titled ‘Existentialism as Literature’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (2012), Jeff Malpas discusses Fosca’s story without mentioning Regina, interpreting Fosca’s lesson to the reader as: meaning lies “in our

⁶⁹ Fallaize, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Bergoffen, “Finitude and Justice: Simone de Beauvoir’s *All Men Are Mortal*,” 116.

⁷² de Beauvoir, *All Men Are Mortal*, vi. Narcissism is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “excessive self-love or vanity; self-admiration, self-centredness” or involving reverting to a childhood phase of “gaining emotional or erotic gratification from self-contemplation” (“OED Online,” November 12, 2014).

⁷³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 647.

involvement *in* life, and not in some abstract perspective on it”.⁷⁴ Similarly, Susanne Moser, in her study of de Beauvoir’s *oeuvre*, briefly discusses *All Men Are Mortal* in relation to de Beauvoir’s philosophy of temporality and finitude, without discussing Regina’s role.⁷⁵ Bergoffen suggests that *All Men Are Mortal* is de Beauvoir’s attempt to work through “the relationship between risk, failure, finitude and freedom,” as part of “her experiment with a hybrid literary form, the metaphysical novel.”⁷⁶ All of these critics provide valuable insights into the novel’s existentialist themes, but they do not address the significance of the character of Regina in much detail.⁷⁷

Scholars who do focus on Regina include Kristana Arp and Terry Keefe.⁷⁸ Arp describes Regina as “a vain, anxiety-ridden actress,” who believes she “can achieve immortality by existing in [Fosca’s] eyes,” until “she finally realizes the cruel joke: his immortality renders everything in human life insignificant for him.”⁷⁹ In her study of de Beauvoir’s *oeuvre*, Arp demonstrates that the author often uses “interpersonal relations to make metaphysical points about human subjectivity.”⁸⁰ In particular, she argues that de Beauvoir depicts Regina as needing the look of the other to feel as though she exists, and that Regina exemplifies existential “bad faith”.⁸¹ In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre’s “bad faith” is a complex state of being, most simply described as a “lie to oneself”.⁸² De Beauvoir relates “bad faith” to the *hetaira*, whose life as a kept woman, she says, is marred by insincerity: “[a] persistent bad faith dominates her inner life and permits her

⁷⁴ Crowell, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, 303.

⁷⁵ Moser, *Freedom and Recognition in the Work of Simone de Beauvoir*, 2008, 64.

⁷⁶ Bergoffen, “Finitude and Justice: Simone de Beauvoir’s *All Men Are Mortal*,” 117.

⁷⁷ Anne Duchene suggests the novel’s Prologue chapters, which tell Regina’s story, are “fairly dire ... involving one of those strident monsters of vanity and egotism France tends to indulge; here, an actress, avid for immortality.” While not a scholarly analysis, Duchene’s review illustrates the dismissive attitude towards the “insufferable” Regina that is reflected in a number of scholarly interpretations. The tendency to focus on the significance of Fosca are summed up in the following statement: “It is important not to lose patience: her role steadily dwindles, as Fosca tells her his story.” (Duchene, “A Fabulous Freedom.”)

⁷⁸ Keefe, *Simone De Beauvoir; Arp, The Bonds of Freedom*.

⁷⁹ Crowell, *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism*, 258.

⁸⁰ Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 41.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48.

studied lies to seem the truth.”⁸³ My argument complements Arp’s work, with one important exception:⁸⁴ Arp argues that “Regina’s desire to have others look at her does not jibe with Sartre’s description of being-for-others in *Being and Nothingness*.”⁸⁵ In contrast, in my interpretation, Regina’s desire to be looked at by Fosca results in the very “decentralization” that Sartre describes as occurring in the other’s look.

Terry Keefe’s study, which also takes into account de Beauvoir’s overall philosophical, autobiographical and fictional writings, argues that Regina,

like so many of [de] Beauvoir’s heroines ... [is] a living illustration of the ‘hollowness’ of consciousness or the difficulty of knowing what we are, and she sees relations with others as constant competition and conflict.⁸⁶

According to Keefe, despite her depiction of Regina as “an unpleasant, malicious woman,” de Beauvoir “ensures that our dominant feeling towards [her] gradually comes to be one of pity.” He argues that this is achieved because Regina’s “obsessive aversion to death” is “deeply human.” In particular, the reader sympathises with Regina’s “anguish” when, having discovered Fosca’s indifference, she sees herself “from the point of view of eternity.”⁸⁷ She realises that “nothing at all can enable her to stop the march of time or escape death.”⁸⁸

Despite their important insights, neither Arp nor Keefe reads Regina in relation to her gender or in relation to de Beauvoir’s archetypal actress in *The Second Sex*. As explained in my introduction, I dispute the suggestion that *All Men Are Mortal* “does not directly reflect ... feminism,”⁸⁹ and argue that Regina’s destructive longing for immortality anticipates significant aspects of de Beauvoir’s argument in *The Second*

⁸³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 584.

⁸⁴ For example, I concur that Fosca’s point of view engulfs Regina’s (Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 42). I explore the implications of the dominance of Fosca’s perspective further, in terms of its role in Regina’s objectivation, duality and self-estrangement.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 41–2.

⁸⁶ Keefe, *Simone De Beauvoir*, 174.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

⁸⁹ Duchene, “A Fabulous Freedom.”

Sex. These aspects include de Beauvoir's concept of female narcissism and the narcissist's reliance on her reflected image to secure a sense of identity, as well as the problem of servitude that limits women when they focus on pleasing men in ways that consign them to "immanence, [or] stagnation."⁹⁰ Regina mistakenly tries to achieve transcendence through the pursuit of fame and recognition and vows to make herself "sacred" to others (11). This is consistent with the ideas presented in *The Second Sex*, for example, de Beauvoir's argument that transcendence is only achievable through devotion to the craft of acting, which, significantly, also facilitates the transcendence of others.

⁹⁰ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 642, 29.

De Beauvoir's "Actress" figure

De Beauvoir's analysis of women and narcissism in *The Second Sex* is mobilised, in part, through the archetype she calls "the actress". One of a number of female archetypes, "the actress" features prominently in the chapter titled "The Independent Woman", which is situated within Part VII: "Towards liberation".⁹¹ The archetype also appears in chapters titled "The Narcissist" and "Prostitutes and Hetairas", the latter of which emphasises film stardom.⁹²

In "The Independent Woman", de Beauvoir argues that "gainful employment" is the only way a woman can "guarantee her liberty." Without it, woman "persists in the vain pursuit of her true being through narcissism, love, or religion."⁹³ Exploring the pitfalls that women in her era faced if they desired to be self-sufficient and independent, de Beauvoir concludes that most career women are resigned to a life that is always an "immanent enterprise"; as a result, she "does not passionately lose herself in her projects."⁹⁴ The significance of these pitfalls is that the actress, along with other performers such as singers and dancers, represents a unique possibility of freedom. For de Beauvoir, this possibility was a recent and significant development, because actresses had been an "unknown species" before the seventeenth century; in her view, the advent of the profession for women marked the beginning of a new way of being in the world.⁹⁵

De Beauvoir discusses actresses who came to know "vast renown,"⁹⁶ arguing that "[f]or three centuries they have been almost the only women to maintain concrete independence in the midst of society, and at the present time they still occupy a

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 689.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 578–587.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 689.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 711.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

privileged place in it.” She suggests that their careers tended to “reinforce” rather than hinder “the affirmation of their femininity.” That is, “their professional successes—like those of men—contribute to their sexual valuation”.⁹⁷ Talents like acting, singing and dancing enabled renowned actresses to “have an occupation that requires their ability and justifies them. They attain concrete, positive freedom in work they choose and love.”⁹⁸ Such actresses were not “torn between contradictory aspirations”; in other words, they were not torn between “self-realisation ... [through a career which provided] validation of themselves as human beings” and “self-fulfilment as women [through feminine preoccupations with] dress, beauty, care, [and] charm.”⁹⁹

However, in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that social precariousness accompanied the actress’s privilege, because the “unusual advantages” of the profession “conceal[ed] traps ... [of] self-worship or ... gallantry”.¹⁰⁰ That is, while the profession provided a unique opportunity for women to transcend their culturally ascribed roles, this was complicated by the heightened risk of narcissism and reliance on male approval. She points out that “masculine support” is a tempting convenience when one lives “marginally to the masculine world.” In turn, such support is likely to hinge on an appealing appearance. Unless the actress can “avoid this reef” she will become a “bad actress,” one who “will exaggerate all the narcissistic defects.”¹⁰¹ On the basis of de Beauvoir’s analysis, it is possible to conclude that, while the “traps” of narcissism and dependence on men were common for all women, “the actress” was more vulnerable than most. In *All Men Are Mortal*, Regina is vulnerable to the traps de Beauvoir describes. This relates to Arp’s argument that Regina depends on the look of others to

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 711–2.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 585.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 712.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 712–3.

feel alive: “Only when many eyes are trained on her can she really believe in her existence.”¹⁰²

For de Beauvoir, the significance of acting for women is that it allows for the pursuit of a “real profession,” which is a key to “true independence.”¹⁰³ In her view, actresses who are “genuine artists” not only “transcend self in the roles they create,” but they escape the need to seduce men, because they have “an occupation that requires their ability and justifies them.”¹⁰⁴ In contrast, she argues, most “Hollywood stars” are at the mercy of their producers and “remain all their lives in a precarious position ... under the never ending necessity of seducing the public and the men anew.”¹⁰⁵ The fate of such actresses is to be in bondage, in a slavery that is worse than that of a prostitute “who simply yields her body.”¹⁰⁶ In this sense, de Beauvoir’s depiction of Regina as an actress can be understood to anticipate her later examination, in *The Second Sex*, of the relationships between acting, transcendence, and the condition of womanhood. Throughout *The Second Sex*, transcendence is an optimal state of being; it is related to freedom and is the opposite of “stagnation.” For de Beauvoir, transcendence is the only way to “justify ... [one’s] existence.”¹⁰⁷ The depiction of the actress figure, in both *All Men Are Mortal* and *The Second Sex*, allows de Beauvoir to explore the tension between acting and transcendence. That is, the actress figure is an archetype of womanhood through which de Beauvoir examines narcissism and dependence in relation to the existential ideals of freedom and independence.

When de Beauvoir typifies actresses as seeking through “artistic expression to transcend their given characteristics,” her discussion is grounded in the existentialist position that without an “expansion into an indefinitely open future” there is only

¹⁰² Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 41.

¹⁰³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 583.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 647, 585.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 583.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 28–9.

“immanence, [or] stagnation.”¹⁰⁸ For de Beauvoir, pursuing transcendence to avoid stagnation is a moral and existential responsibility, without which the individual (both male and female) is either guilty of a “moral fault” or bound to suffer “frustration and oppression.”¹⁰⁹ The moral imperative de Beauvoir ascribes to transcendence as an aspect of liberation accords with Sartre’s argument that the most meaningful pursuit of all is “freedom”.¹¹⁰ In this sense, Regina’s integrity in *All Men Are Mortal* hinges upon pursuing transcendence and freedom through her craft. When she pursues fame and immortality through male approval instead, this undermines her path to transcendence and her subsequent despair is an existential crisis resulting from a “moral fault”, in relation to her choices as both woman and actor.¹¹¹

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir recognises that actresses have “a variety of goals.” For some, “acting is a means of making a living, simply a profession; for others it leads to a fame that will be exploited for purposes of gallantry; for still others, it brings the triumph of their narcissism.” De Beauvoir describes all of these as “third-raters” in comparison to the group she calls “[t]he greater actresses”. As examples of the latter, she refers to such renowned nineteenth-century actresses as “Rachel [Felix]” and “[Eleanora] Duse”.¹¹² While the narcissistic actress will be satisfied by “simply exhibiting what she *is*,” a “great actress will aim higher yet ... she will be truly an artist, a creator, who gives meaning to her life by lending meaning to the world.”¹¹³ In other words, such figures achieve authenticity from their roles as interpreters of the world. In relation to de Beauvoir’s discussion of liberty and transcendence, the figure of the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 711, 28–9.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹¹⁰ This pursuit carries great responsibility, according to Sartre, because when we pursue freedom, we find that “it depends entirely on the freedom of others, and that the freedom of others depends on our own”. With no excuses or determinism on which to blame errors, radical freedom brings an absolute responsibility that extends beyond the individual, because in choosing one’s path, one commits to an ideal which is then projected on to others: “[N]othing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, p.48, 24).

¹¹¹ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29.

¹¹² Ibid., 647.

¹¹³ Ibid., 712.

actress is therefore a significant archetype that has been foreshadowed by Regina in *All Men Are Mortal*.

Regina is shown to have talent and a capacity to move her audience. In the opening scene, the audience applauds loudly through five curtain calls and greets the actors after the show with flowers (1): “their eyes glowed with enthusiasm” (2). Regina’s friend, Sanier, says that Regina and Florence, another actress, will have “exceptional careers” (5). However, Regina shows no desire to motivate or “reveal the world” to others, something that de Beauvoir argues that true creative workers do.¹¹⁴ As the story progresses, Regina’s choices and preoccupations situate her firmly in the “bad actress”—rather than the “great actress”—category.¹¹⁵ Her failure to commit to facilitating the “transcendence” of others through her performances renders her a “third-rater” or a “bad actress,” who surrenders to narcissism, “seeing in art a servant of [her ego].”¹¹⁶

Regina’s goal is fame, a goal she conflates with the desire to be loved: “how often had she sworn to herself that one day she would be loved, she would be famous!” (24). In this sense, Regina does not perform art for the sake of her audience or the art itself. On the contrary, she thinks herself to be too good for her provincial audiences (1). After thundering applause in the darkened theatre, Regina is disappointed when the lights go up and she sees who has witnessed her performance:

When they had been sitting in the darkness, invisible and anonymous, one did not know who they were; she could as well have been performing before a gathering of gods. But now, seeing them face to face, she found herself confronted by ordinary mortals of no special importance. (1)

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 580.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 712–3.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 580, 647, 712–3.

In this passage, Regina's mundane audience seems to confirm her own ordinariness; in contrast, she believes Fosca's immortality will affirm and reify her uniqueness. The reception of this "ordinary" audience diminishes Regina's sense of her importance, as does their admiration for her rival co-star, Florence. In de Beauvoir's terms, Regina's preoccupation with how she is admired, rather than with how well she has performed and moved her audience, suggests that she is like "the vast majority of women [for whom] an art, a profession, is only a means: in practising it they are not engaged in genuine projects."¹¹⁷

In her pursuit of fame, Regina, as a narcissistic "bad actress," necessarily experiences disillusionment. The possibility of Dulac's patronage fails to assuage her existential anxiety, and she realises that even stardom would not relieve her sense of her impermanence:

Perhaps her name would be remembered for a while. But there would be no one to remember that special taste of life on her lips, that passion that burned in her heart, the beauty of the red flames and their phantasmagorical secrets. (25)

For Regina, only the immortal Fosca can provide the immortality she craves. She imagines that when she talks to him, "every inflection in her voice reverberate[s] through eternity" (44). Fosca is a figure who can reflect her back to herself as larger than life; as such, he is worthy of being in her imagined audience, her "gathering of gods" (1). Having been made aware of his immortality, Regina marvels that she was ever "satisfied with [her] modest ambitions": to "be beautiful for another ten years, to play Phèdre and Cleopatra, to leave a faint memory in the hearts of mortal men which would gradually crumble to dust" (32). That she is frustrated by the ephemeral nature of her occupation, as well as of her life, is evident when she tells Sanier: "You're lucky to be a writer: books live on. The rest of us won't be around for long." (5).

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 585.

Further demonstrating her anxiety over her impermanence, Regina is troubled that the character she portrays on stage, Rosalind, “dies” every night. She muses: “Rosalind was dead, she died every evening, and there would come a day when she would not be born again ... Her hand was trembling. From the moment she left the stage, she had not stopped trembling.” (32) After being drunk and misbehaving, she sees in the mirror that her stage makeup is “all that remains of Rosalind.” Her awareness of the precarious nature of her performance brings a visceral reaction: “She leaned over the lavatory and threw up. ‘Now what shall I do?’ she asked herself” (34). The role of Rosalind reminds Regina of the precariousness of her existence, as a woman and as an actress. In this sense, Regina pursues Fosca’s love to secure a more lasting—and less precarious—form of transcendence. In his gaze, she initially feels “beyond space, beyond time” (35), as though “[t]here were no longer any hours or days, no more time, no more place” (28). Struggling to accept the limitations of her life and her craft, Regina begins to believe that Fosca’s eternal love will allow her to transcend such limitations in a more meaningful way than mortal fame could provide: “he’ll guard me in his memory until the end of time” (40). She comes to believe that to be admired by the same eyes that have “gazed upon so many women celebrated for their beauty, for their talents” means she will be able to join their ranks, be “part of that story” and never be forgotten (43-5). Living on in Fosca’s eternal memory then becomes her main reason for living, such that when she is without him, she comes to think: “there is nothing left for me but to die” (77).

Regina’s pursuit of immortality, first through fame (her pursuit of Dulac’s approval and patronage) and then through Fosca’s love, distracts her from focusing on her profession. When she values Fosca’s admiration more highly than her stage career and is then rejected by him, she has no avenue to transcendence, either through him or through her craft. De Beauvoir’s argument in *The Second Sex* is that an actress’s

dependence on the approving gaze of the male other compromises her artistry and renders her in a state of servitude, within which “no road whatever is open to transcendence.”¹¹⁸ On this basis, Regina is like de Beauvoir’s *hetaira*, a woman who “tries to captivate the world for her own profit.”¹¹⁹ Brought down by her narcissism and dependence on male approval, Regina is therefore the epitome of de Beauvoir’s “bad actress.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 580.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 712–3.

The problem of gallantry

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir uses the term “gallantry” to describe a mode of female dependence on men caused by economic inequality. She also argues that “marriage ... still means practically subordination to man; for masculine prestige is far from extinction.”¹²¹ In *All Men are Mortal*, Regina enters what de Beauvoir terms the “field of gallantry” when she dresses to please Dulac, conscious of enhancing her chance to become famous.¹²² At the dinner party that follows, Regina “sense[s] Dulac’s gaze” as she crosses the room, and she asks her friend Annie if she looks “beautiful” (20-1). Entering the “field of gallantry” in such a deliberate way, Regina is shown to be aware of—and somewhat dismayed by—her complicity in the game she is playing:

She hated the way her hair was done and the film-star make-up. She hated the false smile that she could feel forming on her lips and the social tone of her voice. ‘It’s degrading,’ she thought angrily. (21)

At this point, the female characters in the novel start to express de Beauvoir’s ideas on women’s subjectivity directly. When Regina states her preference for wearing her hair in plaits—her usual, less glamorous, style—Annie agrees that it would look better. Regina then confirms a desire not to exploit herself in the future:

‘Roger wants me to tone down all my distinctive features. They only appreciate obvious beauty.’

‘It’s a shame.’

‘Don’t worry. As soon as I’ve made two or three films, I’ll make them accept my real face.’ (21)

That Regina’s conviction is naive is supported in de Beauvoir’s later argument in *The Second Sex* that most actresses “remain all their lives in a precarious position ... under

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 585.

the never ending necessity of seducing the public and the men anew.”¹²³ The conversation between the two women illustrates Regina’s initial willingness to conform to a feminine ideal in order to secure Dulac’s support, as well as her awareness of the compromise that this entails.

The chapter titled “Prostitutes and Hetairas” in *The Second Sex* examines women who come to depend on male approval for their financial support as well as for their “prestige”.¹²⁴ De Beauvoir states that the movie star is an example of the *hetaira*, because she “yields Woman over to the dreams of man, who repays her with wealth and fame.”¹²⁵ That is, the *hetaira* allows men to define what women will signify in the world. For de Beauvoir, these film stars—as exploited and perpetually seductive *hetairai*—are complicit in their own exploitation and show no commitment to “universal liberty.”¹²⁶ Such a woman, even if she desires fame on her own, will nearly always:

attain her ambition through masculine ‘protection’; and it will be men—husband, lover, suitors—who will crown her triumph by letting her share their money or their fame. It is this necessity of pleasing individuals, or the crowd, that relates the ‘star’ to the hetaira.¹²⁷

Regina illustrates de Beauvoir’s argument that the willingness to please, in pursuit of fame, limits the actress’s capacity to become a true artist, because, “[t]he hetaira does not reveal the world, she opens no avenues to human transcendence; on the contrary, she tries to captivate the world for her own profit.”¹²⁸ These figures are very different to de Beauvoir’s idealised “creative workers who, transcending themselves in the work

¹²³ Ibid., 583.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 579.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 583.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 580.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

they produce, go beyond the given and make their appeal to a freedom in others for which they open the doors of the future.”¹²⁹

Although Regina mutters that she “hate[s] those horsetraders [sic]!” referring to film producers, she declares herself willing to sleep with Dulac if necessary (21). In this sense, she demonstrates the characteristics of de Beauvoir’s *hetaira*, and the producer is portrayed as objectifying women: “He was a connoisseur of the shapely leg, the well-rounded figure, the supple gait: he was a horse-trader” (20). Dulac, as a stereotypical, exploitative Hollywood producer, is shown to have the power to objectify and eradicate the actress’s unique characteristics. The party scenario in the novel, in particular, accords with de Beauvoir’s description of Hollywood in *The Second Sex*:

The subjection of Hollywood stars is well known. Their bodies are not their own; the producer decides on the colour of their hair, their weight, their figure, their type; to change the curve of a cheek, their teeth may be pulled ... private life is no more than an aspect of public life ... The star who refuses to be pliant to these requirements will experience a brutal or a slow but inevitable dethronement. The prostitute who simply yields her body is perhaps less a slave than the woman who makes a career of pleasing the public.¹³⁰

Regina’s lover Roger’s advice that she tone down her “distinctive features” suggests the loss of uniqueness which Regina fears, and which de Beauvoir refers to in the above passage. Such loss of individuality is also implicit in Fosca’s immortal gaze, in which Regina is yet another woman he has experienced over the centuries (16).

For de Beauvoir, being under the control of a producer like Dulac means being “subordinated to the director, [permitting] her no invention, no advances in creative activity.”¹³¹ As such, “[t]he greatest misfortune of the hetaira is not only that her

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 583.

¹³¹ Ibid., 585.

independence is the deceptive obverse of a thousand dependencies, but also that this liberty is itself negative.”¹³² That is, the independence of de Beauvoir’s Hollywood “star” is an illusion. Should she try to test it by standing on her own two feet, “the star, deprived of masculine support, [would see] her prestige grow dim.”¹³³ In *All Men Are Mortal*, because Regina hopes to achieve fulfilment and fame through Dulac’s approval, and through Fosca’s eternal love (40), she is a figure seeking “feminine emancipation” through “men of authority.”¹³⁴ As a result, she necessarily undermines her own “emancipation” and is trapped—like de Beauvoir’s hetaira—in a state of “servitude”: “[t]he gifts lavished upon her are chains.”¹³⁵ Regina’s surrender to Dulac’s exploitative patronage and to Fosca’s eternal perspective of her are examples of her acceptance of exploitation, “gallantry” and immanence—the hetaira’s “moral fault”.¹³⁶ Doubly bound, Regina thus represents de Beauvoir’s “bad actress” who has fallen into, and is constrained by, the “trap” of male gallantry.¹³⁷

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 582.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 581.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 582.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 28–9.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 582.

The trap of narcissism

Regina's narcissism makes the type of transcendence de Beauvoir advocates in *The Second Sex* impossible, because it leads her to crave immortality and fame at the cost of her independence and her existential integrity. Instead of being motivated to inspire transcendence in her audience, her narcissistic pursuit of fame tempts her to rely on gallantry, such that liberty eludes her.¹³⁸

While in *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir cautions against thinking of all women as fundamentally narcissistic, she notes that the unfulfilling and repressive conditions of womanhood often "lead woman more than man to turn towards herself and devote her love to herself."¹³⁹ In her view, this makes transcendence through meaningful action impossible, and she describes narcissistic women writers in particular as being "plague[d]" by "a love for themselves that poisons their sincerity, limits them, and reduces their stature."¹⁴⁰ The problem for de Beauvoir is that "a stubborn narcissist will be limited in art as in love for want of the ability to give herself."¹⁴¹ In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir suggests narcissistic women cannot "forget themselves" long enough to be capable of a "genuine love affair," or of wholehearted commitment to the creative "disciplines that require a hard apprenticeship and demand solitary effort."¹⁴² This is reminiscent of Regina's callous treatment of her lover in *All Men Are Mortal*.

De Beauvoir argues that self-worship is most marked in actresses, because "nothing satisfies the narcissist so profoundly as to dedicate herself publicly to the theatre."¹⁴³ This is so because, in the theatre, "better than in mirrors, she sees her double, haloed with glory, in the eyes of others."¹⁴⁴ This imagery echoes that used in the

¹³⁸ Ibid., 585.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 641.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 648.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 647.

¹⁴² Ibid., 646–7.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 647.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 646.

opening paragraph of *All Men Are Mortal*: “In every face there were eyes, and reflected in each pair of eyes was Regina, bowing and smiling” (1). Similarly, in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir refers to the narcissistic woman’s need “to hold an affectionate dialogue between self and self.”¹⁴⁵ In the novel, Regina derives comfort and gratification when, sitting at a table in a bar after an opening performance, she pretends to do her makeup so that she can look at herself:

She needed to look at herself. She loved her face; she liked the lively, subtle shade of her blonde hair, the haughty severity of her high forehead and her nose, her winsome mouth, the boldness of her blue eyes. She was beautiful, yet hers was a beauty that was so harsh and so unusual that at first it startled. ‘Ah! if only there were two of me,’ she thought, ‘one who speaks and the other who listens, one who lives and the other who watches, then how I would love myself! I’d envy no-one.’ (4)

In terms of de Beauvoir’s argument in *The Second Sex*, Regina is the *hetaira* who misguidedly “seeks in fame the apotheosis of her narcissism.”¹⁴⁶ Regina exemplifies the idea that “the admiration she feels for her ego in many cases limits the achievement of an actress; she has such illusions regarding the value of her mere presence that serious work seems useless.”¹⁴⁷

The narcissism of Regina, as of de Beauvoir’s “bad actress” in *The Second Sex*, makes it impossible for her to be a transcendent actress engaged in “serious work”¹⁴⁸ that “reveal[s] the world” to others.¹⁴⁹ She “lacks the generous-mindedness to forget herself, and this deprives her of the possibility of going beyond herself.” On these terms, she is not like the “great” actresses—described by de Beauvoir as “rare

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 642.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 587.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 712.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 580.

indeed”—who “make their persons the instruments of their art instead of seeing in art a servant of their egos.”¹⁵⁰ Rather, she is the “bad actress,” who, “instead of integrating her narcissistic self-indulgence and her sexual liberty with her artistic life ... sinks into self-worship or into gallantry.”¹⁵¹

The character of Regina therefore highlights a basic tenet of de Beauvoir’s feminist philosophy: that “woman’s situation” or “drama” of “inessential[ity]” in a male-dominated world leads to characteristics—such as narcissism—which present obstacles to her fulfilment of her moral obligation to pursue “liberty” and “transcendence”. Such fulfilment, according to de Beauvoir, is a moral and existential necessity, without which the individual is guilty of a “moral fault” and bound to suffer “frustration and oppression.”¹⁵² As de Beauvoir says in her introduction to the 1988 edition of *The Second Sex*:

what peculiarly signalizes the situation of woman is that she—a free and autonomous being like all human creatures—nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men ... propose to stabilize her as object and to doom her to immanence.¹⁵³

Regina is complicit in her objectivation by Dulac and Fosca, because it satisfies her narcissism. Trapped in an existential crisis, her dilemma illustrates and thus foreshadows de Beauvoir’s articulation of the situation of women in *The Second Sex*.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 712–3.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., 29.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Narcissism and the thwarted “Unique”

At the heart of Regina’s crisis is her sense that she is losing her uniqueness, something she has hitherto relied upon for her sense of worth. According to de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, the narcissistic woman prizes her uniqueness while, counter-intuitively, looking for her “double” as evidence of it. Over time, “reduced to generality” by domesticity, de Beauvoir’s “woman” seeks her “double” in the mirror as well as in literature.¹⁵⁴ Regina, who—as we have seen—admires her reflection and wishes there were two of her, illustrates this phenomenon (4). She dreads generality, and her need for affirmation of her uniqueness leads to anger when her audience shows appreciation for her co-star Florence:

They surrounded Florence, too. They had also brought her flowers, and when they spoke to her, that little flame shone in their eyes as well. As if they could like both of us, thought Regina angrily, a blonde as much as a brunette, and each completely different. (2)

In her anger, Regina exemplifies de Beauvoir’s later proposition that “[t]he hetaira who seeks individual fame is *a priori* hostile to any other woman who, like herself, covets a privileged position.”¹⁵⁵ This is also evident when Regina attempts to sabotage Florence’s relationship with Sanier by mentioning Florence’s other lover; she does so because she feels bitter that Florence has Sanier’s undivided attention:

Love was in their eyes, love alone; the great human drama was unfolding between them as if no one on earth had ever loved before, as if Regina had never loved ... [n]o amount of success, no triumph could, in that instant, prevent Florence from shining in all her glory within Sanier’s heart. (4)

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 644–5.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 585.

The scene positions love as an avenue to the unique state that Regina desires, and comes to seek, from the immortal Fosca. Despite thinking herself better than others—“[n]o woman can compare herself to me”—Regina nonetheless feels threatened, and seeks reassurance in her mirror (3-4). This highlights de Beauvoir’s view that a woman finds “the magic of her mirror a tremendous help in her effort to project herself and then attain self-identification.”¹⁵⁶ With fewer opportunities to attain self-identification than men, de Beauvoir argues in *The Second Sex* that “woman” turns to her mirror as a surface upon which to assess her value: her passive beauty, “captured in the motionless, silvered trap,” is the measure of her power in a man’s world.¹⁵⁷ The reflected image supports a false sense of individuality and uniqueness:

[T]he world is reduced to this sheet of glass wherein stands resplendent an image: the Unique. Each woman, lost in her reflection, rules over space and time, alone, supreme; she has every right to men and fortune, to fame and pleasure.¹⁵⁸

The theatre audience’s appreciation of the dark-haired Florence, such that they admire “a blonde as much as a brunette,” foreshadows Regina’s reaction to Fosca’s similar lack of discernment. Fosca explains to Regina that he loves Annie as much as he loves her and can make no “distinction” between them (78). That Regina is not unique to Fosca is also evident when he refuses her offer of companionship early on:

‘You say no without even looking at me. Look at me.’

‘It’s not worth the trouble,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen you a hundred times.’

‘But from far away ...’

‘From both far and near.’

‘When?’

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 642.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 643.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

‘Throughout every age,’ he said. ‘Everywhere.’ (16)

The scene complements Dulac’s objectivation of Regina’s body and confirms Regina’s view that men cannot appreciate anything but “obvious beauty” (21). It also relates to her rejection of religion, as a young woman, on the basis that God could not offer her exclusive admiration: “God loved everyone; she could never be satisfied with such indiscriminating benevolence” (11). She vows to become saintly without religion: by stirring passionate admiration in others, she would make herself “sacred to them” (11). Regina’s desire to be extraordinary motivates her to impress Fosca; she does not “want to be just another blade of grass” (7).

Preoccupied with proving her uniqueness, Regina takes Fosca to the village where she grew up, hoping to present herself to him as an individual. She talks of her childhood, “eager to resuscitate, however briefly, those little, transparent creatures in whose bodies her own heart had once beaten” (63). Her eagerness suggests de Beauvoir’s conception of the woman who feels her uniqueness threatened by “generality ... [and] seeks to find again the dead child within herself, even to revive it.”¹⁵⁹ Fosca’s withering response is to point out that within each mortal life there are “[a]lways the same efforts, the same failures” (63). When Regina asks Fosca if he remembers her stories, he shrugs and says:

‘It’s a story I’ve heard so many times.’ She jumped up. ‘No! It’s not the same!’

‘The same one, the only one.’

...

‘But I’m different ... If I weren’t different, why would you love me? You do love me, don’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he replied.

‘And for you I’m unique?’

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 645.

‘Yes,’ he said again. ‘A woman who is unique like all women.’ (63-4)

Regina comes to realise that: “Everybody believed they were unique, preferred themselves above others. And they were all wrong, she as much as anyone else” (78-9). Fosca’s story shatters “any remaining hope [Regina] may have had of seeing herself as unique.”¹⁶⁰ As Keefe argues, it is both ironic and poignant that Regina’s “commitment to Fosca eventually causes her to feel even less unique than a relationship with a mortal might have done.”¹⁶¹ In these scenes, it is possible to see the nature of the exploitative gaze of audiences and the film industry—as represented by Dulac, with his taste for “obvious” beauty—as having its parallel in the effect of Fosca’s “ageless gaze” on Regina and her threatened sense of uniqueness (34).

Listening to Fosca, Regina realises that, in his immortal gaze, “the world [is] nothing more than a parade of fleeting visions” (62). The effect on her is a sense of fragmentation and dissolution. Fosca’s “look ... would never die” and “[a]ll [Regina] could hope to do was to stay afloat a little longer before being transformed into foam.” (63). In this respect, Fosca’s view of Regina conforms to de Beauvoir’s position in *The Second Sex* that women are treated as “inessential” in a patriarchal world,¹⁶² a perception reminiscent of Sartre’s idea of contingency.¹⁶³ Whether the indifference to her uniqueness is linked to God, the immortal Fosca, or the film producer, it puts Regina’s sense of her individuality and significance at risk. Regina thus illustrates and foreshadows de Beauvoir’s point that narcissistic women prize uniqueness as an antidote to the obscurity and generality of their inessentiality in a male world.¹⁶⁴

The novel *All Men Are Mortal* is therefore imbued with de Beauvoir’s developing philosophy of the limitations women face in the pursuit of transcendence

¹⁶⁰ Keefe, *Simone De Beauvoir*, 179.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁶² de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29.

¹⁶³ Sartre argues that human existence is “contingent” rather than “necessary” (Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 49).

¹⁶⁴ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 643–6.

and liberty.¹⁶⁵ In particular, Regina's predicament is a precursor to the narcissistic woman's need, born of her social marginalisation, to believe herself unique, as articulated in *The Second Sex*. Regina informs de Beauvoir's "bad actress" type, who focuses not on her craft, but on achieving fame. Regina's preoccupation with fame and her own uniqueness makes her susceptible to the "field of gallantry." This prevents her from approaching acting as an art form which can bring meaning to others' lives. As a "bad actress," she is doomed to remain confined "in immanence" and in a state of "dense ennui."¹⁶⁶ As such, Regina supports and illustrates the themes of narcissism, fame and gallantry that de Beauvoir articulates in *The Second Sex*, published three years after *All Men Are Mortal*.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 28–9.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 585.

Sartre's philosophy of the look of the "Other"

At the end of the novel, Regina screams in terror as she contemplates her mortality (403). Her crisis has come about for a number of reasons, including her objectivation by Fosca and Dulac, her fear of death, and her precarious state of being, which, as previously argued, relates to her being a "bad actress". Developing the existential interpretation of Regina's crisis further in this section, I read her objectivation by Fosca and Dulac through Sartre's study of what he terms "the phenomenon of the look".¹⁶⁷

Sartre describes the other as "the being through whom I gain my object-ness."¹⁶⁸ In *Being and Nothingness*, this "object-ness" refers to an individual's "object-state" or the "quality or state of being an object" as a result of "objectivation" by another individual.¹⁶⁹ This state of being occurs because the look of the other causes the self to be "stripped" of his or her "distanceless presence to the world."¹⁷⁰

For Sartre, the looked-upon self experiences "uneasiness" in the look of the other,¹⁷¹ a feeling that stems from the power shift that occurs when the self becomes an object of contemplation. In this power shift, the individual's surroundings, as he or she sees them, undergo a "regrouping", such that the landscape now "turns toward the Other a face which escapes me."¹⁷² As such, Sartre writes, the other "has stolen the world from me," generating "a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world which undermines the centralization which I am simultaneously effecting."¹⁷³ Sartre argues that the self's mastery "of the situation" is significantly reduced because of the "one real dimension by which it escapes me, by which unforeseen reversals cause

¹⁶⁷ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 268.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 257–268, 633.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 255.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

it to be otherwise than it appears for me.”¹⁷⁴ In other words, the world of objects has “a secret face” for the other that is imperceptible to the self.¹⁷⁵ The other reminds the self that he or she is not the centre of all that he or she perceives.

According to Sartre, when the self experiences “being seen” by others, the experience threatens the subject’s agency; as a result, “essential modifications appear.”¹⁷⁶ A sense of vulnerability and “uneasiness” follows the subject’s realisation that the world looks different to the other, and this difference is beyond the self’s grasp.¹⁷⁷ Sartre argues that this look steals the self’s being and confers on it an identity:

The Other holds a secret—the secret of what I am ... By virtue of consciousness the Other is for me simultaneously the one who has stolen my being from me and the one who causes ‘there to be’ a being which is my being. Thus I have a comprehension of this ontological structure: I am responsible for my being-for-others, but I am not the foundation of it.¹⁷⁸

Throughout this process, a “for-itself” remains, a subjectivity which is “unrevealable” to the other.¹⁷⁹ But the other’s look produces a disquieting split in the self, such that: “my being-as-object or being-for-others is profoundly different from my being-for-myself.”¹⁸⁰ Significantly, Sartre argues that the subject’s awareness of his or her being-for-others is not a “concrete intuition” of a specific entity; rather, objectivation triggers “an uneasiness, a lived wrenching away from the ekstastic unity of the for-itself.”¹⁸¹ In *All Men are Mortal*, Regina’s experience of Fosca’s objectivating look is an example of such existential “uneasiness”.¹⁸² Her alienation from “the world around her” (41) corresponds to what Sartre describes as “a world which the Other has made alien to

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 265.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 263.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 259–260.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 255, 259, 275.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 364.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 79, 270.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 273–5.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 275.

¹⁸² Ibid.

me.”¹⁸³ This reflects Sartre’s idea that being looked at is “the alienation of myself ... [which] involves the alienation of the world which I organize.”¹⁸⁴

Fosca’s look splits Regina into a diminished being-for-itself and a valued being-for-others. While she initially perceives herself to be uniquely beautiful and talented, destined for great things, Fosca sees her as a generic, insignificant figure, whose value is her ability, when performing, to make *him* feel alive (69). Regina asks Fosca if it makes no difference to him whether she is “like this or like that ... stingy or cowardly,” and she wonders: “Did he not place any value on those virtues in which she took so much pride?” (49). Her realisation that she is not unique to Fosca echoes the uneasiness of Sartre’s looked-at subject, split by the look of the other, such that the subject is no longer “a pure consciousness of things”¹⁸⁵ but has been influenced by a version of self that is “a *degraded* consciousness” as seen by the other.¹⁸⁶

Read through Sartre’s philosophy, Fosca’s look “has stolen the world” from Regina, because his immortality reveals to her the absurdity of her mortal human life. When Fosca is unmoved by being told of Regina’s childhood home and memories, she realises she cannot make him “see the world through [her] eyes” (62); subsequently, her world is rearranged around his perspective. Regina’s experience of “decentralization” and loss of control complicates her need for the look of the other to affirm her existence. The loss of her total mastery “of the situation”—in Sartre’s terms—causes her to feel weary and numb: where once she might have felt “the pleasant ripple of contempt in her heart; she could no longer feel contempt for anyone” (64). She loses “the proud solitude of former days; now she was just another woman lost beneath the sky” (65), and she has “no desire to do anything. In the mirror, even her face appear[s] to be asleep” (65). Caught in Fosca’s indifferent look, Regina therefore experiences what can be described

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 261.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 273.

as a polarisation between herself-for-herself and herself-for-others, which catalyses profound existential “uneasiness” and “decentralization”. This, in turn, increases her realisation that her being-for-others—the “secret face” Fosca sees and will remember—is beyond her control. As Arp puts it, Regina realises that Fosca’s “point of view ... swallows up her own, [and] is a ‘curse.’”¹⁸⁷ Read in the context of Existentialism, Regina’s exposure to Fosca’s look leads to a disquieting theft of her subjectivity and control.

A key shift in Regina’s story that demonstrates her Sartrean objectivation occurs in the scene in which she ceases to find comfort and reassurance in her own reflection. Getting ready for her party, she decides to wear her hair in plaits, saying she wants everyone to see her “real face” (71). Looking at herself in the mirror, where she has grown accustomed to finding proof of her worth, Regina still experiences her image as an object for display: “This face which she had so loved now seemed like a mask; it no longer belonged to her. Her body, too, had become a stranger to her—a mannequin in a shop-window.” (71). In Sartre’s terms, Regina’s estrangement from her reflection represents a “fall ... toward objectivity” and “an *alienation*.”¹⁸⁸ She experiences a growing sense of her existential absurdity or meaninglessness, beginning to perceive herself as no more significant than a blade of grass or “the beating of wings in ... a void” (74).

When Regina begins to see herself as an object—as a “mask”, a “mannequin”, and a “stranger” (71)—the *me* she encounters is, in Sartre’s terms, a version of herself that “does not have the characteristics of consciousness.”¹⁸⁹ This “stranger”, says Sartre, is “neither a simple unification of my subjective representations ... nor an empty image which the Other makes of me for himself and for which he alone bears the

¹⁸⁷ Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom*, 42.

¹⁸⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 274–5.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 273.

responsibility.” He describes it as: “Me separated from Me by an impassable nothingness, for I *am* this me but I am not this nothingness which separates me from myself.”¹⁹⁰ In Fosca’s gaze, and subsequently in the mirror, Regina encounters a distorted “Me” who is generic, an actress whose very being is a charade.

After seeing her own reflected face as a “mask”, Regina finds that Fosca’s pitying stare ruins her otherwise “brilliant party” (72). She is convinced that Fosca “could see the mannequin, he could see the comedy” (72). Her “uneasiness” inspires rebellion in her and makes her determined to embrace her life as a mortal, even if that life is fleeting:

In spite of him, in spite of his sympathetic smile, she wanted to feel the burning heat of her life once more. She felt like tearing off her clothes and dancing naked; she felt like murdering Florence. What happened afterwards was unimportant. Even if it were only for a minute, only for a second, she wanted to be a flame that would rip through the night. (73)

The scene leads to her renunciation of the stage, which echoes Sibyl Vane’s renunciation of the stage in *Dorian Gray* (84), published some fifty years earlier. Jacqueline Rose argues that Regina’s retirement is a “bid for authenticity.”¹⁹¹ And for a moment, as seen in the above quote, Regina feels she has succeeded in escaping the “mask” and the “mannequin” (71), in particular because she takes action and feels emotion: “She looked at Fosca, she defied him. She was burning, she existed.” (74). Ironically, Regina’s retirement sabotages this pursuit of transcendence, perhaps because in de Beauvoir’s conception, transcendence is only achievable through the commitment to acting. Another possible reason is that, as the novel goes on to show, Regina’s feeling of success, as seen through Fosca’s eyes, is yet another mask: “He tore away all her masks, saw through all her gestures, her words, her smiles. She was nothing ... Behind

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁹¹ de Beauvoir, *All Men Are Mortal*, vii.

all the words, the gestures, the smiles, lay the same deceit, the same void.” (74). In this way, Fosca’s look thwarts Regina’s bid for authenticity.

In Sartre’s Existentialism, the look of the other is unsettling and disorienting, but also essential, in the sense that the other is “the *one who looks at me*,”¹⁹² and in the process “teaches me who I am.”¹⁹³ On this basis, the other is the essential context for the self’s existence: “as seen *in the world* and from the standpoint of the world.”¹⁹⁴ The other is “the indispensable mediator between myself and me.”¹⁹⁵ One’s bearings are set by the other, and the role of the other is fundamental to one’s sense of existence: a being acquires “a nature by the sole fact that the Other confers on it an outside.”¹⁹⁶ As Judith Okely puts it, “[t]he individual necessarily uses ‘the other’ for self-definition. He or she needs the other’s gaze and presence as a confirmation of existence.”¹⁹⁷ By this logic, Regina should benefit from Fosca’s look. Instead, she illustrates Sartre’s argument that the other’s look, if allowed too much influence in the process of self-definition, can lead to “self-estrangement”, a mode of existential “bad faith” that occurs when one allows the other to dominate the self, such that one resigns oneself to being only what others perceive one to be.¹⁹⁸ Regina resigns herself in this way when, towards the end of her party, she acknowledges Fosca’s influence on her, saying: “I see everything through his eyes” (75). As we have seen, this perspective has caused her alienation. Moments after toasting the end of her career in an attempt to refute Fosca’s perception that she is insignificant, Regina stops laughing: “With [Fosca’s] eyes, she could see through this new comedy, this comedy of self-conscious laughter and hopeless words” (75). Because of this new perspective, she comes to doubt her significance. Later, alone with Fosca,

¹⁹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 257.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 222.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 262.

¹⁹⁷ Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 57.

¹⁹⁸ Cooper, *Existentialism*, 116–7.

she declares herself to be a lie (75). This is in line with Sartre's conception of "bad faith" as "a lie to oneself."¹⁹⁹

In a Sartrean reading, Regina's objectivation by the indifferent looks of Fosca and Dulac, as others, causes her to experience vulnerability, existential "uneasiness" and self-estrangement. The effect is amplified by her role as an actress, for Regina's obsession with Fosca is symbolic of her obsession with her audience. She refers to him as "this man who had not applauded, but who had devoured her with his ageless gaze" (34). In light of Sartre's ideas, an important aspect of Regina's crisis is her relationship with her audience; this aspect highlights the problem of dependence on an audience for validation.

On meeting Fosca, Regina believes she will win the "game" of seduction as she usually does (7). But Fosca says he is "incapable of feeling admiration" for anyone (67), and that he only appreciates her performances because she is so successful at "pretending to exist" that she "even succeed[s] in making [him] exist" (69). In the exchange that follows, Fosca points out that Regina is dependent on being viewed by him:

'But it's not pretence,' she said disconsolately. 'It's true. I do exist!'

'Oh! you're not so sure of it as you'd like to believe,' he said. 'If you were, you wouldn't have insisted so much on taking me to the theatre with you.' (70)

Regina's need for audience validation is foreshadowed in the novel's opening paragraph, when she is shown to be transported by the audience's response. In the gaze of her appreciative audience, she experiences a sense of elevation: "The roaring of cataracts and the rumbling of avalanches filled the old theatre, and then an impulsive force brought her back to earth and sent her soaring heavenwards" (1). The feeling gives her an unearthly sense of being alive and reflects her earlier dreams of becoming a saint

¹⁹⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48.

through stirring admiration in others (11). The novel, with its focus on actor and audience, therefore depicts the actress as dependent upon the look of the other to validate her existence. It is this dependence that catalyses Regina's self-estrangement and dissolution. In other words, the choices, which result in her becoming a "bad actress", in terms of *The Second Sex*, heighten her existential vulnerability to bad faith.

Conclusion

I have argued that de Beauvoir's depiction of Regina's alienation anticipates her later exploration of existentialist ideas about female actors, narcissism and transcendence in *The Second Sex*. Additionally, Regina is unsettled by a Sartrean ontological duality in the look of an other who is indifferent to her uniqueness. When Regina is objectivated by Fosca's "ageless gaze" (34), she is split into a being-for-herself and a being-for-others. When the objectivated Regina sees herself *only* as Fosca sees her, she exemplifies existential self-estrangement, a mode of bad faith caused by allowing the other's view of the self to dominate self-perception.²⁰⁰ Regina therefore represents the development of de Beauvoir's philosophies about women, acting and narcissism, as well as reflecting the ideas Sartre expresses in his philosophy of the impact of the look of the other on the self.

²⁰⁰ Cooper, *Existentialism*, 116–7.

Chapter Two:

Sibyl Vane and Dorian's Look

Oscar Wilde's only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, has been the subject of literary analysis since its controversial reception.²⁰¹ According to Wilde scholar Michael Gillespie, *Dorian Gray* was strongly censured in the United Kingdom in 1891 with an "aura of heavy-handed moral disapproval" after being well-received in novella format in America in July 1890.²⁰² Dorian Gray is a beautiful young man who loses his innocence when an artist, Basil Hallward, paints his portrait and shows him his beauty. The corruption of Dorian deepens when Basil's friend, Lord Henry Wotton, encourages him to value his youth and pursue hedonism. Dorian's subsequent fear of ageing causes him to yearn to trade places with his portrait. When this actually occurs, Dorian is free to indulge his whims without any apparent consequences. He develops an opium addiction in "the foulest dens in London," and is said to "corrupt everyone with whom [he] become[s] intimate" (145). He later murders Basil (151), while continuing to maintain his youthful, unblemished façade. The hidden portrait, however, reflects his misdeeds, becoming a hideous depiction of his "conscience" (212). The novel ends when Dorian, increasingly paranoid and troubled, slashes the portrait and dies at its feet, stabbed through the heart. He has become a hideous old man while the portrait has been restored to perfection.

²⁰¹ Much of the controversy related to the covert homosexuality of the figure of Dorian Gray (Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ix).

²⁰² According to Gillespie, "a sense of personal moral outrage [became] the basis for a general aesthetic condemnation" of "Dorian Gray" in the United Kingdom. The work was described by an anonymous Daily Chronicle critic as "unclean ... [having] spawned from the leprous literature of the French Decadents – a poisonous book, the atmosphere of which is heavy with the mephitic odours of moral and spiritual putrefaction" (Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 21–3).

In the key sub-plot within the novel, Dorian goes to a theatre and becomes infatuated with the actress Sibyl Vane. He idealises her and they become “engaged to be married” (58). Dorian later rejects Sibyl when she announces her desire to pursue domesticity as his wife; Sibyl then ends her life, destroyed by his rejection. Dorian’s cruelty causes the first blemish to appear on his portrait.

Many critical readings of *Dorian Gray* examine the role of Sibyl primarily for clues to understanding Dorian’s character. However, some theorists have suggested that the issue of authenticity lies at the heart of her representation. As previously cited, Voskuil highlights themes of authenticity and theatricality within Sibyl’s narrative,²⁰³ while Marcovitch argues that the figure is a study of persona.²⁰⁴ I argue that authenticity and persona are indeed central themes in the interpretation of Sibyl’s character and role in the novel, but that a more incisive examination of these themes—as they relate to “transcendence” and “objectivation”—facilitates an important reading of Sibyl’s crisis.

I examine Sibyl’s representation in two ways. Firstly, I study the character in relation to de Beauvoir’s theorisation of “the actress” in *The Second Sex*. Secondly, I analyse the role of Dorian’s look in Sibyl’s crisis by drawing on Sartre’s analysis of the look of the other. My analysis reveals that Sibyl in *Dorian Gray* may have influenced de Beauvoir’s characterisation of Regina and her thwarted “bid for authenticity.”²⁰⁵

²⁰³ Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 1–19.

²⁰⁴ Marcovitch, *The Art of the Pose*, 128.

²⁰⁵ de Beauvoir, *All Men Are Mortal*, vii.

Literature Review: Contemporary criticism of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Early critics often discussed Wilde rather than the novel itself, frequently conflating the author with the character of Dorian. Only in the late 1900s did critical responses begin moving beyond this approach.²⁰⁶ In these critical works, Sibyl is considered either in terms of her function in Dorian's narrative, or in terms of sources that may have informed her creation. For example, David Rose suggests that Sibyl is based on the actress Vesta Tilley.²⁰⁷ These sources are often used to understand Wilde's life and motives. Regenia Gagnier, for example, likens Wilde to Sibyl—"the actor who could play any part"—with Sibyl reflecting Wilde's own domestication in marriage.²⁰⁸ Gagnier, who reads the novel in its historical context, does not analyse Sibyl's role beyond arguing that she illustrates how Dorian's decisions are culturally circumscribed, that is, he is "forced to choose between a loving, maternal Sibyl Vane and a male-bonded Harry Wotton."²⁰⁹ Such readings tend to emphasise Sibyl's significance in relation to what she tells us about Dorian or Wilde. I posit Dorian as audience—and therefore other—to Sibyl. Reading Dorian's impact on Sibyl through Sartre's ideas about the objectivating look of the other, I interpret the actress-character as representing a crisis of objectivation and rejection. As such, I demonstrate that Sibyl's significance as a literary figure extends beyond highlighting Dorian's moral corruption.²¹⁰

Other limited readings of Sibyl include Gillespie's discussion about whether or not she is Dorian's "mistress,"²¹¹ and whether she represents the "working poor."²¹² Gillespie considers Dorian's pursuit of Sibyl as it relates to his "new hedonism" and

²⁰⁶ Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 23.

²⁰⁷ Böker, Corballis, and Hibbard, *The Importance of Reinventing Oscar*, 51.

²⁰⁸ Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 98–9.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 95.

²¹⁰ Wilde, *Art and Morality*.

²¹¹ Gillespie, *Oscar Wilde and the Poetics of Ambiguity*, 50.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

gratification.²¹³ He points out that Dorian, with the help of Lord Henry Wotton, understands Sibyl's suicide to be a glamorous tragedy, better than the banal life she would otherwise have lived.²¹⁴ Colin McGinn also argues that Dorian sees Sibyl's suicide "as but a beautiful moment in a finely wrought tragic work,"²¹⁵ while Linda Dryden argues that because "Sibyl belongs to the 'rabble' ... her gruesome suicide is regarded [by Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian] as no more than a threat to Dorian's reputation."²¹⁶ According to Dryden, Sibyl's suicide is essential to introducing Dorian's demise: "[t]he narrative of Sibyl and her tragic death is critical in establishing the detachment that Dorian cultivates throughout the remainder of the story."²¹⁷ In such readings, Sibyl is little more than a symbolic figure in Dorian's story.

Dryden, in an argument similar to McGinn's, states that Dorian relegates "Sibyl's existence to the abstraction of drama."²¹⁸ His "immersion in the artifice of décor and aesthetics emphasizes his distance from the actual world of struggle and genuine feeling that Sibyl endures" and, arguably, represents.²¹⁹ In these arguments, Sibyl is significant in terms of the novel's tension between aesthetics (art and theatre) and real life. As McGinn points out, Dorian and Lord Henry conclude that "[s]o long as sin is aesthetically expressed, there can be no objection to it."²²⁰ These responses of Dorian and Lord Henry, which reduce Sibyl's value to the characters she plays on stage, will be examined in more depth in the analysis that follows.

Kerry Powell suggests that Wilde's representation of Sybil is consistent with perceptions of actresses in the Victorian era, because actresses' lives were seen in the period to be "incompatible with the domestic satisfactions of other women whose

²¹³ Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 67, 85–7.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

²¹⁵ McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 127.

²¹⁶ Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles*, 129.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

²²⁰ McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*, 127.

identity seemed single rather than complex, their lives contained by marriage and motherhood.”²²¹ In this environment, society questioned the authenticity of the actresses themselves: “could actresses ... be thought of as women at all?” According to Powell, such Victorian rhetoric “could glorify or even spiritualise the actress in one breath, and in the next define her in terms of suffering, disease, madness, estrangement from humanity, and death itself.”²²² Powell’s themes, and the contrast he highlights between the domestic “authentic” woman and the inauthentic stage persona of the actress, relate to one of Existentialism’s core themes: “the conflict between the bogus and the genuine self”.²²³ Wilde has Sibyl embody this conflict when he juxtaposes her desire for an ordinary life with Dorian’s expectation that she should combine marriage with a stage career. While Sibyl desires to conform to social conventions, Dorian desires to subvert them. In Powell’s words: “Wilde departs from the usual script of Victorian thought ... in making Dorian prefer Sibyl the actress to the ‘real’ Sibyl who loves him.”²²⁴ Nonetheless, in contrast to Dorian’s subversive ideas and expectations, Sibyl faces

the usual dilemma of the Victorian actress as conceived by others and often by herself—helpless, that is, to combine a career on stage with a happy domestic life. The two, as usual, are made to seem incompatible.²²⁵

For Powell, Sibyl conforms to Victorian ideas about the actress: “[i]n her sickness and death Sibyl Vane ... performs the doom of actresses generally, as the Victorian imagination tended to conceive it.”²²⁶ While Wilde may have been attempting subversion of the status quo, Sibyl’s commitment to acting is represented as wavering and her subsequent suicide reinforces the Victorian idea of the actress as a precarious

²²¹ Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 181–2.

²²² *Ibid.*, 182.

²²³ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 9.

²²⁴ Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 190.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 190–1.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191–2.

and unstable figure.²²⁷ I argue that further attention must be given to Sibyl's surrender to "gallantry" and to the effect of Dorian's look on her.

A number of critics have noted the importance of Existentialism to interpreting *Dorian Gray*. Gary Schmidgall notes the relevance of Existentialism to reading Dorian's inability to escape the consequences of his misdeeds. For Schmidgall this makes the novel "a rather remarkable anticipation of the philosophy of [E]xistentialism" because "[E]xistentialism emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of individual experience and stresses man's responsibility for fashioning his self and his moral responsibility for his acts and their consequences."²²⁸ Schmidgall's reading relates to Sartre's argument that "[i]n life, a man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing."²²⁹ This in turn relates to Existentialism's first principle, namely that, in the godless universe Sartre depicts, "existence precedes essence."²³⁰ Gillespie also alludes to the novel's Existentialism when he says the novel's depiction of "hopelessness about the ability of any individual to follow a personal moral system ... comes very close to evoking the nihilism of some more contemporary thinkers ... [including] French existential writers like Camus and Sartre."²³¹

I argue that—just as Dorian's character is an "anticipation" of Existentialism—Sibyl's role anticipates both Sartre's philosophy of the objectivating look of the other and de Beauvoir's theorisation of "the actress" in society. Read through Sartre's philosophy of the look of the other, Sibyl's suicide is catalysed by a conflict between her different selves, triggered by her experience of Dorian's objectivating look as a

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray and Three Stories*.

²²⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 37.

²³⁰ Ibid., 20.

²³¹ Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 19. The role of evil within the novel has been read briefly in relation to early existentialist Kierkegaard's notion of "anxiety about the good" (Gordon, *Existential thinking*, p. 117). Dorian's fear of death has also been explored in light of Martin Heidegger's philosophy (Barnett, *When Death Enters the Therapeutic Space*).

member of her audience. In de Beauvoir's terms, Sibyl's suicide is the outcome of her failure to achieve transcendence because she has surrendered her craft and turned instead to male "gallantry".²³²

Another important context for the relevance of Sartre's idea about the look of the other to the novel is provided by Bernard Green's psychoanalytic reading of *Dorian Gray*. Green argues that the characterisation of Dorian is "a remarkably astute description of the consequences of representational distortion" involving a perception of a self by an other. That is, Dorian exemplifies "the discrepancy that may be experienced between representations of oneself offered by another and representations arising primarily from one's inner sensations."²³³ Green argues that, in real life, such a discrepancy has an "impoverishing effect" on the person "who is systematically and inaccurately mirrored," because:

recognition and confirmation are given only to those aspects of the personality of the object that are in accord with the projected images; the other parts of the personality are ignored or actively suppressed by the projector and perhaps most tragically by the person himself.²³⁴

The existential impoverishment Green describes arises because of the split between confirmed and ignored aspects of an identity; this concords with Sartre's theorisation of the ontological duality catalysed by the other's objectivating look.²³⁵

In Green's words, Dorian is "willing to supplant his own reality with another's fantasy" to "remain the unchanging object of adoration."²³⁶ When he catalyses this impoverishment in himself by allowing the other's perspective to define him, it can be characterised as Sartrean self-estrangement.²³⁷ When Sibyl pleads with Dorian to give

²³² de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 585.

²³³ Green, "The Effects of Distortions of the Self: A Study of The Picture of Dorian Gray," 393.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 401, 403.

²³⁵ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 252–275.

²³⁶ Green, "The Effects of Distortions of the Self: A Study of The Picture of Dorian Gray," 400.

²³⁷ Cooper, *Existentialism*, 116–7.

her another chance to please him through her stage performance (86), she shows her willingness to supplant *her* authenticity with *his* in order to retain his adoration, which reveals her own existential impoverishment and bad faith. This willingness to surrender her “own reality” to Dorian’s reflects de Beauvoir’s idea of a “moral fault”.²³⁸ That is, when Sibyl surrenders her potential for freedom and transcendence in pursuit of marriage to Dorian it constitutes “subordination to man” and the acceptance of oppression.²³⁹

²³⁸ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 29.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 29–31.

De Beauvoir's "Actress" figure

As I have argued in my introduction, de Beauvoir's ideas about actresses and fame in society can be applied to Sibyl in *Dorian Gray*, despite having been articulated some fifty years after the novel's publication. This is partly because de Beauvoir's analysis relates to actresses rising to prominence during the eighteenth century and maintaining significance during the period in which *Dorian Gray* was written. The importance of actresses, for de Beauvoir writing in 1949, is that "[f]or three centuries they have been almost the only women to maintain a concrete independence in the midst of society, and at the present time they still occupy a privileged place in it."²⁴⁰ Examining *Dorian Gray* within the framework of the nineteenth century, Powell suggests that Dorian's worship of Sibyl typifies "the tendency of the Victorians to isolate the actress in a ghetto of the imagination, unassimilable with other women and ... the 'great realities' of their domestic lives."²⁴¹ The age, according to Powell, reinforced an "an unbridgeable gap between women performers on one hand and wives and mothers on the other."²⁴² I suggest that this gap in turn relates to de Beauvoir's views in *The Second Sex* that the transcendent possibilities of acting are incompatible with the servitude inherent in male gallantry and marriage.²⁴³

Sibyl meets Dorian after he is captivated by her performance on stage on his "first foray into the underworld of London."²⁴⁴ Having experienced his admiration, Sibyl comes to see her acting as a poor substitute for love. After they become engaged, Sibyl gives a performance that disappoints Dorian because it is "simply bad art" (82). She explains to him afterwards that she has seen "through the hollowness [of acting], the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant" (84). Sibyl tells Dorian: "You ... brought

²⁴⁰ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 711–2.

²⁴¹ Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 189.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 580–585.

²⁴⁴ Dryden, *The Modern Gothic and Literary Doubles*, 126.

me something higher, something of which all art is but a reflection ... I might mimic a passion that I do not feel, but I cannot mimic one that burns me like fire” (84). In this regard Sibyl is an oppositional figure to Dorian in that she yearns for reality while he yearns for aesthetic perfection.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that, in her era, there were two kinds of actresses, each corresponding to a female archetype. The first actress fears the risks of independence and so accepts the bondage of masculine financial support; when she allows herself to be supported, her artistry is compromised.²⁴⁵ For de Beauvoir, these are “the vast majority of women [for whom] an art, a profession, is only a means.” Because such women “are not engaged in genuine projects,” their work falls short of artistry.²⁴⁶ The second type of actress is dedicated to her art, and as such, for de Beauvoir, she is the “genuine artist,”²⁴⁷ who “attain[s] concrete, positive freedom in work [she] choose[s] and love[s].”²⁴⁸ It is this potential of the actress that makes her stand apart from other women.

Briefly, according to de Beauvoir, “a great actress” can only “be truly an artist, a creator” if she “gives meaning to her life by lending meaning to the world.”²⁴⁹ The problem, as described in *The Second Sex*, is that, because their profession involves being looked at, female stage performers can fall into narcissistic “traps”. Additionally, they can be tempted away from taking risks and away from “the discipline implied by all real work” by “[t]he conveniences of masculine support.” De Beauvoir describes the actress who succumbs to this temptation as a “bad actress.”²⁵⁰ Included in her discussion are “Hollywood stars,” whom she terms *hetairai* and associates with prostitutes. At the mercy of others, such actresses “remain all their lives in a precarious

²⁴⁵ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 712.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 585.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 647.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 585.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 712.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 712–3.

position ... under the never ending necessity of seducing the public and the men anew.”²⁵¹ For de Beauvoir, such actresses endure a form of “slavery” that is worse than prostitution; that is, they are enchained to men and unable to seek significance through their art.²⁵²

Sibyl clearly falls short of de Beauvoir’s standards of true artistry, because she pursues Dorian’s “gallantry”. For de Beauvoir, “gallantry” includes both marriage and patronage since both involve a female dependence on men that is often financial.²⁵³ Reading *Dorian Gray* through the framework of *The Second Sex*, Sibyl’s error is to surrender her autonomy and independence to Dorian’s authority. As she says to her mother, Dorian “rules life for us now” (59). Upon receiving Dorian’s proposal of marriage, Sibyl ceases to see the meaning of her life in her work. Instead, she thinks of Dorian as having “freed [her] soul from prison”; he has “brought [her] something higher” (84). However, the kind of freedom Sibyl envisions through marriage is, in de Beauvoir’s terms, a form of “subordination to man” that undermines her liberty, and thus her surrender to it represents a “consent” that constitutes a “moral fault.”²⁵⁴ In this light, Sibyl, in de Beauvoir’s terms, becomes a “bad actress” by failing to realise her potential. In contrast, it is Dorian’s view that she should keep both domestic and stage roles.

According to de Beauvoir, the individual attains transcendence through the successful undertaking of projects and “achieves liberty only through a continual reaching out towards other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion into an indefinitely open future.”²⁵⁵ Sibyl’s path to transcendence thus lies in her commitment to her craft, and her downfall occurs because she lacks the

²⁵¹ Ibid., 583.

²⁵² Ibid.

²⁵³ Ibid., 31, 578–587.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 31, 29.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 28–9.

necessary dedication. Sibyl tells Dorian that, before she met him, she had faith in her craft: “I believed in everything. The common people who acted with me seemed to me to be godlike. The painted scenes were my world. I knew nothing but shadows and I thought them real” (84). However, despite her immersion in her craft, her actual motivation is her material needs: she acts because her mother needs the money (59). This puts her into a different category from de Beauvoir’s “great actress ... who gives meaning to her life by lending meaning to the world.”²⁵⁶ Lacking the “genuine” motive required for true artistry,²⁵⁷ Sibyl’s material circumstances, in part, prevent her from achieving transcendence as an actress.

Sibyl’s failure to maintain a genuine commitment or engagement represents a failure to fulfil her existential responsibility. The imperative de Beauvoir ascribes to “liberty” complements Sartre’s argument that the most meaningful pursuit of all is “freedom.”²⁵⁸ Sartre’s radical freedom rules out determinism as an excuse for errors and brings with it a responsibility that extends beyond the individual.²⁵⁹ In choosing one’s path, one commits to an ideal which is then projected on to others.²⁶⁰ Such views seem to inform Dorian’s observation that Sibyl “spiritualizes” her audience through her acting (79). In existentialist terms, it is her responsibility to continue to do so, for the sake of her own liberty and thus the liberty of others.²⁶¹ In these terms, Sibyl’s way to freedom and transcendence is via the facilitation of the transcendence of others, and her moral integrity is at stake.²⁶² In accordance with this idea, Sibyl’s pursuit of love and marriage at the expense of her career is criticised in the novel.

Sibyl fails to recognise this. When she sees a possible future with Dorian, she decides the craft of acting is a “sham” (84). In her final, poor performance, she says she

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 712.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 585.

²⁵⁸ Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, 48.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 24.

²⁶¹ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 28–9.

²⁶² Ibid., 580.

sees “through the hollowness, the sham, the silliness of the empty pageant,” and becomes aware that “the Romeo was hideous, and old, and painted, that the moonlight in the orchard was false, that the scenery was vulgar, and that the words I had to speak were unreal, were not my words, were not what I wanted to say.” (84). That her new awareness occurs quickly and that she acts primarily in order to earn money would suggest that Sibyl is like de Beauvoir’s “vast majority of women” for whom “an art, a profession” is only a means to an end.²⁶³

Defining authenticity and theatricality as “ontological descriptors ... that capture the concern with subjectivity that has dominated our theory in recent years,”²⁶⁴ Voskuil, in her study of acting in the Victorian era, argues that, for Dorian and Sibyl, “[t]he tortured end of their romance ... turns on a dispute over the right relationship of the theater and the actual world—that is to say, of theatricality and authenticity.”²⁶⁵ While “Dorian wants to believe that theatricality and authenticity can be perfectly compatible modes of being,”²⁶⁶ Sibyl believes that escaping theatricality is the only way to achieve and prove her authenticity.²⁶⁷

Sibyl announces that she “hate[s] the stage” and can no longer act (84) in a scene that parallels the one in de Beauvoir’s *All Men are Mortal* where Regina announces her retirement from the stage. There, Regina’s resignation is a final (and futile) attempt to prove to herself and to Fosca that she exists, that her actions impact on others and that she is an authentic being (73-4). While Sibyl’s more apparent motives are different, her decision to stop acting and pursue real happiness is also driven by a desire for a more authentic life; it is therefore an earlier incarnation of Regina’s “bid for authenticity.”²⁶⁸ In both cases, misplaced faith in, and dependence on, their male lovers

²⁶³ Ibid., 585.

²⁶⁴ Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 4.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 1.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 2.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 119.

²⁶⁸ de Beauvoir, *All Men Are Mortal*, vii.

informs the women's decisions. While Sibyl confuses Dorian's admiration of her stage persona for love of her "authentic" self, Regina mistakenly believes the immortal Fosca's love will affirm her uniqueness. In both novels, there is a sense that, for the male characters, women are not individuals; that is, one woman can stand in for all women. Dorian loves the many women Sibyl plays, while in *All Men Are Mortal*, Regina comes to realise that she is just another woman to Fosca, and not at all unique. The horror that the actress-characters experience at discovering the irrelevance of their "real" selves to their lovers relates to the argument (in de Beauvoir's analysis) that women, more than men, depend on a sense of their uniqueness for a sense of self.²⁶⁹

Though Sibyl's desire to retire from the stage reflects Victorian mores, her decision is represented as a fatal mistake. This is because the real object of Dorian's affection is her composite stage persona, and he values the way she "spiritualizes" the most uncouth in the audience, such that "one feels that they are of the same flesh and blood as one's self" (79). Basil Hallward, Dorian's artist friend, notes that Dorian attributes spiritualising powers to Sibyl on stage, including her ability to transcend the restrictions of time, the very state that Dorian desires:

If this girl can give a soul to those who have lived without one, if she can create the sense of beauty in people whose lives have been sordid and ugly, if she can strip them of their selfishness and lend them tears for sorrows that are not their own, she is worthy of all your adoration, worthy of the adoration of the world.
(80)

Basil and Dorian value Sibyl's ability to transform the lives of her audience and this complements de Beauvoir's argument that "creative workers who, transcending themselves in the work they produce, go beyond the given and make their appeal to a

²⁶⁹ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 645–6.

freedom in others for which they open the doors of the future.”²⁷⁰ While Dorian recognises Sibyl’s power to—in de Beauvoir’s terms—“open the doors” to “freedom in others” in the novel, Sibyl herself fails to value this capacity. Turning her back on the theatre because she aspires to marriage, she chooses the “field of gallantry,” within which “no road whatever is open to transcendence.”²⁷¹

Dorian’s scorn then leads to Sibyl’s despair: “A fit of passionate sobbing choked her. She crouched on the floor like a wounded thing.” With his “chiselled lips curled in exquisite disdain,” Dorian finds her “absurdly melodramatic.” Wilde represents Sibyl as becoming visually diminutive as she creeps nearer to Dorian: “[h]er little hands stretched blindly out, and appeared to be seeking for him” (86). In this scene, Sibyl demonstrates what de Beauvoir terms “slavish compliance” to the expectations of others.²⁷² She apologises for acting poorly and begs Dorian not to leave her:

[C]an’t you forgive me for tonight? I will work so hard, and try to improve ...

[I]t is only once that I have displeased you. But you are quite right, Dorian. I should have shown myself more of an artist. (86)

In existentialist terms, Sibyl’s declaration that she will continue acting in compliance with Dorian’s desires is an act of bad faith, in that she merely wants to please Dorian. Dorian in turn punishes her for this demonstration of bad faith. Describing the scene later to Lord Henry, Dorian—as though commenting on a performance—says: “It was terribly pathetic. But I was not moved a bit. I thought her shallow” (96). Later, he muses that he “cannot feel [her] tragedy” (97). The “authentic” life sought by Sibyl has therefore sabotaged her capacity to offer transcendence to Dorian and others through her acting. Consequently, she cannot achieve transcendence herself.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 580.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 585.

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 583.

Sibyl's desire to be emancipated from life as an actor finally and ironically makes her emancipation impossible. In de Beauvoir's terms, unless she commits to her craft, facilitating her own transcendence through the transcendence of others, she is like an exploited film star who, having surrendered her creative initiative to a male director, is doomed to remain confined "in immanence" and a state of "dense ennui".²⁷³ The figure of Sibyl thus foreshadows de Beauvoir's ideas about the film actress as *hetaira*, who, "deprived of masculine support, sees her prestige grow dim."²⁷⁴ In advocating the freedom and significance of an acting career over the servitude of domestication, de Beauvoir inadvertently perpetuates the Victorian notion that the acting profession, for women, is incompatible with marriage. In contrast, Dorian's desire to have a wife who remains an actress subverts both the Victorian era's and de Beauvoir's logic, though Dorian's expectation is morally suspect.

Dorian sets "actresses" apart from "the majority of women, whose lives seem by comparison predictable and superficial."²⁷⁵ He loves her for this distinction, for her effect on others, and for her distinguishing glamour. As he says to Lord Henry:

Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination. They are limited to their century. No glamour ever transfigures them. One knows their minds as easily as one knows their bonnets ... There is no mystery in any of them ... They are quite obvious. But an actress! How different an actress is! Harry! why didn't you tell me that the only thing worth loving is an actress? (51)

When Sibyl rejects the stage in order to pursue a life she considers more authentic, she becomes "limited to [her] century" and risks becoming like these other women in Dorian's eyes.

²⁷³ Ibid., 585.

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 582.

²⁷⁵ Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 184.

De Beauvoir also suggests that “actresses, dancers and singers” are set apart from the ordinary woman, who “does not passionately lose herself in her projects,” but rather “regards her life as an immanent enterprise.” Such a woman may choose to have a career, but is not concerned with “the *content* of [her] tasks.”²⁷⁶ Like Dorian’s ordinary women, who are “obvious” and lacking in mystery, de Beauvoir’s ordinary women “become addled with importance and plume themselves ostentatiously over their least accomplishments.”²⁷⁷ De Beauvoir singles out female actors as having the potential to be different, because their careers “reinforce” rather than hinder “the affirmation of their femininity” and because “their professional successes—like those of men—contribute to their sexual valuation.” Although such women “skirt the sphere of gallantry,” they have the potential to escape it by “making their own living and finding the meaning of their lives in their work.”²⁷⁸ On this basis, Sibyl’s choice of an ordinary life means she sacrifices what de Beauvoir considers a meaningful life.²⁷⁹

Sibyl’s existential conundrum resonates with what de Beauvoir argues is the problem faced by all women who are trying to achieve fulfilment and liberty in the face of a powerful masculine figure: “stabilize[d] ... as object”, she is doomed “to immanence since her transcendence is to be overshadowed and for ever transcended by another ego.”²⁸⁰ As such, the drama of Sibyl as actress relates to

[t]he drama of woman [which] lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject (ego)—who always regards the self as the essential—and the compulsions of a situation in which she is the inessential.²⁸¹

In light of de Beauvoir’s existentialist concepts, Sibyl’s desire to abandon her craft for marriage dooms her to immanence, servitude and ennui. Neither committed to her craft,

²⁷⁶ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 711.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 711–2.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 28–9.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

nor resistant to the “field of gallantry,” she is character who is trapped as a performer and as a woman, and for whom there is no hope of transcendence.²⁸²

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 585.

The concept of persona and Sartre's "Other"

When Dorian thinks himself in love with Sibyl, he describes her to his friends as young, Greek and beautiful with eyes that are "violet wells of passion" (50). Contributing to his feelings, Sibyl portrays characters on stage that reflect idealised womanhood. Dorian declares that, in admiring her, he is in love with "all the great heroines of the world in one" (54). He says to Basil: "Lips that Shakespeare taught to speak have whispered their secret in my ear. I have had the arms of Rosalind around me, and kissed Juliet on the mouth." (74). Being in love with such fictional depictions of women inflates Dorian's own sense of self, and he has no interest in the particularities of the individual woman behind the portrayals. There are parallels here to de Beauvoir's *All Men are Mortal*, in the sense that the immortal Fosca also sees women as interchangeable and lacking individuality.

Marcovitch analyses Sibyl in relation to the existentialist idea of persona, arguing that she is "a prism of personalities—not a single woman, but one who promises a multitude of experiences with a multiplicity of theatrical female characters."²⁸³ This "promise" is, in turn, linked to Sibyl's ability to let go of her actual self on stage and allow the idealised female characters she portrays to inhabit her form. When she renounces her multiple roles and abandons the "mimicry" of the stage to pursue her love affair with Dorian, he withdraws his love. Sibyl's "authentic expression of passion seems to [Dorian] but a poor, melodramatic imitation of what she had formerly been able to enact on stage."²⁸⁴ Dorian prefers Sibyl's scripted words to any she might want to say:

I loved you because you were marvellous, because you had genius and intellect,
because you realized the dreams of great poets and gave shape and substance to

²⁸³ Marcovitch, *The Art of the Pose*, 128.

²⁸⁴ Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 2.

the shadows of art. You have thrown it all away. You are shallow and stupid ...
You are nothing to me now ... Without your art you are nothing ... [a] third-rate
actress with a pretty face. (85)

In *Dorian Gray*, therefore, Sibyl is effectively split into a persona that is admired, and a self that—as Green puts it—is denied her humanity and worth.²⁸⁵ She is *Dorian Gray*'s “most telling example of the impossibility of uniting a persona.”²⁸⁶ Central to her fragmentation is Dorian's look, which reifies, objectivates and polarises her as an actress. As such, Sartre's objectivating look of the other is pertinent to further consideration of Sibyl's role in the novel.

Dorian's objectivation of Sibyl is apparent when he describes her as the only “thing” he cares about (53), and the “loveliest thing” he has ever seen (50). For him, an actress is “the only thing worth loving” (51). The repeated use of “thing,” though common in the day, contributes to the sense of his objectification of her. Green argues that: “Dorian's denial of Sibyl's inner state—in his unwillingness to allow himself to experience her feelings—is equivalent to denying her existence as a relevant affectively alive human being.”²⁸⁷ In terms of Existentialism, Dorian's disdain for the woman that is Sibyl, and the effect of this on her, represents the alienating potential of the other's objectivating look, as theorised by Sartre.²⁸⁸

According to Sartre, the look of the other is an “objectivating” presence (or the suggestion of a presence) that creates “uneasiness” in the looked-upon self, by drawing subjectivity away and rendering the self an object of contemplation.²⁸⁹ In the look of the other, Sibyl is split into an admired persona—loved as the realisation of “the dreams of great poets” and as the embodiment of “the shadows of art”—and an “absurdly

²⁸⁵ Green, “The Effects of Distortions of the Self: A Study of The Picture of Dorian Gray,” 404. As Powell argues, “[l]ike so many actresses in so many Victorian texts, Sibyl Vane is written out of love and marriage, and ... written out of humanity too.” (Raby, *The Cambridge Companion to Oscar Wilde*, 191.)

²⁸⁶ Marcovitch, *The Art of the Pose*, 128.

²⁸⁷ Green, “The Effects of Distortions of the Self: A Study of The Picture of Dorian Gray,” 404.

²⁸⁸ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 273.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 275.

melodramatic” self, whom Dorian describes as “shallow and stupid ... [a] third-rate actress with a pretty face” (85-6). As such, read through Sartre’s philosophy, Sibyl is split into an uneasy duality of a valued persona or being-for-others, and a rejected being-for-herself.²⁹⁰ As a result of being split and devalued in this way, she becomes vulnerable, self-estranged and lacking in agency.

After Dorian’s rejection of Sibyl, he experiences a sense of bereavement: “Where he went to he hardly knew”; “[t]he air was heavy with the perfume of the flowers, and their beauty seemed to bring him an anodyne for his pain” (86). Dorian blames Sibyl for his pain, until he sees his conscience in his portrait (88). The reader is aware of Sibyl’s grief only through Lord Henry’s explanation to Dorian that she has been found dead in her dressing room:

She had swallowed ... some dreadful thing they use at theatres. I don’t know what it was, but it had either prussic acid or white lead in it. I should fancy it was prussic acid as she seems to have died instantaneously. (96)

In Sartre’s terms, Sibyl experiences the alienation that is “a fall through absolute emptiness toward objectivity.”²⁹¹ Being depersonalised or objectivated by Dorian causes her to be existentially impoverished and denied an “existence as a relevant, affectively alive human being.”²⁹² As such, Sibyl exemplifies the existential split that concerns Sartre. No longer “a pure consciousness of things,”²⁹³ the being-as-object is, according to Sartre, “a *degraded* consciousness”²⁹⁴ experienced as “an uneasiness, a lived wrenching away from the ekstastic unity of the for-itself.”²⁹⁵ A Sartrean lens therefore produces a sense of Sibyl as depersonalised and existentially impoverished prior to her suicide, a state neither recognised by Dorian, nor explicitly given to the

²⁹⁰ Ibid., 273.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 274–5.

²⁹² Green, “The Effects of Distortions of the Self: A Study of The Picture of Dorian Gray,” 404.

²⁹³ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 259.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 273.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., 275.

reader.

Conclusion

Reading Dorian's gaze as a version of Sartre's "look" facilitates a reading of Sibyl's crisis as a depiction of the fracturing awareness that occurs when the actress is split by the look of the other into a being-for-herself and a profoundly different being-for-others.²⁹⁶ Because Dorian loves Sibyl's on-stage persona, but is unmoved by her "authentic" self, he polarises her with his objectifying look. In this respect, Sartre's philosophy enriches our understanding of Sibyl's character and her relationship to Dorian as one of actress to audience.

In de Beauvoir's argument, a desire for fame and a reliance on the approval and support of men will cause the actress to experience servitude and "a dense ennui."²⁹⁷ Reading *Dorian Gray* through de Beauvoir's Existentialism, Sibyl not only sacrifices her art but also her freedom and her sense of self when she pursues the "field of gallantry" within which "no road whatever is open to transcendence."²⁹⁸

A Sartrean reading reveals Sibyl as a character who experiences vulnerability, shame, and a degraded consciousness in the objectivating look of Dorian as other. Read through de Beauvoir's ideas, Sibyl becomes a woman whose emancipation from a scripted life—her "bid for authenticity"—dooms her, because it involves surrendering to Dorian's gallantry. The application of existential theory to the novel thus contributes a new interpretation of Sibyl, an under-examined figure in a notable literary work. My existentialist analysis demonstrates the continued relevance of Sibyl and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and illustrates that a broader context for the importance of this dissertation is the largely unacknowledged use of existential concepts in contemporary celebrity theory.

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 273.

²⁹⁷ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 585.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

Chapter Three: Existentialism, “the Actress” and celebrity theory

In developing my novella, I not only analysed two novels featuring actresses, I also examined debates concerning fame in celebrity theory. Complementing my work on the value of Existentialism in analysing the novels, I have found that many critics in celebrity studies draw on Existentialism—albeit implicitly—in their theorisation of fame as a troubling experience.²⁹⁹ While few explore the role of Existentialism in detail, David Giles and Jonathan Goldman both link the condition of being a celebrity to existentialist themes of anguish, authenticity, objectivation or contingency.³⁰⁰ In this chapter, I examine the synergy between my analysis of the novels and celebrity theory. While there is no direct comparison to be made between Regina and Sibyl as represented actresses and today’s actual celebrities as living beings, they reflect similar problems. For example, Regina’s pursuit of eternity—in lieu of fame—through the immortal gaze of Fosca reflects Leo Braudy’s argument that individuals pursue fame in order “to be singled out within time and to survive beyond it.”³⁰¹

It is notable that de Beauvoir’s existentialist themes do not complement the work being done in celebrity studies to the same extent as Sartre’s themes do. I have therefore focused on Sartre’s concepts of “objectivation”, ontological duality, “decentralization” and the look of the other as they relate to the trap of fame and existential anguish.

²⁹⁹ Morrison, “Dorian’s ‘look’: Jean-Paul Sartre and the Divided Celebrity.”

³⁰⁰ Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, 90; Goldman, *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity*, 1.

³⁰¹ Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 589.

Objects of worship

The clearest parallel between celebrity theory and my analysis of the roles of Regina and Sibyl is a perception of performers as objects rather than individuals. Dorian not only refers to Sibyl as a “thing” in several instances (50, 51, 53), but he describes her as, in death, having “passed again into the sphere of art” (106). Lord Henry Wotton suggests that Sibyl “never really lived, and so ... never really died” (100). Similarly, after surrendering to Fosca’s perspective, Regina begins to see her reflection as an object—as a “mask” and a “mannequin” (71). In celebrity theory, celebrities are theorised as similarly objectified. For example, a study in 2009 concluded that some celebrities experience “a depersonalizing ‘entitization’ process, in which [they feel] like a thing rather than a person of unique character.”³⁰²

After abandoning her ambition to become a saint, Regina promises herself that she will become “sacred” through fame instead of sainthood (11). Similarly, Dorian tells Lord Henry: “Sibyl Vane is sacred!” (52). Although this is not directly addressed in my analysis, both novels anticipate the argument in celebrity studies that objectified celebrities are frequently worshipped by their audiences in ways that resemble religious fervour. For example, John Castles argues that “[s]tars are ‘quasi-divine’; they are the modern gods,”³⁰³ while for Joseph Roach, the “public intimacy” celebrities share with their audiences is “rooted in traditional religious doctrine and, more deeply and lastingly, in popular religious feeling.”³⁰⁴ Brady links the idea of contemporary celebrity culture to secularism, arguing that “fame and the approval of posterity replace belief in an afterlife.”³⁰⁵ As Chris Rojek puts it, “celebrities have filled the absence

³⁰² Rockwell and Giles, “Being a Celebrity,” 185. Giles also refers to the celebrity’s “impression of being a product rather than a person” (David Giles, p. 85), while Goldman refers to celebrity culture’s “methods of commodification and objectification” (Goldman, p. 16).

³⁰³ Castles, *Big Stars*, 8.

³⁰⁴ Roach, *It*, 16.

³⁰⁵ Brady, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 28.

created by the decay in the popular belief in the divine right of kings, and the death of God.”³⁰⁶ Demonstrating the usefulness of Existentialism to the study of celebrity culture, Rojek’s argument that the celebrity matrix is “one of the mainstays of organizing recognition and belonging in secular society”³⁰⁷ suggests that celebrity culture is driven by what William Barrett, in his study of Existentialism, calls “the despair of a world from which God has departed,”³⁰⁸ or “the West’s fateful encounter with Nothingness.”³⁰⁹

When Fosca expects Regina to make him feel as though he exists (69), and Dorian admires Sibyl for enchanting and spiritualising her audience with her portrayals of Shakespearean characters (74, 79), they both behave in ways consistent with celebrity theorists’ views of audience expectations. Rojek argues that the celebrity icon, in lieu of the religious icon, is expected by the audience in celebrity culture to assuage “feelings of isolation and loneliness” and facilitate “recognition and belonging.”³¹⁰ Similarly, Roach likens celebrities to saints and martyrs, because all of them wield a “mysterious force of mass attraction” and are therefore charged with the “‘reenchantment’ of the world.”³¹¹

³⁰⁶ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 13.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁰⁸ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 17.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

³¹⁰ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 52.

³¹¹ Roach, *It*, 16.

Celebrity theory and ontological duality

In recognising their functions as enchanting objects of worship and contemplation, Regina and Sibyl experience the alienation of their “authentic” selves. Regina, wanting to show everyone her “real face”, sees only a “mask” and a “mannequin” in a mirror (71). Sibyl discovers that Dorian’s love is not for the woman that she is, but for her stage persona, an entity that exists in his mind, pieced together from the various Shakespearean heroines she portrays and from his fantasy of her being his “famous, splendid, magnificent” wife. Stripped of that persona, Sibyl becomes “[a] third-rate actress with a pretty face” (85). As Gillespie points out, Dorian has “no sense of the humanity behind the stimulus”.³¹²

The representations of Regina and Sibyl as divided into authentic and inauthentic selves reflect one of Existentialism’s core themes: “the conflict between the bogus and the genuine self”.³¹³ The idea of “the genuine self” relates to the argument of Søren Kierkegaard—whose ideas influenced Existentialism—that there exists “an ‘authentic’ self for which we alone are responsible.” The “bogus” self, on the other hand, can be linked to Kierkegaard’s idea that “inauthenticity” arises out of a need to “conform to society” and its expectations.³¹⁴ The notion of ontological duality—the existence of a bogus and a genuine self—is also a dominant focus in celebrity studies. For example, Edgar Morin argues that the celebrity figure or “the star” tends to be “drawn into a dialectic of division and reunification of the personality” such that “[t]he psychology of the stars requires a brief incursion into the psychology of the dual personality.”³¹⁵ Morin describes the twentieth-century celebrity image as the celebrity’s double, with primitive origins as an entity “revealed and localized in shadows,

³¹² Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 85.

³¹³ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 9.

³¹⁴ Earnshaw, *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 3–4.

³¹⁵ Morin, *The Stars*, 66.

reflections, mirrors.” He argues that for most people, a duality of inner self and public persona is “internalized: it is a dialogue with our soul, our conscience,” while for the celebrity, the duality is externalised and consequently amplified. The celebrity “sees”, as though from the outside, “this archaic double resuscitate, detach itself from her, and unfurl on the screen: it is her own image, omnipresent, spell-binding, dazzling.”³¹⁶ Roach suggests, with regard to film actors, that “[c]elebrities ... like kings, have two bodies, the body natural, which decays and dies, and the body cinematic, which does neither.”³¹⁷ And although Braudy advocates a shift from the “outdated polarities of the past” that focus on the “ancient division between the social and the ‘inner’ self,” he too describes a “constant tension between ... the talked-of self and the unexpressed self” made more acute by fame.³¹⁸

It is important to note that post-structuralism and postmodernism make it difficult to conceive of an “authentic” self in anything other than general terms,³¹⁹ and that, within Existentialism itself, as Steven Earnshaw argues, the self “is not understood as a concrete entity.”³²⁰ Nonetheless, the notion of a “core” self distinct from a persona is not inconsistent with Sartre’s ideas.³²¹ In the field of celebrity studies, Richard Dyer and Rojek argue that the celebrity’s “core” self is distinct from the persona that represents him or her in the public domain.³²² Similarly, David Marshall argues that at

³¹⁶ Ibid., 66–7.

³¹⁷ Roach, *It*, 36.

³¹⁸ Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 596, 592.

³¹⁹ Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 8.

³²⁰ Earnshaw, *Existentialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, 2.

³²¹ Although Sartre disputed the idea of a self understood as a fixed identity - in his Existentialism, the self is an entity that exists “in a perpetually unstable equilibrium” - he recognises the idea of a unique consciousness that is capable of the “project of sincerity” when he concedes: “[y]et, the for-itself is”. (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 1969, 77–79).

³²² Dyer and McDonald, *Stars*; Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*; Rojek, *Celebrity*.

the “core” of the celebrity persona is “a ‘real’ person ... housed in [a] sign construction.”³²³

When Regina begins to see herself and her reflection through Fosca’s eyes as a meaningless and generic entity, we learn that “[h]er body, too, had become a stranger to her” (71). In Chapter One, I argued that the *me* she encounters through Fosca’s eyes is, in Sartre’s terms, a “stranger”.³²⁴ This “stranger” is a version of the self as described or perceived by the other.³²⁵ The same term could be used to describe Sibyl’s persona, pieced together in Dorian’s imagination. Echoing these representations, the celebrity persona is widely theorised in celebrity theory as a media-audience creation. Rojek describes celebrity personae in today’s intensified, technology-driven culture as “cultural fabrications” whose personalities are “concoct[ed]” by “cultural intermediaries”.³²⁶ These “fabrications” undergo “productive assimilation” by the audience that consumes them.³²⁷ To Roach, the celebrity persona is a “special, spectral other” to the ordinary celebrity, “[c]onstructed ... through the publicity manipulated by celebrities themselves or their acolytes and through the imaginative contribution of their fans.”³²⁸ It is “an image ... synthesized as an idea.”³²⁹

Reflecting Dorian’s attitude to Sibyl, whose “core” self is effectively irrelevant to his relationship with her persona, celebrity theory argues that there is little room for celebrities’ “veridical” selves in their relationships with audiences.³³⁰ Roach draws links between the celebrity persona and an “effigy”, in that each produces an “uncanny effect of lifelikeness” and “will very likely have only a coincidental relationship to the identity of the actual human person whose peculiar attraction triggered the hunger for the

³²³ Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, xi. Additionally, for Giles, “the idea of a core, ‘true self’ is very much alive in modern (Western) society” (Giles, 78).

³²⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 274.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, 273–4.

³²⁶ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 10–11.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

³²⁸ Roach, *It*, 17, 44.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³³⁰ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 65–6.

experience in the first place.”³³¹ Roach’s notion of the “coincidental relationship” between self and persona relates to the contingency which Goldman describes in his discussion of celebrity objectivation.³³² Goldman argues that “celebrity makes the self contingent,” because the identity “depends on an audience for its continued existence, turning the individual into a stereotype, condemned to perform itself until death.”³³³ Goldman’s analysis and Roach’s “coincidental relationship” both reflect Sartre’s argument that “in one sense my being-as-object is an unbearable contingency and the pure ‘possession’ of myself by another.”³³⁴ Sartre’s “unbearable contingency” is amplified for Regina and Sibyl, and is also evident in discussions within celebrity theory about the irrelevance of the celebrity’s “veridical” self to the audience’s relationship with his or her persona.

The exclusion of Sibyl’s real, “veridical” self from Dorian’s feelings for her is clear when—shuddering at the touch of her lips to his hand—he accuses her of killing his love: “You used to stir my imagination. Now you don’t even stir my curiosity. You simply produce no effect ... You are nothing to me now” (85). According to Gillespie, Dorian’s appreciation of Sibyl is based on an imaginative effect rather than on desire,³³⁵ and lasts only as long as she gratifies his hedonistic appetite for sensory pleasure. As such, theirs is a fantasy-based relationship that is consistent with Rojek’s argument that the magnetism at work in the relationship between audience and performer “typically operates through the organized mobilization of fantasy and desire.”³³⁶ The way Dorian rejects Sibyl also anticipates Robert van Krieken’s argument that the audience or fan

³³¹ Roach, *It*, 17.

³³² Goldman, *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity*, 1.

³³³ *Ibid.*

³³⁴ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 364. In a discussion of actors valuing “craft” and “authenticity” over fame, Thomas Fisher draws a link between celebrity persona and “a Hegelian ... ‘being-for-others’.” According to Fisher, “stardom ... can be seen as a model experience of servitude and alienation.” (Fisher, “Acting Disaster,” 344.) In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre builds on Hegel’s term “being-for-others ... as a necessary condition for my being-for-myself.” (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 238.)

³³⁵ Gillespie, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 85.

³³⁶ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 65.

appreciates the performer not as a person, but as a way to facilitate either their own self-appreciation or a sense of *schadenfreude*.³³⁷

³³⁷ Krieken, *Celebrity Society*, 91.

The look of the other and the trap of fame

Dorian's dismissal of Sibyl's "inner state" and Fosca's inability to recognise Regina's uniqueness foreshadow Rockwell and Giles' description of the "depersonalizing 'entitization'" of celebrities.³³⁸ For Braudy, too, fame is "depersonalizing as much as individualizing".³³⁹ Indeed, the experiences of Regina and Sibyl are brought to mind by Braudy's description of the audience's "impersonal" embrace:

Having constructed a public self in order to escape from shyness or some more extreme private torment, these aspirants [to fame] discover themselves entrapped in an audience attention that is intimate but impersonal, embracing without nurturing.³⁴⁰

Regina's lover Roger anticipates a similar entrapment for Regina when he predicts that, if she is remembered by Fosca thousands of years into the future, she will be "pinned in his memory like a butterfly in a collection" (45). Indeed, Fosca's immortal look consigns her to eternal insignificance and deepens her awareness of her mortal limitations. This exemplifies the irony that Braudy later describes as "the essential paradox of fame in the twentieth century: the desire for transcendence through personal glory that leads not to freedom, but to a new and more secure entrapment."³⁴¹ Braudy also describes the experience of celebrity as an "embalming above ground."³⁴² Drawing on similar rhetoric, Rojek suggests that the celebrity's "public face becomes a living tomb of staged personality."³⁴³ The sense of fame as a restrictive and restraining state is

³³⁸ Rockwell and Giles, "Being a Celebrity," 185.

³³⁹ Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 578.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 577.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 589.

³⁴³ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 80.

echoed by Marvin Carlson, who argues that the actor risks being “entrapped by the memories of his public.”³⁴⁴

Braudy links the trap of fame to the audience gaze when he argues that being on stage is to “feel trapped by the gaze of others.”³⁴⁵ While aspirants to fame may initially yearn for its “validating gaze,”³⁴⁶ in time they become disempowered “[h]ostages of the eye.”³⁴⁷ The notion that modern fame involves a restraining gaze directly relates to the Existentialism of Sartre and de Beauvoir. When Rojek argues that the celebrity experiences a “tyranny of the public face,”³⁴⁸ and Braudy says celebrities are “permanently in fief to their audiences,”³⁴⁹ they echo de Beauvoir’s argument in *The Second Sex* that the narcissistic woman “dooms herself to the most complete slavery” because she “makes of herself an object that is imperilled by the world and by other conscious beings.”³⁵⁰ If she somehow “avoids the tyranny of an individual man,” says de Beauvoir, she nonetheless “accepts the tyranny of public opinion.”³⁵¹ The idea of celebrities being disempowered by the audience gaze also relates to Sartre’s description of losing one’s subjectivity in the objectivating look of the other: “being-seen constitutes me as a defenceless being for a freedom which is not my freedom.”³⁵² He describes the look of the other as a kind of “possession”.³⁵³

³⁴⁴ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 9.

³⁴⁵ Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 27.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 553.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 566.

³⁴⁸ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 11.

³⁴⁹ Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 581.

³⁵⁰ de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 651.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 651–2.

³⁵² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 267.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 364.

Existential anguish and “decentralization” in the look of the other

Regina comes to see herself, through Fosca’s immortal eyes, as meaningless. This reinforces her fear of mortality and insignificance, and the novel ends with her screaming in terror after Fosca reminds her that her life will be over soon (403). Sibyl—upon discovering the illusory nature of her relationship with Dorian—is reduced to a vulnerable, degraded and suicidal woman: “A fit of passionate sobbing choked her. She crouched on the floor like a wounded thing.” Becoming a tragic figure, throwing herself to the floor—in a way Dorian finds “absurdly melodramatic” (86)—Sibyl imitates, without becoming, the tragic heroines Dorian has seen her play on stage.³⁵⁴ Dorian loves these heroines, not the woman who portrays them. Echoing Regina’s distress after her “bid for authenticity” at her party fails to confirm her unique significance, and the suicidal anguish Sibyl experiences when Dorian fails to recognise the value of her authentic self, Rojek argues that celebrities can suffer existential crises, with symptoms of helplessness, self-harm and sometimes suicide, when the “veridical” self is excluded from his or her relationship with an audience.³⁵⁵

The crises of Sibyl and Regina in response to the dismissal of their “authentic” selves complement what David Giles describes in celebrity theory as the “existential anguish” or “private-public self anguish” of a necessarily thwarted “quest for authenticity.”³⁵⁶ In their qualitative study of the experiences of fifteen US celebrities, Giles and Donna Rockwell emphasise this existential struggle, concluding:

At the moment they are famous, celebrities have become a commodity, and their job it is now to sell their “image” to contemporary, celebrity-making media

³⁵⁴ Voskuil, *Acting Naturally*, 2.

³⁵⁵ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 65–6, 80.

³⁵⁶ Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, 90, 81.

outlets. They are left alone to sort out the difference between image and self, between media creation and authentic being.³⁵⁷

In the study, the celebrities spoke of having to become hyper-vigilant to adapt to their status. Dividing themselves into “two identities,”³⁵⁸ they reported “crafting, servicing, and protecting” their public personae to the detriment and potential resentment of the veridical self.³⁵⁹

Giles argues that a split between “the private experience of self and the public presentation of self” can result in problems for the celebrity.³⁶⁰ Other theorists describe such problems as a potential “disturbance in the soul”³⁶¹ or a “psychic mess”.³⁶² For Rojek, “a pathological slippage between the I and the Me [can occur], as the public face resorts to more dramatic attempts in order to alert the public to the horror, shame and encroaching helplessness of the veridical self.”³⁶³

Although Regina and Sibyl were imagined and set in very different societies, both represent an existentially troubling dispossession that relates to a surrender of self-definition to an other. This dispossession is echoed in the arguments of celebrity theorists. For example, Rojek suggests that “the public faces that celebrities construct do not belong to them, since they only possess validity if the public confirms them.”³⁶⁴ In celebrity studies, the mythology surrounding the celebrity persona is conceptualised as developing beyond the individual’s control so that it erodes the celebrity’s sense of self-determination. These celebrities can then face a “potential loss of *control*, a major source of distress” if their sense of authenticity is threatened by their perception of

³⁵⁷ Rockwell and Giles, “Being a Celebrity,” 203.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., 187.

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 196.

³⁶⁰ David Giles, pp. 77-78.

³⁶¹ Roach, *It*, 17.

³⁶² Braudy, *The Frenzy of Renown*, 577.

³⁶³ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 11.

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 19.

themselves as “unit-shifting sources of capital.”³⁶⁵ In similar terms, Rockwell and Giles argue that objectivation is distressing for celebrities because it leads to a confusing loss of agency,³⁶⁶ while Goldman argues that popular culture’s “need for the subject to become an object” leaves the celebrity with no “agency over itself.”³⁶⁷

Also engaging with self-definition and agency, Morin argues that when the celebrity’s double unfurls on the screen, a dynamic arises in which the celebrity is “subjectively determined” by this double.³⁶⁸ Morin argues that the celebrity “is subjugated by [the] image superimposed upon her real self,” and “devalued” by “a phantom of her phantom.”³⁶⁹ In my interpretations of *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray*, both Regina and Sibyl become “subjectively determined” by their personae, as the latter are defined by Fosca and Dorian. In Morin’s terms—allowing for the discrepancy between the human film stars of his study and the represented actresses analysed in mine—the “real” Sibyl is devalued by the phantom personae that Dorian prefers, while Regina’s “real” self is less valuable to Fosca than is her being-for-others on stage. In all cases, at the heart of the matter is the problem of self-definition as it relates to the other’s look. While Norman Taylor describes *Dorian Gray* as “a seminal text of celebrity,” in the sense that Dorian’s mysterious, ageless beauty resonates with “an obsession with youth and ageing for a culture now capable of digital manipulation,”³⁷⁰ I argue that Wilde’s depiction of Sibyl’s crisis also foreshadows the theme within celebrity studies of the persona as antagonist to authenticity owing to a sense of dispossession and loss of control.

The descent of Dorian’s initial worship into a brutal rejection of Sibyl reflects a trajectory that is evident in today’s tendency to adopt “a variety of ceremonies of ascent

³⁶⁵ Giles, *Illusions of Immortality: A Psychology of Fame and Celebrity*, 85.

³⁶⁶ Rockwell and Giles, “Being a Celebrity,” 185.

³⁶⁷ Goldman, *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity*, 7, 1.

³⁶⁸ Morin, *The Stars*, 66–7.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 67.

³⁷⁰ Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture: Consorting with the Machine*, 189.

and descent to symbolize honorific status and the loss of it.”³⁷¹ As Rojek argues, celebrities frequently experience such primitive rites of ascent—characterised by elevation, magic and immortality—and of descent, characterised by “scourging, disintegration and redemption”.³⁷² “Ascent” is demonstrated in such phenomena as biographies and billboard images, as well as through tabloid coverage and talk shows.³⁷³ The rites of descent include eating disorders, phobias, substance abuse and suicide; they “centre on the mortification of the body ... [which] brings the celebrity down to earth.”³⁷⁴ In *Dorian Gray*, Sibyl experiences similar rites of ascent and descent at the hands of Dorian when she is elevated in his esteem then mortified by her irrelevance to him. As such, Sibyl’s crisis suggests an experience akin to the process Rojek describes as “status-stripping”.³⁷⁵

Rojek describes the mass media and audience as “architects” of the process of status-stripping, and thus of the crisis that ensues.³⁷⁶ The power of the audience and mass media to undermine a celebrity’s self-perception, such that they internalise their “descent” and experience crises of the nature Rojek and other theorists describe, makes it possible to tie the celebrity’s existential crisis to Sartre’s ideas about the decentralising impact of the look of the other. Sartre describes a subject’s “uneasiness” in the look of the other, resulting from “decentralization”, which refers to a shifting locus of power and perception that occurs when a subject becomes an object of contemplation.³⁷⁷

³⁷¹ Rojek, *Celebrity*, 75.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 255-275.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have argued that particular aspects of Existentialism usefully illuminate the role of the look of the other in the crises of two fictional actresses depicted in the novels *All Men Are Mortal* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I have analysed these texts through the existentialist themes of transcendence and objectivation, as articulated by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* and Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* respectively. This approach has facilitated new interpretations of these actress-characters who have been relatively neglected in literary criticism to date. Although depicted in novels set in very different societies and published in different eras, both characters represent an existentially troubling dispossession which my analysis has linked to gender and to their relationships with others in their audiences. In particular, I have shown that, in each case, the actress-character's crisis is linked to the surrender of her self-definition and her independence to the other after experiencing his objectivating look.

The fictional actresses I have examined illustrate de Beauvoir's argument that the opportunity for female transcendence provided by acting is often complicated by women's narcissism and dependence on men. For de Beauvoir, when free and genuine engagement in chosen projects is not achieved, transcendence descends into immanence, a downfall that represents a moral fault, or frustration and oppression, depending on whether free engagement has been willingly surrendered. In her discussion about the actress as a female archetype in *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that narcissism and dependence produce a "bad actress" because they undermine an actress's capacity for generosity and compromise her genuine commitment to liberating herself and her audience through her craft. Interpretations of the actress-

characters in the two novels are thus enriched by applying de Beauvoir's developing philosophy of the limitations women face in the pursuit of transcendence.

Both de Beauvoir and Sartre emphasise the individual's existential responsibility to pursue liberty for oneself and for others, and the consequences of not doing so. I have shown that both *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray* anticipate de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* that, in her era, this pursuit was more challenging for women than it was for men because women's avenues to liberty and transcendence were frequently more limited. The existential reading undertaken in this dissertation not only recognises the importance of particular existential concepts to understanding the crises of the actress-characters, but it also shows that de Beauvoir's feminist ideas, later articulated in *The Second Sex*, inform her novel, *All Men are Mortal*, in ways not widely acknowledged by critics.

In the novels I have examined, each actress-character adopts an other's view of her, with the other depicted as both a lover and an audience member. By adopting the other's view, the actress-character comes to devalue her own significance as a human being. Each decides to retreat from the theatre as a way to reconnect with her authenticity, and despairs when this bid fails. In coming to accept that her value to the audience lies in fulfilling the expectations of the other through acting, and that her desire for authenticity is irrelevant, the crisis of the actress-character in each of the two novels can be understood as a depiction of self-estrangement, which is a form of existential bad faith. That is, each actress-character has allowed the other's perception to dominate her self-definition at the expense of her sense of authenticity. These specific depictions of actresses in crisis, rather than actresses in general, anticipate de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* that women in particular struggle for meaning and liberty in a world that treats them as inessential. As portrayals of actresses per se, they suggest an amplification of the effects of Sartre's "unbearable contingency" and

decentralisation, which is the effect of the objectivating look of the other as the audience.

In order to develop my novella, I surveyed the work of celebrity theorists on the psychological impact of fame. To date, celebrity theorists have only marginally and often indirectly drawn on existentialist ideas in their studies. My analysis of *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray*, including the critical literature reviews and the survey of celebrity studies, illustrates the contribution that existential concepts can make to the analysis of contemporary representations of actors and audiences, in relation to questions of gender, identity and transcendence.

One relevant concept often examined in celebrity studies is the persona as a being-for-others. The existentially troubling dispossession that distorts the actress-characters' self-definition in *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray* is echoed in these studies, which suggest that the validation and definition of celebrity personae ultimately rest with audiences. According to this argument, dispossession and loss of control can accompany fame because celebrities' externally determined and reified personae can threaten their sense of their own authenticity. In the novels I analyse, the Sartrean contingency that both actress-characters experience as a result of the devaluation of their authenticity resonates with the argument that the irrelevance of the celebrity's "veridical" self to the audience's admiration of him or her can lead to symptoms of helplessness and self-harm in the celebrity.

The idea of the celebrity persona as a media-audience creation in celebrity studies is also reminiscent of Sartre's "stranger", a version of the self that is determined by the other. As discussed in this dissertation, the alienating surrender of self-definition to the other's look is referred to by a number of celebrity theorists who express the problems of fame in terms of existential anguish, authenticity and a duality of self and persona. These discussions essentially draw on the Sartrean concepts which inform my

analysis of the two novels, including decentralisation, self-estrangement and ontological duality in the objectivating look of the other.

Sartrean decentralisation before an objectivating look, as a commonplace existential condition in which the subject is robbed of the locus of perception and control by the looking other, is amplified in the novels' representations of actresses disempowered by objectivating others in their audiences. In contemporary celebrity theory, the power of the audience and mass media to undermine a celebrity's self-perception, such that the celebrity internalises his or her externally-determined ascent and descent, suggests the shifting locus of power and perception described by Sartre. Braudy's argument that the desire for fame and transcendence ironically leads to a restrictive state of being, in which the celebrity becomes a hostage of the eye, illustrates the relevance and value of Existentialism to celebrity studies.

Another parallel between my interpretation of the two novels and representations of fame in celebrity theory lies in the objectivation and worship of performers. In *All Men Are Mortal* and *Dorian Gray*, the actress-characters are described as either being sacred or aspiring to be so, and both are objectivated by others in their audiences. Celebrity theorists argue that audience worship resembles religious fervour and that this relates to a search for meaning in a secular society, but that there is no place for the celebrity's veridical self in that worship.

In conclusion, I have demonstrated that the existentialist concepts of transcendence and objectivation can effectively be used to understand the depicted crises of actors in fiction. In my analysis, the actor is negatively affected by the intense look of the other as represented by the audience or a significant person in the film industry. I have shown that *All Men are Mortal* can be read as a precursor to ideas later fully developed by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, and suggested that *Dorian Gray* may have influenced de Beauvoir's work on the actress and on transcendence. My

literary analysis employs the existentialist ideas of de Beauvoir and Sartre, which complements the often-unacknowledged use of existentialist concepts in celebrity studies. Finally, these concepts and celebrity studies have contributed to the development of my novella. In particular, they have influenced the characterisation of my protagonists: I represent the female protagonist as restricted by her desire to transcend obscurity, while her former lover, whose final look haunts her, is represented as struggling with fame and self-estrangement. Existentialist concepts therefore not only usefully inform the analysis of the fictional actor and the effects of fame, but enrich the characterisation of actors in fiction.

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