

# Sexual assault and the ethics of non- representation in contemporary fiction

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English and Comparative Literature

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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 – *Sexual assault and the ethics of non-representation in contemporary fiction***

This thesis consists of a critical component and a creative component in an examination of how non-explicit representations of sexual assault against women can function in an ethical manner in contemporary fiction. In particular, the thesis argues that representations which veil or otherwise deny the reader direct access to the sexual assault scene can create productive, ethical spaces which invite the reader to reflect on cultural assumptions. The thesis analyses J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) and explores current debates concerning the representation of suffering. The thesis raises the question of what is at stake in the representation of sexual assault. In *Disgrace*, Coetzee's use of an unreliable narrator and a limited point of view, among other strategies, confronts the reader with the unknowable and directs the reader's attention to issues of sexism, racism and violence in post-Apartheid South Africa. *A Mercy* represents sexual assault obliquely and uses euphemism to refocus readers away from the immediate 'body in pain', representing sexual assault as a systemic (and historic) culture with social implications for the understanding the present.

In the creative writing component, my novella titled *Taking Care of Amy* explores the issues raised in the thesis. The story, set in present-day Western Australia, centres on a single mother who is raising her three daughters — two teenagers (one of whom is disabled) and a toddler — under difficult circumstances.

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# TAKING CARE OF AMY

## **Jamie – the ashes**

Lena was at the sink when I got home, a pile of grimy dishes stacked up beside her and her elbows working with furious purpose. The wet crook of her thumb came up and snagged her hair out of her eyes. She cast an eye my way but continued with her task as I milled about the kitchen, then hunted around in the fridge.

I tapped my purple nails on the frame of the fridge and directed an irritated click of the tongue over my shoulder. “Mum, there’s no food!”

Lena didn’t reply. I slammed the fridge door. “Mum?”

“Lay off, Jamie,” she warned. I shrugged my school bag off my shoulder and dropped it down heavily but said no more.

As I turned away, the steady stream of dishwashing was interrupted by a hurt sucking in of air. Lena swore and snatched her hand back, spraying water all over the countertop, knocking over the precariously perched clean dishes, and smashing a plate to the ground. She swore again, and kicked at the wreckage around her feet. Lena was holding her finger, quiet now. She let me inspect. The slice was a clean line that went right across the finger, and when she parted it, for a moment, there was no blood. The cut was to the bone; it shone up at us, white as paper.

I looked into the sink with its used dishes and grey water. Bits of food blobbed around the edges of plates and cups that were stuck part way out of the water like icebergs. Investigating the water with the tips of my fingers, I felt around the underside of a frying pan and the rim of a bowl, groping my way to the bottom to pull the plug out.

“Mum, rinse it,” I said, turning the tap on. Obediently she let the stream flow over her water-puckered fingertips.

“Go get a Band-Aid, Jamie,” she said. In the lounge room, I stepped around little Cassie playing on the floor, toy building block in her mouth. Amy sat near the couch quietly rocking with her long, gangly legs tucked underneath her, listening to the clip-clip sound of her beads. She smiled her signature manic and toothy grin at me as I brushed past her. I smiled down at her but her eyes were back on the beads; she rocked more fervently.

Lena stuck the plaster tightly around her finger with her lips pressed into a firm line. She took a broom and pushed the broken mess of shards into the corner of the kitchen. Lena plonked herself down on a chair in the living room, sighing and swearing, almost soothingly, to herself. She lit a cigarette, the smoke curling into patterns on the

ceiling; the rest of the dirty dishes abandoned to gather another day's worth of dust and mould.

Lena swore again when her phone rang from beneath her narrow backside. Coupling lit cigarette and mug of coffee, she fished the vibrating mobile out of her back pocket.

“Yeah?” she coughed.

Cassie looked up from her coloured blocks with wide, baby eyes as Lena went quiet. Amy stood and swayed behind her. The light caught the movement of her beads and cast spots of reflection on the walls. With her brow furrowed, Lena turned away from them. Tucking the phone between her ear and shoulder, she sucked purposefully on her cigarette. I stopped texting and watched her closely. Her lips were pursed in a little ‘o’ to draw in the smoke. When she breathed out it streamed out her mouth and nostrils, like it did when something annoyed her. She put her coffee mug down; her eyes trained on the cigarette. She listened but still did not say anything. We were all with her in her quiet now, like deer with our ears pricked, straining to pick up the sound of a hunter. Only the clip-clip of Amy's beads continued; it made the room seem even quieter.

I tried to figure out who it was. If it was someone Lena knew well she would be loud. Even when she was just listening she'd jostle for the last word, and every now and then throw herself back in her chair and nod vigorously, as though the person at the other end could see her. If it was the bank, or our caseworker from DCP, her voice would go all polished and not sound like her at all. I asked Bill about this once, him being the only one of her friends who still came around. He said Lena was *being polite* and that she only bothered to be polite with people she didn't know. Everyone else knew it was a fake. *It's complete bullshit*, he'd said, smiling wryly.

Lena hung up and cast a vacant glance in our direction as if just remembering we were around.

“Jamie, get some pants on Cassie, will you?” she said. The fine thread was broken and I snapped to attention.

“Who was-?”

“Just go, *okay?*” Her tone left no room for questions.

I scooped up Cassie who started to work herself up to a big wailing cry at being taken away from her toys. I struggled not to drop her as she threw herself back, bracing her muscles against me.



“And find Amy’s shoes,” Lena yelled after me. I stamped louder on the stairs to let her know I was not pleased, but I didn’t object.

\* \* \*

Gran’s ashes arrived a few days later in a little plastic box, like the one I carried my school lunch in. The next day Lena drove us to Bill’s house, balancing the box on her knees. As we took off, Cassie started to whinge and arched her back against her seatbelt, but one rigid, stern frown from the rear-view mirror and she hushed her grumbling.

Amy was being good and I crossed my fingers she would stay that way. At fourteen she wasn’t heavy but she was nearly as tall as me and when she decided to be a brat it was impossible to move her. Free of any inhibition, she would spit and rake her fingers through my hair, screaming and kicking wildly. I had put her favourite things in the car just in case – strings of beads, ripped magazines, and silver pompoms. They would usually keep her distracted. She rattled the beads against the car window with one hand and shook a pompom in the other hand. I sensed Lena getting edgy but she kept her eyes on the road and didn’t say anything.

“Please, please, please,” I had whispered to Amy, as I hastily fastened her seatbelt around her, “help me out today.” She kept her head tilted to the side as though she was listening intently. I had felt sure she understood.

Bill came out to the driveway to meet us. He was a small man with the shrunken face of a proper alcoholic. I caught a glimpse of his crooked teeth when he poked his head through the car window with a wide grin. He wore the same type of thin shirt he had had for years: grey, collarless, and threadbare with wooden buttons. The thin sticks of his fingers matched the projecting bones of his cheeks and chest, as if the suffering in his life had worn away at him. His face had a small cut, his right eye was swollen, and his sand-coloured hair, buzzed to the skull, revealed a bunch of pock marks and bruises. He looked older every time I saw him.

Bill opened the driver’s side door and Lena got out.

“So the old lady’s finally going to keep ‘er mouth shut, ay?” Bill chuckled, but then he saw Lena’s face. It was not angry or sad, but empty; a blank stare. He drew her into a one-sided hug and ushered us inside. At the doorway I dodged away from his hug and rancid breath. He laughed, even as I glared at him, and clicked on the kettle while we settled ourselves. Guiding Amy by her shoulders, I put her next to where Lena had plopped

Cassie down, in the lounge room. Amy made a gurgling noise and a thin line of spittle dribbled down her chin. As always, her eyebrows were trained in concentration. I wondered if she also thought that the smell of cigarette smoke made Bill's place feel like home. The kettle rumbled up to boiling point, its steel lid clapping. Then it whistled, loud and shrill.

Even from the back Bill looked like he had been knocked around. Lena had to say his name, once, then twice, a bit louder. It wasn't unusual, and on the third time he turned, smiled.

"Bill, can you take the girls for a couple of days next week? There are some things that need seeing to."

Bill plonked a cup of tea in front of Lena and nursed his own in his lap. "Course, o' course. Whatever you want. Not a problem." He blew on his tea and took a mouthful.

"Things're going to be a bit tough without Dotty helping out, eh?" He tipped his teacup up, drained it and cleaned its rim with the flap of his shirt. He shrugged, not looking at Lena now. "She was more trouble than she was worth, if yer ask me." Pause, then, "Suppose she never liked me much, though."

Lena didn't reply. She had closed down any complaints – Bill's and her own – years ago, making a clear line in the dirt, *don't cross here*. Bill kept his gaze low and continued to scrub the cup with his shirt flap. It made a high, annoying squeak. And soon the conversation turned to other things. Bill fumbled under the table and came up with a small, plastic bag with something tapered poking out the top.

Lena leaned across and tapped his hand, "Hey, not now. Not with the kids here."

He rolled his eyes, let his head flop back and sighed. Then he dropped the bag back down by his side and gave me a conspiratorial wink. I rolled my eyes in return. As the conversation continued his eyes would roam back to the bag and snag there wistfully.

I was bored and asked to look at Gran's ashes. Lena hesitated and, for a moment, it looked like she would refuse. But then she got them from the counter top and opened the box like it was a present. Inside was a weighty paper bag, as heavy as a doggy's poop-scoop bag ready for the bin. I opened the bag gingerly. I expected the ashes to be grey or black, like the charcoal remains at the bottom of a fire, but they were sort of light brown; the colour of the sand we kids played in behind the house. They smelled like bonfires, but with no hint of beer or wet grass.

In the lounge, Cassie was fidgeting, and to stop her trying to climb over the back of the couch, Lena scooped her up and popped her back down on the floor.

“Ma ma *ma!*” she said, building up to a cry. Lena dropped the ashes in front of her and handed her a spoon. The distraction worked like a charm. Bill and I listened as small lumps of metal soon clicked against the spoon. I thought of Gran’s heavy rings. They had been on her fingers for so long the skin underneath them had become withered and pale. The rings had clunked up and down between knuckle and the bend in her finger; it had been a long time since she could get them past her thick, arthritic joints. They were a part of Gran, just as much as the dark red dye she used on her hair, or the look in her eyes she got whenever Lena asked for money.

Cassie had abandoned the spoon and gone in hands first, squidging her fingers like she did in the sandpit. Her baby hands were fat at the wrists with soft plump palms and tiny fingers. Lena coming back from wiping Amy, snatched Cassie up, propped her on the sink and washed her hands, all the while telling Bill about the cremation.

Traces of ashes were trodden down into the carpet, washed down the drain, and rubbed on the tea towels. Smudges of Gran.

\* \* \*

The tattooist looked apprehensive when Lena told her what she wanted. A school of inked fish swam up the girl’s neck and towards her ear and she bit the end of her thumb. Lena’s determination made the tattooist look very young.

“I don’t know if I can,” the girl said finally, shrugging her shoulders.

“Why not?” Lena asked, and then as if the deal were done, hissed to me, “Jamie – watch your sisters!”

The tattooist’s eyes flicked from Lena to Cassie – her face was blotchy from crying – to Amy, making a wild swing at the neat stack of magazines.

“I, I don’t think the insurance covers it. The health codes ...”

“The health codes!? You’re not using fucking rusty needles, *are you?*” Lena stuck the girl with one of her piercing stares.

The light above the reclining chair shone down on Lena like she was at the dentist’s. Hand held out with the palm facing up, she closed her eyes and looked relaxed. It was the hand she had cut right where the finger bent, so there would be a faint line but no scar when it healed. I think she had felt cheated by that, wanting something to show for her pain. The needle buzzed in the tattooist’s hand, a pot of light brown next to her.

On the street outside the tattoo parlour Lena peeled back the fresh gauze for our curious eyes. The words ‘my mother’ stood proud and raw in brown, curling letters against the soft tissue of her palm; she’d had Gran’s ashes mixed into her tattoo.

“Gran’s in there,” Lena said to us. “And if you ever miss her, this is where she’ll be.” I felt sick because there was nothing of my Gran in Lena’s sore hand. Nothing that might tell others who she was, or what she was like. If Gran could’ve spoken at that moment I knew she would’ve said she hated it. But Lena looked pleased with herself, smiling down on us with a kind expression, her injured palm a badge of honour.

There was still a lot of Gran left in the bag so Lena asked me where I thought we should spread the ashes. “Where reminds you of her? Somewhere nice.” She stroked my hair away from my eyes and suddenly I felt calm. I knew Lena meant somewhere outside, but we never went anywhere with Gran. It was always our house or hers. I thought of Gran’s lounge room. Her cat moving sluggishly along the top of the couch, drooling and shedding hair, while we watched TV — a metre away on the other side of the small lounge room. The wooden floorboards creaked but they were never dirty.

When I stayed mute, Lena suggested the north bank of the river. I recalled us taking a walk there once. It had been over a year ago and Lena, still coming down from a weekend bender, had asked Gran for money. I remembered Gran saying no and Lena screaming at her. Gran had screamed too, then she had cried.

Lena parked close to the water and we all tumbled out. Walking to the water’s edge I held Amy’s hand and Lena carried Cassie. I felt like I was floating, removed and dazed, but not sad. A clawing wind thrummed and threatened rain. The rolling grey clouds moving over the surface of the river. We kept the memorial short. Lena whispered something I didn’t quite catch, probably “goodbye,” and tipped the contents into the water. The ashes clumped, then spread out, sending a puff of brown back at us. I held my breath.

Deep inside me, I felt a faint stirring. “Things are going to be different now, aren’t they?” I said, echoing Bill.

The sky rumbled. Crickets sung out from the bushes. Lena’s eyes were dry. “Is that a bad thing?” she said, shrugging.

“No, no, not a bad thing.”

Where the ground was wet and sloped we herded Cassie and Amy between us, keeping vice-like hands on their upper arms. Normally Cassie would get whiny about this but the spitting sky was too much of a distraction. As thunder cracked and the lightning

branched out in long, broken lines, Cassie fanned out her fingers at the specks of rain, and Amy started to wail.

## Tim – the break-up

The breakup with Linda had started the minute we got together; the cracks getting bigger and bigger until there was nothing left. It finally ended on a Tuesday around one o'clock in the morning. The white beam from the streetlight had shone through the blinds and across my chest like a prison uniform. In the dark, stuffy room I could barely make out Linda's shape. She was sitting at the end of the bed not saying anything. She was just a dark, hunched shape, a gargoyle scowling into the gloom. I tried to find her face but the darkness had spread out like ink in water. I strained my eyes.

“So what now?” I said to the opposite wall, breaking the freeze-frame.

“Maybe we should talk.”

“Now?” I asked.

“Yes, now,” she said.

In the lounge room she sank into the big armchair like a punctured balloon. I hunted around the kitchen for something to drink. Her eyes followed me. One look at her eyes, red-rimmed, blinking rapidly, and I knew she was going to cry. I felt the muscles in my neck and jaw tense at all the drama, at all the dragging it out. I willed her to get out, wanted her to go; I was already pushing her out the door in my mind. *Away, away, away.* But still she sat, her hurt and dejection draped around her like a cloak, and I hated her for it.

Discovering a dusty bottle of red, I poured it out and stood uncertainly for a moment, stalling. Then I handed her a glass. She took it without looking at me. I snorted in derision and pinged my glass with a fingernail.

“I can't do this anymore, Tim,” she said finally.

“So, what is it? You're cheating on me?” I didn't really think that she was, but we needed to argue about something.

“‘Cheating’ makes it sound like there was deception and sneaking around. It was just nice to talk to people who wanted to talk to me – people who noticed me.” Linda stared and rolled her wine glass. She took a breath and had a moment of resolve. “I need a break,” she said to the ceiling.

Okay, I was surprised. I had always assumed I would be the one to leave her. “So you *are* sleeping with someone?”

“Noooo,” she said, drawing out the word doubtfully. “It wasn’t like that. I just don’t want to have to do *this*.” She made a frustrated gesture with her hands. “You’re never here anyway.” Her words glowed between us like hot coals before the inevitable gush of tears fell.

“Tim,” she said through her sobs, “This. Isn’t. Working.” Her one word missiles shot down all further lines of communication.

So I didn’t say anything.

“Oh come on, Tim! I thought we were going to talk for a change.”

I had never wanted to know about Linda’s life before me. I had never asked her because I had no desire to know. It was neater that way; less room for misinterpretation. But as we ran into this wall of silence, I realised I could not remember one word of anything she had ever said to me. I almost felt sorry for her then. She must have worked hard to keep coming up with new topics, kindling the conversation, poking it, keeping it going, stretching it out and guiding it, so it didn’t fizzle.

I threw my hands up in irritation. “If you want to end it, Linda, then end it. Don’t make this all about me. As far as I can see, I’ve never lied to you, I’ve always paid my way, and I’ve never *cheated*, and I bought you whatever you wanted—”

“Oh *perfect!* That’s a *great* relationship,” she spat the words out.

“You know I’m not much of a talker.”

“It just feels like you don’t want to be with me.” Her voice softened. “Maybe we should stop trying to make it work.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” My indifference slammed the conversation shut with a slap that left no echo. I went back to bed and stared at the ceiling.

The tyres spun in the driveway as she sped away. I didn’t know where she was going and I couldn’t bring myself to care. I pictured her eyes red and bulging, snot leaking from her nose, as she told her small-minded friends all about callous Tim. It made me furious with her all over again.

In the morning there was a letter on the kitchen counter. *You’re a monster*, I read. *It took you a whole year to tell me you loved me and even then you never meant it. I want you out of the house by the time I get back.* I imagined her face as she wrote it; rage etched across it, scrawling words and dotting i’s so furiously that the ink had blotted the pages.

She was right, of course. I liked having her around but I didn’t love her. Linda had done things for me, that was all. She would not admit it but it was probably the same for her. I could never understand love, the way she wanted it. She wanted a lover free of

imperfections and character flaws. I didn't want anyone to feel that way about me, and I'd never feel that way about somebody else. Maybe I was incapable of love. At thirty I was the man I'd be for the rest of my life. It was a bit late to change tactics.

\* \* \*

Back in Perth I moved into my parents' basement, feeling trapped under their critical frowns. *Disappointing. Lazy. Useless.* I wore their words like old, worn clothes. My mother said, "You just need to get some goals and get motivated. You're too clever not to. Just don't let it turn into a rut." I recognised tell-tale phrases she'd picked up from years of support groups: Community Connect, Beyondblue, Be Active.

My mother dealt with the whispers; mainly people I'd gone to high school with who wanted to know why I was back living at home. It didn't bother me. My life stretched comfortably in front of me, even and undemanding. I was cross-dissolving back into a life of mediocrity.

After six months of waking up at noon, eating everything in the fridge, and listening to the same Whitesnake record over and over, my father called me into the lounge room and told me to move out. He sat in his big, comfortable armchair with my dog Jet at his feet. Jet didn't follow me like he used to.

As I stood in front of my father I already knew what he would say. It was like being fired, I knew from experience, and bore all the usual signs: the explaining that my performance had been unsatisfactory, my token request for another chance, the customary token encouragement that I might be better suited elsewhere. I'd been expecting the conversation for a while.

"Fine," I said. "I'll leave. This house is so small I don't know how you stand it." It seemed like the kind of thing someone being kicked out should say.

"It's not small when there are only two people here," he shot back.

My mother was waiting in the kitchen for me. "You want me out as well, then?" I asked her.

"You need to sort yourself out, Tim. You can't keep relying on us."

"Don't worry, Jet and I'll be out of your hair soon." On hearing his name Jet ambled into the room and lay down under the kitchen table, begging my mother with his eyes for a morsel of cheese.

"Jet stays with us," my mother said, not looking at me.



“But I paid for him!” I said, unable to keep the whine out of my voice.

“And we’ve paid for him ever since!” my mother threw back. “Besides, your father is attached to him.” She leant down and gave Jet a scratch behind the ears and patted the barrel of his body. Jet thumped his tail on the floor but did not get up; his thick, short coat shone in the patch of sunlight he lay in. In a moment of pettiness I tried to lure him over to me. He just gave a few more tail wags, then flopped his head back on the floor and closed his eyes. *Traitor*, I thought.

My friend Dave agreed I could me stay with him for a few days, or weeks. It was never established how long.

“I suppose you could stay for a few days,” he said and I said, “Yeah, a couple of weeks is all it’ll be.” I knew he wouldn’t confront me. Back when we were at university I’d commandeered his textbooks just by insisting they were mine. All it took was a ‘*no, this is definitely mine*’ to his gentle questioning, and he bought himself a new set at fifty dollars apiece. The books even had his name written in them.

My mother gave me a lift to Dave’s house along with all of my possessions. There weren’t many. Without the bed or TV, everything I owned fitted into the back seat of the car. After the split with Linda I’d thrown away everything, except a few clothes, basic hygiene items and important identification documents. At the time it had felt liberating not owning anything more than would fit into a reasonably-sized suitcase. Then I had sat at the kitchen table wondering what to do next. I bought myself a pack of cigarettes and called my parents from a pay phone.

“I just don’t understand *why* you did it, Tim.” My mother had sounded on the verge of tears. I tried to explain to her my moment of enlightenment but I didn’t feel it anymore. All I felt was a residue of mild dread.

It was the same feeling as I had now, dragging my suitcase into Dave’s house. I unpacked at Dave’s but when I looked around my room I had the strangest feeling I had attended my own funeral.

## Lena – the letter

Curled up on Amy's bed, my mother's cat purred like an old refrigerator. I shoved him away, remembering horror stories about pets smothering children in their sleep. I gave up after the fourth time he came back. His lanky body looked as pathetic and harmless as an old mop head. I don't know how he out-lived my mother.

That night I was feeling the weight of guilt and hopelessness more than usual. I'd been staring into the back of my closed eyelids, unable to find a way into sleep for hours. Giving up, I shrugged off my blankets and lit up a cigarette. My mother's words rang in my ears. *You're a disgrace, Lena. God help those girls.* My new tattoo throbbed and itched. I went across the hall, hounded by my mother's scolding tone. With each step the tattoo burned like her disapproval.

"What?" Jamie murmured, without opening her eyes.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

"Mmm ..."

Jamie kicked one leg free of her blanket and rolled over to face the wall she'd covered with posters cut out of magazines. Clothes, clean and dirty together, lay over her bed, and over the floor around it. A few posters had snuck onto Amy's side of the room; shirtless men sporting six-packs and serious expressions. What would Amy make of them?

She needed a new mattress; that was for sure. The room smelt faintly of piss and dust. My favourite photo of Amy was blu-tacked to the wall. In it she was nearly thirteen. With her hair brushed away from her face and the spit wiped from her chin – her body stilled by the camera – she looked just like any other teenager.

Such suggestions of the teenager she could've been usually had something to do with her outfit – skinny jeans and boots and a certain style top. It was when she wasn't stimming with her pompoms and her beads, just a wry smile lighting up her face. Then I saw the life that she might have had – we might have had. Sometimes I imagined her talking to me like Jamie did, about how much she hates school, or begging for a new mobile phone.

When I was pregnant with Amy her dad had told me we would get married, but the smell of spirits on his breath said otherwise. He left more often after Amy was born. I remember his snap of anger when I questioned him, when I said I was struggling to raise

his daughters. He went dark on me after that. He cut us off like a gangrenous limb when he heard Amy's prognosis. I shivered, *it was better to have him gone*.

I looked at her lying asleep, for the moment unmoving. If it wasn't for the crumpled lump of plaited hair, Amy would have been a perfect camouflaged, her face pale against the sheets. Not even a hint of red in her cheeks or lips. There was hardly a sign of her body under the thin covers. Her waxy eyelids were closed with only a smattering of lashes visible. If it weren't for the soft, raspy snores coming from her half-open mouth, she could have passed for dead.

I crouched down on the floor clutching my cigarette, and watching her breathe. The cat curled into the small curve of her arm, purring loudly, droning in harmony with her. The night stretched on forever, as I paced and waited for the misty grey of morning.

\* \* \*

There was a sharp knock at the door. It was so early the girls were still asleep, even Cassie. I raced to the door to keep it that way, pulling the door open and dragging a jumper over my head at the same time. For a foggy minute I thought I saw my mother standing in the doorway. The whiplash of my thoughts left me feeling winded and wretched.

"Were you asleep? *I've* been up since five." In my neighbour's hand was a familiar aluminium tray covered with foil. As if paying entry, Helen shoved another of her day-old meals at me, and pushed inside. I sniffed, it smelt old and over-baked.

"I didn't go to bed until three," I said, following her into the kitchen.

"I didn't go until half-past."

This was how it was; if you had the flu, she had the plague. After my mother's funeral, she'd greeted me with *my mother died when I was half your age*.

"Oh," was all I could think of saying.

Today she had an official-looking envelope in her hand. It looked like the one I had seen sticking out of my mailbox yesterday. I took it from her with thanks all the same. Truth be told, I'd expected the arrears letter sooner. I had been avoiding it. It was full of the usual complaints – late payment, cause for eviction, ten working days, and all the rest. I felt her beady eyes feast on my face as I skimmed over it. I tried to keep my expression neutral.

"What does it say?" Helen asked making herself at home with the kettle.

I let out a breath. "I can't make the rent. I haven't been working my usual hours."

“Why not? Can’t you pick up more hours?”

“I’ve got the girls to look after, don’t I?! *Jesus!* And it’s not like I get any help!”

Helen’s expression stayed level. Then she raised her eyebrows.

“No,” she said. “I guess now your mum’s gone, you don’t anymore. You’ll get carer benefits though.”

“It’s not enough. I have to find a new place. Somewhere cheaper.” I dreaded the thought. I’d only just found a new child-care centre for Cassie: one that didn’t call up DCP every time she had a bit of nappy rash.

“Nonsense. Don’t go thinking you’ll find a place; what with the time and the cost – no, what you need is someone living here to split the rent with.”

My heart sank while my mind sparked fireworks. I couldn’t imagine another person living in my house. Another body, sitting on the couch and watching our TV. The men who came through for a day or two were different. Blown in with the tumbleweed and dumped out with the garbage. They were always gone by the time the beer had run out. Anyway, who’d take us on? *A toddler, a teenager and a disabled kid. We had no hope.*

“It’s crazy. There’s no space. The two girls are already sharing a room.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Well, no—”

“All right then, so shut up. It’ll be good for you. Everybody needs a support network, and the landlord doesn’t need to know. As long as the money is coming in, they don’t care.”

“Maybe—”

Helen set two hot mugs of coffee down on the table. “You need to get out and meet some people. Make some friends, find out who needs a room. Why don’t you let Jamie look after the other two tonight?”

The thought sat there while I got used to the weight of it.

## **Tim – the first meeting**

I'd gone to the beach with Dave on a whim. In the car, the sticky late afternoon heat had my shirt sticking to my back; the seatbelt rubbing a raw line on my collar bone. Dave, in the driver's seat, sat with his arm crooked out the window; the ash on the butt of his cigarette shredded by the whipping of the wind. When he'd said it was a beach bonfire party, I'd felt a small jump of youthful enthusiasm, like back when skydiving, and skinny dipping in sub-zero water, still appealed.

The heat dropped off dramatically with the setting sun; soon only the glow of the fire offered some relief from the chill night air. A warm, gritty beer and circle of complete strangers had me regretting my decision to come down. Dave, unperturbed, settled back in his chair and chatted to the guy across from him.

"Yeah, I know the feeling," he said with an empathetic nod, hinting that he had something to say on the subject, but he didn't go any further. It occurred to me then that I didn't know Dave very well at all. I had no idea how he knew these people. I didn't really care to know either.

Someone slid a sandy can into my hand. Not knowing who had brought the drinks, I was happy to keep taking them until they ran out. I scanned the crowd. I hadn't seen Linda in about a year and she'd have no reason to be here, but my brain did this from time to time: subconsciously patting its emotional pockets, checking for people who were no longer in my life.

The sting of smoke sent me squinting away to the ocean's edge. I wondered how many fire-related injuries there were at such beach gatherings. A lot, I guessed, looking at the not-so-steady people standing close to the bonfire, their clothes and hair dangling unnervingly close to the flames. A guy came over, dragging me away from my thoughts, and leaned over in a confidential manner.

"How're you goin', mate? Wasted?" He gave me a lazy, uneven blink, "I'm so fucking wasted," he said in a beery breath. *Wasted*. It was ironic really, the people most likely to say "wasted" weren't really wasting anything at all. It was no loss to anyone that their brain cells were being eroded away in a cloud of liquor and recreational drugs.

I gave a noncommittal sound. It was one of those conversations where disconnected words were laid over each other like in a game of Scrabble. No one was

really listening to anyone else. By the time I decided I didn't care about being nice, the guy had already turned his attention to the drink in his hand.

The mosquitoes were starting to bite and sand had spilled into the tops of my shoes. I considered asking Dave to drive me back. Then someone nearby offered to get more drinks out of the esky.

That was when I noticed her on the edge of the circle. More accurately, I saw her noticing me. She was pretty enough. Not as young as Linda, but she had an air of confidence that Linda had never had. Like sly thieves we acknowledged each other with no need of words. Through wispy lashes, she stared at me. Eager to escape from the grasp of the guy next to me, I tipped back the beer I'd been handed and let it soak in. Feeling more confident than I should, I followed the small inclination of her head and we walked away from the group.

The ocean, folding in on itself, dribbled over black stones. Every few waves, the undertow rumbled the smooth rocks over each other then bowled them back to the beach – percussive and round. Behind us, the bonfire was like a sentinel stretching up into the sky. She walked towards the dunes with a self-assured directness, making firm-toed footprints in the sand.

She had a head start, so she slowed deliberately, glancing back unabashedly. Her hair, straight and thin, had whipped itself into strings down her back. A heavy wool jumper overlaid a long skirt. I could see her narrow hips and the straight lines of her thighs moving beneath the fabric. Abruptly she stopped, looking into the rushing and dragging waves until I had caught up.

“Hi,” I said, feeling uncertain. She raised her eyebrows but her eyes stayed lidded and unfocused. It was then I realised, with some relief, that she was completely drunk.

She towed me along by my elbow as I staggered down the beach, squinting against the billowing sand. Then, in a sudden rush, she dragged us both down, my head hitting the sand with a blow. I lay stunned as she caressed my chest, her hands working their way down my thighs. Surprised, I dug my fingers into the cold, wet sand, and held my breath. The wind raked over us, throwing grains into eyes and ears. Then she pulled me forward and held me, helpless as a ragdoll, against her breast. My fingers shook as I moved to reciprocate, pushing her top back from her stomach and moving to kiss her, hesitant, and unable to keep up with her frisking hands. Her perfume was light and floral under the smell of smoke. She was on top of me now, clumsy but with a kind of fierce determination.

I could hear voices further down the beach but I doubted anyone could see us, half-hidden by the dune at the curve of the bay. I made out three distinct voices gradually moving towards us. It was still a surprise when she let me go, abruptly pushing herself up on her knees to clamber off me. If she said anything before she left I didn't catch it, but I felt her eyes on my face, puncturing the dark of the night.

Silhouetted against the rolling waves and inky sky, she stalked away, her sandals slapping the soles of her feet like applause. The teeth of my zipper had left a bite mark on the bone of my hip. I zipped up my fly, crunching sand.

A cold wind whipped off the water; the moon looked marooned, and I couldn't bring myself to call after her.

Heading back to the party I felt a little cowed. I found a spare cup and rinsed my mouth with water, spat and then drank the rest. Rubbing a hand over my face I went over to Dave, fully dressed and a little starry-eyed.

"Where were you?" Dave asked.

"Just went for a walk along the beach."

Dave looked at me closely, eyeing the sand still clinging to my jeans. "Sure you were. Just 'walking.'"

Later, through covert questioning of Dave, I learnt that her name was Lena. Single mother of three. His eyelids flickered down as he told me. I only half-listened, tantalising my nerves with thoughts of finding her, this woman who knew what she wanted and made no demands in return. I tried to picture her face, but she kept sliding out of my grasp. It was not long before I couldn't remember what her voice sounded like, or if I had even heard it.

## Jamie – the comic book

I picked my way across the school car park to where Lee and Miranda were waiting as usual, though Miranda's mother had only just started letting her walk with us. Looking over her glasses, her mum had trained her eyes on us. *Promise me*, she said, *promise you'll come straight home and stick together – the whole way*. When she said it she looked directly at me for some reason. My face grew warm as I felt her eyes on my unwashed shirt and too-small skirt. I gave her a defiant look in return, and Lee prodded me in the ribs. *Come on*, she hissed.

Miranda was easy to spot with her red hair and deeply freckled skin, the effect of many summers with her beach-going family.

“What took you so long?” Lee asked, leaning on her bag.

I shrugged. “I'm here now.”

“Do you still have my calculator?” Miranda asked. I nodded.

“You still don't have one? It's almost April,” said Lee.

“I'll get one when I need one, and so far I can make do with Miranda's.” I smiled at Miranda teasingly and elbowed her in the ribs. She swatted me away with a half-smile.

Lee frowned. “I didn't see you in maths.”

“I was there.”

“Why didn't you sit with us, then?”

“Maybe I wanted to get some work done for a change.”

Lee shook her head and picked up her school bag. We walked in a line with me balancing on the curb. Ignoring Miranda's whinging, we took a detour to visit the corner store.

The bell ting-ed as the door swung shut behind us. The comic stand was right in front of us. Loads of blood on one of the covers, bright against the green of the background; white faces frozen in dramatic screams.

*Take it*, hissed a wicked voice somewhere in the back of my mind. Nimble fingers pinched the comic and whisked it into my school bag. I felt my face flush and couldn't look at the man behind the counter. Miranda and Lee were buying ice creams.

“Hurry up, Jamie! I'm going to be late!” Miranda urged. “Aren't you getting an ice cream?”

“I'm not hungry.”



“How can you not be hungry? You didn’t eat *anything* at lunch,” said Lee.

I pulled a face. “Seriously, are you stalking me or something? Come on, let’s go,” I was already heaving the door open. At a safe distance from the store I pulled out my prize.

“Where did you get that?” said Miranda.

I smiled deviously and Miranda widened her eyes. “You can’t do that! You should really take it back.”

“It’s done now. We’ll only get into trouble if they find out.”

“Give me a look, will you?” said Lee. We flicked through the pages and were soon dramatizing the different parts in silly, high pitched voices.

“I’m really a ghost, you know,” I said in a conversational tone.

“No, you aren’t,” Miranda said, her voice uncertain.

“You know I am. You don’t have to worry. You’re my friends.” I made my voice a bit deeper and stared at her, unblinking. “I’m really dead, you know.”

“Stop it,” said Miranda.

“Stop what?” I said innocently. “I’m only telling the truth.”

“Leave her alone, Jamie,” said Lee.

We walked on in silence, Miranda peeling away when we reached her house. We paused as she let herself in through the front door without a goodbye.

“What’s the matter with your mum, then? She sounded a bit off colour on the phone,” Lee’s dad asked when we got to her house.

Gran’s death had thrown Lena into a tailspin and her sadness was seeping into the whole house. She had taken to staring out of the window a lot and her eyes were often puffy and red. I’d thought she was keeping it together in front of other people though.

To my relief, Lee deflected the question. How could I explain the blank moments that seemed to fall over Lena when I saw her watching Cassie, her face completely empty? When her dad repeated the question his wife tilted her head sympathetically at me and took him into the next room.

When Lee’s mum gave me a lift home, she said I looked tired, although I didn’t feel tired. It was nice to not have to walk. When we got in the car she clicked her seatbelt and checked her reflection in the rear-view mirror: one of those habits that come out like a reflex. Her car smelled clean. I bet she never had to clean piss and vomit out of the carpet. She looked sideways at me as she drove.

“Things okay at home, Jamie?” She seemed calm but I could hear a tone of urgency in her voice.

I shrugged a bit lower into my seat and stared out of the window. “S’pose.”

“Because there are people you can talk to.” Pause. “You can talk to me, if you like.” Another pause. She waited for me to reply.

I knew what was coming. I hunched my shoulders a bit, ready for it.

“If you ever need anything ...” she said finally as we pulled up at my house. That was what they all said. *If you ever need anything.*

“Yeah ... Thanks for the lift.” I slammed the passenger door shut before she could say anything else. The dry, brittle grass crunched beneath my shoes as I crossed the front yard. I didn’t look back.

## Tim – the new job

Dave set the fire break inspector job up for me and I took it because I was broke. I was two weeks behind on rent and sick of reheated noodles. Scouring the fridge, I'd take thin slices of this and that like a self-disciplined mouse. Dave would rub his neck when he came home to find me still on the couch. *An easy job with decent pay* was how he pitched it. He must've put in a good word because they didn't even ask about the gaps in my already unimpressive resume. They gave me a stack of paperwork to read about fire safety principles.

The first place was a shock. I inspected their fire breaks, sighed, checked my list of regulations and made a note on the side of the page. The farmer had hovered beside me with a pleading look as if he knew what I was going to say. He was thin and his skin was lined. Late sixties: shoulder-length hair, a punch of grey at his temples.

I pressed my lips up and together in a "No Deal" kind of expression.

"This isn't really sufficient, you know. The fire breaks should be wider – at least twice this size. And cut much shorter." This was putting it mildly, for there weren't any fire breaks to speak of. The track that followed the fence looked like the result of motorbike traffic, and maybe the odd car.

"But my extinguisher ..." The man clutched to the idea like a magic feather. What would the man do if a fire did threaten his property? Fighting a full-scale bushfire with that tiny extinguisher was laughable, if it weren't so frightening. Of course, in the case of a full-scale bushfire, the chances of fire breaks actually helping were also slim to none. Regulations were regulations, however, and there was no way I was going to put my job on the line because he had failed to uphold them.

"I'm afraid the fire breaks are a requirement regardless of whether or not you own a fire extinguisher." The man looked dolefully at the fence line, then back at me. I wanted to escape his sad eyes. I was discovering that the problem with this job was the hope that wouldn't stay quashed. I had to quash it again and again and that was like kicking someone already down.

"Shall we take a look at the hayshed?" I asked.

When my report came to its inevitable conclusion I granted an extension. The man thanked me profusely, promising a farm entirely up to code two weeks from now. I was dubious but nodded in agreement. Chances were I'd come back to find the property in

exactly the same condition with the addition of a second extinguisher, perhaps one that was new.

\* \* \*

As I entered the house that night I heard Dave's new girlfriend making it clear she wanted me out of the house. She'd been complaining about me even when she knew I was within earshot. Dave's voice was quieter, but I detected a conciliatory tone. I knew then how it would play out.

When I walked into the lounge, Dave smiled at me in a social-worker kind of way.

"So how was your first day?" He hiked his eyebrows up in a display of interest.

I shrugged with one shoulder. "Seemed all right."

Dave nodded, still smiling enthusiastically as I dropped my bag at the door. His girlfriend gave me a critical once-over with her eyes and shot a meaningful look at Dave. He stammered and she sighed loudly. "Tim," she barked, "I'm going to burn that woolly hat if I see you in it again. It looks like a cosy." She didn't like the coat I'd had for fifteen years either; it was one of the things I hadn't thrown out in the great cleanse.

"And it's about time you found yourself some real friends," she said, while she kept her eyes fixed on her hi-tech phone. "You're too closed. You need to get out more. And you need to find a place of your own." She shot a meaningful look at Dave who opened his palms at me apologetically. She rolled her eyes and turned back to me. "You need to do something with your hair. Change your image. You're thirty-one, not sixty-eight."

## Lena – the shopping trip

A single dim ray peeked through the gap between the curtains. It was early, maybe five o'clock. Cassie was sucking her thumb where she had fallen asleep in the middle of my bed. As the house was still quiet, I lay back down and forced myself to lie still. As soon as I heard movement downstairs I dragged myself up and made my way to the bathroom where I stood facing the wall that was pimped and puckered with age. Leaving the door open to listen for Cassie, I peeled off my cotton top. I balanced on one foot, and then the other, I tugged my legs free of my underwear. Rolling them into a ball, I piled them into the corner and shoved the door closed as far as it would go. The swollen wood resisted, squeaking as I forced it far enough back to see into the mirror. I stood in front of it, spreading my white arms like some frail bird. My reflection gawked back at me. I took a speculative pinch of body fat.

The shower coughed and spluttered when I turned the hot water up. A warm fog billowed against the glass wall of the shower. Catching the flow in my cupped hands, I splashed it on my face and over my head, and then turned to let the jet of water pummel my back. Scrubbing and rinsing, I worked from my shoulders down to my ankles to get rid of any lingering clammy sleepiness. Shampoo ran down my face, stinging my eyes. I felt hair coming away in my fingers.

I scrubbed my skin hard until it glowed pink and raw like a bad sunburn. Stepping out, I wrapped a grubby towel around myself, tucking the ends together so they stayed.

In the living room I put the television on. On the news a local mother was accused of trying to kill her autistic son and then herself. Kelly Staples. The name rang a bell. Maybe I had met her or seen her around Amy's school. The news reporter said it was "shocking" and "a hate crime." Her tone was level and her expression blank. I dropped into a chair.

*Hate crime.* What rubbish.

It had a lot more to do with love than hate, even if she had done it. Even if I didn't know *her*, I knew that much. They said she'd have to undergo a psychological evaluation to find out if she was competent to stand trial. I clutched the towel tighter around myself. My hair dripped water down my back. I shivered. I hoped she told them everything. She had probably never slept a full night because she was scared of what would happen tomorrow. Maybe her husband had tried for a while then left. The boy probably lashed out

at her when he was upset. He'd never apologise because, to him, she was nothing more than a piece of furniture. There'd be days she couldn't stop crying. Maybe her son had been sicker than usual that day. Maybe someone said he had to leave the playground because he was disturbing the other children. She had to tell them everything.

"Mum?" Jamie said, coming down the stairs. She had a hairbrush in her hand, halfway up to her hair.

"Yeah?"

"What are you doing?"

I gestured at the television. "Watching the news. What's it to you?"

"Whatever," she said. "Amy's up, so's Cassie. Amy's face is bad again, and they both need changing." She went into the kitchen.

I went upstairs and found some clothes to wear. They smelled vaguely of sweat and cat piss but there weren't any obvious stains. Cassie was playing with the cigarette butts in the ashtray I kept by the window. The ash was all over her face and hands; she'd tipped the ashtray upside down on the floor.

"Oooh," she said, mashing one cigarette butt into another. Then, "Ma ma ma," as she held her hands out to me.

I lodged her on my hip, leaving the ashtray where it lay. She fingered dirt and ash through my hair as I carried her downstairs.

"Is she ready yet?" Jamie asked. She had her schoolbag over her shoulder ready to go.

"Here," I said, passing Cassie over to her. "She's ready for day-care. You can take her."

Jamie thrust her hands up and backed away, "No, Mum, no way! She's filthy." Jamie's hoop earrings swung as she snatched her hair away from Cassie's fingers. Using the sleeve of my shirt I wiped the worst of the ash off Cassie's face and hands. Jamie looked apprehensive but she took Cassie and wrinkled her nose.

"Mum, she stinks! Did you change her?"

"Let the day-care do it."

"*Mum!* They'll call the socials again!"

"I don't have time for this, *okay!* What are we bloody paying them for anyway?"

Jamie rolled her eyes and yanked the front door shut behind her as she left. She was angry and I knew she would still be dark at me when she got home. In the lounge room I

found Amy rocking and pressing her tongue to the window. Outside, her bus was just taking off. She'd have to stay home today.

Jamie was right. Amy's skin was red and raw around her mouth. She let me clean it with a damp cloth and put some cream on it, then she took my hand when I offered it to her.

"Let's go and do some shopping, yeah?" I said.

She made a lot of high-pitched "yea-aah" sounds and clapped her hands together.

"I'll take that as a yes, then?"

"Yea-aah."

I thought of little Cassie. She could only say "Ma," "Bah" and "Ah" but she did a lot of pointing, gesturing, and voice inflection. I knew when Cassie took my hand that she wanted me to walk. I knew when she clutched at my legs with a begging look, she wanted to be picked up. I knew when she approached the refrigerator that she wanted food. I translated her cries and coos. But at fourteen, Amy, my other baby, also existed in the moment, passing through a world that seldom saw her. And when it did, the eyes often looked away. Cassie at eighteen months old would soon be overtaking Amy.

Amy would always be like this. Amy would always be my baby.

\* \* \*

In the carpark I cursed and yanked on the handbrake. Leaving the car blocking the way, I stalked over to the offending car and inspected the windscreen. It had no disability sticker.

"Fucking typical," I said out loud to no one in particular, "do you want the disability that goes with the parking bay too?" I kicked at the illegally parked car. Some passers-by turned their heads in my direction and then quickly turned away again. I kicked the car again, but then felt tired all of a sudden.

Back in the car, I stamped on the accelerator. Amy burbled in the back seat; I could see her hand flapping in my rear-view mirror.

It was a good fifteen minutes before I found another parking space some distance away. I had to trek across the car park with Amy in tow. Used to seeing me with Amy, the men and women I usually worked with nodded to me from behind the shopping centre checkouts. But I still felt the familiar heat of discomfort inching up my neck. It was not embarrassment. It was just the prickle of people's eyes; being with Amy was like living in a fishbowl.

No sooner did I start shopping, fielding Amy in front of me, than a lady bobbed down to Amy's level and took her flapping hand in hers.

"Aren't you precious? What's her name?" she asked me. I resisted the urge to remove her hand and slap her round face. *Why did everyone think they had the right to grab her?*

"Amy," I said curtly. The woman did not seem to notice my anger. Amy started to protest the restriction to her movement, her eyebrows furrowed.

"And why are we so grumpy today?"

I blinked at the comment. "She's autistic," I told her.

The woman peered at her and said, "But she's so pretty. Oh, she just looked at me!" I stared at the woman. She misinterpreted and wrapped her arms around me.

"God never gives us more than we can handle," she stage-whispered as she released me. I smelt a faint whiff of peanuts and fly spray. It must've been that that set me off.



## **Tim – the second meeting**

Inside the shopping centre I heard a storm of low angry voices and a single shrill voice climbing higher and higher. The commotion was coming from the tissue and laundry powder aisle where a small crowd had gathered, their necks craned. They didn't want to wait around for nothing, but they didn't want to miss anything either. What if someone started a fight, or got arrested. A few dedicated shoppers were carrying on with their shopping, angling to reach certain products, hurrying through the danger zone.

I pushed in for a glance at the conflict. That was when I saw Lena in front of the fabric softeners, screaming at another woman, calling her an ignorant bitch.

I touched her arm. "Lena, are you okay?" She looked at me in confusion, either trying to place my face or deciding whether or not to hit me, I was not sure. I could see the cogs of recognition starting to slide into place but then the other woman said something else and Lena's head flicked back. "Don't tell the store security I called you a bitch. Tell him I called you a *fucking* bitch, because that's what you are. Now get out of my sight before I do something we both regret."

The middle-aged woman tugged her sweater down over her hips in a self-conscious manner. Like many of the females around here, she dressed down. Billowing shirts that seemed to only come in size extra-large were the unofficial uniform of women in her age bracket. They weren't flattering, and I got the feeling this was the intention. Lena seemed to be one of the few women who liked to counteract dowdiness. I could easily picture her in the bathroom before work, leaning into the mirror to apply lipstick, smoothing out her eyebrows with her little finger. The other woman was fattened and flattened under layers of baggy jumpers and loose-fitting jeans. Her body was mummified and sexually negated. She had no make-up on, nothing to hide her dry lips and bitten nails. She was hardly a threat to Lena. At least no threat that I could see. I wonder what had attracted Lena's rage.

Outside in the car park, Lena grappled for cigarettes and lighter. I followed her. The skinny, young girl with her was making a thin, distressed noise and rocking back and forth.

I turned away from the girl and put my hand on Lena's shoulder, trying to comfort her. "Lena, it's Tim ... from the beach."

She nodded, but seemed to have no idea who I was. She was looking down at her cigarette packet, her eyes glittering with angry tears. She did not look at me. I offered to

drive her home, in her car. She shrugged, then nodded, taking the disabled girl's hand in hers.

The foot-well had a collection of rubbish that had obviously been there for months. I kicked an empty bottle out from underneath the pedal and drove off, getting used to the feel of the strange car. The steering wheel was slightly sticky, with a shiny patch on one side where overuse had buffed it smooth. Odd stains and splatters covered everything, especially the windows.

Lena stared out the window, giving vague directions only when we reached intersections. She furrowed her brow and looked out at the pavement whizzing past. I gave up and pulled into a car park overlooking the beach. She had to be coaxed out of the car to get some fresh air, but the girl in the back seat made a run for it as soon as she saw the water. She was gangly and uncoordinated like an intoxicated deer.

“Amy, no.”

The girl hesitated. Lena caught her and led her back, passing her the strings of plastic beads she fished out of her bag. The girl sat on the grass and shook them out in front of her. Lena sighed. She sat by me on a low wall, her heels pressed against the flat of the concrete, looking over the water. I could see the small impression of her breasts through her jumper as she breathed. Her chin trembled and she kept touching her mouth with two fingers, breathing in, tapping twice. Her lips were full, despite her age – I guessed about forty – and painted a deep shade of pink. The tide crept in and the water swelled at her feet.

To the east, the industrial side of town cut across the horizon, but the rest of the bay was a gentle blue curve, with gulls on the air, and a smattering of clouds in the distance. I knew that when the tide was out and the sand corrugated it was possible to find a ridge and walk into the sea for half a kilometre before the water came to knee height. Salt crusted the nearby wooden walkway that bordered the bay. A steady *clip clip clip* sound came from behind us.

Lena's tears were rolling silently. They dribbled down her cheeks and plopped from the end of her nose. Her eyes were turned downwards. She started sniffing and more tears squeezed and plopped. I made a show of trying to comfort her but I sounded like a pamphlet. *It's going to be okay, it's not your fault, blah blah blah*. The useless words filled the air like disinfectant. Amy shook her beads on the grass behind us like moving wall paper. Lena's hurt poured out of her: her day, raising three girls, trying to make the rent, the struggles of the morning, the woman at the supermarket.

“And after I *explained* Amy’s disabilities, *severe* disabilities, this *bitch* had the nerve to say ‘at least she’s healthy – that’s the important thing.’” Lena adopted the woman’s high-pitched, condescending voice. I struggled for the right facial expression, groping for something between incredulity and exasperation. But Lena wasn’t looking at me. Her eyes were darting back and forth, replaying the scene in her head.

“You know what she said when I was leaving?! That it was the *parenting* that was the problem.” She paused for my obligatory hmmm, my eyebrows peaking skyward. “As if it were my fault!”

I cringed. Not at Lena’s seething venom but at being her confidant. I wanted to ask her if there was someone else she could talk to, but she was already lighting a cigarette and inhaling furiously. Her hands stubbornly bare, and her pointed fingernails shiny as they flicked down the lighter’s igniter. I thought about those fingers raking down my back.

“People are always *thinking of* me and Amy, but they never *do* anything. I can’t even get someone to fucking babysit for a few hours so I can, oh you know, have a conversation with an adult. Or just sit down. Or breathe. I would be over the fucking moon if someone looked after Amy for – say *twenty minutes* – so I could just sit and breathe.”

I went to say something but Lena cut in. “It never happens. My life is like this twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, and three hundred and sixty five days a year. I never get to sleep in, never get a day off, and I can’t even remember the last uninterrupted night’s sleep. People don’t get it. They have no fucking idea.”

She was running out of steam now.

“I guess parents do things because they love their children. And their children love them back,” I said.

Lena snorted and gestured towards the drooling, rocking girl. “Do you think she’s ever going to tell me: I love you?” I swallowed, I had little to offer. My life was placid and satisfactory in comparison.

“You’re lucky,” Lena said when I said I didn’t have any children. I waited for her to elaborate but she didn’t. I stalled, trying to think of something to say. I grappled for another topic, but faltered. All I could think about was her hips moving against mine that night at the beach, and the sliver of bra I could see now when she bent forward. I had paused for too long but Lena was looking the other way and didn’t seem to notice.

“I need to get back. Jamie will be picking Cassie up from day-care soon,” she said.

She climbed into the driver's seat without a word and for a moment I wondered if she meant to leave me standing there. But she gave me a "hurry up" gesture and I got in the car.

The street flashed by as she took the next left so fast that the gear slammed and we all swayed inside the vehicle. I didn't say a word.

At the house, Lena took the disabled girl upstairs and left me sitting in the tiny lounge room with her toddler. I felt completely maladapted to my surroundings. Lena had that parent-of-multiple-children outlook that could be summed up as "just do it." I could see it was an attitude, or mantra, she extended necessarily to her friends, her family and now, to me. But up until this point I had never looked after a child, and had only played at being an adult. And under no circumstances was I qualified to play at being a parent. The toddler looked at me curiously while she tugged at the dirty top she was wearing. I pulled out my phone and checked the time. The toddler watched me do it with an unnervingly unabashed stare.

Another girl about the same age as the disabled girl – maybe fifteen – came in from the kitchen. There was something distinctly Lena in her eyes, otherwise there was little resemblance. She had long, dark hair and a wiry quality about her. I could see she was a half-match to the disabled girl, one a distorted reflection of the other. Twins maybe. The same soft shade of brown hair matched with deep brown eyes. The disabled girl's eyes rarely focussed on anyone, she held her head bent forward and to the side. She was a frail and twisted version of her sister's robust frame. But the shape of their faces was the same as well as the size of their hands. Amy was the hollow echo of this girl's clear tone.

"Ma ma ma," said the toddler, reaching up to the girl demandingly.

"I'm Jamie," she said to me, brushing away the little grabbing hands. Jamie. Amy. A ridiculous choice of names. Whose bright idea was that?

"Where's the toilet?" I asked, more to get away from them than for any real need.

"It's upstairs," Jamie said, slumping into the armchair, not bothering to look up from her phone. Cassie looked set to climb into her lap.

The bath was grungy, with several brown tidemarks around it, and the toilet had not been flushed. It smelled terrible. Water damage crept up the walls. A mangy-looking cat, curled up on the ledge of the bathroom window, eyeing me with a hostile expression. Unable to find any soap, I rinsed my hands in the rusty, little sink.

I glanced into the bedrooms on my way downstairs. The contents of both spilt out onto the cluttered landing. It seemed they were all sleeping on mattresses on the floor and

there were no curtains in any of the windows. In one large room a couple of toys lay among the dirty clothes strewn over the floor: cheap, plastic and many of them broken. The toddler must be sharing with Lena. A shabby cot stood in the corner of the room, but it was currently being used as a clotheshorse.

The next room I looked into I was met with Lena's steady gaze. She had Amy on the floor and was changing her nappy. I sprang back as though stung and hurried back downstairs to wait for her.

When she came into the lounge room she said nothing about what I had walked in on upstairs. Instead, I asked Lena for her telephone number, and she got mine, then we parted in a kind of daze. Even as I called a taxi and let myself out through the rusty gate I had the feeling I'd be back.

## **Jamie – the sneak out**

It was dark in the bedroom. I could see the lump that was Amy on the mattress opposite mine. I reached for my phone. Amy moved around, shoving her blanket away.

“Are you awake, Amy?” I asked her.

She murmured sleepily and turned her head to me, then to the ceiling. I press a button on my phone and the screen lit up with the time. I blinked into the sudden light and traced my thumb over the screen to unlock it. The glass had been shattered when Miranda dropped it on the footpath. She had given it to me when her parents had bought her a new phone.

“It’s half-past two!” I said to Amy, squinting. “What are the chances Miranda is awake, do you think ... ?” I send a quick text. After a few minutes the phone beeped in my hands. “Ah-ha!” I got out of bed and moved about, feeling with my hands, trying to find a jumper without turning the light on. Amy sat up.

“No, Amy. You have to stay here. I won’t be long, promise.” I smiled and squeezed her shoulder. “You go back to sleep.” Amy rocked and flapped her hand, but stayed in bed. I pulled a grey sweater over my head, shoved my phone into my pocket and went over to the doorway. Amy was still watching me. She smiled as I waved back at her and snuck into the empty hallway.

I crept passed the bathroom and Lena’s bedroom. The lights were all off. I paused at the head of the stairs, listening. I couldn’t hear anything. A little faster now, I went downstairs and eased the front door closed behind me.

The brisk cold of the wind whipped around my face. The night air seemed to suck at me, making my skin feel dry like weathered stone. I walked along the deserted street, my feet knowing where to go. The cold sank into my skin and my teeth were chattering by the time I arrived. I let myself in through Miranda’s bedroom window, hoisting my leg over the low windowsill and embracing the warmth inside.

Miranda yawned and hugged me when I sat down on her bed. It was nice at Miranda’s. Not as tidy as Gran’s house, but friendlier and comfortingly busy in the daytime. Her bedroom walls were like mine, covered with pictures cut out of magazines. But hers were collaged on corkboard with the sides carefully trimmed into straight lines. The walls were a warm yellow and fashion scarfs hung from hooks on the back of the door. I always felt at home here.

“You’re *freezing!* Your skin is like *ice!*” she said, shivering and pulling the blankets up to cover her arms. I got the spare duvet from the cupboard and wrapped it around myself. We chatted until the horizon grew light.

I knew Miranda would let me sleep if I wanted to, on a makeshift bed of quilts and blankets, and sometimes I did. But the familiar tug of guilt dragged me from the duvet and back out the window. It was just before six when I let myself back into the house. I crept back to the bedroom where Amy was snoring peacefully.

## **Lena – the playground**

The day after the screaming match at the shopping centre, Amy came home from school with her face more chapped and raw than usual. Leaving Cassie in her highchair, I ushered Amy up to the bathroom. She'd been grouchy since she stepped off the bus as if she knew what to expect. When I tried to get the cream on her face she slapped at me wildly, mostly hitting my arms. She had virtually no muscle tone and was so skinny that her slap didn't pack any punch. Lint from her clothes, and from the floor, had stuck to her irritated skin and needed to be washed off. She started howling, rhythmically; a familiar sound.

I picked up the washcloth again.

"Amy, it's okay. Listen to me. You're okay." I tried to calm her, but she threw her head about and head-butted me in the chest. I let her go. The cream to help her skin dropped to the floor. I picked it up and showed it to her. I could hear Cassie banging away with her spoon.

"Look, Amy. This will make it feel better." I keep my voice soothing. But she didn't want me anywhere near her; she was too far gone in her terror. I continued to speak in low tones, hoping that she would tire. But she shoved me again and this time managed to get her finger into my eye. I tried to keep from yelping in pain, stifling it into more of a grunt. Eventually I got her on the floor, sitting in my lap. My heart was beating fast as I rocked her. Her breathing was jagged, but in minutes she was calmer. Only then did she let me wipe her face and put the cream on. Then I got her to stand up and I took her hand. Down in the living room I turned on the television and put on a cartoon for her and Cassie. Amy giggled weirdly. It was high-pitched and eerie, and always made me cringe. She only did it in the aftermath of her outbursts. I hated it.

Cassie, freed from the highchair, was clutching at me, grabbing at my hair and clothes, getting her fingers caught in my necklace. I let her do it, pulling her to me. Amy sat just out of my reach, watching the screen. I knew she would not let me hug her so I held Cassie a bit tighter instead and watched the television too.

Later that afternoon I took them to the local playground. Amy always tried to open the car door and jump out when she saw it. I wasn't sure why she was so obsessed with this particular park because all she did was sit at the top of the slide and stim with her beads.



As soon as I opened the car door, Amy leapt from her seat, ran across the sandpit and clambered up the climbing frame. The equipment was designed for much younger children so she had to duck down through the archways to reach her usual spot on the slide. I helped Cassie onto the baby swing, but had only pushed her a few times before two young girls arrived with their mother. I stroked Cassie's hair and helped her out of the swing to play in the sandpit.

It wasn't long before one of the girls ran over to me pointing an accusing index finger at Amy. "She hit me! She hit me!" she shrieked. I went through the motions of asking the girl if she was all right. Reluctantly, she admitted that she was.

The girl went back to playing. This time I watched as the girl climbed close to Amy to get to the slide. Sure enough, she soon yelled in her shrill voice, "She hit me again!" She held her arm out to her mother to prove that she had been injured. As far as I could see nothing had happened. Maybe she wanted to get hit, for the attention. It was a big playground and Amy wasn't occupying all of the equipment.

Soon the mother yelled over to her daughter with a voice that could crack the sky, direct and thick. "Let's go! We can't stay where people hit you!"

I gave her a dark look. She gathered her bags and ducked her head, ready to scurry away like a little rat. She must've seen me walking over to her. If she had something to say she could do it to my face. Maybe she thought I'd shrink into the fading sun with my badly behaved daughter.

She turned and fled at my approach. I swore at her retreating back, but she had the sense not to turn around.

"Come on, girls. Let's go home." I said, walking them back to the car. "Did you have fun, Amy?" I didn't expect an answer. She never spoke. It was a familiar one-sided conversation and, as usual, I was left to fill in the blanks.

\* \* \*

The sound was faint, but it was too rhythmic to be anything else at half-past nine at night. I walked hesitantly upstairs, part of me hoping that, in a second or two, I would realize it was the wind, and not my daughter. But it was not the wind, or the settling floorboards. It was Amy convulsing violently on the floor of her bedroom.

She lay in a pool of her own saliva, sprawled across the carpet. I sat her up and she went limp in my arms, her head lolling back like a Pez dispenser. The seizure must have

happened while I was watching television with Jamie, as Cassie, who refused to stay in bed, scampered across my toes. I had thought Amy was asleep, but she was here, all alone, fireworks blasting through her brain, disoriented, pupils so wide that I could barely see the brown of her eyes. And on her face, a look of utter terror. I tried to comfort her, dear Amy, my daughter who hated being touched or comforted.

“It’s okay. It’ll be okay. It’s okay.” But I didn’t believe this myself. So, instead I spoke the only true thing I knew: “I’m here, I’m here, sshhh, I’m here.”

Before long her body soon went quiet and slack. I laid her on the mattress and sat by her, watching her eyelids drop, waiting for her to fall asleep, her head resting in the palm of my hand. When she was snoring softly I left. I felt drained. That must have been when my hand felt in my pocket for the scrap of paper with Tim’s number on it.

It was his distance that drew me to him. He’d said his name was Tim, not Timothy, just Tim. When he walked beside me, not touching, his strides had been measured and relaxed. He seemed happy to let me talk about whatever I wanted. And when I fell silent he didn’t prod me for more. I liked that. His sandy hair was slicked back in an oily rigidity and his tired-looking eyes were set deep in his skull. His teeth were a beautiful, dentist-ad white. The rest of him didn’t really live up to those teeth.

He wasn’t a big man; only around five-foot eight, judging by the few inches he had over me, but his strength still struck me. Not a bulky, amassed strength, all bronzed down and oiled up, more the sinewy or knotty strength of a lean man, firmly planted on his legs; his feet hitting the footpath with surety. I liked that about him. Maybe he’d be the calm, steady centre that I could gravitate around.

I thought I could see a glint of goodness in him but I only saw it by searching for it, swirling him around in my mind until everything boring and petty fell away, leaving behind something bright and worthwhile at the bottom of the pan. Gold-panning. That was what crossed my mind as I typed his number in and pressed call.

## **Tim – the move**

We spent the night in the cramped space of her mattress, back-to-back, or huddled together to fit. She had not bothered to put her clothes back on and her vertebrae grated against my own as we breathed. I had pretended to fall asleep after sex and then listened to her moving around the room and hallway. Eventually she came back, quelling whatever impulses had dragged her out. When the sounds finally stopped and I felt her settle beside me, I opened my eyes.

Often women looked peaceful or vulnerable in their sleep, but not Lena. Her brow was slightly furrowed and, even in her sleep, she'd snatch, drag or kick the blankets.

In the early hours, there was a wailing at the bedroom door. Cassie had fallen asleep on the couch earlier on in the evening. Lena had left her there and she had woken up to an empty room. Somehow she must've made it up the stairs and I heard the frantic banging of her palms on the door. Lena stirred slightly and then woke all at once, leaving the bed to let Cassie in. There wasn't any room but, hysterical and exhausted from crying, she fell asleep on top of Lena, her head resting on her mother's bare chest.

I must've caught a few minutes sleep here and there, but when I awoke, my muscles were clenched and sore. I had used my jacket as a pillow and the lines had left their impression on the side of my face.

When I stayed again the next night Lena didn't say anything. When I appeared on her doorstep she just let me in as if she had been expecting me. That was how the sex was as well: expected and accepted, if not exactly welcomed. Not at all like that first night on the beach. But she let me as though she had given me a master key. I walked right in, completely unhindered. She didn't say anything the night after that, when I moved my things into her house. All she did was pull the clutter off the cot and drag it into the girls' room. It was this that made me say yes when she asked if I'd watch Cassie and Amy while she ducked out to run some errands.

My visions of sitting on the couch, a warm mug of tea in-hand, went out the window when she explained everything that went along with "watching the girls."

"We're trying a new medication, but it makes her too tired. She sleeps a lot now." It felt like Lena was talking more to herself. "She used to be pretty active. The doctors thought she might start talking by now, but she hasn't, yet." Her eyes flicked to me as if to ward off any dispute. I gave a half shrug and apologetic smile.

“She may improve ... when she becomes more accustomed to the dosage. Anyway, there are extra blankets behind the couch. If she seizes – she probably won’t, she usually seizes during the night – then call me. Most of the time she’s ...” Lena gave a noncommittal gesture, “... well, she’s like this most of the time.” We both looked at Amy absorbed in shaking a pompom and tapping the hardwood floor.

“Anything else?” I asked, apprehensively.

“Don’t let Amy get hungry. Cassie’ll get hungry and she’ll let you know, crying and whinging. But when Amy gets hungry and no one’s in the kitchen, she’ll go and take whatever she can find: a block of raw bacon, *anything*, bite into it, chew through the plastic and everything. Don’t let her feed herself either – doesn’t matter what it is, she’ll throw it on the floor. There’s baby food in the pantry for Cassie. Oh and there are nappies for both of them in the hallway cupboard. Cassie’s are pink and Amy’s are the ones with the stars.” Lena untucked the top of Amy’s shirt and pointed. Amy looked at her as she tucked it back in. “When Jamie gets home she’ll take over. She knows what to do. Oh, and I’m not sure I told you, Amy is a ‘faecal smearer’, so, if she can, she gets into her shitty nappy, covers her hands and body with it, and whatever is nearby: walls, rugs, bedding, you name it. Just keep an eye on her nappy and you’ll be fine.”

It wasn’t long before, in the heavy quiet that followed the slamming of the front door, I smelt one of them. It was Amy, of course. I’d never changed a nappy before, let alone the nappy of a fourteen-year-old girl. I stood there for a long time just looking down at the tapping girl, not knowing if she was aware of me at all. I had seen Lena change her that afternoon, almost without looking, and certainly without breaking the thread of her conversation. I had tried to explain to Lena but she had simply laughed.

“Just do it. It won’t even take five minutes. You’re lucky she doesn’t have her period – then you’d really have something to complain about.” When I persisted with my doubts she grew angry and asked, with a menacing edge that only allowed one answer, whether or not she was going to have to stay home because of me. I watched with a forlorn, sinking feeling as she drove away.

First I got Amy to lie down on the floor. I couldn’t help but note the firm feeling of her young breasts through her thin top. They didn’t have her wearing a bra, but she needed one. Distracting Cassie away with some toys, and holding my breath, I took the soiled nappy off and cleaned Amy with a wet cloth. A slow wiping motion, while she stared at me. *How similar this is*, I thought, *the gesture is almost the same*. I pushed the clean nappy between her legs, then pulled her pants up over her long, spindly legs. *What a waste*, I

thought as she slowly got up and went into the kitchen. Her hips swung involuntarily, causing a tightness in my jeans. *What a waste of a body.*

Cassie tottered over to me with her hand outstretched.

“De! Dee! De!” she said excitedly.

“Yes,” I said, “it’s a ...” I tried to identify the object in her hand. It was dark with something thin and straight poking out between her fingers. With a queasy recognition I saw she was holding a dead cockroach.

“Oh, no. You don’t want that. It’s dirty.” I made a disgusted face to illustrate the point. “Yuck – dirty.”

“Hee!” Cassie laughed, delighted, and still holding the cockroach. I took her hand and brushed the bug onto the ground. Cassie started to grizzle half-heartedly. I was trying to distract her with one of the toys when I heard Amy rummaging through the drawers in the kitchen. I remembered Lena’s warning about Amy’s tendency to eat anything and rushed to find her. The leap of quick panic in my chest elicited a strange anger in me. Feeling overwhelmed and losing my patience, I grabbed her arm with more force than was necessary and brought her back into the lounge room.

Almost immediately, Amy snatched the pompom Cassie was playing with, making her cry in earnest. The cat purred behind me. We wanted Lena to come home.

“Soon. She’ll be home soon,” I told the girls, hoping it was true.

## **Jamie – the flashcards**

I sat on the mattress in our bedroom with Amy across from me. The old fan in the corner whirred, turning back and forth, moving hot air around the room. I was still wearing my school uniform but didn't bother changing. Instead, I pulled the elastic out of my hair and massaged the tight feeling out with my fingers. Then I brushed Amy's hair forwards so it framed her face. It looked just like mine.

The sun was just starting to set. I held up a handful of photos in front of Amy, pointing.

"Do you remember Dad? We were pretty young when he left. I was three. Well, that's what Lena says anyway. So you must've been two." Amy brushed the photos lightly with the tips of her fingers.

"Look, there's you." I showed her the picture where she was just a baby, even younger than Cassie was now. Amy made a grab for the photo. I felt it begin to rip. "No, Amy. You have to be gentle." Amy hummed, tapped the wall several times and touched the photos again. I smiled at her and she smiled back.

"That's better. You would've liked Dad. He used to buy us ice-cream when Lena wouldn't. It's the only nice thing I remember from when I was a kid. Everything else was pretty bad. Lots of yelling and breaking things. Lena was always crying or screaming or both. You think it's bad now! It was terrible then. You're probably better off not remembering." I put the photos aside and picked up Amy's flashcards. I fished out the drink card and held it in front of Amy. "What's this?" I asked her.

Amy reached for her beads. I snatched them away.

"No, Amy. You can have the beads when you tell me what this is. Sign the word." I stared at her intently, willing her to focus. "What's this? It's a drink, Amy. Water. Make the sign for drink, Amy." I made the sign with my hand.

Amy flapped her hand and tapped the picture.

"Yes, drink. Make the sign for drink."

Amy grabbed the beads. Spots of light flicked over her face as she started shaking them. I sighed and leant back against the wall.

Someone was walking around. It must be Tim. He was here all the time now and I could hear his heavy steps. As he walked passed the doorway Amy broke out into a broad grin.

“Do you like him, Amy?” I asked her. She laughed and I laughed back. “Timmy? You like him?” And for a moment everything felt like it should: sharing a secret crush with my younger sister.

“I think he might like you,” I said. Smiling and laughing, she smacked her hand down on the mattress, then on my knee, just a little too hard, but I didn’t mind.

## **Lena – the morning**

I stared into my mother's eyes. We were underwater, it was quiet, and we spoke in whispers, each unable to hear the other because of the rapids overhead. My mother's hair floated all around her so, with the sunlight shining through it, it looked like she had a shifting auburn halo. She held my hand. Her warm tears floated to the surface, where they were taken downstream by the rapids, and out into the ocean. I tried to follow as many tears as possible, but soon all the water looked the same. As they floated away into the wide spans of blue, I kept searching for them.

I woke with a jolt.

Someone was trying to yank at the blankets. Too big to be one of the girls. He tried from the side of the bed, rolling over, dragging the blankets with him. I kicked and pushed, resisting with my whole body. He got up and left, a feeling of apology in the air. I woke up an hour later to no one.

Later I heard Tim in the kitchen throwing the dirty cutlery into the sink, slamming the cabinets. He'd be disgusted by the dirt and mess. It was disgusting, I knew. I recognized him by his sulking sounds, like a child having a tantrum. It had been so long since someone else was privy to the small workings of our household. I was surprised to find him still here, though he'd moved into my bed weeks ago.

When the last man moved out I felt like celebrating. No more of that nasty pig-of-a-man lying semi-naked on my bed every afternoon. No whining voice pleading for me to bring him more beer, while I held the house together with duct tape and determination. He'd barely acknowledged Cassie, his daughter, then not even six months old. He'd completely ignored the other two other than to yell at them to keep it down. I was so happy when his car disappeared, along with my television and the rent money from my wallet. Payment for the removal of waste – that was what it felt like.

I had been left before so I was used to it. Like the tide, those who came rushing in to help soon rushed out the back door. Tim would leave just as quickly and I'd be left with the current tugging at my legs and the sand sucking away from under my feet.

The first guy had left when his kids, Jamie and Amy, were just toddlers, still hanging off me. Jamie cried as her father drove away. She didn't cry when the other one left.

And now there was Tim.



In bed he was like a soft child, burying himself between my breasts. I'd stroke his hair and speak in a low sweet voice, the way I imagined his mother once had. That's all men wanted – a mother. Women knew they couldn't have that. They had to be the mother. Different types of mothers perhaps, but mothers all the same. We even give our girls their own dolls to look after. *Be careful with Mary-Sue. Don't drop her. Have you fed her yet? That's right, rock the baby.* It was a short step to looking after a real baby. We'd been practising since before we could walk.

The banging in the kitchen made me angry all of a sudden. I had children, children who needed me – why should I have to look after another one? I went down to the kitchen, ready to face whatever was before me. Ready to fight, if need be. Tim was hunched over the stove. The smell of coffee wafted towards me. He looked up and smiled.

“Would you like some breakfast? There's toast and coffee,” he said.

I felt a surge of thankfulness. A stirring. A stirring of tenderness. *Interesting*, I thought, *that could be something like affection*. Not quite affection, nothing that strong, but something akin to it. I tried to make my face show my feeling but Tim was not looking. I had an overwhelming desire to tell him, *hold me tight, look after me, be strong!* But these were words I couldn't say, wouldn't say. And they were demands I knew he couldn't meet.

I looked at the coffee and the food, and I sighed.

“I'll just wake the girls,” I said, and went back upstairs. I found Amy halfway down the stairs, shit covering her arms and mouth like she was dipped in fondue. All down the wall, on the handrail, and along the floor. Amy finger-painting in long brown smears. Her bus was leaving in thirty minutes.

“Jamie! *Jamie!*”

“*What?*”

“I need you to get Cassie ready for day-care – don't come down the stairs yet, Amy's covered them in shit.”

“Uggh!”

“Jamie!”

“I'm *doing* it already!”

“Can you drop Cassie on your way to school?”

She didn't reply but by the time I'd cleaned the stairs and got Amy cleaned up and dressed they were fed and gone. And soon Amy's bus was idling outside the house. Tim stared at me as I marshalled Amy out the front door, traces of her shit still on my shirt, and

put her onto the bus. I waved as the bus pulled away. She tapped the window, smiling at me. I couldn't help but smile back.

## Jamie – the school check in

I opened the bathroom door to see Lena checking her face in the mirror. She spent more time looking in the mirror since Tim moved in. She had her work shirt on, her hair pulled back from her face. Her eyes flicked to me, then away.

“You said you would go to Amy’s school check in,” I accused.

“I’ve got to work.”

“Why didn’t you swap shifts? Or get the day off?”

“Look, I can’t afford to take time off. And I don’t see you getting a job.”

“Well, someone needs to go and meet her teachers.”

“Jamie, leave it. I don’t have time for this.”

“I’ll go then.”

She snorted. “*You?*”

“I’ll tell them I’m eighteen.”

Lena sighed in frustration. “Do whatever you want. I don’t care.”

“I will.”

The circle route bus stop was only a short walk away from Amy’s school. Some bus drivers asked for an ID card and refused to take you if they saw the school uniform. Luckily, this bus driver was happy to take my money with a polite nod, her eye straight ahead as I chose a seat towards the back.

All of the kids at Amy’s school had Autism Spectrum Disorder. The teacher and six aides worked in a large and spacious room with lots of bins and cubbies, all very white. Schedules for the different activities were displayed on the walls. Indifferent eyes slid over me, and no one asked me what I was doing. I took a seat among the parents.

One woman beckoned me towards an empty chair. I took it, feeling a little less out of place.

“They’re great here, aren’t they?” she said into my ear. She wore a shirt with a loud, geometric print, and white pants. The studs of her earrings glinted; they looked the real deal. Her face was kind of round, suggesting she ate too many chocolates and cakes, but her makeup looked nice – not overdone like some women do.

“Yeah.” I nodded, not really sure what she was referring to.

“My David is starting to write after only eight months. He couldn’t even form a sentence before we came here.” This piece of information burst right out of her, like she

wasn't even trying to hold it in. She probably said the same words to everyone she spoke to. For some reason I felt strangely reassured by this woman, who nodded like a sage leaning back in her seat.

"Who are you here for?" she asked.

"Ah, Amy." I paused. "My sister," I added a little warily.

"Oh, Amy is such a delight. Such a sweet little wisp of a girl."

Wheelchairs and other adaptive equipment were positioned drawn up to two large work tables. Four kids sat at one large station, another four around the other. Amy looked up with a big smile, and a loud hum. I went over to her.

She had a sentence strip that read 'I want ...' in front of her and an array of picture cards to stick on a blank Velcro tab. I'd seen her use it, but she often got the cards mixed up. Pretty much she only wanted what she always wanted: water, beads, or food.

The lady waved at Amy in a friendly way and I went through the motions of pointing and waving to encourage Amy to respond, knowing that she probably wouldn't. And she didn't. She just sat looking at her picture cards and rocking in her chair.

The Daily Living Skills room had racks of clothes, coffee and cake for the parents, and staff helping out with an energy that was so happy, I could feel it buzzing off them. The teacher who had taught Amy for two years came over to discuss her therapies, diet and community outings. When she looked at me I could see the cogs in her head ticking. I waited for her to ask questions about why I was here or where Lena was. But she didn't, and I liked her more for it.

She told me that they had been working on sorting similar objects into bins. Amy had started to use a stamp to "sign" her name, she said. I was impressed though I wasn't sure what she'd ever have to sign. Toilet training, brushing her hair and teeth and getting dressed were still her main goals. I nodded.

"It would be great to get Amy involved in our supported-work program, but we've had a little trouble getting in touch with Lena," the woman said. It didn't surprise me. Lena was dubious about Amy coming here at all. *It's fucking ridiculous what they expect her to do*, she said when I brought up the possibility of Amy going more often. *I don't trust any of them. She's better off here – she's safer at home.* I'd meant to bring it up again but I didn't have the energy.

"The supported-work programs?" I asked.

"We have intensive family support funding for people like Amy to get a bit more independence. They can get jobs with someone there to support and supervise them.

There's one that would really suit Amy. It would involve her paintings being turned into postcards – half of the proceeds would go directly to her.”

“Oh,” I said, letting the information sink in. I wondered how I could convince Lena this was a good idea.

I soaked up the optimism and helpfulness of the staff, and then left. I felt so sure that Amy could have a better life. It made me so happy I skipped the rest of the day at school and went into the city. I spent the afternoon wandering the shops and stealing odd little things that I thought Amy might like. Then I left, just in time to pick up Cassie from day-care.

## Tim – the beach

It was hot all week. The humidity was suffocating and made me feel lifeless. I went about my work half-dazed, blundering around paddocks, squinting into the sun. I paid little attention to the people whose properties I was inspecting, using my hand to shield my eyes from the harsh rays and fanning myself with my file. All day I was in and out of the work car, relishing those exquisite moments when I could stand in the shade for a while. Talking about fire was its own special torture, and it had me dreaming of my air-conditioned office.

The house was no better. There was no insulation, so nights sharing the narrow bed with Lena were restless and sticky. Lena was irritable in the morning and snappy when I got home that afternoon.

I was not keen on the idea of having to find somewhere else to live so I resolved to do something to lighten her mood. *A trip to the beach*, I found myself offering, *with the girls*. Lena was dubious but she eventually agreed when Jamie piped up in my favour.

Now Saturday had arrived. I looked at my watch, it was almost noon. We should've left an hour ago.

"Jamie!" Lena rapped her fist on the bathroom door again. Jamie's reply was muffled but the meaning was clear. Lena gave a small grunt of frustration then looked at me, standing with my swimsuit in hand. It was as though she thought I'd suggested going to the beach just to annoy her.

"Er, I need to get changed," I said, pointing at our bedroom where Cassie still lay asleep on our mattress under the cool fan.

"Oh, just get changed in there." She gestured to the girls' bedroom. I hesitated, wondering if she intended me to change in front of Amy. She saw my hesitation and honed in on it.

"Oh for God's sake! She's not interested in your dick."

I crept into the room like a scolded child. Standing facing the staring girl, I stripped off. It felt strangely intimate this undressing under Amy's vacant gaze, like having sex in a church. It was almost exciting. I tugged my board shorts up one leg then the other with a strange sense of exhilaration, feeling inexplicably disappointed when the material covered me. Amy went back to banging on the floor.

At the beach the silhouettes of young women simmered in the breeze, hair swept back from faces. Their stretched out bodies sizzled as they reclined on striped towels and

sheltered their eyes with the crooks of their elbows. Some young men sat a conspicuous distance away from the women, with an open esky propped behind them. Their noses and shoulders were a shiny, blistered pink.

I slid on my sunglasses to inspect Lena more closely – to see if she was looking at the young men and women, like I did. Or maybe she was looking at me. Careful not to turn my head, I strained my eyes sideward to follow her line of sight. She was watching the slow bulge of ships in the harbor labouring against their ropes.

We walked until we were as far from other people as we could get, and lay down our towels, claiming the spot as our own. The sand was coarse here, more like crystals than dust. Jamie and I swam away from the bank, the water turning from blue to brown, and suddenly deepening. We trod water. Her small face was sun-polished with delight. I was afraid that one day that shine would rub off.

*How could she be so happy?* I wondered as I ducked away from the water she flicked at me. For the most part, I knew what her life was like, and the rest I could guess. Maybe she laughed out of pure necessity. She had to be her own parent because her parent couldn't be, not all the time.

"The water's nice! We never get to the beach. I can't even remember the last time," Jamie yelled.

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

She tilted her head back to feel the sun warm her face. "Do you think I'm pretty, Timmy?"

"Sure. My teenage self would think you're a keeper."

She smiled, showing all of her teeth. "Thanks, Fireman Tim." She giggled at her latest nickname for me then dived down, fathoming the water with the agility of a fish. A silver-backed swimmer in the seams of the sea.

Lena was in the shallows watching Cassie run towards the retreating waves then run away shrieking as they advanced. Next to Lena, Amy brushed her hands back and forth in the sand and gaped up at the seagulls overhead.

My legs looked like large fish in the stippled water. As I was noticing this, Jamie pulled me over backwards, holding me down with her darkly tanned arms.

"You're so white," Jamie said as I blustered and blubbered the water out of my mouth.

"English skin." My usual response.

I lifted my eyes toward the high, white cotton clouds. A tiny click of neurons and I realised something. I was happy. I tried to savour the feeling but my intellect piped up, holding up my situation against social standards and finding it lacking. The feeling I identified was steadily picked apart in my head. Joy quickly became contentment, and soon blankness became emptiness, and my happiness became little more than an aftertaste.

Beneath our treading feet there were brittle feathers of coral and darting schools of tiny fish. We had gone out too far. In the murky half-light, somewhere below us was an unreachable blackness, a crushing weight. Shivering, we swam back to shore.

The sea water dripped and puddled as Jamie and I blinked through the rivulets streaming down our faces and off our eyelashes.

Under the sun's harsh light, Lena's skin looked leathery. The wrinkles across her forehead didn't go away when she stopped frowning. She had become thinner in the few short weeks I'd known her. Her body was betraying her. The ashtrays around the house had become full of hair. Stress-related hair loss, I'd told her, but she refused to see a doctor. Or a psychologist.

I reached for my fishing gear, one of the draw cards when I'd brought up the idea, and set up the rods.

Amy, in her fold-out chair, was unable to grasp the fishing rod I tried to put there, but I persisted. I prised the beads out of her skinny fingers and wrapped her hand around the rod, squeezing her fingers as if her hand was made of clay and would somehow stay where it was moulded. Under Lena's sceptical gaze, I gripped Amy's hand and weakly cast out for her. But she started to struggle, so I had to give up and cut a hole in the bottom of the built-in drink holder so I could shove the rod through her armrest. I let the rod slouch at a pathetic angle; the line barely dangling into the water. *Good enough*, I thought, unable to look back at Lena. I could feel the discontentment coming off her in waves even with my back turned.

The fishing lines hung in big, arching loops out in front of us. Waves sighed and licked at the soles of our feet leaving slick green watermarks. I looked over at Lena's face, hoping for a flicker of interest or perhaps a smile, but she was crouched and staring out at the water. The worn-out soles of her thongs were getting wet but she didn't appear to notice. I wondered if she was thinking about the first time we met. Her tangled hair fell over her face, her expression unreadable.

"You know there's a theory that if you count the waves there's a pattern. Like every third, or ninth, or whatever, is bigger than the rest because it hits the wave in front of



it and creates this one big wave. And if you're paying attention you can pick when it's going to happen," I said to Lena, although it was Jamie who nodded amenably.

Lena shivered, despite the heat, and looked miserable. I changed tactics.

"Do you want to try?" I offered her my rod just as Cassie tried to climb onto Lena's lap with her wet, sandy little hands grabbing at clothes and hair. Lena turned her eyes into bullets and I took that for a firm no.

I cast out again, letting the line rush through my fingers but the expected splosh from thirty metres or so never came. Instead, the line tugged upwards. A seagull was flipping around like a kite at the end of the line, twisting and jerking.

"You've caught a seagull!" Jamie said, in shock.

I stared up, not knowing what to do.

Behind me I heard a rasping hack. I cast a frantic eye back at Amy, who was staring up at the bird and wheezing. Lena smiled then started laughing; a struggling snigger that soon escalated, spreading to the others so they were all cackling in an unrestrained, squealing pitch. Then my line went slack, arching back to the ground like a pencil mark drawn faint against the blue of the sky. The seagull had wrenched itself free and flown away. Then I laughed too, shooting a raised eyebrow, an I-told-you-this-was-a-good-idea look at Lena. But Amy's manic, wheezing laugh did not ease up and I soon felt the victory slip away. *It's not a human laugh*, I thought. *Who knows what she is really laughing at?* Her drool was stuck to her shirt in a long string of glob. Her eyes unfocused and her skinny body slumped sideways. She was a shell without an inhabitant, vacant.

As we made to leave empty-handed, Lena's dark eyes measured me.

"They just weren't biting today," I said, as though she had asked a question.

"Fat lot of good that does, then."

"You can't force fishing. That's not how it works." But she was no longer listening.

Jamie picked up the wet towels and threw them into a plastic bag. She looked at me.

"Come on ... Fireman Tim." She giggled again. She had had a good time at least.

Lena gathered up Cassie, carrying her high on one hip, and dusted the sand off Amy. Her wrists were strong yet slender as she grasped Amy's arm. Her face was serious, as if bracing herself as she guided her daughters up the sandy slope of the beach, without looking back.

## **Lena – the checkout**

When Sarah first started working in the shopping centre she told me she was thirty-one. We both knew that was a lie. She was old enough to know better, to know best even. She could be beautiful, I noted with interest, with her pretty collarbones and flyaway hair. Prettier than me, anyhow. Today she looked away from me with a sorrowful expression that cried out to be asked what was wrong. It was a slow day on the checkouts, and air-conditioning in our area was turned up too high. I watched as she pulled on her sweater, her back arching and her slender arms bent upwards.

“Uh! This place is so depressing.” She sighed, leaning on the checkout across from me. “I can feel it sapping my life, draining all the happiness and youth out of me. One day I’m going to be in the middle of a god-awful twelve-hour shift and I’ll realise I’ve spent my whole life here without realizing. Doesn’t it make you feel sick? It makes me feel sick.” She looked at me expectantly. I thought about how long I’d been here, or places just like this one. Too long. Much longer than Sarah.

“Yeah,” I said, indifferently. “Work is fucked.”

“That’s the worst part about these places. Your life slips by without you noticing,” Sarah continued. “We spend all day running about for people who can’t read a price tag or aisle number without someone spoon-feeding it to them. And for what? Do you think that they’re grateful?” She paused, expectant.

I shrugged.

“No, they’re not. Not one bit. Don’t kid yourself. Even the nice ones who bother to say thank you. They all think that we’re their personal servants just dying to carry and find things for them. Bastards, all of them.” She looked into my eyes, as serious as a car crash. Sarah’s take on life didn’t leave much space for disagreement. It wasn’t really a conversation though; I was just an audience.

“I guess,” I said.

Only then did she ask me about my life. I threw her a few dry husks of information to chew on, a few old details that I was sure I had told her before. I knew she would not ask for more.

A packed trolley parked in aisle four caught my eye, the one I’d seen half an hour earlier lined with cans of dog food and topped with a bag of chips. No one had claimed it yet. I checked the clock on the wall and waited another five minutes then mentioned it to

the boy who'd started work a couple of weeks ago. He wore the same faded, shapeless uniform that I had on. He walked over to the trolley and, with the precision of a surgeon, he laid a hand on the milk.

"It hasn't been here that long," he reported.

Sarah lapped up the drama. "What should we do? Some of that food will go bad. Should we unpack it?"

I felt sick with the sudden awareness that these mind-numbing days were part of a life that I would never get back. Years of boredom doing the same pointless things over and over. My stomach roiled with the aftertaste of onion.

It was Jamie's birthday in a few days. After my shift, I went down the refrigerated aisle and looked through the cake selection. I picked one up and examined it. It was much better than anything I could make and there was already "Happy 16<sup>th</sup> Birthday" written across the top in very precise letters. Jamie's friends would probably have elaborate cakes and piles of presents. I saw her face when they showed up wearing new clothes and playing on their new phones. She never complained though. She deserved more than this but I couldn't give it to her. This would have to be enough.

Driving home that afternoon, I traced my tongue over my still burnt and salty lips, and peeled my sweaty shirt away from my back. I pulled into the driveway, trying not to think about the state of the house: my cluttered coffin. Around the back of the house the garden shed stood open with its contents dragged and spread out.

I let my key click loudly in the lock and entered the silence. It was rare to have a full day when all three girls were at school or in day-care. And they wouldn't be home for another hour. The living room smelled hot as if the air hadn't moved all day. I left the cake, still in a generic plastic bag, by the door. The heat was sticky and, as I climbed the stairs, I felt coated in its heavy wetness. It was even hotter upstairs, and the ceiling fan in the bedroom laboured without effect. When I heard the tap of a mug on the kitchen table downstairs my heart swooped. Amidst a train wreck of thoughts, I ran back downstairs to find Tim at the table, one leg crossed over the other, his open laptop balanced on his thigh. Milk in a bowl of cereal wobbled like broken skin, a small spoon seesawing on the edge of the bowl. I looked and waited for it to drop.

"I was thinking, the ceiling could use some paint, and the walls," he said. It felt like more of an accusation than an observation. He didn't bother with hellos anymore.

"Perhaps you'd like to paint them?" I said. He would never paint them, of course, but he'd like them painted.

He turned and stared at his laptop again, without answering. I knew I meant as much to him as his last computer game.

I retrieved the cake and put it in the fridge. Tim said nothing and didn't look up again. We coexisted, but more often now I avoided occupying the same space as him for too long. We were good at doing empty things for each other. There was always the predictable cheap wine and sex. Or cheap sex and wine. We didn't talk. At least not to communicate with each other. Criticisms were given freely and kind words could not be trusted.

## Tim – the dance

I think I believed that life was like it was in cartoons and you wouldn't get hurt until you realised it. It was a kind of childhood indestructibility that was lost when we became adults and learnt to recognise the risks and dangers in the world. We were all like the coyote standing on thin air: only those who were aware of the gorge would fall and get hurt. This was what was going through my mind that evening when I picked up a hot oven tray without a mitt; it took a whole second for me to feel the burn and drop the tray. Angry, pink skin blistered before my eyes.

As I ran my painful fingers under the cold tap, I told Lena about my theory. She laughed in my face.

"It takes time for the pain message to reach your brain," she said, shovelling food into Cassie's mouth. "*Jesus*, don't you know *anything*?"

My cheeks flushed as I slunk away with her calling after me in the mocking "meep meep" noises of the roadrunner. I hated it when she made out she knew more than me. She was a checkout chick; she was supposed to be the unintelligent one.

I stalked into the lounge room. Jamie eyed me and swung her bare leg over the armrest of the couch. I sat down. A small triangle of her blue underwear was just visible. She looked at me looking.

"Whatcha thinking about, Timmy?" She smiled just like her mother.

I was a moment late replying. "Uh, Amy. Do you know where she is? Lena wanted me to feed her."

Jamie turned back to the TV before I finished talking. "Oh, I don't know. She was here a second ago." The light from the screen flashed blue, then yellow on her face. I couldn't quite remember how old she was. Lena told me she was in year 10. How old was that? Fifteen? Sixteen? Maybe younger? *Too young*.

I found Amy behind the couch. "There you are. What are you doing hiding down there?"

She was quiet as if she were asleep, except her eyes were open, twitching back and forth.

With my burnt fingers I gingerly picked up some of the objects she had scattered around her – ripped up paper, a plastic plate, strings of beads – and took her by the hand. I lead her over to the couch. Jamie had taken off into the kitchen. I changed the channel to

give Amy something to watch while I got her food. Her breathing was a shallow in-out, in-out. The room grew dark around us, as she sat, rocking to and fro.

\* \* \*

The next day I came home from work and Lena left immediately, leaving me with Amy. I put on some music to blast away the silence of the house. It also served to amuse Amy, I soon found.

She was like a marionette puppet. When I pulled the strings, she waved her skinny limbs and danced around. The chorus was loud and strong. *Here I go agaaaain on my ooown, going dooown the only road I've ever knoo-oown ...* Amy smiled up at me with her big jumble of teeth. She jumped arhythmically then bent down to tap the floor. Jamie appeared at the doorway and chucked her schoolbag on the couch. She sauntered over to the CD player shaking her head.

The music stopped abruptly. Amy kept laughing and jumping, her narrow hips twisting this way and that.

“Really, Timmy, I thought you’d have better taste, being a fireman and all,” said Jamie.

“Actually, I’m not a fireman,” I started, fingering the Band-Aids on my fingers, but Jamie had already busied herself in front of the CD player. “Are you going to DJ for us, then?” I asked.

She turned back to me, smiled and raised an eyebrow as a woman’s voice blared over the speakers. *Lights, camera, action. If he likes me, takes me home,* Jamie joined in, her voice deep and almost in tune. *Come on, you know you like good little girls,* she sang on, closing her eyes and swaying from side to side. She ran her fingers through her hair and let her hand trail back down her neck. I couldn’t tear my eyes away. She looked just like Lena. Amy moved her feet to the sound and grabbed at Jamie’s hair.

“No, Amy. We’re dancing.” Jamie said, abruptly stopping to untangling her sister’s fingers. She looked at me then. “Come on, Tim. Dance!”

“This isn’t really my style.”

“Don’t be so lame, Timmy! This is Lana Del Rey. Even Amy’s into it.”

*You can be my daddy. You can be my daddy.* The words blared through the speakers.

I swung my arms around feebly. Jamie let out a small, annoyed sound and grabbed my hand, forcing me to move more vigorously.

“This is how you dance to a song like this,” she said. She put my hands on her waist and then clamped her hands around my neck, rocking from one foot to the other. “Get it?”

“Er ... I think so.”

She pulled away. “Now try with Amy.”

“Jamie, I’m not sure—”

“Timmy! How’re you going to impress the girls if you never learn to dance?”

Amy’s narrow waist was warm beneath my hands. Her arms were bent close to her chest as she was squashed against me. She wriggled, trying to get away, then stopped and made a gurgling sound in her throat. I let her go before the song came to an end.

“I’m going to find Lena,” I said. I felt Jamie’s raised eyebrows as she watched me walk out of the room.

## **Jamie – the birthday**

My birthday cake was layers of sponge and cream, with a pink icing so perfectly smooth it looked plastic. I knew it was store-bought – no doubt about it – but it was more than I expected from Lena. Even from the stairs I could read the “Happy 16<sup>th</sup> Birthday” written on the cake in long, sticky letters. The words were beginning to melt under the heat of the candles, and dobs of wax were just starting to drip and dribble.

The big metal platter under the cake was something Fireman Tim had apparently insisted on. When he first moved in he’d paced out measurements around the house and made sure flammable items – pots of paint, jerry cans, and so on – were not stored too close to the barbeque. When the neighbours started up theirs he sidled up to the fence and raised his eyebrows, particularly when they left it smouldering.

“One spark is all it takes, Jamie,” he said. “The wind will do the rest.”

People nattered around the table. I recognised the voices of my friends – Miranda and Lee – along with their parents. I could also make out Tim and Lena in all the chatter. The singing began in uneven scraps as I walked into sight with the people left behind trying to join in halfway through. I stood uneasily and smiled at no one in particular until the hip hip hoorays were over. The candles flickered in sad pools of red and white wax as I gave a weak blow. Miranda broke into a fit of polite clapping.

Then Lena slid the knife over to me. I moved to pick it up and knocked the knife right off the table with my elbow. It clattered to the floor and lay there next to my foot. A stray cat hair curled around the blade. Lena picked it up and wiped it on her jeans before cutting the cake. A big slice was shoved in front of me, very pink and sugary. I passed it on to Lee, feeling ill all of a sudden. She looked at me suspiciously but took the paper plate out of my hands. Soon the cake was all in pieces and the adults began passing around beers.

Amy’s birthday was only three weeks later in the year than mine, but she hadn’t had a birthday party since we were very young; at least seven years ago. Lena had said that Amy wouldn’t notice either way. Lena had given up hoping, I knew that. But I saw the smile on Amy’s face when we sang happy birthday. I still wished she was going through this with me: graduating high school, getting a summer job, buying a used car. Maybe it could be that way. Maybe if I got her to that workplace the teacher had told me about.



I took the bracelet I had stolen for Amy out of my pocket. A silver chain with three tiny blue flowers dangling down. It was pretty. I had thought about keeping it for myself. Amy was mashing up her cake with her fists. She had pink icing all over her mouth and down her top. I crouched down beside her.

“Hey, Amy,” I whispered, “I got something for you.” I swung it in front of her face. Then I quickly clasped it around her wrist before she had time to move. I left her to her cake then, smiling as the little blue flower became covered in pink.

I crept away as the party turned into what it was going to be all along – an excuse for the adults to get together and drink. Their laughter followed me into the other room with Lena’s voice growing the loudest. I’d taken a discarded glass of wine, which slopped up the edges leaving streaks. I took a sip; tiny, just enough to cover the tip of my tongue. It was much sweeter than I had had before. Lena usually liked her alcohol dry, like her. I tried a bigger sip and the tang dug into the sides of my cheeks. I couldn’t help but pull a face. Taking the glass in both hands, I took an even bigger swig, gulping quickly, trying not to taste it too much and swallowed hard. I felt a bit sick and I wondered if Lena would even notice if I got drunk.

Miranda walked in, in search of a glass of water.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked.

“Nothing. It’s my birthday – I can do what I like.”

Miranda narrowed her eyes at me for a second and then took a glass off sink.

“That skirt looks really nice on you,” she said, but it was not really Miranda talking. Every now and then Miranda would become someone else. Someone who was extremely polite and only said things you wanted to hear; things that didn’t mean anything at all. I looked down at my plain black skirt, which was crumpled and starting to fray along the hem line. I knew it didn’t look good.

“Yeah. You look nice too.” Miranda hardly ever didn’t look nice. She looked warm and sunny in a yellow tank top and a clean, white shorts. She gave me a meaningless smile. *She’s so pretty*, I thought. *Does she even know?* Nice thin legs and beautiful arms.

The party had moved outside and the barbeque had been fired up. Someone was walking around taking photos. Then I recognised him, Lee’s father. A heavysset man, his shirt strained at the middle button around his big stomach. He had long, curly eyebrows. Lifting a hand, he stuck a small number of grey hairs back on his sweaty scalp. He held his camera in a questioning sort of way, tilting his head and slowly raising the lens to point at Lena and Tim. I watched Tim lean over to kiss Lena who looked away. Then something

else caught Tim's attention. A bird flying too low attracted by all the food. Tim looked upwards as the camera clicked, his face darkened by the bird's shadow.

## **Tim – the failing**

I had no inspections scheduled for the morning so I lazed about in bed until I was fairly certain everyone had left the house. I ventured downstairs. No-one was around so I let the computer start up on the kitchen table while I made a quick snack of buttered toast. By the time I settled down in front of it, it was ready for me to play a couple of games.

Lena soon corporealized, and objected, as usual. “You’re wasting your life playing these games. There are so many better things you could be doing, you know.”

She thought she was helping me by pointing out its purposelessness. But she was wrong. I knew why I did it. The sense of achievement was instant and left a small glow that I craved.

I tried to explain again. “It’s the sort of space where you can forget about where you live and what you ‘should’ be doing. You can feel connected to somewhere that has no relevance in your life. It’s like an in-between place.”

Lena took this in for a moment before responding. “Oh,” she said and walked to the window, her back to me. Her squashed pack of cigarettes materialized in her hand as she opened the window. She patted the cat and slipped the cigarette between her teeth, peering back at me.

It was frustrating, being sized up. From the outside I pigeonholed easily. It was even worse when I knew she probably had it right. Lena may not like what she saw but at least she knew what to expect.

She narrowed her eyes in satisfaction, sucking the last drag out of the cigarette before extinguishing it with a fizz. The window frame was puckered with such black pimples, all along its edge. I checked my watch – 10:35am – and gave myself another ten minutes.

Lena already had another cigarette in her long fingers and was flicking the lighter. When she finished her second cigarette she walked across the room and directed a demanding glance my way. She told me she had the late shift today. And the kids were out of the house. I knew what this meant. She undid the top buttons of her shirt as if I needed it spelled out. The gesture was strangely off-putting. She continued to insist with her body until I compliantly shut down the computer and followed her up into the bedroom. Her hands became insistent and greedy as she manipulated me into sitting high across her hips.

Greedy. Sharp. Pointed. Aggressive. Needy. This was not even lust, it was desperation – premeditated, not improvised. It felt like the opposite of desire.

“Try this,” she said, cupping my hands around her throat. I couldn’t keep my eyes from widening. I felt her steady pulse against my fingertips. It made me feel queasy, and deeply aware of my own blood hammering in my veins.

“Wh- what do you want?” When she released them my hands sprung away from her neck as if magnetically repelled. She rolled her eyes to the ceiling and sighed as I knew she would. She hated it when I asked questions. Instead of answering me, she rolled over, twisting her hips and sending me sprawling. It felt like I had just failed a test. Lena’s phone rang in the other room but she didn’t look up or make any move to go to it. While her face was turned away I crept out of the room. It was hard to be continually disappointing someone. I guess I wanted a kind of grade-seven intimacy. I wanted promises and handholding.

After that incident I found myself avoiding going to bed until I knew she was asleep. I would come up with excuses not to be alone with her in the house. And when I couldn’t avoid her, knowing what she was after, I’d make a show of cupping my hands and tensing my muscles without actually applying force to her windpipe, knitting my brows together in pretend effort. Unless I pressed hard enough to feel the furrowed tube of her throat she’d complain. It never got to the point where she was unable to breathe though. Instead, she maintained a constant, wheezy rasp. The more she egged me on, the more her need disgusted me. I was sure, even when we went out together, our silent, stiff-legged walks, had us both thinking about friends we used to have, people we could have been. Somehow, I had ended up with another woman who sapped my energy, just as Linda had. Perhaps it was inevitable, as if I was too mild for their tastes and they needed the kick to make me palatable.

After a few tense nights like this I suggested we go for a drink, to subdue Lena’s demands for a while. She said she needed time to get dressed. I never understood this process. Twenty minutes in front of the mirror making herself more alluring, more appealing – was it for the benefit of others or herself, I had no idea – then, she’d wrap herself up in a prickly, uninviting shell. *You don’t want to attract the wrong attention*, she’d said. *It’s dangerous*. I didn’t understand her at all, that much was clear to me.

The restaurant was only a short train ride so we decided to leave the car. That was a mistake. After weeks of endless heat, the weather took a turn. By the time we left the wind was up and the surf was throwing such a roaring mist that the coastline had faded into

whiteness where it curved away southward. The dirty smell of coffee hung above rotting timber and coastal damp. I could hear the branches of the trees slapping each other around. Then it began raining. The sky did not seem surprised. One big boom reverberated as we sheltered beneath the railway bridge. The swirling wind ensured we got a soaking anyway. Seagulls squealed, and wheeled through softened skies, as clouds paused in their onslaught. Drying out, we waited for the train. A few came through, some stopping at the opposite platform heading to local destinations, others muscled by, non-stop to the city. Eventually we gave up and searched for any restaurant that would let us in without a booking.

When we entered the restaurant I saw Lena watch me as I squirmed away from the looks of patrons. I felt their appraising once-over from my skinny arms to my short legs, and their probing looks left me feeling grubby and self-conscious. It was always the men. They would give a small jaw-clench and roll of a shoulder before they looked past me, already dismissing me. I knew what they were seeing when they looked at me. My eyes were too small, my body too narrow and shallow. I thought about the protrusion of my stomach, and how I looked down at it in the shower, fascinated and disgusted by its curves and slopes.

We found a table and, eager to have something to do, I ordered two drinks at the bar, carrying them back carefully, threading myself through the maze of people. Lena eyed the glass and ran her finger down the condensation and to the base, pausing for a moment before she drank. I could see her anticipating the citrus tang and the slow fire of the alcohol. I held my wineglass tight, still feeling uneasy.

“Greg! Hey, what a surprise!” she said, gesturing to a tall man loping past our table. He turned, his short, blonde hair curled about his ears. With a skittering squeal she sprung up to hug him. Then another hug, and soon I felt like I shouldn’t be watching without permission. When she didn’t pull away at all, the intimacy of the situation turned spotlight bright. Greg laughed it off, stepping backwards.

“Lena! It’s been too long. How’ve you been?” He had a discernible accent. Something a bit Kiwi, maybe. All of his ‘E’s becoming ‘I’s.

“Good, really good. You’re looking well.” I could see the nonverbal signals bouncing around. She smiled at him like a well-fed cat. There was a spark and attentiveness that was never present when she spoke to me. The air between them fizzed and crackled.

“So what brings you to the neighbourhood?” Greg asked, tucking his thumbs into his pockets.

“We were just having some dinner,” said Lena. I felt the awkward hanging of her “we” as Greg saw me sitting at the table. I watched for the familiar disregard.

“Hey.” His voice was careful now, in front of this larger audience.

“Oh, this is Tim. Tim – Greg. Greg – Tim.”

“Nice to meet you.” His hard stare clashed with his smiling mouth.

“Yes, nice to meet you too.” I offered a smile although I knew it looked rigid. Another long moment passed.

“Well, I’d better get going. But we should catch up soon – for coffee,” he said finally.

“Of course, yes. It’s great seeing you again, Greg.”

“It’s always a pleasure seeing you too,” he said. Another peck on the cheek.

After Greg left, I felt something humming off Lena. She seemed to shiver with excitement at some indefinable thrill. She leant into the table on her elbows and whispered at me like waves on the seashore, “So where were we?”

“A friend of yours?”

Lena brushed her hand over her chin, “Yeah, he is, I guess.”

My thoughts dissolved into the wine until I felt as light as a cork. Other people’s conversations bubbled up around us and scattered words drifted towards our table.

It was easy to tell when Lena was drunk because a flush crawled across her neck like a red flag. Perhaps it was a mechanism to give everyone fair warning to get out of the way. She was just like one of those brightly-coloured, poisonous frogs.

She was staggering by the time we set off home. I was off down the street before I realised that Lena was not following. Turning back I saw her disappear into a side street leading to the park. At least I hoped that was her destination. I didn’t have the energy to find out, or care, but I sighed and went after her anyway.

She stumbled down the small slope to a carpark, falling, her knees jarring on the tarmac. With one great effort she pulled her legs towards her and inspected the damage. Tiny blood globules started through the torn and inflamed skin.

“Let me see,” I said when I caught up to her.

She was like a child who had fallen off her bike, mutely letting me inspect her injury. I rubbed the sand off with my thumbs and gave her hands a kiss.

“It’s just a graze. You’re a trooper. You’ll be okay.”

She lifted her hands to let me pull her to her feet, but it wasn't easy. First I offered her a hand, then two, then I put my arm around her and, bearing most of her weight, dragged her upright. Then she shooed me off. At this point, I gave in and directed her from a distance with my fingertips as if I were a rudder on a boat.

## Jamie – the rating

Leaning back on my bed, I watched Miranda colouring her nails with a black marker.

“What about Adam?” she asked.

I flicked my eyes to the ceiling, thinking. “He’d be a six.”

“You’re so mean. He’s totally an eight.” We both knew that these fleeting secrets would be passed around the schoolyard tomorrow like sweets. She’s got a *crush*, Miranda would hiss, and the other girls would shiver. Half-truths would be told, so we could deny it all later on, when the words came back on someone else’s lips.

I shrugged. “Who else?”

“Um ... Xavier.”

“Maybe a seven.”

Miranda nodded, not really paying attention, still bent over her task. She added the finishing touches to her nails then looked up at me with the look she gave when she wanted me to do something. Her smile was wicked like a razor’s edge.

“How about Tim?” Then she burst into a fit of giggles at her daring and at the ridiculousness of the question. I pictured his high forehead and weak chest, his hair thin despite him not being that old. His long, shambling stride. The way he walked – hunched down – like tall people do to fit in even though he wasn’t tall. His arms and neck were brown, but the rest of his body was so pale he was almost see-through. His nails were always clean though, and well-shaped. He smelt like car freshener, or sometimes he smelt of smoke. His high cheek bones and deep brown eyes were the best parts of him.

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said finally, sitting up.

“Oh, come on. If you had to.”

“Seven-ish?” I smiled, a quick, warm flash then I opened the notepad on my lap and drew two hearts in the margin with my biro, loopy and small.

Miranda’s eyes bugged as she burst into a fresh set of giggles. “But he’s so *old!*”

But he didn’t seem old to me. In a lot of ways he seemed younger than we were.

“Yeah, but things are so much better when he’s around. He’s sweet. I don’t know,” I said, looking down at my hands. “He might even stay, if Lena doesn’t scare him off.”

“Do you think they’ll get married?”

I scribbled in the notepad. “Maybe. Lena is a bitch, though. They fight all the time. I don’t know why anyone would stay with her.”



Miranda looked thoughtful. “You’ll be old enough to leave home soon. Then you can live wherever you like. Maybe you could live with him.”

A thought crossed my mind for a second, but then it was gone.

“Lena would lose it if I left. She’d have a complete mental. And the socials would come and take Amy and Cassie for sure.” I didn’t tell Miranda that Lena had had meltdowns before. She’d spent too much time with Bill, buying heroin instead of food. It got really bad and Gran was given guardianship of us until Lena settled down. Now, with Gran gone, we’d go to strangers. People we didn’t know in houses we’d never been to. They’d split us up too. Who’d take all three of us?

Miranda was still giggling at the idea of Tim and me keeping house together, but my face was solemn. When Miranda noticed, her face became solemn too.

\* \* \*

“Getting dark soon,” Lena said pointedly when I got back home. She was putting cream on Amy’s face. Amy tried to brush her hands away.

“No. Leave it alone now. It’s sore and needs time to get better.” She offered Amy a shiny, silver pompom and Amy took it. *Shh shh shh shh*. She shook it rhythmically and spots of light flickered on the walls. *Shh shh shh shh*. I saw that the bracelet wasn’t on her wrist anymore. She might’ve broken it or lost it somewhere, or Lena might’ve taken it off her.

“You shouldn’t let her stim all day long. She’ll never get better like that.” I said, watching her.

“She’s fine.”

“She’s not fine. Did you use the flashcards with her?”

“I don’t need to. I know what she wants. It’s obvious.”

*Shh shh shh shh*. The spots of light moved around the room. Amy tapped the floor, rocking her body back and forth.

“That’s not the point, Mum. These therapies really *work*. She could be talking by now if—”

Lena laughed, meanly. “She’s had the same goal from those teachers since she was three. I don’t think they’re going anywhere.”

“If you only tried—”

“Oh, you think I *like* cleaning up shitty nappies and having her hit and spit at me?”

*Shh shh shh. Shh shh shh shh.*

“Maybe if you stopped treating her like there’s something wrong with her she would get better. And stop dressing her like she’s six. She’s almost fifteen!”

“If you think you can do better then be my fucking guest!”

I sucked in a lungful of air. “I want to sign her up to get a job. I talked to her teacher. I really think she could do it.”

Then it felt like there was no more air left. Amy tapped her pompom on her knee with a serious expression and flapped her hand. Lena glared at me silently then she stood up and walked over to me. My spine prickled. Maybe I had taken it too far. I got ready to make a run for it if I needed to. But Lena just slammed the tub of cream for Amy’s face down in front of me and walked out of the room.

## **Tim – the mini skirt**

Lena had started crying most nights. Her noise was an extraordinary irritation, as if she had floods of tears stored behind her eyes, as if she were flushing out all her grief and impurities. Sometimes she woke in the middle of the night and her crying would wake me up too. The first time it had happened I had dragged myself out of bed and sat with her, asking her what was wrong, asking her if she was okay. She had no answers for me so I had just put my arm around her. Eventually the tears had stopped falling and the hiccupping of her chest subsided. We had gone back to bed and I slept through the few short hours until my alarm went off.

These days I didn't get out of bed when I heard her crying. I would roll away from the noise, pressing my head into the pillow to block it out. She didn't care if I saw her cry either. Sometimes I thought she wanted me to see, meeting my gaze defiantly through her tears. During the day she was fine. She was detached even. The jobs of the day – feeding kids, washing her hair, changing nappies and putting on her uniform – were all carried out, fast and remote. That was the Lena that I could understand. But at the end of each day she would be different. Sometimes we would be getting changed for bed and as she shed her work uniform, her face would crumple like an old paper bag. She would drop her work clothes on the floor and pull on the top she usually sleeps in, crying all the while. I would watch from across the room. All that emotion made me feel like a stone. Her face was awash with everything she was felt while I was dry, and annoyed.

Lena got home from work before me that day and was sitting at the kitchen table, her body concave and thin as a coat hanger. She took a long drag from her cigarette and a whole chunk of ash dropped to the floor.

“How was work?” I asked.

She shrugged, blowing out a lungful of smoke.

I waited for her to ask how my day had been but she didn't. I busied myself with the files of reports I had to go through.

When Jamie sauntered in, schoolbag over one shoulder, Cassie over the other shoulder, the whites of Lena's eyes pounced on her, sharp and brisk like the bite of a whip. Soon Jamie was circled by Lena's smoke. Jamie went placidly amidst the tension, putting Cassie down to pour a glass of milk. She seemed immune to Lena.

When Lena got all hurt and angry like this, I killed her in my head. I imagined her dying suddenly, like someone smudged her out of existence. I didn't want her to die, I just wanted to see if I'd feel sad about losing her. It was a grief litmus test. If I could feel a stir of sadness, if I could picture myself missing her, I knew I should stay. Sometimes when I killed her in my head, she'd twitch. Maybe she sensed that she was being killed, over and over in my head.

"I've had enough," Lena said.

Her words irritated me because I had heard them before. Her jilted air grated on my nerves. I was sick of her carrying around her grief like a badge of honour, like a cloak she wrapped herself up in.

I didn't bother engaging with her. "Coffee?" I asked instead.

She closed her lids, whether to avoid the acrid smoke or to block me out, I didn't know. Eventually she nodded, and bent down to pick up Cassie.

I gave the coffee pot a rinse, even though it never really looked clean. Cloudy tide marks of years of coffee-brewing were permanently etched onto its glass. I dumped water into the pot, shaking fresh grounds into a filter paper and slotting everything into its prescribed place.

I set her coffee down in front of her, soupy black coffee sloshing against the mug's bright yellow interior. She put Cassie down, straightened her sweater and crossed her legs. I watched her dip her face to the curls of steam and take a sip.

*The way people like their coffee, that's the way they like their sex,* she'd said once, grinning over a dark roast, black coffee. My cup swam with cream and sugar.

I sat down across from her at the table and leafed through my report notes. I heard Amy's bus pull up outside.

"I'll get her," Jamie called from the other room. The front door opened and banged shut. Lena was picking at the dry skin around her fingernails.

"The shower's broken," I told her. Lena's brown hair clung to the plughole and soap was caked to the taps. I suggested calling the landlord, but she looked at me like I was an idiot.

"And what do you think he's going to say when he sees the state of this house?"

I was fairly sure that was a rhetorical question but I answered anyway.

"Maybe he'll make an effort to keep the house in working order."

Lena snorted. "Or maybe he'll kick us out so fast I won't even have time to get my stuff." I looked at the wall behind the stove, caked thick with grease and grime. When I'd

tried to clean it, the paint from the wall had come away exposing the powdery crumbling wall.

“What do you do when you have a rent inspection?”

“We don’t have rent inspections. As long as there’s no problem, the understanding is that no news is good news.”

“And what happens when you want to move out?”

“I guess we’ll figure that out when it happens.”

That was as much as I could get out of her, so when my mother called, I took the excuse and left the house.

We went out for dinner at a nice Italian restaurant. The waiter came over to us, easy and relaxed. He handed us menus and told us the specials. When he walked away from the table, my mother opened her menu and scanned the pages. I liked how easy the conversation was with her. Thus far, the tone of our talk had been conciliatory. And all of her lines of questioning were unobtrusive, especially where Lena was concerned. My mother asked merely who I was living with and did I like it there. She settled for a first name, a postcode, and a shrug as a response. I was sure she still felt guilty about kicking me out. I ordered lavishly, knowing she would pay the bill.

Dropping me back to the house after dinner, my mother peered out when the headlights shone on the house. The flowerpot she’d bought us when I first moved in was still sitting by the front door where she’d left it. But now it was half-dead. She got out of the car and went over to inspect the flowerpot. Cigarette butts stuck out of the soil, adding insult to injury.

“Plants can’t live on love and dog piss, Tim, and I made sure I got a low maintenance one. You need to bring it inside and water it.” She cast her eyes over me, “or put it in the ground.”

I nodded and lingered near a larger scrubby bush by the door, fingering its leaves. I saw my mother look over the disgraceful state of the yard. Even in the dark I could make out the clothes hanging on the line, a timeline of sun-bleaching. Some were fairly new and freshly hung out but others had been there so long the colour had sapped right out of them. Other clothes had been abandoned to the line and webs coated their pegs. The stray socks on the edges had been there so long that all were rigid and faded to the same nothing colour. The barren yard had bald patches and wild, overgrown edges. The hose lay cracking in the sun, leaving a pattern of dead grass when you tried to move it.

My mother let out a sigh. “Okay then,” she said, finally. “Say hello to Lena for me.”

I nodded.

“I will call you on the weekend,” she added.

She walked back across the dusty front yard and I waved from the front door then closing it behind me.

I walked into the bathroom to find Amy on the floor with her leg in Jamie’s lap. Jamie was methodically shaving Amy’s legs, the razor working back and forth. She’d dressed Amy in one of her miniskirts. It sat low on her skinny hips. On top she had on a deep blue tank top cinched in with a belt. Her lips were painted bright red and she had blush on her cheeks. Her hair was pulled back in a high ponytail. She looked like a fragile doll. Jamie noticed me and smiled.

“Don’t you think she looks hot, Timmy?” There was something in her voice that was odd.

Amy looked up at me. The spit had been freshly wiped from her chin and she looked nearly normal. I smiled at her, and she smiled back.

That night, after Lena had cried for a solid forty minutes she had fallen into a very deep sleep with the blankets pinned underneath her. I, however, lay wide awake. I tried to wrestle some of the blankets back from Lena but she was immovable. I gave up and left the bed. I wandered along the corridor to the girls’ room. Jamie was not there. I’d suspected she was sneaking out at night, but I hadn’t said anything to Lena. Sharing a room with her two sisters, I could hardly blame her for wanting to get away. Cassie’s cot stood in the corner of the room and she was sleeping on her stomach, completely motionless.

Amy’s back was angled toward me. She was still wearing that deep blue singlet which showed the line of her shoulder blade and an expanse of pale skin. Gazing at her skin under moonlight – her freckles looked like constellations – clustered stars calibrated with spine and hips. Amy never expected anything from me, was never annoyed at me. Had no expectations of me. It was refreshing, even compelling. *Why can’t Lena be more like you?*

I put my hand on her, she felt cold. Her body was all milky bone and translucent skin, and it didn’t know how to keep itself warm anymore. The night air was pleasantly cool as I sat on her bed, listening to her feathery breath. I couldn’t bring myself to cover her and could not drag my eyes away from those spiral, speckling galaxies. As she

breathed, the lines of her shoulder blades moved together and soon, a sluggish half-roll put her on her back.

She turned her head to me, eyes half-open and, for a second, I was sure she was looking straight into my eyes. I didn't dare to move away. Her eyes flickered closed again and her breathing soon became deep and rhythmic.

## Lena – the exercises

I motioned for Amy to get up. She must have been tossing and turning in her sleep more than usual because her clothes were twisted around her. The brittle sticks of her limbs knocked together as she moved and blinked herself awake. The previous day's seizure had really taken it out of her, but she didn't have school. Later she fell asleep in the kitchen until just after lunch time. She slept in her chair, rigid. Her forehead rested hard against the tabletop. It was then I noticed that her tank top was on back to front, its white tag sticking up under her chin. I must've put it in on wrong. I couldn't remember. Back-to-front tops were not a rarity in this house. Neither were inside-out shorts or missed buttonholes.

Amy's arms and legs were so thin. The doctor said it wasn't her diet, it was her lack of muscle. The doctor was young, but authoritative, and she wrote down the number of a local physio. We only went there once. He showed Jamie and me how to lay Amy on the floor and encourage her to push off our knees to reach something interesting. If it was something exciting enough she might respond, he said. He recommended we do these exercises for twenty minutes a day so her muscles would develop. Gentle stretching and muscle relaxants would also help, he said. I remember nodding keenly to whatever he had instructed.

Amy had been younger then, and easier to engage. The medications to curb her fits and tantrums were to blame. When she started on them she stopped trying to talk and it became harder to get a response from her at all. But I knew I hadn't tried enough. Jamie was right.

Jamie was focused on the sister she wanted, not the sister she had. She still believed that one day they'd chat and go shopping together. I knew that would never happen. Amy would always be how she was now. She'd never dress herself or make herself something to eat. She'd never have a job, as Jamie wanted her to.

If I'd left her to nature, the world would have swallowed her up by now. Instead, here she was, tethered to me, and dragging my head beneath the water. *Right now I could walk out the door*, I often told myself. In my stomach I could feel the physical pull, could see myself walking down the steps, picking up my wallet and car keys, then closing the front door after me.

With Cassie on hand and Amy in the other, I went into the lounge room. There on the floor, I bent Amy's left leg up and pressed my hand against her foot.



“Come on, Amy. Push.” I tried to snag her attention with a teddy bear, keeping it out of Cassie’s grabbing hands. I squeezed it so it lit up and played a few lines of *You Are My Sunshine*. She didn’t move. I tried again.

“Come on! Get the bear.” Nothing. I gave the bear to Cassie and sat back on my heels.

My thoughts went to Tim. He was more supportive lately, offering to help out more, even bringing us back bread and milk from the shop. Most amazing, he was being nurturing towards the girls, all of them. I was surprised because he often seemed so immature. But he’d feed Cassie and look after Amy without me even asking. I felt grateful then, the girls had a good man in their lives. That was something.

I picked up the bear where Cassie had dropped it.

“Look, Amy. Where’s the bear?” I shook it vigorously, pushing her legs hard.

“Come on! Get the bear!”

When I gave her leg another little shake, she pulled it away.

Tim appeared in the doorway. His business shirt was tucked into dark blue jeans. I felt his eyes on me.

“She shouldn’t be on the floor. It’s so dirty.” He continued into the kitchen where I heard him get a beer. *So dirty*. They were my mother’s words. It was as though she was in the room, whispering: *God help those girls when I’m not around*. I felt myself grow dark inside.

I let Amy go. She got up and went to the window, tapping it with her fingers then flapping her hand and rocking her body. Then she smacked the floor as hard as she could four or five times and hummed bars from a familiar song. Then she repeated it all, like a loop repeating itself over and over. Cassie stared at her and banged the floor too.

Amy had done all this since she was Cassie’s age. And she never got bored. Her face was calm. Oddly, I felt jealous. *Right now*, I thought, *she’s happier than I am*.

## Jamie – the bats

After the weeks of endless heat, the weather took a turn. A fine mist wafted in from the sea, beading our hair and hanging from the tips of our noses while Miranda, Lee and I trudged around town trying to scare up some action. As the southern sky pressed down, the beaches and bays turned the colour of tin, reflecting the clouds.

“Do you get afraid of the dark?” Miranda asked quietly as we walked home from school.

“No, not really. Why? Are you?” Lee said.

“Not really. I’m not afraid of it. I just don’t like it very much ... Do you *ever* get scared?”

“What’s there to be afraid of?” said Lee, annoyingly sensible.

Miranda shrugged.

“Bats?” I offered. “Everyone’s scared of bats. They’re creepy.”

Lee shook her head. “My dad knows about bats. We sit out the front of our house at dusk and watch them. Some of them are huge and you can see how heavy each wing-beat is; they go from stretched wide to almost touching underneath them. They’re just like furry birds.”

“Yeah, but birds are creepy too.”

“Crazy people are scary,” added Miranda, almost to herself.

Lee shrugged and pushed the newsagent’s door open. After buying ice-creams, we checked out the magazine shelves, celebrities smiling at us, or caught grimacing, half way through a blink, a defensive hand held up towards the camera. In adverts, hair fell like sheets of silk, smooth and reflective like it had been polished. My hair grew in a mesh of fuzzy, brown knots, and brushing it did no good. It just fluffed up more like it I had been electrocuted. We all peered at a girl modelling a new line of lipstick, looking over her shoulder, chin jutted out, her telescoping eyelashes cast downwards.

“That’s what I want my hair to be like,” I said.

“Maybe ... if we used a hair straightener on it. I have some spray at home that might work,” Miranda said, doubtfully, examining the ends of her own hair: thick, heavy, coppery red. Lee caught a drip of her ice-cream on her tongue and started talking about bats again as we left the store. Something about how they hung off trees and how this scraped away the new shoots.

“... they killed the gum tree in the front yard so Dad started playing rock and roll music to stop them roosting. He even put up a scarecrow ...”

I pictured Lee’s father in sturdy boots with a butterfly net in his hand, stomping off into the jungle to find exotic new species. Any animal that ever came up in conversation had, at one time, been studied, observed or owned by Lee’s father. A smug tone shadowed Lee’s stories so I’d often ask strange questions or make up animals to catch her out.

“Don’t bats have sonar hearing or whatever?” I asked.

Lee shook her head. “Not these ones. They hear pretty much the same as you and me.”

Not knowing enough about the subject I had to accept this, but I did so grudgingly, narrowing my eyes and staring at the path. Lee hitched her school bag a bit higher on her back, sensing my chilly detachment.

“So, are you going to ask Gary out anytime soon?” I asked, just to make her squirm.

She gave a satisfying flinch. “No, I wasn’t going to.”

“But you think he’s hot?” It wasn’t really a question.

“Well, I guess.”

“Then why don’t you ask him out?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Why?”

Miranda was now trailing behind, not wanting to be part of the teetering fight.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you a lesbo?”

“No!”

“Then why? Too scared?”

She sucked in the air around her. “Not all of us want to be sluts, Jamie!”

I felt a warm glow and a mild pride at being able to make her crack. “Well it’s obvious you’re not getting any! You’d be more fun if you were.”

“Guys, don’t fight,” Miranda said in a small voice, but neither of us took any notice.

Lee’s cheeks were pink with heat. “You’re a real *bitch*, you know that?” With that she turned onto the path home and started walking double speed.

“Virgin,” I called after her. “That’s right, run home to mum!” I made mock crying gestures at her back.

“Oh, Jamie,” said Miranda, “why’d you have to do that?” She hurried after Lee.

When I got home Lena was talking to Bill by the front door. She was nodding at him, cigarette in hand, wearing a man’s jumper that came almost to her knees.

“That’s all it would be. Makes everythin’ better, I know it,” Bill was saying.

Lena nodded.

“What’re you talking about?” I demanded.

Bill staggered back in mock alarm, palms out. “She’s a righ’ little pistol, this one! Whoowee – she’ll get cha!”

Lena was looking down but I kept my eyes fixed on her.

“What did he say?”

“Leave it, Jamie,” said Lena. I felt the same panic every time Bill came around, always asking for favours. While Lena looked off into the distance, he stared down the length of me unashamedly. I gave a disgusted noise and slunk through the door, darting away from his prying fingers.

He laughed. “Pow! Pow!” he said, and made a shooting motion with his hand.

Some time passed before Lena came in. She was alone, which was a good sign. She lit another cigarette and she sucked in sharply. When Gran was alive Lena would have to smoke out on the patio. When it was cold or rainy, she’d stand in the bath and blow the smoke out the window. Now, she smoked everywhere. She looked out the windows but kept them all tightly shut, letting the smoke cloud up the glass. Tim hated it; these days they yelled at each other more and more.

## **Tim – the visit**

Outside the supermarket I waited in line, lured by the smell of cooking sausages despite how unappetizing they looked.

“You have to sell the sizzle before you sell the meat,” the woman in the blue polo shirt said. She waved her tongs to emphasize the point. “You’ve got to let them smell the sausages, you know. Sell it!” She turned to the salad counter with a rigor mortis grin. “Can I help you, dear? Just two dollars fifty – lovely.”

The other girl, her hip thrust out, was making a show of moving the meat around on the barbeque with half-hearted shoves, picking sausages up at random and putting them back down after a perfunctory glance. The rolls of spitting fat and puckered skin were collecting black flecks from the dirty hot plate. I stepped out of the line and went to look for Lena inside.

When I saw her she was serving customers at the checkout, her hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. I thought of Amy’s tight ponytail the night Jamie had dressed her up. As Lena’s line ended she spied me and spoke a few low words to the woman on the checkout across from her. She pushed a “closed” sign to the end of her conveyer belt and came over.

Outside, under a tree, she let down her hair, and groped for her cigarettes. Somehow the fine tangle of her hair managed to avoid the flame of her lighter. Years of practice, I assumed. Sitting on a milk crate, she cast a look at me with red-rimmed eyes; last night’s mascara was smeared, adding to the ruin. Finding me uninteresting, Lena turned away again, resting her head against a tree.

“I thought I’d drop by.”

She pressed her lips together.

I offered some general chatter to engage her. The traffic, the weather, my job.

She raised her eyebrows.

“You haven’t shaved,” she said. I hadn’t done so for days, and was surprised she hadn’t noticed until now.

“My razor’s a bit blunt. I’ll pick a new one up inside.”

“I’ll get it. I’ll shop before I come home.” She gripped her cigarette in her teeth and fished around in her pocket. “Anything else you want?” She handed me a shopping list full of household items. She had clumsy handwriting and hopeless, phonetic spelling. I shook my head and handed it back.

It was the end of her break and inside a steadily growing line was forming at the checkouts. As Lena moved to go back, her phone rang.

“Oh hi, darl. How’ve you been?”

I followed her inside, her voice barking into the phone.

“I said to her, what do you think you’re doing, going over there at all hours of the night? I mean it’s so, like, *fucking* ridiculous ... ” A woman in the queue covered her child’s ears and fired a damning look. Lena either didn’t notice or didn’t care. Her yapping ceased for a moment. She replaced it with her hacking cough. She nodded now, as if her partner in conversation could see her.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said in vigorous agreement. She pressed one finger to her free ear to better hear, punctuating her friend’s remarks with an occasional “Shit. Shit. Yeah.” Her peeling laughter showed off the scooping white curve of her throat. I could remember how it had felt beneath my hands. She snapped the phone shut and returned to her place behind the checkout. I almost envied how she could doggedly disregard the disapproval of other people. I shrank away from the customers’ hostile eyes as they complained about the wait and Lena took back the ‘Closed’ sign from the end of her conveyor belt. I felt embarrassed when she waved me goodbye. I got the feeling that was why she had done it.

## Lena – the black eye

When Bill came around again, he pressed a small package into my hand and winked.

“Ere ya go, then,” he said.

I stowed it under my mattress for safe keeping, promising myself to leave it there. But I felt twitchy and irritable just knowing it was there. I snapped at the girls and started a fight with Tim. I knew I was being unreasonable.

Later when I got home from work and walked into the lounge room Cassie was screaming and Amy was seizing on the floor. Jamie and Tim were nowhere to be seen. Amy’s body was a plank of wood, her neck arching backward, her chin pointing to the sky. Her arms were folded at the elbows like a skier, fists clenched into tight, vibrating knots. Her skin was ashen and her mouth opened like a ventriloquist’s puppet, opening and closing without sound. Her eyes were rolled back so far that her brown irises were lost. Cassie was shrieking, terrified, her face beet red as she forced out the same piercing note, over and over again. *Where was Tim? He should’ve been watching them.*

I cradled Amy as best I could and shushed Cassie. The seconds ticked by as she thrashed about. Under the noise of Cassie’s shrieks and Amy’s strange sucking noises, I heard another sound: an odd wailing. It took me a while to realise it was coming out of my mouth.

Blinking away tears, half-blind, I stood watch, poised over both children until at last Amy stopped spasming and started to fall asleep. I kissed Amy’s forehead and touched her hand. Her eyes were half-mast. I thought she was about to reach for my hand, but she was only pushing it away. And then she was asleep.

Cassie was still whining, but it was unmotivated now. On her cheek I saw the familiar fingernail marks and bruising that were Amy’s calling card. Cassie yelped and lashed out at me when I tried to get a closer look at her face.

Tim appeared in the doorway. I rounded on him.

“And where the *fuck* were *you*?” I hissed at him, trying to keep my voice low for Amy’s sake.

He looked bewildered, his mouth opening and closing with nothing coming out. I continued to rant. “You were supposed to be looking after them! Now look!”

Tim swallowed. “I– I was just upstairs. I don’t understand.”

“You don’t *understand*? I’ll explain it to you! While you were fucking around upstairs, Amy had a seizure!” I slammed my hand down on the floor. Tim flinched. His pathetic mumbling only irritated me more. I was glad to see him bolt out the door just as I knew he was going to.

I got up off the floor, deciding what to do. I didn’t want to try to get Amy up the stairs to her bed. I got her a pillow and a blanket and made up a makeshift bed right where she lay. Then I crawled onto the couch, feeling completely drained, and turned on the television with the volume right down low. Cassie had picked up a packet of biscuits from somewhere and soon had chewed-up globs stuck all over her face.

“Ma ma ma,” she said, holding up a half-eaten biscuit.

I pulled her up onto the couch. A dark bruise covered her whole eye, growing darker already. Soon it would start to swell – that I knew from experience.

An expected house call from the next-door neighbour interrupted our peace and Amy’s exhausted snores.

“Lena, there you are. What are you doing hiding away? Anyone would think you were a recluse.”

“Oh, it’s you, Helen,” was all I could think to say.

“How are you coping? You look tired.” She studied the lines on my face. The expression on her face made me cringe. I felt all of the stresses in my life weighing me down. Hollow-eyed, I looked away. “It’s been a long day.”

“It’s barely four o’clock – how can you be tired? You’re not pregnant, are you?”

I briefly contemplated a stretched-out stomach and aching feet, and resolutely shook my head, no.

She ambled into the kitchen with confidence and within minutes had a tea towel I didn’t know we owned and was buffing away at the mess. Leaving Cassie in front of the TV, I followed her. Watching her clean had a strangely soothing effect. She continued to chatter in measured tones.

“I’ve noticed that man is still here. It must be quite serious. I hope he looks after the girls for you,” she said, stirring her coffee.

I had hoped that too. I had no idea where he was. He hadn’t tried to call me.

“Hmm,” I said, trying to keep my face neutral, looking at her over the top of my mug.

Helen took a sip, made a face and pushed it away from her. “Did I tell you about my Aunty Sue? She was coming round for lunch the other day so I made an amazing beef



lasagne following a recipe I'd been meaning to try for months. Then she calls me – at eleven o'clock – and guess what? She's become a vegetarian.”

“Really?”

“Mmmhmm.” Helen's lips were pressed tight in lipsticked disapproval as she got up to tip the contents of her mug into the sink and give it a scrub out. “How was I supposed to know? I had to freeze the lasagne and make sandwiches. She said it was all about animal rights, but I think she's worried about getting fat again.”

Her eyes flicked over to Cassie who had wandered in and was trying to climb up on the open drawers.

Helen looked horrified. “What happened to Cassie?”

Maybe it was that look that later sent me clambering up the stairs to pull out Bill's package. Even the sight of it made me feel better. It felt like I was coming home. If I could block everything out for just a little while then I'd feel better, I thought. Be a better mother, more calm and accepting. I just needed one hit.

## Jamie – the social worker

I'd just arrived home from school when a car pulled up outside. A government-issue car, I could tell by the spotless finish. Suddenly I saw with fresh eyes the stuffed plastic bags, the dirty nappies and empty bottles heaped against the front wall, and scattered across the scrubby patch of lawn. The bald tyre Amy played with sat in the middle. A few metres away, a yellow-brown ring of flattened grass marked its original resting spot.

A woman got out of the car, her hair bobbed and tucked behind her ears, a long flowing cardigan over her black pants. She hoisted a large tote bag stuffed full of files onto her shoulder and began to make her way across the lawn.

I backed away from the window. Shit. "Mum, there's a lady here," I called, then more loudly, "Lena!" I looked around; Cassie was playing in the lounge next to Amy who was in the chair with her beads. Lena must be upstairs, but she wasn't replying.

There was a rapping at the front door. Cassie, picking up on my tension, started a snivelling cry, throwing out her arms for me to lift her up. When I brushed past her, her face turned red as she cried in earnest.

"Lena!" I called again, from the base of the stairs.

"What?" She sounded half-awake.

Another sharp *rap, rap, rap* at the door. "Coming!" I yelled and raced upstairs.

Lena lay on her mattress with the crook of her arm covering her eyes. Pockmarks on the inside of her forearm stood out against the grey-white of her skin. A syringe lay on the floor next to a bit of grubby cotton wool, a dirty spoon and a dusty plastic zip-lock bag.

"You stupid bitch! What have you done?!" I shrieked.

"Fuck off, Jamie," she said, but there was no heat in the statement.

I chucked some clothes at her. "There's a social here right now, so put these fucking clothes on," I hissed. Her eyes slitted open then and fluttered in an effort to focus. Then she breathed in deeply and they closed again. Then I slapped her, hard, and her eyes snapped open.

"Bitch. You little bitch," she muttered, trying to sit up.

Cassie was now screaming, and I could hear the rattling of Amy's beads.

*Rap, rap, rap.* "Hello? Can someone please let me in?" I ran down the stairs and yanked open the door.

The woman looked surprised.

“Hello, are you ...?” She looked down at her file, “Jamie-Lee? I’m Paula Bauers, from the Department of Child Protection. I’m your new caseworker.”

“Wednesday, next week.” That was all I could think to say.

Paula looked a little impatient and moved her tote bag higher on her shoulder.

“Yes, Wednesday was the scheduled meeting. However, we’ve had a phone call about the toddler’s wellbeing. Then we called up the day-care centre, and she wasn’t there, although I understand it is one of her days? It’s err ...” She rifled through her papers.

“Cassie?” I asked stupidly.

“Yes, Cassie. If I could just come in?”

I led the way into the lounge room, shoving toys, half-finished plates of food and rubbish aside to make room for her on the couch. She sat down, eyeing the overflowing ashtray on the armrest.

Cassie was watching me, still crying but not as loud as before. I offered her a toy building block to calm her down. That was when I noticed the bruise which took up half of her cheek. I gaped at it, wondering where it had come from. In her chair next to Paula, Amy continued to play with her cereal packet and beads.

I had a bad feeling about Paula. Our usual social worker let our family get along without much interference. She didn’t do home visits very often and she always got our names and details confused with others. She’d turned up every now and then but with no apparent aim except to check that we were all still alive. This one, Paula, was not going to be so easy. I could tell by the way she cast an eye over the girls. She watched Amy rip up the cardboard with her hands and teeth. *Dirty clothes and too skinny*, I could almost hear her thinking. Then Paula looked at Cassie and I could tell she was noting her bruised cheek, her bulging nappy and the skin around her legs that looked crusty, red and irritated.

“She’s okay. It’s nappy rash. We have a cream for it,” I said, all at once.

Paula wrote something down and kept staring at the girls. “Is Lena here?”

“She’s upstairs,” I said, going over to the stairs, “*Mum!*”

Lena appeared unsteadily at the top of the stairs. Her shoulders and collar bone showed sharply through her thin, white skin. She had lost weight over the past few months and looked withered and fragile in her over-sized jumper, her feet shoved into filthy *ugg* boots. Still, at least she was dressed.

She wove her way down the stairs.

“Sit down,” I hissed, pushing her into the ratty armchair. She curled up there, looking dazed.

“Hello, Lena. I’m Paula Bauers. I’ve just taken over your case.”

“Righ’,” Lena said.

“How are you coping, Lena? It says here your mother has recently passed. I’m very sorry about that. She helped with Cassie and Amy? Do you have someone else helping you now?” Paula waited with her pen poised. On her face, a neutral expression.

Lena gazed at me and I answered for her. “I help. I look after them and take Cassie to day-care.”

Lena nodded. “Yeah, righ’.”

Paula put her pen down. “Sorry, Lena. It looks to me like you’ve used today. Is there something you want to tell me?”

Lena’s head lolled a little as she raked a hand through her hair. There was an overly long pause. We all sat there pretending that the answer wasn’t completely obvious.

“She’s tired, aren’t you, Mum? Just tired. You haven’t been sleeping,” I said.

“’s righ’,” Lena said, after another long pause.

Paula was looking through her many notes. I hated those files, full of things that could be used against us. “You’ve used heroin before, I see, Lena? They put you through the methadone programme?”

“Yeah.”

“When did you start using again?”

“I didn’t—”

“You can keep telling me you haven’t used, but we both know you’re going to test positive,” I could hear the frustration in her voice. “Is there a particular reason you used heroin this week?”

It was an effort for Lena to dredge up a response. The pause dragged on.

“Just tired,” Lena said, finally.

Paula stood up, visibly relieved to be off the couch. She went over to Amy and looked into her face. Amy ignored her, moving pieces of shredded cardboard around. “How is Amy?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Good,” I said. “She goes to school.” I struggled for something else to say. “Yeah, she’s fine.”

Paula nodded her head once and tucked her hair back behind her ear. Then she crouched down beside Cassie.

“Hi, Cassie. How are you?”

Cassie looked at her, her mouth slightly open showing her tiny square teeth. She held out a block as an offering. “Dis! Dis!” she said fervently.

“Yes, this. What colour is it?” Paula prompted. Cassie looked at the block closely, “It’s red. Look. Red.”

“She’s fine. It’s just a bruise. She’ll be fine,” I insisted, but Paula was not looking at me.

“And how did this happen?”

*I don’t know.* I looked at Lena for a second but she wasn’t going to be any help. “Um, she banged it.” I folded my arms.

“What did she bang it on?”

“The ground.” I was thinking quickly now. “She fell over.”

“Oh.” She directed herself at Lena. “We’re going to have to take her into the hospital to get her checked out. Just to make sure she’s all right.”

“Yeah, all righ’,” slurred Lena.

“*Mum!*” I protested, but Lena was too far gone. Then Paula took Cassie away. The baby-seat came out of the boot of Paula’s car, like she had decided to take Cassie before she had even got here. Cassie, sobbing and screaming, snot and spittle running down her little face. I saw Helen poking her head out of the door. She made eye contact with me and quickly shut the door.

## **Lena – the hospital**

Cassie, my baby, they had taken my little one. Maybe five or six hours later, I drove to the hospital. I left Amy with Jamie who wouldn't look at me.

The winds were hushed and the clouds were thin and high. I felt like I wouldn't be missed by anyone if I just kept on driving. If I could evaporate and wake up somewhere else, another city, another job, another life, no one would blink an eye. A swirl of people in the street passed. The shock and recoil of traffic. I wound down the window and lit a cigarette. My shaking fingers knew what to do, and I balanced the steering wheel with my knee.

The ash whipped off the butt, shredding white in the wind. Soon the cigarette was little more than a glowing stub. I tossed it into a puddle on the footpath. I reached into my pocket to check my pack, thumbed open the lid and counted. Five cigarettes.

The woman behind the front desk at the hospital was very young, her hair cut short with a long chunk at the front covering one eye. I gave her the details: Cassie April Walters, 20 months old, born on the eleventh of February two thousand and thirteen, admitted earlier today.

“The reason for admission?” the woman asked.

“Check-up.”

She stared into her monitor, picked up the phone and dialled a number.

“Take a seat, please,” she said.

I slumped in one of the small, upright waiting room chairs. Half an hour passed, then an hour. I felt jittery and uncomfortable, and I went back up to the counter.

“What is taking so long? Why can't I go in?”

“Please sit down,” she said curtly. Her expression was dark.

“But I just want to see my baby! Let me fucking see my baby!” I knew that I was screaming now, but I couldn't stop. They expected me to act like a wild animal, so that was what I was. The woman waited for me to stop yelling.

“Don't swear at me, and take a seat, otherwise security will escort you out.” Behind the thick layers of protective glass she had her finger poised on a button. Her face looked almost bored. The other people in the waiting room made sure to look away when I turned in their direction.

Then I went back to the woman. “She’s my baby!” I started again, pounding the glass with my fists. In a flash, strong hands were on me and all of a sudden, I was outside.

“Go, before the police turn up,” the man advised. Then he was gone.

\* \* \*

I drove one block from the hospital and slept all night in the car. I woke with a start to hear the birds singing. Memories of the day before started coming back to me in bits and pieces. My eyes were bloodshot and ached in my skull. I shivered because of the cold. Then I shivered again, unrelated to the cold.

Outside the car’s fogged window, three teenage boys skateboarded on a paved ramp in the park, a couple of businessmen talked on their mobile phones, a woman hailed a cab. For them today was just another day, a beautiful day.

I pulled my sweater tight around me. The dank and powdery smell of the kids permeated everything, my sweater, the car, my thoughts. A blinding headache rose behind my brow. I turned on the car and drove home.

My mother followed behind me, stalking me like a shadow, weighing me down.

## **Tim – the nightclub**

After our fight, I had no aim other than to get away from the house. I walked around the streets until I found a reassuringly run-of-the-mill café. I went inside and ordered a coffee.

The man behind the café counter watched me check my phone, once, twice, then again.

“Married, are ya?” He asked pleasantly.

I shook my head.

“Got a girl at home, then?”

I thought about the chaos I’d left back at the house. “No,” I said finally.

The man exhaled through his teeth. “Makes it easy,” he said, setting my coffee down in front of me, and leaving me to my own devices.

The people around me, students from the local university, were young and vibrant. I listened to their chatter and gathered that they were heading to a nightclub. I realised that I’d hardly ever been to one. I’d become an adult without ever really going through that stage. They were all at that teetering point between childhood and adulthood – enthusiastic, outgoing and vivacious, caring only about how they looked and where the next party was. When had I been any of those things? I laughed to myself, attracting an alarmed glance from a girl with long, heavy dreadlocks. Of course, Lena would say I’d never become an adult. At least not a good one.

Later that night – unable to face Lena – I ventured into a club down on the main street. It was still fairly early so the place was mostly empty, save for the diehard drinkers. A girl approached, introduced herself and offered to buy me a drink. I declined.

“A girlfriend?” she asked, sounding understanding.

“I’m not sure,” I said. It was true too. I wasn’t sure. Not anymore. Certainly we weren’t friends. She nodded, and sat down.

“It’s complicated. I get that.”

I relaxed a little bit, and ordered a drink. She talked easily, telling me about her studies, about her life now she’d left home, her favourite movies. She gave me the information freely and warmly. I had to pry the information out of Lena.

I found myself telling her about my job, what I wanted my life to be like, and eventually I told her about Lena. It was disconcerting to find how shallow our relationship seemed when spoken about out loud. How oddly inconsequential. I laughed and thumped



my fist down on the table as I told her this. When my fresh beer went flying and shattered like a firework on the floor, I laughed at that too.

Soon strong arms carried me away from the girl, through the door and dumped me on the sidewalk, where I rested my head on the hard concrete. My eyes were full of sand and my lids glued shut. Blackness swum around the edges of my vision. I placed my palms on the ground and tried to rise. I breathed in through my nose, feeling oxygen rush across open capillaries, and out through my mouth, relaxing the airways. *Home*, I told myself, *I have to get home*. But where was it?

## **Jamie – the discovery**

When Lena left I fed Amy and put her to bed. I was unable to shake the feeling that maybe no one would come back. It was so quiet. I tried for a long time to go to sleep, but it was like I was waiting for something that would never come. Eventually I must've fallen asleep.

Rhythmic noises startled me awake. It was a familiar sound but I was groggy with sleep and couldn't place it. Then there was a thud as Amy hit the ground. I found her convulsing violently with blood from her nose spattering with each forceful exhale as she gasped for air. There'd been many other nights like this. Amy's distorted face twitched and spasmed, her eyes rolled back and her body shaking like an earthquake.

I waited. After about two minutes she stopped seizing, then I got her back onto the mattress, her weak and shaking body barely conscious. In the dark, I cleaned up the blood on her arms, face and floor. Then I sat with her until she was completely asleep. She was exhausted. The time on my phone read 2:42 am. In the bathroom I brushed my teeth and washed the blood off my hands. I kept seeing red speckles long after they were gone.

I knew I had no chance of going back to sleep. I peeked at Amy's sleeping form again. Not even an earthquake would rouse her now. It was then I decided to stow out of the house, sending a text to Miranda to let her know I was coming. I soon got one back: *Still awake. Window is open.* I grabbed a bottle of vodka from the kitchen and left.

A few hours later I was back, feeling warm all the way through and a little bit drunk. There was a light on in the house but I didn't remember leaving one on. I opened the front door hesitantly. Upstairs someone was moving around. At the top of the stairs I found Tim, dead drunk and holding himself upright only by leaning against the doorway of my bedroom. He must have got home by taxi, as Lena was still nowhere to be seen.

"Tim," I hissed. "You need to go to bed."

"Hmm ... yearh. I'm goin' ta," He slurred and took a crashing step forwards.

"Shh! Amy is asleep." I beckoned him to follow me, supporting him like I would if he were Lena. I put my hand on his ribcage and directed him with my weight and words. He was easier to move than Lena in this state. He giggled like a girl as I guided him down the hallway to their bedroom.

"Now go to bed, Timmy."

He rested his head on my shoulder, eyes half-closed. “You’re beau-da-ful.” He sounded like all of the other men Lena let in the house then.

“And you’re smashed. Go to bed.” I pushed him hard in the direction of the bed.

He lurched into the room. I left him to sleep it off and went to my bedroom. Amy was on her back staring at the ceiling, but I couldn’t tell if she was awake or asleep. Her breathing sounded odd and shallow.

“Amy?”

She didn’t move. I crept into my bed and watched her from across the room. Eventually I threw off my blankets and went over to her. I put on her lamp. There were marks on her face I hadn’t seen before. Then I saw her top on the floor. I quickly checked down her body, in places her skin had turned red, like someone’s thumbprint had been left on her. Then I saw it. Her nappy was pulled down. It was halfway down her leg, and the mattress was soaked where she had pissed herself.

I froze. My heart pounding; my whole body shaking. I wanted to scream. I wanted to go across the hall and scream at Tim, but a whimpering sob came out instead. *What had he done? How had this happened? Was this the first time? What should I do? What should I do?* Questions flooded my brain. I felt physically sick. It hurt to think of what he had done.

“Amy?”

Eyes open, still she did not move. I cleaned her up as best I could. For the second time that night I had to wash her blood off my hands. She still looked exhausted and was unable to walk, so I carried her over to my bed. I put her next to me on the mattress and put my arms around her. Through the gap in the curtains, slow black clouds rolled across the moon.

There was a scraping noise in the hallway. Body stiffening and barely breathing, the pump of adrenaline snapped me out of any sleepiness I still had. My heart whacked in my chest like a sledgehammer. My hand snaked to my phone. Stomach clenched, I pressed a button to make it light up, then scoured each dark corner, peering into every shadow cast, looking for an intruder. *No one there.* I kept the light on though. I closed my eyes and willed the hammering to stop. Small droplets of fear condensed on my skin and soaked the armpits of my shirt. My eyes felt like they were shrink-wrapped open. I forced myself to let my muscles relax. I was tired, exhausted. Sleep settled uncomfortably over me.

## Tim – the hangover

I swam from the blankets. *How had I got to bed?* The blankets were tangled around me. I became aware of the pain – as if an incredible weight was pressing down on my head – and I tried to open my eyes. Blinding white. Sunshine on a hangover. A headache in a headache in a headache. There was a rhythmic thumping at the base of my skull. I looked for a point of reference, anything to stop the splotches of light thumping behind my eyes. Every time my eyes dipped closed the room would swing around in a big arc and I would feel myself speeding towards the ceiling. My open eyes would then jerk everything back into place with an irritating haste that scarcely left me time to catch my breath.

Images of the night before swam out of my grasp, hazy and abstract. I reached for the fleeting memories; hair falling over a pillow, a heavy darkness, large eyes peering out. I gave up, too distracted by the pain. My mouth was dry and tasted foul. Acrid. It reminded me of rotting seaweed, shrivelled up in the sun. A deep nausea clutched at my stomach, making it feel raw and tender. I crawled off the mattress.

Hazily, I wondered where Lena was. I wasn't sure if she had even come home last night. I was caught between wanting to see her and hoping that she stayed away, not knowing what was in store for me on our next meeting.

When I dragged myself to the fridge for some cold water, which was the only thing I could think of without my stomach roiling, Jamie flinched at the sight of me, judgemental eyes on my face. I knew I must've looked a real mess. She was probably used to seeing hungover men, from the little I had found out about Lena's sketchy track record. I wondered what she must think of me. She left abruptly, taking Amy with her and not bothering to even say hello. I saw a flash of them, Jamie towing Amy along by the elbow, before the front door banged shut behind them. Cringing at the noise, I paused, letting the soothing quiet settle over the whole house. I was grateful to have the house to myself, not having to interact with anyone.

I set my eyes on the couch and dragged myself onto the big cushions like a ship wreck survivor finding a desert island. Curled up, with my feet tucked underneath, I clung to the couch with stiff fingers grateful for the reassuring firmness.

I nursed the glass of water in my lap and waited for the nausea to pass. And waited to feel like myself again. And waited for Lena to come home. And waited.

## **Jamie – the eviction**

I called Lena's phone again, holding my phone to my ear with one hand and Amy's hand with the other. We walked quickly down the street. There was still no answer. I hitched my schoolbag higher on my shoulder. It was full of clothes, money I had stolen from Tim's wallet, some food – anything I could think of taking with us – just in case Lena didn't come back and we needed to stay somewhere overnight. I thought about where I could take Amy. People went through my mind and I dismissed them quickly. Bill, Miranda, Lee ... Lee's mum. *No*, I thought. None of them would understand. All they would do is ask questions. I gave up trying to think, and led Amy into Hungry Jack's. I bought us some fries and sat in one of the booths to eat.

I watched Amy's face, sitting across from me. I put a chip in her hand and she took it the rest of the way to her mouth. I wondered what she was thinking. I looked for signs, anything at all, any differences in how she acted. But Amy, as always, was unreadable. Passing her another chip, I started to cry. The tears fell onto the plastic table in front of me. I kept passing her chips. Sometimes she would let them drop into her lap, or fall from her mouth, half-chewed, onto the table. I cried harder. Maybe it was just the noise of my crying, but I think she understood. She looked back at me.

"I-I just ... want ... y-you to be ok-ay," I choked out through my sobs. "Ple-ase be ... okay."

We walked back to the house later that morning and I saw Lena's car parked in the driveway. She was sitting out the front of the house smoking – without Cassie. I hadn't expected that. A new ache started in my stomach. Lena looked wrecked. It made me feel very scared and alone. I knew that I couldn't tell her what had happened. I couldn't risk losing Amy to some foster family. But I had to get Tim out. I just had to get him away from us.

I cornered Lena before she had a chance to stand up. She looked at me with unseeing eyes. I could tell that she had been crying. Now she was cried out. She had those red rims, proof that she had no more tears to offer. I must look just the same. When I crouched down she submitted, rigidly, her back stiffening, to an embrace. I felt how skinny she was. Skinnier than me, even skinnier than Amy. Too skinny. She didn't have any answers to the questions I asked her about Cassie. She was in the comedown, which

would've been bad even without losing Cassie. Lena stood and moved around like a wounded dog waiting to die. She had given up.

"Tim needs to move out," I said, finally.

She blinked at me, not seeming to understand my words but not questioning either. It made me sick to think of him still in there – in *our* house. She looked from me to Amy, who had gone over to the tyre in the front yard. Amy was pulling at it hard, as though she wanted to tear the rubber. I decided to pitch the argument I had been practised. I had to be quick. I wanted to say it before Tim came out and ruined it.

"*He* left them alone – if it wasn't for him, none of this would've happened! Cassie would be fine. She'd be *here*, at home," I said. Lena flinched at the mention of Cassie's name. I pushed on, "This is *his* fault! And we're never going to get Cassie back with him in the house! We don't know him, and we don't need him. He needs to go." I said these things as though they were facts I was reading out of an encyclopaedia.

Lena seemed to take it in. She had her fingers pressed to her mouth, almost like a gag. Her anger could be sparked and fanned into a blaze; it could fuel her like nothing else. I knew that from experience. She swore wearily, and leaned back against the front door, resting her head back. She found another cigarette, lit it, and took a drag.

"I can't pay the rent without him," she said. Her voice sounded so small. I took a tentative breath, knowing this next part would be the most difficult. From my schoolbag I fished out the form I'd already filled out. It had been sitting in there, getting more crumpled, since we last discussed the issue. I found it again when I packed this morning. I put it in front of Lena.

"Amy could get that job we talked about." I made my voice as gentle and confident as I could. Lena blew her smoke down at the form, her eyes fixed on the blank space where her signature should go.

"Mum, I really think it would be good for her."

"Jamie, she's not—" Lena began.

"Just think about it," I said quickly.

Lena stayed quiet and I didn't want to push it. She went inside and I got Amy and followed her in. I left her standing in the kitchen with the form. I caught a glimpse of Tim on the couch and rushed to take Amy upstairs into our room. I crossed my fingers and willed things to go my way.

Lena started moving around downstairs then I heard her talking. The tone of her voice soon became angry and my ears were pricked to hear what she was saying. I got bits

and pieces but only from her side of the conversation. I tried to jigsaw it back together. But when Tim started yelling too I didn't need to hear the words to understand.

I smiled at Amy and brushed the hair back from her face.

"It's going to be okay now," I whispered to her, making it a promise.

Tim left soon after that, with an air of hurt and resentment. When I heard the tyres of the taxi crunch down the driveway, sending the loose gravel flying, I felt lighter. It was as if I could breathe again.

I slept on the same mattress with Amy that night, letting her breathe her tiny snores into my ear. When my phone beeped and lit up in the middle of the night, I ignored it, letting it beep until it stopped. Amy's hair tickled my face and her elbow dug into my side. I kept my eyes open for a while and watched the door, just in case.

## **Lena – the shift**

With Tim and Cassie gone there was a void. I sat in the lounge feeling numb and empty. I'd catch myself getting up to change or feed Cassie, and then remember that she wasn't here anymore. Each time it was a fierce blow. The house felt like an empty shell.

Amy wandered past me into the kitchen. I followed her in. Her needs kept me grounded. She usually got hungry around this time in the afternoon. I poured her a cup of milk and handed it to her. Then I scoured the cupboard for food. Behind me I heard the splosh of liquid hitting the floor. The milk puddled over the floor but Amy kept walking to the table with her cup. She was just about to sit down when she sprang back up again. I went towards her, ready to settle her into the chair. It was then she picked up the dishtowel lying by the sink, then walked over to the spilt milk and stooped down to cover the puddle with the dishtowel. Then she moved the towel around a bit and left it there, going back to the table.

I stood there in shock.

She was completely disconnected from the spaces around her, both physically and emotionally, but in this brief moment she got it. She had noticed that she had spilled the milk and she tried to clean it up. *She tried to clean it up.*

I hadn't realised how much I had given up hope until I felt this glimmer. I stood rooted to the spot, tears prickling my eyes. With this small event, I felt hope's pulse again, and I could let myself feel a bit lighter. My hands trembled as I urged them to move, to start working again.

Then I looked down at the form Jamie had given me lying on the countertop and signed my name.



## Jamie – the test

A sick thought struck me that night as I was lying in bed. I couldn't shake the question clawing in my head. *Why hadn't I thought of it before?* Sleep did not come easy, and by half-past six the next morning, I was out the door. It had rained during the night, heavy and persistent, and now the air was sharp and clear. Things stood out against the colourless spring day: black telephone wires, bright green branches that were still bare, and red traffic lights. I felt like I stuck out too, walking into the empty street where the quiet lanes curled and rose.

The man behind the chemist counter smiled uncertainly when I approached and told him what I wanted.

The man hesitated. "Ah ... I'll ask my supervisor. Just a moment." He disappeared into a back room.

I heard the sounds of a stern conversation. She didn't seem surprised to see me standing at the counter, conspicuous in my school uniform and backpack. She came from behind the counter and fished a pregnancy test from a low shelf down one of the aisles.

"Is this pregnancy test for you?" she asked.

"No," I said. She looked as if she didn't believe me.

"Does the person taking it know how to use it? Have they used a pregnancy test before?"

"Uh, yes." I lied. I sounded pathetic, and I felt like crying.

"How old are you?" she asked me, more softly.

"Eighteen."

Finally she sighed and scanned it through. "That'll be \$16.95. Is there anything else today?" she asked. I shook my head and pulled out a twenty-dollar note, one I had stolen earlier from Tim.

Back home I wrestled the nappy off Amy. She giggled like she was five and my hands started shaking again. *Would this even work?* The nappy was wet so I squeezed it onto the stick and prayed. The seconds ticked by. I felt a growing throb of panic inside of me. I reached for the test and looked at it. Cold hands of shock grabbed me by the stomach. Two blue lines. Pregnant.

## **Lena – the end**

I put the plug in place and turned on the hot tap as far as it would go. The water gushed out, filling the bath. The water was pricklingly warm. I undressed and my skin grew pink as I inched into the water, lowering myself down. The heat wrapped around my calves, hips, my waist. I leaned my head back on the rim of the bath. Sweat slithered down my neck. When was the last time I took a bath like this? My memory dredged up the vague thought of me as a young girl.

I stayed there until my fingertips were as puckered as raisins. I closed my eyes. There was an unbearable lightness of having none of my children in the room and the weight of the space that they should occupy. A dull ache in the centre of my being – not quite longing, not quite grief, not quite heartbreak, but it was reminiscent of all three. I felt it, a physical pain, all over my body. It was the pit in my stomach, the tightness in my chest, the lump in my throat, the throb at my temples, and the verge of tears. My children were being swept away from me, inch by inch.

Maybe Cassie would never come back. She might be placed under the care of some other family. A family who could give her a clean room, a proper bed, good food, and no bruises or cuts. The ache of not having her with me was suffocating. I slipped my head under the water and held my breath.

Jamie was my partner in crime. I was not a mother to her. She had drifted from me, and now only the thinnest of tethers kept her from disappearing into the horizon. The past few nights she had stopped sneaking out of the house. I now found her every night in Amy's bed, Amy tucked in right beside her with Jamie's arm around her. I rose out of the water, gasping.

Amy I always missed, though she was not even gone. I'd miss her when she was right there in front of my eyes. I'll never know her.

A door slammed somewhere. Then a long silence. I lay back against the edge of the bath, allowing the quiet to surround me. Footsteps on the stairs. The creak at the top step. The noises were full of mystery.

I didn't want to see anyone. What I wanted to do was lie here with nothingness washing over me like a sluggish wave. I had done something wrong, something so huge I couldn't even see it, something was drowning me. I had let them take Cassie away from me.

I thought of the woman on the news who'd tried to kill her child. Was this what she felt like afterwards? This terrible lightness? It was so peaceful I could hear my tears falling. I was adrift.

On my wrist my tattoo stood out sharp against my skin. My mother's hands felt cool on my brow. Her face swam up to my eyes and she looked on me kindly. *What should I do, Mother? How should I look after my girls?* She wouldn't answer me.

Plunging under the water one more time, I gripped the sides of the tub and pulled myself out. It felt like being born again, the floor rolling and pitching beneath my numb feet.

## CRITICAL SECTION

# INTRODUCTION

## REPRESENTING SEXUAL ASSAULT: ISSUES IN LITERATURE

### **Introduction**

The representation of sexual assault first became a topic of interest for me when I read *Disgrace* (1999) by J. M. Coetzee. In *Disgrace*, the rape scene is depicted indirectly through the limited third-person perspective of the main character who is locked in another room. As a reader, I found myself in the uneasy position of being both distanced from the sexual assault and, at the same time, encouraged to try to understand the experience of the victim and her subsequent decisions. This representation was unlike any other I had read. This led me to question how sexual assault is represented in fiction, and to look for other writers who had used similar non-explicit representational techniques. Although implicit sexual assault is quite common in fiction, the majority of the representations I found tended to cast doubt in the reader's mind as to whether a sexual assault had occurred at all. In other words, in *Disgrace* the sexual assault is a given, while in many of the other novels the assault itself is in doubt.<sup>1</sup>

My reading of *Disgrace* and the other novels raised questions of ethics in relation to the differences between explicit and non-explicit representations of sexual assault in fiction. My two major analyses, as I will discuss, show how J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) both divert the reader's attention away from the scene of the sexual assault to raise broader social, political and cultural issues, challenging the reader to reconsider their assumptions and ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, *Atonement* (2001) and *On Chesil Beach* (2007) by Ian McEwan, and *A Passage to India* (1924) by E. M. Forster.

I addressed the issue of the non-representation of sexual assault in fiction in my dissertation, and the debates and my analysis also informed my novella, *Taking Care of Amy*. In the novella, the victim of sexual assault, a low functioning autistic teenager, is unable to speak coherently. Because of her limited ability to communicate in terms of her severe developmental disability, she is unable to give consent to sex, and is unable to speak about her experience of sexual assault. The novella, therefore, is informed by the non-explicit representation of sexual assault, compounded by her disability.<sup>2</sup>

In *Taking Care of Amy*, the reader is given no knowledge of the actual sexual assault. My choice of representation is intended to confront the reader with the limits of their knowledge of Amy's experience of her life in the house. Her experience of sexual assault in terms of trauma, pain and understanding is unknown. By not focussing on the physical act of the sexual assault, I wanted the fiction to refocus the reader: on the under-resourced and precarious stability of the household and family (despite its love and good intentions), on the vulnerability of other members of the family, and on the impact the sexual assault might have on Amy and the family as a whole (in the present and further down the track). As is the case with representations of sexual assault, there is much debate about the representation of people with disabilities. I have tried to address this in the novella in the way different members of the family and the household see Amy and her abilities and limitations. That both sexual assault and disability are bound up in myriad ethical issues inevitably provided a challenging range of issues to deal with in my writing.<sup>3</sup> Having said this, explicit discussions about the problems of representing the experience of persons with disabilities in relation to issues of sexuality and sexual assault have not been the focus of this thesis, which has been to examine the ethics of representing sexual assault non-explicitly.

### **Sexual assault in contemporary debates**

Contemporary debates in literary studies on ethics in relation to the representation of suffering often focus on collective traumas, such as World Wars I and II, the Holocaust

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<sup>2</sup> I would like to note that "individuals with either physical or developmental disabilities ... are significantly more likely to experience a sexual assault" (Davis 2011, 40). It is estimated that "women with a disability ... experience sexual assault at twice the rate of women without a disability [and] up to 83% of women ... with a developmental disability suffer sexual assault during their lifetime" (Davis 2011, 40). The majority of these assaults are not discovered.

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of issues of representation in fiction in relation to people with disabilities, see *Disabling Barriers, Enabling Environments* (1993), edited by John Swain, Sally French, Colin Barnes, and Carol Thomas.

and 9/11 (Verbestel 2010, Calvo and Nadal 2014, Kaplan 2010). While these studies have proved useful to my research, my focus is on fictional representations of sexual assault, specifically considered as a trauma inflicted upon an individual which may also be represented as a collective trauma.

Because this thesis is focused on trauma narratives, in relation to specific types of representation of trauma in contemporary fiction, it is important to first look at how trauma has been conceptualized by writers and critics, and how trauma theory has developed, influencing how rape is represented. Legal studies that have considered problems related to the evaluation of accounts by victims and perpetrators in law courts have also informed my study. The term “sexual assault” in legal discourse refers to all types of sexual offenses, and this includes rape. With this in mind, my working definition of sexual assault, in my discussion of the literature and my analyses of the novels, refers to all instances where a perpetrator engages a victim in sexual acts against their will or without their consent.

Because of the stigma of sexual assault, women are often reluctant to consciously come to terms with their traumas and can resort to a world of suppression and silence due to feelings of guilt or shame (Lamb 1999). The female victims of rape have previously been understood as (and are often still understood as) having no possibility of overcoming the barriers of shame and denial that their trauma has invoked. Therefore, these female victims are caught in a spiral of re-enactments of their traumas because they are unable to voice their trauma experiences to end the effect of the brutalities they suffered. As critic Sharon Lamb has noted, there is a reoccurring understanding that “the victim is one who is pure, innocent, blameless, and free of problems (before the abuse) ... often presented in juxtaposition with the perpetrator as the evil monster” (1999, 108). She raises the issue with this perspective: “While modern-day thinkers may be more sympathetic to a victim, it is clear that her body is no longer a “good” body, one that behaves and follows her wishes. Female passivity is thus re-created and re-inforced” (Lamb 1999, 112).

The majority of the debates concerned with the representation of sexual assault against women in fiction have tended to focus on broad questions, such as whether or not sexual assault should be represented in fiction at all, rather than how it is represented (see Ehlich 2001, Wykes and Welsh 2009, Horeck 2004). When critics have considered the nature of the representation of sexual assault, debates have tended to focus on the merits and potential pitfalls of explicit representations. When indirect representations of sexual assault have been addressed, they have generally been criticised as tending to reduce the perceived severity of the crime, which in turn, it is argued, might contribute to myths about

rape that question the authenticity of female resistance, and which therefore tend to represent females as obliging and passive (Higgins and Silver 1991, Coetzee 1986, Tanner 1994). The possibility that silence and non-explicit portrayal of sexual assault might be of positive strategic use in fiction has not yet featured in literary debates.

I have used the term ‘non-explicit representation of sexual assault’ to refer to fictional representations where doubts are not raised about the sexual assault, yet where the reader is not given a direct account of the sexual assault. This differs from ‘implicit’ representations, which I define as representations that direct the reader to interpret whether or not a sexual assault took place at all. The majority of literary criticisms of indirect representations of sexual assault are based on the possibility that the sexual assault may be disputed.

The absence in current debates of discussions on the potential of non-explicit representations of sexual assault is problematic as it is important for critics and writers to recognise that such representations have been used to produce a range of positive effects, including an imperative for readers to question their own assumptions. The majority of literary critics endorse explicit representations of sexual assault in fiction and, in itself, this may deter writers from experimenting with non-explicit representations. In opening up critical discussion on this form of representation, I hope that critics may reassess the potential benefits of non-explicit representation, which may also inform writers that this representational strategy can be a positive choice. In my review of novels in English featuring sexual assault, I have found very few writers who have employed the non-explicit representation of sexual assault to raise related ethical issues.

In this thesis, my research question addresses the value of non-explicit representations of sexual assault against women in fiction. My focus on women emerges from my finding that the majority of non-explicit representations of sexual assault in fiction are against women. My methodology has been firstly to examine debates in literary criticism, philosophy and legal studies concerning interpretations of non-explicit and explicit representations of sexual assault, looking at contradictions and overlooked issues. I then conduct close readings of two novels, by Nobel-prize winning authors, Coetzee and Morrison, which use non-explicit representations of sexual assault to re-contextualise the reader’s assumptions and ethics. My analysis of these two novels is supported in turn by my readings of the relationship between ethics and representation.

My research has shown that the two novels I have chosen use non-explicit depictions and silence as representational strategies to avoid potentially exploitative



portrayals, to challenge dominant frameworks of understanding the elided assault/s, and to position the reader in a space of critical reflection, of the reader's assumptions and the grounds for those assumptions. As such, the broader framework for the thesis is the implications of representing Others' suffering and how such representations can be ethically productive for the observer. In the sections that follow, I examine the role of fiction as a medium in terms of its potential for bringing about empathetic engagement and critical reflection. I then go on to examine the key criticisms of both explicit representations and non-explicit representations of sexual assault in fiction, as identified by critics. I address these issues through the concepts of the suffering Other, Dominick LaCapra's "empathic unsettlement", and Derek Attridge's "deconstructive reading", all of which inform my theoretical approach. The context for the discussion of the work of other literary critics is what they have assumed about the effect of the non-explicit representation of sexual assault against women in fiction. Finally, I introduce the two novels I will analyse in depth, giving my reasons for choosing these two important works.

### **Literature as influence**

An underlying premise of my thesis is the persuasive potential of literature. In order to speak about fictional representations of sexual assault having an effect on the reader it must first be established that literature in general has the potential to be influential. Many critics have observed that fiction comments on human experience by means of providing experiential representations and, by these means, literature is able to inform social change (DePaul 1988, Nussbaum 1995, Spacks 1988). Michael DePaul argues, for example, literature can "supply the kind of experience needed to develop a person's faculty of moral judgment" (1988, 563). This combination of the experiential perspective(s) offered in literature and the empathetic engagement of the reader in these discussions present literature as a significant medium for considering representations of social issues.

For literary theorist Martha Nussbaum, the style or genre of a work can influence the way that its content is received. On this basis, certain aspects of life are conveyed less adequately in "argumentative writing" (such as philosophical articles and essays), than in novels (1990, 3-6, 8). Literary fiction can be defined as the creative, experiential exploration of the human condition.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, such fiction is able to imaginatively

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<sup>4</sup> The human condition in literature can be understood as any thematic concerns which raise fundamental questions about the issues of human existence. See, for example, *The Human Condition: Literature Written in the English Language* (1974) by James Edwin Miller.

represent a range of different perspectives, situations, contexts, and dilemmas, and can expose, affirm and/or reject widely-held beliefs and values. Through exposing, critiquing and challenging the structures and limitations of cultural and social perspectives, such fiction can inform readers' understanding of themselves, of 'Others' and of society.

Patricia Meyer Spacks is a critic engaged in the debate about the representation of sexual assault in fiction. She argues that fiction has the potential to engage the reader in questions of morality, arguing that: "paradigms of fiction provide an opportunity for moral playfulness," (1988, 185). In my understanding, the term 'playfulness' in her work refers to literary fiction's capacity to emotionally engage the reader in morally working through the particulars of ethical issues in order to entertain a multitude of possibilities to deepen and expand the reader's comprehension. It is an approach which contrasts to the more systematic, impersonal reflection evident in such disciplines as philosophy, referred to by Nussbaum earlier. Spacks goes on to argue that, when reading fiction, the novel should not be looked at in terms of how accurately it imitates the real world, but rather "what moral utility it asserts" (1988, 186). That is, literary fiction, for Spacks, is more valuable as a tool of ethical investigation rather than, in terms of its qualities, as mimesis.

In relation to suffering and the reader's perception of others' suffering, Georges Bataille stresses that literature can provide a medium through which the horrific can be safely approached and its fascination explored (1992, 107). Following on from his observation, literature that represents suffering, either directly or indirectly, may provide the reader with the necessary distance from the depiction of horror, suffering and pain, to allow them to contemplate their own thoughts and responses.

Nussbaum, Spacks and Bataille all represent literary fiction as having the potential to allow the reader to experientially and emotionally engage with moral and ethical dilemmas. For Nussbaum, for example, the reading and interpretation of certain novels can develop a reader's sensitivity, a stage which is essential for achieving ethical understanding: "Our highest and hardest task is to make ourselves people 'on whom nothing is lost'... this conception of moral attention and moral vision finds in novels its most appropriate articulation" (1990, 148). Nussbaum expands on this assertion in *Poetic Justice* (1995), in which she argues that, by triggering readers' imaginations and emotions, literature functions as an ethical testing ground, helping readers to engage with characters who are different from themselves (Nussbaum 1995, 5). Susan Sontag, in relation to what she terms the 'ethical potential' of literature states: "Literature can give standards and pass on deep knowledge, incarnated in language, in narrative. Literature can train, and exercise,

our ability to weep for those who are not us or ours” (2007, 205). In relation to understanding lives and experiences that are not our own, both Sontag and Nussbaum emphasise the potential of literature to influence readers’ ethical thinking.

For Sontag, the desired outcome of critically reflective responses by readers will depend on the amount of time and concentration the work of fiction requires of readers (2003, 122). In other words, she argues that reading, which requires the reader to mentally convert the words on the page into imagined scenes, requires the reader to play a more active role than is the case with non-textual, visual representations. Her example, perhaps a little crudely, contrasts literature with television: “Literature tells stories. Television gives information. Literature involves. It is the re-creation of human solidarity. Television (with its illusion of immediacy) distances—immures us in our own difference” (Sontag 2005, 13-14). The feature she highlights here is one that I have referred to as the experiential quality of literature.<sup>5</sup>

Some theorists turn to fiction to offer better understandings of trauma: “Fiction that helps readers access traumatic experience has assumed an important place among diverse artistic, scholarly, and testimonial representations that illustrate the effects of trauma on memory and identity” (Vickroy 2015, 8). However, fiction may also help readers understand *victims* of trauma, and challenge commonly held beliefs about what it is to be a victim. This may include denying readers access to the traumatic experience.

As such, my position is more aligned with Susanne Kappler. In *The Pornography of Representation* (1986) Kappler, within her overall view that fictional representations influence readers’ perceptions of everyday life, argues that fiction influences conceptions of what constitutes sexual assault, and what constitutes appropriate sexual behaviour (3-4). In reading such fiction, the reader’s own beliefs and assumptions about these issues may be challenged and/or confirmed.

As Kelly Oliver argues, challenging the reader’s preconceptions, fears and desires is a necessary step towards the reader becoming a self-reflexive, ethically conscious person (1999, 199-200). Depictions of sexual assault in literary fiction, whether explicit or non-explicit, can, in theory, productively challenge and change readers’ beliefs. In particular, literary fiction can provide the means for the reader to experience ethical dilemmas and develop empathy, while maintaining the distance necessary for critical reflection.

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<sup>5</sup> See also *Consciousness and the Novel* (2002) by David Lodge.

The explicit representation of sexual assault in fiction is, of course, not unethical in itself, rather the focus, style and the narrative context in which it is represented can raise ethically complex issues. As Wayne Booth, in the field of literary criticism, argues in his work on ethics, literary works portraying unethical acts and/or stereotypes can and do prompt ethical reflection by readers (1988, 179). In this sense, authors of fiction, while they cannot be held accountable for the acts they depict, can be deemed responsible for the style and context of their depictions. That is to say, authors might choose to represent unlawful and/or unethical acts, such as sexual assault, in ways that are or are not ethically constructive, even by virtue of a genre's explicit disinterest in ethics (the horror genre, for example). In this context, it is useful to examine debates by critics as to the effect of different representations, and the degree to which these are considered to invite or shut down critical reflection.

The representation of sexual assault against women can be a difficult subject matter for writers, as the topic necessarily engages with issues of gender, power and identity, and often involves issues such as race and class. Representations can be further complicated by the wide range of associated cultural beliefs and stereotypes involved, by the reality and frequency of sexual assault in society, by the potential for undesirable, voyeuristic reader responses, and by the problem of aestheticising sexual assault, with the risk it will present as a desirable outcome. (Graham 2003, Adorno 1967, Morrison 1994, Fitzpatrick 2010, Higgins and Silver 1991, Horeck 2004).

Representations of rape (as the dominant form of sexual assault) in fiction have been the subject of much debate by critics. These discussions have focused on the politics of representing sexual assault in both fiction and non-fiction, with the debates broadly informed by feminist theory. The main issues have been: how social understandings of sexual assault are constructed (Chasteen 2001, Brownmiller 1975, Estrich 1987); how gender stereotypes and rape myths figure in these constructions (Horeck 2004, Kappeler 1986, Morrison 1994, Gunne and Thompson 2010); and how literature, whether fiction or non-fiction, can confirm or challenge dominant misconceptions (Tanner 1994, Ehrlich 2001, Fitzpatrick 2010, Gunne and Thompson 2010).

### **Explicit representations of sexual assault**

What constitutes sexual assault is not always clear, both in fiction and in reality, and is often deemed as requiring interpretation, particularly regarding issues of consent. The

issue of what constitutes sexual assault is further problematized by the differences in gender roles in society, and by related stereotypes of power and powerlessness, as these inform the reading of both fictional and non-fictional representations of sexual assault. The capacity for misunderstanding (often the case in law) has been a key reason that many critics have advocated for the explicit representation of sexual assault (Higgins and Silver 1991, Tanner 1994, Scarry 1985). Explicit representations, they argue, reduces the distance between the reader and the depicted scene of the sexual assault this, in turn, avoids misinterpretation (as to the attacker and the effect of the attack), and makes the reader more aware of the impact and seriousness of the sexual assault (Tanner 1994, Higgins and Silver 1991, Scarry 1985).

Explicit representations of sexual assault against women have, however, been read by other critics as inherently problematic (Horeck 2004, Gunne and Thompson 2010). The problems include the potential: to re-inscribe normative, reductive understandings about gender codes; to eroticise the sexual assault evoking voyeurism in the reader; to give readers the false impression that they understand the suffering of the Other; to negatively represent the female victim as devalued/tainted/devastated; and to produce the sense of a second violation in readers who have experienced an actual sexual assault. I will examine each of these in turn.

In 1992, a group of critics asserted that: “Prior to the feminist reanalysis of rape beginning in the 1970s, influential segments of both the scientific community and the public conceptualised all but the most narrowly defined acts of rape as sex that was desired by female victims” (Muehlenhard, Harney and Jones 1992, 130). In this context, the political priority for many feminists has been to make the reality of sexual assault explicit, in order to bring it to the public’s attention. This type of graphic representation of rape has now been identified as problematic and reductive, the shift being that such representations are now read as reinscribing negative rape myths: “the powerful and sadistic rapist pushing his hostility outwards and onto the helpless and passive victim” (Gunne and Thompson 2010, 202).

One of the key arguments against explicit representations of sexual assault has been that they risk repeating (and therefore reinforcing) conventional notions of gender-relations, that is, depicting the female as weak, passive and therefore, inevitably, a victim; in contrast, the risk is that conventional images of the male will be confirmed as the strong, active perpetrator. In conventional fictional representations, Susan Billingham argues:

[W]oman and victim are practically interchangeable terms. Feminine women are victims-in-waiting; masculine women are abnormal (perverse, crazy) and [are] therefore inviting punishment precisely for refusing to be women (2010, 106).

On the same basis, in support of explicit representation in fiction — Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver — argue: “rape and rapability are central to the very construction of gender identity and ... our subjectivity and sense of ourselves as sexual beings are inextricably enmeshed in representations” (1991, 3). There is agreement then that the continued and complex association of certain behaviours with gender inform, and are informed by, representations of sexual assault. For example, in accordance with basic gender stereotypes, the woman is often represented as the more passive actor, sometimes even coquettishly seductive, while the man is the more active, more blatant seducer. Critics of explicit representations of sexual assault in fiction argue that these representations inscribe sexual assault with normative understandings of power dynamics and gender roles, often directly portraying the sexual assault as female victim and male perpetrator. Non-explicit representations of sexual assault clearly do not automatically prevent such problems. However, as I will discuss, non-explicit representations can avoid focusing on the spectacle of the suffering female body.

The feminist aim to bring the reality of sexual assault and its extent to the public’s attention was followed by a rapid increase of such representations in fiction. Whereas prior to the 1970s, there were only a few narratives of sexual assault, now fictional representations became more common (Plummer 1995, Greenberg and Hofschire 2000). When critics began to be concerned with the depiction of graphic violence in general, arguing that it risked normalising such violence, the critique extended to the now wider array of depictions of sexual assault (Moorti 2002, 34, Fitzpatrick 2010, 187). Novels that contained depictions of violence against women, even if they were intended to protest against such violence, were now accused of contributing to violence against women (Horeck 2004). Explicit representations of sexual assault are still susceptible to such criticism on this account, with the critique made more complex by the consideration of the representation of violence within the politics of eroticism.

A number of critics have argued that, problematically, explicit representations of sexual assault can be read as erotic (Virdi 2006, Horeck 2004, Graham 2003). Such representations have been widely criticised for their role in extending and “open[ing] up women’s bodies as a site of fascination, eroticism and voyeurism” (Gunne and Thompson 2010, 213). Tanya Horeck highlights the dilemma: “are we bearing witness to a terrible

crime or are we participating in a shameful voyeuristic activity?” (2004, vi). The crisis for writers is, in explicitly representing sexual assault, that they are at risk of eroticizing the event, and involving the reader in voyeurism. Lucy Valerie Graham explains this “double bind” of rape representations as when writers “expose atrocities” in their writing but “risk ... turning violence into a pornographic spectacle that [threatens] to implicate the viewer” (Graham 2003, 441). A related problem, identified by critics, is aestheticisation, in which textual features such as metaphor, vivid and visceral imagery and repetition, may present the sexual assault as a dreadful but pleasurable reading experience<sup>6</sup> (Surányi 2003, Adorno 1978, Nussbaum 1995, Sontag 2003).

In his essay, “Cultural Criticism and Society” (1949), Theodor Adorno famously wrote that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (34). One of the implications of this quote is that art, through the limitation and inadequacies of language, must do injustice to the experience of trauma. Furthermore, it argues that at this point in history, life had exceeded the representational possibilities of art. In 1962, Adorno returned to his statement, arguing this time that aestheticism might relieve, and therefore reduce, the horror of suffering. Like other critics, however, he warns that depictions of suffering may merely provide entertainment for those who have not experienced the suffering (Adorno 1978). In acknowledging the complex benefits of art in representing trauma, Adorno states that the role of art is inevitably contradictory: “suffering ... demands the continued existence of art while it prohibits it” (1978, 312). This presents a problem for writers, who are inevitably caught in a double bind.

Critics have argued that readers of explicit representations of violence and suffering might come to wrongly believe that they know what the victim has experienced (LaCapra 2001). These arguments point out that while it is desirable for the readers to empathise with the victim, it is also necessary for readers to be aware of the limits of their understanding, acknowledging that they can never fully comprehend the experience of another being. Again in relation to representing the suffering of Auschwitz prisoners, another critic argues:

Violent events belong to those who experience them. The hurt and pain entailed can only be fully comprehended by the individual who is violated ... We tread a fine line between the need to maintain the integrity of these experiences and our desire to employ them so as to resist the social conditions that make them possible in the first place (Mason 2002, 251).

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<sup>6</sup> For example, see *Rape, A Love Story* (2003) by Joyce Carol Oates.

In this context, as I will discuss, LaCapra emphasises the importance of staying true to facts (especially with history writing), while not foreclosing empathy in the writing of trauma.

In an attempt to prevent the reader from taking erotic or aesthetic pleasure in the sexual assault, some writers have chosen to focus on the damage inflicted on the victim. The problem here is that representation itself makes it impossible to fully grasp the pain of the Other:

[W]hen one speaks about “one’s own physical pain” and about “another person’s physical pain”, one might almost appear to be speaking about two wholly distinct orders of events. For the person whose pain it is, it is “effortlessly” ... while for the person outside the sufferer’s body, what is “effortless” is not grasping it (Scarry 1985, 4).

As Elaine Scarry points out, the problem is that “pain ... resists verbal objectification” (1985, 12); the nature of pain is that it cannot be accurately described in words. Scarry states that “the relative ease or difficulty with which any given phenomenon can be verbally represented also influences the ease or difficulty with which that phenomenon comes to be politically represented[:] the one that is more visible will receive more attention” (1985, 12).

The work of critics has shown that an essential aspect of representing pain and suffering is the use of the first person point of view, in other words, “the language of agency” (Scarry 1985). In addition, the use of specificity (in terms of who is acting upon whom, and what exactly is being done), it has been argued, can produce a greater effect on the reader while avoiding the possibility of voyeurism (Scarry 1985, 14). In this view, both the evident use of agency and the specific representation of injury produce a more experiential and vivid experience for the reader. This model of explicitly representing pain and suffering does not, of course, necessarily avoid sadistic or voyeuristic responses by readers. Feminist film critic Laura Mulvey stresses the voyeuristic and sadistic pleasures of the one whose gaze objectifies the erotic object, while emphasizing that there are differences between the experience of watching movies and reading novels (1989, 11, 27). She states:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed. (Mulvey 1989, 19)



As discussed, when writers represent the violence of sexual assault in explicit detail, they not only make the reader a bystander to the depicted violation, but can also produce a sense of complicity in the violence (Graham 2003). The explicit representation of pain may produce a ‘turn-away’ response, even indifference when the reader is positioned as a powerless onlooker.

In trauma theory, poststructuralist scholars such as Cathy Caruth and Julia Kristeva advocate the representation of suffering and trauma through stylistic devices which stress the fragmentary and disruptive nature of traumatic experience. Similar perspectives are held on the representation of suffering and trauma in relation to the victim’s experience, (Caruth 1996, Kristeva 1989, Rothberg 2000, Scarry 1985). These literary critics argue that the victim’s experience and suffering can never be represented. Such extreme experiences can only be communicated through signs or representations which aim to evoke it in the most effective way. What is effective will depend on the type of response one wants to evoke; making the experience understandable for readers, or stressing the ways in which the act and experience can never be understood.

My own argument is that the experience of pain inevitably has an ‘unshareable’ aspect and, therefore, limiting representations to the physical representation of the trauma may give the impression that the reader fully comprehends the pain and the painful experience depicted. This is clearly a problem in the representation of sexual assault, which can involve hidden aspects such as a loss of sense of self and dissociation, even compliance in the interest of self-protection. Part of the argument of this thesis, which I will develop further in the next section, is that confronting the reader with the limits of their understanding of the Other’s pain and experience, while encouraging empathy, is a more productive way to represent sexual assault, if not all acts of violence.

An aspect of explicit representation is whose point of view is to be represented. Scarry clearly argues the importance of writing from the victim’s first person point of view to try to encourage identification with the body in pain. This argument stems from early 1970s debates when feminist writers and critics started to challenge depictions of sexual assault that focused on the thoughts and motivations of the male rapist (See Morrison 2003). At this time, writers began to represent the experiences of the female victims by specifically depicting physical violation and psychological damage (Field 2010, Gedalof 1999), seeking to re-inscribe rape as a traumatic event for the one raped, with the first person narration aiming to elicit the reader’s sympathy for the victim and outrage for the perpetrator (Higgins and Silver 1991, 3).

Later feminist critics, whose work is perhaps more informed by post-structuralist theory, have highlighted the role of religion in descriptions of women in fiction, arguing that representing the victim as ‘devastated’ is problematic in that it can produce a sense of the female victim as devalued or made ‘impure’ by the sexual assault. On this basis, “[the] image of the sexualized and tainted female body is a regressive one, [and] some women writers have tried to reverse its connotations” (Gunne and Thompson 2010, 202). Following such observations it is not surprising that critics conclude: “within women’s writing, the representation of rape may be the most subversive when it does not destroy the victim” (Fitzpatrick 2010, 196). That is, in terms of the relations of power between men and women, images of sexually assaulted women as ‘devastated’, ‘destroyed’ or ‘tainted’, tend to reinforce normative (and socially damaging) understandings of gender relations, where the experience of rape is understood as irreparably damaging and shameful for the victim. I later argue in relation to *A Mercy* and *Disgrace* that these novels challenge the dominant and erroneous belief system that the agency of victims is permanently devalued by their experience. The critical debates as to how victims of sexual assault are represented in fiction shows that readers and critics play an important role in the deconstruction and reconstruction of such misconceptions.

One of the main ethical concerns underlying the explicit representation of rape in fiction is the effect of sexual assault representations in fiction on perceptions of actual rape in law and in society. Since these fields all involve social constructions and issues of power and gender, fictional representations cannot be considered separately from the social contexts in which such representations are read. One concern is what effect explicit fictional representations might have on readers who have actually experienced sexual assault. One of the recognised complexities of representation in relation to sexual assault is the extent to which representation can risk evoking the trauma of the original offence, a problem that has been experienced by women relating their experience of rape in court.

In her study of both fictional and non-fictional representations of sexual assault in South Asia, Ananya Jahanara Kabir examines the ethics of representation in relation to sexual assault, and asks whether it is possible to tell the stories of victims of violence without causing a “double violation” (2010). That is, her study finds that reliving trauma in the form of a public testimony can constitute a second trauma. In this sense, fictional accounts of sexual assault can be experienced as a double violation by real victims of sexual assault. This issue had also been raised by Thompson and Gunne in their discussion

of rape in literature, arguing that “graphic representation of sexual violence constitutes what some feminists see as a second violation” (2010, 2).

In summary, the various problems associated above with the explicit representation of sexual assault are: the re-inscription of normative understandings of gender-relations, the normalisation of sexual assault, the aestheticisation/eroticisation of sexual assault, the assumed ‘devastation’ of the victim, and double violation. The wide range of issues raises the question as to how sexual assault can be represented in fiction, and theorised and discussed by critics. In order to address this question in the next section I examine arguments in favour of the non-explicit representation of sexual assault.

### **Non-explicit representations of sexual assault**

In discussing debates over non-explicit representations of sexual assault, it is necessary to first acknowledge that various approaches such as silence, euphemism, omission, as well as other such representations have been the subject of much criticism. For example, fiction writers who have attempted to represent sexual assault euphemistically, or who have otherwise veiled, avoided or obscured the sexual assault, have been criticised as producing passive and reductive depictions (Higgins and Silver 1991, Virdi 2006). Similarly, it has been argued that representing sexual assault non-explicitly through silence and omission distances the reader from the horror of the sexual assault and reduces the perceived severity of the event (Brownmiller 1975, Higgins and Silver 1991, Tanner 1994).

In relation to non-explicit representation and the religious discourse around sexually assaulted women, Jyotika Virdi comments that “the erasure of rape from the narrative [itself] bears the marks of a patriarchal discourse of honour and chastity” (2006, 266). In Virdi’s view, avoiding the direct representation of rape encourages patriarchal ideology, including the perpetuation of rape myths and gender-role stereotyping, where women are represented as consenting, passive objects and men as powerful agents. In a similar vein, in *Rape and Representation* (1991), Higgins and Silver criticise the “conspicuous absence” of rape in novels, an absence they describe as “obsessive erasure” (1991, 2). They, over-simplistically perhaps, explain this “rhetoric of elision” as “male uneasiness” about the coercion involved in sexual assault (Higgins and Silver 1991, 2). In other words, they claim that avoiding direct representation of sexual assault may stem from a patriarchal, cultural impulse.

In arguments such as these, narratives which do not explicitly represent the scene of sexual assault have been criticised as making the scene of sexual assault “unreadable”, and such non-explicit representations termed: “negative, passive or inverted” (Higgins and Silver 1991, 3, 115). In other words, for this group of critics, non-explicit representations are inherently damaging because, in conformity with many legal cases, speculation can be made as to whether coercion was actually involved. In other words, the non-explicit representation is considered to allow too much room for misinterpretation. The work of Higgins and Silver, in particular, reads non-explicit representations in fiction as inherently ambiguous because they can lead to the questioning of whether or not the sexual assault took place. Their criticism focuses on the non-depiction or non-portrayal of sexual assault, the explicit downplaying of the severity of a sexual assault, or scenes which are too obscure to be identifiable as sexual assault.

My argument is that, while the explicit details of the sexual assault may not be available to the reader, this does not necessarily imply a questioning as to whether or not the sexual assault took place. In my analysis of *A Mercy* and *Disgrace* that follows, I show that non-explicit representations of sexual assault can unequivocally communicate to the reader the occurrence of sexual assault, and that an absent, or non-explicit, representation can itself be represented as a presence in the narrative, drawing the reader’s attention to it, rather than away from it. In this sense, I agree with Ernestine Schlant who argues that “silence is not a semantic void; like any language, it is infused with narrative strategies that carry ideologies and reveal unstated assumptions.” On this basis, absence can be a presence that informs the meaning of a fictional work (1999, 7) and, on this basis, non-explicit representations of sexual assault can be understood as having the capacity to hold meaning.

While critics of non-explicit representations of sexual assault have opposed what they understand as absences in the text, the absence of the fictional victim’s voice has also been identified as problematic (Brownmiller 1975, Higgins and Silver 1991). It has been suggested, for example, that silence, as a form of non-explicit representation, is not only restrictive for writers (in that it limits the ways a writer might convey information to the reader), but can also convey female passivity. As discussed, some critics have argued the importance in fiction of relaying the victim’s experience from the victim’s point of view, a view largely influenced by discourses of law and legal proof. However, as discussed, since traumatic experiences in real life suspend and challenge written representations, critics have called for unconventional ways of expressing these experiences, through fragmentary

and innovative narratives which mimic trauma. My view, that silence can be understood — not as reductive and patriarchal — but as a useful and subversive narrative strategy, refers only to fictional discourse. In fiction, silence can be a productive strategy, as Sorcha Gunne argues:

The rhetoric of speech and silence in the aftermath of rape is not consistently analogous with the dichotomy between power and submission. Not speaking can potentially be an action that reclaims agency (Gunne and Thompson 2010, 165).

Consistent with this view, I show that in both *Disgrace* and *A Mercy*, the victims' silences can be read as subversive. My analysis confirms that 'not speaking' can be represented in fiction as an action that potentially reclaims agency, as a representation that actively resists more dominant, oppressive and hegemonic voices.

In the arguments that favour explicit representation we have seen critics argue that readers need to witness the victim's body in pain, and that this is absent by definition in non-explicit representations (Higgins and Silver 1991, Tanner 1994). According to Higgins and Silver, fictional representations of rape and physical sexual violation should always represent the physical trauma of the violated body: "[There is a need to] recuperate what has too often been left out; the physical violation and the women who find ways to speak it" (1991, 3). In these arguments, the body in pain is necessary in order for the reader to empathise and comprehend the sexual assault. Laura Tanner in *Intimate Violence* (1994), for example, addressing the interaction between readers and fictional representations of rape and torture, argues that readers need to be made aware of the fictional victim's "suffering body" to "remind the reader of his or her own violability" (1994, 13). Tanner focuses on the readers' experiential awareness of their own bodies in relation to the represented suffering body of the victim: "Denied an explicit account of the novel's violence, the reader is ... frustrated" (Tanner 1994, 21). She argues that the readers' ability to empathise and associate with the victim requires the novel to engage them in an explicit scene (Tanner 1994, 9). Tanner argues that distancing is inherent in all literary representations as the "manipulation of words, images, and literary forms" adds a degree of separation between the reader and the content of the depiction (1994, 9). She also asserts however that, when drawn into a scene, readers find themselves in "a position of discomfiting proximity to the victim's vulnerable body" or "discomfiting proximity to the violator" (Tanner 1994, 10). On this basis, like Scarry, she argues the need for the scene of sexual assault to be explicitly represented from the victim's perspective, so that the reader's distance from the experience of the victim should be minimal.

While I agree that empathy is a positive aspect of reader response, I do not agree that explicit representations of sexual assault will necessarily provoke reader empathy. As discussed, there are a number of risks. The first is that the suffering body may be a source of eroticism or titillation for the reader. The second is that the depiction may repel readers; the third is that the reader may falsely believe they understand the suffering of the Other. In other words, explicit representation of sexual assault is by no means a guarantee of empathetic reading. In my reading of *A Mercy* and *Disgrace*, I show that the inclusion of representations of the suffering body is not the only way to achieve reader empathy, and that a purely empathetic reading may not be the most productive reading of sexual assault.

On the problem of sympathy as opposed to empathy, Susan Sontag in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), argues that while we (as viewers/readers) have an obligation to familiarise ourselves with the suffering in the world, we “should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at [images of suffering], about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show” (95). In particular, she stresses the inherent danger of occupying the passive position of the sympathetic spectator:

So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. To that extent, it can be (for all our good intentions) an impertinent – if not an inappropriate – response (Sontag 2003, 102).

In fiction, in the face of represented suffering, a reader’s feelings of impotence and pity towards the represented victim may also inappropriately reassure a reader as to their lack of responsibility.

Again in relation to the often stated ethical preference for empathy over sympathy, Suzanne Keen critically examines the limits of empathy in *Empathy and the Novel* (2007), in research which interrogates the links between reader empathy and altruism. She finds that narrative empathy “often features as a first step in a process that expresses concern for others in voluntary action taken on their behalf”, but “[b]y no means does this inevitably lead to better behaviour” (Keen 2007, 16, 150). As I will discuss, Coetzee’s novel, in particular, requires the reader to reconsider the limits of empathy.

The key criticisms of non-explicit representations of sexual assault can be summed up as follows: non-explicit representations can cover-up, misinterpret, contest or downplay the severity and/or veracity of the sexual assault; the absence of the victim’s voice can contribute to a stereotyped representation of female passivity; and the lack of an explicitly represented suffering body of the victim can prevent reader empathy. In the chapters that follow I address these criticisms, arguing that in *A Mercy* and *Disgrace* the non-explicit

representations are not inherently ambiguous and that the inclusion of the victim's voice or suffering body is not used to bring about an appropriate reader response. On the basis of my analysis of the two novels, I argue that non-explicit representations can avoid the potential voyeurism associated with the body in pain and can refocus the reader on the broader role, issues and implications of sexual assault. In relation to both *A Mercy* and *Disgrace* I argue that the reader's attention is diverted productively to particular social and historical contexts, and to the prevalence of sexual assault in women's experience in *A Mercy*. On this basis, redirecting readers away from the site of trauma and humiliation, in these novels, enables a focus on sexual assault in its context, addressing important related issues of power, race and gender.

From addressing the concerns raised by critics of representation, and the potentially negative reader responses to such representations of sexual assault, the problems which must be taken into account have been identified as: the problem of articulating, sensitively and ethically, a traumatic experience; the problem of how to deter voyeuristic and sadistic responses in the reader; and the problem of how to avoid re-inscribing traditional power dynamics.

### **Ethics and the suffering of the Other**

As I have shown, fictional representations of sexual assault inevitably involve ethical issues in so much as sexual assault is a social reality and its representation can affect readers' responses to the issue. The extent to which a text motivates ethical reflection in a reader is relevant when a literary work depicts violent or abusive acts, in particular, when someone is shown to suffer and someone is shown inflicting suffering. While it can be argued that authors have a responsibility to convey sexual assault ethically, the ethical potential of representations can only eventually be realised by readers. In particular, I argue, the critic as reader has the added responsibility of interpreting, promoting and passing judgement on different representations of sexual assault.

The reader is in a difficult position when confronted with the suffering of represented Others. As discussed, sadism and voyeurism are obvious contenders as undesirable effects of explicit representation. As Terry Eagleton argues in *Sweet Violence* (2003):

[T]here is a streak of cruelty in the kind of pity which finds itself helpless before a hopeless situation. The frustration involved in this can fester into sadism, as a kind of psychical defence against one's impotence (159).

Faced with graphic scenes of sexual abuse, a reader wishing to avoid such scenes and effects can often do little except skip pages. When the reader is denied direct access to the scene of the sexual assault, the reader is potentially confronted by the limits of their knowledge, and is faced with their own assumptions. The novel, *Disgrace*, as I will show, uses non-explicit representation as an ethically productive approach to provoke thought and reflection by the reader in relation to the Other whose experience is not articulated, and, in this sense, the novel avoids voyeuristic engagement with the suffering body.

Of course, readers vary considerably in their reception of texts in terms of their personal experiences, and in terms of the social and cultural contexts which inform their interpretations and understandings. What will invite an ethical response in one reader may not do so for another. As such, I have analysed *Disgrace* and *A Mercy* in terms of the response invited by the narrative and its representations. That is, I have made an argument about how non-explicit representations of sexual assault have been deployed by these two authors, how these representations avoid the traps discussed, and how they can be read as ethical and productive narratives.

As a broad conceptualisation of what a reader's 'ethical response' might be, I suggest an attitude of critical thought and (self) reflection, coupled with an intent to empathetically engage with the characters. In my analysis of the two novels, I have assumed that the desired approach to any fictional text is one of empathy (without over-identifying with the characters) and a willingness to reflect critically on the issues raised. My selection of *Disgrace* and *A Mercy* as texts for analysis in relation to the issue of non-explicit representations of sexual assault, demonstrates my own critical preference for texts which require readers to reflect on their perception of, and culpability toward, the silenced Other. In my reading of the various debates on explicit and non-explicit representation of sexual assault, I have concluded that the ethically appropriate attitude for someone reading about sexual assault and suffering is to respond to the experience of Others' suffering, while acknowledging distance from the Others' suffering. This requires the reader to be made aware of their own responses in order to address their own assumptions, ethics and ideas. This admittedly ideal response can produce a more ethically productive response by the reader to the suffering Other, and to the Other who inflicts suffering.

In the context of pitying the victim at the expense of critical engagement or responsibility, LaCapra's "empathic unsettlement" is a useful concept (2001). Empathic unsettlement is the disruption of the engagement and empathy the reader feels for the sufferer, by the text's challenge to the reader's conventional frameworks for



understanding. For example, a level of empathy is maintained by the text, while the basis for that empathy is questioned. As part of his discussion of empathetic unsettlement, LaCapra stresses the value of non-explicit representation, in which the reader comes to realise he or she can never completely comprehend the Other's experience. LaCapra also discusses other disruptive narrative techniques which can trigger readers to think, that is, to be 'unsettled' in their conventional ideas, with the desired effect being a greater understanding of the limits of representation.

LaCapra's discussion of empathic unsettlement aims to prevent over-identification with the suffering, in order to provoke critical reflection (2001, 41, 79). As he describes it, such unsettlement can act as a counterforce to the 'numbing' or disassociation that can be part of an individual's response to traumatic representation in particular. Empathic unsettlement, therefore, can be considered a critical strategy in the representation of suffering in fiction. On this basis, the ethical engagement of readers, faced with a novel that includes sexual assault, may depend on the play staged between empathy and estrangement.

Another strategy in the non-explicit representation of trauma and suffering in general is the deconstructive reading and writing of texts, each of which pays close critical attention to exposing the structure, content and style of the text in relation to dominant power dynamics. Coetzee in particular is a noted writer of deconstructive texts, and *Disgrace* in particular questions the basis for readers' judgments, often indirectly questioning what might be understood and what might escape understanding. For Attridge, a major commentator on Coetzee's oeuvre, literary fiction can only be understood through this kind of critical interrogation: "[literature is] something that comes into being only in the process of understanding and responding" (2004, 39).

For other major critics, the deconstructive writing and reading of a text allows it to be 'dismantled', bringing to light new understandings of the meaning in the text (Butler 2003, Levinas 1998). The related issue of deconstructive approaches to ethics, outlined by Emmanuel Levinas and Judith Butler among others, addresses the need for readers themselves to suspend judgment of the Other (Butler 2003, Levinas 1998). Their emphasis stresses the ethical necessity of being open to Otherness, while questioning the Other and questioning the Self, and is clearly a useful insight into developing an ethics of reading in relation to fictional representations of sexual assault.

In *Ethical Modernism: Servants as Others in J.M. Coetzee's Early Fiction* (2004), Attridge argues that confrontation with Otherness<sup>7</sup> or with Others' difference in works of literature is both inevitable, and ethically productive:

Literary works that resist the immediacy and transparency of language – as in the case of modernist writing – thus engage the reader ethically; and to do justice to such works as a reader is to respond fully to an event whereby otherness challenges habitual norms (653).

According to this approach, an ethics of critical reading will include awareness of the 'singularity of the text', without attempting to reduce what is being read into something familiar, or simplifying it into any one explanation. By allowing the text to be Other the reader is able to better understand its meanings and intricacies (Attridge 2004, 11). On this basis, with respect to the Otherness of the text, Attridge urges critics and readers to be 'creative' readers:

[To] read creatively in an attempt to respond fully and responsibly to the alterity and singularity of the text is to work against the mind's tendency to assimilate the other to the same, attending to that which can barely be heard, registering what is unique about the shaping of language, thought, and feeling in this particular work (2004, 80).

Such a reading requires the reader to be sensitive to a text's stylistic features, as well as its socio-historical context. The aim is for the reader/critic to question the text and postpone judgment and, for Attridge, it is this sensitive attuning to the text that makes reading a literary text ethically productive (2004, 67).

One of the overall aims of the deconstructive text, therefore, is to question readers' assumptions, as Attridge says: "While affirming the other as other ... I encounter the limits of my own powers to think and to judge, my capacities as a rational agent" (2004, 33). On these terms, the making of meaning requires the questioning of the reader's bases for making meaning and the potential transformation of the reader must question their social and cultural norms, with the process opening up "new possibilities for thought and feeling" (Attridge 2004, 11).

In considering whether and how *Disgrace* and *A Mercy* bring about such 'new possibilities', I have drawn on LaCapra's empathic unsettlement as well as critical, deconstructive reading (LaCapra 2001). In relation to representations of trauma, empathic unsettlement "may be understood in terms of attending to, even trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others", avoiding the trap of "unchecked identification, vicarious experience, and surrogate victimage,"

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<sup>7</sup> 'Otherness', for Attridge, can refer to the text itself, a fictional person or an actual person.

(LaCapra 2001, 40). The contention overall in my thesis, therefore, is that in these two novels, the tension between the desire to empathise on the part of the reader and various writerly strategies of deconstruction, including the non-explicit representation of sexual assault, potentially frustrate reader attempts to empathise, and, because of this, they produce the possibility of ethical reflection. In summary, an ethics of reading is implied which takes into account the need both to go along with the text and to resist the text. As I will discuss, an ethical approach which includes empathic unsettlement and deconstruction can produce the necessary space for approaching and questioning textual representations.

### ***Disgrace and A Mercy***

In the following chapters, I address how the non-explicit representations of sexual assault in two different novels might produce critical reflection in their readers. J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), through specific narrative techniques, depict sexual assault in a non-explicit way and both, I argue, encourage readers to think more broadly about sexual assault and the suffering of Others, in relation to culture and society.

J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) is concerned with issues of race, gender and power in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. The protagonist and unreliable narrator, David Lurie is a university professor who is forced to resign as a result of his sexual misconduct with a student. A parallel to this event occurs later in the novel when Lurie's daughter, Lucy, is raped by three African men outside of Lurie's (and, therefore, the reader's) range of perception – Lurie is locked in another room when the assault occurs. After the attack, Lucy refuses to speak with Lurie about her experience, in spite of his persistent questioning. Much of the plot is driven by Lurie's reactions to Lucy's rape and his attempts to understand her subsequent decision to marry a relative of one of the perpetrators in order to stay on the land. The novel indirectly questions normative understandings of how rape victims should react, including speaking out about their rape, in the context of Lucy's implied distrust of the South African police and legal system. With Lurie established as a morally unreliable character, readers are encouraged to be critical of his desire for Lucy to speak out about her rape. The ethical parallels (and differences) between choosing to be silent (Lucy), not having an historically legitimate voice in society (the Africans) and not having a voice at all (the wild dogs Lurie helps put down) are explored in the novel.

The second novel, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), is set in America in the late 1600s. In the novel, there are many non-explicit representations of sexual assaults with the effects experienced directly and indirectly by all the female characters. The representation suggests the systemic and historical circumstances and nature of sexual assault and its far-reaching consequences for the victims including pregnancy, physical/social displacement, insanity, and becoming violent themselves. As counter to representing the constant possibility of violence and sexual assault, I argue that Morrison also foregrounds explicit and positive representations of female sexual desire, female community and moral, male characters, all representations which suggest the possibility of change, and which reconfigure the violence and sexual assaults as aspects of the historically oppressive system of slavery.

In choosing these novels for my study of non-explicit representation of sexual assault, it was important that each had at least one scene of sexual assault which was not directly depicted. In other words, the scene of sexual assault could not be available to the reader through either the point of view of a character, or via an omniscient narrator. Any retrospective discussion of the assault by the characters was acceptable as long as it did not include a 'flashback' scene that could function as an explicit representation, with all the associated potential pitfalls of that form of representation. To complement the development of my own novella, it was necessary that the subject of the sexual assault was female.<sup>8</sup> In order to inform my own development as a writer I limited my study to full-length literary fiction written in the last twenty years.

As my discussion of the various debates on explicit and non-explicit representation make clear, in my dissertation I pose a number of questions about the potential of non-explicit representations of sexual assault in fiction, aware that, in literary criticism, though critics are divided on the issue, few are clear on what non-explicit representation can achieve. My investigation focuses on the degree to which these two novels can trigger critical reflection of their own responses by the reader; how the narrative context within the novel can influence a reading of the non-explicit representation; how such representations can relate to socio-cultural issues and stereotypes concerning sexual assault; and the extent to which normative values and assumptions can be questioned when the details of the individual attack are not made available to the reader. I ask whether or not the victim's voice is included in the narrative and to what effect; whose perspective the

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting that all of the examples of non-explicit representations of sexual assault that I found had female victims.

reader approaches the sexual assault through, and to what effect; and what the text refocuses the reader on, in the absence of the physical (and emotional) suffering of the individual victim.

By exploring the way in which these novels confront readers with the suffering of Others, and by examining how non-explicit depictions of sexual assault can invite critical reflection in the reader, my thesis contributes to debates on the potential of literature to productively and ethically influence readers. In this sense, I argue that these novels show non-explicit representations of sexual assault to be an important ethically productive strategy.

## **Conclusion**

While I have resisted making prescriptive statements about preferred forms of representation, my thesis does argue, as will be evidenced in the two novels I analyse in the following chapters, that non-explicit representation can be used to open up a space for ethical reflection by the reader. On this basis, my analyses show that non-explicit rape representation can be rich and productive in terms of the ethical reflection they motivate. As I have shown, this is contrary to the view of some of the critics I have discussed (Higgins and Silver 1991, Brownmiller 1975, Tanner 1994). Through analysing how non-explicit representations function in these novels, I suggest such representations can avoid exploitative tendencies, such as eroticising the sexual assault or re-inscribing rape myths (e.g. the victim as responsible for her own assault).

Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), and Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) both use a non-explicit mode of representing sexual assault to refocus the reader's attention away from the body in pain onto other key issues surrounding sexual assault. Both novels prompt critical thought and questioning by confronting the reader with the unknowable, and by centralising the sexual assault/s, while inhibiting voyeuristic responses. In this way, the reader is provided with a space for ethical reflection but is prevented from over-empathising or believing they know what the represented victim has been through. I demonstrate, in both novels, that the non-representation of the sexual assaults fulfils a crucial function. I examine and compare the non-explicit scenes of sexual assault in each of these novels to identify what effect the non-explicit representations can produce.

I also explore the subversion in these narratives, and other related narrative techniques that function to productively challenge any overly-simple readings. These

narrative techniques include emphasising the victims' narratives (rather than the perpetrators' narratives), the foregrounding of particular aspects of the narrative, the strategic paralleling of different narrative threads, and the manipulation and/or questioning of the perspective the narrative is told through (multiple perspectives in *A Mercy* and an unreliable perspective in *Disgrace*).

Similarly, I look at seemingly related choices the writer has made in relation to what has not been represented, including not representing the voice of the various Others, and the occlusion of a central moral voice or ethical authority within the text. I show how these narrative strategies serve to support and encourage a critical and ethically productive reading of the non-explicit representations of sexual assault.

In this Introduction I have set out the parameters of my thesis in terms of my theoretical approach and the novels I have studied. I have established the context for my work by showing what other critics have argued in relation to the representation of rape in fiction. In doing so, I have identified that explicit rape representations have been recognised as posing a set of problems for writers and critics, problems such as voyeurism, over-identification, and re-inscribing victim myths. On the same basis, non-explicit rape representations have been identified as problematic due to the scope for misinterpretation, the continuation of patriarchal silence around sexual assault, and the minimising of the crime of rape. My thesis draws on LaCapra's empathic unsettlement and Attridge's concept of creative reading in relation to deconstructive reading and writing approaches to show that in the novels I have examined, non-explicit representation has been used as a positive and ethical choice.

In Chapter One I focus on Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace* (1999), in which the rape scene is hidden from the reader's field of perception. I argue that, in *Disgrace*, the representation is ethically productive as it produces a space for the reader to identify and question their own assumptions and to critically reflect on issues of judgement. Coetzee's use of limited point of view, among other strategies, directs the reader's attention away from the specific crime of rape to issues of judgement, and the treatment of silenced Others in the context of post-apartheid South Africa.

In Chapter Two I analyse Morrison's novel, *A Mercy* (2008), which represents a number of acts of sexual violence obliquely as well as through silence and euphemism. I argue that, in *A Mercy*, the non-explicit representations function to refocus the reader away from the physical acts of sexual abuse to show the broader, generational and social implications of African-American slave history. In particular, Morrison depicts a culture of

sexual assault while producing positive images of active female and male desire. Through distancing the reader from the acts of sexual assault, I argue that Morrison empathically unsettles the reader, engaging the reader in active ethical reflection on their own cultural assumptions and values.

Overall, I argue that both Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Morrison's *A Mercy* use non-explicit representations of sexual assault to draw attention to the broader, historical and social workings of power, which in both cases involve racial relations. I argue that, unlike the nineteenth-century novel of realism (Crary 1992, 102) in which moral guidance and lessons were expected, and were obvious and evident, these novels provide no explicit guidance, rather they open up a space of reflection and questioning for the reader that allows for each to reconsider their own beliefs and assumptions.

## CHAPTER ONE

### COETZEE'S *DISGRACE*: SILENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

#### **Introduction**

As discussed, a number of critics have debated the ethical implications of representing sexual assault in fiction, including different styles of representation. For example, some critics argue that representations of sexual assault in fiction need to be explicit to avoid minimizing the horror of such events and to avoid the reader misinterpreting the scene as other than sexual assault. In relation to this critical environment, this chapter examines J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (1999), and its non-explicit representation of sexual assault, in the context of the novel's use of silence and non-visibility. In the novel, the rape of the central character's daughter occurs outside of his and the reader's view.

In examining the novel's representation of sexual assault, I have necessarily taken into account a range of related issues. For example, *Disgrace* is situated in South Africa and the novel raises issues of both race and gender, showing rape to be inextricably linked to these factors. One important context for this analysis is that *Disgrace* has been singled out by some critics as containing racist and sexist depictions. I argue that what is regarded by these critics as the novel's racism and sexism largely arises from the novel's immoral and unreliable narrator, whose judgements the reader must contend and contest.

In this chapter, I give a close reading of the non-explicit rape scene and the victim's subsequent silence in the context of the wider narrative. I then provide a defence against the key criticisms of non-explicit representation of sexual assault. This includes a way to productively read the victim's silence as agency rather than as passivity. Coetzee's use of parallel narrative threads, the deflection of reader empathy, an unreliable narrator and his limited point of view, are among the other supporting strategies Coetzee uses which invite the reader to understand the non-explicit rape scene in an ethically productive



way. Ultimately, I argue that the non-explicit rape scene redirects the reader's attention toward systemic and cultural violence and inequality, while opening an ethically productive space for readers to question their assumptions and preconceptions about issues concerning sexual assault.

Coetzee is a prominent white South African writer and theorist with a body of work primarily concerned with issues of language, power, and representations of the Other. He won the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature, the Booker Prize for *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), and a second Booker Prize for *Disgrace* in 1999. Coetzee is recognised as being involved with the anti-apartheid movement, as stated by scholar Isidore Diala: "Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and Andre Brink – three of South Africa's most distinguished white writers, all with definite anti-apartheid commitment" (2003, 51).

### *Disgrace*

*Disgrace* is told from a limited third-person perspective through the point of view of central character, David Lurie, a twice-divorced English professor at the University of Cape Town, who is fifty-two years old when the novel begins. This perspective effectively gives the reader access to Lurie's inner thoughts without the implicit endorsement of his perspective that a first person narrative would have. This enables the reader to have an understanding of Lurie's values and experiences while critically distancing them from his position. As a white, educated, middle-class, professional male, Lurie is represented as occupying a privileged position among both white and black populations in post-apartheid South Africa.

As the novel opens, Lurie is shown undergoing what might be called a mid-life crisis. That is, the reader is told that he is aware that he is getting older and he is acutely aware that he can no longer attract women as he once did. He associates his attractiveness to women both with his power as well as his sense of self: "if he looked at a woman in a certain way, with a certain intent, she would return his look [but now] his powers fled. Glances that would once have responded to his slid over, past, through him" (7). The reader is first introduced to Lurie when he uses the services of Soraya, a local prostitute who is referred to as "exotic" (7). Over time, Lurie develops feelings for Soraya, which he believes to be reciprocal, thus negating the commercial aspect of their arrangement. When he sees her in the street with her two sons, in a quite different role, he hires a detective to find out where she lives. Due to this invasion of her privacy, she refuses to continue to see

him. Therefore, the reader's first introduction to Lurie is as a man who is inappropriate, dominating, delusional and immoral in his behaviour towards women, in particular. That is, in relation to Soraya, he intentionally disregards her personal and professional limits as a sex worker, invades her privacy, and harasses her.

His descent into disgrace continues in the first section of the novel, when he has an affair with Melanie Isaacs, a mixed-race student many years his junior. Lurie acknowledges that his advances are undesired and unwanted by Melanie. In spite of this knowledge, he describes the sex between them as "not quite" rape (25). When Melanie later files a sexual harassment charge against him with the university, Lurie pleads guilty at a disciplinary hearing but refuses to apologise, or to show remorse. The panel informs him that, in order to keep his job, he is required to make an apology and that it is irrelevant whether or not it is sincere. He still refuses to do so.

When he is forced into resignation, he seeks refuge at his daughter's small farm in the country where Lucy lives alone (she had recently ended a lesbian relationship), but runs a boarding kennel for dogs. At Lucy's suggestion, Lurie volunteers at the animal welfare clinic, helping her older friend Bev Shaw, with whom he goes on to have a brief mutually sought out sexual relationship. Although initially repulsed by the job, Lurie helps Bev euthanize unwanted dogs left to roam wild in the countryside, and eventually insists on personally disposing of their bodies.

The key sexual assault scene in the novel occurs when three African men come to the farm, lock Lurie up in the lavatory, shoot the dogs, set Lurie on fire, while they rape Lucy then steal Lurie's car. Explaining to Lurie that her trauma is a "purely private matter", Lucy refuses his urging to tell the authorities of the sexual assault (112). Over time it becomes clear that Petrus, Lucy's African farm manager and neighbour, may have known about the attack in advance and may be protecting one of the assailants, a young boy who is suggested to be "mentally deficient" (208).

Lucy continues her work on the farm and, frustrated by her refusal to act, Lurie returns to Cape Town where he seeks out Melanie's family to ask her father for forgiveness. However, Lurie lusts after Melanie's younger sister while he is at their house and Melanie is absent during the apology. Lurie has discovered that his ideas, which informed his academic paper on Byron's sexual conquests (and which Lurie had hoped to turn into an opera) have changed. He begins to see Byron's actions from the point of view of the women, noting that some of the women "would call it rape" (160). He returns to the Eastern Cape to find that Lucy is pregnant as a result of the assault. Near the end of the

novel, Lucy's decides to enter into a marriage of convenience with Petrus, becoming his third wife. In exchange for his protection, she stays on the land and he gains ownership of the land, even though it is suggested that he may have been indirectly involved in the attack in order to gain control of her property. The reader and Lurie are left to try to make sense of the situation. Lurie resumes volunteering at the clinic and, in the final scene of the novel, Lurie euthanizes his favourite dog, treating it the same as all the other dogs.

The novel, therefore, has three main narrative threads: the first is Lurie's sexual misconduct and his personal progression towards change; the second follows Lucy's rape and her subsequent determination to stay on the land; the third involves the treatment of dogs, both domestic dogs and stray dogs. The recurring theme of violence towards Others and the contexts in which it occurs is evident in each of these plotlines. By examining how these stories are represented, and their ethical similarities and differences, it is possible to see how the non-explicit representation of sexual assault and the juxtaposition of the narrative threads contribute to opening a space for readers' critical reflection.

### **Silence and the non-explicit representation of rape in *Disgrace***

The non-explicit representation of Lucy's rape involves two key narrative aporias or gaps/silences. The first is the invisibility of the actual event as the third-person limited narration gives only Lurie's point of view, and he is locked in another room at the time. Lurie watches as Lucy "unlocks the back door and enters. The tall man follows" (93), then Lurie has no perception of Lucy until after the attack when she lets him out of the lavatory four pages later: "Lucy has turned her back on him. She is wearing a bathrobe, her feet bare, her hair wet" (97). As such, the reader only has access to Lurie's imagined versions of the rape. During the attack, when prevented from seeing Lucy, Lurie immediately imagines what is happening to her: "A vision comes to him of Lucy struggling with the two in the blue overalls, struggling against them. He writhes, trying to blank it out" (97). Lurie then imagines Lucy's sexual assault again, and this time he imagines himself as one of the rapists (160). The remainder of the novel is primarily driven by Lurie's reactions to his daughter's rape, in particular, her decision to stay on the land by marrying Petrus.

The second narrative gap in relation to Lucy's rape is her virtual silence about the event. When Lurie presses Lucy to talk to him about the event and to report the crime to the police, she refuses. Instead, she insists on the right to narrate (or to not narrate) her experience, declaring: "I will tell what happened to me" (99). She occasionally gives a

brief detail about her experience, her trauma hinted at when she tells Lurie “I meant nothing to them, nothing. I could feel it” (158). More often, though, she reminds him: “you don’t understand what happened to me” (157).

There is a significant difference between the two silences described above. The first is a ‘passive’ silence brought about by Lurie, the character through which the novel is narrated, being locked out from witnessing the rape. That is, he does not choose not to see, the decision is taken out of his hands when he is forced into another room, and his desire to know what happened is evident in his questioning of Lucy (98-99). Lucy’s silence, in contrast, is an ‘active’ silence, as her refusal to speak of the act or to go to the authorities is a conscious decision.

Lucy radically (but not complacently) presents her rape as “the price of staying on” the land (158). As discussed, Lurie’s and Lucy’s differences are contextualised by their different positions as father–daughter, male–female, heterosexual–lesbian, academic–labourer, intellectual–pragmatist. As such, their different responses to the rape both present and unsettle conventional understandings. They also create a third space in which the reader is able to contemplate other situations and resolutions. In this respect, the racialized history and politics of South Africa is an essential context for understanding the different characters’ ethical positions represented in the novel.

When Lucy ultimately does not speak out about her rape, and the narrative does not include an account of the sexual assault, the effect is that the reader, left with only Lurie’s unreliable perspective, must try to interpret Lucy’s actions. I argue that Lucy’s distinction between public and private, and her refusal to speak about the rape, can be read as an awareness of the problems – ethical, pragmatic, social, and historical – of seeking legally punitive action in South Africa, as well as of Lucy’s refusal to take on the traditional role of the victim. In this sense, silence itself becomes Lucy’s agency as it allows her to maintain ownership of her trauma, and its solution, within a historically racist and politically unstable society.

### **Defence against criticisms of non-explicit representations**

The non-explicit representation of sexual assault in *Disgrace* is very different to critic Laura Tanner’s ideal representation of rape in fiction. To reiterate, Tanner advocates that the representation of rape be not obscured from the reader, be told from the victim’s perspective, with minimum distancing of the reader from the scene. In *Disgrace*, the rape

scene takes place while Lurie, the character whose perspective narrates the novel, is locked in another room. Thus the sexual assault is completely obscured from the reader. Therefore the victim's account of the sexual assault is absent, and Lucy only refers to her experience obliquely, giving virtually no subsequent details about the assault (99, 112). The reader is approaching the attack through the perspective of Lurie, who has himself been charged with sexual misconduct, and does not understand his daughter or her subsequent decisions.

Lurie says to Bev: "Lucy isn't safe. I am trying to persuade her to hand over the operation to Petrus and take a break. But she won't listen to me" and then he asserts "I know what Lucy has been through. I was there." (139-140). However, "Wide-eyed [Bev] gazes back at him. 'But you weren't there, David. She told me. You weren't.' *You weren't there. You don't know what happened.* He is baffled" (140, italics in original). In the first part, Lurie's believes that he knows better than Lucy, worrying for her safety and trying to change her mind on her decision to stay on the land. He then falsely assumes he knows Lucy's experience, and is confused when Bev contradicts him.

However, importantly, the novel does not question, or invite the reader to question, whether or not the rape took place. Lucy was alone when her father arrived and, prior to his arrival, she had been in a lesbian relationship. Furthermore, after the attack Lucy is discovered to be pregnant. Therefore, in these ways, misinterpretation is unlikely as the novel does not support a reductive reading of the rape as not happening or as consensual sex<sup>9</sup>.

Also, the rape is preceded by a violent physical attack on Lurie where he is set on fire. Lurie's thoughts in this instance turn from his dilemma to the looming threat to Lucy: "The scrape of a match, and at once he is bathed in cool blue flame ... He can burn, he can die; and if he can die, then so can Lucy, above all Lucy!" (96). The aggression represented suggests the animosity of the three men towards both father and daughter, perhaps because they are white and land-owning. This representation, therefore, challenges the stereotypical notion of 'woman as victim', as Lurie is a victim of the attack as well. Although, it should be noted, the attacks are different in nature – Lurie's attack was very violent, he is set on fire, and Lucy's attack was sexual.

The third person limited perspective allows for the brutality inflicted on Lurie to be represented graphically, while silent on Lucy's attack. The extent of Lurie's trauma serves to indirectly suggest the severity of Lucy's attack. That is, the physical and emotional

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<sup>9</sup> As Higgins and Silver (1991) suggest this kind of representation could be read.

repercussions of the experience are visible in Lurie, and implied in Lucy. She is not represented as ‘devastated’ though, and the scale of the trauma is not known. Lurie’s thoughts invite the reader to also look for the effects of trauma on Lucy: “His hands, he notices, are trembling ever so slightly. Lucy has her arms folded across her breasts. Is that because she is trembling too?” (100). Lurie is represented as unsure about what is happening to his daughter and this has the effect of outlining his (and the reader’s) inability to share the experience of the Other, particularly the pain and trauma of the Other. The reader must contend with the limits of the narrator’s and their own knowledge.

Lurie’s desire to know what has happened to his daughter so he can help her constitutes much of the narrative drive of the second half of the book. In this sense, the common criticism that non-explicit representations of rape in fiction disengage the reader from the event does not apply here. Through the character of Lurie, the reader is prompted to question and actively think about what they assume about rape, and Lucy’s experience and actions. The unrepresented rape scene is significant as it alerts the reader to the fact that its importance lies beyond the actual act. As a result of the distancing, the reader is prompted to try to question their assumptions in this particular context, to understand why Lucy is reacting in the way that she does.

Although rape myths are raised in *Disgrace* – Lurie, in particular, is shown to be guilty of perpetuating such myths – they are all productively interrogated and are not endorsed in the novel. For example, Lurie views his behaviour with Melanie as “not quite rape [but] undesired to the core” (25). He then is “wary” of Melanie’s distress, suspecting her of making deliberate, manipulative sexual advances: “She has stopped crying, but long shudders of misery still pass through her ... The sheet slips aside; she is wearing only a singlet and panties. Does she know what she is up to, at this moment? ... What game is she playing?” (27). Lurie’s hypocrisy is exposed in view of the difference between Lurie’s rationalisation of his behaviour towards Melanie and his reaction to his daughter’s rape. Lucy’s rape evokes Lurie’s rage directly towards Lucy’s attackers (towards Pollux, the young attacker who returns to the farm, in particular): “*Swine!* Never has he felt such elemental rage. He would like to give the boy what he deserves: a sound thrashing” (206, italics in original). Although Lurie, himself, perpetuates rape myths, he is discredited as unreliable by the narrative, which draws attention to the hypocritical contrast in Lurie’s understanding, inviting the reader to be critical of his thoughts and actions.

So far I have argued that the potential pitfalls of non-explicit rape representations in fiction, as identified by critics, do not apply to *Disgrace*. There is a point, however,

where *Disgrace* may be open to criticism, because the primary focus of Lurie's narrative (of the novel) is on his personal development, and in this light the rape might be read as secondary to the understanding of it in relation to how it affects Lurie's development. However, Lurie as a character provides an ethically productive perspective for readers of non-explicit rape representations, as I will discuss below. Furthermore, making the rape one of a number of incidents which affect Lurie is a productive narrative technique. It serves to engage the reader in ethical reflection about rape and rape victims, particularly the dynamics of power in relation to sexual and racial politics. I argue also that the rape is central, given that its story constitutes a pivotal moment in Lurie's (albeit limited) self-questioning, and it is a story which points towards the broader context of rape and sexual abuse in post-apartheid South Africa.

### **Benefits of an unreliable protagonist**

Lurie, the protagonist in *Disgrace*, functions in the text to influence the reader's understandings and interpretations of Lucy's rape and her choices. Lurie is established early in the novel as a character lacking moral self-awareness, and the reader is positioned by the narrative to be critical of his actions and attitudes, which include his response to Lucy's rape. The novel does not offer the reader any other perspective to guide the reader's interpretation of events (Meffan and Worthington, 2001, 140). Lurie's problematic views are questioned by other characters in the novel, and eventually by Lurie himself. Although Lurie does not act as a moral authority in the text, this prompting of the reader to critically reflect on his views can be ethically productive.

The novel's opening sentence encourages the reader to establish a sceptical distance from Lurie: "For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well" (1). The phrase 'to his mind' produces a critical distance between reader and character and avoids the endorsement, generalisation and naturalisation of Lurie's point of view. This tells the reader that Lurie's opinion is not the author's nor is it the narrator's. His view, in the opening sentence, that sex is a 'problem to be solved' alerts the reader to the central and semi-impersonal role sex has for Lurie, even as his experiences increasingly force a questioning of his relationship to, and understanding of, others.

The extent to which Lurie rationalises his sexual exploits and his blindness to the feelings of others, particularly women, is established through his encounters with several

characters, notably Soraya the prostitute whose services he uses, and Melanie the student he sexually harasses. For Lurie, both Melanie and Soraya are fundamentally objects to be utilised by him, and, significantly, they are both represented by him (racially) as dark: “her honey-brown body ... Soraya is tall and slim, with long black hair and dark, liquid eyes” (1) and “Melanie: the dark one” (19). Lurie’s perception of these two women highlights their gendered and racialized otherness as he sexualises and objectifies them, subtly raising issues of exploitation and colonialism. At one point Lurie tries to coerce Melanie, saying “a women’s beauty does not belong to her alone. It is a part of the bounty she brings into the world. She has a duty to share it” (16).

Lurie hides his exploitation of the women from himself by maintaining a romantic notion of love towards them that involves fantasies of ownership and protection. This romantic love is not reciprocated by either woman. In his relations with Soraya he not only imagines romantic feelings, but also that she returns these feelings: “an affection has grown up in him for her ... he believes, this affection is reciprocated” (2). His view of her notably shifts from romantic to functionary according to how she pleases him: whether “entirely satisfactory” or, for example, “compliant, pliant” (1, 5). Lurie’s delusion of romance allows him to ignore the economic basis of their relationship to the extent that when he sees her in the street with her two children, he imagines himself as their father. As a result of his inappropriate pursuit of her (he disregards her obvious attempts to avoid him), Soraya acts by discarding him as a client. Refusing to acknowledge her agency over her life, he hires a detective to track her down and phones her at home asking when he can see her. When Soraya tells him that he is harassing her and he is not to call again, her attitude and autonomy shock him, indicating the level of Lurie’s blindness to the agency of Others, particularly women.

In the encounters between Lurie, as professor, and Melanie, as student, the reader sees what Lurie sees, including Melanie’s misery, Lurie’s acknowledgement of Melanie’s discomfort, and his willingness to both ignore her distress and use his position of power to get sexual gratification from her. In one incident, after he sees Melanie “avert[ing] herself” during sex as if she had “die[d] within herself for the duration”, Lurie sees that sex with him was “undesired to the core” (25). However, this does not alter his behaviour and he still conveniently interprets the encounter as “not quite rape” (25). Due to the established critical distance, the reader may disagree with Lurie’s view that the act was not rape. In the aftermath of the encounters with Melanie, Lurie justifies his actions to Lucy as his “rights of desire” (89). This attitude of entitlement is still present when Lurie is called before the



disciplinary hearing to account for his sexual misconduct with Melanie. He refuses to make a detailed public confession or to apologise, even insincerely. Lurie objects to this, and his lack of cooperation invites a critique of the situation in which Lurie is invited to express contrition, regardless of whether or not he feels remorse (Meffan and Worthington, 2001, 141).

Lurie's sexual mistreatment of Melanie is both a prelude to, and paralleled by, Lucy's rape. The explicit and potentially ambiguous encounters with Melanie are, therefore, later implicitly and productively re-evaluated in light of Lucy's rape. After Lucy's rape, Lurie's perspective on rape and what constitutes rape changes, and this is evident in his changed view of Byron's libertinism (Lord Byron is the subject of his research) and in his desire to apologise for his actions with Melanie. While the two rapes have clear differences – in terms of their attackers (single/multiple), the context around the events, the consequences (Lucy's pregnancy), and how the events are handled socially and legally – these differences serve to challenge the reader who is invited to reflect on the differences and similarities between the two rapes.

The parallel between the two rapes also impacts on the way Lucy's rape is represented and read. When Lucy is gang raped by the three black men, Lurie's lack of self-awareness initially prevents him from seeing any similarity to his own sexual behaviour, and he is outraged by the attack. Lurie urges her to report the rape to the authorities, and when Lucy refuses to do so, the parallel with Lurie's own refusal to speak at his hearing exposes his hypocrisy. In spite of the reader's limited access to Lucy, the reader comes to know that Lucy has quite different values to Lurie and is not interested in exploiting others on the basis of her desire, either for others, or for the land. For example, while Lurie is presented as exploiting women sexually, Lucy has recently ended a lesbian relationship and is leading a life of celibacy. While Lurie has worked in a cultural elite and privileged position in the university, Lucy has worked the land alongside her black neighbours, paying Petrus to help her when he is not on his own land. In this sense, their differences symbolise discursive tensions between the individualism of white privilege — a life of the mind which includes Lurie's cultural interests in opera and literature — and Lucy's situation which is embedded in community co-operation and actively engaged in physical labour.

The extent of Lurie's limitations and delusions becomes more evident to him when he tries to imagine Lucy's experience of the rape and glimpses for the first time that others have different realities. Earlier in the novel, Lurie's worldview had been both unconcerned

with those around him and very abstract, summed up as “When all else fails, philosophize” (60). But after his daughter is raped, he struggles to empathise with Lucy. These attempts are not successful, as Lurie finds it much easier to imagine being one of her attackers. In this imagining, he is shown as empathically distanced from the experience of women and more receptive to the African men’s experience of domination:

Lucy was frightened, frightened near to death. Her voice choked, she could not breathe, her limbs went numb. *This is not happening*, she said to herself as the men forced her down; *it is just a dream, a nightmare*. While the men, for their part, drank up her fear, revelled in it, did all they could to hurt her, to menace her, to heighten her terror. *Call your dogs!* they said to her. *Go on, call your dogs! No dogs?* ... he can, if he concentrates, if he loses himself, be there, be the men, inhabit them, fill them with the ghost of himself. The question is, does he have it in him to be the woman? (160, italics in original).

His words are disturbing and voyeuristic as, implicitly, Lurie’s imagining violating his own daughter. In this case, Lurie’s attempts to visualise the rape scene are questionable, and the reader is left to ask whether Lurie’s imaginings (and their own) are derived from the desire to understand his daughter’s trauma, or from a voyeuristic and sexual desire.

Thus, the reader is also made aware of the voyeurism implicit in the act of ‘knowing’ the experience of the rape. He or she must try to understand Lucy’s trauma without having access to either the experience or her thoughts. In this way, Coetzee confronts the desire to base our understanding on knowledge that may be incorrect or inaccessible, effectively requiring the reader to engage and question the basis for their own ethical response to the rape narrative.

### **A positive reading of Lucy’s silence**

Lucy’s silence has been interpreted negatively as penance stemming from the end of white oppression in South Africa. Even in the novel itself, Lurie interprets Lucy’s actions this way, telling her: “You want to make up for the wrongs of the past, but this is not the way to do it” (133). Some critics have had similar readings of Lucy’s silence. For example, Elleke Boehmer asks “how ... can we speak of atonement if it entails that the women as ever assume the generic pose of suffering in silence? Is reconciliation with a history of violence possible if the woman, the white Lucy ... is, as ever ... biting her lip?” (2006, 146). Salman Rushdie also believes the novel is “suggest[ing] we must now accept that blacks will oppress whites” and, therefore, the novel is “a part of the darkness it describes” (2002, 298).

For Caruth also, history and trauma are inextricably linked and an individual's trauma narrative inevitably pertains to a nation: "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (1996, 24). In this sense, *Disgrace* is a rape trauma narrative which focuses on the silent/silenced response to the attack, rather than the attack itself, linking Lucy's individual experience to the collective historical trauma of the Apartheid. While this type of reading attempts to interpret Lucy's silence, the reading betrays Lucy by transforming her experience into an abstract allegory, ignoring her individual trauma.

Indeed, Lucy's refusal to speak out after her rape can be problematic when read from conventional understandings of rape and rape victims which equate the silence of victims with passivity and shame. However, I argue that such understandings of rape victims should be interrogated, and that Lucy's rejection of traditional models for behaviour for rape victims<sup>10</sup> prompts questioning of these rape scripts.

Following Lucy's rape, Lurie, who has proven to be morally unreliable, urges his daughter to speak out. Lurie believes that Lucy's silence is the result of shame: "She does not reply. She would rather hide her face, and he knows why. Because of the disgrace. Because of the shame" (115), and, "It will dawn on them that over the body of the woman silence is being drawn like a blanket. *Too ashamed*, they will say to each other, *too ashamed to tell*" (110, italics in original). Lurie's reasons for urging her to speak, prescribed by dominant feminist ideals<sup>11</sup>, echo the assumed mutual inclusivity between shame and not speaking out. Lurie says to Lucy: "If you fail to stand up for yourself at this moment, you will never be able to hold your head up again" (133).

However, the reader is positioned to question Lurie's opinions, including his view of Lucy's silence as shame. Both assumptions — that to be silent is to be shamed, or to speak out is to counteract shame — are questioned in *Disgrace*. Indeed, Lurie's approach

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<sup>10</sup> There have been numerous studies about the recovery processes of victims of various kinds of traumatic experiences. "Because the traumatic syndromes have basic features in common, the recovery process also follows a common pathway" (Herman 1992, 3). The recovery process involves establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community. Consequently, trauma experts emphasize the importance of reconstructing the trauma story in order to promote healing.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Susan Brownmiller, in her research on the political history of rape, points out that silence about rape emerges from the cultural convention that raped women are required to show and feel shame. In this context, Brownmiller states, "in making rape a speakable crime, not a matter of shame, the women's movement has already fired the first retaliatory shots in a war as ancient as civilization" (Brownmiller 1975, 445). Carine Mardorossian similarly stresses the importance of the public articulation of the victim's narrative: "Through speak-outs, women come to understand that an experience they might previously have perceived as interpersonal in nature is in fact rooted in historical and social relations" (Mardorossian, *Towards a New Feminist Theory of Rape* 2002, 764).

to his daughter after her rape can be critically viewed in terms of a social convention as addressed by Joan Didion:

The convention assumes, by providing a protection for victims of rape not afforded victims of other assaults, that rape involves a violation absent from other kinds of assault. The convention assumes that this violation is of a nature best kept secret, that the rape victim feels, and would feel still more strongly were she identified, a shame and self-loathing ... Ultimately we're doing a disservice by separating rape from other violent crimes ... We are participating in the stigma of rape by treating victims of this crime differently (1991).

Lucy herself demonstrates an awareness of language and the problem of idealised, abstract metanarratives when she warns her father (and the reader): "You keep misreading me," maintaining that her silence should not be read as an abstraction, and that it signifies neither collective "guilt" nor personal "salvation" (112). That is, her reaction predicts the critics' responses and contextualises her refusal to give an account of her rape: "in this place, at this time ... this place being South Africa" (112). In this sense, Lucy's decision shows a mistrust of the system which has historically privileged her, leading her to choose a different resolution that will allow her to continue to live on the land with her black neighbours.

The reader must therefore contemplate Lucy's decisions and motivations in the context of the society at that time. That is, in the context of a post-apartheid South African legal system that, the novel suggests, has historically been prejudicial in relation to Africa's black population. By re-situating rape in the specific context and circumstances in which it occurs, broad models for understanding rape are shown to be ineffective. Therefore, one way of reading the novel's representation of the rape and of Lucy's silence is not only in terms of the avoidance of dominant rape narratives or scripts, but also in terms of how the novel highlights the different cultural and historical contexts of sexual assault and its punishment.

Lucy's refusal to report the rape can be read as a form of active resistance, because she is refusing to be told how to act and she is making a conscious choice about how she will deal with the rape, although her reasons are ambiguous to the reader. In Lurie's account of the rape, Lucy is described as "the object of a crime" and he comforts her saying that she "did not choose to be the object" (111), therefore representing her as a passive victim. However, in light of Gunne's claim that "Not speaking can potentially be an action that reclaims agency" (Gunne and Thompson 2010, 165), Lucy's silence about her rape, which might be more typically associated with being submissive, can be read as challenging stereotypes of female passivity. Lucy's attitude is that she continues to have

agency over her experience and over her subsequent decisions. Lucy's refusal to report<sup>12</sup>, or to speak of the details of the rape, places her outside the readily recognisable, yet reductive, moral and legal discourses that surround sexual assault.

According to Graham Stott, in reference to representations of rape in fiction, critics tend to allocate rape victims into one of three groups: the devastated victim, the revengeful victim, and, to a lesser degree, the victim understood as essential witness (Stott 2009). Such categories have also conventionally framed the way society and real individuals have perceived responses to rape: "Social psychologists chart a socially constructed process of cognition that comprises a series of what they refer to as 'rape scripts,' which condition the way we understand and interpret rape" (Middleton and Townsend 2009, 119).

As such, Lucy's reaction to her rape resists the dominant frameworks of responding and does not appear to fit any of the traditional models for understanding rape victims. In terms of Stott's above cited categories of dominant rape narratives, immediately after the attack happens, Lurie observes that Lucy seems calm and organised, contrary to the view of the victim as devastated. In contrast to Lurie's physical and psychological suffering after the attack, Lucy (in the hospital) "fills out the form for him, seats him in the waiting room. She is all strength, all purposefulness, whereas the trembling seems to have spread to his whole body" (101). Lucy is also not interested in revenge: she seeks no punitive action for what happened to her, legal or otherwise, and she avoids confronting her attackers. She also refuses to bear witness by not recounting her story to either Lurie or the authorities.

The withdrawal of the possibility of any moral and/or legal resolutions in *Disgrace* leads to the reader's questioning of the rape and its role in the novel on different terms. Thus, the radical separation of Lucy's response from more typical rape scripts may serve to remind the reader of their own assumptions about race and power in terms of justice. Lucy's silence can thus be viewed as a vehicle or textual strategy for interrogating structures of power, authority and language. Lucy's silence redirects the reader away from the physical particulars of the rape towards the larger system of politics, race and regulation. The rape highlights the intersection between the individual and the national, raising issues of the politics of power and women's agency in those contexts.

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<sup>12</sup> Helen Moffett's argument about rape in South Africa can provide insight into Lucy's predicament: "evidence of autonomy and agency in a victim of sexual violence is always already compromising, since its absence is held against the victim as potential consent while its presence ... is seen as taking away from—if not outright denying the scope and reality of the violation" (Moffett, 2006, 76).

As discussed, Lucy's silence about her rape is paralleled by the other rape victim who is silent in the novel: Melanie. Just as Lucy refuses to speak of her experience of rape, Melanie's voice is mostly absent during the proceedings of the university sexual harassment case. In a sense, she does speak out about her harassment in that she lodges a complaint, although it is not clear whether this is under her own volition. Melanie's 'speaking out' is further complicated when Lurie refuses to read Melanie's statement and instead pleads guilty:

'I have stated my position. I am guilty.'  
'Guilty of what?' 'Of all that I am charged with.'  
'You are taking us in circles, Professor Lurie.'  
'Of everything Ms Isaacs avers, and of keeping false records.'  
[...]  
'You say you accept Ms Isaacs's statement, Professor Lurie, but have you actually read it?'  
'I do not wish to read Ms Isaacs's statement. I accept it. I know of no reason why Ms Isaacs should lie. (49)

Although it could be argued that Lurie is showing his culpability by not contradicting her statement, his refusal to hear what she has said effectively means he does not allow her story to be told in court, effectively silencing her. It is also notable that Lurie apologizes to her father not to her and that she is absent. The nature of Lurie's apology further silences Melanie because by turning to her father instead of her, she is made the implicit subject of an exchange between the two men. Lurie therefore never acknowledges Melanie's sovereignty, just as he has little understanding of Lucy's. Both scenarios reveal his patriarchal view of women.

While Lucy's silence can be read as empowering her, Melanie's silence/absence is perhaps more troubling for the reader who may be tempted to assert interpretations and assumptions of oppression and submission into her absence and silence. Melanie's response to her rape is different to Lucy's in the sense that she seeks legal retribution for what was done to her and Lucy does not. However, Lurie will not admit guilt in the courtroom and the end result, therefore, as for Lucy, can be understood to question the benefit of the legal and quasi-legal process. Coetzee, however, never explicitly takes up this line of argument. Indeed, it is ultimately up to the reader to come to their own conclusions about what has occurred and the impact of this, after the novel has challenged the reader to consider an array of possibilities and interpretations. Overall, the text encourages the reader to look at Lucy's and Melanie's experiences, outside of the formal

processes of the law to take into account historical issues of culture and power in understanding and approaching the experience of gendered and racialized Others.

The reader's point of view on these events and decisions is circumscribed, on the one hand, by all events being filtered through Lurie's views and, on the other hand, by having almost no access to Lucy's thoughts, including the rationale for her decision-making. Because of this limited access, the reader's ethical responses are circumscribed rather than shaped by sympathy or empathy. That is, novels often invite readers to take on certain moral viewpoints on the strength of the empathy or sympathy the fictional characters elicit rather than the reader's critical thought (Sontag 2003). Sympathy for, or empathy with, Lucy is necessarily restricted. However, as previously discussed, sympathy is a complex emotion and not always a desirable reader response as it not only puts the reader in a passive position, but also absolves them from any responsibility (Sontag 2003). On this basis, narrative barriers to deflect the reader's sympathy in *Disgrace* are an appropriate narrative technique in terms of the novel's South African context and the suffering of different races, genders, and sentient beings.

I argue that the limited emotional engagement available to the reader supports a more active ethical engagement with the issues raised. For example, the reader is left to piece together the context for Lucy's experience, including race politics in South Africa and the contested ownership of land.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, the novel seems to require the revisiting of normative understandings of rape victims and responses to rape.

### **Lurie's and Lucy's refusal to publically speak out in the context of South Africa**

There is a telling similarity between Lucy's refusal to speak out – interpreted by Lurie as shame – and Lurie's refusal to publicly apologise during his hearing at the university for his sexual harassment of Melanie – an act which he explains as “Eros”<sup>14</sup> or “a god who acted through [Lurie]” (52, 89). While Lucy's silence can be read as a refusal of the traditional role of the victim, with all the disempowerment that this can involve, Lurie's refusal to apologise is a rejection of the convention of the insincere public apology. When encouraged to make a statement of apology he responds: “Am I being asked to issue an apology about which I may not be sincere?” (58). The answer is as follows: “The criterion

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<sup>13</sup> For further information on the context involving land ownership and race relations in post-apartheid South Africa, see Jennifer Wenzel's article, *The Pastoral Promise and the Political Imperative: The Plaasroman Tradition in an Era of Land Reform* (2000).

<sup>14</sup> See Helen Garner's discussion of sexual harassment in *The First Stone* (1992) – she too questions the resort to legal resolution and also asks what has happened to Eros.

is not whether you are sincere ... The criterion is whether you are prepared to acknowledge your fault in a public manner and take steps to remedy it” (58). Like Lucy’s, Lurie’s refusal to speak is, in this case, an active choice.

However, there is a significant difference between these two silences: Lucy and Lurie come from different moral positions, as Lurie is the (guilty) perpetrator of the sexual abuse of a student, and Lucy is the (innocent) victim of sexual assault. Furthermore, Lucy’s choice, at least in part, can be read as a pragmatic understanding of her situation. Lurie tells Lucy: ““As for the police, if you are too delicate to call them in now, then we should never have involved them in the first place. We should just have kept quiet and waited for the next attack”” and Lucy responds ““With regard to the police, let me remind you why we called them in in the first place: for the sake of the insurance. We filed a report because if we did not, the insurance would not pay out”” (134). Lurie, on the other hand, refuses the pragmatic option to publically apologise (insincerely), an act which leads to his dismissal from his job. Lurie even states, “There are more important things in life than being prudent” (49).

Importantly, the two refusals to speak are alike in respect to their implicit questioning of the usefulness of formal avenues for justice. Lucy’s silence questions the benefit of (or even the possibility of) legally punitive action in the context of South Africa and its past. Her refusal to speak out acknowledges the negative social impact of approaching the authorities, and suggests that, in the context of South Africa, the end result is unlikely to be fair or fruitful. Other incidents also suggest the difficulties of policing post-apartheid South Africa. For example, the unsuccessful process of finding Lurie’s stolen car after the attack (153-155) provides a context for the reader to question the police’s capacity to find and prosecute the right attackers.

In a similar, more complex way, Lurie’s silence questions the benefits of the legal formality of an insincere apology. Literary critics have read the scene of Lurie’s hearing, particularly the panel’s invitation for him to make an apology as a negative comment on the South African Truth and Reconciliation commission.<sup>15</sup> The Truth and Reconciliation hearings took place after apartheid had ended to reconcile the victims and perpetrators of “gross violations of human rights” through given testimonials and amnesty (Republic of South Africa 1995). In this context, the public trial was about instilling shame rather than

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<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Elizabeth Anker, “Human Rights, Social Justice and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*” (*Modern Fiction Studies* 54.2 [2008]: 233-67) and Rebecca Saunders, “Disgrace in the Time of a Truth Commission” (*Parallax* 11.3 [2005]: 99-106).



about issuing judgements and justice. A key criticism of the commission was that “the pressure to forgive misplaced the burden of reconciliation on victims rather than on those who were responsible for apartheid” (Nagy 2004, 719). Related issues of apology, responsibility and forgiveness are all interrogated in various ways in *Disgrace*. According to Rosemary Nagy, in *Disgrace*:

Coetzee provokes acceptance of a nuanced examination of what it means to be responsible and to take responsibility, particularly, how deep a moral transformation is needed and of whom it should be expected. He relentlessly captures the ambiguities of assigning and taking responsibility, and the limits of moral transformation (Nagy 2004, 709).

Lurie, who refuses to make an apology at his own public trial – the university tribunal – says: “Private life is public business. Prurience is respectable prurience and sentiment. They want spectacle: breast-beating, remorse, tears if possible ... I wouldn’t oblige” (66). Lurie’s second ex-wife, Rosalind, tries to convince Lurie that: “trials are not about principles; they are about how well you put yourself across” (188). In other words, Lurie’s ex-wife focuses on performance, which in this case includes Lurie’s appearance and status, as influences on the legal system.

Despite Lurie’s inability to understand the Other, he eventually accepts his responsibility towards the Other, admittedly in challenging ways. This acceptance includes apologising to Melanie’s father for his treatment of Melanie and a final scene where he euthanizes a favoured dog. Here, responsibility means more than words or formalities, and demands facing difficult situations where the suffering Other must be addressed. As I will discuss, this message of taking responsibility for one’s treatment of Other points towards the possibility of reconciliation.

### **Representations of sexism and racism**

In *Disgrace*, the views of all Others (in terms of race, sex and species) are partial and limited in their representation (for example, Lucy’s perspective is deliberately unknowable to the reader; Lucy also draws attention to her role as a “minor character” (198) in the story). In various critical works, including *Into the Dark Chamber: The Writer and the South African State*, Coetzee shows his concern with the representation of the Other in analysing works of fiction (Coetzee 1992, Attridge 2004, Attwell 2002). To represent the Other risks objectifying or claiming a level of knowledge of the Other, and it has been suggested that Coetzee attempts to avoid this problem by refusing to represent the Other (for example, Probyn 2002, Atwell 1992, Attridge 1996). Lurie’s unreliable perspective on

the Other encourages an awareness of what is not known in the narrative (Meffan and Worthington 2001, 133-134). Such an awareness is productive as it promotes critical reflection of reductive and stereotypical understandings of Others.

As discussed, Coetzee has been accused of being racist based on the depictions in *Disgrace*. In particular, South African writer Christopher van Wyk claimed that *Disgrace* “is a racist book. The white characters are fleshed out, the black evildoers are not” (in Donadio 2007, 1). Elizabeth Lowry puts the view that: “What *Disgrace* finally shows us is the promised victory of one expansionist force over another, with women as pawns, the objects of punitive violence ... *Disgrace* is a deeply pessimistic book” (1999). Mardorossian notes that *Disgrace* has been criticised by other critics as “reproduc[ing] and perpetuat[ing] stereotypical representations of black and white relationships in South Africa” (2011, 73).

One of the most debated aspects of *Disgrace* is the depiction of the rapists as black South Africans. Some critics argue that the novel presents a powerful, truthful portrayal of the reality of racial relations in South Africa in the years shortly after apartheid, while others condemn the representation of the rapists and thieves as black South Africans on the grounds that they are damaging and stereotypical (Attridge 2002, 317). I argue that the representation of race and gender in the novel is more complex than is typically perceived and that Coetzee, writing from the perspective of a white, male intellectual with extensive knowledge of South Africa, is very likely to have foreseen, even addressed in the novel, the reactions the novel provoked (Glenn 2009, 80). One support for this view is that Coetzee’s critical work engages with issues of power and language through contemporary literary theory. On this basis, David Atwell, long-time interpreter of Coetzee’s work, represents *Disgrace* as engaging with racist assumptions on a deeper level (Atwell 2002, 332). Lurie’s anger at the actions of the black men casts his sexually abusive behaviour towards coloured student Melanie into hypocrisy, presenting another parallel to the views of many white post-apartheid South Africans (Glenn 2009, Mardorossian 2002).

Paul Franssen draws attention to Coetzee’s use of symbolically significant names throughout his oeuvre, and that this may hold true in the case of Pollux, the mentally disturbed boy who is involved in Lucy’s rape (2010, 240-241). Franssen suggests that the name could refer to Pollux from Roman and Greek mythology who, with his twin Castor, is called to account for a rape. In that Pollux’s rape of Lucy was a reflection of Lurie’s crime against Melanie, Pollux and Lurie are twinned. The parallel between Lucy’s rape

and Melanie's rape is further linked by Lurie's apology (to Melanie's father) resulting from his reflection on Lucy's rape.

While the representation of black men raping a white woman can be considered to be reinforcing colonialist and reductively stereotypical practices, it is possible that Coetzee subverts the trope by avoiding a focus on the men's skin colour. In Atwell's interpretation: "the blackness of the black characters is the least significant feature of their representation" (Atwell 2002, 335). In *Disgrace*, Coetzee's refusal to make race an explicit feature of characters includes the following: Soraya is "tall and slim, with long *black* hair and *dark*, liquid eyes" (1, italics added); Melanie has "*black* hair, *wide*, *almost Chinese* cheekbones, *large*, *dark* eyes" (11, italics added); Lucy's attackers are said to have "*countrymen's* long strides" (91, italics added); one of the men has "a *high* forehead, *sculpted* cheekbones, *wide*, *flaring nostrils*" (92, italics added); and Lucy shouts "Hamba" (92) when the men are disturbing the dogs. These descriptions are vague and may or may not imply racially determined features. In this way, Coetzee urges readers "to rethink not just the assumptions through which black on white rape is viewed ... but also the deeply racialized way in which rape is naturalized precisely *as* a black on white crime (thus decriminalizing white on white or white on black sexual violence)" (Mardorossian 2001, 74, italics in original), as is evident in Lurie's own 'sexual misconduct' case involving one of his students, Melanie.

In contrast to Melanie's name which Lurie translates as "Meláni: the dark one" (18), Lucy is a name commonly associated with light (Graham 2012, 437). Playing on these associations of dark and light, the two women's names expose gender and racial stereotypes. Lurie is shown to have a history of desiring 'exotic' women (7) and he assumes that he has the right to purchase and/or possess them without being responsible or respecting their lives (Graham 2012, 437). In this regard, Lurie's own sexual abuse of Melanie and Lucy's rape, are understood by Lurie as dissimilar, showing how an act can be normalized and decriminalized in relation to race. On this basis, Coetzee is not insisting that sexual assault is the "price" whites must pay for "staying on" (158), but instead he is bringing the reader's attention to the implicit assumptions inherent in a situation of unequal power and discrimination.

## Animals as the suffering Other

Responding to the suffering of the Other is a key issue both in *Disgrace* and in arguments about the representation of trauma. The suffering of animals – that is, non-human Others – is relevant in that representations between humans and animals in the novel raise important ethical issues regarding sexual assault in the novel. The treatment animals are subjected to at the hands of humans effectively extend the raised issues of silence, responsibility and suffering in relation to the Other. Specifically, over the course of the novel, Lurie learns to read the silent and suffering Other differently, becoming more aware that he does not (and cannot) understand the experience of the Other. Thus, the progression of Lurie's treatment of animals in the novel parallels the progression of Lurie's treatment of the female victims.

As acts of violence, Lurie's and Bev's euthanizing of dogs in the animal shelter via injection contrasts with the shooting of Lucy's dogs at the time of her sexual assault. The represented scene of violence against the dogs by Lucy's attackers is explicit, detailed, brief and brutal:

There is a heavy report; blood and brains splatter the cage. For a moment the barking ceases. The man fires twice more. One dog, shot through the chest, dies at once; another, with a gaping throat-wound, sits down heavily, flattens its ears, following with its gaze the movements of this being who does not even bother to administer a *coup de grâce*. A hush falls. The remaining three dogs, with nowhere to hide, retreat to the back of the pen, milling about, whining softly. Taking his time between shots, the man picks them off (95, italics in original).

The scene is unexpectedly paralleled in Lurie's thoughts during the euthanizing of the dogs in the clinic, also represented as violent:

If, more often than not, the dog fails to be charmed, it is because of his presence: he gives off the wrong smell (*They can smell your thoughts*), the smell of shame. Nevertheless, he is the one who holds the dog still as the needle finds the vein and the drug hits the heart and the legs buckle and the eyes dim ... He is convinced the dogs know their time has come ... They flatten their ears, they droop their tails, as if they too feel the disgrace of dying; locking their legs, they have to be pulled or pushed or carried to the threshold. On the table some snap wildly left and right, some whine plaintively; none will look straight at the needle in Bev's hand, which they somehow know is going to harm them terribly. Worst are those that sniff and try to lick his hand ... Why pretend to be a chum when in fact one is a murderer? (147-148, italics in original).

While a surface reading of the text might suggest that the deaths of the wild dogs by euthanasia in the novel are humane and merciful, and the shootings of the owned dogs are violent, Coetzee refuses the contrast by his detailed focus on the similarities in the deaths.

That is, the novel focuses on the absurdity of the false binary: the outcome is the same for the dogs, who die regardless. These two scenes are represented as remarkably similar in terms of the stress and trauma for the dogs. In both scenes, the dogs flatten their ears and whine, appearing to sense the imminent danger.

The dogs, in both cases, are understood by the protagonists, as objects. The men who shoot the dogs in Lucy's kennel are represented as committing a crime in the legal sense, in that the dogs' deaths signify the destruction of property. As such, when Lurie recounts the story of the attack to the police, the dogs are included after such stolen property as "money, clothes, a television set, a CD player, a rifle" (108). The dogs, that is, are not regarded as a form of sentient life, but as a form of property. Because the euthanized dogs belong to no-one, their deaths are sanctioned under the law, and on this basis the euthanized dogs are also treated as objects. As Lucy astutely explains to Lurie about one of the female dogs in the clinic:

No one wants her, and she knows it. The irony is, she must have offspring all over the district who would be happy to share their homes with her. But it's not in their power to invite her. They are part of the furniture, part of the alarm system. They do us the honour of treating us like gods, and we respond by treating them like things (83-84).

In her discussion, the dogs are Other, represented as unable to communicate other than in a basic way, dependent on more powerful humans, and relying on empathy for their good treatment and survival.

The violence against the dogs, I argue, provides a parallel story to the novel's incidents of sexual assault. For example, the institutionalisation (and, therefore, rationalisation) of the euthanasia parallels Lurie's rationalisation of his treatment of Melanie (as I will discuss). In turn, Lurie's outrage at the sexual assault of Lucy is paralleled by the shooting of the dogs by Lucy's attackers which is readily identifiable as illegal and 'wrong'.

The female victims of sexual assault in the novel, Melanie and Lucy, are both largely silent (by choice or otherwise). Lucy refuses to speak of her experience of rape and Melanie's voice is mostly absent during the proceedings of Lurie's sexual harassment case (although her speaking of the harassment initiated the case). Like the dogs who depend on the protection of others, the women suffer at the hands of other people: Melanie is a student abused by Lurie, a teacher in a position of power; Lucy is overpowered by a group of men with guns. The dogs also suffer at the hands of others, who do not consider them as subjects, only objects. Many of the dogs that were shot were in cages and posed no threat;

they were shot because they could be. Their deaths can only be explained as an act of intimidation and/or an intention to punish, and leave Lucy defenceless. The euthanized dogs on the other hand, are put down because no human wants them: “Those that no one wants. We’ll put them down” (90). In this way, in the novel, the dogs are on a continuum of suffering with all other suffering beings.

Lurie understands his sex with Melanie as a legitimate seduction and, in the novel, this can be read as a parallel to his view that the euthanasia of the dogs is justified. Lurie’s understanding of sex with Melanie contrasts to his response to Lucy’s rape. While Lurie initially sees the two sexual assaults as completely different, his attitude changes over the course of the novel and he eventually apologises to Melanie’s father: a conventional apology from one man to another. A relativity in terms of ‘acceptable violence’ is suggested in relation to Lurie’s unquestioning sexual behaviour towards women, and the euthanasia of the dogs. That is, these are indirectly brought into parallel when Lurie notes of one of the rapists: “[The shorter man’s] face is placid, without trace of anger. It is merely a job he is doing” (94).

Significantly, Lurie’s attitude towards animals is shown to change over the course of the novel, as he develops a capacity to empathise. Early in the novel, he tells Lucy:

[T]o me animal-welfare people are a bit like Christians of a certain kind. Everyone is so cheerful and well-intentioned that after a while you itch to go off and do some raping and pillaging. Or to kick a cat (73).

In response to Animal Welfare Clinic worker Bev Shaw’s comment that she senses he must like animals, Lurie replies jokingly: “Do I like animals? I eat them, so I suppose I must like them, some parts of them” (81). The quote displays Lurie’s willingness to use Others for his own gratification, and is indicative of his initial inability to empathise.

At Lucy’s suggestion, he volunteers at the Animal Welfare clinic, exposing him to countless instances of animal suffering and frequent displays of Bev Shaw’s compassion. However, it is not until after the assault on Lucy, that Lurie’s attitudes towards suffering others begin to change. In his desire to help his daughter, he attempts to get Lucy to tell him what happened to her, and ends up with his own interpretation of her experience, saying that he “knows” what she has been through (115). Lucy objects to this, telling him he does not know what happened (157).

Through his struggles to help and empathise with his daughter, he starts to become more compassionate towards other silent, suffering beings. For example, he begins to feel for the plight of two sheep that are intended for slaughter at a party:

[A] bond seems to have come into existence between himself and the two Persians, he does not know how. Nevertheless, suddenly and without reason, their lot has become important to him ... He remembers Bev Shaw nuzzling the old billy-goat ... stroking him, comforting him, entering into his life. How does she get it right, this communion with animals? ... One has to be a certain kind of person, perhaps ... Do I have to change ...? Do I have to become like Bev Shaw? (126).

Lurie is still ultimately selfish, and his concern is for his awareness of the suffering, not for the suffering itself. This becomes clear in the conversation between Lurie and Lucy:

‘He is going to slaughter the two sheep ... I’m not sure I like the way he does things – bringing the slaughter-beasts home to acquaint them with the people who are going to eat them.’

‘What would you prefer? That the slaughtering be done in an abattoir, so that you needn’t think about it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Wake up, David. This is the country. This is Africa.’ (128-129).

Later on in the novel, in relation to the suffering of animals in the Animal Welfare clinic, his ability to empathise has noticeably increased: “Tears flow down his face that he cannot stop ... He does not understand what is happening to him. Until now he has been more or less indifferent to animals” (143). Lurie then takes on the self-imposed role of disposing of the bodies of dead dogs because he cannot stand the men using “shovels to beat corpses into a more convenient shape for processing” (146). In this scene, he realises that this act is not for the benefit of the dogs who “are dead [and do not] know of honour and dishonour”, but “for himself, then” (146). Lurie notes that “He may not be their saviour ... but he is prepared to take care of them ... Curious that a man as selfish as he should be offering himself to the service of dead dogs” (146).

In the final scene of the novel, Lurie has learnt how to empathise: “He and Bev do not speak. He has learned by now, from her, to concentrate all his attention on the animal they are killing, giving it what he no longer has the difficulty in calling by its proper name: love” (219). However, this then is immediately made ethically complicated as Lurie agrees to “giv[e] up” a favoured dog, rather than putting off euthanizing him for another week (220). Lurie literally packages the death in order to cope with the act of euthanasia:

[H]e will ... caress him and brush back the fur so that the needle can find the vein, and whisper to him and support him in the moment when, bewilderingly, his legs buckle; and then, when the soul is out, fold him up and pack him away in his bag ... He will do all that for him when his time comes (219-220).

Lurie’s final action challenges the reader, as does Lucy’s decision to marry Petrus. However, the parallels between Lurie’s sexual behaviour and the men’s attack, and the

parallel between the treatment of the female victims and the treatment of animals, invite the reader to reflect on the acts themselves. The representations pose challenges and invite the reader to consider their actions in the context of South Africa, where politics and violence and exploitation have historically applied.

### **An ethically productive reading practice**

In many debates Coetzee has addressed the ethics of representation, the limitations of words, and the unknowability of the experience of the Other (Attridge 2004, Coetzee 1992). He is cautious speaking on behalf of others, a hazard he describes as implicitly involved in having authorial power (Coetzee 1988). His fear is that representation might become misrepresentation in that ‘speaking on behalf of’ might become ‘speaking instead of’ Others<sup>16</sup>. On this basis, Coetzee’s non-representation of Lucy’s rape can be read as a refusal to speak for the raped woman.

In his essay *Into the Dark Chamber* (1986), Coetzee examines a number of authors’ foci on representations of suffering and argues that writers need to go beyond the choice of either ignoring atrocities, or reproducing them:

When the choice is no longer limited to either looking on in horrified fascination as the blows fall or turning one’s eyes away, then the novel can once again take as its province the whole of life, and even the torture chamber can be accorded a place in the design (368).

His words have encouraged critics to read his work as striving to engage readers in ethical issues without offering simple resolutions or understandings (Attridge 2004). As such, the solutions or positions achieved by the different characters in *Disgrace* are not represented as right or wrong. On this basis, when Lucy reaches her decision that contravenes dominant socio-cultural norms it might be considered as a response to the system she and her attackers inhabit at the time, one that she seems to acknowledge is a system imbued with prejudice. Lucy believes that it may be appropriate for her to report to authorities elsewhere, but not at that time in South Africa (112). Attwell argues that “Surely Lucy’s position is *in part* the result of a climate of racial consciousness and the prevalence of racial discourse” (2002, 337). When Lucy makes unconventional decisions after the rape, the reader (together with already morally-compromised Lurie) tries to understand. The non-explicit representation of the rape, therefore, is part of the reader trying to ‘read’ her decision through the silence beyond Lurie’s limited third person point of view. This

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<sup>16</sup> This has been a key topic for feminists, most notably Linda Alcoff in her essay ‘The problem of speaking for others’ (1991-2).



limited perspective, imbued with attitudes informed by the particular cultures of sex and race, has the reader questioning the reason for their own values. In this postmodern novel there is no guiding, moral authority to assist the reader in making their ethical judgements. In this regard, *Disgrace* poses questions rather than provides answers as it positions the reader to think about the relationship between power, language, discourse and pain as these affect all sentient beings.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that Coetzee's *Disgrace* is not simply "a part of the darkness it describes" (Longmuir 2007, 119), as some have suggested, but rather a complex statement that does encourage the reader to think through the issues, question the representations provided in the novel and question their own inherited values. On this basis, the central non-explicit rape scene is both crucial to the text and a productive space of reflection. The parallel stories of the novel, particularly those of Lurie and Lucy, produce ethical dilemmas that challenge the reader's assumptions.

When Lucy chooses to remain silent about her rape, against the wishes of her father, her response may be seen as a refusal to allow her experience to be read within the traditional rape narrative (Stott 2009, 317). In responding to Lucy, readers are, on the one hand, aligned with Lurie in his attempt to empathise with Lucy, but also positioned to trust Lucy above Lurie because of her representation as an essentially reliable character. Lucy is represented as having the authority to make her own decisions, even if that involves rejecting normative social conventions of how to respond to rape, such as her decision to marry Petrus in order to stay on the land. Like Lurie, however, the reader is denied access to most of Lucy's experience, including any reflections on what her life has been like to date. The novel's rejection of the familiar frameworks for understanding pain, in this case, sexual assault, (such as revenge, devastation, and bearing witness) can be read not only in terms of LaCapra's 'empathic unsettlement', but also in terms of the unrepresentability of suffering as discussed by Attridge (2004) and Coetzee, himself (1992).

When Lucy makes the pragmatic decision to become Petrus's third wife, a role which will enable her and her forthcoming child to stay on the land under his protection, the decision again triggers unsettlement in the reader. In this sense, the narrative as a whole resists closure both through its limited perspective, and its refusal of the conventions of appropriate behaviour. In this sense, no over-arching frameworks of

understanding are established, sought or proposed in the novel and the choices made by the characters are driven by their cultural and social realities, all of which are implied but not explained. The reader is faced with these narrative developments without recourse to established values, frameworks or definitive ethical guides. This unsettling position, however, is productive in creating a space for critical thought and reflection.

The non-explicit rape representation in *Disgrace*, therefore, may not lead to an emphasis on the horror and pain of rape, but it does enable the reader to focus on questions and issues of power in relation to rape and its punishment. Lucy Graham argues that “the central incidents in both narrative settings of *Disgrace* are acts of sexual violation, but notably, in each case, the experience of the violated body is absent, hidden from the reader” (Graham 2012, 438). That is, attention is effectively directed away from the suffering body towards the referential real: the wider context of rape and racial tensions.

The representations of racism and sexism in *Disgrace* have been read as either highlighting these problems in the context of South Africa, or as “worryingly unquestioning” of these problematic attitudes and events (Attridge 2002, 317). However, rather than reading the novel as condoning such attitudes, I argue that *Disgrace* poses a range of ethical challenges for the reader, opening up a series of complex questions instead of providing answers. On this basis, the novel’s representations are ethically complex and promote active thought and reflection.

As I show in Chapter Two, the non-explicit representations of sexual assault in the novel *A Mercy* are notably differently to that of *Disgrace* in terms of the narrative structure, stylistic choices and point of view. However, the representations ultimately function in much the same way to be challenging and productively thought-provoking for the reader.

## CHAPTER TWO

### MORRISON'S *A MERCY*: CULTURE, IDENTITY AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

#### **Introduction**

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) offers a fictionalised account of the late seventeenth century: the early stages of the slave trade and the foundation for the racial and class tensions which would later become established through the American Revolution and the Civil War. In representing the beginnings of American society, Morrison gives this historical period an emotional and political depth through representing voices that were originally silenced, and contextualises these in relation to issues of present-day sexism and racism. In the novel, numerous sexual assaults, affecting multiple characters and spanning a decade, are referred to indirectly. I argue that these non-explicit representations of sexual assault avoid the potentially voyeuristic spectacle of the female body in pain; articulate and privilege the narratives of the victims; empathically unsettle the reader; and envision the possibility of social change. In particular, the novel's non-explicit representations refocus the reader on a broad endemic culture of sexual assault against women. At the end of the novel, the troubling violent actions of the principal character, African-American Florens, are only comprehensible as actions taken in response to an overwhelming oppression. In this regard, sexual assault in *A Mercy* is represented as a pervasive reality for generations of women, influencing their treatment, identities, actions and decisions, and, therefore, society as a whole.

Morrison is a leading African-American writer and scholar, winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved* (1987) and the Nobel Prize in 1993. Her novels are known primarily for their concern with issues of racism, sexism, violence, desire, and historical injustice. Morrison's concern with the historically unrepresented voices is evident in her rewriting and reconstruction of historical narratives in *A Mercy*, providing a context for

ongoing social tensions in America. As Justine Tally puts it: “As with most great authors, Morrison may be talking about the past, but she is speaking to the present” (Tally 2007, 3). Morrison’s oeuvre as a whole critically examines how a society can create outcasts, where whole groups of people become marginalised and victimised by prejudice and stereotyping. This is particularly the case with the socially established race and gender values which result in oppressive sexist and/or racist behaviour. Her work explains human behaviour as something which is the result of, and marked by, social and cultural constructs. It is not surprising, then, that much of Morrison’s fiction includes scenes of social conflict with often violent consequences.

In all of Morrison’s novels, sexual assault against women, whether threatened or actual, is a frequently recurring subject. In *The Bluest Eye* (1970) the plot follows the young girl, Pecola, who is raped by her father. In *Tar Baby* (1983) one of the characters forces his girlfriend to have sex with him. Vulnerability to sexual assault is also a theme in *Jazz* (1992) and in *Paradise* (1997). *Love* (2003) contains a gang rape scene and paedophilia. Unlike *A Mercy*, all of these novels portray sexual assault explicitly. The recurrent and explicit representation of violence against women in the novels, particularly rape and other forms of sexual assault, has led to some negative criticism of Morrison, as well as of other feminist authors who have similar representations in their fiction. Diane Johnson argues that her work “entirely concerns black people who violate, victimize and kill each other” (Johnson 1977, 6). Michiko Kakutani, similarly, observes that “almost all the women in [Paradise] are victims” and “[t]he men ... are almost uniformly control freaks or hotheads, eager to dismiss independent women as sluts or witches, and determined to make everyone submit to their will” (1998, 8). Another critic comments on Morrison’s ‘preoccupation’ with brutality which, it is argued, borders on the amoral (Bryant 1987, 84). Another points out “the presence of stereotypes [and] negative images” in *Sula* (1973) (Lehmann-Haupt 1987, 90). Ágnes Surányi observes that black female writers across the world are often criticised for their so-called “obsession with violence” (2003, 173).

The frequency of the depiction of (sexual) violence in novels written by female authors can partly be understood in terms of the second-wave feminist goal to make the severity and frequency of female sexual assault explicit (Mackinnon 1997). As discussed in the Introduction, some critics argue that writers who use euphemisms for sexual assault, or who otherwise veil, remove or obscure the representation of sexual assault risk creating conservative, passive and/or reductive depictions which can downplay the effect of the

phenomena of sexual assault in society (Higgins and Silver 1991, Tanner 1994). This feminist goal, identified in 1993 by Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, was to bring sexual assault into the 'social sphere' (1993, 261). Partly as a result of this commitment by feminist writers, whereas once the sexual assault narrative "hardly existed except in private, often hidden, form" now "such stories are everywhere" (Plummer 1995, 78). As discussed in the Introduction, the increase in representations has raised a parallel concern that "the media ... often eroticize the depictions ... of sexual violence to titillate and expand their audiences" (Alcoff and Gray 1993, 262).

Amid the increase in real and fictional representations of (sexual) violence against women, *A Mercy* represents sexual assault non-explicitly, a notable departure from her previous novels. My argument is that *A Mercy*'s non-explicit representations of sexual assault avoid the potential pitfalls of direct representation and open up a productive space for critical reflection. The strategic non-explicit representations of sexual assault redirect the reader's focus away from the physical aspect of the traumatic events towards sexual assault as a pervasive occurrence.

Over the decades, Morrison's reflections on her writing reveal a consistent commitment to forging new and potentially productive ways of representing sexual assault. In particular, in a BBC interview in 2003, Morrison says her novels employ a number of writing strategies to sabotage what she has termed "prideful" narratives of rape (Morrison 2003), that is, rape scenes that depict powerful/heroic male perpetrators (Morrison 1994). She believes this kind of glorification is detrimental and she advocates a subversion of this trope, which is evident in her fiction (Morrison 1994).

Strategies to promote an ethically productive reader response in *A Mercy* include the manipulation of point of view, silence, empathic unsettlement and the use of euphemism and juxtaposition. I argue that the novel substitutes images of female victims with images of women expressing female desire. In relation to both sexual assault and women's sexual desire, Morrison's representations serve to engage the reader in critical reflection on their own social and cultural positions and values. Overall, the non-explicit representations emphasise sexual assault as systemic violence, with all this implies for disempowering women, while the novel also shows the potential for social change.

## *A Mercy*

*A Mercy* is set in the late 1600s when the slave trade is just beginning in America. The novel is told primarily through Florens, a young mixed-race girl whose first-person, letter-writing narration recurs throughout the novel. Her narrative is divided up by the narration from the perspectives of the other characters. All of the characters, with the notable exception of Florens and her mother, have their stories told by an unnamed narrator through a limited third-person point of view. This point of view allows limited insight into the characters' thoughts and self-concepts, while representing the silenced stories of the lives of such people in history.

When the novel opens, Florens works as a slave on Jacob Vaark's rural farm. Jacob is an Anglo-Dutch farmer, trader and lender. Florens, her mother and her baby brother had once belonged to Senhor D'Ortega, a cruel slave master and plantation owner. As partial settlement of D'Ortega's debt, Florens's mother had encouraged Jacob to take Florens to work on the farm and he had reluctantly accepted her. Her mother gave Florens to Jacob because she believes he is a good person. She also needs to nurse her infant son, who will not survive without her, and to protect Florens from the imminent threat of sexual assault at the hands of D'Ortega among others. Florens interprets her mother's act as abandonment, feeling that her mother has chosen Florens's baby brother over herself. Florens's phobia about mothers and motherhood then reverberates through her life.

Jacob hopes Florens will raise the spirits of his wife, Rebekka, as all of their children died before their sixth birthday. Jacob, an orphan himself, has taken in other slaves, including two girls: Sorrow and Lina. Sorrow, a racially-ambiguous girl represented as nearly feral, with red hair and black teeth, was found shipwrecked by a sawyer who gave her to Jacob. Native-American Lina was the sole survivor of a tribe decimated by smallpox. The church that sheltered her sold her to Jacob. The reader also meets Willard and Scully, two white male indentured servants, working on a neighbouring farm to be freed from their contracts.

On the Vaark farm, Florens, now a teenager of about sixteen years, has a short physical consensual relationship with an unnamed African-American blacksmith, who visits to do some work on the farm, then leaves. When Jacob dies and his wife Rebekka needs treatment for smallpox, Florens goes to find the blacksmith as she is in love with him and he knows about herbal medicines. On finding him, Florens discovers he has taken in a child. She is jealous of the boy Malaik, and when she is alone with him she breaks his arm.

When the blacksmith returns, Florens attacks him as well. After this event, Florens returns to the farm and is shown to no longer fear others. By the end of the novel the community of women on Jacob's farm breaks up. Rebekka has recovered and is considering selling Florens and giving Sorrow away. All four women, as well as the other minor female characters, have been subjected to or threatened by sexual assault. The novel ends with an account from Florens's mother which explains her reasons for giving Florens up. The title of the novel is brought into focus when Florens is not subjected to sexual assault or attempted sexual assault, due to the 'mercy' of her mother in giving her away.

### **Non-explicit representations of sexual assault in *A Mercy***

Sexual assault (and other violence against women) including threats, is represented frequently and indirectly in the novel (76, 102, 117-8, 126, 160-1, 163). The representations are distanced from the reader both by the limited details given and by their retrospective narration. The oblique and euphemistic references serve to represent sexual assault as a culture that is understood by all of the characters as an everyday reality.

For example, Florens's mother notably brings together pain and sex and female identity in her reduction of women to a body part, a violated vagina depicted symbolically as an open wound: "to be a female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal" (163), and that, ultimately, "there is no protection" (163). As a victim of sexual assaults (165), she speaks from experience, having been exposed to what she euphemistically calls "the mating" (163). This refers to when Florens's mother and two other women were taken into a shed and forced into having sex. Her reference to the "shadows of men" who "sat on barrels, then stood" suggests the multiple sexual assaults which, by this stage of the novel, need only to be subtle (161). The ambiguity of these terms is clarified when the reader learns that both Florens and her brother are the products of these sexual assaults (164), also referring to sexual assault as an act by men as a group, rather than as an individual-man-on-woman act. As such, sexual assault is represented as systemic and the constant threat of sexual assault shapes the lives and the futures of the female characters, regardless of race or class.

The most notable example of the threat of rape influencing behaviour is Florens's mother's decision to give up her child to protect her from rape. This impossible choice indicates the double bind the women experience: they are both dependent on men for their

survival and live under the threat of male (sexual) violence. The novel ends with this mother's lament about her choice, which was no choice at all.

The unequal balance of power between men and women in the characters' social environment is often internalized by the characters, and the reader is made privy to the psychological conflicts the characters' experience. That is, in the novel a group of women are shown over an extended period of time to shape their behaviour and their identities according to the ever present threat of rape, in particular. For example, Jacob understands sexual assault in terms of his need as the master to provide security on the farm, where he equates property with slaves, women and material goods, respectively: "A frequently absent master was an invitation and temptation – to escape, rape or rob" (32). Native American Lina is subjected to assault at the hands of a man referred to as "a Europe" (102), associating violence with power on a political, colonial scale. Sorrow's experience of sexual assault happens when she is eleven years old:

On occasion she had secret company ... The housewife told her it was monthly blood; that all females suffered it and Sorrow believed her until the next month and the next and the next when it did not return ... she talked about it, about whether it was instead the result of the goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending, instead of what the housewife said. Because the pain was outside between her legs, not inside where the housewife said was natural (117-8).

As a result of these implied brutal and multiple sexual assaults, Sorrow falls pregnant – Lina poignantly asking her "Do you know you are with child, child?" (121), the repeated use of 'child' drawing attention to Sorrow's vulnerability.

All of the characters are represented as constantly aware of the ever-present possibility of sexual assault. Regardless of class, race or gender, all of the characters consider rape and sexual assault to be the norm. The women are intimidated by the threat. Florens knows and worries about her situation: "I don't need Lina to warn me that I must not be alone with strange men with slow hands" (39). In her fever-stricken state, Rebekka, the boss's wife and the main white, female character, fears for Florens when she is travelling to find the blacksmith: "How long will it take will she get lost will he be there will he come will some vagrant rape her?" (70). Even through her delirium, as represented through her frantic repetition of 'will', Rebekka's chief concern is the (inevitable) threat of sexual assault.

Florens's vulnerability reminds Rebekka of the past threat of sexual assault she was subjected to when travelling to America. Rebekka remembers her own need to "escape from the leers and rude hands of any man, drunken or sober, she might walk by"



(76). In showing the white wife as also vulnerable to abuse, Morrison represents sexual assault as creating a culture of threat and dominance affecting women of all social classes. This represents race and class as subordinate to the gendered codes which shape the characters' identities and social interactions.

The novel makes it explicit that relations between men and women are constructed on the basis that sexual assault is centrally related to men's power over women. For example, when Florens passes by some male indentured servants, the latter are aware that "a sudden burst of sweating men out of roadside trees would have startled a human, any human, especially a female" (144). In this regard, men in the novel are typically read by the women as intimidating, while the women, with the notable exception of Florens, are always shown to be intimidated. On this basis, Sorrow endures the "slow goings" (126) – a euphemism for rape – as, for her, it is an inevitable and unchanging part of life. Because of this, she finds the idea of the consensual sex she glimpses between the blacksmith and Florens completely foreign to her:

What Sorrow saw ... was not the silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood ... that Sorrow knew... the blacksmith grabbed Florens' hair ... to put his mouth on hers. It amazed her to see that. In all of the goings she knew, no one had ever kissed her mouth. Ever (126).

Her description is worth noting for what the aptly named Sorrow notices in particular. She sees both familiar and unfamiliar gestures in the exchange. That is, the act of being grabbed by the hair was likely to be familiar in the sexual act that involved force, but – as she comments – her experience of sexual assault had not also involved tenderness and an engagement with her desire. Women's sexual desire is, as I will show, often overridden in this culture of sexual intimidation, but is, if only in a limited way, still represented as a realisable factor in the narrative.

### **Defence against criticisms of non-explicit representation**

As discussed, Laura Tanner's model for representing sexual assault partly suggests that the account of the sexual assault should be represented from the victim's perspective. In these terms, *A Mercy* partially meets these requirements as the narrative represents, if indirectly, the point of view of those victimised by sexual assault. In terms of Tanner's other requirements – that the representation of sexual assault is not obscured from the reader and that the reader is distanced as little as possible from the scene, particularly from the victim's pain – *A Mercy* does not fit the model. The sexual assaults in the novel are all

brief, in the past, and indirectly represented, distancing the reader and obstructing the reader's access to representations of the pain.

However, in the novel, it is never questioned as to whether or not the obliquely referred to sexual assaults took place or not. Both men and women accept rape and sexual assault to be a real if not inevitable threat that is ongoing. Sexual assault is shown to be a product of the social environment that is closely linked to gender and power relations. The characters most vulnerable to sexual assault are already on an unequal footing in terms of power. This makes the criticism of non-explicit representations of sexual assault – that the text may downplay the incidence of sexual assault and support the myth that sexual assaults did not happen – difficult to sustain.

The direct and indirect consequences of sexual assault and the threat of sexual assault are also evident throughout the novel. The direct consequences include pregnancy (as with Sorrow and Florens's mother), and insanity (evidenced in Sorrow's imaginary friend, Twin). The indirect consequences are represented as fear (Rebekka's case), shame (in Florens's mother), and violence (Florens's ultimate reaction). These alternatives are represented as consequences of an endemic culture of violence against women and make the criticisms of non-explicit representations of sexual assault untenable.

### **Female vulnerability versus female community and female sexual desire**

In *A Mercy*, Morrison also foregrounds positive images of gender and race relations which envision the possibility of change. In this sense, the all-pervasive representations of sexual assault are complemented by more positive representations of female community and female sexual desire. That is, though the reader is made aware of the women's vulnerability to sexual assault, they are also made aware of female agency and resilience. In this way, the novel addresses how sexual assault relates to socio-cultural issues of race, gender and class without allowing the representation to reinforce the stereotype of female helplessness. For example, the novel suggests the possibility of female agency through the depiction of Florens's consensual sexual experience with the blacksmith. Florens's story, the most prominent in the narrative, includes powerful representations of her sexual desire for the blacksmith and her active participation in their sexual relationship. As Lina observes: "Since [the blacksmith's] coming, there was an appetite in [Florens] ... A bleating desire beyond sense, without conscience" (60). Here Florens's desire for the blacksmith is so strong that Lina fears for Florens.

As Roynon observes, the focus in *A Mercy*: “lies not in the descriptions of brutality and suffering but, most unexpectedly, in the descriptions of a teenage girl’s sexual needs and fulfilment” (Graham 2012, 50). Roynon reads this as a subversion of the “canonical rape narrative” arguing that:

[Morrison’s] redirected gaze and her manipulation of language are themselves weapons that undercut the power of male rapists, that articulate the specific traumas, survivals and pleasures of specific female characters, and that thereby subvert canonical rape narratives (2010, 52).

As discussed, the scene of Florens’s sexual fulfilment is given in detail through the character of Sorrow positioned as witness. In order to make sense of what she sees, Sorrow contrasts Florens’s sexual encounter with her experience:

What Sorrow saw ... was not the silent submission to the slow goings behind a pile of wood or a hurried one in a church pew that Sorrow knew. This here female is stretched, kicked her heels and whipped her head left, right, to, fro. It was a dancing. Florens rolled and twisted from her back to his. He hoisted her up against the hickory; she bent her head into his shoulder. A dancing. Horizontal one minute, another minute vertical (126).

In contrast to Sorrow’s “silent submission” (a description which implies rape), Florens and the blacksmith are depicted as active agents taking pleasure from the sexual experience. The juxtaposition and contrast to Sorrow’s coercive, negative experiences work toward undermining the association of the male body with power and rape and re-inscribing the female body as an active sexual, desiring agent.

Florens’s acknowledgement of the pleasure she derives from the blacksmith recognises her sense that the act is undertaken within the overall norm of sexual coercion. In contrast to other men, Florens feels “safe” with the blacksmith: “with you my body is pleasure is safe” (137). The reference is offset by the description: “dancing”, “horizontal”, “vertical” which indicate that neither one is dominating the other (126). On this basis, the scene corresponds with what Joanna Bourke advocates as a “good sex” model (Bourke 2007, 439). That is, the male body of the blacksmith becomes the site of Florens’s (sexual) satisfaction, rather than a source of physical harm or oppression (Bourke 2007, 437). Thus Morrison presents the reader with a world in which sexual assault against women is common and widespread but, in which, consensual, fulfilling sex is also possible. In such a representation, Morrison both protests sexual assault and avoids prideful narratives of sexual assault in which male heroism is linked to domination. On this basis she suggests there is the possibility of positive and productive gender relations.

The depiction of the female community acts more broadly to undermine the notion that to be female is to be powerless, representing a functional society of women which is completely independent of men, even in the face of such oppression. Throughout the novel, the female characters are represented as dependent on and socially inferior to men. They occupy inferior social positions and are living under the constant threat of male violence and sexual assault. As the white wife of Jacob, Rebekka is described as “servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed the safest” (75-6). After Jacob dies and Rebekka falls ill, the servants Lina, Sorrow, and Florens are afraid because, if their mistress dies, as Lina observes, they are “three unmastered women ... out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone ... Female and illegal ... subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile” (56). The description makes it clear that to be owned by a male, literally to be “mastered”, is the only security possible for these women. Without this attachment, the women are vulnerable. The reason the women can only find safety through being attached or owned is the same: their bodies are a desirable and saleable commodity. In that to be female and illegal is to be without rights, then all the women in the novel are at the mercy of men.

On Jacob’s untimely death, Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow, and Florens as “unmastered women” form a temporary, isolated female community (56). The basis of the community is their common vulnerability; as Rebekka comments: “Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay” (96). Despite their different backgrounds, races, and stations, the women work towards the same goal of creating a sustainable community. The effect on the women is most evident in the developing relationship between Rebekka and Lina. When Rebekka comes to rely on Lina, they build a friendship in spite of their significant class and racial differences. Rebekka later refers to Lina as “the single friend she had” (71) when Lina is caring for her during her sickness. In this sense, the female community is represented as functioning on the basis that its members have overcome their differences and can count on each other.

However, Rebekka’s previous life of privilege (relative to the other women) eventually leads her to betray Lina. The betrayal arises when Rebekka distances herself from Lina in order to be accepted and protected by the church and people from a nearby village. As soon as Rebekka reasserts her prior superiority and betrays Lina’s friendship, the community breaks down. From Rebekka’s perspective, the loss of her husband makes her seek the protection the settlers can provide, but it is a protection only afforded to her,

as a white woman. The re-assimilation of her beliefs and lifestyle renders her friendship with the Native American Lina impossible. Turning away from the female community on the farm can be interpreted, however, as an act born out of social pressure. This is suggested in Florens's description of her at this time as being 'unwell' but not in a physical sense: "Mistress has cure but she is not well. Her heart is infidel" (157). When Rebekka returns from her church meetings, Florens describes her eyes as being "nowhere and have no inside" and that they "only look out and what she is seeing is not to her liking" (157). The hollowing out of Rebekka's former allegiance is a prediction as she later tries to give Sorrow away and sell Florens (157).

Although this community ultimately breaks down, the fragile sense of female agency and community outside of male support is suggested. The female community in the midst of male oppression is thus an important depiction in undermining notions of inherent female helplessness. In this way, the novel foregrounds both moments of female agency and consensual sexual activity as not based on intimidation and power. The effect subtly draws power away from the dominant norm of sexual assault, represented indirectly, as an ever-present, as a threat in the background.

### **Good black man/good white man**

The perpetrators of sexual assault in *A Mercy* are anonymous, with their only identifying feature being their maleness. This runs the risk of implicating all men as rapists. Perhaps to avoid associating sexual assault with all men, Morrison includes explicit, positive (and, at times, sexual) representations of male characters. For example, although *A Mercy* focuses mainly on the lives of the female characters, the novel also depicts Jacob and the blacksmith, as complex, generally positive characters. In particular, Florens's letter-writing narrative positions the reader with the 'good' black man – the blacksmith.

As said earlier, Florens narrates her story, throughout the novel, in the form of letters to the blacksmith addressed to 'you': "I explain. You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like" (3). The letters describe her desire for him, her journey to find him when Rebekka is sick, and the events that occur with the boy, Malaik, the when she finds him. Yet the representation is complex, partly because, as Florens acknowledges, the blacksmith is illiterate: "You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (158). Florens's use of second-person in her letters to the blacksmith has the effect of indirectly addressing the reader too. The reader is

therefore aligned with the good and free African-American man. One of the benefits of this alignment is that, when Florens feels betrayed by the blacksmith's affection for Malaik and attacks both of them, the reader is positioned to see Florens's actions as a product of her mother giving her up, and the sexually oppressive culture, rather than any doing of the blacksmith. In terms of black men being represented as rapists, the reader's positive affiliation with the blacksmith undermines such preconceptions.

Although little information is given about the blacksmith, the reader knows he is a free man and therefore more privileged than Florens. She describes him as "hav[ing] rights, then, and privileges like Sir [Jacob]. He could marry, own things, travel, sell his own labor" (45). The blacksmith is, therefore, different from herself and the other slaves on the farm. The reader gains the impression he is an essentially moral character because he does not need to act under the pressure of enforced violence, he adopts the small boy, and he is represented as a healer with knowledge of herbal medicines. The healing power of his goodness is therefore practical and symbolic, as is suggested when Florens states: "The medicine [the blacksmith] know[s] ... will make Mistress well" and "the blacksmith healed Mistress" (39, 143). Furthermore, Florens's sexual encounters with the blacksmith, as discussed above, are positive and represented as both desired and mutually fulfilling.

Jacob is also represented in the novel as being an essentially good character. For example, it is implied that he is a reluctant slave owner: "Jacob winced. Flesh was not his commodity" (20). This is recognised early on by Florens's mother who notes that: "I saw the tall man [Jacob] see you [Florens] as a human child, not pieces of eight" (164). She trusts Jacob implicitly to provide a better situation for her daughter and considers it a "mercy" when he agrees to take Florens (164-5). Jacob also 'adopts' other characters: Lina and Sorrow, showing him to be a compassionate man. Ultimately, Jacob's viewpoint allows for the conflict between his ownership and his humanity to be represented.

Reinforcing this point, the novel also subverts the reader's expectations of an imminent rape. For example, on her unaccompanied trip through unknown territory to see the blacksmith, Florens passes a group of men "all native, all young" (100) and she feels fear. One of them goes as far as making a crude sexual gesture by putting his fingers in his mouth. But against the expectations set up by the novel, the men do not assault her. Instead, they offer her water and she continues on her way:

I have fear of them too. They rein in close. They circle. I am shaking ... One pokes his fingers in his mouth, in out, in out. Others laugh more ... I drop to my knees in misery and fright ... He grins while removing a pouch hanging from a cord across his chest. He holds it out to me but I am too trembling to

reach so he drinks from it and offers it again ... I gulp it ... I am shock. Can you believe this. He runs on the grass and flies up to sit astride his horse. I blink and they all disappear (100-1).

In this scene, by setting up an expectation of sexual assault then thwarting the expectation, Morrison requires the reader to challenge their own stereotypes and assumptions. In this way, Morrison links social constructions of gender to oppression and vulnerability, while at the same time undermining the notion of sexual assault against women being inevitable.

### **Privileging the narratives of the victims**

*A Mercy* represents individuals in the context of historical and social concerns, focusing on specific individuals, rather than faceless groups. The emphasis avoids the possibility of “reduc[ing] the lived experience of specific individuals to undifferentiated bodies” (Bourke 2007, 25). That is, the reader’s concern is always with specific characters and their particular circumstances. On this basis, the narrative retains an emphasis on the personal and the emotional aspects of her characters’ lives, giving the readers insight into the role that circumstances play in the difficult choices the characters make. In addition, however, the novel always connects elements of her characters’ lives, even their most private dimensions, such as sexual desires, as always related to larger social and cultural issues. The reader is therefore encouraged to empathise with the effects of living under such constraints and oppression, rather than focusing on either the physical aspect of sexual assault or the perpetrators of such assault.

One of the ways in which the novel redirects and undercuts the traditional narrative of sexual assault is through the articulation of individual women’s stories. By privileging the narratives of the women affected by sexual assault and the threat of sexual assault, Morrison refocuses the reader on the far-reaching effects and avoids putting the focus (and re-inscribing power) on the perpetrators, who are virtually absent from the novel.

### **How multiple perspectives creates empathic unsettlement**

As indicated, each chapter of *A Mercy* is told through a different character’s perspective in limited third person, with only Florens’s story, as the framing narrative, repeated. Only Florens’s and Florens’s mother tell their stories in first person. The other character’s stories alternate between Florens’s six sections, filling the information gaps of her overall tale (Lane 2003, 154). The complex non-linear structure of the novel is challenging for the reader. The form may require readers to spend more time reading and rereading different

sections, piecing together narratives that are difficult to understand. In this respect, the fragmentation encourages the reader to revisit and revise understandings of the characters' different experiences, actions and perspectives when new information is made available.

There are effects from having the novel told from multiple perspectives, with the effects of the abuse foregrounded and the actual scenes of sexual assault in the background. In particular, the non-explicit representations of sexual assault are part of a disruptive narrative that serves to both encourage and frustrate – “empathically unsettle” – the reader's attempts to understand and therefore empathise with the female victims (LaCapra 2001). The multiple perspectives, overlapping and recounting events, also show the characters as fallible, leaving the reader without an authority or guide in the text with which to align themselves. Faced with the challenging actions and choices of the characters, the reader must make sense of situations by reflecting on their own underlying assumptions and socio-cultural values.

The lack of any direct access to the instances of sexual assault in the narrative, confronts the reader with limits to their understanding. Dominick LaCapra argues that such “empathic unsettlement” can productively provoke the reader, avoid over-identification and prompt ethical reflection (LaCapra 2001). In such ways, the reader empathy is both encouraged and refused in the novel. The distancing of the reader from the scenes of trauma, coupled with the shifting third-person perspective, not only disrupts empathy, but encourages the reader to focus on the consequences of the trauma and how it shapes identity.

Although Florens's narrative is dominant, the interspersed other characters' perspectives often challenge Florens's account, encouraging the reader to maintain a critical distance from her. In much the same way as David Lurie functions as an unreliable narrator in *Disgrace*, Florens's misinterpretations are made obvious to the reader. In fact, Florens's perspective, more so than the other characters, conveys an understandable naïveté when as a child, then as a teenager, she clearly does not understand events. For example, in Lina's narrative, the reader learns that Lina warns Florens – with respect to the blacksmith – that she is but “one leaf on his tree” and Florens replied “No. I am his tree” (59). Florens's conviction of her centrality in his affection produces a self-image of stability and strength, which is later cast into doubt when the blacksmith leaves without saying goodbye, fulfilling Lina's expectation.

Each event is retold and reinterpreted by different characters. The misunderstandings, misrepresentations and discrepancies between the characters' accounts



have far-reaching consequences. For example, when Jacob accepts Florens as partial payment from one of his debtors, the foundational event is reported differently by Florens, Jacob and Florens's mother. Florens recounts the event's effect on her; how the debt collector specified who he would accept, separating her from her mother:

Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A *minha mae*<sup>17</sup> begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due (7).

Further on in the novel, Jacob gives a more comprehensive account (21-25). Jacob's account focuses the effect of the event on himself; on his distaste for the buying and selling of slaves, but that "perhaps Rebekka would welcome a child around the place" (24).

There are discrepancies in the two accounts. While, in Florens's account, Jacob first chooses to take Florens and her mother (7), in Jacob's account, however, Jacob chooses Florens's mother and does not mention Florens at all (22). Also, in Florens's version, her mother's reaction is to "[beg] no. *Her baby boy* is still at her breast. Take *the girl*, she says, my daughter" (7, italics added). The use of the affectionate 'her baby boy' in contrast with the dispassionate term 'the girl' in reference to Florens, leads Florens to believe that her femaleness is significant to her mother's decision. In Jacob's account, Florens's mother says "Take her. Take my daughter" (24).

At the end of the novel Florens's mother talks of the event to Florens in an account that Florens will never hear: "There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your [Florens's] vice for shoes. It was as if you were hurrying up your breasts and also hurrying the lips of an old married couple" (160). Here Florens's mother notes Florens's pubescence and her desire to become a woman which increases her susceptibility to sexual assault. In Jacob, she saw "another way" (161) because she believed he saw Florens as "a human child, not [as] pieces of eight" (164); a view confirmed by Jacob's account. When Jacob agrees to take Florens, removing her from the threat of sexual assault, Florens's mother sees this as "not a miracle ... It was a mercy. Offered by a human" (164-5).

By structuring the novel according to different emphases and perspectives, the reader is prompted to question the stories, as each of the characters are shown to be fallible. Through the different acts of remembering and re-remembering, "aspects of the story are told and retold and shared by many characters so that there can be no ultimate

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<sup>17</sup> Portuguese for 'my mother'.

and overriding truth” (Small-McCarthy 1995, 297). Without a single position of ethical authority as a guide, the reader is required both to challenge and to understand the different experiences and interpretations, as well as their effect on the characters’ identities, actions and decisions. The multiplicity of perspectives, therefore, works as both a writing strategy and a critical reading strategy. As the stories progress, readers are engaged in constructing and deconstructing their common sense assumptions and values to understand the society that they are vicariously experiencing.

With regard to Morrison’s novel *Sula* (1973), the critic Deborah McDowell argues the novel is difficult as it “invites the reader to imagine a different script for women [one] that transcends the boundaries of social and linguistic convention” (McDowell 1989, 60). I suggest this criticism applies to *A Mercy*, as Morrison does not provide moral guidance or give ideal solutions. Rather the novel is constructed so as to convey the difficult circumstances endured and the absence of any ideal, moral solutions. The depictions unsettle the reader and provoke critical engagement with the issues raised: “Morrison’s writing does not embody the perfect solution to the difficulties inherent in the writing about rape ... Her novels do comprise sites of resistance to sexual violence, however, in the innovative ways they treat the subject” (Roynon 2010, 51). Florens’s solutions to her trauma include her violent response and removing herself from society. Her story is ultimately left open-ended, resisting easy understandings. In this sense, the reader is confronted by Florens’s actions, unable to easily pity or condemn her.

### **The state of being orphaned and Florens’s violent actions**

The novel not only represents the sexual assaults indirectly through the multiple perspectives and retrospective accounts, but also draws the reader’s awareness to other linked issues. For many of the characters this is the experience of being orphaned and the consequential loss of attachment indirectly resulting from the sexual assaults. For Florens, the dispossession and displacement she feels when she is taken to Jacob’s farm, and her own vulnerability to sexual assault, have far-reaching consequences and are represented as two powerful forces in her life.

Almost all of the characters experience some kind of forced separation from their mothers. Jacob’s own experience as an orphan is the cause for his ‘adoption’ of Florens, Lina and Sorrow. Sorrow’s orphaning happens when she is the sole survivor of shipwreck. Lina’s orphaning was the result of her tribe being wiped-out by smallpox. The state of

being an orphan is intrinsically and symbolically a state of being motherless, with all this implies in terms of displacement in relation to both motherhood and nationhood. Feminist critic Saidiya Hartman argues that to be a part of the African diaspora was itself to be “motherless” in terms of losing one’s cultural identity. Her concept includes the loss of national and cultural identity as well as the loss of original kinship networks which define one’s place, role and status. In this sense, to lose one’s mother was to be “denied your kin, country and identity” and to be a slave, or to be descended from slaves, is, literally and metaphorically, to be an orphan (Hartman 2007, 85).

Through such symbolism the novel places trauma at the heart of African-American history: traumatized children develop ways of functioning designed to “prevent the return of the helpless state experienced at the time of traumatizing event” (McDougall 1986, 151). In the novel, such mental functioning is represented as both protecting and damaging to the individual and community. This is particularly relevant to understanding Florens’s actions at the end of the novel.

As discussed, Florens interprets her mother’s act as a rejection, and as a result the novel shows her as wary of mothers:

Mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy’s hand (6).

The implied connection between her perception of mothering behaviour and her own separation from her mother informs Florens’s later violence towards the blacksmith’s adopted child, Malaik. When Florens is placed in the position of pseudo-mother to Malaik, her memories of abandonment resurface. Specifically, following the blacksmith’s look, she sees herself instead of the boy:

And there is another reason, you say. You turn your head. My eyes follow where you look. This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother’s dress hoping for her hand that is only for her little boy. The second time it is a pointing screaming little girl hiding behind her mother and cling to her skirts. Both times are full of danger and I am expelled ... My mouth goes dry as I wonder if you want him to be yours ... As if he is your future. Not me (133-134).

The memory replays her dispossession by her mother, what she calls her first “expel”. The need for safety and refuge make Florens determined that “This expel can never happen again” (135). The scene with the boy, as a perceived threat, culminates in her attack on him. That Florens and the boy have both been adopted poignantly informs Florens’s

transformation. The attack on the blacksmith's adopted child is a manifestation of the emotional trauma of Florens being given away, interpreted by Florens as an act of betrayal:

His fingers clutch the doll. I think that must be where his power is. I take it from him and place it on a shelf too high for him to reach. He screams screams ... I am trying to stop him not hurt him. That is why I pull his arm. To make him stop. Stop it. And yes I do hear the shoulder crack ... he screams screams then faints (137-8).

Florens's act can only be explained in the context of the culture of sexual assault which led to what she wrongly perceived as her mother's rejection of her. Her ongoing fears of rejection are realised when the blacksmith turns against her: "Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever" (140). His rejection of her repeats her mother's rejection and Florens resolves at this point to be her own protection. Her subsequent independence emerges therefore from her traumas and her lack of choice: "Not again. Not ever" (140). Florens's violence against the boy and the blacksmith's rejection of her is therefore associated with a dramatic shift in that she is now perceived as no longer able to be attacked and assaulted. As such, Scully, one of the male slaves, observes her previous vulnerability to assault and her transformation:

If he had been interested in rape, Florens would have been his prey. It was easy to spot that combination of defencelessness, eagerness to please and, most of all, a willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others. Clearly, from the look of her now, that was no longer true ... he knew she had become untouchable. His assessment of her unrape-ability ... was impersonal (150).

Through being violent towards a defenceless child, Florens, formerly described as "docile" (144) and "defenceless" (150), has become "unrape-abl[e]" (150). The oddness of the word "unrape-abl[e]" as applied by a former, potential attacker, impels the reader to associate the capacity to be raped with compliant behaviour. However, Florens's actions are shown to be in the face of unsurmountable oppression, and her own violence still clearly reflects the violence of the overall culture. That Florens's "answer" is not an acceptable answer continues to encourage the reader to contemplate the issues raised.

In Florens's final words she says: "I am become wilderness ... now the soles of my feet are hard as cypress" (159). Florens's reference to trees and to wilderness shows her awareness that, to reject her role in society, she must now live outside that society. The metaphor that refers to feet and shoes shows the extent of her transformation as originally Florens's soft feet were considered a vulnerability: "my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have strong soles ... that life requires" (2). The need to wear shoes is also a metaphor which refers to Florens's being in society in general. After

walking barefoot back from her journey to the blacksmith, her “hard as cypress” feet (159) suggest a new capacity to survive.

At the end of the novel the reader does not know what Florens is going to do, only that she is shaping an identity outside of social conventions. This lack of closure invites the reader to try to understand Florens’s actions as symbolic as they are clearly outside the conventional framework of behaviour. When Florens refuses the scripted role of the black female slave in favour of her own survival, the reader is left to speculate what the future might entail.

### **Sabotaging the language of male pride in representations of sexual assault**

In my introduction to this chapter, I referred to Morrison’s expressed need to sabotage the “language of pride”, in which representations of sexual assault tended to re-inscribe, celebrate, and even provide the pretext for, domination as a key aspect of male identity:

I’ve read rape all my life – but they [rape narratives] always seemed to have no shame. ... There was this male pride attached to it, in the language. [My writing] took it out of the realm of the fake, sensational romanticism in which rape is always played. We all say, ‘Oh my God, rape!’, but when you look at the language, it’s the language of pride. There is something about it, from the rape of Lucretia all the way on – so I just wanted to sabotage all of that (Morrison 2003).

Morrison refers to the need to subvert or diminish the implied power/heroism of both the portrayed act and the perpetrator. Effectively, Morrison is intending to do what historian Joanna Bourke calls ‘demystifying’ the ‘category of the rapist’ (Bourke 2007, 439).

In the majority of her novels, this is achieved through the explicitly depicted rape scenes, allowing the reader direct access to the decidedly unromantic rape scene (Morrison 1994, 164). Keeping in mind her words in the quote above, it is clear to see that she defuses the language of pride in her descriptions. Of her novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Morrison has said that the rape scene is “more accurately repellent when deprived of the male “glamour of shame” rape is (or once was) routinely given” (1970, 215). Although in a different way, *A Mercy* provides another alternative to the ‘prideful’ representations of sexual assault. In its use of non-explicit representations of sexual assault, *A Mercy* gives little attention to the perpetrators or to the act, but instead privileges the culture produced by the pervasiveness of sexual assault as is evident in the female victims’ narratives.

## Reconstructing history and ‘writing back’

Literary works, and the way critics interpret them, play a crucial role in reader’s perceptions, through the deconstruction of sexual and gender roles, behaviour and victimhood. As Justine Tally states: “What we do as writers and critics is not just important, it is crucial; it is not just informative, it is formative; it is not just interesting, it profoundly shapes the perception of the world as we, and others, come to “know” it” (2007, 1). Morrison’s oeuvre portrays African-American life and relates the experience of history through the eyes of African Americans, particularly women (Morrison, 1989).

In her 1989 essay, Morrison criticises earlier texts for writing about African-Americans from a white male point of view and notes that it is never assumed that African Americans, of either gender, would “write back” (Holm 2010, 14). As other critics acknowledge, read against the background of her social criticism, Morrison’s novels have a constructive and regenerative function:

The opportunity to analytically unmake and remake the past is an unfailing ideology in Morrison’s fiction. The past including past works – not the future – is treated as unfinished and continuously unfolding. By revisiting specific themes, techniques, and textual strategies, Morrison positions her characters, her readers, and the society-as-readers to discover that the (recurring) past is a reservoir from which the future can be drawn and redrawn in more expansive and enabling ways (Ryan 2007, 160).

Morrison’s works, it has been argued, “give voice to the voiceless and record a history of a people, especially those she refers to as ‘ordinary,’ people, who have been ignored or purposely forgotten” (Raynor and Butler 2007, 177). This is particularly evident in *A Mercy* where the narrative includes the stories of a Native American, white indentured servants, and an African-American girl.

Towards the end of the novel, Florens is represented as a writer when she scrawls her story into the wood of a room in Jacob’s unoccupied house: she observes, “There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor ... These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves ... Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world” (160-61). Her words suggest the importance of the many formerly closed personal stories which have no room in society. Her words are also in contrast to the formal documents where such stories are under-represented and/or absent. The image of the words covering the floor, implies the foundational nature of the stories which continue to structure American society. That the words need air calls on the need to publish such stories and look to the novel to challenge dominant perspectives and the isolation of

marginalised voices. There is, in the description, a sense of futility in that Florens's words may never get the 'air that is out in the world' (161); no-one will be able to read her story as an historical account. However, in the novel, she addresses the contemporary reader. In this way, the novel gives voice to the marginalised as, in Morrison's words, they "write back" (Holm 2010, 14).

Morrison expressed the view that: "racism is as healthy today as it was during the Enlightenment" (Morrison, Afterword 1970, 63). In *A Mercy*, Morrison reconstructs a socio-historical foundation for current social tensions in America. As Tally puts it: "Morrison may be talking about the past, but she is speaking to the present" (2007, 3). The novel addresses the conditions of childhood and motherhood in the context of slavery, but also the context of the birth of the American nation, all circumstances which affected future generations. The novel criticizes the foundational scene depicting the beginnings of slavery in America, and implicitly suggests that the effects of such a society continue to shape American values.

The novel prompts readers to try to understand human behaviour as something which is the result of – and marked by – historical, social and cultural constructs, beliefs and events. As Raynor and Butler argue, Morrison "illustrates the destructive nature of patriarchy both within the mainstream American society and African American communities. Morrison's novels serve as 'historical' narratives by showing the inextricable links between gender, race, and class" (2007, 178).

## **Conclusion**

I have shown in *A Mercy* that Morrison employs a number of narrative strategies, including the non-explicit representation of sexual assault, a foregrounding of positive depictions (of female sexual agency, female community, and positive male characters), and the complex narration told from multiple perspectives. Morrison replaces explicit scenes of sexual assault with a narrative that depicts the all-pervasive nature of sexual assault and its effects on its victims. On these grounds, the reader's attention is directed away from the immediate spectacle of the sexual assault, onto the endemic nature of such violence. Where *Disgrace* offers the reader access to one unreliable narrator and leaves decision for the reader to interpret, so in *A Mercy* Florens's decisions remain to be interpreted by the reader. In that *A Mercy* gives all of the victims a narrative, there is no

one ethical authority to guide the reader and the choices made by the victims require the reader's input.

*A Mercy* demonstrates that a backdrop of non-explicit representations of sexual assault can effectively redirect the reader's attention to other key aspects of sexual assault such as its links to socio-cultural issues, and the effect it has on identity and on social interactions. The non-explicit representation of sexual assault in *A Mercy* both outlines the systemic nature of sexual assault yet avoids re-inscribing negative stereotypes about the perpetrators and victims. The positive images of female resilience and female sexual desire foregrounded in the novel serve to envisage the possibility for change.

Florens's 'choice' in the novel is either to fulfil the socially-expected role as a female (as epitomised through motherhood), thus being vulnerable to sexual assault, or must reject her role entirely, placing herself outside of society by becoming 'unrapeable'. The consequence of living in this society, where sexual assault is a constant threat, highlights the extent of the problem. In this way, *A Mercy* productively promotes empathy and reflection on the part of the reader, without providing any ethical authority as a guide.



## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have shown how non-explicit representations in the novels under analysis redirect the reader's gaze and create a space for ethical reflection. In J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999) and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), I argue, the reader is invited to reassess dominant socio-cultural assumptions and values. I have examined debates concerning the potential pitfalls writers of fiction face in the representation of sexual assault. In any kind of representation involving rape or sexual assault there is a perceived link to its lived reality and occurrence in society. As such, writers necessarily always contend with inherent issues of trauma, gender (and race) relations. In view of this, I have shown that explicit representations of sexual assault in fiction are encouraged by some critics on the basis that these can make readers aware of the severity of the crime and its effect on its victims. I have shown that others see such representations as unnecessarily eroticising the event, allowing the reader to over-identify with victim/s or perpetrator/s.

Explicit representation per se, I have shown, also risks the reproduction of stereotypes. In contrast, one of the risks of non-explicit representations is the possibility of producing passive or reductive depictions of sexual assault, downplaying the severity of the crime, or leaving room for misinterpretation. As discussed, on this basis of the dominant narrative of sexual assault as it is judged in court, a number of critics have argued that non-explicit representations can distance and disengage the reader, leading to false judgements.

With these criticisms in mind, I have raised the issue of the conditions under which representation of the suffering of Others is productive (if at all). I have examined non-explicit representations in relation to the strategic use of silence to avoid exploitative portrayals, to challenge dominant and narrow frameworks of understanding sexual assault. In my analysis, I have shown that, in these two novels, non-explicit representations of sexual assault serve the purpose of creating a space for questioning and for active thought/reflection. In that the non-representation highlights the unknowability of the

experience of the Other, it impedes the reader from over-identifying with either the victim or the perpetrator. This in turn refocuses the reader away from the pain and humiliation of the victim and the reputed 'pridefulness' of the act of perpetrators, to productively emphasise a society informed by, and read in relation to, the racialized and gendered imbalance of power.

In Coetzee's *Disgrace*, a rape occurs outside of Lurie – the viewpoint character's – field of vision. The non-explicit representation of the sexual assault is further complicated by Lucy – the victim's – refusal to speak about her experience, either to her father or to the authorities. In relation to the criticisms of non-explicit representations, I have defended this representation by showing that the only viable interpretation is that the act was a rape, and by showing that the novel does not support rape myths. Lucy's agency is demonstrated through her refusal to have her actions dictated to her, thus problematizing normative assumptions and understandings of rape and rape victims. Her silence, in this case, can then be read, not as reductive, but as a challenge to normative responses to rape. The parallel story to the sexual assault involves Lurie's student Melanie and this story also interrogates rape myths, such as the idea that rapists are invited by their victims to have sex with them.

In *Disgrace*, I have shown that a critical distance is established from Lurie, on the basis of his unreliable narration, which positions the reader to question his self-belief, actions and responses. Thus, when his daughter Lucy is raped, the reader is in a position to objectively criticize Lurie's responses. In view of Lurie's unreliability, Lucy's silence, and the represented dominance of the white South Africans' point of view vis a vis the various racially identified characters, the reader is left to make sense of events for themselves. I have argued that Coetzee's use of unreliable narrator and limited point of view, among other strategies, refuses to represent the events as a moral tale and that this confronts the reader and directs attention to the inextricable relationship between issues of sexism, racism and violence in post-Apartheid South Africa.

In Morrison's *A Mercy*, I have shown that sexual assault is represented, frequently yet obliquely, as endemic to the depicted slave communities. The non-explicit rape representations in *A Mercy* avoid reinscribing negative stereotypes about perpetrators and victims while outlining the systemic and endemic nature of rape. The rapes are represented as occurring across and affecting generations of women, suggesting the historical legacy of sexual violence in America. Counter to the repression and oppression depicted, I have shown that Morrison also foregrounds images of female resilience and female sexual

desire. As in *Disgrace*, I have shown that *A Mercy* requires the reader to look outside familiar and stereotypical explanations to understand the unpalatable choices that the characters make.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison employs a number of ethically productive narrative strategies, including the non-explicit representation of sexual assault and the foregrounding of positive depictions of female sexual agency. She also depicts a female community and positive male characters in a complex narration that, importantly, is told from multiple perspectives, suggesting the unviability of a single truth. Through these strategies, Morrison draws the reader's attention to the pervasive nature of sexual assault and its effect on its victims, in this foundational historical period, suggesting both the problematic legacy of such a history, as well as the humanity of the characters involved, and the ever present possibility of change. In both of these novels, the female characters – Lucy in *Disgrace* and Florens in *A Mercy* – retain agency over their futures, even while making decisions and taking actions that are outside the purview of convention. Where *Disgrace* offers the reader access to one unreliable narrator and leaves the choices of Lucy (the victim of sexual assault) for the reader to interpret, *A Mercy* portrays multiple perspectives, and the victims often make impossible choices such as giving up a child. In both novels, there is no single voice of authority, no omniscient narrator to serve as an ethical authority to guide the reader. The often unpalatable choices made by the victims are not easily understood and demand the reader's interpretation.

Based on my reading of these two novels, I have identified the following features to be desirable for an ethical non-explicit representation of sexual assault: the victim has agency (although not necessarily voice), the representation discourages reductive and/or stereotypical readings of sexual assault and those involved, and the representation encourages critical thought and reflection on the part of the reader, particularly regarding the suffering Other.

These features also inform my novella titled *Taking Care of Amy*. The story, set in present-day Western Australia, centres on a single mother who is raising her three daughters — two teenagers (one of whom is disabled) and a toddler — under difficult circumstances. The novella explores the issues raised in the thesis and includes a non-explicit scene of sexual assault. My novella, Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999), and Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) all depict the non-explicit mode of representing sexual assault as ethically productive in encouraging readers to look beyond reproductive judgements towards more nuanced and compassionate understandings. In view of this, my thesis stresses the need for

the re-theorisation of non-explicit representations of sexual assault as a potentially beneficial strategy for writers, readers and critics.

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