

ERRATA SHEET

- p. 2, para. 2: “After much contemplation, much sifting, the idea...” would be clearer if written as “After much contemplation, much sifting, I have come to the conclusion that the idea...”
- p. 73, para. 2: “death throws” should be “death throes”.
- p. 75, para. 1: use of “it” refers to the difficulty faced by authors such as Brian Castro, in particular his autobiographical novel *Shanghai Dancing*, in reaching a wider audience.
- p. 78, para. 1: “I have come to believe that it is not possible to effectively communicate...” could be better worded as “I have come to the conclusion that communication is ineffective ...”
- p. 109, para. 2: “alternate signs” should be “alternative signs”.
- p. 124, para. 2: “aggravate” is intended to be interpreted in its more colloquial sense, to irritate.
- p. 191, para. 2: “the youngest” is better read as “the younger”.
- p. 192, para. 2: “lightening” should be “lightning”.
- p. 308, para. 1: “Your absolutely” should be “You’re absolutely”.



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abstract

My PhD thesis is comprised of two components, a creative and a critical. The creative component is in the form of a novel, titled *28*, written in the first person by one of the main protagonists, known as Scribe.

During one of his visits to the hospital, where his son lies in a comatose state, Scribe is wandering the corridors when he happens upon a young woman with the intriguing name of 28, a patient being treated for a nervous breakdown. 28 becomes the catalyst for Scribe to begin writing a journal, recording his past and present experiences interlaced with the quirky stories that 28 tells at each of their encounters. As their relationship develops, so does the Scribe's writing, setting both on a course of self discovery. When the truth of 28's identity is revealed, the relationship takes an unexpected turn.

The novel is comprised of twenty-eight chapters, each relating to a year in 28's life and a day in the life of Scribe. Plot is deliberately relegated in this character-driven, psychological study that sets out to confront issues of life, death, morality, and the creative process, issues that insist on surfacing as inescapable forces in the characters' lives.

For the critical component of my thesis I have adopted the essay form, discussing the writing process and how that process affects a cathartic experience for the writer and subsequently the reader. In exploring that process the essay highlights the writer's ability to enter a very crucial creative space, or state of mind. The term 'entering the fictitious' is used to describe that process. It is suggested that the fictitious arena offers immense

creative freedom and endless possibilities, allowing fiction to enter into a discourse in a way that non-fiction is often unable to.

statement

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

I give consent to the thesis being made available for photocopying and loan if accepted for the award of the degree.

Signed

... 28 August 2005

acknowledgements

I would like to thank my primary supervisor and mentor Professor Thomas Shapcott for giving me free reign with this project and somehow understanding just where it was all going; Dr Sabina Hopfer for not only her academic and creative assistance but for her true companionship and emotional support; Professor John Coetzee whose astute reading and insightful comments during the final draft of the novel were greatly appreciated; and Dr Patrick Allington for his ongoing advice and careful reading of my exegesis.

28 prologue

Imagine losing the ability to reason, to no longer comprehend, being unable to form ideas in the accepted way. I think I am losing that ability. But is it really a loss, or is it more of an abandonment?

Life is conceited. Conceit keeps us alive. Each time I think, 'Finally, I have found all the answers, found an absolute way of looking at the world and my place in it,' I realise I have been led astray, enticed by my own arrogance. Then, I have no choice but to find my way back from the narrowing precipice of conceit, and start again.¹

¹ Anonymous, circa 2005, from a novel or a poem or perhaps a play, yet to be written or possibly already written and forgotten.

27 admission

It is time to take stock of the events that have led me to this point. I will take one last look – over the buildings, past the skyscrapers, and into the distant horizon – before turning inward to trace the steps of my journey. I will attempt to assemble a picture in order to make sense of that journey. I will call that assemblage *logic*. And who knows, I may even uncover more than I expect; perhaps I may even open a few doors that were previously neglected.

It is my intention to understand something of the force that is both the inspiration and the essence of creative endeavour. A force that is for me a process that explains the human need to write, to tell a story, to express concepts. After much contemplation, much sifting, the idea of separating the academically critical aspect of this study from the creative and fictional component is no longer an option; it is a distraction. The critical and the fictional have evolved side by side, each playing a key role in determining the other. In my attempt to dissect, trying to separate one from the other, I have realised that they are inseparable. So, side by side, and often intertwined, they shall

be presented here. It is as if the final product will see the fictional and the critical reunited. And that is how it should be, and how it works best for me, for their relationship is complementary and symbiotic, each emerging from the same source, from the same need, and working towards the same end. Both are the product of human creative response.

This is both a psychological study and a metaphysical exploration. Metaphysical in one way because it deals with first principles, focusing on the way in which we think about the world and our place in it. It is also a metaphysical study in that it functions outside of the corporeal, by dealing with the human psyche. Also, it will become evident that I am deeply engaged with the question of moral and ethical obligations, so it is also a study in ethics.

Existentialism is present throughout, acting as a springboard. I see a connection between the methodology of existentialism and the way in which a novel functions: both working from a preoccupation, a concern that demands attention, and choosing the best tools available to flesh out the answers. By so doing, existentialism and the novel avoid reduction to any fixed set of tenets. Of particular relevance is how, through the novel, the existentialist interpretation of freedom has been successfully conveyed. I think immediately of mid-twentieth century novelist-philosophers such as Camus, Sartre, Kazantzakis. Then a culturally diverse selection of contemporary writers that have in many ways evolved from these same viewpoints come to mind – authors such as Primo Levi, John Fowles, Anthony Burgess, and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn; and, closer to home, Brian Castro, Kate Grenville, and Louis Nowra.

Many views from a variety of linguistic backgrounds have influenced this work, including English, French, German, Italian, Greek, Chinese, Russian, Japanese –

supporting the universality of both the questions raised and the ensuing debate. Not all of the influential authors are mentioned or cited, but their influences are apparent nonetheless in providing a backdrop for this inquiry, therefore an extensive bibliography follows the body of this text.

26 of human exploration

The psychological and philosophical aspects of writing form an integral part of the creative process. For me, they offer both motivation and inspiration. The writing process involves an exploration – often it is the exploration itself that ignites the writing, and once begun they continue together, each feeding the other. However simple that synopsis may seem, a complete interpretation of the writing process remains difficult and allusive. It is not by nature a tangible commodity. Perhaps this is largely due to the tendency of writers to defy, and often vehemently refute, definition and categorisation, particularly when it comes to analysis of creativity. John Fowles uses an analogy in *Wormholes*, and although seemingly light-hearted on the surface, his wit aptly describes how many writers may feel about divulging aspects of the writing process: “Novels are like old love affairs – there is so much, not all bad, that one doesn’t want to talk about,

so much one can't."² I believe that the writer is intimately engaged in a discourse with the ever-changing human condition but is reluctant to, or can't, expose that intimacy.

I also believe that the nature of creativity will best be learned through direct experience. In order to reveal the writing process, it may be necessary to explore a variety of writing attitudes and to utilise the smorgasbord of creative mediums available, ranging from poetry and verse to scriptwriting and the novel. This study is empirically based, drawing, wherever possible, on the influences and opinions of creative writers. And whatever style is necessary to convey my hypotheses will undoubtedly come to the fore and be employed. As I write, I begin to recall anecdotes and impressions, and many fragments that will need to be pieced together. And there is an underlying feeling that the inclusion of a novel into this academic and fictional cooperative will best exemplify my intentions; perhaps that will be how I end the journey.

2 John Fowles. Wormholes: Essays and Occasional Writings. 1998. Ed. Jan Relf. London: Vintage, 1999. p. 433.

25 further definition

Within my writing I often refer to terms such as literature and fiction in the same breath. And although distinctions are useful for certain purposes, for categorisation into genre for example or for academic and publishing purposes, the criteria I have adopted are not based on style but rather on content. The works I have included deal with issues that deserve, perhaps demand, our attention. In general, whether I talk of fiction or writing or prose or poetry I am referring to highly creative literary works that are important, for me and this essay, for the concepts they portray and the ability of the writer to communicate with clarity and considerable creative expression their intentions.

In regards to methodology, which I have touched on briefly, I will say no more than to suggest that at this moment I see myself as a writer – undefined. And although arguably somewhat post-modern, partly existential, perhaps even absurd or surreal, I believe a creative writer should be allowed the liberty to adopt, even invent, their own methodological terminology. If at times I use words such as discussion, journey, or

investigation to replace thesis, paper, or essay, I do so because they more adequately describe my circumstances.

Finally, if I collect fragments and piece them together, if I suddenly present a claim in the form of a poem or a quirky story, it is because, as I strive to get to the bottom of what the creative process is, I will be re-creating that process. It will be presented as it is and as it unravels. And at times, ideas may seem to be abandoned, only to be picked up again later. In the end, it will all come together. That is the way of the writer. And for me, that is the difference between producing a creative work and a rigidly defined research document.

I believe that creative writers are comfortable with fragments and entering a fictitious arena for both inspiration and assimilation of their ideas. The reader's understanding of quite complex and fragmented poetry and prose relies on an ability and willingness to enter the same fictitious arena as the author. At times, writers may tread a fine line between the fictitious and reality, running the risk of being overly abstract and inaccessible, but what they do, at those instances, is allow a glimpse of the mechanics of creative writing. Although they lead the reader into the fictitious, in many ways they also expose the process of fiction itself.

A fragment has come to mind. For me it is appropriate and relevant, so I would like to place it here: Janet Frame, the New Zealand writer, wrote *Owls do Cry*. A copy sits over on a side table. If I lean across, stretching, careful not to tip my chair, I can just reach the book with my fingers. Beneath it, there is a collection of her autobiographies in one volume. Both books are on loan. I haven't read her thoroughly in the past. I know her work only through cursory glances in libraries. She is difficult to read at first, but once you accept her style, you begin to flow with the poetic rhythm within the narrative. I

think of how she spent seven or eight years in psychiatric hospitals diagnosed with schizophrenia, receiving over 200 electric shock treatments. I am told that she was scheduled for a lobotomy but was saved by the publication of her first book. Suddenly she was no longer considered mentally ill, but a creative genius who published, among other works, eleven novels, and received numerous awards.

24 a moment of clarification

The writer's art is in many ways an obsession. Moral duties, based on a sense of justice and the need to exorcise personal and social demons, are key motivational forces that are difficult to ignore. But writing is a healthy obsession. The demons that the writer works to purge are not only personal, they are universal and very much a part of the totality of human existence. They are a reflection of an innate psychological aspect of humanity.

It is imperative, though, to view the writer as not running away from but running towards. I believe the writer's end goal is one of freedom, and that the writing process is a treacherous yet reliable vehicle to that end. Within the journey the most evident obstacle to confront is fear. And the greatest manifestation of fear occurs when confronting death. This study will raise what I term a metaphysical suicide. It is important to note that I am not suggesting a death of the author in a way that may be imagined following a reading of texts by theorists such as Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, Cixous, or Kristeva. The death I am concerned with involves metaphysical aspects of a spiritual and emotional kind. This death is not at the hands of the readers; it is not the

relegation of author into insignificance by language and text; it is not the overshadowing of a dominant collective unconscious; and it is not the diminishing of the creative individual condemned to homogeneity and compromise by an oppressive marketing machine. Rather, it is the writer, condemned by his own hand the moment the first words appear on the page. It is self-immolation.

The role of the author is a clearly defined one for me – rendered from the author’s personal and social, and psychological and philosophical awareness. My greatest departure from the theorists mentioned above is in confronting not death *to* the writer or *of* the writing, but, importantly, death *within* the writer and *by* the writer. Therefore, this study least aligns with what I would term linguistic and linguistic-psychoanalytic views with a tendency to relegate the author to a subordinate position – the text being antecedent to the writer. For me, a book does not exist merely “in order for language to become aware of language,”³ as suggested by Maurice Blanchot. I have come to know the writer as a unique craftsperson, an artisan who is both architect and builder, with language as a tool.

I approached a man who stood gazing at a newly constructed house. With indifference, he introduced himself as Roland, before returning to his odd vigil.

‘A wonderful building, unique and well designed,’ I said, with sincerity. ‘It’s so unusual, striking really.’ I noticed that he stood with one shoe in a puddle, ‘Odd’, I thought to myself before again addressing the man. ‘The architect must have known what he was doing. Especially the way that second story balcony is angled ever so slightly to the east, giving a spectacular view of the city over the trees. Don’t you think?’

3 Maurice Blanchot. The Station Hill Blanchot Reader. Ed. George Quasha. Barrytown, New York: Station Hill Press, 1998. p. 473.

‘I’m sorry,’ replied Roland, somewhat startled, ‘I wasn’t really listening. Did you say *architect*? Not important. These things virtually build themselves, you know!’ He pointed to a large sign. ‘The architect was also the builder. They just follow a formula, depending on the availability of materials.’

I left Roland pondering the mortar between the bricks.

I was just reflecting on my own writing, and how best to describe it. A few terms came to mind, a few influences, but none stuck completely. I don’t see my essay writing falling fully into the category of fictocriticism. And I’m not certain if the term metafiction is entirely accurate for my fiction even though I admire the play with endings in Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* and the endless possibilities that Calvino creates in *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, both works stimulating the reader-writer relationship. If I had to find a term I think I would adopt metafiction and modify it: same pronunciation, but different spelling and meaning – *metaphiction*. Metaphiction is what I see in the writing I most enjoy, and what I try to achieve in my own writing. Metaphiction is fiction that portrays the metaphysical, and it is the metaphysical portrayed through fiction. It sits outside of limitations, above categorisation, and beyond labels. I think I should continue to write just as I have always written, naturally.

23 writer's role

. . . that evening, I unfolded a large sheet of paper, and began – enthusiastically at first, then with trepidation, and finally without either enthusiasm or trepidation – to jot down as many words as I could think of to explain the role of the writer. ‘If writers are as important and in command of their art as I believe, then what is it that they should be doing and hoping to achieve, and what are their obligations?’ I thought. A few words were repeatedly persistent; I noticed I had written them down more than once. These are some of them: *responsibility, duty, ethics, passion, transformation, discovery, liberation, freedom, communication, discussion, honesty, compassion.*

I never got as far with that list as I wanted to. Just as I was beginning to warm up, the ringing of my telephone interrupted me. Not long into the conversation, I knew I wouldn't get back to what I was doing – the idea had gone cold. But later, as I sat writing and thinking – midnight having come and gone – I flicked through a few books. I have chosen this quote from one of them:

“Literature that is not the breath of contemporary society, that dares not transmit the pains and fears of that society, that does not warn in time against threatening moral and social dangers – such literature does not deserve the name of literature; it is only a façade.”⁴

For me, Solzhenitsyn wrote about many things, not just about the politics of totalitarianism and war, but about the way people respond to the obstacles that confront them. And that is an important aspect of writing for me – writing about responses and obstacles in a way that is more than just a mere list of historical events.

Although it does on occasions prove to be problematic when writers are expected to function in the dual capacity of artist and analyst, I believe it is not at all foreign to them. Writers are masters of functioning in many capacities, performing a multiplicity of roles for a single project, shifting between characters, between concepts, between plots, between writing styles. It is certainly plausible to suggest that writers are capable of being aware of their own creative processes as they write, or, if necessary, to retrace the steps they have taken. Fundamentally, as I have discovered during this exploration, the acceptance of the benefits of both analysis and complete creative freedom is necessary, otherwise the art is lost and the landscape is left barren – devoid of architect-designed homes, leaving only kit homes built to a formula.

⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Solzhenitsyn: A Documentary Record. Ed. Leopold Labedz. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1972. p. 108.

22 act one

Act one of a two act play

A published writer and academic, aged in his forties, is convalescing in bed at home after a surgical procedure. Otherwise healthy, circumstances now and in the past have caused him to re-evaluate his outlook on life and to question his writing. Significantly, this comes at a time when he is thinking about a paper which needs to be written for a conference he has been invited to attend. The bed is situated just left of centre stage, the head end closer to stage left. A partition, perhaps just the suspended frame of a window, divides the room vertically close to the foot end of the bed. The only other furnishing on the stage is an old desk (also described within the text), a round, weather-beaten, outdoor pine-table with books stacked under one side to keep it aloft. It is piled high with papers and books, and a computer. The desk is in darkness. Our writer, flat on his back in bed with a book in his hands, stops reading to listen to a couple of passers-by who pause just outside his window before moving on.

PASSER-BY 1: Why bother?

PASSER-BY 2: Because of the bits in-between.

PASSER-BY 1: Then why not forget everything else and just go for the good bits, enjoy? Chuck the rest, I say.

PASSER-BY 2: It's like a layer of smooth ice-cream between two biscuits: you persevere with the boring, cardboard-like biscuit because you know it holds the creamy stuff inside.

PASSER-BY 1: Again: why bother?

PASSER-BY 2: *[frustrated]* It holds it together. The trouble with you is that you just want to have your cake and eat it too.

PASSER-BY 1: You've got a thing about desserts today.

PASSER-BY 2: The way to stay happy is to have contrast. If all you do is swim around in the cream, you won't appreciate it for long. You have nothing to compare it to.

PASSER-BY 1: Why...

PASSER-BY 2: *[interrupting]* Bother?

PASSER-BY 1: No. Why compare?

PASSER-BY 2: *[thinking]* In order to examine, and to understand. *[pause]* By seeing differences, we understand.

PASSER-BY 1: Understand what?

PASSER-BY 2: Well. Everything we've been talking about: to understand who we are, why we are, and to appreciate the good times, and to respect and learn from the not so good times too. And that's how you find the middle road, the one that gives you respite from all the struggle and all the excitement.

PASSER-BY 1: I'd rather have it all good; none of that bad stuff and no in-between. None of that, one day like this the next day like that, routine. That's what spoils the good times. How can you feel good if you always know how painful things are, or can become?

PASSER-BY 2: That's what living is all about. You can't always have it so clean. Once you accept that, it's actually okay, it's quite bearable. You just need to leave some things as they are, and to take the good with the bad. Trust me, it works. Like Sisyphus and his fate, condemned by the gods to roll that stone up the hill. *[They move on. Voices begin to fade as they exit stage right.]* Never ending rolling: pushing it all the way to the top, where it comes tumbling down again. But he has his moments...

PASSER-BY 1: Why bother?

Attempting to make himself more comfortable, the writer begins to reposition himself. With difficulty, he only barely succeeds.

WRITER: Sisyphus and his fate. Condemned by the gods to an eternal struggle. That's one way to look at fate. But even that's too clean. We all want a clean explanation.

The writer pauses briefly before raising his hand to glance at a letter he has recently opened. He lets his hand drop. He speaks aloud to himself; the audience is privy to his private thoughts:

WRITER: Invited to speak, yet again. One of the staff members must have read 'The Writing Game' or seen the title perhaps and presumed I had something to say about

the business of writing. Timely, I suppose: given that I've been lying here, in this bed, trying to forget the pain. Mmm, thinking a lot about this quagmire that I seemed to have stepped into; thinking a lot about my writing. What is it that writers really do, and why do they do it?

Fate has twisted itself around my ankle. And dragged me into a hostile place; a landscape with little light. But it is a landscape not unfamiliar to me. I should be writing now, I suppose, but survival must come first. Sometimes it is necessary to sink completely before a glimmer appears in the darkness to show the way.

I have begun to doubt, to reassess my beliefs. There are questions that have troubled me for a lifetime. I wonder about death, how and when my life will end. And also, I wonder about death psychologically, emotionally, and metaphorically. The idea of death, and suicide, is our one constant universal truth. No matter how much we try to ignore it, death is entrenched in our being. *[He becomes excited]* The writer speaks of such truths. They are at the heart of the writing process. It is the undercurrent that drives both the writer and the reader.

In that undercurrent lies a great deal of responsibility. Duty calls. The onus needs to be repositioned, placed back onto the shoulders of the author. And if authors want recognition, they are obliged to take the blame for their actions, for their words, for better or for worse.

The writer has been relegated to the role of scribe, a mere spectator, note-taker. I have finished with the role of scribe. Finished with the safety of shallow waters. I want to be a true writer.

Our writer carefully reaches to a side table and takes his glasses and places them on his face. Slowly he reaches for a cup and drinks from a straw. Finally, he takes a small notepad and pencil. We continue to hear his internal thoughts as he writes on his pad.

WRITER: Guests, students, and fellow academics and writers... No, no, that won't do. *[Using the pencil, he scratches out the words on the pad.]*

It is an honour to be amongst . . . No! *[He also crosses out these lines.]*

Straight into it. That is best. Dispense with the preliminaries. *[Spoken without writing. Followed by a thoughtful pause.]*

This paper is titled: writing and the business of suicide. *[He writes.]*

Writing enthusiastically to begin with, he soon becomes lost in his words, gradually writing less and less.

WRITER: I have chosen the term suicide and not death because the writer's act is a self chosen one, and it is something we do to ourselves. You see, I believe that we kill off a little piece of ourselves each time we write. That is our job, our business, at least when we are doing it well.

We have a need to exorcise things that niggle at us, sometimes some very personal issues, other times more global concerns, but all very human in the end. I believe strongly in the cathartic benefits of writing. I write because I need to write. A colleague of mine once said to me, and it probably sums up how a lot of writers feel, "If I didn't write, I think I would go insane".

As he speaks the next few lines, slowly his hands and the pad begin to come to rest on his chest. The lights dim to a soft, warm glow. We are taken away with the words of his thoughts.

WRITER: In this bed, my thoughts drift; it is difficult to keep track of their skittish and giddy antics. Before they escape like naughty imps, I catch what I can of them, jotting down bits onto this pad and onto scraps of paper that I hold against my palm in front of my eyes. I'm lying flat on my back: to minimise the chance of haemorrhaging, I am told. My thoughts slip into the past, somehow a connection exists between the then and now. Past, present and future, like the movement of jelly in a warm pot, dance in a colourful swirl.

Lights fade to black on the bed as lights fade to bright on the desk.

WRITER: I spiral into the memory of a time not long ago, a time I often prefer to forget. I was still developing the craft of writing; I am still developing the craft of writing. Back then I hadn't even earned the title of scribe: unable to formulate comprehensible ideas.

Two moments, then and now, locked in a kindred exchange. The passing of time, inconsequential. Moments alive, extensions of my flesh, of my mind. They are symbiotic; they feed into each other, one nourishing the other.

A tightness in my chest, fear and insurmountable challenges, trying to distract and diffract and envelope, but unable to curb my desire to write. The will to write is a powerful force.

My arms on my chest, my eyelids heavy, a gentle synthesis. I see myself ten or twelve years ago, sitting at my desk, my makeshift desk: old, round, weather-beaten pine found in a shed. Books stacked as a leg under one side to keep it aloft. Pens and pencils roll conveniently into my lap, engaged in my work, the table rocking and swaying to the rhythm of the words. I recede to the rhythm, going back, going all the way back; I am there.

Our writer, now as a young man, appears at the desk, seats himself, lights a candle, and begins to type into his computer as he speaks. He stops at times, pondering, with a look of despair, sorts a few papers, before continuing.

WRITER AS A YOUNG MAN: The electricity to my home was cut off today; the gas will soon follow. I managed to get power restored, otherwise I wouldn't be writing this now. The rent is another month overdue. Everything is going down, closing down. I can't send or receive e-mail: my service provider sends messages saying, "attempt to debit your credit card has failed." They want their bills paid. I'll add them to the list of creditors, which now includes three banks with whom I have three plastic credit cards and a cheque account all overdrawn – with access denied. I wait, any day now, for the sheriff to arrive to repossess my car. He'll be polite about it, they tell me, knock at the door, introduce himself, hand me an official letter.

"Park it around the corner, tell him you had to sell it, or say it was stolen," is the advice from friends. But why postpone the inevitable? Although it does get me to Uni and to work in comfort. Yes, the paid work that funds my study as a mature age student would come to an end without a vehicle. It would be difficult to carry my tools of the

trade on public transport: ladders, saws, chisels, hammers, timber. Interestingly, the worse it gets, the more I write.

My son doesn't phone me very often; I've spoken to him from a public booth the last three nights running. I cried before and after; didn't and couldn't cry on the phone. His voice was full of happiness, couldn't destroy that. He's had his childhood harmony disturbed enough by adults, their petty bickering. A perfect family really, for a while, except for one thing. Money. Always plenty to eat, always a warm bed, and always plenty of love. We were all happy and healthy, just didn't have a lot of wealth that's all. A sad and insidious complaint, an obsession for some, that financial blight; a complaint I couldn't answer, not with love anyway.

So I sit here, the candle burning, two stacks of mail, unopened. One I know is a solicitor's letter representing one of the banks, initiating court proceedings to force me into bankruptcy. I should have kept a better watch on business last year, a few people cheated me out of my rightful earnings; legal action is not a possibility, it takes money to win.

Our young writer leans forward and blows out the candle on his desk. The desk immediately plunges into darkness; lights go on over his bed.

WRITER: Anyway, where was I. Yes, in this bed. The worse it gets the more I write, and the more I need to tell my story. We write from a need to tell our story, or to change what is unjust in the world. We want to relate our feelings and opinions. *[His head rolls gently to one side on the pillow, his voice softens.]*

As I let the swirling jelly begin to set now, I know that much of what I write is born of a need to communicate. What I write is by no means memoir, but it is

autobiographical, how can it not be? It is autobiographical in the sense that emotions and concepts that have touched me, and that I need to come to terms with, are translated into my work. *[Speaking more sprightly, and searching for pad and pencil.]*

And also, I write in the hope that my work will reach an audience, therefore engaging others in an interactive experience. We write, on a personal level, and on a global scale, because it helps us and helps others, and may just help to nudge in the right direction contemporary human thought - thought that sometimes drifts off course like a lost vessel at sea in need of the occasional tug from a passing boat or the illuminating light of a beacon.

We talk about writer's block and drying out, but that would be too easy. Just when you think you have reached retirement or earned a break, something always comes up; if not personally, then in the world around you. If you don't fight for what is right, protest against injustices, they invade you, have a tendency to consume you, consume the world.

Suddenly his head falls to one side. After a moment, snoring is heard. Lights fade to black, curtain closes.

End of Act One.

21 entering the fictitious

Research for the creative writer involves probing and analysing. It is an investigation in which I find myself fossicking for bits of information to prop up an argument; simultaneously I reject ideas that threaten to loosen the bolts of the scaffolding. An intellectual play, assembling structural ideas until an argument is nicely capped off and leak-proof. And where is the site for creative construction? It is in the fictitious – the arena for shaping ideas.

The fictitious is a product of the imagination. Fiction writing, exemplifying the creative act, is a way, via the imagination, of entering the fictitious. When I enter the fictitious I access a vast storehouse of both collective and individual human experiences and endeavours. The fictitious is where I find the most human solutions to human questions. It is a process in itself, by that I mean a complete concept. It is a concept that has intrigued and baffled many theorists, and it may have been used to help construct

other paradigms: “there is a path that leads back from phantasy to reality – the path, that is, of art.”⁵

I scratch my head, idly, letting my thoughts drift. An excess of convenience thinking has led to a convenience-hungry society obsessed with convenience food and convenience living, content with amateur aesthetics and broken-down ideology. No imagination! Imagination can create change. Imagination produces the best of what the world has to offer. What I imagine, makes me what I am. I think Descartes had it wrong; he should have said, I *imagine* therefore I am.

5 Sigmund Freud. Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis. 1963. Trans. James Strachey. Eds. James Strachey and Angela Richards. Vol 1. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1991. p. 423.

20 uncanny fiction

Within the arena of academic debate, the effectiveness of fiction as a medium for communicating human thought should not be denied. In literature analysis, social sciences, and linguistics, the author should not be relegated to auxiliary status, subservient to textual significance. The work of authors and the responses of readers should be appreciated as effective and deliberate means for distilling academic concepts.

Not only can fiction work as a threshing ground for theoretical issues, it can serve to spawn new, and underlying, concerns. The nucleus for the theoretical aspects of this study stemmed from early concepts within my creative work, and as I have mentioned, both are now maturing together. It has, in fact, become clear that the creative work will become a novel to appear as the final chapter in this analytical saga, for it is through the developmental process of creative writing, such as novels, that concepts can be teased out and formed, and ultimately communicated.

Although it is my intention for the concepts within this study to be useful for all writers, I have concentrated on aspects of fiction, particularly the novel. It is my

endeavour not only to support the position of the literary novel as a valuable instrument for digesting, evaluating, and imparting knowledge about the humanness of humans, but also to demonstrate that entering the fictitious through an engagement with writing and literature, both for the reader and author, renders the participant capable of engaging in a practice of a highly metaphysical kind. It is therefore a practice that I see as having philosophical and psychological implications. And it can be emotionally and sociologically cathartic. But it demands recognition and appreciation of the cognitive ability of the writer, and, of course, the reader. There are, however, sceptics, willing to question the role of the writer and the validity of their writing. I would like firstly to discuss the affects of psychoanalysis on creative writing. Later I will look at the struggle between fiction and non-fiction.

Riding on the back of a Freudian transformation in human thinking, psychoanalytic perspectives have achieved a remarkably significant shift in the way humanity views itself. And although in philosophical terms, when Freud turned the lens inward, it became a landmark in the evolution of thought, it would be fair to say that in hindsight some conclusions were, and continue, to be drawn prematurely. Certain generalisations relating to writers carried determined and damaging implications. Freud's premise was that authors knew little of what they were doing in regards to the human psyche, and that readers had no understanding of what they were responding to. This type of reluctance to fully appreciate the role of both writer and reader undermines the importance of fiction. It was the writer's world, their innate ability to tap into the source of creative inspiration, that Freud the psychoanalyst was so determined to systematise. However, Freud, although accepting that much insight into the unconscious workings of the mind could be revealed by the exploration of creative writing, resisted acknowledging a deliberate effort on the part of the author – shied from acknowledging

the author's ability to move freely between reality and the imagination, between the conscious and unconscious. The result is that many theorists since have failed to accept the writer's potential as a kind of practicing psychoanalyst, philosopher, and artist rolled into one.

In *Creativity*, Kevin Brophy convincingly argues that Freudian theorists, such as Lacan and Kristeva, continued to employ traditionally psychoanalytic rhetoric to further their cause. According to Brophy, Kristeva, like Freud, "regards the artist – in particular the writer – as one who is perversely immature."⁶ Contradictions and ambiguities in psychoanalytic theory – supporting the power of writing one moment while denigrating it the next, or simply trying to adopt or adapt elements to further the psychoanalytic enterprise – seem extensive.

Such ambivalence is highlighted in Freud's discussion on the uncanny. At one moment he accepts the imaginative process of literature as being a far more "fertile province"⁷ than real life, and accredits the imaginative writer with the ability to move about freely in the world of representation, while at the same time denouncing fiction as mere inventions that leave the reader with a feeling of dissatisfaction. But Freud betrays himself, for he gives the literature he refers to nothing more than a superficial interpretation and all the while generalises in regards to the writer and the writer's work. There is a sense of speaking with a forked tongue, highlighting the complexities of literature while in the same breath declaring the structure of the novel to be merely a clever trick played by the author with the intention of leading the reader on. Within that logic there is a failure to fully accept the many facets of the novel. In his inability to see below the surface, Freud is contradicting the very foundation of his entire beliefs; for is

6 Kevin Brophy. *Creativity: Psychoanalysis, Surrealism and Creative Writing*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1998. p. 181.

7 Sigmund Freud. *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works*. Trans. James Strachey. The Pelican Freud Library; Vol 14. Ed. Albert Dickson. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. p. 372.

it not the basis of psychoanalysis to attempt to see below the surface? Finally, there is Freud's great respect for Dostoevsky, to the point that he is prepared to admit in an essay, "Dostoevsky and Parricide", that in regards to *The Brothers Karamasov* and Dostoevsky's ability as a creative artist, "analysis must, alas, lay down its arms."⁸

More recently, in *New Maladies of the Soul*, Kristeva discusses the potential for writing to generate a new living identity, enabling her patients to "reconstruct their psychic space."⁹ Discussing specifically adolescents, Kristeva gives an example of an eighteen-year-old female whose writing gave her the chance to "make amends with her memories of the past."¹⁰ Kristeva's work focuses on the cathartic potential of writing, but only, it seems, when co-ordinated by the trained analyst capable of discerning between the many possible perversions and betrayals that lie on the page.

Like Freud, Kristeva sees writing as a precursor to something else, to normality perhaps, to a heightened reality, but ultimately as a tool of psychoanalysis. For me, writing is not a device adapted for semiotic discourse; it is not for "pursuing the Freudian project of exposing the neurotic in artists and their art."¹¹ Writing is the deliberate and creative act of entering the fictitious.

To validate the criticism against the psychoanalytic faculty it is only fair to attempt to posit an explanation for the psychoanalytic reasoning that has led to the conclusions regarding creative writing. An explanation will make it possible to begin to understand at least some of the logic behind the Freudian view of literature, a view that has

8 Sigmund Freud quoted in: John Lechte, ed. *Writing and Psychoanalysis: A Reader*. London: Arnold, 1996. p. 123.

9 Julia Kristeva. *New Maladies of the Soul*. 1993. Trans. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1995. p. 137.

10 Kristeva. *New Maladies*. p. 138.

11 Brophy. *Creativity*. p. 186.

influenced not only psychoanalysis but theorists and critics throughout many academic disciplines.

Why, to borrow a term from Freud, a denial of the potential of literature? And why accusations and allusions that have encouraged a succession of sceptics willing to see writers as merely accidental agents of their literature?

My argument, which I believe sits closely with Brophy's interpretation, is that in many ways, instead of uniting with literature, the intellectual explosion that accompanied psychoanalysis perceived certain advantages in attempting to align itself with the more accepted sciences of the time rather than with the humanities. That belief has caused a schism, with disciplines such as psychoanalysis denouncing the arts and humanities in an attempt for wider approval. As Brophy suggests, "The openly expressed desire of psychoanalytic discourse to occupy the ground of science works to obscure its annexation of literature, while inflating the status of its assertions."¹²

If an understanding of creative writing and its processes continues to develop, psychoanalysis will gradually become a lessening threat to literature. For even though psychoanalysis and those employing a psychoanalytical paradigm have on occasions been seen as undermining the effectiveness of literature, discussions such as this will assist in loosening the tension and advancing the cause for creative writing. What has occurred, and needs to be corrected, is the denial of the creative aspect of literature. In many ways, as psychoanalysis evolved into a science, moving into the intellectual and away from the instinctual, the need to conquer its subject became paramount in order to make psychology complete as a concrete science. The realm of the fictitious epitomised the elusive subject that needed to be flushed out of its abstract hideaway and reduced to servility.

¹² Brophy. *Creativity*. p. 81.

Brophy has a tendency to see sectors of the psychoanalytic faculty in the role of usurper, a usurper determined to establish psychoanalysis as the scientific authority on the human psyche, with a willingness to do so at the expense of literature. My sentiments are in accord with Brophy, particularly in regards to the inability of psychoanalysis to “contain creativity.”¹³ But it is also important to recognise that psychoanalysis has had and will continue to have the potential to offer beneficial insights into literature and the creative process. I would hope that a more homogeneous relationship is developing, with advantages for both psychology and literature coming about through a state of symbiosis, with each feeding in and out of the other. However, a reciprocative relationship functions not only in respect to the position of one to the other, but by each being respectful of the other.

As W. H. Auden implies, in an article entitled “Psychology and Art Today”, a Freudian view of the artist has a tendency to implicate the artist as neurotic. And as misleading as this may be, from it, two important issues are raised that I would like to elaborate on, for they begin to touch on the essence of this study. Auden sees Freud as charging the artist with harbouring an ulterior motive, that writers expect certain rewards from their activity. And also that the writer “starts from the same point as the neurotic and the daydreamer, from emotional frustration in early childhood.”¹⁴

Firstly, I would like to propose that the writer must have a motive. But perhaps the motive is not always as narcissistic or selfish as implied. It is possible that the writer, truly in command, is serving both a deeply personal issue as well as a selfless and altruistic one. Secondly, although it is fair to suggest that writers need to come to terms with psychological, often childhood based, problems, for writers are human after all, I

13 Brophy. *Creativity*. p. 180.

14 W. H. Auden quoted in: Edith Kurzweil, and William Phillips, eds. *Literature and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. p. 121.

see that not as a sign of psychosis but as an integral part of the writing process, a very real part of the writer's apprenticeship. At the same time the writing process also endows the writer with the ability to go further. Through writing, the writer has the ability to deal with many far-reaching human issues.

Freud recognised that art and the writer have the capacity to function outside the boundaries and limitations of the physical world. But, from a Freudian point of view, that is not necessarily performed intentionally or from any great ability on the part of the writer; it is simply a result of the closeness of the artistic disposition to that of the neurotic. As a result, Freud sees a shortcut through the mind of the writer into the fantasy world of the neurotic. I'm not a diagnosed neurotic, so I am uncertain if the fantasy world of the neurotic is the same as the world of the fictitious that I am able to access. But perhaps an important difference lies in the ability that writers and artists have of being in control.

By being able to enter the fictitious, do what they like there, and come out alive, the writer possesses an ability that is intriguing to the scientific mind. In short, the writer has something that science wants. However, saying to writers, *you are all neurotic but we can help you*, is not the way of going about finding out how it is done.

I would also like to suggest, and will continue to discuss throughout this study, that the world the writer enters is arguably as real as the physical world, that the realm of the fictitious may not be a physical one, open to the many instruments of detection and analysis that we have so far been able to develop, but it is a utility and it is able to be understood and experienced. It is, for me, very rational, and it exists.

Psychoanalysis, as a branch of psychology, may have borrowed from literature to further its own ends but, as I have suggested, it has also stimulated the debate regarding the creative process. And while Brophy views the interaction between the two as a Freud-led invasion, I view the relationship between fiction and psychoanalysis as an interactive one. As the dust continues to settle, we see literary fiction holding its rightful place as a prominent vehicle for human discourse. Literary fiction has and will continue to benefit from the interaction. A vast array of psychological novels have already grown out of the encounter. That is how, typically, literature will borrow back from the psychoanalytical explosion.

John Lechte suggests that a willingness to accept writing as more than a mere object marks a shift in viewpoint in recent times. He refers to a “reflexive capacity of psychoanalysis” that “has led to the discovery of the subject status of the object,” which accepts that psychoanalysis is not only informed but also “formed” by the writing it analyses.¹⁵ I believe that discourse in the field of creative writing, particularly the willingness of creative writers to openly discuss their work and the writing process, has had a significant influence on awareness within academia.

15 John Lechte, ed. Writing and Psychoanalysis: A Reader. London: Arnold, 1996. p. 11.

19 reaching a wider audience

Albert Camus, speaking about the universality of *The Plague* as a metaphor for the European resistance against Nazism said, “although this enemy is nowhere named, everyone in every European country recognized him.”¹⁶ Through fiction and metaphor, readers were allowed access to a discourse that they would otherwise be restricted from entering. For many, access provided the means for addressing deeply emotional and intellectual concerns, and to share in a collective response to grief and fear.

Eva Sallis, through her novel *Hiam*, has reinforced the notion of fiction as having the ability to reach a wide audience – often far wider than academic writing. She has observed that, in this instance, the print run for her academic work, which is based on the same body of research as her novel and carries the same message, is, “less than 10% of the print run for my novel.”¹⁷

16 Albert Camus. Selected Essays and Notebooks. 1950. Trans. & Ed. Philip Thody. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1970. p. 220.

17 Eva Sallis. Research Fiction. 1999. Text Vol 3 No 2. Available: <http://www.gu.edu.au/school/art/text/>. 20 March 2004.

Theoretical concepts can be understood and can evolve through fiction. I have mentioned that the inspiration for this critical essay came about as a result of needing to resolve a conflict in my own writing. As the novel, that I am concurrently writing, steadily progresses, conflicts are ever present – some strengthen, some decline. Certain paradoxical and unresolved aspects within my novel are being played out on the page, in my mind, within the fictitious arena. Those aspects, moving from dilemma to resolution, are what sustain the writing. It is crucial to resolve them adequately. As the characters evolve, becoming individuals, they develop traits and opinions; issues are bounced around, probed, and pulled apart. My personal ideology has begun to change. My knowledge and opinions have broadened. I am forced to find a logical and acceptable reason for the decisions I present. My mind is grappling, relentlessly, with the moral, social, and psychological complexities of the issues. For example, I have been forced to acquire a deeper understanding of the polemics and nature of suicide. By the time this project has reached a conclusion, the insights achieved within the writing arena, by entering the fictitious, will have come to fruition. That is when the process will have reached a satisfactory end. The reader too, I hope, will benefit from the journey, will benefit from entering the fictitious.

18 fictional suicide

Within fiction a metaphysical suicide is at play. It involves an exorcism, a kind of spiritual suicide. It stems from a real concern, even an obsession, that humans harbour. For Camus, “there is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide.”¹⁸ A decade after Camus, in a different language in a distant country, the same opinion was still being echoed: John Barth’s narrator in *The Floating Opera* declared, “the question of whether or not to commit suicide is the first question... .”¹⁹ In my opinion, writers are comfortable working within the arena of suicide and death. As part of the fundamental questions regarding existence, the writer is present. And in terms of a cathartic process the writer is also engaged. And so is the reader.

Through writing, an attempt to deal with demons is undertaken. Ironically, each confrontation has the ability, and indeed the intention, to destroy the inspiration that actually initiated the process. In effect a part of the self, primarily for the writer, but

18 Albert Camus. *The Myth of Sisyphus*. 1942. Trans. Justin O'Brien. Middlesex: Penguin, 1975. p. 11.

19 John Barth. *The Floating Opera / The End of the Road*. 1956, 1958. New York: Anchor, 1988. p. 168.

also, potentially, for the reader, is destroyed. It is in many ways, arguably in all ways, a suicidal process.

Although merely a snippet, I will leave this suggestion as it is for now, as a seed that has been planted. It will grow throughout the remainder of this discussion, directly and indirectly, relating to both this essay and the novel. Within the novel, suicide has begun to play an important role. In many ways it is beginning to represent the death and rebirth of the changing logos of humanity. But it also carries a far simpler aspect: I hear my characters asking, “What makes anyone want to jump to their death, anyway?” Questions surrounding suicide are always vexing. I guess the answers lie in getting to know your subject, getting to know your characters, and getting to know yourself.

17 the larrikin

In Sartre's *Nausea*, Antoine Roquentin struggles with self and freedom. As I skim through the pages to refresh my memory, I also reminisce about the subtle changes that the hero has undergone. I ponder the term anti-hero and the archetypes that fit the bill – the sometimes frivolous, often misunderstood, the simple and carefree disposition capable of harbouring deep intuitiveness and pathos – idealists, like Don Quixote or Quasimodo. I turn to Roquentin again, looking at the way Sartre uses him: Roquentin's search for meaning becomes a metaphor for Sartre's beliefs in the place and power of fiction. Roquentin is a self-effacing character, certainly not flamboyant, and certainly not the larrikin seen in more recent times: there is no father shouting from the top of the stairs at his uncontrollable daughter, "You are a slut, Lilian. And you are running wild."²⁰

I like the term "larrikin." It focuses more astutely on the mischievous aspects of the hero, particularly a character's ability to be not only disruptive, but socially and

²⁰ Kate Grenville. *Lilian's Story*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986. p. 136.

personally destructive. The larrikin is a chameleon, shape-shifting from the egotistical hero, through the more docile self-effacing anti-hero, and into the mischievous trickster of today. Evolving, through the hand of the writer and reflecting our changing social milieu. I follow the course, from the extroverted King, Odysseus, to the hopelessness of Don Quixote and Quasimodo, the introverted abasement in early Dostoevsky, Joyce, and Kafka, moving further into the internal darkness of Sartre and Camus, and finally transformed into the larrikin – whose antics have broken out in novels as widespread as Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*, Kazantzakis' *Zorba the Greek*, Barth's *The Floating Opera*, and Grenville's *Lilian's Story*.

There is much of the existentialist in these heroes, many appearing as representatives of the general feelings of despair and disheartenment caused by events such as the second world war. Australian novels such as *Lilian's Story* were slower in coming forth, compared to other Western countries, suggesting a relatively young nation preoccupied with colonial concerns. I see the advent of the larrikin as an attempt to stir conservative waters. In *Lilian's Story* we are confronted with an egocentric and absurd character with an estranged sense of patriotism and a penchant for anarchy. "Do not worry about getting old gracefully, girlie, be foolish and loud if you feel like it,"²¹ are the words an ageing Lilian imposes on a young schoolgirl. I will return to this theme of colonialism, particularly in an Australian context, but firstly it is important to stay with the idea of the hero seen as a larrikin – a larrikin and a rebel.

21 Grenville. *Lilian's Story*. p. 206.

16 rebel writer

The larrikin, rebellious by nature, is an activist. For me, a writer is also an activist, and the writer and rebel are linked by a belief in the ability of their actions for inducing social reform. The ultimate sacrifice for the rebel is being prepared to kill and be killed: “A life is paid for by another life, and from these two sacrifices springs the promise of a value.”²² If rebellion is seen as a physical demonstration of metaphysical disturbances, then the fictitious has the potential for being a metaphysical arena for resolve. An outcome is possible, not with physical loss, but through a metaphysical exchange.

A rebel without a cause is absurd. In terms of writing, a novel without a cause is a farce. Camus believed that behind every rebellion is “a demand for unity,”²³ I see unity encompassing unity of thought, unity between individuals, and unity of nations. In terms of writing, unity manifests through the relationship between reader and writer. But unity is betrayed if a writer abuses fundamental moral principles.

22 Albert Camus. The Rebel. 1951. Trans. Anthony Bower. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1971. p. 138.

23 Camus. The Rebel, p. 221.

15 writer as terrorist

Terrorism can not be condoned; it is a violent and haphazard response – not an action but a careless reaction. Terrorism is the result of political and social moral-mayhem. I want to focus on terrorism for its relationship to aspects of the rebel. It is an extreme, probably the most extreme, form of resistance. I believe a metaphysical connection exists between the writer, the rebel, the terrorist, and ultimately the act of suicide. By looking at the motivating factors, I believe an understanding is possible.

There have been many attempts to define terrorism. Most are essentially identical with only minor word changes; while others, widely varying, are generally inadequate. According to both Cooper²⁴ and Hudson²⁵, the definition adopted by the United States State Department in 1998 is probably the most widely accepted. It is also almost

24 Barry Cooper. Unholy Terror: The Origin and Significance of Contemporary, Religion-Based Terrorism. 2002. The Fraser Institute: Studies in Defence and Foreign Policy. Available: <http://www.fraserinstitute.ca/admin/books/files/terrorism.pdf>. 1 November 2003. p. 9.

25 Rex Hudson. The Sociology and Psychology of Terrorism: Who Becomes a Terrorist and Why? 1999. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Available: http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/Soc_Psych_of_Terrorism.pdf. 2 December 2003. p. 18.

identical to that used by Stern.²⁶ If the word *violence* is left out, it can be summed up something like this: terrorism is premeditated and politically motivated; it is perpetuated by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, and is usually intended to influence an audience. It is also not uncommon for a terrorist to fit the bill of the intellectual, being dedicated and proactive, and in touch with technology and current affairs, as well as being able to speak multiple languages including English. “Such a consciousness desires reform, but finds that legitimate channels of constructive activity for one reason or another appear to be closed.”²⁷ And according to Bruce Hoffman, the terrorist is fundamentally an altruist, believing in the good that will be achieved for a wider community.²⁸

I believe that violence is neither the motivating factor nor the key aspect for the terrorist. I believe that the motivation for the terrorist is not unlike that of the writer and the suicide, involving a very real and overwhelming desire to put an end to that which is perceived to be oppressive and a cause of distress. In a spiritual and psychological sense there is a strong similarity between the three, but each focuses on what they believe to be the most effective solution.

Like the writer, the terrorist has been seen throughout history as part of a revolutionary undercurrent. As discussed in the chapter “Defining Terrorism”, Hoffman traces terrorism from its roots in the French revolution, where it held positive connotations, through many manifestations. He discusses the revolutionary republican Carlo Pisacane, who denounced his title as duke to subsequently die in a revolt in 1857 against Bourbon rule; he recounts issues surrounding Armenian nationalists, whose people suffered a genocide of an estimated one million during the First World War, rebelling against their

26 Jessica Stern. The Ultimate Terrorists. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999. p. 11.

27 Cooper. Unholy Terror. p. 10.

28 Bruce Hoffman. Inside Terrorism. London: Victor Gollancz, 1998. p. 43.

colonial and despotic rulers, the Ottoman Empire, a strategy “that would later be adopted by most of the post-Second World War ethno-nationalist/separatist movements.”²⁹ And he mentions the anti-colonialist revolts by indigenous cultures in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, during the 1940s and 50s, in opposition to continued European rule: “Countries as diverse as Israel, Kenya, Cyprus, and Algeria, for example, owe their independence at least in part to nationalist political movements that employed terrorism against colonial powers.”³⁰

By attempting to get to the heart of rebellious motivation, I am certainly not, as I have mentioned, condoning terrorism. Les Murray, in a recent interview for *The Paris Review*, supports the same view, adding: “but I understand it. [...] People made desperate sometimes lash out.”³¹ Clearly an act of terrorism is wrong. It is forced upon its recipients who become the tragic victims of violent anger. But for this discussion it is necessary to temporarily put the horror of such actions aside, to separate the means from the end, and to place terrorism alongside other reactionary activities in order to gain an understanding of how they relate to basic human responses. Writing, as a human literary response, may be better understood in the light of investigation into other human behaviour, and the inverse may also be possible.

Like a suicide bomber who deliberately ends their life to rid the world of something they believe is worth dying for, so too does a writer throw themselves into their writing. Justification stems from a sense of duty towards righting what is firmly believed to be in need of correcting. What then is the difference between the writer and the terrorist when both are prepared to go to incredible lengths to purge what they see as social injustices? It appears to come down to moral and ethical reasoning rather than

29 Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*. p. 20.

30 Hoffman. *Inside Terrorism*. pp. 25-26.

31 Les Murray. *The Art of Poetry No. 89*. 2005. *The Paris Review*. Available: <https://www.theparisreview.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/5477>. 16 June 2005.

pure logic. Clearly, regarding the writer, no one is murdered in the process. But suicide does exist. It exists spiritually and metaphorically, for there is a great deal of metaphysical killing in the writing process.

Ideals and political agendas are certainly addressed and attacked by both the terrorist and the writer. Often, both attempt to destroy their enemies. And often, both are accused of being radicals, activists, or anarchists. Depending on the society, both may be jailed for their beliefs, or they may be immortalised. Writers are often condemned under the same laws as terrorists for acting against the beliefs of a nation's political system. Writers are often imprisoned for questioning the status quo. It seems that both the terrorist and the writer fight for the notion of freedom, against what they perceive as constraints or injustices – it is merely their weapons that differ.

When forced into action, do not all activists respond similarly – according to duty? In literature, the larrikin, the hero, the rebel, have all been employed by writers at one time or another to terrorise their enemies. In classic times, it is Odysseus who – after returning home to find his family and empire besieged by greedy suitors vying for his wife's hand in marriage and eager for his kingdom – cages them in his lofty hall where he wreaks havoc, slaying every one of them: "Ashy terror seized on them all, and every man looked about him for some escape from the precipice of destruction."³²

The activities of many classic contemporary characters at times reach absurd lengths. The behaviour of protagonists amount not only to that of a dissident, but border on and often achieve what could be interpreted as acts of terrorism. Kazantzakis' Zorba not only exploits monks, ridicules the state, and denounces logic as we have come to know it, he is reckless and destructive – prepared to bring down a mountain, if need be.

32 Homer. *The Odyssey*. c. 800 B.C. Trans. Walter Shewring. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980. p. 266.

Zorba knows only his own morality, and achieves nothing in accepted terms. In *A Clockwork Orange*, Alex, portrayed as evil personified, also achieves nothing in conventional terms while exploiting religion, manipulating the law, rejecting the state, and ridiculing the morality of the day. He attempts suicide in an ultimate moment of despair.

In Barth's *The Floating Opera* terrorism is taken to extreme when the narrator, Todd Andrews, spends the bulk of his time denouncing life and planning his suicide in what can be seen as akin to the attempts of a modern day suicide bomber. Andrews is determined not only to cause his own extermination but to orchestrate a virtual holocaust by planning a gas explosion with the intention of destroying an entire river-boat, the show being hosted onboard, and the entire audience including himself, his close friends, and half the citizens of the town of Cambridge, Maryland.

In an environment where freedom of thought is suppressed and actions restricted, where ignorance is maintained and despair prevails, violence will often seem to be the only choice. Whether a writer, activist, or terrorist, each has an audience, and each is prepared to take extreme measures for their cause. But the terrorist abuses their audience by violently forcing an ideology upon them. It is the relationship with an audience that forms an important aspect of this discussion.

It is possible to open a door of understanding into the mind of the author and the creative process, and to thereby show that avenues, other than violence, exist. It is not, as many political analysts engaged in the topic of defence and foreign policy would like us to believe – a necessary element of human culture. I am shocked to hear current political views that express the opinion that terrorism is simply a part of life that we need to get used to. The most absurd arguments in support of a world in conflict can be found in the

pages of political reports: “Indeed, the fascinating studies of chimpanzees by Jane Goodall or Michael Ghiglieri have shown that war is part of primate life.”³³ I could imagine standing in front of a jury with the excuse that I forced a stick in my neighbour’s ear because I saw an ape doing it.

One thing is certain: suicides, and extremists such as suicide terrorists, perform an act that is both ultimate and poetic. By reasoning that their only choice in an attempt to reconcile their actions for themselves and in the eyes of others is to sacrifice their own lives, the suicide terrorist takes on aspects of the romantic. Vengeance becomes subordinated, particularly in the eyes of peers: at best the act becomes venerated, seen as heroic; and at worst, it is seen as a desperate willingness to die for a cause. The rebel, the terrorist, the activist, cry out in protest against conditions of imposition. Through their acts they are trying to identify with others, and attempting to unite others, as does the writer. The writer – as activist, terrorist, rebel – creates an identification with others, with the reader. Unlike the writer, who enters the fictitious, the suicide and the suicide terrorist see no chance of resolution, and therefore react violently in the real world.

³³ Cooper. Unholy Terror. p. 8.

14 reader-writer relationship

It is by the very nature of the writer's exploration, the self inducement, that the term *suicide* is most appropriate. It is self-death. And as such there are social, metaphysical, emotional, and spiritual complexities involved. Suicidal catharsis involves both an external and internal cleansing. And although the writing process occurs within the mind of the writer, it stems from an external source, has a connection to that source, and may eventually find its way back to that source to complete the process: from society (the raw material), to the artist (the writer), transformed into a creation (the writing), and returned to society (the reader).

As a writer, I don't perceive my ultimate endeavour simply as a personal one. The process is part of a chain reaction, and, I feel, it is a necessary continuation if the writing process is to become complete and satisfying. Involvement, firstly for the writer, then for the reader, and possibly for society as a whole, places the writer in a potentially powerful position – a position that can be anything from altruistic to narcissistic.

In this light, a writer's actions, and the response of the reader, need careful consideration. I believe that through a mixture of emotions and deliberate cognitive concepts writing is an attempt to transfer an experiential state from writer to reader in order to share or to understand events and experiences. And this state is for both the writer and the reader, a self-induced condition – being neither forced nor imposed. Both are free to continue or to end the relationship at any point.

Through the emotional and conceptual transference, a reader-writer relationship develops, and the reader, by engaging with the text, accepts that reader-writer relationship. I believe that the reader's motivation is a desire to submit to the same cathartic metaphysical suicide as the writer. Therefore, and as I have mentioned throughout this essay, the writer is not an accidental artist, and certainly a writer's success is not dependant on interpretation by psychoanalysts, literary theorists, or the like – writers are not the servant of some arcane linguistic phenomenon in which the work “simply ignores”³⁴ the writer's involvement. Language is a tool for the thoughts of the writer and nothing more, and, as Italo Calvino suggests, particularly in works such as *The Literature Machine*, language can in fact be restricting and the writer should struggle to break free of its confines.

When I write, I am aware of the processes involved in writing; I am aware of the story I am telling; and I consider the consequences of my writing. It is through my awareness that responsibility arises. I believe that the greatest responsibility is in regards to the reader. The reader is responding to the same story; both writer and reader become fellow travellers, kindred spirits in a collective unconscious, if you like. The author's deliberateness of intention can be highly persuasive. And by that persuasiveness the writer becomes an interlocutor between the subject matter and the reader, with the all

34 Maurice Blanchot. *The Sirens' Song: Selected Essays of Maurice Blanchot*. Trans. Sacha Rabinovitch. Ed. Gabriel Josipovici. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982. p. 99.

important element being the way in which the writer handles the subject. Writers have the ability to infiltrate the psyche of their audience by entering into a very personal space. The writer is able to engage the reader, able to introduce them to a discourse that would otherwise not be open to them. In all of this, there is no contract, no guidelines, and no disclaimers, just an unwritten agreement with an unwritten code of ethics.

The reader-writer relationship can become an extraordinary one. I think of the young Jacques in Camus' *The First Man* embarking on his love affair with books. Jacques, in a family struggling to stay ahead of poverty and hunger, is barely able to tear himself from his reading in order to set the table; and finally, still with book in hand, he receives the command, "Jacques, eat," and so he eats, but he eats "food that, heavy as it was, seemed less real and less solid than what he found in the books."³⁵

35 Albert Camus. *The First Man*. 1994. Trans. David Hapgood. London: Penguin, 1996. p. 194.

13 suicidal writing

The rebel, the terrorist, the suicide, the revolutionary, they have all responded to the words and ideals of activist writers. The German novelist, poet, and playwright Goethe influenced an entire generation with his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, a spate of young suicides is believed to be attributed to its release. In the 1949 introduction, Victor Lange calls the response “overwhelming.”³⁶ This is not an isolated example, merely an extreme one. All writing to some extent has an influence over the reader. I often wonder how many young Romeos and Juliets have lived and loved in imitation of their heroes.

As creator, the writer does not play a detached role. The writer enters the landscape of the work – through imagination, through experience, through a familiarity with the craft of writing. The process is not without its dangers. There are countless examples of writers and artists who have caused themselves great misery and personal harm; many have contemplated death and suicide and have certainly understood

³⁶ Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe. *The Sorrows of Young Werther: The New Melusina, Novella*. (The Sorrows of Young Werther, 1774). Trans. Victor Lange. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1949. p. v.

displacement and alienation: Louis Nowra and Brian Castro have discussed their emotional states in memoirs and exhibited them extensively in their fictional characterisations. Castro believes that depression and suicide for a writer “comes with the territory.”³⁷ Some writers have succeeded in ending their lives prematurely: Sylvia Plath and Primo Levi are two well documented cases. In literature, rarely is the death motif, or an actual death or suicide, not included in a work. Literature is where we are able to enter into a dialogue with such, often taboo, issues.

I would like to discuss Primo Levi for a moment. Levi was a very passionate and astutely focused writer within his field. His life has been well documented, by those who knew him, and in his own work. It is in many ways difficult to call him a survivor of Auschwitz, for Primo Levi, like many others who managed to be alive at the end of Nazi occupation, carried with him an unyielding memory of one of the most inhumane episodes in human history. I believe Levi never forgave his persecutors and never really came to terms with being a victim. At times, writing from a position of extreme anxiety, Levi was inclined to hold an entire race accountable, believing in the innateness of evil. At other times, he managed to escape his tormentors by blending the science of chemistry with mystery and fantasy and weaving them into compelling social and philosophical anecdotes. In *The Periodic Table*, Levi utilised chemical elements from the periodic table to build an engaging volume of both fact (chemistry) and fiction (engaging plots and characters).

Even though much of the motivation and reasoning behind the Nazi machine, however indecent and severe, was comprehensible, the treatment handed out from one human being to another as occurred in Levi’s Auschwitz experience was, for Levi,

³⁷ Brian Castro quoted in: Jane Sullivan. "Castro and the Friction of Fiction." *The Age* 22 March 2003, sec. Review: 3.

unfathomable. It was an incident that – no matter how much he analysed it, reduced it to atoms, split its atoms, and split them again – was inexplicable, enduringly painful, and perhaps, in the end, unbearable.

I would like to mention that the question over Levi's death, whether accidental or suicidal, as unavoidable as that question often is, is not a vital one for this discussion. It is Levi's writing and how he dealt with life through his writing that is of greatest concern here. His death is interesting and may add a dimension to the writer's enigma – it certainly opens a discussion about the psychology and effects of war – but it does not speak of the writer's work. As Alexander Stille suggests, it is neither a logical conclusion nor an ironic contradiction to Levi's writing.³⁸

When I read Levi's work, I read about his experiences. But as important as his work stands as a powerful account of the horrors of Auschwitz, perhaps many of his words have done little to heal his own psychic wounds and the wounds of others who also suffered as he did. I propose that an extensive reading of Levi's work reveals an author at times unwilling to enter the fictitious – that there was Levi the calculating biographer and historian, and Levi the writer of creative fiction. I feel that if Levi had more often and more completely allowed himself to enter the fictitious, allowing his characters to find answers by exploring possibilities, he may not have left us remembering those moments of bitterness and anguish that stain his words.

In *The Drowned and the Saved*, his final offering, Levi denies the capacity for good and evil to coexist within us. Here it seems that the Dostoevskian image of a tormented soul, both victim and slayer, is intangible for Levi: "I do not know, and it does not much interest me to know, whether in my depths there lurks a murderer."³⁹ It is

38 Alexander Stille quoted in: David Keffer, and Allen B. Ruch. *Primo Levi*. 2001. Available: <http://www.themodernworld.com/scriptorium/levi.html>. 18 October 2003.

39 Primo Levi. *The Drowned and the Saved*. 1986. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. London: Abacus, 1989. p. 32.

an ironic, self-deprecating tone, serving not only to undermine the complexity and sensitivity in Levi's own writing but impacting on the writing of others like Kambanellis, Sebald, Vonnegut, and Schlink, who believe that we are all accountable for such crimes, and that perhaps ultimately we are all accountable for all crimes.

A chilling remark comes from Levi's son, Renzo, who believes that his father had already written the last act of his existence in the conclusion to *The Truce*: Levi confesses that "a dream full of horror has still not ceased to visit"⁴⁰ him. During the final months of his life, coinciding with the completion of *The Drowned and the Saved*, Levi was being prescribed anti-depressants. According to his wife, Lucia, "he was tired and demoralised, and... suffering from depression."⁴¹ At times, resembling a historian, it is not his characters that talk – it is Levi the scribe. Increasingly, throughout his life as a writer, and since his death, we have sensed the stranglehold of Levi's past over his work, and never more clearly than in the pages of that final book – his most unforgiving account of the holocaust.

By contrast, Levi may well have found his greatest solace while working on fiction – fiction that was removed from the commentary of straight narrative accounts of the Holocaust. It is during his more creative and experimental times that Levi's emotions are most stable, and we find him more contented. His best fiction sits furthest away from the beginning and end of his writing career, furthest from his most melancholic states, and furthest from his most factual accounts of the holocaust. During this period we find his most experimental works, *The Periodic Table*, *The Monkey's Wrench*, and *If Not Now, When?*. In "The Hard Sellers", a bizarre, short futuristic tale full of satire and irony, in which a young protagonist of the "nonborn" is implored by a group of

40 Primo Levi quoted in: Diego Gambetta. Primo Levi's Last Moments: A New Look at the Italian Author's Tragic Death Twelve Years Ago. 1999. Boston Review. Available: <http://bostonreview.net/BR24.3/gambetta.html>. 12 February 2004.

41 Lucia Levi quoted in: Gambetta. Primo Levi's Last Moments.

bureaucratic hunters of souls to assist in the restructuring of the planet earth by being born into a body, Levi writes: “one thing I can affirm from personal experience: anyone who has tasted the fruit of life can no longer go without it.”⁴² There was always a touch of irony in Levi, and that will be sadly missed for it was certainly one of his most powerful tools, and a most thought-provoking device. But hopefully we can take for face value what the young protagonist declares at the ending of the same story: “you yourself said that each man is his own maker: well, it is best to be so fully, build oneself from the roots.”⁴³

Levi tells us of the desire for his literary characters to break away; and at his best he is capable of blending fiction with memoir and layering stories within stories in a vivid and absorbing metaphorical pastiche. “A great number of human figures especially stood out against that tragic background: friends, people I’d travelled with, even adversaries – begging me one after another to help them survive and enjoy the ambiguous perennial existence of literary characters.”⁴⁴ But both Levi the pessimist and Levi the optimist vie for supremacy within his writing, particularly when fiction and historical commentary struggle in opposition. Although all of Levi’s work is filled with portrayals of extreme human endurance, suffering, and compassion, it is within the freedom of his more fictitious pieces that Levi the optimist prevails.

42 Primo Levi. The Sixth Day. 1966. Trans. Raymond Rosenthal. London: Abacus, 1991. p. 179.

43 Levi. The Sixth Day. p. 183.

44 Primo Levi. Moments of Reprieve. 1981. Trans. Ruth Feldman. Middlesex: Penguin, 2001. p. 10.

12 entering the fictitious 2

After being distracted momentarily by the voices in the corridor, I turned my attention back into the room and waited. 28 is a woman with a number for a name. That in itself is strange, but in the end it may prove to be the least of her eccentricities.

She looked up from the book she was reading and spoke, 'From childhood I was conditioned to believe that sadness came from an absence of some sort. I grew up obsessed with loss, always trying to fill in the gaps. You can buy devices to plug the gaps; consumerism offers happiness.'

28 closed the book and placed it next to her on the bed. She brought her knees up under her chin and made herself comfortable against the pillows behind her back before continuing in a soft voice, 'Death is experienced as loss. That is why we cry when somebody dies. We cry because we think something has been taken away from us.'

'Is that the only reason we cry?'

'There are probably other reasons. But that one is a wrong one.' She paused. I weighed her words.

‘A wrong one?’

She continued, ‘I used to think of myself as sitting on a throne in the centre of the universe, with no consideration for anything or anyone else, except when it was for my own benefit. When I was sad, I blamed emptiness, my thoughts turning to all the things I’d lost over the years and everything I didn’t have but wanted. I have a name for it now, sorrow-as-loss; it creates emotions that are difficult to overcome, aggression and anger.’

We sat without talking for a long while. I’d never done that before, not with someone I had only just met. Eventually, 28 shared an unusual story about her childhood, about her dreams. I’m not sure if it was a true story, with 28 you can never be certain where fact ends and fiction begins. But in that room, with 28, those things don’t really matter.

28~~

I have a secret place. I go there to solve and resolve whatever needs resolving and solving. I call it the fictitious. It is like entering a dream. I first found it when I was very young. I think it began with those really scary nightmares that children have. No! It was the nice dreams, the happy ones, but the ones that end before you want them to. After waking I would teach myself to go back into them. It took a lot of practise, but eventually I found I could even control them – moving characters around, putting words in their mouths, even playing a role myself. That worked so well in the scary ones too: ‘This is just a dream’, I would say. Then I’d change the events however I liked.

As I grew older, if I had a problem I found I could literally ‘sleep on it’. During my dreams, all would be solved. Sometimes I would wake up with a mind full of fantastic ideas. I sleep with a pad and pen next to my bed now. I’ve had to learn how to shut it off though. Sometimes I have bizarre moments of inspiration at the most

awkward places and times. Even during or after love-making. It's a huge effort to restrain myself from reaching for my pen. I'm sure many lovers have been offended.~~

The fictitious realm of the writer is a place or state of being that theorists have strived to uncover and to emulate. Psychoanalysis has opened up discussion about the unconscious mind and in many ways has led to the dreamlike explorations of the surrealists. Surrealism, as an attempt to reach beyond the real, has proven too abstract at times. Magic Realism has also attempted to bridge the gap between our logical, scientific mind and the abstract and endless world of imagination. Surrealism, in many ways, failed because it attempts to be wholly abstract. For the scientific mind surrealism lacks predictability and substance; by that I mean surrealism offers no guarantee for theorists; it is far too open to interpretation, the reader's response is never assured. But for those reasons alone, surrealism is a success in itself for it never sets out to be anything more than it is. But in a critical climate searching for concrete theories that fit, at least partially, into the laws of cause and effect, surrealism falls short of the mark. For me, it is an invaluable tool for experimentation in the processes of creativity and imagination. It teaches me and reminds me to keep experimenting. In many ways, like language, it is one of the tools of the trade, but it is not an end in its own right.

Kevin Brophy, discussing Lacan's interest in free association, suggests, "The 'anything goes' of free association, and for that matter of Dadaism, punk music, rap, or terrorism, are not enough in the end. They are not true revolutions or real steps to freedom."⁴⁵ I think what Brophy is saying has a lot to do with the notion of balance and responsibility that I have outlined in this study. But, importantly, balance and responsibility, for me, cannot impose restraints on creativity.

⁴⁵ Kevin Brophy. *Explorations in Creative Writing*. Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 2003. p. 218.

Entering the fictitious is entering the meeting place of the rational and the surreal. It offers the ability to access the unconscious and the subjective while utilising consciousness, the cogito, the rational and objective aspects of the mind. They become both separate and inseparable, opposites and companions. In the fictitious, there is balance. In this way, the fictitious has come to exist as a place of understanding and creation for me, where even those two old adversaries, life and death, can be made sense of. The conflict between them, perpetuated in the real world, can be resolved in the fictitious.

Gilles Deleuze uses a metaphysical approach that calls for an appreciation and acceptance of the instability of the physical world, suggesting an embrace of randomness and fluidity and a rejection of the ideal that is unattainable in an imperfect universe. Seen in this sense, order and the ideal become limitations. Demanding order imposes restraints, restraints on life and creativity. Deleuze sees his philosophy as akin to the novel, questioning both the past and the future, with writing as a life giving force: “One’s always writing to bring something to life, to free life from where it’s trapped, to trace lines of flight.”⁴⁶

Eugene W. Holland supports much of what my study has proposed concerning the ability of the writer to delve into the fictitious and retrieve something sensible amidst disturbances in our so-called ideal reality. Holland believes Freud is indebted to literature and poets for discovering the unconscious long before he did. Similarly, Holland reminds us that Marx is reputed to have said that the novels of Balzac taught him more about class struggle than all his reading on history and political economy. Holland distils Deleuze’s view by saying, “literature often diagnoses syndromes for

46 Gilles Deleuze quoted in: Ian Buchanan, and John Marks, eds. Deleuze and Literature. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000. p.6.

which psychiatry then develops an aetiology and a therapy.”⁴⁷ Or in Deleuze’s words, “the writer as such is not a patient but a physician, the physician of himself and of the world.”⁴⁸

47 Buchanan and Marks, eds. Deleuze and Literature. p.251.

48 Gilles Deleuze quoted in: Buchanan and Marks, eds. Deleuze and Literature. p.251.

11 endings without closure

General postmodernist trends are increasingly supportive of the claims that no real conclusions are possible; that the only possibility, the only reality, is one of multiple, or endless, possibilities. Nothing is clear-cut it seems, all is rhizomic. This is simultaneously a valid, yet risky maxim to adopt. There is a warning sign that needs responding to when writers experience difficulty in adequately forming closures to their novels, and often trends become an easy template to follow.

Robert Musil provides a relatively early yet intriguing example. After more than 20 years of writing *The Man without Qualities* Musil struggled to conclude it. His sudden death in 1942 solved the problem for him. Many hypotheses exist surrounding his dilemma. Had Musil perhaps taken on a greater task than he was capable of completing satisfactorily? Hugh Martin posits that any decisive ending would devalue the preceding text that suggests there is no universal solution, no completeness. “Musil recognised there was no prescriptive formula that would satisfy everyone, let alone himself. To allow a second rate ending would be to accept artistic defeat. He wrote in a

notebook that he had considered ending the novel in the middle of a sentence with a comma.”⁴⁹ Martin goes on to suggest that the variations of endings fit within the framework of the theme. The main character, Ulrich, desires to “‘live on the edge of the possible.’ It is the various possibilities that attract him, indeed the *promise* of uncertainty.”⁵⁰

But has the non-ending merely become a trend? Is it a symptom of postmodernism? Is it a true reflection of the state of the novel and the state of humanity? Is it related directly to the state of mind of the writer? I think the non-ending reflects all of these. I believe postmodernism is the product of the mind of the thinking writer, which in turn is influenced by the society it reflects. But I also believe that a trend exists, a tendency to use the non-ending purely as a postmodernist device, and it is an easy cover-up of an inability to be conclusive.

On the surface this would seem to support an argument suggesting that with increased social difficulties and expanded theories, writers are faced with a far more complex and sometimes very abstract set of ideas and ideals. And in their difficulty to find absolutes, they are left with the creation that is postmodernism. But to accept that would also mean to accept that writers are at a point where they need to be satisfied with their dissatisfaction.

I think what is being demonstrated is an inability to address issues with conviction. We are accepting the idea that if something appears too difficult, then it can stay that way, an approach that promotes a tendency to follow in a very blasé, matter of fact, way. Within trends we are inclined to see styles being excessively imitated, with artists revealing a certain ignorance towards the original intentions of the creative

49 Hugh Martin. [Into the Millennium: The Never Ending Novel \(Reflections on Closure\)](#). 1998. Text: Vol 2 No 2. Available: <http://www.gu.edu.au/text/school/art/text/oct98/martin.htm>. 24 July 2004.

50 Martin. [Into the Millennium](#).

devices being employed. Without an adequate conclusion, the process of writing is left dangling; it is unsatisfactory and dissatisfying for the writer and the audience.

Having said that, the non-ending done well, and by that I mean not just left hanging without cause, has the ability to reflect the multifarious and cyclic aspect of humanity's awareness and deep considerations. Accomplished successfully, the non-closure is a denunciation of duality. It is a response in support of a more complex system and human attitude that is not always satisfied with binaries, not always willing to accept clear definitions like good and evil.

I will continue the discussion on the limitations of binary thinking in later chapters. For now, I must decide whether this thesis will be comprised of a clearly defined beginning and end, or if it will be allowed to breathe with an eternal life of its own, feeding in and out at will with the fictitious.

10 writing and the business of suicide

Having arrived at this point, I am surprised to find how much material has been uncovered and the degree to which the concept has changed since its inception. The heading typed just above, was once the main title of this study. Now, all that remains is this short chapter, almost bare. One niggling idea remains however, without a home – otherwise I would be tempted to dispense with the chapter entirely. I am unable to place that idea elsewhere, and I haven't the heart to chop it out either. So it remains, dangling like a misplaced modifier. But it is a modifier, and by nature it must point to something else, support something, somewhere. I will explain, and let it blend with earlier chapters and lead into the next ones.

The term *business* has appeared in the heading for a few reasons: an obvious reason is that it refers to a person's trade, an occupation involving income. However, the term equally means an unpaid skill, a hobby perhaps or a passion. *Business* also refers to a thing that holds interest or concern, the nature of a given thing, what it is about, in this

case the nature of suicide. The choice of words was deliberate. Ironically, from the diversity of definitions comes a certain accuracy. As the original title of this thesis, I felt it appropriately represented the gist of my argument. It was a heading full of promise, and packed with ideas. Now, through uncompromising selection, concepts have been included while others have been discarded. As a result of an intense and turbulent, sifting and sorting, process, this once bloated chapter stands deflated.

Could it be that the original title has been left stranded, stripped of substance? Faced with extinction, the only choice for survival is in a lesser role, that of a sub-heading. Although, for me, the meaning and significance of the phrase is undeniable, but for a reader, as the phrase now stands – relegated – the importance of its implications and its underlying relevance as the foundation and connecting thread for this entire work is questionable. Without previous insight into the text, the reader of such a phrase may only guess its meaning. But the chances are that the concepts that the reader develops will be no more than a shabby semblance of the author's intention. The reader may be lost without knowing what meaning the author has given to each word, let alone their composite importance as sequences forming phrases and chapters. From the gestation period onwards this study has been the market place of words – trading and exchanging one meaning for another, one word and one clause for a better one. The result is that each sentence has been hand-crafted through a process of genesis, evolution, and conclusion. By way of deconstruction and reconstruction, and careful selection, a meaning has formed. And that formation gives the meaning a history. And its history leads back to the essence, and the essence is the phrase from where it all began, *writing and the business of suicide*.

There is of course another, and yet another, and another beginning, well before all that. But I will leave those beginnings for another time.

9 writing, the business of suicide, and identity

It is difficult to find a novel that doesn't mention death, especially a cruel one or a suicide. I look at the books resting on my book shelf, some I have read, some I was supposed to read as a student but never got around to. Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One hundred Years of Solitude*, I read that a few years back. I remember murders and war, unmitigated attacks by armies. I recall its beginning, with Colonel Aureliano Buendia facing the firing squad. I remember generations of families with names like Buendia and Sugundo, all inextricably linked through life and death, and their alienation and their many ghosts. I remember a suicide: the rejected musician, Pietro. And an attempted suicide, the Colonel, who tries to shoot himself in the chest. The Colonel's despair arises from the futility he sees in the wars around him that are fuelled by opposing egos.

I like what the Magic Realists do, paralleling the Surrealists in freedom of expression in many ways. I think of Borges and Calvino; then I wonder about writers closer to home, who would, perhaps, be more inclined to write about rural or parochial matters. They do, but they also let their writing take flight. That makes me think of Peter

Carey. I remember *Oscar and Lucinda*, his third novel, but I'm not certain if I've read it in its entirety – just different sections at different times. But I know it is set in Australia, that the relationship between the lovers is often detached and skewed, and that the climax sees Oscar and Lucinda wagering on the transportation, across inhospitable terrain, of their cathedral built of glass.

I check with my partner who has by chance just closed the cover of a more recent Carey novel, *My Life as a Fake*. She comments on my interpretation of Oscar's tragic death, as a consequence of his flight from Lucinda. 'You're probably right,' she says, calling from an armchair across the room. She reminds me that Carey often uses death and suicide as a backdrop; often characters re-invent themselves as a consequence of death. 'There's a suicide or two in this one as well,' she says, displaying the book. 'You should read it.' For a second, thinking she is about to toss the book to me, I lunge forward, even though I'm in an impossible position behind my desk. My partner smiles and drops the book onto the low table beside her. I check the internet: a column in *The New Yorker*, a John Updike review, makes mention of the violent suicide of the character David Weiss and how the novel is based in part on the infamous Ern Malley hoax of 1944. 'So it's about writing?' I call out. 'Yes. Well, that's the setting, anyway. The female protagonist is the editor of a magazine. The story begins with her searching for an answer to her mother's death—' I interrupt: 'Don't tell me. A suicide?'

I believe that suicide as a literary device is more than just an easy way for writers to dispose of characters. Supporting that view leads to a discussion concerning self and identity, in particular the individual's place in society and how both the nation and the individual in terms of identity have become invariably tied. Writing, identity, and the metaphysical suicide that I have presented in literature and for the writer in many ways

evolve by the same process. It is a process of elimination: not necessarily in the sense of deducing from a wider group a final definitive solution, but a procedure that involves overcoming and discarding in order to progress. For me, as formulated throughout this study, there is a need to focus on resolving past dissatisfactions and conflicts – a continuous reassessment, an openness, and an acceptance of the fluidity, drift, and ebb and flow of human development is necessary.

Elizabeth Costello, a character in J.M. Coetzee's novel of the same name, runs the risk of fading into obscurity under the self-destructiveness of denial and uncertainty. A famous Australian writer, her words and ideals stand for what it means to be Australian. The novel, for me, is a metaphor: Elizabeth Costello is the idea of Australian identity personified. And she is also more: she is the mind of colonialism. Through her, the novel suggests a universality of colonialism. Her symptoms reflect the infirmity of ailing colonised countries: "She is not sure, as she listens to her own voice, whether she believes any longer in what she is saying."⁵¹

In writing of a cathartic nature, it is vital for the writer to write out parts of themselves. But the requirements for that cleansing process are no easier than those for a nation in search of identity. Identity on a national scale, and identity on a personal level, which I will call selfhood, for me, exhibit a commonality of purpose. And I see the process of dealing with death as fundamental in the search for the end goals in both instances – identity and self. The fear attached to cathartic suicide is strong; it often involves a complete or partial re-evaluation of past ideals and beliefs, discarding what is no longer appropriate or beneficial. And Elizabeth Costello "is not sure that writers who venture into the darker territories of the soul always return unscathed."⁵² Confrontations may arise, asking controversial amendments to accepted ideology, historical

51 J. M. Coetzee. Elizabeth Costello: Eight Lessons. Milsons Point, NSW: Random House, 2003. p. 39.

52 Coetzee. Elizabeth Costello. p. 160.

foundations, and ancestry. Beliefs, and changing beliefs, can alienate individuals. But such disturbances are part of a necessary transformation. The colonial mind of Elizabeth Costello has closed the door on certain historical disturbances, “better on the whole, that the genie stay in the bottle.”⁵³ For her, certain disturbances are better left as they are, left to be forgotten, “. . . certain things are not good to read or to write.”⁵⁴ She is a character afraid of her past, and unable to reconcile events in her life. Two of the most disturbing and resounding events for Elizabeth Costello involve her being violently raped as a young woman, and an inability to completely resolve differences with her sister. Elizabeth Costello is unable to overcome her demons. Her vocabulary is dotted with phrases that bar access to her world, to her self, and to her past. And her floundering thoughts are punctuated with silences that mark a wayward attempt to negate the existence of the unreachable and the unthinkable which she ironically and inadvertently protects. Elizabeth Costello is aware of, yet denies responsibility for “the grubbiness of that cellar.”⁵⁵

Brian Castro’s protagonist in *Birds of Passage* is also an individual immersed in this struggle: not able to embrace the present, not willing to let go of the past. Unable to find a compromise between the two, unwilling to draw the best from both and to let go of the rest to form a new paradigm, he harbours thoughts of suicide, and declares, “I wander about the house with a lingering feeling of wanting to clean up a mess on the floor.”⁵⁶

53 Coetzee. Elizabeth Costello. p. 167.

54 Coetzee. Elizabeth Costello. p. 173.

55 Coetzee. Elizabeth Costello. p. 180.

56 Brian Castro. Birds of Passage. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1983. p. 110.

8 redirecting the mail

The writing process can truly be one of sublimation. By accessing the world of fiction, writers have the capacity to move beyond the role of mere commentator. Perceptions and interpretations can be fashioned through creativity into potentially far reaching propositions. I have already mentioned that in regards to this study the relationship between the critical and creative components has been a symbiotic one, that theory and fiction have evolved side by side. It is a relationship that has been crucial for allowing me to sort information, compiling to create a finished product accessible to a variety of readers. Eva Sallis, it seems, has worked in a similar way. I mentioned in chapter twenty that her work with Arabic culture, by being expressed not only in academic but also in fictional writing, has allowed her to reach a wider audience than otherwise possible. Although that may be desirable in itself for many admirable as well as economical reasons, it is important to note that such a result often stems from an emotional, metaphysical, or moral concern very much a part of the writing process. Sallis found she needed a way to fully vent her mixed emotions of excitement and rage, of what she

called a “life-altering experience.”⁵⁷ Finding it difficult to express some of those emotions, Sallis “invented a character who could carry the burden of everything [she] couldn’t convey in academic prose.”⁵⁸

I am again reminded of Janet Frame and the way she uses Daphne’s uninhibited thoughts in *Owls do Cry* to suggest that although the unconscious is the home of repressed thoughts, those thoughts are not irretrievable. Through Daphne’s diagnosed madness Frame brings unconscious ideas into consciousness. Daphne is a reminder of how the creative writer works and how fiction can be a healing process. I believe that fiction writing and entering the fictitious is a healthy practice for both writer and reader.

Iakovos Kambanellis, poet, exceptional playwright, and survivor of the Nazi concentration camp Mauthausen, was at first a reluctant writer. When he set down his memoirs – somewhat fragmented and confused – he had already found within his writing, particularly his plays, a powerfully expressive outlet for his thoughts and beliefs. Some twenty years after his experiences as a young man, Kambanellis reflects on how he felt upon release from Mauthausen: “I wrote scattered fragments about life in the camp, before and now. I tried to write something more, something completely my own, but I didn’t manage it. Disappointed by my own imagination, I was confined to writing only about what I had seen at Mauthausen and what I had heard people say. ‘A writer,’ I thought, ‘writes what he imagines and not what he has lived through. Perhaps I’m not cut out to be a writer.’”⁵⁹

Arnold Zable, in his own uniquely fragmented style in *The Fig Tree*, relates the story of his fortuitous meeting with Kambanellis in Athens in 1997. Kambanellis’ parting words to Zable offer a summary of his life as a writer, relentless in his willingness to continually unearth and re-evaluate the human condition: “To be a writer,

57 Sallis. Research Fiction.

58 Sallis. Research Fiction.

59 Iakovos Kambanellis. Mauthausen. Trans. Gail Holst-Warhaft. Athens: Kedros, 1995. p. 314.

he tells me as we part, is to search for the contradictions that exist within us all, the subterranean rivulets that course beneath the surface calm.”⁶⁰ Interestingly, Kambanellis, who earned the reputation as possibly Greece’s best known playwright, still does not consider himself a professional writer. He is humble; but perhaps he is alluding to a more subtle aspect of the writer, something more metaphysical by nature that eludes being categorised simply as a profession. Arnold Zable tells us that Kambanellis “just writes because he must – because injustice cannot be forgotten, because there are things that must not be left unsaid.”⁶¹ Indeed, as Kambanellis reconciles his past and the past of the world in which he lives, he manages to rescue something of his self and the selves and identities of others who care to read his work or see his plays. And perhaps, in a somewhat more hopeful and forgiving manner than Primo Levi, Kambanellis has managed to write himself back into the world. “Today, when I see the meeting of the past with the present, things that I had not understood become clear in my mind. Perhaps I understand them now.”⁶²

60 Arnold Zable. *The Fig Tree*. 2002. Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2004. p. 139.

61 Zable. *The Fig Tree*. p. 139.

62 Kambanellis. *Mauthausen*. p. 7.

7 Australian literature is alive and kicking

An ongoing debate, that today appears to be livelier than ever in Australia, concerns the state of literature, in particular the decline of the novel. I have already mentioned psychoanalysis and its relationship with the development of science in what I see as one of three competitive influences affecting literature. The second is more obvious, coming from within the arts itself, particularly the visual arts. I will discuss that briefly, because I see no threat at all in that regard, before tackling what I regard as a more urgent concern involving aspersions in a non-fiction versus fiction conflict.

Simply, I see the novel and writer as part of a necessary evolutionary continuum, forming a cornerstone for the creative arts, powerful in their own right, and often an integral component and a source of inspiration for other artistic expressions. John Fowles, somewhat wryly, voices his opinion in a 1995 interview. He sets the scene for his response by mentioning Philip Marsden's *The Bronski Beat*, which he is reading at the time, a novel about the history of Poland that recounts its endless invasions, destruction of life, and catastrophes. Fowles suggests that in many ways the history of

the novel resembles the horrors and holocausts of Poland, he says, “in spite of the countless ‘invasions’ by the visual arts it still makes a nonsense of that silly question I’ve been hearing most of my adult life: ‘*Is the novel dead?*’ Like Poland, it isn’t!”⁶³ I believe interaction between the arts is necessary and productive, seen only as a struggle from outside. Within, there is an abundance of freedom, acceptance and compatibility.

Like Fowles, I feel that it is often easy and fashionable for critics to paint a black view of the arts. And that leads to what I perceive as the third major threat for the novel and novelist. Arguments, coming from many sectors, often from within the publishing industry, from academics, biographers, and essayists, seem to be predicting the worst, that fiction is in its death throws. Biographical historian, Drusilla Modjeska suggests that fiction at the end of the last century was too postmodern, leading to uneasiness and detachment, and creating a void to be quickly filled by non-fiction in which “memoir and biography became an Australian success story.”⁶⁴

In many ways, Australian literature has only just begun to come of age, with a vast supply of raw material for writers. As they adapt that material and indeed adapt themselves to the material, they will unravel what it means to be Australian. Literary development can be seen as both critical to and consistent with cultural change, in particular the search for national identity and a place for the individual. I don’t see fluctuations in sales directly related to style or genre, but rather an indication of something more intricate.

Non-fiction is not without its shortcomings. Often, maintaining an appearance of truth in non-fiction becomes an obsession. The worst scenario being that *truth* in fact becomes increasingly more contrived, moving steadily further from its goal in a bizarre and relentless search for the ultimate *truth* or *big* story. Two recent cases come to mind:

63 Fowles. *Wormholes*. p. 434.

64 Drusilla Modjeska. *Give Me the Real Thing*. 31 August 2002. Sydney Morning Herald. Available: <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2002/08/30/1030508122371.html?oneclick=true>. 9 September 2003.

Jayson Blair, who resigned from *The New York Times* after confessing not only to plagiarism but to completely fabricating articles from various locations while he was in fact in his Brooklyn apartment; and Stephen Glass who was fired from *The New Republic* for what began as the invention of damaging reports about real people, and turned into the even more bizarre lies involving the invention of entire stories and even websites for the imaginary subjects of his articles.⁶⁵

And only yesterday, an article, from the half open pages of a newspaper on a coffee table in a cafe, announced a memoir, another in a long line of clones, released with the intention of feeding a trivia-hungry audience. It was refreshing to read an honest review: instead of providing an endless list of sensational tidbits extracted for the sole intention of tempting the reader into buying the book, the reviewer offered an enlightening quote from the leading French newspaper *Le Figaro* declaring the newly released celebrity's diaries as "the latest in a worrying trend of "non-books" [that] have no literary merit and discourage true authors."⁶⁶

Brian Castro's fully-fledged autobiographical novel *Shanghai Dancing*, which is as close to a meditation on memoir as you are ever likely to find, is a perfect example of blending fiction and non-fiction. Interestingly, it has faced difficulties in reaching the wide audience that it deserves, and as a result, throws many contradictions into the discussion. Castro, after successes as an award-winning novelist with worldwide acclaim, was suddenly confronted by demanding publishers and unenthusiastic agents: "I think I was the bottom of the pile as far as they [agents] were concerned."⁶⁷ Castro finally turned to a smaller more personal publisher, waiting two years for Giramondo Publishing to be fully operational, to handle his work. One of Castro's concerns and key issues with the problems he encountered was that he was being asked to "dumb

65 Matthew Ricketson. "Don't Believe Everything You Read." *The Age* 1 May 2004, sec. Review: 8.

66 Henry Samuel. "Diaries Shatter a Legend's Secrets." *The Age* 17 April 2004, sec. World: 16.

67 Brian Castro quoted in: Sullivan. "Castro and the Friction of Fiction."

down,”⁶⁸ to compromise his art and his commentary by making it more accessible. *Shanghai Dancing* includes everything: fiction, autobiography, memoir, photography, and family myths and secrets; it is not the case of a novelist being unable to talk the talk, or to deliver; it is something else. It is perhaps an unresponsive audience, and although audiences are often driven by the opinions of critics and publishers, it also reveals an audience in what I see as conservative turmoil, unwilling to approach material of a more demanding or adventurous nature.

My concern with trends and consumerism is not so much with trends in themselves and the economics that drive them, but with the underlying social milieu. I don't believe politics or consumerism or anything else for that matter can be blamed entirely for dictating trends. In the case of literature, I believe a nation's psyche is at play in regards to what is being read.

This can be explained by what I see as apprehension regarding the novel coinciding with recent social and political unrest, highlighted by a movement towards, yet eventual failure of, republicanism. This is by no means a cause, but it does suggest something of the political and social milieu of the Australian psyche, a psyche on the verge of change, at a turning point perhaps, or a crossroad if you like, yet hesitant to take the next step. What we are witnessing could be apprehension and uncertainty, and therefore a turning away, not only from our future, not only from the novel, but from imagination.

With an increased interest in biographical and historical texts are we opting for the comfort of the colonial shadow? I think so. And works like those of Castro are not the safe net that we are hoping for. Viewed from the perspective of a poet, Brophy, in *Explorations in Creative Writing*, quotes Peter Bakowski's observation that “In

68 Brian Castro quoted in: Sullivan. "Castro and the Friction of Fiction."

Australia there's still this thing where we feel that a poem has to refer to nature or the Australian landscape."⁶⁹

Due to fear of the unknown mixed with historical guilt and uncertainties, the psychic tendency of the majority is to find refuge inside the girdle of the familiar, the consequences are that writers who are breaking new ground, who are insightful and accurate, are not being read and not being encouraged at a time when their work is most needed. But turning back, may also indicate the need for questioning. Our regression may not be entirely detrimental, as long as a purely romantic colonial idealism doesn't cloud the true picture, creating puffs of opiated smoke wafting from the pipes of staunch nationalists. With an open approach, it could be seen as a precarious yet potentially exciting time for Australia and Australian literature. What will it be: a big step forward or a gradual sinking into the quicksand of colonial illusion and social disillusionment? A temporary relapse into our childhood, as long as it is a re-evaluation of our infant roots rather than a retreat into the folds of the colonial security blanket, may be a useful and necessary exercise. And the writer's role is a crucial one, with great responsibility in terms of the outcome.

⁶⁹ Peter Bakowski quoted in: Brophy. Explorations in Creative Writing. p. 41.

6 freedom or death

I have one final vexing question. As a writer, am I fleeing or fighting? Escaping is often necessary. It is a human tendency. It may be a mental and emotional retreat, even seen as a spiritual endeavour. And to be able to psychologically go into ourselves for security and centering can be a healing and productive exercise. I believe that writers use the same process to write. But it cannot be mistaken for a haven: the issues that drive us there must eventually be dealt with.

“No one can bar the road to truth, and to advance its cause I am prepared to accept even death.”⁷⁰ Who is responsible for such extreme talk? Could it be the war cry of a fanatic, a terrorist perhaps? Or the pleading words of a suicide at the point of despair? Maybe they are the honest words of a writer doing what a writer does best: being engaged in the business of writing? They are indeed the words of a writer, Solzhenitsyn.

⁷⁰ Solzhenitsyn. A Documentary Record, p. 112.

As previously discussed, the rebel, the suicide, and the terrorist are all in essence activists, seeking freedom and advocating change. And willing to face death to do so. The writer however, as part rebel, part suicide, and part terrorist, is probably the only one capable of advocating ideals ethically. It is often not the most expedient form of protest, but it is often the most effective. It is the most effective not only for its moral sensibility but because it attempts to incorporate and stand for all other processes. In fact, I have come to believe that it is not possible to effectively communicate through writing without a substantial understanding of all other processes – the voice of the writer finding completeness through assimilation with the rebel, the suicide, and the terrorist.

As a writer, I see the pursuit of freedom as the most highly prized human possession. But it can never be completely achieved. Our inability to experience absolute freedom arises from our knowledge of death, or at least from a fear or denial of death. Impending death often hangs above us by a thin thread like the Sword of Damocles. Freedom from death therefore takes the position of the ultimate freedom. But because we perceive it as unattainable, always in fear or attempting to live in denial of its presence, we are never free. The inevitable, however, can be used as a strong motivator, and may provide a greater sense of freedom than is often experienced – not by ignoring its eventuality, but by accepting its finality. By allowing closure to be a reminder of the fullness and freedom of the stuff of life, the maxim *live till you die*, although often misappropriated, becomes a potent one.

The importance in literature of the hero and anti-hero alike is realised in this regard. Heroes, with an ability to tap into the idea of freedom from death, take on universal appeal. And although often destructive – even self-destructive in their worst incarnations, as in the case of Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*, Lilian in *Lilian's Story*, or

Todd Andrews in *The Floating Opera* – they all exude the same endearing quality of striving for freedom above all else. Driven by a passionate desire to live, they have found freedom from the discomfort of an oppressive world.

What we admire in such characters is their cry in affirmation of life. And the hero's cry tells us that the only way to freedom is to accept death, to gaze upon an image of ourselves lain out on the death bed, and catching our own glance, fixed eye to eye, declare: I am coming soon enough, but I will live until that day arrives; and when I am there, you can be sure that the vultures will have little left to feast on, for I will be an empty shell.

5 penultimate conclusion

Ultimately, writers are attempting, through a type of personal and communal catharsis, to gain freedom. I have covered freedom in many forms: freedom from death, freedom from fear, freedom from restraint, and freedom from oppression. I have argued that freedom comes from confronting fear, death, restraint, and oppression. But are writers capable of killing all the demons? It has been suggested, as one of many possible reasons behind his death, that Primo Levi feared the advent of exhausting his supply of material.⁷¹

Realistically, I believe new demons and new concepts continue to rise and need to be tackled. Lingering on one topic and succumbing to stagnation should invoke far greater fear. I have personally felt the weight of being bogged down in my own writing; it becomes a slow death. In this study I have raised concerns about getting trapped by over-categorisation and over-simplification. Dealing in opposites is one way down that path. Duality can be destructive. David R. Loy, professor at Bunkyo University, Japan,

⁷¹ Gambetta. *Levi's Last Moments*. 2004.

understands that the story of good and evil is attractive for its simplicity, but is aware of its deceptiveness: “It keeps us from looking deeper, from trying to discover causes.”⁷² Loy reminds me of what Solzhenitsyn declared in *The Gulag Archipelago*: “If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them.”⁷³

From the outset, my approach has been one of rectitude. During the second draft, however, I came close to betraying my beliefs. The bulk of this chapter, a semi-conclusion that I had been tentatively approaching, was moved. ‘What I have written,’ I thought, ‘if left in place, would detract from the effect of the remaining chapters, destroy a sense of the unfolding drama, ruin the plot and the tension.’ Fortunately, my principles prevailed, and I returned the section to its original position. ‘Fiction already runs the risk of becoming a mere servant of reality,’ I protested, slamming the keyboard. ‘I am trying to divulge everything I know about the creative process, laying it out in full view, and at the crucial moment I want to compromise!’ I thought that by following the rules of reality and convention, suspense would benefit, that a more accessible product would be achieved. Now, another type of suspense has appeared, another, less homogeneous, dimension, borne from a creative need. I am pleased with the result, and the story has been saved from ending too soon, for as I have discovered, there is always more to come, always further and deeper to dig.

I have realised that the desire for suspense becomes an obsession, forcing dependence on its continual fabrication. It is an illusion; it is the dramatic gimmick that

72 David R. Loy. [The Nonduality of Good and Evil: Buddhist Reflections on the New Holy War](http://www.transnational.org/features/2002/Loy_NondualityGoodEvil.html). 2002. Available: http://www.transnational.org/features/2002/Loy_NondualityGoodEvil.html. 12 December 2003.

73 Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn quoted in: Loy. [The Nonduality of Good and Evil](#).

reality is based on. Suspense becomes a lie! The fabricated world that we call real, that we construct and put in order, is in fact full of such lies. What we call reality is nothing more than a reconstruction of a natural phenomenon – abstractedness. Abstractedness comes from the ebb and flow of the fictitious and the surreal. Only when we reconstruct do we think about order, tension, conflict, suspense, plot. We do everything for effect. It is unnatural. Our constructed reality is unnatural.

Jean-Paul Sartre has written tomes, often indecipherable to the layperson and immensely challenging to the initiated. I still pick up *Being and Nothingness* and draw a deep breath in preparation. With degrees in both Philosophy and Creative Writing, I am condemned in many ways to be torn between the two, but always with appreciation and respect. Philosophy has taught me not so much *what to think*, but *how to think*. Fiction has allowed me to engage in a sympathetic exchange with myself and others. I think of Sartre's own balancing act between philosophy and fiction. I think of Camus, Castro, Fowles, and many other writers. An element in their fiction writing touches me, and conveys their messages in a heightened and memorable way beyond the capabilities of their essays. I have written many papers circling the essence of what Sartre was implying in the pages of exhaustive volumes like *Being and Nothingness* and other essays like "Existentialism is a Humanism". But when Sartre declares that we are condemned to be free, it is only after re-reading and cross-checking and referencing that I fully understand what I believe to be the crux of his argument. When I read the novel *Age of Reason* and the protagonist, Mathieu Delarue, realises that for him there is no good or evil unless he brings them into being, and he is alone, enveloped in a monstrous silence, without excuse, and Sartre declares that Delarue is "condemned forever to be

free,”⁷⁴ I comprehended, without a shadow of doubt, what those words mean. I have entered the fictitious arena and been touched.

I have tried to present this work as an unravelling of ideas, as a search into the true nature of creativity. In many ways I feel I have let myself down, only gently pressing against the restrained boundaries of conservatism. But I take heart in the notion that change often comes from a gentle caress, and the evolution of literature, and of literary analysis and theory, will continue to be transformed. Through this process I have come to realise that fragmentation is an integral part of the fictitious arena. I not only accept, but welcome, the pieces. And offer them, assembled as faithfully as possible, as close as possible to how they first appeared – floating in some infinite sea of irreducible plasma – without chronology or any other form of lineal constraint.

And so it is that I have taken a step closer to the meaning of creativity. It has come to be represented in a state of flux. I see it growing, forming, becoming. And instinct, always a component of creativity for me, that too has come to exhibit a greater sense of movement. In presenting many fragments on these pages, intuitively and without bias, and resisting compromise, I have stayed true to my aspirations as a creative writer. I have followed my instincts in the belief that the ideas collected here, offered as close to their original form as the current academic parameters will allow, have achieved the greatest degree of originality and sincerity.

Nikos Kazantkakis said that instinct knows things in a way that the intellect cannot, that instinct knows the thing while intellect understands the relationship between things. Henri Bergson believed that only intellect can seek to solve some problems, but

74 Jean-Paul Sartre. The Age of Reason. 1945. Trans. Eric Sutton. New York: Vintage, 1992. p. 320.

will not solve them, “only the instinct can solve them, though it will never seek them.”⁷⁵ Not long after that, in *A Collect of Philosophy*, Wallace Stevens suggested that philosophy takes us to a point at which “there is nothing left except the imagination.”⁷⁶ I agree with Stevens: we must allow imagination and intuition to carry us beyond that point. If solutions are to arise, philosophy cannot be limited by reason.

I believe that great philosophy, like great fiction, is an achievement and celebration of our imagination, an imagination that can lead us into an arena that is not limited by logic. There is one vital question that imagination always asks, a question that authors are familiar with: *what if?* With the ideas of authors such as Kazantzakis and Stevens coming from the first half and middle of the last century they mark a moving away from duality, and lead the way for the modern writer’s search for a collaboration between opposites – widening the path into the fictitious arena that knows no duality, no opposites, no comparisons, and is willing to accept diversity, absurdity, abstracts, and fragments.

75 Henri Bergson quoted in: Nikos Kazantzakis. *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*. 1938. Trans. Kimon Friar. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958. p. xvii.

76 Wallace Stevens quoted in: Maurice Natanson. *The Erotic Bird: Phenomenology in Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998. p. 6.

4 myth of Sisyphus revisited

Adopted as a metaphor for the human spirit and exemplifying the existential human struggle, Camus' original use of the Sisyphean myth, although ripe for its time, seems to have lost some of its flavour. In the passing of the twentieth century its poignancy has been left to seep between the widening cracks in the shifting plates of contemporaneous movement. Our social and philosophical climate has changed, but perhaps a re-evaluation will set the records straight.

For Camus, in many ways, it has been just such gaps that have been the basis of his theory – the space in-between. We find Sisyphus condemned: relentlessly pushing his rock and forced to acknowledge his fate, but the moment when he is returning to the bottom of the mountain to begin his struggle again, that is the focus of Camus' attention. It is, for Camus, a moment when Sisyphus is free and able to defy the Gods; it is the moment Sisyphus exists for. But there are further implications that tend to be overlooked.

In forming a classical interpretation of the original myth, it is easy to regard Sisyphus' fate as one worse than death. Camus endeavoured to make sense of, and give purpose to, the absurdity of the situation, steering away from what could be seen as a nihilistic interpretation. But Camus' interpretation begins to break down if it is taken too literally. It is reduced to a simple binary theory without substance in which we find Sisyphus being either engaged in his toil or descending to begin his futile task again.

The aspect of such an interpretation that troubles me most is the notion of an absolute distinction between two states of mind. In simplifying the myth, a dichotomy between the ascending chore and the descending freedom arises. But in essence a fragile balance also exists. And that balance can be easily toppled. The moment of descent is one of freedom, a moment for defying the gods; but I believe it is possible to imagine the futile and demoralising task of pushing the rock becoming unbearable and intrusive. If the only solace or respite is found in the descent, what happens when the repetitious and futile task of rolling begins to invade that moment of respite, when one overlaps the other? And what if the drudgery of the previous rolling attempt lingers in the mind, spoiling the free time? And what if the thought of beginning again also invades the mind? Is it not possible to see a moment when respite is completely overrun with fear or anguish for the futile and painful task that has been imposed? That is the moment when freedom no longer prevails or gives respite. That is the moment when a burden becomes overwhelming and erodes into all other cognizance. The burden at that point becomes all-consuming, the boundaries are blurred. In the binary world there is a tendency for absolutes and extremes, only on and off. There is no room for variables, and there is no allowance for the overlapping of endless possibilities.

So why do I write, and why do I live? Do I roll my heavy rock up the mountain purely to enjoy the moments of freedom as I defy the gods during my descent in an absurd world of unending repetition? And what would happen if my condemned soul found the struggle unbearable? What would happen if there was no space or time left for freedom, if the pain began to eat into every moment of freedom, physically and in thought? And what would happen if all that remained was despair? One answer could well be death. But I feel that such propositions arise as a result of Binary Logic.

The rolling of the rock is the daily grind of the world we have built around us. But although our constructed world, and even the natural world, may be absurd, they are absurd in all their glory. What I understand when I read Camus is that freedom should be sought not away from the struggle but within it. Otherwise we reduce our experiences to moments of either freedom or incarceration. Camus reminds us time and again throughout his writing, and Dr Rieux in *The Plague* is so much like Sisyphus in this regard, of the ability to overcome absurdity by being immersed in the struggle and by accepting both the struggle and the absurdity.

So I write and live within the absurdity, coming to terms with one aspect as another arises. I enter the fictitious, and delve as deeply as I can between the cracks in the shifting plates of our contemporary world. I keep writing and thinking and playing – all rolled into one tight ball that comforts my soul, that *is* my soul in many ways, a tight ball that rolls around endlessly, over hills and far away, picking up sticks and sharp objects, one day, revelling in the easy going over soft grasses, the next. No matter what happens, I know that eventually the rolling will smooth out the jagged edges. And all the while, I pluck bits from the core, re-examining them and going back in to reinvent myself. That

is how I prevent myself from becoming a hard and immutable Sisyphian rock
condemned to a life of dichotomy.

3 act two

Act two of a two act play

It is the day of the presentation of our writer's paper on the importance of fiction. He is standing, behind a pulpit, front centre stage, facing the audience. A glass of water and his notes are in front of him. He is well presented, is wearing glasses, and appears to have recuperated well enough from his medical procedure only days before. The dialogue takes up from where his internal monologue ended in Act one.

WRITER: So, I'm lying in this bed, dreamlike in thought, planning the future one minute, reflecting on the past the next. Perhaps so much dreaming takes me away from the task at hand, away from the present. I think about friends I have known who have died, often suddenly. Friends who have died in accidents, from AIDS, from cancer, from suicide. I think of illness. We all know someone who is living with an illness; some get over their illnesses. "The survivors tend to be the ones that don't give up," I'm told;

but that's a senseless statement, a truism: of course survivors don't give up. Waiting for my results may prove to be more difficult to endure than the procedure. My appointment with my specialist is a week away.

I am thinking: about writing and what it is that writers do and where moral and social obligations fit in to the scheme of things. It all seems strangely centred around the prefix EX. Maybe the drugs they have intravenously fed into me have caused me to hallucinate, driven me to aberration, but I have come up with a list that I believe defines the role of the writer. Although my intentions are honest you may take it light-heartedly if you like.

A writer should: expand, express, experiment, explore, expose, extrude, extract, externalise, exfoliate, exterminate, exorcise, execute, exhibit, examine, and even excrete, but a writer should never expect, expire, exit, or, and the big one for me is, excuse. [*He takes a sip from a glass of water.*]

A writer being true to his or her self. It has a lot to do with authenticity. There is a condition in our consumer-based society, ironically, for asking more and more for the truth. But what truth? A type of fabricated truth. I should mention at this point that everything I've said so far may or may not be factual, it may just be my thoughts – wandering, inventing – perhaps a character from a novel has appeared before you to speak his mind. But I speak the truth as I try to speak of what the writing process means for me, and the magic it spins. The completion and the realisation of that process is the reader-writer relationship; it is the hope that words will speak to others.

So: authenticity, truth? There is a trend that we are currently witnessing which suggests a moving away from the novel and fiction, into biography and non-fiction. It is a curious insatiable tendency, one linked to a widespread desire for what we believe is the truth. Curious because biography is composed of so much invented, subjective,

interpreted and re-interpreted material. In the end, so-called non-fiction may be less accurate and reliable than fiction. We are becoming obsessed with the need for fabricated truths. Don't we get our fill from the media, from war correspondents, from advertising slogans, and corporate lies? We believe politicians when they tell us lies, yet we question fiction when most of it is the truth.

I find I am toying with the notion that nothing speaks more honestly than fiction because fiction does away with pretences. Without pretence, we are able to let experiences happen without resistance, without questioning, and without doubt. Fiction speaks on a more spiritual and emotional level. Fiction has always been comfortable moving about in the metaphysical and psychological realm of the human psyche. Fiction works in a world where there are no promises yet many solutions. If we lose fiction, if we allow it to be overrun, we lose a part of ourselves that allows us to think for ourselves. The fictitious is where we are able to enter a world of freedom and autonomy, a place without lies and without propaganda.

I should add that it has never been my intention to enter into a comparison between fiction and non-fiction. If I do so at times, it is simply in defence of criticisms aimed at fiction. Every form of writing is a valuable one for me. Personally, I enjoy moving between genres, utilising that which serves the purpose best. It is like choosing a weapon before going into battle.

At this point our writer stops with a concerned expression on his face. He touches his right shoulder before continuing.

WRITER: I'm sorry to say this, but I feel I must cut my presentation short. There is an intense jabbing pain in my right shoulder. I have been warned that it is a sign that

blood is still seeping from the hole in my liver where a sample was taken quite recently for testing. *[He pauses, and when he continues he seems more composed.]* The registering of pain associated with the procedure is quite fascinating, and no one is certain exactly what is happening. The best explanation suggests that because there are so few nerve endings near the liver, a direct response is not felt. Instead, as blood seeps into the abdominal cavity, it places pressure on the diaphragm and other organs. Nerves in this region lead along the spine and to the neck where they get mixed up with other nerves leading to the right shoulder. The brain is deceived into thinking that pain is being experienced in the shoulder. Like fiction, it is a little confusing at times: something is happening, but we are not always certain of the how and why. I am reminded of my Chinese acupuncturist who can put a needle in your toe to stop an itchy ear. The fictional novel uses a different logic to non-fiction, as Western medicine uses a different logic to Eastern. Like the paths of invisible meridian lines. Fiction is unusual, but it works.

His presentation appears to have ended; but his bowed head, and his hands still grasping the pages, suggest there is more to come. After an extended silence, he folds the pages, removes his glasses, and turns to walk away. He takes only a few steps before stopping. Suddenly, with determination, he replaces his glasses and returns to the podium.

WRITER: No, no, that is not how I want to finish; not with rusty ideology. I have tried to talk about honour and duty and honesty, but all I have done is reposition a few makeshift boundaries. I have cordoned off and categorised one ideology after another, following some stale and contrived course that leads nowhere but back onto itself. With

my mind conditioned to incessant partitioning, this way and that, I have managed nothing more than a few cursory lines of chalk on a dusty blackboard.

Something must happen to those lines. And indeed it has. I have tried to ignore the changes, but from the corner of my eye I have sensed it in my own writing – a slight curve at first, a subtle bend, a gentle opening up. Until finally I am no longer comfortable, comfortable with my position, of the luxury of sitting on which ever side of the fence I choose.

The lines before me are blurred, the fences will come down, the barriers dismantled. From my first, perhaps accidental, smudge on the page that changed the course and ideas of my writing, I have been privileged to witness the fine line between fact and fiction gradually erode. For that I should be grateful, not defiant. But too often I have been reluctant to participate, too often I have been the willing spectator. I stand here now, on the threshold of my more mature years, with the realisation that I have been wrong for a long time. Wrong to draw so many lines of demarcation! I see now that there are no real lines, that the lines that serve as boundaries are nothing more than flimsy fabrications. And I see that fiction has the ability to expose the fraudulence of such feeble boundaries.

Our writer turns. Curtain begins to close. We see his back fading into the shadows as he walks offstage (centre rear).

The End.

participation is essential in making the story complete, making it come alive, making it real.

Fact, verisimilitude, or total fiction? That does not matter. It is truth. It is actuality, tempered by the social, seasoned by imagination, and manifested through the fictitious. The role of the writer is to tell a story. Not necessarily their own story, not necessarily another's story. The writer is not only in the business of memoir and is not merely a collector. The writer is both historian and futurist, realist and surrealist. What the writer does is deal with the universality of the human condition, and, in so doing, employs a variety of literary devices, contributing to an eternal story. And that story is a creative response born of necessity and nurtured in the womb of the fictitious. A story without end. A story that speaks the truth, the universal truth. And it all takes place in the realm of the fictitious. Being creative is being able to access the fictitious.

1 standing on the edge

Drifting, along grey and overly sanitised corridors lined with faded Monet prints, I was lost, until my attention was caught by the slender figure of a young woman perched on a chair inside a narrow room. Intrigued by the way she was positioning herself, I stopped a few metres away from the doorway. She clasped her hands under her chin to support her head, brought her elbows to her knees, and planted one foot securely on each armrest. Breathing out with a full and contented sigh, she began to hum, almost prayer-like, before relaxing into a silent, motionless pose, her back to the partially open door. I edged forward. She nodded, very slowly, down, then up, then down again. Moving closer, I craned my neck just over the threshold and peered into the room.

Without turning, she raised her hand, extended her index finger, which did a little dance like a caterpillar crawling along a leaf, and beckoned me into her cell.

‘Don’t fall’, were the first cautious words I spoke to her.

‘Oh, I won’t fall,’ she replied, ‘I never fall.’

All our encounters are just like that – spontaneous, bordering on bizarre. She has a way of disturbing normality, to the point that I believe nothing will ever be normal for me again. 28 is a woman with a number for a name, that in itself is strange, but it may well prove to be the least of her eccentricities. On the first day that we met, she insisted that her existence amounted to nothing. I am beginning to realise she represents both nothing and everything. Her beginnings are endless, and her endings have no beginnings. She carries with her none of her past, living only for the moment, yet, through every breath, her soul conveys the entire history of humankind.

I am compelled to turn to writing for the first time in my life to untangle the mess I find myself in. I'm learning to assemble my scattered uncertainties. It was 28's idea to start this journal. 'Recording your thoughts may be therapeutic,' she said. I know the words on these pages are more a composition of her words and her thoughts rather than my own, and not always conveyed as eloquently and accurately as they deserve to be, but they offer a means to my liberation, so I value them and record them faithfully. I need to write about so many things, so much more than merely about this woman, but it is a start. When I have the courage maybe I will write about my son. It is Andre, lying in a bed, upstairs in the same hospital as 28, who needs my attention. If I thought that anything I wrote here would honestly help him, I would begin now and never stop. For the moment I will stick to writing about 28. Why her words have stayed so vividly in my mind, I don't know. Perhaps it is because I am tired, and because the past days have been such an ordeal, maybe that has something to do with it. Now that I have started writing about her, I will keep going, at least for a while. I will describe her, if I can. Although, to completely define her, her appearance, her complex manner, her speech, her mode of communication, would be an impossible task. I lack the necessary devices. I

am a novice at all this. I will try to reconstruct her phrases, try to recall her stories as she conveyed them to me. Something like this:

28~~

Standing on the edge. High above it all. Trying to detach, trying to unhook the last rusty barbs from my skin. Buildings like walls of a labyrinth. Amazing. Chilling. Many people below – many small labyrinthine people searching for exits, and hoping that the way out is a way in, an invitation to something new. Some hope that the way in is a way out. But the realisation, it comes, as a sharp SMACK in the face with a cold hand. After the smack, all and nothing at the same time. Then just a silent lonely quiver. Reality is a gaze into nothingness, into an abyss. Oh, to glide into the blackness of that abyss, to turn at will, dive and spin. Then to come soaring out, in total control, rising above the man-made maze and the man-made mess. But for what? Another new beginning? Better, perhaps, to drop, plummeting limp and lifeless into that black hole, spiralling downward, wingless, with no desire left to flap ... They were my last thoughts before I awoke in this hospital. I had been standing on the edge.

It was a long climb – twenty-eight flights of stairs. Life is a long climb, more treacherous for some than others. Twenty-eight years. Twenty-eight flights. Twenty-eight years sounds so little, so simple, so easy to write off. We should count our lives in days not years. Ten thousand two hundred and twenty-two days – including leap years – of looking at the same face in the mirror. You don't notice the gradual transformation in the pores of your skin, in your eyes, in your soul. Ten thousand two hundred and twenty-two days, only to find ... No shout to be heard. No monument erected in honour of your existence.

I tried to be like other women, tried to be like my mother. But none of that came naturally for me. I toyed at being like men, studying them, acting like them; they are sometimes easier to understand. But there was no common ground for me there, nowhere to settle my self, nowhere to bed down for the night. It was like trying to stay under water when you needed to come up for air. I was lost in many ways, without soul, without mind. Spiritless. But all I wanted was to be lost with everyone else; then I would feel the comfort of belonging. To be part of a tribe, any tribe, was what I yearned for, even if it was a lost tribe, just to be a part. I wanted to feel their displacement with them, their grief, even their guilt. Instead, step-by-step, day-by-day, year-after-year, my own personal exile swelled and consumed me. I was an alien in my own land. I wanted to jump. I wanted desperately to escape.~~

She paused for a very long time, almost trancelike. I was uncertain how to act, not sure whether she was waiting for me to comment, or if I had offended her in some way. I wondered if she ever intended to speak again. I thought about prodding her, or calling a nurse, or just quietly slipping away. Suddenly she took a small plastic bag from her lap and offered its contents to me. Jellybeans. After hesitating, I chose a red one and a yellow one. She said that a nurse had given them to her, in an attempt to encourage her to eat.

‘I’m in no hurry to fill my belly,’ she said, shaking the bag in front of me. ‘Going without food is the best way to clear your mind.’

I chewed alone and in silence. Being with a stranger in a strange room, and unwilling to break the quietude, I was like a child that had been given a treat to pacify them. Jellybeans of all things, my son’s favourite. The sweetness and the colours of the lollies began blending with my own childhood memories. I slipped into a state of

contentment, waiting for my host to direct me, but it was as if she were momentarily concerned with something other than what our conversation could offer. She was elsewhere.

Now, after getting to know 28 over the past few days, I am beginning to learn that this is her usual way. There is a subtle aspect about her, something in her behaviour that is unique and not open to everyone. It is a silent communication, and with practise it is possible to detect where her thoughts are – never precisely though, but approximately. It is like an awareness of her mind's general location, whether she is collecting information in order to continue a conversation, or whether she is pondering ideas in another more private space and time. It is subtle, but important.

Although she has never made me feel unwelcome, I now instinctively understand when 28 needs to be alone, when there is nothing left to say, and when it is time for me to leave. She speaks only when it is necessary, and it is not unusual for vast intervals of silence to punctuate her words. At those moments a deep sense of calmness prevails. For her, ordinary communication is conveyed by an overall feeling, a feeling difficult to define. Her audience needs to be sensitive to delicate nuances; the slightest gesture, the gentlest movement of her body, the gradual change in facial tension, skin colour, and complexion all convey so much about her. At least that is what I am beginning to learn.

My standard of education is fair, but my background is from a class that prefers to work with its hands. Most of my relatives are tradesmen or farmers, with the odd restaurateur, and one accountant. Even though I had both the ability and inclination to go further with study, it was not encouraged. I still dabble in personal interests like architecture and structural design, but carpentry is my trade – I have become respected as a cabinet-

maker. I find time to read often enough – manuals, magazines, and newspapers, even the occasional novel if the story is to my liking. Most nights, as I am arranging the words on these pages, a dictionary is necessary for support, in more ways than one. Beneath a solitary lamp I sit. My language-fattened lexicon close by on my desk is either propped under my left elbow preventing me from toppling sideways into sleep, or else it is pinned down somewhere on the other side with its binding splitting at the seams as I flick through its deteriorating pages, searching, in an often vain attempt, for the right words to convey 28's style and her distinctive, often feisty, tone.

I understand her thoughts but not always her words, and I fear that in my naïve way my mediocrity may consist more of betrayal than portrayal. And with so much confusion in my life, unable to reconstruct even myself, I doubt whether I have the ability to assemble and disseminate the words and ideas of someone else. But I can only hope that at least something of what I offer is palatable.

28~

If I were stronger and a bit meaner, I'd have bullied my way through the world out there instead of taking flight. I took flight because of fright. A little downtown sojourn took me up twenty-eight flights of stairs. I entered that building in the same way that I entered this life: agoraphobically, with a silent gaping mouth, a tight chest, and a few hesitant, sharp, shallow breaths; then the first full gush of air, overwhelming and icy cold, bringing me to life. Before long I headed for the safety of the stairs. But not lavish, carpeted, stairs. No! I was taking flight, taken by fright. I fled for the concrete stairwell out of sight. The stale odour of the unexplored filled my nostrils.

The climb ahead, a mystery unfolding, unwritten and untold. Steps spiralling upward. I climbed, always upward. That is a fact. Many steps for one person. Just one

push of an elevator button for those on the inside. They get to where they're going faster, but they don't know how. Someone else is pulling the strings. Reaching the first level is like landing in the sandpit of life. If I try hard enough, then I can almost touch that sandpit, feel my fingers raking in the grains.

Are we ever really able to recall the forgotten, or do we make a collage in our minds of arbitrary images, a random amalgam constructed from different times, even from other people's lives? I have no right to claim ownership of that little girl now. No right to claim that moment as my own. Who was she?

And what happens to those memories that we thought were forgotten, those moments in our past that have been buried for a very long time until an event or a person reminds us of one of them, and the memory comes rushing back? Where has it been all that time? Really forgotten? Nowhere? Impossible! Where is Forgotten, anyway? And when does a moment cease to exist? When you give up the fight? Bah! Fight or flight, take flight from fright; or drop.

In the sandpit is the place to be, and the place to begin. I met a dribbler there. He was a tyrannical sand merchant, an overfed three or four year-old megalomaniac with chubby little fingers and toes that no light had ever shone between. He over-salivated, and continually sucked the drool back in and out between his lips just for fun. When he took control of the sandpit you could see that he felt exceedingly proud of himself, so much so that his podgy little bulbous crimson cheeks puffed out and almost completely buried his nose. His face looked like a new born baby's buttocks with a pea wedged between them. He disliked me, resented my younger, more carefree ways. But I was proud to be aged one – crawlin', and a kickin', and a pullin' everything down around my head. Crawling around was my own mode of transport, my freedom. The dribbling little chubby megalomaniac who never let me play in the sand was chauffeured around in a

high-tech, three-wheeled, carbon-graphite, space-shuttle. ‘This is my domain,’ he would shout from the sand, although perhaps not quite in those words. Then he would beat his chest, and thump the ground. ‘Gruff!’

I, on the other hand, was a sensitive, understanding, new age kind of kid with curls; and overalls; and a sun hat; and a charming smile – with dimples. Oh, and I never wet my disposable nappies, not intentionally anyway. I was trying desperately to get out of that habit; it weighed me down, drew too much attention, and took up too much time. How shameful, lying flat on your back being hoisted up and down by your ankles – washed, wiped, lubricated, and repackaged into a miniature Sumo wrestler. Because of my caring and somewhat inquisitive disposition, I began thinking more and more about that dribbler who, day after day, built his empires in the sand. ‘What is he so afraid of, that he needs to be in control and hoard his possessions like that? And where did that fear come from? Was he born that way, with an inflated need to selfishly accumulate castles in the sand?’ Fear is a great motivator. And a powerful eraser.

I didn’t have the answers back then. Not in-your-head kind of answers, anyway. More of an instinctual response to the situation. I destroyed one or two of his bridges and roads, at least I think I did – it happened so long ago. If in reality I didn’t, then I should have, so I will now. I’ll have a good kick. I can see it clearly. You will have to excuse me, if I indulge. After all I was just a baby at that stage, wanting to play and make friends. I didn’t know the rules. I didn’t know that his goal was to build build build, ever faster and ever higher. And anyway, in my opinion, his building ability was second-rate, structurally inept. He didn’t even have the right tools. As for me, I wanted to enjoy the texture of the sand, sprinkle it and spread it, carry it around in my creases. Yes, maybe I mashed the occasional castle under my heels, or speared the odd house with my toes as I pivoted on my sand filled nappy – and I know that in his eyes I was

just a crazy, destructive mashing-machine – but I was simply expressing my freedom and experiencing the sand. I was doing my own creating, spreading the grains randomly, letting them form their own arbitrary landscape. And I wanted to share the sand with everyone.~~

2 point of view

‘Sometimes there are parts of ourselves that need to be gently teased out. We are protective, like an oyster shielding its precious pearl.’

But there are emotions inside my shell that I am uncertain about. I fear that if they escape, I will have no control over them. Just like the time I thought my son had lied to me. I blamed him for turning the power on to my work-shed. I started lecturing him, about safety and honesty. He hadn’t actually done anything wrong; it was a misunderstanding, between him, his mother, and myself. But I couldn’t stop, not once I started. That shed was a dangerous place with all those power tools in it. Andre cried, and the more he cried the angrier I became, and the angrier I became the more I yelled at him. I tortured his feelings and destroyed his innocence. At the same time I killed a part of myself. I killed that part of me that promised I would never do anything like that to my son.

Andre and I talked, after I calmed down. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said, as only a child can, a child willing to take the blame in order to keep the peace – and to protect love. It made

me wonder how people can start out being so similar when it comes to emotions yet try so hard to become different. Trying so hard makes you forget, and eventually you forget how to behave and how to forgive. If I could be like anyone in this world when it comes to forgiveness, I would want to be like my son.

Approaching her room from the corridor was like entering the scene of a murder. 28 was slumped backwards over the middle of the bed, her knees bent and hooked over the side, her sockless feet limp and motionless. Stepping cautiously around to her head, my eyes followed her arms to her hands and her delicately parted fingers dangling loosely. Her blonde hair was spread like tentacles over the faintly patterned linoleum floor. Wearing tights and a loose shirt with long sleeves, she could have been a dancer in a dramatic pose. But was she dead? Her mouth seemed twisted, her face like an ogling grotesque mask. It took some time for me to realise that she was trying to smile. She must have sensed my concern and emitted an awkward, indecipherable squawk.

Keeping her head inverted while trying to speak forced the corpuscles of her face to swell. 'It's gravity,' she remarked. 'The weight of your flesh, especially your cheeks pulling down, distorts your face. And the dizziness, then the nausea, nearly cause you to faint; but that goes if you concentrate, if you focus on just one object.'

I began to tilt sideways, first my head, then gradually my whole body, trying to relate, trying to assimilate.

'I'm just looking at the legs of the chair,' she informed me.

I tried to do the same.

'And at the skirting-board behind it.' She pointed. 'And at the dust on the floor, and a narrow strip of paper that seems to have found its way under there. I don't recall seeing it yesterday.'

‘At the age of two I used to bend over backwards from a standing posture, like a contortionist, and look at the world upside down while walking on my hands and feet. Then later on at school, in about year seven or eight, I became interested in gymnastics; I would have been content to spend the rest of my life hanging from bars, ropes, poles, swings, rings, trees, dining tables, doors, clotheslines, anything – you name it, I hung from it. Bat-girl! ‘She excels at gymnastics,’ the instructor said on my report card. ‘Pity she doesn’t apply herself as enthusiastically to Maths and Science,’ wrote my house master.

‘It really is a different way of looking at the world, inverted like this. Not for everyone though; my younger sister howled when she was hung upside down.’

I was beginning to lose my balance and was glad to have us both back to the upright position.

A soothing ‘Mmmm’ issued from 28 as she rose, scratching her head, ‘It tingles, stimulates the scalp.’

She inquired about my son, but I had little information to convey. Andre’s condition was still the same, flat on his back, upstairs in the children’s ward, tubes inserted in his nose and mouth, needles penetrating his veins. At every visit I smooth back his golden-brown hair and plead with his eyes for a sign. But there is no response, no sight of the striking blueness of his full-of-fascination eyes that once penetrated a world so fresh and alive for him. His eyes no longer scan intensely, no longer question, no longer weep. Andre, a twelve year-old who only weeks ago had told me how grown up he had become – too old for Harry Potter books – now lay as if his life had ended, like a broken angel found fallen to earth. My hands, hard and rough, seem too large and too awkward to caress that angel, seem as if they would damage his tender skin and draw blood. If a stranger happened by, they would believe they were witnessing an

intimate moment between two souls, one comforting the other in a compassionate exchange. But there is no communication between us, no awareness by my son of my presence, no matter how hard I try to believe there is.

This morning, two nurses arrived to wash Andre. I had spoken with them many times individually, but now they arrived as a duo. I stood up politely. Little was said in reply to my greetings except, 'It's bath time.' My first reaction when they began to draw the curtain around the bed was to leave. The smaller, more frail nurse hesitated, fixed her uniform, checked the band that held back her dark hair, and fiddled with the trolley of cloths, sponges, and a bowl of water; she was uncertain whether to begin while I was there. The taller one, much larger in all proportions, with a gentle, chubby face, knew the routine. She did most of the lifting and the huffing and puffing. Clearly an old hand at this, she grunted out monosyllabic commands and otherwise indicated directives by thrusting her dimpled chin about as if conducting an orchestra. I was in the way. And I felt uncomfortable. But I was glad I stayed. At the end I took a towel and helped dry my boy – his back, under his arms, around his neck. 'Have you washed behind your ears properly, Andre?' I dabbed his cheeks and eye lids as softly as I could. Each time I lifted the towel away I hoped that his eyes would open and he would smile.

28~~

Different angles. Altered perspectives. A smorgasbord of languages and foreign styles. Making no sense, without words. Words forming on the page. Words twisting in the mouth. Unable to think any more without words. Words were designed for stick-on labels. Conveyor belts carry slabs of processed thoughts. But not from the soul. Soul thoughts. Soul-writing. At the end of the day, the language we employ is of little

consequence if meaning is not conveyed. The shade of a person's skin or the texture of their hair, the propensity of their nose or the configuration of their toes. Try looking at a human body, try looking at a tree, just try to look at any object, without forming words. Maybe, if we look at the world, and look at ourselves, without the usual words, then we will be able to construct soul-words.~~

She paused, then without warning – snap – like an acrobat or one of those beetles that click, her position changed, she was arching herself backwards on top of the bed with her navel pointing towards the ceiling.

‘This is called kissing the sky with your belly.’

She held her position for three long breaths before gradually lowering herself down again to the mattress. Flat on her back, she brought her legs straight up – L-shaped – then continued until her toes came to rest on the pillow above her head.

‘We must take a different approach, you and I, come at it from different angles. Be on the look-out for alternate signs.’

Her voice was muffled, her face buried beneath her thighs.

‘You know, everybody is entitled to a different point of view. When I was climbing the stairs in that office building, between the first and second floors, I was thinking about that little dribbler back in the sandpit at crèche, the one I told you about. Perhaps he was entitled to his views as much as I was to mine, even if I couldn't agree with his obnoxiously determined ways.

‘I was taking the last few steps before drawing up to the second floor – or so the sign above the door informed me – when I stepped on something hard that scraped underfoot. It was a sharp piece of glass, part of a mirror, triangular in shape, smaller than the palm of my hand. I picked it up, able to see the reflection of only one of my eyes at a

time as I tilted it from side to side. Turning the piece over, I read the remains of a few words scrawled in a cursive style on the back, with some bits crossed out like the draft of a letter or a poem – ack, lac, refract – fragments like that. I think it was an ode to someone named Jack. I began to play with the idea that maybe my companion in the sandpit was called Jack. Maybe I was holding the shard of a poem written to him.’

She began gradually curling herself into a ball while holding an imaginary mirror to her face with one hand.

‘I remembered,’ she continued, ‘a day when he came to the sandpit with small paper flags – coloured blue, white, and red with vertical bars. He used them to crown the turrets of his castles. His mother was delighted when she came that afternoon, declaring that her clever Jack had reconstructed the entire island of Mont-St-Michel, with its soaring abbey, fortified towers, and even the humble St Aubert’s chapel.’

‘The more I think about it now, the more I’m convinced that my dribbler was indeed called Jack. I see our parents and the caregivers introducing us and trying to teach us each other’s names – and the names of all the objects in the universe. The problem is, the objects changed for me after that, they lost their identity. And Jack also became just a name and no longer my unique little dribbler. And then one day another Jack arrived in the sandpit, and later on, in my other world away from the sandpit, an auntie gave birth to yet another Jack. Did this mean that all Jacks were the same, that my Jack was just a duplicate Jack?’

Rolling onto her side, propping her arm under her head, 28 now moved into a somewhat more comfortable position. Beginning by facing away from me, she methodically raised her leg in the air, up and down, like human scissors. Eventually she turned, repeating the exercise with her other leg.

Sometimes I assemble an idea that I think must be close to the truth, like Jack in the sandpit, then I wonder if I am just deceiving myself. So many stories and so many points of view. Which ones and who can you trust? It's like looking into two mirrors at once.

At some time, in the beginning, I believe I must have known what could only be described as an innocent truth, when I existed as a whole entity, before my personality began to split – multiplying until I was no longer certain who I was. As the years unfolded I moved further from that truth, each single part of myself opposing all the others, trying to manipulate, trying to win out.

I'm sure we are all fascinated with mirrors at some stage, crawling up to our own reflection, amazed by the ability of the other that we see before us – a miming toy, capable of imitating with precision our every movement. Yet some of us are disturbed by the presence of that other, mocking, competitive intruder.

I wonder what Jack was like. Perhaps, as a toddler moving into his second year, jetting about his parents' home in his little 'trotte-bébé', he was very happy. Happy bumping into walls, happy with his mother's soft but full breasts, happy with receiving all he demanded, and happy in his infantile reality. Happy that is, until one day when he gazed into the long gilded mirror in his parents' bedroom. To anyone witnessing this event, it would seem that nothing unusual was taking place, just the normal outbursts of a child's laughter – the monkeying around, the fascination with arm and body movements and the many variations of distorted facial expressions. But perhaps Jack turned blue then white then red, and began to shiver – a turning point that would change his life forever.

Gazing at himself, perhaps he realized that he was not the centre of the universe as he'd been led to believe, perhaps he saw something that resembled how others saw

him. 'There are two of me,' he would declare, 'and I don't like that other one that I see, that blob that is at once inside me, yet outside me. It wants to replace me. That thing, as seen by others, could indeed be anything they fancy, anything they care to interpret me as. And how dare they! To think, that who I am may be determined by them, and always differently, depending on which one of them you care to listen to!'

He would be astonished by the idea, the unending possibilities and the uncountable perspectives overwhelming his infant mind. With his sense of self shattered, he would cringe at the notion that his appearance could and would be compared to others and by others, and that he was who he was in terms of those others. 'I am not omnipotent,' he would shout, 'and this thing that I have become, this presence, or lack of it, is irrevocably common. What will become of my social standing, my position in life, my future? My god, I am one of them!'

I left her dangling backwards over the end rail of her bed, arms folded like the wings of a bat, her tone of voice deepening with the change of pressure from her new position. In a barely audible, low drone the words, 'Au revoir, Monsieur, take care of yourself,' faded behind me.

These first few entries have been written in retrospect. 'Retrospect' is a word that 28 often uses. I like its power – it takes you somewhere quickly. 'History' is the opposite, both the word and its meaning are slow. So is 'yesterday'. Gradually, I will catch up to the present day with my writing. I already have several tales to tell from my encounters with 28. And for more than a week my son has lain unconscious. Both of them are imprisoned in the same building. Maybe I will keep writing tonight until I finish these first entries, filling the pages with stories and thoughts, and then I will continue each

evening, after each visit to the hospital to sit beside my son, and later to drop in on 28. I will write, at least until this ordeal is over. It is difficult to calm the flood of memories – of my life, my son, my ex-wife, and now this strange, but intriguing, woman, 28, who I talk with, sometimes for hours.

But should I question my sanity when discussions with 28 are all that are really tangible for me? ‘Tangible’ is another of her favourite words. Visions of my son, Andre, are sadly like a dream, but I must try to make them my reality. What I used to call ‘everyday life’ has ceased to exist. At the end of each day, when I drag myself back to my ground-floor apartment to try to sleep, I see my son – disappearing around corners, calling from the hall, or standing behind me in the mirror as I wash or shave. My mind is bathed in images of him, past and present – from months ago in a home with his mother, and more recently during weekend visits to this box-like dwelling in which I hide, barely existing. I hear his breathing – my own breath falling in with the rhythm of his quiet exhalations as if I were still by his bedside.

3 the scribe

What is it with 28 and names? She has an obsession for doing away with them one moment only to replace them at some later stage with incredibly obvious ones of her own fancy. On our third meeting she contrived the pet name of ‘Scribe’ for me. And her behaviour in general was really quite erratic, almost rude at times. It was her tone more than anything else.

I’m not sure what to think because part of what is fascinating about 28’s nature is her spontaneity. Maybe I am overreacting, maybe I just don’t like the idea of a younger person being so frank, maybe I feel uncomfortable or threatened because she is a woman. But her sudden lecturing came as a surprise. And I really felt that her behaviour was uncalled for. On my way home on the bus, and later that night in bed, I tried to decipher what she said. The more I thought about it however, the messier it got; and now I am still trying to unravel the mystery because somehow I feel responsible for the incident.

I suppose I had been more inquisitive and honest than I had been previously, and more willing to talk about myself. But I soon regretted my openness. What resulted from a couple of harmless questions was a barrage of opinions that I was totally unprepared for. Her outburst was at moments insulting, yet at other times almost comical. And naturally, in her magical way, she softened it all to the point that it was difficult to be sure what she really meant. 28 is cryptic by nature, and cryptic by name. Unfortunately, recent events have re-enforced my belief that nobody is reliable, that people are too inconsistent, and that it is almost impossible for them to follow simple rules and behaviour.

I'm a craftsman; my work relies on precision and planning, cutting and shaping pieces of timber accurately so that they fit together seamlessly. I follow a step by step process: beginning with knowing exactly what I want to achieve and then seeing the results materialise by meticulously shaping each piece, the smaller parts fitting together to form the whole. If along the way I make a mistake, if just one piece doesn't quite fit, then the finished product is useless. What good is a lopsided bookshelf or a tallboy with drawers that you can't open properly?

This is how the third day unfolded, as best as I can recall.

I was walking down the corridor in the basement after exiting the lift; I was in my own world, still struggling with the latest news from upstairs – the meaning behind EEGs and CATs – and hoping that any radiation from scanners will not make Andre's condition any worse. They can't find anything seriously wrong with him, and the sooner he comes back to consciousness the greater his chances of a complete recovery. But his body has had a great shock – strong enough to throw him into a coma – so they keep telling me repeatedly.

‘You have to understand, it takes time to recover from such a state.’

‘But a large percentage never recover,’ I protested. ‘And he’s not responding to treatment.’

I know those thoughts are corrosive, but what can I do when all I get in reply to my frustration is, ‘His condition is to be expected; he has had a great shock.’ Nothing concrete, nothing definite. No real action.

I’m fed with figures and statistics from documentation that has been compiled from extensive research, comparisons are made and charted, previous cases examined. They are dealing with percentages on a chart while my boy lies there lifeless. They can catalogue all they like when this is over, not now while there is work to be done. They say his progress is normal – under the circumstances. But what progress? And what is normal? I feel useless. And I cry.

As I turned towards 28’s door I was glad to see her legs swaying from the edge of the bed where she sat, reading. I was anxious to take my mind off the thoughts that kept repeating.

‘Everything is open to interpretation,’ she muttered, closing the book.

I tried recalling what I had been thinking about since we last spoke, in regards to our conversation about differences in perspectives and wanting to be the centre of the universe, but 28 was not interested in ideas of yesterday, except to say that maybe some of us never get the chance to be the centre of the universe to begin with.

‘Maybe there is not much love around. Maybe there is competition – for attention, for ascendancy, or for the breast,’ she said, moving to the chair. ‘So, can we miss what we’ve never had?’

I wasn’t certain.

‘My mother,’ she continued, ‘would laugh in the face of the whole idea. I can imagine her now, boasting, “I’ve always been the centre of the universe. That’s how I’ve survived.”’

So some of us, I thought, have always been the centre of the universe, some of us never, and the rest have tasted the pleasure, perhaps briefly, only to have it wrenched away from them.

‘You know, Scribe, I believe that emptiness for one person may be clutter for another.’ I agreed, adding that one person’s loneliness may be another’s solitude.

I tried to engage her further on the subject, continuing to make comparisons, some amusing ones I thought, but she was distancing herself from me and my words. I inquired about her health and about her plans for the next day. But the sincerity of my questions seemed false. Our pleasantries continued for a while with only minor responses from 28. From time to time she gazed out the window; she seemed pleased to have my company but not my words. That is until I mentioned, with no real intention, her name. ‘What’s your name, your real name?’ I had struck a sensitive nerve.

28~~

Names are not necessary; they are just tags. You know what they do? They imprison. Usually we are named after someone or something that we are forced to have a connection with. It’s a sticky thing that’s hard to dissolve, stays with you like gum on the sole of your shoe, or bird-shit in your hair. They call me 28. That’s my room number. See, there on the door. This is room 0028, twenty-eighth room, in the basement.

‘See how she’s going in twenty-eight,’ they say, or ‘How’s twenty-eight today.’

So that’s who I am now.

Who are you, and whereabouts in your life are you, Scribe? Are you at the threshold of a new beginning, putting the finishing touches on a long chapter perhaps, or are you just floating in limbo? Have you much to learn, or are your senses dulled from inactivity? Or do you, like so many others, feel that you've learnt about as much as you need to learn in order to survive, and that will do? That's it for a lifetime? School's out, for ever – unless something manages to squirm its way out of the dross pit that you're sinking into and bites you on the arse.

I like my number though, and I like the view from the window in this room. Upstairs, on the ground floor, I'd be in room 028, then 128, and so on through the ascending floors. I'm at the bottom again. But it's not a bottom, more like a new beginning, a new cycle that leaves behind the shed skin of its predecessor. The basement is a place of conception, a womb. We pop out onto the ground floor. Splat. To begin our climb, one floor at a time. It is good to return to the basement for inspiration. That is where creativity comes from.~~

28 is like gradually shifting sand. By the time I think I have her pegged, she has already moved. She is an impossible puzzle. She accepts all nations and all beliefs, yet aligns with none in particular. I haven't guessed her nationality, and her political and social inclinations are obscured by riddles. She claims that her allusiveness is her prerogative, and that everyone is entitled to privacy. She is boisterous one minute and silent the next. She is a woman with many frontiers, throwing in a *ciao bella* after discussing films by Bertolucci or Fellini, or suddenly declaring that there is more to life than power, and that *Übermenschen* are just a fantasy. She switches from Northern European to Middle Eastern, from African to Asian. She is like Joan of Arc one minute, like a Tibetan monk the next, then, twisting like a Russian gymnast, she quotes lines from Solzhenitsyn.

Do you believe in secrets? Believing in secrets, like the ones your grandmother whispered to you when you were very young as she tucked you into a warm bed on a cold night, keeps us interested, keeps us hoping. We adore and are intrigued by the unknown. A secret is unique by nature. Secrets are individual because they are impossible to compare, unless they are not secrets any more. So secrets are special, unknown and interesting. Wanting to be unique, that is why we keep secrets. I could be unknown for you if you like. I could keep secrets, let them filter out slowly, disguised.

A good story reveals only as much as is necessary to keep the reader on the hook. If I were a character in a novel, I would give the impression that I was unpredictable, even unstable, maybe with a suicidal tendency. The reader would anxiously turn the pages, hungry for more information – will she or won't she jump at the end of the book. Interspersed with hints of my mental state would be facts and clues uncovered by a second character, a type of investigator, like yourself perhaps. You would share your discoveries with the reader. Taking on the role of scribe you would keep a journal of your thoughts. And those thoughts and the thoughts of the reader would be one and the same. You would embellish the story with certain particulars concerning the surroundings, giving it a sense of place and time. You would give the characters form by describing their physical features.

But how far would you go? How much would you divulge? Would your observations be concerned merely with decorations, the external adornments that create the façade with little insight into what lies under the surface? Or would you delve into the hidden desires and motivations that drive a character to their end?

Please, Scribe, do not dally in the mundane. Superficial descriptions may fascinate some readers, but they will never fully satisfy the erudite enthusiast whose undernourished soul strives to transcend the murky depths of the literary bog.~~

What was I supposed to feel – anger, intrigue, confusion, amusement? I’m still trying to make sense of it all. Erratic at best is all that I can say about her at this moment. She added three separate, yet somehow related, ideas to finish off with, moving from one to the other without warning, yet they seem to connect, seem to be about the same thing – language and writing. A slight pause, as she glanced out the window, marked her paragraph breaks.

28 triptych~~

The novel I’m reading is a series of discussions between two characters. In a passage towards the end, the author, who has written himself in as one of the characters, claims that human nature is predictable and universal, and that in thousands of years nothing very much has changed. He believes that everything is foreseeable and really quite simple. And all is connected and interchangeable. If it takes a mere suggestion or hint to change how we view or interpret things, then that shows the universality of all things. He argues for example that the title of his book could actually have been anything, and that although it is seemingly simple, it is both simple and complex, standing for one thing, yet pointing to everything, Try changing the title, he suggests. What if it were called ‘Conversations with God’ or perhaps even ‘Conversations with Self’. And maybe play around with the names of the characters, try changing his name to Jesus or Mohammed or Buddha or Gandhi or any other religious or theosophical disciple, and then imagine him engaged in a discourse with his God, who is actually the other character, who is a symbolic God, an inner God, or even himself. He would then be both

characters. Is the concept of God really dead, he then asks, if we are still able to participate in fundamental metaphysical questions like who we are and how and why we should live? And how far have we strayed morally and ethically when we avoid issues like that? Are we ultimately avoiding the Self? I'm reading the novel in a different light now. It is an interesting exercise. I've realised that all we ever do is give modern interpretations to age old concepts.

As Scribe you could relate my impression of you in your writing. I'm a character who sees you as being of medium build. Strong across the shoulders. Not too much of a belly; ha, got you, you pulled it in. You can breathe normally again. Your forearms are strong and firm, probably from sawing and hammering and making things, but you have gentle eyes, and your hands are only rough on the surface. You are healthy, and handsome – if I may add – for a man of about thirty-four or thirty-five. You're smiling, probably because you are closer to forty and I have paid you a compliment.

Foreign languages cavort like beautiful music, their exotic words are magical sounds, intense and exciting and mysterious. Then you learn their meaning, and the magic is gone. I'm not going anywhere for the next few weeks; you are most welcome to drop in whenever you please.~~

I'm becoming both curator and narrator. Whether that is a role constructed from my own designs or led by the fancy of 28, is uncertain, but I am feeling increasingly responsible for the words on these pages. My name, given to me at birth by my parents, alive in memory alone, is also being transformed. It is redundant. Am I to adopt the name of 'Scribe' and to undergo a process of self-examination, exploring both inner and outer

worlds? Somehow I sense that the answers to the most allusive questions are sitting right in front of my nose.

I am at the hospital every day, for most of the day. I wonder if it is wise to get so close to someone I hardly know. When I work with my hands, I understand the timber I am shaping. Each piece has an identity all of its own. I take it and study it and get to know it. Tapping with my fingertips and caressing with my palms, I determine its contours, its grain, its individuality. I feel its weight, its smoothness, and its hardness. I understand every unique feature and every flaw before I begin shaping and creating with it. Understanding my son has been like that, taking every step as a unique experience. Sure he is just like other boys; he has hair, and skin, and teeth, and possesses a heart beat. But the beat of his heart, the feel of his skin, the way his hair curls slightly, and the way he smiles, is like no other.

4 responsibility

Am I neglecting my boy with all these words and stories, dwelling in a kind of obsession with myself? I thought about church today. Is that the place to find salvation and comfort? Perhaps I should pray, or talk to a priest; maybe I should see a counsellor. But I pray and counsel in my own silent way. And, above all, I have a gut feeling – like the anticipation you have when watching a movie or reading a love story – that in the end everything will be all right. I will wait, hoping, with confidence, for that positive outcome. Whether it arrives through instinct, faith in God, Karma, or some other means, I shall see.

I wonder if the outcome is predestined? Maybe this whole affair is a test – character-building stuff? I don't think I'm a bad man. And although I'm being pushed out of my son's life, I do what I can. Andre is suffering, yet he is the least to blame. Should I be writing for him? What would I write anyway? Clichés? When I think of what to say to Andre, my feelings are reduced to the same few words at the end of each day. Instead of filling the pages of this journal with those words, I write nothing more

than tentative scribble on endless scraps of paper. At the very start, there were so many pages that made no sense. Then one day, the page that now sits at the front became the first page. All those deleted pages that rambled on endlessly had been trying to say the same thing. I have learnt from that, and although what I now write looks paralysed on the page without potency, I will write the only thing there is to say to my son – Andre, I love you!

My ex-wife sneered and growled today; she looked as if she might go for my throat. Nothing has changed. She avoids me as much as she can, yet still can't resist an argument, even at times like this, even in the same room as Andre; she just can't resist. He lay there in need of support, I was sitting next to him, hoping that somehow he knew I was there. I flicked through a magazine from time to time, stroked his arm, and waited for any slight movement or sound. I was just trying to make him a little more comfortable by adjusting the bed, and the sheets under him, and his pillow. I carefully manoeuvred my way around wires and leads used for monitoring his condition and ducked under a tube that fed glucose and such to him intravenously. She walked in, and typically, I jumped at the shrillness of her voice.

‘What are you doing there?’

Startled, and turning too quickly, I nearly caused an accident.

‘Oh, it's you,’ I said, feeling as if I had been caught doing something wrong.

That's how it usually starts, with an innocent or selfless deed twisted into something ugly. Then she manages to turn the whole situation into something personal, as if everything I do is planned solely to aggravate her. Herself always before others. But that I can understand, not the abuse. Why call me an idiot? Why carry on like she does? I can't understand why she still hates me so much.

28 was sitting cross-legged in her chair facing the centre of the room. Today she was wearing a hospital gown that took on the qualities of a meditation robe. Her head was held high on her straight neck and spine, one hand gently rested in the palm of the other in her lap. She welcomed me with a slow blink of her eyes, turning briefly towards me; her hair, darker, a light-brown, perhaps fawn, dead straight, and shorter now at shoulder length, swayed heavily like chain armour. She appeared at that moment as part Buddha part Cleopatra.

‘You’ve cut your fringe,’ I remember commenting. ‘I can see your eyes.’

‘We always think we can see people better when they cut their hair. Although, I suppose we do try to hide behind our hair sometimes, and our clothes, and all sorts of other fashions.’

‘I like it. The cut suits you very much.’

‘I didn’t cut it for you.’ She waited. ‘But I’m glad you like it.’ Then smiled.

She changes like a chameleon. But more striking than a few superficial alterations, is this woman’s remarkable tendency to transform physically – her features, her movements, her skin tone, seem to respond to her mental and emotional state. Even the colour of her eyes appears to change according to her mood.

Yesterday, I was certain her eyes were brown, contrasting well with her fairer hair; certainly not the deep blue I saw today. I’m sure I remember a distinct moment, when her hair was illuminated by a splinter of light radiating from between the curtains. A halo shone around her head – copper, gold, and deep-red – like the colour of desert sands at sunset. At that moment I was aware of a penetrating flash emanating from deep within brown eyes. I recall that image vividly because at that moment the glow in her

room invoked memories of remote outback travels, of open space and emptiness, and of a vast array of textures and timbers – red gum, ash, oak.

‘I had an encounter with my ex-wife. I didn’t need that today.’

28 studied me with a sideways glance, waiting for more.

‘She hates me, so much. I don’t understand where that comes from.’

28’s eyes widened.

‘She hates you because she hates herself. Every time she sees you, or thinks about you, her past comes flooding back; and probably not just the past with you, but all pasts. You’re a reminder of her failings.’

‘I spent years thinking about that, going down that path, but it got me nowhere. I tried everything, from being supportive and encouraging, to playing it tough, but all it got me was a divorce.’

‘Whose idea was that?’

‘The divorce?’

‘Yes; yours or hers.’

‘She threatened for years. No, not really threatened, but said that was what she wanted, what would make her happy.’

‘Did it, make her happy?’

‘No. She’s been even worse since, complaining about everything and everyone. Yelling at Andre for nothing. Drinking, and everything else, more than ever.’

‘That must be difficult. Maybe we should change the subject, if it upsets you, or if it’s none of my business.’

‘No that’s fine. It’s just all so confusing. Why can’t we just get over it, no matter whose fault it was or is. We’re stuck in the same groove. I just wish there was something I could do about that.’

‘There’s probably nothing you can do about it. The truth is, the more you try the less she feels in control. Then the unpleasant memories and the guilt and the sense of inadequacy get worse for her. She probably needs to do something to change her life, we all do at times, but she has to do it for herself. Unfortunately, that’s hard work. It involves accepting responsibility for her own actions. In the end, maybe it’s just easier for her to blame you.’

‘So does that mean I should give up?’

‘Haven’t you already given up?’

Maybe 28 was right. I probably wanted to give up long ago. But can I just turn my back? And there is Andre of course.

‘All I want is a little peace and quiet. We don’t have to be best friends, but a little less aggravation would be nice. The finances are sorted out. I never hassle her, at least I don’t think I do. I don’t even really talk to her, except when Andre’s involved.’

‘The boy.’ She weighed her words. ‘He probably has a lot to do with it, I would imagine – the tension, the shifting balance of love and power. And then there are the dreams and expectations that were never fully recognized. You said that when you talk, it’s usually about your child. You know what your ex-wife probably thinks?’

I shook my head.

‘She probably thinks, “Is that all I’m good for?”’ 28 looked out the window – studied the trees, their branches, the bushes, the grass – as if looking for something, a bird perhaps. ‘I’m not accusing you, not by any means. It’s nobody’s fault. It’s just that, sometimes some hurts are hard for some of us to get over.’

‘I’m sure I haven’t hurt her, not intentionally. No more than any other couple.’

‘It’s probably as I’ve been trying to say – quite the opposite – killing someone with kindness. It’s the baggage she carries. No one should enter a relationship with too much excess baggage.’

‘That’s the reason why I can’t condemn her, or hate like she does. But there’s still a side of me that feels like I’m being taken for a ride.’

‘Maybe you are. But maybe she feels the same way. Maybe you’re just no good together at all any more. She’ll come around though, hopefully. The most difficult thing for any of us is to accept that things rarely turn out as we expect them to, but looking for the positive aspects can turn disappointment into something wonderful and new – and delightfully unexpected.’

She shifted in her chair, tilted her head back, and found the part in her hair – brushing a few loose strands into place with her long fingers.

‘You know, Scribe, when I entered the ground floor of the National Waste and Recycling building I had no intention of ending up between the caustic sheets of this hospital. Who’s responsible for that? My mother, the security guard who wasn’t around to stop me, the universe? No, me! Anyway, I’m here now, so I may as well make the most of it.’

28’s words were a tangled and complex assortment today. I’m not sure if I entirely agree, or fully know what she was saying. Half the time I’m not sure what she believes in. Maybe I’m not sure what I believe in. Her faith comes across as a lack of faith. It’s like she believes everything, yet questions it all – urging you to trust everyone, yet be suspicious, even of yourself.

But underneath it all she has more faith than anyone. Or is that just self-confidence, or merely a game she's playing? I don't think so, and that is not fair. She is nice, and trying to help. I'm just being too suspicious. Maybe I need to think about faith. What are my beliefs? Where do I really fit in, with my son, my friends, my ex-wife, 28, with the world?

It is hard to have faith at times like this, yet that is what we immediately run to for solace, faith in something greater than that which exists, but faith is not around us, it is internal. It has a lot to do with responsibility.

28~~

You know, Scribe, not only are stories assembled from bits and pieces of information from here and there, but most stories are told from the end and work their way back to the beginning. That's how we live, and find solutions. Sometimes at the end we find nothing. It's like looking under rocks at the beach. I remember the few times I was able to play on the beach when I was young. I wasn't supposed to; we were never taken by our mother. But if I could find an excuse to get away, with my sister, or with friends, I would play all day – in the water, on the rocks, collecting shells. So much fun. But my shoulders always got burnt. My sister and I would peel each other's flaking skin in the bathroom after a bath. Tea-tree oil soothed the pain and reduced the redness.

And of course, there was no hiding the fact that we had been out in the sun all day, not with those tell-tale signs. She yelped like a dog the moment we walked through the door. But her revenge was not immediate; it came in stages. She would deliberately push and grab us by our most sensitive sunburnt parts. Scowling at us, and saying that we only had ourselves to blame if it hurt. I got most of the blame, for being so

irresponsible, for not looking after my younger sister. We were born only a year apart; in terms of friendship we were very close. We both felt responsible for each other.

Stories that begin at the end and work their way back ... Dogs howling and snapping under the hot sun ... Responsibility ...

A four year-old boy was savagely killed. On a family holiday, the boy was attacked by wild dogs while camping with his parents, his older brother, and another family also with two young children. They were camping in a national park where animals are protected. The wild dogs, dingoes, known for being fierce predators that hunt in packs, had cleverly cornered the boy and his brother between two ridges. The only way out was a narrow gap about a hundred metres ahead. The older boy, about eight, said, run. He tried to pick up his young brother, half dragging him in panic, as the dogs fidgeted, anxiously drawing closer. Running was the worst thing to do. The chase was on, but in seconds the dogs were nipping at the boys' heels. They were both brought down, by pressure and from their own stumbling fear. The older boy crawled to his feet, escaping, as his brother was being hauled into the scrub by lethal jaws.

Naturally, there was an inquiry into the incident, to find out who was responsible. The initial reaction by the minister in charge was to order the culling of two or three hundred dingoes in the area, nearly the entire population. It was an overreaction, perhaps to cover up for the fact that months of complaints about rising problems between dingoes and humans in the popular holiday area had been ignored. Finally it was decided to put-down at least those dogs most likely to pose a threat to humans. One ranger couldn't bring himself to shoot a dog he had become fond of. The rangers had named many of the dogs. But it was not for personal and emotional reasons they said, it was to make easy identification of any problem dogs. A plea came from conservationists. The

culling wouldn't solve anything, it had more to do with park management and with educating campers, they said.

Previous to the tragedy, there had been many incidents and a string of reports, but nothing had been done by government or rangers: was it because to date no one had been seriously hurt, or was it because bureaucratic red-tape and indifference from politicians had resulted in inactivity? For years, tourists and locals, had been encouraging the once shy dingoes by feeding them, often for a souvenir snapshot. It was just a matter of time before something went wrong.

At the time of the incident the young child's parents were with their friends, a beer in hand, preparing to sizzle their burgers on a gas barbecue. They had told the boys to stop hanging around, to go off and play, but not too far away. How long had they been away? How far had they strayed? Not long, but no one knew for certain; not far, but they were out of sight.

Dingoes are not native to the park, nor to the whole country in fact. They were brought across thousands of years ago from an adjacent continent by the first, now indigenous, settlers.

So, who's to blame? The dogs for being hungry – for just being dogs, the aboriginal people for introducing the dingoes into the country, the tourists for feeding them, the boy for straying, his parents for not keeping a closer watch on him, his brother for not being braver, the rangers, the government? Who's to blame?~~

5 lies

Is it natural to grow up resenting aspects of our parents? Surely, we can't get along with everyone, not totally. When I was still at home with my parents, I promised myself that I'd never lie to my own children, or anyone else for that matter. Andre, when you were younger, just five or six, you asked me if I'd ever leave you. You were watching an animated children's movie, a fantasy. During one scene, in which a tiny infant creature is left orphaned by the death of its parents, you were quite disturbed. As the creature sobbed, tears dripped down your own cheeks in sympathy. I comforted you, and said I would never leave you.

Don't hate me for breaking that promise. I could never have foreseen the split between your mother and I. Allowing myself to be pushed out of our home – because out was the only way out of the predicament – was not a resolution, it was being bulldozed out of the picture. I'm still confused about the events that took place over those last few years. Partners fall out of love, but the love for their children does not need to fade because of that.

Tonight, even though it was late, I walked most of the way home from the hospital. I was thinking about my marriage, where it began, where it went wrong. All the lies and dishonesty that overshadowed a relationship founded on love and truthfulness. Although a young man of twenty-four is absorbed with being alive and enjoying himself, he also has plans. I met a woman who seemed to share my desires and aspirations. We would be the perfect couple. And during those early years all was bliss. Our own determination to succeed and to have a child would atone for the disappointments and misguided events of our own upbringings. We would make amends for our parents' mistakes, and everyone else's mistakes. But our happiness was short-lived because it was a selfish one, and the comfort it brought shrouded us in a false sense of security and morality. We became complacent, oblivious to the world around us, and ignorant of each other's changing needs.

Today I sat low and quietly in my chair beside Andre, his soft child's hand in my palm. There seems to be more paraphernalia around him day by day, more equipment to monitor him, more lines attached to his body. My elbow rested on his bed. I stroked his cheeks and forehead, combed his hair and made him comfortable, trying to salvage his thin body from beneath the tangled mass of tubes and wires. In the room, around him, on every spare shelf or surface, I have begun placing his favourite things – pictures, cards, books, toys, ornaments, puzzles, and games. I hope that they might help him. He has many reminders of happy times. I have even offered him his favourite jellybeans, and I will leave a few each day in case he wakes while I'm not there. I moved one or two cards, from his last birthday and from recent well wishers, close by so they would be

nearer to his vision. I read them to him. One was very touching from a school friend of his, Emily. She is keeping a seat free for him, next to her, for when he returns.

It was a chore getting his mother to bring in his possessions, and she claims that most of his early things were thrown out by me. But that is not true. Even over those matters we are unable to agree. Fortunately, over the years I have kept the best of what he produced and accomplished at school and at home, like drawings, and projects, and gifts he made for us. Many are with him now. Others lie next to me on my desk and around my living room. It is difficult to pack them back away right now.

Sitting with him today, I tried to force myself to smile, but in that room of overwhelming despair a smile was against the odds.

‘An electrician’s first-year apprentice does wiring better than this,’ I gibed without pleasure at the excessive lengths of tangled leads.

A nurse came in and out, said little, tried to appear as cheery as she could in front of my sullen face. My boy is in a stable condition, they say, but not from any of those devices he is attached to, or from any drug that is administered to him. But I suppose that anything is worth trying, and hoping for. I went back to stroking my boy’s arm.

At that moment a commotion was heard from the distance, echoing down the cold grey corridors. I recognised the voice that was at the centre of it all. A familiar surge of anxiety filled my body, tingling to my toes and fingers, and setting like a lump of cement in the pit of my stomach. My heart-beat rose, my body stiffened. The world became bloodless, my own veins seemed empty and it was as if I too suddenly needed a hospital bed, with a saline drip and a blood transfusion.

‘Ha, what a joke. If I worked in this place, Sister, I’d get it done in half the time. Do you know how much cleaning and mothering I’ve done over the years?’ bellowed the not too distant voice. ‘Has his father been in?’

‘Yes, he’s with your boy right now.’

I heard the heavy pounding of awkward but deliberate steps advancing towards us. The deepening and quickening of heavy breath. Andre’s meter registered a sudden rise and fall in brain activity. Then a wave of uncontrolled energy flooded the room, announcing the arrival of a woman whose rage had doubled since only yesterday, who had now become a barbarian with heaving breasts, far removed from the woman I thought I married over a decade ago.

‘You’re not only making a fool of yourself and our child, but also me.’ She threw a small carry bag at me. ‘What the hell are you doing with all his things anyway? He’ll never come home. You’ll make him die here.’

In the bag was ‘Tim the teddy’, Andre’s first soft toy. It meant so much to him, for so many years.

28 cheered me up. And as usual, although her honesty is at times brutal, she still managed to be uplifting and positive. She listened and understood, and made me feel comfortable; and that lessened my burden. Later, the things she said make even more sense, seeping into my psyche like warm water in a cold bath.

What began as anger towards my ex-wife turned suddenly and unpredictably into self-pity. I found myself with nowhere to hide, without time to escape to the safety of my home. In the washroom upstairs, I broke down. My entire body heaved as I held the basin, trembling. When I looked up I was appalled at the reddened and dismal face in the mirror, a pathetic stranger to me. I ran the taps on full to wash away the embarrassment, splashing cold water on my face and neck and chest to cool the heat, to dissolve the tears.

The worst of what I had experienced disappeared as quickly as it came. But I was left with a chill. I cleaned the basin, the mirror, the floor, bringing myself back to a reasonable sense of normality. I needed a distraction, to help me forget. I needed to reduce my incessant thoughts to something less frenetic. I needed a companion, at least for a while.

As 28 spoke, indeed filling the cold with warmth, I sensed a story, a memory from her past, beginning to surface, beginning to be reassembled and relived in front of me in that hospital room. 28 turned and faced away from the window, a long window capable of letting in plenty of sunlight even on an overcast day like today.

‘One cannot face the light when talking about lies,’ she said, and reached behind her to close the blind and curtains. The room became dark and mysterious. I felt more chilled again. Was that what I wanted?

28~~

Suddenly the stairwell shaft became cold. A draught crept in on all sides. Darkness threatened as a tube in the overhead light flickered. I stumbled on something that clung to my boots. Becoming tangled, I looked down in the half light to find that it was a plastic bag. The bag was printed with a motif above a slogan for a mobile phone service provider: ‘I’m free’ blazoned in red beneath a picture of a young woman winking from behind her tiny phone. I kicked my feet free. The light struggled to remain alive. Like that light, I struggled to stay true to my purpose. My grandmother who loved me, fed me well on a diet of fairytales and dreams. But they are lies in many ways. She innocently believed they were harmless, full of morals and tradition. But most stories are full of propaganda. An appropriate name for a publisher of children’s literature would be ‘Propaganda books’.

Lies, lies, lies; an escape from responsibility. To tell you the truth, it is not easy to face up to the truth. Lies protect us. Lies pop up as a defence mechanism. Lies protect our fragile veneer. Lies have the capacity to bulldoze our logic. Insidious and mean, lies become the keepers of a brutal state of mind. Some people lie to protect their sanity, the insane lie to protect their insanity.

It is difficult to change old habits. Do people change?

Not in the way that most people think. It is not that people change, it is that at first they misrepresent themselves. They sell themselves to those around them; portraying themselves as best as possible, to be liked, loved, accepted, and so on. Often we do a quick makeover on our weaker aspects, in order to impress and to align better with others. In time, as the cosmetics fade and the forced and false persona gradually declines, the hidden, original person is revealed. And, although it does constitute a change, it is really no more than a reversion back to the truth, as innate characteristics and preferences resurface, reinserting themselves to their rightful position.

It is important to be truthful. But being honest never really got anyone very far in a material way, so in order to compete it is, for some, easier to lie. That is what wearing make-up has become for many women, a deceitful edge, over men and other women. Women have learned to become experts in the business world.

I wonder when it was that my mother began telling lies. She hated my grandmother, both her parents, but in particular her mother. Her mother was a wonderful grandmother to me, and everyone else. That happens though, a grandchild getting along with the same person their parent was unable to. At some point the innocence between parent and child

stops, the teaching begins, and then the teaching becomes discipline, and the discipline becomes punishment.

I now realise that I was inducted into the world of lies at the age of five. Until then I was a child who told the truth, and was allowed to get away with telling the truth. Saying whatever comes to mind, honestly, is truth for a child. And I was happy because of it. Complaining, dribbling freely, making faces, being totally honest about my emotions, likes and dislikes, even about other people, was all acceptable. It was even seen as cute. After that though, at about five, I had somehow reached a magical age – according to society, according to my parents – when my behaviour and honesty was no longer acceptable.

If I couldn't tell the truth about how I honestly felt then I had no other alternative than to lie. I was forced to be deceptive. The world of lies, at the age of five, was forced upon me.

I remember the first lie that truly affected me. It was about an incident between my mother and grandmother. Each had their own version, but who would I believe? Two different opinions, coming from two people I thought I could trust. Here is what I have come to make of it. See what you think.

To have had my mother as a daughter, shows that my grandmother was a woman of great stamina and determination. 'A selfish and whingeing brat,' my grandmother called her. No, that's not true, she would never have said anything like that. My Auntie called her that, often. Grandma would have called her 'complex and misunderstood.' My grandmother was forgiving and unable to outwardly denounce anyone, least of all her own daughter. There was one day though. In fact it was the only time any act of aggression, either verbal or physical, was known to be perpetrated by my grandmother –

except an incident once with someone who tried to steal her handbag, of course. But that's another story. The act, on this occasion, was unquestionably accidental, executed by an extraordinarily patient and caring mother without intention to do harm.

We need to go back, drifting gently, to Grandma in her twenties. She is married, living on a farm. My grandfather is working down on a remote part of the property. All is peaceful. At the house even my mother, as a toddler, is quiet, amusing herself with her toys on a rug on the floor. Grandma is rocking in her chair, back and forth, daydreaming after a hard day's work – she can cut it with the best, on the farm and in the home. Dinner is in the oven, the house is clean, she is looking forward to her husband's return. He will be back shortly before dusk, park the ute, head straight for the laundry to wash up – scrubbing under his finger nails as best he can – then change into clean clothes for dinner. My grandmother will welcome his kind smile, the way he always gives her a peck on the cheek, his strong yet gentle presence, and the way he calls her 'love'. And most of all she will welcome his conversation while they eat. They will talk of crops, the fruit trees, the fences; they have both done their fair share, and together they make decisions. The toddler will be due to be fed again, this time beside them at the table, a light but nourishing meal, perhaps mashed banana and avocado. They grow their own avocados, nice ones, even though the climate is considered a little too harsh for such fruit. But my grandfather has a way with things like that. After dinner he will lie down on his back on the rug, and sit his daughter upon his chest, making her laugh for ages, until Grandma decides that it is time for their child to be bathed and changed, ready for bed.

The rocking of Grandma's chair slows as her distant thoughts return to the domestic routine at hand. She stands. On the way to the kitchen she smiles with pride at her girl stacking multi-coloured blocks. On the clock above the stove she checks the time, adjusts the temperature for the oven, looks out through the back window over the hills towards the setting sun, 'life is kind to good people,' she says, before kissing her child on the forehead on her way back to the comfort of her chair. Rocking, in comfort, back and forth.

She closes her eyes, just for one more brief moment before her husband returns. Fully relaxed now, feeling the rhythmic rocking, back and forth, lulling her to the edge of sleep. Suddenly, with a jolt, she is awakened, sensing exactly what has happened, even before any sound is heard from her baby. She is reminded of that sickening feeling in a car when you know you have driven over an animal. She feels an overwhelming discomfort. A numbing shock, then panic. She jumps from the chair, fully aware that the damage has already been done. It is a sickening moment. She sees her baby girl, stunned, behind the rocking-chair, staring, mouth open, at her hand on the floor. No tears yet, uncertain of her pain. Her tiny fingers distorted, flattened, a bruised imprint of the curved feet of the chair already swelling from her knuckles down. Only when her mother takes her baby in her arms and places her injured hand between the warmth of her breasts does the screaming start. Then the tears begin to flow, and the true meaning of pain is conceived.

'She was always careless, and far too busy too worry about me,' my mother would allege throughout her life. 'I nearly lost my fingers under the weight of her crushing blow.'

Although she was too young to remember, she did in fact break a finger or two on her left hand, but any wounds healed quickly, unlike her vindictiveness. She never let our grandmother, or anyone else for that matter, forget that incident. I'm certain that my mother would have dearly loved to have had Grandma's epitaph read, 'Here lies the bone crusher'. ~~

6 the funeral

Today, when I entered her hospital room, she was seated, not as I've come to expect, not in some awkward or unusual posture, perched on the back rest of the chair or slung backwards over the bed, but quite simply and normally down on the seat of the chair, her legs together, her back straight, and her hands resting gently on her lap. She smiled briefly, and after a moment's deliberation she took a blanket from beside her, wrapped it around her waist, and tucked it up under her breasts. She was now half concealed. And her fists were clenched tightly around the blanket securing a cocoon-like shelter, as if preventing herself from escaping.

'I've been expecting you', she said.

The contents of 28's room had changed little, except for the addition of a single white lily lying across her pillow. The blind was up and the curtains only partially drawn, creating a sombre, filtered glow of light throughout the room on this bright day. There was also a distinctive scent of frankincense in the air. The atmosphere was one of

gentleness and serenity, yet at first 28 seemed anxious and irritated, like someone who was expecting bad news. Hesitantly, I sat, resting on the end of the bed, and waited until, eventually and slowly, she spoke. Her words coming awkwardly at first, their meaning unclear, yet in some ways what developed was profoundly poetic. She was like a newly formed moth, uncertain of its purpose in the world. But she became more confident the more she spoke. And I sensed her unfurling wings strengthening in the warmth of her own breath, her confusion and uncertainty giving way to adventure.

On this sixth day another story was shared with me. I feel that I am journeying with 28 as she gradually divulges the details of her life. Together we climb, step by step. Do we climb to the top? Who knows.

28~~

I ran inside, anger filled, and face on fire, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. Still so much a child, responding like a child with a juvenile retort. Someone dead? What does that mean? Dead like an ant, there are billions more, all just the same. You say I can't visit Grandma's ever again. That can't be true. Mother slapped my face, more than once, and my thighs. I supposed she must have been more angry about Grandma's death than I was, for all I said was that I loved Grandma more than anyone in the world, and that Grandma can't be gone. 'I don't believe in a place called, Dead,' I cried. But my mother is a very emotional woman; that is what Auntie and Grandma told me.

Tears and weeping; a tragic cry; laughter, giggling, a comic guffaw. Laughter and tears: both are nervous reactions, both selfish too. Grandma told me that, told me all about tears. Nothing reminds me more about my grandmother than her words about laughter and tears, except thinking about her funeral perhaps, and maybe also the row of wooden beads she gave me to wear as a necklace. Those three things all happened in the same year. I wore the necklace on the day of her funeral, a sad day, the last day of my

sixth year. I cried at her funeral. Was it for her or for me that I shed tears? Was it for what she'd lost or for what I'd lost? I lost my grandmother, she lost the world. I was troubled, nobody understood. My grandmother would have understood, she usually did. She would have said, 'Don't cry for me my sweet grandchild. Take a slow, deep breath, relax, remember all the good times we shared, raise your head to the sky, and sing a loud refrain like that of a kookaburra.'

We laugh at tragedy; call it comedy, on the stage, on the screen. That's weird and distinctly human. There are certain times, suitable for certain behaviour, and then there are other times when that same behaviour is unacceptable. Where's the dividing line? Who draws it? That was a good old movie, called 'The dividing line' or something like that. That woman. Yes. Like a 1920's actress doing tragedy. A Sarah Bernhardt look-alike, but with wild hair, and wide-eyed in terror. A terrible accident. She was crossing a road. A car squashed her baby. She struggled furiously through the flattened basket and the blankets and the toys, crazed, only to find that her baby's tiny body had gone limp. She shook it, frantically, but it didn't respond. She laughed. Hysterical laughter. No tears. Real tears sound like laughter.

At the end of the movie, the mother placed a single white lily on her baby's little wooden coffin before two men lowered it effortlessly into its grave. On the landing of the sixth floor, crushed into the concrete by a stomp and a twist of a boot heel, there were petals and stamens and the stem of a lily just like the one in that movie. Maybe a death had brought it there; maybe it was a rejected gift thrown out, out of sight out of mind, a tormented lover now sitting alone in despair. A boot-heel erasure of memories. My grandmother adored lilies. She grew them in her backyard along the back fence in the shade. They grew from bulbs that she collected from one season to the next, and

when she had too many, she ate them, said they were therapeutic. Some people said maybe that's what killed her. More likely, that's what kept her alive for so long, even after she became ill. Grandma, with a heart as young and free as a spirited, mountain mare.

I remember a story I was told about her. One of her sisters told it to me, not sure if it's true though, but it sounds typical of the sort of woman that my grandmother was. My grandparents lived in a small but comfortable country cottage surrounded by hills and trees, with plenty of fresh air and good food. My grandfather owned and operated a reasonably profitable berry farm, while at that time my grandmother was the head district librarian. One day she was visiting from the country, without my grandfather who disliked the city a great deal. She was tidying up some property matters with their solicitor. She was at the local shopping centre near our house, and I am told that she was about to enter a bank to organise their business accounts when a man of medium build, probably in his twenties, ran by, knocked her off balance, and snatched her handbag. To the astonishment of those around, my grandmother, who would have been in her mid to late fifties at the time, was dazed for only a second, recovered her balance, and took chase while hollering: 'Stop him, he's a thief.' The villain was so surprised and alarmed, that he turned in fright to see who was in pursuit, couldn't believe his eyes when he saw my grandmother gaining on him, tripped, slammed into a pole, and let the bag spill from his grip. He clambered to his feet and fled down a nearby side street, but without my grandmother's handbag.~~

Once again the hypnotic rhythm of 28's voice began to seduce me. Very few individuals are truly comforted by their own words. And few of us actually like the sound of our own voices. I have always found it difficult to express myself verbally, particularly in

the company of strangers. If I am put on the spot I begin to fumble and sweat. I wonder if I have ever been totally honest with my feelings. Suddenly, a need to be honest overcame me, and compelled me to disturb the thoughtful mood that prevailed in that room. I asked 28 if she was aware of how comfortable and enjoyable it was for me to listen to her. I probably should have added and I know I wanted to say that it was enjoyable just being near her, but as it turned out, what I had said was enough. The look on her face was like that of a mother whose favourite glass ornament had just been dropped by her child. I had shattered the calmness, jolted her back into reality from her place of serenity and thought, and most of all I had clearly embarrassed her by drawing attention to herself.

‘She is capable of blushing,’ I thought, as the colour rising in her cheeks gave her an innocently alluring appearance. She’s a woman who, although speaking from her own experiences, likes to forget about herself. She is like an actress walking onto a stage for the first time; and in the glare from the lights she believes there is no one in the audience. She performs admirably until someone tells her she is in front of a full house, then she becomes nervous and forgets her lines. But somehow, if she is a true star, she gradually picks herself up, regains momentum, and finishes like a professional.

‘Now that you’ve made me blush,’ she said, ‘Maybe it is time that I was quiet for a while, talked less about myself, and more about you and your family. Or maybe I should let you leave, and not bail you up for so long. You are so kind to visit me. Surely I must be boring you.’

On another occasion, after thanking her for listening to me and helping me to unburden my problems, I had noticed a similar embarrassed reaction. She blushed then as well, and had looked away timidly. At that moment I had felt extremely uncomfortable. In my

awkwardness I was unable to contribute more than a muffled cough to our suddenly halted conversation. 28 eventually broke the silence that followed. She straightened her back, filled her lungs, folded her arms across her chest, and in a dry, mocking, but playful, manner began to instruct me in an authoritarian tone.

‘I think you are mistaken in your judgement of me, kind sir,’ she exclaimed. ‘But if it is advice that you want, then perhaps I can snatch a relic from my archival collection of golden rules, somewhat messy but appropriate, at this moment in time anyway, I think.’

Fixing a gaze directly into my eyes, raising an eyebrow, and huffing with a smile, she continued. ‘I would say there are three rules to follow; three is the usual number, when it comes to rules like this, so I think that is a good sign for us at the moment and a good way to begin. Firstly, to think before one speaks is fundamental. I try never to utter anything unnecessary. There is already enough superfluous debris floating around the universe, getting into our hearts, getting into our heads, into our hair and between our toes, without me adding to it. Secondly, telling the truth; which entails being willing to accept the consequences that come as a result of that. And thirdly, to speak from the heart. That is every human being’s ultimate responsibility to themselves, and to everybody else for that matter. You see, for me, speaking from the heart, in tune with the rhythm of truth, has a soothing effect. When you give in to your heart the rhythm takes over. It is the rhythm of a beating heart, the rocking of a baby’s cradle, the ebb and flow of waves upon the shore.’ She began swaying gently in her seat.

There would be more to come, that was certain, but not for the moment. She was pondering her own words. I was pondering a mixture of her words tangled with my own thoughts. Strange ideas invaded my mind. Bizarre images, past and present, flocked to centre stage and demanded my attention. I was drawn into a kaleidoscope world devoid

of both place and time. I glanced at 28. Her profile, faintly silhouetted against the shaded light from the window behind her, seemed disturbingly alien. How could two people from the same city, sitting in the same room, suddenly be light years apart. We were viewing two different scenes in our minds, setting the stage for two different shows. But somehow, somewhere along the way our thoughts would meet. That would almost be a certainty with her.

Thoughts and feelings must be like fat rubber tubes, I thought, stretching out in all directions, reaching to extremes. Then without warning, they spring back, ricocheting all over the place, out of control. Sometimes they collide head on with other people's thoughts, sometimes they bounce off without any real contact, and sometimes they pass completely untouched, unnoticed. Then there are those very rare times, with certain, unique, people with whom you connect, that the lines begin to dance. With those people you can make some sense of the mess, and the lines don't get tangled. Thoughts and feelings rub up against each other, sway together, head off together; sometimes they soften to each other to the point that they almost melt into one.

I felt comfortable now, letting my mind wander, relaxing, without straining to force everything into order. From time to time 28 would continue swaying in her chair, very slightly, in small circular motions, but just for a moment or two. I had the feeling that if she kept it up for too long at any one time I would fall completely under her spell. I smiled to myself; I don't know if it showed. I thought of how wonderful it is to see another human being in a state of contentedness. And I thought of how wonderful it can be to see another human being smile. I thought of Andre, wanted to reach out to touch his face, to feel his smile. And just at that moment 28 turned and smiled, as if she understood more about what I was thinking than was physically possible.

If there was ever a moment in my life when I could believe in something extrasensory, telepathy for instance, today's experience would have to be that moment. Everything that was said, and perhaps not said, inside that room affected me profoundly. And it was not simply because of the way 28 smiled at me, and not just the extraordinary closeness I felt with her. Sure, the same surroundings bring out similar reactions in people, and we were, and have been, in very similar moods, but there was an uncanniness that was more than coincidence. And to top it all off there was the story of her grandmother's funeral that she described to me, how strangely familiar it was. Yet, I had no way of knowing any of the people in it, and it had no immediate connection to me. But it was as if I was hearing a passage from my own past that I had forgotten, and 28 was reminding me of it.

She began swaying again, gently in her seat, while gazing at the lily resting across the pillow on her bed. She whispered, 'I wonder how many people are looking at a flower right now. I wonder how many people just smiled.'

She carried me away with her words, back to her childhood, back to the sixth floor that she climbed in her mind. We ended up standing side by side at her grandmother's funeral.

28~~

My grandmother's closest relatives, what a selection of characters, what a show. A display befitting the performance of a comic farce. The cast consists of about six key players. Although perhaps there could be less of them, four or even three. But I must consider my uncle and myself who have parts with a fair degree of importance, so five or six is best.

It would be necessary to dispense with ordinary names for the characters; a title for each that best describes their behaviour is far more appropriate. Their names should be a manifestation of the story that their lives have created. In that way their names will undoubtedly suit the nature of the ensuing drama. This is done by taking into consideration particular human aspects and idiosyncrasies. From these human bits and pieces a profile for each character is assembled and developed.

Often a personal profile is constructed according to attire and other such outward appearances, each character is distinguished by a floral tie, or the way they wear their hair for instance. Often something appropriate for the setting, in this case a funeral, is also thought worthy of consideration, like a particular type of hat. And indeed these details are important – to a certain extent – but those types of signifiers are not precise in themselves for they cause us to jump to conclusions; they may lead us to believe that similar people always dress in a similar way, or that we can judge the philosophical or moral attributes of a person by their outward appearance. I ask you, what message or image is conveyed by brown shoes, a white shirt, or a flower in the lapel? Individual personality is determined by what is said and done rather than by physical characteristics such as dress sense. So words and deeds are what should be carefully noted. Watch out for what is said and done. Particularly the stuff that is done.

One of them is described so: she had nocturnal eyes, with a face like an owl. Sunlight made her squint, and caused her to complain continually with an ooh ooh ooh. If she were wise, this Cousin Owl, she would realise that it was futile to always be complaining about the sun, much easier to simply shade your eyes and cover your head instead. This particularly hot, bright day flustered her more than usual, so much so that she hooted with gusto like never before.

Another character is Nanny Froufrou. Exactly who she is a Nanny to, I have never found out. 'Do you like my dress,' she says. 'I bought it in Paris, visiting a distant relative. You know the eccentric painter one who disowned you all, but welcomed me. We shopped together. He helped me choose the dress, cut so perfectly at the waist and flowing outward with length and volume; but not too garish, the pink polka dots, divine against the silver, the chiffon, you can't get it like this anymore, not over here anyway. The dress is designed to swish, especially at a ball. When you pass close by a man in a finely cut suit, perhaps a Pierre Cardin, the materials nearly ignite from the sparks when they touch. And then, when you waltz with your bon ami, and he holds you close, and twirls you around and around the dance floor until you nearly lose your head, the effect is like a cyclone. And I tell you, heads turn.'

So there I am, hot and bothered in the back seat of a crowded car, crushing my aunt, fidgeting from knee to knee, embarrassed about being treated like a baby, and feeling certain that I must be placing an undue strain on her poor legs. By the way, she is the key player in this story. Apart from my dead grandmother of course, but hers is a non-speaking part. Obviously my grandmother is crucial to the plot, being the reason for the occasion. And it is her silent legacy that inadvertently evokes, in those of us still living, certain emotions and memories, not to mention infusing the moral undertones that pervade the story. But it is the way the others react, and in particular my Aunt's behaviour, unnoticed by anyone but myself, that reflects the essence of the story.

It occurred to me on the day of the funeral that my grandmother had never commanded such a gathering while she was alive and capable of speech. So much for words. And as for my words: well, this entire story is from my perspective. I took on board what I saw and heard, but only those bits that I chose to, and there are certainly

many other people's versions. But what this story is really about is not me, not my aunt, not my grandmother, and not any of the many other relatives and friends that attended that day – it is about tears.

Ahead of us, gliding along on slow turning wheels, the hearse, eerie and black, was on course for its inevitable rendezvous with the cemetery pit. We rode along behind, about five cars back, in my uncle's family sedan. He drove without a sound from his tightly shut lips, except for an occasional grunt in response to one of the many mundane comments issuing from his passengers. There were six of us in the car including him. My Aunt was becoming increasingly uncomfortable, and beginning to perspire from the added weight and heat that my fidgeting on her lap created. It was a no win situation, the hotter we got, the more I had to fidget, and the more I fidgeted, trying to get comfortable, the hotter we became.

'Can't you keep that child still,' snarled a weasel-like relative, stuck in the middle of the back seat next to my aunt and me, while elbowing my ribs.

They were the first words that Miss Weasel had spoken since losing the fight against Cousin Owl for the window seat when we set out on our journey.

'Thank God I never had children,' she added.

'You need a man for that first, dear,' Froufrou hissed from up front.

And that was probably the most disruptive comment possible, managing, in an instant, to destroy any semblance of peace in the car. War broke out. Words, some sarcastic, some facetious, but most just downright rude, pinballed at high speed around the cabin of the car. Only my tight lipped uncle, although equally under fire, remained silent. My auntie tried, to no avail, to maintain decorum. I was beginning to feel unwell, and the faces and gestures and sounds of our fellow passengers began to dizzy me. I was

a sole child caught amidst the rancour of childless spinsters arguing the ethics of parenthood. These are my relatives, I thought, cackling hens who can't lay; and impotent cocks too afraid to crow.

I was intensely grateful to my Aunt for the saving breath of fresh air that she suddenly allowed to enter the cabin of the car by lowering the window next to us. Instantly I revived, and the heavy scent of over-perfumed, heated female flesh – most of which was coming from the direction of Nanny Froufrou – began to disperse. Cousin Owl, in the back on the other side to me and my aunt, caught on to the idea of opening a window. She was soon hooting into the breeze while mopping her dripping brow and cleavage with her handkerchief. Now tired of the idea of quarrelling with mere mortals, she cursed at the harshness of the sun, beseeched the omnipresent heavens to rescue her from her predicament, and in general lamented the hapless life that fate had so cruelly dealt her.

My uncle wore a conservative, dark-grey suit and a white shirt, appropriate for such an occasion, except for the really tacky, overly wide, mauve tie with bold green letters blazoned across the front promoting a company logo, MUTZ. I pondered the meaning of those initials on my uncle's tie for some time during our journey – in between caresses from my aunt who never complained about my fidgeting, even though my bony posterior continued to dig resolutely into her lap. Memories of my grandmother came to my mind from time to time, but thoughts that ordinarily would have been comforting, now made me nervous and uneasy. Images of her dead body lying encased in a coffin, a black and sinister box being transported not too far ahead of us, continually invaded my mind. It was my first contact with death, my first attempt at understanding that someone so close and previously so alive could suddenly be so terminally gone. The notion of a thing so finite had been foreign to me until that day. I was afraid of the whole

event, the whole ritual, and I was afraid that somehow my grandmother would be aware of what was going on, and that she would be angry with all of us for what we were doing to her.

Driving in his somnambulistic state, his face fixed on the convoy ahead, my uncle was like a servant from the underworld. It was while pondering the extent of his humanness, and wondering if he might well be the next most likely relative to fill a coffin, that I finally deciphered the meaning of the initials on his tie. The letters MUTZ could only stand for one thing, and I shook from both fright and humour at the thought, My Uncle The Zombie. I've never forgotten how guilty that moment made me feel, that silly unrestrained moment; yet there was something tantalisingly playful about it too. Every time I saw that man, even years afterwards, I would blush at my memories of him mesmerised behind the steering wheel of his car. And sometimes I would picture him traipsing, a stiff legged prowler of the night, in and around cemeteries, in search of whatever it is that zombies search for. Often in front of him I would be on the verge of bursting into laughter, and finding it almost impossible to compose myself. Eventually, unable to get those ghoulish images out of my head, I decided that I had to confess my childhood silliness. And to purge myself completely I knew I would have to confess to the one that my diabolical affirmations were directed at.

I was embarrassed and a little nervous when finally the appropriate occasion arose. At one of our rare family gatherings I approached Uncle Mutz with much trepidation, and led him away from the group. I spoke, he seemed to listen, but I wasn't certain how much of what I said made sense to him. Ironically, for a man capable of effecting such a condition in me, my brave confession had little affect on him. His indifference was isolating, causing a barrier to form both between us and the rest of the world, leaving me and my words alien and barren. I had expected anger, or annoyance,

sympathy perhaps, even amusement, but not indifference. I waited, but no real response came, just a nod and a half hearted smile of acceptance, followed by a brief cough. His stare, although directed at me, focused on some indefinable point in the distance. Even after I moved, his gaze remained unchanged. Maybe in his mind he was still driving in the funeral procession, five cars back, following that black, slow moving hearse. Maybe he had recognised his fate on that burial day, or even long before, and had resigned himself to an altered and unorthodox existence. Maybe, for him, what we call life, the bits and pieces of things that fill up the gap between birth and death, had become entirely futile, and he waited for death to rescue him. Is that perhaps what we call living with one foot in the grave? Maybe, truly, he had become a zombie.

Approaching the cemetery from the last turn off, down a narrow avenue, Cousin Owl gasped with surprise as if too much air had suddenly entered her throat. Reading the street-signs on a post she hooted, 'It's a one-way street. Did you see that sign? This turn off to the cemetery is down a one-way street.'

After a moment of her seeming to come to terms with the thoughts in her own head she continued, 'Oh well. We're all on a trip down a one-way street, I suppose.'

She fell back into her seat abruptly, starry-eyed. This was her moment of deep reflection. A demonstration designed to persuade the rest of us of her ability to thoroughly and maturely understand the meaning of death and the underlying complexity of her own words. The others paid her little attention.

During the silence that filled the car I sensed a change in my aunt. Something was wrong. It was almost as if I felt myself suddenly beginning to sink into her body, as if her flesh and bones were collapsing from the loss of her soul. She looked perturbed.

‘Are you all right,’ I asked her timidly. But there was something secretly the matter with her that she wasn’t going to tell.

I was persistent, as only a child can be. And eventually she looked straight into my eyes and confided in me.

‘I think I need to cry,’ she said, ‘but I can’t.’ She began stroking my hair.

That poor woman understood how much better it would be for her to cry. But she could not. Something was stopping her.

‘But it just happens,’ I said in a determined, innocently scolding way. ‘When you get hurt, the tears just come out. That’s what they’re there for.’

It was not only death that I was witnessing and having to come to terms with, but now also grief. I understood this new emotion even less than the first one.

After passing through the main gate, the road narrowed even further into a track of loose stones before turning uphill to reach a plot exposed to the hot, dry winds of the northern slope of the cemetery. The uneasy figures of mourners, mostly unfamiliar to me, awaited our arrival. They were spread out amongst what had become an arid, dusty landscape – an unearthly protuberance encrusted with withered herb bushes and unkempt grasses. It was like an ancient sacrificial tomb in decay, summoning, for one last time, an offering to the Gods who waited, garnished with wilted floral arrangements, behind dehydrated tombstones.

‘So this is death,’ I thought, trying to make some sense of it all as we alighted from the car.

Nanny Froufrou, swishing her determined hips, headed straight through the middle of a group of people who had gathered near the grave. Unless I was mistaken,

I'm sure she said, after clapping her hands sharply to arouse attention, 'Let's get this show on the road.'

Miss Weasel got caught up in the sudden commotion of side stepping and shifting around that Froufrou's arrival had caused, but she managed to zig-zag her way around feet and elbows to eventually burrow up near the front of the group. Uncle Mutz was the furthest behind, approaching stiff-legged and cautious, and content to stay somewhat behind the rest of us. Cousin Owl in the meantime had made herself at home in the shade of a rickety old pergola some distance away. She was fetched by my aunt at Froufrou's dogged insistence.

Looking around the crowd, I began to study the faces of my relatives and others. A priest, peering over the top of his spectacles, a closed bible in hand, recited all the obligatory words. A middle aged man, who I didn't know, an old school friend I think, with a rough complexion and wearing an ill-fitting suit, mumbled a few indecipherable lines from crumpled notes that threatened to launch into the breeze. A worker on my grandparent's farm remarked with heart-felt sincerity that Grandma had treated him like a son.

Uncle Mutz, stoic like a statue for most of the ceremony, couldn't suppress a cough that insisted on interrupting the most emotional parts of this poor man's speech; my uncle was clearly embarrassed by the attention that this drew to him. Cousin Owl, deep in contemplation, kept her eyes closed. This was not simply as a result of her being light-sensitive; no, this was not a display of inferiority. The truth is that owls actually have incredibly acute hearing. They have been known to catch mice in a barn at night in total darkness simply by listening to their movements. I think Cousin Owl was getting in tune with her ancestral capabilities, even if she didn't know it herself. I closed my own eyes for a while, and understood better the meaning behind the sounds around me.

Miss Weasel blew her nose so loudly that I jumped and decided to keep my eyes open. My aunt smiled at me every so often, squeezing my hand. I could tell that the tears still wanted to come but wouldn't.

Having forgotten entirely about my grandfather, I was shocked when I saw him step forward, crying, as the coffin was lowered into the grave. He was not the strong, sun-ripened farmer that I remembered. Instead he was shrunken and grey. He shook as he reached the grave for one last good-bye.

Nanny Froufrou was the only person besides Uncle Mutz who seemed to be emotionally untouched. She regularly adjusted her dress, her mind filled, perhaps, with thoughts of satin and silk, of Paris, and of grand dances; she surveyed the surroundings, her mind drawn elsewhere, as if keeping a watchful look out for passing cavaliers on horseback on their way to a gala event. Cousin Owl proved to be the loudest, and, loosing all composure, right on cue, broke into a screeching fit of lamentation as the coffin disappeared from sight. Miss Weasel, noticing that her nose blowing was being overshadowed, fell to her knees between my grandfather and the owl and began remonstrating loudly, 'It should have been me. She was too good a woman. Why wasn't it me?'

At the funeral I never questioned my mother's absence. The next day when my aunt dropped me back at home they spoke little, and my mother said only a few words to me, until later when she entered my room where I was unpacking my dolls and some books and crayons from my overnight bag. She told me to hurry up and to get changed, so she could wash my clothes. She began rummaging through my bag, picking out socks and other garments with her fingertips as if I had a contagious disease and all my clothes needed disinfecting. I began unpacking as fast as I could, but before I had removed

much at all, she wrenched the beaded necklace from under a shirt and swung it wildly in the air.

‘What the hell is this,’ she screamed, freaking out completely and thrusting her fist with the necklace right in front of my face.

She actually held my head from behind and ground her knuckles into my nose. I pleaded that Grandma gave them to me. My mother said they were hers and accused me of stealing them.

I went to live with my aunt for a couple of months after that. When I finally saw my mother again, she had changed. She was swollen and red, and ugly and vague. And although her personality had adopted a certain degree of determination, it was no more than a new face to her old aggression. She had become pretentious and sarcastic. She said that she was a new woman, that she was free of the restrictions forced upon her by her own mother, free of the struggles with her husband, free of all the idiots in the world. She said that no longer would anyone hold her back, no longer would anyone cause her to be miserable. And in a grand gesture that seemed to have become her new manner – performing as if addressing a vast audience of admirers – she declared that her children would learn their place, and learn some respect; she would no longer be our slave, or anyone else’s slave, and most importantly she had got over all the abuse she had suffered at the hands of everyone around her. She was over it all! I thought she was over-weight, over-dressed, and over-tanned.~~

7 critiquing the critical

There is no real treatment for Andre, nothing assured. It is a waiting game. They can treat him for shock, a high voltage shock in my workshop, and they can attend to his few minor burns with ointments and bandages. In those things he is lucky. His body will recover, but his mind is reluctant to come back to us. What is successful on one patient is not necessarily effective on another, and no one knows why. He has been pinched, and pricked, and probed, even had ammonia waved under his nose in order to get a response. Today they prescribed an antidepressant which affects the levels of serotonin in the brain. The other day it was a stimulant, similar to adrenalin, hoping to jolt him back to life. Dr Firbanks, now personally in charge, administered 400mg intravenously. The small dark-haired nurse, who is always preoccupied with her appearance, assisted him. Andre stiffened for a moment as the liquid entered his vein, and I thought perhaps he was about to respond. My heart pounded inside my chest, in hope, as I imagined him miraculously sitting upright and greeting me. But I think Andre's body was just reacting momentarily to the intrusion of yet another chemical.

I am tired. Last night I slept restlessly, more so than usual. My mind was again too active, thoughts were being crammed into an already overloaded head that ached desperately for comfort on the pillow. No matter how soft and clean the sheets and pillows on my bed are these days, I find it almost impossible to relax. It is as if I am trying to sleep in a dusty ditch in some desert wasteland; it is as if I am surrounded by sharp thorns, while thirsty insects drink from the wells of my pores. Memories mixed with fantastic dreams took hold of me and like a tornado spun me around throughout the night. In the early hours of dawn, I lay wasted, hoping that the storm had spent itself. But as the sun began to filter through my curtains a recollection of 28 speaking about her grandmother began to stir my mind heavily, like a shovel in thick cement.

I thought a lot about my own grandmother, the one I remember, on my father's side. She died when I was only eight or nine. As the years go by, the images fade. She was a happy woman with few needs. She expected nothing, yet somehow received everything – especially love and friendship. She always had visitors, giving and receiving little gifts from each other – usually food and home-made cookies. She was nice to be around.

I caught a beetle once, in her small garden in which she grew a few veggies and flowers. She said we should call it Alexander, my grandfather's name, and we put it in a matchbox. There is a children's rhyme that comes to mind. I asked my grandmother to repeat it, over and over again, until I'd memorised it. I only vaguely remember it now, something about a child and his beetle in a box, and the child in despair over who had let his beetle out. After I'd kept my beetle overnight, next to my pillow, we decided to set it free. It was then, much to my surprise, that the insect revealed a pair of hidden wings; it took flight with a golden flutter, using my finger as a launching pad.

My grandfather, suffering more from chronic negativity than anything physical, died a few years before my grandmother. I have only one recollection of him: sitting quietly in a small chair in front of a fire in winter; happy enough to see his grandson, but with a strange indifference. In my mind, I see myself walking up to him. He turns. His face is blank and featureless, except for a longish nose, drooping at the end; his complexion is quite grey. After an initial greeting he turns back to his private thoughts and the warmth of the fire. He is a cold man in many ways, perhaps a sad man, and it is not just because of the weather. It is because of the life that he couldn't lead. Alexander, you say you could have been a great footballer, except for an unfair injury to your knee that robbed you of that chance. But from what I saw, you seemed to take very few chances.

It is my Uncle Jimmy, my grandmother's brother, who, today, I remember the most vividly. I don't know what came of him, not of late. We used to attend a family gathering every Easter at his small country property, all the relations would be there. I had some of the best times of my life on those occasions, catching up with distant relatives. They were the type of events that you are initially reluctant to attend but by the end of the day you are glad you went. The adults would eat and drink and reminisce, until they were full to the brim of all three. As one of the children, and there were plenty of us, I enjoyed my fair share of bragging and teasing, and often exaggerating. A feeling of contentment prevailed from being comfortable in a group in which I knew I could get away with nearly anything. They had little knowledge of my real life except for what I wanted them to know and believe.

I have carried in my mind an image of Uncle Jimmy holding a clump of earth, a rich mixture of fertile soil and prehistoric clay tempered by the stony outcrops of the

Aegean. Moulded in his palm to the shape of his fist, it had become his talisman. Whether I actually saw the clod of earth or if I only heard about it, I really can't remember now; it must be nearly thirty years ago that I was that child. Jimmy and Jasmine came from Asia-minor – it is strange to refer to my grandmother by her first name, yet Jasmine has such a beautiful sound to it for me now. They were two in a family of many which included their parents, their grandparents, a couple of distant cousins, an orphan by an aunty on their great-grandmother's side, a lodger who never paid any rent, and three other siblings – two brothers and one sister. They all emigrated when Jimmy and Jasmine were in their early teens; not at the same time, but eventually, over a period of a decade, they all left in the hope of a better life.

The town they came from, then called Alatsata, was small and humble, semi-rural and typically Mediterranean, close to the coast, and not far west from the main city of Smyrna, now called Izmir. The family were quite prosperous grape and olive growers who made their own wine. In the nineteen twenties, with continuing political conflict between Greeks and Turks, they were forced to flee. My grandmother said that they stayed until the last possible moment, until they could see the fires of Smyrna burning in the north. No matter how much they loved their home, their land, and their neighbours, being Greek in a Greek part of Turkey that the Turkish forces wanted purged was not only dangerous, it was for thousands of people the most life threatening situation they would ever be in.

'Jimmy, Jimmy,' his family cried, begging him not to go back.

'And for what? Family history – pieces of paper, portraits, jewellery? Most will perish in flames, or be thieved, so why hold on to fragments? Damn the lot, damn this world, damn this hell. Just get in the boat and forget about it,' pleaded Jasmine, waist-deep in the sea, being pummelled by waves, and straining to hold back her brother.

Jimmy meant more to her than life itself, she had often said; and everyone in Alatsata knew it was true.

‘Nothing is worth risking your life for, Jimmy.’

But Jimmy broke away.

Jasmine screamed after him, ‘And damn you too,’ as the waves devoured her final view of her brother scrambling back on to the shore.

By the time Jasmine recovered from the belting waves, the small boat was already overcrowded. She threw herself in; it was now or never. In Athens they set up temporarily with old friends, but they were penniless and in shock.

‘Jimmy will arrive soon,’ said Jasmine, for almost two months.

The idea of finding a new home in a new land was a distant thing, seemingly impossible and far too enormous to fathom. But Jimmy would soon lead the way. He caught up with them on a day when his mother was cooking his favourite dish of split-pea soup.

‘The aroma brought me to you,’ he would joke for many years to come.

At first, many called him crazy, for he had swum from their mainland town to the nearby island of Samos.

On the day his family and the rest of the village had fled in boats, Jimmy ran back to his home via empty streets. He stood, panting, at the front gates leading to the house that had been built by his father and grandfather. Olive trees, heavy with ripening fruit, covered the hills to his right, while to the rear and to the left recently harvested grape vines stood like wooden sentinels, alert and at the ready.

‘They will not abandon their land, their home,’ thought Jimmy in awe of the vines.

But the fight as far as humankind was concerned was already over. The air was thick with the impending invasion. Flames and destruction, and a foreign smell, filled his nostrils. He knew it was not safe to stay as gunshots rang out nearby. He took one last look at his home.

‘This land is oblivious to our petty human struggles,’ declared Jimmy as he knelt by the roadside to take a piece of that land with him – that land which refused to surrender. He dug his nails deep into a muddy patch of clay, was for an instant joined with the place of his birth, and drew out a fistful of sodden earth.

He headed South, away from the fires, away from the advancing invasion, but in every direction and in every town he was only a step away from danger and was forced to keep moving. He saw violence and death, was repulsed by the atrocities that were perpetrated in the name of honour and freedom and religion. His only hope was to keep moving and not to think too much, not let the terror freeze him in one spot. He turned towards the coast. Finally, he found his only hope and took it. Leaving from a point in Turkey where an arm from the mainland virtually shakes hands with the island of Samos, Jimmy swam side-stroke, holding the clod of earth wrapped in two handkerchiefs in his fist. Over the ensuing weeks he searched for his family on Samos, Chios, Lesbos, Limnos, and many of the other islands of the North-east Aegean, before heading for Athens. The port of Piraeus, he was told, was where the refugees had been taken before homes could be set up for them.

His first words to Jasmine when they finally had time alone, after the tears and the laughter and repeated embraces, were simple, but only she would truly understand what they meant for Jimmy.

‘I may be barred from returning to my rightful home, I may have been stripped of my possessions and had all the records of my past burnt in a villainous attempt to erase my existence, but I am still free. In my heart I am free to love who I choose, and in my mind I can think what ever I like. Yes, some may say it was crazy to return to a town under siege just to find that out, but sometimes it is necessary to give in to crazy urges.’

‘I don’t think you’re crazy; I think it took guts.’

‘Do you remember Kostas, the pedlar?’ he asked Jasmine.

‘Yes, I think so. The old man who used to come to our town on a donkey every month, selling material, and threads, and ribbons, and things like that, many odd bits and knick-knacks.’

‘That’s him. Well, on my way out of town I came across a sight so disgusting and disturbing that I shall never be able to erase it from my mind. And if I don’t tell someone, tell you now, I think I will go mad. You see, I saw that harmless old man hanging from a tree, a noose, made of his own cloth, around his neck. Beneath him lay his donkey with its throat cut.’

Jasmine said nothing, could only follow her brother with her eyes as he nervously paced back and forth, struggling within.

‘But that is not the worst of it. You see, I ran to his body, in the hope that he might still be alive. When I reached him I nearly threw up from the shock. He had not been dead long, his body was still warm, but his face, his face was mangled. They had hacked off his nose. Later, from all the people I spoke to while searching for you and the rest of the family, I learned that that type of brutal disfiguring was not an uncommon practice. The invading armies were told that all Greeks were pigs, so some of the fighters took it upon themselves to make them look like pigs.’

It was on one occasion, many years later at one of our family gatherings, that Jimmy, now much older and proud of his new farm in his new land, was derided for his crazy actions as a youngster – for risking his life for a lump of earth. ‘What is so special about that mud you keep, Jimmy?’ I heard someone ask. For me, as a child, looking up at Jimmy, at his strong chin, his nostrils that almost breathed flames, I understood not what his words meant, but what gleamed in his eyes. Jimmy replied, ‘It reminds me of where I came from. It reminds me of who I am. It reminds me that just as everything we strive for may in the end be worth nothing, something can always come from nothing. And it reminds me that I once had guts.’

Now, for me, alone with only my thoughts, I hope for my son’s life to return to normal; I hope that something will come of all this nothingness, and I hope that Andre has at least some of Jimmy’s guts.

28~~

I was getting itchy on the seventh floor. And not just itchy feet, as the saying goes. But some sort of skin disease. ‘A nervous reaction,’ the local doctor suggested, ‘Causing her to break out in a rash.’ It wasn’t the first time, and every time it started it wouldn’t go away – not easily. In the beginning it appeared on my skin only underneath my clothing, but then it began to creep up my neck and out from behind my ears for everyone to see. I scratched until my skin began to bleed. The scabs that formed were even worse to deal with than the rash.

It was back with my aunt, staying for a short time, that the itching lessened. She lived away from the city, like my grandmother used to. Not really in the country though,

not a large property, but her house adjoined the state forest. One day, again at my aunt's, my rashes finally disappeared for good.

You can run blindingly fast at the age of seven, even with an itchy rash – good practise for the stamina needed to climb the steps to the rooftop. Defiantly, I scaled everything – fences and gates and any obstacles that came my way. I was going somewhere, of that I was certain. Where? Who knows and who cares, you find out when you get there. I ran from my aunt's house, not because of her, but because I had to. Something was about to erupt.

I ran through her backyard, leaping over everything in my path, a wheelbarrow, a spade, a barbed-wire fence. Down into a ditch I sped, through a damp gully, dodging trees and shrubs, and up and over to the other side, out into the bush, out into the awakening murmur of life on a fresh morning as it began to warm. Slowing to a walk, my feet crunched twigs and leaves, no matter how carefully I stepped; birds and animals, alert, listened and watched – curious but not afraid.

I crouched, not from exhaustion, but from hurt. A hurting inside, like when someone punches you in the stomach. But I couldn't stop for long; I had to keep walking. Thoughts of my grandmother kept coming to mind; what was happening, I wasn't sure. That dear person I once loved so much, was all I could think about, think so much about. Why had she left me? Left me to this. I cried like I had never cried before. Walking faster, almost running again, I fled like a fugitive. Maybe I could escape those thoughts. Movement is good for that, it keeps memories behind you.

I ran and ran and ran, until I stopped bawling. Finally I fell to my knees, this time from sheer exhaustion. My face and eyes, red and hot and throbbing. I pleaded to the unknown – searching the sky, the trees, the ground – for an answer, for solace.

‘Grandma I miss you. Grandma I miss you so much,’ I pleaded, my heart swelling with both love and pain.

At that moment I understood that I had been a silly girl for the past year or so since my grandmother’s death, silly to have kept so much bottled up inside. I thought I had been acting bravely. I thought that I was being independent, just like an adult. And it was also at that moment that I understood what real tears were. And I understood what my grandmother’s funeral meant for me. I had ignored the sadness that comes with loss. At her funeral there were so many mixed emotions and confused reactions, making little sense to me as a child. Were they sincere or just for show? Some people cry for themselves, for what they’ve lost, caring little for others, while some care ultimately for others and little for themselves.

What a silly girl to hide so much inside. Afraid – afraid like the dread of looking into a coffin. I believed that no one would listen, no one would understand, no one would care. I kept a lid on my emotions, smothered them like a lifeless body buried in a coffin. But every hurt and every anger was poised, ready to reach out at any moment and pull me towards the box. Empty the box, silly girl, empty the box. If you don’t empty the box, really rattle it about, you get sick. All those demons waiting to haunt you. The haunted do terrible things to themselves and to others.

I stayed in the bush, weeping. I stayed until my casket was empty and all the sludge at the bottom had been scraped clean. I stayed until distant words from my grandmother formed and filled my heart. ‘Cry, my child, if you need to cry. Cry until you can cry no more. Cry both selfishly and selflessly. Cry with all your might for yourself. And cry with all your might for those around you, for those who also cry, silently, and for those

who can't cry, for those who care and for those who don't. Cry until your tears turn to laughter.'~

8 monkey in a tree

Crouched on the floor over by the window, knees bent and parted like a frog, 28 was reading a magazine that she had spread across a cushion to raise it to a more convenient height. A few other objects had been laid out around her, some water in a glass, a pen, a crossword folded from a newspaper. Her view of the hall was partially obstructed by the bed, making her unaware of my approach. Quietly I watched from the doorway as she turned a page or moved her glass slightly to one side to reach for her pen. I became hypnotised by the image of 28, who at that moment reminded me of a small child lost in its own world.

Her voice startled me, 'Hello Scribe. Just one second and I'll be finished reading this article. Make yourself at home.'

Shuffling a few paces into the room, peering searchingly over and around the bed, I almost expected to see scissors, a bottle of glue, or a colouring book and pencils scattered around the floor.

She turned briefly to greet me with a happy, crooked smile. ‘It must look like I just woke from a sleepover with friends,’ she said, ruffling her already messy hair and scratching her elbows.

‘No, not at all. But if you would rather be alone?’

‘Usually, yes.’ She straightened her shirt and sipped some water. ‘But with you it’s different.’

I stood awkwardly near the end of the bed without replying.

‘I really will be only a second. I just want to finish this last paragraph.’

She returned to the words in front of her as I quietly studied her silhouette. I hadn’t seen her wearing glasses before: they were thinly framed, with a tortoiseshell-like finish. They added a more inquisitive dimension to her character. When she had finished, she folded the magazine closed and looked up at me. The smile that began to appear on her face was interrupted by a sudden look of surprise. Still squatting, she removed her glasses, nearly losing her balance. I wondered why I had caused her to react in such a shocked way.

‘You’re still standing! And virtually halfway out in the hall. Come in Scribe, come in.’

I hesitated, then stumbled from tripping over my own feet. Uncertain, I turned in a full circle looking around at the choice of furniture – at the bed, the floor, the chair, a low table. 28 made my choice easy by tucking a few cushions under herself, and offering me the chair.

‘I’m more than comfortable down here. Take a seat.’

‘Thank you,’ I replied, hoping she really would be comfortable with the seating arrangements. ‘I didn’t know you wore glasses?’

‘Oh, these,’ she said, taking them from her lap and moving them back and forth in front of her eyes, trying to focus on me. ‘Just spectacles for reading, in case my eyes get tired, that’s all. They help after long hours of studying or marking papers.’

‘So, you’re a teacher?’ She didn’t answer that question, not straight away.

‘You know Scribe, you probably felt a little awkward at first, when you were just standing there above me. And now you’re still higher than me and getting comfortable in that chair – you up there and me down here. I bet you’re starting to feel more confident, and superior, aren’t you?’

I informed her that in fact I felt quite uncomfortable and out of place.

‘Then come down here with me,’ she proposed, with an animated gesture of her arms.

But I had to explain that these days I didn’t venture to the floor too often, a habit more for when kids were around, something that adults did less on their own. As we talked I began thinking of days gone by, with Andre. I missed rolling around with him on the floor and feeling the enjoyment of being involved in his activities, particularly his building projects and his drawings and his reading.

‘Children are at home on this level,’ she said softly. ‘When your son leaves this place, you should spend more time with him, on the floor. It is natural, and fun, and we are all equal there. And no one is barred. No one is denied access.’

‘So, are you a teacher, and do you have children of your own?’

‘My younger sister is a teacher, and she has children. We have to work hard at keeping in touch with children, they have a pure and innocent vision of life. We have to keep the vision of the child alive in ourselves.’

I believe that alienation comes from being barred, from being treated as an outsider. As we vie for a place in this world – a place that we hope will suddenly and miraculously allow us to know who we are – we are forced into a position of estrangement from our fellow humans. Yet in reality, we are competing for nothing more than vaporous illusions. We push and shove, when all we want is acceptance and companionship. How ironic, and what a strange manner of social conduct we humans have. Instead of working together, we try to outdo each other. It is as if we fear there may not be enough of what we yearn for to go around. And so a vicious cycle is set in place: the more intensely we search and compete, the more we exclude others, and the more we exclude others, the more we create enemies, and the more we create enemies, the more we alienate each other. Being human carries with it a great deal of dissatisfaction and loneliness.

That's what happens when we let our visions slip out of focus. Everything we look at becomes blurred, even our own reflection, especially our own reflection. In a frenzied attempt to sharpen the picture, our panic causes us to compete and to alienate and to want to defeat. But the blurriness actually stems from something quite simple. It is not part of a mystical challenge that needs to be surmounted. It is not buried like a treasure waiting to be discovered or exposed by scientific and commercial endeavours. It is around us, here, there, and everywhere, and it is part of us, seeping out from the earth and spilling out of our pockets as we walk, and it has always been with us. Our blurriness stems from an inability to fit in with nature. We no longer understand our place in the natural world. We have made many comforts for ourselves and made many changes and modifications to our environment. All the while we have been trying to get closer to something that is already within us. But the further we move out, the further and the smaller the thing within becomes. We are part of one enormous moving away.

What strange voyages we have undertaken, what obscure devices we have imagined and then created. The things we contrive, useless paraphernalia, moving us further from the truth.

What were the first little toys in prehistoric times, a digging stick, a club for beating? Clever to begin with, becoming terribly distorted, moving out of focus. We keep ourselves busy trying to make our lives better.

Simple contrivances from ancient times, a table and a chair. When did we raise the first few items above the ground, placing food and belongings out of reach, safe from rodents and wily scavengers? And when did we begin building walls? Those things were our first civilised airs, those humble furnishings and barriers, that is where it all began, elevating our status, transforming us from animals into lords.

Now our urbane palaces are adorned with the most elaborate appurtenances. We force ourselves to sit, bums on chairs, no elbows on the table any more, please, thank you, and thank you over there. And you there under that tree, snap to attention, this is the pinnacle of civilised man. No time to rest now. We must continue to search for new ways of refining and defining and death defying our craft. We need to expand our supplementary list of assorted accessories, essential, indispensable, the very core of comfort. We must aim for perfection, attaining nirvana, through the construction of our personal abodes. Our personal abodes are kitsch.

Elevation has reached saturation. Personally, I prefer simplicity. Crouching or resting, a bit lower down, closer to the earth, it is more natural for me. What is our natural position anyway!

All other animals have their own naturally preferred position and posture. Some, like horses, sleep standing up. We are strange beasts, collecting what we want whenever

we want, with total disregard for other life. Giraffes eat from tree tops, other animals eat grass. Humans have evolved in such a way that we have obtained freedom to choose. We think we can be any animal at any time and take the advantages that come with that. If we can't control another species, we kill it. Simple solution. What a strange freedom we have developed for ourselves. From this freedom of choice we have chosen to reconstruct the world to suit all our wildest whims and fancies. We are like small children running wild in a lolly shop without restraint. We have gone pleasure mad, yearning only for comfort, and have forgotten our place.~~

28 leant forward, and turning sideways, she placed her right cheek on the pillow in front of her. 'If you listen carefully, with your ear to the ground, you can hear all sorts of sounds and feel all kinds of vibrations – warning signs of things to come, and echoes of the past.'

She remained listening quietly, resting her head on the pillow, eyes shut. My own ears began to twitch, becoming increasingly sensitive at the thought of her words. She spoke again, very quietly.

'I'm comfortable like this. Does comfort make happiness? I know that when I'm happy I'm also comfortable, and that I'm happy even without any possessions. But if I'm comfortable I'm not necessarily happy, even surrounded by loads of possessions. What about you?'

I'm not sure how much I actually responded to her question. It was more an unspoken commitment. A few words filtered out from my many wandering thoughts. She understood.

I have always been interested in making things. Working with my hands gives me a great deal of pleasure. It is with carpentry that I seem to be the most skilled. Most of my training has come through trial and error, playing around as a child with sticks and off-cuts. And then later on just experimenting – some things worked, others didn't. I learnt from my mistakes. As for school, my mother never pushed me, not like my father and my father's parents. They liked to lecture me about survival and the need for an education. 'It's a dog-eat-dog world out there, like a jungle,' they would say.

So I studied for a while, on and off, enough to get by, perhaps even a bit more. I tried thinking about ideas that questioned the world and existence, how we, as humans, should treat each other. I read books by big men with big ideas. I learnt, I guess, that most of them are actually just ordinary men making a big deal about little things. 28 and I agreed today that there is only one law that needs to be understood. And that law is best explained in her own words, 'Each of us is nothing more than a long armed monkey swinging around in trees. Just look at our hairy armpits, you'll see what I mean.'

She was also right when she said that the objects we buy and sell are merely part of maintaining a deceptive impression of superiority, 'structures that create an unrealistic and humanly-skewed world, clothing and all sorts of curious fashions to mask who we really are, a vain attempt to elevate us to a position above the rest of the animal kingdom.'

In our homes we surround ourselves with elaborate and often impractical furnishings that we believe are indispensable, many that I am guilty of personally crafting. I have had all sorts of extravagant requests from indulgent individuals with more money than style. When I look now, for the first time, focused, I see that we are surrounded by unrealistic objects designed to support our bodies in unnatural positions around settings of other unrealistic objects, and all this takes place during uncomfortable

human situations and gatherings. But the most questionable aspect for me as a craftsman has to be the fact that much of what is made is never used – just looked at or haughtily displayed.

28~~

It's all monkey business, Scribe; yet we refuse to admit it. On occasions, we come face to face with other apes, suddenly bringing our frivolous tree-branch swinging escapades to a halt. These others may be different in appearance because they are from outside our immediate circle of family and friends, or they may be no different at all, just unfamiliar. But we have been conditioned, and we have begun to compete, so at that moment of first contact, each of us has the same initial response and would like to say to the stranger confronting us, 'What are you gawking at?'

That moment is a tense and testing one, from which two choices inevitably arise: either we go our separate ways with a polite nod, a kind gesture, one acknowledging the other with respect; or else each of us tries to overpower the other, either by cleverness or by force, taking advantage anyway we can. And power always involves taking, one from the other.

I'd like to tell you a tale, a tailless tale. I heard about a family of apes that existed quite a long time ago, probably thousands, or more like tens of thousands, of years ago. The exact date is not important, but I know the story is true because descendants of that family told it to me. The family in the story was a very large one, like what we would today term an extended family, except even larger, and with many more sisters and brothers, some only distantly related, but still family nonetheless. They lived happily, the only race of their kind, swinging and eating and loving and nurturing in and around

their trees. They had a few basic rules that none of them really knew the origins of, but not knowing the origins of such things didn't matter. They were simply rules that had always been in place, probably not even made by anyone to begin with because they were just common sense ways of behaving and were simply part of getting along together; not laws at all really, not like the ones we know. And because those rules came naturally to these apes, they didn't need to be written down.

Those apes had never changed the way they lived – not since the beginning of time – they were content with their lifestyle. Content, that is, until an earthquake caused not only a split in the land but a split between its inhabitants. The family was divided. An enormous rift in the land was formed, a kilometre wide gap – a kilometre at the nearest points and just as deep, and running almost the entire length of the continent. There was no way across this cavern, not for the time being anyway.

The family of apes were well and truly divided. After years of searching and investigating the situation, they were forced to give up any hope of reuniting the two halves of their family. Many decades passed, and eventually each group forgot that the other group existed. Gradually, the attributes and priorities of each group began to differ more and more. One group stayed in and around lush trees, living much as they always had – developing and adapting their physical and mental skills only when necessary, and accepting as sufficient and complete their simple way of life that incorporated simple needs and simple laws. The other group, however, began developing themselves mentally in all ways possible at an ever increasing rate, and continually developed ideas for adapting their environment to suit their needs – re-channelling water, destroying plants and trees without regard for the future, and generally cheating the environment whenever possible without regard to anyone or anything else, not even their fellow apes. Their priority was to make life as comfortable and as easy for themselves as they could.

They got lazy, lost a little hair, and I think, if I recall accurately the story as described to me, they even began walking on two limbs rather than four, again purely because of their laziness, you see, they no longer cared for climbing and swinging through trees. ‘Why climb, when we can just chop the damn thing down,’ they bragged. Strolling around on two legs caused all sorts of skeletal problems for their bodies however. Structurally, it was not a good idea, and their front limbs gradually weakened while their rear limbs became less dexterous to the point that they were no longer useful for anything else besides trying to maintain balance. That’s when furniture had to be invented by the way, or so I’m told.

Anyway, their environment deteriorated to such an extent that their existence began to be threatened. They had rearranged and destroyed so much of their surroundings for their own selfish benefits that the entire ecosystem was no longer sustainable. Eventually, at a huge general meeting they decided that the vast rift in the continent, which over the years had formed into a mighty river, had to be crossed. They were certain the grass would be greener on the other side. And because they knew it would be easier to cross the river and begin anew rather than attempting the long and arduous task of reversing the mess they had made around them in their own land, they decided to construct, with one great effort, a fleet of rafts to carry them across to the other side.

Many apes died throughout the construction of the rafts and during the mass exodus that followed, but not from any natural causes or disasters, but from petty struggles between themselves, mostly quarrels over who should do the work. There was much conflict during the cutting and shaping of the trees for the raft building, and later they competed furiously to get on board. Those that made it on board continued to argue while crossing the great river. It seems that no one wanted to do any of the hard work,

especially during the long days of paddling that were involved in the voyage. The strongest began to overpower and enslave the weakest, causing all sorts of disagreements and uprisings. Death and unnecessary suffering prevailed, and at the end of the journey, because much animosity had been engendered, many of the remaining slaves were cruelly and unnecessarily slaughtered.

Of course, the aggression didn't end there. Once the newly arrived apes realised there were others on the land they had come to, great battles, involving covert attacks, murder and further slavery, ensued. No matter how much the native apes tried to reason with their invaders, they could not make the persecutors understand that what they were doing was wrong and unnecessary and that they could all exist together, together as a family, learning from each other. Their beliefs were ridiculed and ignored; it was absurd in the eyes of the invaders to suggest that all creatures were in fact equal and inseparable. Some of the natives even implored them to consider their similarities, suggesting that they may well have all been related at one time, perhaps long ago. But the invaders cared for none of that romantic ideology, and they set about systematically wiping out the entire race of the former inhabitants.

They weren't completely successful in their extermination attempts, but that is another story. What I am interested in most of all is, at what point did the two tribes stop being sisters and brothers?~~

9 thin veneer

I was close to completely breaking out in a fit of laughter today. 28 and I became light-heartedly engaged in a conversation about the moral values of men and women, and the conflict between the sexes. It was a deliberately playful bit of fun on both parts. I began playing the role of the stereotypical male, bragging about the natural ability of men as leaders, and pointing out the difficulties we face, living in a modern world with heightened tensions and increasing demands, and all the while having to please everyone at the same time. 28 commented that women don't have to try at all to please everyone or to overcome difficulties.

'I'm glad you agree,' I said. 'Women don't think on such a grand scale. It must be nice just to concern yourselves with simple things.'

'No, you miss my point,' she protested. 'We don't need to try because it just comes naturally, and quietly.'

'Oh, I see. Then it is touché, 28, touché.' I acknowledged her victory blow with a twirl of my hand and a nod of my head.

She smiled modestly.

We enjoyed teasing each other. And for many moments my worries were forgotten. But as soon as I became aware of the fact that I was enjoying myself, I became overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt.

‘I don’t deserve the right to be happy when all of Andre’s rights have been revoked,’ I admitted.

28 decided that I needed to loosen up, to lighten my load, and to take it easy. I would be no use to anyone if I destroyed myself.

We agreed that sorrow, if left unchecked, leads to pity, and pity can be all consuming. And as she said, ‘Pity is a relentless creature, with tentacles that lash out and bind your wrists and ankles and never lets go. Given half a chance, that creature will lasso your throat and drag you down into the murky depths of its underworld.’

I have found a friend in 28, whoever she is. I know so little about her, and although I wonder why it is that we get along so well, I try not to question it too much. We have decided to forbid ‘why’ questions, when it comes to us and our meetings, for the time being anyway; they only lead straight into the path of that tentacled creature.

Eventually, after the hours slipped by, I was forced to leave in a hurry to catch the last bus, but not before she had cheekily had her pleasure by provoking me.

‘Women are in many ways superior to men because they are motivated differently.’

‘Is that right,’ I replied cautiously.

‘Oh, absolutely. Men have to think too hard about being virtuous. A so called honest man is too busy fighting with his internal, masculine, egocentric demons to get

on with the job of being good, whereas the feminine approach is more instinctual. It is easier to do what's right from a feminist perspective because feminine priorities stem from a different urge, a more natural and less bound to the material world type of motivation.'

I was being coaxed along again. And yet, again, I was enjoying the challenge.

28 paced the room like a tiger, then turned suddenly. 'Being less competitive makes women better suited to rule the planet.' She sighed, or was it a purr? 'But alas, they are too busy playing the role of the oppressed and fighting amongst themselves to learn how to go about taking charge. They need to learn leadership, and, most importantly, in order to succeed in this male-dominated world, they need to fully understand their opponents.'

'You said "opponents". That makes me think that you're setting up some sort of war or competition. Isn't that a contradiction of what you believe in?'

'I'm just telling it the way it is. Women have to approach their liberty that way, on those terms.'

'An eye for an eye?'

'Love, kindness, and subservience didn't get us very far. Sometimes you have to fight for change. And if you're going to fight, you sure as hell better get to know your enemy.'

'How well do you know your enemy?'

'Me?'

'Yes, you!'

'I don't have an enemy. I stand for no one and against no one. I was merely stating a case for the feminist cause. I never said I was a feminist. That would be too easy. And then you would have me branded and categorized. And you would think you

knew everything about me, reading false assumptions into everything I said and did. I couldn't have that.'

'But if you were a feminist, how well do you think you would know your enemy? Just for the sake of this argument.'

She had a stubborn and reluctant look on her face.

'Come on, be fair, you can't just end it there.'

She squinted her eyes, shook her head gently, keeping her lips tight, and held her breath.

'Cat got your tongue? Or are you keeping a secret, afraid of betraying your fellow freedom-fighters perhaps?'

She let out a long puff of breath. 'No secrets to conceal, just plain facts. For feminists to succeed, it is necessary to engage men on masculine terms; that is the only way to gain entry, to gain some control. But, of course, no male is going to show a feminist the game or allow them in. That would be preposterous for them, something akin to all the very wealthy suddenly giving up their riches for the poor and oppressed – they wouldn't, even if they thought it was the right thing to do.

'Ironically, men are so dependent on women, having them around to look after them like slaves, supporting them, being there for them, rubbing their bellies when they're afraid or they get hurt. But their male pride won't let them admit any of that. How does that saying go? Behind every great man ...'

'Yes, that is often true,' I agreed, holding back from any further comment at this point.

'Most men are nothing more than figureheads, Scribe, puppets reluctant to give up their positions of power and dominance. They are struggling though, to hold on, to maintain their authority. In the eyes of the feminist, times are changing. Feminism is

leading the way into a very exciting era. I hope I am still around to see the changes if the right type of feminists get their way.'

I had been thinking to myself, and had to say it, no matter what the consequences, 'But aren't the type of women that take charge of such movements, and perhaps all women, no better than the men they try to dethrone? Don't they just hide all their unscrupulous characteristics better than men do? Of course, we are all no better and no worse than each other. But, I wonder sometimes about the way we all go about our business?'

28 stopped, thought, then laughed. I soon followed, smiling broadly.

'Arr, you are smarter than most other men, Scribe, and you know women better than you probably should. But don't get too carried away with confidence; you will always be an outsider as far as women are concerned.'

She leant close to me from the edge of the bed, the brightness in her face dimming, 'In all seriousness, I think you are right about women taking charge. At the moment, in many ways, the greatest hindrance to the female cause comes from women themselves, from women exploiting femininity. But the point is, and you have mentioned it yourself, that we are all the same, men and women, no better and no worse than each other, and if that is the case, then shouldn't women at least have a go at running things, a fair go; then we can judge the results?'

'And then what? Will we be any better off? Has anyone thought that far ahead?'

'And then, after that, after the feminists have got their way for a few hundred years, we can get on with the next stage. Don't look so worried, it won't be that bad for men. You might even enjoy it. But the next stage, after all the feminist angst has dissipated and things have balanced out a bit, that is the stage I yearn for – the day when no person will be judged, not by gender, colour, or anything else for that matter.'

28 poured juice from a jug for herself after offering me some. Between sips from her glass she spoke.

‘I am drinking orange juice, for their sake. No, not the feminists, the nurses and doctors. I have had only water for over a week, and although I feel good, and calm, and clear of mind and purpose, they threatened to virtually tie me to the bed, using all sorts of intravenous drips and medications, if I didn’t start eating. But I have not really compromised, I was about ready to begin food again anyway. I will begin with juice, that is the best way, and that will appease them for a while.’

She licked her lips, then pressed them together. ‘Mmmm, it tastes so good, are you sure you don’t want some? It is the nectar of the gods. You can’t buy a sensation like this, not what I’m feeling right now, nor can it be imagined if you haven’t experienced it. Here’s to your health and your happiness.’

Raising my hand I performed an imaginary salute in response to her toast ‘When you were talking about women just now, you said that a day would come when we would no longer judge. Do you really believe that we’re meant to sort it all out in the end?’

She swished juice between her cheeks before swallowing with a gulp. ‘You’ve found my weakness, Scribe. It’s a romantic snare that I keep getting hooked on.’

‘You seem pretty free of snares to me.’

‘Maybe. But freedom in itself has many constraints attached to it, don’t you think?’

I nodded with uncertainty, letting her continue.

‘I find it a never ending struggle just to maintain my position, like walking on a ledge. You’re in control until someone, or something inside you, calls out. “Watch out! Don’t lose your balance.” Then you get the shakes and it’s all over, you’re grounded and

chained. What really frightens me, though, is the level of betrayal in our so called civilised society. Betrayal is the greatest destroyer of freedom. Down in the streets, where people should meet and rejoice, you find swindlers lurking in shadowy doorways, anxious to cheat you out of what is rightfully yours. At every turn, hawkers offer deals that promise safety and security, "Take a pamphlet, it's free, see how our system can help you foster a fuller and more enlightened YOU." And all around, slogans confront us with 'Buy now, pay later' schemes and personal investments, tailored to suit our individual needs.

'At the end of every day, after searching for that 'Successful You', and wondering what happened to the 'Innocent You', you make a tally of your achievements, a record of what you have accomplished, according to ... according to what? For what or for whom were you supposed to be achieving anyway? Oh, that's right, you realise, you were searching for your identity. Your identity is out there somewhere, they told you so, the hawkers and the squawkers, and you saw it on television and in the tabloids and magazines. And you will do whatever it takes to find your identity because freedom only comes from knowing one's identity, and you will do it much better this week because you had it all wrong last week. And you know that you won't succeed until you get your priorities right; they told you that too, those hawkers and squawkers.'

28 lay backwards across the bed, gazing at the ceiling, her arms resting by her side. 'Time passes. In bed, when you close your eyes, you begin to wonder where all the dreams have gone. Now you simply hope that tomorrow will bring something better than what you were left with today, and even that is not so important, as long as things don't get any worse. Every morning you begin again, a little slower than you used to. The

thought of searching for an identity has faded. You are in debt up to your ears from investing in your individuality.'

'So you see no chance of ultimately being free?' I questioned, not sure of the bleak turn our conversation had taken. 'Is there no complete freedom for you?'

'It's an uphill climb all the way, and just as you think you've reached the final summit, and are finally free, you realise that there is another, even larger, peak ahead. It's a useless exercise, I tell you, a vain struggle. Who wants to be free anyway? Not by those terms. The media, the advertising, the politics? You can't trust what you hear – you tell yourself that. And even those out there who have made it, the ones you read about or see on screens, the ones that seem to have attained that which eludes you, they don't have it all that good – you tell yourself that too. At least, there is a certain amount of comfort in accepting and knowing your place, and it is your duty, and a responsibility – and again, you tell that to yourself. After a while even being chained and abused can become comfortable.'

She sat up again, but seemed very distant, moving slowly with only a few careful gestures as she spoke.

28~~

Phantoms. Freedom is a phantom that you shouldn't chase. Chasing phantoms brings pain, phantom pain, like the one you get when something is wrong, very wrong, inside, but no one can see it, just like imaginary pregnancies or that strange sensation, a tingle or a jab, long after the cause of the pain has gone away. If you lose a limb, for a long time afterwards you still feel it there, dangling or twitching or moving with a mind of its own.

Phantom pregnancy is called pseudocyesis; I know that because they study it in this hospital. A woman, just two doors further down the hall, used to cry out regularly, thinking she was giving birth. 'Push, push,' she would holler, usually in the middle of the night, until someone came to sedate her. All she had been diagnosed as having was severe abdominal bloating, but her desire to have children had become so strong that her hormones actually began to change. She developed all the signs of pregnancy – tender and swollen breasts, and she stopped menstruating – but there was no embryo. Something inside her had brought on a physical change. She really believed she was pregnant.

We talked one day and she had many sorrows to let go of. In many ways her reaction was typically human, typical of human logic. We think that by imitating a thing, we will make it really happen. We confuse what's real with what is pretend. Sometimes I think our world is a simulated demonstration that we are not actually supposed to be living in. Like pseudocyesis we think that if we imitate all the signs, we will actually be doing it. We are not Homo sapiens, we are Pseudo sapiens. Sapiens, from the Latin, means wise. We are pretending to be wise.

Do apes chase their own tails? Not the smarter ones I suppose, except when playing, and only when they actually have a tail to chase. Humans chase their own tails, long after the tails have gone.

There is another interesting pseudo activity, pseudocopulation, maybe we will talk about that too one day.~~

I'm becoming aggressive lately. Probably through my frustration, but I don't know. The worst thing is that I'm so unsure about everything I do and say, and everything I see and hear. I question my own opinions, opinions that I've held all my life.

Today on the bus a father with his two children, a boy and a girl, was seated near me. He wasn't a wealthy man, and not well educated, but the kids were dressed nicely and they behaved themselves from what I could tell. One of them, the boy, the youngest I think, was talkative and inquisitive. He asked too many personal questions, embarrassing his father. Sitting there, watching them, I went through a bizarre merry-go-round of emotions.

At first I was envious of the father, with his two children, all travelling together. The boy was asking a lot of questions about the bus and the driver. His father didn't really answer, just told the boy to look at the scenery. I started to dislike the father for his indifference. Then, as the boy became more and more personal, asking questions about the other passengers around him and bringing up events that had occurred in their home, I started to sympathise with the father, believing that the child was becoming quite a handful. They really were embarrassing questions, the type that young children inevitably ask in public, like the reason for the colour of a person's skin or their strange appearance and physical features, or the way somebody is dressed, or their weight and size, or an odd manner of speech. The boy was also becoming quite restless and began fidgeting and wanting to move around the bus.

At one point the father leant across to his son, and, thinking no one could see him, pinched the boy's arm, a hard pinch, twisting the skin between the shoulder and elbow. The boy stopped in his seat immediately.

'Don't bawl now,' the father threatened, as tears began to well in the boy's eyes. 'You hear me? Or I'll hurt you worse than that.'

My allegiance with the father shifted instantly. I wanted to hit him. I thought about asking the driver to stop and do something; I considered quietly waiting and then following them when they got off the bus, to find out where they lived, who they were. Maybe then I could make a report to the police or just take matters into my own hands.

The boy soon recovered, he seemed used to the routine. As we came close to my stop, the boy was again bating his father, asking why they never had enough money, and why he couldn't buy a game they had seen today. His father ignored him; the girl tried her best to answer her brother. Then came one of the most embarrassing questions a child can ask in public, 'Why did you and Mum split up.' The father started to pay attention now, as if expecting what would come next, 'And why does Mum hate your guts?'

I felt ill and dizzy. I no longer wanted to intervene, I no longer could. And what would I have said anyway? I was glad to get off the bus.

I walked at a lightening pace to get home. It was a fresh night, but my anxiousness made me sweaty and uncomfortable. I picked up a thin branch that had fallen from a tree. It was thick enough in the middle to make it difficult to break. That annoyed me. I walked faster and with all my effort forced the two ends towards each other until the thing snapped. I threw one of the halves ahead of me, watching it tumble down the footpath and embed itself in a bush. I toyed with the other piece until I came to a picket fence, and like a small boy I ran the stick across the wooden slats, making a rattling percussive drum roll. When I looked back, I noticed that I had scratched paint off some of the paling. It was an old fence, already in need of repair, but still my heart quickened as I threw the stick into the gutter and moved on, with another entry in my list of things to feel guilty about.

I turned the corner, getting closer to home. 'I was alright till I left the hospital,' I thought to myself, trying to make sense of my feelings. I felt very alone. That happens after so much excitement. With 28, even disagreements are happy moments. Somehow in those situations I'm lifted out of my problems, then when I come back to reality it can be sudden and frightening. And then the guilt is even stronger than before. I had to shake loose of that creature's tentacles.

I was already on edge, when, no more than a hundred metres from home, a large dog jumped up from behind a metal gate next to me. All I saw was a ravenous beast on the attack, barking intensely only inches from my face. It was a dark spot in the street, and I didn't expect it; I nearly jumped out of my skin. It wasn't the dog's fault for being caged and stir-crazy, I knew that, but after I had gone a little way past and recovered slightly from the ringing in my ears, I turned back, anger burning inside me. I kicked repeatedly at the gate. All I wanted to do was kick the shit out of something or someone – that dog, its owners, their house, the gate. The dog cowered and backed off. Knowing that I had gone far enough, I walked home. Lights here and there were switched on revealing dark faces behind dusty curtains. And again, I felt guilty.

10 the case

I have customers waiting for cabinets to be built: mahogany bookshelves for one, a coffee table for another. Some that I haven't even begun are already well overdue. I sat for an hour or two in my workshop today in 'The Village', the resurrected old jam factory in Richmond. I was happy to get a space there last year. I feel at home among artists and other craftsmen.

Tom, the viola maker was in, bright and early as usual. He keeps to himself. I like that. You hardly see him, but it's good to have him around, good just knowing that someone else is in the building, quietly going about their work. I said a quick hello before moving on. Around the corner, I passed Dave's metal sculptures, 'Minimalist Industrial Trash', he calls them. Behind the wire grid and torn curtains, a man-hole cover had been welded onto a sharp spike, poised like a giant thumb-tack. Cassandra was also in, but she was busy remoulding the female torso of one of her life-size latex pieces. A poster taped up on the far wall advertised her upcoming exhibition, 'Rebirth and Exile'.

Unlocking the two metal doors to my studio and sliding them open, I was immediately aware of the mustiness. I opened both windows and checked around for dampness. A gentle breeze soon freshened the large room. I sat on my work stool, fitting comfortably onto the seat, shaped by my own hands from oak, back in high school. I sipped from a mug of tea, and swivelled, scanning the timber and tools and the well-worn benches. The scent of off-cuts and shavings filled my nostrils. I would have liked to pick up something to work on, even just a little. The pieces of Andre's unfinished desk lay stacked and covered in the corner. I wanted to walk over and touch them, but I was unable to. As I stared, my palms tingling. I rubbed my hands together. Without moving I could feel the smoothness of the cut and sanded pieces of oak that stood waiting to be assembled. A desk to study on. I can't touch it, not now.

There is a method for determining any changes in Andre's condition. Dr Firbanks explained it to me today. A series of checks and tests are used to assess, and then grade, the level of consciousness of a coma patient. It is called the Glasgow Coma Scale. The patient receives a score for the degree of response to external stimuli. It's difficult to remember everything he told me; but the important aspect is that Andre fared poorly on his first day, with little or no response. But lately, his responses have been improving gradually in some areas. I have asked if they could let me know when they next test him, so I can make sure I'm around – probably tomorrow or the next day, they said, and Dr Firbanks will be there with another specialist.

On more than one occasion, I have become excited, thinking that Andre was awakening, but the nurses and therapists have told me not to get too carried away. A coma patient often shows signs of movement, and may seem to hear and understand, but these signs are merely normal reflexes. I have done some of my own reading and

internet researching. But the staff have advised me not to do that, 'You can't trust what you read; it's full of too many hopes, and too many tragedies. Take it all with a grain of salt. And be assured that we are doing everything possible here.' I have found one or two helpful sites. The staff are right about most of the others – while one account gets your hopes up, another just makes you want to give up.

They have virtually stopped treating Andre for electric shock now, in many ways his body is healing and staying relatively healthy. His fluid levels are fine and his tissue tests are also good. That is encouraging. Electrical injuries affect the amount and distribution of fluid in the body. From what I can gather, fluid replacement is the most crucial aspect after severe electrocution; that is what causes much of the tissue damage, not only around the site of the burns, but throughout the body and even in the cells of the brain.

I just looked at the clock. This is becoming a very late night entry, early morning actually – 3am. Quite a few hours have passed since I came home. I was lying on the couch, on my side, one arm dangling on the ground, thinking about my uncle again, Jimmy. My thoughts of him are strong these days. He came up in conversation earlier this evening, with 28. I told her a part of his story, about his return to Samos where he had met a girl during his escape from the invasion of his home – a home that had been a family home for generations, and then suddenly no one in that family would ever see it again.

When Uncle Jimmy fled Asia Minor, barely a teenager, crawling out of the water onto the Samian shore, he was happy to find nothing but sand and pure white pebbles. He rolled onto his back, resting on what he described as the most beautiful, deserted beach he had ever seen. After a steep climb he reached a vantage point, Psili Ammos,

where he could see spot fires on the opposite bank. It was like another world, a dramatic play reaching its climax. The sky darkened. Ashes began raining down and blanketed the marble shore beneath him. Gazing further up along the coast towards his home, he could see the largest fire of the lot, the fires of Smyrna, now reaching out in every direction, as far west as his home. He could almost reach out and take it in his hand, like the clod of earth that he now squeezed, the clod of earth that he had carried with him from his home. It was the last remnant of a land before the bloodshed.

He turned his gaze back to the soil below his feet. Looking along the shore he decided to head west, sticking close to the sea, and came to the small village of Kalipso. He was welcomed and fed, and rested for a night. In the morning he was ravenous, but ate only yoghurt and figs. He needed to keep moving. The track was rough and rocky. After two or three hours the fire within began to subside. Jimmy came upon a place he called heaven.

‘I met a beautiful peasant girl, the last thing on my mind. I asked her to marry me after only five minutes. But she didn’t answer. Her family took me in. I stayed for three nights, and regained my strength. On the last night, I secretly promised to return for her. The next day, I called out to her as I left, heading up and over the mountains in search of the port at Vathi on the other side of the island, “How will I find you again? I don’t even know the name of your village.” She laughed and picked up a small stone as if to throw it at me. Then she dropped it at her feet. “You said that you went to school in Smyrna,” she called back, “then you must know something about mathematics. When you come, if you do, you fool, and you are crazy enough to try, just ask for the village that Pythagoras was born in.”’

Eventually Uncle Jimmy did go back, found her, and they got married.

‘How could I not?’ he always joked. ‘There is a very good reason why I had to return. On one of only a few rare occasions when I could get her on her own, she told me that the women of Samos were the most sensual and passionate women in all of Greece. She took me on a walk to an orchard, we sat amongst the apple trees, high on the side of a hill. We ate. She was like a goddess in every way. I had not felt such an urge towards a woman before. I wanted to take her in my arms, but we just stayed and talked – not long, certainly not long enough. I listened with pleasure. It was then that she told me the legend of Hera, a true Samian. When Hera married Zeus – one of the greatest marriages of all time – they spent their wedding night on the island. A night that lasted for three hundred years.

‘The wedding feast and the whole affair was magnificent. The gods brought gifts unheard of before. Gaea, Mother Earth herself, gave Hera a tree with golden apples. She planted it in her orchard, here on the island, an orchard just like the one we were sitting in. My goddess told me to look out for it on my journey. No one has seen it for centuries, but it is said to appear for those who are noble at heart. And then an apple can be picked. “I think I have already found it,” I said. “And you are my golden apple.”’

To think that Jimmy had grown up so near to his ‘goddess’, nothing more than a narrow channel of sea between them, yet he would never have known she existed if fate had not led him to her. It took war and revolution, a raging fire, a dangerous escape down the coast, and then a mighty swim between two shores to bring them together. And months later, he returned, as promised, so they could become husband and wife.

Some of my love for mathematics, particularly geometry, must have come from that side of the family, from that region. It is pleasing to know that when every angle and every shape is just right, everything simply slots together with ease.

‘Pythagoras,’ I said to 28, ‘believed that all the phenomena in the universe could be explained by their mathematical relationships.’

‘Yes, that is one of the things he thought about.’ She straightened her back. ‘He also believed that we shouldn’t use mathematics for our own greedy devices. He encouraged his students to tune into what he called the Harmony of the Spheres, a certain music created by the movement of the planets and by the expanse of the heavens and the sky.’

‘Both my sister and I studied Pythagoras. It seems that all three of us are interested in him, but for slightly different reasons. You’re interested in him for his contribution to mathematics; my sister read about him when she was studying astronomy; I’m more interested in his moral philosophy.’

‘Very few people know him for more than a clever mathematician. Everything I learnt about him at school was related to triangles. That would have been the same for you, it seems.’

I agreed.

‘But mathematics was a mere diversion that intrigued him sometimes, like a hobby. My sister and I found out so much more about his life and teachings; it became a challenge in the end, to see who would come up with the next piece of information about his ideas. Unfortunately, so much of what he taught was passed on only by oral tradition, and a lot of what has been written has not been translated.’

28 became clearly excited. She explained the entire history of human thought to me at the speed of light, and somehow it made sense. She told me more about Pythagoras than I could have possibly imagined.

‘The region you talk about, Scribe, marks the birthplace of modern thought. The only problem is that ever since that birth we have got it all wrong; it has been one big

misunderstanding after another. Maybe one or two individuals have come close to getting it right along the way, but for the most part it hasn't looked good.

'It seems that around 500 B.C. Pythagoras began teaching that the earth was a globe and not a disk, and, turning on its axis, it took twenty-four hours to complete one full rotation.

'He got a few minor details wrong. Like thinking that the sun was a reflection of a larger central fire. But he knew that the earth and the other planets were revolving around something.'

She was waving her arms around, tracing spheres and constellations.

'And, you know, that started it all off, Scribe. About two generations later, Democritus, another philosopher, extended the whole concept of space and matter. He claimed that the universe was composed of an infinite number of particles, called, you guessed it, atoms, and he decided that they had settled into place from a state of chaos and confusion.'

Watching and listening to her, made me think of the 'Big Bang' theory, in a round-about way, and most other recent theories in one form or another.

'Then the world went dark and crazy, as it often does, and we are still recovering – limping around like an old wounded dinosaur with failing sight. Occasionally, we think we've come up with a concept, like Copernicus did, but then we have to admit that we borrowed a bit from here and a bit from there, and that it has all been done before, two thousand years before in his case. Now it's about two thousand five hundred years for us, and it ain't getting any less.'

'It's about time we gave birth to something new,' I said.

'I don't think we can. The problem is we keep missing the important stuff! We close our eyes and ears too often to too much. Like with Pythagoras, he wasn't just a

mathematician or an astronomer, he was a humanitarian. You know the Major Scale that western music is based on?’

I nodded a yes.

‘One day Pythagoras was passing a metal worker who was busy forging tools with different sized hammers and anvils. Interested, he stopped to listen to the variety of tones coming from all the different sized metal objects. Later, he took a piece of string and tensioned it, plucked it, did a few mathematical equations, then plucked it some more, and the rest is history.’

‘Are you telling me that we need to branch out, be interested across the board?’

‘We need to open our eyes, our ears, all our senses, even our hearts, and to accept, and to stop censoring and manipulating.’

She looked sideways, very slowly, for no apparent reason, then faced me again.

‘It’s selective amnesia, Scribe. We just turn the other way, and forget, whenever it suits us. It has always fascinated me how we can remember some things and not others. I bet no one ever told you that Pythagoras was a vegetarian who sipped sage tea and fasted. The same can be said of Plato, but his life is another story. And it was one of them, I think, yes, it was Pythagoras, who required that a student, keen on entering his academy, undertake a fast for a month or so, could have been forty days, in order to gain entry.’

‘28 days, perhaps?’

‘Maybe, but that’s not important. When you’re cleansed, you’re cleansed. There’s not necessarily a precise time frame involved.’

28, again animated with excitement, gestured with her hand. ‘Pass me that case from over ... Where is it?’

Raising herself upright onto the seat of the chair where she was sitting by the window, she stood on her toes and pointed towards the other side of the bed. Momentarily, her face contracted into a puzzled frown before relaxing again. Then, using her extended arm like a Captain at the helm, she swung swiftly, directing a change in course with her finger pointing to the other end of the room.

‘The wardrobe, try the wardrobe, that skinny coffin shaped cabinet wedged in next to the mirror. Open it. There it is, see, standing on its end, down the bottom. Those pesky women in white who shuffle around here like penguins have gone and jammed it in. That’s it, don’t be shy. Give it a good yank. Do you need a hand?’

It was only a small suitcase, but it proved difficult to extract from the bottom of the wardrobe. The problem was that I couldn’t get to the handle, having virtually no space to fit my fingers in around the sides.

‘It has to come out, let me help,’ she insisted. But just as 28 was about to come to my assistance the case budged, sending me toppling backwards.

‘Bravo, Scribe! Drop it on the bed if you wouldn’t mind. Just dump it there on the end.’

The case seemed to be empty, except for a sheet of a paper, or a card, that seemed to slide around inside for a moment as I placed it on the bed. The brown, firm-sided construction, the wooden handle, and the metal locks dated it, I thought, to maybe forty or fifty years ago.

‘This case is older than me,’ I remarked.

‘It’s older than both of us put together. It belonged to my grandmother, from her childhood.’

The case, barely large enough for one person on an overnight trip, was plastered with overlapping stickers and labels from different destinations, some faded and worn, others relatively new. The handle was adorned with tags that came to rest like small flags.

28 was not necessarily projecting her words in my direction, not necessarily speaking for my benefit, simply letting them happen. I was forced to listen closely at first, fearing that if a few phrases came out too softly or if she drifted too far into her own abstract world, I would not be able to follow her. Sounds from heightened activity in the corridor echoed into the room, intermittently posing a threat, capable of upstaging her. She rarely repeated herself, and this would be no exception. Thoughts came and were spoken and then were gone. I followed her trail as best as I could.

28~~

You look at that case and the first thing you are aware of is the places it's been to. It's no longer a case but a travel journal. The original purpose of the case has been relegated to a position of less significance. The way it is viewed has shifted. And perhaps many things have been forgotten. My grandmother, for instance, couldn't remember how much her parents paid for it or where they bought it, even though it was an exciting event for her. I can't remember exactly when I first used it. And nobody can recall the original colour or pattern that is hidden underneath all those stickers and stamps. One day, perhaps my children or grandchildren will find the case buried beneath a pile of unused relics stored in an attic or a cellar and say, 'Look at all the places Nanna has been to.' It will ignite their imagination. They'll picture fantastic and exotic scenes of me and my travels. Perhaps they will act them out, inventing all sorts of dramas and experiences, creating a larger than life image of their nanna. The case will have become an extension of who I am, or maybe in their eyes it will even become me.

But if I tore all those labels off, used a little steam perhaps, gave it a good scrub, inside and out, I wonder if it would still be the same case I inherited ten or fifteen years ago. And what of the reaction of those children to the new case? Would it still have the potential for being something precious to them? Would it be of any use to them? What would they care? Just an old useless case, scrubbed up a bit. Would they have any qualms about kicking it around? Maybe they would turn it into a plaything like a house or a car for a brief afternoon's amusement. Later they may even destroy it, by booting it through the sides or mashing it under their feet. And if I showed them all its labels and tags, and declared that this case had travelled the world with me, would they suddenly see it in a different light?~~

11 fallen angels

Sometimes, thinking about you, makes me so angry. There is a connection, and always will be. Even the term 'ex-wife' connects me to you. And if it wasn't for our son, I would gladly have nothing to do with you. I can't recall the last time we spoke without you losing your temper. Is that my fault or yours? Even just a simple telephone conversation turns into warfare. I have tried many times to explain the frustration I feel, but the discussion never goes beyond tactical manoeuvres and point scoring. I've never been good at that, not when it comes to hurting your opponent. When did I become your opponent anyway, that is what I'd very much like to know?

You are so unapproachable, and because of my frustration and anger, I find it difficult to stop myself from blaming you for Andre's accident. My mind writhes night and day; I am becoming consumed by the question of blame. I turn one way then the next, finding excuses, finding faults, believing, disbelieving. To whom should the finger be pointed? The shed full of tools was not the only thing I was forced to leave behind, but it was unguarded and unsafe. You laughed when I told you to keep it locked up.

‘What would you care?’ you mocked. ‘If you were concerned about your son you’d have been a better man while you were still around.’

You’ve never told me exactly what aspects of my manhood I was supposed to be better at. Was it solving all your problems for you, making your life easier, keeping the waters around you as calm as possible? I thought I did that. At least I tried. I feel that you deliberately kept my head spinning with doubt. I was at your command. At one stage, at the height of paranoia, I asked questions of our friends and other couples. Embarrassing and probing questions, scrutinising their relationships – comparing myself to other men and comparing our relationship to other relationships.

There was not much more I could do to make you happy, except get a better job perhaps, working for a company rather than myself. But I did well enough on my own, and I was able to be creative and in control. You and I have always used a different scale to judge success. And have you forgotten the time I did take a job with a higher wage? That was short-lived: you complained about the long hours.

Always the same accusations and the same insults, ending with the same marching orders. And I would make the same promise to myself. ‘The next time she tells me to leave, it will be the last time,’ I had said those words over and over to myself. And I had broken the promise on every occasion. But finally on that one night, crouching over my son’s bed, trying to comfort him back into his dreams – while you screamed at the top of your voice at the height of one of your worst episodes – I realised I could take no more.

Our son’s words that night will never leave me. ‘It’s alright Dad, Mum will stop soon, then we can all go back to sleep. Don’t worry.’

Too much pain, too much forgiving, and too many allowances. I stormed into our bedroom. ‘The party’s over,’ I said. ‘Next time anything like this happens, I go. You

keep telling me that's what you want, so be it. But if I go, I'm never coming back. Just remember that.'

I stormed out of the house and stayed with friends. The next day, with flowers and a spring-clean of our home and our life, I tried more than ever to rekindle the fading happiness. But it was like trying to put a seal on an active volcano, a volcano that had only just begun to stir. After two weeks of mild disturbances, the lid finally blew for good. I have never missed you, only what I believed you and I stood for. But I miss Andre, often.

I returned, a few weeks after our final split, to take my possessions, to repossess. I broke into the house through a window at the rear. The moment I stepped down from the sill onto the carpet I knew I was in a foreign world. The house was no longer a domain in which I was welcome, it belonged to another life. I couldn't take a thing. I wish I had. But I couldn't. The truth is, taking anything would have meant a fight, and I was too tired to fight. It was a different man who had the stamina to fight. I fled the scene, giving-up for good – giving-up for my own well being. Why continue the battle when there is no hope of a cease-fire?

But I regret that now. I wish I had taken my tools. I wish I had disconnected the power that led to the shed. Andre had told me several times that he had been making small things out of timber: a pencil-case for school, some bookends for the shelf in his room, a hanging mobile of stars and planets. 'I want to be like you, but you're not around to show me,' he had once said during a telephone conversation. I can picture him trying to be like me, reaching up to flick on the main power-switch behind the laundry door, walking out through the back sliding doors onto the decking, taking three steps

down to the lower driveway, turning, opening the heavy wooden door that should have been locked ...

28~~

I'm afraid today, reluctant to continue the climb. The passage through the stairwell is tight and the air is rancid. There are still so many steps ahead. But I can't allow a moment's uncertainty to disrupt a lifetime's determination. Hesitation. Consternation. My defence mechanism will kick in. My ears will prick up – they already begin to twitch. Survival.

Somewhere, on one of the levels above, I can hear a click clicking of sharp heels on a concrete floor, pacing. And still further up, maybe from the rooftop, laughter and singing, filtering down to lead me on. A beguiling voice, not woman, not man, eccentric, eclectic, full-blown with joy. A heavy door slams shut!

There is a scuffing sound, coming from below. I can hear words, deep and rumbling, fragments of phrases rising from under ground. They seep in, slow and thick, so dense I could almost grab a hold. I can taste them, almost see them. They fill the air with an old-leather smell. I begin to quicken my steps.

Like a recording played fast in reverse, the sounds around me become tangled. My senses rattle in an alphabet swirl, a cacophony of words fracture the air with a high pitched squeal. Blocking my ears, I panic, difficulty catching my breath. My ascent is halted, I can't outrun what has surrounded me. If only I could jump onto the hand-rail and make a quick escape, sliding side-saddle at high speed all the way down, past the invasion and out of the line of fire.

Most people say that their lives were simpler when they were young, that it would be nice to go back. Not for me. I was scared and misunderstood.

I'm just a misunderstood eleven-year-old girl trying to make sense of my woman's thoughts. Maybe I think too much and then that gets me confused. But I have to think because I'm not happy. I feel like I have to run away. 'You can't outrun something that is tied to your ankle,' Grandma used to say. But something is troubling me. My eleven-year-old life is not what it should be.

I'm becoming afraid lately, very afraid, of unknown figures lurking in the shadows, hiding beneath the stairs and behind the doors. I don't usually frighten so easily. My mother is always lurking in the shadows, always just around the corner, watching and listening. She tells me that I'll have no chance of making it to heaven, the way I behave. Who says I want to go to heaven anyway.

If heaven was a place, and if I could actually go there, just for a visit, I bet I would find nothing more than just a plain old ordinary world exactly like this one, a mirror. I think maybe there are a million billion worlds or more out there just going on and on forever in all directions, like the branches of the huge willow tree in my back yard. When I climb it and sit in the middle, it is like looking at an enormous universe. Each leaf is a world of its own, flapping in the breeze.~~

I have already made one confession tonight, I may as well finish what I have started – while I have the courage. Feelings about my Uncle Jimmy have been inside me for some time. Some of them I have written about and they are very special to me. But I have left out one aspect. I have left out the truth about how I have really felt about him. Jimmy, this is my final confession, and the final chapter to your story.

I hadn't seen you for quite a few years when you appeared out-of-the-blue and very much older. You heard that I was engaged to be married.

'Are you certain she's the woman for you?' you asked me, without having met my future bride.

'Of course!' I answered.

'No doubts?'

'No doubts!'

'And what about her, are you the man for her?'

'Of course.'

'How do you know that?'

I hesitated from shyness, but my head was in the clouds with love and gave me strength. 'Because she loves me.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure.'

'Then what are you waiting for, my boy? Let's go and get her and do it now!'

You and I had lunch that day and spent the afternoon together. As I studied your aging face, youth still glimmered in your cheeks and ignited your eyes. You teased your moustache, as you always did. Something struck me from the past, a reminder of a part of myself that I am not proud of and that I try hard to forget. I could never tell you, nor anyone, about it. I am ashamed of myself, ashamed of my behaviour.

Jimmy, the way you moved that day, the way you spoke, and the look in your eyes – in the cafés, along the streets, in the shops, and on the beach – was so typical, so much you. You are honest. If you care about someone you show it, and if someone crosses you, you let them know, and you don't give a damn what they think. I have always admired you. But it is now time for me to confess: there have been times when I

have been embarrassed to be associated with you. That is an insult, a grave insult, especially to you, but it is also an insult to my family and to myself.

From when I was a child, your honesty and determination, your way of being you, has brought out in me both admiration and shame. One minute I would be looking up at you in awe, and the next I would be cringing from embarrassment at your openness and vitality. My reaction made me feel small. I was too self-conscious and too eager to fit in to be like you. If I could turn back the hands of time, I would sit with you for ages and not even talk; and we could walk, anywhere you like, for as long as you like, and I would be proud to hear you say the things that you are not afraid to say to anyone. The word 'refugee' was never mentioned at home. Jimmy, you used it with pride.

Thinking of you reminds me that I come from refugees and peasants. My grandparents all arrived in this country as small children. They met here and married here. My parents, wanting desperately to fit in, rejected their background. Gradually, their blood was drained of the warmth and richness of their people until it was replaced by a cold vaporous gas. They never used the words 'peasant' or 'refugee'. For them, it must have been difficult enough being a wog, let alone a refugee wog. I did as they did, and as others did. In appearances, our family flourished, but we withered and died on the inside. You, Jimmy, are part of a rare breed, willing to stay true to your colours, no matter what the consequences.

Three months after that visit, you came to my wedding. That was the last time I saw you. It was a memorable celebration. Plenty of good food, and many close friends. A few relations were absent; that was partly thanks to you. You were right about the old rivalry. I remember your words clearly, 'To hell with the stale relatives, still acting crazy and inhuman, like they did in the middle of the war.'

Memet was my closest friend; it was only fair to have him as my best man. Turkey and Greece were so far behind us.

‘In these situations it is best to follow your spirit, it is like a fire that burns inside you. Don’t even listen to your instincts, and don’t think too much. Don’t even listen to your heart. And above all else, my boy, don’t try to please everyone. That just gets you into trouble. Memet is your friend; he is good to you, and you are good to him. You trust each other, and that’s all that counts. Who cares where he comes from, or where anyone comes from? People are always asking questions like, “Where do you live, and where do you come from?” As if it matters. It doesn’t matter! The place I was born in doesn’t even exist any more.’

You said that you used the same argument when you persuaded your goddess to leave her island and come with you to another land. Then you said to me, ‘You’re good with your hands. There is a saying, “Home is where the heart is.” That is true! But if your heart yearns for something that doesn’t exist, well, don’t despair, when you’ve finished your crying, and if you want it badly enough, go out and build it with your own hands.’

The greatest wedding gift came from you, but it was not in a box. You gave me your words and advice. Strange, perhaps. And very personal, always. But I think you were trying to be like a father to me. You put your arm around me, outside in the gardens, not long before the ceremony.

‘Come,’ you said, ‘let’s have a quick talk.’

We stepped away from the crowd. ‘Some of these people, some of the ones I don’t know. I’ve tried to talk to them, but I’m not sure about them. They’re too rigid. No imagination. And they don’t like having fun.’

I didn't say a lot. You kept your voice low, fortunately, as we walked further away from the others. 'By the way, did they circumcise you? When you were a kid? Your parents?'

You didn't really wait for an answer after seeing my stunned face.

'It's a barbaric act of mutilation, I tell you. It's not your parents' fault, they were just following suit. But the ones holding the deck, they're the ones, they want to make you just like them. With the same hang-ups.'

You looked over at the guests. 'Some of those in-laws have been dealing for a long time. Make sure you check the deck if you get involved with them. But better to keep your distance. You know, some Northern Europeans, because it gets so damn cold where they come from, hate washing. I'm not saying that they're all the same, but a family I worked for once, they used to share the same dribble of bathwater once a week, at best, and it wasn't because they couldn't afford it. Not like Mediterraneans, using the hot sun and the sea to purify the body and cleanse the skin. An antiseptic for any ailment. The sun and the sea, that's all you need, and some olive oil to keep you looking young. Why do you think your grandmother and your auntie, Ambrosia, were so beautiful, even in their eighties?'

I smiled, you became more lively.

'And making love my boy, where I came from we did it in the open, with the sun shining on our bodies.' Your hands began to join in with the telling. 'There is nothing like gently removing the clothes from a woman to reveal the softest parts of her body. And the slower you do it, the more exciting it is. None of that shyness, of having the lights out at night or turning your back, or leaving half your clothes on under the sheets. And none of that "wham, bam, thank you ma'am" and in a few seconds it's all over. That's not sex, that's rape, I tell you!'

We had wandered far enough. You took me by the arm and led me back towards the wedding.

‘I’m not saying that a winter’s night, by a warm fire, is not romantic, because it is, but it’s the way you go about it. I could tell you a few stories, but I think you’ve already got the picture.’ You laughed and slapped me on the back, affectionately, but with terrific force.

‘Anyway that’s enough of that talk for now. I’m getting hot under the collar, if you know what I mean? I just have one more thing to say to you, because it’s appropriate.’ You turned to face me. ‘Some things are sacred, and love is one of them. And because it’s sacred, if you’re not prepared to do it properly, then you have no right to do it at all. I can accept a lot of things, even abstinence – that is holy, but I can’t accept carelessness. All your heart, my boy, or not at all.’ You took me in your arms, kissed both my cheeks and then my lips. ‘Now go and get married, and be happy forever!’

Even though you were over eighty years of age, you danced all night. And then you were gone.

Jimmy, your advice on my wedding day was both good, and not so good. Maybe I went too far, maybe I tried too hard. I don’t know. All I know for sure is, I’m just not you. Yassou, Dimitri!

12 mother of pool

Rain has really begun to pelt down. I made it home just in time. Heavy clouds have been threatening to unload a deluge all day. There were mild showers on and off, beginning yesterday, but nothing like the downpour now. After I went to bed last night and finally got to sleep, my dreams became a constant curtain of drizzle, as full of rain and bleakness as the streets outside.

The absence for some days of any real sunlight has been depressing. And now the sound of the wind and rain is making me edgy. I can't hear anything else. Ordinarily, I wouldn't mind this kind of weather and the comfort that comes with being sheltered and safe; but the gas heater, that has only two of its six elements in working order, is inadequate in this overpriced apartment. It's rare to need heating anyway this time of year. And each time the rain eases there is an incessant dripping caused by one of the downpipes near the window of this room. Why have they put it so close and with a bend that has rusted out? It doesn't carry any water anyway, from what I can see, not on the inside. Actually, the problem begins with the spouting. It overflows easily, partially

because it is blocked with leaves and partially because it is old and has sagged irreparably out of shape. Most of the rain spills over the edge of the spouting, at one end where it runs down the outside of the pipe. At the bend it follows the path of least resistance, making a course along the mantle above my window. Like the edge of an umbrella, great blobs of rain drop onto the windowsill along its entire length. During exceptionally heavy rain, water leaks in onto the carpet. Maybe that is what aggravates me. I'll have to do something before next winter. I'll have to complain.

I just had a hell of a fright. Sitting here writing, being deafened by the rain one minute, and tortured by incessant drops at my window sill the next, I was pondering the next sentence. I drifted into a bizarre arena where anything is imaginable, thinking that if something terrible suddenly happened outside, if there was a mass-slaughter of humans and animals, or if the world ended, I wouldn't even know about it. I could wake to find that I was one of only a few survivors, perhaps the only survivor. Just as I was most lost in my thoughts, an incredible banging on my door startled me completely. I jumped in my seat. Somebody must have wanted something. My heart pounded. I didn't want to answer. I wanted to be left alone, with my fear and my thoughts. After a pause, they knocked again, longer this time, but not as fiercely. Eventually, I put my ear to the door, and although the rain was getting louder and heavier again, I heard footsteps and maybe a door closing. It was probably just a neighbour.

There's no law against not answering your door.

About seven or so years ago, the three of us were at the beach. A few white wisps of cloud danced across an otherwise sapphire-blue sky on a pleasantly warm day, perfect for swimming. The water was just right – clear with softly rolling waves. Andre was

happy splashing around on his own in the shallow water, while out deeper I held him safely, letting him float on his back or, much to our amusement, letting him attempt to dog-paddle with a wild flurry of kicks and arm movements.

We were keen to encourage him to feel confident in the water. I was happy with what he had achieved: Andre had ventured into the water several times. And he was comfortable, even with the occasional splash in the face from the waves, or a little salty water in his mouth.

Urging me to let him try on his own, you were keen to offer advice from the sandy shore. ‘He’s not going to learn while you mother him,’ came your frustrated words, impatient with my patience.

But every time I loosened my grip he would sink and become nervous.

‘Enough for today,’ I thought, taking him for one last plunge while keeping his head above sea level.

As we came from the water you huffed disappointedly. ‘My father just threw me in from the old jetty when I was half Andre’s age.’

‘Is that why you’re afraid of swimming?’

‘I’m not afraid. I just don’t need to swim in polluted water.’

‘But it’s alright for us, is it?’

‘Take him back in. Let him do it on his own.’

‘He’s done well today. Leave it for next time.’

‘He’ll never learn doing it your way.’

I leant close to you so that Andre couldn’t hear, as I towelled his hair. ‘He’s had enough for today, and I’m not sure he feels all that confident. He doesn’t float well on his own. But I was like that. I always found it difficult to tread water. I still do. Some people are just like that.’

‘Bullshit. That’s the worst thing you can do – giving him your hang-ups.’ You stomped, five paces, towards the edge of the water, put your hands on your hips, then marched back.

‘Take him back in – now!’

The day turned from a pleasant outing into a torturous fiasco; I couldn’t quieten you down, except by giving in to your demands. People stared, I was weak and dragged us both back into the water. Andre got soaked. He still hates the beach and probably also me for forcing him.

All that is history now, but in many ways I think the tone for the relationship between the three of us was set that day.

I have an update on Andre’s condition. It is confirmed that nothing seems to be physically wrong with him. One final suggestion has only just made sense to me. And it disturbs me. The visiting neurosurgeon mentioned, as a possibility, an old treatment that has regained interest in some medical circles. Not a lot of research to date, but some trial results have shown interesting and potentially promising results. Specific details about the procedure, I am not certain of, and for the moment I find it difficult to consider it an option. I hope it is a last resort. Dr Firbanks said nothing about it. The neurosurgeon suggested that a few sessions using low voltage pulses via electrodes at specific points around the body, particularly the head, might arouse a reaction to the point of activating his nervous system, literally shocking him into consciousness. How ironic, when you think that it was an electric shock that caused the problem in the first place. It would be a reasonably safe procedure I was told, particularly considering Andre’s low response to pain. They have tried pinching and jabbing and other means, like responses to light and sound, to see if he reacts.

I watched today as they performed their tests, gauging Andre's performance and rating him. He is responding slightly, to some things more than others. He did well with sounds – his eyes fluttered, he occasionally twitched, and he tightened his hand or moved it more than once. Again, I was told not to get excited, especially if he responds to my voice. It is inconclusive they say and clearly not an indication, because although it is common, rarely does a patient remember such events. But there is improvement, and that makes it difficult to know what to think, particularly when all the doctors agree that there is nothing physically wrong with Andre.

Does that mean he only needs a good shake or a jolt? They also suggested trying anti-depressants again, a different one this time, a lithium based solution in his drip. A specialist insinuated that perhaps it is a psychiatric problem. He inquired about Andre's state of mind for the past few years and particularly prior to his accident. It is all a bit frightening really. I don't know what to think or what to let them do. In the end it is his mother's decision. I have to accept that. My gut-feeling is to wait, but the truth is, the longer the coma continues, the greater the chance of permanent damage to Andre.

A small group of three students from Andre's school came to visit him today. I think they were nervous at first, that is understandable. His teacher was with them. She was very attentive and considerate, not only in regards to Andre, but in the way she handled the others. The two boys became a bit fidgety and uncomfortable towards the end, not knowing what to do. They were probably glad when their teacher suggested that they all visit the cafeteria for a drink and a snack before heading back to school. The girl, Emily, who sent him a very lovely card when he first arrived in hospital, stayed behind for as long as she could. We talked. I thanked her for the card, told her I had read it to Andre, more than once. She is also twelve. As she sat there, leaning towards him, I wondered if

I was witnessing Andre's first romance. Was it just beginning, or had it blossomed long ago? I wondered if Andre was aware of it?

As she was leaving, I offered Emily some of Andre's jellybeans, the ones that I have been placing by his bed for him. They were all I had to offer her. She took two or three and hurried to catch up with the others. It was then that I remembered something strange. As I was closing the drawer next to his bed, I was reminded of almonds. I could have offered her some, because, even though I didn't know where they had come from, someone had been leaving them for Andre. What is really quite intriguing is that the pile has grown. It was hard to tell, and probably quite insignificant, but, in a similar fashion to my jellybeans, it seems that someone has been leaving almonds. The two piles growing larger side by side. Perhaps it is one of the nurses, perhaps it is his mother. Or perhaps nothing more than a curiosity for my tired mind.

After such an eventful day I have almost forgotten about 28. She was in her room, as usual, when I visited after eating a sandwich and after all the clatter of the evening meals had died down and most of the visitors had gone home. There is never a need to hurry, she is not going anywhere in the near future, or so she has told me on several occasions.

She was seated by the window overlooking the small garden. A soft glow from the outside light illuminated the trees and bushes. I was always intrigued by the fact that we were in the basement level yet her room had the good fortune of facing out onto a lower section of the hospital grounds, a kind of 'Inner Sanctum' she called it.

After briefly greeting me, 28 stood and turned a full circle with her arms stretched above her head. 'It rained heavily last night. Beautiful freshness. I had to sneak out to feel it. I know a way. I took a walk in the liquid crystal drops.'

Then she floated to the bed, on her back, and was lost in a pool of distant thoughts. I sat in the seat opposite the one she had risen from, my usual position on most occasions. I watched and waited. She turned, not away from me, but into herself – curling up like a child. She spoke. I felt like an eavesdropper.

28~~

Water on the twelfth floor. Something leaking, over there in the corner, wet and running down the wall. Stop, silently listening. A steady dripping, plip, plip, plip, from inside the red metallic box on the wall. A fire hydrant. My ear against the dented door, I discern an echo, BOOM, like a kettledrum. A puddle forming at my feet, like the puddles in winter streets on the way to school. Splat with my old black shoes, but the water gets in and soaks my stockings and socks. No amount of shoe-polish will fill the hole in the scuff at the front. In winter, my toes stay cold all day long. Splat again, the puddle is bigger, and growing, like a rocky pool or an ocean – tempting for a young girl, dreaming. I gaze, trying to catch sight of my reflection. I see my face clearly for that perfect instant between the outward movement of the ripples – light brown hair, plaited on each side; skin slightly pale, with cheeks that often blush; a freckle or two here and there, mostly on the nose; lips pert and fresh; and eager eyes, flashing mysteriously for a second, then erased by a passing wave. Splat, another splash of my shoe.

The ripples are calming as they settle like the still surface of a swimming pool. I would like to dive in, to be surrounded by the warm caress of liquid against my skin.

Twelve years old, at the edge of adolescence, at the edge of the pool, needing a comforting hug, needing a guiding hand. Our neighbours' swimming pool. Always a welcome, school friends and locals, all go there. The heated water, so easy to stay in till

your skin wrinkles. Warm jets of filtered water forcing their way back into the pool. Comfortable, embracing, like a spa, like a hug. Today it feels different. My first experience of anything quite like that. I was only twelve.~~

I need to let my own thoughts intervene, just for a moment, for it was at this point that I felt I no longer belonged, that I no longer had the right to listen. I noticed, more so than any time before, that while she was speaking, 28 forgot that I was there. She was mesmerised, staring at the ceiling. I'm sure she could see the dripping water developing into a puddle, into a pond, into a swimming pool. She tapped her foot several times, and kicked at the air like a child.

This makes me concerned. Her eccentric and playful stories are consuming her. It is no longer a case of her being involved, it is more that she completely slips into another state. She leaves the room. Sometimes, when she talks about being eleven or twelve, I'm certain that she becomes that age and that girl again. Her use of language and even the sound of her voice changes. But not with any consistency. Not in a way that is predictable. Sometimes she may even shift in tone and appearance in mid-sentence. I can see the changes in her eyes, so womanly one moment and a child the next.

Also the way she mentions climbing stairs, to get to the rooftop, it is all too real for her. And as for her sister, I think she must exist, or at least have once existed. 28 knows so much about her. They seem very close, as if they are one and the same.

She must have suffered a great ordeal, maybe even many ordeals, that I am certain of. I overheard her memory of a very personal part of her life today.

I was only twelve. The day was soaked in sunshine. Luminous rays of light entered the swimming pool and blended harmoniously with the water in an exotic display of colour. My body became charged, became fully alive and sensual. I could feel the rhythm and hear the beat. I became part of a magnificent, erotic dance, spinning and gliding in time with an ancient drum. All turned to silk. Like a dolphin, I leapt into the air and then dived as deep as I could go, emerging close to the edge. The warm jets of water, bubbling, rubbing, caressing and pressing, against my body.

I didn't know it could feel like that. Is anybody watching? A strange pleasure, against my legs, around my hips, between my thighs. I was only twelve. I didn't know it could feel that good. I lay back, floating, trying to keep hold of the edge while letting my legs part. I closed my eyes.

I stopped! Why did I stop? That's right, my mother stopped me. She stood over me by the pool. She shrieked, 'What are you doing there to yourself?'

I stiffened.

'Get out of there! Get out!' she demanded wildly, 'Dirty girl!'

As I ran inside I didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The sight of that 'Dirty girl' would forever be in my mother's eyes, and in my mind. She would cling to that image and to those words of abuse. She used them whenever she needed to hurt or to manipulate. She will always be the mother of the pool, never a mother of pearl.

It is all just history now. History can only move into the past when we are no longer involved.

Splash with my shoe. I've obliterated the lot. The guilt has gone.~~

13 superstition, chivalry, and rhyme

‘What is this hell? I don’t know any more if my son is dead or alive. Why are you putting me through all this? You’ve killed him! I don’t even know if I can keep going in to see him. I can’t watch him die. I’m suffering, and all you care about is almonds. Haven’t you got anything better to ring me about. It could have been anyone, you idiot! That’s probably what they do in there, leave almonds as a cure. Witchdoctors!’

She slammed the phone down. I hung up like I was handling a nuclear warhead and wondering what I had done wrong, again.

An unusual thing happened to me today. I have ended up with a poem in my possession, written by I don’t know who, although I am almost certain that the author is a strange lady that I met in the hospital when I was leaving Andre’s floor. I almost knocked into her. I had my head down after pressing the button for the lift and waiting patiently. For no obvious reason, she was startled, seemed surprised to see me. We had never met before. At first she began to get out of the lift, but decided to walk back in and ride

down to the ground floor. It was as if she suddenly changed her plans because of me, or because of nearly walking into me, perhaps.

The incident has stuck in my mind for many reasons. But before I continue I must make a note, for it is related.

A note to you, Andre. I send my love, as I do every night, and every day, all day long. Keep fighting, son. There seems little I can do, but so much we can all do for you. I become frustrated sometimes when I read or hear of the wonders that are being achieved throughout the world, in medicine, in science, through hope, through believing. I wish such miracles would happen for us. Maybe it is me who is not trying hard enough. I should try harder for you and not be so concerned about myself. I am writing about so many things other than you, and I doubt whether any of it will actually serve to help you. My excuse is that the writing helps me regain my strength, to stay in control. I don't know if that is so.

What I did today was undignified. I lied. I lied about visiting Andre, and I chose not to acknowledge his existence. I feel guilty, I feel ashamed, but most of all I feel so angry towards myself because in a way I have betrayed him. It might not be a big deal for a child, but for me it amounts to the worst form of dishonesty.

It was a long ride down in the lift. That strange and alluring woman asked me what I was doing in the hospital. It was too complex for me to explain everything. And she was very attractive. I forgot who I was for that moment; it was a wonderful way to escape, seemingly harmless, just a momentary blind-turn from my life. But that meant turning away from Andre. What it is that comes over us in those situations, I am not

sure. I can only guess how far I would have been prepared to go in terms of what I said, what I would have exaggerated, what I would have denied.

I said nothing about my son, pretending that I was on my way down to visit an old friend. I didn't lie very convincingly, and I changed my story more than once, eventually settling on the idea that the person I was looking for was someone I hardly knew, but was concerned about. I had no excuse for being up on a higher floor except that I had got confused about where to find them.

The woman in the lift was astonishingly vibrant and friendly. Her long striking hair was tied up, but still hung to the middle of her back, and the colour began as light-brown, almost blonde, at the front, becoming deep-red in the longer strands. A thin wooden comb, like the type a Japanese Geisha might wear, held it all in place. At first her manner and voice seemed strangely familiar to me, someone I knew, I thought for a second, or maybe someone famous. I think I was probably reacting to nothing more than the physical attraction I was feeling towards her.

We were squashed into the back corner of the lift by the passengers we picked up on our way down. She commented that lifts were not her preferred mode of transport. We agreed that it was like being shut into a cage. She knew a great deal about the hospital, and was sympathetic towards the needs of all concerned, including the patients, staff, and visitors. She did two strange things though, before getting out at the ground floor.

The first thing was that she bent to pick up a piece of paper that she herself seemed to drop from her bag. But she said it wasn't hers and insisted that it must be mine. I took it reluctantly, with little time to explain that it couldn't have been mine, before the second odd thing happened, possibly as a way to change the subject, but I'm not sure.

She said, quite matter-of-factly, holding both my hands clasped around the paper as the doors opened to the ground floor, ‘I hope your friend recovers soon. But don’t expect too much. They only ever keep a few patients down there, interesting ones, under observation in a way. Patients they don’t really have a place for. They’re not that ill, physically; and probably not that ill, mentally, either. Some have tried to injure themselves, but they’ll be all right. They just need to rest.’

I stayed in the lift, confused about the incident with the poem and her odd remarks, but I was also attracted by this woman’s charming smile and manner, and her entire appearance as she walked out ahead of the closing doors. For a moment I wanted to force my way from the lift and catch up with her, but the grubby steel doors sliced into the image until it was gone.

28 was not in her room. I returned to the ground floor, and made my way down the hall filled with gift shops, news-stands, a post office with banking facilities, and several cafés and fast food outlets. It’s like a small village, supported by the pain and disease industry going on around it. I went on my way, walking until a bus came by. Glancing at the poem from time to time, I tried to unravel the peculiar incident that had occurred with the mysterious woman. I could not make sense of the encounter. Here is the poem:

GOING NOWHERE

Where is nowhere

Is it somewhere over there

Is it mentioned during rhetoric

When the speaker eats the chair

Is it stamped on faded pages
In an expatriate's passport
Are clues to its location
Jumbled in political retort
Will I hear it buried in the past
If I press my ear down to the ground
I'll be honest, those are not the places
Where nowhere can be found

I think nowhere
Is nowhere yet everywhere
A simple accident
Can lead you right into the middle of it
I found it once, residing
In my heart and in my soul
Funny how it got there
It was carbon dated, before the dawn of man
The more you search for it
The further from your sight it goes
But if you squint your eyes just so
Like magic it appears right before your nose

Now I yearn to return to nowhere
Where it's free to come and go
Where boundaries signal boundlessness

And oppression reigns no more
But somehow along my merry way
I've lost touch and can't get back
I've adjourned too long on lollypops
And gimmicks that distract
Why do we say this world is real
When it's full of horrors beyond belief
I think nowhere
Is less shrouded in spectacles of deceit

When I return to nowhere
With a pack upon my back
I'll send a message loud and clear
down that old forgotten track
I'll sing and dance the buck's fizz
In the palm of destiny's hand
And await the first arrivals
Destination, nowhere land
A trick of light will get you through
Without a shadow of a doubt
You're already halfway back there
If you turn your body inside out

14 wooden minstrel

It really hadn't occurred to me until today to mention it, but out of courtesy I told 28 that I had included much about her and our conversations in my daily writings. Anxiously I waited for her reaction.

'That's nice,' she said nonchalantly, more interested in unfurling her fingers to reveal the deep lines in the soft flesh of her palms. She drew closer. Her gaze, expressing a concealed inquisitiveness, scanned my face.

'See that line? See how long and strong it is? That's my life line. And those braided cuffs around my wrists; and there, that heart line, unbroken and curving upwards at the ends, together they all mean that I'm going to live a very long and happy life. But I don't know. Those lines can't foresee a big truck you might forget to look out for when you cross the road, or a war you might suddenly find yourself in the middle of.'

She took my right hand into hers. Turned it over. Studied it briefly. Looked at my face, then back to my palm. She closed my fingers over, and guided my hand back towards my lap.

‘Our whole life is in the palm of our hands. But not in a palmistry sort of way. Not predetermined. We, us, ourselves. We create it. We take our life in our own hands and shape it. And even though we often try to disguise the truth, the truth is that we are always responsible for the outcome.’

At times like this I am never certain what 28 thinks of me, or whether I am making a fool of myself, or worse still, whether she is making a fool of me. Somehow it is almost as if my actions are expected.

‘Do you think I’m mad?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘Some people do.’

‘You’re different. I can see how that could be misunderstood.’

‘Am I so different to you?’

‘I’m not sure. I don’t think so. But you’re individual; you do and say things that others, that I, probably wouldn’t.’

‘I wonder if it is me that is different to you, or you that is different to me? Who is the more stable?’

I laughed. ‘I suppose I’m more mainstream, more like everybody else. I’m less interesting than you are.’

‘I find you more interesting than me.’

‘Well, there you go. We both think the other one is more interesting.’ I paused. ‘How come you’ve never told me your name?’

‘Not name questions again!’

‘I’m just interested. I’ve thought about asking one of the staff here or lifting the cover on your medical chart just there, but it almost seems wrong now, after all this time.’

‘I like the fact that I’m anonymous with you. It gives me a sense of freedom.’ She lowered the tone of her voice, asking softly and inquisitively, ‘What do you call me in your head, and when you’re writing about me?’

‘28,’ I replied, hesitating, ‘I have to call you something.’

‘Do you?’

She stood and moved across the room to the mirror mounted on the wall, removing her cardigan along the way. It was then that I became fully aware of the dress she was wearing, quite a beautiful dress, fitting her extremely well – cut just below the knees, somewhat formal and business-like, but elegant, sleeveless with a v-neck and collar, and a soft comfortable material, probably cotton, flecked with shades of blue with a very fine, pastel magenta trim. She appeared much taller and far more elegant than I would have imagined possible. She stepped into high heels. An odd thing for most patients in a hospital, but not for 28.

‘If I didn’t have a name for you, how would I—’ I couldn’t find the right words.

‘Go on. If you didn’t have a name for me?’

I slid to the front of my chair. ‘Well, you wouldn’t exist. You’d be, nothing.’

‘I’d be too abstract for you to cope with. Is that it?’

‘Yes, I’d say so. Yes, too abstract.’ I eased back into my chair and watched her movements around the room as she searched and gathered a few small items.

‘Most people think that the moon is dead. But when I look at it, I see a woman laughing. The word lunatic means moonstruck, it comes from the Latin, luna, moon. There is a superstition, that sleeping in moonlight can cause insanity. I often sleep under the moon. In my bedroom I always leave my curtains open so I can bask in the soft glow.’

‘Do you like my dress?’ she asked, spinning on one foot, ‘It’s new.’

She didn't wait for an answer, turned, placed a hairbrush on the bench below the mirror and opened a small drawer, taking out lipstick and other cosmetics.

'From where we stand, the moon is the brightest object in the night sky. We watch, intrigued, as it moves through its cycle, trying to make sense of it all. But it is just a trick, we say. Like this mirror. It is merely reflecting light from somewhere else.' She gazed at me in the mirror. 'Now that we think we know everything about the moon, and we feel we have conquered it, it is no longer useful. But it still has its effect.' After a dramatic pause, she continued. 'The images and thoughts that you reconstruct on the page are yours. You are entitled to do with them what you wish; don't you think so?'

I agreed.

She began applying make-up to her face. I was perplexed by her behaviour, but the events that followed explained everything, including my strange encounter with the woman in the lift on the previous day. I was more than a little embarrassed.

'Don't overdo it, though,' she said, while blackening her long eyelashes. 'In writing it is easy to get carried away with fiery displays of the sun while overlooking the subtleties of the moon. Let it flow. Structure is useful to a point, but it can also stifle. Adhering to formulas only results in what I would call strangulation by conformity. Good writing has to breathe, and you have to be flexible enough to go wherever it takes you.'

28 continued applying make-up while keeping up our conversation, and, as is her way, she seemed to be inhabiting several places in her thoughts simultaneously as her mind traversed distant landscapes. She inquired about Andre, certainly expecting the usual response, while coating her lips with a rich burgundy hue. She was just being polite, of that I am sure. She knows full well that the day I have any real news about my son I will come leaping into her room, bursting with joy. But Andre has been showing

many signs lately that are positive, and everyone is trying hard to shake him from his sleep. It will happen, he is a fighter.

‘Were you in yesterday? First time you haven’t dropped in to visit me.’

‘No, I wasn’t feeling well, thought I might be coming down with something, and didn’t want to risk being near Andre.’

The moment I spoke I knew that what I was doing was wrong. One lie, one guilt, one embarrassment always leads to another. But like yesterday, it just seemed easier than telling the truth.

‘You know,’ she pressed her lips together while re-capping the lipstick, ‘there’s very rarely a thirteenth floor in a building. Superstitious and easily frightened creatures we are, easily frightened by the myths we are told. We can easily be frightened away from our friends too. When I was thirteen, with only my sister to talk to, about all I did was dream and wonder what life would be like if things were different.’

I was becoming increasingly interested in why she was applying make-up to her face, and why she was doing it with me as her audience. She made it seem quite natural, as if this was something we did together often: discussing the day’s events while she applied make-up, like a couple getting ready to go out for a quiet dinner in town.

‘I wouldn’t have thought you’d be the type of woman to wear make-up, or a lot of make-up anyway?’

‘I’m not, as a rule. But it helps me gain access to certain places without drawing undue attention to myself. It also helps me access certain aspects of who I am. I feel like an actor preparing for a role.’

I slip out from time to time without anyone noticing. And although technically I'm free to go at any time, they want me to be – I think I've mentioned this to you before – they want me to be in a stable condition, on what they call a nutritionally balanced diet, before I finally check out. So really I should stay put in this room.

The original deal was quite different to the current one, though: they wanted to trial a new anti-depressant on me, the same medication that they're using on other patients around here. I resisted. And they found it a little difficult to persuade me. I only took the pills twice, and I tell you, on the second occasion I sat for two hours contemplating the window, not what was on the other side, just the window. I thought, how beautiful it would be to open that window and let some fresh air in, without actually getting off my arse and doing it.

What really concerned them though was my diet. Not eating for a while is nothing more than a cleansing process for me, but they just wouldn't accept that. So, all the guinea pigs in here were merrily eating what they were given, happily taking their medication, except for me. In the end they decided that as long as I was harmless they would forget about the medication, the trial had progressed well enough without me anyway, I was just a hindrance. But because I was now their responsibility they were determined to get me eating again. They tried a few shots of something to increase my appetite, but that was futile. My doctor says that while I'm not eating I won't be going anywhere.

So, even though they'd be glad to get rid of me, I'm forced to stay here. They've condemned me, Scribe, but I refuse to submit, not on their terms.~~

Now, it is time to describe what is probably the most embarrassing moment in my life. How to write about it, I am not sure; perhaps, just as it happened, is best.

She put on a wig; actually, it was a type of half wig, an extension. She put her hair up at the back, high on her head, and somehow tied in longer darker strands, some deep red, that were tightly plaited. That is when I began to feel uneasy. She looked at me in the mirror, winked and smiled, tucked and twisted and combed, and finished off by pushing a long wooden fork through her hair as the final flourishing touch, marking the total annihilation of my self-esteem. She didn't need to turn around for me to recognise her. I felt complete and utter shame. I could see my own face staring back at me. I looked away.

She moved to the bedside cabinet. After removing the lid from a rectangular plastic container she took out a medium sized knife, and said, 'Vegetable knife. Sharp. Very useful.'

'I'm sure it is.'

'Would you like to see what I can do with it?'

Without waiting for my answer, she tossed it in the air. It spun like a baton being twirled at a parade. And just at the last moment, before it reached the ground, she lent sideways, bending at the knees, and caught it, by the handle, in one hand.

She reached into her container again, took out a large piece of fruit, sat it on the lid, and began cutting.

'Pawpaw. Would you like some?' She sliced the ripe fruit easily. 'It is a thing of beauty. Can you smell its exquisite fragrance? Look at the rich orange colour of its smooth juicy flesh, and the collection of small soft seeds, like black pellets, clustered down its oval shaped centre. You must try some.'

She handed me a plate with two wedges and a spoon.

‘Go ahead she said,’ licking her fingers and sitting opposite me. ‘See how creamy it becomes in your mouth. Don’t be too quick to chomp and swallow it. I like to savour it.’

She was right, it really was a very ripe and sweet fruit.

‘This is a special moment for me, Scribe. This fruit is the first solid food I have eaten in two weeks. It is time to begin eating again, slowly. Fruit for a while now, instead of just the juice I have been drinking. The staff here are not sure about me. They can’t figure me out. My doctor was quite open about that. I think they want to get rid of me, want to pack me into my old suitcase and ship me elsewhere. But if I start eating again they will leave me alone. A diet of juice no longer appeases them.

‘I’m really only hanging around while I sort things out. I sold my apartment before I came here, before I started my climb of remembrance. Now I’m doing an internal spring clean. And I haven’t worked out where I’m going next. But a door will open, and a new opportunity, a new challenge will present itself. I’m putting my feelers out, my gaze is beginning to widen.’

I placed my plate down next to my chair and listened as she continued.

‘Not much happened on the thirteenth floor of my life. Instead of turning outward I turned inward. I kept in touch with fewer friends; at school I did only what was expected of me, enough to pass, and participated in sport and other activities only under sufferance. That year I wrote a lot of poetry that no one would ever read. After that it was all laughter, lunacy, moonbeams, and menstruation.’

She filled a glass with water and took a sip. Holding it with her fingers she began toying with it, carefully rotating it without spilling a drop.

‘This glass holds water. It is a vessel, constructed to contain the nature of liquid. But we delude ourselves, for water is not as containable as we think, it is fluid, more fluid than we are willing to accept.’

She turned the glass one more time before holding it by the rim at head height. ‘The abstract, the fictitious, and the dream, they are not illusory. The illusion lies in our attempt to contain that which is unable to be contained. We may think we have it under control, but—’

She opened her hand and let the glass drop from her fingers. I watched it fall, smashing at our feet. Glass and water spread in all directions.

‘The barriers are gone, shattered. The nature of liquid remains unchanged. It is still fluid.’

I had little time to think before a nurse entered the room. ‘Is everything all right in here,’ she inquired, concerned, looking around. ‘Oh dear, you’ve had an accident.’

‘I dropped it,’ said 28.

‘Never mind, I’ll clean it up. Watch where you stand until I come back.’

She returned quickly with a pan and shovel and scooped up the broken glass and water.

‘Are you having a party in here?’

‘Yes, I’m serving water to my guest. We’ve run out of champagne.’

‘Maybe I can get them to send you some from the kitchen.’

‘Thank you, and some dips and biscuits would be nice.’

‘I’ll see what I can do. If you can keep the noise down though it would be appreciated. It *is* getting late.’

‘Certainly. We understand.’

An orderly appeared with a mop and a bucket filled with warm detergent. By the time they had finished, there was no sign of 28's little water demonstration.

'They mopped up the water. It's gone.' She grinned and shrugged her shoulders. 'Oh, well! There's always someone ready to disprove a theory.'

After reading 28's poem again, I recalled something I wrote long ago. Although I'm not sure whether I actually wrote it or if it was drummed into me at a very young age in primary school. Perhaps a poem by one of those outback poets with names like Digger or Johnno or Banjo. Maybe my poem was a reaction to how I felt about all that stuff. I only remember the first stanza, but I know with certainty that there was more. And I used to play the guitar, try to play anyway, and sing along. They were the lyrics! As I try to remember, an image gradually forms in my mind. I think I can even visualise the drafts of hand written pages with corrections and scrawls covering them, and the chord changes written above the verses and the chorus: G A# G F, something like that, fairly simple, and an F# and a C, all majors I think. Amazing how it comes back to me. I'm tapping my feet to the rhythm.

After humming to myself and tapping away, I'm certain the first two verses went something like this:

AUSTRALIAN MADE

I'm an all Australian Male
I practice what I preach
I'm at home in a city tower
Or sitting on a big red rock

I can spout outback philosophy
And I hold no prejudice
I'm a guest under the Simpson sun
With respect to tribal law
Respect to tribal law

In this world of pageantry
I wish that I could fly
But for every move there's a penalty
We pay along the way
Maybe I'm just dreaming
But I hope and I pray
For a world without enemies
Where any man can stay
Any man can stay

I would have been very young when I wrote that. Maybe I should finish it one day. Use bits of what I vaguely remember, mixed in with how I feel now, a much different me – a naive young boy turned middle-aged cynic. But poetry is only for the young and naive, and for anyone still growing up. Poetry is for dreamers. All writing is for dreamers. It serves nothing and no one except the boy that I was when I wrote that poem, and people like him, like 28. Dreaming is what we do when we're wasting time, it's an excuse, it's a trick that our minds play on us.

Who are we really? And when are we ever fully being that person? Even on these pages that I write for myself without any intention of ever revealing them to anyone else, I am unable to completely let myself go. There is a constant apprehension, a fear that someone may find my notes, read them. Or maybe I will die before I have finished with them and had time to destroy them or write them as they should be written. So I write with fear in my mind. I write for an audience. I write what is politically, socially, and morally correct. I am always holding back because I am always guided by fear. Do we ever not hold back?

I have tried to resist, but now that I have started, it is impossible to stop. I just remembered a child's game, one in which you take turns in a group, or with your best friend, telling about the worst thing you have ever done. It is about holding back. I will try to write it truthfully. I will try not to hold back.

I was with a few school friends, both male and female, all in our early teens. We began playing that game. I was afraid to tell about anything that really happened or troubled me. And I didn't think that anything eventful enough had happened in my life anyway. I made up a story, around an incident that actually occurred, but was in reality quite tame. I think I said I stole from a shop, got caught by the manager, and talked my way out of it when the police arrived. I lied; I wasn't the type of kid who stole, it seemed wrong, it was something that never really entered my way of thinking.

Looking back now, I'm sure we all lied. It seems that some of us invent shocking and exaggerated stories in an attempt to embellish our normally mundane lives. At the time, I was trying to impress my peers, while covering up my deepest fears. Our peers evaluate us by the worst and the best we achieve, never by the in-between bits. That is why, particularly when there is little in our lives to get excited about, little to be proud

of, we panic and make things up. And we know that attention will be focused on things like our mistakes, so we try our best to hide the worst.

I would like to try to tell my little story again now, tell it the way I should have when I was in that group – if I have enough guts not to hold back. I have kept it hidden for long enough. But in some ways I am cheating, of that I must confess, for it has little hold over me now, after so many years, and it is certainly no great act of bravery to cheat on that boy, the boy that I once was.

My dear father, I hated you so much when I was young, yet could never understand why. I was brought up to love my mother above all else, you yourself endorsed and enforced that practice. As I grew, the two of you grew apart. But I could never understand that. Mum's hurt became my hurt, while your struggles were endured silently, unless you responded in anger, and then I was unfortunate to witness the worst side of your nature. I believed, without questioning, that Mum's sorrows and frustrations were directly caused by your domination. In my eyes you were the persecutor, and Mum, as both giver of affection and the focus of all the love I had, was someone I had to protect.

I must have been about Andre's age, or perhaps younger, but I know I was old enough to begin craft work at school, making things with real tools, not toys. At around that same time, I was also developing an interest in fantasy and sorcery. I had come across a book or two on witchcraft and magic, and was becoming absorbed in the potential that the occult had to offer. To my young mind the supernatural seemed like a metaphysical solution, the only solution, to all my problems. I remember saving up for months what seemed like a fortune, to buy the book-of-all-books on the subject, *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*. It promised to unlock all the secrets – clairvoyance, divining for treasure, protection from enemies, levitation, transportation,

invisibility, curing illness, reading minds, and so much more. But it would entail a lifetime of discipline, and still wasn't quite what I wanted. I would practise, however, and in the mean time I would keep looking. Eventually, my research led me into the darker areas of voodoo where I found what I believed would be a solution to all my problems.

Dad, I carved an image of you out of soft wood. I stuck some of your hair from your comb to it; I dripped wax onto it; on one hand a nail clipping of yours protruded like a prehistoric claw. For thirteen days, I left it under the bed where you slept. After that, at midnight, by the light of a full moon, I energised it, reciting the appropriate incantation. And when it was ready, I kept it locked in my cupboard wrapped in thick cloth inside a sealed box adorned with ancient hermetic symbols. I was frightened as hell at the thought of the power I might have unleashed, and for days, sleep consisted only of tossing in a delirious hot sweat.

To want to maim or kill your own parent is disturbing for a child's young mind. It is also disturbing for anyone to think of a child wanting to commit such an atrocity. But what is even more disturbing is the cause of that child's thinking. We hopefully get over it, eventually. If there are excuses for the acts of children, are there excuses for the acts of adults? To lie in bed, beside a partner, and wish for the most horrible intervention or possibilities as some sort of relief, is not only disturbing, it is insane. And it is the worst type of insanity, for you are fully aware of that insanity. It is no longer a child's game.

In hope of a way out of my childhood situation, I turned to wood working – creating my little carving. Maybe that is when I did my apprenticeship. As an adult I still turn to my craft.

It is interesting how death, death to yourself, death to others, can be seen as an immediate solution to problems. Annihilation, a way out in times of utter despair. If only there was a way of stopping at the crucial moment – when the situation really gets out of hand. I did stick the pins into that little image of my father. Nothing happened, I don't think. As for my wife, I never actually tried to kill her, although I never stopped hoping for a life for Andre and myself without her. It became my obsession, not just at night, lying awake thinking and hoping, but during the day as I worked. As it worsened, it became like a seesaw, one day planning for a beautiful life together, for the three of us, even for another child, then the next day wanting a quick resolve to the misery. I was hoping for a miracle.

I have said enough for now. The rest is another story that I will take up later, perhaps.

15 the desk

Changes are happening to Andre: subtle changes that I can't seem to put my finger on, and that no one else – not the doctors or nurses – are aware of. Something in his face is different. Although I do admit that if I study his expressions for long enough, which I have surely done, his appearance shifts, from happy to sad to empty to pleading, but that is another thing entirely. I can only describe what I see as a gentle transition over the weeks, in his face and body language. He has become more at peace with himself. I feel that he is just under the surface, reaching out. I have seen him smile.

I left another two jellybeans as usual for when he wakes, a red one and a blue one. I also noticed a few almonds had been added again. That is still strange and inexplicable, but they are a gift, and as such I will leave them where they are, next to the jellybeans in the top drawer beside the head of Andre's bed.

This morning I woke somewhat startled from a very strange dream:

I am very top heavy, taller than I should be. My head seems bulbous, inflated. Suddenly, I'm walking into my parents' home, which is at the same time really the home of the parents of a past girlfriend. My mother is in the bath. But she is a younger version of herself at that time, and I understand that I know this image of her from old photographs, not from personal memories. Entering the kitchen, I begin to cut up hot, steamed potatoes. The utensil I'm using is more like a soft balloon, and completely inadequate. Looking for the right instrument in drawers and cupboards proves to be an ordeal. Soon I become distracted, discovering the most unlikely objects for a kitchen, more like tools and bits and pieces from a garden shed. The next thing I am aware of is a vast quantity of toilet paper unravelling in my hands. I am clumsy, and the paper is making a mess. The more I try to clean it up, the worse it gets. Next, I'm sitting and using a toilet somehow in the same room, in a very distant corner. I finish, stand, but can't do up my pants and belt because of too much oily, messy, mashed potato on my fingers. My zipper and clothes become tangled. I waddle as best as I can to the sink to wash my hands, but every time I place them towards the warm, soapy solution that awaits, the water retracts down the drain. I become more and more frustrated: I can't keep my pants up, the sticky lumps of mashed potato on my hands are increasing, and more toilet paper seems to be appearing everywhere. Strangely, I don't want to touch the taps of the sink because I fear that I will be scolded by my mother, but almost immediately I realise that she is actually younger than me. As I look around the room, everything in turmoil, unclean, and covered in food and paper and scraps that have appeared from nowhere, I tell myself that the least of my worries should be the taps, but I can't bring myself to touch them.

Suddenly I am back with the potatoes, trying to cut them into cubes, but still finding it nearly impossible. Now the problem seems to be the skin, which wasn't there

before: it is coming away from the rest of the potato making a complete mess of my attempts. I say to myself, 'This skin is like the skin of my mother.' At those words a television appears; it is inside the refrigerator – one of the doors is open. I am watching a program. An African-American female talk-show host is standing, doing an exaggerated commentary for a parade of skimpily dressed models. Their routine begins soberly and subdued, but soon develops into a bawdy dance around the studio. The dance quickly descends into a crude display of naked breasts and wiggling hips. It becomes apparent that they are performing for the pleasure of an overseas businessman, who is seated to the side, off camera until now. He has been invited to choose one or more of the women for sexual exploits. I am then distracted by the sounds of my mother getting out of the bath and then her approaching voice. I panic at the thought of her seeing me in my semi-undressed state and hurriedly push my hardening penis, underpants, and shirt ends back through my fly, managing to zip myself up to some extent, but somewhat dishevelled and with my belt still undone. My greatest concerns are the smudges and bits of potato on the front of my pants which I attempt to remove with an overly wet, dripping sponge. My panic wakes me.

What did I want from my mother – reconciliation, respect, sex, friendship? Or was it about my ex-wife or somebody else who also didn't appear in the dream? A mixture of all those, perhaps. How bizarre!

The other day 28 and I spoke at length about mothers, about parenthood, about relationships. Mum, I think about you often. It has been two, almost three, years, since you died. Sometimes I blaspheme against you, and sometimes, when I am angry, I blame you and Dad for my own short-comings. I know that is unfair. Most of the time I remember the good times we shared together.

I briefly mentioned my strange dream to 28. She got the gist of it, said little directly, but a lot indirectly. When she talks about her own mother, I think she is surprisingly forgiving, in light of her experiences.

28~~

Mothers know more about their children than their children realise. But it is never easy to stay in touch. And mothers and daughters don't find it any easier than mothers and sons. Some mothers have a vision of creating a thing of beauty, a thing to cherish, that will love them eternally for all their sacrifices. Others just give up; maybe it isn't the right thing for them. But you can't tell till you try, and often you are only blindly following tradition.

I don't have children. If I did, I know I would want to make amends, and then it wouldn't work out like I imagined, and then it could get ugly. I'd try too hard to be my child's best friend. I'd probably talk too much, and confuse the kid. Probably better to be the type of mother who finds it difficult to reveal the things they feel and fear.

You know, a mother sees many things, in a mother's way. She senses when her daughter is about to get her first period, or when she's in love. A mother washes her son's sheets and underwear before the semen stains turn yellow, and she knows when he sneaks a girl into his bed. She knows when you've lost a fight in the playground, smoked a cigarette, or waggled classes for the day.

Some men I've known have wanted me to replace their mother. It was impossible for me to ever completely fulfil what was expected of me, to be a perfect mother, lover, and best buddy.~~

‘I was about eighteen when I first left home,’ I told her. ‘No hard feelings. I had got over most of my early teenage hassles by then. It was more a need to do my own thing, have a place to be private in. My sister was older, my brother younger. I was the first to leave. I moved interstate for work, and to be with a girl.’

‘And what happened?’

‘I don’t really remember. I was a bit full-on as a young man, I guess. I wanted to work hard, play hard. I wanted kids too, everything. I think talking about children was the turning point. We started to drift. “I can’t commit like you want me to; and children, they’re just not on my immediate agenda,” she said, or something like that. It was a long time ago.’

‘You seem a bit more laid-back than you must have been in those days?’

‘I probably am, that’s true.’ I was quiet for a moment, then coughed into my hand. ‘It’s not easy to keep a fire burning when it keeps getting smothered.’

‘Pity.’

She pushed her chair back and sat on the end of the bed so that she was no longer opposite me but to my left, sitting at shoulder height. Her feet dangled off the ground and swayed, and she rested her elbows on her lap.

‘Have I told you about dream manipulation, about being able to direct dreams, even moving the characters and making them speak?’

I made myself comfortable.

‘When I was a child, I escaped into my dreams. There were the frightening ones, of course, but as reality became more and more disturbing I found greater freedom and pleasure in my night-time travels. It got to the point where if I was suddenly woken, by a disturbance, a noisy alarm, traffic, or someone in the family for instance, I would be desperate to return to the world of dreams and to continue the story.’

I was unsuccessful at first, or, at best, not able to accurately recall the images and action. If I went back to sleep completely, I would drift into totally new terrain without control, but if I was able to maintain a kind of half-state, somewhere between fully awake and deep sleep, then I found I had the most success. It was in this state that I was able to reconstruct my dreams and finish the story.

At some point, I'm not sure exactly when, I developed the ability to step back into a dream, even a disturbing one, and take full control. In the dream, I was able to say, this is a dream, nothing can hurt me. By the age of fifteen, I was constructing elaborate scenes and plots from beginning to end. I was the writer and director. As I drifted off to sleep each night, I would decide what I wanted to dream about and then enjoy. I could change anything at any time. I could appear in my own dreams if I wanted to, and say and do anything I wanted; or have anyone or anything else say and do anything I wanted them to. But the best part of all was just sitting back and letting the characters and plots that I had set up develop on their own. I even set it up so that my fictitious world of dreams could answer all my questions, from my deepest concerns to my simplest whim. The conflict would be resolved right before my sleeping eyes.'

Secretly, I have feared the worst – the possibility of Andre not recovering. I have feared that if I lost him, I would end my own life. I have talked myself into believing that if a great part of me was destroyed then it would be too painful to go on. But while I am immersed in thoughts like that, I am wasting time; thoughts like that have stopped me – dead in my tracks, as I wait, paralysed, to see what will happen.

Three young men who all died at the same age have left their stories to be disseminated. Their stories come to me indirectly, at different times, and from a variety of sources. The three men almost certainly never knew each other, but their stories are universal and eternally entwined. Each of them, endowed with a unique personality that distinctly influenced their individual decisions, was forced into a course of action, forced to choose, because of their individuality. But was there any real choice for any of them, or were they just three young men being true to themselves, acting as they had always done, the only way they could?

Take yourself back to the Second World War. No, any war will do. Take yourself back to a town, normally quiet, perhaps in a humble farming district far from any city, a town suddenly threatened by invasion. News comes in spurts and all accounts of the war are conflicting. This uncertainty only heightens your fear that the enemy are virtually at your doorstep. Most of the townspeople, those who have not been ordered away to fight, try to prepare for the inevitable, but they don't really know what to prepare for.

You have been brought up with simple yet honest ideals, caring for the needs of your family above all else. With parents, a younger sister, a wife, and a son and daughter, you are the strongest and the most capable of sustaining the family into the future. Recent government policies, although unable to work miracles, have not been unfavourable, and national pride has been mounting throughout the country since the advent of war. To you, however, country simply means land, and the land is your life. Intense patriotism is foreign to you, and it is patriotism that has fuelled the conflicts leading to war, with one nation's goals inevitably coming into conflict with the goals of

another. There is much anger and fear surfacing around you. You are forced into taking sides, forced into patriotism.

The reality of war now darkens your village. Men and women are being rounded up and taken away. The fittest have been executed on sight. Your own sister has been raped and tortured. Your parents, although degraded and persecuted, are considered too old to pose a threat; your wife and children are terrified. You are young and strong, a select extermination squad comes looking for you and others like you. Witnessing your neighbours being hunted down you tremble with fear, you know you are not the fighting type. Your parents and wife persuade you, for the good of the family, for your children, to hide. A secret place in a small cellar beneath the floor boards in the back room is prepared as a haven, with enough room for a makeshift bed and rations if need be. To the elation of you and your family the plan works on several occasions, even during times of close scrutiny by your enemy. As a result of your concealment you are able to do very little to help your family in their daily chores, but you find ways, discreetly.

Even though the enemy occupation appears to be continuing indefinitely you have hope. Hope, that is, until your family is forced to provide food and lodgings for enemy officers. Although food and water is secretly passed to you by night, the situation becomes increasingly unbearable. You are unable to communicate with anyone at length; you are confined to a dark hole twenty-four hours a day; and your fear of being found torments you. Living in that underground world – now even more absurd than the one above – is not a life at all. The smell of dust, of soil, of darkness, and the stench of your own body is inescapable; so too are the sounds of heavy boots on the floor above, and the flow of muffled voices filtering through the tiny cracks. Months pass; you can endure no more. With a gun, and your face in a pillow, you commit suicide.

Now take yourself back to the beginning again. You're in that same town, the same house, working the same land, with the same parents and sister and wife and children. All is as before, the same degree of self-fulfilment, the same happiness and contentment. The only thing different is you. This time you have the inclination of the fighter. There is a rebellious streak in you. And you have pride, stronger than most in your village. You believe in change, but only for what is better and for the good of the people. In the evenings you meet with other progressive thinkers and begin spreading the ideas of the new movement – warning about the failing and corruptible policies of the current government, and preparing for the mounting threat from antagonistic countries. As the invasion nears, you say goodbye to your family; it is not easy, but you have a greater cause. With hundreds of others the mountains provide a refuge for you to unfurl your resistance to the invasion.

The days pass quickly. You are involved in countless ambushes and hit-and-run operations. Dying never enters your realm of possibilities, though you would give your life gladly for the cause. The only outcome you will accept is one of victory for the people, and you look forward to the day when you will reunite with your family. Nine months pass quickly, like the turning of a page; you are in a hide-out with three others, a group which has earned the reputation as the most fierce rebel fighters. Somehow – perhaps by chance, perhaps because of the advice from an informant – your camp is hit. A barrage of mortars and machine-gun fire gives you little chance. Your body is never recovered. There is no formal burial, just the memory of a fighter with a cause.

Now take yourself back to the beginning just one more time. Again you are in the same house with the same family under the same conditions. The invaders have arrived. There is much mayhem and anger and anxiety. You agree to hide, it is better for you, better for

the family. But after only a few days, after many people are killed and others taken away, you decide that hiding will only make matters worse and put your family at too great a risk. You join the safety of the flock; heading on a long journey north by foot, you and your family are being sent to work as prisoners of war in makeshift camps. In your mind you justify your decision by assuring yourself and your family that conditions won't be as bad as the scattered reports you've been hearing. You make it to the camp, although somewhat weary. And once there, you feel secure amongst your own people, enduring the war together.

Even though you comply with the rules, at all times obeying every whim of your captors, you and your kind are persecuted. And the persecution and the poor living conditions grow steadily worse each day. The more you try to please, the more you are abused. But there is a faint glimmer of hope: surely the war will end, surely the captors will show some compassion. 'It is just a matter of time,' you maintain. 'No matter what madness has come over the world, we are all humans, aren't we?' But conditions do continue to worsen. Over the coming weeks, food, already grossly under-provided, becomes virtually non-existent, and the availability of clean water is reduced to a trickle. You are willing to try anything to survive amidst the madness, where one law prevails above all others – survival of the fittest and the shrewdest. You betray your friends, you inform, you lie, you cheat. You even turn your back while your sister is relentlessly beaten. After nine months you die from starvation.~~

I looked at myself in the reflection of the bus window. The night-lights of the city rolled across my stagnant and sour old puss. I am no longer familiar to myself. My eyes are bloodshot and bags have formed underneath, weighing on my cheeks. My face has grown long; I'm not eating enough. It's hard to raise a smile; my lips are permanently

turned downwards. My breath is shallow and stale. I should exercise. I seem smaller than I used to be; my shoulders sag, and my stomach protrudes like a pregnant duck. Enough is enough.

Half way home, I got off the bus and walked with the vigour of a man on a mission, the spark of an old flame beginning to rekindle.

I reached the restored building that housed my workshop. Unlocking the outside doors I entered and fumbled for the lights. I passed the room of Tom, the viola maker, and the sculptures and artwork that filled the other studios. Reaching my metal doors, I unlocked them and slid them aside. I opened the windows and threw back the musty sheets that buried my destiny. Andre's desk was about to be revived.

I picked up each of the finely sanded pieces of oak and began testing them for assembly. Some sections had begun to change, to warp or swell slightly, even though I had stored them well. The timber is still young. But time will cure it once they are refinished and bonded together.

Stroking the smoothness of the timber today, taking hold of the legs as if they were the limbs of my son, was the fuel I needed for my soul, and for Andre's soul, and for the patient reconstruction of so many damaged fragments of life. Both a gentle and determined effort will see the task completed. It will be finished not in real time, but in healing time, and in Andre's time – without trying to drive the nails home in a single blow.

16 reason and instinct

Logic can be dangerous when it intrudes on sincerity.

28~~

On the sixteenth floor I stepped on a used strip from a packet of contraceptive pills. A rectangular, foil backed strip with little plastic bubbles encapsulating tiny, smooth, sugar coated tablets. The strips are carefully numbered and colour coded so you can't get it wrong, but the pills are shiny and slippery, and far too small. In the morning, especially if you're tired, they're easy to drop. That's when they end up rolling around the sink or under a cabinet. I've even dropped them down the drain and had to miss a day or two, hoping I would still be baby-proof. But a day missed here and there never mattered.

Most brands have the same sort of generic names, attempting to incorporate the familiar with the scientific: Linda 28, or Ovulette 35, or something like that. I kicked the packet to one side. 'Most women dispose of those things carefully,' I said. Those seemingly insignificant little things that keep mounting into something bigger. At

sixteen I just wanted to be free to explore the world and my body; instead, I was inundated with pills, tampons, and push-up bras – pressured, threatened, lectured, and immobilised by the sinister possibilities of pregnancy, rape, and sexually transmitted diseases.

I was climbing to be free of accessories, accessories worn for effect, sometimes worn for a reason, often a very shallow reason. All part of the mating game. The mating is pure – pure animal instinct. The Game is pure too – pure logic: simply raise the percentages to improve your chances of success. Eliminate the competition with a marketing strategy, and the simplest way is to make the competition look bad. It's all in the way you package yourself.

I decided that I may as well pin my feelings on my lapel, in case anybody wanted to find them. Everything else was hanging out of my pockets, anyway, restricting my movement and cramping my style.

When I was sixteen I left home. I left for many reasons, but it was an instinctual sense of survival that guided me in the end. An incident between my mother and younger sister, only a few days before I shoved my life into a backpack and fled, almost stopped me. My sister, only a year and a half younger than me, was very similar in so many ways, but in appearance, almost identical – fair skinned, slim, of medium height, the same facial features. She would have been fourteen or fifteen at the time, beginning to develop physically – the woman in her beginning to show – yet she was still childlike in many ways, in nice ways, and dependent on others close to her. My sister was sensitive and my closest friend.

I can picture the transformed face of our mother in a frenzy: her anger had bloated her entire body out of proportion. She held my sister by the arm while dragging her through the house, slapping her face and hands. My sister was screaming and pleading for our mother to stop. In her desperate attempts to escape, my sister's body and head struck walls and door frames and furniture. Our mother just kept hitting and dragging my sister.

'Don't you ever dare do that again,' my mother raged. 'You're a dirty girl.'

I was petrified. My whole body hurt with pain and confusion and felt like it was turning inside out. I had to do something, but found it hard to move, hard to concentrate my thoughts. I couldn't remain a spectator. I wanted to run; but that urge would have to wait, for suddenly our mother grabbed a wire coat hanger that was hanging from a door knob. She twisted it, one-handed, using her teeth – not wanting to let go of my sister. What a frightening image I have of her twisting that wire; her ugly, over-salivating grin, like a wild, hungry beast. Then, with a holler, like the victory cry of a hunter about to cast the final tragic blow upon its victim, she raised the twisted wire whip above her head, and began striking my sister across her thighs, across her knuckles, across the back of her neck. I screamed, 'No! No! No!' and ran at the wire, seeing only it and my sister's panic.

Somehow, I overpowered my mother, and, startlingly, her fury calmed in an instant as she stumbled to a chair and seated herself. Head down, she seemed dazed and shocked by her own behaviour. There was a dead calm, a moment of relief, but only till she regained her breath and strength. She raised her head, revealed the blood-red whites of her eyes, and stormed towards our sobbing huddle. Without a chance for us to escape she dragged us both to our rooms.

'This is a warning, the last warning either of you will ever get. Nobody moves, nobody makes a sound.'

I was terrified.

The cause of our mother's violent outburst on that occasion was explained to me by my sister on the day I left. My sister had been sitting against her bed in front of a mirror, naked from the waist down, exploring her body. She was touching her genitals. Our mother suddenly walked in on her and exploded. My first reaction to what my sister said was one of confusion. I felt emotionally incapable at the time, of sifting through an entirely new aspect of my sister's past with her. I told her simply that, whatever happened, nothing she did on that day or since could ever be interpreted as wrong, I promised her that. I told her, that above all else, she must live through that experience, accept it, and let it become a part of her, no matter how badly a part of her wanted to escape it. I was troubled by both my frustration and my sorrow, at not being able to fully comfort her. Why had she told me now? I was so involved in my own struggle. And crazily, I couldn't fully comprehend the whole idea for myself, of growing up, of adulthood, of our mother, and our father.

My father was rarely around when my mother was at her worst, maybe she planned it that way. He was never unapproachable, but there were certain things he avoided talking or doing anything about and my mother's anger was one of them. In a way I interpreted his reluctance as indifference, making him a quiet accomplice, and that distanced me from him. But I always felt that he had his own tangled web of uncertainties to unravel and when I found out he wasn't our real father, not to both of us anyway, many of the gaps were filled in. That's another story, for another time perhaps.

Much of what I said to my sister and much of what I did made little sense at the time. How could I help her, particularly at that moment, when I was trying to free myself? Only a few days previously, when I had begun packing for my escape, I came

across something I thought I had lost. Buried beneath the stuff that children collect – a doll without arms, a ragged teddy-bear, a bangle, a bracelet, a promise of eternal love etched on a page in a diary – I found my grandmother's necklace. I held it to my neck, and cried. I cried until I laughed, and I laughed until my body hurt and I could laugh no more. I had never really grieved the loss of my grandmother, a woman so important to me that she will always be the most influential person in my life. My memories of her are not complete, they come in snippets – like a collection of old newspaper clippings. I paste them together in my mind and they fuel my heart. I gave the necklace to my sister, as an object it had no use to me. I took the beauty of the memory and moved on.

At that moment, more than ever, my sister and I became one and the same. With tears welling in our eyes, we hugged for a very long time in silence. I felt her body against mine, it felt good and warm. How could something so innocent as a young woman learning about herself, through herself, be interpreted as something bad? The thought weighed heavily on my mind. I couldn't release my sister, not then. Strangely, I had struggled with an inability in myself to explore my own body, often questioning my apprehension and confusion. I hadn't really masturbated, and I didn't for many years to come, yet all the while I was ignoring a curious urge. I was certain that my mother had done the same thing to me as she had done to my sister. As I hugged her, I searched my memory, bits from the past came and went, but I couldn't quite remember, didn't want to remember, everything. In my mind I would get to a point and then see only darkness, followed by an onslaught of distorted and senseless images. I was so afraid to touch myself. I tried in the neighbours' swimming pool that day when I was twelve. Maybe it was then that my uncertainty began. My mother told me to go home and wait for her that day.~

Shuffling through the cabinet next to her bed, 28 produced a string of beads.

‘I thought you gave them to your sister?’ I said, turning them over in my hand and feeling their beautiful smoothness as I dropped them into my palm.

‘I did.’

‘How come you have them?’

‘Good question. What does your instinct tell you?’

‘I’m not sure about my instinct; it leads me astray.’

‘And your logic?’

‘My logic is more reliable. It tells me not to trust my instinct. I guess you and your sister must have been, or still are, very close.’ I handed her the necklace.

‘For me, reason and instinct are like two hooped rivals locked in an eternal battle. They butt heads relentlessly, foolishly, neither allowing the other one to gain ground. I only wish those stubborn beasts would agree to let the other one be, if they could work together, then I would have a little peace. The battle between reason and instinct, laced with a little guilt, makes a powerful cocktail.’

‘My instinct wants to ask a question.’

She waited

‘Why are you really in here?’

She gathered her thoughts. ‘I followed my instinct.’

‘Where?’

‘I followed it up twenty-eight flights of stairs. To the rooftop.’

‘Why?’

‘I thought we promised not to ask each other so many ‘why’ questions!’

‘I’ll try to make it the last one.’

She toyed with the beads, ‘I suppose I followed my instinct because nothing was logical.’

She put the beads back where she had taken them from and offered me a drink.

‘Juice or tea?’

I accepted a peppermint tea.

She was chirpy while we sipped our warm drinks. But as the evening drew on, she drifted more and more into her own world. I sat and listened, also drifting, moving in and out of my own thoughts and concerns. Our ideas blended; now they remain entwined.

28~~

Do not spit. That’s an odd sign. Why suddenly out here on the landing of the sixteenth floor? Must be a level of spitters in there. Life’s full of spitters. But they spit only when it’s safe. They should try it from the rooftop of a tall building with the wind in their faces. Spitters. Fluids. Everywhere – blood, sweat, tears, semen, and swimming pools. I left some of my fluids in the pool that day. It took six years, on the eighteenth floor, for me to experience anything quite that sexual again, to get over the guilt. But that is still a couple of years away, first things first. First is sweet sixteen.~~

Scribe~~

Am I really to blame? Feeling guilty for all that went wrong in my marriage, as a husband, as a father, as a protector. She accused me, all the time, for actions and ideas that never entered my mind. I started to question my sanity.

Her behaviour today reminded me of what she was like, and apparently still is. I was embarrassed to be associated with her. But at least I was able to let the performance

go on without feeling I had to intervene, or worse, to support her. It was a different experience not to be on the receiving end and having to defend myself or justify my actions. I just let her go. And watched in amazement. It didn't touch me. It was like a dream, a dream that I was in control of.~~

28~~

It is difficult looking into a mirror without thinking about my sister, without thinking about that part of my life. There were many times, at my weakest moments, when I couldn't look straight into the reflection of my own eyes without fear. A kind of overpowering trauma would make me shake and twitch. After many deliberate encounters, I have overcome my fear. It started one night when I was delirious from lack of sleep and too much worry. My room was lit with only a candle or two. I sat cross-legged on the floor and fixed a gaze on myself in my dressing mirror. 'Who are you really?' I demanded. 'Who the hell is that inside there, in that head, and what the hell do you want from me? And why are you wasting my time with games, always beating around the bush like you do?' There was no answer, although I was afraid for a moment that an answer would come and prove finally and absolutely that I was indeed insane.~~

Scribe~~

From Andre's room I could hear her down the corridor at reception, pounding the desk and stomping around.

'Where the hell, in this useless place, is somebody who knows what they're doing? I'm not trying to be rude, but I rang three times this morning, from home and work, and nobody knows what's going on and nobody's bothered to call me back. Now I'm here and you still can't give me the answers I need,' she screamed.

Only muffled sounds came from the nurses at first, shuffling files around, trying to appease her.

‘What do you mean the doctor’s doing rounds in another ward?’

A muffled response.

‘I don’t care about the other wards!’

A muffled response.

‘What’s he doing about my son.’

Again, muffled response.

‘Two days ago you told me that a visiting Canadian or whatever he is would be examining him and doing special tests.’

‘He did, and the initial tests look promising. He has suggested ...’ Something muffled and indecipherable faded to nothing.

‘Have you tried anything he suggested?’

‘We’ve been waiting for a final report, and for your approval of course.’

‘How can I give approval if I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to be approving?’~~

28~~

You know, we look at ourselves in the mirror, but do we really see anything? I stared for a very long time at the face in the mirror until I accepted it as me. Me, with all my failings; and me, with all my successes. The image that I studied through blurred eyes, too mesmerised to blink, took on a multitude of facets. From angry and old to young and sprightly, I saw my first reflection, that first childhood gaze, and every gaze ever since. My features mutated from one character to another in an unceasing display of metamorphosis. I reclaimed parts of me that I had forgotten even existed, some I found

lurking in shadows and buried under rocks, some hiding, others afraid, and some undernourished and starving. I recognised them all, but not at first. Sometimes I nearly turned away or wanted to shut my eyes, but I carried on until the last face finally settled – an amalgamation of all the others, a vessel that contained them all. It was a face that had always been with me.~~

Scribe~~

You really began bellowing at this point. I actually jumped in my seat at first. Then I reminded myself to treat it just like a dream that couldn't really hurt me. What sounded like two female nurses, someone higher up, a sister perhaps, probably the one answering her questions, and also a male orderly, tried to calm her, imploring her to quieten down, for her own sake and the sake of the patients and other visitors in the hospital.

'I don't care about anybody else! I'm sick of hearing about everybody else, and I've had enough of the self-centred, inhumane attitude around here.'

A loud and sudden crash of metal added to the commotion. A trolley or two that she must have shoved in anger clashed loudly.

'Please calm down,' came the repeated request, this time more sternly. 'There are sick patients.'

'What about me? Can't you see I'm suffering more than anybody around here? What about me and my life?'

'Please, we understand. You can wait in my office and both Dr Firbanks and myself will come and answer all your questions as soon as he's finished in the other ward.'~~

I think there are two ways of looking at yourself. One is like an object that we prepare for the outside world by dressing and decorating according to what is deemed appropriate. The other is like a human being that has needs and wants, and has something to say. Which of those ways we have a tendency to treat ourselves more, in turn must reflect how we treat other people. If we treat ourselves like an object, like something outside of ourselves, then we have no hope of treating and accepting our neighbours as anything more than an even further removed foreign object. I took the time after that to really study myself, my changes, my expressions from day to day.~~

Scribe~~

I had moved down the hall at this stage, and could see a nurse crouching to reassemble one of the devastated trolleys. My ex-wife paced one way then another. Lost for words for a moment. Or more likely perhaps, judging by the fury in her face, it was that she had too many things to say and they had bottlenecked in her throat, unable to escape. It was then that she saw me and that was like throwing a match into an exposed keg of kerosene. Her eyes locked on mine. I couldn't break away, but didn't want to. I felt determined to hold her gaze.

'That's the pathetic fool who's to blame for all my misery. That's him. That's him. That's him. The pathetic little loser.'

Anyone can understand a frustrated and concerned mother in despair over the life of her child. But when a sister, two nurses, and an approaching security guard can't appease her anger, and make her realise that none of what she is doing is helping anyone, then there is no hope for ever expecting her to be reasonable.

I kept a fixed gaze, straight into her eyes throughout the confrontation. I was calmly detached. She stormed out after screaming at me repeatedly. The whole scene was like a flashback from the past, 'I want you out of here. I want you out of my life. I want you out.'~~

28~~

I said earlier that we were happy when we are truly being ourselves. But I wonder how that can be proved. We often feel happy when things are going right for us. But sometimes, even when the going is smooth, there are moments when something sinister is reaching up from underneath and won't let go. Again, I think that has something to do with reason and instinct, but one of those rare occasions when they do in fact agree. We can use them as a gauge. When we are in balance, mind and heart, reason and instinct, are in accord. But I never see them as being one, as forming a composite, they are never able to unite in themselves. They are simply not of the same stuff and never will be, and they cannot be compounded like the mixing of two parts to form a whole, or the combining of two chemicals to form a third element. Reason and instinct are volatile – two incompatible and unpredictable substances when brought together.~~

Scribe~~

You never minded who bore the brunt of your outbursts. This time, being able to watch rather than be directly involved, showed me how wrong and confused you were all those years. You insisted that the cause of all your misery and hatred stemmed from my existence in your life. You said I was pathetic, that your behaviour would change if I left. In those days, and for a long time after, there was a pain in my heart that throbbed,

especially throughout the lonely hours of the night as I lay thinking, ‘Could I really be to blame for all your misery?’

My mental confusion and uncertainty worsened daily, whisked one way then another by distorted accusations and manipulations. Finally I had no choice. The memory of my love for you, and the sympathy I felt, from one human being to another, forced me to give in, to surrender. I had loved you intensely, and had been hanging on to a memory of that fondness and beauty. But when I held your gaze today, unflinching and confident, I knew that that distant flicker of hope had finally disappeared over the horizon.~~

28~~

Reason and instinct never quite mix, but working together, at a safe distance they create some interesting results. I see them as two distinctly different tools, or two different approaches that can be employed in conjunction with each other. And they will never understand each other. Of course, reason struggles to make sense of instinct; but never will. While instinct never even attempts to understand reason, or anything else for that matter; it is in essence the absence of all rationale. It is those moments when responses from both are the same that we look for, your instinct says one thing and your mind agrees, and that is our gauge of happiness and of course then it is advantageous to take notice of what both are saying, but they are students of two different schools, two different masters.~~

Scribe~~

I have been privileged to glimpse a side of you that is beautiful and caring, but which you, and no one else, choose to negate. You opt for the easy way, giving in to immediate

rewards and pleasures. In the end, I gave in to yet another of your whims, but it was the ultimate, and certainly most final whim. I left in the hope that you would be appeased and find at least some comfort and calmness. But most of all, I left in the hope that our son would be released from your torment and unhappiness. He needed a caring mother, a friend, a guide. Your hatred of me and the world was destroying that boy's heart and soul.~~

28~~

I think happiness comes when reason and instinct are able to agree. It is then that we can be certain of our goals. When we use reason and instinct to work for the same end, then we have balance, then we get somewhere. If they clash, if one wants to be Apollo, stubbornly guiding the mind, while the other, Dionysus, gives in to every whim and eccentricity of the heart, then you have a split and will never be happy – always torn one way then another with uncertainty.~~

Scribe~~

Enough is enough. I've had a problem getting over many things. I don't deny that. But I can't even use her name on these pages, it makes me ill, ex-wife is all I can manage. It's not just the squirmy feeling in my stomach. It's more. She doesn't deserve a presence on these pages and in my thoughts. If I could wipe the memory of her I would. From now on I will refer to her simply as X. ~~

Do we ever change, really? Very little seems to change within us. But external influences are always pressing us and shoving us about, bringing out the best in some while the worst in others. Does the pushing bring out the truth? With 28 I once discussed

the idea that the only way for us to change is to take charge of our lives. Being in control creates happiness and fulfilment, and as she said, ‘We owe it to ourselves to try to become the best possible version of who we are.’ And I think I am beginning to understand what she means. But is it attainable? In reality, it is as if we are gradually being forced into a corrupted version of what is potentially possible for us.

I had to smile: 28 said that humans are only marginally smarter, if at all, than a fly trying to get out of a closed window when only a few metres away a door is wide open. According to her – and I’m not certain where I stand on this – not only do we change very little but we become not much wiser either. Most of our life is spent coming to terms with the world we have been dropped in the middle of. For her, that is what ninety-five percent of our learning consists of.

‘Plop,’ is what she said, ‘right into the middle of a bucket full of thick messy stuff. Sink or swim. And just as you think you’ve got the hang of it, and are nearing the top, Slop, another ladle full of that messy stuff, called “human experience,” is dumped on top of you. And down you go again. If you stay too long at the bottom, you rot.’

She has a scathing and sceptical view of people sometimes, ‘We only appear to change. Real metamorphosis is not possible in humans. Change is nothing more than an outward gloss over, like painting over cracks that eventually reappear.’

I like to think that we have the ability for real change, that gradually we can become something, hopefully, better. In much the same way as taking a piece of wood, cutting it into timber, and then shaping it into something beautiful. 28 doesn’t seem to agree, ‘Look at what happens to a stick of wood near a flame as you gradually increase the temperature,’ she said, ‘it can’t take the heat and bursts into flames. People are reluctant to change, afraid of the fire, afraid of the other side, afraid they may break if

they bend too far. That is what people are like. You can't make something out of nothing. And that is why only beautiful people make beautiful things.'

28 was comforting today when she said that my leaving X was, 'an instinctual retreat, and damn logical.'

17 coma-toes

What a day! Finally, I am alone – desperate to write. I need to get it all down in the hope of emptying myself, emptying my thoughts, and trying to come back to earth (if that is possible). I have just returned from a crazy and unbelievably magical moment, a celebration that has picked me up off my feet and carried me away into a wild carnival of dreams. Today, at 3pm, Andre awoke from his coma. After what has been an agonising four weeks of waiting and hoping, he smiled, remembered me, and reached for my hand. I kissed his face through the flood of my tears. I had to contain my enthusiasm, otherwise I would have ripped him from the machines. I wanted to take him into my arms, hold him tightly to my chest and dance around the room – my mind and body, uncontrollable. I must have seemed almost comical in my delirium, acting like a farmyard hen, panicked by the sight of a fox: I ran one way then another, back and forth, from Andre’s bedside to the nurses down the hall, calling out something about a miracle and pleading for someone to confirm what I couldn’t believe was happening. My poor son, what a sight to awaken to.

The news spread quickly throughout the hospital. There was much commotion and celebration; the whole place seemed to come alive! Later, when order had returned and we were alone, Andre and I embraced until sleep overcame both of us.

Thinking back now, what seemed like an elaborate and drawn out affair actually happened incredibly quickly and routinely. What, to me, seemed like hours of excitement and supreme joy, of dancing and celebration, was in fact more a case of me being in the way, of doctors and nurses having to calm and reassure me while trying to check Andre, gathering information and readings and making adjustments for his comfort in order to maximise his chances of recovery. And it all took place in a few moments. They tell me he was only conscious for about a minute or two; then he drifted in and out of a dream state, mumbling like in a fever – only about ten or fifteen minutes altogether.

I find it extraordinary that I managed to perceive the entire event differently to everyone else; it seems that my sense of time and place was out of sync with the rest of the world. And now, I am left stranded, like an alien. It is the middle of the night, some twelve hours after Andre's awakening. I don't understand how I came to be here. I know I have not been at my desk for long; mostly, I have roamed from room to room like a lost child. Earlier, I prepared a sandwich of peanut butter; at first I couldn't get it past my lips; then later, during another circuit of my apartment, I scoffed it down with two or three glasses of juice.

I should sleep, I know that. My vision wavers. I am vibrating, yet my body is still. But something within me is trembling because it no longer feels at home. I am alone and aware of my aloneness like never before. I should be happier than I have ever been in my life, and in many ways I am, yet I can't share that happiness, and that makes

my loneliness hard to bear. It is as if I don't fit into my own body: my skin is awkward. I pull on it – flabby in some places, tight in others, like a suit that is poorly tailored. I wonder how I behaved at the hospital? Did I act appropriately? What do they think of me? What is being said about me right now, and how should I act in the future? Should I apologise, for my excitement, for my happiness? I'm too confused, too tired, but I can't stop going over these thoughts and images. I should focus on Andre, picture his face, his smile, his peacefully sleeping body, and his toes, wiggling – that is how it all began, with his toes moving under the sheets. I know he will fully recover. Everyone is hopeful of that. And I know for certain that the worst has passed. I will sleep soon, for his sake and my own.

I slept; for how long, I don't know, probably only a few hours. Somehow I found my way home, in a taxi, I think. I remember paying someone for something. One advantage about living on the ground floor is that you don't have to climb any stairs. This is my home for sure, a quick glance around the room, at my makeshift furnishings, confirms that. Looking at the worn, borrowed, two-seater couch becoming more and more visible, and the second-hand rug that doesn't quite cover all the stains on the grotesquely patterned, floral carpet, I wonder what has become of my life. Nothing fits. Nothing belongs, not even the desk under my elbows – a desk of oak, handmade by me. My head keeps filling with thoughts that won't let me be. Here they come again – invaders – thoughts of X, of Andre, of work, of 28 and her crazy ways.

The light coming in from outside suddenly dimmed and then brightened again, perhaps a heavy cloud passing over, or maybe just a truck in the street. I wonder why there is so much light anyway.

I just went to the window. It is morning; I didn't realise. That explains the brightness. I can't keep it out, not with those cheap Venetian blinds that come with this place. I prefer the soft glow at night from my small lamp with its frosted twenty-five watt globe blending into the darkness.

Early morning, the sun shining, birds singing, the working day beginning with a hum. It was a frightening thought that woke me: maybe the whole affair with Andre had been a dream. But I have phoned the hospital, it is all real – Andre is fine. They say he has was awake once again and talking. He is sleeping now, and needs his rest. I will go back in soon, even though they say not to rush. I will clean myself up first, shave this prickly face.

In a way I feel guilty about X, for what happened yesterday evening. No one notified her about Andre until late. Earlier, when, miraculously, Andre first sat up and spoke to me, one of the staff had asked me if X had been notified. I said I would phone her, but the small nurse with the long black hair, whose name I can never remember, said she would call for me. She couldn't get through and forgot to try again later. Caught in the excitement, I didn't check. I remember, once, wondering where X was, but assumed she was on her way. Eventually someone notified her, and after a few hours, after all the excitement, she turned up. She woke me. Actually the nurse woke me. When X arrived, Andre and I were still hand in hand, my head resting on his bed. I wonder what went through her mind at the sight of us. Maybe she couldn't bear having to touch me. Maybe she couldn't bring herself to disturb such a beautiful image. She said she tried poking me with her hand bag, but I didn't budge. Then, so she said, she was about to pour water down my back when the nurse appeared; I don't have a reason to doubt her.

While I was still in the room, she didn't get close to Andre. Yes, she kissed him and said all the right things, but it was contrived. She didn't seem to be feeling the same joy or the same hope that I was feeling. Maybe she was but couldn't show it.

'Well, have you finished?' she said, motioning me to the door. 'Can I have some time with my son, alone?'

I don't know what went on after I left. I'm never certain what goes on and how that woman acts when I'm not around, although I've heard about some of the things she used to say behind my back.

Not wanting to go home, and uncertain where I needed to be, I glided through the corridors of that hospital like a weightless bird. Without realising it, I headed for the one place and to the one person I most wanted to share my happiness with. Entering the basement level from the lifts, past the faded prints on the walls, like I had done so many times before, turning right then left, offering a brief nod to staff in the corridor and stationed at the narrow, chest-high counter along the way, I came to the partially closed door numbered twenty-eight. I tapped lightly, hoping she was still awake. I listened, and tried to peer in to see if a light was on. I heard the sound of movement coming from her bed, the click of a switch, and saw the sudden burst of soft light fill the room.

Having been woken from her dreams, she seated herself upright in bed and covered her shoulders with a scarf. I told her of Andre's recovery; there would have been no mistaking my excitement and unparalleled joy. I apologised over and over again for disturbing her, but I couldn't contain my desire to recall in detail all the events – Andre's toes, his first murmur, his touch, his eyes meeting mine, my state of panic, and my apparently comic attempts to alert the nurses. I babbled on endlessly like a fool until she was forced, first politely, then bluntly, to demand an end to my incessant chatter.

‘No more, Scribe. Enough is enough,’ she commanded. ‘You have no consideration for others.’

The room resounded with hollow silence. 28’s eyes were wide and burning. Of all the people I really needed to share my feelings with, and of all the people I thought would care, it was her. She let her eyelids close for a moment to calm herself and to restore a semblance of accord to the room.

‘No, don’t leave,’ she said.

I stopped halfway between the end of her bed and the door. Turning slowly, gradually lifting my head, I faced her. ‘I came in here feeling like running, jumping, hugging, loving the world.’

Her voice was subdued now, ‘Come closer, I can’t see you.’ I took a step forward. ‘And how do you feel now?’

‘Now, all I can think of is— everything but what I was thinking about when I first came in. Your response has been like lead in my soaring balloon. I’m ashamed for my own happiness. It was just a little happiness that I thought I deserved. Now, instead of a mind full of thoughts that drift and lift into the clouds, I’m thinking of lost souls without a home, without companionship; I’m thinking of churches and prayers; and I’m thinking of the man that I might become if things don’t turn out as I hope.’

She turned to the bottom drawer of the cabinet next to her bed and produced a small bottle of brandy. At her request, I boiled some water in a small jug and made some tea.

‘I’ve been saving this for just such an occasion,’ she said, pouring brandy into two glasses, enough for a couple of large mouthfuls, and a dash in our tea. ‘You better have the rest,’ she decided, topping up my glass. ‘I shouldn’t really be drinking this stuff; I haven’t for a long time. My sister likes it, though.’

We clinked glasses, sipped brandy and tea.

‘Scribe, I’m sorry if I hurt your feelings; that would never be my intention. I lost my head. Still half in a dream I guess.’ She pushed back the blankets and began climbing out of bed, ‘It doesn’t feel right, me being in bed like an invalid while I’m trying to talk to you.’ She put some thick socks on her feet and sat next to me.

‘I need to get something off my chest. Lately I have been thinking a lot about your relationship, between the three of you: between you, your son, and your ex-wife.’ She waited to gauge my response before continuing. ‘This may not seem like the right time, but if I may, I think I need to be honest with you about what I’ve seen and heard. I know I’m an outsider, so just tell me to ‘put a sock in it’ if I go too far.

‘You see, for quite a while I’ve been afraid that the time would come when you would be all-forgiving and ready to start anew. I’m so very happy for you at the moment, even though I haven’t really shown it, not in the way you thought I would, anyway. But you’re on a high at the moment, and that makes you vulnerable.’

Alcohol was probably the last thing I needed. I had been soaring in ecstasy over Andre’s recovery, but came down to earth with a thud from the fiery brown liquid. Then, as if the warm brandied tea was meant as an anaesthetic, 28 continued, first with interrogation, then with advice. I promised not to make any sudden decisions, to forget about the future for a while, and to come to terms with the past and live in the present. I wasn’t completely certain what she was getting at, and I was exhausted. But some of her words were indelible.

‘I just want you to think carefully about how this situation came about. I wouldn’t want to see you or your son go through anything like it again.’

‘I have thought carefully, for weeks, for months.’

‘Will you and your wife get back together now?’

‘That’s the furthest and most bizarre notion— I don’t even want to think about it!’

‘If you don’t go back, you will never see him again. Not in the way you would like to. Not unless she wants you to, only when and how she wants you to. Your relationship with your son will be on her terms. For that, you will have to be very strong. No middle ground. No fair play. Only extremes. The winner takes all.’

‘I’ve survived in the past.’

Suddenly I felt heavy, giddy. I think the past weeks of waiting and hoping by Andre’s side, the months of frustration following my separation from X, and the hopeless years before that, struggling vainly to revive the love and respect that once existed, had caught up with me. Unable to stand, I was pinned to my chair. That is all I remember.

I suppose 28’s final comment was only fleeting. But it stuck in my mind because my mind was stuck to the inside of my skull like hot gum on the bottom of a shoe. I don’t care if the boy will be taken away, back to his mother’s, back to her demands. She will do what is right for the boy, eventually. She has to. Maybe she is up there now with him. Maybe they are speaking like mother and son, smiling, and touching.

Maybe she is at home in bed. Maybe she is in a foggy, forgotten daze after numbing herself to sleep last night. Who knows? My head is swaying in ever increasing circles, one moment I’m drawing closer to the words I am writing, then the next I am moving further away; my eyes struggle to stay in focus. But it is virtually impossible for me to stop these thoughts that seep onto this page. I must finish.

I wonder how much more 28 implied than she was actually willing to divulge last night. I'm reading between the lines. Maybe I'm just too tired. Or maybe it is time to think about more important things.

I see Andre playing in the yard in summer. He is laughing, kicking a ball, running in the sunshine, eating jellybeans.

I will shower now, and go to him.

I must phone the hospital again, to check on my boy. They think I am mad. I have called so many times, and I wanted to speak to Andre. They said he was asleep. I keep asking them if he is awake yet.

What am I still doing here at home? I must clean up and go back in. I need clean clothes, that is what I was looking for. I will go now. Signing off. Goodbye. No more words. Finished. No more X. Good luck 28. Hello Andre. Wonderful to have you back, my boy.

Should I take him a gift? Goodbye. Stop, now. Must shower, and find clothes.

18 mortals and mermaids

Andre is well and I am happy. They say that his rate of response and recovery is better than anyone could have imagined. He was awake three times today, for twenty or thirty minutes at a time. I was with him on all occasions: he faded in and out of sleep but in his waking moments he was often quite perky. And he was aware of his surroundings. I think he understands what is going on. He seems to know about the events of the past weeks; he has a recollection of things even without having them fully explained to him. I think he has been with us all along!

As for 28, I have forgiven her. She has her own problems, and I guess we all succumb to careless impulses like 'speaking before thinking'. What really matters is that Andre is healthy, even though I know he will soon go back home with X. The fact is that even if Andre was taken to a distant land, far away forever, and I never saw him again, I would at least be happy just knowing he was alive. For now, he will remain in hospital, probably for a few more weeks. No one is certain how long it will take for him to regain his full strength.

‘Have you ever been in love?’

28 spun like a dancer, coming to rest just centimetres from where I was seated. With a flick of her head from side to side and a click of her fingers, she beckoned a response. I didn’t answer.

‘The more we love, the more we hate.’ She turned away. ‘Hating everything that doesn’t contain love. And the more we hate, the more suspicious we become.’ She jumped to face me again. ‘Some of us, anyway. But not so much when we’re young, at least not for me. It took a while for the penny to drop. Plop!’ She moved her finger towards her mouth as if to whisper. ‘You’re in one of your quiet moods this evening, Scribe.’

I nodded.

‘Care for a story?’

I nodded, again. ‘Why not!’

‘Why not, indeed!’

I slipped into a more reclined position by the window. 28 looked around the room, deciding where to sit, before letting herself fold to the floor at my feet, her legs crossed and tucked up under her chin with her arms wrapped around her knees.

28~~

Who is this fellow on the stairs? More fluids. He’s having a quick swig from a bottle, whiskey maybe. He’s suited up, has a tie; too much executive stress! That could explain the dried-up vomit on the stairs just below: too much anxiety mixed with the wrong fluids. I threw up when I was eighteen – with the same old words of my mother, ‘dirty

girl!' slithering around in my head. I threw up in my dreams long after that too, until the guilt went away.

I loved a man. One day, because of something that happened before I even existed, our love was dissolved in an instant. I have often wondered how my image of him could have changed so suddenly. All the moments that came to form our world together, with the two of us firmly planted in the middle, exploded in an instant – the pieces were scattered in all directions. We were sent spinning, upside down and out of control.

Perspectives change, roles shift. Spectators become participants, the innocent become guilty, the tormentor and the victim are easily exchanged.

My father became a stranger, and my lover became my father.

It was my mother's indiscretion and my old friend, reason, that haunted me now. Would I have had sex with my father if I'd known who he was? And what of the man who brought me up, taught me about morals and love and trust? Would I have acted the same way towards him all those years if I hadn't have thought he was my father? I loved both men, a daughter to one, a lover to the other. Then their roles were switched on me; the rules became blurred, my mind became confused. My lover was really my father.

One day, my mother and a younger man, a close family-friend, would satisfy an uncontrollable passion. Some eighteen years after their brief indiscretion, I was to fall in love with that man, the man who actually fathered me. He was an older man, handsome and experienced. For me, maybe I never expected our relationship to last forever, but it was solid and it was what I needed. I didn't need what came of it. I didn't need it to end as it did. I was forced to lie to myself – to soften the blow. I invented an image of a man that never existed. He became brutal and selfish in my eyes, loving me only for my youth. I had to lie. Lying softened the confusion. I begged him to tell me if he knew, if

he had any idea at all, that he was my father. ‘Of course, not!’ he replied, but in many ways I had hoped he would answer otherwise. That would have made it easier for me to turn on him. I told myself I could never trust him; maybe he had some idea that he was my father; maybe he knew straight out; maybe he enjoyed the idea. But the truth is that neither of us knew the sin we were committing. My mother knew. She said she sank with the weight of her own guilt. That’s her story.

Why did I feel so sick, so dirty, and turn on him – my lover? Was what happened so bad? Was it really depraved and sordid? This was a man I loved, but a man whose semen had fertilised the egg that became me. My mother never talked about it after her first fit of anger. Everyone was the cause except her. ‘Do you realise what you’re doing, you slut?’ She blurted out the whole story.

It wasn’t till many months after my mother’s revealing explosion that I absorbed the propensity of what had happened. I began to deteriorate in both mind and body, losing all ability to reason. I saw only a world inside my own head – the shifting faces of lover turned father and father turned stranger. My mother’s silence, everybody’s silence, laid the blame even heavier on my shoulders. I couldn’t escape my mother’s silent thoughts, ‘Dirty girl, dirty slut!’ My head began to throb, my body shook, I burned cold, my jaw locked so tight I thought I would crack my teeth. A heavy soup-like mixture of vomit and bile began to rise in my throat, forcing its way out of my stomach and up inside my chest. I gagged; my mouth filled, my nostrils filled. I erupted in a flood of retch and tears.~~

I looked at 28, somewhat perplexed. I wasn’t sure how to react. I wasn’t certain how I felt about such things.

‘That is sad,’ I murmured, regretting the words for their inadequacy the moment they left my mouth.

28 was silent.

Trying to cover-up my uneasiness, I came out with what must have sounded as inappropriate as my previous comment, ‘You must have loved him very much.’

‘I loved him with both my hearts.’

‘Both your hearts?’

‘Yes, we used to joke about how much we loved each other. He would say he loved me with all his heart. I would reply, “Only one heart? Is that all the love you have for me? I love you with two hearts.”’

She was quiet again for a moment before continuing. ‘The absolute woman has twin hearts, one under each breast, both beating rhythmically, bom bom bom; and they alternate in perfect syncopation, making two become one, opposites in accord. A single heart can only deal with one emotion at a time, there is no balance. A single heart needs everything to be either good or evil, right or wrong.’

I smiled, ‘In many cases, I guess, that is very true.’

I looked at the woman on the floor in front of me. As she frowned, she looked tired. Creases formed at the corners of her mouth and eyes. She had frowned a lot. Yet amidst those marks of time her youthfulness and beauty still managed to sustain itself. Dimples formed at her cheeks, and her skin appeared warm and healthy. Her eyes twinkled. She continued, softly and affectionately, peering out through the long window of her room, as if I wasn’t there.

28~~

We would be together on my bed, both on our sides, his body moulding to mine from behind, we cuddled, felt each other’s warmth flow through one to the other. We lay like

two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, from top to bottom fitting perfectly. One morning I told him about a poem that I was forming in my mind, maybe it would be a short story, but I wanted to write it out, especially now that it had formed itself more clearly during the night. In my story there existed a mermaid, an outcast from humanity, an exile from the Gods. Mermaids were beautiful creatures, free, their own masters, but their independence made them both disliked and admired by all other creatures, especially humans. They never knew who to trust. Jealousy and intrigue and lust always surrounded them, so they showed themselves little on the surface and on the mainland where people dwelled.

One mermaid, a little more carefree and adventurous than the rest often basked and played around on the rocks near a quiet cove in warm waters. Although she was two-hundred years old in mind years, her body was young and just reaching maturity; it was a beautiful sight to see her bathing in the sun or splashing in the warm waters. She made the acquaintance of a male human, an outsider himself, a compassionate man with radical ideas for improving the lot of his people, but he was very misunderstood. He walked alone most evenings around the cove, thinking and hoping. After his first unbelievable sight of the mermaid, he gradually, day after day, managed to gain her confidence and trust until they were able to sit on the rocks talking, communicating their aspirations and their dreams for a more utopian world. He was captivated by the mermaid, not only by her outward appearance, but by her internal beauty and passion. They became very close, understanding each other, comforting each other. It was inevitable that their bonding grew every day into powerful love. Eventually they decided that they could not live apart, with only a few secret hours at the end of each day, always alert and afraid that they might be caught. They wanted desperately to consummate their deep love, but a physical relationship between human and mermaid was virtually

impossible. She knew of only one legend in which a mermaid in ancient times, who loved a human as much as she herself surely did, managed to lose her tail and become human and live entirely with her partner on land. Somehow, the legend goes, they managed, through their enormous love for each other to unite sexually, and from that act of love she transformed fully into a human. But their love, and sexual desire, would never be completely fulfilled, for the female mermaid was virtually a fish from the hips down, her legs were joined as a single finned tail. It was impossible for a human male to part her legs and enter her no matter how persistent or clever he might be. This was the carefree life of freedom that the mermaid had been condemned to.

‘That is a lovely fable,’ my lover said from behind me, clutching my left breast with one hand and stroking my thigh with the other. After a moment’s silence he whispered in my ear, sending a charge down my spine and out to every nerve ending.

‘There is a way, there is always a way.’

He kissed the back of my neck.

‘Let me show you how, my mermaid,’ he said, moving a hand to my shoulders and bending me forward. I folded easily, my head towards my toes, until the lips of my vagina, warm and swollen, appeared between the tops of my thighs. Gripping my waist, he entered me from behind, slowly, reaching around to my front to caress me at the same time.~~

28 was quiet for a very long time, curled into herself. I wanted to approach her, gently unfold her and tuck her into bed. Instead, I slipped away unnoticed.

X phoned, very late. I thought it was the hospital. She wanted to know who my friend was that she met today at Andre’s bedside. I said I had no idea. ‘Is she your girlfriend?’

she persisted. I told her again that I had no idea. She wouldn't let go. 'I don't think you should let a slut hang around my child'. Again, I tried to explain that I knew nothing of what she was talking about. I asked why she thought the woman was a slut. 'She must be a slut if she has anything to do with you!' Again I said, to no avail, that I had no idea who the woman was. She talked for several more minutes, I said nothing, not really listening. Eventually we hung up.

It was a strange day, full of mortals and mermaids and Eros and sluts.

19 solitary bee

‘I’m a happy, buzzing bee, Scribe. What a glorious day it has been: the sun was shining, the air was fresh and clean. It made me feel like I was nineteen again, with my childhood long gone and my teens about to draw to a close. It felt good to be squeezing out of all the cobwebbed confusion of the past.’

28 was wearing a vivid orange t-shirt over her hospital gown. Loosely draped around her shoulders was a black, fluffy cardigan, finely speckled with golden glitter. Brown tights ending with bright yellow socks completed her attire. Her hair was dark, almost black, certainly darker than yesterday, and it seemed to have been trimmed, causing it to bob above her shoulders and to break into a dance at the slightest movement. Whether she makes these cosmetic changes herself, or has them done when she slips out of the hospital for a walk, I am not certain, but she continues to transform.

‘You’re certainly dressed brightly and cheerfully tonight,’ I commented.

‘You should have seen me earlier, before they made me change. Now I have to wear my hospital-gown again. I don’t like it; it’s scratchy. I prefer something more

comfortable and happier, but that isn't in line with hospital policy. There is always a certain protocol to follow. Insects are like that, the ones that follow an organised routine, keeping socially ordered. Certain bees, honey bees, are like that – drones. But worst of all is the blind regimentality⁷⁷ of ants.'

We were sitting face to face, me on the chair, 28 on the end of the bed. For a moment her expression seemed to change to that of an insect. She continued.

'First a nurse, then a doctor, and finally an orderly came in here trying to convince me to follow the rules. At one point the four of us were holding a mini convention, about the need for social order. In the end I agreed to follow the rules; I'm a guest in here after all. But now I've partly changed back again. I'm safe in the evening: the night staff are flexible and relaxed, and rarely come in unless I buzz them. Bzzzz.'

'Why do I get the feeling that we're going to talk about insects tonight?'

'You're very switched-on tonight, Scribe. But I rather thought we tended to venture wherever the wind took us.'

'No channelling of the breeze on your part?'

'Me? You know I'm not that organised.'

28 tucked a pillow up for support as she hooked her right arm over the end bed-rail. She rested her head on her shoulder and smiled.

'I was lying on this bed today, looking out the window. I was thinking that coming out of my teen years had been like extracting myself from a cocoon or from an impossibly tight-fitting body-stocking. Have you ever experienced that?'

'Cocoon, no! And a body-stocking, well, that isn't something I'm in a hurry to experience.'

'Fair enough. But some things are worth trying, just once.'

⁷⁷ I think this word is an invention of 28's, a combination of mentality and regiment, used to describe the reasoning behind regimental behaviour.

‘Maybe.’

28 studied me, up and down, slowly, before continuing.

‘As I gazed out the window, I drifted off, dreaming. I imagined I was resting on my side in a field covered with a blanket of colourful wild-flowers. And I remembered a day, a special day, quite a few years ago. I was nineteen, on my own, resting, soaking in the warmth. Bees were busying themselves, flying from one choice stamen to another. From time to time they buzzed close by, some even toyed with the idea of landing on me before moving on. One bee was particularly fascinated by my presence. It came so close I could feel its tiny wings fanning my skin. It investigated my armpits, my hair, my ears, my cheeks. It came to rest on the tip of my nose. I went cross-eyed trying to focus; the bee became a giant blurred monster so close to my face. Can you focus onto the tip of your nose, Scribe?’

‘Not without getting dizzy, or getting a headache.’

We both tilted our heads back and tried to focus. We looked like a pair of clowns making crazy faces.

‘As it buzzed around me, investigating me, I sensed that my bee was somehow different to the other bees. She had a more slender body shape and her colourings were brighter. She lingered longer than the rest – just doing her own thing. The others were on a mission, working to a schedule in military style. She hummed with a gentle whir as she hovered before me. She moved forwards, sideways, and backwards with ease. I became absorbed in her microcosmic world; my thoughts were lured, gently spinning, into the tawny-orange and black bands that circled her abdomen, drawn by the deeper, almost burnt-red, splash of colour near her tiny waist-like segment where abdomen joins thorax and around her shoulders, and I was fascinated by the busy fluttering of her four transparent wings.’

28 moved to the top end of the bed and sat upright.

‘The world filters in to me in fragments. I see and hear only pieces of what is said and done – out there, and far beyond. As I sit here, I receive mixed signals and conflicting views from all directions. On one side, over to the right for instance,’ she pointed to the door, ‘what filters in from the corridor are merely snippets of what goes on in this hospital and of what goes on in the world around me. And the world I see and hear is just one world folded within another world within another world within another world – endlessly. I hear and see and come to know only a tiny fraction of what there is to hear and see and know. And although my senses feed off that corridor, there is little satisfaction in what is consumed; I am the recipient of a clinical cavalcade of metal and hygiene and anaesthetics and pain. I talk the talk of doctors and nurses and technicians; and at the end of the day, when I ask for a drink to soothe me, my cup is filled to the brim with the melancholic whispers of hospital gossip.

‘On the other side,’ she pointed to the window, ‘exists another extreme. My senses perceive a garden of nature, humming with the single most wondrous sound in the universe – the sound of the colour green swaying in a golden breeze.

‘And so it is that this room becomes a vortex. It is where an interfusion takes place; it is the conjunction between left and right and everything in between and all things beyond. And because of that, this place has no certainty, no absolutes. It is the unknown, the uncertain, the mysterious. It is the theatre of the unreal. Here, there is no substance. Here, could in fact be a joke or a mere figment of the imagination. Yet, it is the resting place of infinite possibilities. When you enter this room, Scribe, you enter the fictitious.’

She stopped to take a deep breath, raising her arms slightly as her chest expanded, and letting her hands fall into her lap as she exhaled forcefully.

‘You got a bit excited,’ I said, moving in my chair.

‘Yes, I did. I forgot who I was for a moment.’

‘Are you back now?’

‘I’m not sure. Maybe I’m nineteen. Maybe I’m a bee. Partly you and partly me.’

‘I don’t think you would want to be me.’

‘Why not? I could be you and you could be me. You could hop into this bed and then I would be gone.’

‘Where would you go?’

‘I would go to your place. And in the morning we would both see the world in a different light.’

‘I don’t think the staff here would like that. They’d be more than surprised.’

‘They’d only pretend to be surprised. In the end they would rather just be doing their job, and finding lost souls isn’t in their job description. Mostly they would be annoyed at the extra work involved and what people would afterwards say about what happened.’

I watched 28, propping herself up with pillows behind her back, trying different combinations, one on top of the other, then changing them, until she became comfortable with some sort of triangular configuration. I looked out the window and asked, ‘What happened to your bee, when you were nineteen?’

‘My bee? She taught me bee-sight.’

‘Bee-sight?’

‘Yes, a way of looking at the world, or, rather, a way that the world lets us look at it. I had always thought of vision as some sort of strange, invisible force that we actively send out to suck in information. But watching my bee, I realised it was

something far more passive – the information is out there all the time, radiating its own signal.’

28 closed her eyes, ‘We can shut it out’. She opened her eyes, ‘And we can let it in. But it is always there. The most interesting thing, though, is the way bees receive images, all in fragments, then they assemble them.’

‘They have large eyes similar to those of flies, don’t they?’

‘Similar, but I don’t know that much about flies, or really care for them to be honest. I think they’re eyes are pretty much the same, angled differently though. I watched my bee closely, and I remembered something I had read when I was younger: she had five eyes, three small ones that formed a triangle on the top of her head, and two large compound eyes, one on each side of her head. I watched her as closely as I could, imagining what it would be like to have compound eyes made up of thousands of tiny lenses fitting tightly together. Because of their curved, bulbous shape, each lens faces in a slightly different direction and receives just a small, independent part of the surroundings. There is a nerve coming from each lens that sends an image to the brain where all the images are combined to form a total picture, like a mosaic.’

‘So that’s bee-sight?’

‘Yep, and they don’t have eyelids either; their eyes are always open, assembling fragments.’

‘And that’s how you see the world?’

‘Maybe. Perhaps I’m a human with a bee’s soul. But not just any bee. There are many types: some are social bees and others are solitary bees. I’m a solitary bee.’

28 became quite animated. ‘I’ve since read a lot about the ways of bees,’ she said. ‘Do you want to hear more?’

‘Why not.’

What follows has something to do with the secret lives of bees. And ants. And me. And 28. And fragments. I'm not sure any more whose ideas or words they all are. I wonder if it really matters.

fragments~~

Most types of bees are solitary bees; they do their own thing and live alone, but they cooperate with each other if necessary, and sometimes thousands of them gather in a small area to build their nests; there are no rules and no obligations, merely an understanding and mutual respect. And they live without workers, simply males and females. Each female is her own queen who does her own work.

My bee was a Carpenter Bee, just like you, Scribe. She built a nest in a dry twig, digging a long narrow tunnel. Then she placed pollen and nectar right down the end before laying an egg. She sealed that section with a mixture of saliva and woodchips which set to form a base for the next section. She continued all the way along the tunnel until she had filled it with a series of cells. She knew that when her eggs eventually hatched, each larvae would have its own personal store of food.

It's a stony view heading out of town on this southbound bus. Bright lights – red, white, and yellow – fading into foggy streams in the distance behind me. Heading home. Another night alone. Seriously alone. With a sudden grunt, a passenger jolts from a warm cushion of drowsiness, and, in an instant, he has disembarked just in time for the short walk home or the connecting train. My turn to move will come soon, unless I stay on board, stay till the end. Have I ever taken this ride to the end of the line, any ride to the end of the line?

Some types of bees depend on a social structure, in much the same way that ants do. To me, that means that their lives only have a purpose when others in their society recognise the same goal as them. How sad!

I have watched those other bees with their structured societies, their division of labour, where the queen's function is to lay eggs – after she has killed off any rivals by stinging them to death, of course. The drones too have little more than a single mission – to mate with a queen. Drones depend on workers to feed them because their tongues are too short to collect nectar. They are fed until food becomes scarce in the colder months; then they are driven out of the hive and soon die. Workers neither lay eggs nor mate, but do virtually everything else, including cleaning the hive, building cells, and keeping guard.

How do we escape the relentless ties we have to those around us? Should we try to escape? Is there no respite from our connection to others? Rare moments during writing are an escape. There are times when I lose myself in the creation before me. And then sometimes, if I'm very lucky, I get answers! But mainly I get respite. Have I tasted something sublime? Have I entered the fictitious?

We call a community of ants a colony.

Some ants march across large areas of land in huge armies, eating other insects that get in their way.

Slave-maker ants raid the nests of other ants and abduct the young. They raise them as slaves.

Colonies fight against each other. In their fierce battles they use their powerful jaws to grab hold of an enemy's antenna, leg, or waist. Gangs are formed, attacking

individual victims: several ants will hold an enemy while other members tear them apart. Sometimes these acts of violence escalate into massive wars in which thousands of ants get ripped to pieces.

The slaves of the slave-makers aren't actually forced into slavery. The abducted ants merely grow into adults who accept their plight and comply.

In my hand, a snapshot of Andre playing in the backyard with some of his friends. It was taken on his birthday, a few years ago now: an Asian boy holds a painted balloon, an Italian friend, Michael, is chasing a girl with red hair and freckles, I can't remember her name now, and two others in the background are kicking a ball.

No prejudices at that age. Prejudice was my greatest lesson. In my first years at school, I wanted to make as many friends as possible. That went well for a while. But I soon learnt that I couldn't get along with everyone. Or, more to the point, that not everyone wanted to get along with me.

In secondary school, words like *wog* and *nip* began to emerge as labels for those in the minority. I was a wog, but I survived by assimilating and learning to fit in with the majority. I never betrayed the minority group though; well, not blatantly anyway. There were times when I may have been more silent than I could have been, but you can't stick up for everyone, and you can't fight everyone else's fight.

There were wogs, and spicks, and ching-chongs, and nips – all lumped together. A Greek, an Italian, a Spaniard, they each had such an individual heritage, yet they were all lumped together as part of a mass insult. 'They're all just greasy wogs, what's the difference?'

I never saw anyone get more offended than Min. He was a great friend, but he was so proud. It infuriated him to be called Japanese and to be told that all 'slanty-eyes'

look the same. 'I'm not Japanese,' he would protest. 'I'm from Beijing, the capital of China!' That would just make it worse for him; his intimidators would break into chorus, singing: 'Ching-chong Chinaman, slanty-eyed and yellow skin.'

What form of individuality is possible when we live in our roughhouse societies? We scream out at birds and animals when they make a racket – frogs all croaking at once, crickets and cicadas making an unbearable din. But what about all the so called *civilised* creatures, all of us humans moving about – yawning, talking, walking, running, racing, fighting, building towers, bending rivers, and bombing cities. Surely something or someone out in the universe must sometimes want to scream out, 'Will you please SHUT UP down there!' I would feel like doing that.

It's all just noise and commotion, a real hoo-ha, and a real shambles. Can we ever be free in our crazy, spinning worldpool?⁷⁸ We take all the fragments and try to make sense of them.

Min grew up to be more than fairly tough. Karate and working out. He was handy to have in our immediate group of friends. He had something to prove, I guess. He never asked for trouble, quite the contrary, but he didn't shy away from it either. I hope he knew that the rest of us were always there to back him up.

The funny thing is, I never actually saw Min fight. He didn't need to. The posture he adopted, his voice, and the look on his face when he was angered was enough to make anyone back down – forget Tai Chi, he was Samurai! We often joked, 'That was one thing the Japanese had taught you.'

78 Another 28 invented word.

He remained proud of his heritage. I didn't. Perhaps in many ways, my grandparents, after fleeing to a new country, were all too keen to embrace the culture of the people they deemed as their saviours. They didn't complain when their children denied their own history; they weren't insulted or ashamed when their children were embarrassed by the 'old ways'.

Very little was passed down to me through my parents. Only now I am starting to awaken, to yearn for the old tales my grandparents told me.

... oh, sometimes I'm not even certain if I've changed at all. After so many steps and twists and turns, you would think that I could expect to look back and gaze upon an enormous trail of discarded outer-shells. But there is nothing, just a little dust at my heels. Then other times I feel like I've undergone a massive upheaval of mind and soul. Movement is change, I keep telling myself. And change is an integral part of our cultural metamorphosis ...

20 imploding anger

Little things have been getting to me lately, and people everywhere are becoming increasingly rude to me: the bus driver jammed me in the door tonight; whenever I walk into a shop I stand unnoticed for ages, and when I finally get attention the service is poor and I usually walk out empty handed and frustrated; my neighbours and the noise in the streets keep me awake at night; and even the way the phone rings is beginning to irritate me. Probably the worst of it is that friends I had forgotten about have begun pestering me with their feeble attempts to do-the-right-thing – phoning or dropping in unexpectedly to see how I am. Nothing is satisfying – even food has no flavour.

There is a saying about the calm before the storm. Am I experiencing some sort of strange moody dullness *after* the storm? It's like I have narrowly escaped a disaster, only to return home to find that everything has been destroyed. I have to build my life again, build while trying to keep my balance on an insane roller-coaster ride. I am uncertain about which way to turn, if I can, indeed, turn at all. I have one word to describe my feelings. Emptiness! And that emptiness has formed a hollow cavity in my

chest. All I have to fill it with are petty incidentals. I spend my time overreacting to minor details – scrutinizing the hospital, the doctors and nurses, and agonising over my position with X. I’m becoming obsessed with Andre’s future, his well-being, wondering whether he cares about me and whether he knows how much I care about him and about his home life – will he miss me or will he quickly become accustomed to not having me around? I stay awake pondering the most insignificant details and events: last night I spent hours recounting almonds in my head, guessing the reason behind their appearance by Andre’s bed, imagining all sorts of sinister happenings. I am breaking down. Decomposing.

As a result of my deterioration, I am unable to face work. And although I am aware of something going on under the surface, I can’t get to it, I can’t see it.

Anger and mistrust are rising from the emptiness I feel, and the emptiness keeps growing. These bits that I tip onto the page are the last loose fragments of a hollow man. All that remains are vague recollections of who I once was, something of an inkling that I was not like I am now. I want to get back to the simple life – to stand beside a length of timber supported between two frames, a sheet of sandpaper wrapped around a padded block in my hand, and a cup of tea, comfortably within reach, on a bench full of tools.

Numbness. When I dropped in to see 28 today, she had visitors. It was early afternoon, earlier than my usual visits. I’d been playing all sorts of games with Andre for hours – Chinese checkers, a card game he’d taught me, called ‘go fish’, backgammon, and all sorts of puzzles and quizzes from books bought at the newsagency downstairs. I needed to stretch my legs. He needed to rest.

From what I could see from the corridor, there were two children and a man. I stood, unable to enter, yet curious. I had never thought of 28 as having any other visitors

besides myself. In an odd way, I had come to think of her as existing only for me. I felt annoyed, yet strangely detached. And although the idea of sharing intruded on what I had come to regard as my own private arrangement, I had no desire to take the matter any further.

I should have charged into her room and protested, demanding answers:

‘Why have you not told me more about yourself? Who are these people, and what are you hiding?’

I should have shaken her by the shoulders and made her listen. Not let go until she faced me and told me all:

‘You talk about climbing buildings, about the passing floors and the passing years, about jumping, about endings, about beginnings, about futility on the one hand and embracing life on the other. Your personality swirls and switches. You talk and care about your sister more than anyone and anything else around you – a sister I doubt even exists. Your crazy ideas spring from all directions. And one moment I’m concerned about you, more than you could possibly believe – wanting to protect you; then the next minute our roles are somehow reversed and I’m like a child at your feet.’

Instead of saying or doing anything, I left. And returned later.

‘How is your son?’

‘He’s doing really well; he looks so wonderful. They’re trying to sort out his medication; that’s all they need to do now.’

‘Medication?’ 28 looked surprised.

‘They’re still concerned about keeping him stable. He’s been through quite an ordeal. And they think it’s best just to use something to help keep him calm for a while.’

We wouldn't want anything to slow his progress, or to go wrong, not now – not after all he's been through.'

'I suppose not. But "medication", "keeping him calm". Those sorts of words always bother me. As long as they know what they're doing, I suppose.' She thought for a moment. 'It's just that so many people, in here and on the streets, are on medication – needing to be kept calm. It's not the medication or the people who are on it that I have a problem with, it's more that sometimes I think medication is taken by the wrong people.'

I wasn't certain what she meant. 'I'm sure they know what they're doing,' I said hesitantly.

'In some cases, sure. But what I mean, what I really believe is at the centre of the problem, of many problems perhaps, is not misdiagnosis or prescribing the wrong medication, it is more that the wrong people are being diagnosed, and medication, like anti-depressants and such, are being taken by them for the wrong reasons.'

I probably screwed up my face.

'I'm having trouble making myself clear, I know that. I'll try to explain,' she continued. 'It always seems to be sensitive individuals that have to take something in order to cope – to desensitise themselves. We wrap them in cotton wool for a while, to protect them, like we do a fragile piece of art. But what or who are we protecting them from? From heavy-handed, destructive bullies. And it is those bullies with their barbaric principles who should be taking the medication. We shouldn't be numbing the sensitive. We should be numbing the barbarians. Then we could set about sensitising the insensitive. They're the ones that need to chill out. All I see is the insensitive dominating and bullying while the rest are forced to take medication in order to cope. I used to have

a favourite saying, “the guilty never feel guilt”, in many ways that is true in this situation, if you think about it.’

28 slumped back in her chair, weighing her own words as she so often does. Then she smiled as if pleased with herself. It was at this point that another of her now familiar traits came to the fore. She sat upright. Her eyes widened. Her tone and attitude did a back-flip and I felt as if I was suddenly listening to a very different woman speaking in a very different voice.

‘I’m surprised you haven’t sussed me out by now. You’re too trusting. People aren’t like the timber you work with – predictable. It’s a mistake to take people on face value, thinking you can understand them like a piece of wood that you hold in your hands, turn, evaluate, know how it will perform, know how it will look in the end.

‘I’m a forgery. Two women in the one body. But only one woman is really me, or so I’m told. But I believe it is almost impossible to part us now. I know what I’m saying is not making much sense. In a way, I hope you make very little sense of what I’m saying and then write me off as a mad woman. That would be the easiest way for both of us. I’m not exactly sure myself what is happening – to me and around me. I’m afraid, often. I’m on my way out of a dark place, knowing I’ve made a mess of things along the way, but I have to get out, don’t I?’

I didn’t answer.

‘Naturally there are problems, so many gaps and contradictions, but I can’t tell you what I don’t know, and it is difficult to explain what I don’t fully understand. And believe me, there is certainly a great deal that I don’t know and don’t understand. The more I tell you, the greater the risk of you coming to your own conclusions. You might even get to know everything before I do, and then you will say, “I have found her out!” But by uncovering the mystery before I do, I fear that you will be unable to understand

properly. Then you will accuse me of deceiving you. In a roundabout way I have deceived you, but you need to know the whole story – of me and my sister – before you can pass judgement. The problem with that is, you have inadvertently become an accomplice, and therefore, not only will you be biased, but if my sister and I get hurt, you will also get hurt. I promise you that. I only hope that you get over it. I hope when you know the whole story you will not get too angry and too hurt. Certainly if you get ahead of us, and unravel the mystery, you will feel so betrayed and cheated that you will not let me finish my story, our story, the story of my sister and me.’

I still had nothing to say and felt as if I wasn’t being invited to speak anyway, just to listen.

‘The staff here say that I’ve been through a trauma, and I suppose I have, but not just a clinical one. My mind will recover, it is already getting back to its old self, but I wonder what will come of my soul. Do we ever recover from a soul trauma?’

‘I read a book once with a title similar to that. The story was about a migrant. At certain key moments during her journey, as she travelled, searching for herself and a new place to call home, her very personal thoughts were written in both her adopted language and her mother tongue. In many ways she slipped in and out of her native language trying desperately to assimilate with her new country. Reading the dream-like sequences, a mixture of languages, was beautiful yet eerie; they made the reader understand what it felt like to be out of place in an alien landscape. You felt just like that young woman searching for her lost soul.’

She began to blend into her environment, relaxing deeply into the chair beneath her. As her tone softened, I kept listening, understanding some things, letting others drift by. I was slipping deeper into a strange dullness, without the desire to question or to become involved. Yet, somewhere, a small quivering part of me was hanging on to

many questions, trying to call out. Right now, I lacked the motivation and the concern to ask or question anything. I just listened, and looked – at 28, at myself. I thought about my life and tried to imagine what was really going on in my own mind. I tried to picture myself, from afar. All I could see was a grey figure, head bent like an old dog sniffing at dust in a vacant lot. ‘No reaction,’ I thought, ‘You’ve lost the will to act.’

‘When the time comes, when you know, or think you know the whole story, please don’t accuse me of being a fake,’ she said, jolting me back into reality. ‘I already know I’m a fake, living in a shadow.’ She stopped and scratched her head for a moment. ‘Although, I wonder if I can be blamed, certainly not entirely. I didn’t plan any of this. And I’m only just starting to make sense of it all myself. If I’m not certain of who I am or who I’ve become, then how can I be a fake? What am I a copy of, if I haven’t deliberately styled myself after anyone or anything? Sometimes I don’t even know if I’m the eldest or the youngest sister. Right now, I’m oscillating between the two.’

She had begun to lose me.

‘Poor Scribe, you’ll only get hurt with all these women in your head. Don’t be angry.’ She lent forward and patted my knee. ‘Speaking of women, how is it going with Andre’s mother. Are you still writing about her, in your journal?’

‘Sometimes. When I have to,’ I answered, surprised that she had guessed I had written about X at all; although, I suppose it wasn’t too hard to work out.

‘Do you write about her in the second person or the third person?’

I waited for her to elaborate.

‘Do you write to her directly, in a personal tone, or do you speak about her indirectly. For instance, the words on the page, do you use ‘you’ when you address her, or ‘her’ and ‘she’?’

‘Sometimes both. Most often ‘you’, I think.’

‘Maybe she is still close to you in your mind, and in your– ’

I cut her off. I don’t even remember what I said, but I was certain the word ‘heart’ was about to come from her lips, and I couldn’t bare to hear it, not associated with X, not from 28 and at that moment.

‘Keep writing, Scribe. Write it out of your system. Spill it onto the page. All of it! Then you will be able to see more clearly. See everything more clearly.’

An unexpected snicker came from my mouth. ‘I hope you’re right. Things are pretty messy at the moment.’

‘Messy, yes, for me too. But messy isn’t all that bad. I’m learning to let myself go. I’m going off again now. I can feel it. Over time I’ve become more aware of it, and I’m getting used to it, it’s not that bad once you learn to give in, succumb to imagination and the endless possibilities it holds. “Let it happen girl”, I say to myself. And each time I do, life gets a little more bearable.’

Her eyelids became heavy, her head light – drifting in a circular motion. She touched her face softly, gently letting her fingertips fall down her cheeks and over her chest to come to rest in her lap.

‘I know I’m not making much sense, but before you lose me into a world of complete gibberish, I want to apologise in advance to you. I want you to know that you have fallen into this predicament with me by chance. It was not a trap. There is nothing insidious at work here, nothing planned. You are a witness who has become involved, and in many ways it may seem as if your hands are tied, but rarely is anything as it seems. Not in the outside world.’

I mumbled something about not caring enough about anything any more to really worry or get angry about it.

‘Your absolutely right, Scribe!’ She laughed. ‘We shouldn’t care about anything. But we should learn to not care in a caring way.’ She waited. ‘If we don’t care, we can’t be afraid, and if we aren’t afraid, we can’t get angry. I think that’s why we like training ourselves not to care. Not caring, that’s what we want. It’s safer that way!’ She rubbed her chin. ‘Is that really what you want?’

‘I’m not sure. I don’t like myself when I get angry. I know that.’

‘Where does anger come from, and where does it go, I wonder. What we see is the big bang; that’s the climax. But there’s a lot more to it than that. And so many other people involved: partners, children, parents, strangers – they all get mixed up in it. Sometimes they cause it. In our own eyes, at that crucial moment of the explosion, everything is unjust. That’s why it happens, because of that unbearable feeling of injustice! But where does that anger go after the explosion? I exploded at 20; or rather, imploded.’

28~~

There was a time when I really started disliking myself. ‘Climb faster; get to the top. Get the job done!’ I can still hear those words echoing, even now, inside my skull. I wanted no one to disturb me. I didn’t want to be found. I calculated my climb, quietly yet assuredly taking a few steps at a time. I believed that everything human was second rate. For me, being human meant simply patching up the holes of inadequacy. And the greatest inadequacy was an inability to accept that nothing is absolute. What keeps us going, I thought, what keeps us searching and believing, is arrogance – believing in our greatness and ability to come up with certainties. That is how and why we survive. It is not survival of the fittest, it is survival of the most arrogant.

Twenty years and twenty floors. The so called 'dominant species' is in fact very dumb. If we are as intelligent as we make out, why do we spend the majority of our time chasing absolutes and always trying to change, adapt, and re-arrange ourselves and the world around us? Why did we spend so much time complicating issues and missing the obvious? Other creatures seem to have it right from the word 'go'. Maybe other creatures are more evolved. Maybe they have already been through the intellectual development stage, long before us, and realised their place in the scheme of things.

I like chocolate. Choc-o-late. Even the sound of the word sends a creamy, dreamy, comforting ripple of delight through my body. I've developed an incredible chocolate passion. Insatiable! I just can't get enough, and I don't care.

I need to keep up my supplies of chocolate goodies. And I need more varieties, too. All over the house, hidden. Stocks of chocolates in drawers once used for socks; some more stacked in tins on the kitchen shelves; while others wait cooling in the refrigerator or stored under my bed. Sometimes I find melted blobs that I have forgotten about, usually in a warm place near an electrical device, like behind the computer or a heater or on top of the stereo. The scent of chocolate fills my home, and how sweet it is!

Look down there, I discern, with a cat-like stare homing in, some sort of wrapper: measuring about four centimetres by six, shiny as polished silver, slightly crumpled, with an unfurled twist turning upwards at the ends like a fancy Venetian gondola. It slid into view, at the behest of a slight breeze, across the step below my feet. I recognise the brand. One of my favourites. The memories are returning, my taste buds come to life.

I could be, and at twenty I dearly want to be, hidden within the folds of that chocolate wrapper. Protected inside, like the creamy almond praline surrounded by a

rich dark blend of cocoa that once sat within. There, to safely be, nothing more than praline. Until someone comes along to shatter the calm and suck me away. Then I will realise, learnt the hard way, that it is 'no life' that chocolate life.~~

28, you asked me today about writing in the second person. I suppose I do, when I really mean what I'm saying, when I'm being my most personal – like writing about myself in the first person. As for lecturing me about the predictability of people. I have always thought that people were unpredictable. You, sometimes, more than anyone. I just don't know if I can be bothered working it all out any more.

Every grain on every piece of wood is different, yet I have learnt to work with them all – red-gum, ash, pine, oak. I know people are not like the wood I work with, and that has much to do with my confusion; but now I wonder if in some strange way we are in fact all quite predictable, and that perhaps we are all cut from the same stubborn tree – a rigid, unbending stump, full of knots, with all us sharing the same twisted grain. As we grow we are unwilling to bend with the breeze.

How poetic I have become. The Scribe turned poet. Can anger be vented through poetry? Has all this writing done me any good? Sometimes I feel so angry, so confused. Sometimes I feel like I could explode. 'That would make a mess,' you would say. 'A loud bang, Scribe, and you'd be gone.'

Some people explode all the time. 28's mother explodes into violence and gets away with it; she vents her frustration on others, beating up on others. She is a horrible... I don't know how to say it. I'd like to say, bitch. There! I've said it, but it looks so flimsy on the page and not as harsh as it sounds and needs to be. But perhaps it is not a fair thing to say about someone I've never met. X is an exploder!

I'm an imploder, I think. When I get upset I make an internal mess of myself. Maybe that's worse than exploding; others still get hurt, indirectly. Andre is an imploder. My mother was an imploder; I probably inherited it from her. My father was an exploder, only when things got rough. As for 28? It's very difficult to decide. What would she say? Maybe something like this:

'Oh, me! I'm both Scribe, depending on the need.'

Then she would make some funny movements, an imitation of an aerobic workout perhaps, as she sucked in air and drew in her body, her hands and knees tucked into her chest. Then, breathing out suddenly, she would kick and flick out her limbs, forming a star. And she would somehow manage to do this poised on the edge of her seat.

'You can never tell for sure which way I'll go. "Look she's imploding, how sweet. And now she's exploding, all over the place. How fascinating to watch her do that."

And then she would straighten up, with a stern expression. 'Perhaps most of us are both types at different times, but have a tendency towards one. Imploders are very detrimental to themselves, and then sometimes to others later: Sometimes they can only implode for so long and then, when it gets really bad – too much imploding too often, then they explode with a really big bang!

'Exploders always hurt others first, maybe because they don't want to get hurt themselves. Exploding is a defensive reaction against feeling emotions, and we don't want that, do we? Interestingly, I think that people who are extremes of one type never really understand the other. And I've watched, closely, Scribe, for most of my life, to see that an exploder is never directly affected by the actions of an imploder. The imploder emits a little puff of smoke as part of their life is extinguished. "What's that odd smell in

the air,” others say, “like something burning? No, it’s gone now. Must have been just a change in the breeze.””

A quick and final note tonight, a note to X, in the second person, because it’s personal:

The day I left, I exploded; that’s when I knew it was over. I grabbed you by the throat and hoisted you off the ground. I had to shut you up. For a brief moment, as I backed you into the wall, I thought how nice it would be to tighten my grip until the last pathetic squeals fell from your mouth. I let go, turned, and said no more.

Until then I had said, ‘Goodnight, I love you,’ every night, and kissed you. No matter what had gone on during the day, each night I managed to dig something out of myself. Hope. Until I decided there was no use digging any more.

21 youth and old age

She held a folded sheet of newspaper and was tearing the centre out of it as she sat, preoccupied and slightly hunched over, at the head of the bed.

‘Imagine, Scribe, a man. A man with a death-wish. A wish to do away with himself.’

Her tearing was ragged and seemed endless as she carefully rotated the paper.

‘That wish, a destructive seed spawned at childhood and allowed to grow unhindered, is propagated along the way with sprinkles of evil until it becomes an all too familiar face.’

Finally, the centre piece fell away, and she unfolded her paper project.

‘Could you picture yourself as such a man, or see someone you know becoming like that?’ She drew a long breath. ‘Put yourself in that position. Hold this frame up to your face. Like this.’

She held the paper border up like a picture-frame and stared at me from the other side.

‘We have gone a long way together.’

‘So we have,’ I agreed.

She struggled with the frame, trying to keep it from collapsing.

‘Perhaps we’ve even gone beyond paper frames,’ she said, becoming annoyed with her limp paper craft.

‘What is there for us, after paper frames?’ I said, half-heartedly.

‘Oh, I’m not sure, maybe chopping blocks.’ She turned her head sideways. ‘I’m not afraid to put my neck on the chopping block – if you’re not afraid.’

‘What have I got to lose?’ I answered.

‘Friendship, perhaps.’

‘Yes, friendship. We will see. Maybe friendship needs to be tested sometimes. Put it on the chopping block, as you say.’

‘Yes. Off with its head! And let’s have a good look inside to see what it’s made of while we’re at it.’

She threw the paper frame into the air. At first it crumpled and threatened to plummet, reaching no further than the end of the bed; but then, miraculously, as if carried by a breeze, it opened like a parachute, spun, and came gliding towards me as I sat by the window in the visitors’ chair. I caught it with both hands.

‘You’ve been framed, Scribe’

‘It seems I have.’ The paper cut-out formed a perfect rectangle through which I gazed, somewhat surprised, at 28. It was an odd pose, and I wasn’t good at taking the next step, so I just held onto my paper frame.

‘I was thinking, before you came in: Imagine if we could trace evil, follow its trail. Like that man, or that type of fellow. Imagine if we could recount every step in his miserable life. Wouldn’t we be startled at how each step appeared so blatantly wrong to

us? Wouldn't we be astounded by the poor choices he made, his wayward interests? And wouldn't we be astounded at how obvious and deliberate his attempts at self ruin were? What if we could go back through his life to the essence of his childhood, a childhood in a broken home perhaps, seeing him wanting to kill himself, maybe with his father's power-tools?'

'What is she trying to say,' I thought to myself, but I let her continue.

'If we could stop that child, right at that point, maybe we could change his destiny. Then he might not grow into that miserable man.' She had never looked at me more sternly than at that moment. 'What is going on in that child's mind I wonder,' she continued. 'Is that the moment when evil first begins to take hold?'

I was scrambling in my mind for an answer, for some sort of response.

'You look hot, Scribe.'

Without answering, I let the paper frame fall to the ground. I was feeling panicked, I wanted a way out. I scanned the windows. 'It's stuffy in here,' I said eventually 'Such a warm day and the air-conditioning is making the air humid.'

'No use looking at the window. That won't open. I've tried, more than once.'

'It's not that bad, it's just—'

'We're stuck in here, and we can't let the outside in, and the inside can't get out. Do we really need any outside help?'

I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand and tried to compose myself. 'So what would this boy, this boy who is on the road to misery, be thinking?'

'I'm not sure. But maybe if that child really had a death-wish, and maybe, just maybe, if he was beginning to react foolishly to the world around him, a world of confusion for him, then maybe he was reacting without really knowing why.'

'Perhaps.'

‘Wouldn’t it be our duty to intervene if we could. If we could find out the cause. Find out what was going on in his heart and in his mind and help him understand, stop it all from consuming him? Often even little things can consume us sometimes, don’t you think?’

‘Of course, especially with children, especially when they don’t even know what’s going on.’ I was uncomfortable and hot, but regaining control. ‘So tell me then, what do you think is the most likely cause for a child to be so ...’ I hesitated, searching for a word that I somehow knew I wouldn’t find, ‘afraid, confused?’

‘There could be many reasons.’

‘What is one that comes to mind.’

‘Oh, I suppose, the relationship between parents and children, there is always going to be friction there. A mother, perhaps, not what she used to be, or what she would like to be. Let’s say, a mother who finds it hard to meet a new partner, and perhaps she is not as young as she thinks she needs to be to find happiness. And probably she has a child, and the child gets in the way and is a reminder of the past.

‘That is not the child’s fault, but maybe the child feels responsible. Maybe the child feels that he or she has always been in the way and is the cause of all the family conflict. And maybe the father, who is no longer around, is frustrated with not being able to fulfil what he sees as his rightful role.

‘And so the tension builds and the situation worsens, and the child is in the middle of it all and takes all the blame. And perhaps the father is starting to distance himself, and the child can see that too. And maybe what the child wants most is for his mother and father to be together and to be happy, one big happy family. But it is too late and the conflict always seems to involve the child. The truth is it would all be a lot easier if it wasn’t for the child.’

‘It’s a lot for a young mind.’

‘It’s a lot for any mind that doesn’t understand.’

I leant forward and picked up the paper frame from the floor.

‘I don’t think Andre has a death-wish,’ I said.

‘Maybe he hasn’t. And maybe none of what I’ve said is even remotely close to the truth, for him or for anybody. But it’s what I have a gut feeling about, at least some of it.’

‘You have indeed put your head on the chopping block, haven’t you!’

‘Perhaps I have, Scribe.’ She bowed her head for a moment before looking up again. ‘Now it’s your turn.’

‘I haven’t much to say. And what makes you think that I’m not too insulted to say anything right now, anyway?’

‘Maybe you are, and maybe you will wait till you get home and write it down, to vent your anger.’

‘Maybe I will.’

‘Maybe you will.’

I waited, a minute or more could have passed, I’m not sure. Then I spoke: ‘In many ways, as a parent, I’ve hoped that Andre will follow in my footsteps. When he was born, I was so proud. And as he grew, a young boy, I was there, eager to help him over any hurdles that got in his way. I was always full of hope ...’ I toyed with the paper in my hands; too self-conscious to look at 28, I kept my head and eyes angled down. ‘Doubts and disappointments come along, many times. But in the end they’re really nothing. All those years, all I ever wanted was for Andre to be happy, and for all of us to live peacefully together.’

‘It doesn’t seem much to ask for, does it.’

‘No.’

‘But how easily it all goes wrong.’

‘I remember a lot of the angry and hurtful things that were said and done, by all. When it all goes sour and there is nothing left, even the really good times are hard to keep free of the dirt. In fact, remembering those good times makes me feel even sadder.’ I coughed. ‘Once, Andre was a few years old, maybe four or five, he came into our bedroom rubbing his face, still half asleep. He whispered in my ear, I was already starting to awaken, becoming aware of his presence. He wanted to tell me about a dream. He wanted to be comforted. To find out whether I was asleep, he lent over me carefully and whispered into my ear, “Daddy, are your eyes still open?”

“Yes,” I replied, not thinking much of the beauty behind the question till after I had tucked him back into his own bed and was drifting off to sleep myself. I nearly cried with happiness from the fullness in my heart at that moment. Now, when I remember that story, my heart hurts so badly with regret.’

When I finally looked up, 28 had moved. She was seated at the end of the bed looking over me, waiting patiently.

‘Sorry’, I said, somewhat startled. ‘I was away with the fairies. I’m sorry.’

‘That’s alright. You don’t have to apologise to me, especially not for that.’ She smiled.

‘Tell me a story, will you?’

She thought, frowned with concern, then replied, somewhat awkwardly, ‘What sort of story, Scribe?’

‘Any story. The first one that comes to mind. I’ve become quite used to them.’

‘Any story?’

‘Yes, any story.’

‘You’ll have to help me. At least give me an idea to get me started.’ She pulled her legs up onto the bed and folded them, leaning forward eagerly.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Come on, Scribe, you can do it.’

‘Okay, tell me about, about yourself, when you were twenty-one.’

‘Twenty-one?’

‘Yes, twenty-one. Isn’t that where we’re up to?’

‘Up to?’

Yeah, there isn’t a choice really. We’re up to twenty-one.’

‘Oh dear! No choice. There certainly is: any which way and any which where you care to go. And aren’t you leading the way in all of this?’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you! No one forces you to come here. It’s not as if I go running around the hospital every evening looking for you, to drag you down here.’

‘Okay, fair enough, but aren’t we on a certain course. You have to admit that?’

‘The only course I’m aware of is the course you’re steering, Captain!’

‘Captain? Me?’ I had to stop for a moment to collect my thoughts. ‘So, if I’m steering, can we stick to the course we’ve already begun.’

‘Sure, as long as you know there is a choice. Shall I continue my story?’

‘Please.’

‘Let me think. When I was twenty-one, I was back at Uni after a break the year before. It was a time in my life when I couldn’t make sense of what I was doing. I was studying and working. “What is it all for” I would say at the end of the day. And I would

bury my head under the covers at night ready to escape into that wonderful playground world of dreams, where I felt more at home than anywhere in the waking world.'

'What work did you do?'

'Oh, you don't want to know. Everything from cleaning houses and toilets to waiting tables, retail sales, and tutoring. And always underpaid.'

'And Uni?'

'Mmm, a mixture of disciplines, really, with mixed feelings about all of them. Now that I recall, it wasn't so much what I learnt academically that has stayed with me, but more what I learnt emotionally.'

'Go on,' I said a little too anxiously.

'Okay, I'm thinking.'

'Sorry, but you were the one who said I was the captain.'

28 grunted, before continuing.

'What has stayed is a general feeling about not getting too hung up. I had to accept that not a lot had really changed for me over the years. During that time, I let go of a lot of demons, and realised that out of all the people and the stories and the events that I thought had influenced me, only a few really mattered. I remember a lecturer, a literature professor. He was in his late seventies; he also let his demons out, in the end.'

'In the end?'

'A sort of eruption one day.'

'Explosion or implosion?'

'Very good, you're learning. But it wasn't so much like that with him. I suppose he'd just had enough of turning the other cheek, and, when the time was right, he stood up for himself. In many ways, I think he was too nice – to his students and to his associates. You know what he told me? He said that after all those years he was still

learning to deal with his emotions. I was young and thought that was strange, but I was so struck by his honesty.'

'Sounds like a pick-up line.'

'Far from it, I hope.'

'Sorry, I shouldn't have said that; I don't even know him.'

'He wasn't like that. But, you know, what you just said reminds me of how people often reacted to him.'

'Something about the title of professor always makes people react stupidly.'

'I think you're right. Either we want to put them down, out of ignorance, or else place them on a pedestal to worship them in awe. No middle ground. Makes it difficult, if you're a professor, to form new friendships, I'm sure.'

'Was he a good teacher?'

'He was gentle and honest. I liked him, few others did. The first time we really spoke, it was late in the year, in his office, he told me that honesty makes you vulnerable. Now I think he was right. In the end he didn't shy away from honesty, even though it was difficult for him.'

'So what happened, in the end?'

'In the end? Well, we were studying Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Do you know it?'

'Sort of. I don't think I've read it though, but I know the story, vaguely.'

'That's not important, anyway. What matters is that we were talking about love and sex and relationships. He drew an analogy to his own life. I think, in a way, the class slyly led him along – into a more secret and personal discourse about his own exploits. He spoke sincerely about previous partners and sexual encounters, and divulged certain

private matters to the class in regards to his relationship with his current wife, believing it to be relevant to the discussion, of course.'

'Was it?'

'I thought it was. But from what he said, and reading between the lines, you gathered that he had been quite a ladies' man at times and married at least once before. He seemed to regret in many ways the passing of what he termed his "more virile years". What was extremely moving, though, was when he spoke of "the never ending discovery of the intimate and spiritual aspects of companionship". Most of the students, probably out of immaturity more than anything else, misconstrued what he was saying and used it as ammunition to mock him. Childish rumours spread around the campus, growing more and more exaggerated.'

'So in the end his honesty brought him ridicule?'

'Something like that. Although, there was, what could be called, a final showdown between him and the class.'

28 looked at me furtively, as if to say, "Stop me if you like, if you think I'm rambling". I had no intention of stopping her and widened my eyes in eagerness.

'The professor and I crossed paths some years later, walking in the sun along the beach. He revealed to me a recently developed, and most unusual, aspect of himself – a habit really, or probably, you could say, something of an infatuation. I'm sure many people would consider his little diversion to be quite a perversion, but if you knew anything of that man's past, his academic mind and his compassion, you would understand how harmless his exploits were.'

This time she stopped herself. 'Perhaps I've said too much, and I wouldn't want to betray a friendship. Any way, I'm digressing into another story, another side of a very complex individual. I do often wonder though, who the real Professor is – the slightly

perverted old man, the compassionate humanitarian, or the accomplished academic?
Could one be condemned while the others praised? What do you think?’

‘I think you’re teasing me.’

‘How?’

‘By beating around the bush.’

‘Not intentionally!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘As sure as I can be. I was going to tell you about the showdown, in class. That was the professor I knew when I was twenty-one. The other professor will have to wait for another time.’ She paused, gauging my response, then continued. ‘He told us several intimate, very intimate, details about himself and his wife, and their need to find a mutually satisfying balance between sexual activity and companionship. If it were a thesis you could call it “Life after sex”. But due to his honesty about such an intimate subject, the students nicknamed him “strap-on”’.

28~~

There was always a great deal of anxious clock watching during class and a stampede for the door at the end. I often turned to catch a glimpse of the professor tidying his desk as everyone evacuated the room. He looked disappointed sometimes, but never became disheartened. He lived by the motto that you can’t reach everyone all of the time, but if you can touch just one person once, then you have achieved something great. By the end of the year, disrespect from students had worsened. ‘Time stands still during Strap-on’s tutorials,’ many would joke. The derision he received had got to the point where crude remarks were being bandied around campus: audible comments in his presence,

whispers in the corridors, snickering in classrooms, notes passed around in lectures, and poetically inept stanzas scrawled on classroom boards and lavatory walls.

One day he came to class quite late, and not exactly sober. Barely speaking, he just listened to readings and waited until the end of the session. Then he said something quite remarkable, something like this: ‘To hold the hand of someone you love, a tear in your eye, and to apologise for not being able to have an erection is the most difficult moment in your life for both yourself and your partner. But if that person holding your hand, squeezing tighter, says, “I don’t mind; I have memories; I have love, and I have come to know the warmest of affections from you as my closest friend,” then you have the pleasure of feeling something unimaginable, an indescribable sensation coursing throughout your entire being, an orgasm more complete than any sexual one.’ At that moment a tear trickled from his eye. He soaked it up with one corner of a tissue without pausing. ‘When you are able to hold the hand of someone you love without the thought of defiling their body, when you can lie with them side by side in bed, sharing comfort and warmth, without a wild, stiffening monster rising to be appeased, and when you can speak with honesty about yourself and your feelings and receive a selfless response devoid of the twisted words that come with the unquenchable madness of sexual conquest, then, and only then, can you fully understand love. And if I shed a tear or two, it is not for old age. If I shed a tear or two, it is for the impetuous heart of wasted youth rejoicing in all its superficial and vulgar escapades. Youth is like a strap-on dildo.’

There was only about thirty seconds till the end of class that day, but it seemed like thirty minutes. Each student’s gaze, unable to rest, moved from the professor, to the clock on the wall, to the person beside them. When the time came, the professor was the first to leave.~~

I've been thinking about earlier thoughts, most of them appear as passages on these pages. I look back over them now, and they are not as well written as I would like them to be. They are vague. When I started, I thought I was writing about everything and everyone around me, about Andre, X, 28. They are in there, as my own experiences, but oozing out of every line is so much about my hidden self. The workings of my mind have been revealed, unravelled into a portrait of who I really am, beginning with the mysteries of my youth and moving into the now. It makes me anxious. My first reaction is to destroy it all, to wipe out these pages in an instant without a second thought.

Instead, I am drawn to them and read over them, it is an addiction. I think I am seeing myself for the first time. I see the day I ran away from home, unable to understand either myself or my parents. I see the day I really began to hate, first my father, then myself, then my mother, then myself again, and then never really stopped hating myself and trying to understand my parents. I see when not even voodoo or God could make a difference, and I see that it was then, and from then on, that I did more harm than good, not only to myself, but to everyone around me. In many ways I thought I was becoming a man. That's what I thought! But I was hurt and afraid, and most of all I was confused. And because of those things, particularly the hurt, I hurt myself.

I think of Andre, I see many things, I see him, his friends, his teachers, his mother, and I see myself. I hope Andre is not following in my footsteps.

22 night-club

From the moment she spoke her first words today, I knew I was in for quite a show.

‘Oh, good to see you, Scribey boy. Come in, all the way in, if you dare. Your timing is either very good or, depending on how you look at it, very poor.’ She was flitting around the room, opening and closing cupboards and drawers and searching under the bed.

Before I could ask what she meant, a nurse entered, scanned the room briefly and went to a food tray on the side table. After opening and closing the lids to the dishes, she turned to 28 disapprovingly.

‘Just the vegetables again, my dear! Oh well, I suppose that’s better than nothing. Can I ask them to get you anything else before I clock off?’

‘No, thank you. You’re leaving early this evening. Who’s on duty?’ 28 continued rummaging from place to place as she spoke, causing the nurse to turn in circles in order to reply.

‘Just Nurse Shirley, and a new girl. Not much happening down here lately.’

‘We’re well trained on this floor.’

‘That may be so.’ She made a quick note in 28’s hospital file. ‘I’ll take this with me,’ she said, hoisting the tray. ‘Don’t forget to take a stroll in the morning after they weigh you. Good for your appetite!’ Then walking out as briskly as she entered, with one final glance over the entire room, she addressed me. ‘You should try to get your sister to eat more, if she ever wants to leave here.’

Caught unaware, I nodded agreeably and shrugged my shoulders without giving much consideration to the nurse or her words.

‘So, Scribey boy thinks he’s my brother now, does he,’ 28 laughed, and spun past where I was standing, poking me in the ribs, on her way around the bed to the other side of the room.

This was my twenty-second visit with 28, and she was the most talkative and outgoing that I had seen her. And although our meetings had begun as quite a casual arrangement, and still were in many ways, an air of permanency had developed. I felt as if I was keeping a regular rendezvous with a life-long friend, as if I had known her for more like twenty-two years, rather than twenty-two days.

‘Do you actually have a brother?’ I asked.

Bent slightly forward, she gazed into the mirror on the wall near the corner of the room. Her head and shoulders were still, but from the waist down she was almost dancing, stepping and tapping with her feet and shaking her hips. Because of her excitement, I was unable to relax, and fidgeted about like a poodle with a rash, trying to decide whether to stand by the window, sit in the chair, or settle at the end of the bed.

‘Chill out. Take a seat. Make yourself comfortable. Although before you do, perhaps I should warn you. Even though you’re welcome to stay and chat, as always, I do have something planned for myself tonight. You see, Scribey, you’ve walked in, right in the middle of dress-up time.’

I frowned.

‘I can tell by your face that you’re already taking me too seriously. But it’s nothing to be afraid of. Just a little evening of dressing-up, just for old times’ sake. It helps create the right mood for dispersing the worries of the day, and I’ve had so many things on my mind today.’

I pondered the implications of what 28 meant by ‘dress-up time’. Perhaps it was time for me to leave. But I couldn’t resist the invitation to stay.

Her back was turned to me as I lowered myself into the chair. She rarely faced in that direction, standing over by the mirror, rarely inhabited that space in that part of the room. The only occasion I remember her being positioned like that was the day after our meeting in the lift, and that day caused me a great deal of embarrassment. “Oh dear, not again!” I thought, as 28 produced a lipstick, deep pink in colour, from the single drawer vanity unit perched below the mirror and began decorating her pouted lips.

‘Not feeling any déjà-vu are we, my brother?’ she said.

‘I seem to remember a brief encounter with a stranger in a lift, and a poem.’

28 smiled, and as she applied make-up, I could see her face clearly reflected in the mirror. Whenever our eyes caught each other’s gaze, an eerie sensation, both alluring and unnerving, caused me to shy away. I felt uneasy, as if I was peeking from a distance at something sacred or taboo, yet very exotic. Each time I looked away, incapable of holding her gaze, I became more insecure. A strange dynamic was taking place via the mirror. Not a game, more a challenge or a teasing out. Gradually it became easier for me

to keep eye contact. But never did I manage to out stare her, not when she really wanted to stare me down anyway. She was in a commanding mood tonight.

Under the skilful artistry of her hand, 28's face was changing. And physically, her stance, her manner, and her voice also underwent noticeable transformations. Her gaze suddenly became less penetrating. She was becoming twenty-two, puckering and painting, and teasing her hair; getting ready for a night on the town. She found more implements in the drawer and rolled them onto the small bench top, began sifting through them, looking for colours.

'I don't have a brother, but I do have a brother-in-law.'

It was then that I noticed she had again changed the colour and style of her hair, perhaps yesterday, perhaps the day before. It was now a very deep rich auburn-brown, similar to, but perhaps darker than, when we first met – no, not when we first met, it was almost blonde then, but later, when she darkened it and had it cut. I used to think that her hairstyle changes were just an illusion brought on by my tired eyes or the varying levels of light in her room. She mentioned once that the hairdresser in the foyer was a good hairstylist, so it seems that during her walks she finds time to visit a salon. Intriguing! I didn't think she was the type. "Little things keep me amused in here." She had also said. There is an explanation for some changes in 28, but there is not for others.

'I rarely wear this stuff. In fact, after my early twenties, of cramming in every wild and raging and raving event that I could, I stopped.'

With a charcoal-black eyeliner moistened on her tongue she began highlighting her almond shaped eyes; her irises like jewels, vivid and blue, became clearer and more striking with each stroke and each word that she spoke.

She began humming a familiar tune, and swaying gently, stepping from side to side. Somehow, she had hoisted and tucked up her hospital gown in a way that almost

had me believing she was wearing a dress, as if cut on an angle from the one knee to the top of the opposite thigh. Then suddenly she had finished. And without warning, and in one contorted and fabulous movement, she pounced into the air, landed on all fours on the bed, stretched her body forward over the edge, and brought her face to within less than a centimetre of my stunned eyes.

‘Good to see you again, Scribey boy. Do ya feel like steppin’ out with me tonight?’ She ruffled my hair, something no one had done to me since my school-days. ‘Isn’t it time you let your hair down, and celebrated? After all, you’ve been through a hell of an ordeal lately.’

I mumbled something about having so many things yet to sort out, and not wanting to celebrate prematurely. Everything has been so out of my control, all I wanted now was consistency and security. She held her position for a long time. I felt the warmth of her breath rolling past my cheeks and down my neck. I thought for one crazy moment that she puckered her lips, a kiss perhaps. Instead, she leapt backwards laughing, a strange and feral sound gurgled from deep within her soul. She collapsed on her back on the bed.

‘You are absolutely right, Scribe. Too much levity at the wrong time can bring you undone. I think. Or maybe that’s not so at all. Anyway, each of us should know what’s right for them. And what is right for you? Let me see. Stability. Stability is the key for you right now, stability through moderation. You know, you’re right, and you’re right because you know what’s best for you. And you know what’s best for you because you understand about moderation and stability. That’s you – you, you, you.’

She began forming silent words, as if blowing bubbles. Eventually she spoke again. ‘I like that word, I like it a lot right now, Staaability. Scribey, you are the Stability

Boss. And the job of Mr Stability is to make sure that we don't meddle in other people's business. That can be a very dangerous thing to do indeed.'

I certainly had never seen her like this before, so animated and so intent on amusing herself at my expense, even provoking me. I didn't bite back, but wondered where she was leading to. She continued for quite a while, joking around and kicking her legs in the air from time to time.

'You know, Scribe,' she said, turning her head to the side to face me, 'I've told you things I've never told anyone before. And I appreciate and respect you for the friendship you've shown me.' I was shocked by her sudden shift in tone. 'We can be very different in many ways, yet I trust your judgement, and I think you trust mine. The funny thing is, the more you like someone, and the more you respect them, the more you care about them. And if you care too much, you end up sticking your nose in where it's not wanted. Be sure to let me know if I stick my nose in too far.' She smiled, then turned to face the ceiling, her body becoming completely limp.

She drew in a long, smooth breath through her nostrils, taking about fifteen to twenty seconds to do so, and for about the same duration she held her lungs fully extended before exhaling, breathing out as slowly and as controlled as she had inhaled, completely emptying her lungs now.

'I'm running out of stories to tell you.'

I was alarmed at the idea of our visits ever coming to an end. I listened and savoured every word as if it might be the last.

28~~

I was with my sister, my brother-in-law, and some of his friends. Actually, he wasn't my brother-in-law at the time, but he did become that later. We were holidaying, travelling

around the country in two cars. Lots of camping and cheap meals. We were due for a night out, in one of the larger towns we had come to. After dinner at an Italian restaurant, gnocchi with a mushroom Napoletana sauce and a glass of the local wine for me, we headed for a night-club down by the coast. Squeezing too many passengers into one of the cars made the trip cosy. It was a balmy night, a light sprinkle of rain glided in through an open window. A beer was sipped by one or two of the boys while my soon-to-be brother-in-law drove.

Seated on a small stage at one end of the narrow upstairs night-club room sat three young women on stools, adorned, retro nineteen-seventies style, with feather boas around their necks, flared slacks, and tight tank-tops with the words 'Hip Shakin' Babe' written in sparkles on the front of each. All three were dressed identically, except for colour variations. They sang modern versions of jazz and rhythm 'n blues standards to the accompaniment of electronic backing tracks. Their voices were reasonably good, but the absence of real musicians made the whole performance sound too much like Karaoke for my liking. We lost my brother-in-law's two male friends because of that; they decided to head for another venue. That was a pity, but the three of us stayed put, frequenting the bar which stood lengthways down the centre of the venue. Drinks weren't priced like gold bullion, so we became quite merry and talked a lot and mixed in freely with the crowd. Down one of the side walls there were floor to ceiling windows that overlooked the bay, a wonderful view. We were young and happy and in the mood for a good time.

My brother-in-law, two years older than me, was twenty-four or so at the time, a smooth dancer, very slick and very sexy, quite appealing to women. Close to the dance floor, a tall, thin girl with long, multi-coloured hair swayed and twisted senselessly against a round, pedestalled table that she held to help maintain her balance. Her

physique was as gaunt as the single chrome pole of the table. Sharp strands of her hair punctured the air as she treated us to an out of tune and out of time sideshow of writhing dance and intermittent nihilistic attempts at vocal harmony. During one of the more laid-back songs she began wailing, even further out of tune and out of time than before. We attempted an interpretation of what she was saying, I thought she was screeching out the words, 'Steve and I are getting drowned at thirty', but after some deciphering aided by my sister, we finally realised that she was actually saying, 'Being alive and getting down and dirty'. Neither phrase made much sense.

She spoke to my brother-in-law more than once, hooking him with her tentacles whenever he came near. My sister and I noticed that not only was this sideshow diva out of tune and out of time, but she was also well past her use-by date. Not so much old, just very wasted from too much raging. She said she was twenty-two, but she looked forty-two. It was during one of her groping attempts on my brother-in-law that I noticed a pram, of all things, tucked under the table behind her. We watched, astonished to find that it was hers, as she repeatedly rummaged through a pouch at the back for cigarettes and money. It was bizarre. Like me, my sister wondered if she might really have a baby in it, and if she didn't, what she did in fact have in it.

It wasn't till sometime later, at the less noisy, back end of the room, that my brother-in-law talked about the sideshow diva. A junkie, he said, who had brought her small child in with her in the pram. We could hardly believe what we were hearing. She had been there virtually all day. It was a ritual for her on most days, often coming in with her partner to begin drinking at around lunch time. Her partner had stumbled out earlier and often ended up crashing at someone else's place. Beginning in the afternoon, she had fed her child on bottles of milk laced with cough syrup to help him sleep. It was well after midnight by this stage, the air was smoky, and many people were drunk and

dancing. Drinks had been spilt, and the occasional pushing went on, and certainly a lot of noise. Perhaps harmless enough for mature people, but no place for a baby.

Not far from the sideshow diva with the pram sat two primary school teachers, in their mid twenties. One had blonde hair, and, like the diva, showed an all too obvious interest in my brother-in-law. She had been eyeing him off for some time. A futile debate ensued between us and the school teachers, questioning the actions of the mother with the pram. Blondie was more concerned about chatting up my brother-in-law than caring about the baby, but she was happy to use any excuse to talk to him.

‘I say she is wrong. Surely it’s against the law. We should do something,’ Blondie protested with forced conviction, inflating her young moon-face, a face begging to have its plump nubile cheeks pinched. Actually, not long after that, she leant across to me and whispered in a squeaky voice, ‘Do I look okay? Are my cheeks nice and red, or do I look a bit pale?’ Then she squeezed those already flushed cheeks. Blondie’s darker haired friend seemed to think that the mother was legally within her rights, and that obviously if she wasn’t, she wouldn’t have been allowed in the club in the first place. We had found that laws varied during our travels, so many differences from state to state, and so many strange and antiquated ideas still in place.

As I detached myself from the conversation and the room and probably the universe, I looked around me. ‘What a different world, with different rules, in this clandestine cave of night dwellers,’ I thought. I think the club was actually called ‘The Cave’. How appropriate. We escaped into many caves at that age, doing our own thing amongst other escapees. Drawn together by nothing, except the need to get away. Brothers and sisters united, superficially. If the lights suddenly came on in that club and if all the effects were stopped, we would be mortified. How quickly our personalities

would change. Our masks would melt like wax in an oven. Silently we would go our separate ways – naked.

Before long, I was ready to tell Blondie, who knew nothing about everything, to shut up. I didn't, however. Perhaps I should have. Her much more amiable friend told me that she had never seen Blondie perform quite so openly, although Blondie did like to talk, and it was not uncommon to tire of her 'incessant platitudes' as her friend phrased it. Blondie, without experience, had now become an authority on motherhood. She extolled the virtues of that most 'natural and most spiritual of all journeys,' praising and embracing it as essential for 'feminine fulfilment.' 'It is the supreme sacrifice,' she declared, and such sacrifices are 'infinitely rewarding.' For her it was the ultimate and only path in becoming the 'complete' woman.

Everybody had their own agenda that night: Blondie wanted to see my brother-in-law perform for her, to show her some machismo – clearly, what excited her was a man in control; the diva-mother wanted anybody to do anything that was outrageous, encouraging everybody to be as much out of control as possible, maybe to cover up for how much out of control she was in her own life; and on the list goes, with each person fooling themselves into believing they were united, bonding.

And that's what started the potentially dangerous events that followed. After the diva-mother treated us to her grandest performance, she went missing, for a long time, thirty minutes or more. Before she disappeared she was on the dance floor, attempting to climb onto the shoulders of a guy she had just picked up, when they both fell backwards. She hit the ground heavily, his weight coming down on top of her. After being helped to her feet she staggered off. I became concerned, and went looking for her in the toilets. My sister also scouted around, and said she would grab a drink for us from the bar at the same time. While we were gone, Blondie urged my brother-in-law into doing something

about the child in the pram that was left unguarded. She was sure that a man like him would be able to handle the situation. The bar staff weren't willing to do anything; their advice to both my brother-in-law and my sister was simple – don't get involved.

My brother-in-law went over to the pram and moved it out from under the table slightly. Unzipping the weatherproof covering, he reached in with his hand. He expected to find a child inside, maybe a toddler, and hopefully asleep. But he wasn't prepared for it being only a baby, small and rugged up. He couldn't believe it. He was truly shocked when he walked back to us. 'It's just a baby,' and then through pale lips he mumbled, 'it's cold.' He said he shook the baby, but he wasn't certain if it reacted, 'It really freaked me out.' He tried to find a manager, or anyone who could take control.

According to law, the woman had every right to have her baby in the club. She had come in at lunch time, so she was entitled to stay, and the baby was too young to be classed as a minor. Also, she was a regular who was well known by most of the staff.

'But the baby is cold,' my brother-in-law protested to a stone-faced burly male monolith whose shoulders filled the entrance to the room. He stood guard at the top of the stairs. Pinned to his shirt, a plastic tag, with the word 'security' printed on it underneath a two digit number in bold black lettering, conveyed his sole function.

'You didn't touch it, did you?' hissed the stone-faced monolith.

'I think the baby's unwell. This is really serious. We should call an ambulance.'

'Did you touch the baby?'

'Come on. This is absurd. That baby could die, if it isn't dead already.'

'Did you touch it?'

At this point another stone faced monolith, just as wide, came striding over in slow motion, night-clubbers parted in silent obeisance.

Together they began pushing my brother-in-law, a little at first, and more in a way that motioned rather than physically directed him.

‘I want to see the manager.’

‘I’m in charge here!’

‘Please, just go and see for yourself.’

‘Did you touch that woman’s child?’

The monoliths had begun to push him further and further down the stairs now, and somewhat aggressively. My sister and I followed. Not far behind was Blondie.

By the time we reached the bottom of the stairs they had pushed my bro into the street. The second monolith turned, forcing us to stay inside. Everything moved too quickly from then on. We struggled to get past, but couldn’t, and thoughts of going back upstairs for help were a futile option.

My brother-in-law admitted touching the child to the stone monolith outside, and pleaded with him to just go up and look for himself or at least call the police, but that was the last thing he remembers saying. He was told to fuck off, told to never come back again, punched several times in the stomach, slapped once in the face causing his nose to bleed profusely, and then threatened that if he called the police he would be accused of creating a disturbance and harassing the woman and her child. I did my own threatening when Blondie came running out to assist her hero. She soon left.

We did call the police, told them exactly what went on, and told them that we were only interested in the safety of the baby. The person we spoke to said they would look into it. We’re not sure what happened, or if my brother-in-law did any good at all that night. But at least he tried.

Ironically, a few months after, my sister showed me an article in a recent newspaper about a tragedy in a bar. Yes, you guessed it, it was about the death of a

baby. It actually occurred in a different club, but in the same city. From what was written in the article there was no way of telling whether it was the same woman and child, but who knows. At first, my brother-in-law did want to find out, and thought if he could get a hold of a photo of the mother maybe he would know for certain, but he decided to let the issue drop. 'There's nothing to be gained by trying to prove a connection to any of the people that night,' he said. 'When you think about it, there's a connection regardless of who's involved. There's a connection emotionally and morally, and always will be, for us and for all concerned. And you know, everything is connected to all of us in the end, all crimes, all deeds, and all thoughts.'~~

28 lay on her back on the bed, her feet on her pillow, and her arms folded behind her head.

'Where do our actions stem from, Scribe?'

'I'm not sure.'

'One thing I learnt that night was that everything we do, every deed, every act, is either an action or a reaction. Funny really, that night on the way home, my brother-in-law was so embarrassed about being beaten up, about not being able to properly defend himself. His male pride was a little dented I think. But he was far more a hero in the eyes of my sister and me than he could possibly have imagined. And though both of us loved him in many ways, I think after that night my sister decided that he was the perfect man for her. I think she was right. She made two beautiful children with him.'

28 began to cry.

'Sorry, Scribe. I seem to be getting over emotional.' She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

'Don't be sorry.'

‘Two beautiful children with a beautiful man. You’d think that after the way she had been treated by our parents she would have had little chance of doing the parenting thing well herself. She has a handsome boy and a lovely little girl who’s six, two years younger than her brother.’

28 turned to me, apologised again, and asked what time it was.

It was time I departed. We had spoken for nearly three hours.

‘Goodnight, Scribe. Thank you for listening.’

‘Thank you for the company,’ I replied, ‘as thought-provoking as always.’

‘I shall scrub this face and rinse this hair. It’s a bit late to shower, they might not approve, but I will tiptoe in. It will be a relief to watch these pencil lines and paints spiralling down the drain. What an odd person I had become on that twenty-second floor. But my life was about to change, again. Bye, Scribe. Keep on climbing.’

23 genetically modified

Andre is such a beautiful boy. I know I am biased when I say that, overlooking all the mischievous antics and notions that he has got up to over the years. But why not? Why dwell on them? Why even consider them? He is alive. And seeing his smiling face every day, watching his hands move, listening to his voice, touching him, and being touched by him in return is truly unbelievable. The past weeks, the many hours vigilant by his bed waiting for him to awaken, are now almost forgotten. How quickly that happens. The whole affair remains as nothing more than a moment of darkness, like a storm that blows in at night and in the morning is gone. But at the time it wasn't like that at all. There was always doubt and fear. 'You should prepare for the worst,' everyone said. But Andre and I never gave up.

'Have you ever wondered why sometimes our thoughts are so confused?'

'Quite a lot lately, actually,' I said in earnest as I seated myself by the window.

'I think it happens when we deny our inheritance.'

‘Our inheritance?’

‘Yes, our inherent inheritance, the one you can’t give away.’

‘Are we talking about hereditary things here?’

‘Yes, hereditary things! I had a crazy thought today. I was thinking, what if everything, and I mean everything – who we are, what we think, how we act – from the moment the first cells begin multiplying, and every moment and every day and every thought after that, what if they all actually just develop without us having any control over them.’

‘No control? None at all?’

‘Zip!’

‘I can live with that.’

‘You can? I can’t. And I don’t think you can either.’

‘Why?’

‘Why do I think I can’t live with it or why do I think you can’t?’

‘Both.’

‘Okay, I only need one answer anyway. You just said, a few moments ago, that your thoughts are often quite confused. I think confusion comes from the struggle that begins when we try to take control. And when we’re successful, we have control.’

‘What if we don’t want control?’

‘Then we don’t change.’

‘What’s so bad about that?’

‘Nothing. If you’re happy with your lot, and just want to carry on. But who makes the important decisions?’

‘That has something to do with why we pay taxes.’

‘Sure.’ She smiled at my cynicism. ‘But there are important, little decisions – personal ones.’

‘I know what you’re saying, and I agree, to a point.’

‘And to what point is that?’

‘I agree that obviously we have to learn, learn how to act, learn how to think, and so on. But you’re implying that a great part of who we are is formed after we’re born and after our genes have done what they have to do. You place too much emphasis on our surroundings and our experiences.’

‘Until I was twenty-three, or thereabouts, I denied my inheritance. I desperately wanted to believe that nothing was inherited, “We make ourselves, moulded from nothing. We take a blank and shape it!” I thought. Then suddenly, I wasn’t so sure any more, and I didn’t like being uncertain. To think that our genes just get passed on automatically, down the ancestral line – some from this side some from that, some from your mother some from your father, and some from so far back that it’s impossible to trace – and they control you and determine who you are or who you are going to be. It just made me quiver.’

‘And now you believe that uncertainty and confusion are the best proof of our ability to be free thinkers and to create our own destiny.’

‘I’m not sure what I believe.’

‘Maybe you’ll just have to be happy with a compromise.’

‘A compromise. I’m not sure about that – compromising can be an excuse sometimes, a way out of having to take a stance.’ She smiled, raised her hands like petals spreading in the sun, and tilted her head.

We continued talking, but as I watched her, I became lost in her movement. And, although I think I answered a few times, I can’t remember what was said. I was far too

fascinated by her enthusiasm and her manner, the way she held her body, upright, and the way she became playful and happy. She looked so alive. “Where did she get her behaviour from?” I thought. “Has she learnt those beautifully unique characteristics along the way, created them herself, or is she a replica of the past?” Eventually I began drifting back to an awareness of our conversation.

‘ . . . and if that’s the case then we are nothing more than a creation as the result of a cruel and ruthless selection, as unfamiliar cells are forced together at the moment of conception, all vying for supremacy. Cells, charged with a plethora of genetic information, passed on from generation to generation, perpetuating a hostile and volatile configuration. Chemical and neutron charged messages are being shot around the body as part of a fierce civil war that is waged in the battlegrounds of our body. How can our mind, our logic, settle those disputes? And that is exactly why there needs to be something more. Otherwise we have to give in to the war of intolerance, confusion, and insanity. And from that comes a world— well, just look around you. You know what I mean.’

‘Mmmm,’ I half nodded in agreement. ‘It’s hard to disagree with you, and you know it. But I sometimes think it’s better just to leave things as they are, and to accept our destiny.’

She stood, walked over to the door and closed it. She made herself comfortable again on the bed, her arms wrapped around her legs, her chin on her knees. When she spoke, her voice was softer.

‘A piece of floral material tied around the hand-rail on the twenty-third floor reminded me of a seamstress. Come to think of it, she would have been about twenty-three when I met her. She wore a scarf on her head to hold back her hair while working. The design of the material had always attracted me. A textured, lavender coloured

background with jade petals and random clusters of dots in various shades of blue; the main motif consisted of tiger-lily shaped flowers in soft pinks, mauves, and deep reds, very tastefully designed, not too busy or gaudy like many paisley patterns you see around these days. I had wanted her to make something for me out of the same material, a dress, even a scarf like hers, but the material was no longer available.

She offered me her own scarf as a gift one day after carefully washing, ironing, and folding it. It looked like new. I couldn't accept it, but we had a long chat that afternoon over a warm drink and a piece of pecan pie. That lovely young woman who usually spoke very little told me about herself and about her past, sharing with me some very special secrets.'

28 stopped, inspected me with probing eyes and, with some hesitation, made a curious suggestion.

'Let's tell a story together!'

'A story?'

'Yes, a story.'

My reaction showed.

'Don't worry, I'll begin, you just follow on and we'll take it in turns.'

'I'm not sure if I can.' I wasn't certain if she was kidding me or not, and, if she wasn't, how far she would go with the idea. I reluctantly agreed. 28 began.

'We'll continue with the seamstress. She sewed hems, mainly, in a small shop. Her vision was to design women's fashion. Which she did, but as yet had neither the recognition nor the finances to start her own label or outlet.' 28 stopped, then nodded.

'Your turn, Scribe.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Just say anything. Let the ideas carry you along.'

‘No, this is silly.’

‘It probably is, but if that’s what you think about it, then it should be easy for you. Don’t take it too seriously. Just have fun with it.’

‘It’s not so much silly, more that I can’t, not just like that, not in front of you.’

‘Oh, come on. It’s just me. Give it a go.’

‘What was her name?’

‘I forget, and it doesn’t matter.’

I took a moment, to gather my thoughts. ‘Okay. She has large brown eyes. She is, she has a tired looking face, from overworking, but there is something inside, underneath her outer veil, a certain vitality that hints at her being someone different from others around her.’

‘Well done. I like it. Anything else?’

‘Not at the moment.’

‘Okay, my turn. She has a secret, a secret desire that means much more to her than being a successful fashion designer. She really only perseveres with dress making because it has been her family’s trade for generations. It is what she grew up with and what she does well. And above all, it is what is expected of her. But what she really silently yearns for is something completely different.’

28 nodded, suggesting it was my turn.

‘She has been reading, no, she has been studying, at night-school. And because she comes from a poor background she has no one to talk to about her true desires. Her family knows that she is doing some sort of study, but to them it is hardly of interest and not worth mentioning.’

‘That’s great, Scribe! Let me think. Her aspirations are of little concern to the family, you say. They are so unconcerned that even the criticism is half in jest, “You

should be getting married, not studying,” they say. Her father’s favourite line is, “She wants to marry her books. That’s fine for her, but it won’t give me any grandchildren.” But it is all mainly just teasing, and although the family perceives the money she spends on courses and books as a waste, it is hers to do with as she pleases and she is certainly not stingy when it comes to helping anyone out. Over to you, Scribe.’

‘Her hidden passion is certainly for studying and reading, but her focus and the field that she studies is, is science. Unbeknown to all, she has been studying—’

‘Are you sure.’

‘Of course I’m sure.’

‘Next you’ll be telling me she’s doing a research degree in genetic engineering.’

‘Yes, that’s it, genetic engineering. And through her research she hopes to produce crops that are sustainable as food for the future – healthy crops, full of nutrients, and free of disease.’

‘Are you absolutely sure?’

‘You started this.’

‘You’re right, I did. But, what you don’t know about her is that although she is researching plants, what she is really interested in is human genetic engineering. And importantly, contrary to the beliefs of her colleagues who maintain that everything is determined by genes – everything from criminal traits to the way we kiss – she can’t help feeling there is something more. Her memories of the poverty she grew up with as a small child, won’t let her ignore the idea that much of the troubles for the people she knew were caused by their surroundings and the terrible work conditions that they were forced to endure.’

‘Does she have a lover?’

‘That was a quick change of topic. I don’t know if she does. I don’t think she has time for a lover at the moment. But it’s your turn, you decide.’

‘Okay, she has a close male friend that she met while studying. They have been seeing a lot of each other lately. He wants to get closer to her, but he’s not entirely sure about her feelings towards him. How do you think she feels about him?’

28 paused, unconvinced about the direction I was taking. ‘Her friend, he grew up very much a scientist. That’s what he always wanted to be, and he hasn’t had much cause to deviate from his goals and his beliefs. She wants to help him see the world through a different lens. His research has to do with what he calls Pharming, a new era of pharmaceutical farming, animals and plants engineered to suit our every whim. He has specialised in the study of cloning and breeding animals with specific attributes, like organs that are more human than animal and can be whipped out and used for transplants. He comes across as being too pragmatic, seeing only facts and figures, which is his prerogative, but he represents an ideology that is unable to see people for what they really are. “We are not just molecules and atoms,” she said to him one day, “we are flesh and blood.” That was a mistake, because he responded with, “That’s exactly right! What is our flesh and blood made of if it isn’t made of molecules and atoms?” He was joking with her really, but ultimately, their differences would be what stood in the way of them really getting close.’

‘I think she would have had more to say about that. She would have protested. “We have feelings in there too,” she would have said. Often she tried to make him meet her half way. At that stage in her life, she believed that who we are is partly determined by upbringing, by society, and the world around us, and partly by our genes.’

‘Yes, you’re right Scribe, because what she said next, even though he wasn’t listening, was, “What I really fear is that technology has become a religion. As our

previous religious beliefs have gradually declined, and as responsibility for the world around us has shifted from the hand of God to the hand of man, we have become increasingly uncomfortable with our position. From the moment we began crucifying the gods we also began a frantic search to find alternative scapegoats. And gene theory may well be that goat. We have worked our way through genetically modified viruses, foods, plants, animals, and humans to finally reach our ultimate creation – genetically modified religion. You see, if we can blame our human frailties onto genetic defects and inadequacies then we have managed to shirk responsibility for much of society's problems.'

I was beginning to enjoy the storytelling and responded quickly. 'But, in a way, and a very important way – answered her friend – don't you see we have actually become God. Look at all our achievements, our creations!'

'Ahh! But the most damaging perspective is seeing ourselves in the centre,' 28 cut in, 'always in control, always having to control. That's why, during our favourite pastime of playing God, we invented the computer.'

'And what is wrong with that?'

'A great deal. Interestingly though, like many of our inventions, it really serves as a way of trying to understand ourselves. We are desperate to know precisely how the self and the mind, how the human identity, is formed and operates. And all the answers are right in front of us.'

'Where?'

'Just like in the Bible, where humans were created by God, in God's image, so it is that we have created the computer in our own image. Well, it was the best we could do at the time. But that primitive contraption actually gives a perfect example and

solution to the debate about who we are, our genetic structure and influence, and our social and psychological development. In a word, our identity.'

She waited to make sure she had my attention. 'I'll be as brief as I can,' she added. 'Look at it this way: our genes determine the hardware. By that I mean our physical capabilities, our structural potential. That is why some people are more physically suited to some activities than others. We have a capacity for achieving certain things depending on our physical constructs; just like machines, computers and robots, are designed to handle different applications to varying degrees depending on requirements.

'So, that's how it is with humans and how we are assembled genetically: our genes determine the hard drive, the potential speed of the processor, the monitor, the size and flexibility of the whole unit. But the system is blank, and needs to be loaded with software. And from the moment of birth we are fed an endless supply of information and advice, all programming our human machine. We are conditioned by our environment, until at one point we begin to develop the ability to think for ourselves. At some point we should be able to decipher, evaluate, and catalogue all that information. But not all of us are fed enough of the right information. And many of us choose, out of confusion and out of convenience, to ignore what is available to us. It is an endless task keeping the information on our hard drive in order and as compressed as possible in order to keep the whole system running smoothly.' She paused again. 'Is this boring you?'

'No, not at all – I guess I'm just wondering about our seamstress, whether we've lost her on the way.'

'Yes, and her male friend too,' she said playfully. 'Diversions are all part of the complexity of storytelling, that's what I'm about to explain to you.'

‘I’m all yours.’

‘Okay, where was I – yes. Unfortunately, one of the major problems is that unlike a computer or robot, we can never really scrub the hard drive clean and start again. Or can we? Some people freeze up completely, and need rebooting. Some never reboot, too many damaged sectors. And there are those that go completely haywire and destroy everything around them. Sometimes we can mend with patches or new components, repairing or removing the bits that are causing problems. I’ve been trying to scrub my hard-drive; at least clean it up a bit.’

‘I think you underestimate human achievement. And don’t underestimate the potential of computers. I’ve seen what they can do.’

‘Don’t get too carried away with computers, Scribe. They are certainly a wonderful tool, created by some outstanding minds, but they are just a tool, nothing more. They have led to one fascinating discovery though, something that their inventors are somewhat perplexed about, even a little embarrassed about.’

‘And what is that?’

‘It has to do with the difficulty science has with understanding our world. Scientific logic works well to give indications of what is physically happening around us most of the time and why it is happening. And it works extremely well after the fact. But it can’t predict the future very well, and it has trouble analysing some very natural, instinctual, and of course very human concepts. Basic metaphysical questions about our world and our place in it are just not graphable.’

‘So, when these great scientific minds began creating software and tasks for their machines to compute and carry out, they thought they were starting at the difficult end by working with concepts of a mathematical kind. They believed that once the mathematical aspect was conquered everything else would be a piece of cake, that the

doors would literally fly open inviting them into an endlessly effortless infinity. They thought they were working from the top down – with mathematical calculations, planning the affairs of multimillion dollar companies, keeping tabs on the entire inhabitants of a country, running factories and farms, co-ordinating wars, and mastering games like chess – and that to imitate basic, everyday, human activities and functions would easily follow.

‘Well, they got quite a shock. What they thought to be the most basic, proved to be the most complex. In fact, the more common they thought an activity was, the more creative and elusive it turned out to be. And you know what, even though they have struggled through most of the challenges, and at least come close to success, there is one activity that is still causing their mathematical minds constant grief – something that even a child can do. It is one of the earliest human concepts, seemingly simple because we take it for granted, yet the most creative of all human activities – storytelling. Even a small child can understand and make up their own stories. But it will, without doubt, be the last achievement attained by a machine. Do you know why?’

‘I have a good idea.’

‘It’s the most simple and natural of all human activities, yet it is highly complex. Complex because it requires a vast diversity of human attributes. A story is elaborate, in form and substance. It involves planning. It is mathematical, scientific, philosophical, psychological, and extremely social. It is both the creator and the creation of language. It speaks of emotions.’

I have been lying on my bed in the darkness for many hours, half awake half asleep. Daybreak is nearing. I have been thinking about my ancestral ties, who I am, and how I became the man that I am. I used to believe that my surroundings played a major role in

determining me, how I acted, how I reacted, how I felt about the world around me. I thought that human beings were born like a fragile eggshell, pure and untouched. Children are wrapped in cotton wool for protection; otherwise they develop flaws, may be struck by flying debris from the fantastic but absurd construction that multiplies around them with an irrational urgency, and may crack. We are created as blanks, I believed, ready to be formed, waiting to be filled in, to be conditioned.

Yes, if we give in, we are conditioned; but if we carry on the work of our eternal ancestors, the form, like an ancient tree, continues to take shape. Then there is 28, seemingly lumped together as a pile of offcuts; yet she is held together more strongly, and with greater flexibility and resilience than any of us. How she does it, without screws and glue, I am not sure. You can look for faults, or try to imagine tiny fissures appearing in her finish. But they close over before you're certain of what you've seen. She believes she is all flaws, a complete mess. We laughed one day when she concluded, 'At least that makes me perfect in one way, a complete mess.'

I'm smiling now as I vaguely recall a moment in my childhood. I created a lot of laughter, and a hug or two from my mother and aunties. My grandfather, I think, was standing over me as I played on the floor. 'Tell me,' he asked smiling, 'which came first: the chicken or the egg?' 'The chicken,' I replied without hesitation, 'otherwise there would be no one to look after the chick when it hatched.' How certain I was at that age!

24 a hint of affection

I don't think I have mentioned anything about counselling yet. We went again today, for the second time, at three in the afternoon – to discuss marriage, divorce, reconciliation. The two mediators, one male, one female, calmly ask questions in turn. They seat us on a couch, together, while they are in front, each on a chair, higher up. Not only do I feel a bit like a child, but the seat of the couch dips in the middle, causing X and me to lean inwards. It is difficult to sit without having to touch shoulders. I found that as we talked we gradually drew closer to each other. Maybe it is an integral part of the process, a deliberate attempt to bring couples closer together.

I'm not really sure why we went. Although, perhaps I have a better idea than X does, even though it was her idea to go in the first place. It will be the second and last time we go. That is also her decision. She had the wild belief that a mediator would agree with her accusations, proving what an inadequate husband and father I've been. From the moment we sat, she tried to ridicule me, paying particular attention to gaining the sympathy of the female counsellor – almost expecting it! She kept raising her voice

and standing and waving her arms about. The last thing the counsellors were there for was to take sides, but the more she pranced around the room, spitting accusations at me and forcing attention on herself, the more it seemed to her that they were supporting me. She showed her true colours and all was revealed. My part was a very small one. I stayed calm. The only person to become irate was X, and that was her mistake. Usually she relies on drawing her opponent down into the mud-pit. Today, she was faced with three calm individuals, trying to help her. At one point I thought her frustration might get out of hand. She really felt that it was three against one. And no one was at all interested in her cheap and nasty ridicule. All I can say is she made a fool of herself. I genuinely felt sorry for her.

‘You seem quite upset at the moment,’ the female counsellor said. ‘What do you want right now?’

Pointing at me, stiffening in her seat, ‘Him. I want him out of my life.’

‘But he is out of your life, from what we can see. Just as you wanted.’ Silence from X. ‘And he’s prepared to work towards coming to a reasonable agreement between the two of you and your child. Isn’t that what you both want?’

‘He’s fooling you. Can’t you see that?’ And then followed the usual string of verbal abuse and the list of inadequacies I am supposedly guilty of, a list of crimes that I have cleverly managed to conceal from the rest of the world. The funniest part of it is how in the same breath I can be accused of not wanting children, being a lousy father, and being a lazy and selfish arsehole, while being criticized for spending more time with our son than her, always acting the proud father and having to be involved in everything Andre does, and spending too much time at work. I never knew whether to work hard or stay at home. Because of all that I was always careful not to let her see Andre and me

having too much fun. And although I regret behaving in that way, in many ways I still do.

Outside in the car park, she said we should go for a drink. She was thinking only of wine or beer and somebody to drink with, even if it was somebody whose life she would like to destroy. I was thinking of how I needed to get away as fast as possible, before I exploded. With her it always ends in a no-win, no-way-out, situation. You either have to crawl into a hole and die or else erupt. Either way, so much energy is drained out of you. The hole was always the better option. She rarely gave in the other way. A slugging match of verbal abuse only fuelled her rage.

She rung me that night. She'd been to a bar; I had been to the hospital after a long walk.

'You were all ganging up against me. You had them fooled into believing your 'nice little boy' routine.'

I asked her why she was still doing all this.

'Doing what? You make me like this. It's you that causes it all.'

I asked why, after such a trauma for Andre and for all of us, and now with such excitement and joy, she couldn't just once think of somebody else besides herself. She bellowed down the phone and finally hung up after I asked why she has progressively been seeing less and less of Andre.

28 listened, I had to tell someone. I also mentioned that over the years X had shown some good qualities as well as some incredibly nasty ones. She fluctuated dramatically between caring and being bitterly detached.

'For reasons I will never know,' I said, 'she has found it difficult to communicate her feelings – to me, to Andre, to others. I wish she could put that behind her.'

‘I don’t think she can - not with you, not at the moment.’

‘I promised myself not to dwell on all this. I’m sorry. I expect too much from you. I shouldn’t.’

With the tip of a pencil she pushed the brim of the floppy beret she was wearing. ‘As long as you’re not just trying to impress me.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Nothing, let it go.’ She scratched a few lines in a sketchbook on her lap. I couldn’t see what she was drawing

I pressured her for an answer.

‘Some people enjoy dramatic conflict, that’s all. They think it will show how good they are. But honestly, let it go, I meant nothing.’

‘I keep promising myself not to talk about her or let her get to me. I don’t even want to think about her.’

‘That wouldn’t be easy.’

‘If I wanted to impress you I’d find another way. I wouldn’t mention any of this.’

She nodded without looking up from what she was drawing. ‘It wasn’t my intention to accuse you.’ Then, as she slowly raised her head, her face became fully exposed. An innocent expression, like a child, with her hair tucked under her hat. It was a look of apology. Her hands became limp and a warm smile softly appeared, asking for forgiveness. ‘What will you do when Andre fully recovers and returns to his mother?’

‘I haven’t thought about it.’

‘Maybe you should.’

‘Hopefully things will settle down.’

‘For a while.’

‘I worry about that. Just as it all starts looking good and I relax, BAM!’

‘Tell me, do you know what you really want right now?’

‘I think I do. What do *you* want?’

‘Me? I want to get out of here. Go back to being normal.’

‘What’s stopping you?’

‘Nothing actually. I’ve even started packing my bags.’ I looked around the room, expecting to see her suitcase half packed. She waved her hand, to catch my attention.

‘Metaphorically speaking, of course. I haven’t got much to take with me anyway.’ We both laughed. ‘Your turn. What do *you* want?’

I thought for a moment. ‘I want everyone to be happy.’

‘Everyone! Including you?’

‘Naturally.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘What are you suggesting?’

‘Nothing. It’s just that—’

‘It’s just that, what?’

‘It’s just that sometimes we have to look after ourselves – look after ourselves first. Sometimes we do more harm than good by always trying to keep the peace. I think you know what I mean.’

‘I know what you mean, but that still doesn’t guarantee happiness?’

‘I think it does, most of the time. Happiness never lasts long when it isn’t complete, not for me anyway. I think happiness happens when we are satisfied with ourselves, both for who we are and in the way we treat others. Happiness is when we can look in the mirror, smile, and say “I’m proud to be me.” Don’t you agree?’

‘I guess so.’

‘You guess so?’

‘Yeah, I guess so. I have to think about it for a while to be absolutely certain.’

‘But right now you’re only guessing.’

‘What’s wrong with that? Don’t you ever guess?’

‘Oh, without a doubt; guessing is what I do best.’

‘Really?’ I was in the mood to challenge her. ‘And what do you guess about?’

‘Everything that I’m not absolutely sure of. Which is just about everything.’

‘And how do you go about it?’

‘How do I guess?’

‘Yeah, what do you do?’

‘I just make a guess.’ She scratched under her hat with the pencil. ‘You want the whole process, don’t you? I can tell by that look on your face.’

‘What look?’

‘That tell me all, sort of persistent look.’

‘So, tell me all.’

‘I don’t think about it too much. That’s the key. I pick any old notion that comes to mind, without hesitation, without worrying about whether I’m following the right path or not.’

‘Then what happens?’

‘Well, I just keep on with the idea, keep asking questions. Sometimes I have to wait until the options present themselves, and then sometimes they come quite suddenly and fast paced, almost too quick to handle. One thing leads to another and eventually I get to where I need to go. If I need to force it, I keep fossicking about with my nose buried deep, that gets results too. But everything starts out as a guess. Perseverance gives it substance.’

‘Can you guess what I’m thinking?’

‘I’m not a mind reader.’ She moved her hands and fingers like a magician casting a spell. ‘But, most of the time I have a pretty good idea of what’s going on in a person’s mind.’

‘Tell me what I’m thinking then.’

‘Are you challenging me?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘Very well then.’ She said, scrutinising me intensely. ‘It probably has something to do with what we were talking about earlier, about happiness.’ She was eager for a response from me.

I shrugged my shoulders. ‘Maybe.’

‘Freedom,’ she continued. ‘You are wondering how you will ever be free of all the responsibilities that bind you to the things and to the people that you no longer want to be associated with.’ She paused, breathed deeply to fill her lungs fully, and, with open palms facing up, waited for an answer, or at least a clue. ‘You’re not going to help me, are you?’

‘Why should I?’

‘Because that’s how it’s done.’

‘Oh really? Sorry. Maybe it’s time to change the rules.’

She grinned. ‘Maybe I’m too close to the truth. You seem a little edgy.’ I fidgeted, but not from nervousness. ‘Yes, I think I’m on to something.’ She clapped her hands together in delight, surprising herself with the loud sound her hands made. I think we both jumped for a second, then laughed. ‘You know, probably the single most important thing any of us wants in life is freedom. But we can never really have it.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because of one thing – death. Death is always with us, hanging about just over our shoulders. We fear it constantly. And we fear it in many ways: death of a friend, death of a lover, death of a child, a sister, even death of a job or of a day gone by.’

She stopped, became quiet, and repeated the words ‘death of a sister.’ I waited without questioning. Something disturbed her, and the look on her face, a strange ‘please don’t say anything to me for a moment’ sort of look, concerned me. She eventually continued, in a much softer tone. ‘You and I have talked a lot about happiness, in one way or another. And although freedom gives us the greatest happiness of all, I really want to know what is at the bottom of it. What is it really? We are so afraid of death, but ironically, death gives us freedom.’

‘But what sort of freedom?’

‘Yes, what sort of freedom. Maybe there is no complete freedom.’

She murmured a few words that sounded like a child praying. I didn’t hear them fully – death, love, childhood, sister – I think.

‘The only way to be happy is to accept the inevitability of death. But by that I don’t mean to give in to it. No. What I mean is to do exactly the opposite – to live. So when the time comes to leave your earthly pleasures behind there is little left, just an empty shell. They won’t need to cremate me. I will just crumble to dust like dry lizard’s skin. That is the only way to win this game. That is what is meant by cheating death.’

‘I like your theory, but, in terms of what I was thinking, you couldn’t be further from the truth. I wasn’t thinking about freedom, or death, at all. Although, at first I thought you were on the right track. In many ways what I was thinking about is the complete opposite. What I had on my mind was commitment, and friendship, and getting close to other people.’

‘Oh well,’ she shrugged, ‘it was just a guess.’

‘Yes. Just a guess.’

‘Keeping in mind, of course, if you had allowed me to finish I would have been able to show you how closely related the two concepts of commitment and freedom actually are. I could have shown that through commitment to others we learn respect, for all things, and from that we are able to respect and commit more fully to ourselves, thereby enabling greater freedom in our pursuits, in our beliefs, and in our relationships. But never mind all that now.’ She was clearly pleased with herself.

After watching her sketch for some time and saying very little, I leaned forward in my chair. ‘I’m not sure how to say this, but you make me very happy.’

‘Do I? Thank you.’

‘Don’t you think we get along very well?’

‘Yes, very well.’

‘I’ve been thinking that we should get to know each other better.’

‘Better? Better than what?’

‘Well, I’m not sure. You know! Better than now. Perhaps spend more time together, do things outside of this place when our lives get back to normal.’

‘You want more. We all want more. That means somebody or something has to give.’

‘Not a good question, huh? Not at a good time.’

‘It’s just that you already know about all there is to know about me, or at least all there is to the portfolio of me – that dossier you are compiling. How much more could you possibly want to know?’

I felt that I was beginning to make a fool of myself. ‘Everything, I want to know everything about you.’

‘Everything? That’s too much. And after a while it just gets boring – no mystery.’

‘Are you afraid to let me know who you really are?’

‘Now I understand, you want to know my identity. You are too late, by a whisker. I have decided that searching for identities is what we do when we’re bored. I came to that decision only a moment ago. It is a compulsion, looking for secrets, magic keys, but the search always leads to a dead end. We should know better than to waste time on dead ends.’

She shifted; folded her sketchbook closed; dropped it to the ground with a slap; the pencil soon followed. She stood up, walked to the side wall, and slid the palm of her hand lightly over the roughened surface. ‘What do they call this raised, bumpy finish?’

‘Textured,’ I replied. She raised an eyebrow, looking like a renaissance artist. She was quite a picture in her hospital gown and beret.

‘No, not that, another word, with a great, Latin or Yiddish, sound.’

Only a few names, like rendered and bagged, came to mind.

‘No, no, no. Not any of those. Think, Scribe! There’s another.’

‘Roughcast,’ I said feebly, trying to appease her excitement.

‘Um, it’s coming to me. Shteck, shtook, shtookie, shtooko! That’s it: shtooko.’

‘Stucco, I think you mean to say. Pronounced like ‘stuck’ with an ‘O’ on the end.’

I tried to explain that I thought stucco was like rendering, simply the technique of building up a few layers of a mortar mix over the wall, with the texturing done at the end, but she was happy to ignore me, content with her own imagined interpretation that entailed some mysteriously meticulous process.

‘Shtooko,’ she kept repeating, fondling the wall.

She pressed her cheek to the surface, like someone listening for a heartbeat or a tiny sound. And then becoming more intimate, like a parent with a child, or two lovers, affectionately cheek to cheek, she moved her face in small circles.

I looked at the sketchbook on the floor and again at the way she was dressed, so picturesque. ‘Do you paint?’ I asked.

‘Me?’ she purred. ‘No, not me. My little sister, she is the artist. I can’t paint, or draw, at all. Books, I like books.’ She continued rolling against the wall for a moment longer then stopped, glancing at me over her shoulder. ‘You already know that I’m living in the fictitious, Scribe. You are too now; you’re part of it. We make it up as we go along, the options are endless, like these little bumps on the wall. My sister and I made many things up when we were young, we still do.’ She hesitated. ‘I still do, at least. Our mother scoffed and scolded us. Screamed and beat us. “Get real,” she liked to say. She hated our games, resented our imagination. She criticised anything that had to do with creativity. I don’t ever remember her finding pleasure in music or in a painting, not anything that we had anything to do with anyway. And I don’t think she ever read for pleasure, certainly not a novel. She hated fiction.’

28 leant back against the wall, began moving again, gently rotating her shoulders and moving her head from side to side. Pressing herself into the textured finish, she immersed herself in the wall, feeling it, understanding it. For a moment the sensuousness of her movements gave life to the bumps, to the wall, to the room – as if her velvet touch was causing all inanimate objects to return her caresses.

‘We oscillate between two extremes, between countless fictions and endless realities. In that way we are ourselves, but never ourselves. We are many selves. In the fictitious, we learn about our selves. But if there is one moment when we are truly being

ourselves, it is neither in the fictitious nor in the real; it is in the in-between. When we are floating between the two, that is when we are who we truly are. We are movement.'

Her words, her motion, were seductive – capable of causing the room and everything in it to float. I listened as her words flowed.

'There is a great sense of freedom in the fictitious, a lot of healing goes on there. But just as the waves of the fictitious can be soothing, the real can be treacherous. The real is where you get your hands dirty. Of course, one without the other is incomplete, and you can't get stuck in either one for too long or you start to decompose. Movement, ebb and flow, movement is essential.'

If I close my eyes, I can still see her moving against the textured wall in her room, her body becoming fluid like the waves that mix with the shore. I also see Andre, and remember his words today, nothing important was said, just small-talk and fun, but how wonderful those simple words are – even the humorous and vague notions that come out oddly and confused as he recovers. One thing he said in particular interests me, though, and leaves me with the question, who is the Almond Princess? I am convinced that she is part of a dream or a fantasy, especially considering what he has been through, but it is intriguing. He claims that someone came to him, on more than one occasion. She held his hand, spoke to him like a princess, telling him stories, and then leaving almonds for him, for when he awoke. He said that he felt himself awakening with every story – wanting to hear more and wanting to be a part of the story.

I think he was slightly delirious; it was at the end of a long day. Let him have his fantasy. Perhaps his princess is the young school friend who came with their teacher and the other two students when he was still in a coma. She is the same girl, Emily, who sent a card, and has phoned, and is eager to visit him again as soon as Andre is well enough.

25 precursor to love

I have become very fond of 28, more than I probably should, or need to, at this time in my life. But when *is* the right time. Love for another human being has no method, no timetable. 28 would be glad to hear me say that, certainly she could not dispute it. And she could not argue with me wanting to take destiny in my hands and direct my own course, especially when my instincts are pointing me in that direction.

A novel I read, many years ago, was about a very intimate, somewhat erotic and sensual, yet touching, story of a man whose partner becomes extremely ill with an incurable cancer. I can't recall the name of the author. I think the book was titled 'Immutable Sands' or something like that. I wish I could remember for certain, but that it is not so important at the moment. In the story, a woman, who the man befriends during the ordeal with his wife, becomes sexually attracted to him. Her advances, although sincere, are rejected by the man. After much deliberation and desperation, and even hope, he challenges the woman to give him one good reason why he should engage in a sexual relationship with her under his present situation. If she can come up with a

satisfactory answer to appease his doubts, he promises that he will become her lover. It turns into a psychological game of seduction as the novel explores, through the woman's intellectual and physical advances, the emotional and moral connection, not only between the two, but between all concerned.

I told 28 the outline of the story and asked her, 'If you were in the position of the woman, what would you do to convince the man?'

'Supposing I got myself into that position, although I think I would not, but let's assume that I did, I would do nothing. Once my intentions were clear, I would wait for him to come to me.'

She hit precisely on the point of the novel. I told her that all the woman's attempts to win the man over, by way of justification and morality and individual needs, only served to push him further away from her. The harder she tried, the greater the barriers became, forming an ever widening distance between them. Then I said, 'Interestingly, no one, that I have asked that question of, has ever answered as you have.'

She had one final point to make on the subject. 'That may be so, but I think you are focusing too much on the role of the woman, and you have underestimated my reason for suggesting how I would behave. What would be more to the point, if it were me, would be to see it as a way of judging him. I would be very interested in seeing how he responded. It would tell me all I needed to know about him.'

As we continued, for hours, I came to believe that the tingle of romance that I have been feeling between us was very real and very strong. Thinking back, 28, always one step ahead, has sensed it well before me – the way she has answered certain questions and avoided others, her movements, and her excitement at seeing me. I only

hope I am reading the signs correctly – we have talked so much about many things with so many dramatic shifts.

28 reached to the small drawer beside her bed. ‘If something was so terrible that it never went away, could it drive you to insanity?’

‘I don’t see why not. It happens.’

She took a half full, crumpled paper bag, dropped it in her lap, twisted further around and pushed the drawer closed with her toes.

‘Can we really criticise anyone who ends their life? Do we have the right to judge?’

I hadn’t thought about it often enough, and wasn’t really in the mood at that moment to do so, but out of politeness I was brief, yet honest.

‘Killing yourself also affects others, that is always a shame. We can never know what a person, who does that, goes through. And if they are someone special to us, someone we admire or love, it must be devastating.’

‘Do you think the way a person’s life ends affects our memory of them? Would it change all the things they did and said while they were alive? Would it change their image – the myth that was them?’

‘It is nearly impossible not to. Did you know someone close to you that committed suicide?’

She began eating nuts from her paper bag. She offered me some. ‘Please, take one, they’re almonds.’ I stood and reached into the bag. ‘Take more,’ she urged, pushing the bag firmly onto my hand.

I sat opposite again. She hadn’t answered my question. It was not the sort of question to ask twice. ‘Nice almonds,’ I said, ‘Fresh.’ It was at that moment, as she

placed an almond between her teeth, and as I glanced from her mouth to the bedside drawer where the bag had come from, that I realised there must be a connection – a connection between 28 and the almonds that had been gradually piling up beside Andre’s bed.

‘So it’s you,’ I declared triumphantly, yet surprised. She admitted to leaving the almonds. The more I thought about it the less surprised I was; it all fell into place. I told her that I had been wondering for weeks who had been leaving almonds. ‘So it is not his friend from school. You are the Almond Princess.’

‘You have found out. I didn’t know how to tell you. Or more precisely, *when* to tell you. Now you have saved me the trouble.’

‘Andre has saved us both the trouble.’

Self-conscious, she looked away for a moment. ‘So, he said “Princess” to you.’

‘Yes, “The Almond Princess.”’

‘Oh dear.’

‘It’s okay, I don’t have a problem with it.’

‘It makes me sound like a character in a fairytale.’

‘You are in many ways.’

‘Oh?’

‘Sorry, not in a flimsy way. In a magical and— ’

‘I know what you mean.’

‘I can’t believe he was telling the truth, and I can’t believe it was you. But it all makes sense now. So, is there anyone else you’ve met that you haven’t told me about?’

28’s face turned scarlet. ‘Oh dear! As a matter of fact . . .’

‘I was only joking, but it looks like there is something else you have to tell me.’

‘I, I bumped into, you know who, once or twice.’

‘My X?’

‘Yes. Only briefly. She didn’t even ask who I was. We just, said a few words to each other, that’s all.’

‘So you spoke?’

‘Nothing much really, just small talk.’

‘And she wasn’t rude to you?’

‘On the contrary, she was quite pleasant.’

I fidgeted in my chair and coughed. ‘Quite pleasant?’

‘Don’t worry, I saw through her façade.’

‘Any other secrets you have to tell me?’

‘Not that I can think of. I have a question though?’

‘Fire away.’

‘Are you two actually divorced?’

‘What! Yes, we are. Although it was actually quite difficult. I’ll never forget it. She was very strange back then. I had to get the papers served on her. Why do you ask?’

‘I think she wants you back.’

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. ‘She hates me!’

‘Obviously not as much as you think.’

‘You’re crazy.’

‘We already know that.’ We laughed, until she cut the laughter short. ‘I’ve seen love come in many ways. Love can be passion. Love can be great friendship. Love can be dangerous ownership. Maybe she wants you back so she can throw you out again.’

‘Maybe she does. Maybe she misses me like a boxer misses his favourite punching bag. But let’s leave that for now. I’m glad the two of you hit it off so well, but,

please, tell me more about Andre. He said he spoke with the Almond Princess. What happened?’

‘You have to understand that I wasn’t myself. I hope you’re not angry.’

‘How could I be angry. How many times did you visit him?’ She didn’t answer.

‘You visited him often, didn’t you?’

‘Yes. I just sat and watched and listened. The way my mind was then, I swear, I could see and hear things that I couldn’t have before and can’t now.’

‘I think you helped him. I think you have a lot more to tell me.’

‘I’ll tell you what happened, but there is nothing special about what I did.’

I nodded and waited until she was ready to continue.

‘You yourself gave me the idea, when you mentioned Andre’s cheeks turning red. I knew that somehow he was wanting to be back in this world, and was very much trying to respond. So I visited him regularly, talking to him softly, and occasionally I placed an almond on his forehead, just for fun. He nearly giggled several times; he was trying to break free. I realised that he was not far away, just in another place. He had left our world, perhaps he didn’t care for our ways, not for the time being. He had entered another space; like we all do when we dream, or daydream, or drift off into a world of fantasy. Maybe he needed to work things out, and maybe, in many ways, he was letting others around him work things out.

‘As soon as I realised that his playful side was reacting, a side of him that was easy to reach, I knew I could get to what it was that held him in his state. I asked questions everyday, watching his responses carefully – a slight twitch of a finger, reddening cheeks, the blink of an eye, or the wiggle of toes under the sheets. Eventually I asked him – and you’re not going to like this, Scribe, but I think you’re ready for it – eventually I asked him, ‘Why do you hate your mother and father?’ And before you get

excited, we all know that he loves you both, as much as it is possible for any son to love his parents. But I thought that maybe it is the separation, between you and him and between you and X, that he hates and doesn't understand.' 28's eyes widened. 'Are you okay, and calm? I know you love him and he loves you, there is no doubt.'

I was attentive and not at all hurt. When she was satisfied with that, she continued.

'Anyway, he twitched like I had never seen him twitch before, but 'enough is enough' I thought, and I left it at that for the time being. I merely kissed his soft cheeks, and his beautiful lips – I hope you don't mind – and departed, leaving two almonds for him as usual, in case he awakened. I felt I was close, very close, but there was still something more going on in his other world that was keeping him there. It took a few days, but one morning it dawned on me, and I promised myself that I would have one last try at reviving him before I explained everything to you. By the way, remember when you saw me in the lift that day?' I nodded. 'Well , that's who I was on my way to visit when I literally ran into you. Anyway, back to what I need to tell you; it is vital, for all of us. What I realised, and it is something that I have been trying in my own way to show you for a few days now—' She stopped. 'Perhaps it's better if I just tell you what I said to him. "Andre, I whispered to him. Why do you want to die?" And, you may not believe me, but he spoke to me, "No, no. I don't want to," he said. I continued very carefully. "Andre, your mother and your father love you, they don't want you to die. You should be careful with what you do, careful with those power-tools. You know Andre, it is not your fault that your mother and father are not together."

'And Scribe, I tell you, that boy sat up and smiled, as if he'd never been in a coma at all. I swear. It was not for long, but he was fully awake and looked about the room. I was afraid at first, really taken aback. Perhaps I should have called a nurse, but

the way your boy smiled at me, all I could do was hug him. He virtually went straight back to sleep in my arms. As I laid his head on the pillow, I whispered to him, “Your daddy will be in to see you soon. Don’t wait too long to tell him that you love him.” I have never experienced anything as powerful and emotional as that in my life.’ 28 began to cry, gentle tears slowly moved down her cheeks. ‘I will never forget it, Scribe. We, should never forget.’

Andre is going home in two or three days. I have been working furiously on his desk, trying to get it finished. It is looking good. I will have it in his room at his mother’s house in time for his arrival. The doctors say he will recover even faster if he is at home. He will need to make daily, then twice weekly, contact with a member of staff or a registered nurse for a while. I haven’t thought about arrangements to see him. It will be awkward, but something will be sorted out.

26 falling in

28~~

I find the concept of falling, a fascinating one. The verb, fall, is explicit in its indication of a drop – a fall from grace, to fall sick, to fall victim. We say a woman falls pregnant instead of she becomes pregnant, or, better still, she rises to pregnancy. Why? It's derogatory, has a sense of something evil, of impending doom. Maybe we should look at it more for what it is, an act of giving and creating.

A girl slammed into me, rushing somewhere. I was steadily ascending, getting ready for my own fall, she burst out through a door, coming from inside. Maybe the lifts were full or broken down, but she didn't apologise, didn't give a damn. Who cares? It doesn't bother me any more to know that something is happening on the inside and I'm not invited. What floor was I on? Yes, the twenty-sixth. Keep climbing, girl. Getting dizzy, getting ready, getting close now.

My family didn't invite me, they disowned me. For me, they had become an alien tribe; their world was a world in its own right. I clung proudly to my independence.

They resented the fact that I didn't toe the line, play the game by their rules. They needed their sorrow, their dependence on one another. They needed to be victims in a terrible world, together. I became one of their scapegoats, an object of blame for their guilt, so they could be free of blame, and free of guilt. Every time I showed them a way out of their misery I was threatening to take away the very thing that they clung to. So I was always an outsider. I grew more alienated until late in my twenty-sixth year I found a home, a place, part of a group, a group on the outside, a group that might accept me.

I found a way in, and found a relationship. She said she understood me and promised to help me. She had all the answers, and she was convincing. But right from the beginning she had a certain way of looking at me, always the same way, like men look at you when you first walk into a room, up and down, waiting for you to bend over. Before long I realised I was just a skirt hanging on a clothes rack for her – a costume for certain occasions, depending on her mood.

It's easy for another woman to arouse you sexually, they know what to do, but somehow that's cheating. She was like that girl on the twenty-sixth floor, bumping, and always in a hurry. I was just in her way most of the time. We were both twenty-six, but I was lost while she was found. She enjoyed hating men. And she did what she did without question. I envied that.

Was there love between us? Pleasure maybe, but not love. No exploration, no discourse, no tenderness. She knew how to seduce a woman, what another woman liked, what felt good. But it was all too clinical. She was always too busy getting-off herself. She was, in that way, worse than the worst man. I was both an object to satisfy her desire and a nuisance.~~

I was intrigued, but nervous. 28 was doing what she often did, so well. She was preempting what was on my mind. I felt the moment for making my intentions clear slipping away with every word that she spoke. I was sure that she was trying to put me off, trying to make me reject her. Or was she just telling me everything to test me, to leave it up to me to decide what I wanted to do. Either way I was hooked.

I was about to intervene, to take charge of the situation, when she jumped, a mighty leap like a frog, onto her feet from the bed and sprang onto the chair. She was literally in full flight today, and her eyes were fiery. I had no choice but to let her continue.

‘I’ve thought a lot about the ways in which we communicate: a gesture, a glance, a word or two.’ She slid the fingers of her right hand along the back of her left arm and shivered slightly. ‘And there are many other ways, and endless variations and combinations to them all. A simple touch for instance, can mean so many different things. My twenty-six year old touched me. She had a lesbian touch. A touch that bound us like a secret between two friends. We were eager to be alone to share in our private seduction.’

As she confessed more, I listened intently, without interrupting. I let the story come to me. 28 was now standing on the seat of the chair looking down, balancing with her arms outstretched at her sides, holding them out for as long as she could.

28~~

That was at first. Later even that was shown to be mechanical. ‘That is how I’ve touched every lover; no other woman has complained,’ she would say. My needs and my body were of no concern to her, she did only what was necessary to get the response and attention she wanted. Not only in love-making, but in all aspects of our lives together, if

I liked a certain thing she would ignore it in preference of her assured format. She would excite you, and give you just enough attention to keep you interested. I was a servant, running after her boot heels. She wanted to be praised and admired and congratulated. She believed that everything that went right in my life was due to her wisdom and guidance, and that everything that went wrong in *her* life or between us was caused by my betrayal or inadequacies. I couldn't budge without facing abuse and wild, absurd accusations. Her sadistic determination to manipulate and belittle me became all I could see of her, poisoning the image of a woman that I thought I could love. Even during lovemaking she wanted control, and instructed, and criticised.

But I have said enough for now. Thank you for listening. I also say these things for you, not just for me. I think you understand what I am saying, Scribe. Have you not been through all that yourself, perhaps many times? The only problem is if we keep going back for more of the same treatment – not good to keep going back for more of the same.~~

Many things went through my mind as I listened. How could any sensible person fall in love with 28. Her demeanour is radical, to say the least. And where does she fit in. I laughed to myself: if we were out together, would she suddenly behave strangely without warning, as she so often does, at a restaurant perhaps, or in front of friends? She has no name, no ordinary name, because she is a force, a flow of energy, not a physical being. She is ever watchful and full of irony. She reminds me of a caged bird that has tasted freedom and is no longer able to trust the hand that spreads the seed. When she has been free, she has travelled to distant horizons and mixed with wild creatures, and although I sit with her and she is in front of me, I wonder whether she ever really returned from her travels. Every time, another little piece stays behind.

But who am I to judge? All I ask is simply to know something normal about her: what she does for pleasure, for instance, or what foods she enjoys. I have only ever seen her eating nuts and seeds and fruit. What clothes does she really wear? What music appeals to her? Does she like sport? And what job does she do? There is no one for me to ask. Nowhere for me to inquire. The grey walls of the hospital are my only resource. The staff think I'm her brother. Did she plan it that way?

I know nothing of substance about her, yet I think I am in love with her – I know I am in love with her. And I want to spend time with her, finding out who she really is. Andre will be leaving soon, it has been confirmed, in two days, on Friday. He will have been in hospital for a month. I will have no real purpose to go back after that, yet I know I will be drawn. If I tell 28 how I feel, what have I got to lose?

At that moment a nurse came in to do her final check for the night, temperature and such things. As she filled in information, asked questions, and generally made conversation, I glanced at 28's medical records. They had always been in the room, at the head end of her bed, but I hadn't looked. I didn't feel it was appropriate, and, knowing 28, it would have been out of bounds. I had given up trying to find out her real name long ago, but, suddenly, there it was, right in front of me. Although I saw it, I deliberately looked away without letting the name register. Why? I'm not sure. It would have been an invasion of privacy. Maybe it would have destroyed the magic. But then the nurse's words struck me, something she was saying, something I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed before. She kept using the title of Mrs when she spoke to 28. Marriage? A husband? Even a child? Maybe she is divorced! Maybe it is nothing at all!

'Don't keep your sister up too late,' the nurse said, almost singing, as she left.

I turned to 28. 'Once, when I came in earlier than usual, you had guests, they were just leaving, a man and two children, a boy and a girl I think.'

‘Yes. They have nothing to do with this, with 28 and what happens in here.’

‘Are they related to you in some way? Are they your sister’s family?’

‘You might say that.’ She stood up looked into the mirror and poured a glass of water from the jug. ‘There is so much you don’t understand, and it is too late to tell you now. And probably not important anyway.’

I asked what I had been thinking for some time. ‘Your sister’s dead, isn’t she?’

‘She’s dead, I’m dead, we’re all dead. It’s all very complicated, yet very simple too. Sometimes it is just better to let things be, Scribe.’

‘Will you tell me what happened?’

At first she looked intent on resisting, then, for a moment, she softened. ‘You really want to know, don’t you? But you have to understand that even I’m not sure if I know what happened. Not everything, anyway.’

‘You promised me once, on the twentieth floor, my twentieth visit—’

‘So you’ve been keeping count!’

‘How can I not. What you said that day was that you would talk to me when you’d sorted everything out. Are you still sorting?’

‘Sorting? Maybe I am. First, I want you to answer a question for me, if you can!’

Her gaze at that moment reached it’s most brilliant. Our eyes were locked in a fiery exchange, nothing else existed. She penetrated my exterior shell as I remained paralysed in a sort of sublime agony. ‘Let go,’ my soul pleaded. But it was too late. It was as if she had reached out, ripped my eyes from their sockets, and, gripping them in the palms of her hands, forced me to take a hard long look at myself. Servility is all that remained. Is there any hope for me, any sanity. I am falling, falling for 28. And I am out of control.

‘Why, Scribe, why would a man continue to have a sexual relationship with a girl if he knew she was his daughter?’

It was a question I certainly wasn’t expecting. ‘I don’t know.’

She almost pleaded, ‘He couldn’t have known, could he?’

‘I don’t know. And it’s not fair to ask me.’

She raised her voice. ‘Why is it not fair?’

‘Because, because I don’t know enough about what happened, about what you’re asking. I can’t judge.’

‘What *can* you judge then?’

‘I don’t know!’

‘Can’t you judge the fact that a father slept with his daughter? Can’t you judge the crime he committed in making her love him – and she did love him, more than humanly possible? Can’t you judge the fact that because of him, she could never love again? And can’t you see, that even if he’s guilty of none of that, then he’s still guilty of the most abhorrent of all crimes – the crime of silence, the silence that came afterwards and was worse than any other crime to endure? Why couldn’t he just talk?’

I was out of my depth. ‘I don’t know. Sometimes men just can’t face up to things like that, not in the way we expect them to.’

She moved to the window, and gazed out. ‘I’m tired, let’s not talk any more tonight.’

I thought about leaving, but stopped myself. A strange urge overwhelmed me. ‘A story, I have a story to tell you. If you’ll listen?’

She became suddenly subdued, sat on her bed, and waited without speaking.

I honestly don't know why your father has behaved in that way. I hardly know my own father. My father was a cold man – unable to love. How can you say 'I love you' to someone who never says those words back to you? I tried, many times, in the beginning. Eventually, I gave up and drifted away. Then I met X. I spent the greater part of our life together, right up until the end, saying 'I love you', giving affection and friendship to someone who never returned it. I threw everything I had into what I believed was essential for true happiness, hoping that love would provide the crucial missing ingredient, like a nutrient or tonic – one drop and all the misery is dissolved. Maybe I yearned to experience what I had missed out on, a special kind of love that I was certain existed, one with honesty and passion.

Perhaps I searched in the wrong places, perhaps I was misguided by my feelings for X, a person who I believed also yearned for that special kind of love. Or maybe I just wanted to understand coldness, to understand where it came from? Maybe I just wanted to understand my father.

When I take a piece of timber that is bent or twisted, just by looking at it, I can determine its history. I know just how to handle it and work with it. If its true nature is twisted and knotted, and if the tree from which it was cut displays the same contorted characteristics, then, instead of discarding it like others might, I know it can be worked with, and the most wonderful and beautiful results achieved. But it must be worked in accordance to its true nature, for no amount of effort will cause it to change.

I have also seen a piece of timber, a fine piece of raw material, that has been bent by poor craftsmanship. But if it has been badly treated, there is always hope for it. There is always a chance for restoration, for reconstruction, for straightening. You said to me

once that people are not like the timber I work with. I think that sometimes they are.

You just have to know how to read the grain.~~

A crazy poem, I invented on the way home, has stuck in my mind:

A fragment here, a fragment there

Doubt casts shadows

On shadows of doubt

Kissed by lips, on lips

Lips become lips when kissed

Older depths of a younger soul

A young soul held in obstinate hands

27 cast away

Andre you are doing so well, sitting and smiling and talking and playing games. Tomorrow you will leave the hospital. The doctors all agree it is the best way to bring you back to full strength. But take your time, take however long you need. You laughed so hard and long today, making me laugh too. I thought I was going to break into tears. What a silly thing to laugh so much about, we were only playing noughts and crosses, but you, forgetting you were noughts, placed a cross on the page and thought you had won. We should all laugh like that over such simple things. I love you, boy. I really do.

Oh! 28, if only things were simple with you. After tonight I don't even know what to call you any more. I am still recovering. Where should I begin? Should I even bother? I don't know. You talked about lies, as if you were accusing me. Then without warning, the truth came out. Both of us have been hiding, each from our own fears. It was crazy. I'm still not certain I can believe what you told me. Is it all just another attempt at

digging into the unknown. If it is, it will destroy you. Sometimes it is best just to let go. You, yourself, more than anyone, would agree with that.

When I walked in, at about nine o'clock, I must admit, you were quite a picture, seated on your suitcase, flicking through a magazine as if you were waiting to leave at any moment.

'Should I call a cab for you?' I joked.

Your hair was neat and short, a fairly plain style, for you. You touched it with your fingers. 'This is my natural colour, chocolate brown. Do you like it?'

I did. You looked more down to earth than I ever remember seeing you. And you are far more fragile than I had thought. You wanted to talk about lies. You said there were so many reasons why we lie, but I felt we had spoken so much about that in the past. I wondered why you were so keen to continue. 'My greatest fear,' you whispered, 'is the damage we do when we deceive ourselves.'

I asked to hold your hand, and you let me, at least for a moment, it was soft and warm. I got nervous being so close to you. I had to stand. I had to move away to catch my breath and calm myself. I walked to the door and back, and returned to the edge of the bed, not too close, not too far from you. I thought carefully before continuing, and told you that there was nothing more beautiful than two people in love. What else I said, only you can say. All I know is that I opened my heart to you.

I couldn't hear your words at that stage. All I could think was, 'It is just her way. She needs time. She will simply turn up one day, her suitcase in hand. I will open the door and she will leap into my arms, forever.'

'Scribe, listen to me. I'm not in the business of lying, and you must understand that I could never gain any pleasure out of hurting you or anyone, but I'm not who you think I am. You must go, build your home and your self.'

I'm sure she would have slapped me to my senses if I hadn't responded. 'Perhaps you think I would be better off getting back together with my X. Maybe you think any woman would do, as long as it's not you.'

'That's not true.'

'Well, then we should at least give you and me a chance. I will keep visiting you and we will get to know each other better.'

She became angry. 'Don't you see, nothing I've told you, none of it, happened to me. I'm a nobody. It all happened to my sister. This has all gone too far, Scribe, but I will be leaving soon, they will discharge me any day now.'

'That's not the truth. The truth is, you think I'm foolish. And you've led me on. At least you could have the decency not to lie to me.'

Suddenly she was irate. Jumping up, gesticulating wildly with her hands and body, and reaching for the buzzer beside her bed, she threatened to call a nurse.

'Go, Scribe, get out of here. It's not me you want. There's no refuge here. I don't want you whimpering under my skirt, clinging to my thighs.'

She was performing like a prima donna on a stage. I thought, 'Maybe she is just acting.' But she was serious, and clearly annoyed. Stopping in mid flight, she scowled threateningly. Suddenly, she seemed twice her size.

'Go and build your home, make it beautiful, let it reflect who you are. Fill it with all the furniture you have made with your hands, and make it ready for when your son comes to visit. And don't forget to laugh and cry with all your heart along the way.'

I wanted to retreat like a scolded dog. Uncertain of what to say, in my mind I rattled through possible phrases and feelings. I needed to find something to use as a reply, as a defence, as an excuse, before I rose to flee. How could I begin. 'I'm sorry you feel that way,' or 'I thought we were friends,' or 'How dare you.' Should I just grab her

and kiss her; or even slap her. I couldn't escape without a comment, but at that moment I was pulled in all directions, my mind frantically attempting to salvage some dignity, needing to make some sense of the moment. My heart was broken and I could feel the warm liquid of love and expectations seeping away.

The words I finally spoke were without substance. I was unable to show my disappointment, incapable of displaying any of the anger or any of the hurt that I felt. I was faceless, without courage, without even the ability to fall to my knees. No anger came out, and no love was shown. Even walking away in silence would have been a statement. Instead, I muttered nervously, 'It is time for me to leave,' or words similar to that, and stood to leave, shaking, 'and you probably need to be alone.' I was shocked and broken. I was tired of trying to build. Tired of gluing together shards of broken furniture. At that moment I realised the last drops of hope had been squeezed from me. I was a tired man.

I was about to slide from the room when more of her words caught me – puzzling words, adding even more confusion to everything else she had said.

'Will you finally let it sink into your head. I have told you before that I am a fake. And now I say it again, clearly, I AM NOT WHO YOU THINK I AM. I'm an impostor – not even half as good as the woman you seem to have fallen in love with, the same woman whose mind and soul I've tried to inhabit and tried so hard to understand. I'm a poor imitation.' I stopped to listen; what else could I do! 'I loved my sister more than is humanly possible. Until the very last moment I thought I knew her fully. When I lost her, the emptiness caused me to collapse – a spike had been plunged into my soul. It was more than I could bear. I will never get over it, but I must learn to live with it.'

I stood motionless and listened. Her voice quietened.

‘And you Scribe, there is no place for you amongst the rubble that has been left behind. You think I am who I am not. And you think that perhaps that doesn’t matter. But either way you are out of luck. I am – apparently – a mother and a wife. That is the verdict, according to the staff here, according to my records, and according to the three loyal visitors who unfailingly appear to spend their afternoons with me – a man who calls himself my husband, and a boy and a girl, that he picks up from school, who are convinced they are my son and daughter. I will take my rightful place with them soon. I have finished inhabiting other bodies.

‘I have wounded you, I can see that, and I knew that, and I warned you. Unfortunately whatever I say now will only aggravate that wound, but you deserve the truth.’

‘The truth?’ I managed to say. ‘I don’t know what’s true and what’s not. This could all be lies. Everything you’ve ever told me could be made up.’ I looked at her, waited, then asked, ‘What is the truth? Tell me.’

‘Everything.’

‘Everything? Even the stories!’

‘The stories, more than anything else.’

I started to leave again.

‘Wait, don’t go,’ she hastened, ‘not yet. I have one more truth to tell you.’

I turned.

‘Please, sit, here on the bed.’ She reached forward.

I’m sure she would have leapt forward and grabbed me if I had tried to leave.

‘I could love you, Scribe. We have become close, and I am very fond of you. You are affectionate and caring, of that I am sure. I am also sure that in many ways my sister would have seen that side of you too. But, the truth is, you have appeared at the

wrong time. You have missed the auditions, and now there are no roles left.’ She touched my knee. ‘The show has nearly ended. We have both denied you. I have denied you on the grounds of my matrimonial and maternal obligations. And my sister, well ... She has left the stage, forever.’

I struggled to grasp the reality of what I was hearing – trying to make sense of the fact that I was, and had always been, talking to 28’s sister. After giving me time with my own thoughts, she began speaking again, choosing her words carefully.

‘A word of warning, a reminder in fact, about what is lurking in the wings. The woman you know all too well from another time, a previous performance. Instinctively, you know her better than you think you do. Perhaps you should not forget that you rejected her long ago. It is easy to slip into old habits, especially when you are out in the cold and frustration and loneliness is beating like a harsh frozen wind against your cheeks. But keep trying to step forward. You have a lot of work to do – for yourself, and for your boy.’

I was listening but in my mind I was still sorting out what I could not believe. ‘So the man and the children I saw you with, they’re your family?’

‘I don’t deserve them, do I?’

‘On the contrary, I’m sure they’re very lucky to have you.’

‘You’re just being kind.’

So many questions flooded my mind. I could never have asked them all and would probably never completely understand the answers anyway. We sat silently for a long time. Strangely, it was a comfortable and uncomplicated exchange – full of communication without words. Eventually I spoke.

‘And what about your mother. Is she still alive?’

‘My mother? I keep in contact, but less and less over the years. She showed some interest in her grandchildren, at first, but that was short-lived. And she’s never liked my husband. I can’t talk to her right now. Not when all she has to say is that her children have caused yet another major embarrassment in her life.’

‘I’m sorry, it wasn’t a good question.’

‘Oh, not at all, she’s the least of my concerns. Through my sister, through 28, as we have come to call her and know her—’

‘And invent her?’ I interrupted.

‘Yes, she would probably agree with you on that. Thanks to her, and thanks to you too, I’ve learnt to come to terms with many things in my life.’

‘Has all been worth it?’

‘What do you want me to say?’

‘The truth.’

‘Her truth or my truth? Or your truth?’

‘What *you* honestly feel about it.’

‘Right now I’m not sure. I do know that sometimes I feel it has all been for nothing. That’s why I ended up in here. I have to tell you that I don’t remember much at all from the early weeks when I first arrived. I do know that I had to follow my sister’s footsteps, to find her. I climbed the same twenty-eight flights of stairs to find out why she, why she jumped, to find out if I could jump. I have found many answers, and faced many fears inside myself, but, I’m still afraid to imagine the overwhelming pain that someone must feel in order to do such a thing.’

‘I’m sorry, but I’m so confused, and nothing you’re saying is helping me much.’

‘Just understand that I have not been me, but her, most of the time. That’s why there is no way you can possibly know who I am. It wasn’t even me that went to your son.’

I tilted my head back and sighed. ‘Do you find me depressing?’

‘No. Why do you ask?’

‘I was just wondering, that’s all.’

‘I suppose that *is* just all – the wondering. No answers, they’re not important. What’s important is the wondering. That’s the fun part!’

‘The fun part?’

‘Yes, why not? The part that keeps us alive.’

‘I suppose so.’ Then, as if a shadow passed over her face, I watched her expression change.

‘It kept my sister alive, until . . . It also killed her.’

I said nothing.

‘Do you mind if I still call you Scribe? I don’t know what other name to use.’

‘Not at all. I’m used to it.’ I was still thinking about fun and staying alive. ‘It keeps children alive,’ I said. ‘I only have to look at Andre, and how happy he is, and how much fun he has when he’s lost in his wondering and his imagination, fascinated by the world.’

‘Until he grows up, and realises that while he’s been dreaming, a world of cheap veneer has been erected around him.’

‘You’ve been telling me all this time to look through the veneer, to go past it. You’re just as bad as, just as bad as me.’

‘I’m much worse. And sometimes I question whether all these words, and all these stories, are nothing more than fractured fairytales. Then I remember her, who she

really was. You're a lot like her in many ways, in many good ways. The first day I met you, I sensed something, something very familiar. But you shy away sometimes.'

'That is my right isn't it, my right to choose?'

'Sure. Unless we no longer have a choice.'

'That's when we need a little luck.'

'Or a good friend.'

'It's all part of putting yourself in the right place.'

'It's all part of putting yourself in the right place with the right people.'

I felt a crushing sadness. 'It has been so nice getting to know you, until now.'

'It has been very nice, Scribe. I'm sorry.'

28 after the storm

I must put Andre's interests first, above all else. That child, forced to deal with so much disappointment at the hands of his parental tormentors, needs only to get well now. We must stop tightening the screws that are causing so much pain. It has all been so unnecessary, causing only sadness and illness. But he will learn to survive, learn to understand, and learn from experience. He is already beginning to see that to survive he must be responsible for the choices he makes. And he must always have choices, always have the right to choose. Only a tyrant would take away that right. Even parents can become tyrants.

What abominable kinds of beasts we can become, creating havoc in the minds of children, turning the innocent into victims of our unresolved struggles – children, who are unable to comprehend the madness that drives their tormentors into a fury.

I am at home, sitting at my desk. I have been here since mid-afternoon, since Andre dozed off to sleep. He is at his mother's house. I had to leave. I could have stayed longer

and mingled, but that place is no place for me. There were a few friends, mainly X's relatives. She was talking about the exorbitant medical bills, speaking in a way that implied she was intending to pay them herself. She has already asked, no, demanded, that I pay. It is the last thing on my mind, but of course I have already worked out the finances.

So, I am alone. Andre is back with his mother. A woman I thought I knew well has returned to her husband and children. And I am in love with a woman who is dead, a woman I have never met. All I have are a few memories and a suitcase. Inside the suitcase are two sheets of paper and a necklace made of beads. 28, or rather – her sister, has flown the coop. She was not in her room at the hospital today. One of the nurses, who I had seen before, recognised me. She is the one who thinks I am 28's brother. I kept silent as she put words in my mouth, assuming that I had arrived late to pick up 28.

'I'm sorry you came in for nothing. Your sister called a taxi. There is something here for you though, I think; just one moment.' She vanished down the corridor, occasionally glancing into rooms or asking questions about the whereabouts of another staff member.

After several minutes a second nurse returned carrying a suitcase. I recognised the case, 28's – old, brown, battered, and covered with stickers. The nurse spoke abruptly.

'The lady in 28 discharged herself this morning, said to give this to,' she read from a note, 'the Scribe. Are you the Scribe?'

'That's me,' I confessed without hesitation, eagerly reaching for the case. I was surprised at my readiness to adopt the title of Scribe.

At first I thought the case was empty, but just like a few weeks ago when 28 asked me to extract it from her wardrobe as a prop for one of her many tales, something

slid around inside it. I've been debating whether the few hand-written pages and the necklace were in fact inside it back when I first touched it. As I sit here at my desk, trying to put pieces together, running over the same words and scenes, I realise that this is in many ways the closing chapter. I hope somehow to make it a new beginning.

As I hold them in front of me, I am puzzled by the sheets of paper from inside the case. What is the true name and nature of the author. In fact it is two authors that I see before me, both are written in a different style, the handwriting is clearly not the same on both. One I am almost certain belongs to 28. It is her final note, scribbled in her last moments at the end of her climb. The other is her sister's, the woman I spoke to every evening at the hospital. I know nothing concrete about either of them, yet I know so much that is vital to all three of us. Are they the words of disturbed women, a crazy 28 and a grief stricken sister? Did 28 jump? Did she slip? Who knows! Does it matter? It matters to me only for what could have been. But what really matters is what she left behind, and what she has done for others, even after her death. I have much to consider, and much, I imagine, that will stay with me for some time, maybe forever. Perhaps if I just let it be, and not try too hard to make sense of it all, it will gradually make sense by itself. These are the letters:

sister~~

I forced open the door to the roof, and entered the blinding sun. Falling backward for a moment, I stumbled with dizziness until my eyes and legs recovered. How divine that moment was, a serene interval as I regained my balance. For a second or two I was caught in that in-between state, split between control and complete lack of control. I had to act or perish. I found a railing and a wall, and fumbled my way to the edge. What a sight! The gaze down was darker, colder, and more terrifying than I could have possibly

imagined. I tilted my head away, turning upwards towards the sky for safety, but the intense light and heat was as unrelenting as before. I wanted to cup my face in my hands to conceal my eyes, but I couldn't let go of the railing that kept me balanced, kept me grounded and attached to the massive structure beneath me. I couldn't settle my gaze, switching uncontrollably from one object to another. The glare from above blurring wildly with the darkness from below. I could no longer focus. I was unable to see. Then I suddenly stopped looking, and was able to see, able to see more than I had ever seen before. Then I understood.

In the safety of this hospital bed, I have not recovered. I recovered long before this. It was in the face of danger that my strength and clarity of mind returned. A lack of action and a fear of responsibility, that is the cause of failure. Eliminate that cause, I say. Rip it out. Put an end to the rot that ransacks the busy streets of the mind.

Without opening my eyes, I followed the railing to the highest part of the building and climbed up and out onto the ledge, to where the wind could touch me from all sides. I gained my composure and readied myself for the outside world. And again felt that space between control and no control. I opened my eyes and looked down, down from the edge. I felt a sudden pull, drawing me forward and over and down. I was being lured by the weight of my burdens, my guilt, my sorrow, and my regrets. Still those cold steel weighted shackles pulling me down.

What real understanding do we have of what we put ourselves through in this game called life? Only yesterday, and the day before that, and ten years ago, and twenty years ago, and perhaps even twenty-eight years ago I was a colleague to only one certainty,

that of life and death. Without credentials I have engaged in a debate with death, and with life I have done little more than monkey about. But I suppose that being a monkey is far better than being an ass. And as for death, if it was ever an option, then there would have been countless times in my life when I would have taken that option. Death is weightless, it is meaningless. It is nothing more than the hole that is left when something is taken away, nothing more than an absence. It has no substance. Therefore it is unable to offer anything. It is a moment, and at that moment all options cease to exist. Death marks the point when all freedom to choose is gone.

At the top I realised the nothingness behind all the imposed condemnations I had suffered, and instantly the shackles dissolved and the weights turned to helium and rose to the skies, my heart was carried away with them. I am free, I roared. But to stay free I must stay true to myself, and that is difficult. A whirlwind has calmed within me now, and although the view is still far from tranquil, it is no longer disturbing. No longer an insane, misanthropic frolic. Above the gaping hole of emptiness, I build my home. My only regret is the hours wasted, doubting, hours when I should have been living. But it was not until that crazy moment, at the top, cavorting and jeering at the world, that moment when I realised I knew I could jump, that I finally knew I could begin again without fear. At that moment I was free. Now, after the storm, after the storm that was, and in expectation of all the storms that will be, I begin again my climb. I begin with renewed vigour, spiralling towards another peak. Perhaps a little wiser, maybe. But with passion. I would always exchange wisdom for passion. I feel now as I did in the beginning, at every beginning, a woman yet to be invented, mere squiggles without form on a page in the architectural den. I only hope that the new climb will provide enough thrills to entice me and excite me as before.

They said they found me clinging to a part of the external plumbing, the drain pipe or something like that. ‘Emotionally tired,’ I remember one of the nurses saying later, ‘On the rooftop of a twenty-eight storey building. Clinging, she was. And she was crying, but with no tears in her eyes, like hysterical laughter. She was like that when they brought her in here.’ But that’s what *they* say. I was flying. After twenty-eight flights, what use are tears? What good are little weeping glands? Real tears come from deep within the soul. Real tears sound like laughter. Yes, I admit that I became weak at the knees, trembling at the sight of the world below. And became flushed with the cold sweat of fear. But I held fast. And battered by the winds of time, with whitened knuckles I clung like a soldier with a solitary flag hoisted high on a pole in the face of a raging storm. We must all find our own way, but to do so we must first walk to the edge, accept who we are, and then take control.~~

28~~

I’ve trudged up that stairwell, step by step, my feet heavy at first, as if encased in boots of lead and shackles of steel. My back arched, my gaze barely lifting above the dust at my feet. Laden with the weight of my times, and the weight of my mother’s times, and her mother’s times, and all times before that. I had collected too much debris along the way and carried it with me, straining my shoulders and strapped around my girth like the burden of a pack-horse.

I am at the twenty-eight floor of my life, struggling to catch my breath. I try to believe that the weight has left me, but it returns. Most of it I can deal with, and some of it simply fades, and being lost in the present helps keep back the past. But there is one recurring pain that refuses to submit – that bird of prey that has dug one talon into my spine and another into my gut while it picks at my heart with a savage beak.

Stale concrete air, rising heat, in this deserted stairwell shaft. Taking one last look at the rear of the grey door of nothingness that leads into the twenty-eighth floor, a foreign terrain on the other side that I kept at a distance. But it was always nearby, will always be just over there. Access is easy, no appointment necessary – simply slip through the doorway, no entry fee. Once inside, marvel at the radiant world of polyester carpets, plastic furnishings, and nylon apparel. Above the doorway, an illuminated exit sign, cracked and flickering and dusty. It signals a constant reminder that there is always a way out, in an emergency. But who wants out once you're in? I could go in there, with everyone else, and take the lift, back down to the ground, back to my usual, good old, day-to-day affairs. I could ignore the other door. The one that leads to the roof. The one that I can't quite put my hand to, just slightly out of reach. I must choose, I can't just stand here, uncertain and afraid.

Fear and loneliness are reducing me to water. Their molecules have entered my bloodstream and are multiplying by a thousand a second, heading with a magnificent force to my heart where their purpose will be realised. Those nasty microscopic particles are diluting my blood, making me weak at the knees. My legs are beginning to tremble. Funny, I didn't think it would be like this. Now the wateriness is beginning to affect my brain, making it wobble with flaccidity, so much so that thinking is beginning to hurt. I am panicking. Sweat, hot and cold sweat. Reaching, clutching to any bits of memories. All is fragmented. Like a frightened child, first day at school, nothing connects. Everyday is like that first day. What have I become? Nothing. Squashed. Squashed like a forgotten jellybean in the back pocket of a fidgeting arse.~~

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