

Pet Names

Connection and identity in second-person fiction.

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Volume 1:

Pet Names

School of Humanities
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Thesis
in Fulfilment of
The Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

September 2014

Declaration

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Date

Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge and sincerely thank the people who have assisted me throughout the development of this thesis. Firstly, Professor Brian Castro, my supervisor, whose knowledge and constructive feedback proved invaluable in helping me work through the many challenges I faced during the process of developing both the creative work and the exegesis.

Secondly, I would like to thank Tracy Chaplin, for contributing her darling anthropomorphic illustrations to the pages of *Pet Names*.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents, Nadia and Trevor, and my partner Matt for their continual encouragement, advice and feedback. For their support, I am truly grateful.

Abstract

The creative work, *Pet Names*, is eight loosely interrelated narratives. Each narrative depicts the nuances and idiosyncrasies of a generic suburban character who fails to fulfil a need for interpersonal connection and self-satisfaction. The narratives are vignettes of each character's daily life and include the mundane, irrational and absurd. The narratee/protagonist in *Pet Names* is addressed using the second-person pronoun.

The exegesis is entitled *Hello, is it you you're looking for? Connection and identity in second-person fiction*. It comprises several analytical chapters that explore ways in which second-person narration not only complements but also highlights the thematic elements of a text that involve interpersonal connections and notions of self. The exegesis examines the second-person narrative works of authors Julio Cortazar, Miranda July and Lorrie Moore and analyses how these individual authors' use of second-person narration reflects their rhetorical interests concerning interpersonal relations and definitions of selfhood. The exegesis cites a number of narrative theories concerning second-person narration and relates them to *Pet Names* and to the writings of the above-mentioned authors. Also included is a chapter on narrative empathy that deconstructs the complications involved in representing unempathetic characters. It debates whether reader-empathy is necessary in narrative, particularly in my own writing, where there is a questioning of narratorial 'appropriateness' by deploying challenging forms of address.

Pet Names

A novella by Lauren Lovett

Illustrated by Tracy Chaplin of Gretel Girl

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Pet Names

We do not hold their hand. We do not invite them for dinner. We do not trust them to care for small children. We find their language crude and their actions unsettling. We draw the curtains and close the door and move to a different train carriage.

This does not make them go away.

We do not want to acknowledge it but they are like us. And we are like them. We want someone to hold our hand. And invite us for dinner. And trust us with small children.

We long for a pet name. This is our reasoning. It is theirs. It is yours.



This is: You.

Part One

Sometimes it is easier to define yourself by what You aren't, and what You don't, and what You won't ever. It's a process of elimination, a process You should work on when, or if, You meet new people.

You are not a piggy in the middle. You are not a princess in the castle. You are not a butcher, or a baker, or a candlestick maker. You are pretty sure candlestick makers don't even exist nowadays. They have become redundant, just like typewriter technicians.

You are not a Lithuanian boy with a lisp, a Vietnamese girl with large knuckles or a Canadian with a phobia of lint. You are not a farmer or a dental assistant or an engineer with a dislocated hip. You do not own a goat, or a pipe, or a stomach that disagrees with dairy. You do not have a daughter in the navy, a turtle in an aquarium or a cousin in Brazil. You are not the first person to mispronounce 'plover'.

You are not a member of a gym, or a transsexual support group, or horticultural society that meets in a community hall on Wednesdays to talk about orchids. You do not darn socks, or despise swans, or sleep with your eyes open. You do not have a third nipple, or a pilot's license, or a designated shelf for dust and athletics trophies. You do not hate television, or pollen, or Your Mother. You do not sponsor a dolphin.

You do not remember your third birthday, or your tax file number, or the last time You went on a holiday. You do not have an oversized pancreas or a hunchback or a set of

encyclopaedias from 1954. You are not envious of Dennis Quaid.

What You do have is: an overbite and a conscience and a freezer that needs defrosting. You have an aviary and a bus ticket and a half-sister with a distinctive forehead. You have parents and a walkman and a voucher for cake. You cancel appointments. You like salt. When asked whether You urinate in the shower. You lie. And say no. You feel guilt. You burn toast. You are fond of, Johnny Winter, the little cactus on your desk at work.

In the future, You will eat cereal for dinner, frequently spout curse words, and find yourself staring at disabled people for inappropriate lengths of time. You will make plans to become more social, enthusiastic and proactive. Rather than acting on these plans, You will unbutton your trousers and watch monotonous television programs. You will regularly think about your cousin, You will try your hand at poetry, You will feel like a dickhead. You will compare yourself to people on the street, and on the bus, and in the supermarket. They will trump You, in almost all areas. This will make You want to ingest copious amounts of whipped cream. These things will happen later. Right now You are in your bathroom, and recalling those particular incidents from your childhood. Because, You are who You are. And this is something You do. Often.

Do not shower. Do not dress conservatively. Do not catch the bus to work. Take off your clothes. Stand in your bathtub. Now, think of your childhood. Think of Ben.

Your older cousin had inexplicably long nose hair for a seventeen year old. Sometimes when she sneezed or tried to whistle, the hair in her nostrils would twitch, like rat whiskers. For this reason, everyone called her 'Ben'.

One morning, when You were trying to shove your cat inside the washing machine, Your

Mother informed You of Ben's accident. The accident turned your cousin into a vegetable. What kind of vegetable, Your mother wouldn't say. But what You did find out was that: from that day on, Ben didn't have to go to school.

Several weeks after Ben's accident, and whilst fed up with the tedious task of threading pasta onto a piece of wool, You realised that You too could become a hospitalised (and permanently-unschooled) vegetable.

Your cousin had avoided school via a serious crafting mishap. According to Your Mother, Ben was trying to make a piñata. And for some reason, unbeknown to your family, your cousin had chosen a rather unorthodox method of piñata construction. Unable to find a balloon, Ben placed a shopping bag over her head and fixed it to her neck with masking tape. Then poor Ben ran out of air before she even had a chance to soak the newspaper in the special papier-mâché glue.

Your phone rings. Assume that it is your overweight colleague calling. Instead of answering, bathe in tepid water and think about your childhood pet 'Sophia Foccacia'.

From an early age, Sophia Foccacia developed the habit of urinating in headwear. And when there wasn't an unsoiled baseball cap, helmet or beanie left in the house Your Mother started making inquiries.

You live (and have always lived) in a town without enough deviant felines to necessitate a school for cats. When Your Mother finally realised this, Sophia Foccacia was enrolled in a canine class. Like You, Sophia Foccacia detested school. For this reason, You decided that the right thing to do would be to incorporate her into many of your 'vegetable-seeking' accidents.

After the first accident as a duo (the one where You attempted to poison yourself and Sophia Foccacia via excessive shampoo consumption), Your Father sat You on his knee and asked You why You 'were acting out'. Unsure of what the phrase actually meant, You told Your Father that neither You nor the cat had any desire to make (or star) in movies. And, in your opinion acting was best left to bearded dwarves and red-haired mermaids and little wankers named Macaulay Culkin.

What Your Father actually wanted to know was whether You were putting yourself (and the family pet) in harmful situations in order to receive hugs and kisses from your emotionally crippled mother. After burping a lavender-scented bubble, You assured Your Father that the thought of motherly-kisses actually made You a little ill. To You, Your Mother's lips were wrinkly and uninviting and like they'd be more at home on the face of a baby elephant seal.

Drop a bath bomb into the water. Climb out of the bath when your bottom feels as though it is attempting to smuggle a sherbet cone. Think about another accident. Think about that one at the beach.

As you recall, Your cat was not fond of your drowning idea, not even when You assured her that the water would help her become an unschooled vegetable. You put on your bathers and goggles and swimming cap. Sophia Foccacia chose to remain naked. You looked over to Your Mother. She was using the back of a plastic spade to apply sunscreen to Your Father's shoulders.

You tucked Sophia Foccacia down the front of your bathers. You waded into the water. You politely requested that she refrain from clawing at your genitals. You floated on your back and You waited for jellyfish to sting You (and your cat) into vegetative bliss.

A wave broke on your face. You screamed. You swallowed water. And seaweed. And Sophia Foccacia's breakfast. You thought You were drowning. You thought You saw Jesus. You thought that cat puke would taste worse than it did. Your Father wrapped You in a towel and kissed You on the mouth and informed You that Sophia Foccacia, like all cats, was allergic to the ocean.

On the drive home, You told your parents that school had been cancelled for the rest of the term because giant spiders had gotten into the classrooms and eaten all the chalk. Your Mother started to laugh. Your cat cleaned her nethers. And Your Father, well he awarded your imagination two metaphorical gold stars.

In class, on the day after your jellyfish accident, You shut your eyes and kept them closed (even after the fat boy next to You tried to pry your lids open with your yellow crayon). After numbering the sides of a hexagon, the teacher asked what You were doing. You said that if You kept your eyes closed every school day, between the hours of nine and three, then You might just be able to make yourself believe that school was just 'a horrible dream'. What You said made your teacher laugh, and your classmates laugh, and the fat boy put your yellow crayon under his armpit. It also made You even more determined to become: just like Ben.

Get out of the shower. Get ready for work. Put on the trousers that make your arse look like a busted watermelon.

Spin in your chair. Re-taste your breakfast. Stop spinning. See your employer. Try to avoid eye contact (even when she asks You into her office). Do not sit. Prefer to stand. She tells You to take leave. Stress leave. Lengthy leave. Realise that Your Father must have informed her about your most recent accident. Pack your belongings. 'Treat it like a holiday, sit by a pool, drink from a coconut, take up salsa, make your own yoghurt, learn

how to fence....' your boss continues. Do not respond. Clear your desk. Pocket a stapler. Throw Johnny Winter in the recycling bin. Go home.

Sit in your lounge room. Play with your leg hair. Think about *that* accident, the one that apparently warrants lengthy 'yoghurt making' leave.

On *that* day, your colleague was on another diet. She opened her bag, took out a hamburger and cut it into tiny pieces. You didn't have the heart to explain the logic behind 'smaller portions'.

During your break, instead of your usual lunchtime activity (of sitting in the staffroom and staring at a plastic container of pasta salad), You walked home.

your neighbour waved. You hid behind your elbow and went inside. You knelt in your lounge room and pressed your face against the floor. And after briefly choking on carpet fibres, your thoughts turned to Ben. You thought about how Ben had been 'turned off' two days before her twenty-first birthday. You tried to recall your own 'key to the door' celebrations. Was there cake? And dip? And little pieces of cabana impaled on toothpicks? Were there streamers? And unenthused 'jolly good fellows'? And embarrassing photos of You, as a three-year-old, defecating in a plastic pool? You couldn't remember. You tried harder. your thoughts turned to Ben. And your poor aunt. You closed your eyes and clutched some air. You pretended that You were hugging. Hugging Ben and your aunt. You felt stupid. You re-smooshed your face into the carpet. You thought about making yoghurt. You thought about where someone even has to go to purchase a fencing outfit. You thought about throwing a mini, lunchtime party in your cousin's honour.

You were unsure as to what type of party your cousin would have liked. You realised that

your only memory of (the pre-comatose) Ben was at a family get-together, when she collapsed on your face during an intense game of Twister.

Conscious that your lunch break was almost over, You scaled your hallway cupboard, threw unopened camping supplies to the floor and (after taking a moment to envy people who enjoyed doing things outdoors) You located the board game.

The arrow pointed to the red spot. You took off your shoes. You pictured Ben and her piñata. You pictured your aunt having to peel the plastic from her daughter's face. You pictured Your Mother apologizing – constantly apologizing to your aunt for your insensitive (and continuous) questions about the accident. You pictured Ben's untouched papier-mâché glue. You realised that there wasn't actually any glue. You snapped the arrow in half. You wrapped yourself in the Twister mat. Someone knocked on your door. You thought about possible visitors. You thought about Your Father and 'Jehovies' and your boss. You realised that your lunch break finished over an hour ago. You panicked and ran into the bathroom.

The knocking continued. Still wrapped in the board game, You attempted to hide in the bathtub. You tried to jump into the bath. Your scissor kick failed. your face united with the tiles. You sat up and rubbed your forehead. You saw blood. You passed-out.

The knocking stopped. Your Father climbed through an open window. He checked the rooms. He checked the aviary. He checked his hair in the hallway mirror. He found You on the bathroom floor, unconscious and wrapped in polka-dotted plastic.

Your Father continued to hyperventilate, even after You explained that, this time it really was an accident. On the way to the hospital, he insisted that whilst he needed to inform Your Mother of your accident, he must prevent her 'unwelcome' visits by telling her that

after the accident (and a healthy dose of band aids and antiseptic), You moved overseas.

Instead of responding, You bit your tongue and fainted.

Sit in your kitchen. Decide to treat your leave like a holiday. Think about fencing, and cultivating yoghurt and buying a pineapple. Think about your lonely cactus, at work and at the bottom of the recycling bin. Think about suitable holiday activities. Feel an overwhelming obligation to shop.

Walk down to the local commercial strip. Stop to watch a sales assistant undress a mannequin. Notice that the mannequin's bellybutton is much smaller than yours. Try to decide what equates to a normal size. Locate your bellybutton through your sweater. The sales assistant notices You. Lean against a pylon, act relaxed and casual and as though You haven't just been forced to take yoghurt-making leave.

You are at Second Chance, your local charity store. Collapse in a discoloured beanbag. Hold your head. Think about Ben. Pick up a ladies hat and try it on. Stand in front of the book section. Ignore the romance novels. Run your fingers over the spines of the hard backs. Trace a particular title twice. 'Pets are to love'. Take the book from the shelf. Encyclopaedias fall to the floor. Leave them there for the volunteers to pick up and put back. Select, at random, page fifty-three. Stare at the picture of the puppy in a party hat – at the puppy that looks like the love child of Richard Gere and a raisin.

Look the dog directly in the eyes. Assume that he is called 'Jerome Martinez'. Jerome Martinez the dog with the dyslexic owner. The owner who struggles to differentiate between a lowercase 'b' and 'd'. The owner with a penchant for open-toed sandals and undercooked pasta. The owner with irrational fears. Fears of cartoon ghosts. Of Echinacea. Of handlebar moustaches. Touch Jerome Martinez on the nose. Feel as

though You have a holiday companion. Feel better about yourself.

Go home. Place your palm on the photographed dog's chest. Wonder if a snake or a spider had ever bitten Jerome Martinez. Wonder whether his owner loved him enough to suck the venom from his canine limb. Decide that yes, his owner would suck the venom. Decide that Jerome Martinez's owner would have been the type of person who would even resuscitate a moth. Dislike yourself a little for not being more like Jerome Martinez's owner, for not mouth to mouthing moths.

Read the numbers that make up the year the book was printed. Nineteen. Seventy. Seven. Put your entire palm on Jerome Martinez's chest. Understand that there is no possibility that this dog is still alive. Strongly believe (that if Jerome Martinez was murdered) his owner would have avenged the animal's death. Even more than in that film *The Fugitive*, when Richard Gimble avenged the death of his wife who was killed by that amputee bastard.

Press the page against your face. Wonder if Jerome Martinez's death was an accident, the type of accident that your cat Sophia Foccacia was involved in. The type of accident that make mothers leave and fathers compulsively hug.

On the morning of this particular accident: Your Father repeatedly cursed Your Mother and her cold heart. Your Mother threatened to leave. You were afraid that if she left, just one more time, that she might never return. You decided that if You were going to prevent Your Mother from leaving, You needed to find the perfect hiding place for the car key – in a place that You were certain Your Mother would never look.

You took the key from its home on the hat rack. You praised your cat. 'Good Sophia Foccacia. Good girl'. You continued with like compliments as You inserted the car key

into your pet. You told your cat that You loved her. You told her again, with more sincerity. When You were knuckle deep, You stopped complimenting your cat and You stopped pushing the key further into secrecy.

Your Mother returned from the veterinary clinic. Sophia Foccacia did not. Your Mother threw a vase. And a cushion. And a small ceramic horse. When she calmed down, she asked how You would appreciate some idiot putting a key up your backside. Instead of answering, You removed a little plastic diary key from your pocket and unbuttoned your pants. Your Mother said curse words and went to her room. You chased after her and offered to help pack her suitcase but (according to Your Mother) You had already done enough.

Take four and a half minutes to decide whether to make instant or percolated coffee. Take five minutes. Realise that your coffee could have been made by now. Put six spoons of instant granules in your cup. Add another spoon because You want to feel more awake, more alive, more like Ferris Bueller.

Think about possible ways in which Jerome Martinez died. Rule out terrorism. Decide that the dog probably died of a broken heart, like in romance novels. Wonder if your Mother will go the same way. Remind yourself that envisaging Your Mother's death is not an appropriate holiday activity. Think about cultivating yoghurt.

Carefully remove Jerome Martinez from his page. Be startled by the bark of your neighbour's dog. Accidentally rip through Jerome Martinez's right paw. Swear and tuck the ripped picture into the back of your shoe.

Go outside and feel guilty for not treating your birds the way that they deserve to be treated. Interrupt your pets and their special 'alone time'. Tell them that they are beautiful.

And lovely. And the most perfect of holiday companions.

Your neighbour is outside. She is using hairclips to attach her washing to the clothesline. Continue to affirm your animals. Give them more specific praise. Comment on the symmetry of the male budgie's feather detailing. Compliment the female on her ability to keep up with her partner's libido. Praise both birds on their ankles, their slender ankles. Stop when your neighbour goes inside.

Think perhaps the woman went into her house because she is jealous of your affinity with birds. Think that perhaps, through the holes in your fence, your life seems exciting. And enviable. And like some type of yoghurt-filled holiday.

Lean against the aviary. Think about your cousin Ben. Wonder if she realised that she was a role model, your role model. Recall your childhood pursuits. Feel as clichéd as teenage poetry. Realise that, by now, Your Father would have probably told everyone about your recent board-game accident.

your pets are at it again. Shield your eyes. Ensure that your fingers are spread far enough apart for You to see clearly. Wonder whether You are a filthy voyeur or a naturalist. Put your hand in your jeans to check. Feel reassured that You are not a filthy voyeur. Pretend You are David Attenborough. Picture yourself with a British accent. Picture yourself with a French accent, naked and with a strategically placed beret. Want to get inside the aviary. Decide that, in this situation, Attenborough would not get inside the cage. Push your face against the chicken wire until your cheeks ooze like butter through the holes of a dry biscuit. From this distance, realise that the female budgie is an involuntary participant in the activity. Watch her chest rise and fall. And know this is rape.

Smash your hands against the aviary. Smash and yell noise, not words, just noise. Shout

caveman-esque, monosyllabic sounds. Get into the cage. Catch the male budgie, the rapist. Hold him tightly in your hand and (in haste) squeeze.

Look for a shoebox. After three minutes, give up. With bird free hand, tip cornflakes onto the kitchen floor. Shove the rapist inside the cereal box and hold the top closed. Debate whether to poke holes in the box. Decide that if You don't, then You are no better than the prison guards who torture inmates with the thing where a wet towel is put on a bound person's face in order to emulate the experience of drowning.

Seal the cornflake box. Think about 'death by wet cloth.' Think about 'expert opinions'.

After Sophia Foccacia died and after Your Mother left, Your Father sought out 'expert opinions'. This initially surprised You as, on more than one occasion, You recall Your Father referring to psychiatrists 'soapboxes with holiday houses.'

The second 'professional' was of the same opinion as Your Father in that she believed your accidents were simply drastic, creative attempts at drawing affection from your snow cone of a mother. Not wanting to expose your plans of evading education, You played along with the woman and pretended that You simply 'acted out' in order to receive a big, bosomy hug.

Routine made Your Mother feel safe. So after she left, Your Father made a point of calling her at the same time each week. Sometimes You would speak to Your Mother (about animals and snake venom and how your belly-button lint always seemed to smell of burnt cheese) but most of the time, Your Father was the one who did the talking.

Your Mother would often try to visit and bring You things. Things like chalk and gum and little hand-drawn pictures of salmon. But (frightened that her visits would induce

more accidents) most of the time, Your Father would tell Your Mother that she couldn't see You because You were busy sleeping or showering or busy in the shed, constructing babies from gum nuts. After a while, Your Father didn't have to say anything because, well because Your Mother stopped visiting.

Believe that sitting on the kitchen floor (and holding a box containing a raping bird) is not an appropriate holiday activity. Decide to leave the house.

Press the bus buzzer. Get off behind the man with the pocket square. The man watches You. Feel exploited, like a dog in a party hat. Enter Second Chance. Try on shoes. Be startled by the sound of a dying Casio. It is the man with the pocket square. He is playing and watching You. He is multitasking. Feel self-conscious. Feel uncomfortable. Flick through the t-shirts.

The pocket-squared man is still watching. Busy yourself with the shop's hosiery. Decide that the stockings smell like an old prawn (if a lady kept it in her underpants for an entire summer). Cover your mouth and hold your stomach.

Put both hands over your face and hold your breath. Think about the summer when You tried to turn yourself into a roast vegetable. The summer when You looked like a pretentious robot.

It was unbearably hot. Your Mother put a box of ice creams up her shirt. Your Father muttered something about the lack of sufficient ventilation in his jocks. You and Sophia Foccacia remained outside, in the sun, wrapped in aluminum foil and black skivvies.

After stripping You down to your underwear, Your Father cried, force-fed You melted ice

cream. And Your Mother, well she just sat on the sofa and shook her head.

Walk home. Hear the same music from Second Chance. Head toward the sound. Bump into a trestle table. Knock over beanies that have been knitted for Aids babies.

Hide behind a brochure. Read about the 'Cans for Mans' food drive. Pity the pamphlet for having to contain such an unimaginative phrase. Try to think of more creative titles. Peer over your brochure at the man with the pocket square, at The Organist who is providing the soundtrack for the service. Try to decide whether he is a charitable person, a 'Cans for Mans' type of guy. Try to decide whether judging The Organist is an appropriate holiday activity.

Turn your attention to The Priest. His microphone is one of the ear ones that telemarketers and pilots use. The microphone is much too close to The Priest's mouth. His words sound all breathy and spitty.

Remain in the foyer. Submerge your hands in the holy water. Wipe your fingers through your hair. Realise that your actions are socially inappropriate. Wonder if Your Father has told these people about your recent accident. Feel self-conscious. Pull your shirt up over your face.

Through a buttonhole, watch The Priest and think about the many things that could fit through the gap in his teeth. Decide that a rice cake would fit but a tampon would not. Leave the church in search of an appropriate holiday activity.

Unbutton your pants and turn on the television. Find Miss Serbia's eyebrows much too uneven to warrant the crown. Watch the remainder of the pageant. Fall asleep.

Dream that You are a unicorn with a mane of stringy cheese. Dream that atop your back sits The Organist. He is wearing one of the beanies meant for African Aids babies. Despite the fact that You are a mythical creature with cheesy hair, know that stealing a baby's beanie is immoral. Gallop along the beach, spot Miss Serbia and Miss Poland building a sandcastle. Overhear them arguing. Understand the argument to be about whether the castle should be decorated with shells or smashed crabs. Neigh in agreement when Miss Poland says that smashing crabs for a sandcastle is no worse than making a merkin from a meerkat. Feel uncomfortable when the women throw down their shovels and kiss passionately. Despite feeling uncomfortable, trot over to the women and watch as they de-bikini each other and writhe about in the sand, kissing and touching and touching and kissing. Feel like a filthy voyeur. Hoof yourself in your mythical stomach. The Organist dismounts. He removes the square of material from his pocket and uses it to rub your hoofing injury. Love him a little.

Wake and think about Your Mother. Want to call her. Want to draw a picture of a baby salmon. Instead, go outside to check on your budgie.

Press your face against the cage. Allow your hair to become tangled in the wire segments. Think about that woman, the one who was unfortunate categorise enough to receive one of your haircuts.

After your parents separated, and after Your Mother and her salmon artwork finally stopped visiting, Your Father bought wine glasses and patterned serviettes and a little cheese knife. And as he struggled to remove the cheese knife's stubborn price sticker, a lady knocked at the door.

The lady was attractive, but not beautiful – sort of like a butterfly that has been slightly stepped on. She sat beside You on the couch. She ate the cheese and drank the wine and

used a corner of a serviette to dislodge a poppy seed from her teeth. Your Father played with his shirt collar and told pathetic ‘dad jokes’. After each joke the lady laughed hysterically – throwing her head back as though she had just been on the receiving end of an uppercut to the jaw.

During dinner, Your Father commented on the lady’s perfume and necklace and handbag. You spat broccoli into your serviette and wondered whether Your Father secretly preferred ladies clothing, if every night, after You had gone to bed, Your Father would dress in women’s clothing and dance around the house.

That night, You woke to the sound of horrible jazz music. You crept into the lounge room (half expecting to find Your Father in a blouse and heels and standing on the sofa playing air clarinet). Instead, You found Your Father asleep on the couch and with his hand partially wedged in the opening of the lady’s skirt.

What You saw made your face feel hot and your legs feel heavy and hands feel as though they wanted to get some scissors.

Your Father woke and started to cough. The lady woke and started to scream. Your Father removed chunks of the woman’s hair from his mouth. You put the scissors inside your pajama shirt and hid in kitchen cupboard, behind the industrial-sized bag of oats.

Remove your hair from the wire. Enter the aviary. Look for your pet, the rapee. Whistle. Look and whistle. Fear that she has run, or rather flown, away. Assume that a mental patient has broken into your aviary and eaten the face off your budgerigar. Right off. your budgerigars little, intact face emerges from the nesting box. Relax.

Remove the lid from the container. See four eggs. Four little white sugared almonds. The

blood drains from your face and heads south. your shoes feel as though they have become engorged with fluid. Instead of feet, feel as though your body now stands atop two black puddings. Understand that the beautiful-bonbonniere eggs are in fact, rape babies. Remove the sugared almonds, one by one, from underneath their mother's backside. Apologise once. Blaspheme twice. Crush the eggs between your thumb and forefinger.

Spread your fingers in front of your face. Want the yolk to stay with You, on You, for just a little while longer. Stare at the albumen. Try to determine whether your crushing actions made You a backyard abortionist.

Think about ethics. And about The Priest at the church. Wonder how much money he has stolen from the collection plate. Picture The Priest, naked and sprawled across a huge pile of fifty-cent pieces. Picture him rubbing coins over his bare nipples. Decide that picturing The Priest's nipples isn't a suitable holiday activity.

Go inside, check on the rapist. Open the cereal box. Realise that You forgot to stab air holes into the container. The rapist is motionless and covered in cornflake crumbs. He looks like a tiny schnitzel.

Decide that now is the time to take action and become a better person. Become less of a socially inept sugared-almond-killer and more of an Aids-baby-beanie-knitting type of person, the type of person who would mouth-to-mouth a moth, the type of person who actually deserves to take a yoghurt-making holiday.



He is: Your Father.

Your Father leans against his car and removes his left shoe and sock. He lights three cigarettes and proceeds to 'butt out' on the sole of his foot. He then redresses his singed foot and drives home.

Your half sibling, the one with The Forehead, attempts to colour her yoghurt with an orange crayon. Your Father hugs his daughter and collapses face first, onto the couch. The cushions smell of barbeque sauce and condensed milk. Your Father breathes through his mouth and tries to forget things.

The forehead answers the phone. A man is trying to sell automatic blinds. Instead of handing the phone to Your Father, The Forehead asks the caller who he thinks would win in a fight between a lady orangutan and a man antelope, a mantalope. The man curses and hangs up.

Your Father watches a reality television program. Overweight couples are peeling prawns and giving them to elderly homeless men. Your Father turns off the television. The forehead sneaks into the kitchen cupboard and consumes three packets of sweet biscuits. The nail technician holds her fingers out like a gun and informs her daughter that she has been caught 'shortbread handed'. Your Father hides his face under a pillow.

His shoulder is bleeding. He presses his pajama shirt against his wound. The nail technician sings 'Brown Eyed Girl' and continues to seek out more of Your Father's ripe pimples.

The forehead enters her parents' bedroom. She is holding her pet guinea pig and she is wearing a lasagna box on her head. Your Father hides the bloody shirt and tells his daughter that she is brilliant. The girl nods in agreement. The packaging falls off her head. She stops nodding and squeezes her guinea pig until it squeaks.

The nail technician addresses the last of Your Father's infected pores. Your Father steps into the shower and lathers his arse with scented gel. After soaping the remainder of his body, he rinses and wonders whether You are looking after yourself.

He buys himself two drinks (one for each hand) and rocks on a barstool. He loses his balance and one of his beverages. Tonight's band is made up of four girls and an industrial fan. As far as Your Father can tell, the fan's purpose is to blow the girls' hair back into their faces and mouths and microphones.

The audience consists of three people. A man in a sweater vest, a woman who looks like a peach with legs and Your Father. The legged-peach claps with one hand. Your Father leans against the pool table. After the set, the musicians coil their leads and curse. The fan does nothing. Your Father knows that he should get home and sit on the couch and eat rindless bacon with The Nail Technician, The Forehead and the guinea pig. But that is not what he wants. What he wants is for the girls to play another song. A song that he can commend with enthusiastic clapping. A song that will distract his thoughts from You.

Your Father purchases more drinks and stands outside with the smokers and the dying plants. The man in the vest holds a beer with both hands and stands too close to the bassist. The musician covers her breasts with effects pedals.

Your Father spots your boss. She is vomiting into a garden bed. He averts his eyes. When

he is certain that she has finished, he offers her one of his drinks. She asks whether You are over your 'gastric issues'. After informing her that 'gastric issues' would have been a cover story for your recent 'on-purpose' bath accident, Your Father inquires as to whether your boss would be able to put You on leave. Stress leave. Lengthy leave. Leave that Your Father will pay for.

Pleased that his offer was accepted, he goes inside for another drink. The legged peach is sitting on the edge of the stage and playing with the velcro on her sandals. Your Father sits beside her and imagines what it would be like to leave his family, buy a suede jacket and become a musician. And before he realises what he is doing, Your Father is on stage, holding a guitar and slurring Bowie lyrics into the back of the fan.

The guitarist asks to be compensated. Your Father insists that the string was already broken, and if anything, the instrument sounds better with only five strings. The guitarist curses, chewing gum falls out of her mouth and into her hair. She is too angry to realise.

On the way home, Your Father thinks about one of your childhood accidents, the particular one with the chewing gum.

On the morning of this accident, your Father was holding a lady razor. Your Mother was trying to explain that there was no point in shaving her legs if she planned on wearing jeans for the entire winter. You were in the lounge and attempting to wear the family cat like a beret.

After throwing the razor at Your Mother, Your Father took You to see a movie. He bought the tickets. You bought the snacks. You returned from the candy bar with eight packets of chewing gum. Your Father shook his head and kissed You on the mouth.

In the cinema, You sat on the carpet and swallowed pieces of gum. Your Father sat in the chair and tried to kiss You on the top of the head. You pulled away and requested that Your Father not touch You with his lips. Or his hands. Or even his earlobes.

During the film's romantic moment – the one between the unattractive raccoon and the magical bullfrog, Your Father fell asleep. He woke to find that You also had given up on the film. Unlike Your Father, You had not fallen asleep. Instead, You had attempted to suffocate yourself by wedging chewing gum into your nostrils and ears and bellybutton.

Trying to avoid a scene, Your Father subtly dislodged the gum from your right ear and asked what 'in Christ's name' You were doing. You lied. You told Your Father that the gum was helping You to 'get good at holding your breath'.

In the car (instead of letting You know that You couldn't breathe out of your ears and stomach) Your Father told You that he loved You more than anything. More than cake. More than Bowie. And more than Your Mother.

Your Father pulls into the driveway. It is late and the house is dark. He opens the bathroom door and is greeted by The Nail Technician. She is on the toilet. She is unhappy. She is saying that she feels exactly like a mongoloid walrus.

Your Father wants to tell her about the band. And about his dreams of becoming a musician. And even about the woman in the crowd that looked like a peach on legs. But instead, he kisses The Nail Technician on the mouth and tells her that she is beautiful. And slim. And lighter than a baby walrus (even a runt baby that is too emaciated to access a nourishing nipple).

Most nights, Your Father dreams about having sex with a reverse mermaid – one with the legs of a woman and the head of an old trout. But tonight is different. Tonight, he dreams about last week. And about the installation job at the retirement home. The job he took before he drove to your house. And found You unconscious. And in your bathroom. And cocooned in a Twister mat.

In this dream, tonight's dream: he and The Nail Technician argue about the length of their daughter's skirt. The argument reaches a stalemate. Your Father starts to quote rape statistics. The nail technician hands her daughter a pair of tracksuit pants. Your Father leaves for work. He arrives at the nursing home. A nurse asks for smoke detectors to be installed in every room, and even in the tiny cupboard where ear buds and absorbent underwear are kept. Your Father leans his ladder against an oven. The nurse begins to dry retch. She says that recently this kitchen was filled with smoke. Your Father laughs and tells the nurse that the phrase 'don't cry over spilt milk' is a shortened version of the saying 'don't cry over spilt milk and especially don't gag over burnt biscuits.' But the nurse isn't 'gagging over a biscuit' because biscuit didn't cause the kitchen to fill with smoke. No, she is nauseous because, she is remembering the smell. The indescribable stench caused by the female resident who snuck into the kitchen, preheated the oven, placed her head on a wire rack. And proceeded to cook her own face.

Your Father wakes. The forehead has wet her bed and she refuses to change into dry clothes. After wrapping several beach towels around her waist, Your Father tucks The Forehead in beside him. She makes noises in her sleep. Noises that sound like a drowning kitten. Your Father covers his ears with bedding but the cat-like yelps still manage to permeate his pillow and quilt.

He moves to the couch. If his daughter sounded like a different animal (say, a puffin or a llama or a goose) he could have stayed in bed. But ever since the incident with your

childhood cat, Sophia Foccacia, all things ‘feline’ unsettle Your Father. After moving the couch cushions into a comfortable formation, Your Father thinks about the day, that double-barreled one, when Sophia Foccacia died and Your Mother left.

On that day, after a particular lengthy argument with Your Father, Your Mother decided to drive herself to the Caravan Park. You panicked and hid the car key inside Sophia Foccacia.

After catching You with your finger knuckle-deep inside the family pet, Your Mother cursed. And pulled her hair. And took the cat to the vet.

You cried. Your Father kissed You on the mouth and told You not to blame yourself. Your Mother returned from her bike ride to the clinic. Unfortunately, Sophia Foccacia did not. Your Father wanted to know ‘the prognoses’. Your Mother politely requested that Your Father ‘cut the Sherlock-bloody-Holmes shit’. Unconvinced the cat’s death was your fault, Your Father asked if Your Mother had accidentally killed Sophia Foccacia herself (perhaps by way of a shopping bag and some tasty crackers and a bucket of bleach). Your Mother said that she couldn’t take any more questions and any more of Your Father’s faggot hugs and any more of your disturbing activities – activities that ultimately lead to pet death.

Your Father told her to stop masking her pain with anger. But she believed that she had an obligation to be angry. With Your Father. And with You. And with the whole fucking situation. Your Father put his hand on Your Mother’s forearm and reminded her that swearing made her sound like a homeless man. A homeless man with dementia. And barnacled elbows. And breath that smelled of canned meat.

Your Mother threw her suitcase and coat out onto the driveway. Your Father prepared his arms for ‘makeup’ hugs. And with optimistic limbs still outstretched, he watched Your

Mother drive away.

After watching several quasi-pornographic music videos, Your Father is no longer tired. He leaves the comfort of the couch and goes into his daughter's room. He sits on the edge of the damp mattress, winks at his daughter's guinea pig and picks up a plastic ukulele.

Your Father closes his eyes and pictures himself onstage. Men are cheering. Women are removing their underpants. An angsty teen is carving his name into her forearm. Your Father imagines himself, coiled in a microphone lead and feeling liberated. And loved. And successful. He removes apple stickers from his daughter's ukulele and prepares to create his first masterpiece. He heard once, perhaps on television, that it's best to write from personal experience. Unfortunately, Your Father is a man of few experiences. He has never traveled. Or wrestled a bear. Or even stolen a grape from the greengrocers.

After three failed verses about the varying pitches of smoke alarms, Your Father begins writing about the people in his neighbourhood. In this town, little is left secret. And everyone seems to be (at the very least) nostril-deep in someone else's business. This was something that Your Father had difficulty accepting when You were Young and at your most accident-prone.

Conversely, Your Mother found it easy to cope with all the prying questions and condemnatory comments. Your Father put it down to the fact that Your Mother has a cluster of dead ants in the place where her heart should be.

Even now that your accidents are almost non-existent, Your Father has difficulty dealing with people and their frequent meddling. Occasionally, when someone asks about You, Your Father will lie and say that You are working in a latex factory...in Burma. Or teaching gymnastics to paraplegic children in a little village at the foot of the Italian Alps. Or

sometimes he will tell people that You are on the frontline. And holding a clipboard. And educating soldiers about the dangers of trench foot.

He starts to write things about people in his neighbourhood. Odd things. Inappropriate things. Private things. And after only a page of dot points, Your Father realises that he and his family aren't the most bizarre people in the suburb. And momentarily, his abnormalities make him feel ordinary. And forgettable.

He wakes smelling of stale urine. The nail technician calls out from the bathroom. She asks whether thinking about skinny things (like alfalfa sprouts and a clock's minute hand) might help her lose those few stubborn kilos. Instead of responding, Your Father picks at the scabs on the sole of his foot.

When The Nail Technician and The Forehead leave for their weekly crafting workshop, Your Father reads over the previous night's dot points. He has enough lyrical content for an entire anthology of songs. He phones the pub. He informs the bartender that he is a musician with a guitar. And eye shadow. And lyrics of gold. The bartender laughs and tells Your Father that all artists are booked based on their demo C.D, not their make up or golden lyrics. Your Father apologises, feels emasculated and hangs up the phone.

Your Father attempts to make the most of his empty house and phones Your Mother.

Years ago, after their separation, Your Father made a point of phoning Your Mother at the same time each week in a hope that routine might help her feel safe. And appreciated. And less like a woman with a heart of dead ants.

Since living with his new family, Your Father has tried to call Your Mother when he is alone. He feels he owes it to You to check on her. To make sure that she is still alive and

somewhat functioning.

Voicemail. Your Father tries again. This time, she answers and immediately begins asking about You and your life in France. Your Father tries to avoid lying as much as possible. But it is difficult, especially since after your recent accident (and in a desperate attempt to stop her from visiting You and making You more miserable) he told her that You moved to France to find yourself.

Your Mother's questions continue. Your Father invents ridiculous stories. Saying things like: when You are not cutting felt circles for Paris' second-most successful beret factory, You are at home, cultivating a moustache and constructing model planes from the shinbones of frogs.

The nail technician and The Forehead return home. Your Father hangs up the phone and opens his arms. Instead of hugging, The Forehead threads beads into Your Father's fringe. Your Father admires his hair accessories and wonders whether You lie in bed each night, and regret not doing things with him. Family things. Bonding things. Fringe-beading things.

Your Father is not a religious man. Nor has he ever been. When he was Young, his parents told him that Jesus was simply the man who rented a townhouse in the North Pole that was next door to the Clauses and adjacent to the Easter Bunny's burrow.

Your Mother was somewhat religious – somewhat in the sense that, as a child, she did the whole eat-circular-wafers-and-dress-up-like-Cinderella-and-adopt-a-saint's-name thing. When You were a child, your parents made a conscious decision not to teach You about religion. That was until your 'accidents'. Actually it was one accident in particular that caused Your Mother to turn to the church.

On the day Your Mother ‘turned’, Your parents had the neighbours over for dinner. Your Father prepared a roast. Your Mother prepared her ‘we have company’ face. You climbed over the fence and into your neighbour’s yard to steal firewood and prepare for a double crucifixion. Before serving the chicken, Your Father removed the bird’s ‘arse bit’ and went outside to give it to Sophia Foccacia. But he couldn’t find Sophia Foccacia. Nor could he find You. He checked the shed and the sand pit and the compost heap. He looked in the laundry and the rose bush and even the glove box of his car. His search ended when he peered into the neighbour's yard. On the other side of the fence, Your Father found You. And Sophia Foccacia. And two poorly constructed crucifixes made from firewood and skipping ropes. Unaware that You were being watched, You pinned Sophia Foccacia’s paw in position and reached for the staple gun.

Nowadays, Your Father frequently visits church because he is in the profession of installing and repairing smoke detectors. And churches (what with all their tea light candles and Ash Wednesdays) need their detectors checked regularly.

It was from being in the local church (and around the gossiping God-fearers) that Your Father learned the entire story about the woman from the nursing home, who attempted to bake her head into non-existence.

Your Father prepares pasties to take to the picnic that was organised by his daughter's dance class. It's a fundraising event for dogs with weak hearts.

The gazebo is adorned with pictures of paws and frowning-faced love hearts. The forehead is annoyed that her parents didn’t remind her to make decorations for the event. Your Father apologises and kisses his daughter on the mouth.

The other parents' culinary efforts make Your Father feel inadequate. When he thinks no one is watching, he steals some heart-shaped candies from another platter and pokes them into his cheese and spinach triangles.

The dance teacher shakes a donation tin in Your Father's face. He reaches into his pocket for change. The woman tilts her head to reinforce the fact that she is sorry, 'sorry to hear that, after all these years, You are still so unwell'. Your Father assumes that The Forehead must have told her teacher about your recent board-game accident.

After dropping several dollars (and a breath mint) into the fundraising tin, Your Father reassures the woman that, not only are You perfectly fine, You are currently overseas, in France, playing classical guitar for a traveling show that educates children about iron deficiency.

On the drive home, Your Father ignores The Nail Technician. She is shaking her bejeweled finger and informing Your Father of all the health and safety rules he breached when he decided to insert deceptively hard candies into soft pastries. Your Father turns up the radio and pictures himself on stage, receiving applause for his voice and his lyrics and his Bowie-esque eye shadow. The nail technician turns down the radio. Your father turns it up again. The nail technician curses. The forehead drops her sherbet cone all over the backseat and begins to cry.

After stopping the car, Your Father and The Nail Technician take it in turns to console their daughter and kiss her zingy-sherbet lips.

After pretending that The Priest phoned to say that one of the smoke detectors had fallen into the baptism bath, Your Father drops his girls home and drives to the pub.

The bartender mouths the words ‘no C.D, no sing’. Your Father swears that he had demo C.Ds this morning. But whilst he was at work, a petty criminal (with impeccable music taste) broke into his car and stole every disc. The bartender reminds Your Father that the venue will not book him unless they can hear him first. Your Father goes into his car to find more cigarettes.

He drives to the dilapidated caravan park where Your Mother used to pretend she fled to years ago, after heated arguments. Your Father opens the car door. He lights up. He removes his shoes and socks. He thinks of last week and of the phone conversation that he had with Your Mother.

She had just arrived home from work. He pictured her sitting in a cubicle, reeking of bleach and opening a new packet of urinal cakes. Attempting to make polite conversation, Your Father asked if urinal cakes came in various shapes. Or whether there’s just that one, circular kind. Your Mother requested that he abstain from any more cleaning-related questions.

He confessed that your accidents had started again. He told her that, this time, he found You in your bathroom. You had used a Twister mat to make yourself some type of modern-day sarcophagus.

Your Mother blamed all your accidents, even this one, on two things. One: your troubled cousin ‘Ben’. Two: Your Father’s freakish obsession with hugging and kissing and using pet names like ‘baby’ and ‘dear’ and ‘baby deer’. Your Father attempted to push the blame onto Your Mother, calling her an emotionally-quadruplegic bitchface. After apologising for using the term ‘bitchface’, he asked what exactly it was that Your Mother had against hugs and kisses and affectionate pet names. Instead of answering the question,

Your Mother demanded to know the number of your hospital room. Your Father lied and explained that she couldn't possibly visit You because not only were You out of hospital, You were out of the country. He told Your Mother that after You recovered You flew to France, to live, forever. And ever. And perhaps for even longer.

He is about to sing his sole when he hears something. It is the sound of two teenagers. They are swapping saliva and talking about 'how awesome' it would be if they named their children after characters from eighties sitcoms. Your Father puts the cigarette to his lips hums the Family Ties theme and drives home, to be with his girls.

The nail technician is still awake. She is pretending to read a romance novel. What she is actually doing is: waiting to see if Your Father smells like another lady's perfume. Your Father doesn't smell of perfume. Or shampoo. Or even deodorant. He smells of cigarettes and stout. The nail technician asks when the church decided to refashion itself into a brothel. Your Father admits that he wasn't actually at the church and changing a smoke detector. And that he was really at the pub, trying to book a gig. The nail technician laughs, stopping only to choke on her own spit. Your Father goes to sleep feeling embarrassed. And ashamed. And like breaking something rather valuable.

The forehead and The Nail Technician pretend they are going to church. But instead, like every other Sunday, Your Father's girls drive to the local football oval. Where they sit. And sip hot cocoa. And admire the toned arses of the under-eighteen football team.

Your Father eats cereal, listens to Neil Young, and remembers how Your Mother used to look when she was naked and lying face down on the unmade bed and snoring. Even when she was sleeping, Your Father remembers Your Mother seeming unhappy. It was as though every part of her body emitted misery. Her drooping shoulders. Her callused heels. Her deflated butt cheeks.

Your Father is about to start his fourth bowl of bran flakes, when the phone rings. It is Your Mother. She wants to come over to talk about You. And about France. And about the affair that she said she had, all those years ago, with that jaundiced gentleman named 'Samsonite'.

Your Father tells her that she has five minutes, less than five minutes until The Nail Technician returns home. Your Mother smells like chemicals and looks as though she applied her makeup whilst riding a rollercoaster. Your Father tells her that she looks nice. Like a youthful squirrel. She perches on the edge of the lounge and asks Your Father how long it usually takes for someone to find themselves in France. Your Father stares at the carpet and shrugs.

Your Mother says that she knows that You are not overseas. And, that Your Father lied so that she wouldn't visit You. Visit You and 'fuck You up' even more. Your Father reminds Your Mother that swearing makes her sound like a homeless man with meat breath.

The nail technician forgot to buy tea bags so your parents drink cups of boiled water. Your Mother wants to confess some things, some things that she has been keeping to herself for many years. Some things that she wants to admit in case she dies of cancer.

Your Father spills his hot water and asks how long she has known about the cancer. And he also asks if she is wearing some kind of hairpiece. Your Mother says that she doesn't have cancer, or artificial hair. She just meant that she wanted to share some of her secrets in case she was to ever get meningococcal or myxomatosis or some other life threatening illness.

He taps his watch and reminds her that she needs to leave soon. She reveals that she never

had a lover named Samsonite. And that, years ago whilst packing her overnight bag, she invented a fictitious lover so that Your Father wouldn't want to touch her anymore. She says that she never intended to hurt Your Father. Because she loved him. Very much. She just didn't love his kisses. Or his hugs. Or even when he removed an eyelash from her cheek.

She spills hot water on her lap. He advises her to quickly remove her trousers. And kiss him. Your Mother and her pants, remain seated and united. Your Father confesses that he thinks he might still, perhaps, love her. Your Mother unzips her jeans and allows them to fall to the floor. She is wearing flesh-tone underpants that have a bleach stain on the crotch. She lifts her shirt over her head until her face is completely covered. Your Father attempts to remove her top from her head but she insists that he leave it there. She then discloses what actually happened to Sophia Foccacia on the way to the veterinary clinic and asks if she is a terrible mother. Instead of answering, Your Father picks up his daughter's ukulele and begins to play the song he has been working on, the song about the idiosyncratic people in his neighbourhood. Your Mother shakes her head, making the empty sleeve of her blouse fly around and hit her in the face. Your Father stops, mid verse and confesses that he's been contemplating running away to start a band. Or to join the circus. Or to sit in a café in Quebec and eat Quiche Lorraine.

She says that he can kiss her if he wants to. He puts down his ukulele and leans across the couch. She flinches. His teeth hit a button. The nail technician and The Forehead return home. Your Mother removes her shirt from her face and attempts to cover her nakedness with her blouse and a broadsheet newspaper. The nail technician calls Your Father a 'c hole' and throws a shopping bag at his face. A jar of orange marmalade flies out of the bag and hits Your Mother in the collarbone. The nail technician tells her daughter to get back in the car.

Your Father reaches underneath the couch and pulls out a packet of cigarettes. Your Mother says that she had completely forgotten about his singeing habit.

‘Does it change anything?’ She asks, redressing.

‘No. It just makes your feet a little crispier.’

‘Well, I 'spose that's something.’



I am: My Sweetness.

You don't know who I am but I know who You are. I have seen You before at the Second Chances op shop. Sometimes when I go to that store, I like to put little plates inside my jumper and run outside. It makes all the blood pump to my heart. And also, it makes the old op shop ladies chase me. It's funny to make old people do things that they aren't supposed to. Things like running and screaming and punching their crinkly monkey fists into the air.

Yesterday I saw You at Second Chances. You were reading a book about the war. I stared right at your face for ages but You didn't see me because I was hiding behind a rocking horse and wearing a shopping bag on my head. After I saw You, I went home and ate cereal and asked my mum if You were a Nazi. She said that You weren't. But I still think that You might be a teeny bit Nazi, just like mum says I am a teeny bit 'attention deficit'. I learned about Nazis at school. I also learned that cheese is not a vegetable and that sucking on the end of the water bubbler spreads germs.

I don't really need to go to school. I am already the smartest in my class. I know this because when I kill things, all the other kids cry or dob. And my dad says that people who cry and dob are 'pussies'. When he says pussies, he actually means 'stupid'.

At school and at home I like to hurt things that are smaller than me because it makes me feel powerful like a shark or a Jesus with a gun. The other day I killed a mouse. I was in the alleyway at the end of my street and I ran over the mouse with my bicycle. Before I buried it, a man came into the alleyway and started talking to me. He was an ugly man.

When he was speaking I imagined what he would look like without any clothes on. I pictured a dog poo in the rain.

The man called me 'My Sweetness' because he couldn't pronounce my name properly. That is because my name is Polish. Poland is a country where people eat sausage and wear jackets.

We buried the mouse near the playground. Instead of saying a prayer, I sang a song called 'Now I Wanna Be your Dog.' The song is by a band called The Stooges. My dad has lots of records by The Stooges. He also has one with a banana on the cover and another one by a lady named David Bowie.

I usually sing a song after I kill something. I have a really good voice. Fat aunty told me that I have 'the voice of an angel'. I have never heard an angel sing. I don't think fat aunty has either. But I said 'thank you' anyway because I am very polite. Yesterday, when mum was plucking the hairs from her toe knuckles, I told her that fat aunty will probably be able to hear angels sing really soon. Maybe even sometime this week. Mum looked confused, so I called her a pussy.

At school, the teacher put me on the red spot for calling a girl that word. I tried to explain that I was just saying that the girl was stupid because she licked her bee sting to see if it tasted like Violet Crumble. I always have to sit on the red spot. I have to sit there for drawing crossbows and for pulling wings off moths and for throwing pencils at the deaf boy. It doesn't matter that I miss out on a lot of learning because I am already the smartest kid in my class.

I don't think that You are very smart. I do know that You went to my school when You were little. I saw your name written in the back of an old book about Africa – the book

with the photos of those African people who don't have enough money to buy clothes. your name was written on the last page, right next to an arrow that was pointed at an old man's naked body. I don't think that You had many friends when You were at school.

I don't have many friends. I think it's because the other kids are jealous of my 'smartness'. Mum has tried to make me be friends with The Boy that lives near my house. He came over once. And one time, I visited him at his grandmother's place. His grandmother made biscuits that tasted like cat food.

Mum says that I should be nice to The Boy because he is from a 'broken home'. I'm not sure why she says that because I've seen his house and it is all in one piece. I don't really like hanging around The Boy because he is a gay. I know this because when I went to his grandma's house, he asked me to put makeup on his face. I drew whiskers on his cheeks with a lipstick. His grandma walked in and asked 'what in the heck' I was doing. I said that I was putting makeup on her gay grandson. She told me to ring my mum.

Right now, mum is at work and dad is pushing his nail clippings down the side of the couch. I ride my bike to the park. The park is empty because it is a school day. I am not at school because I told dad that school was cancelled. Sometimes I tell my parents that school has been 'called off' because all the year ones got cancer or because the library is filled with wasps or because the principal got arrested for punching a swan. My parents don't believe me, but most of the time they let me stay home anyway. I'm pretty sure it's because they already know that I am the smartest kid in my class.

The park isn't empty anymore. You are here and sitting next to the swings. I want to talk to You, but I decide not to because I remember that You are a teeny bit of a Nazi. The Boy from the 'broken' home says that You live next door to him. And he told me that once he watched You (through the gap in his back fence) give yourself a Chinese burn. He said

You were twisting your arm because You are a 'suicider'. I told him that 'suicides' don't do Chinese burns, they eat rat powders and hang from ropes and try to fall asleep in ovens, like fat aunty did. My parents sometimes take me to visit fat aunty in the hospital. I don't know why, she's not even my real aunty. I bet she's not even anyone's aunty. Maybe that's why she tried to take a nap in her oven.

Mum is upset. I know this because she has been in the shower for ages. She always has long washes when something bad happens. Maybe she thinks that, if she tries extra hard, she can scrub all of her sad feelings away with her big loofah and purple shower creams.

The hospital people said that fat aunty died a peaceful death. I'm not sure what that means. Maybe it's like relaxation. Sometimes after an excursion our teacher says we need 'relaxation time' to make us calm down. We put our chairs on top of the tables and then we have to lie down on the carpet and close our eyes. The teacher plays music that sounds like fairies crying and she tells us to take slow, deep breaths. Instead of closing my eyes, I squint them so I can still watch the deaf boy fiddle with his bottom.

Maybe that's what the doctors meant when they said 'peaceful'. Maybe fat aunty lay down under her hospital bed and died listening to fairy music.

I sit next to the creek and pull the legs off a caterpillar. I think about my mum, rubbing her knees with the big loofah until her kneecaps start to fall off. Maybe I should tell her that an angel came to me and told me that fat aunty is happy. And relaxed. And listening to tinkly music. Maybe that will make mum and her kneecaps feel better.

At the park, I karate kick the swing set. It doesn't fight back, because it is a swing set. A little bird falls over in the bark chips. I walk over to see if it is drunk. The bird does not fly away. It just starts to run away very slowly because its wings are all squashed and broken.

I pick up the bird and ask how many wines it has had. My dad sometimes asks mum this question when she starts to tell us stories about how beautiful and skinny she was when she was Young.

The bird tries to wiggle out of my hands so I give it a little squeeze. And another little squeeze and then I poke it with a twig. I would like to shoot it with a crossbow but I do not own a crossbow. The ugly man who helped me bury the mouse is near the swings. I go and give the little bird and the twig to him.

Today is the day of fat aunty's funeral. I have never been to a 'people funeral' before. Mum says I have to wear black because it's 'tradition'. The only black thing I own is a Batman t-shirt. Mum says we have to go shopping because Batman isn't 'appropriate' for funerals. At the shops, mum holds a frilly skirt against my waist. I try on the skirt and make a big frowning face to show mum that I hate it. Mum tells me to just pick whatever I want. I choose a pair of overalls that have a tiny skateboard on the pocket. The skateboard has flames coming out of its wheels. The flames make it look fast and tough and just like me.

On the way to the church, mum says she feels dirty and like she wants to have another shower. I tell her that she should talk about her upset feelings and not go in the shower and scrub her kneecaps because kneecaps are very important for walking and dancing and for doctors to hit a little hammer on. Mum asks me if I know what happened to The Boy in the hospital. I say yes, I know he got sick from being 'a gay'. Mum shakes her head and says that The Boy and his mum are going through a very difficult time and that it's important for me to be nice to him and even for me to visit him in the hospital next time. When I ask why, she says, 'because life is too short for nastiness.' I tell mum that fat aunty's life wasn't short, fat aunty was probably as old as the hills. Mum asks how I know about that saying. I tell her that I heard fat aunty say it about the magazines in the

hospital. Mum puts on her sunglasses so people can't see that she's crying.

There aren't many people at the church but most of the people that are here are really chubby so the church still looks pretty full. The ugly man from the park is here too. He is up on the stage and he is playing the organ. I wave to him. But he cannot see me because he isn't wearing glasses and because I am very skinny. I look around for You but You are not here. Maybe You have your own Nazi church to go to.

The Priest reads a poem from his book. He tells us to shut our eyes and say a prayer for fat aunty. I say a little prayer and then open my eyes to see if anyone in the church is fiddling with their bottom.

On our way to the cemetery, mum asks what I prayed for. I tell her that I prayed for everyone, everywhere to never have nastiness in their lives ever again. Mum leans over, kisses me on the head and tells me that she's lucky to have a daughter like me. I don't tell her that I really prayed for a crossbow. I don't tell her the truth because the truth can make people upset. I know this because I am the smartest kid in my class.



He is: The Organist.

The Organist often wishes that he were born a bird. Sometimes when inflating a beach ball, other times when touching his privates. In his opinion, birds have it better. Not easier, just better.

You enter a pew and hide your face behind several food-drive pamphlets. The Organist watches and wonders if You are perhaps a fugitive. Or a recluse. Or a recluse fugitive. He finds You compelling. He would like to hug You. And take You home. And build You a fort from soft furnishings, one with turrets of old flannels and discoloured pillowcases. From his stool, he catches your eye and smiles. You conceal yourself behind a portly parishioner. The Organist turns back to his ivories and wishes that he were born a bird.

He usually eats a plain potato after church. And today, is no exception. Tasteless food is no stranger to this performer's palette. Since his grandmother's passing, he has taken to acts of self-deprivation. Sometimes to the point of tears. Sometimes even to the point of foetal-positioned-rocking on his floral bathroom tiles. The Organist locks eyes with his potato and thinks about the lady from his church. The lady who recently removed a par-baked cake from the nursing home's oven to allow adequate rack-space for her head.

He flicks through television channels and feels unattractive. After watching a commercial for 'light bladder leakage', he decides to leave the house.

In an alleyway, a girl rides over his left foot. The girl is using one hand to steer her bicycle and the other, to hold a dead mouse. Her name is difficult to pronounce, so The Organist decides not to pronounce it. Instead, he calls her 'My Sweetness'. The Organist and My

Sweetness head to the particular park with the urine-scented slippery dip. My Sweetness goes down the slide twice. The Organist decides that children (in comparison to adults) must have a higher tolerance to the smell of urine. Whilst the girl plays on the equipment, The Organist holds the mouse.

He wants to put the rodent down, in the bark chips, and wash his hands. But for My Sweetness' sake, he does not. For My Sweetness, The Organist holds the mouse gently and compassionately, as though it were not a dead animal. But, as though it was his grandmother's little, senior-citizen hand.

In a patch of dirt between the swings and the toilet wall with the genital illustration, My Sweetness begins to dig. The Organist feels he should be the one to do the manual labour, the grave digging. But now he does not want to part with the mouse. Now, he wants to keep the tiny animal in his hand, for just a little longer.

My Sweetness spits on the ground in an attempt to soften the soil. The Organist joins in. Both take turns in spitting. The Organist stops when he realises how the situation might look to a passersby. Satisfied with her efforts, My Sweetness runs her dirt-clad, minstrel fingers through her hair. The Organist watches, mesmerised.

He imagines what it would be like to be this girl, this Sweetness. He pictures his sweetened self, eating sugar packets and daydreaming of Santa. He imagines himself, wearing nothing but an unbuttoned flannelette pajama shirt. A purple shirt adorned with cartoon cupcakes. To this pianist, a life as My Sweetness is a life without the constant, underlying need for self-deprivation.

He looks at the mouse and wonders whether it took its own life. Filling his hands with playground dirt, he thinks about the woman from the church. The woman who didn't want

to eat any more digestive biscuits. The woman who didn't want to knit any more beanies for any more babies (aids or otherwise). The woman who didn't know that it was most effective to kill oneself with a gas ignited oven, not an electric one.

My Sweetness begins to sing. Before he can question the song choice, My Sweetness explains that it is a factual fact that all dead and dying things like Iggy Pop music. She plucks the handkerchief from his pocket. The Organist observes the gift (that he received from his grandmother) absorb corpse juice. He watches and wishes that My Sweetness had embalmed the body first.

The girl's tears hinder her singing. With The Stooges' song now almost unrecognisable, The Organist puts his arm around My Sweetness' shoulder and together they sing:

Now we're gonna be face-to-face

And I'll lay right down in my favorite place

And now I wanna be your dog

My Sweetness apologises for purposely running over the rodent on her bicycle. She tells the mouse that sometimes, she kills things because it makes her feel powerful like a shark or like a Jesus with a gun. She confesses that killing is just something that she likes to do and that it cannot really be explained – just like it cannot be explained why some people like to smell their own farts. The Organist unwraps the rodent, pockets his handkerchief and wishes that he were born a bird.

On his way home, The Organist buys whiskey and wine and some kind of alcohol that resembles melted toothpaste. In his kitchen, The Organist stares at his purchases and thinks of You. He wonders if right now, You are in the church and concealed behind pamphlets or magazines or a broadsheet newspaper. The Organist closes his eyes and

pictures You with a moustache made of movie reviews and a stock-exchanged pea coat.

The Organist thinks about You, at church hiding behind the pamphlet. He wonders what someone like You would possibly need to hide from. Mixing his drinks, The Organist thinks about the elderly woman from church, the facial-baker. He wonders whether there is a possibility that she too was simply hiding. Hiding inside her oven. Hiding so that no one could judge her or judge the way she felt about The Organist's grandmother.

Licking the rim of a wine bottle, The Organist remembers that his taste buds and alcohol are natural adversaries. He empties his purchases into his bathtub and tries to think of other possible ways to medicate the guilt that comes with euthanasing a grandmother.

As he changes into his flannelette pyjamas, The Organist wonders how many birds of paradise, at this very moment, are having sex. He knows that birds of paradise are rarely intimate. Attenborough himself said so. With this in mind, The Organist estimates that right now, in the world, there are seventeen birds of paradise currently 'at it'. Eight couples and one lonely oropendola bird having it away with a leaf. The Organist wonders if You have ever been so lonely as to copulate with a plant.

Whilst combing his eyebrows with his toothbrush, The Organist thinks of his grandmother and wonders whether she has any eyebrows left. He heard somewhere, perhaps on the news that hair takes a long time to perish. He pictures his grandmother's skeleton. Only two recognisable features remain: her eyebrows and her moustache.

The Organist unfolds his handkerchief and wipes his perspiring palms. The material's rodent aroma makes him think of My Sweetness. From his stool, The Organist scans the pews to see if she is at tonight's service. If My Sweetness did attend church, she would behave like the girl from his Sunday Schooled past – the particular girl who (when the

teacher's back was turned) would lift her dress and put nativity figurines in her underpants.

Mid lamb-mentioning hymn, he turns from his ivories and sees You. The Organist can tell that You do not regularly attend mass for two reasons. One: You arrive after communion. Two: You simultaneously bow and curtsy before entering a pew. Watching You causes The Organist to miss a bar, two bars of music. The Priest is not impressed. You sit between an old man and an obese woman. You clasp your hands and grin unnecessarily. The Organist wonders whether You have come to church simply to ridicule the God-fearing, the overweight and the elderly. The Organist watches You, and tries to work out whether You are silently making fun of the old people. Mocking their prayers and their fear of impending death.

Plucking aphids from his pinched posy, The Organist recalls his grandmother's cutlery drawer. And how it almost entirely consisted of airline knives, forks and spoons. Assembling his stolen stems, he recalls how his grandmother saw her cutlery-thieving as a way to get even with the airlines for their ridiculous prices.

On his way home from the cemetery, he watches a young girl rock (Norman-Bates style) in a porch chair and wonders whether he should have taken his grandmother to a taxidermist. He pictures her atop his mantel, stuffed and in a pouncing-panther position. Glass crunches beneath his sensible footwear. He recognises the smashed eyeglasses. They belong to his grandmother's friend, the facial baker. Picking up shards of broken glass, The Organist wonders how the woman's spectacles ended up here, on the footpath in front of Norm-ette's house. Perhaps The Baker has made a full recovery. Perhaps she is out of hospital and has taken up skateboarding. Perhaps, she skated past this very street and lost her glasses during some kind of impressive maneuver.

The Organist equates the increased attendance to the introduction of free post-mass biscuits. Looking at the backs of the God-fearing heads, he tries to locate the particular woman who gives communion to hospital-bound devotees. To The Organist, all old ladies look the same from behind. That is, all except for the one with alopecia. He stands in the foyer and opens a packet of macaroons. The balding woman attaches a piece of paper to a trestle table. The woman's sign reads 'free the biscuits'. The Organist wonders whether alopecia and dyslexia are perhaps linked. After the service, a woman approaches The Organist, removes desiccated coconut from her teeth and informs the musician of The Baker's location.

The Baker is sleeping. The Organist presses his thighs against the side of the hospital bed and opens a box of expired truffles. He assumed that her burnt face would resemble a platter of deli meat. He was wrong. The Baker's face is akin to a raisin. A raisin that has been squished in a child's schoolbag, between an uneaten saltine and a drawing of a three-legged pigeon. Smoothing the woman's sheets, The Organist remembers the times when he caught her and his grandmother sneaking out of the nursing home for 'little inhalations of heaven'. The Organist smiles and recalls the particular time when The Baker refused a second cigarette because she was concerned about stunting her growth.

The room's lack of Hallmark and chrysanthemums is saddening. But even despite her condition and lack of well wishes, The Organist envies the woman. He envies the friendship she shared with his grandmother. Growing up, The Organist didn't have many close friends, mainly because his grandmother didn't allow other children into her house. The Organist spits out bits of truffle and recalls the friends that were permitted. He closes his eyes and remembers the hours spent in his grandmother's lounge with his two closest companions: a videotaped Attenborough and a large-print animal encyclopedia.

The Baker wakes.

She does not smile, even when offered an expired chocolate. The Organist runs his fingers across the masking tape and wood glue and all the other materials he used in his bullshit reconstructive attempts. Squeezing the glasses until they break, The Organist feels like an idiot for assuming that poorly-repaired spectacles and a box of old truffles might make up for what he did to his grandmother and to this woman, this baker.

The Baker asks if The Organist can also no longer eat lamb. Avoiding the question, The Organist attempts to sound convincing when he explains to the woman that, like Crawford's mole and Bowie's eyes, her burns give her character. The Baker does not respond. The Baker asks the musician (and his truffles) to leave.

On the bus ride home, The Organist wonders whether he should have bought The Baker a balloon. One with flowers and 'get well soon' written in lowercase, submissive letters. Or perhaps a balloon featuring a unicorn and an unattractive child hugging.

The bus smells of cheap cologne and damp toddlers. The Organist thinks of his grandmother. And of how it was decided that she was incapable of independent living when her occasional soilings became frequent.

The Organist gets off the bus. Across the street, a redheaded boy kicks a spaniel. The Organist debates offering a truffle to the child. Not wanting to be a stranger with candy, he keeps the expired treats to himself. He eats truffles and envies all children, redheaded or otherwise. Instead of a bird, The Organist momentarily wishes he were a child.

On his walk home, he asks himself whether a sociable person would obsess over their grandmother's death in the same way that he has. Instead of obsessing, he assumes that normal people would probably go out for gelati or to purchase blinds from a furniture

store. He pictures a couple, holding hands and shopping for soft furnishings. And he wonders if perhaps all that his life is truly lacking is a held hand and a lamp stand.

The Priest uses various faux-curse words. The Organist apologises for visiting The Baker when he should have been at church. The Priest is forgiving...but The Organist assumes it is only because forgiveness is in The Priest's job description. The Organist inquires as to whether the church could do something to help The Baker. Something like a telethon or a motivational song performed by local celebrities. The Organist is reminded that he is not a pop star and that the hospitalised woman is not a malnourished child.

The musician arrives at the nursing home. Seven raise their hands to volunteer. Out of that seven, the nurses allow three men and one woman to accompany the musician. The Organist drives the nursing-home bus to the hospital.

After six toilet breaks, The Organist and his quartet are ready. The shortest choral members stand at the front. The woman says that she likes being at the front as it allows her more room to dance. The Organist counts backward from five. On zero, they sing. The Baker tells the choir that she has no idea why any of them would want to be her dog. And that, if anything, she has always been more of a cat person.

Now that he is closer, now that he can see the lines where her expressive eyebrows used to be, he can tell that The Baker is upset. And he realises that My Sweetness was wrong in thinking that all dead and dying things like The Stooges. The Baker rolls over and feigns sleep. The Organist leaves.

The bus is one retiree short. The elderly woman says that someone probably shot the missing man. Shot him to steal his hearing aid. The Organist wants to yell at the woman and perhaps slap some sense into her sunken cheeks. Instead of yelling and slapping, he

calmly requests that the retirees remain on the bus whilst he attempts to find the escaped member of his quartet.

After an hour of unsuccessful searching, The Organist collapses in the hospital's flowerbed. Closing his eyes, he waits for a sign. After several, sign-less minutes he returns to the bus. With head on the steering wheel, The Organist wishes, now more than ever, that he were born a bird. A peacock. A parrot. A pigeon. A bird that could care less about misplacing someone's grandfather.

On the drive, one of the men attempts to lift the mood by stretching a stolen-surgical glove over his head. The glove bursts. The man's teeth fall out.

The nurse is extremely angry that instead of a quartet, the musician has returned to the home with a trio. The nurse calls The Organist the most offensive of curse words and demands that the musician return to the hospital.

The Organist listens to the news on the radio. Two people have died in a car accident. The driver and the passenger. Their car collided with an oncoming truck that was filled with second-hand mattresses.

The Organist turns the radio down and pictures the accident. For a moment, he wonders whether You were the driver. And whether the elderly escapee was the passenger. The Organist feels sick at the thought of You and the old man kissing passionately. So passionately that You forgot to steer, causing your car to veer into the path of an oncoming truck. A truck that was collecting mattresses for orphaned children. For tiny, parentless children who were desperately looking forward to the feeling of something softer, of something other than wooden floorboards underneath their sleeping spines.

The gift shop is closing. The Organist peers through the shop's window. But the old man is not trapped beneath the pile of plush toys or in the magazine rack or hiding amongst the sealed pornographic magazines.

The Organist checks The Baker's room. Slumped in a chair, with wayward comb over, the escapee looks exhausted. Both men silently watch the rise and fall of The Baker's sleeping chest. The Organist takes the 'it's a girl' balloon from the escapee's hand and secures the string to The Baker's bed head.

Staring at the balloon, The Organist wonders whether the escapee and The Baker were once romantically involved. The musician wants to ask if the escapee still loves The Baker. Loves her despite her deli-meat face. Despite her absence of eyebrows. Despite her feelings for The Organist's grandmother. The feelings that (on hearing about the grandmother's death) caused The Baker to cook her own face.

The elderly man fixes his hair and apologises for escaping. The Baker stirs in her sleep. Lowering his voice to a whisper, the escapee says that he barely knew The Baker. And that he isn't quite sure why he came back, to her room, to watch her sleep. The Organist fears that perhaps the escapee returned for tips. Facial-baking tips.

Back at the nursing home, the escapee begs The Organist to drive somewhere else. Anywhere else. The Organist thinks of his grandmother's final months. The thought of living in this nursing home, in any nursing home, is nauseating. Closing his eyes, The Organist tells the escapee to run away before either of them changes their mind. Pressing his hands into his eyelids, the musician silently counts to one hundred.

'Ninety-eight, ninety-nine'. The Organist opens his eyes. Still seated, the escapee has not lived up to his name. The Organist helps the old man off the bus and up the ramp to the

nursing home.

In his lounge room, The Organist decides that he should help the escapee. Help him. And perhaps hug him. And buy him cigarettes. Poking his breakfast potato, The Organist decides that he does not want to be alone today. Alone and thinking of his grandmother. Instead, he wants to be out. Hugging and smoking. Rolling marbles and wolf whistling. Eating peanuts and throwing stones. The Organist looks at his organ and tells it to fuck itself. The instrument does not respond.

The images on the packaging are more confronting than The Baker's face. He opens the packet. The one that features the rotting toes. The cigarettes are neatly packed, each one brushing shoulders with the next. The Organist envies the cigarettes and hopes that someday, he too will have someone to press up against.

He cannot borrow the bus. It is out and filling itself with bingo enthusiasts. On the public bus, The Organist wonders what the escapee must have said that made the nurses agree to the daytrip. The Organist decides that the old man probably told the nurses that The Organist is pathetic. So pathetic that if the escapee wasn't allowed out, then the musician would most likely climb in behind the church's organ and stay there, like a child in a disused fridge, until all the air ran out.

Outside the bus, a sparrow pecks at an old hotdog. Inside the bus, the escapee metaphorically drops his lunch. People bury their faces inside their jumpers. The Organist asks if the escapee knows what actually happened to the two women. The escapee does know. He knows about the baking. And about the day when The Organist picked up his grandmother from the retirement home to take her for a drive. The escapee tells The Organist not to blame himself. The escapee understands what it's like to drive on country roads. On winding, slippery, livestock-covered country roads.

The Organist pictures the crossing sheep and recalls the moment between seeing the flock and collecting it. He recalls the moment when he chose not to apply the brakes. That brief, intentional moment, when he took it upon himself to decide that his grandmother deserved to die in a car. And in the country. And with family. Instead of in a communal chair with blended meat and vegetative strangers.

The Baker wakes and requests that The Organist and escapee refrain from singing about dogs. The men oblige. The Organist offers The Baker a cigarette. She takes two from the pack. One for herself and one for The Organist's grandmother. Holding a cigarette in each hand, The Baker requests that the two men smoke the cigarettes outside, on the ladies' behalf.

The Priest is too busy to talk. He has many important things to do before mass. Things like: sound-check his lapel microphone and learn the proper pronunciation of all the patrons who have died since last night's service.

Even with inaccurate pronunciation, The Organist knows it can only be her. He listens to the elderly god-fearers as they unsubtly crunch communion wafers and pictures The Baker's last moments. He hopes that someone or at least something was with her when she passed. A nurse. A televised game show. A cigarette.

The Organist shops in an attempt to distract his thoughts from The Baker. Sifting through souvenir spoons, he spots You. You are on the other side of the store. You are hugging a pair of women's trousers. Momentarily, The Organist wants to take the trousers' place. And hold You. And befriend You. And love You to the extent that your death would warrant a face-bake. Instead of doing these things, he busies himself with unpaired socks.

By accident, he touches a set of underpants that have made their way into the sock bucket.

Picking up the deflated, flesh-tone briefs, he tries to convince himself that the privates (and their person) are very much alive and well. But he knows otherwise. He knows that all thrift-store underwear comes from the houses of dead people.

The Organist puts down the pants. And, in fear of finding his grandmother's and The Baker's unmentionables, he heads out of the store. On the counter, is a caged bird. Instead of concerning himself with the ethics of donating a pet to a thrift store, The Organist asks to purchase the budgerigar. The elderly volunteer looks tired and confused.

He takes his purchase to the park, sits on the bench and faces the toilet wall. It looks different. The penis picture has been painted over, covered up with an equally offensive coat of beige. He puts the cage on the grass and attempts to enjoy the company of his new, feathered friend.

After deciding that he doesn't deserve a pet, he opens the cage and tips it on its side. Releasing the bird makes The Organist want to laugh. And whistle. The bird walks towards the play equipment. Rather than reminding the bird that it might perhaps be better to fly (and not stroll) away, The Organist goes into the public toilets, leans against the basin and stares at his reflection.

Across the park a small child is punching the swing set. After three punching minutes, The Organist recognises the girl. My Sweetness stops to ask The Organist if he would like a snack. He politely declines. Instead of snacking, they both begin to swing. My Sweetness sings about an old lady with a remarkable ability to ingest entire farm animals. With each verse, The Organist's stomach becomes increasingly audible. My Sweetness reminds him that she has an available snack. One that she has prepared earlier. In a momentary lapse of self-deprivation, The Organist accepts the girl's offer. My Sweetness kicks off her shoes and climbs down from the swing.

My Sweetness hands The Organist her 'birdcicle'. She clears her throat and prepares herself for another Stooges' rendition. The Organist stares at the impaled budgerigar, and is unsure of what to wish for.



I am: The Priest.

Darren hides in many different places. The lady with alopecia discovered him in a dream. The man with the swollen knee came across him in a public toilet. Many people have found him after a near-death experience or inside the walls of a prison. As a child, I found Darren hiding inside the uppermost layer of my father's lasagna.

In my childhood, I rarely communicated with anyone other than my dog. Her name was taken from my favourite storybook character, Queen Elizabeth. During my childhood, Elizabeth and I would often retreat to my tree house, sit down to cups of lemon cordial and spend hours reading about the Queen and all of the other characters in the royal family.

I was the only one who called her Elizabeth. To everyone else she was either: Pants or Tits. The name Pants arose when she was a puppy and after she was found hanging from our Hills Hoist in a pair of my school trousers. No one knew exactly how she got stuck in my clothing. My father suggested that she must have leaped into the trousers after climbing the clothesline 'like one of them coconut people'. 'Tits' was coined after the dog jumped up to steal a piece of preserved meat from my nanna's wrinkly hand. And instead of grabbing the salami, the dog accidentally bit nanna's prosthetic breast (which, unfortunately for my grandmother, resulted in the prosthesis looking less like a breast and more like a worn-out sports sock).

Elizabeth and I were inseparable. We played together, ate together and occasionally even bathed together. During most school holidays, dad would take Elizabeth and me camping. In the summer break of my final year at primary school, my Younger cousin also accompanied us on a trip.

On the second night (and after an unsuccessful seven hours spent fishing), I lay in my sleeping bag and attempted to ignore my cousin. She was outside, removing tent pegs and politely informing me that I was a loser. A gigantic loser that 'stunk like a dead fish '. From my sleeping bag, I patiently waited for Elizabeth and hoped that both the tent and I did not blow away before she returned.

My cousin pretended that the pegs were boomerangs and proceeded to hurl them across the campsite. Unfortunately for my cousin, pegs (unlike boomerangs) do not return to their thrower. And unfortunately for Elizabeth, hurtling metal is very difficult to dodge in the dark.

I hyperventilated. My cousin cried. My father yelled 'Tits!' The tent collapsed. Dad wanted to bury Elizabeth that night but I wouldn't allow it. I clutched her tightly and refused to accept that she was really gone. I sat outside the tent and took stock: My toes were freezing. My arms were hugging my knees. My ears were desperately trying to catch the sound of dog breath.

The sun woke and so did my father. Outside the tent, I was curled up next to the fire hugging Elizabeth. Dad covered me with coats and carried me into the tent, where I fell asleep. He then dragged Elizabeth down to the river's edge and started to dig. After only a few minutes of manual labour, dad was exhausted. So to save his energy, he attempted to fold Elizabeth in half.

I woke and found that instead of Elizabeth, my arms were hugging my cousin's parka. I ran outside. Elizabeth was gone. My immediate thought was that a pack of hungry wolves had come and eaten her during the night. Eaten her right out of my arms.

My father was by the river and attempting to fold Elizabeth like a bed sheet. I knelt down, removed my shoes and used them to dig. And silently, my father and I worked together in burying our dog. When Elizabeth was completely covered with soil, I asked if we should say something. Dad began to sob and asked God to take good care of his sweet little Tits.

My cousin washed her fringe with bottled water. My father poured uneaten baked beans into the river. I sat in the back of the ute and emptied the bag of tent pegs onto my lap. I then asked God to pick a peg, any peg and use it to avenge Elizabeth's death. Twenty minutes passed, the pegs had not moved.

Dad explained that God didn't exist to avenge deaths. According to my father, God existed for one reason and one reason only: to make people feel less afraid. On the drive home (and whilst Dad and my cousin played their umpteenth game of 'I Spy'), I decided that God could take Elizabeth's place and become my best friend.

At the dinner table, whilst grating cheese, I asked the big man if he wanted to accompany us for dinner. He did not respond. So I looked to the ceiling and asked again. After my twenty-fifth unanswered dinner invitation, I slammed the grater against the table and demanded that he reveal himself – reveal himself so that I could kick him in the neck for being so rude.

Dinner was ready. My father was curious as to why I had set the table for three people and also why half the dining room was covered in cheese. Instead of responding, I held an ice cube in my palm, watched it melt and thought about all the different types of best friends that Elizabeth and I had read about in storybooks.

As the water dripped onto the tablecloth, I had a mini revelation. I realised that every character in every book knew the name of their best friend. Snow White knew the names

of her dwarves. Batman knew that the little bloke beside him was Robin. And the Queen definitely knew what her favourite corgi was called. So, I could never assume the role of God's best friend if I was unsure what his Christian name was.

I tried to remember if I had heard anyone use his real name. I knew that lots of old people were religious so I tried to recall if I had heard some elderly women mention his name in the chemist or in the jam aisle at the Good Prices. I asked my father if he could take me to church to meet God. Assuming that some Jehovah's Witnesses had come round while he was out buying bread, my father told me not to open the door to strangers. After reassuring him that my brain hadn't been 'poisoned' by doorknockers, I explained that I simply wanted to meet the man who would be looking after Elizabeth. And make sure that he was scratching her stomach in just the right spot – the spot that made her leg go all kicky. Dad laughed and told me that God wasn't like the Santa in the shopping centre and that people didn't go to church, climb onto his doughy lap and simply ask him for things. No, unlike Santa, God could be anywhere. And many people believed he would be with them when they needed him the most. This made me extremely frustrated. Not only did I have to work out what his name was, I also had to wait for him to realise that the time when I needed him most was, right then, at that very minute.

That night, I had difficulty falling asleep. I stared at my macaroni solar system mobile and thought about Elizabeth. She had been gone less than a week and already I missed her so much that my insides felt as though they were hosting a karate tournament. I wanted my new best friend to hurry up and reveal himself. I knelt beside my bed and united my hands. I had seen women do this in the movies, after their husbands had been sent to war. I asked God to reveal himself so we could get on with doing best-friend things. Things like comparing genitals and painting pinecones and telling the ethnic girl from down the road that she looked like a gorilla. But unlike in the movies, kneeling at my bedside did not make God appear. Nor did it make a shell-shocked husband return from the frontline. No,

all it did was fill my guts with cynicism and decorate my kneecaps with dimply carpet impressions.

Now, many years later, You are next to my pulpit, lighting candles. You bow to each lit tea light as though the flames were some kind of authority. Needless to say, You do not come to church often.

You pick up a candle and talk into it as though it were a can and string phone. Perhaps You are attempting to connect with a relative who has passed on. Or perhaps You are attempting to contact Darren. Maybe You are like me, when I was a child, before my lasagna awakening in which I not only discovered Darren but God's first name.

When You leave, I sit in my side of the confessional booth and eat a granola biscuit. I tell Darren about my day. I ask about his, but he does not respond. The church is no longer empty. The Organist has arrived. He is attempting to play that song from Beaches. I silently curse his mother for being so persuasive.

The Organist's mother used to phone often – not because she and I were secret lovers. Or old school friends. Or even members of the same health club. No, she called because she worked for a telemarketing company (and I am one of the only people in the district without a silent phone number). Unlike most people, I actually enjoy talking to telemarketers. I find the discussions a welcome alternative to the heavily ailment-based conversations that I have daily with the church's elderly parishioners.

Several years ago, whilst trying to convince me that the cathedral needed roller shutters, the organist's mother asked if we had any place for her son. I was confused as to why the young man would want to help out at the church if he had little, to no interest for religion. She said that she simply wanted her son to be more involved in the local community

because she was concerned that he didn't have any social skills. And he also spent an unhealthy amount of time with her mother. I asked just how old the organist was, and was told that the organist was simply much too old to want to enjoy the company of an old woman.

I would like to think that I am a godly enough person to put up with the organist's awful musical ability, but unfortunately I do not think that way. In fact, if it weren't for the musician's mother, I would have replaced the organist with a cassette player a long time ago. I thought back to the time when we buried Elizabeth.

It had been almost two weeks since we buried the dog and God was still 'playing hard to get' with his friendship. The holidays were nearly over and I was concerned that I would have to start the new school year alone, and friendless. I confessed to my father that I was having difficulty coping without Elizabeth. And that I had been contemplating hitchhiking to the campsite so I could dig her up, and give her one last hug. What I said made Dad kiss my forehead and buy some flowers and drive me back to the campsite.

I could see the pointy rocks. And the broken fence. And the tree with the bosoms. But I couldn't see the spot. I asked Dad if we had come to the wrong place, if maybe we were on the wrong side of the river. He squished my face against his waist. His body hair itched my nose. I tried to pull away but he pushed my head back into his stomach. It was as though he believed that his belly could somehow soften the bad news.

After realizing that dad was right and that the rising water had turned Elizabeth's riverside grave into an underwater one, I picked up a stick and starting beating the tree across its bosom-like burls. Dad told me that we could come back and visit Elizabeth another time, when the water level had dropped. But I didn't want to wait. I couldn't wait. We hadn't driven all that way just to go home again.

I took off my shoes and socks and pants. I waded out into the river and continued to stick my head underwater in a hope of locating Elizabeth's grave. Dad called out from the bank, requesting that I 'please be careful'. When I was almost certain that I had found the right spot, I asked dad to throw me the flowers. He scrunched up the bouquet and hurled it across the water. Unfortunately for my father, he had the throwing arm of a weedy schoolgirl. And unfortunately for me, swimming toward the flowers was extremely tiring. And it wasn't long until my poor attempt at sidestroke turned into a dismal attempt at staying afloat.

I held onto dad's shoulders and coughed up bits of moss into his hair. We collapsed on the riverbank. Dad held his chest and pulled a dragonfly from his beard. I pulled my t-shirt over my jocks and discretely pissed myself. And we both lay on our backs and watched the clouds. Dad asked if I too could see the rabbit and the monkey and the cigar-smoking flamingo. I reached out for my father's hand, and told him I saw all the things that he did. But the truth was I couldn't see anything, not even the cigar.

I like to adorn my bedroom with fairy lights and other illuminations that are commonly reserved for the festive season. I feel that surrounding myself with bright lights gives me a greater affinity with Darren. Of course, he has never commented on any of my interior design choices but the lack of acknowledgement has never disheartened me. This is because Darren and I share a special relationship, one that isn't built around social trivialities like compliments.

Since working for Darren, I have lived alone. That is not to say that I am completely lonely. Living a somewhat solitary life has enabled me to learn many different ways of entertaining myself. Sometimes, on the days that Darren doesn't pop by, I amuse myself by fantasizing about women from the church. Unfortunately (as there are very few

attractive women in my congregation) this type of entertainment is very brief.

Your mother began featuring in my fantasies around the time she started bringing You in on a Sunday. What attracted me to your mother wasn't her legs or figure or even her eyes. No, it was her mouth – her thin, sorry-looking lips that hung over her chin. In my younger days, I would often lie in bed and fantasise about locking lips with your mother and sucking the misery right out of her drooping pout.

The phone rings. It is the organist. He is nervous and begins unnecessary small talk about the weather and seasonal fruit. I wonder if he is working up the courage to resign. He lists the numerous differences between peaches and nectarines. I try to remember where I put my cassette player. But, unfortunately the musician has not called to resign, no, he has phoned yet again, to see if I will visit the hospital. With no intention of doing so, I tell him that I'll think about it. He asks if I would like to be included in the performance that he has planned for the hospitalised woman. I remind him that Live Aid has already been done.

I sit down to my evening meal. It is not lasagna. Since discovering Darren, I have avoided all forms of pasta as I fear that if the dish could contain Darren then it could very well contain other, foreign deities that I do not intend to find. I prod at my minted peas and unleavened bread and picture the hospitalised woman's face. One parishioner likened it to toasted muesli. Another said it was more like well-worn boots. But mostly, I have been told that the woman's face is akin to preserved meat. I would like to visit her. Not only to decide which description is most accurate, but to comfort her with prayer. I've wanted to ask Darren to clarify where he stands on the circumstances but I know that the whole situation is greyer than Leslie Nielsen. Perhaps that's why You were talking into the tea light candle yesterday. Perhaps You were asking Darren what he thinks about the woman's situation. That could very well have been the case, given your own history.

When You were in Your early teens, Your father visited me at the parish (which was surprising, since he was well known for being rather devout in his Atheism). He recounted your numerous incidents. And I did my best to reassure him that it was common for adolescents to engage in attention-seeking behaviour, especially if their parents were going through a separation. Given Your father's stance on religion, I chose not to explain that You may have actually been acting in such a way because You were trying different, drastic ways to connect with Darren.

The new school year was only a few days away and I was no closer to finding Elizabeth's replacement. Dad admitted that he was concerned about me. Not because of my sudden interest in religion, but because of my nightmares. Since the day we took Elizabeth the flowers, I had been have recurring dreams. I dreamt that the current had pulled her from her resting place and washed her body downstream. Down the river. And into the ocean. And right into the mouth of a hungry elephant seal. Whilst I was almost certain that elephant seals did not inhabit the local waters, my dreams seemed so realistic. So much so that they caused me to wake saturated by my own tears and sweat and sometimes even my own, well, something else.

Worried that I wasn't coping without Elizabeth, my father tried to 'fix' me with hugs and new shoes and little cream-filled biscuits. But I knew that all I really needed was a new companion. What I needed was 'the best friendship' from the rather elusive holy man. Whilst my father continued his attempts at 'fixing' with a batch of pancakes, I decided that I needed to be more proactive with my search. On more than one occasion, I had heard my father refer to God as 'the man upstairs'. Therefore, it was only logical that I consult the butcher who lived in the unit directly above ours.

To my surprise, the room wasn't decorated with hanging meat, tables of pheasants or

curtains made from striped, bloodstained aprons. No, the place didn't look like it belonged to a butcher at all. Instead it looked like it belonged to a student or to some kind of odd, milk-loving minimalist.

We sat in the lounge on one of the upturned plastic crates. The butcher drank beer and sifted through magazines. I drank nothing and contemplated how to ask my religious questions. He offered me a pornographic magazine. I hesitated. He called me a fairy. I took the magazine and opened it to the poster in the middle. The butcher told me that it was ok if I wanted to borrow the magazine for 'you know' purposes. I thanked him and attempted to make some small talk before I sought his advice about finding God. The butcher started showing me pictures from his magazine. Mainly pictures of breasts and bottoms and of women who had things in their mouths. Things like lollipops and strawberries and bits of their own clothing. He asked if I had a 'missuz' of my own. I lied and said that I had three. He laughed and told me about this postman friend of his who was with two girls at once. He then corrected himself by saying that there were actually three girls but that one of the women 'passed out' just as things 'got going'.

We continued to look at the magazines and every so often the butcher would go back to talking about his friend, who in the butcher's words was a 'living legend.' The more my neighbour spoke, the more I realised that I had perhaps come to the wrong person for advice.

He showed me to the door. I thanked him for the magazine. He wished me luck with my 'harem' and encouraged me to let him know if I ever followed in the legendary Darren's footsteps. I looked up at my neighbour, confused. He explained that Darren, the postman, was the legend, the God.

These days, as a priest, I sit in the toilets and practice the pronunciation. I quietly say her

name over and over. My speech impediment kicks in. I close my eyes and attempt to calm myself with prayer. They are out there and they are waiting. I adjust my vestment and whisper her name one last time.

I read the list. I pause when I reach her name. My impediment arrives with full force. I look over at the organist and apologise. No one, not even someone as musically inept as the organist, deserves to lose their grandmother and their grandmother's not-so-secret admirer in the same year.

After the remaining biscuits and parishioners are gone, I take a bundle of food-drive pamphlets to distribute them at local businesses. The sports club is empty. A cleaning woman and a mop emerge from behind the bar. I recognise her. She's your mother. I focus on her lips and fondly recall the role they played in my old fantasies. She lets me know that Bingo has been cancelled due to tonight's televised Doris Day documentary. I feel a little insulted that she sees me as the elderly, blotter-holding type. Your mother mops her way out of the front room. I pour myself a drink and spill half of it down my front. I go into the men's room, remove my shirt and hold it under the hand-drier.

I am not alone. Your mother is also in the bathroom. She is sitting in a cubicle, attempting to push her tears back into her head. I conceal my half-naked self in the stall next to hers. I assume that she is upset because she and the baker were close. But your mother is upset for other reasons. Many other reasons. There is a small hole in the cubicle wall. I contemplate requesting that your mother press her miserable mouth (or perhaps even a bit of her bottom) through the hole so I can kiss her. Kiss her better.

After silently apologising to Darren for my inappropriate thoughts, I put my fingers through the hole. Your mother holds onto my index finger and begins an impromptu confession. She divulges all the things that fill her guts with nauseating guilt. After

admitting that she occasionally prays her German neighbours will develop strep throat to give her ears a break from their irritating accents, her fingers begin to tremble. And she confesses that, many years ago, on the way to the veterinary clinic, she killed your childhood pet in a bizarre attempt to protect You from our scandal-loving community.

She squeezes my pointer tightly and asks whether I understand. I picture my father desperately trying to fold Elizabeth in half and cover her before I awoke. And I think about my recurring nightmares. Your mother repeats her question. Instead of answering, I ask her whether elephant seals could ever possibly be found in this part of the world. She took me back to my childhood, holding onto my finger like that.

Even though I was almost certain that God wasn't a postal worker (who took intoxicated girls to bed), my neighbour was so emphatic with the way he referred to his friend as 'the God' that I felt as though there was no other option than to interpret it as a sign. Plus, I was getting rather desperate to find my new best friend since my bed-wetting nightmares were on the incline.

My father was asleep in front of the nightly news so there wasn't a need to use the alien abduction cover story that I had prepared on the way down from the butcher's place. My dinner was on the coffee table and waiting for me. Dad had started eating without me but must have grown tired after a few forkfuls. I sat on the couch, next to my snoring father and consumed the bottom layer of my undesirable lasagna.

Dad snored so loudly that he woke up. I offered to reheat his meal in the oven. But he said he'd eat it like it was. An amusing soda commercial came on the television. Dad started to laugh, which in turn made him start to cough, and hold his throat and stop breathing. I ran into the kitchen to get a glass of water. I panicked and threw the water at his face. My father frantically pointed behind himself, signaling me to do something to his back. I

didn't know what to do. Was I supposed to hug him? Or kick him? Or ever-so-gently kiss him on the spinal cord? I looked to the ceiling and asked for Darren's assistance. But there was no response. What happened next was down to me. I couldn't simply keep panicking and throwing water at my father until he choked his way into the afterlife. Following a quick, incomprehensible prayer, I climbed onto the arm of the sofa, lifted my hand above my head and karate-chopped my father between his shoulder blades. Food flew from his mouth and hit the record player.

And there, splattered across the Hank Williams twelve inch was the sanctified mass of pre-digested food. I tried to carefully remove the lasagna from the record. The top piece of pasta slid out of my fingers. And there he was. With a golden melted mane, a béchamel beard and pea-green peepers, my Darren had arrived.

I handed my father a glass of water and a woolen blanket and climbed up onto the couch. 'That was a bit of a scare' he said tapping his chest. 'It's alright' I said pressing my head against his pillowy stomach, 'there's no need to be afraid.'



She is: The Baker.

The Baker stares at her crusts and wants to cry. Instead of crying, she watches tennis. The player with the unfortunate nose trips over the ball boy. The Baker would like to laugh but she's frightened that it will make her head leak. The nurse returns. He tends to her weeping cheeks and asks that she at least try to get some rest.

For the few minutes a day that The Baker is able to sleep, she has the same dream.

In her dream, she is young (between sixty-six and seventy-one) and she is carrying a washing machine on her shoulders. The machine is one of the old models that rape the environment of water. Trying not to collapse under the weight of the appliance, The Baker knocks on the door of the church. Through the wall, she can hear The Priest. He is engaged in an intense game of solitaire on his mobile phone. Despite the fact that she is knocking with both fists, The Priest cannot hear her. The washing machine falls to the ground and crushes a small lizard. She tips the machine on its side and peels the lizard from the pavers. In an attempt to revive the animal, she sprinkles it with washing powder. Unfortunately for The Baker, the reptile insists on remaining dead. After tucking the deceased into her pantyhose, she lets herself into the church. She walks past The Priest. She kneels on the second step. She removes the lizard from her pantyhose and places it on a candle. The Baker opens her nightgown and spreads it over the animal and over the candles. And as she burns, she craves a cigarette.

‘Hey Nancy’ she calls, pressing the red button. The nurse unfolds his arms and requests that the woman address him by his proper name. ‘Nancy, do I look like a Christmas ham?’ The nurse does not respond. The Baker asks to be shifted into one of the ‘special’

corner rooms because, well because she is certain that death is imminent. Very imminent. Within twenty-four hours imminent.

She wants to sleep, to dream about washing machines and lit nightgowns. But she cannot sleep. Her head is too sore. And tight. And crumbly like biscotti.

Before she moved into 'the home', The Baker frequently made biscotti for her fat neighbours. She did not bake because she liked her neighbours or because she was one of those fat-enablers or even because she was a giving person. Baking kept her mind from thinking about things, inappropriate things, things like the colour of The Organist's grandmother's undergarments.

The Baker knew The Organist's grandmother well before the two women were in the same home. She had seen the grandmother from a distance. At bingo. And bowls. And at the medicinal-marijuana group. But it wasn't until The Baker moved into the retirement facility, that she built up the courage to speak to The Organist's grandmother.

At the home, each day had a different and pathetically alliterated theme. And on 'Mince and Melody Monday', after a meal of bland beef and wet potatoes, socially inept music-types would come and play old show tunes for the residents.

On one particular Monday, as a mongoloid man set up his glockenspiel, The Organist's grandmother sat down next to The Baker. The two women realised that they had a lot in common. They both liked cigarettes, fish oil and knitted socks. And they both despised chamomile tea, themed weekdays and jazz. The only thing that really differed between the women was: The Organist's grandmother had romantic feelings for the Channel Seven weatherman and The Baker, well she had romantic feelings for The Organist's grandmother.

She asks the nurse to phone his yakuza connections, phone them and get them to 'do her in'. The nurse reminds the woman that he is Korean, not Japanese. The Baker says 'po-tay-to po-tah-to' and prepares herself for another, brief, washing machine dream.

In this dream, The Priest is not playing solitaire. He is playing Sudoku. The Baker knocks at the door. Again and again. She knocks with both hands. The washing machine falls from her shoulders. She peels oozing organs from the pavers. But this time, the reptile's face doesn't look squished and lizardy. No, in this dream, the lizard resembles The Baker's cousin, the simpleton with the patchy chest hair.

The Baker wakes, sips lemon cordial, and thinks about her relatives. After her thirtieth birthday, The Baker felt as though she needed to provide her family with some kind of explanation (as to why she wasn't married and mothering children). So, one evening over dinner, she announced that her ovaries had died.

Her father spilled wine. Her mother swore and tried to pass it off as dialect. The Baker unblocked the saltshaker and attempted to come up with a convincing and medical-sounding explanation.

Initially, her mother was not convinced that ovaries could die from excessive sunbathing but after hearing the 'grape to currant' analogy, she covered her face with two slices of pane di casa and wept.

After finally accepting her daughter's infertility (and since birth defects were no longer an issue), The Baker's mother set her daughter up with a third cousin. The Baker and her cousin (with the sporadic chest hair) lived together for two years. 'Chesty' moved out when he finally realised that he was being deceived. And that The Baker wasn't avoiding

intimacy because she had one of those rare cycles that caused her to menstruate for three hundred and sixty five days a year.

The nurse comes in to change The Baker's dressing. He lowers the bed sheet and gasps at The Baker and her nakedness. The Baker refuses to alter her gown – explaining that if she turned it around and had it open in the back then her skin would be touching the mattress. And in no way did she want her body coming into contact with the mattress and its collage of piss stains.

When the nurse swabs the place where her eyebrows once were, The Baker asks again about the yakuza. The nurse says that whilst he is unable to track down the Japanese mafia, he might be able to give The Baker something that will help her sleep.

She puts the tablets in her mouth and holds them underneath her tongue. They taste sweet, like meringue. She thinks about her fat neighbours and wonders whether, in her absence, they have been baking their own sweets.

She hopes that the pills will alter her dreams. But they don't even make her drowsy. She sits up, further opens her nightgown, and recalls The Organist's grandmother's dreams.

The Organist's grandmother never dreamt about anything exciting or extraordinary. She didn't have flying dreams or erotic dreams or the ones where You arrive at work only to realise that You are completely naked. No, The Organist's grandmother's dreams were usually about losing her orthopedics or finding dried apricots that looked like baby Jesus. But it didn't matter what The Organist's grandmother dreamt about. The Baker was just grateful to be the person the woman had chosen to tell.

When she was having difficulty recalling parts of her dream, The Organist's grandmother

would close her eyes. Sometimes, The Baker would see how close she could get to the grandmother's face before the grandmother opened her eyes. One time the grandmother opened her eyes when The Baker's lips were almost at kissing distance. And The Baker had to pretend that she was checking if any of the liver spots on the grandmother's neck resembled Mary Magdalene.

A clown from the pediatric ward pokes his head into the room. He asks if The Baker would like to hear a joke. The clown recites several racist jokes. Instead of laughing, The Baker asks for her face to be sprayed with the trick flower. The clown reminds the woman of the correct way to put on a hospital gown. The Baker pretends to have a seizure. The clown leaves to get the nurse. The Baker ends her performance and thinks about the epileptic lady from the retirement home.

At the retirement home, during televised game shows, the epileptic woman would fall onto the floor. Sometimes a nurse would come to help. Other times, The Organist's grandmother would kneel, unite her hands and pray that the woman's seizing be brief. The grandmother was good like that. She was thoughtful, even to the extent that (if the seizure was a wet one), the grandmother would use her own knee blanket in an attempt to conceal the fitting woman's shame.

The Baker rolls onto her back, closes her robe and watches a religious television program. A Young girl is talking in tongues, clutching a picture of a rainbow and weeping.

Before The Baker was in hospital, she and many of the home's other residents would regularly attend mass. The Baker enjoyed church. She liked the wine. And the bizarre priest. And the half-eaten macaroni Jesuses that the Sunday-School children would create (and snack on) and display in the foyer. What she didn't particularly like was: The Organist. The Baker never voiced her opinion of The Organist to his grandmother. Instead

she settled on glaring at the musician disapprovingly whilst discretely chewing her communion wafer.

The Organist visits. The Baker does not want to talk to The Organist about anything. Not about his grandmother. Not about the weather. Not even about the way her cheeks weep when she yawns. The musician enters the room with a box of chocolates and an awkward expression. The Baker feigns sleep until he leaves.

The Baker enquires, yet again, about yakuza connections. The nurse sits on the edge of the bed and asks The Baker if she wants him to try, one more time, to convince The Priest to visit. The Baker covers her face with her half-eaten sandwich.

The Organist returns. With him are four residents from the home. With bits of sandwich filling still on her face, she feigns sleep. The Organist arranges the residents into height order. The tallest man pockets tongue depressors. The shortest man threatens to call the police. The Organist reminds his quartet of the purpose of their outing. Through squinted eyes, The Baker watches The Organist and his choir complete a few vocal warm ups.

The Baker continues pretending to be asleep when the choir begins their performance. She does not recognise (or understand) The Organist's song choice. When the song finally finishes, The Baker opens her eyes and asks that The Organist and his quartet let her get some rest.

The nurse enters with a bouquet of needles. The Baker pulls her sheet up to her chin and tells the nurse to go and prick himself. He says that there have been a number of complaints about her back-to-front robe. And that, if she doesn't cover up then he will be forced to sedate her, not once, but thrice.

She begins to cry. The nurse confesses that he didn't intend on actually going through with his threats. He gives The Baker lemon cordial and biscuits and the permission to make sexually inappropriate jokes at his expense. But the woman's tears do not stop.

Exhausted and saturated, The Baker reaches for the kidney dish at her bedside. She stares into the dish and traces the leathery craters on her reflected face and mutters the words 'genuine calf'.

As a child, The Baker would climb the neighbour's fig tree and carve pictures into the under ripened fruit. One afternoon, as she was fashioning a fig into an angry gibbon, she heard her parents arguing. The Baker dropped her unfinished artwork and climbed onto the branch closest to her parent's bedroom.

Her father said her mother had rocks in her head.

Her mother said she had read about it in that magazine column.

Her father said the columnist had rocks in his head.

Her mother said she was going to throw all of The Baker's trousers away, just in case trousers really were what made girls 'go that way'.

Her father called her mother an idiot.

Her mother confessed that she much rather be an idiot than have a daughter who was 'that way'.

Her father said if she was so concerned about it then why wasn't she out buying their daughter lipstick and handbags and all the other kinds of shit that women waste their husbands' money on.

The Baker climbed down from the tree (and after being coerced into changing into a skirt) her mother took her shopping.

The Baker came home holding her new belongings. A gingham apron. A woolen skirt. And a handbag with a clasp and a zipper and a label that read ‘genuine calf’ in little gold letters.

She has a visitor. The Priest sits at her bedside. She tells him not to worry about forgiving. But The Priest hasn’t come to forgive or to provide the woman with communion or anointment or even a pamphlet. He’s visiting because The Organist convinced him to. The Baker asks to be shifted into a corner room. But The Priest cannot shift the woman because priests do not have much authority when it comes to hospital arrangements. The Baker asks again, saying she’s ready for the corner room and that there’s no point for someone of her age and her condition to use hospital resources, resources that should be used on someone who really needs them. She looks defeated and exhausted and overcooked. The Priest tells the woman that he will move her to the corner room if she closes her eyes...and keeps them closed. When The Baker shuts her eyes, The Priest pushes the bed around in a circle.

When her bed is back in its original position, The Priest tells The Baker that she is in her new room. She starts to open her eyes. He puts his hands over her face and encourages her to relax. She asks how long she has to wait. The Priest makes shushing sounds and tells her to keep her eyes closed. The nurse enters. The Priest attempts to sign to the nurse, signaling for him to play along. Surprisingly, the nurse understands The Priest’s epileptic-looking gestures and leaves the room.

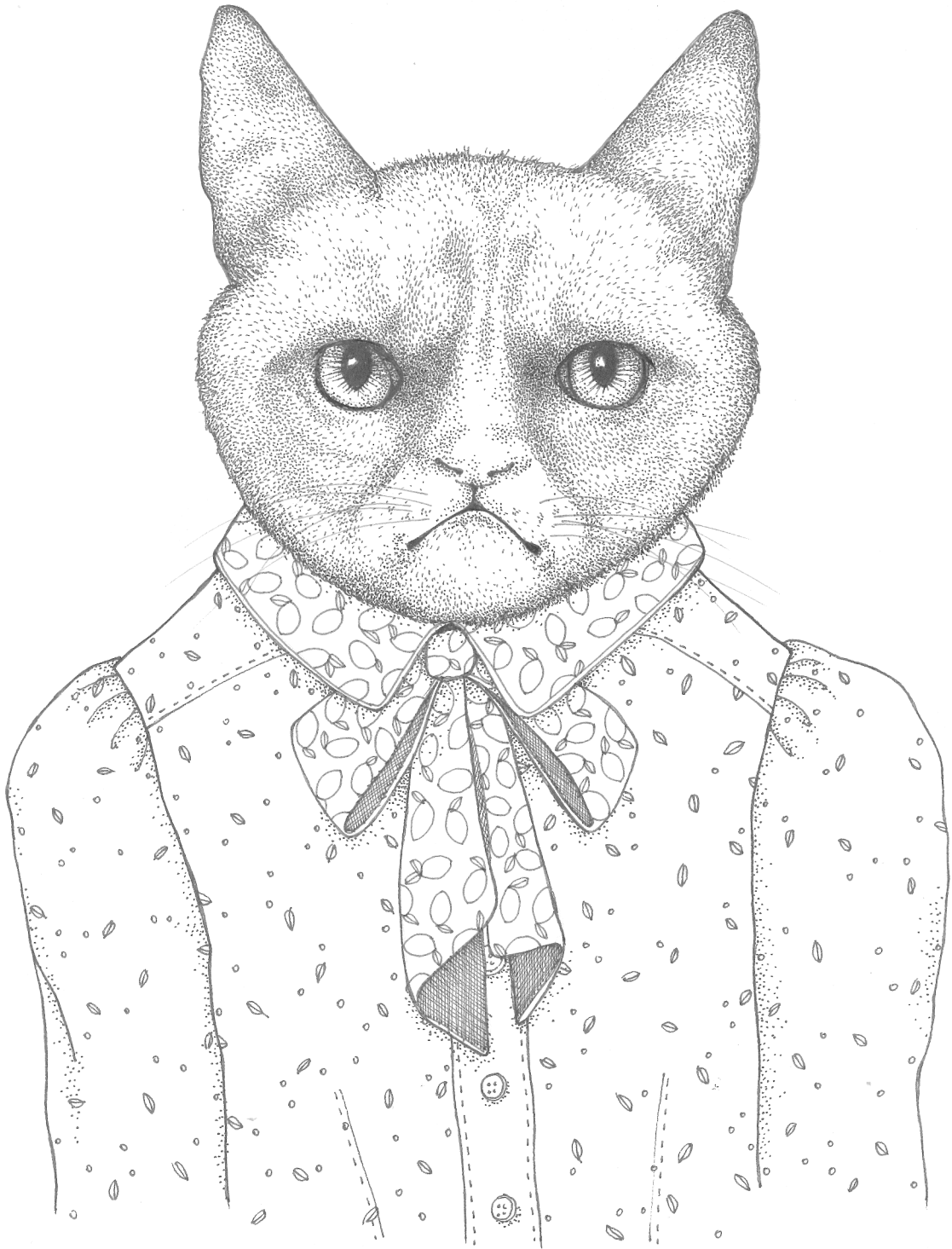
The Priest asks the woman to describe what she sees beneath her eyelids. Feeling somewhat coerced, The Baker says that she can see a light. And angels with sparkly wands. And almost all of the popes. The Priest puts his hand on The Baker’s shoulder and encourages her to relax.

She confesses that she always sees the same thing when she closes her eyes. The Priest asks her what she thinks her visions mean. And whether the washing machine perhaps signifies cleansing. Or whether the burning might represent being punished for her mistakes...her oven-related mistakes. The Baker assures The Priest that her visions are not cryptic puzzles because she 'aint no Aesop's fable.' Feeling slightly insulted, The Priest asks what she does foresee happening when she passes.

The woman attempts to roll onto her side, her robe opens. The Priest shields his eyes to prevent the image from burning itself into his head. When she is finally in a more comfortable position, The Baker tries to envisage her own death. She admits that she does not foresee angels or bright lights or even one, measly pope. She does not imagine The Organist's grandmother or her childhood pet, Big Hopper, the deaf rabbit. No, what she imagines is her mother sitting in a lounge room, surrounded by crockery. Her mother will not have a halo. Or a subtle ethereal glow. Or even a set of homemade, coat-hanger wings. No, all her mother will have is a bottle of methylated spirits and a rag. And her mother will clearly be unaware that The Baker died because her mother will be busy. Busy using the rag to remove her daughter's penned name from underneath each and every piece of chinaware. To ensure that The Baker cannot inherit a thing. Not even a fucking sugar bowl.

The Baker opens her eyes. She realises that she's still in the same room. She begins to cry. The Priest apologises for deceiving her. The Baker looks to The Priest. Perhaps for a prayer. Or a tissue. Or for some reassurance that her premonition was tripe. But The Priest does not say anything. Instead, he bows his head and stares at the linoleum floor.

'Maybe, I brought it all on myself.' She says. 'Maybe I should have never insisted on wearing trousers.' The Priest winks at The Baker. 'I don't know about that. Your backside always did look pretty good in a pair of slacks.'



She is: Your Mother.

A notebook floats in the clogged urinal. Your Mother retrieves it. Wiping the pages on her pants, she thinks of Your Father.

Initially, she contemplated telling people that the marriage failed because he was an abuser. And a drunk. And a mass murderer who hid his victims' fingers inside sachets of potpourri. But after a little more thought, she decided that if people asked, then she would say that Your Father met someone else. Someone unlike her. Someone who liked to hug.

Your Mother puts the book with the other forgotten items: the nail clippers, the nudie playing card, and the size seven-left shoe. She returns to her knees and faces the urinal. The stench doesn't bother her anymore. The relationship between her nose and urine has become familiar, like a couple's relationship that is long past the stage of spontaneous-gift-giving and wind-abstinence. A man walks in, apologises and refers to Your Mother as 'love buns'. He then unbuttons and proceeds to empty his bladder on the side of the urinal that Your Mother has already cleaned.

Twice a week, the club holds a bingo night. Initially, it was hoped that it would be a way to bring the community together. After two weeks, it was obvious that the game only appealed to the elderly, almost deceased, members of the neighbourhood.

'BINGO!'

The bingo lady leans over an elderly gentleman. The man does not have bingo. He doesn't even have a card. Before returning to her balls, the woman makes patronising comments

about the gentleman under her breath. Your Mother watches, unwraps toilet rolls and makes a conscious decision to avoid growing old.

She uses the tap behind the bar. She is supposed to use the one outside but outside is cold and dark and without bingo. Her bucket is full and heavy. To lighten her load, Your Mother purposefully tips some water onto the carpet. Her actions go unnoticed as tonight the patrons are too focused on winning the hamper of knitted slippers, tinned fruit and coupons.

Your Mother's feet are wet. She stands in front of the mirror and decides to remove her socks as though she is an erotic dancer. A Young girl enters the toilets. Your Mother stops her striptease and pours an excessive amount of bleach into the basin. The girl answers her phone and informs the caller that she would rather contract aids from a monkey than be seen wearing open-toed sandals. Your Mother returns her wet sock to her wet foot and recalls an argument she had with Your Father. The particular argument where she told Your Father that if he didn't stop being an asshole, then she would tell everyone in the neighbourhood that he contracted a venereal disease from the man who used to sit outside the local Good Prices and eat hair gel.

She sits in her car and moisturises her knuckles. Her fingers resemble dried fruit and smell of the swimming pool. She closes her eyes and moves her arms around in a breaststroke fashion. A child throws stones at the passenger-side door. Your Mother ignores the child, turns on the radio and thinks of You.

When You were around six or seven years old, Your Mother took You to swimming lessons at the local aquatic centre. Before each lesson, other children would splash in the shallows and affectionately wedge bathers up backsides. Instead of splashing and wedging, before every lesson, You would crouch next to the concrete mermaid and lick

chlorine from your knees.

At the swimming centre, your social shortcomings made Your Mother feel inadequate. Her feelings of inadequacy soon turned to those of grave concern after the final swimming lesson (or as the instructor affectionately called it: the wet fun party).

Unlike the other children, You chose not to swing from the Tarzan rope. Unlike the other children, You chose not to search amongst the used band-aids for oversized, plastic treasure. And unlike the other children, You thought it would be a good idea to swallow chlorinated water, coil your body in the lane rope and attempt to drown yourself.

The child throws a stone at the car. It smashes Your Mother's rear-view mirror. After a presentation of middle fingers, Your Mother drives home.

Your Father phones later than usual. Apparently he was at dinner with friends. He makes an effort to phone Your Mother occasionally – to check on her, for your sake. She silences the television and attempts to contribute something interesting, something that will make him want to phone more often. He talks about steak tenderness and calf leather. Your Mother interrupts and says that her whole body smells like the aquatic centre. Your Father mimics the sound of a dying handset and hangs up the phone.

There are two pillows. Two pillows designed to cushion two heads. Your Mother punches one of the pillows and throws it to the floor. She climbs under the covers and spreads her limbs out like a starfish in an attempt to make the mattress feel less vacant.

She sits in the kitchen and plugs her leaking nostril with a tissue. This morning she is not alone. With her are three days of unwashed dishes. She stares at the phone and asks it to ring. As expected, the appliance ignores her request. After cursing at the phone, Your

Mother prepares for work. Her bag is filled with irrelevant receipts. Whilst launching scrunched docketts at the microwave, Your Mother comes across a raffle ticket that she had forgotten about.

The treasurer licks his fingers and flicks through the pages of a folder. Your Mother waits patiently. She has won second prize. The treasurer grunts because Your Mother's prize consists of a meat platter that would, by now, almost certainly be spoiled.

Your Mother stares at the platter. The platter stares back at Your Mother. She picks up a steak and thinks about tenderness. And calf leather. And the woman with the exceptional nails. She puts the platter in the staff fridge and prepares herself for the male toilets.

The tray has been moved. Someone has put it on the floor, underneath the chip fryer. Your Mother retrieves her meat and leaves. The platter is larger than the seat. For precautionary reasons, she straps it in with a seatbelt. She looks at her passenger in the rear view mirror and feels socially inept.

She unstraps her meat and thinks of You. After your most recent accident, Your Father said that You moved to France to 'find yourself'. Hopefully (along with yourself), You will also find that You miss Your Mother. Perhaps even to the extent that You buy her a lovely little Eiffel tower snow globe. She throws her platter on her kitchen floor and tries to comfort herself with slices of white bread.

When they were still together, the majority of your parents' arguments stemmed from the same thing: Your Mother's inability to show affection. Unfortunately for Your Mother, the more that she wanted to touch and feel, the less she felt that she was able to. Needless to say, this frustrated Your Father. Sometimes, on the nights that Your Mother fell asleep in front of the television, Your Father would even go as far as to vegemite her a little Hitler

moustache.

After most arguments, Your Mother would leave. You were under the impression that she drove to the local caravan park for some special ‘mum time’. But what she actually did was: park her car behind the disused meatworks and cry herself to sleep.

If the arguments weren’t about Your Mother’s Nazi heart, then they were almost certainly about You and your accidents. Believing that You had inherited her social shortcomings, Your Mother saw your accidents as attempts at getting people to befriend You out of pity. And after the drowning accident, Your Mother decided that You should see someone. Perhaps a doctor or a counsellor or a librarian who knew the location of the large-print self-help books. At no stage did Your Father want You to seek outside help. In his opinion, all ‘professionals’ just wanted money to put towards buying themselves the highest horses possible. And according to Your Father, your attention-seeking behaviour would probably stop if Your Mother simply hugged You once in a while.

Your Mother pockets several slices of bread and leaves the house. A Young girl is jumping up and down in the alleyway. Your Mother realises that the girl is in the middle of an ant nest. Your Mother looks around for the girl’s parents. But according to the child, her parents are in Africa and teaching snakes how to become handbags.

The girl asks Your Mother to do a speech for the dead ants. And not just any speech, but a speech ‘like the ones that get done in the churches’. Your Mother picks up several ants and places them onto a piece of her pocketed bread. Whilst creating a carbohydrate-casket, she tries to recall her church-going days. She cannot remember any hymns. She can only remember looking like an idiot.

As a child, Your Mother was made to dress like a doll for church. Since it was never

explained why the attire was necessary, Your Mother assumed that Jesus must have had a bit of a thing for Holly Hobby.

Despite her doll-like appearance, Your Mother was always assigned the part of the ugliest Wiseman in the church's annual nativity production. One Christmas, in an attempt to entertain the other children, Your Mother tried to turn her synthetic beard into a merkin. Unfortunately for Your Mother, her pubic beard was not amusing. In fact, it made baby Jesus cry. Sadly, making friends has never come naturally to Your Mother.

Unable to recall a single hymn, Your Mother says 'Mary. Joseph. Hallelujah. Amen'. The girl demands a proper 'church speech'. Your Mother feigns a migraine and walks home.

She sits on her doorstep and thinks of You. She wonders if right now, at this very moment, You are eating a croissant and twirling the ends of a moustache – perhaps a moustache attached to the face of your new best friend. The neighbour's dog circles the front lawn for the perfect place. Your Mother shields her eyes and wonders if Europe has made You more social, more social and less like Your Mother. And whether maybe, just maybe, traveling has also helped put an end to your accidents.

When Your Mother was twenty-five, she craved the companionship of a cat. After discovering Your Mother's craving, Your Father feigned a feline allergy.

For over a year, her cravings went unsatisfied. She refrained from purchasing a pet, not because of Your Father's 'allergy', but because she read this in a pamphlet at the chemist:

Much like a couch cushion, the face of a sleeping baby is both warm and comfortable. Unlike people, cats often have difficulty differentiating between cushions and Young heads. Under the age of eighteen months, babies can

have trouble waking when smothered. If You, dear reader, are both a new parent and cat owner, please make sure that your feline friend does not find comfort on the face of your sleeping child. This is very important – as leaving sleeping babies in the company of cushion-seeking cats can result in childlessness.

When she was certain that You had mastered the skill of autonomous waking, Your Mother took You shopping. The Get a Pet had four kittens, three white and one with flecks of all the unappealing, earthy colours that are often found together in a bowl of minestrone soup. Your Mother named the cat Soup, but a few years later the name was changed. And thanks to You, she became: Sophia Foccacia.

You poked Sophia Foccacia in the eyeball. The shopkeeper, pointed to a sign behind the counter. ‘You break it, You buy it’. Even though she was certain You had not ‘broken’ the animal, Your Mother complied with the sign. The cat sat on the cashier’s counter and cleaned itself. Your Mother stared at the unfortunate-looking thing and hoped that it, unlike her, would have no issue being affectionate with You or Your Father.

A woman spills her shandy. Your Mother fills the bucket in the bar sink. Her manager drops bingo balls and becomes irate. Your Mother apologises and quickly makes her way to the ‘appropriate’ tap outside. She crouches between a wet burger and a prize-less scratch ticket and thinks about You. The bucket overflows.

An old man has slipped in the spilled shandy. The woman next to him is using her voice, not a phone, to call an ambulance. Your Mother begins to mop. The elderly man incorrectly counts the number of fingers held in front of his face. When he finally gets it right, the elderly woman shouts ‘BINGO!’

Your Mother waves to the ambulance as it drives away. Her boss says that she saw You last night with a woman, in the bar near the hospital. After sarcastically advising her boss to make an optometrist appointment, Your Mother realises that she has been deceived.

She phones Your Father. He is eating pudding. She apologises for calling at such an inopportune time. Your Father threatens to hang up. With pen poised, Your Mother asks for your French phone number. Instead of answering her question, Your Father lists varieties of pudding in order of his preference.

Your Mother stares at the digits of the phone number of your supposed French apartment, the digits that actually make up the number for a local pizza chain. She wonders if You even went anywhere after the most recent, and most severe bathing accident. The phone rings. It is Your Father again. He confesses that he gave her a faux number because he doesn't actually have your French phone number or even your French address. But he swears (on the graves of everyone in his new family) that You are definitely overseas, and finding yourself. Unsure of what to believe, Your Mother feigns a migraine and hangs up the phone.

In her letterbox is a postcard. On the front is a hand-drawn picture of a French stick with a moustache. On the back are nine words.

Mum, will visit when I get back. Très promise.

She traces her pointer over Your Father's poor attempt at your penmanship. Your Mother swears again and again. Venetian blinds move in the windows of nosy neighbours. Your Mother displays fingers and goes inside.

On her lap are three things. A cat. A microwave meal. And a postcard from your deceitful

father. Your Mother wonders just how poor of a parent she must be to warrant such an elaborate (and multicultural) method of preventing her from seeing You. Your Mother tries to cheer herself by mocking Your Father's artistic (in)ability. She stares at the pathetically penned breadstick and speculates as to what authentically French image will feature on the next postcard. Perhaps a snail in a beret. Or Gerard Depardieu and a manicurist comparing French tips.

Your Mother asks her cat if she is really such an awful parent. The cat does not respond. Your Mother pokes at her microwave meal and longs for a different pet. For one more articulate and less concerned with its crotch.

She retrieves the set of teeth from the urinal. She stands on the bingo podium opens her palm and presents the dentures as though they were a glass slipper. A bottle of wine falls off the bar. Your Mother postpones the search for her toothless Cinderella and attends to the spill.

Someone tugs at her clothing. Your Mother stops mopping. She hopes to turn around to find that You have arrived with various gifts. Gifts like flowers. And candied hearts. And invitations into your life. But unfortunately for Your Mother, You are not the one connected to her cardigan.

The inverted face lifts Your Mother's mood. Instead of inquiring as to how the teeth found their way into the urinal, Your Mother smiles and politely suggests that the man might consider purchasing some denture adhesive. Too embarrassed and toothless to answer, the gentleman pockets his teeth and returns to his seat.

Bingo enthusiasts board the bus. Your Mother enters the women's toilets. Penned love-declarations cover the hand-drier. Your Mother recalls your cooking accident.

This accident happened during winter, so naturally You were naked and in the bathroom and drying your freshly washed stomach with a hairdryer. Your Mother knocked on the door and told You to use a towel. You refused, saying that the fibres hurt your ‘tummy skin’.

Half an hour later, Your Father kicked the door open. You were seated in the basin, with your lips around the hairdryer and You were trying to cook your insides.

Once again, Your Father blamed your internal-cooking on a lack of motherly hugs. Instead of arguing, Your Mother sucked in her stomach and hid inside her shirt. Your Father demanded that Your Mother give You a hug. Your Mother remained inside her blouse, studying her protruding bones, and searching for those elusive signs of affection.

Your Mother bites her tongue. Blood drips on her microwave meal. Potatoes turn pink. She sucks her sleeve and thinks about another accident.

Before this accident, your mother recalls standing in the kitchen and shoving unwanted peas down the sink. Your Father was in the lounge, licking sauce from a cushion. You were outside and gluing grass to your back.

Your Mother refused to wash the dishes. And the dishes refused to wash themselves. She opened the kitchen window and (as she was competing with the neighbour’s lawnmower) she screamed your name. You chose not to respond.

Twenty minutes passed. Your Mother left the sink in search of You. She checked in the garage. And in her coats. And in the laundry hamper. She removed meat from the chest

freezer. Someone screamed. She dropped a frozen chicken.

Your Mother found You. You weren't in the freezer, hiding behind old Neapolitan and fish sticks. You were on the neighbour's grass, covered in glued clippings and waiting to be consumed by the lawnmower. The neighbour covered her mouth with her hands and continued to scream through the gaps in her fingers. Your Mother apologised and offered the woman some tea. And cake. And sedatives. With all three offerings refused, Your Mother reached into the traumatised neighbour's pants and pulled out a pouch of tobacco.

You stood in your backyard, against the fence, and removed your clothes. Your Father thought of ways to improve your self-esteem, and as he hosed You down, he reminded You of all your supposed accomplishments.

In your yard, You dripped in the flowerbed and reluctantly accepted compliments. Next door, Your Mother sat on uneven lawn and willingly ingested carcinogens.

Three days before your parents separated, Your Father commented on the attractiveness of Your Mother's arse. Your Mother attempted to cover her body with couch cushions.

When asked if she was having an affair, Your Mother threw upholstery and plastic fruit. When told that an affair might explain her emotional distance, Your Mother looked for more things to throw.

You put an orange inside your shirt and left the room. After drawing a face on the thrown fruit, You, the orange and the family cat retreated to Your Mother's cupboard to try on skirts.

Your Father continued with his accusations. Your Mother feigned migraines and

menstrual pains. In bed, she pulled the covers over her face and thought about adultery. She imagined herself bathing with Dennis Hopper and pumicing calluses from his manly feet.

In the wardrobe, You wedged yourself inside a small suitcase, and fell asleep to the phlegm-rattled soundtrack of Your Mother's snore. In the morning, Your Mother woke both angry and pant-less. Your Father requested that she see a doctor about her snoring. Whilst looking for her pants, Your Mother requested that Your Father see a doctor about having the face of a bastard. Your Father covered his head with his pillow and admitted he often wished that Your Mother were having an affair. Because it would mean he could hate her.

Whilst looking for pants, Your Mother found You (and the cat and the expressive orange) covered in underwear and asleep in an open suitcase. As she carefully removed sports bras from your face, Your Mother said she was having an affair. A serious affair. With a man named Samsonite. Your Father threw pillows and bedding and lamps. A lamp hit the wardrobe. The cat shrieked. You screamed. The orange remained silent.

Two days before your parents separated, the electricity cut out. Instantly, Your Father decided that the most logical (and therefore only) explanation was that some poor bird must have accidentally (and simultaneously) trodden on two different power lines.

Your Father found torches. You shoved a torch down your pants and declared yourself a glowworm. Your Father laughed. Your Mother confessed as to why the electricity was actually out. Your Father stopped laughing. Your Mother put a torch inside her pants. Your Father was not amused.

In the lounge, You and Your Father built a fort. In the toilet, Your Mother read the

newspaper by candlelight. One of the obituary photos looked as though it was taken after the man had died. On closer inspection, Your Mother realised that the man simply had dual lazy eyes.

Your Father needed help attaching sheets to the ceiling fan. He opened the toilet door and shone a torch in Your Mother's face. Your Mother shielded her eyes with the stock exchange. Your Father got angry with Your Mother for three reasons. One: she forgot to pay the electricity bill. Two: she saw no hazard in reading by the light of a broken birthday candle. Three: she disliked forts.

Instead of helping with castle construction, Your Mother feigned bowel movements to make Your Father return to the lounge. When celebratory wax began to burn her hand, she chose to read her newspaper outside, with the aid of the neighbour's security light.

On the morning before your parents separated, Your Mother woke (on the neighbour's nature strip) covered in the real estate section. In the lounge, beneath towels and crocheted tablecloths, Your Father continued to sleep. Your Mother nudged his face with her foot. You crawled out from amongst the linen and left the room.

When they had finished arguing, Your Mother went into the laundry and found You on the floor. You were crying. And inserting your finger into the family cat.

The Priest leans against the jukebox and drinks lemonade. Your Mother lets him know that bingo was cancelled due to a televised Doris Day documentary. But The Priest did not come for bingo. He came to drop off fliers for the local food drive.

Bowie plays on the jukebox. The Priest extends his hand to Your Mother and in an appalling British accent says, 'let's dance'. After presenting her palms, Your Mother

explains that she can't dance because she has 'shit on her hands'. Unsure of how to redeem herself, she simultaneously bows and curtsies. After reminding her that she is in the company of religion, not royalty, The Priest proceeds to dance alone.

Your Mother enters the men's toilets and sits in the cleaned cubicle. She looks at her contaminated hands and thinks of You. She wonders if right now, You and Your Father are sharing hugs. Or milkshakes. Or affectionate (yet unwarranted) hi-fives. She leans against the cistern and wonders whether You have ever tried to find her. Or your fictitious stepfather Samsonite.

The Priest enters the toilets. He is covered in soft drink. He removes his shirt and ties it to the dryer. Your Mother informs The Priest that there's a clotheshorse in the staffroom. Startled and embarrassed, The Priest covers his nipples with cakes of soap and conceals his nakedness in a cubicle.

Your Mother stares at the dryer. She thinks about your hairdryer accident. And your mowing accident. And your drowning accident. And your most recent bathing accident. Despite the fact that she isn't in private (or parked behind the meat works), she allows herself to cry.

The Priest pokes two fingers through a hole in the wall that separates him from Your Mother. Your Mother holds his fingers and tells him how long it has been since her last confession.



I am: Big Nan.

I like to tend to my cuticles, make religious tapestries and create Johnny Cash collages. Once I attempted all three at once. Surprisingly, it didn't go well. Right now I am making a cake. I am using a packet mix because I dislike cooking. The cake is for my grandson. He has a sweet tooth, or rather, a whole mouth of sweet teeth.

My husband liked to cook. His specialty was rump roast. For luck, he would slap the meat before putting it in the oven. One evening he forgot to slap and the meal tasted like a flannel.

I'm no good at roast dinners. I would be if there was a packet mix. A pre-prepared, powdered roast dinner. One that's only requirement was the adding of water. Most of my friends love to cook. Most grandmothers do. Unfortunately for my family, I am not 'most grandmothers'. No, I am just Big Nan.

I have two birds. Both lads. Occasionally I catch them in a moment of togetherness. If I catch them when my grandson is around, I cover them up with a tea towel. I will then dispose of the cloth because I don't feel right about using it afterwards. I have an abundance of tea towels because whenever someone goes on holiday, they bring me one back. I guess people assume that old women love nothing more than a dry dish.

I've been meaning to clean out my husband's 'study'. I am not avoiding the cleaning because I am a mourning widow. I am procrastinating because there are other things that I would rather do. Things like makes collages. Sometimes when I feel a bit lonely, I sneak a

photo of myself in amongst the layered pictures of my Man in Black.

I catch my grandson playing with the inflatable doll. I tell him that she is a Christmas decoration that his grandfather and I used to adorn with tinsel and macramé Jesuses. The Boy does not believe me.

I don't particularly mind that my grandson plays with the doll. I'm almost certain that she's clean. My husband hasn't used her in years. And no, he didn't 'use' her because he was sick in the head. Her purpose was to be there for him in a way I couldn't. Not because I am prudish. Or because my preference lies with the ladies. But because I do not like to be touched or hugged or even held by the hand. Physical contact makes me uncomfortable. It always has.

The only time I hug is for family photos. And we haven't had one in years. My daughter won't allow them. She doesn't want her father to be near her son. Right now, the two lads couldn't be further apart. My husband is at the home and my grandson is here, on the guest toilet, eating sultanas and trying on sandals.

My toothbrush tastes different. My grandson has probably tampered with it. He likes to fiddle with my things. My toothbrush. My pantyhose. My imperial leather. The kid is odd, like his father. I never did understand what my daughter saw in that man. Sometimes, I dream about running the son of a bitch down in my car. I look after my grandson on most days. I agreed to have him every Tuesday. However according to my daughter, there are several Tuesdays in each week.

My daughter arrives. She looks like a prostitute. I ask how much she charges. She shows me her middle finger. I offer her two dollars. My grandson removes several clip-on earrings from his hair and leaves with his mother.

I won't go to church tonight. At church, the women only talk about two things: gingivitis and the price of ham. Tonight I plan on watching antique-valuing programs on the television.

The news is on. A man was attacked by a shark. My husband thought he saw a shark attack once. He stripped down, tackle out and everything, and swam to help. Turns out it was just two big, lesbian women consummating their love.

I flick through the channels. An antique expert fingers the nostril of a wooden camel. I turn up the volume and moisturise my hands. Last week I went to the hospital to visit a lady from my husband's home. I bought my best moisturiser, sat at her bedside and rubbed cream into her knuckles. And all the while I couldn't help but think that I should have been moisturising her charred face. Poor dear, she looked like the second coming of Ash Wednesday.

My husband is in a home. I put him there because my daughter was certain that he had mistreated her son. All speculation mind You. But I put my husband in a home anyway. To be honest, he was doing my head in. Always in my space. It was suffocating. And he was constantly whining about something. The air conditioner. The lack of elastic in his socks. My distaste for cuddling on the couch.

I enjoy my own company. Lots of people find that hard to believe. Lots of people can't even be alone for five minutes. My daughter couldn't. Got that trait from her father, not me. That's probably why she shacked up with the first man that showed her a bit of attention. Brilliant decision that turned out to be.

I do miss my husband's cooking. Pre-packaged, microwave dinners aren't nearly the same. And I must say that my mattress is certainly much colder without another backside

in there, warming it up.

My grandson is in the bathroom eating lipstick. I tell him that consuming cosmetics will make his hair fall out. My daughter phones. We argue. She sends You to collect my grandson. You introduce yourself but I already know who You are. I even saw You just last week, in the Good Prices, sniffing a melon.

I also knew You mother when she was small. She and her parents attended my church. You're definitely Your Mother's child. Like her, there's something about You that isn't quite right. You're like that kid on the news last week. That busboy. The one who impaled a dissatisfied customer with a ladle.

I witnessed a stabbing once. Well my husband witnessed it and told me about it. But he went into such detail that it felt like I was there. It happened at the post office. A girl launched at her brother and speared him with a biro. And if it wasn't for the post office attaching their pens to those little chains, the injury could have been lethal.

I miss my husband. I miss his dinners and his love of simplistic board games. I try to focus on my tapestry. It's a modern take on the nativity scene. Baby Jesus is wearing jeans.

My friend arrives with scones and accusations about her stolen wig. I invite her inside and humour her for half an hour. Cream sticks in her moustache. I try to ignore the cream, but the way it dances around her lip (in time with her chewing) is almost hypnotic.

Before I put him in a home, my husband did the whole hypnosis thing. A hideous woman (who referred to herself as a 'healer') came to the house. I knew instantly, that the woman was a fraud because a legitimate healer would have definitely cured themselves of such an

unfortunate-looking head. My daughter seemed to think that hypnosis would help find out what went on between her father and her son. The 'therapy' did not expose anything untoward. It did, however, make my husband cluck like a chicken and soil his best corduroys.

My friend overstays her welcome. To make her leave, I keel over and pretend to pass a gallstone.

A few years back, I had 'the stones' and was often bathroom-bound for the best part of an hour. During those times, my husband would sing to me. I would sit on the toilet and press my ear against the door. He would pull up a chair and from the hallway he would sing 'Hey Hey You You! Get out of her gall!' Oddly, those were the times I felt closest to him.

I climb into bed and begin a pair of house slippers. Tonight I knit a pair in royal blue. The Queen's blue. Part of me wants to give these slippers to my daughter – for no other reason than to help cover up a bit of her body. Some nights I lie in bed and pray that she will get married. To the greengrocer. Or the postman. Or that pregnant looking man who stands on the median strip and yells at buses. My grandson is in dire need of a male role model. One other than my husband. One that the poor child doesn't want to wed.

I look at the empty, untouched side of the mattress. In my knitting bag is one of my Johnny Cash faces. One that I got off the Google. I lick the underside of the picture and stick it to the vacant pillow beside me. Now that I don't feel so alone, I begin to fall asleep.

My grandson is in the lounge filling his bellybutton with bran cereal. I decide to do something unnatural. I decide to cook. Plucking pieces of eggshell from a mixing bowl, I realise that I do not know how to make pancakes. I ask my grandson for assistance. He

refuses. Under my breath, I call him his father's name.

I stand at the stove and watch the pancakes burn. The smoke detectors sing. My grandson covers his ears with the thighs of the inflatable woman. Amongst the smoke cloud, The Boy and I sit down to a packet of home-brand shortbread. I ask him about school. He talks about crayons and leprosy. I ask him about girlfriends. He talks about the likelihood of someone dying from eating their own earwax. I say that he must fancy at least one girl in his class. The blonde one. Or the smart one. Or the one with the lazy eye. My grandson asks how I know there's a girl with a lazy eye. I tell him that its school policy for every class to have at least one.

I go into my room and find my grandson asleep underneath a pile of my underwear. I sit in my husband's study, and begin to cry.

My daughter takes my grandson to the beach. I stay home. It's not so much that I dislike the beach as I dislike the routine a lady must undertake before going to the beach. I haven't tended to myself since, well, since before my husband went away. I don't even look down there when I shower.

My husband liked to swim in the ocean. He said it made him feel free. Like he could just sidestroke into the sunset, never to be seen again. Sometimes I wish that he had. It would have made things a lot easier. When my daughter's accusations started, I contemplated driving to the water's edge, shoving my husband into the shallows, and telling him to head for the horizon.

Some people say Your Father swam off into the sunset. Some say he grew a moustache and became a used furniture salesman. Others say that he bought himself a bride over the internet and moved interstate to start a new family. The lady who works at the chemist is

certain that he burnt all of his clothes and joined a cult. But all Your Father actually did was move to a neighbouring suburb and marry a manicurist.

At church, I sit in the back and cover my face with a shawl. If people see me, they will probably stop their conversations about the price of ham and begin asking about my grandson's marital plans. At this church, having an interest in gossip is just as important as having an interest in Jesus.

Tonight The Organist sounds as though he is playing with his feet. Poor sap hasn't recovered from his grandmother's death. Some of the girls at bridge think there is something wrong with any man who would rather apply corn pads to his grandmother's feet than go out to discos and woo a hot tart. Once, whilst passing me the collection plate, my friend said that The Organist is probably one of those stool pushers. Lord knows what she says about my grandson.

I take out my teeth and put them in the cup on my nightstand. I apply one of the half-eaten lipsticks to my sunken pout. I stare at my reflection. I look unlovable, like a transvestite turtle. I lie in bed and wonder whether my body is shrinking or the bed is growing. I think of my husband. And decide to sacrifice tomorrow morning's tapestry session to visit him.

The nurse leads me into the common room. A row of recliners blocks the window. I sit down with the others and take in the view. The woman next to me smells of gherkins and naphthalene.

The staring window looks out onto a football field. From the overgrown grass and the decomposing tabby by the goal posts, I get the impression that it has been a while since the oval hosted a game.

The gherkin woman tells me that her daughter is coming to visit soon. 'Today or tomorrow. Or on the day that comes after today.' I read the woman a Garfield comic from yesterday's paper. She strokes my forearm. I tell her that she has lovely hair. She says it was a gift from her late husband.

A man arrives with a small child. The man is holding those cheap puffy flowers that You buy at the cemetery. He gives the flowers to an elderly woman. The child gives the woman a Fisherman's Friend lozenge. The child then scratches his testicles and sucks on his fringe. The man looks at his watch. He takes his son by the hand. They wave and they leave. The elderly woman drops the Fisherman's Friend into her tea.

A resident recognises me. He says that my husband is out on a day trip with a Younger man. And that the man was wearing a very smart dinner jacket. I slam the newspaper against the arm of the chair and try my best not to say something blasphemous.

At home, I try to distract myself with craft. It does not work. My thoughts are consumed with questions about my husband and the jacketed gentleman. What were they out for? Dinner? Dancing? Romancing? I feel sick. Perhaps my daughter was right about her father.

I silence my speculating with television. The weather girl is a lush Young thing, with legs longer than the nose of a Mediterranean. I've stopped using that word around my daughter. 'Lush' that is, not 'Mediterranean'. My daughter dislikes hearing terms that The Boy's father used when he got a bit punchy. I can only remember a few. Lush. Slapper. Tit Biscuit. I don't mind complying with the 'ban'. I've never used the term 'Tit Biscuit'. I'm not sure that I even know what it's supposed to mean.

The phone rings. It is my daughter. I tell her that today is not Tuesday. She asks me to

come to the hospital.

I flour my hands and clap them together like a gymnast. I mix the ingredients and attempt to channel my inner stereotypical grandma.

I sit on the kitchen floor, floured and defeated. I want to enter The Boy's hospital room with cake and biscuits and hugging arms at the ready. But unfortunately for my grandson, the skills of baking and hugging take more than a few minutes to master.

My daughter and grandson are sleeping. There is another bed in the room. Someone is hiding under the sheets and crying. I tap the blanket. It continues to weep. I tap again and ask if there's anything I can do to help. I tell the blanket that sometimes, when I feel down, I cheer myself up with a collage.

The crying becomes louder. Surprisingly, my daughter and my grandson do not wake. I offer the blanket a Good Prices biscuit. The weeping subsides. The sheet is flung to the floor. A fat girl is revealed. She is cross-legged and tear-soaked and holding the wrong end of a pair of scissors.

I leave the hospital without waking my daughter or grandson. I sit in my car and listen to my Man in Black. But it doesn't help.

I continue my modern, religious tapestry. The wise men are playing badminton. My thoughts return to the hospitalised girl. I try to cheer myself up with a crumpet. It does not work. I stare at the ceiling and think of my husband and of the man in the dinner jacket. I wonder whether the two men went to a hotel room. And if the jacketed man tried on the complimentary shower cap. And if my husband pocketed the tiny soaps. And whether, after a lengthy pillow fight, the two men put on their pajamas and held hands.

I touch my cheeks. They are wet. I think about the girl in the hospital. Closing my eyes I try to erase her from my mind. I think of something else. I picture Clint Eastwood, naked and atop a stallion. It doesn't work. All I see is the fat girl.

The phone rings. It is my friend. Her television is on the blink. She is coming over to watch the antique-valuing program at my house. I feel used.

She arrives. I compliment her on her new hair. She hands me store-bought digestive biscuits. I regret inviting her over. The man on the program has too many teeth for one mouth. I think it's a British thing. I think of my husband. I think of the hotel room. I settle my stomach with a digestive biscuit. My thoughts turn to the hospitalised girl. I want to talk about what happened at the hospital, with girl and the scissors. My friend sneezes. Biscuit crumbs spray from her nose. I decide to keep the hospital incident to myself.

My husband is not out sampling hotel soaps with the man in the dinner jacket. He is here and slouched in a beanbag. I am surprised that the nursing home has beanbags. In my opinion, the things have hip displacement written all over them.

I sit down on the floor next to my husband. He is reading a racy romance novel. I ask if he would read some aloud to me.

Mary falls down the stairs. Her ankle is twisted and her stockings are ripped. She sits up and asks Joseph if he happens to have a pair of crutches in his pocket. He doesn't. All he has is a setsquare. Mary uses the setsquare to splint her injury.

Joseph asks if Mary would like a kiss. Mary shakes her head and asks Joseph to help her stand up. Joseph lifts Mary over his shoulder as though she were a bag of potatoes. He

makes grunting sounds that make Mary feel overweight and unattractive.

Joseph puts Mary down on the stairs. And after rubbing her bruising bottom, Mary kisses Joseph on the cheek. Joseph cries rape. They both laugh.

I ask how much (of what he read) was from the page and how much was from his head. 'About sixty forty' he says. I tell him about the incident in the hospital. About the overweight girl who tried to arrange for her crotch to be donated to our grandson.

My husband sits up in the beanbag and apologises for many things. For humouring our grandson's delusions. For owning an inflatable woman. And for making snide remarks about my collages.

I ask about the man in the dinner jacket. According to my husband, the man was lonely and needed some company. I put my head on my knees. My husband puts his hand on his chest and tells me that he has never done anything untoward with a Young man or an old man or even a middle-aged man.

I tell my husband that I miss him. I ask him to come home. 'I am home' he says. And allows the beanbag to further consume his weather-beaten body.



We are: The Boy and Lizzy-June.

I found Lizzy-June in Big Nan's makeup drawer. Lizzy-June is dark brown and she has a purple face. Her face wasn't born purple. I made it that way when I coloured it in with some nail polish.

I am not brown or purple. I am just a normal 'boy colour'. I live with my mum and sometimes I live with Big Nan. Lizzy-June lives in the top part of my nose. It's safe up there. Even though Lizzy-June is the front half of an earwig and I am a boy, we are pretty much the same in every way. And very soon, Lizzy-June and I will be a wife. And Medium Pop will be our husband.

She asks what we want in our sandwich. We don't answer. We go into Medium Pop's room and blow into the plastic woman. We try to remember if we saw Medium Pop ride the lady at the beach or at the pool.

We press the sandwich onto our face. The honey makes our eyebrow hair twist together. We lick our hands and listen to Big Nan. She is in the next room and talking to the picture inside her locket. We do not like the way that Big Nan talks to photos of Medium Pop – like Medium Pop was already dead.

You are in the kitchen. We have seen You before - through the gap in mum's back fence. Big Nan wants us to come out and meet You. We don't want to. We want to hide in Big Nan's cupboard and sniff the vapour rub.

We go into Medium Pop's study room and pick a book from the shelf. Most of the birds in the book are drawings. We learned that drawings are also called illustrations. We don't know if the drawn birds are real or make believe. We won't ask Big Nan. We don't trust what she says, because one time she told us that prunes were delicious.

We look at the photo on the wall. In the picture, Big Nan and Medium Pop are holding hands. We try to hold each other's hands and we feel angry at Big Nan for sending Medium Pop away.

We listen to You and Big Nan. You are talking about birds. Big Nan tells You that Kevin and Gavin will never have babies because they are both boys. We ask if You have any pets. You tell us that You live alone. We say that we thought You would have at least one pet. People who are bad at friends have pets. That is because animals aren't very good at telling if someone's a loser or not.

We look at your feet. You have a piece of paper wedged in your sock. We think the paper has 'affirmations' on it. We saw on television that losers 'do affirmations' for themselves so that they don't want to die as much. We play with our zipper and tell You that we still have one of those poison sachets that come with new shoes if you're interested. You are not.

Big Nan says that You are going to walk us back to mum's house. We don't want to walk with You so we whisper in Big Nan's ear and tell her that we have seen You before, in your backyard kicking ponies.

On the way home, we think about Medium Pop. We remember that we have a pencil in our pocket. Maybe we should eat the pencil. Maybe the pencil's lead will poison us so we'll get sick and have to go to Medium Pop's hospital. We lick our lips and we think about

breaking into the newsagent and eating all of the pencils. But we remember, we remember that we have only ever seen old people in the hospital. Perhaps the place is only meant for really old people. Just ones over forty. We try to remember how old Medium Pop is. We guess he is probably forty-two years very old.

We think about the time when we got bored of waiting in the car. The time when we snuck into Medium Pop's room and saw mum eating his jelly cup. We did not yell at mum because she looked sad and as though someone had already told her off.

Most days, mum has a face that looks like it's being told off. It's not because she feels bad for eating Medium Pop's jelly cup. It is 'cos she doesn't really like us that much. We make her feel like a bad mum. And she says that we are almost as annoying as the people who let their dogs treat our driveway like a toilet.

On the way home, You take us into Get a Pet. You look at the budgerigars. When you're not looking, we climb into a bin filled with pellets. The pellets smell like the cereal mum buys on the weeks when she doesn't get paid any money. A pellet goes up our nostril. We panic a bit because our nostril is already full up. We think about the type of breakfast we will eat with Medium Pop when we're married. Muesli? Yoghurt? Pancakes? We decide that we would probably eat bowls of love heart candies covered in milk.

A Get a Pet worker tells us to get out of the pellet bin and leave the store. We wait for You outside, on the footpath.

We ask if You and mum are friends. You say that mum is a very nice lady. We can tell You are lying. We say that You and mum and Big Nan are all liars. Ones who send Medium Pops to hospitals for people over forty. You look confused. You ask questions. We don't talk about Medium Pop anymore. You ask more questions about Medium Pop.

We throw a stick at your legs. You trip and fall. You don't get up. You keep lying on the road. We get worried that You will become like the foxes and the rabbits on the expressway. We run to get Big Nan. We come back for You in Big Nan's car. Big Nan takes You into the chemist for some bandaids.

We are in Big Nan's room. We are looking at old photo albums. Lots of faces have been cut out. They are all his faces. We ask Big Nan if she knows anything about the faces. Big Nan makes a face that makes her penciled eyebrows touch. Her eyebrows look like two millipedes kissing. We ask Big Nan again. And to show her that we are very serious, we do a blackmail. We say that if she doesn't tell us then we will be forced to karate her face off. Right off. So all she has left is a skull and some dangly flesh bits.

Big Nan takes us into the kitchen. She picks up a bread knife and points at the tea-towel drawer. She shakes the knife and tells us to 'go for it'. We don't move. We are a little bit worried that Big Nan wants a tea towel to soak up our blood (after she has stabbed us). We take deep, brave breaths and open the drawer. Under the tea towels, we find an envelope saying: heads.

We reach into the envelope and pull out a handful of dad's faces. We throw the faces on the kitchen floor. Big Nan is watching us. We move the faces around and make them into letters and words. Big Nan does not shout or hit or cry. And she doesn't even do the cross face that makes her millipede eyebrows kiss. Big Nan just looks at the floor. At the nasty swear word that we have spelled out for her.

We spread out like a starfish and closes our eyes. We pretend that we are not on Big Nan's kitchen floor and lying next to the swear collage. We pretend that we are on our honey moon and floating in a pool with Medium Pop.

Big Nan forces our eyes open with her wrinkly hands. She tells us that she is giving us a serious warning. Big Nan says that if we don't start behaving, we will turn out exactly like our dad. The warning doesn't make us feel good. It makes us feel like we just ate salad.

We pick up all the photos and go back into Medium Pop's room. We use a glue stick and we glue all of dad's faces onto photos of Big Nan. A book falls off the shelf. All the books make an avalanche. We get scared so we hug the plastic lady and stick our tongue in her mouth.

The earthquake finishes. The woman's mouth tastes like sick. We go into the kitchen to see if the earthquake split Big Nan's house in half. Big Nan is lying on the kitchen floor. She starts to cry and tells us that there wasn't an earthquake. She stands up and starts bashing her head against the dented part of the wall.

Between each head-butt she says swear words. Swear words at herself. We tell Big Nan that we are sorry. Big Nan keeps bashing. We say sorry for everything we can think of. For rainy days and itchy jumpers and bruised pears and for looking just like dad. Big Nan stops bashing. She wipes her face with her sleeve. She tells us that she loves us and pushes us into her huge belly. Her boobs cover our face and make it hard for us to breathe.

Big Nan opens a packet cake and gives us the end bit. We think maybe brides and grooms use big knives to cut wedding cakes because they love each other so much. Big knives for big love. We eat our cake and think that we will need a samurai sword at our wedding.

We are not allowed to see Medium Pop. We haven't seen him in ages. When mum goes to the hospital, we have to wait in the car. We finish our cake and try to think of plans, secret-sneaky plans that will help us get into the hospital.

We pull a nail out of the floorboards. We hold the plastic woman tightly and kiss her on the mouth. We smooth our hand over her cartoon hair and tell her that we hope she goes to heaven. We use the nail to pop the lady and then we use our teeth to rip her head off. We pick a yellow dress from Big Nan's cupboard. The dress smells like a moth's balls. We try to fit our face inside the plastic woman's head. It is tricky. We suck in his cheeks and think of skinny things like cheese sticks and flamingo legs.

Mum finds us. She takes off our mask. She asks us if we have eaten any fruit today. We have eaten two pieces of cake and half a jar of strawberry jam. We tell mum we have eaten three bananas and a rambutan.

We know that mum is unhappy because she is in the kitchen cupboard and eating five kinds of biscuits. We tell her that the biscuits will make her fat. So fat that her butt will get stuck and she will have to stay in the cupboard, next to the onions and flour, until she is dead.

Mum splits a cream biscuit in half and tells us that wearing a plastic lady's head and a big dress wouldn't have gotten us past the nurses and into Medium Pop's room. She says that Medium Pop is never coming home. Not to live. Not to visit. And especially not to marry his grandson. We snatch a bit of biscuit from mum's hand, put it down our pants and then throw it at her legs.

In bed, we think about how Big Nan said that her Kevin and Gavin could never have babies because they are both boys. We pat our tummy and wonder if it is the same with humans. We open our jeans and imagine ourselves with lady privates. We think that maybe Medium Pop will want to marry us if we are a lady.

Mum is in the shower. We are surprised that she could get out of the pantry after eating all those biscuits. Mum doesn't see us. She is busy shaving her shins and crying. The way that she is standing in the shower lets us see her private bits. We leave the bathroom and try to find an old kiwifruit and a strawberry marshmallow.

You come over to mum's house. You give me a shirt and say that it is for my mum. After You leave, we tie the top around our waist like a skirt. We look at our reflection in the window and we begin to dance. We close our eyes and pretend that we are a swan. Not a swan that was born an ugly duckling. We pretend that we are one of the bitch swans that was beautiful from the very moment that its egg fell from its mother's lady hole.

Mum wants to know where your shirt came from. We ask questions about her privates. We say that we need to know for a school project. Mum doesn't believe us so we tell her that her lady hole is probably gross and full of witches. We sit on our bed and decide not to make our new privates from food because the kiwifruit is too hard and the marshmallows are too delicious. We stuff our mouth full of marshmallows and try to find something sharp.

Before we open our eyes, we pray that (while we had fainted) the doctors swapped our boy bits for a lady's privates. Maybe a dead lady who doesn't need to wee or have babies anymore.

We peek underneath our bandages. We say a curse word. We look for mum. We cannot see her. Maybe she is hiding and waiting for the perfect time to jump out and yell 'surprise' – just like at parties. We can only see two hiding places. One: behind the pot plant, and two: under the arm of the big girl in the bed next to me. We ask the girl to move her arms like a windmill.

We decide that her name is too long and boring so we decide to call her 'Meat'. A nurse comes in and sits on our bed. Meat tells the nurse that she is going to be a bridesmaid. We remind Meat that we asked her to be the flower girl.

We ask Meat if she wants to play dead. We close our eyes and poke out our tongues. Mum comes in the room with a cup of coffee. We peek to see if mum is upset that we have died. Mum is not upset. She is not sad or angry or yelling at Jesus. No, she is drinking coffee and doing the newspaper word puzzles.

We play with our bandages and think about that time when we heard mum on the phone. That time when she said that sometimes she sees us as a mini version of our mustard father. We think about those words 'mustard father' and decide that they probably are what people call nasty dads. Dads who yell at mums and throw remote controls at dogs.

Mum pats our head and tells us that it isn't normal for someone to want to marry their Medium Pop. She says it is actually against the law. We ask if maybe, at the wedding, a policeman might come and 'do an arrest'. Mum makes shushing noises and pushes our head against the pillow. We close our eyes and wonder whether we would still want to get married if Medium Pop was like all the others. All the others who think we look just like our mustard father.

Mum leaves to get more coffee. Meat sighs and says she is sorry that mum isn't excited about the wedding. We ask Meat if having a lady hole is better than ice cream. Meat says that ice cream is better. We look at Meat's fat head and ask a different question. We ask if it is better than long weekends.

The boy is asleep in the hospital bed. The mother is asleep in the hospital chair. Meat is not asleep. She is under her covers and staring at her privates. Quietly, she asks her

crotch if it will miss her. To her expectations, it does not respond. After a brief, and somewhat incomprehensible prayer, Meat reaches inside her pencil case for scissors.

The sun is sleeping. We are not. We are playing with our bellybutton and we are thinking about Meat. Our bellybutton is soft and warm. We think about Meat's bellybutton. We hope that Meat has not died. Or been kidnapped. Or been attacked by an eagle.

The nurse says that Meat is being fixed because Meat had an accident. The nurse wont tell us what kind of accident it was. Sitting up makes us hurt. Standing makes us hurt even more. We do not care. We want to find Meat to see if she's ok and to ask her to help us prepare for our wedding.

Mum says we have to get back into bed. We think that maybe mum always has a sad face because she never got to be a bride. We tell mum that we are never going to be like her. No, we are going to be different because we are going to get married and become a wife. A wife who is in love.

Mum uses the hospital phone. She calls You and asks You to bring some bed sheets. We wait for mum to come out of the toilet. You look chubbier than normal. We ask if You are like that man on the television who found out he was fat because he had an unborn twin stuck inside his body parts. You tell us that You are not like the man but that, sometimes, You wish that You did have a twin. Not a body-part twin, but a born one. Mum calls out from the toilet and thanks You for the sheets. She asks You to give her some 'alone time'.

Mum comes out of the toilet. She is wearing the bed sheets like a wedding dress. She gives us her scarf and says we can wear it like a tie. She says that we can be the groom. We shake our head and ask mum what she is doing. She says that if we really want to get married then she'll let us marry her, marry her instead of Medium Pop. We start to get

angry.

Mum takes off her bed sheets and takes a little bottle out of her handbag. She empties it into her coffee. We think that maybe the bottle is full of medicine, the type of medicine that will make her go to sleep. The type of medicine that will make her sleep for ages and only wake up when we have become grownups with beards.

Mum drinks her coffee and starts to cry. Her black makeup gets smudgy and makes her look like a melting panda. We don't like to see mum crying so we tell her that she should try to be happy. Mum says she doesn't know why we want to marry Medium Pop. She says that sometimes Big Nan doesn't even like being married to Medium Pop.

We play with our jelly cup and tell mum that we've always wanted to be a wife.

Mum says that she loves us and that our health and happiness are very important to her. We tell mum that sometimes imagining her and Big Nan getting attacked by an eagle makes us happy. Mum starts to swear.

Mum keeps swearing. She starts to hit her knee and shake her head. We look at mum's tight jeans and think maybe Medium Pop wouldn't want a bride with just any old lady hole. Maybe Medium Pop wants a bride with privates he has seen many nappy-changing and baby-bathing, times before.

Mum is tired from all her swearing and knee-hitting. She leans back in the plastic chair and closes her eyes. We bite a big chunk out of our plastic hospital cup and tell mum to go to sleep. Mum listens to us. She listens because she doesn't know what we are going to do. We test our cup on our arm. It doesn't cut into our skin; it doesn't even make a scratch. Mum still has her eyes closed but she is getting fidgety. We do not have long. We look around the room for something jabby.



This is: You.

Part Two

Your mouth is much bigger than the rapist's. Put the bird's entire head inside your mouth and blow.

Try to convince yourself that your mouth is not filled with the small head of a bird. Pretend that You are inflating balloons for your neighbour's son's birthday. Picture yourself and the church organist dressed as unconvincing clowns, clowns that look like allergy-suffering homeless men.

Whilst resuscitating, wonder whether The Organist has any children. Think that perhaps the musician has a whole flock of children. Picture The Organist throwing handfuls of dry cereal to his offspring, as though they were ducks in a pond.

Twenty minutes pass. Remove the bird from your mouth.

Hold your hands like an open casket. Push your palms toward the female. Stop pushing when she pecks You. Understand the peck to be her way of grieving. Believe that everyone grieves in his or her own, unique way. Know that Your Mother grieved the death of her beloved cat by moving away from You, the perpetrator.

Put the deceased bird in the food bowl, amongst the seed husks. Lift the lid of the nesting box. Pat the female bird on her grief-stricken head. Tell her that she just has a different version of Stockholm syndrome and that the rapist must have abused her so frequently that

she came to care for him. Inform the bird that You have seen cases (where this type of thing happens) on the television.

Your neighbour is outside. She is praising her dog for having such slender ankles. Do not feel flattered that your neighbour has copied your pet praising.

As You prepare to bury your pet, decide that more people should attend the funeral. Think of possible guests. Realise that neither You nor your dead bird know many people. Think about The Organist. With bird free hand, touch your spine and imagine being ridden by the pocket-squared musician. Visualise the feeling of The Organist's crotch pressed against your back.

Your neighbour peers over the fence and clears her throat. Open your eyes. Stop touching your spine. Sweat until You develop a liquid moustache. Your neighbour asks what happened. Lie. Say the bird drowned in his water dish. Your neighbour asks why the bird isn't wet. Panic, say 'cryogenics' and invite the woman to the funeral.

your neighbour smoothes the sides of the hole and tastefully neatens the grave. She tells You to put the bird in the ground only when you're ready to say goodbye. Apparently, she has plenty of time because today is Tuesday. Close your eyes and attempt to remember the good parts of the bird's life – the parts when he wasn't raping.

When she stands, your neighbour accidentally lets out a tiny fart. Want to invite her inside. Perhaps for some cereal or hand sanitiser. Want to thank her for her grave neatening and her funeral attendance and even for her fart. Want to hug your neighbour, bury your face in her stomach and ask her (with a sweater-muffled voice) why she isn't busy on Tuesdays.

Your neighbour invites You over for drinks and rice cakes. Think about the ethics of attending a wake (for a death) that You are ultimately responsible for.

Stand in the woman's kitchen. Wonder if she saw You, through the gaps in the fence, when You were crushing the rapist's unborn babies. Panic. Believe that your neighbour is some sort of 'avian pro-life advocate'. One who intends to poison your drink and then suffocate You with an ottoman? Feel your organs wince with fear. Fear that they (and You) will soon be 'ottomanned' to death. 'Ottomised'.

Ask your neighbour if she owns an ottoman. When she asks You to repeat your question, thank her for helping with the funeral. Tell her that she has a kind and beautiful heart. Find your compliment highly inappropriate. Change the subject. Ask the woman where her son is. Before she answers, ask her more questions about The Boy. Ask if he plays sports and eats vegetables and wears mismatched pyjamas and dresses his dog up in old souvenir t-shirts.

Your neighbour tells You that every Tuesday her son stays with her mother, his grandmother. Because every Tuesday is your neighbour's R.D.O.

Tell your neighbour that right now, for You, every day has become a R.D.O. Tell your neighbour that You are on sick leave.

Remember the picture of Jerome Martinez, in your shoe. Touch your ankles. Your neighbour asks if You are on leave because You have injured your leg. Shake your head. Make up a disorder. Tell her You have 'dreamititus'. Tell her it means You are unable to dream. Know that she does not believe You. Elaborate. Tell her that You worked with heavy machinery and that the absence of dreaming hindered your ability to obtain crucial sleep nutrients. Tell her that your dreamititus made You a liability to yourself and the

company and the heavy machinery. Understand your neighbour's face to be made up of both skepticism and poorly applied makeup.

Want to tell her the real reason that You aren't working. Want to tell her about your accidents. And how You have been advised to treat your 'lengthy leave' like a holiday. Want to ask your neighbour to accompany You on an exotic trip. To the Caribbean or the Solomon Islands or even just to the Asian food court at the local shopping centre.

The phone rings. Your neighbour swears into the receiver. Feel uncomfortable like You did when your parents argued. When the woman begins slapping her microwave, hum the theme tune from *The Love Boat*.

She hangs up the phone and tells You that she is furious with her mother, more furious than usual. Ask if You can do anything to help. She sucks her fist and asks if You could pick up her son (from his grandmother's house).

your neighbour attempts to write her mother's address on the underside of a yoghurt lid. Assume that she must have been dropped on her head as a baby. Wait patiently as your neighbour swears and asks herself questions that she doesn't intend to answer.

Decide that there was no need to write down the address, as the house is within throwing distance. And that it was also unnecessary for your neighbour to even ring her mother because even the shortest of 'can and string' phones could reach the ears of both women.

Stand in the grandmother's yard. Wish that your garden were more like this one (the type that a gnome would be proud to call home). Wonder if You could dedicate your holidays to becoming the grandmother's friend. The type of friend she would want to entertain on her patio. And crotchet a vest for. And kiss.

The grandmother invites You inside. As she speaks, focus on her jowls. Watch them bounce and sway, almost hypnotically. Turn your attention to the woman's locket. Try to imagine what picture, if any, lives inside the jewellery.

Look around the kitchen. At the religious tapestries and numerous photos of the grandmother and the grandfather. Notice that, in every photo, the two are hugging. Their bodies entwined tapestry threads. Assume that the bluebird locket contains a picture of the grandmother's husband: the grandfather. Silently hate the locket. And the grandfather.

The grandmother has two budgies in a small cage. One blue. One white. Look at the blue one. Believe it knows what You have done. Before You return The Boy to his mother, want to explain to the bird exactly why You had to squish the unborn babies. Stare at the grandmother's microwave and wonder if Your Mother had any secret-children after You. Think about Your Father's daughter, the one with the oversized forehead.

Offer your hand to The Boy. Do not be surprised by his refusal. Ask if he ever dresses his dog in 'people clothes'. The Boy says he likes penguins. Make a pathetic joke about penguins' formal attire. When The Boy doesn't laugh, explain your joke. Feel stupid for both the joke and the explanation.

He takes a toffee from his pocket and smashes it against his teeth. Decide that he could never eat in the company of the queen. Try to ignore The Boy's audible eating by imagining the quietest sound in the world – the sound of two handkerchiefs kissing. Picture two handkerchiefs, peeping from The Organist's pocket and kissing passionately. Kissing as though they were on the Titanic – and soon to become mere wet cloths. The Boy removes the toffee from his mouth and throws it onto the ground. Tell the child about children in Africa. Children who would kill for that toffee. Do not respond when The Boy

informs You that his toffee is much better on the ground than in Africa and making children kill each other.

Take a detour. Enter the Get a Pet. The Boy submerges his hands into the aquarium. Look away. Go over to the birds. Count the budgies. Seventeen. Choose one budgie and stare at it. Try to make eye contact with the bird. When it defecates in its own water bowl, decide that all birds are stupid. Hope the sugared almonds are not listening to You and hearing your anti-avian thoughts. Imagine what the squished budgerigars might say.

Some days we go to the public pool and piss in it. We piss and then we watch swimmers as they accidentally swallow teensy gulps of water. We do not piss because we are malicious. We do it because we believe that diluted urine offers a welcome alternative to a swimmer's usual diet of loose change and used bandaids. After urinating in chlorine we perch on the backs of ponies and pity You.

We would like to say that we pity You in an un-patronising, empathetic way. But we cannot – as we do not.

Step away from the aviary. Look at the ceiling. Stare at your egg-crushing fingers and decide that during these holidays, You are going to become a better person. A person who cares for animals to the extent that You make all other animal activists seem like: blue-whale-stabbing, white-tiger-eating, ivory hunters.

Take your first step in becoming a better person, a person who enjoys holidays. A person who takes an interest in current events and has a herb garden and needs a diary to keep track of appointments and social activities. A person who dances and takes vitamins and has no difficulty pronouncing 'bruschetta'. A person who recycles and befriends church musicians and cultivates yoghurt. Think about helping others, about saving lives. A

lifesaver. Yes, You like the sound of that. Decide that when it comes to saving lives, it's better to go for 'quantity over quality'. Press your crotch against the shop's counter. Take a moment to enjoy the way the cool glass feels against your groin. Purchase takeaway containers filled with crickets.

Place the containers on the concrete. Do not unite your hands religiously, instead simply close your eyes and pray that this will make up for your prior pet-harming actions. Watch as hundreds of crickets shoot into the air like fireworks. Hope that through releasing the crickets (from their almost certain death) You are on your way to becoming a better person.

Shake crickets from your trouser leg. Straighten your back. Stick out your chest. Walk, no, march away from the shop and into the afternoon.

Enter Nice Buns. Press your face against the display cabinet. Leave a breathy impression of your nose on the glass. Buy a raisin bun. Eat the way that You imagine a queen might eat. Picture Her Majesty feeding raisins to her wax double at Madam Tussauds. Wonder whether the wax artists bothered to recreate the queen's privates. Or whether, in the place where Her Majesty's royal vagina should have been, the wax artists stuck an English toffee. Think about toffee. Realise that You have left The Boy, alone, in the Get a Pet. Fill your mouth with bun in an attempt to drown out any potential, spontaneous screams.

Think about all the things that could have happened to the child. Immediately think of a hungry, child hating, pack of wolves. Realise that wolves do not inhabit this country. Relax. Panic when You remember that the zoo has three wolves (in what You consider to be an easily-escapable enclosure).

Outstretch one arm into the superman position. Convinced that your outstretched arm is more Hitler than Superman, retract your arm and try again. When You are satisfied that

your limb is more hero than dictator, run back to Get a Pet.

After two streets, feel ridiculous and return your arm to its usual walking position. Walk quickly and with purpose. Hope to see The Boy. Hope to see The Organist. Picture The Organist nodding compassionately as You inform him about your lost-child predicament. Envisage the musician kissing individual strands of your fringe. Hugging and shushing and reassuring You that You are a good person. A person who he (and maybe Jesus and maybe even all of Jesus' friends) would like to help.

Feel relieved to see that The Boy is outside the store. He is waiting for You. He is sitting cross-legged and chewing on a sticker that says 'I LOVE MY WHIPPET'. He smiles. Return the gesture and feel as though You are on your way to becoming a better person.

On the way home, The Boy informs You of his plans to marry his grandfather. Start talking about safety houses. Stare at the footpath and imagine the child's grandfather squeezing an impressive beer belly into an ivory gown. Realise that the child is crying. Crying and pushing You onto the road.

Sit on the footpath and wait for The Boy to return with his grandmother. Hold your leg up, above your heart. You have been pushed, not snake bitten.

Thank the grandmother for coming to your aide and for driving You to the chemist. Politely request that she not tell The Boy's mother about the incident. The grandmother turns up the radio as if to ignore your request. Contemplate cutting all her hair off in her sleep.

your front door is open. Someone is inside your house. Instead of phoning the police, try to think of what You own that is worth stealing. Stand in your hallway. Partially wish You

had enough interest in sport or home security to own a baseball bat. Remove your left shoe. Hold it above your head. Prepare to attack your intruder with some ‘cushioned heel support’.

Push open your bedroom door and attempt to produce a convincing karate noise. Drop your shoe on the floor when You find your neighbour standing on your bed, dressed in your clothes. She looks as though she has been crying. Decide not to ask questions. Instead, tell her about her son's pushing. Your neighbour hiccups. Request that she remove your clothes and return them to the pile on the floor.

Your neighbour smells of peach and paint stripper. Watch her bounce on your bed, in unison with her hiccups. When the woman's hiccups subside, offer her an instant coffee. Say the word ‘instant’ quietly as though it was a shameful word. A shameful and uncivilised word for a shameful and uncivilised beverage.

Want to ask the woman why she came into your house, uninvited, to try on your clothing. Instead, sit on the floor and listen as your neighbour intersperses her overly audible coffee consumption with apologies. Bite your lip when she sits on the floor beside You and apologises for ‘breaking-in’ to try on your clothes because she wanted to feel as though You were all over her.

Count the number of seconds between your neighbour’s bedroom-suggesting glances. Eleven. Five. None. She begins stroking your forearm. Hold your breath as though You were underwater and seven years old and trying to perfect a handstand. Take your thoughts somewhere else. Think about the rapee. About Sophia Foccacia. About Your Mother. Think about hot cocoa and knee blankets.

Feel embarrassed for both yourself and the woman. Tell your neighbour that You are

tired. And diabetic. And married. When she inquires as to whether You are 'Type A or Type B', say 'both' and politely ask her to leave.

When You are alone, check on your widow bird. She is hanging from the top of the aviary. Picture your bird wearing tiny roller skates. Picture her in an Attenborough documentary. Picture her impaled on a kebab. Wonder if she would be happier dead and impaled and somewhere other than your backyard. Ask the bird if that's what she would prefer. She does not answer. Ask her again. She remains unresponsive, just like Ben. In haste, pull her wing. Stop. Now, pull it again, pull it harder.

Decide You need some guidance in the pet-owning area. Feel that You should have gone to another church, to any other church. Stand in the pew. Try not to stare at the lady next to You (the one whose bald spot seems to be growing by the minute). Struggle to sing along to the hymns. Peer over the balding lady's shoulder. Assume that her little worn booklet contains hymn lyrics. The woman turns away, but it is too late, You have already seen the IKEA catalogue that she has open inside her hymnbook.

Question the hymns' continuous references to lambs. Was God a farmer? Did he make nature documentaries? Did he precede Attenborough? You are unsure. Your parents never really educated You about Shrove Tuesdays or burning bushes or advent calendars. Your Father put religion in the same basket as the Tooth Fairy, diet pills and women's intuition.

Realise that The Organist is watching You. Again with the multi-tasking. He is playing the organ and watching You like he did in Second Chance. Silently envy his impressive ability to multitask. Wonder if he has magical powers and if he knows that You have a tendency to injure your pets and a tendency to picture him in unflattering jocks and a tendency to picture him on a cruise ship, enjoying being your holiday companion. Attempt to shield your face behind the balding woman. You startle her. She drops her book. The IKEA

catalogue falls to the ground and opens to the utensil page. A small frying pan has been circled in red pen. Next to it, in scratchy handwriting it says ‘Get this one. Good for eggs.’

In the foyer, stand amongst the God-fearing and the biscuit-eating. Watch an elderly man pull apart a cream biscuit, lick all the cream off and put the biscuit back with the others. Perhaps this man could be your holiday companion. Or better yet, You could spend your holidays teaching the man about hygiene. Wonder if your boss intended to list ‘conducting informative hygiene seminars’ (right after coconut drinking and salsa dancing) as an appropriate holiday activity.

Open your bedroom door. Expect to see your neighbour in your clothes. Sift through the flannelette haystack and try to find your needle of a neighbour. Reach the carpet and feel slightly disappointed. Stare at all your empty clothes – on top of each other – hugging each other. Feel as though they are mocking You. Punch a pair of trousers. Pick up the shirt that You wore during the rapist’s burial. Decide to give it to your neighbour as some kind of unconventional friendship charm.

Feel You’ve the right to enter her house unasked. Feel, that after the ‘breaking and dressing’ incident, You’ve the right to even use her toothbrush to brush your teeth, eyebrows and various other hairs. The door is unlocked. Enter uninvited. In the kitchen, find The Boy on the floor, eating marshmallows and using a deodorant lid to hollow out a kiwifruit.

The Boy wedges a pink marshmallow down the front of his pants and tells You that his mother is busy. ‘On the toilet and washing her hair and cooking a parfait kind of busy.’ Leave the shirt on the kitchen table.

At home, remind yourself that You are on holidays, yoghurt-making holidays. Decide that the local Good Prices probably doesn't have a section reserved for acidophilus and bifidus. Kick the couch.

Hear a woman's scream coming from the house next door. Run to your neighbour's house. Stand over the woman. Stand and watch as she applies pressure to the shirt, your shirt, in an attempt to slow the bleeding. Wonder if this would have been on your boss' list of suitable holiday activities.

Spill hot coffee on a fat man's foot. Apologise repeatedly when You realise that he is wearing open-toed sandals. He mutters something into the folds of his neck. Find yourself wanting to scold his skin some more. Remember that You have more important things to focus on right now. Apologise once more and do some kind of hybridised bowing/curtsey action.

Give your neighbour her (now half-empty) coffee. Feel somewhat satisfied that the vending machine makes worse coffee than You do. Sift through the magazines. Choose one that is older than your neighbour's son. Ask your neighbour if she has let her family know about the accident. Ask if she has phoned The Boy's father. Without breaking eye contact with the floor, your neighbour politely informs You that contacting The Boy's father would be less than 'fucking' necessary.

In the local Get a Pet, resist the temptation to ask the caged birds whether they despise You. Remember why you're in the store. Watch potential pet owners and how they act around the animals. Quietly imitate the 'aww' sound a lady makes when she pats a kitten. The lady realises what You are doing. Feel embarrassed. Go and stare at a goldfish.

A small girl approaches You and asks You whether you're a Nazi. Advise her against purchasing any of the fish that are floating on the surface. An employee calls You over to watch a rat give birth.

There is no nurse. No bed. No doctor. There are no tears or screams and there is no husband with two empathetic and apologetic hands to hold. But there are babies, lots of tiny hairless bean-sized rat babies that drop out of their mother. The shop girl becomes emotional. Feel uncomfortable. Think about Ben and about piñatas. Leave the store and buy some yoghurt – for research purposes.

Drop your groceries on the footpath. A child crosses the road to help You. It is the same girl from the Get a Pet. Thank her for helping pick up your aspirin and your potatoes and your yoghurt. The girl tells You that her mother sometimes wipes yoghurt on herself when her mother's wee feels like razorblades. Agree to pay the girl a specific amount of money if she helps You carry your shopping home. Tell her about the pregnant rat at the Get a Pet. The rat that gave birth to teensy rat babies. The girl tells You that she held a baby rat once and squeezed it until its 'heart muscle broke'. Confess that You have also done some unkind things to prior pets. Assure the child that all those things are behind You now and that now You are on your way to becoming a better person. The girl asks if that means You've quit being a Nazi. Do not respond. She tells You not to worry about being a Nazi because it's just your 'thing' and everyone has their own 'thing'. According to the child: 'You have being a Nazi. Fat aunty had her special oven thing. The girl in my class has eating glue sticks. The Boy down the road has his gay thing and I have squishing and squashing. Squishing and squashing little animals until I feel powerful. Like a gorilla or a dad with a broom handle.' Being perceived as a Nazi is never a good sign. Think about possible ways to improve yourself. Think about donating your budgerigar to Second Chance so that she can be claimed by someone more responsible. Someone unlike yourself.

On your way home from Second Chance, stop at the park. Four children are playing with the drink fountain. Their mother is sitting in the bark chips and eating a mandarin. Wonder if the woman would notice if You took one of her offspring...and if she were to notice, wonder if she would particularly mind. The mother whistles. The children run over to her. They all sit and eat fruit. The woman looks at You and smiles. Under your breath call her a 'greedy child-monger'.

Think about cows and sheep and horses and about Your Father's new partner. Your Father's new (well newer) partner doesn't particularly look like a farm animal. She looks more like a hybrid. Not like a liger or a mule. More like Kenny Rogers spliced with some sort of attractive mollusc.

You disapproved of the mollusc almost instantly. Not because of her 'hybridity' or because she was a manicurist or even because she was not Your Mother. You disliked the woman because she possessed a quality that You and Your Mother seemed unable to attain – no, not immaculate nails or a defined arse but, the ability to express emotion. Bucket fulls, truck loads, crazy daytime-soap-siren amounts of emotion. And when your half-sister (the one with The Forehead) was born You were sent a card that featured a photo of Your Father and The Nail Technician using their retarded arms to create a heart-shaped border around their new baby.

Someone knocks at your door. Think about possible visitors. Perhaps it is Your Father, perhaps he is coming over to give You hugs and chicken noodle Sophia Foccacia and one of those motivational-self help cassettes. Perhaps it is Attenborough visiting on behalf of your budgerigar, visiting to put You in a cereal box and tape the top closed and to intentionally 'forget' to punch air holes into the sides. How you would explain yourself and your actions? Like to think that you'd come up with

something more articulate than ‘sometimes, some people are just cunts. And I guess that, sometimes, well, Sir. David Attenborough, you may wish to identify me as ‘some people.’ The knocking continues. Perhaps it is the young girl from the Get a Pet coming to check if you’re still pissing razorblades.

Open the door. Do not ask her if she has bought You something, something like chalk or gum or little hand-drawn pictures of salmon. Say nothing. Your Mother asks if she can come inside. Sweep your arm to the side. Point like an airhostess. Point to the lounge room. She sits on the edge of your sofa and apologises if she stinks of bleach or urinal cakes. She asks how You’ve been enjoying your holidays. Inquire how she knew You were on holidays. She doesn’t answer. Tell her about the rat babies. Ask her if she still thinks about Ben. She doesn’t respond. Ask again. She points to the open board game box on the floor and asks if You want to play. Do not tell her that You threw away the plastic because it was ripped and stained with bits of your forehead. Say that You’ve lost the Twister mat. She smiles and asks if You want to improvise and use couch cushions as the dots. Tell her that You were actually planning on spending your afternoon teaching yourself how to cultivate yoghurt. That is the type of person You are now. A person who makes yoghurt. She laughs and asks why anyone would want to make yoghurt. Say that’s what people do on their holidays. ‘What people, wankers?’ Do not respond. The question is rhetorical. Your Mother gestures for you to pass her a couch cushion. She gestures again and calls you ‘rabbit’. She is Your Mother. She has called you ‘rabbit’. Reach for a cushion.