‘Kardinia’: a novel and exegesis

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Abstract

This doctoral thesis is concerned with two interrelated components exploring literary form and style as they relate to the reading and writing of unsympathetic characters.

Section one (30%), the analytical written component, examines these themes in light of three novels that have influenced my creative work: *The member of the wedding* (Carson McCullers), *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (Jean Rhys) and *The driver's seat* (Muriel Spark). These novels have all been criticised for formal considerations, often attributed to socio-cultural qualities such as the authors' gender, ethnicity, and/or personal histories, that inhibit readers' engagement with the narrative. Rather than looking to reconcile these elements, this exegesis aims to find a theoretical bridge that enables a complementary analysis of the texts without resorting to essentialism. Douglas's notion of dirt as "matter out of place" and Kristeva's use of abjection present as useful analytical terms, but key components of their frameworks limit their applicability across place and time. Duschinsky's "purity discourses" remedies these limitations, incorporating dirt and abjection into a flexible, non-essentialist, ideologically contingent theoretical mechanism. This mechanism is overlaid across Douglas's three-part description of the process of dirt (from 'safe' non-differentiation, to differentiated and 'dangerous', to a return to indiscriminate formlessness) allowing a three-part analysis of the novels, whose narrative arcs conform to this same pattern.

Section two (70%), 'Kardinia' (the creative component), a novel about a young man caught between two worlds, mirrors the three-part structure of the novels from the exegesis (from 'safe' dirt, Harry becomes differentiated and 'dangerous', before returning to indiscriminate formlessness), intentionally manipulating reader engagement and sympathies, taking a character with an abject status and resolving his trajectory in a story of unexpected salvation and hope.

Each of these four novels demands an engagement with the "in-between, the ambiguous and the composite" (Kristeva 1982, p. 4). This engagement challenges the hegemony of a narrative form reliant on easy relateability and comfortable resolutions, thereby contributing to the diversification of our expectations of the role and structure of fiction.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my supervisors, Ian Syson and Barbara Brook, for their thoughtful guidance and encouragement.

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A note on the text

All references to Carson McCullers are from *The member of the wedding*, all references to Jean Rhys are from *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, all references to Muriel Spark are from *The driver's seat*, all references to Mary Douglas are from *Purity and danger* and all references to Julia Kristeva are from *Powers of horror,* unless the text indicates otherwise.

Her Kind

By Anne Sexton

I have gone out, a possessed witch,
haunting the black air, braver at night;
dreaming evil, I have done my hitch
over the plain houses, light by light:
lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.
A woman like that is not a woman, quite.
I have been her kind.

I have found the warm caves in the woods,
filled them with skillets, carvings, shelves,
closets, silks, innumerable goods;
fixed the suppers for the worms and the elves:
whining, rearranging the disaligned.
A woman like that is misunderstood.
I have been her kind.

I have ridden in your cart, driver,
waved my nude arms at villages going by,
learning the last bright routes, survivor
where your flames still bite my thigh
and my ribs crack where your wheels wind.
A woman like that is not ashamed to die.
I have been her kind.

Introduction

> "If you're reading to find friends, you're in deep trouble"
> – Claire Messud, *Publisher's Weekly*, April 29, 2013

'Kardinia', a novel set in contemporary Melbourne (Section Two of this thesis), explores the circularity of identity, the ways the past feeds into the present, which in turn becomes another person's past. Juxtaposing the beauty of the Australian landscape with the violence of macho football culture, the story investigates the role and meaning of responsibility in a subculture more concerned with brutality than with love. These themes are advanced through the eyes of Harry, whose personal values put him at odds with his peers. Told from a range of perspectives, shifts in time, tense and character, the structure and literary style of 'Kardinia' interferes with readers' engagement with the narrative, ultimately implicating the reader in Harry's 'outsider' status.

It is this emphasis on structure and style that is explored in this exegesis, which focuses on three texts that have influenced and inspired 'Kardinia' – *The member of the wedding* by Carson McCullers (first published in 1946), *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* by Jean Rhys (first published in 1931) and *The driver's seat* by Muriel Spark (first published in 1970). These novels have all been criticised for formal considerations, often attributed to socio-cultural qualities such as the authors' gender, ethnicity, and/or personal histories, that inhibit readers' engagement with the narrative. Rather than looking to reconcile these elements, this exegesis aims to find a theoretical platform that enables a complementary analysis of the texts, a way of tackling these questions about style and narrative structure without reverting to essentialism.

Spark's *The driver's seat* opens with the following exchange:

> 'And the material doesn't stain', the salesgirl says.
> 'Doesn't stain?'
> 'It's the new fabric,' the salesgirl says. 'Specially treated. Won't mark. If you spill like a bit of ice-cream or a drop of coffee, like, down the front of this dress it won't hold the stain.'
> [Then t]he "customer, a young woman, is suddenly tearing at the fastener at the neck, pulling at the zip of the dress ... saying, 'Get this thing off me. Off me, at once.'

This motif of stain – of dirt, defilement, of something fundamentally not right, not clean – is a prominent concern also in *The member of the wedding* and in *After*

leaving Mr. Mackenzie, whose main characters struggle to deal with their dirt, their "matter out of place" (Douglas, p. 52), in their bid to reconcile their positions in society. Frankie or F. Jasmine or Frances Addams (as the character variously calls herself), McCullers' young protagonist, lunges at the ceremony of her brother's wedding to put her world right, Julia Martin from *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* tests the water with her family in England before returning to Paris to tidy up her life, while Lise from *The driver's seat* looks to the certainties and securities of death as a solution to her mess.

If distaste and defilement are common denominators of these books, then Douglas's theory about dirt and purity (as detailed in *Purity and danger*) and Kristeva's theory of abjection (see *Powers of horror*) emerge as obvious contenders for a theoretical bridge between these texts. However, neither Douglas nor Kristeva can fully account for shifts in the meaning of dirt and abjection across place and time. Duschinsky seeks to address this problem by reconceiving of dirt and abjection in terms of "purity discourses" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 323), an adaptation of Douglas and Kristeva that allows for the variable nature and application of these concepts. This is explored in Chapter One of this exegesis.

Contextualising the discussion: a review of the literature

Carson McCullers (1917-1967) is an American author whose work is generally located within the oeuvre of Southern Gothic, with writers such as Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter and Eudora Welty. Some of the critics and scholars who have defined this position include: Evans (1964), Free, Gilbert & Gubar, Hart, Hassan, Logan, Westling, and Young. Focussing on misfits and outsiders, McCullers' writing has been embraced by theorists, such as Adams (1999), Bell (2011), Carr (1976), Fiedler (2003 [1960]), Free (2008), Hart (1957), Kenschaft (1996), Logan (1996) and Rubin (1977 [1996]), who point to this emphasis as sublimation of struggles with her own body (she had many health problems) and with her sexual identity (McCullers never openly identified as a lesbian but many claim that she was).

In *The Member of the wedding,* during a game where Frankie is pretending to be God, she determines "that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted" (1946 [1972], p. 116). Lines such as these have been tendered by critics and scholars such as Burns, 1964, p. 127,

Fiedler, 2003, p. 333-334, Hassan, 1959, p. 314 and Phillips, 1964, p. 70, as evidence of McCullers' 'queer' identity. For example, Adams (1999) says:

> Although it would be difficult to argue that *Member of the wedding* is a novel about homosexuality, the repeated use of the queer functions as an open secret. For those who wish to explore its possibilities, the queer reinvests unconventional erotic relations, both real and imagined, with positive valences (p. 561).

This interpretation is challenged by White (1985) and by Westling (1985), who each maintains that the book is less about sexual identity and more about gender politics, the social constraints felt by young women coming into adulthood. Being able to switch back and forth from male to female, Frankie can slip in and out of these (perceived) traps at will. Thus, the caveat provides "a neat symbolic solution to Frankie's conflicts" (White, p. 99). This view is supported by Halberstam (1998), who says that tomboyism

> tends to be associated with a 'natural' desire for the greater freedom and mobilities enjoyed by boys. Very often it is read as a sign of independence and self-motivation, and tomboyism may even be encouraged to the extent that it remains comfortably linked to a stable sense of girl identity (p. 6).

Gilbert & Gubar (1998) offer yet another perspective, suggesting "that the female Southern gothic, with its emphasis on sexual conflict and gender confusion, is a direct response to post-World War II attacks on feminism" (Logan 1996, p. 11):

> Indeed, the plots constructed by these writers are often so critical of or punitive towards their female protagonists that their authors would seem to have internalised just the horror at independent womanhood [articulated in] the writings of literary men (Gilbert & Gubar, p. 101).

These various and at times competing interpretations of McCullers' work demonstrate the contentious critical history of McCullers scholarship, an interpretation echoed by Evans (1964), who says McCullers' ideas are not popular, they "do not flatter the reader. They are uncomfortable to live with" (p. 126):

> Although she has sometimes been considered a 'simple' author with only one or two themes, McCullers's critics have consistently struggled with her 'uncomfortable truths'. The critical history of McCullers scholarship is one of disagreement over the images, traditions, and assumptions that have labelled her" (Logan 1996, p. 11).

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Jean Rhys (1894-1979) is most often discussed in the context of postcolonial writers such as Jamaica Kincaid, Nadine Gordimer, Hanif Kureishi and postcolonial and

feminist theory (Abravanel 2003; Maurel 1998; Savory 1999; Seshagiri 2006; Thomas 1999; Wilson, L 2006). Born in Dominica to a Welsh father and a Scottish West Indian mother, then educated in England, she often 'passed' for white but was largely ostracised as a Creole. She wrote four novels between 1929 and 1939, then disappeared from public view until 1958 when the BBC dramatised her last novel, *Good morning, midnight* (Nebeker 1981, i).[1] Described as "a doormat in a world of boots" (Moran 2007, p. 115), she held a series of low-status jobs, including briefly working as a prostitute, and was an alcoholic. Her novels directly address themes of women's subjugation and dependence.

Davidson (1984) cites Bender's observation that "Rhys is commonly viewed ... as 'the author of one masterpiece [and] four less interesting novels'" (p. 215), of which *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* is one. Simpson (2006) concurs:

> Despite the perspicacity with which all of her narratives record the lives of the disenfranchised and interrogate the conditions of subjectivity, even readers who have become Rhys enthusiasts tend to privilege her last novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, which was published almost three decades after the others and is usually celebrated at the expense of her earlier works (p. 1).

Of these earlier works, Berry (1995) argues that

> *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* has proved to be the most resistant to the blandishments of critical attention. Many critics simply do not know what to make of the protagonist ... Moreover, those critics who concentrate on neo-colonialist and feminist themes find few tropes of exile or liberation to extrapolate from the grim, no-exit world of Mackenzie (p. 544).

Thomas (1999) quotes an anonymous *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer who

> called Julia Martin a 'prostitute'; Gerald Gould in the *Observer* referred to her as a 'paid mistress to one man after another.' In the *New Yorker* the more urbane R.M.C. described the novel's theme as 'woman's inability successfully to emulate the amorous nomadism of a bachelor' (pp. 84-5).

Wolfe (1980) derides *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* "as a book which does not give its heroine's desolation the quality of art" (p. 84). While Berry (1995) says that although *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* "has received much praise for formal and

[1] It wasn't until 1966, when she was 72, that she finished *Wide sargasso sea*, the book which established her literary reputation; its success prompting the republication of her novels by Andre Deutsch and reprints by Penguin (Staley 1978, p. 201).

stylistic accomplishments, the consensus seems to be that, despite all its formal artistry, Rhys's tale is grimy, sordid, unappetizing, pessimistic, and disturbing" (p. 544).

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The work of Muriel Spark (1918-2006) has typically been located (some would say 'marginalised') by critics within the oeuvre of 'Catholic' writing (see Bradbury 1973; Cheyette 2002; Cixous 2002; Edgecombe 1990; Kermode 1990; Randsi 1991; Whittaker 1982). She is particularly associated with writers who also converted their religious affiliation to Catholicism – such as Ford Madox Ford, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh – using the text to play out themes of guilt, confession, suffering and responsibility, casting discussions of agency and affect against the backdrop of a deterministic God. Gregson (2005) says, "Spark sees people as at the mercy of both internal and external forces: institutions mould their careers, but even their emotional lives are overwhelmed by drives beyond their control" (p. 3).

This 'control' is invariably understood as God, Rankin (1985) claiming that Lise (the protagonist of *The driver's seat*)

> hides a very complex interior. Her quest for autonomy and the narrative within which the quest is set lead the reader to ponder whether, since Lise obviously has a creator (Spark), there is also a larger creator behind the surface of all structures (God) (p. 155).

Kermode (1990) goes one better, describing Spark as "an unremittingly Catholic novelist committed to immutable truths" (p. 268).

McQuillan (2002b), however, is uncomfortable with the way the 'Catholic writer' label has been attached to Spark's work, arguing that such

> divisive and rigid categorisation (which takes little account of Spark's Scottish Presbyterian upbringing and entirely overlooks her avowed Jewish cultural history) leads to doctrinal criticism, which reads Spark's novels for moral and theological content, reading her texts like the penny catechism (p. 2).

Cheyette (2002) is also careful not to over-interpret the theoretical implications of Spark's religious conversion; he posits the idea that Spark's Catholicism was as much about dissent as it was about assent, and can be understood as a political and culturally disruptive act (p. 99).

Spark is also a key figure in Scottish literature, a chronicler of a Scottish sensibility; theoretical ground often overlapping with postcolonial issues, themes

which occasionally played out in her private and professional life.[2] While Spark resisted "the universalising rhetoric" (Cheyette 2002, p. 101) of her work, claiming she didn't "feel committed in that way" (Hynes 1988, p. 26), Carruthers (2008) points out that "the construction of Scottish Literature ... tended toward an essentialist cultural nationalism," a theme ("essentialism in identity") that is directly paralleled in Spark's fiction (p. 488). That parallel, however, is rarely straightforward, for, "as ever with Spark, the identity we might think we are fairly certainly dealing with is never far from revealing itself to be something sometimes differently edged" (Carruthers 2008, p. 498). MacKay (2008) argues that this is why

> Spark's writing is seldom read historically and contextually ... because her narrative experiments seem to operate almost exclusively in the conceptual space where the more abstract preoccupations of Roman Catholic theology overlap with the metafictional and fabulist concerns of postmodernism (p. 3).

Nordhjem (1987) neatly summarises the situation:

> Within their narrow range Muriel Spark's novels in their way incorporate all the fashionable isms of the modern scene: surrealism, existentialism, absurdism, structuralism, feminism ... They do not expound them but take them as read. The Spark world is made up of what little the storm has left. The novels focus on the fragments scattered by the trends (p. 140).

* * *

One commonality observed in all three of these writers' works is the apparent flat, affectless tone of the characters and the situations in which they find themselves. Lubbers (1963) criticises the limited range of McCullers' general framework:

> The imaginary scope of the author is not wide. Typical figures and ideas, characteristic scenes, forms of behaviour recur in all of her books. Nor does her fictional town alter much. It is expanded or contracted as needed, a café or a drugstore forms its significant center: in short, the stage remains, the properties are shifted (p. 204).

McQuillan (2002b) draws attention to similar flat, stage-like qualities in Muriel Spark's *The driver's seat*:

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[2] Such as her very publicly contested religious and national identity. For example, she called herself "a gentile Jew" and vociferously fought her son's claim that both her parents were Jewish (Cheyette 2002 p. 95; Stannard 2010 p. 460-463). She was a self-imposed exile, moving from Scotland first to the United States and then to Europe, bouncing between France and Italy, claiming that exile "has ceased to be a fate, it has become a calling (Cheyette 2002, p. 96; Spark 1970, p. 151).

> the whole of the novel, with its cool as marble depthlessness and its refusal to engage with the emotions or motivations of its characters, can be reread as an unnerving police report (p. 3).[3]

This reading is picked up by Freeman (2002) who notes that one "effect of Spark's portrayals is a rootless quality which can be as disturbing as the strange events she depicts" (p. 129). For Jordison (2010), however, the "novel is so distant and cold and unlikely that it's impossible to give any credence to it".

Rhys's work is similarly described by Staley (1978) as "carefully modulated, terse, frequently flat, always understated" (p. 205). Staley observes that the "economy of language and directness of style can lead us to underestimate the range, depth, and quality of feeling in her work" (p. 224). This is a structural decision and well as a stylistic choice, Emery (1990) noting that reader's expectations "for a classically ascending or descending narrative are continually thwarted as the novel's structure circles phlegmatically back around itself" (p. 123). Logan (1996) describes "the symbolic nature of McCullers's characters" (p. 3), emphasising their two-dimensional unbelievability, while Dangerfield (1946 [1996]) states that they are neither "rounded" nor "quite human" but "remind one of faces one may have seen, in a dream perhaps, in a tabloid paper possibly, or out of a train window" (p. 31). He continues, saying that what makes *The member of the wedding*

> so unusual is the fact that most of it takes place through the medium of desultory conversations between three really weird people sitting in an even weirder kitchen. Nothing or almost nothing occurs (p. 32).

This 'nothing' speaks to Dangerfield's expectations of what he defines as 'something', perhaps the wedding, a happening which Seymour (2010) points out "never appears in the novel as an event – a fact all the more notable" because it seems to be promised in the book's title (p. 305).

Davidson (1984) says of *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* that

> nothing is, indeed, a key issue in the novel. Julia's earliest memories are of being happy because of nothing and then of being frightened by nothing ... By the end of the novel, she better knows the nothing that pervades her life. More specifically, she knows that her role in her family is nothing; that her dreams of her first love were nothing; that her hopes for her next affair have

[3] And Spark confirms this intention in an interview with McQuillan, describing the influence of nouveau roman (a literary style made popular in France by writers such as Robbe-Grillet and Duras), which emphasises surface and form over emotional content and plot (2002b, p. 215).

> already come to nothing. But ... neither is she crushed between the weight of those two voids (pp. 225-6).

Nebeker (1981) makes a similar point, arguing that "the theme of 'nothingness' that haunts the human race and the realisation that the one clear truth of existence is the fact of 'nothing'" is the "eternal current" of *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (p. viii).

For Curtis (1987), "all Rhys's novels depict voyages into darkness and nothingness" (p. 148), creating an atmosphere of ambiguity that Emery (1982) argues enables them to "disrupt illusions of moral and narrative order" (p. 424). This ambiguity is a key motif in what Dell'Amico (2005) terms Rhys's characters female masochism:

> Any given textual detail will constitute a devastating portrayal of a woman internalising and playing out misogyny for one critic, while to the next it will be this *as well as* evidence of Rhys's disturbing commitment to traditional female submissions (p. 61).

On the other hand, Maurel (1998) argues that if

> Julia Martin is a blank page, it is because she will not be written upon. Blankness then opens up a world of infinite possibility ... *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* elaborates another conception of blankness as a potent act of resistance meant to circumvent semantic entrapment. The dynamics of the narrative are revitalised in the process (p. 28).

Spark is also described as "a disturber of the peace, a disjointer of time, of narrative drive and sequence" (Maley 2002, p. 184). McQuillan (2002a) says:

> Spark's novels are untimely because they represent the political value of contretemps. They are unseasonable, inopportune, ill-timed, always unorthodox, constantly misread. In her geographical location (writing in Italy or France), her nationality (Scottish), her gender, her race ('part-Jewish') and her creed (Roman Catholic), she is decidedly in a relation of otherness to the tradition of English Literature (p. 11).

This "relation of otherness to the tradition of English Literature" pertains to each of these authors, giving their novels an unsettling quality that confronts the reader with their own expectations about the relatability and accessibility of fiction.

Skirting the issue of comfort and likeability

Art created by women has a long history of being undervalued vis a vis men's (often by women themselves) – this is not news – putting female writers in a damned-if-they-do-damned-if-they-don't position: if their characters are too likeable then their

books are subject to be "disparaged as chick lit" (Mead 2014, p. 39) or, as the novelist Meg Wolitzer calls it, "slumber party fiction – as though the characters are stand-ins for your best friends" (Mead 2014, p. 39), a criticism wryly mocked by best-selling 'chick lit' author, Jennifer Weiner, who says, currently "the most gauche thing a modern-day writer can do is write a protagonist who is – oh, the horror – likable" (Weiner 2013), and if they're unlikeable then the books run the risk of being considered 'unladylike' or at least less obviously feminine (betraying one's sex), but the works are assumed to have greater literary merit.

It is not uncommon for female authors to be praised for writing like men (for a range of examples, see Collins, Guest, Hemple Prown, Piepenbring and Randall); a fear of one's work being dismissed because of gender likely accounting for the long history of female writers concealing their sex (their "disreputable femininity", Gilbert & Gubar 1988, p. 240) with gender-ambiguous initials and pseudonyms (for example, the Bronte sisters,[4] AS Byatt, Isak Dinesen, George Eliot, PD James, Harper Lee, JK Rowling, just to name a few), so as not to deter male readers who, according to industry wisdom, tend to avoid books written by and/or about women (Tuffield 2012) (Coben 2014).

As recently as April 29, 2013, a freelance reviewer from *Publisher's Weekly* questioned the likability of Nora Eldridge, the protagonist in Claire Messud's novel, *The woman upstairs* (2013): "I wouldn't want to be friends with Nora, would you? Her outlook is almost unbearably grim" (McCleave Wilson 2013). Messud hit back – the insinuation being that a male writer would never have been asked this question – defending her characters and her authority over the narrative by asking would you apply this standard to Nabokov, to Phillip Roth, to Jonathan Franzen, to David Foster Wallace, to Shakespeare?

The exchange set off a renewed round of debate about bias by the book industry towards female writers (a bias that seems to have some basis in reality, borne out by statistics collated by VIDA,[5] these and similar statistics are one of the primary reasons for the establishment in 2013 of Australia's women's writing award, The

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[4] Emily Bronte's *Wuthering heights* was initially published in 1847 under the pseudonym Ellis Bell, a decision later explained in the preface to the 1850 reprint by Charlotte Bronte (who published *Jane Eyre* under the pseudonym, Currer Bell): "we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice" (Bronte 1850).

[5] http://www.vidaweb.org

Stella Prize[6]), a discussion prompting the January 2014 launch in England of the #readwomen2014 Twitter hashtag, followed by the August 2014 Melbourne launch of the #writingwhilefemale and #menreadingwomen Twitter hashtags.

In 1856, the critic and editor Marian Evans (later better known as the novelist George Eliot) excoriated 'women's writing' for its "one-dimensional characters and impoverished language" (Mead, p. 43), concerned perhaps about society's tendency to trivialise women's writing and by extension the women who write it (such as herself). Given such historical precedent, an argument can be made that early reviews of McCullers, Rhys and Spark may have mapped certain clichés about women, women's writing and expectations of likeability onto the perceived shortcomings in these novels (shortcomings that might have been otherwise rationalised or considered differently had the books been authored by men); extending the criticisms to the authors themselves, the implication being that it is the writers who are vacuous, empty, one-dimensional and unlikeable, and thus the works need not be taken seriously.

Joan Didion touched on this issue when talking about the beginning of her writing career in the late 1950s, expressly mentioning Carson McCullers as a casualty of the gender credibility gap:

> A man who wrote novels had a role in the world, and he could play that role and do whatever he wanted behind it. A woman who wrote novels had no particular role. Women who wrote novels were quite often perceived as invalids. Carson McCullers, Jane Bowles. Flannery O'Connor of course (Kuehl 1985, p. 345).

As a female writer writing an exegesis about books written by women, I felt some pressure to approach this exegesis from a feminist standpoint. After all, the authors are women writing from a female perspective about women's concerns (how could they not?). Wasn't it automatic to frame my interpretations in light of their 'femaleness'? And particularly so, considering that the majority of more recent academic analysis and literary criticism of these writers' works has been by women who appear to take the books' so-called shortcomings as a given but are bent on sensitively explaining away these qualities much as a doctor might detail a list of unpleasant symptoms accompanying a chronic yet incurable disease. The subtext: she couldn't help it.

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[6] http://thestellaprize.com.au

But why, as Kirsch (2013) argues, "should male writers be allowed to create monsters and anti-heroes, while women have to create friends and confidantes? Does the societal requirement that a woman be likable – read: inoffensive – extend even to fiction?" And when women do create monsters and anti heroes (and clearly they do – Flynn's Amy Dunne from *Gone girl,* Heller's Barbara Covett from *Notes on a scandal*, Messud's Nora Eldridge from *The woman upstairs*, Weldon's Ruth Patchett from *The life and loves of a she-devil*) why should these qualities be rationalised as a problem, a departure from a norm?

We don't generally analyse novels written by men in terms of their 'masculine' basis in the theory. Male (heterosexual) identity is treated as an unremarkable given. The writing may be good or bad, meticulously realised or riddled with weaknesses, but the attribute is located within the text and according to the skills of the writer, not explicitly considered as predetermined and explicable by the writer's sex. Margaret Atwood (1989) made a similar point in her introduction to *Women writers at work: the PARIS REVIEW interviews*:

> Male writers may suffer strains on their single-minded dedication to their art for reasons of class or race or nationality, but so far no male writer is likely to be asked to sit on a panel addressing itself to the special problems of a male writer, or be expected to support another writer simply because he happens to be a man (p. xiii).[7]

Joyce Carol Oates (2013) described this phenomenon on Twitter as "an accurate reflection of universal bias. All (male) writers are writers; a (woman) writer is a woman writer". When, in 1989, the *Paris Review* asked Oates about the advantages of being a woman writer, she answered:

> Advantages! Too many to enumerate, probably. Since, being a woman, I can't be taken altogether seriously by the sort of male critics who rank writers 1, 2, 3 in the public press, I am free, I suppose, to do as I like (Phillips 1989, p. 382).

While artistic freedom may be 'an advantage' of not being taken seriously, Oates and Atwood are clearly frustrated by the double-standards applied to male and

[7] This may no longer hold, but I have yet to find contradictory information. The 2014 Melbourne Writers Festival included a session called 'Lad Lit' featuring Omar Musa and Chris Flynn , but both writers objected to "the event's cringeworthy title" (Sullivan 2015) – "I hate this idea of men writing about men for men says Chris Flynn. Both himself and Omar hated the title of their panel 'Lad Lit' #mwf14" (Allen 2014) and neither author, I think, would claim they were there to discuss their "special problems" as male writers, or to offer "support" in their capacity as a fellow male writer.

female writers; double-standards that the VIDA Count demonstrates still continue to hold.

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So how does one approach writing about three 'difficult', occasionally frustrating, challenging novels written by three 'difficult', occasionally frustrating, challenging women writers who appear to deliberately try to inhibit readers' engagement with their work? Whether it be the claustrophobic settings, the circularity and repetition of threads and images, the character's memories and forgettings, the shifting points of view and changing temporal perspectives and/or the fixation on certain objects and details deliberately throwing the reader off-centre, these stories unsettle the borders of our comfort zones, resist categories, engender uneasiness, and demand a level of reader discomfort.

One can appreciate the temptation to want to invoke details from these writers' lives as 'reasons' for the uncomfortable elements in their fiction. One could dismiss *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* as "a hard, dry, desperate book" (Berry 1995, p. 544) written by a hard, dry desperate writer (a writer who has been down on her luck, who has worked as a prostitute, who has battled addiction) who, according to the *New York Times book review* "has no interest in achieving anything except a portrait of a certain woman" ('Twice as naturalism', June 28, 1931, p. 6); *The member of the wedding* could be written off as "utterly pointless" (Wilson, E 1946, p. 87), penned by "a limited or minor writer" (Logan 1996, p. 8) too naïve and myopic (and way too dysfunctional, not to mention ill) to know any better; *The driver's seat* could be dispatched as the product of arrogance and stupidity, written by "an artist who believed in God and was determined, in her books, not simply to suggest His presence but to act just like Him" (Mallon 2010) – as though all writers aren't playing God!, as Ann Patchett (2013) so decisively argues (p. 50).

However, this approach would be based on assumptions about the relationship between the author and the text; a complex relationship that can't be fixed, as identities are never static:

> They are knit from a plurality of different descriptions arising from a plurality of different signifying practices ... since everyone acts in a plurality of social contexts, the different descriptions comprising any individual's social identity fade in and out of focus (Fraser 1992, p. 52).

Therefore, rather than concentrate on the gendered production and reception of dislike (in so far as these elements can be separated), I have chosen instead to focus on the dynamic and operation of 'dislike' itself within the books; to approach the novels as purposeful texts written by wilful writers (whose gender is beside the point) and to try to understand the elements of the books not as symptomatic but as primary, as intentional components of a crafted literary work. To quote George Eliot again (writing as Marian Evans in the *Westminster Review*): the "greatest benefit that we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies" (1856, p. 54). My starting point then is to "extend my sympathies" to McCullers, Rhys and Spark by taking these writers seriously, not as women writers and not as writers writing about women, but as writers, period, each with something deliberate if not entirely pleasant to say.

Section One, Chapter One takes the concept of dislike, and explores its application in theory. If the engine of recoil is distaste, then Douglas's concept of dirt and Kristeva's theory of abjection appear to present a useful foundation for an investigation into the mechanism of dislike in these three novels. However, these approaches can't account for shifts in their meaning and application across place and time. Duschinsky seeks to address this limitation by reframing the discussion of dirt as a discursive judgement, "an economy of discourses, shaped in their form by the particular circumstances in which diversity is subjected to mental or social ordering in the name of essence" (2011b, p. 323; see also Duschinsky 2013a).

Section One, Chapter Two takes Duschinsky's concept of "purity discourses" and overlays them on Douglas's three-part description of the transformation of dirt to dangerousness (p. 172) – I. dirt (non-differentiated, safe), II. differentiated 'dangerous' dirt, III. return to indiscriminate formlessness – employing this three part structure as a framework for analysing the novels, examining the ways the characters in each book engage with discourses of 'dirt' and 'dangerousness', and the discursive judgements that implicate and reify them within particular categories across their respective narrative arcs; thereby opening up the possibility of different ways of thinking about our expectations of the role and structure of fiction

Section One, Chapter One: "Caught all by ourself" – abjection, dirt and other yucky stuff

In *The member of the wedding,* Berenice, the family maid, famously says:

> We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each of us somehow caught all by ourself (p. 141).

This 'being caught' is the platform, the essential foundation of Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject.

In *Powers of horror*, Kristeva describes the abject as a central process in the development of self ('I'), where the 'pre' subject (baby) first learns to differentiate self from other not by what they *are* but what they *are not*. This 'not' is the abject object (initially the mother, but more generally body wastes and fluids), what the self rejects in order to maintain a coherent sense of their meaningful personhood, a pattern that is repeated throughout one's lifetime: "The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*" (p. 1):

> We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger (Kristeva, p. 9).

Subjectivity then 'needs' the abject, this unwanted aspect of itself. It exists in negative relation to it, and so is perpetually drawn to it (however obliquely), defining itself by repudiating the abject and thus clarifying the border between self and other:

> My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit – *cadere*, cadaver (Kristeva 1982, p. 3).

Abjection "hovers at the borders of the subject's identity, threatening apparent unities and stabilities with disruption and possible dissolution" (Grosz 1990, p. 86). This process of pointing "to the importance of anxiety, a desire to expel or to distance the abject other as a condition of existence" (Sibley 1995, p. 8) forms the foundation of social belonging. People resist abjection/being categorised as abject, and seek to distance themselves from that which is so-named (from that which threatens to engulf or destroy them or their systems of meaning, which, according to Kristeva, is one and the same thing). For example, Kristeva refers to her reaction on seeing a pile of

children's shoes in the museum at Auschwitz, and says "the abjection of the Nazi crime" becomes plain because of the way that image allows death to interfere with her "living universe", those things that are meant to "save me from death: childhood, science, among other things" (p. 4):

> It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite (Kristeva, p. 4).

Kristeva's theory of abjection is built on Douglas's research (which rests on the work of Eliade, which owes a strong debt to Westermarck), which defines dirt as "matter out of place" (p. 52). For Douglas, dirt is disorder:

> In *Purity and danger*, Mary Douglas argued that in every culture, whether primitive or modern, things are categorised according to distinctive criteria whose confusion is viewed as an outrage. When boundaries are breached – when form is endangered – they must be restored: rituals of avoidance, punishment, and purification are ways of doing just that (Asad, p. 76).

However, in order to uphold and restore them, these boundaries must be perennially re-articulated:

> It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created (Douglas, p. 23).

This is a necessarily cooperative process and is why Douglas argues that human beings are intrinsically social animals; rituals formalise the collaborative policing of boundaries, which reinforces social cohesion:

> If ritual is suppressed in one form, it crops up in others, more strongly the more intense the social interaction ... Social rituals create a reality which would be nothing without them. It is not too much to say that ritual is more to society than words are to thought (Douglas, p. 78).

Nevertheless, this emphasis on cooperation and conformity creates its own demand, reinforcing the need for identification and "search for deviance; for without deviance, there is no self-consciousness of conformity and vice-versa" (Davis 1986, p. 95).

Deviance, then, has the potential to mobilise "agents – individuals and collectivities – to defend specific normative orders and identities, perhaps introducing new regimes of governance" (Seidman 2012, p. 12). This dual function of deviance is at the heart of Douglas's theory:

> while disorder spoils pattern, it also provides the material of pattern. Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used. So disorder by implication is unlimited, no pattern has been realised in it, but its potential for patterning is indefinite. This is why, though we seek to create order, we do not simply condemn disorder. We recognise that it is destructive to existing patterns; also that it has potentiality. It symbolises both danger and power (p. 109).

Another way of putting this is to say that disorder is infinitely powerful and imminently dangerous.

> Duschinsky (2011a) shows how Kristeva
>
> superimposes a universal account of structural linguistics onto the frame of Douglas's anthropology. She proposes that subjects strive to achieve a state of purity, wholeness and autonomy by symbolically closing up the body through the categorical divisions of language. In the maintenance of our 'clean and proper' categorical divisions, we engage in a continual attempt to sequester or destroy the hated bodily matter that necessarily underlies but also disturbs our experience of the world. Kristeva (1980: 69-73) terms this 'jettisoned' matter out of place 'the abject' (p. 151).

Douglas's definition of dirt lines up very neatly with the operation of the abject, described by Kristeva as that which "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 4). Given Kristeva's reiteration that the abject is consistent with Douglas's definition (Kristeva 1996 [2000], p. 21), it is tempting then to treat the abject and dirt as conceptually interchangeable.

Structural inflexibility: limitations of Douglas and Kristeva

For Douglas, the process of ritual classification of dirt is necessary to the formation and maintenance of social order. For Kristeva, the process of both being abject and jettisoning the abject is necessary for subject formation and integrity. However, each of these theories has been criticised for "a reductionist account of subjectivity" and offering "a fatalist politics" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 317). As Foucault (1981) reminds us

> we must not imagine that the world turns towards us a legible face which we would have only to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world in our favour (p. 67).

In *Purity and danger*, Douglas "directs all questions of causality immediately back to a unitary social structure and universal human desire for coherence – even though her examples rarely fully support this claim of a direct correspondence" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 316). Also, "it is generally accepted that the dominant narrative of *Purity and danger* does not offer strong tools for analysing or evaluating the operation of social power in the service of particular interests" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 316). Douglas predicates her analysis on the assumption that society is organised by cooperation and orderliness even though evidence "of power relations is present throughout [her] empirical descriptions but not included in her theorisation of purity" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 316). Furthermore:

> Douglas fails to consider that whether bodily dynamics are experienced as disorder, elicit anxiety or instigate a pollution drama will depend on their meanings for agents ... even if bodily transgressions are disturbing, whether they will also be a site of pollution will depend on the self that is doing the meaning-making. Douglas's structuralism has no place for this agentic moment (Seidman 2012, p. 11).

Douglas herself makes the point that a search for purity is necessarily paradoxical. It is

> an attempt to force experience into logical categories of noncontradiction. But experience is not amenable and those who make the attempt find themselves led into contradiction (p. 174).

This then is one advantage of Kristeva's theory of abjection; the concept allows

> for the idea that we may be ambivalent about dirt ... In contrast to the majority of interpretations of Douglas, which polarise the binary between 'dirty' and 'clean', the notion of the abject leaves more room for the idea that 'filth, under certain circumstances, might surprisingly be a good or enjoyable thing', that one might desire to see and experience abject spaces, and that the marginalised may exist next to the mainstream, the excluded next to the included (Campkin, B 2007, pp. 76-7).

Cohen (2004) supports Campkin's position about the flexibility of abjection vis a vis ambivalence:

> Psychoanalytic discussions of filth, even when they do not explicitly articulate a biological basis, have rightly been criticised for their transhistorical assumptions, but they have the utility of showing how contradictory ideas – about filth as both polluting and valuable – can be held at once (p. xiii).

The flexibility of Kristeva's theory of abjection then appears to provide a useful armature for analysing *The member of the wedding*, *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* and *The driver's seat* because its dynamic of desire and repulsion mimics

the dynamic of the motivations, actions and positions of many characters within these novels, along with paralleling much of the critical, academic and anecdotal response to the works. However, this strength is undermined by a fundamental weakness.

Butler (1999) points out that Kristeva's theory

> appears to depend upon the stability and reproduction of precisely the paternal law that she seeks to displace. Although she effectively exposes the limits of Lacan's efforts to universalise the paternal law in language, she nevertheless concedes that the semiotic is invariably subordinate to the Symbolic, that it assumes its specificity within the terms of a hierarchy immune to challenge (p. 102).

Furthermore, Butler (1999) states: "Kristeva does not seriously challenge the structuralist assumption that the prohibitive paternal law is foundational to culture itself" (p. 109).

Fraser (1992) attributes this flaw to Kristeva's

> additive approach to theorising … her penchant for remedying theoretical problems by simply *adding* to deficient theories instead of by scrapping or overhauling them. This, I submit, is how she ends up handling certain features of structuralism; rather than eliminating certain structuralist notions altogether, she simply adds other, anti-structuralist notions alongside of them (p. 63).

While Douglas and Kristeva's theories position dirt and the abject as central to the development and maintenance of individual and social identity, their arguments are hobbled by the presumption of a fixed, underlying social system and/or order.

Knowing your place: the limitations of purity

What is the threat of dirt, of abjection? If it can be identified and isolated by ritual, by jettisoning it, then what is the mechanism of its power?

Dirt threatens because it pollutes. It seeps in and sullies. It does not exist on its own but is always contingent on non-dirt, it is defined in opposition to and contaminates that which is not dirty. Their relationship is dialectical. If it were discrete then dirt could be isolated and removed. If, however, it has permeated the site, contaminating it, its eviction necessarily forces removal of the good with the bad. The clean with the unclean. For if it can't be isolated it has created a stain on what is wholly good (in society, in the individual). To remove it implies sacrifice of good for bad. It suggests the possibility that we are all vulnerable to expulsion and banishment for none of us is ever fully clean.

In this sense, dirt and purity are inextricably linked, or rather dirt and the abject are intrinsically connected to impurity. They tarnish and contaminate. They diminish and dilute. They construct us as bad from the inside out. And they force us to confront this troubled relationship with our own construction. As Douglas states:

> Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the nature of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death. Wherever ideas of dirt are highly structured, their analysis discloses a play upon such profound themes (p. 24).

Duschinsky (2011b) explains how definitions of purity invariably combine two elements:

> The first is that of being unmixed. The pure is qualitatively homogeneous and self-identical. The impure, by contrast, is that which is qualitatively heterogeneous, incorporating materials from two or more separate origins; it can never present itself as an origin, for it is already marked by its dependent, derivative status. The impure is of necessity marked by temporality, whereas the pure speaks of its proximity to and perfect manifestation of pre-temporal essence. Purity discourses map the lateral distinction between homogeneous and heterogeneous onto the vertical distinction between primary and secondary, ideal and derivative. Hence the second element … the normative valuation of the pure above the impure (pp. 313-4).

These assumptions about purity – 1. that purity is possible, and 2. that purity is better than impurity – are consistent with the theories of Douglas and Kristeva.[8] However, as Trotter (2000) points out

> the in-between, the ambiguous, and the composite account between them for a very large proportion of human experience; if these disturbances were consistently to provoke abjection, we should all feel abject all the time. By the same token, there surely are other events, such as a lack of cleanliness or health, which nauseate us without unsettling any symbolic universes (p. 159).

Goodnow (2010), referring to Kristeva, cites 'boundary-crossing' examples from cinema, such as "films in which men dress as women", illustrating that "the wiping out of gender differences need not be horrific" (p. 42). Goodnow (2010) is also concerned with the vagaries of cause and effect surrounding uses of the term abjection, pointing out that the definition of the abject as that which 'disturbs identity, system, order' does not "enable us to say whether the emotion that results will be one of horror or one of panic, suspicion, aggression, or amusement" (p. 33).

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[8] Insofar as each theory explores the ways people attempt to create order and/or expel disorder, thereby both pursuing purity and preferencing the pursuit of purity to tolerating impurity

Murray (1983) suggests that any 'horror' arising from the use of 'abjection' as the basis of classification is specious:

> If there is any psychological reality to the 'horror' purportedly inspired by such classification difficulties, it is confined to anthropologists intent on eliciting complete and exhaustive contrast sets (p. 396).

The logic of Douglas's concept of 'dirt' has also been questioned. Cutler (1985) makes the point that Douglas "concentrates on what is disgustingly or objectionably out of place ... but what about just ordinary old junk and rubbish – stuff that does not pollute or defile, that is not taboo but just junk?" (p. 4).

Furthermore, as Fardon (1999) reminds us, many "writers have noted that the formulation is not reversible: all matter out of place is not dirt" (p. 100). Sperber (in Thompson, 1990) employs the example of "jewellery in the cutlery drawer", saying that it is only when the object is less "valuable than the objects it has been placed among" that the 'dirt' label sticks (Thompson, p. 168).

* * *

In his analysis of disgust, Kelly (2011) states that it is precisely because of the variety of ways that "disgust is puzzling and intriguing" that "no coherent account has yet emerged to resolve the puzzles or systematically accommodate the data" (p. 13). This also holds true for Douglas and Kristeva. As interesting as their theories about dirt and abjection might be, their interpretation and application clearly need refinement. De Nooy (1998) supports Campkin's position that the "topic as a whole has been under theorised" (Campkin, B 2007, p. 79), claiming that "in practice 'the abject' has tended to become 'a catch-all term for 'yucky stuff'" (De Nooy 1998, p. 289).

My dictionary defines purity as an absolute cleanness or a "freedom from physical or moral pollution" (*The concise Oxford dictionary*). However, as has been demonstrated, dirt and/or abjection, the polluting agents leading to impurity, are culturally, temporally and situationally relative concepts – for example, see Brook (1999 [2014]) on spirituality and the cultural relativity of the permeable body (p. 62) – and, if dirt/abjection are relative, then so too must be purity (the absence of dirt/abjection), in which case it can't be absolute across time and place. As Miller (1997) states, even if "disgust is innate, and to be found in all cultures at all times, its 'styles' have changed significantly" (p. 160).

Hamlin (2004) focuses on Douglas and Becker, arguing that

> we need something more to make sense of the representation of filth in particular places and times. From their writings one might assume that, because reminders of our mortality and the threats to our social identity will be with us always, so too the filth revulsion will always arise, and societies will always be taking steps to banish filth from our senses, conversation, and thoughts. Historically, this is problematic ...what might be called the level of filth consciousness varies enormously, not only from culture to culture but within a culture from century to century or even decade to decade (p. 5). Douglas herself calls dirt an "omnibus category" (p. 52).

Cohen (2004) paraphrasing Douglas, says, pollution "is not simply the opposite of cleanliness; it also arises out of a *confusion* of categories" (p. xi).

Duschinsky (2013) demonstrates that Kristeva herself doesn't settle on one definition of abjection but in *Powers of horror* employs the term to mean variously "impure, ineffable, disgusting, horrifying, illicitly desirable, outside of logic, rejected by classification, maternal, [and] continuous (as opposed to discrete)" (p. 3).

Meninghaus (2003) makes a similar observation of the use of the term more generally:

> Oscillating, in its usage, between serving as a theoretical concept and precisely defying the order of concentual language altogether, the term "abjection" also commonly appears as both adjective ("abject women," "abject art") and adjective turned into a substantive ("the abject") (p. 365).

What is needed then is a more flexible, context-dependent notion of purity that can account for the political dimension of meaning-making.

Economies of discourses

Duschinsky (2011b) argues that the concept of purity or dirt might be more usefully thought of as a discursive judgement that can

> best be conceptualised as an economy of discourses, shaped in their form by the particular circumstances in which diversity is subjected to mental or social ordering in the name of essence (p. 323; see also Duschinsky 2013).

Foucault (1972) defines discourse as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (p. 49). This process, this discursive practice, is predicated on choice and exclusion (similar to the process of imposing order, as described by Douglas), the narrowing of categories, the "delimitation of a field of objects, the definition of a legitimate perspective for the agent of knowledge, and the fixing of norms for the elaboration of concepts or theories" (Foucault 1977, p. 199). This framing allows that

> ‘meaning’ does not so much reside in the discourse itself, but rather resides in the actions that people take with it ... This emphasis on action can also be seen in anthropological perspectives on linguistics, particularly the ethnography of communication ... which focuses on discourse as part of a constellation of contextualised behaviors which members of cultures use to demonstrate that they are legitimate members (Jones & Norris 2005, pp. 4-7).

An emphasis on action is also a feature of Critical Discourse Analysis, which concentrates on

> the ‘hybridity’ characteristic of all social uses of discourse and the analysis of how, through ‘conjunctures’ ... of text types and ways of speaking, speakers and writers perform strategic acts of domination and resistance ... We suggest that the relationship between discourse and action is dynamic and contingent, located at a nexus of social practices, social identities and social goals. This relationship is manifested in the tension between the kinds of actions that discourse and other cultural tools make possible and the ways people purposefully mix these tools in response to their immediate circumstances (Jones & Norris 2005, pp. 8-9).

In ‘Purity, power and cruelty’, Duschinsky (2011b) focuses on Primo Levi,[9] contrasting Levi’s work with Douglas’s. While Douglas does suggest some

> exceptions to social and cognitive norms … classed as impure … Levi’s writings show that this classification is not associated primarily with the breach of a norm but by the classification of phenomena as purported threats to an essence – in which the norm that organises a cultural field may be grounded (pp. 323-4).

Seidman (2012) supports the contingent nature of this classificatory process; describing “a politics of otherness” which is directly about managing the social and psychological forces that govern

> the category of the Other[10] and the actual population of hated selves. The aim is to protect the symbolic and social division between the defiled and the civil, along with divisions and rankings internal to this binary (p. 18).

Levi explored this process within Fascist ideology, observing its operation in different institutional and social contexts:

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[9] In 1974, Levi began work on an Italian translation of Mary Douglas’s work *Natural symbols* (1973) for the Einaudi publishing house (published in 1979) (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 313).

[10] Seidman is concerned with the “loose and confusing ways” that ‘other’ as “a non-normative status” is used in theoretical scholarship (p. 2), reserving ‘Other’ (upper case) as a noun, as opposed to the lower case adjective, ‘otherness’, or the process (verb) of ‘othering’ (p. 4). In psychoanalytic theory, Lacan (1973) makes the distinction between the upper-case ‘Other’ as a shorthand for the Symbolic order, “the locus of speech” (p. 129), and the lower-case ‘other’ as an idealised component of the divided self (p. 83).

> In the first mode, Fascist ideology asserted the need to purify the world of that which did not belong to its true and ideal essence. In the second mode, individuals were brought by the suffering and complicity with cruelty necessary to survive to a sense that they had been torn from their essence. A lingering sense of shame is associated with experiences of chaos and contamination, as the symbolic boundaries of the self are transgressed and undermined. In the third mode, sources of purity were sought to help give order to a world experienced as chaotic (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 322).

Sibley (1995) argues that the "need to make sense of the world by categorising things on the basis of crisp sets … is evident in most cultures … Problems arise when the separation of things into unlike categories is unattainable" (p. 32). Duschinsky (2011b) observes that Levi also noted this problem:

> purity discourses appear where, due to the relations of power structuring their present, actors or institutions have need of a consecrating ideal and a means to mentally or socially regulate their world … dirt is indeed matter out of place, but it is so for actors attempting to achieve particular goals in discursively contested situations, who need or wish to differentiate between a state of sulliedness and a state of purity so as to produce a meaningful and efficacious narrative regarding the relationship between essence and the world (p. 323).

For Duschinsky (2011b) then, Levi's work highlights the "historical and political contingency of judgements about purity" (p. 313). This argument is supported by Seidman (2012) , who says that defilement dramas "are less about restoring order in general than about enforcing specific normative orders. This is accomplished by infusing the outer edge of normative arrangements, and the space (physical and/or symbolic) beyond, with an aura of danger" (p. 20). As Duschinsky (2013b) explains:

> The desire to exorcise impurity and maintain purity is not the result of an innate drive within every human being for order, as both Douglas and Kristeva at points suggest. It is caused by the discursive assessment and construction of subjects and other phenomena as by degrees distant or proximal to a qualitative homogeneity that is – rightly or quite wrongly – taken to be their essential truth (p. 65).

The process of dirt/ying and purity discourses in *The member of the wedding*, *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* and *The driver's seat*

While neither Douglas nor Kristeva can account for shifts in the meaning of dirt and abjection across place and time, there is little dispute that the ambiguity of their borders infuses the boundaries of dirt and abjection with an aura of danger. This is the source of its potency, of its emotive force. Trotter (2000) refers to the 'gleaming

efficiency' of rubbish; which, however "foul it may have become ... testifies in its very dereliction, to the power which cast it down and out" (p. 20).

Douglas describes the connection between dirt and dangerousness as a three-part process:

> So long as identity is absent, rubbish is not dangerous ... Where there is no differentiation there is no defilement ... Thus a cycle has been completed. Dirt was created by the differentiating activity of mind, it was a by-product of the creation of order. So it started from a state of non-differentiation; all through the process of differentiating its role was to threaten the distinctions made; finally it returns to its true indiscriminable character. Formlessness is therefore an apt symbol of beginning and of growth as it is of decay (p. 172).

In the following chapter, I take each of these states in turn (I. dirt: non-differentiated , safe, II. differentiated 'dangerous' dirt, III. return to indiscriminate formlessness), pairing them with the corresponding sections of the novels (divided into three sections), which I suggest conform to a parallel narrative arc. Duschinsky's concept of "purity discourses" is employed to analyse this structure, tracking the ways the novels effect this transformation in their main characters (from rubbish, to differentiation and danger, then back to benign dirt), exploring how McCullers, Spark and Rhys utilise tropes pertaining to ritual and transformation (shifts in time and place, travel, origin stories, themes of birth, death and exile, an engagement with borderlands, ideas about the 'pure' sealed body, the role of costuming and disguise, the connection between self, sanity, spirituality and the journey of the soul) to 'purify' and reset the narrative possibilities of their protagonists.

Section One, Chapter Two: Purity discourses in *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, *The member of the wedding* and *The driver's seat.*

I. Dirt (non-differentiated, safe)

After leaving Mr. Mackenzie is a novel structured around departures and returns. Julia Martin is 'left' by Mr Mackenzie who in turn leaves town (or suggests to her that he does). Upon his return he ceases to provide her with financial support precipitating Julia's departure from Paris, and her return to London (to her family and to her past). However, Julia's mother, who is very ill, soon passes away ("'She's gone,' said the nurse ... 'Gone.' That was the word," p. 123), and Julia is rejected by her family. Her sister, Norah, announces that she plans to leave London immediately with Miss Wyatt, who has supplanted Julia as a sororal fixture (and one suspects is also Norah's romantic interest). With no home and no immediate family remaining in London, Julia goes back to Paris. Once there, she encounters Mr Mackenzie again but the event is without affect, and the book concludes with the implicit understanding that *she* has now fully 'left' Mr Mackenzie (as opposed to him having left her) and the life she has known heretofore, which is closed to her both literally, as a concluded passage of time, and metaphorically, by her advancing age, which the text repeatedly suggests precludes her ongoing success in attracting male benefactors.

After leaving Mr. Mackenzie opens on considerations of literal 'dirt', with Julia moving into a cheap hotel on the Quai des Grand Augustins: "It looked a lowdown sort of place and the staircase smelt of the landlady's cats, but the rooms were cleaner than you would have expected" (p. 9).

Julia is established from the outset as a 'pre-sorted' outsider, the embodiment of "matter out of place", much like the elements in the still-life painting hanging in her room, "every object ... slightly distorted and full of obscure meaning" (p. 10).

Douglas stresses that 'dirt' is created by the "differentiating activity of mind, it is a by-product of the creation of order" (p. 172) and Rhys goes to some lengths to establish the various "economies of discourses" coming to bear on Julia's sense of self and the ways she has been positioned as 'dirt' by herself and others prior to this point in time.

Rhys keeps the reader and the other characters (and arguably Julia herself) at arm's length throughout, denying access to a comforting interior monologue that would establish Julia's complexity and humanity. At the times we are allowed access

to her private thoughts she is often angry. As early as paragraph two, Rhys employs second-person narration to have Julia comment cruelly on the hotel landlady: "'She can't possibly be a Frenchwoman'. Not that you lost yourself in conjectures as to what she was because you didn't care a damn anyway" (p. 9).

Obviously she did "care a damn" about her circumstances or she would not have said that she didn't, but the tone coupled with the point of view seems so brash and cold it invites a similarly dismissive attitude towards its speaker. This emotional detachment is mirrored by the character, who appeals to nationalism in an attempt to classify "what the landlady was"; Julia immediately applying a discursive judgement, subjecting their relative status to a "social ordering in the name of essence" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 323). Yes, Julia might be down on her luck but at least she is a Frenchwoman (the implication being that it takes one to know one), or at least she is more of a Frenchwoman than the landlady; an identity that she privately employs to trump the status of the woman she fears is judging her, to rectify for herself their power imbalance.

Julia might be a French national, but the text strongly suggests that she was born elsewhere, probably in England – unlike her mother, Mrs. Griffiths, who was born in Brazil. Mrs. Griffiths is described as "Dark-skinned, with high cheek-bones and an aquiline nose" (p. 97); it is likely that Julia resembled her mother and had an 'exotic' appearance that would have been read as 'foreign' and/or 'other' (GoGwilt points to several instances in the novel addressing the theme of "reading, race, and identity", p. 65). Early in the text Julia's eyes are said to be "beautiful – long and dark" (p. 14), and similar terms are later used to describe the subject of a "rum picture" by Modigliani, an Italian Jewish artist with Tunisian ancestry – the scene ("a woman lying on a couch" with "a long, dark face, and very big eyes" p. 52) inviting parallels between the two women as exotic foreigners of marginalised ethnicities.

While Julia spent significant time as a young woman in England, Mr Mackenzie makes clear that Julia

> had married and had left England immediately after the armistice. She had had a child. The child had died – in Central Europe, somewhere – and then she had separated from her husband and had divorced him or been divorced by him, Mr Mackenzie could not gather which. Or perhaps she had never really been married at all. In any case she had come to Paris alone (p. 25).

This 'retelling' is consistent with the "practices [of] creating and managing otherness", as described by Seidman (2012, p. 16):

> The psychological transformation of an ordinary self into a defiled personage is paralleled by a re-narrativising of his biography … The earlier script would perhaps be redescribed as a malicious disguise, an act of cunning and deceit masking horrifying, vile truths (Seidman, p. 17).

So Julia is French, but naturalised, not 'purebred' unadulterated French, a complicated status that she shares with Mr Mackenzie, who tries to have it both ways. When in Paris he

> disliked to be recognised as English, but at the same time, when he heard Frenchmen being funny about England, he would become hot and aggressive and would feel a righteous sense of betrayal (p. 23).

Nevertheless, for the most part, Mr Mackenzie is French enough to 'pass', whereas Julia is of foreign appearance and alone, a grieving mother of a deceased child possibly born out of wedlock, or she is a divorcee, or she has been abandoned by her husband. She is a woman of no clear origin, potentially a liar or insane, and she has been sleeping with a man and he has been paying her way. Taken individually, none of these statuses is socially desirable; taken together, they are highly toxic.

This toxicity may be the foundation of Mr Mackenzie's attraction to Julia – bell hooks (1992) talks of "the desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other" (p. 25) – but it is also the foundation of Mr Mackenzie's classification of Julia as dirt, his ambivalence about his own cultural legitimacy informing his desire to organise her status as inferior to his. Duschinsky (2011a) argues:

> The pure ideal is never a secure quality attached to the subjectivity of individuals in any class, age, gender, or race. What is erected through appeal to purity is, rather, a *spectrum of subjectivities embedded in a matrix of power-relations*: the consecrating resources of purity (coded feminine, though not necessarily female) are possessed, in different degrees, by citizens (coded masculine, though not necessarily male). Though no citizen is ever fully consecrated, ownership of sufficient purity permits actors to make claims to dominant and legitimate subject-positions (p. 155).

Julia seems to have been using 'Frenchwoman' as a hybrid term to refer both to a national identity and a standard of femininity. Mr Mackenzie's sceptical tone about her family background operates similarly to the way Foucault describes institutions' use of exclusion to regulate discourse and what can be counted as knowledge – "Doctrine binds individuals to certain types of enunciation and consequently forbids them all others" (1981 [1987], p. 64) – questioning the subject's right to speak by calling into question her sanity and ability to be honest as a way of

warding off her 'danger' (Mills 2004, p. 58), in the same stroke establishing a seemingly self-evident status of authority and superiority. Mr Mackenzie thereby embodies the patriarchy and draws on the forces of the state to demonstrate his power, at one point (prior to Julia's slapping him with her glove at the restaurant) having Maitre Legros, his solicitor, threaten her with deportation and "the *police des moeurs*" (p. 31), akin to the vice squad, effectively calling her a prostitute,[11] pulling the rug out from under any illusions she may have continued to harbour about her own gentility:

> When she thought of the combination of Mr Mackenzie and Maitre Legros, all sense of reality deserted her and it seemed to her that there were no limits at all to their joint powers of defeating and hurting her. Together, the two perfectly represented organised society, in which she had no place and against which she had not a dog's chance (p. 22).

In *Blush*, Probyn (2005) discusses ancestral shame, outlining how shame can be heavily overdetermined:

> Ancestral shame reminds us of how we are forged in many different relations – those of kin but also those of geography and history. Those different proximities produce very particular emotional responses and affective identities, which are transgenerational as well as intercultural (p. 107).

Julia's shame is cross-cultural, intra-familial, trans-generational, gender-bound, racist and classist, and it positions her as well "out of place" before this story really gets started.

* * *

If *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* is structured around departures and returns, *The member of the wedding* is similarly structured around arrivals and partings, but it is told from the perspective of one who remains behind.

The member of the wedding opens with Frankie inventorying her decline over a "green and crazy summer" (p. 7) when she "had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways" or "walked around doing one thing or another" like a piece of trash blown about by the wind. The trees at first "bright dizzy green" turn "black and shrunken under the glare of the sun" (p. 7), and she is alone but for the company of John Henry West, her six-year-old cousin, and Berenice, the family maid (her

[11] "In the public imagination nothing is as dirty as the work of the prostitute and the prostitute herself, who is figured as the dregs of society and 'regarded as a kind of sponge or conduit of other's men's "dirt" (Wolkowitz 2007, p. 31, citing Grosz 1994, p. 201).

father having largely absented himself at work). Then "her only brother, Jarvis," (p. 11), an army corporal posted in Alaska, wires that he is engaged and that he and his fiancée will be visiting Frankie and her father "this Friday" (p. 11) before being married the following Sunday in Winter Hill, the bride's home town. Frankie and her father attend the wedding, accompanied by Berenice and John Henry West, at which point Frankie attempts to involve herself in the proceedings, much to everyone's embarrassment (mostly her own). On return from Winter Hill, other events quickly overtake her, and the story ends with Frankie establishing a new friendship and moving on.

The member of the wedding begins with a framing of the action, the "it" of the first line seeming to suggest the wedding alluded to in the book's title:

> It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world (p 7).

Membership is a constant theme throughout the novel, however, as Frankie herself explains, not being a member isn't exactly the problem. In fact, she doesn't know the "name for what had happened to her" (p. 10), just that she "was afraid ... because the world seemed somehow separate from herself" (p. 31).

What seems to be important to Frankie is not so much the rights conferred by membership (her entitlement to hang around with the other girls, to participate as a member of the wedding party) so much as her sense of her identity as a member, to be embodied, a necessary part of a whole.

Kristeva says:

> The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural *loss* that laid the foundations of its own being (p. 5).

Frankie is closely acquainted with loss. Her mother died when she was born, her father withdrawing into his role as provider, no doubt motivated by grief (Frankie representing the literal cause of his mourning), so she has experienced the literal and metaphorical death of her parents. Her live-in grandmother died when she was nine, followed by the arrival and then departure of The Marlowes (boarders) after Frankie witnessed Mr Marlowe's "fit", a primal scene telegraphing her loss of innocence (p. 50). Her only sibling enlisted in the army. Her best friend, Evelyn Owen, recently moved away to Florida (33), and her cat, Charles, disappeared.

This theme of loss is echoed by Berenice, the mother figure in Frankie's life, who frequently catalogues her own regrets and disappointments. This list is headed by the death of Ludie Freeman (the love of her life), but is accompanied by a more pervading general loss of hope (for finding love again, for the future of her foster brother, Honey Brown, for her own future, for an identity not defined by race).

Budick (1994) notes that in "the Lacanian model language not only responds to the loss and absence of objects in the world but occasions loss and absence" (p. 156). Frankie's experience of loss is coupled with what she interprets as mounting evidence of her own unworthiness; two perceptions which converge around the event of the wedding, correlation becoming causation in her mind; her unworthiness resulting in her loss of a place in the wedding party.

As if being "unjoined" from others isn't bad enough, her own body has betrayed her. She has grown so much her father now refers to her as "blunderbuss" and insists that Frankie no longer shares his bed, but sleeps in her own room (p. 32):

> She was five feet five and three-quarter inches tall, and she wore a number seven shoe. In the past year she had grown four inches, or at least that was what she judged. Already the hateful little summer children hollered to her: 'Is it cold up there?' (p. 25).

Frankie worries that if she doesn't stop growing she will become "a Freak" (p. 25) like the performers in the House of Freaks at the annual Chattahoochee Exposition. If dirt is defined by Douglas as "matter out of place", then 'freaks' are a variety of dirt by virtue of their ambiguity, which "imperils categories and oppositions dominant in social life … our most fundamental categories of self-definition and boundaries dividing self from otherness" (Grosz 1996, p. 57). Adams (2001) says:

> Freaks announce themselves as the antithesis of normality, and part of the sideshow's frisson arises from the audience's recognition of the ease with which freak and normal may slide unsteadily into one another (p. 9).

Understandably, then, Frankie "was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her as though to say: we know you" (p. 27).

Kristeva states that the "body must bear no trace of its debt to nature: it must be clean and proper in order to be fully symbolic" (p. 102). Yet Frankie's body is in the thrall of nature, the thrall of irrepressibility, making her "even more 'grotesque' than her adult counterpart: not only is she female, but she is in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood" (Gleeson-White, p. 12).

Seidman (2012) argues "that figures of difference become Other if they are symbolically associated with a condition of excess and ungovernability" (p. 4). Those conditions of "excess and ungovernability" map directly onto Duschinsky's distinctions about the homogenous versus hetergenous nature of purity and impurity, impurity being implicitly unlimited (and thus ungovernable):

> The pure is qualitatively homogeneous and self-identical. The impure, by contrast, is that which is qualitatively heterogeneous, incorporating materials from two or more separate origins; it can never present itself as an origin, for it is already marked by its dependent, derivative status (Duschinsky 2011b, pp. 313-4).

Garland Thomson (1996) proposes that the classification of 'freak' has shifted "from the embodiment of wonder to the embodiment of error" (p. 13), the definition of 'error' entailing 'impurity' in so far as 'error' is understood as wrong, less than perfect, not right (not whole, complete, nor properly configured).

Because an error can never be the essence, the thing itself, it cannot be a "perfect manifestation", it is always a deviation from that manifestation. If the "dangerous and contaminating are those things which don't fit within the ordering structures" (Miller 1997, p. 43), then Frankie, as neither a girl nor a woman, is necessarily impure, anomalous, and "thus becomes polluting" (Miller 1997, p. 43).

So *The member of the wedding* opens on an impure, abject Frankie:

> This was the summer when Frankie was sick and tired of being Frankie. She hated herself, and had become a loafer and a big no-good who hung around the summer kitchen: dirty and greedy and mean and sad (p. 29).

Frankie feels like dirt, a status she attempts to reinforce in a brief rampage of improper actions (an acting-out of rage, no doubt aimed at provoking some response from her father). In the weeks leading up to Evelyn's departure, she 'borrows' her father's gun from his bedside drawer and carries "it all over town", shooting "up the cartridges in a vacant lot", she steals a knife from the Sears Roebuck store, and she commits "a secret and unknown sin" with Barney MacKean in his family's garage (p. 33). Furthermore, Frankie is acutely aware that the world has been at war but she can "not join the war and this made her sometimes feel restless and blue" (p. 31).

Nevertheless, despite the provocative nature of her behaviour, she continues to fly beneath the radar, flirting with boundaries, but not stepping beyond them blatantly enough to draw specific attention, to distinguish herself to others (specifically her

family) as a problem. She is disaffected and grubby – she describes herself as "dirty and hungry-eyed" (p. 73) – but her impurity is yet to become 'dangerous'.

* * *

From the outset *The driver's seat* (1970) invites us to dismiss Lise, treating her (and the other characters in the book) as "absurd caricatures" (Jordison), "as if Spark wants to parallel the emphasis on reality with a reminder that this is all a fiction, a writer's story being recreated in the mind of a reader in the act of reading" (Lanchester, p. viii). Spark's first direct reference to Lise is as "the customer" (p. 7), as though she (the author) finds Lise distasteful and is holding her up like dirty laundry for inspection, with as much pained third-person distance as is possible. There is no question Lise is impulsive, emotionally unstable, potentially insane. Barely five pages in and she has locked herself in the office bathroom, shouting at everyone to leave her alone, her hysterical laughter having turned to tears after her immediate superior repeats his offer that she take the afternoon off to pack for her holiday. But perhaps more significant is the revelation that she has done 'this' before:

> She had begun to laugh hysterically. She finished laughing and started crying all in a flood, while a flurry at the other desks, the jerky backward movements of her little fat superior, conveyed to her that she had done again what she had not done for five years (p. 10).

The driver's seat opens explicitly on the subject of dirt, Lise having a run-in with a sales girl about the stain-resistant qualities of a dress. But Lise is already damaged goods, her co-workers wary of her, the rituals of the office a symbolic holding pattern for Lise's volatility, her colleagues' quick responses to her outburst telling the reader everything they think they need to know: Lise is an emotional time-bomb waiting to explode.

Lise is thirty-four years old. She is thin, about five-foot-six feet tall, "neither good-looking nor bad-looking" (p. 18, p. 21), with pale brown hair (p. 18). She has worked at the company (an accountants' office) for sixteen years, aside from "*the* months of illness" (p. 9, my italics). She has been living (alone) in her apartment for ten years, since she was twenty-four, "a one-room flat ... circumscribed by ... dexterous pinewood outlines" (p. 13), as though she is living in a coffin, the "flat as clean-lined and clear ... as if it were uninhabited" (p. 15), her own small pine box. This is the epitome of 'being' dirt, Lise as the living dead, barely a silenced breath away from the ultimate abject object, the cadaver:

> If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. The border has become an object (Kristeva, p. 3).

Of all of the protagonists discussed in this exegesis, Lise is the one who most closely flirts with death, her engagement with that border the most lively and visceral, the loose threads of her life organised in this novel into a morbid contrivance around its realisation. Spark plays with our empathy, not revealing much about what may have caused this adjustment to Lise's state of mind until almost two-thirds of the way through the novel:

> 'I'm a widow,' Lise says, 'and an intellectual. I come from a family of intellectuals. My late husband was an intellectual. We had no children. He was killed in a motor accident. He was a bad driver, anyway' (p. 77).

By this stage, we are so inured to Lise's peculiarities that this passage can read as one in a series of absurdities (another persona, part of her laboured preparations for her own demise). Except that the book's other fanciful tales and anecdotes are not confessional and don't convey direct, historical information. Furthermore, Lise has already told us that she is afraid of traffic accidents, which seems to underline the significance of the detail: "I'm afraid of traffic. You never know what crackpot's going to be at the wheel of another car" p. 55.

Rankin (1985) says, we "are given Lise's exterior self, and have to construct her interior self, the self most novels would give us as a matter of course, by using the clues spread about the narrative" (p. 147). Earlier, Rankin argues:

> The surface, as in all Spark's novels, is glassy and easy to skate on, but the depth is always under-cutting any facile interpretation based on what is stated. The book's meaning lies in what is implied or thrown away (p. 147).

If Lise is telling 'the truth' about her husband, then this disclosure (in the middle of the book, where we've stopped paying attention) is an account of tragedy: a young, childless woman (likely twenty-three, just before she moved into her one-person apartment) loses her spouse in a vehicle collision.

The entire passage suggests past tense; there is no hint that she is surrounded by the loving support of family. It appears that Lise has now lost everyone and is very much alone.

Spark seems to be pitting our laziness against us, to call into question the judgements we so freely make of others by parading Lise as an object of derision,

courting people's cruel appraisals. And Lise is strange (at best she is eccentric, at worst she is quite mad). Even the porter, someone whose status Lise deems beneath hers (reminiscent of the dynamic between Julia and her hotel landlady), feels free to openly scoff: "The woman laughs hugely as one who has nothing to gain by suppressing her amusement, she laughs aloud in Lise's face" (p. 16-17).

Lise describes herself as an intellectual, as though she has renounced the body in her self-definition, preferencing the mind, the interior, over exterior qualities. And certainly her lifestyle appears ascetic. She has cut herself off from anything resembling a connection to other people, to nature, to experience. She is organised and contained. Pure. It is only with the approaching vacation (a situation that demands a proximity to others, to nature, to experience) that she begins to lose her composure.

In an examination of the grotesque and excess, Pimentel Biscaia (2011) explores Bakhtin's emphasis on the

> functionality of orifices ... Through them the body is able to escape its boundaries and makes connections with the world; eating, drinking, defecating and copulating happen when the body meets the exterior (p. 56).

The suggestion of leisure, of pleasure (situated at the boundary between self and other, where interior meets exterior), presents a threat to Lise's clearly delineated boundaries, potentially breaching her containment with the messiness of the outside world. It is an inversion of a power dynamic usually controlled by a dominant party: in this instance, Lise's isolation is the consecrating ideal to be protected. She is the one who wishes to remain discrete, pristine.

Let us call Lise's 'condition' madness. Madness implies dissolution. And, as previously argued (Miller 1997, p. 43), dissolution or fragmentation is the opposite of 'essence', and so madness, while in this case organised around the need for control, is necessarily (semantically) impure. However, having an air of dangerousness is not the same thing as being dangerous. Lise comes with a warning label. She has been identified as a loose cannon, a boundary breaker, as matter out of place. Dirt, yes, but still dormant; her dangerousness is yet to be fully activated.

II. Differentiated 'dangerous' dirt

Purity is about essence and control and purity discourses are about policing that border between essence and disaggregation. A pure environment is a contained environment, unlikely to contaminate. Julia, Frankie and Lise each reside in controlled, quasi artificial spaces that exist seemingly independent of their inhabitants: Julia in a series of cheap hotels (though that wasn't uncommon during the period), Lise in an apartment that is so lacking adornment she could leave and it would feel uninhabited, and Frankie whose house is presented in two-dimensional frame, almost as though it were a stage set. These 'homes' accommodate the characters' 'undifferentiated' selves. It is when circumstances conspire to have them leave these spaces that the spectre of their differentiation and potential dangerousness (their symbolic ability to defile) is raised.

Bakhtin (1963) defines carnival as

> a pageant without footlights and without a division into performers and spectators. In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life*. Because carnivalistic life is life drawn out of its *usual* rut, it is to some extent 'life turned inside out,' 'the reverse side of the world' ('*monde a I'envers*'). The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended (p. 122).

In many ways the act and process of travel is like a 'carnival', "life drawn out of its *usual* rut" – the tourists interchangeable members of the revelling horde, the day-to-day power dynamics of their worlds turned upside-down as they are feted by a service-industry of valets and waitstaff, guides and interpreters, all there to facilitate the traveller's pursuit of carnal desires, what Urry (1990) calls "the energetic breaking of mild taboos" (p. 92) – feasting, sex, a pageantry of the body (dressing it up and down, grooming and pampering), indulging the pleasure of looking (the "scopophilial" or "tourist" gaze, Berger 2004, p. 24) – in a parade of bookings and registrations that operates on rules and expectations orthogonal to most peoples' ordinary modes of existence.

Lise, Frankie and Julia each embark on some kind of travel and travel is instrumental in the structural developments of all three novels, but particularly so in *The driver's seat*, where Lise's colleagues ("the whole office", p. 10) advise her, "You need a good holiday, Lise. You need your vacation" (p. 10), the implication

being that she needs 'a time out', a break from her regular routine. She responds with, "I'm going to have it … I'm going to have the time of my life" (p. 10), which could easily be advertising copy lifted from a travel brochure (the novel was penned many years before the release of the film, *Dirty Dancing*, which made that "time of my life" lyric famous), and the direction of the novel is set. Lise is off. She has been put into motion like a wind-up toy. As if to underline that course, when Lise is leaving for the airport the building porter asks if she is "going to join a circus?" (p. 17), and then laughs again "with spiteful and deliberate noise" (p. 17) as the taxi drives away, heralding Lise's entry to carnivalesque mode via the estranged world of the grotesque and its "play with the absurd" (Kayser 1957 [1963], p. 187).

For Lise, being edged into a performance of leisure (which privileges indulgence over restraint, the epitome of sensory engagement) along with the bourgeois normality of considering herself deserving such a break (that she is of that ilk), triggers a break with passivity, a comfortable stasis, setting off her transformation from dirt to differentiation and dangerousness. She is tormented by the suggestion of the blurred borders arising from the unpredictability of other people's physicality and actions, which she is unable to tolerate quietly. Death is preferable to that anxiety, an anxiety manifested symbolically in her attitude towards material objects, in this case, her clothing: "She drops her hand and looks at her coat which is stained with a long black oily mark. 'Look at my clothes,' Lise says. 'My new clothes. It's best never to be born'" (p. 76).

Lise's preparation for entering carnival mode is announced on the very first page as she shops for a dress for her vacation:

> It is patterned with green and purple squares on a white background, with blue spots within green squares, cyclamen spots within the purple. This dress … has been too vivid for most customers' taste. But the customer who now steps speedily out of it … had almost smiled with satisfaction when she had tried it on. She had said, 'That's my dress' (p. 7).

It is not simply the shopping for gaudy clothing in the "Resort Department" that indicates Lise's shift to carnival mode – she also purchases a "lemon-yellow top with a skirt patterned in bright Vs of orange, mauve and blue" (p.10), and a "summer coat with narrow stripes, red and white, with a white collar" (p. 11), that she insists on pairing despite being warned by the sales girl of their clash: "You won't be able to wear them together" (p. 11) – it is also what that clothing represents.

Bakhtin (1963) says that during carnival

> what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure … All *distance* between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: *free and familiar contact among people* … A free and familiar attitude spreads over everything: over all values, thoughts, phenomena, and things. All things that were once self-enclosed, disunified, distanced from one another by a noncarnivalistic hierarchical worldview are drawn into carnivalistic contacts and combinations (p. 123).

This is the essence of what makes Lise dangerous, that preparedness to engage in "free and familiar contact", the dress in all its inappropriateness signalling her willingness to take liberties (with herself, with those around her), to invade peoples' boundaries, to attempt to involve them or make them complicit in her madness, her freak show, simply by her presence. For who wants to be associated with such a person? Confronted by our own vulnerability, the disavowal is almost instinctive:

> Encountering freaks, we contemplate the potential dissolution of our own corporeal and psychic boundaries, the terror and excitement of monstrous fusion with the surrounding world. If identity formation, whether individual or collective, involves a dual gesture of incorporation and repudiation, freaks remind us of the unbearable excess that has been shed to confer entry into the realm of normalcy (Adams 2001, p. 7).

The dynamic of a "nearness that is not wanted" operates similarly to drives such as love and hunger (what are thought of as more life-affirming impulses) highlighting an implicit threat arising from potential confusion about where one feeling ends and another begins. Meninghaus (2003) writes:

> The theory of disgust, to that extent, is a counterpart – although not a symmetrical one – of the theory of love, desire, and appetite as forms of intercourse with a nearness that is wanted (Menninghaus 2003, p. 1).

As soon as Lise engages with the reality of her vacation she becomes the embodiment of "unbearable excess", her garish clothing differentiating her like a uniform announcing her ungovernability, an unpredictability people immediately attempt to corral with mockery, admonishment, polite avoidance (genteel ostracisation) or some combination thereof; so that the sales girl's warning ("you won't be able to wear them together" p. 11) can also be read as a caution against impurity, the danger of mixing that which shouldn't be mixed (a mini defilement drama) – a "moral-symbolic" boundary monitored and defended by a self-appointed expert (Seidman 2012, p. 15).

Pimentel Biscaia (2011) argues that any "place that favours contact among different people enacts carnivalistic designs. These are often the sites of the crude slum naturalism which so attracts the grotesque: besides roads and fairs, brothels,

taverns and public transports fill the purpose" (p. 52). Airports and the interior of planes (as public transports) also qualify.

At the airport, Lise draws attention to herself, coming into contact with many different people along the way: she irritates the clerk checking in her luggage, she holds up the line behind her, and then she wanders about the departure lounge:

> And it is almost as if, satisfied that she has successfully registered the fact of her presence at the airport among the July thousands there, she has fulfilled a small item of greater purpose (p. 20).

She stops at the bookstall where she encounters a tall woman looking for hardback covers that match the colour schemes of her guest bedrooms, a comment perhaps on judging books by their covers. This is the first time Lise speaks in a foreign accent, claiming "I can speak four languages" (p. 22). Unlike Julia, who has to work against her status as an 'impure' naturalised Frenchwoman, Lise draws attention to herself, actively distorting any identity that might be attributed to a distinct origin and/or ethnicity, heightening people's discomfort by muddying her background, making it difficult to get a fix on her.

Urry (2001) often refers to travel as "corporeal travel":

> This is to emphasise something so obvious that it has often been forgotten, that tourists moving from place to place comprise lumpy, fragile, aged, gendered, racialised bodies [Veijola and Jokinen,1994]. Such bodies encounter other bodies, objects and the physical world multi-sensuously (p. 3).

Travelling then is a porous physical experience: we carry our construction of our bodies with us in a constant dialogic adjustment to the new and unfamiliar.

On the plane, Lise deliberately seats herself beside a dark-suited businessman, who, despite a brief mix-up with her seat-belt, keeps to himself. Her left-hand neighbour, Bill, however, is eager to strike up conversation. Lise, who describes Bill as "dark" (p. 25), coded as foreign and/or other, impure (similarly to Julia and her family), says to him, "You look like Red Riding-Hood's grandmother. Do you want to eat me up?" This exchange bothers the businessman who looks at Lise in alarm:

> He opens his mouth, gasping and startled, staring at her as if she is someone he has known and forgotten and now sees again. She smiles at him; it is a smile of relief and delight. His hand moves again, hurriedly putting back the papers that he had half-drawn out of his brief-case. He trembles as he unfastens his seat – belt and makes as if to leave his seat, grabbing his brief-case (p. 27).

Later the businessman will tell police that he moved seats because he was frightened of Lise: "I must have sensed something" (p. 28). This is reinforced by Bill, who tells Lise:

> 'He wasn't your type ... He was frightened of your psychedelic clothes. Terrified.'
> 'Do you think so?'
> 'Yes. But I'm not' (p. 31).

For Robertson (1996), the grotesque is defined as

> the locus of conflict between two contradictory principles. More specifically, it is the process that infects order with its own negation. This conflict, which arises in what I shall call the gap of the grotesque, involves a radical subversion, for it opens the gaping chasm of categorical separation. No alternatives are possible: order or anarchy, but either only in absolute. Their only border is the grotesque (p. 5).

Lise, seated between the businessman and Bill, the "Enlightenment Leader" (p. 33), has become that place, the unstable border between order and anarchy.

Seidman (2012) writes about the "micropolitics of self-purification", the "[m]oral-symbolic boundaries … marked and sustained by a combination of hygienic, health, aesthetic and etiquette practices" (p. 15). Bill attempts to sublimate his anarchy, his dangerousness, by channelling it through dogma (expressed as a purity discourse), religiously observing a macrobiotic lifestyle ("a cleansing diet", p. 33, but "not just a diet, it's a way of life", p. 36), a literal and metaphoric means of purification which he explains to Lise like a benevolent missionary, casting her not as a threat to the consecrating ideal but as a potential new recruit, her dangerousness (the preparedness to disregard social boundaries) qualifying her for the role (much as God loves sinners despite the sin), assuring her "I'm your type and you're my type" (p. 36).

Yet Lise is distracted by the businessman, now sitting several rows ahead of them, wondering why he, like everybody else, is afraid of her. Bill attempts to reassure her, saying that *he* isn't afraid of her and that she shouldn't worry about the businessman either because he is "a mess" (p. 38). According to Trotter (2000), 'mess', unlike 'waste', "has not yet become, and may never become, either symptom or symbol" (pp. 20-1). While the businessman's role in Lise's story is still unclear, it is precisely this intersection of mess and fear (his ambiguity) that awakens Lise's interest in him. She experiences herself as visible, differentiated, a polluting agent. "I have to go and wash" (p. 38), she tells Bill.

* * *

Lise's story is notable for its clear demarcations of space and place. De Certeau (1984) argues that "a movement always seems to condition the production of a space and to associate it with a history" (p. 188). In *Patterns in comparative religion*, Eliade (1958) insists that these places carry their own meaning, and particularly when they are of symbolic significance:

> In whatever religious context you find them, whatever *sort* of value is placed upon them ... ascents, the climbing of mountains or stairs, flights into the air, and so on ... always signify a transcending of the human and a penetration into higher cosmic levels (p. 108).

Lise may not have penetrated "higher cosmic levels" but her flight acts as a literal and figurative journey (transporting her not only from one place to another, but also from one state to another). Haliloğlu (2011) argues that "different cities can generate different modes of articulation and offer different perspectives stemming from the different discourses that reign in those cities. Thus, leaving one city for the other is leaving one life-style, one perception of the world, for another" (p. 140). It is not surprising then that when Lise goes to check-in to her hotel in Naples she seems confused, unsure where she is. She gives the concierge her name, but when he asks for her passport she asks him what he wants in Danish, then French, Italian and lastly in English:

> 'It is confusing,' she says ... handing over her passport.
> 'Yes, you left part of yourself at home,' the concierge says (p. 44).

In *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Rhys (1931) describes a similar phenomenon experienced by Julia Martin on her arrival in London:

> 'I thought you were settled in – where was it?'
> Julia said that she had been in Paris.
> 'Dear me,' said Uncle Griffiths. 'Was it Paris?'
> ... She said: 'I left on Thursday. It's funny, for it seems much longer ago than that' (p. 81).

Frankie from *The member of the wedding* also experiences a distorted sense of time, sitting around the kitchen table with Berenice Sadie Brown and John Henry West, the three of them

> saying the same things over and over, so that by August the words began to rhyme with each other and sound strange. The world seemed to die each afternoon and nothing moved any longer (p. 7).

Time is no longer linear; it has lost its momentum.

Maurel (1998) notes that in *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, the "narrative constantly draws attention to its chronological joints but the nature of the various incidents thus rigorously situated in time tends to expose this clockwork as useless" (p. 43). This is equally true of *The member of the wedding* and *The driver's seat*.

Lise's interest in chronological time extends only so far as it furthers or obstructs her crusade to locate 'her type', the consecrating ideal organising her world view – defined not as a presence, but the "lack of an absence" (p. 71). The "various incidents" structuring this time exist primarily as set-pieces, canvasses to express or reiterate her values as she tears around Naples in search of her man, the quest "highlighting an irredeemably absurd humanity, Spark ... showing the folly of all those, including herself, who wish to transfigure the world" (Cheyette 2000, p. 83). Thus, the student demonstrators, Carlo from the garage, the deposed sheikh, even Bill (the Enlightenment Leader) each draws attention to the fungible nature of certain social norms and boundaries, examples and experiences which Lise subjects to a "mental or social ordering in the name of essence" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 323).

Like Bill, Lise is also on a mission. Now that she is approaching her goal, there is an inevitability about her actions, the people around her disappearing more and more into 'types' (Bill, the Swedes, the police); props in an elaborate play directed and performed by its auteur. Lise's is absolutely a "*monde a l'envers"* (Bakhtin 1963 [1984], p. 123), governed and driven by her social differentiation, her dangerousness, which, she understands better than anyone, needs to be dealt with.

* * *

In *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Julia Martin leans across the table of a popular restaurant at the height of dinner service and hits Mr Mackenzie, her ex-lover and benefactor, in the cheek with her glove "so lightly that he did not even blink" (p. 34), yet in one symbolic, unambiguous gesture signalling her shift from benign dirt to potential defiling menace.

Mr Mackenzie anticipates this shift, claiming he "had no pity for her; she was a *dangerous* person" (p. 33, my italics), a judgment based less on foresight than on experience, recalling an earlier incident when she made "an uncalled-for scene" (p. 33), after he refused her seemingly reasonable request regarding his ongoing support, for a lump-sum payment instead of the stipend that would effectively deny her financial independence.

Mbembe (2003) argues that

> the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides … in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die …To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power (pp. 11-2).

Given their previous arrangement, Mr Mackenzie's financial withholding is akin to exploiting a system of servitude that effectively consigns Julia "to nonhuman disposability" (Otto 2013, p. 153), a first-order mental and social "ordering in the name of essence" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 323), highlighting what Seidman (2012) terms "the making of otherness":

> Hierarchies of status, wealth and power pivot around a politics of exclusion and the making of otherness. This is the dark side of social life. And yet, as we know from the recent politics of identity, the category of the Other is unstable and contestable (p. 18).

Mr James, Julia's first love (when she was nineteen), with whom she is later reacquainted in England (in a dynamic mimicking that with Mr Mackenzie: "Because he has money he's a kind of God. Because I have none I'm a kind of worm", p. 112), demonstrates this contestable instability when reflecting on how the war has affected his feelings about people:

> Before the war I always thought that I rather despised people who didn't get on ... I didn't believe much in bad luck. But after the war I felt differently. I've got a lot of mad friends now. I call them my mad friends (p. 114).

"Men?", Julia asks (p. 114), seeking to clarify whether she is included in this category of friendship, a question Mr James dodges by answering, "the life of a man and the life of a woman can't be compared. They're up against entirely different things" (p. 115). His tolerance for her neediness is firmly capped by cynicism and suspicion, a mistrust shared by the other men who also hold sway over her, a powerlessness which dogs her throughout the novel.

Similarly to Lise, Julia's transformation from stasis (harmless dirt) to differentiation and dangerousness is galvanised by travel, a shift from one place to another (Paris to London by "boat train"). However, Rhys doesn't dwell on the process itself, Julia noting that from the moment she boarded the train to Calais, to "all intents and purposes she was already in England" (p. 60), so that by the time she arrived in London:

> She had lost the feeling of indifference to her fate, which in Paris had sustained her for so long. She knew herself ready to struggle and twist and

> turn, to be unscrupulous and cunning as are all weak creatures fighting for their lives against the strong (p. 77).

Julia's arrival in London thus signals her threat (her dangerousness) to her family and associates there. She is "unplaceable and therefore a potentially transgressive and uncontainable entity" (Otto 2013, p. 159), Uncle Griffiths telling her, "You deserted your family. And now you can't expect to walk back and be received with open arms" (p. 84). In her absence she has been constructed as surplus to requirement, the kind of woman who would abandon her parents, her siblings, her children, her marriage, and her relatives more generally. She is a bad apple (not their kind), no longer a part of the inner circle, assigned the role of freak, as Grosz (1996) uses the term, inadvertently confirming the status of the other family members "as bounded, belonging to a 'proper' social category" (Grosz 1996, p. 65), establishing the distinction "that is not me" (Cohen 2004, p. ix), a position Uncle Griffiths makes abundantly clear when he admonishes her for yelling after her sister: "You've forgotten how to behave yourself among respectable people" (p. 136). The family reviles Julia yet, as Kristeva states, "abjection is above all ambiguity" (p. 9). They are ambivalent "on the part of the subject towards the pollutant" (Campkin, B & Cox 2007, p. 5), because they experience a complicated kind of pleasure (jouissance) in her presence; they want her around so that they can give voice to all their reasons for not wanting her around.

Thacker (2003) suggests that Rhys's work

> constantly subverts any discourse of place as settled attachment ... [the narrative] starts from a bewildering experience of spatial flux and seeks to return to a place of fixity that is forever absent. This perpetual shuttling between spaces is noticeable in the way that Rhys's texts make much use of liminal spaces, such as cafés, bars, and restaurants (p. 192).

McCullers and Spark also make use of such "liminal spaces", however, as Haliloğlu (2011) argues

> one of the reasons why Julia has no place in 'organised society' is that she escapes the clutches of social mechanisms by being constantly on the move. The social contract requires that the subject remain in a given position so that her/his relation to social modes of production and reproduction can be mapped – then he/she can be recruited as a particular kind of subject. Space, if we consider it to 'speak discourse', speaks certain mind-sets, obligations, and expected patterns of behaviour (p. 140).

Julia is never in one place for too long and she doesn't have a permanent address, so it is impossible for those in London society to map her "relation to social modes of production and reproduction"; to the extent that she is "recruited [in London] as a particular kind of subject", that framing must be based on memories of what she had been like before she left (over a decade ago) and/or "expected patterns of behaviour" of her kind of person (an 'amateur' prostitute "or 'sexual free-lance'" woman, Thomas 1999, p. 67). In light of her initial desire to get away from the UK ("One or two things had happened, and I wanted to go away. Because I was fed up, fed up, fed up" p. 51), and her brief references to the way she expects to be 'welcomed' on her return ("she had no illusions as to the way in which her sister would receive her", p. 58), she is unlikely to be harmoniously reintegrated into a comfortable social and/or familial circle.

This presumption is supported by studies into the relationship between moral judgements and cleansing activities.[12] Without a dramatic reason to reframe their appraisal of her, psychological research suggests that Julia's family and associates are likely to hold to and possibly redouble any a priori feelings of distaste.

> Seidman (2012) argues that a
>
> > politics of otherness will often project the division between the defiled and the civil as impersonal, as non-arbitrary and unchanging … The social process of the making of otherness, its historical formation and contingent future, is masked and denied by this impersonalisation. Imagining a fixed moral-symbolic binary order has the effect of minimising the role of agency in the making of otherness (p. 16).

Seidman is referring here to concepts such as religious or natural law. However, considering the evidence about the role of external stimuli on moral judgements (see footnote), it applies equally well to Julia, who is situated by the other characters as Other, fixed by their perception that she 'is' and naturally belongs outside their "moral-symbolic order". Norah says, "You've had practically nothing to do with us for years ... I don't consider that what you do is any business of mine" (p. 75).

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[12] Research shows that negative moral judgements can be based on unrelated laboratory-contrived feelings of disgust (Clore et al. 2008; Wheatley & Haidt 2005), while cleansing activities and manipulations (such as washing one's hands) can ameliorate the strength of concern about one's own morality (Zhong & Liljenquist 2006) and about the morality of others (Schnall, Benton & Harvey 2008, p. 1222).

Thus, when Norah remarks that Julia's hotel "is an awful place" (p. 76), Julia attempts to appeal to her sister not as a family member, but as a fellow Londoner, a statement of origin, trying to create a shared 'us' against 'them' that extends beyond their kinship: "Look at those filthy curtains. My God, *foreigners* must have a fine idea of London – coming to hotels like this. No wonder *they* avoid it like the plague" (p. 76, my italics).

One of the primary purity discourses used to subject Julia "to mental or social ordering in the name of essence" (Duschinsky 2011b, p. 323) is chronological age. When Mr Horsfield, a witness to Julia's gloved 'attack' on Mr Mackenzie, first notices her he refers to her as a "young woman" (p. 37). Yet sitting across from her (a few pages later) he observes that she "was not so young as he had thought" (p. 40). Julia "wanted to attract and charm him. She still realised that it might be extremely important that she should attract and charm him" (p. 88), but Horsfield later describes her as "older and less pretty" (p. 91) than she had appeared in Paris (p. 148), as though the events in the story have accelerated her decline, a perspective reinforced by Norah who tells herself by way of comparison to her sister's appearance, "you're young yet" (p. 139). Uncle Griffiths describes Julia as walking "in the manner of a woman who is tired and no longer young ... people turned round to look at her" (p. 139). And on the final page, Mr Mackenzie himself is struck by her dimming appearance, thinking, women "go phut quite suddenly" (p. 191).

Like Frankie, Julia's body is depicted in the thrall of nature, not the "liminal state between childhood and adulthood" (Gleeson-White, p. 12), but that barren state between adulthood and death, betraying the body's absolute "debt to nature" (Kristeva 1982, p. 102), a debt traditionally borne more heavily by women than by men. Even Julia's sister, Norah – "tall and straight and slim and young" (p. 103) – worries that aging will ruin her: "I'll be old and finished, and that's that" (p. 104).

Russo (1995 [2012]), in her analysis of the female grotesque, discusses the notion of "making a spectacle out of oneself", describing it as "specifically feminine danger":

> Men, I learned somewhat later in life, "exposed themselves", but that operation was quite deliberate and circumscribed. For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap – a loose dingy bra strap especially – were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done

> something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn – too young or too old, too early or too late – and yet anyone, any *woman*, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful (p. 53).

For women then, and in this case specifically Julia, the visible manifestation of aging is a blameworthy inadvertency that can't be prevented, and all Julia's attempts to conceal it (wearing make-up and fashionable clothing) only magnify its inevitability (a moving away from a source – youth as a life-force), which equates to a "loss of boundaries" and thus her culpable impurity ("I thought from the way you were staring at me that I must be looking pretty ugly", p. 92); there being nothing she can do about it aside from insulating herself with social position, an option that appears to have passed her by.

As Julia leaves Mr James' house (lonely, lump in the throat), she is distracted by a flower arrangement, a metaphor goading her with its display; the protections afforded the beautiful sensible enough to know their place:

> There was a vase of flame-coloured tulips in the hall – surely the most graceful of flowers. Some thrust their heads forward like snakes, and some were very erect, stiff, virginal, rather prim. Some were dying, with curved grace in their death (p. 116).

The following day she doesn't visit her mother, but instead wanders aimlessly around the streets: "She walked all the afternoon in a pale sunlight – sunlight without warmth. She did not think, because a spell was on her that forbade her to think" (p. 117). Thacker (2003) says, "Rhys's heroines are thrown into the heterotopic flux of the city, travelling between spaces, and never able to convert these spaces into places of belonging" (p. 194). Although this scene comes directly after Julia's encounter with Mr James, it is not a picture of romantic heartbreak. Naipaul (1972 [1990]) maintains that *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* does not "dissect a passion. It examines solitude and the void" (p. 56), a position supported by Warner (2002), who argues that many of Rhys's characters "occupy the same suspended state of unbelonging and negation" as Antoinette Cosway from *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys 1966 [1992]), a character explicitly identified as a zombi (Warner, p. 156) (see also Thacker 2003, p. 202).

This symbol of death-in-life – the zombi (Emery 1990, p. 143; Howells 1991, p. 148; Savory 1999, p. 74; Thomas 1999, p. 85) – only enhances the sense of Julia's dangerousness, the text playing up related images of exile, blankness, emptiness and ghostliness:

> Rhys's characters are in constant search for the "true home of the self" in its form of existential authenticity and rootedness, while their arrival in that mental and emotional space remains deferred. It is in this sense of personal and existential unbelonging that the figure of the zombi coincides with that of the exile in Rhys's work (Otto 2013, p. 155).

For the other characters then, Julia is a spectre, the harbinger of death, requiring containment and banishment in the crudest sense (an unambiguous ordering in the name of essence) – *not one of us*, *not welcome here*. And in fact, the day following her visit, her mother's condition rapidly deteriorates, so much so that Julia is urgently summoned to her death-bed (a sequence that suggests causality), leading to her final fallout with the family, an expulsion administered after the mother's funeral by the ostensibly 'neutral' Miss Wyatt, who, with "a very slight push" says to Julia, "Come along now, you must go" (p. 138).

* * *

As is the case with Lise and Julia, Frankie's transformation (from dirt to differentiation, from benignity to dangerousness) is precipitated by a journey. However, rather than travelling from one place to another, Frankie and her father play host to visitors and from the moment "when her brother and the bride came to the house, Frankie knew that everything was changed" (p. 34). "*They are the we of me* [she thought]. And that was why it made her feel so queer, for them to be away in Winter Hill while she was left all by herself" (p. 53). Previously she "ate and wrote shows and practised throwing knives against the side of the garage and played bridge at the kitchen table. Each day was like the day before, except that it was longer, and nothing hurt her any more" (p. 34). But now "all this was suddenly over with and changed" (p. 53). Frankie was alive again to her feelings, a jerry-built fortress become pregnable.

Joan Didion (1979 [1984]) says that we

> tell ourselves stories in order to live ... We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the 'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual experience (p. 11).

As if to underline this point, Frankie (a budding writer) repeatedly asks Berenice to tell her about the couple's visit ("Tell me exactly how it was", p. 37), as though by hearing about it over and over she can freeze a narrative in her own mind and then return to her more comfortable state of detachment. Berenice obliges:

> The next thing I realise you busted back through the kitchen and run up to your room. You came down with your organdie dress on and lipstick a inch thick from one ear to the next (p. 37)

But the story she tells (of an unpredictable Frankie, a foolish Frankie, an inappropriate Frankie) challenges the narrative structure Frankie would like to impose on the events, refusing to allow Frankie to easily rule a line under them.

Kristeva argues that we can manage abjection via sublimation through art and poetic language: "In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject. Through sublimation, I keep it under control" (p. 11).

Russell (2013) explains that for Kristeva, this process of sublimation isn't one of "of antagonism or compromise" (p. 136), so much as "as the formal or structural acknowledgement of the semiotic" (p. 146) in the symbolic, resulting "in a transformation of the very form of the symbolic" (p. 137):

> What is re-experienced in sublimation qua retracing is precisely the axis connecting nonmeaning and meaning, self and other, the ambivalent and precarious moment of intimacy-becoming-separation, of affect-becoming-word (p. 143).

What is experienced then is some sense of incorporation and redefinition; what is experienced is some sense of control. Over the course of the summer, Frankie gains a degree of immunity to her feelings (a deadening stasis) by engaging in cathartic activities such as writing shows and dressing up (another form of 'writing'). Jarvis's visit disrupts her processes of sublimation, and by extension, her feelings of control. After her brother leaves, Frankie tells Berenice, "I feel just exactly like somebody has peeled all the skin off me" (p. 47), a graphic metaphor for her sense of porousness and vulnerability, and from that point forward she seeks to re-dress herself by flouting other boundaries in a bid to redefine the border between herself and the outside world. It is around this time she first announces her plan to leave town for good. "I'm going to Winter Hill," she says. "I'm going to the wedding" (p. 56).

Jones & Norris (2005) suggest that

> the relationship between discourse and action is dynamic and contingent, located at a nexus of social practices, social identities and social goals. This relationship is manifested in the tension between the kinds of actions that discourse and other cultural tools make possible and the ways people purposefully mix these tools in response to their immediate circumstances (p. 9).

F. Jasmine (as Frankie now calls herself) piggy-backs on the discourse of the wedding, the culturally endorsed process of embodiment and legal unity to imbue herself with a renewed status. By aligning herself with the wedding she thinks of herself as reborn. Once abject and unmoored, both "caught and loose" (p. 143), she imagines the ritual and authority of the wedding as both grounding and purifying: "after we leave Winter Hill I won't have to worry about things any more" (p. 143). This exemplifies Douglas's point about the mitigating role of ritual for people in transitional states:

> The person who must pass from one to another is himself in danger and emanates danger to others. The danger is controlled by ritual which precisely separates him from his old status, segregates him for a time and then publicly declares his entry to his new status (p. 111).

Frankie as F. Jasmine is driven by her desire to tell people of her plans (she tells the bartender at the Blue Moon, the red-headed soldier, a woman sweeping the porch, the tractor-man mending the road, strangers in Sugarville, a girl from her school, p. 72-75), a physical act of declaring a narrative, like a wedding vow, pledging an oath before witnesses: "The thrill of speaking certain words – Jarvis and Janice, wedding and Winter Hill – was such that F. Jasmine, when she had finished, wanted to start all over again" (p. 71).

If "discourse *is* action, [if] saying something or writing something is a form of doing something" (Jones & Norris 2005, p. 6), then F. Jasmine's constant speaking of the wedding is like verbally mapping a distance between herself and the idealised realm of Winter Hill, the location of the wedding, which although barely one-hundred miles away, sounds like another world (and would be especially so to a young girl growing up in the 1940s). McCullers punctuates the novel with icy motifs and references to cold climates, contrasting the heat and slow decay of the American south in summer with the imagined crisp white purity of northern snow:

> She dreamed of Alaska. She walked up a cold white hill and looked on a snowy wasteland far below. She watched the sun make colours in the ice, and heard dream voices, saw dream things. And everywhere there was the cold white gentle snow (p. 17).

Douglas says that purity "is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise. Most of us indeed would feel safer if our experience could be hard-set and fixed in form" (p. 174). This is borne out by the "old Frankie" (p. 115) who would gladly remake the world excluding summer entirely (p. 116), exchanging the

sense of changeable instability for the hard-set beauty of winter, “as pure as snow” (Shakespeare 1606 [1964], p. 131), a season fixed in form, like her treasured glass snow globe.

Rojek (1993) writes about how, despite the erosion of any sense of authentic and/or unique gaze, “our dreams of escape continue to entrance us and we are nagged by the feeling that our lives will be catapulted into a completely different realm by the activity of travel” (p. 203). Frankie, Julia and Lise all desire to “be catapulted into a completely different realm”, their desire consecrating the ideal of that realm (itself a form of purity discourse), subjecting it to a mental and social ordering based on who desires it and who will and who won’t be admitted.

In *The production of space* (1974 [1991]), Lefebvre famously said, “space is never empty: it always embodies a meaning” (p. 154). It follows then that since “space is always produced by social practices it can always be deciphered for specific social meanings” (Thacker, p. 17). Pile (1996) builds on this argument by analysing

> the intricate and dynamic ways in which specific narratives of space and self intertwine. These stories are about the ways in which people gain a sense of who they are, the ways in which space helps tell people their place in the world, and the different places that people are meant to be in the world. So, in the newspaper articles, there are underlying senses of people having a ‘proper place’ and of people who are ‘out of place’ (pp. 16-7).

Prior to news of the wedding, Frankie feels “out of place”, tired of the town, offsetting her torpor with unattainable gender-bound fantasies of escape and adventure, stories fed by media reports about war and world affairs: “She wanted to be a boy and go to war as a Marine” (p. 30-31). In *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Julia expresses uncannily similar desires to escape (she “wanted to go away with just the same feeling a boy has when he wants to run away to sea” p. 51), yet Julia’s circumstances are such that she can’t convert them. F. Jasmine, however, newly named and in her dangerous state of differentiation, is no longer oppressed by the space in which she finds herself; she has reconstructed her sense of her place in that world (even though she intends to leave it):

> The day before the wedding was not like any day that F. Jasmine had ever known. It was the Saturday she went into the town, and suddenly, after the closed blank summer, the town opened before her and in a new way she belonged ... Under the fresh blue early sky the feeling as she walked along was one of newly risen lightness, power, entitlement (p. 59-66).

In this sense, space acts like a purity discourse, an externalisation and manifestation of the relative agency felt by her former and current self.

Sibley (1992) characterises space as "an integral part of the outsider problem. The way in which space is organised affects the perception of the 'other', either as foreign and threatening or as simply different" (p. 116). One of the primary ways F. Jasmine expresses her changed self-identification is by traversing spaces previously deemed 'other' and therefore off-limits, such as visiting the Blue Moon bar, a favourite watering hole of soldiers stationed at a nearby camp (and where she drinks beer with a soldier and makes arrangements to meet with him later). The "old Frankie had stood out on the sidewalk ... watching all that went on in there" (p. 68). But the "old laws she had known before meant nothing to F. Jasmine, and without a second thought she left the street and went inside" (p. 69).

Douglas says, to "have been in the margins is to have been in contact with danger, to have been at a source of power" (p. 111). Steiner (1967) applies this to social relations, claiming, "in terms of danger; through contagion there is social participation in danger" (p. 147). There is a strong overlap between carnivalesque spaces and borderlands – "the perilous territory of not-belonging" (Said 2000, p. 177) – grey areas that "acquire an aura of risk and danger as they serve as sites of exchange or flow between … two symbolic orders" (Seidman 2012, p. 13). Szytniewski & Spierings (2014) examine the constructed nature of borderlands, arguing that they "are relational in the sense that they are constructed through personal perceptions and interpretations, border practices and spatio-temporal circumstances" (p. 347). F. Jasmine now actively seeks out danger in the town's borderlands, loitering in the evening outside the jail (also known as "Jail-Widow's Walk", p. 146), having her fortune read in Sugarville (divided "from the white people's town" p. 76) by Berenice's mother, Big Mama, and returning to the Blue Moon (p. 157), where she finds herself in a situation that gets out of control (similarly to Julia with Mr Horsfield on the stairs, p. 163-164, and Lise with Bill, p. 97). This literal danger redoubles her focus on the redemptive symbolism of the wedding and she rushes home.

The wedding itself takes up only few pages in the book. Frances is woken early, she travels by bus to Winter Hill with her father, Berenice and John Henry, and then her hell breaks loose ("all that came about occurred in a world beyond her power

… from the beginning to the end the wedding was unmanaged as a nightmare" p. 168).

Adams (2001) describes one of the most famous scenes from the film, *Freaks* (1932), which comes after a

> lovestruck Hans breaks off [his] engagement with Frieda and proposes to Cleo, who eagerly accepts. Their union is celebrated at a carnivalesque wedding feast that turns ugly when the freaks chant their acceptance of the new bride as 'one of us.' She reacts by turning on them in horror, calling them 'filthy, slimy FREAKS' (p. 62).

It's not clear if McCullers saw *Freaks* (she would have been fifteen at the time it was released, the same age she was given her first typewriter), but it's more than likely that she heard about it, as the picture aroused such public outcry "that it had to be pulled from circulation at considerable financial cost to MGM" (Adams 2001, p. 62). In *The member of the wedding*, the book's climactic scene – where Frankie, in an inversion of the movie, attempts to involve herself in her brother's nuptials, wanting to be 'one of them', accepted by the betrothed as a welcome member (mimicking *Freaks'* erotic triangle[13]) – may well have been informed by the film, McCullers assigning Frankie the dual roles of 'rejected virgin' and 'freak', wedding them together in tragic farce as Frankie, in her dotted Swiss dress, flings "herself down in the sizzling dust" calling "Take me! Take me!" after the soon-to-be-honeymooning newlyweds' departing vehicle (pp. 167-8).

Frankie has been subjected to a social ordering in the name of essence and rejected, for she doesn't belong there. This exclusion from the purifying ritual of the wedding results in the apotheosis of her transformation from benign dirt to visible dangerousness.

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[13] Adams claims that as an adult, McCullers had an "erotic interest in women as well as men … [and a] preference for triangulated rather than coupled love affairs" (2001, p. 89).

III. Return to indiscriminate formlessness

If purity "is the enemy of change" (Douglas, p. 174) then dirt, as a constant, is its own kind of purity. Wright (1993), summarising Douglas, describes dirt as "an idea that defines the outside of a culture, a conceptual domain in which all differences disappear and only the threat of defilement remains: as dirt, so the argument goes, everything is the same" (p. 50).

Frances (as she now calls herself) tracks her return home (to formlessness, to dirt) much as she did her trip to Winter Hill, town by town ("each town seemed smaller than the one before" p. 167), except that now the "direction made no difference to her" (p. 169). Seated in the back "with the coloured people" (p. 168), she is seething with rage and wants "the whole world to die" (p. 169). Berenice seeks to comfort her with talk of surprises and promises of parties for her new school friends and slowly, and as they draw closer and closer to home (the journey again as transformative ritual), Frances begins to reframe her memory of the wedding, eventually claiming it "was all just a joke" and that she wouldn't visit her brother "for a million dollars" (p. 172).

This shift is presaged prior to the wedding, when F. Jasmine previews her ill-fitting 'wedding' dress (a "grown woman's evening dress" p. 106) for Berenice and John Henry, her cousin, declaring that the dress "looks like a Christmas tree" (p. 107). The effect is not dissimilar to the effect Ferris (1993) discusses in relation to theatrical cross-dressing, arguing that "while often reinforcing the social mores and status quo, [cross-dressing] carries with it the possibility for exposing that liminal moment, that threshold of questioning, that slippery sense of a mutable self" (p. 8). Bhabha (1994 [2005]) makes a similar argument about the role of mimicry and the colonial subject, contending that colonial mimicry is a "sign of a double articulation ... [it] 'appropriates' the Other as it visualises power. [Yet] Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate" (p. 122).

If patriarchy is a kind of colonialism, then this dressing up has parallel implications. In her orange satin, F. Jasmine is "*a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (Bhabha 1994 [2005], p. 122, italics in text). Hers is an unintentional slippage, but slippage and excess nevertheless, undermining the very image upon which she seeks to fashion herself. Adams (1999) describes this process in terms of Frankie's in-between, adolescent status:

> The excesses of the gown foreshadow Frankie's subsequent exclusion from the heterosexual bliss of her brother's honeymoon: its lurid color is inappropriate to the occasion, and it is too large, signaling her unreadiness to assume the part of the mature woman intended to fill out its contours. Instead of transforming Frankie into a woman, the gown highlights the discrepancy between the body's awkward suspension between youth and adulthood, and the garment's unfulfilled promise of glamour and sophistication (p. 560).

Unsurprisingly then, F. Jasmine doesn't end up wearing the dress at the wedding.

Once home again, Frances is still unpredictable, she is a teenager, but her actions begin to conform to the expected behaviour of a twelve-year-old girl. The night of their return from Winter Hill she runs away, but even this dramatic folly falls within the spectrum of 'normal' delinquency.

At one point during her escape Frances aims her father's pistol at her head, thinking to make good on her promise to kill herself if left out of her brother's honeymoon. But then she realises that "she would be dead – and deadness was blackness that went on and on" (p. 178). Unlike Lise, who desires the constancy of this eternal nothingness, Frances changes her mind, setting up a structural tension which is resolved by her return from the brink; Frances welcomed back to home, to family, to safety, to society.

Kristeva says that the cadaver is the ultimate abject object, "a border that has encroached upon everything" (p. 3). McCullers bestows this status on John Henry West, who dies of meningitis and thus never grows up to overcome his abject 'freak' status, aligning his illness with the duration and passing of the Fair, emphasising the metaphoric connection. He is offered as a sacrifice to the gods of narrative structure in order that Frances can survive beyond the final page.

The member of the wedding closes with the arrival of Mary Littlejohn, Frances's new friend, who is coming to spend the night and accompany Frances and her father to their new home the following day (they are moving in with John Henry's parents). Mary Littlejohn is also an outsider. Prior to the war she and her family lived abroad, so she has an exotic provenance. She has "dimpled hands tapered at the fingers to little pink blobs of flesh" (p. 186), the result of biting her nails, and she wears her "corn-yellow" hair in long plaits tied with rubber bands, which she mindlessly sucks (a nervous habit?). She is "going to be a great painter and Frances a great poet" (p. 186) and they are going to go "around the world together" (p. 186).

Berenice makes it clear that she is not fond of Mary – she describes her as "lumpy and marshmallow-white" (p. 186), remarking that her family are Roman Catholics (p. 187). For Frances, however, "this difference was a final touch of strangeness, silent terror, that completed the wonder of her love" (p. 187).

Eliade (1958) explores the connection between fear, wonder and the unknown:

> Perfection in any sphere is frightening, and this sacred or magic quality of perfection may provide an explanation for the fear that even the most civilised societies seem to feel when faced with a genius or a saint. Perfection is not of this world. It is something different, it comes from somewhere else. This same fear, this same scrupulous reserve, applies to everything alien, strange, new – that such astonishing things should be present is the sign of a force that, however much it is to be venerated, may be dangerous (p. 14).

This combination of the alien and the new in Mary Littlejohn represents something astonishing for Frances: "I consider it the greatest honour of my existence that Mary has picked me out to be her one most intimate friend" (p. 187). As Douglas says, "Order implies restriction; from all possible materials, a limited selection has been made and from all possible relations a limited set has been used" (p. 109). That Frances has chosen Mary seems to have escaped Frances's attention. But Mary has chosen Frances, she has subjected her to "a mental or social ordering in the name of essence" and Frances has been accepted (together, she and Mary are her "we of me"). At last she is a member, fully-fledged, come full circle and installed with heteronormal parental surrogates "in a house out in the new suburb of town" p. 185, no longer dangerous, comfortable in the security of unremarkability, the safe territory of social formlessness.

* * *

If most people strive to preserve and perpetuate life, then being childless and arranging to have someone kill you must be the ultimate "*monde l'envers*". MacCannell (1973) writes about travel settings acting as platforms for "staged authenticity" (p. 589), but Lise appears to have used her travel as a platform for staged inauthenticity, a series of actions (or performances) aimed at discrediting or dismantling any sense others may have of her as a coherent self. Apostolou (2000) states that Spark's "texts give the impression that there is always a hidden camera that the characters are aware of, and that they are putting on an act for the sake of spectators, willing to kill themselves for the sake of the all-powerful image" (p. 282).

Even in her final moments when Lise instructs her murderer to kill her, she "repeats it in four languages" (p. 106), as though to underline that she is a composite, without single origin (impure), ostentatiously refusing to locate herself.

Earlier in the chapter, there is a moment outside the Pavilion cafe, prior to Bill assaulting her (before she hooks up with her killer), where it looks as though she might change her mind. She tells Bill: "I want to go home, I think. I want to go back home and feel all that lonely grief again. I miss it so much already" (p. 96)). Grief stands in this instance, aphoristically, as "the price we pay for love" (Malham 2015), a shorthand for 'living', of life beyond simple existence, but then she rallies and continues her inspection of the Pavilion ("it's the famous Pavilion that I want", p. 94), looking to pinpoint the right location for her murder.

The word 'pavilion' comes from the Old French 'paveillon', derived from the Latin papilionem, meaning butterfly or tent (*The concise Oxford dictionary* 1974). In ancient Greece, butterflies were equated with the soul and "were often depicted on graves", imagery later appropriated by Christian iconography to symbolise the resurrection (Ferber 2007, p. 38), "as represented by the caterpillar, the chrysalis, and the butterfly" (Ferguson 1961, p. 13).

Eliade (1958) says that the

> creation of the world is the exemplar for all constructions. Every new town, every new house that is built, imitates afresh, and in a sense repeats, the creation of the world. Indeed, every town, every dwelling stands at the 'centre of the world', so that its construction was only possible by means of abolishing profane space and time and establishing sacred space and time (p. 379).

Considered from this perspective, the "famous Pavilion", as a centre and as a site of metamorphic resurrection, becomes a holy (sanctifying and, by extension, cleansing) place to die.

In Pimentel Biscaia's (2011) survey of Reineke's theory of the sacrificial victim and the "persecutory phenomenon of witch-hunting", she notes that

> Reineke identifies unmarried women, childless women, businesswomen and midwives as particularly exposed groups to the rage of witch-haters. This was especially true when mingled with a Puritan mentality which viewed these women as monstrosities rejecting the roles that God and tradition had assigned them to fulfil and that were directly linked with procreation (Pimentel Biscaia 2011, p. 168) (Reineke 1997, p. 135).

As if picking up on the Puritan theme, Spark positions Lise (a widowed and childless career-woman of sorts) in the role of judge and executioner, orchestrating her own demise (killing her inner witch/freak) as a means of saving herself from her own monstrous damnation. Reineke argues that the "logic of sacrifice suggests that those who practice it believe that effective action against social disorder mandates the death of the victim and precludes nonlethal, figurative sacrifices such as banishment or incarceration" (Reineke 2014). By destroying herself, Lise restores a purity; her death is a return to a state of calm, of social order, a retreat from 'dangerousness' to indistinguishability, the nobility of nothingness.

This nobility of nothingness dovetails into other tropes about 'good' women, most notably the Virgin Mary, who is the "epitome in Western culture of the female martyr" (Pimentel Biscaia 2011, p. 140). The anguished Madonna is the subject of Kristeva's 1985 essay, 'Stabat Mater', which takes the 13th century Catholic myth as a foundation to explore the idea of the Holy Mother as the prototype of the perfect woman, free of sin (the essence of courtly love) yet devoted to her child (the ideal mother) (p. 136). As Kristeva (1985) argues, an "actual woman worthy of the feminine ideal embodied in inaccessible perfection by the Virgin could not be anything other than a nun or a martyr" (p. 149).

Yet this position isn't without paradox, for in that idealised selflessness there is uniqueness, the Virgin being "unique among women, unique among mothers, and, since she is without sin, unique also among humans of both sexes"(Kristeva 1985, p. 149) – pregnancy being "the dividing line between nature and culture" (Kristeva 1985, p. 149) – and so in the act of disappearing, in her martyrdom, Lise both dissolves and preserves herself, a convenient outcome that Spark, the converted Catholic, no doubt well and truly understood.

Eliade (1958) argues that

> the hope of *a total regeneration of time* ... is evident in all myths and doctrines ... every cycle is an *absolute* beginning because all the past, all 'history', has been completely abolished by reverting in a single instant to 'chaos'. We thus find in man at every level, the same longing to destroy profane time and live in sacred time. Further, we see the desire and hope of regenerating time as a whole, of being able to live – 'humanly', 'historically' – in eternity, by transforming successive time into a single eternal moment (p. 407).

Apostolou (2000) suggests that "in Muriel Spark's work only those who can become objects of art, those who dominate appearances are allowed to survive" (p.

282). By choreographing her own death, Lise, "desperate to control her own destiny in a world where her life so far has apparently been controlled by other people and other forces" (Rankin 1985, p. 146), has transformed 'her time' into a pure, "single eternal moment". A carnivalesque episode of chaos has culminated in the obliteration of her past, her history, and she has been reborn in death, at once essential and undifferentiated; from dust to dust, she is reconstituted as dirt in a perpetual, unremarkable now.

* * *

Julia's transformation (from dangerousness back to dirt) following her excommunication from her family is almost instantaneous. She feels "peaceful and purified" afterwards, "as though she [is] a child. Because she [can] not imagine a future, time [stands] still" (p. 140).

Thacker (2003) argues that the "spatial trope of the circle … displaces the temporal development of Julia's character" (p. 202), however, this is not an interstitial moment; clearly things have changed. On the train, a man asks Julia if she is a Londoner and she says no (p. 141), an about-face from the stance she took with her sister. And when he gives her his business card she lets it drop to the ground, neither interested in meeting him again nor in maintaining the impression, the courtesy, that she might be. The final chapters of *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (including Part III) revisit many scenarios familiar from earlier in the novel (such as when Julia and Mr Horsfield witness an argument at a restaurant, p. 144, echoing the argument Mr Horsfield witnessed between Julia and Mr Mackenzie, p. 35), but, even though Julia ultimately returns to Paris (and to the same address), Davidson (1984) explains, the beginning doesn't quite line up with the end:

> Rhys's narration bends back to its beginning but falls short of it, which gives us, to translate the novel into spatial terms, a geometric figure that corresponds to one full turn of a spiral. The ending of the circled novel is totally open; the action portrayed in the plot can be imaginatively extended in endless repetition. The spiralled novel is both open and closed. The plot imaginatively extended can be represented as a single line of action often repeated but still circling toward its own vanishing point (p. 220).

Keith & Pile (1993) maintain that identity is context-dependent and "is always an incomplete process" (p. 28). At first paraphrasing, and then quoting Laclau (1990, p. 21), they argue that identity "depends on conditions of existence which are contingent, its relationship with them is absolutely necessary" (p. 28).

Early in *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie*, Julia declares, “It was always places she thought of, not people” (p. 12). De Certeau (1984) makes the distinction between ‘places’ and ‘spaces’, arguing that ‘place’ “implies an indication of stability”, whereas ‘space’ is “produced by the operations that orient it”, or, to put it another way, “space is a practiced place” (p. 117). Thus, for Julia, geographical places acting as ‘spaces’ (as outlined by de Certeau), have some continuity as physical locations that can be paired in her mind with *her* construction of them (the way she remembers/practices those places), whereas people as variable, contextually constructed subjects (Mansfield 2000, p. 32), are beyond her control.

If space can act as a discourse, then a literal and/or metaphorical return to a place can operate as a form of engagement with that discourse’s classificatory schema (travel, for example, "corresponds not only to a change of social environment but also to a change of the discourse within which one has to define oneself”, Haliloğlu 2011, p. 141). At this stage in the narrative then, it is not surprising that Julia returns to memories of her childhood (a ‘pure’ untainted time) as a means of reassuming some control of her ‘essential’ identity (“When you are a child you are yourself ... And then something happens and you ... become what others force you to be”, p. 158). Haliloglu (2011) states:

> The way a narrator remembers an event depends on his/her purposes at the time she tries to recall it. Here, the goal is to find a moment of pure happiness: restricted as she is now by society’s rules, her quest is to find an inner core, a psychological depth that is untouched by anything. She wants to capture a moment free from interaction, a moment where she is happy ‘about nothing’, happy in a self-sufficient manner; she wants to construct an extended self that goes well beyond the immediate reactions and thoughts and excitability of the moment (p. 150).

Thacker (2003) observes that the “typical Rhys heroine never really occupies anywhere, never ‘dwells’, in Heidegger’s sense: a hotel room is only ever a kind of temporary halt” (p. 193), she is an exile in a borderland. Just prior to Julia’s decision to go back to Paris there is an incident at her London hotel where, returning late, she loses track in the dark, not realising that Mr Horsfield has leapfrogged her on the staircase. When he takes her hand she screams in alarm, surprised to find someone ahead of her. After she calms down she tells him, “I thought it was – someone dead” (p. 165). It is as though the staircase is a portal, the past reaching into her present, a passage between the living and the dead, between here and there (her mother, and a heritage, a tropical place of sunshine and orange trees, somewhere “that she had never

seen", p. 12). By passing through or ascending she is transformed, delivered back into the light, having safely crossed to the other side. The next day, even though Mr Horsfield offers her money and assistance with finding somewhere to stay in London, she turns her back on his patronage, resolute about her return to the continent, where she insists she'll "be able to manage better" (p. 170).

Back in France, preparing to settle into Parisian life, Julia draws up a notice, announcing that she is looking for work as a governess or lady companion. Then she goes out for the day (a day extending into the evening), coming across a young man who follows her but who rapidly quits the pursuit once he realises her age. Hughes (1989) documents the French Creole myth of the voluptuous devil-woman (la-ja-bless, from the French diablesse) who kills married men who are out too late, leading them to a precipice which they topple off in fright when the la-ja-bless reveals her terrifying skull face (Hughes 1989). Prior to Julia's London sojourn, she may have had the power to tempt this young man who'd been following her, to lead him to a precipice. But that time is past. As a middle-aged woman now, undisguised, she is no longer vested with the capacity to 'destroy' him (she is no longer a dangerously supernatural la-ja-bless). She is reviled but benign. Indistinguishable once more among a sea of the unwashed, he turns away. When she runs into Mr Mackenzie it is almost immaterial.

Seshagiri (2006) says of postcolonial protagonists such as Julia Martin, they "do not mature or take their places in stable social hierarchies; neither do they arrive at self-knowledge through the act of telling their own stories" (p. 500). And yet the story does resolve, Julia embarking on the next chapter of her life, the reader left with the distinct impression that this is the beginning of another stage, a progression. As Simpson (2006) states, "the refusal of closure" is strategic and a notable feature of Rhys's conclusions:

> The thing at the heart of the Rhysian text is feeling, and this occurs on a nonverbal plain that the reader is invited to inhabit once she steps within the pages of the narrative. In this way, despite the grim outlooks of Rhys's heroines, the shady motives of those who surround them, and the tragically foregone outcomes that are effected, her work offers readers an experience that is powerfully affirming insofar as it insists on creative engagement (p. 19).

Conclusion: "for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return"[14]

According to Forster (1927 [2002]), fiction is built on structuring conflict around compelling, causally-related situations (p. 61). Readers like to get behind characters, to empathise with them and to emotionally invest in them both within the text and in what they imagine is the character's life beyond the page. If, as Didion believes, the "writer is always tricking the reader into listening to the dream" (in Kuehl 1985, p. 342), then relatability is identification, because "nobody wants to hear about someone else's dream". We tend to be drawn to characters with whom we share similar flaws (Margaret Atwood says, "flawless characters are insufferable", in Hadley 2013). Or, as Anne Lamott puts it, "I like [characters] to be mentally ill in the same sorts of ways that I am" (p. 50). One of the most destabilising strategies then for a writer is to position an unsympathetic character as a central protagonist.

Implicit for me in the project of writing is to seek to challenge deep-seated socio-cultural assumptions and prejudices, which often shape and/or constrain our engagement with narrative. In this sense, my work (as a short story writer and novelist) is in part a social practice, a form of cultural critique, as much as it is intended to produce 'readable' stories. For this reason much of my writing is slightly off-key or intentionally unsettling, wrong-footing readers in an effort to highlight (however gently) their latent value judgements.

This is a strategy I adopt and explore in 'Kardinia', and it is an approach that has led to this exegesis, as each of the selected texts features an unsympathetic protagonist.

Beyond that commonality, and the gender of these characters and the gender of the authors, these novels don't lend themselves to obvious comparison. What can twelve year old Frankie Addams (an American living in the Deep South in the 1940s) have in common with Julia Martin (a middle-aged 'amateur' and denizen of Paris in the 1920s), or with the likes of Lise (a thirty-four year old English office worker bent on ending her life, in post-war Italy)?

While gender is the obvious common denominator of these novels (the authors and the protagonists are women), a gender-based analysis would necessarily have focussed on how and why the works reflect assumptions about the authors'

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[14] Genesis, 3:19

socio-cultural positions and experiences, rather than on the works themselves. In view of this, the key challenge for this exegesis was to find a theoretical bridge that would enable a complementary analysis of the texts without looking to reconcile the authors' different socio-cultural profiles and/or without resorting to essentialism.

Duschinsky (2011b), in his paper on Primo Levi ('Purity, power and cruelty'), explores parallels between the implementation of discourses of purity by Italian fascists and the Nazis during and about the period of WW2. Like many theorists, he finds Douglas's characterisation of dirt as "matter out of place" and Kristeva's theory of the abject compelling concepts to account for cultural organisation and exclusion behaviours. However, Douglas and Kristeva have been broadly criticised for operating on the presumption "that the overarching social or symbolic structure lies prior to any anomalies" (Duschinsky 2013b, p. 64). Duschinsky (2011b) addresses this criticism by adapting and refining the notions of dirt and abjection into "purity discourses" (as economies of discourses "shaped in their form by the particular circumstances in which diversity is subjected to mental or social ordering in the name of essence", p. 323). This modification allows analyses of dirt and abjection across time, circumstance and place, thereby overcoming some key theoretical limitations of Douglas and Kristeva.

This theoretical platform (outlined in Section One, Chapter One) enables a discussion of McCullers, Rhys and Spark around the operation and employment of purity discourses. This is the focus of this exegesis, an examination of the way purity discourses are deployed in these novels to subject the characters to social or mental ordering in the name of essence, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on their shifting states of social dangerousness (as described by Douglas: from 'safe' non-differentiation, to differentiated and 'dangerous', to a return to indiscriminate formlessness, p. 172).

Section One, Chapter Two addresses this analysis in three parts. Part I takes the characters as they are presented to us, as 'dirty' but not yet differentiated. Part II demonstrates the intersection between purity discourses, the mobilisation of differentiated, dangerous behaviours and social disapprobation. Part III describes the characters' return to dirt, to formlessness. Douglas makes clear that dirt is as apt a symbol of regeneration as it is of decay. The elliptical pattern of the novels' narrative structures in combination with the benign yet blemished state of the characters is a

form of resolution which, while resisting easy closure, allows for a sense of possibility.

* * *

CS Lewis (1971 [1944]) said, "What flows into you from myth [or story] is not truth but reality (truth is always *about* something, but reality is that *about which* truth is), and, therefore, every myth becomes the father of innumerable truths on the abstract level" (p. 42).

Butor (1973) translates this sentiment to the process of fiction making:

> All human beings are narrators, seeking to reconcile what they see and what they say, seeking to make whole and credible the world they speak into existence. But the novel differs from all other narrative in that it gives the appearance of reality to what is not so, what is not verifiable. This makes novels into typologies of inquiry, a quest for reality and a grammar of it; hence ... the novel 'is the best possible place to study how reality appears to us, or might appear; and that is why the novel is the laboratory of narrative' (cited in Bradbury 1973, p. 23).

This idea of speaking the world into a "whole and credible" existence implies a relationship between narrative – the stories we tell ourselves – and personal insight, the nexus of social change. In 'Kardinia', this connection is explicit: Harry's insistence on a revised familial mythology leads directly to his reimagined future.

Fraser (1992), who is concerned with the complex and variable nature of social identity, links this mutability to hegemony, describing 'hegemony' as

> the intersection of power, inequality and discourse ... wherein cultural authority is negotiated and contested. It presupposes that societies contain a plurality of discourses and discursive sites, a plurality of positions and perspectives from which to speak. Of course, not all of these have equal authority. Yet conflict and contestation are part of the story (pp. 53-4).

This framing of hegemony as a process of negotiation and contestation is adopted by McQuillan (2002b), who applies the idea to narrative structure, arguing that if "narrative is the mode by which we understand the world, [then] to disrupt the hegemony of a certain narrative form is to introduce the possibility of a different way of understanding" (p. 10).

The interplay of stylistic and structural devices in *The member of the wedding*, *After leaving Mr. Mackenzie, The driver's seat* and 'Kardinia' demands an engagement with what Kristeva has termed the "in-between, the ambiguous and the composite" (p. 4). This engagement – expressed, monitored and organised by what I have argued is a series of purity discourses around three unsympathetic protagonists –

directly undoes “the hegemony of a certain narrative form” (of easy relatability and comfortable resolutions) and thus directly contributes to the diversification of our expectations of the role and structure of fiction.

The Poems of Our Climate

By Wallace Stevens

I
Clear water in a brilliant bowl,
Pink and white carnations. The light
In the room more like a snowy air,
Reflecting snow. A newly-fallen snow
At the end of winter when afternoons return.
Pink and white carnations – one desires
So much more than that. The day itself
Is simplified: a bowl of white,
Cold, a cold porcelain, low and round,
With nothing more than the carnations there.

II
Say even that this complete simplicity
Stripped one of all one's torments, concealed
The evilly compounded, vital I
And made it fresh in a world of white,
A world of clear water, brilliant-edged,
Still one would want more, one would need more,
More than a world of white and snowy scents.

III
There would still remain the never-resting mind,
So that one would want to escape, come back
To what had been so long composed.
The imperfect is our paradise.
Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.

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SECTION TWO

‘Kardinia’

A novel by Catherine Harris

A note to the reader ...

In Melbourne, ‘Kardinia’ recalls Kardinia Park (since renamed), an iconic Australian rules football ground. Nevertheless, this is a work of fiction. Like most works of fiction it is inspired by observations of real-life experiences and events. However, none of the events described in this manuscript have any factual basis and every character has been created by the author, so any possible resemblance of any character to a living person is entirely coincidental.

Prologue

After the bang of the Grand Final, the year ends with a whimper. Exhaustion. Anticlimax. The off-season looming as regular training sessions dissolve into the long summer days of heat, dust and sweat, the beach better suited to playing cricket than to football, the team disappearing into their secular roles, reconstituted as sober sons, lovers and family men.

The Club likes to give the boys a little send-off before they go. Something to lift their spirits, to tide them over until the new year gets started, a flamboyant gesture that says job well done. There is the annual Beer & Bangers Family Bash, but that's an all-comers affair. "Best not to bring the wives and girlfriends to *this* party," advises Laurie (their coach) with a grin as he hands out details at the door. "Or they won't be your wives and girlfriends anymore."

Some of the fellas laugh.

Harry tears open the crisp white card, rubs the embossed gold lettering, feels it smooth beneath his thumb.

Sportsman's Night, it says. *You are invited*.

I. Resignation

Harry can't take the screaming. "Stop it," he commands, as he plunges his fingers deep inside of her, the warmth of her body enveloping his knuckles, her skin pressed against his as she writhes beneath him, her legs forced apart by his knees, the weight of his body supported by his left hand as he assails her with his right, watching the seasons of expression pass across her face from bewilderment and joy to confusion and pain – spring, summer, autumn, winter – a library of responses articulating her shock, and then she opens her eyes and stares right at him, a fixed affront as he continues to plumb her pinioned body, her inability to get away fuelling his desire for her, a fast mounting torrent rising to a breathless crest so that he doesn't think he can hold on much longer, the will to let go subsuming his pleasure in the waiting, the delayed gratification demanding a release, his body teetering on the narrow ledge, feeling his balance falter, having to grip so that he won't fall, the solid frame of his childhood single bed a half metre above the ground, and then the slow dawning that the girl's groan is in fact his own, a sound released by his own body, the girl herself a recurring figment of his imagination, an apparition of his own making, one he is responsible for, issuing his own denunciations – *you, you did this* – hagridden, as though being judged by his own subconscious, immediately overwhelmed by a flood of disgust and shame, grateful to the rising insistence of dawn for dislodging his unwelcome dreams (nightmares, you might more accurately call them). And then he is awake. Alone again but for the sound of his hurried breath in a tiny bedroom his mother calls his lion's den.

This is Harry. Harry. Also known as Pipsqueak, Squeak, Squeaker, Squib, Two, Nipper, HRH, the Little Prince, or sometimes just the Kid, what they call the younger brother. Mostly. One of the myriad of handles directed to his face. There being plenty of other names for him behind his back. Useless. Washout. Limp rag. Spare. Your standard stuff. Nothing particularly imaginative. And nothing he isn't aware of to some extent or another. Feeling like he was born with a string of addendums: Son of ... Brother of ... Good for ... Though rarely stated directly. Most people sticking to the script, front of house. So that typically it is Harry, a contraction of Harold, phonetic pronunciation, plain and simple. Second issue of Alan "Senior" Furey and Diana Furey, married fourteen years, separated three, divorced six. One brother (Matt), a series of loyal, now deceased pets buried in his mother's back garden (two guinea pigs, two cats, a budgerigar, and Superman the goldfish, having dodged the traditional toilet bowl disposal) and there you have it. Nothing particularly complicated about that. Yet each night is a tribulation. His mind a maelstrom of dreams, tossing and turning, the girl's

face looming in and out of his delirium as he lies with her, her body sometimes willing, sometimes not, but always with that stare, as though she is wanting something from him, her direct gaze beseeching him for help.

He has always been a light sleeper but this is different. This waking in a cold sweat, his skin slippery, the mattress drenched. For a moment there he thinks he has wet the bed, that childhood affliction returned to embarrass him in his adulthood, but the damp pillow reassures him it is only perspiration, like the previous night, and the night before that, the mattress quietly staining a rusty sweaty yellow, these hallucinations occurring more and more frequently, so that he often finds himself on the couch at 4 am, wide awake and exhausted, watching music videos on TV.

Dark shadows form under his eyes. He looks like he has a sinus infection.

His mother thinks it is the flu, or a vitamin deficiency, or some other lifestyle induced malaise – sweating, racing heart, a smothered feeling – brought on by a poor diet and overdoing it. "Too many takeaways," she says, her explanation for everything (not that she is offering to cook). Or, too many late nights, or his body reacting to the influence of someone she doesn't like, or some combination thereof. "You should have gone on the footy trip," is her bottom line. "Everybody needs a little R & R."

"Yes, probably," answers Harry. The path of least resistance, to agree. He doesn't want to get into it with her, the whys and wherefores of him not joining the rest of the team for their traditional end-of-season jaunt overseas, unable to get his mind around it, the unbearable prospect of more of the same in Bali or Las Vegas or Honolulu – massages on the beach, pulled pork at the luau, Jack and Eddy spanking the cocktail waitresses, his brother tooling it up in a hula skirt. And he is hardly going to tell her about the girl. It is not exactly a mother's business, that kind of information, unseemly to know those details about one's children's private lives. Sordid. That's what the newspapers would probably call it. Sordid or seedy or smutty. The tabloids' three favourite words when it comes to describing their family (a not so holy adjectival trinity), as though they are incapable of anything wholesome and clean, the entire brood dedicated to giving public offence. Certainly Diana has enough on her mind (isn't there always something), without having to digest that information; if not them then work, hocking promotional merchandise to desperate businesses looking for an edge, the house littered with random pens and stickers, catchy slogans from companies long bitten the dust. Though maybe he should have told her the truth. Maybe that's what he needs, to get it off his chest.

His wardrobe, once part of a strategic childhood fort complex, sits impassively in the half light; the bookcase stacked with atrophied games, Battleship, KerPlunk, lining the shelves as uselessly as the football trophies atop his chest of drawers. Harry sits up, tries to control his breathing, concentrates on inhaling through his nose, exhaling through his mouth. *And breathing in, count for two, and out, count for two*, until his pulse settles down, his palms clammy against the sheets, imagining himself inhaling the energy of the sun or some shit, *let its warmth loosen your muscles*, as counselled by the Club's yoga instructor, Andrea (pronounced on-dray-uh, she is quick to correct, lest anyone mistake Camberwell for Epping), a pretty twenty-something brunette (aren't they all pretty?) in bare feet and bright Lycra pants, brought in once a week to teach the boys relaxation exercises and to improve their flexibility.

They are well attended, those yoga sessions, all attention focussed on her shapely arse, as she bends and twists in front of them (balancing in the tree position, sticking her ankles behind her ears), demonstrating a series of impossible poses for them to emulate as the lads apply themselves to her instruction, lying face forward, hips pressed to the ground, pretending to concentrate on their technique. He inhales again, slowly, and then allows a quick release, the taut moons of Andrea's neat defined behind something to fix on, crowding out the other images until he feels himself calm down.

It's the not–knowing that's eating him up. Margo does her best to get it out of him, tossing around a handful of names – Tiffany and Brandi, Candy, Keely, Bella, Estelle – but she still isn't decided. There are so many to choose from. Though she is leaning towards Brandi. That sounds about right. "Come on, tell me, am I close?" It's an appropriate name given the situation.

"Name? Whose name? What situation? What are you talking about?" says Harry, though he knows exactly, he knows immediately.

"The stripper," says Margo. "The girl."

Yes, Sportsman's Night. That would serve him right for ringing her back. But you don't ignore a call from your favourite "aunty" (self-appointed). Or four calls. *No good deed goes unpunished.* He hadn't wanted to talk to her – he'd tried forgetting – but guilt had got the better of him even though he had nothing to report. *You know it's "no comment", Maggie*, he'd imagined himself saying, his pet name for her, picturing her rolling her eyes as he said it, the way she always did, before correcting him: *It's Margo,*

not Maggie, how many times do I have to tell you? Which typically only egged him on. Yet, it didn't change anything, he'd inform her. There was still nothing to write home about. *I promise*, he'd add, anticipating her fake disappointment. And then, *Oh, Harry*, from her. All part of the game they played – because it was true, if he did ever have any news she was the first journalist he'd call – the way she courted him and he, in turn, courted her. But that was another conversation.

"A good show, was it?"

"What are you getting at? I don't know anything about it," he continues, a ridiculous pretence, because of course he knows. They all know. They were all there. Were all involved to some extent or another. Knowing is par for the course.

"You and everybody else," says Margo.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that I've asked around. No one's talking. They don't even answer my emails."

"It's the footy trip. What do you expect?"

"All having too much fun, you reckon?"

"Yeah. And maybe there's nothing to say on the subject. Why do you assume there's more to it?"

Margo laughs. "Come on, Harry. Not even a wig and a pair of fake boobs? On Sportsman's Night? That's not going to fly. I didn't come down in the last shower. Someone's got to have drunk too much. Done something stupid. Who are you trying to kid? Jack was there, wasn't he? And there's no show without Punch, so Eddy too." They are the team's other pair of brothers, foundation of the Club's legacy drive, "We are *the* family club"; five years older but with a third less talent and chips on their shoulders to boot. "Would you have me believe that those two sat around behaving like perfect gentlemen?"

She is right, he knows she is. How could he have thought it might be otherwise?

Like all of them, he had dressed carefully for the evening, fastening his cummerbund, then adjusting his tie; Michelle, the girl at the formal-wear company having recommended a clip-on model, unless he was experienced at tying a bow tie (which he wasn't), though even with the clip-on he still needed to be mindful of the band, she'd warned him, that it didn't shift around his neck too much throughout the evening, affecting the position of the bow – they didn't want him looking lopsided (a dead give-away that he was wearing a ready-made).

This was his inaugural year, the first time he'd been eligible to attend the Club's night of nights (the management board self-consciously old-school, restricting the minimum age to twenty-one). Last year he had been just six weeks shy, and while the administration would have turned a blind eye, not so his mother, who let it be known that if it was up to her neither he nor his brother would be attending this year either, there being plenty of other opportunities for them to enjoy themselves without resorting to this institutionalised, legitimised debauchery. "I just can't understand why you'd want to upset me like this," she'd said when they told her they were going anyway. "The Bible says you're meant to honour your parents. Don't my wishes mean anything to you?" But it isn't about pleasing her or not pleasing her. At the end of the day what matters most is being seen as a team player, a good bloke, one of the boys. Would she really mean to deny them that?

He inserted the black opal cufflinks through the buttonholes, double-checking their fit, his mum having threatened to kill him if he lost them, belonging to her father as they had, her only heirlooms (she didn't want him going, but if he insisted on being there then at the very least he should look good). "Here," he'd said, handing them back. "I don't have to wear them, Mum. Or better yet, you wear them. I'll stay home."

"Over my dead body," said Matt. "You're coming with me, like it or not" (it wasn't an occasion for pretty companions and his brother hated turning up to places alone).

Harry was nervous. He knew how these things went, the elaborate pranks, everyone keen to test the mettle of the young guys (him); at very least a dacking or a lap dance was in order (shades of the Under 16s, soggy biscuit competitions at training camp, sculling port between rounds, the seniors taking bets on who would yak first). It was a rookie's rite of passage.

"Just keep your wits about you and don't drink too much," advised his brother, though as if he would have. He didn't want to be caught with his pants down.

Still, he wore his best pair of jocks.

Precautions.

As they waited at the hotel registration desk for their room keys, Matt reminded him to keep a low profile. "Watch your back, is all I'm saying. I'm not saying anything'll happen. Just that it wouldn't be unheard of if it did."

Margo rephrases her question. "Did Jack and Eddy do anything untoward, anything he thinks she'd like to know?"

Harry wants to smash the phone against the wall but knows it will only make matters worse, that he has to see the conversation through if he has any hope of throwing her off the scent. Bugging him for dirt, and nearly four weeks later too. Just when he has almost convinced himself it might be possible to sweep the whole tawdry affair under the proverbial rug, that if he just keeps trying eventually the memory might fade, be diluted by time until it is forgotten, as all bad dreams are eventually forgotten (who inventories their dreams?), overtaken by the relentlessness of the present, the constancy of the new. Though if that is the way it works then surely his dad should have forgotten by now. And surely he should have stopped obsessing about her too.

The girl, the girl, the girl. Tiffany or Brandi, Candy or Keely, Bella or Estelle. He hadn't thought a name could make such a difference, but it does.

Without a name the girl is still just an idea. A face in the crowd. Anybody. Nobody. A fantasy, a fiction. Someone capable of being bypassed, overlooked, omitted, let go. With a name, however, she becomes a real person, rounded and central, whole and present. Which isn't to say that Harry doesn't believe she is a real person already. But a name bestows a history and a context. A backstory, the reporters like to say. Somewhere to have come from. Someone to have been. These details having a nasty way of overlapping with other details, overlapping and expanding, becoming bigger stories, more prominent stories, systematic and involved, with sources and quotes and witnesses to events all corroborating each other until they have a proper beginning, middle and end, the kind summarised by a double-width headline you might see on the front page of the daily newspaper, the kind of newspaper Margo writes for.

Sex, Drugs and the AFL.

Not that girls aren't a dime a dozen. There are girls everywhere. At the beach. At the pub. In the stands week after week. But "Brandi", or perhaps "Tiffany", isn't just a girl anymore. She has been distinguished, elevated, has become a specific individual, the type one might know or run into. She could be the daughter of a friend of his mother's. She might be a friend's girlfriend or fiancée. She could have attended school with one of his cousins. She might work beside Rosie (his current booty call) at the chemist, her identity clearly printed on her prominent PharmaC☺ name tag.

So yes, he would prefer to remain ignorant of her name. Then there would only be one name to remember, that of the original girl, his father's girl, Tracy, long gone but still clambering about in his head. *Stripper Killed in Hit-and-Run.* Isn't one name enough?

"Come on Harry, take pity on me," says Margo. "Everyone's away. We can have lunch, talk it over, chew the fat. You've had a stellar year but it can't all have been easy. That's a lot of pressure on a player with your lineage, second in line to the throne. But there must has been a morning or two you didn't feel like getting out of bed, a training session where you wondered what the heck you'd signed up for. People love to hear about that stuff, not just the chockies but the boiled lollies too. Makes them feel like they're part of it. What do you say?"

For a moment he is tempted to tell her the truth, to say, get out your notebook, this is what I know. He clears his throat, a prelude to a confession, but then he pictures Laurie's face, steam rising.

He often thinks about the girl, imagines her getting herself ready, excited, packing her bag (make-up, fishnet stockings, new satin knickers, her sequined silver bra), the big night finally arrived, her special secret, the telly on in the other room, Jack shooting his mouth off, the usual shit – *I could tackle her*, or some such nonsense – a big dumb grin on his face, the rest of the panel laughing along as he bandies his innuendo because he is dressed in a suit and tie, a real gentleman, and is an excellent ruckman, but she doesn't care, calling, "I'm going, Mum," as she exits the front door, glass panels rattling as she trips off into the evening.

Outside the air would have been cool, goosebumps forming on her arms as she walked. He imagines her hurrying along, trying to warm up, but not too much, she wouldn't want to get sweaty, not if she could help it, kicking off her trainers, slipping on her high heels, the shoes clicking on the rutted footpath – *tap, tap, tap, tap* – a hollow bang, as though she was nailing up the city's holes.

The girl hurried along the footpath, the sound of her steps echoing in the cool air, her subterfuge powering her along, part thrill, part terror, being in possession of her first big secret, stage one in her escape plan for the west.

It was not the kind of secret she could trust with her current crop of friends, concerned as they were with provincial interests – bands, boyfriends, clothes – picturing them confronted by a stern parent, witnessing the immediate crack, spilling her beans all the way down their fair-weather fronts. She had no need for it, to include them, their feeble guilt being offered up to her after the fact, their benign gestures of supplication as her dreams scattered in the breeze.

At school the official curriculum determined that they investigate options for the future (training courses, vocational pathways), their formless youth plotted along an incompetence spectrum, barely able to place one foot in front of the next, balanced on the precipice of an inevitable abyss if they weren't confronted with some basic truths (aptitudes playing second fiddle to opportunities). And for many of her peers it was justified, they didn't have the first clue what they were going to do with themselves in the next hour let alone tomorrow, if challenged outlining a perpetual now of contentment defined by easy friendships and ongoing featureless stress-free jobs that would somehow sustain them into an effortless, nebulous adulthood.

Not her though. She had long known exactly what she wanted to do, how it would unfold, had fixated on the future the way her peers fixated on certain celebrities, obsessing over their choreographed details, never fully processing the gulf between the world they inhabited and the one they aspired to know. Imagining themselves fully formed while she had always understood herself as a work in progress, viewing her adolescence as a waiting game, biding her time as a means to an end. Step one, get some cash together. Steps two, three and four, get out of town, away from her mother and her leery boyfriends, her mother saying, "Can't you just be nice," the two of them always at odds about it as though the girl shouldn't mind these men accidentally walking in on her in the shower, insisting on coming into her room to kiss her goodnight before bed, running around with no clothes on pretending to play father of the house. But they weren't her father. *You're not my dad.*

And now it had commenced. The countdown.

She saw the railway station at the end of the road, the street lights like sentries, framing the way. She was nearly there. She took a deep breath before accelerating her pace; she wanted to remember this moment, to imprint it on her synapses so that she could retrieve it in the future, this shout-out from her past: the place where one chapter ended and the next part (the good one) properly began.

*

What did Jack say? That it was all good fun? The way these girls earned their keep? There was no need for anybody to feel bad. It was a game, part of their shtick, making a mission of it, competing for famous marks. And it was a far cry from that business with his dad all those years ago (though the past is never past). The situations were

completely different. There was nothing clandestine about this. It was all above board. It wasn't as though she was dragged out there against her will. She walked. Somewhat teetering, but of her own accord. It was a public engagement. She was being paid for her services. She was young but she had seemed obliging enough. Smiling. Especially at the beginning.

Or perhaps that was the issue, she appeared too cooperative. Not exactly drunk. She didn't flail. Yet not exactly sober either. There was something automatic about her behaviour, earnest yet robotic, a sense that she was doing what she had been told to do but without an appreciation of what any of it actually meant, the shimmying. They had all played along, the women. Keeping in time, running through the steps to the music. An ensemble entertainment. And then one was invited back for the finale. One and one only. By popular ballot. For a special solo performance. This is how he expects it would have been framed. As a privilege. An honour. A real feather in her cap. *You're the one that they want, honey*. Quite the coup.

For who doesn't love being singled out? Every schoolboy's dream, to be two points down in the final quarter, taking an unexpected grab on the siren, game changer, the commentators scrambling for the right superlatives as you kick the winning goal. But fantasies rarely find such form in real life. There are too many intangibles. Too many unknowns. So much room between beginnings and endings, an unfillable void between how it might be imagined and the various ways it could actually go down.

And here again was another version: *Once upon a time ...*

The longer the show went on, however, the more convinced he became that whoever it was who had spun her that tale had omitted the end of the story.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession and these are my sins: I lied to my mother, I lied to my father, I lied to my brother, I lied to my coach, I swore, I had impure thoughts, twice I took the Lord's name in vain."

It is a fair list for so short a spell. He doesn't mention the girl, what is really on his mind.

Father Murphy pauses, allowing for the probability of what hasn't been said – a lifetime of misgivings not long enough for the confession of most men's sins (including those who view their sporadic unbosomings as more of an insurance policy, *you never know*, than any faith they might have vested in the Almighty) – before issuing some

advice. “Go easy on yourself, Harry. There’s more to life than doing everything by the book. God loves your imperfections too.”

Not according to Laurie, he doesn’t, thinks Harry, recalling the last time his coach took public aim at Alan, his go-to stooge, chastising Eddy (Jack’s brain-dead brother) for turning up hungover to training, comparing him to their father in the good old days, hapless and erratic. “Lucky for me the big man was out of commission so often or I’d never have gotten a game. He can put it away though. Drink us all under the table. I’ll give him that. You tell Senior, thanks,” he said in Harry’s direction, before issuing “Steady” an additional five laps (discipline); Matt laughing it off as Laurie’s sense of humour as Eddy chucked in front of the Williamson Stand, castigating Harry for being such a prig about it. “Who are you to question his authority? You don’t know what goes on behind the scenes. You’re hardly in a position to criticise. Try getting your own ducks in a row before you start telling everyone else what to do.” Glass houses and all of that. And finally, “If you can’t take the heat—” Such was the traction that one’s imperfections gained you at training.

What Harry would like to have done is to have punched Laurie squarely in the jaw, forced him to shut his cakehole. That would have sorted a few things out, made everyone stop and take notice. Though sure as shit if he had, he would have had to take on most of the team as well. Nick would have been in there in a heartbeat. And Keith and Richie had never met a brawl they wouldn’t fight (those two being even bigger dickheads than Jack and Eddy, especially when they’d had a skinful – Harry still had the scar on his chin to show for their Rivalry Round celebrations), not to mention the rest of the coaching staff. Then he’d be saddled with a disciplinary suspension – beating up the coach coming under the banner of “insubordination”, the club having a zero tolerance policy when it came to players assaulting their office-bearers – so he could see it was always going to be more trouble that it was worth. Smarter just to look the other way and play on.

But Harry keeps that to himself. “Yes, Father,” he answers as he is issued his penance, and then he ruminates all the way home.

He isn’t even sure what the problem really is. If there is a problem. And if it wouldn’t be easier to just cut to the chase and issue a blanket apology to everyone who was there. Though what would he be excusing himself for? A lapse in judgement, would that cover it? No, he knows that won’t do. People are rarely satisfied with such abbreviations; they greatly prefer the grisly details laid out for comprehensive public

dissection, something to get their teeth sunk into. The situation might have felt less fraught if he'd been clearer about it himself, what it was that he had found so unsavoury, why he'd felt the need to behave as he had (then and since then), instead of struggling with this overwhelming sense of failure and regret, it being so unlike him to get "caught inside" (even when he was surfing, he rarely got trapped within the sets). Everything had been on the level. Certainly he hadn't done anything wrong. Technically, nobody had done anything wrong. Or had they? And if so, was his reaction a sign that he should feel proud? Hadn't he declared something about his capacity? Shown them something of himself. Too much though, or maybe not enough? So hard to gauge. That being the sticking point with his brother, he is sure of it (Matt begrudgingly returning his trophy to him the following day, Harry loath to touch it), why Matt gives him the third degree, Matt usually being the one to lead the charge, especially at work, though not sure what one would call it in this case.

It wasn't as though he'd mulled it over beforehand, it was implausible that he could have, there was nothing to consider. He just went with his gut. A split-second decision, an involuntary response, he was acting purely on instinct, overcome perhaps by the music and the heat. It was only afterwards that he computed the consequences, had some distance on the way his behaviour might have been interpreted by everyone else (the disgusted expressions on the boys' faces still visible in his mind's eye – *what is wrong with him?* – he doesn't need it spelled out, to know they'd happily smack the shit out of him at the first opportunity).

In the kitchen his mum watches him plonk himself in front of the fruit bowl without so much as a good morning as he reaches for a banana, biting off the stem, the tough fibrous peel no match for his continuing preoccupations. "How was Mass?" asks Diana, not really caring about the service, she's long given up believing in the promises of organised religion, her ex-husband has seen to that, but the Club encourages the boys to attend, good public relations, they say, and she is happy enough to let her kids play along – one cup is as good as the other – especially if some of that credit is attributed to her productive influence. Credit where credit is due.

Harry shrugs, takes another bite of the banana. He knows what his mother wants, a report on who he's seen, which of her friends were there, which ones weren't, who was sitting with who, anything interesting they might have said or done. Typically he would have entertained her with a few choice guesses at what was being discussed in the confessional – the provisional status of Sally Connolly's soul a safe bet, having

recently abandoned her husband for the very married arms of her youngest's fourth-grade teacher – but that was before, prior to what he has come to think of as "the day", the pivot point delineating time as belonging to then and now, a marker after which everything changed, the old rules no longer applying. Now he doesn't have the inclination for those kinds of frivolities, as though to go along is to be complicit in some aspect of the same game, a game in which he doesn't want to participate. It irritates him that his mother even asks, most of the time telling him to save the details for his dad, that she doesn't want to know, preferring to keep her head in the sand – *I'm over it*, a standard refrain. She doesn't really care now either, he knows that too, aside from the fact that he is reluctant to divulge anything, to pander to her curiosity. "It was the same," he garbles, his mouth still full of banana, "exactly the fucking same." Thinking of the crowded anteroom of smokers and gossipers, two-thirds of the congregation, the women like slutty mourners in their black lace and short synthetic skirts, the men more interested in that parade of push-up bras and hair extensions than anything Father Murphy had to say about grace and salvation.

Diana stops scanning the newspaper and turns to him. "Pardon me? What did you say?"

Harry feels the sea stir inside him. He briefly closes his eyes, a breakwater against the rushing swell at high tide as the ocean strains for the shore, the image of the girl tumbling then dissolving as a sandcastle might beneath an oncoming wave, as his mother starts again, berating him about his language and everything else. "That's very nice, Harry. Very nice. A lovely way to speak to your mother. Is that how you talk to Father Murphy? Do you talk like that in church? I don't know who's worse, you or your father."

"What do you care? It's not like anyone's paying attention. No one gives a shit about that stuff."

"Is that so, mister? I think you'll find plenty of people are paying attention. Not that your father can ever be counted on to point these things out to you."

"At least Dad goes to church."

Diana brushes it off. "Now you're being ridiculous."

The phone rings. "That'll be your girlfriend," says his mother.

"Very funny," says Harry, but he makes no motion to move.

The two of them sit staring at each other, waiting for the ringing to stop. They've been playing this game for days now. The home phone ringing off the hook,

Harry refusing to answer it, refusing to take any of his calls. Not from his coach, not from his friends, not even a long-distance one from his brother. “Maybe I should answer it,” says Diana. “Have a bit of a chinwag. Tell whoever it is a thing or two about what goes on around here.” She leans towards the phone, thinking it might goad him into snatching it from her, a dramatic confrontation that will trigger a watershed moment between them, but it doesn’t have any effect, Harry continuing to hold her gaze, his eyes slightly off-focus.

“Look, are you avoiding somebody or something?” says his mother, trying a different tack. “Are you in some kind of trouble? You can talk to me. Tell me what’s going on.”

But where to start? Harry can’t see a way to make sense of it for her, to describe what he is feeling, isn’t clear that there is anything to describe, beyond what she already knows, that he is agitated, having trouble sleeping. Certainly there are the events themselves, facts are facts, but they are none of her business (*what happens at Sportsman’s Night stays at Sportsman’s Night*). And if they are none of her business then none of the other stuff is her business either, not the rage or fury or resentment or insanity of it all – is it his fault? – not understanding why he doesn’t want the same things as the other guys (is it proof that he doesn’t have the goods, why he’s taken one liberty over another?), second-guessing his primary inclinations.

It isn’t something he ever imagined himself doing, dressing up like that for work, not something he equated with the job, though he probably should have. He’d watched his father do it often enough, for the Brownlow, for the Best & Fairest dinner, for Sportsman’s Night. Showering, shaving, trimming his nose hair, and then dousing himself in aftershave, the smell lingering like an arsonist’s accelerant, still detectable in the house for hours after he’d left. It had always been bittersweet, that ritual, attending his father’s preening for the outside world, the intricacies of his process of self-improvement, his elaborate protocols for separating himself from them; the young Harry mimicking his moves at the vanity mirror, soaping up his face then employing a toothbrush instead of a razor, peering under his nostrils for overlooked bristles, all the while knowing that his mother was already locked and loaded with her latest grievances, ready to be unleashed the moment his dad returned. Or, if his parents went out together, that they’d be arguing long before they got home. Either way, keeping it up until the early hours of the morning, his mother looking especially ragged the following day, a

wicked hangover to match her deathly complexion. “Why don’t you go outside and play?” she’d say, her head in a fog of cigarette smoke.

It wasn’t a suggestion.

Why don’t you go outside and play.

He and his brother still said it now when they were trying to get on each other’s nerves.

What is clear to him, what has always been clear to him, is that “play” is all he has ever wanted to do. It has never been about anything else. Not the attention nor the accolades, the false gods of statistics and popularity contests (winning the Best & Fairest three years running, tallying his weekly Brownlow votes, narcissistic displays of showmanship); his is an unvarnished vocation. Pure. Unbred. He lives and breathes football.

That was the very point Laurie drove home when they first discussed his recruitment, that joining the team was his road to freedom, his opportunity to fulfil that ambition. “It’s time for you to put football front and centre. No more fitting it in around school; training late on Wednesday nights, your parents driving you to the game on the weekend. Those bush leagues aren’t serious,” he said. “They don’t have the stuff. Not like you. You’re better than that. You know that. It’s time to take your game to the next level.”

It sounded like something he wanted to hear.

He was recruited under the father-son rule, a policy that allowed clubs to select the sons of past players who have made a major contribution to the team, but they would have wanted him anyway, Laurie said. It was only a matter of time before they came after him. His was a natural talent. He could have been anybody’s kid.

His mother looks at him, her brown eyes boring into his skull, an expression he recognises from way back, invariably paired with some remark about him being so inscrutable it makes it impossible for people to get to know him (or if she’s had a couple of white wines then it might be tales from his infancy, particularly the one about how as a small baby he preferred to sulk by himself than have her comfort him).

“I don’t understand what’s going on in your head, that’s all,” she says, part question, part exclamation, frustrated by this change in his demeanour, wanting to get to the bottom of it, the withdrawal, why her usually stubborn yet polite offspring has overnight transformed into this—

She bites her lip because she doesn't know what to call it, but whatever it is she's had enough of it.

"No one's in any trouble," he finally says, struggling to sound convincing. "I just don't have anything to say to anybody right now. I need some time alone." He might have added something about his inability to tolerate even the idea of his teammates, how everything is rearranged inside of him so that nothing about what he thinks or feels is certain anymore, that he can pin nothing down, but that would have led to an entirely different conversation, and he definitely isn't up for that.

The phone rings again. Diana looks to him. "Go on, pick it up."

"You get it," he tells her.

"Why should I answer it?"

"Alright. Don't."

She lets it ring ten times before relenting, hoping that he'll beat her to it, but right when she thinks she has him broken, he reaches for another banana. She watches him slowly peel it down to the nub as she goes through the motions – *hello, how are you, yes, everything's fine thanks* – then holds the phone out in his direction, announcing it is Laurie again.

Harry pauses a minute to finish his mouthful before taking the phone from her. He stares at the mouthpiece as he swallows the fruit, then presses the "off" button on the handset and rocks back in his chair.

Diana's face is flushed. She looks like she might slap him. Do it, he thinks. *Do it.* Relishing the prospect of being put in his place like that, that his mother might lose control, really let him have it. But she doesn't, she never does (not like that, not with them). She just continues to berate him for being unrealistic – "There's always a lull in the off-season, you know that, what do you want me to say? This too shall pass? I thought my children would be more resilient" – lamenting his refusal to adapt.

"Give me an example," Harry demands, when she suggests he is behaving strangely, that his entire demeanour is uncharacteristically hostile, pugilistic.

"What are you talking about, an example?" she says, gesturing at him slumped at the table behind a pile of blackening banana skins. "You, here, now, this is an example. You're not a child anymore, Harry. It's no way to live," she insists, reminding him that he always has a choice, lest she be held responsible somehow for appearing to have allowed it, to have inadvertently given her permission for the business to devour him, to have eaten him alive. Just as it did his father (and so many before and since), at

first quickly, and then slowly, until that was all that was left of the man, her first husband, her only husband, the husk of a career supported by a tired aging body governed by a mind too cosseted to cope with failure. “You’ve got to find a way forward, to be comfortable with who you are. You can’t let football dictate everything. You see that, don’t you? That you’ve got to have a plan. Otherwise, where will you be in ten years? At the pub? Crying into a beer that someone else has paid for? There’s only so long a player’s career can last. You’ve got to keep an eye on the morning after, take a long-term view, think about tomorrow,” she repeats as though it is a chorus from a song (now that is helpful advice, not). *Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow*. The words ring in his head until he is so sick of hearing them he deliberately slams the door behind him when he leaves.

Fucking bitch. He doesn’t need it right now. He doesn’t fucking need it. He takes off in the direction of the oval, at first walking, but quickly breaking into a run, the sky a pale shade of slate grey as though it wants to rain but can’t.

That is the way the weather has been lately, the seasons distorted approximations of themselves that have got everyone into a tizz about heat and water levels and the future of the planet. Not in such a tizz that they do anything differently, mind you. Just enough to give themselves a headache. At the Club they started a recycling drive, installing three different coloured bins in the change rooms with transparent panels down the sides so you could see what was being put in them (rubbish, paper, bottles and cans), “Reuse Reduce Recycle”, the sticker said. A red rag to a bull. Within twenty-four hours the garbage had been stuffed with a truckload of condoms – *all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy!* – a photograph of the prophylactic wrappers finding its way to page one of the *Herald Sun,* sending Ted Parker, the Club president, into a tailspin, instructing Laurie to burn the offending articles immediately, which Laurie did, all players in mandatory attendance out the back beside the dumpsters (with the exception of Jack, sequestered at home, buried deep in the doghouse, taking a blow on Club orders), sending a great plume of black smoke against the muted sky. Matt reckoned it would have been visible as far away as Whittlesea.

Jack made it his business getting in people’s faces, but especially the Fureys’. Pulling out of a pack at Harry’s first training camp, telling him, “I’ve got my eye on you, Nipper,” then a knee in the groin just to teach him a lesson, how to be a man; the

two dynasties having long been at each other, an agonistic species constantly asserting how it's done.

"Ignore him," said Matt, about as useful as putting Tony Liberatore in the ruck. Not that Harry needed to be told. That Jack was testing him was implicit. Less clear was how to make him stop.

Harry runs until his lungs give out, the burning forcing his pace to a crawl until he can catch his breath. He's never been one to pace himself, his style more the mad dash to the finish line, the late leg scramble, rather than the heel-to-toe chain of successive possessions – driving the coaching staff crazy (*no "I" in team*, etc., another of Laurie's maxims, interchangeable with *make it happen* and *sometimes less is more*).

A lack of faith, Father Murphy calls it. A crisis of confidence, whatever that means. Even his teachers used to tell him to exercise more control. *Be harder for longer.*

Harry knows what they want from him, recognises the discipline of the marathon runner over the sprinter, eking out that energy over a longer haul, but he doesn't understand why it is such a big deal. He isn't greedy or ostentatious. His isn't a hoarding mentality. For him it is more like swimming in a chlorinated pool without goggles. He knows vaguely where he is heading; it is simply a question of waiting for the right moment then taking a deep enough breath and pushing off until he touches the other side.

*

The girl ran up the platform just as the City train pulled into the station. She was moving so quickly she nearly lost hold of her bag as she lunged for the carriage door, one strap slipping perilously off her shoulder as she attempted to reach for the handle before the train had fully stopped. At their last lesson Greta (her contact, the woman who'd recruited her) had warned her not to be late, the manager didn't like it, and now she wouldn't be, thank God. She was nervous enough already without having to incur the anticipated wrath of an as yet unseen boss.

The rest of her gear was well concealed in her overnight bag beneath her nightie and hair dryer. It was the kind of scam she and Cassie often pulled, covering for each other when alibis were required or confirmations needed to be given about time and place and who exactly would be going with them and to where, her mother having

subjected her plans to the most cursory of examinations (nearly anything to sanction her leave pass for the evening, would forgive nearly any "acceptable" social engagement if it meant she and Ray, the fiancé, could have the house to themselves). Except that this time none of her circle had any idea where she was off to or with whom (they remained completely oblivious of Greta, the association having been kept separate from school life, confined to and around her part-time job). The girl was well aware that her mum would have a fit if she got wind of this current plan, even travelling on the train by herself being a major deal, men being on the lookout for girls like her, girls just like her, young, wide-eyed and alone, luring them with extravagant promises, before molesting them in some grisly basement or other then dumping them unceremoniously after slitting their nascent throats.

She touched her hand to her neck. A light perspiration dampened her skin as her pulse quickened, the anticipation that had been building for weeks peaking now that the end of football season was finally here. She was strangely cognisant that the train was a portal between two worlds, acting as a bridge of sorts between her old life, the one she had known so far (claustrophobic, suburban, dull) and this new one (cosmopolitan, exciting, cool), it being up to her whether or not she'd ever go back, the reality being that if she didn't make the effort to return, there was no natural way home, that from this point forward she could slip off the grid, lose herself in another realm altogether, and that she held the power to do this, that she was old enough finally to make herself disappear (if not literally driving away then perhaps securing a passage on the Indian Pacific, say, then finding a job in the west). The immensity of that fact gave her a moment's pause, knowing she was capable of anything, a feeling that she told herself was still excitement, still a happy feeling, dispatching the less seemly implications of the insight (the isolation, the loneliness, the feelings of those left behind) in a mother-like sigh as she glanced at her smudged reflection in the carriage window, scratched and penned as it was with the hastily scrawled graffiti of other teens' snatched attempts at garbled self-expression. *Bazza woz here. Mica hearts Steve. Boyz rule!* And diagonally across the top of them all in poorly executed 3D lettering, *MEGAN IS A SLUT* in thick red ink.

The train hurtled on, the skyline closing from station to station, transporting her into the waiting unknown.

*

As Sundays go, it is pretty quiet. Harry jogs along, skirting rubbish bins and kicking at the gravel, doing his best to lose himself in the activity, one foot in front of the other, like at training, the street a coastal idyll of gently swishing gums and chatty parrots, most of the young children still corralled inside for lunch as he fights the impulse to throw rocks through the windows of the quiet houses, the domestic lull setting off a torrent inside of him.

Again he asks himself how one day can look so different from the next. He doesn't understand. His brain feeling like a shaken Etch A Sketch. Rattly. Incomplete. He can hear his dad. *Bloody women*. Back in the day, his explanation for everything. That and needing a drink. Not that it is the girl's fault. Harry can't hold her responsible for his state of mind, however much he might like to blame her for it, the world feeling like it is closing in around him, getting smaller and smaller as he tries to shut himself off from everything she's touched, automatically ruling out possibilities as he attempts to control the spread, tying off the affected area as one might tourniquet a leg after a snake bite. No, he won't shake hands with boosters at the Members' Social. No, he won't go on the footy trip. No, he definitely isn't checking his email. Doesn't want to know what is being said about him online. All he wants is for everything to go back to the way it was before. Set. Straightforward. Family was family. The team was the team. Each day had its own rhythm and routine. If he played well he was happy, if he didn't, he wasn't. He didn't have to think about what it all meant or where he fit in or what it is that he thought that he wanted. He didn't have to think about changing anything. He hates uncertainty. His whole life has been about following in other people's footsteps, sticking to a well-trodden path. He's spent so much time trying to march in lockstep, the last thing he covets now is being forced to determine his own direction.

At the oval, galahs congregate on the cricket pitch picking over the newly sown grass seeds, their coarse screeching carrying across the field, competing with the low hum of the cars from the main road. He circles the pitch slowly, watching the way the birds stick closely to one another, never straying far from their flock.

A beat up old kombi van burns past the ground, its speakers blaring. He looks to the galahs, expecting the flock to alight, a great spray of pink and grey feathers shot against the pastel sky, but the birds scarcely look up.

Complacent bastards, he thinks. He finishes tying his laces then gets up and makes directly for them, running hard right down the centre of the pitch.

He keeps running, past the primary school, past the units where the paddock used to be, and then instinctively turns left in the direction of Dean's. That's what he needs, the easy company of an old friend. Someone he's known his entire life. And he's known Dean for as long as he can remember. They went to pre-school together. His mother has pictures of them as kids sharing a bath, he in plastic sunglasses, Dean wearing his "frog" shower cap. Dean looked like a cockhead even then. The same lopsided grin. But that is a person you don't have to explain things to. Like why your phone is off or what you're doing with your life. Or the reason you don't want to talk to your coach. And why you don't care if it pisses him off. Laurie is a big boy. He'll get over it.

Dean's house is at the top of the road. As Harry slugs his way up the rise he doesn't immediately notice the song, his thoughts still tangled up with his confusion, the argument with his mother. He is supposed to be on holidays, isn't he? What difference does it make how he spends his time? But as he turns into the street the music catches up to him again, the insistent up-tempo beat, thrumming, never far away now, persistently refusing to let him put the incident out of his mind.

Loosen up my buttons, baby ... like the singer is asking for a favour.

The venue had been so close they could have walked there from the hotel, a large fancy establishment at the top end of the city with champagne in the minibar and thick white robes hanging on hooks inside the bathrooms. Harry and Matt had adjoining rooms, each with a king-size bed, a suite if they'd wanted it to be, separated by a locked connecting door.

Harry tried it a couple of times to be sure, then got his kit off and lay down on the floor (a wheat coloured short-pile, soft under his skin), too late realising he hadn't drawn the curtains, the flicker of fluorescent-lit office windows visible even from his supine position. The ceiling was off-white with a texturised finish and copper fire sprinklers. He briefly entertained the fantasy of setting them off, of igniting a match beneath the smoke alarm and evacuating the building, envisioning the damp huddle of people in partial undress congregated on the footpath below, the disappointed actors of who knows how many trysts.

His tuxedo was sheathed in a plastic suit bag hanging in the empty wardrobe. He felt like an imposter as he slipped it on, the sleeves a margin too short, the legs a fraction too long. "We can have it adjusted," Michelle had suggested, she could put in a word and it would be ready that same afternoon, but with a bird in the hand, Diana

demurred (she didn't like to gamble on other people's largesse), insisted no one would be able to tell.

He scanned the refrigerator – Toblerone, pretzels, juice, wine, spirits – contemplated a shot of whiskey for courage, then slipped an unopened Jack Daniel's miniature in his pocket.

Time called on second thoughts.

Matt banged on the wall when he was ready to go. Harry took one more look at himself, checked the position of his tie, then headed out. They met in the brightly carpeted hallway, game faces on, more acquaintances than relatives, their only obvious familial commonality the infamous pedigree of their shared last name.

But you keep fronting ...

"Shut up," he says to the quiet road, briefly closing his eyes, curtains drawn against a dreary sun, meaning, *leave me alone, go away*, *stop.* Illogical, closing one's eyes to hush an imaginary sound; wouldn't covering one's ears make more sense? Hear no evil. Or is the seeing part and parcel of the hearing, all dimensions of the same memory? A single moment that has stripped him of his capacity for calm, his world having become a catastrophe of noise in that fraction of space in between the before and after. Why, why, why, why, what? Everything a question now, everything conditional. Prior to that night he hadn't spent too much time thinking about what he was thinking: he'd have an idea or not, he'd act on it or not. There was none of this friction, this battling within himself for a comfortable point of view – did he do the right thing, did he have any choice, what other options were available to him? – a commotion of ideas jockeying for prime position.

He feels light-headed. Almost there, he can barely catch his breath.

Half time in the changing rooms at the MCG, the whiteboard covered in a mess of instructions about percentages and marking contests, clearance rates and hardball gets. "Think about your decisions and choices," instructed Laurie, drawing an arrow between teamwork and execution, praising them for pulling together to close down the opposition's space, building momentum, not letting the home side play their game.

Johnno flung Harry another handful of snakes, the sweet candy smell briefly disarming, a pleasing juxtaposition of innocence met with experience, like the scent of baby powder on his crotch. "Be hungry, not greedy," his teammate said, the two of them

sitting towards the back as Laurie crapped on about the importance of finishing, the hardest part of the game, holding their nerve all the way to the end, sucking the sugary reptiles in and out, the sticky tails brushing their chins, competing to see who could cram in the most sweets in one go.

It could be like that when they were winning. The cracks papered over. Fun.

The more Harry presses himself forward the more enmeshed he feels in the past, a highlight reel of marks and interceptions, improbable goals and missed opportunities, scenes playing themselves back to him at random, thrown up from a personal catalogue that he pauses and rewinds, examining for something he might have overlooked, a useful detail, a clue, a way of fitting all his newly accented pieces together.

Playing pool, Dean breaking the rack, a crisp clean shot that scatters the triangle clean across the table. Harry seeing that he doesn't need everything to be perfect. He just wants a clear run at it for once, at whatever it is that he's pursuing. To be able to have a bash without all the annotations. But maybe that's all anybody wants; the secret to happiness, to be free of all the guff.

At the petrol station, on his way inside to pay he is twice stopped by women asking for autographs, smiling and giggling in their tight jeans, the types his mother calls baby home-wreckers, saying *pretty please, we're big fans*. The usual bunk. On and on until he gives them what they want. His name in Sharpie pen on the back of their t-shirts. He doesn't like it, is much happier talking to them when they don't know who he is (though when is the last time that happened?), the girls following him from the drinks fridge to the register, then back outside again. "He'll give you one too," he says, indicating his friend scratching his balls by the cage of gas bottles. The girls laugh again, double entendre, as Dean happily steps forward and takes up the pen.

Where do they come from, these so-called fans? What is the point of this kind of devotion? During the season, female supporters gather around the gates after the matches hoping to catch the eyes of their favourite players as they exit the field. Harry has had more than one pair of underpants thrown in his direction. His brother could open a lingerie store.

Dean doesn't understand why it hasn't all gone to his head, the money and the women. "You have the best life. Tell me, how can you resist? All that desperate pussy." But it has never been something that Harry has really focussed on, it has never felt like

an end in itself, taking it all in stride – the one benefit of being in the family business, knowing it comes with the territory, like sprained fingers and blackened toe nails. And sycophantic fans who don't know when to back off. Though Dean doesn't know the half of it, not really, the lengths they'll go to in exchange for his conspicuous inarticulate company. "It's more like it's gone to *your* head," Harry says, deflecting the question. "Your sick, twisted, fucked-up little head." Thinking of his father again and that fateful evening, wondering if there had been music playing in his car, cocaine snorted right off the back of his hand, the sweet smell of too much Brut, and then back to Sportsman's Night, his girl, *Baby, can't you see?*

But Dean won't shut up. "Are you saying you're happy to share the spoils? Sloppy seconds is good enough for me. Whatever you can spare. Unless you'd prefer me to audition the candidates, break them in for you, which I'd be more than happy to do."

"Jesus, Dean, sometimes you're such a cunt." It is the kind of thing he can say after nearly twenty years living in each other's pockets. Twenty years watching each other's backs.

His friend is flattered. "The pub later?"

"Sure."

The surf is dead flat. They paddle out then sit there straddling their boards, quietly transfixed by the unbroken line of the horizon.

Save a Mouse, Eat a Pussy – the bumper sticker on Dean's ute. Half a mile from the beach, the steady idle of the waves gathers around them in the night, enclosing them in a low auditory fog, a barely discernible racket like the engine noise on an aeroplane at high altitude. Too much Jim Beam, or maybe not enough? Dean fumbles with the keys as Harry leans against the car door scoffing the rest of his chips, lining his stomach, aware of the automatic rhythm of his breathing, the pumping of the air in and out – he saw those machines in the hospital when his grandad was sick, ventilators like game consoles forcing the oxygen through his grandfather's lungs – as the ground shifts beneath his feet, its solidity threatening to dissolve at any moment, swallowing him up in his own ambivalence.

The band at the pub is just tuning up, the sound check wafting across the car park, along with the odd high-pitched giggle and the distant *clack clack* of high heels on the pavement.

Dean digs out his tobacco tin from under the back seat and rolls a spliff. *Tally-ho!* He offers some to Harry, but the alcohol is enough, Harry's mind already playing tricks with him, pairing snatches of conversation with unrelated images. Always leading back to the same topic. Tracks. Shacks. Along the road to Gundagai. Damn, what is the next line? Old-fashioned. Jack. Jack. Jack. Squinting in the dark, trying to remember how it all played out. Sportsman's Night, the crowning social event of the season.

He remembers talking with Jack, early in the evening, before it all went pear-shaped. Jack putting the wind up him about the dancers, telling him he could arrange a dance in private if Harry felt like it. "You know, 'dance'," he said, winking, then assuring him that it was all alright, that it was just a game, that they all knew the score. Harry's eyes on the girl. Jack saying, "What are you looking at?" And then Jack seeing her too. Seeing her properly, as distinct from the others. Harry having singled her out for him.

Yes. That's it, that's what Jack said. Under his breath: "Hello there, you pretty young thing."

Michael Jackson. They were always playing him at Club events.

Harry doubted she was more than seventeen, maybe eighteen years old, her lipstick the same colour as Rosie's, his would-be girlfriend, a blazing slash of recrimination smeared across her dry cracked mouth. Last time he and Rosie kissed he stopped and made her wipe it off, transferring the cosmetic stain to a bloodied tissue to be wadded up and thrown away. As though one act could erase another. One girl could erase another. His father's, his brother's, his. Or was every girl now the same girl, each lost soul his responsibility? And then he was back to Jack again: "Women: can't live with them, can't kill them."

He presses himself against the cool body of the car. He has that same sick feeling one gets riding a roller coaster as the carriage slows to a crawl before making its descent. He squeezes his fists tightly as they approach the summit and then the floor seems to fall away and his knees buckle and he thinks he might retch.

Deep breaths, Harry. *Deep breaths.* Everyone always exhorting him to breathe. He shakes his head, tries to collect himself, to bring his mind back to the present, drawing himself in, a tug on the rope, hand over fist. "Focus on the here and now*,"* his

father is always saying, ever since he started seriously at church and AA, *one day at a time, one step at a time* – the fish and chip shop, the car park, the car, etc. But Harry isn't sure he can. He is too full of grog, too racked with regret.

Dean doesn't notice, busy as he is blathering on about work as usual, how this one client is such an idiot putting decking around the pool when it so obviously calls for tile, a fool's errand, but that he doesn't care how long the job takes because the guy's wife is shit-hot, always running around half naked offering them drinks and stuff. "It's his money. He can waste it however he likes," he says, suggesting again that Harry think about going into business with him ("We'd make a killing"), then detailing the skimpy dimensions of the client's wife's bikini, the bottoms held together by flimsy loops on either side that are as good as asking to be ripped off. "Clearly the bastard's got a huge cock or he won the lottery or something 'cause he's punching way above his weight there," Dean says. And then he tells jokes:

How do you get a nun pregnant?

Fuck her.

By the time they go into the pub the band has already started. Everyone is yelling because there is so much noise, but it is so noisy you can't tell that everyone is yelling.

They push their way up to the bar. "Beer?" says Dean.

Harry nods. "You're a cunt," he tells him, about the hundredth time that day.

Six shots later and his judgement is right off. Rosie lets him in even though it is late and she has to work in the morning, her white chemist assistant's uniform ironed and hanging on the back of her bedroom door. He reeks of alcohol but it isn't the first time, smiling at her through the fly wire, the moths going crazy under the outside light. In the morning he'll curse himself for not dragging his backside home, but for now her bed is warm, the sheets giving off the faintest scent of sweat. He falls into them fully clothed and allows himself to sleep, a dead man's slumber, deep and dreamless.

His mum isn't exactly happy about it. "It's just like the old days," she says when he slips inside early the following morning, standing in the middle of the hallway with her arms crossed as he eases off his shoes at the front door, his useless concession to quiet.

“I’d forgotten how much I enjoyed it, staying up all night waiting for someone to come home.” She looks at her watch. “Not bad, technically still before your alarm would go off. So you had a good evening? Should I expect a visit from the police?”

“Come on, Mum. Give me a break. Don’t be like that.”

“Like what? Where were you last night? I was worried sick.”

“I had a few drinks with Dean. It’s no big deal. It’s nothing.”

“Nothing? After the way you’ve been behaving lately. I had no idea what you were up to, leaving without saying goodbye, your bloody phone switched off. What if something had happened? Would you have even called me, or would I have had to read about it in the papers like everybody else?”

“No. Fuck, no. Of course not.”

“Of course not? That’s all you’ve got?”

He doesn’t know what else to say. He would like to be able to explain himself to her. At times it is all he can do to stop from spilling his guts. About the Club and the girl and how he hasn’t been able to sleep properly since that night, the music like bile, rising up when he isn’t expecting it, so that he might find himself walking down the street or at the pub, happily humming along to the melody before processing that it is that tune again, that he is humming that song, walking in time to that music, the sense of revulsion so immediate and complete that his skin breaks out in a rash of goosebumps as though he has paused too long before showering after a mid-season game, when in fact it is twenty-nine degrees outside in the shade. But where to start? What to say? That he is exhausted? That he needs a break? That he just wants to be left alone?

“Is there anything else?” asks Diana.

“I might have had a bit too much to drink, that’s all.”

“Right.” She’s heard that one before. That and everything else. She shakes her head at him and starts down the hall, saying that if he doesn’t watch himself he is going to end up like his dad, an alcoholic with no impulse control, beating up innocent door-to-door canvassers for trying to get him to switch his electricity provider.

“It’s not the same,” Harry insists as he keeps pace with her, following her into the laundry, where she starts pulling things out of the dryer. “Don’t say that. It’s completely different. You know Dad didn’t mean it.”

His mother can barely look him in the eye. She throws a towel at him. “Take a shower,” she says. “You smell like a brewery.”

The shower is a little steam box, so tightly sealed you can't defog the mirror for a good twenty minutes or so after you turn off the taps, even with both of the windows propped open for ventilation. As he strips off his clothes he thinks of Rosie getting dressed that morning, her thick white tights under her stupid dress, the buckled elastic of her enormous beige underpants visible beneath the distended ribbing. "Why do you wear those undies?" he asked as she buttoned her dress from midriff to top, the fabric pulling slightly at her bust. Had she always worn those underpants? He tried to remember. If so, this was the first time he'd noticed.

"I can put on other ones if you like," she said, her face lighting up as though he'd invited her to her first dance. "I just wear these for work."

The image of her in her underwear, whether it be those undies or any others, was not appealing. He shook his head, fell back on to the bed, sneered. "No. Don't bother. Don't change them for me," imagining his mum, *there he goes again*, knowing full well that this was what she meant by his attitude.

It is a kind of truculence he expects his brother might have understood, the one person who could have risen to his defence, being cut from the same cloth, fallen from the same tree, and so on, not to mention that he was actually there, a reliable witness (in so far as any witness is reliable), could testify to the intoxicated fog of the situation, but Matt can't put enough distance between them, their already cool relationship having turned decidedly frosty in the days leading up to his departure, it being all Matt could do to acknowledge Harry's existence, end-of-season events having driven a wedge between their already tenuous fraternal bond. "I can't believe you did that," is all he'll say on the subject, as though Harry has betrayed them both with his behaviour, publicly compromising the reputation of the entire family with his actions, much as their father had with his. *I can't believe you did that.* The way their mum would talk to their dad. *Wasn't it bad enough already? Why do you always have to make such an exhibition of yourself?* As though he, Harry, is responsible for the entire fiasco, when he knows that isn't the case, can't be, his role simply the logical extension of circumstances set in motion by others, months if not years before he even accepted the invitation. Hardly the same ball park.

But you try telling that to Matt. So imperious. Thinking back to the hotel elevator, not much bigger than the fitting rooms at the formal-wear hire shop, barely recognising himself in the mirror beside his brother, the two of them like male fashion models side by side parading evening attire, or two secret agents on the make, Harry

wearing a black dinner jacket with satin lapel facings and black dress slacks with matching satin stripes down the leg, the light too dim to pick up the subtle differences in fabric quality and design that marked Matt's suit as his own and Harry's as a loaner, off the rack.

He felt like a right idiot at the fitting, standing there as Michelle pinned and tugged and pulled at his jacket. "You've got a good strong frame," she said as she ran her hands across his chest, smiling as though it was an innocent gesture, a professional sizing up of his bearing in the suit. It was the kind of game he was used to from drunk girls at the pub, drunk silly girls who'd get a kick out of sipping from his glass, an affected intimacy he'd fast forget but that they'd likely brag about all weekend.

This was yet another way in which he and his brother were different, Matt loving the limelight, a publicity lush, whereas he eschewed it at all costs – the aversion an exotic lure, irresistible to the sports media who then preyed on his discomfort, stalking him with the same pleasure as sharks mobilised by the scent of blood.

As he spun around his mum said he looked dashing in his get-up, quite the dapper gentleman, but he didn't care about that. He just wanted to get out of there before he was recognised. It was only a matter of time before some passer-by cottoned on. And why wouldn't they? The shop was an arcade of full-length mirrors, with huge windows facing onto the street. He was as good as asking to be seen.

In the car on the way home Diana hassled him again about his manners. "You could have been nicer to Michelle. She is pretty enough. What would have been the harm inviting her out for a drink? How are you going to meet anyone decent with your attitude? Look at your brother. He's always friendly. He didn't wait for Kate to make the first move. You're so stiff. What did I do to make you so uncomfortable around women?"

"I'm not uncomfortable. I just don't need you choosing my girlfriends for me."

"What does it cost you to be more outgoing?"

"I thought you hated groupies."

"She is a nice girl."

"She is a groupie."

"Don't be ridiculous. I went to school with her mother."

It was the kind of conversation they had when his mother was worried about him, when she was worried but she didn't want to say, like being concerned about him attending Sportsman's Night but not wanting to keep going on about it, choosing

instead to badger him with questions until he told her something she wanted to hear. Something along the lines of how happy he was, or how even though he was single he was solidly heterosexual and had lots of female friends. Most of the time he humoured her, knew it was her clumsy affectionate way. That day, however, he wasn't in the mood. "What's her family got to do with anything?" he barked. "It doesn't mean she's not a gold-digger."

"And it doesn't mean you can speak to me like that. Take it down a notch, hotshot. You're not the only one around here with any feelings."

Harry pictured himself pushing his mother off a cliff, the fantasy taking him further inside himself, a quietness that she interpreted as hurt feelings, which in turn made her feel guilty and then resentful and then angry, all in the blink of an eye so that out of nowhere she was screaming at him ("Why do you have to make everything so difficult? I'm only thinking of your welfare") while he was envisioning her remains on the jagged rock below, her bright red blood startling against the pale limestone, the ocean fast washing it away.

He stands in the shower and turns on the faucet hard in defiance of the water restrictions, letting the torrent gush as he replays the scene over and over, trapping water in reservoirs at his feet, wedging his toes together, an impenetrable shelf, until the level breaches his ankles and overflows.

Rosie is fond of whispering messages when she thinks he is asleep. Better than if he is awake, thinks Harry, not having to acknowledge her ridiculous feelings, enunciated so quietly they might not exist at all. Definitely the way he prefers it. Already enough under the rug without having to accommodate her muffled contribution. This time it is that she loves him. "I love you," she utters, barely a notch above her breath. "Do you love me too?"

He doubts it, doesn't think so.

They'd first hooked up at the pub about eight months before and have been fucking on and off ever since. Not that anybody knows, not officially, it isn't exactly the Christian thing to do, getting together secretly after dark, at the beach, by the surf club, at her flat if Katia, her flatmate, is out, Rosie's thick body a lumpy buttress against the fray, her homeliness his private antidote to the onslaught. He grips her upper arm,

watches the way the flesh bulges between his roughened fingers, his hand wrapped around her stippled skin like a vice.

Father Murphy says that romantic love is a blessing, the spirit of the creator packaged for human scale, as sacred and honourable as any other bestowed by God, but if that is the case then why does he loathe her so much? He asks his mother. “Is it possible to love something you hate?”

She scoffs. “Have you been talking to your dad?”

Even after the shower he can still smell Rosie on him, that cloying sweetness in his hair as he stands over the bathroom sink, the cool water running across his hands and wrists, wondering how it is that he can detect her perfume after lathering himself so thoroughly. *I love you*. Did they have sex or not? He doesn’t think so. He is pretty sure he just passed out, though he can’t be certain. Fuck, he hopes they didn’t.

His mum is sorting invoices when he returns to the kitchen, little piles of paper distributed across the table. He struggles with the new aspirin bottle, first fiddling with the security seal then roughly pulling at the residual sheath blocking the opening, releasing a cascade of pills that pour over his palm and scatter in a kind of dot design across the speckled Laminex.

The phone rings again. An image of Jack and Eddy, older and younger brother, conjoined, a grotesque minotaur.

“Jesus. This is bullshit.”

His mum doesn’t want to hear it. “Just answer it,” she says. “Don’t be such a drama queen.”

It is probably only Margo following up about their lunch date, but he doesn’t care. He doesn’t want to sit down with her for a blow by blow of how he ties his shoelaces. He doesn’t want to get that close. “I don’t want to talk to anybody right now. Can’t you just answer it, say I’m out? You’re my mother; buy me some space.”

“Right, that’s it,” says Diana. “I’ve had enough.”

He heads straight to his dad’s latest dwelling, a battered two-bedroom weatherboard around the corner (such are the gifts of the true believers), his parents being modern divorcees, publicly loathing each other but always living within easy walking distance for the sake of the children; it being their game when the boys were growing up – sending them back and forth between their two houses whenever they had a point to

prove, as though regular eviction was somehow beneficial to the children's welfare. "Run, don't walk," his mother's catchcry. How was he supposed to learn to pace himself?

Dean helps him transport his stuff. It isn't much, a rucksack and an overnight bag. It fits easily in the back seat of his car, but Dean tails him anyway, more symbolic than necessary, a two-vehicle convoy trailing around the block.

Harry dumps his things in the spare room, a thin cigar of a space barely wider than the single folding bed, with peeling green and brown linoleum on the floor and warped venetian blinds shading him from the prying antics of the neighbours. It is like a dodgy motel but without the hospital corners, including a scuffed edition of the Bible that his dad has left for him on the folding chair set up as a bedside table.

There is something fitting about finding himself unexpectedly billeted in this makeshift barracks. He pulls out his alarm clock and plugs it in, getting down on his hands and knees to locate the power point under the bed, a cracked fixture with exposed wiring that looks like it might catch fire at any moment (injecting an unexpected dramatic element; which will happen first, that or his father's relapse, his mother certain that the latter is perpetually imminent).

The old man potters around the backyard, demonstrating for Dean the effectiveness of his new weed trimmer as Harry finishes putting his things away, grateful for the rudimentary nature of the place. His father is a neat freak but there is nothing too flouncy. No rugs overlaying the carpet, no runners on the coffee table, no special towels in the bathroom just for drying your hands. It is a straightforward space to match his straightforward outlook. Pared back and basic. Nothing will be expected of him here.

The back door squeaks then bangs behind him, announcing Harry's presence as he joins them outside. "Easy does it," says his dad, "it's not my house," the heat of the day washing out the yard in an overexposed blur, Harry thinking the media would be hard pressed to categorise this moment, the old man looking like neither a football legend nor a drug-crazed monster (or has he, Harry, now assumed that role, a capricious changeling, his mother's most recent description), rabbiting on about his voluntary work, how some desperate bastard broke into the church office and stole the weekly donations, a grand total of forty-five bucks earmarked for the steeple fund. Harry slips off his shoes, feels the tough spears of buffalo grass under his feet, glad for the illusion of a home away from home, sanctuary. Then they crack tinnies. *Cheers.* The three of

them sitting on the folding deck chairs, sipping Fantas in VB stubby holders, his father going on about his different varieties of tomato plants.

The old man waits until Dean takes off before suggesting that Harry call his mother to apologise. “It’s not her fault she goes off at you. She can’t help herself. You know that.”

“But I didn’t do anything,” responds Harry. “Why should I ring her if I didn’t do anything? That’s fucked up.”

“I don’t think it’s about anything you did or didn’t do. That’s not the point.”

“Well what then?” He eases up a brick from the border of the vegetable patch, slaters writhing beneath it on the brown deadened grass as his father considers the question, Harry knowing the answer without having to be told, that it is his dad who bears the responsibility for this disaster, their family’s not so private melodrama. He is the one who scripted it, all those years ago, breaking her down with his bullshit, wearing her out. She’s said so often enough, that he’d destroyed her spirit with his selfishness, leaving her with little more than her name to defend, so that now when it comes to football she shuts down because she has nothing left to give. She’ll drive them to appointments and come to special games, but when it gets more complicated than that they are on their own. All the highs and lows, the star turns and mercurial temperaments, she’s had a gutful of it. What is good for the goose is good for the gander and will have to stand for the goslings too. But understanding that doesn’t change anything. Harry is still furious. “It doesn’t give her the right to pay out on me whenever she feels like it. Why does she always give me such a hard time?”

“Look, if you want to go off at someone, blame me, alright. I’m right here. I’m the reason. Me. My career. Whatever you want to call it. You’re just a placeholder. I’m the one she’s mad at.”

“You call her then. You’re the one always saying not to shit where you eat.”

“I would if I could, you know that, but it doesn’t work that way. That ship’s sailed, it sailed a long time ago. The damage is done. Now it doesn’t matter what I do. It’d just be window dressing. She’s like a racehorse with a broken leg. On the surface it’s healed, but she’ll always walk with a limp.”

“I thought they shot injured racehorses,” says Harry.

“Yeah, well you should still give her a ring,” says his dad. “They only shoot the ones with nowhere else to go.”

It is like a coffin, his narrow bed, but he likes it. He lies there in the dark, a strip of light glowing beneath the door, as his father rattles between the bathroom and the kitchen, the soft shuffle of his slippers betraying his position. Textbook insomnia. Or what his dad calls his special friend, these episodes that plague him night after night, the ones he takes the white pills for, when he takes them, the same ones that leave him groggy in the morning, give him headaches, the joint stiffness and chronic dry mouth, but they are worth it, necessary even, the fear of those long spare hours so intense they often keep his father from going to bed at all (causing Harry to wonder if his own nightmares aren't hereditary, a congenital marker in his DNA, or even contagious, an unidentified strain of virus unwittingly picked up and transmitted from parent to child). Praying for forgiveness (*To seek through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understand Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out* – AA Step 11), but one can only pray so much – his father forcing down another cup of coffee at midnight to stave off weariness, preferring that stark caffeinated consciousness to the vicious derangements of his so-called repose. Would he ever be able to make peace?

This latest bout is precipitated by the coming day's events, specifically an interview granted months ago in the first flush of flattery, his father agreeing to put himself out there in support of a new endorsement deal (*I'm mad for MADCITYSPORTS*), a discount active-clothing line, his signature embroidered on some shorts legs, the words arranged like a logo across a couple of shirt pockets (knowing he should cancel, it's plausible that he's changed his mind, Harry agreeing that he should give it a miss, but he is paralysed by a lack of conviction). "It's just a where-are-they-now story," he qualifies as he irons his shirt later that morning, as though that makes it alright, obviates any risk of collateral damage, creasing and re-creasing it with alternate shots of steam and Fabulon as he shifts from leg to leg, so great is his agitation – he can count on one hand the number of times since getting sober that he's willingly submitted to a journalist's interrogation.

But the big man doesn't like to look a gift horse in the mouth (even when the gift looks more like an interest-heavy hire purchase agreement) and this interview is part of the deal or so he's been led to believe – it is all part of God's plan, he is fond of saying, the journalist assuring him that no one is interested in gratuitously dredging up the past (his culpability in a young woman's death, the inescapable knowledge that there was always something that could have been done, if only he'd had his wits about him,

hadn't drunk so much, hadn't scored so much; and that is just the start of it). "I'm in the business of profiles, not hatchet jobs," the reporter insists, even if the interview subject is the only person to believe it – but you have to have faith, don't you? That having always been his problem, not lacking the wisdom to know the difference, but the serenity to name the issue, to see things as they are.

He keeps saying the article's just meant to be a bit of background, a survey of his career, fluff; the kind of thing you'd read in a doctor's waiting room or on the bus, two-thirds through and then forgotten. But as the day for the interview approaches, Alan's back starts playing up again, aching at night, the bulging discs pressing against his sciatic nerve, shooting pain through his buttocks and thighs, so much so that at times he says he feels his knees might give out beneath him, that they might buckle and he'll crumple to the floor.

Harry listens to his father muttering to himself, rummaging in the kitchen cupboards for his prescription, barely a wall separating them – there but for the grace of God, or is that an insufficient distance? – preparing Weeties at 4 am (you can't take those drugs on an empty stomach), the distempered clang of his spoon on the side of his bowl as he absently shovels in cereal while fiddling with his current jigsaw puzzle. *Dawn*. A cityscape. Or, if he finishes that, he might start on his new one. *Ducks at lakeside*.

Come morning, his dishes line the sink, errant wheat flakes bloated in the milky swill. The cereal gives off a slightly musty smell, the odour reminding Harry of his mother's camphor chest. Moth balls. The faintly necrotic scent of naphthalene.

*

The girl pulled out her cosmetic bag and touched up her make-up, doing her best to disguise fifteen – foundation, lipstick, mascara, blush – the dingy suburbs trailing away faster and faster as the train gathered speed. Not that she needed to worry. Most of the dancers were about her age when they got started, Greta had assured her the first time they seriously talked about it, standing in the Big W car park, the girl gripping Greta's contact details (a telephone number scrawled beside *Upside Entertainment*). It was a standard thing. The blokes liked them young (she herself was barely fifteen when she performed at her first event), no surprise there, and it was harmless really, a bit of fun, and good experience ("You'll easily get other work once you've got this job under your

belt," she'd said), the boss looking the other way when it came to convincing IDs, though everyone was expected to play the game (you might well have been a teenager when you walked through the door but for taxation purposes you had to say you were eighteen).

"You'd be perfect," Greta reiterated, uncommonly glamorous amongst the suburban shoppers in her white jeans, oversized tortoise-shell sunglasses, pumps, lacquered bouffant hair. "I can tell. I've got a nose for these things."

The girl admitted she had some experience. The Eisteddfod, years seven and eight. She loved dancing. And two hundred dollars for two hours' work, that was a lot of money. You couldn't make that much at Big W, not even on public holidays. She was meant to be saving for a car; Mr Pyke from next door had promised to sell her his old Volkswagen Beetle if she could come up with three thousand dollars by Christmas (a bargain, it had only driven forty thousand kilometres), but at this rate she'd be lucky to have the money by the time school finished. With this dancing work though she'd easily be able to afford it. She might even be able to save enough for a security deposit as well.

Her mother thought she was going to the cinema then staying overnight at a friend's (Laura's, or was it Cassandra's? One of them. She always got them mixed up. It didn't matter; they were all basically the same in her view, average height, thin build, dirty blonde hair obscuring their insolent faces), choosing to accept it as the truth, the movies a vastly preferable occupation to the waitressing job her daughter had been banging on about, casual shifts with some nameless catering company. "Who staffs their evening functions with teenage girls? Serving themselves up as part of the dinner menu, because that's what it would amount to – you know that, don't you? – young girls in short skirts balancing t-bone steaks between their bosoms. Coffee, tea, me? Not on your life. As long as you're still young enough for me to forbid it then forbid it I will. And fifteen is still young enough for me to insist on a few rules around here. So no, you may not."

"But Mum—"

"Will not! What would people think?"

And so the girl had lied. Mentally cycling through the dance sequences again, rehearsing the transitions, the hardest steps, the ones most likely to trip her up, no one caring much what she did otherwise, Greta saying at one of their lessons, as long as she smiled and vaguely kept up with the group. Secretly practising for weeks in front of the

mirror at home, pouting and smiling as she looked over her shoulder, imagining the applause as she executed a pretty turn or bent over to adjust her stockings, it never occurring to her that there could be more to it, that afterwards she'd be doing anything other than banking her pretty cash.

*

It's what a father might have explained, if she'd had a father, the type to put her straight, to lay down the law. Or in Harry's case, a mother, Diana not being one to mince her words, much as at times he wishes she would, especially when he is acting as his parents' go-between. "It's your fucking ego," she says down the phone, Senior's voicemail capturing the minute quaver, despair sublimated as disgusted fury. "Your unquenchable thirst for attention." She's long refused to speak to journalists, can't believe Alan has fallen back into that trap, doing interviews again, worse than a thirteen-year-old girl, his susceptibility to flattery. "In all these years haven't you learnt anything? You tell that little shit not to bother me again or he'll be speaking to my solicitor, unless of course you want me to issue a comment, which I'd be very happy to do," Harry dutifully passing along the message as Alan twitches around the garden in his shorts and gumboots, a smouldering fuse waiting to go off.

Parlaying his energy into weed pulling, spreading fertiliser, turning the topsoil, applying moisture-trapping mulch, but no end in sight. Bent over the parsley, dropping to one knee, winded, like he's taken a foot in the solar plexus, saying, "Goddammit, can't she leave it alone?"

Magical thinking of the first order. But that is the way his father has always been when confronted with the truth.

Harry has tried denial, telling himself that he doesn't buy half the stories bandied around about his dad, but in actual fact he does. Everybody does. That is the problem. Predisposed as he is to disclaim it, most of the time one barely has to dig, allegations about the drugs and the women and the alcohol lying about on the surface of his father's reputation like fabled nuggets during a gold rush. Beneath the scuttlebutt and scandal sheets, the denials and rationalisations, there is always something there. It might not seem like much, a speck, a skerrick, a flake panned from the cleanest looking riverbed, but it is rare that a story about his father finds its way to the public domain without having some weight (even Matt would back him on that). His father used to protest that

they weren't true – the media loved to scapegoat him, he would say, to make up lies. The prostitutes, for example; why would he have spent so much money on hookers when so many women were happy to offer their services for free? A classic defence guaranteed to both exonerate and incriminate him in a single misfire (he was the victim here), but the rumours invariably had some veracity.

Laurie calls the house again. This time he doesn't bother leaving a message, he just says his name and hangs up. Matt calls too, from LA. Doesn't say his name but of course Harry knows immediately who it is, can imagine the palm trees visible outside his hotel window, the neon bright cocktail sweating in his other hand. "Call Laurie, you prick. He knows you were home this morning. He saw your car. For fuck's sake, if he messages me one more time I don't know what I'll do. I've already told him to leave me out of it. I'm not your fucking keeper. Get your shit together. You're embarrassing me."

So butt out then, Harry would like to say. But why bother? His brother has always done whatever he likes, whenever he likes. Which often as not involves telling Harry what to do. Or telling him what he thinks others want him to do. Anticipating messages from the coaching staff, as though he has some special insight into the workings of his younger brother's sensitive soul, the only person who can effectively motivate him – "Jim's going to tell you to pick up your defensive pressure in the forward half" – the other boys getting good mileage out of it. "Can't think for yourself, Squeak?"

"Need your brother to give you a helping hand?"

"No, that part he can manage," says Nick. "Right, Goodfa? No trouble putting the elbows to work." The lads making plenty of sport out of it, so that next time Matt comes within spitting distance, Harry snaps: "Do you want to play or do you want to coach?" Everyone knowing the best coaches are often average on the ground.

Not that Matt gives a stuff. "I don't care if you've got your period, change your tampon and get on with it."

Harry thinks he detects the wail of a police siren in the background, the distant drone of authority. His brother's soundtrack? Or is that Laurie's?

"Screw you both," he mutters.

He deletes the message without a second thought.

Harry assumed it would have been easier with most of the boys out of town but it doesn't make any difference. He still expects to see them everywhere, catches himself planning his movements, devising ways to avoid running into them when he goes out.

Rosie is hankering for a thickshake. At McDonald's, the drive-thru line snakes all the way back to the corner. "Let's get out of here," he says, dreading the idea of inching along for another twenty minutes, plenty of time for fellow punters to figure out who is behind the wheel and then heaven knows what. But Rosie is adamant.

When they finally pull up to the order station her housemate, Katia, is behind the microphone.

Rosie leans across to say hello.

"Who's your date?" asks the voice, knowing damn well.

As Rosie makes the introductions, Harry catches a whiff of her BO, a sharp acrid smell mingled with the old-lady scent of lavender talcum powder. "What do you want to eat?" she asks him as she continues to peer up at the microphone, her head hovering above his lap as she orders.

During the season it isn't uncommon for him to devour two or three hamburgers in one sitting, especially before a game, but now it is the last thing he feels like, just as footy is the last thing he feels like along with anything remotely related to it, such as contracts or the other players or the women who are drawn to them. "I don't know, some fries," he says, partly to appease her, anything so they can move along.

"Fries?" she repeats. "That's all you want?"

"You heard me."

"Did you get that?" she says in the direction of her friend. And then back to him. "You're a barrel of laughs."

They drive to the Esplanade and eat staring at the swell, Rosie winding down the window but quickly raising it again as seagulls descend on the car, lured by the aroma of hot chips. "Careful," he says, despite himself, as one dogged bird lunges at the grease-smudged glass. Could it happen? Could they join together and drag her from the vehicle? He allows himself the fantasy, her skirt billowing about her hips, plump legs kicking at the sky as her body is transported aloft by a mass of marauding wildlife.

Rosie is unperturbed, diving into her nuggets with the enthusiasm of a fox raiding a poultry coop. "Look at this one," she says, holding up one of the pieces.

“What?” he says, thinking maybe she’s found one resembling the face of Jesus or Robert DiPierdomenico, that distinctive moustache (his mother is always looking at crap like that on eBay), but it is nothing as illustrious.

“It looks like an egg,” she says, amused at the irony. “Which came first, the chicken or the nugget?”

Which came first, the air or your head? he thinks, knowing it is mean, puerile, the stupidity making him grin. “I don’t know,” he says, glad for once for the distracting thrum of his mobile, repulsed by the idea that she might think they have shared a joke, that they have something, however small, in common. He is glad and then he isn’t.

It is Margo trawling for gossip. “Do a girl a favour, give me something. It’s a slow news week.”

“What kind of gossip?”

“Let’s start with Sportsman’s Night. Jack and Eddy are back, they suggested I talk to you.”

Rosie, her mouth full of chicken nuggets, is wiggling her thin pencilled eyebrows, a wordless attempt at asking who it is.

“Why? What did they say? I told you there is nothing.”

“Come on Harry, this isn’t my first rodeo. Why won’t you tell me what happened? They always haze the rookies. Club initiation. Whatever they call it. I know there would have been a strip show, but I’m getting the impression there was something else. What did Jack mean by saying they had to ‘blood’ you? In my notes I've got, quote, ‘We had to blood the young fella,’ end quote.”

Those motherfuckers. He remembers stepping off the lift that night smack into the middle of a Probus tour group on their way out to dinner, thinking maybe he should just keep going, home, right through the middle of them – the shortest path between him and the street – the muted atmosphere of artificial lighting and mellow muzak already getting under his skin. He’d wanted to be outside, to breathe fresh air, but Matt grabbed his arm before he could get any purchase on the idea, pulling him back like he was a wayward child on a tear at the supermarket. “Steady on. The taxis are this way.”

“But it’s just around the corner.”

“You’re not walking. We’re not walking.”

The taxis were lined up next to the fountain, barely twenty metres from the exit. Even so, the doorman summoned one with his whistle. “Have a good evening, sirs,” he said, holding the door for them.

The vehicle smelled of air freshener, a small sachet swinging from the rear-view mirror, the same overwhelming floral scent as in the hotel, or so it seemed to Harry, wondering how the driver could spend an entire shift in the car without wanting to throw up.

Margo presses him again but Harry shakes his head. "No. It's not true. They're just fucking with you. You know what Jack and Eddy are like. They're probably still stoned on something they took in Phuket. Anyway, I'll have to ring you back. I can't talk."

"Sure you can. Come on. Did they make you dance with the girls? Did they treat you to a special lap dance?"

"No, really. I can't."

"Don't brush me off, Harry. We're mates. There must be something."

"Bye, Maggie."

"Who's Maggie?" says Rosie, the second he is off the phone.

"Mind your own business, okay, Big Ears?"

"I was only asking. There's no need to be so shirty."

Rosie is fond of aphorisms. *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. *What goes around comes around*. *Actions speak louder than words*. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me," she adds.

"Good. Drop it then, alright?"

In geometry, an oval or ovoid comes from the Latin word "ovum", meaning "egg". Off the top of his head he can list the basic properties of ovals – smooth, closed curves that don't self-intersect, with at least one axis of symmetry. It is one of those factoids he picked up at school (science), that and a couple of useless grammar rules (English) – "I before E except after C" (so much for "science"). No wonder he can't spell.

A football oval, like the ball itself, has two axes of symmetry.

"Turn around," he says to Rosie, forcing her cheek against the glass. "I want to try something." He puts his left index finger against her shoulder blade and attempts to trace the outline of a playing field in a single gesture, a complete rotation without lifting his hand before returning to the start point. As he presses his fingers into Rosie's back, he wonders if perhaps this entire episode hasn't been a set-up designed to land him in a shit sandwich. Jack makes no secret of his enmity for the Fureys, that's what happens when you're always cast as second best, but to drop him in it like this – *had to blood the*

young fella – what an arsehole. Though what did Harry expect? Good blokes, my arse. Ted could stick that in a pipe and smoke it. Jack was a fucker. So was Eddy. He didn't care if they were always first to volunteer for the Good Friday Appeal. There was "giving back" and then there was giving something back. The real question was, had he said enough to make Margo go away?

"You know, you can trust me," Rosie says out of the side of her mouth as he stumbles over her zip. "Do you want to tell me? I know something's bothering you. It doesn't matter what it is. I'm good with secrets. I won't tell anyone. We can deal with it together. A burden shared is a burden halved."

It occurs to him that she might have heard more than she is letting on. "Why do you think I've got a secret?" he asks. "And why would I tell you if I did?"

"Because you can't sleep. And when you do you thrash around like something's trying to get out. And you shout in your dreams. It's like you're possessed."

"I've always talked in my sleep. I told you that."

"Yeah, but this isn't talking."

The car reeks of mustard dipping sauce. A small brown stain marks the back of her dress where Harry's finger first pinched the fabric. He presses his hands more firmly into her trunk and tries the circle again.

Startled awake at four in the morning, trying to latch back on to unconsciousness, a fuzzy image of his father in gumboots, something about an ambulance, random details from his dreams, receding, unable to be reconstructed. Fuelling his wakefulness, the music, as though someone has adjusted the faint volume up, up, his pulse keeping time or is that also an illusion? *One, two, three, four ... one, two, three, four ...* Fairly certain that he's dreamt the telephone call, though he can't be sure, someone might have rung – at this time of night it is impossible to know what is real and what isn't – telling himself not to stress it, even if it was a call it was likely just a fan or a wrong number. It doesn't make sense that it was Margo (she isn't a teenager). She'd just been fishing earlier on. Even if Jack and Eddy have been talking, if she had something concrete she would have said as much. That was her job, wasn't it, to fact-find, verify. *Do you have a comment? No comment?* What would be the purpose of her hounding him like this, making late-night calls then hanging up, if she already had what she was after? There was nothing to be gained. It could only get him offside.

He thinks again about the girl, mentally seats himself beside her on the train, her features blank, like an activity book yet to be coloured in, wishing it was possible, that he could transport himself there, that he could tell her to go home.

*

The girl felt a slight chill. She crossed her legs, then examined the pattern of fibres across her knees as the train rattled on, the steady stop-start of the stations metering out the journey with such regularity that the carriage began to feel like a world unto itself, the universe contained within its fluorescent-lit dimensions, the artificial brightness casting a distinctive pall across the faces of its inhabitants, mirrored back by the silver-tinged reflective windows. She surveyed the passengers – a young father down the other end attempting to corral his footloose toddler while his partner, left foot on the pram, fussed over her nursing baby; a woman two rows ahead lost in her Jodi Picoult novel; diagonally opposite an elderly man with sticky-taped glasses reading the *Herald Sun*; and several other passengers variously distracted by newspapers and iPods – wondering if her secret was apparent from her demeanour or if she looked like any other young woman on her way into town. Truth be told, she already knew the answer, but where ordinarily she might have been disappointed, in this instance it pleased her that she so effortlessly blended in. Granted, most of the passengers would have been alarmed to learn that she was still a teenager, but as a twenty-something, her appearance (at a glance at least) was unremarkable.

Would she have described herself as happy? Yes, excited and happy. And a little smug, harbouring a degree of pity for her fellow travellers, these denizens of the public transport system, members of that wider class of citizenry she typically dismissed as "people", a collective noun meaning they had no clue. Uninteresting, boring, passionless, stupid.

Her mother was one of those people, always going on about "our" values and "doing the right thing", as though anyone cared if she only bought Australian-grown tinned tomatoes or never used the clothes dryer, when in the same breath she hung on Ray's every word – *Jump! How high?* – like it was 1952 and her job to do whatever it was he told her, Ray trying it on with her when her mum wasn't around – *get me this, get me that* – the girl saying, "It's not a hotel," then Ray calling her a stupid brat. Denying it later, of course ("A little credit please, as if I'd speak to your daughter like

that"), her mother insisting the girl tell the truth, "You're lying, you're lying" (because she didn't want Ray leaving her like all her other boyfriends had) – "Why can't you just tell the truth?" – when the girl was being honest. Why should she say she'd done something that she hadn't?

The girl wasn't going to live her life that way. Pandering to other people. Day after day. Year after year. Always one foot in the grave. Her father certainly hadn't, taking off the first chance he got. Not that she blamed him. You have to go where the opportunities present themselves. That was her motto too: *You make your own luck*. She was also a free spirit. A maverick. An adventurer.

She dreamt about following in his footsteps, to Exmouth, Western Australia, where last she knew he piloted chartered sightseeing flights for Japanese tourists visiting Ningaloo Reef.

She could draw a straight line to it on the map. Right through the nation's centre, across the Nullarbor, past Kalgoorlie, then north of Coral Bay.

As soon as she could get the money together she was going to go. She had already asked her Big W supervisor for a reference.

*

Uniforms make getting dressed easier, donning team colours as liberating as they are constricting. Alan wears his grey suit, one of two suits hanging in his cupboard, the other, a dark gabardine, reserved for funerals and weddings and newspaper interviews, mostly funerals. The suit has the tired look of a hand-me-down, smooth and shiny after too many trips to the drycleaner, the pants forever being taken in or let out in line with his contracting or expanding waistline. Harry wears jeans. Jeans and a green checked shirt. The shirt could use a pressing but at least it is clean.

Head down, eyes on the ball.

Parishioners nod at them as they enter the church, Senior walking haltingly, like he's aged fifty years overnight (the stress, the sleeplessness, the pills), stopping for a brief whispered tete-a-tete with Dick Tipton, head of the finance committee, about next week's sausage sizzle, one of several fundraising initiatives for a new roof. Harry yawns as he crosses himself then takes a seat on a pew, examining the roster of initials carved in the backrest, the crude letters buffed by years of bored fingers tracing the coarse outlines. Above them, the peeling ceiling paint is patterned with oxidised possum stains.

Penitential Rite, Roman Catholic Mass

I confess to almighty God
and to you, my brothers and sisters
that I have greatly sinned
in my thoughts and in my words
in what I have done and in what I have failed to do
through my fault, through my fault
through my most grievous fault;
therefore I ask blessed Mary, ever-virgin
all the angels and saints
and you, my brothers and sisters
to pray for me to the Lord our God.

At the Club their prayers typically take the form of game-related requests – for physical prowess, athletic dominance, that ineffable something on the field to give them the winning edge – the losses and injuries put down to bad luck, weather conditions, general distraction or foolishness, the whimsy of a higher power. They never pray for forgiveness or absolution of their mistakes, never attribute their poor fortune to unworthiness, a sign of God's disapproval.

He tries to listen but his thoughts keep trailing off, to the swell, to the taste of Rosie's cunt in the morning, the dampness beneath her breasts; how he reviles her and yet is drawn to her, the way she collapses everything, reducing it to its most basic component parts. Sex. Procreation. Death. They could be together forever and he'd never have to do anything for himself again. It is at once appealing and repulsive. Everything about her is at once appealing and repulsive.

After the service, when he gets up to enter the flimsy confessional, a teenage girl blows him a kiss.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession and these are my sins." He is sure everyone in the church can hear him, his words bouncing around the booth like an echo chamber, but he reels them off nonetheless. "I lied to my mother, I lied to my father, I lied to my brother, I disrespected my coach, I swore four times, I took the Lord's name in vain."

"You only swore four times?" says Father Murphy. "And you've been here three times in as many weeks. Is there something troubling you, son? We've been seeing a lot of you lately."

It is a fair question. He and his brother have always gone to church but only so often that they can't be accused of not going, their mother at pains to stress that the

choice of St Augustine secondary college was less about her spiritual beliefs than her interest in them receiving a private-school education; their father's public profile affording them privileged status, the school happy to offer heavily discounted fees if it could claim the old man as one of its own.

Harry tries to answer the priest, saying something about girls, about how everyone's obsessed with them, like Dean, watching his big over-muscled body lumbering after this woman at the pub, twirling her under his arm, then nearly tripping on the dance floor as he stumbled after her, how it was like witnessing a car accident, the way he pursued her, an absolute train wreck, the stark loneliness of that one-on-one play. Knowing it would never happen on the field (*one in, all in!*), how even if the team was losing, there was a unity in the side, a sense of pulling together, everyone knowing which position they were supposed to take, who they were dogging, who they were defending, whose back they were supposed to have. But it doesn't come out right. Finally he stops. "That's all, Father. Thank you, Father. Everything's fine. Amen."

Alan is poised to go in as Harry comes out, an eager commuter late for work.

Harry counts parishioners as he waits for his dad, noting that the girl who'd blown him the kiss just before is now sitting with the Tiptons. She isn't their daughter, Erica, is she? He doesn't recognise her at all. Two teenage boys sit on the other side of the aisle, near the side exit, watching him watching her, the seconds dragging. As he and his father leave, the two boys approach them with footy cards to sign. "No problem," says Harry, scrawling his name across his picture. The old man is flustered but Harry is ready – often as not he forgets his watch but he usually remembers a pen.

He doesn't want to think about sex anymore and yet sex is all that he can think about, images of naked women in compromising positions populating his imagination, intruding on his thoughts as attentiveness might intrude on a dream so that it becomes impossible to keep dreaming without becoming aware of its own violability. Masturbating in the bathroom. A model from a Kmart catalogue. The neighbour's Jack Russell running up and down the side of the house, yapping, as he is showing her a thing or two, and then right at the crucial moment her face morphing into Andrea's, the Club's yoga instructor, with her impossibly chipper grin. He experiences a sensation almost like pain. And then it is over. He is free of it again as his heart beats so loudly he expects he should be able to hear it thump above the barking, the emptiness of the

bathroom like the emptiness of a football stadium an hour after the game. Thinking of running through drills on cold winter mornings, frozen grass snapping beneath muddy stops, the way his coach always says he has quick hands. He smiles to himself, the crude irony, as he wipes his come off the toilet rim, his mind white-hot, an electric blur, everything shimmery like a mirage, the whoosh of nothingness howling around him like the wind.

The shed out the back of the house is set up as a makeshift gym. It is nothing much: a bench press, some weights, a "strive" motivational poster on the wall. The place has a strong whiff of fertiliser about it, a combination of Blood & Bone and dirty socks that can be overwhelming on a hot day. Harry pulls back the latch, the rich loamy scent greeting him like a punch in the face.

Here, at least, he can leave the rest of the world behind.

He gets started with some warm-ups: star-jumps, squats, push-ups. Those standbys he's been doing since he was a kid. The Under 9s lined up on the school asphalt, leaping and bending, handballing back and forth, the teacher yelling "both hands, both hands" until the action became rote.

That's his skill, what he's always had over the others. The way he can zero in, shut out anything in the moment that he doesn't need. Doing circle work, Eddy testing him with a misdirected ball to his face, the same crap he's been pulling since they were in kindergarten, but Harry catches it and pumps it on, his reflexes as twitchy as a prize fighter's.

Everything in the shed is just as he left it the previous afternoon, the barbell in the same position against the wall, his lifting gloves on the stepladder. He and his father usually take turns spotting for each other, assiduously recording their progress in an exercise book bound with a grubby rubber band, each figure written in pencil, never pen, insists his father, because too much is already indelible – mistakes can be made but ink is not easily amended. Harry dutifully dates the top of the page and gets to work on his abdominals.

Two hundred sit-ups and ten sets of the plank later – one minute on, one minute off – until his muscles are burning, he stops and scrutinises his naked midriff.

Neither he nor his father is really designed for the kind of muscle mass promoted on the back of FastShake, the powdered protein supplement they've taken to spooning into their milk each morning. Years of playing football has added some bulk to their frames, but left to its own devices fuel rapidly turns to fat. No amount of training will

ever result in the sculpted definition depicted on the product label. They are too run-of-the-mill for that. Extraordinary footballers, yes, but as athletic all-rounders, not quite extraordinary enough.

Still, they strive, like the poster encourages, periodically adjusting their weights, increasing their repetitions, filling the ledger with smudged notations detailing their progress. More kilos here. Fewer kilos there. Loading up for a few days then a day or two off to relax: that's how you do it, he's been instructed, it is important to give the muscles a rest in between.

Harry loads an extra ten kilos. He knows he shouldn't perform these lifts alone – so many stories (apocryphal?) of people slowly drowning in their own blood, pinned beneath a bench press for days because they'd trained without a partner. But these aren't skull-crushers and he is determined to shatter the plateau.

Can't be told ...

Lying there, on his back, forcing the metal bar away from his chest, there is no more sex, no more noise, no more music, just the pressure of the weight bearing down on him: he feels the deafening strain of it all the way to his feet.

*

The girl got off the train and made her way through the busy station to the meeting point. Greta said the contact would be there around six so she still had plenty of time. She ducked into the Ladies to check her lipstick, pulling out her compact and holding it up to the grim light (the wall-mounted mirrors more like dull carnival mirrors, gobbed and battered sheets of polished steel about as useful for cosmetic touch-ups as the ones at school). Her face appeared to her in a series of small framed segments as she batted her eyelids, checked her lashes for globs. She applied more lipstick, carefully tracing the outline of her mouth, then blotted her cheeks with rouge, her mother's voice ringing loudly in her ears: "You look like a cheap tart."

You'll see, she thought. *You'll see*. The bathroom smelled of urine and ammonia, the floor still slick in places from being mopped, a metal bucket of soupy grey water parked unceremoniously by the janitor's cupboard. As she straightened her skirt one of the toilet stalls swung open and a large woman emerged. She seemed to fill the entire doorway. The girl could smell her from over a metre away, her thin greasy hair plastered across her forehead, her soiled jumper, coat and scarf a thick winter pelt,

restricting her ability to move. She wasn't wearing any shoes. The woman paused when she saw the girl, held the stall door open, gesturing for her to take her place. The girl decided she didn't really need to go.

She left the bathroom, passed through the ticket barriers and took up position near the information windows.

The foyer was full of teenagers. Just like her. Loping about, all looking for trouble (maybe not so much like her). They were mostly clustered under the clocks near the front steps though several groups were also congregated inside like packs of wary dogs circling and defending their territory. Once or twice a boy glanced in her direction; in one instance one of the lads hanging around near the railing actually took a few steps her way, but then he thought better of it, appearing to change his mind, sensing her anxiety, perhaps, that there was something else going on, her nervous energy emanating like a force field, subliminally warning him off as clearly as if she'd told him to go fuck himself.

Not that she was aware of it, focussed as she was on the crowd. Commuters kept pausing in front of her as they stopped to the check the platform numbers. She'd been there before but in these circumstances the station took on a gothic quality, menacing and overwhelming, the ceilings impossibly high, the area loud and cavernous, the city streets surging onto its steps, a barrage of traffic and hubbub threatening to engulf her.

It was nearly six o'clock. A blur of faces. A couple of times she thought she saw someone from her "real" life (Justin from the Garden department, her friend Stephanie's younger sister), her heart thrilling with the pleasure of recognition – not of them per se but of her knowing someone, the reflexive validation of her existence – but then it turned out not to be them, only someone who looked like them. Which was just as well really. She preferred not to have to explain herself to anyone from home.

She stood against the wall, one eye on the clock, the other alert for the person who was meant to be collecting her, wondering if she'd know him on sight or if he too would look like just another face in the crowd. It was very strange meeting up with someone you didn't know in that way when there were so many other strangers around. She'd said as much to Greta. Appointments were usually made between people with real names, were scheduled to occur at specific times at properly designated addresses. Without those particulars how would Greta's friend know who she was? How could he be sure he had the right person?

And then she saw him. On the other side of the flower stall. A tall guy in a leather jacket. She was certain of it. The butterflies returned to her stomach. He was coming right for her.

*

What else would Harry have told her if he could have, aside from, “Go home”? “Get out while you can”? He’s not sure. And who’s to say she would have listened anyway? She may have been perfectly happy doing what she was doing. Wasn’t that always the comeback, that it was the individual’s right to choose? Who was he to judge her lifestyle, to interfere? That’s what Jack would have said, he was pretty sure of it. And Eddy. And Laurie. And Matt. And probably his dad too, or at least he would have back when he was still playing. Harry was the one with the problem. Harry was the one with the issue. And maybe they were right. Maybe what had happened with the girl didn’t matter. And what he’d done didn’t matter either. It was simply a question of perspective, a decision to be made, his choice to press reset and everything would return to normal.

In the kitchen, a giant jigsaw puzzle of London’s Tower Bridge progressively covers the table. Harry holds his plate directly under his chin, the Vegemite rapidly integrating with the butter, a spreading fungus atop his toast, as he peers at the technicoloured walkway, a post-jubilee blue, that his father must have acquired in the divorce.

A piece of the railing is missing. His father, still in his pyjamas, shuffles in like an obedient psychiatric patient who has earned extra privileges within the asylum. “Don’t even think about touching that puzzle,” he says, his voice slightly gravelly, placing his tooth glass on the sink, the long cuffs of his faded candy stripes dusting the grubby floor. He looks like a meth addict, pallid and gaunt in his oversized flannels, his thin hair curtaining his ears, the shapeless strands in urgent need of a wash. As he speaks, Harry can see the hole from his absent right lateral incisor.

“You don’t want me touching it? What? You mean like this?” he says, disengaging a piece of the suspension scaffolding.

His father turns his back, refuses to be drawn in.

The following Sunday Harry decides not to go to church. Rather than parking the car, he idles out the front of the building, the sound of the spluttering vehicle

amplified against the quiet morning as his father grabs hold of the overhead strap and hoists himself out of the passenger seat, a great heave-ho, swivelling his feet onto the footpath and then propelling himself forward, all his weight on his left knee. "I'll pick you up after," Harry tells his dad, wanting the old man to get a wriggle on so that he can get the hell out of there, away from the prying eyes of the parishioners, the not-so-benevolent witnesses to his ambivalence.

Alan is not amused. "It's not good enough, son. Not good enough."

"It'll have to be good enough," says Harry, the familiar pulse mounting at his temples, the prefiguring of a headache.

A sign sponsored by a local real-estate company graphically depicts the parish's fundraising efforts for the new roof. His father leans through the wound-down window and looks Harry squarely in the eye, the image of the red unfunded steeple appearing to emerge out of the top of his head. "I know you don't believe it, but you owe yourself more than this. None of us is alone, Harry. God is watching."

Harry shrugs. "He can watch me drive away then."

"What will I tell Father Murphy?"

"Stuff Father Murphy."

He feels a twinge of guilt as he says it, not having a problem with Father Murphy, the man, so much as what he stands for, the retributive church in all its shambolic glory. Alternating its charitable embrace with the less orthodox cold shoulder, for him it has always been the embodiment of a have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too sanctimoniousness. Because what young child truly understands the first thing about their parents' mistakes other than the way they immediately affect them (and why should they be held in any way accountable)? Gilded censure from the pulpit – *If thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother* – surreptitious glances in their family's direction, as though any amount of choir practice can expunge the sins of their father. *Bless me, Father, for my father has really fucked up!* You try living like that, he might have said.

It isn't his fault (nor his brother's nor his mum's) that his dad has made such a royal mess of things. Nor is it their fault that the repercussions continue to reverberate, a perpetual ripple in their already rippled lives, a private undercurrent of familial shame. Nothing is ever directly said about it, of course. Theirs isn't that kind of community. The congregation just intimates their feelings of approval or disapproval. Happy to

condemn when condemnation is easy – invitations to gatherings not forthcoming, conversations changed or ceased when one of them enters the room – even happier to sing a fallen man's praises once he's seen the error of his ways. A virtuous cycle if ever there was one, his classmates having grown up to become loyal parishioners themselves, prepared to forgive just about everything they know about him, about them, the minute his dad joins AA (the community choosing to overlook Senior's follies thereafter), or is that as soon as he has been accepted into Rotary, their new fundraising cash cow? As though it doesn't matter how they conducted themselves prior to that point or what they are really about, as long as they are prepared to wear the mantle of local heroes, the town's first family, to play their roles as favourite sons.

Harry watches his arthritis-ridden father hobble up the front steps then drives down to the beach while he waits, relishing the quiet as the gulls dip and dive through the waves, sea spray coursing through the air, their wings skimming the salt-whipped foam.

Mass usually lasts about an hour. Harry gives it a full ninety minutes before heading back to the church, anticipating the usual routine that occurs afterwards, his dad holding court, prognosticating with Barry Delaney about the Australian cricket team's chances in the upcoming Ashes series, how they'll go, whether they'll be able to win them back, generally spinning his particular brand of bullshit to some kid or the parent of some kid who'd idolised him since they were a child.

Just thinking about it makes him feel sick. Or does he feel sick anyway? Lately everything has been turning his stomach.

Front Street is crowded with the familiar blur of window-shoppers looking to stuff their faces on pies and fries and jam-filled donuts, while kids with ice-creams scream to go home and bored teenagers flirt with each other over Cokes outside the hamburger place. The drivers are like lemmings, crawling along, looking for the takeaway, so intent on finding a park that they pay no attention to the road. It is worse than dodging runners on the field. His first impulse is to lower the window and yell at them to get out of the way, it taking all his self-control not to simply ram into the back of them, to physically slam the other cars with his frustration. But even in the heat of one of these episodes he never loses sight of how it would play out in the court of public opinion, the inevitable like-father-like-son comparisons (*this family has no sense of*

proportion) and the Club's public reprimanding of his actions, emptying the fantasy of most of its pleasure (though not entirely, and in fact Dean did do it once, rear-ended an old git rubbernecking on Pacific Avenue – a great day as far as they were all concerned, financial penalty aside – but Dean could get away with it, he just paid the fine and moved on because he had no public image to uphold).

Harry turns into Centre Street to avoid the worst of the stragglers, his mind already skipping ahead to the surf he is planning later that afternoon, reports forecasting a light northerly fanning a solid four-foot groundswell, when he nearly runs over her. A girl, the girl, walking back in the direction of the shops. She is wearing jeans and a hoodie, no make-up, carrying a backpack, so it isn't an easy spot, quite the departure from when they'd first laid eyes on each other, but he is sure it is her, the way she grips her top, pulling it around her as one might draw the panels on a robe as he slams on the brakes, almost giving himself whiplash as she disappears around the corner. His mouth is instantly dry, sitting there stopped in the middle of the road, unsure what to do next. It isn't even about what he'd say or wouldn't say to her, the scope for that being way too big to contemplate in the split second of recognition. No, it is simply the unexpected nature of it, running into her like this being beyond anything he anticipated – the idea that her life that could intersect with his any more directly than it already has catching him so off-guard that it takes him another minute before he gets out of the car.

And by then of course she is gone. He loiters at the corner thinking she might have ducked into a nearby house, but after several minutes when she doesn't reappear he gets back behind the wheel, does a u-turn, and retraces his route. His mind is all questions, a rising tide of discomforts messily sloshing in on their own polluted shore. What is she doing there? Is she looking for him? Does she know who he is? Has she seen him before? It is too much to bear, the prospect that she lives nearby, that she might wash up on him again and again. Or is this his opportunity for absolution? Can she exonerate him? Wanting to grip her shoulders, to say, *forgive me, please*. But he's struck too sorry, too dumb, the guilt a palpable gag, depriving him of the ability to speak, to express what he wants to say, her lifeless eyes blinking at him like a discarded doll's. Besides, what can she offer that would fix this in him? What is it that he is trying to make right? He briefly considers ringing Laurie, someone older with more life experience, as the Club likes to characterise anyone over the age of twenty-two, but quickly dismisses the idea, his coach being the last person he'd feel comfortable talking to about such matters, not counting his mum and his dad.

He creeps along, alternately scanning the street and the rear-view mirror for a sign of her amongst the trawling tourists, at once hoping to find her and also dreading it, wishing he was wrong, coming face to face with her as terrifying a proposition as losing track of her, until the driver behind him finally loses his patience and sounds his horn. It is a long steady sound, the kind made by pressing the heel of your palm all the way in so that everyone stops and looks, even the whining infants. And it is fair enough too, ordinarily Harry would have done exactly the same thing, he can sympathise with the guy, but in the moment he is so inflamed by it, it is all he can do to stop himself from getting out of his car and beating the shit out of the motherfucker.

His pulse is racing. By the time he gets back to the church he is nearly forty minutes late.

*

The girl stepped forward as the man approached, smiling, though she could feel her face was flushed and tight (nervous), even though she'd gone over it in her mind a million times, the way she'd extend her hand the same way Greta had when they first met and say, "Hello, pleased to meet you," as though of course she was old enough to be doing this and of course she felt comfortable about it, because if she was eighteen she would feel comfortable about it and so why wouldn't she now; the fact that no one else knew what she was up to being evidence of that, that she was mature enough to be making her own decisions, standing on her own two feet, steering her own course in the world.

After all, she was there, wasn't she? No one could gainsay that.

So she flexed her fingers, ready to extend her hand, a handshake, to make his acquaintance, but the man walked directly to the information counter without so much as a glance in her direction.

Wrong person. She did a quick check around but no one appeared to have noticed. Was it still a faux pas if no one saw you make it?

She'd always had good instincts about people, had prided herself on it, knowing who to latch on to, when someone had something to offer and when they didn't. Or so she thought. That's how she found herself here. On her own recognisance, thank you very much. No one would have expected it. Least of all her dad. It would give him a kick when she showed up out of the blue. Though she'd probably have to ring him first (coordinate where to meet, something distinctive to wear so they'd recognise each

other). The last time he'd seen her she was two years old. She didn't even have the same hair colour anymore.

She'd stay at his place, imagined he'd insist – *of course you will, I wouldn't have it any other way* – wondered what his house was like, if it even was a house, and whether it would be big enough for the two of them long-term or if they'd have to move. Maybe to a complex with a cabana and a pool? Splashing her toes in the cool clear water, her body baking beneath a sun-bleached sky, the two of them discussing what they'd do together that weekend, where they'd explore. She was well into that daydream, picturing herself in a one-piece bathing suit, painted fingernails, her hair pulled back, the long strands fixed with her pearl slide, very Gwen Stefani, when a short stocky guy tapped her on the shoulder.

She jumped, let out a startled gasp.

"You Greta's friend?"

She nodded.

"This way." He turned and started walking before she'd fully processed that this was him, the contact, the one she had been waiting for, in that half second allowing him to gain an extra leg so that she then had to run a little to catch up.

So much for "pleased to meet you".

*

As with all of his dreams, he isn't sure how this one starts. The girl sits on the floor. She is sweating, hands tied behind her back, moisture glistening on her brow as she inhales deliberately through her nose, the tape across her mouth making it difficult for her to breathe. He takes a cloth and wipes her forehead just as the perspiration gathers into a drop, trickling into her right eye, forcing her to close it in a slow wink. Her chest rises and falls quickly as he leans towards her, her body pressing itself further against the wall as though she can push right through it and escape if she tries hard enough. He wants to tell her not to worry. To relax. That he isn't there to hurt her. It will be over soon enough. Stroking her hair, clearing the damp strands that have fallen across her blood-drained face. He imagines the relief of it. His voice a low consolation in the empty room. As though words can soften the exposed brickwork, can cushion the cold uncarpeted concrete beneath his feet. But his voice won't come. Only the familiar fury, a crashing muteness on the tip of his tongue. Will it never stop? Coughing, so Freudian,

saying, “It’s the dust.” The only words he can speak. So oblique. *Say what you fucking mean*. And then he slaps her. Hard. Out of the blue. Her eyes wide with the shock of it. The red mark on her cheek blazing brightly, a brilliant rose, then slowly, slowly fading.

Like most men he knows, he isn’t one to cry – can’t remember the last time he did – but it is something akin to tears making his eyes blink and his throat constrict as though there is a giant fist pressed in it. This relentless anguish. His mind playing tricks on him again. How else to explain it? The dreams and hallucinations. Because he has to admit it looks self-serving, saying he saw her, like he’s making the whole thing up so that he can keep talking about it. And it had all happened so quickly. Harry knows it makes no sense. He can’t remember the last time he ran into one of his mates down the street. But he is sure it was her. He is. Or, he had been sure. At the time. Hadn’t he?

In the car on the way back from the airport, Matt struggles to take him seriously. “What did you see? What happened? Where? When? How exactly? You think it means something because she ran in front of the car? A million girls cross the street every day. Anything could happen. It’s not a sign, some cosmic conspiracy. Are you sure you weren’t pissed?” Kate giggles in the back as Matt lambasts him from the passenger seat. A familiar pattern. The older brother chastising the younger. “Why do you have to be such a dick?” Harry disappearing into himself, he is so accustomed to it, watching the scene at one remove as he pulls into the driveway. Then another five minutes of bickering in the car until their mother (hitherto peering out from behind the living room blind) comes to see what is taking so long, so they all shut up and follow her inside. “What’s going on with you two?” she says later over dinner, their first family meal together since Harry moved out – chicken schnitzel, mashed potato, carrots, *Welcome back, Matt* food – not that anyone is calling it that.

Neither of them answers.

Matt sits at the table scrolling through his phone, his mind already on the next thing, a replay of the last time he and Harry were in a car together, Sportsman’s Night, in the taxi on the way to the nightclub. There’d been an accident near the station so the driver took the long way around, catching every traffic light in between. He had no idea who they were, thought they were going to a wedding reception. Matt was texting so Harry answered for him. “Yes,” he confirmed. “He’s the groom.”

It had been that same time of night, the blue hour fast tipping into black. Outside the venue, a nondescript looking mid-sized office building, two security guards monitored the entrance but that was the only clue to what was going on inside. Matt paid the driver cash, passing across the money like a john tipping a whore, then marched ahead before Harry had properly closed the taxi door. The bouncers knew them by sight. They immediately stepped aside. Harry had his invitation folded in his back pocket but they didn't even ask him his name.

Alan likes to say that in every question lies a kernel of truth, an opportunity for salvation. That's what they promote at AA, truth and salvation. Honesty and redemption going hand in glove. As though God, as they understand him, is sitting around worrying at his beads, waiting for some mortal admission of hypocrisy. *Bless me, Father, for I have been confused*. Of course the truth isn't always welcome elsewhere.

Matt avoids eye contact as they sit around in the lounge room having drinks. Two Crown Lagers and two white wines. "Bottoms up," says Diana in Harry's direction. And then a wink, code for *everything's good with us now*. As long as he remains quarantined at his father's he has been forgiven. Harry takes a slug and puts his bottle down on the side table, what had been "his" bedside table, he realises, repurposed as a drinks stand and imported into the living area, his room already converted to general storage, the bed shrouded in patterned oilcloth, supporting boxes of family memorabilia and scrapbooking supplies, the floor an obstacle course of surplus from his mother's office: unused card stock, last year's calendars – *The Surf Coast* – marketing gimmicks (pens, coasters, a tray of shot glasses) for companies recently gone out of business. So much for empty nest syndrome. He gestures to the table. "I like what you've done with the place."

Kate giggles again, her signature response to everything, then says something about the high quality of the players at this year's draft camp. Like she'd know, Harry thinks, wondering if Matt picked her precisely because of that, because even though she never knows what she's talking about she is always happy to throw in her two cents, has no reservations sharing her half-baked opinions. It fills in the awkward pauses, makes him look like a genius.

Matt's girlfriends have always been like that. Chatty. That is the thing with them. They'll talk your ear off, just like Diana. Though Kate is chattier than most. He

once timed her talking non-stop for nearly eleven minutes. At the dinner table she says "awesome" eight times before the meal has been served.

A yellowing article about Matt and Kate clipped from one of those women's magazines is affixed to the refrigerator door by a grubby *Beautiful Hervey Bay!* magnet (a Mother's Day present circa 1996, the last remaining one of a set of four):

Football's hottest "it" couple arrived looking stunning as they beamed for the cameras. Laughing and holding hands as they posed on the red carpet, he wore a custom-made modern black-tie suit, while she dazzled in a pale pink and sheer lace gown.

Harry is pretty sure he gave his mother those magnets, those and a dish of potpourri. The kitchen is a riot of tchotchkes. Harry counts the dolphin figurines as Matt takes his time choosing another beer. There are eighteen.

When his brother finally emerges from the depths of the Kelvinator he pretends he hasn't heard properly. "You want to what?"

"Don't give me that. You know what I said."

Matt shrugs, takes a slug of his Heineken. "I don't know why you keep hammering on about this. It's a small town. Everybody knows us. It's a bit late to be worrying about being recognised, don't you think?"

I ain't seen nothing.

The smooth sheen of Matt's broad tanned forehead glints under the fluorescent light, as waxy as a whiteboard asking to be defaced. Harry lowers his voice. "What if we run into her again and she says something to somebody? What if she tells someone? What then?"

"Okay. Let's play this out. What's she going to say? Worst case scenario? Go on, give it your best shot."

"I can think of a few things, none of them pretty. That's my point."

"But what difference does it make? It's not like you did anything illegal. What is it that you think will happen?"

"Are you trying to be funny? The shit could hit the fan. That's what."

"Yes, but what shit? What fan? Who do you think's going to listen to any of it? Let's get one thing straight, alright, I didn't do anything wrong. And no one's accusing you of anything either. So leave it alone. It's your word against hers. Your. Word.

Against. Hers. An AFL footballer versus a nobody. No one's going to believe a word she says. That's why it hasn't come to anything yet. Not that it should. And it won't if you don't make an issue of it. Okay? So I don't want to hear about it again. And if I was you I'd keep my trap shut. Especially around the Club. I don't know what you think you're doing bringing it up all the time, asking questions, but nobody likes a shit-stirrer. And I for one don't appreciate you dragging me into your little dramas any more than you already have. Got it? So toughen up little brother," he says, tapping Harry sharply on the clavicle like he is niggling an opponent ... *get out of the kitchen.* And then he saunters back into the dining room with his beer like everything is hunky-dory.

*

The girl got into the vehicle, a black BMW, sinking into the back seat, her skirt riding up so that she had to arch a little to pull it down, the two men sitting up front, neither of them speaking as they headed off before she had buckled her seatbelt.

It felt like an eternity as they drove around, the city an aimless grid of uneven laneways and wind tunnels, poorly lit alcoves and overbright shopfronts, but it might only have been ten minutes, each intersection looking much like the last, the street signs missing or obscured by trees or other traffic. Was this a mistake? For the first time she had real misgivings. *Hello, excuse me.* Where were they going? Where were the other girls? Where was Greta? Would her mother be able to find her if she needed to? But her questions went unanswered, the men smoking, listening to the radio, a lively jangly music that never seemed to end. She couldn't get her bearings (*pin the tail on the tail*). For all she knew they could have been driving around in circles.

She decided she wanted to go home. She was going to say something – *stop, let me out* – but thought better of it, realising it made more sense to wait at least until they reached the venue, then she could explain to Greta in person and if need be, catch a taxi back to the station. She had thirty dollars in her wallet. That should be enough for the fare. But then what? Home? Take two with her mother and Ray doing it on the couch? That had been an unwelcome surprise, opening the door to find Ray's pale hairy bottom staring her right in the face. And not at all funny either, their laughter yet another sign that she didn't belong there, that it was time to leave. Plus, there was the issue of the money.

They turned down an alley, pulled into a parking space beside a dumpster and the driver shut down the engine. She thought they were still in town but she wasn't sure where.

The men said something to each other but she didn't recognise the language, telling herself not to panic as they got out of the car.

It was only after they ushered her out too that she understood she had arrived.

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Harry knows Rosie will be waiting up for him but his is the wrong frame of mind tonight for her glass-half-full disposition. He goes home to find his dad sacked out on the couch, the Nurofen and a packet of Stilnox open on the kitchen bench, the tube of liniment lying uselessly on the coffee table. It isn't the first time. "Back or headache?"

"Both."

Smokey and the Bandit is on TV.

"What's this shit?" says Harry, pointing at the telly. "Change the channel, will you? Here, give us the remote."

His father swipes his hand away as his youngest son leans across him on the couch, almost knocking his coffee cup to the floor. "Leave it alone. My house, my rules. You know the score."

"But you're not even watching it," Harry protests. "How many of those pills have you taken? It says a maximum of four every twenty-four hours. You're not supposed to mix them."

"Those labels are just guidelines. I know what I need."

"If you're that uncomfortable you should go back to the doctor," says Harry, rubbing his own thigh automatically, as though the pain is infectious, a gesture he's picked up from being in the company of too many has-beens over the years, the effect of years of "physical abuse", his mother calls it, the last thing he wants from the game, that kind of arthritic legacy. It is too late for heat packs. "Do you want a cup of tea?" he offers.

"No. I already had one."

Harry leans back, resigns himself to Burt Reynolds (that is a moustache), taking mental inventory of his own physical condition, an orchestra of clicking ankles and knees, missing toenails, blisters, aching shins, intermittently tender Achilles tendons.

His brother already has a bung shoulder. Barely eighteen months older than him, and his arm is taped more often than not. Matt isn't allowed to lift so much as a stubby without a trainer's permission. "Maybe you should lay off it," Harry suggested when he first did it (popped the joint right out of the socket), Harry re-enacting the moment for their mum at the dinner table complete with sound effects, worried it could signal the end of his brother's career if he didn't allow time to fully recuperate, but Matt blew him off. "It goes with the territory," he said, his tone another rebuke, it being plain that he found Harry's concerns irritating, unmanly, certainly a sign that he didn't have the right stuff. "You can't make an omelette without breaking a few eggs," he continued, trotting out another cliché. Publicity would have been proud; it was exactly the way they'd been trained to talk, following up one sound bite with another. Enough practice and it came off sounding completely unrehearsed.

The house smells of fried fish fingers and burnt potato puffs (Birds Eye), what his dad had for dinner.

"I've had enough of this shit," Alan announces during the ad break, then**,** uncharacteristically, "I'm going to bed."

"But it's only ten-thirty," says Harry. The leftover fish fingers are still warm in the pan.

Senior glances at his watch. "Really? It feels much later than that."

The girl groans. Harry puts his hand over her mouth to quieten her as he thrusts into her, her hands and feet secured to keep her still. Her eyes wide as she struggles for breath, her head thrashing from side to side as she fights to shake him off. He presses harder, feeling the wetness of her mouth as his fingers penetrate her lips, her teeth gritted against his skin. He closes his eyes and lets his mind go blank, a crackling *zzzzz* of static, his own private white noise, driving out the doubt, the ever present chatter. It works. For a moment he even forgets where he is. His whole being transported to a quiet place, as though he is sitting atop a very tall tree peering down through the leaves on a distant speck of himself, everything a long way away. And then all the resistance leaves her body and she goes limp, abruptly bringing him back to earth as his fingers slip all the way down her throat like she is trying to swallow him. Harry slaps her to wake her up, lunging at her as she feigns unconsciousness. *Stupid bitch. How can she fall asleep?* She flaps against the floor like a shook rug. He slaps her again, harder now,

noticing the way her head jogs lazily against the floor. It reminds him of an unclaimed football finally coming to rest after hitting the post.

He wakes with a start, his torso sopping wet, his heart pounding as his eyes go straight to the clock. 2.06 am. He stares at it, a beacon in the dark, hearing its soft flicker as it clicks over to 2.07.

This is his brother's fault. If Matt had just let him talk about her he wouldn't be dreaming about the girl again now, her touch, her smell, the sound of her voice hounding his thoughts, bullying him for attention. Or is that the problem, he shouldn't have tried to talk to Matt about it? When had that strategy ever paid off?

Already the sweat is cooling, the sheets tacky to touch.

He needs to make these nightmares stop.

A ribbon of light shines under the door. His father is up again too. He throws back the blanket and pulls on his tracksuit pants.

He expects to hear his father moving about, his usual late-night patter, but the house is suspiciously still. Harry bowls into the kitchen thinking perhaps he's made a mistake, his dad has simply forgotten to turn out the light, only to find his father reeking of alcohol, sitting with legs outstretched in the middle of the floor, the linoleum strewn with paper and tiny jigsaw pieces.

"What the fuck?" says Harry, picking up one of the pages.

"London Bridge has fallen down," Alan answers, his voice slurring, his face wet with tears.

So much for a puff piece. The article proofs had come in. As everyone suspected, the journalist had lied.

The next morning Harry doesn't bother fetching the newspaper. He can see it in its plastic wrap languishing on the scrappy lawn as he dials Laurie's number. "It's over," he tells his coach. "I'm done."

"Done?"

"Yeah," he repeats. "Done and dusted."

"Have you talked to anybody about this?" says Laurie, scrambling for his glasses. "Your brother? Does your mother know?"

"Oh fuck it," says Harry. "I'm sick of talking. I'm sick of the whole bloody mess."

II. Reconsideration

Alan Furey on "that night" and the price of fame

By Stuart Whitehall

November 28, 2006

Alan Furey has finally opened up about his history of substance abuse and the tragic death of Tracy Adams nearly ten years ago.

"This is hard for me stepping back into the public eye, but it's important to be honest about everything, to honour people with the truth. If I wanted to lie it would be easy to say that I turned to drugs because I was sick, depressed, that it was something medical, but that wasn't the reason, not at first. I'd stayed off them for most of my career. It was as the body began to wind down that they became a shortcut to the energy I'd had when I was younger, a way to hold onto the magic. And they were fun. I'd go out and people would give me handfuls of pills, ecstasy, girls cut lines of coke on their breasts. I was always a drinker, a heavy drinker. The drugs hit hard later.

"The thing about drugs – and it's probably true for any addiction – is you don't notice you're crossing the line. At first it's fun, you can keep up with the younger blokes, look like you're still cutting it. But then without realising how, you go from this easygoing attitude to this hardness, you know, and all you can think about is getting more. And then you're on the other side and you have to have them and if you don't get them your life turns to shit.

"I was an equal opportunity junkie, I loved them all. I'd shoot heroin and cocaine, snort speed, crystal meth. I tell my own kids, stay off it, don't go near the stuff, don't believe what your friends say. Drugs are like a virus: they get you from the inside out. Have you seen those zombie movies? It's like that. You become a monster. I destroyed my marriage. I destroyed my career. With the devil in my corner I've done evil things."

He's referring to the death of Tracy Adams. "I know her friends say I knew she was sixteen, but I didn't. As far as I was aware she was nineteen, an adult. That's what she always told me and I believed her. What I didn't understand was how naive she was. We both were."

Adams' personal diary entries claim Furey supplied her with heroin, involved her in orgies with strangers in exchange for speed, that he regularly flew into rages, threatened her with violence if she wouldn't do what he wanted, allegations he vigorously denies. What can't be denied is that the relationship spun out of control, culminating in the terrible events on the night of October 6, 1997, when Adams ran out in front of Furey's car, sustaining fatal injuries.

Autopsy results showed heroin and alcohol in Adams' system. Furey has always maintained he didn't know he'd hit anything. Medical experts agree Adams would likely have survived if taken to a hospital.

Furey was exonerated at the inquest, the coroner ruling the accident a death by misadventure.

"But the guilt gets you anyway. It gets you and it doesn't let go," says Furey. "Every day I think about Tracy and her family. The ordeal they've endured. Every day.

"If God has taught me anything it's about consequences. Back then I was too screwed up to know they mattered. Now I know they're the only thing that does. If there's one thing I take away from this tragedy it's to count my blessings. Life is short. I have welcomed God fully into my life and cherish every moment I get to spend in His company, spreading His word."

But Furey still refuses to respond to charges that his entire story is a fabrication. "He knows what he did," says Michael Adams, Tracy's father. "He was drunk and he was high on the same drugs he gave my daughter. My teenage daughter. She wouldn't do what he wanted and so he ran her down. He ran her down like she was a kangaroo on one of his hunts. He put his foot on the accelerator and he went after her, and then like the coward that he is, he took off. Didn't call an ambulance, nothing. By the time police caught up with him, days later, it was too late to test him for alcohol. The car

had been washed. One of the detectives told me they found him sitting in his shorts by the river, fishing, like he was waiting for them. He didn't even ask what they were doing there."

Furey is apt to quote scripture: "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths*. That's what I do now, I trust and pray. And hope to find the strength to accept myself and all of my failings. Someone once said, we don't see the world as it is, but as we are. By embracing God the world becomes a holy place coloured by the Lord's compassion."

Michael Adams is not so forgiving. "What rot. He can tell himself whatever he wants but this is a farce. He's just trying to make himself feel better. He doesn't deserve the public's affection. Everyone knows he's guilty. He knows it and his Maker knows it and no amount of prayer can alter the fact that he killed my little girl. I'm glad he believes in God. He knows very well then what's on the line. I will not rest until he pays for what he's done. May his soul burn in eternal damnation."

It doesn't take long for Laurie to get over there. Harry isn't surprised to find him at the front door, newspaper in hand, hair an uncombed mess, barely out of his pyjamas, hopping about on the doormat like an agitated rooster. Famous for forcing the issue, he's never been one to duck a contest, always encouraging the boys to be direct. "Are you going to invite me in?" he says, pulling at the fly wire. Harry reluctantly steps aside.

They head straight into the kitchen where Harry offers him a coffee.

"No. I'm right," he says. It isn't a social call. They lean against the kitchen cupboards as Laurie demands to know what is going on.

"What do you mean?" says Harry, churlish, as though he is being accused of something frivolous, a heartless prank orchestrated at his expense by some numbnuts in the locker room. *What is going on?* It is the sort of thing a teacher might say when they know exactly what is going on. The prelude to many a detention. He has the same fight or flight response (hit or be hit), thinking, *everything*, *nothing, what's it to you,* Harry having cleaned the piss from the floor, set his father's clothes in the machine to wash, the doctor having worked his magic, Alan now bathed and sedated, "resting comfortably" (sleeping it off) in bed. "Nothing," he adds quietly a half second later, stifling the impulse to run. His tone lacks conviction.

Laurie shakes his head, smiles to himself. "Look, son, don't give me that crap. Obviously something's up. Your father's a mess. And from what I can make out you're not much better off. You skipped out on the footy trip, you've made it clear you're not coming to Arizona, you haven't returned my calls for weeks. And now you ring up at the crack of dawn to say the old man's drunk again and you're quitting. I'd say that's something, wouldn't you? Do you want to tell me what it is or are we going to keep playing this bullshit guessing game?"

Laurie's Harpic-blue eyes are barely visible through the narrowed lids, his half-time stare. No time for sugar coating. He looks Harry square on, scanning for a sign of recognition. "I assume this is what this is about?" he says, holding up the newspaper, *Furey Reveals All*, a photograph of Alan on the front page. "Stupid bastard. Or are you still hung up on that other business?"

"What other business?"

Like he has to ask. The girl. Sportsman's Night. There isn't any other kind of business.

The social club had been full, pulsing, when they arrived, everyone pressed up against each other in their penguin suits, already red-cheeked and bleary-eyed, Matt welcomed by the throng like a long-lost son, while Harry, naturally reticent, hung back, observed the way his brother, a stray ball of mercury, was effortlessly reabsorbed into the pool. Harry felt eyes on him though he never caught a direct stare, but he could sense the disapprobation, was about as comfortable as a chaperone on a third date.

It was so hot. Someone thrust a cold beer into his hand. Steady? Jack? *Get that into you*. He took a sip, the condensation dripping down his starched shirt.

Across the way his brother raised his glass in a toast.

Watch your back.

"I thought Matt told you to forget about it. Didn't he tell you to forget about it? For crying out loud, how many ways do you want me say it? These things happen. They happen all the time. Everyone's together to celebrate, it's the end of another successful season. People are going to let their hair down, blow off some steam. So it got a little wild. Big deal. That's all it was. They're not bad buggers. You can't afford to waste your energy on some tart at a strip club. It'll only cloud your judgement. The booze, the bravado, the girls. It's the whole fucking point. I doubt she's given it a second thought. Too busy counting her money."

Laurie licks his upper lip and adjusts his posture, crossing his arms, shifting his weight to the other foot. "Unless you don't want to let it go, in which case we've got other fish to fry. Is that what we're dealing with here? Or am I reading this wrong? Your brother and I were just talking about his contract. He must have mentioned it. You're both up for renewal. No one would blame you for having it on your mind. We can adjust the terms, if that's what's nagging you. Mutually agreed, of course. Everything's open for discussion. If you want to have a talk about your future, my door is always open."

Harry considers his coach, standing barely two metres from him, a wrinkly mongrel up close, with grey stubble and thick salt-and-pepper hair, thinking perhaps he hates him more right then than he's ever hated him before. He's always attributed his aversion to intimidation rather than dislike, the way Laurie would march up the front of a room and demand to be listened to, throwing his weight around like a hungry bear. Now Harry sees that intimidation has nothing to do with it. He simply detests the prick. "I think I've made my intentions pretty clear. Why are we talking about my future?"

"All I'm saying is it's natural at this time of year to be sizing up your options."

"And why would you say that?"

"I'm not saying anything. Just that if it's not for you, that's okay. Ted's going to try to guilt you about the money, how much they've sacrificed for your career, but I know the kind of pressure you were under to choose this life. If you want to 'unchoose' it there's plenty of kids out there who'd relish the opportunity."

"I haven't been relishing it enough? So what, now you're firing me?" Harry laughs. It is so typical of Laurie to make out he is on about one thing, only to turn around and actually be on about something else. He can't believe he didn't see it coming. "Is this about Dad again? 'Cause you know, he'll be up soon enough. I can get him to ring you."

"No, it's not about your father. I know you think it is, but it isn't."

"And I had as much right to play in the finals as anyone? All fair and square. Our family's connections are beside the point."

"You're the one who wants to quit." Laurie goes to say something else, but stops himself. "Look son, if you're going to stick around you've got to look like you want to be there. I just need you to pull your finger out, that's all."

"And where do you want me to put it?"

"Don't be a smart arse. You know what I'm talking about. When your brother's on the field he's on it one hundred and ten percent. I don't have to worry about his thought processes, plan how to get the best out of him that day. Even when he did his rotator cuff he still turned up to training; I told him he didn't have to but he was there. Every session. 'For the boys,' he said. For the boys. That's how much he loves the team. He had a free pass, he could have sat that one out, no questions asked, but he didn't want to. You, on the other hand, your head's somewhere else. Always has been. I'm not doubting your talent, when you're on you're untouchable, you might even be better than your brother – you're a joy to watch – but that's no good to me. It's too erratic. I don't need flashes of brilliance. This isn't a crap shoot. I need your mind on the job." He taps the cupboard door. "You're no good to me unless your head and body are in the same place. You can't do this with one hand tied behind your back. It's not going to work any other way. And now you're living here. Stupid fucking idea, for both of you. I know the great man's got your best interests at heart, but times have changed. There's no winging it anymore. You can't just turn up and say that's good enough. Plan, prioritise, prepare, execute. That's what we're all about. That's what won us this

premiership. And it'll win us next year's flag too if we're all pulling in the same direction."

"You think I'm like Dad, that I'm going to screw it up."

"Are you?"

Harry shrugs.

"Yes, well, same direction or no, the board doesn't want to see you go. Not now. Not yet. They've invested a lot in your potential and want the payoff. What's it going to take? There's too much riding on you to just let you walk away."

Later that afternoon Harry meets with Laurie and Ted, the Club president.

"It's just a friendly chat," says Laurie (like there's any such thing), as he shows Harry into the executive lounge. They offer him beer and coffee. He asks for a water.

"I appreciate you coming down," says Ted. "We'd really like to resolve this before it blows up in our faces."

"There's nothing to resolve," says Harry. "This is a waste of time. I told Laurie, it's over. I'm baked."

"I understand you're pretty worked up. But that doesn't mean we can't find a way through it. I know your dad has his troubles but he's a tough old boot. He'll be alright. We'll make sure of it. It might not always look like it but he's still got a few friends in the ranks. We don't abandon our people, Harry. Including you. They don't call us the family club for nothing."

"What concerns me is I don't want to see you making a mistake," says Laurie. "One foot wrong at this stage in your career and you can kiss goodbye any dreams you might have for later. Forget coaching or commentating. You'll be lucky to be pulling beers full-time at the local pub. And that'd just be a waste, not good for anybody."

"That's right," says Ted. "What we want is to reach a mutually beneficial outcome. Something that ticks everyone's boxes. I think Alan would agree."

"I think you should leave Dad out of it."

"Okay. Done. Fair enough. Whatever you like. It's not a good time, I get that. Just as long as all our cards are on the table. And what I want to make very clear to you, Harry, and I'm telling you this eye to eye so there can be no misunderstanding, is that the Club has absolute belief in you." He jabs his finger in Harry's direction. "That's why I asked Laurie to bring you down here today, right to the heart of this organisation, so you can hear it from me. We have absolute belief in you on the field and we have

absolute belief in you as a human being. So let's at least consider all the options before you go heading so far down the highway that there's no point turning back."

They discuss flexible game rosters, lucrative endorsement deals, scheduling inducements and his post-playing career. Harry doesn't care so much about that but he is vulnerable on the subject of loyalty, his family's long association with the Club – relations might be strained, but he isn't looking to forever poison the well.

"You know I trained under your grandad," says Ted. "At Sunshine. Before your time. Back when they were still the Devils."

"And me," says Laurie. "Here. Right at the end. He was a good man."

"Yes," echoes Ted. "Everyone was upset when he retired."

Harry looks to the photograph of his grandfather amongst all the other player portraits hanging behind the bar, trying to line up that image of the blue and gold with the man he remembers from their school holidays up north, a ropy water rat trawling through black mangroves hauling mud crabs. Heading off at dawn as the tide went out, then returning later as it came back in; stringing them up on snapped tree branches then trekking the quarry back to the house, two to three dozen crabs between them, Harry's arms and legs covered in sandfly bites, his limbs crosshatched in bloody scratches.

"See, you're making my point for me," says Ted, following Harry's gaze. "This isn't just about you. Your legacy's as much your brother's legacy as it is your father's and your grandfather's. And that's your privilege, your inheritance, but it's also your responsibility. Have you considered the impact of your decision on them? And what about all the other people who've supported your career? Your mother? She'll be disappointed. Think about all the sacrifices she's made. I can't imagine she'll be too happy. Or have I got that wrong? She might have other ideas for you."

Harry feels a tightness in his chest, becomes aware of the chemical tang of furniture polish rising off the lacquered brown coffee table. Remembering the weight of all those crabs on his shoulders, the sharp briny smell, his grandfather explaining how mud crabs were opportunistic eaters, the larger ones often devouring the smaller ones, descending on them when they were moulting their shells.

"It's the pressure," says Ted, as Harry takes a deep breath. "It can make things seem more urgent than they are. But there's no need for any pressure. You should take your time. We're all friends here."

They strongly suggest he reconsider his resignation, at least for another year.

Eventually Harry capitulates, agrees to think it over.

*

The girl was the last one to arrive, the group assembled in the green room, a dank basement unit smelling of onions, with cockroach traps in the corners, the tessellated linoleum flooring worn and curling at the edges. The other women were clearly older than her but not much, mostly in their early twenties, though at fifteen anyone over eighteen was ancient. Greta did a cursory round of introductions, none of the names sticking, several of them not even bothering to look up as they finished dressing and applying their make-up. She had thought the place would be cleaner. Greta assigned her a seat (her own plastic lawn chair) under which she could store her bags. Then she handed her a pill and a glass of water. "Just a beta blocker," said Greta. To wet her whistle and help her to relax. "Trust me. It'll be fine."

The girl put on her costume, Greta helping her with some extra bright lipstick, drawing a line around her mouth first then filling it in, as she tried to contain her terror and excitement, her first professional performance and for so many local heroes. She wondered if she'd recognise any of them, could get an autograph or two after the show – but she was determined not to appear unsure of herself.

Somewhere out of sight someone turned on a microphone, the distortion squealing through the green room like an alarm. The women were alert now. Several of them started pacing about, reviewing the routines.

The girl watched, fascinated by their rituals – stretching their calves, decricking their necks, limbering their arms and shoulders as though it was a ballet recital, and she a junior understudy. Outside it was dark, the Southern Cross tilted in the night sky, off-kilter, a picture frame slipped off a hook. This was their world now, the punters relegated to abstraction, distantly audible as a recital hall audience might be audible backstage as patrons made their way into the auditorium, settled themselves into their seats, the girl paying lip service to the MC's commentary the way she might pay lip service to a stranger's telephone conversation on the bus, of interest only in so far as she recognised the odd name. But most of the jokes went over her head. And it wasn't all meant to be funny. She tuned out again, her mind skipping from one thought to the next: what her mum might be doing now, if she was suspicious about her daughter's whereabouts – she doubted it, too busy screwing Ray to give her a passing thought, hating her for it and then not caring, projecting beyond, thinking about her new life, on the phone to her friend Cassie, saying, *I'm on the pool deck. Everyone in WA has got a*

pool. And then Greta suggesting, "You might try warming up too," breaking into her reverie. "Get yourself loosened up."

"Here," said one of the other women, extending her hand.

The girl stood, accepting the offer, she and her dance partner engaging in an awkward pas de deux, step ball change, step ball change, just like Greta had taught her during their rehearsals.

"Only the best for the boys," she'd say as she made the girl do it again and again. Rinse and repeat. "Practice makes perfect." *Anything worth doing is worth doing well. There are no shortcuts to greatness*.

Or was that someone else? Nevertheless, it was an ethos the girl respected. It was why she was here. All part and parcel of her plan. Because what was the point of marking time at home when life awaited elsewhere? A concept she would happily have explained if anyone had stopped for five minutes to listen.

It was nearly showtime. The atmosphere in the room changed as though they had been put on notice; backs straight, heads up, like a herd of deer as a lion approached the plain. At some soundless signal the girls were on their feet, waiting at the door. She found herself at the rear of the line marching up the steps. And then she heard the MC introducing them, the crowd going mad, a curtain opening, the lights blazing and they were on.

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The media conference is called for 3 pm the following day. After the statement, a pack of journalists lunge at him with microphones, their questions thrust right up into his face. Laurie tells them to back off but doesn't do anything to make them. Harry turns pink from all the fuss. People think he is shy around strangers, but that isn't it. From the glare of their lights, he knows them too well – like his dad, they have the same haunted eyes as junkies.

How he loathes them. Question after question: "Why has he done it?" "What is the matter?" "What is it all about?" He sticks to the script, reads his prepared statement, then gives one-word answers. "Yes." "Sometimes." "Maybe." Though the truth is he doesn't know. Not really. All he is sure of is that he has to do something; it is either this or something much worse.

He can see now why those kids snap. The ones who blow up their schools or prang their cars into the houses of their ex-girlfriends. Because so many people expect so much yet so little is offered in return.

He doesn't mean money, it isn't about material things. It's just that some people are forever being written up, while for others the umpire is always looking the other way. Everyone banging on about fairness and accountability when the truth is as long as you are scoring, nobody really cares what else you do. At times Harry feels that the only way to move forward is to become wholly unacceptable himself, to push the envelope until the situation is made clear.

His father keeps saying you'd better not be doing this on account of me – such avid protestations – pundits speculating that he is exactly the reason, not because of the drinking, they don't know about that yet (his most recent tumble off the wagon), but manipulating his offspring with his own failings – famously on record as collecting the most Brownlow votes in a career but never winning a premiership – unable to let his children enjoy their moment of glory, knowing that securing the flag will trigger an audit of the family's past, thrusting him back into the limelight, front and centre, Harry having resigned to avoid the intense media attention.

But Harry maintains his father's history has nothing to do with it. Not that he's read all the clippings, pored over the scrapbooks (the old man's scrapes and successes). He isn't about to either. He doesn't need to. He already knows what they'll say.

Harry Furey on hiatus

By Margo Milne-Arthurs

November 30, 2006

Hopes of back-to-back flags are on hold with the news that star recruit Harry Furey will skip out on training camp in Arizona and is rethinking his future.

Furey, a first-round draft pick snapped up under the father-son rule, is ambivalent about the limelight, preferring to keep to himself when he's not on the field. Unlike his older brother, key forward Matt Furey, who thrives under pressure, sources suggest the younger Furey's decision is based in part on personal issues arising from the additional attention that comes with winning a premiership. The well-documented health problems and recent media exposure of the footballing dynasty's patriarch, Alan Furey, have no doubt also contributed to the situation.

The Club was surprised by the move but has talked with Furey and will meet with him again later this week. "A change is as good as a holiday," said coach Laurie Holden, who has encouraged Furey to enjoy a short vacation. "It's a long season and everyone's tired but we are confident Furey will be back and ready to rumble after he's recharged his batteries. We fully support his decision to take some personal time."

But it is not clear whether Furey has the stamina or interest to return to the sport at the elite level. "Does he have the fire in the belly? That's the stuff that counts," says teammate Jack Feddersen. "Only time will tell."

Does familiarity breed contempt or simply provide a platform for its expression? Harry has never known a time without reporters skulking around. At the playground fence, shameless, looking to him for a sound bite. Something quotable. Even a noteworthy rebuff. Always pushing for a reaction. Making up bullshit if they didn't get what they wanted – stories of naked models riding ponies around their living room, Lolitas keeping the old man company in the bath – plying him and his brother with Redskins and other lollies through the cyclone wire, hoping one of them would eventually spill. Or tailing him from the oval to the milk bar and back again, sausage roll in hand, waiting for him to do God knows what, baiting him with choice highlights phrased as questions, a litany of tasteless crimes and misdemeanours (his father's drinking, his drug taking, his cavorting with teenage girls, now that was an education – "Do you know anything about him providing alcohol to minors?" "Are there drugs in the house?" "Have you ever seen him smoking hash?" – incendiary inquiries, doing their best to provoke an outburst, a revelation, anything to get their byline on the front page.

Legend's Son Goes Berserk (the one time he fell for it).

And then this current attention, which confounds him because he can't imagine there is anything left to be said about his family; their entire lives having been stripped and spread, bent back on themselves for public consumption – assignations and separations, resignations and reconciliations, deaths and divorces – so that they have become almost new again they are so worked over. New yet empty, dispossessed of anything they ever once possessed, whatever it was they ever housed now lodged beyond themselves in some plastic location neatly furnished by the press.

At school, the kids used to have a field day giving him and his brother hell whenever a new story broke. Your dad's a fuckin' loony, they commonly said. A bullshit artist. A quitter. That, or that he was a stupid junkie. A drug pusher. The grim reaper. Such eloquence from the mouths of fourteen-year-olds (all confirmed and correctly educated in the politics of sin and resurrection, none of them having the compassion to keep their traps shut). Charming little chips off their older blocks.

Matt seemed to be able to tune them out. "Fuck 'em," he'd say, his teeth red from the sugary contraband.

Fuck them!

Harry practised but he never felt any better for it.

He knew what the Bible said about turning the other cheek, but he would have been much happier with a gun.

As soon as they are finished he goes into the bathroom, leans over the sink, the stained porcelain muffling his hurried breath.

It is the rumble of the sea inside of him. The quiet roar of a shell held up to his ear. *Shhhhhhhhh* ... But there is no peace. All he can hear is the music. Still.

I'm a sexy mama (mama) ...

It was so loud at first that he didn't actually notice it until it stopped, the atmosphere quickly dropping in temperature and then heating up again as Marty "Lightfoot" Karnahan (a retired journeyman and Sportsman's Night veteran) took to the stage to welcome them all to the event.

"Good evening gentlemen," he enunciated deliberately, each word given ample space, an audible leer, the sound distorting as some technician adjusted the microphone levels backstage. "I'm happy to see so many of you here on this players' night of nights. And from what I understand – if last year is anything to go by – this is not a night for the faint of heart, so I trust you're busy fortifying yourselves."

The room erupted in cheers and stomping.

Marty was about six foot tall and chunky in his tight tuxedo and crimson velvet cravat, the waves of his unnaturally bright hair held in rigid whorls but for one determined ribbon that drooped above his right eye like a flaccid windsock. "Before I start, the manager has asked me to request that, for health and safety reasons, none of you get up on top of the chairs and tables during my standing ovation. No seriously, that's what he said. Personally, I don't have a problem with it, but he doesn't want you blokes getting carried away."

As Marty ran through another icebreaker or two – *What's the difference between kinky and demented? Kinky is using a feather, demented is using the whole chicken; How can you tell a blonde's been in your fridge? There's lipstick on the cucumber* – Harry sensed a presence behind him, Jack's boozy breath blowing down his neck.

It was an occasion for celebration and reflection, Marty running through a history of the Club's achievements culminating in that year's premiership flag, acknowledging the contribution of various people along the way. Then he was done with it, the first formalities of the evening, and it was time to move on to the real attraction. "So let's get this party started, shall we?" he said, picking up the microphone stand and moving it stage left. "Kicking off tonight's entertainment, they're sweet and sexy, the Honey Traps. Always a pleasure. Let's make them feel welcome—"

Jack leant in and raised his voice to be heard above the applause. “Welcome to the big league, Nipper. You’re in for it now.”

Margo is waiting for him when he comes out of the bathroom. “Are you okay, mate?”

Okay? Mate?

No.

He smiles at her. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

She is like a pit bull, Margo. Holding her own at those media events. Never taking offence at the crap they sling at her. At press conferences he always looks for her, doesn’t feel right if she isn’t in the crowd.

She jots something in her notebook. He tries to peek but she won’t let him see. “What is it?” he asks. “Come on. I’ve got a right to know. Is it about me?”

She holds it to her chest. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours. What do you say? Do you want to tell me what this is really about? Why didn’t you go away with the boys for the footy trip, and why aren’t you going to Arizona? Is it about your dad? Did something happen at Sportsman’s Night? You never called me back. You said you’d ring me if you had any news, but you didn’t. Is the Club putting some kind of pressure on you?”

Harry thinks he might faint, the corners of his vision blurring, a bird’s wings fluttering, a barrel closing out. He considers returning to the bathroom, but figures she’ll probably follow him inside, someone as familiar with the interior of clubhouse changing rooms unlikely to be intimidated by a simple “Gentlemen” sign on the door. “You know, I really don’t have time for this,” he says, one of his mother’s favourite lines, and turns to walk away, duck and weave, wishing he could run, that the room would miraculously open out before him and that he could disappear.

This is the thing about modern football, gaining possession of the ball is much easier but it is no guarantee you can make good use of it.

Still, Margo must sense he is serious. “Alright then, if it means that much to you.” She holds up the book to the relevant page. An incomprehensible entry, all squiggles and dots. “Shorthand,” she explains. “Us girls, we all started out as secretaries.”

Outside it is warm and bright. Another long November afternoon. In the car park, asphalt wedges portion out the vehicles, a sea of cars huddled in the sun, now a

stately grid. “Chin up, Harry,” says Margo, as she hands him a note out the window of her olive-green Citroën GS. More squiggles and dots. “Everything looks better after a good night’s sleep.”

It is almost four, but still glare dances across the bonnets, pirouetting off the windows, a blinding display, so that even with his sunglasses on he has to squint to find his way.

Lately he is always squinting, as though the world around him is overexposed, smudged, difficult to read. Diana is waiting for him in the car. “You should get your eyes checked,” she says. “You might need glasses.” But that won’t help. It is his eyes but not his eyes, a different kind of vision.

He picks up his mother’s magazine. “You can write shorthand, can’t you?” he says, as they stop at the lights, the slow drip of passing traffic.

“I could once. A long time ago.”

“But you know what it means, all those curly little lines?”

“It’s no mystery, Harry. It’s the same as English, just a different alphabet.”

“So you could translate it?”

“That depends. I could give it a go. Why?”

“No reason.” He moves the magazine further and further from his face imitating his father with the form guide, trying to pinpoint a position where the text starts to blur.

“Stop that,” says Diana, grabbing her *Women’s Weekly*.

Harry looks like he’s been through the wringer.

“Maybe you should move home again,” she proposes (guilt). “Until you sort yourself out, figure out what you’re going to do next. Did you ask the Club? Can’t they find you something to keep you busy?”

“No.” It hadn’t crossed his mind. Not that he wants them to find him something. Unless it means having nothing to do with them. That is a job he’d happily sign on for. “Dean’s asked me to fill in over the break. And Dad says he can probably get me a couple of shifts at the warehouse, at least until Christmas.”

“You’re not doing that.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with it?”

“It’s undignified, that’s what’s wrong with it. Don’t make me explain, Harry, you can see that.”

He can but he doesn’t want to discuss it again, all the ways he should or shouldn’t behave, when it is okay to be himself and when it isn’t, who he has to check

with and why. Dean doesn't give these matters a second thought. If he wants to go to the pub, he goes to the pub. And if he gets shit-faced, he gets shit-faced. No one gives a stuff which DVDs he watches. He could rent *The Notebook* for all anyone cares. But they've been over this ad nauseum. He isn't up for another colloquium on the price of being in the public eye. It is an argument he is never going to win. He changes the topic back to the press conference. "So if I show you something can you tell me what it says?"

"What 'something'? What are you talking about?"

He presents Margo's note. "Shorthand."

"I don't know. Possibly. Parts of it. It's been twenty years. Twenty years at least. Why? Who wrote it?"

"Margo," he says. "And in her notebook too. Pages of it."

"Give me that," says his mother, snatching the paper out of his hands. She presses it against the steering wheel to examine while she is driving. "The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog," she manages with some difficulty.

"What's it mean?"

"It's one of those sentences with all the letters of the alphabet. They used to make us type it over and over at school for practice. Not much call for it these days. Why'd she give it to you? Is it code for something? An in-joke?"

"No. I don't know."

"You don't know? Are you sure?"

"It's nothing. She's okay."

His mother is far from convinced. "You watch yourself there. You don't want her hanging around. You remember what she was like at your father's inquest. A leopard can't change its spots, Harry. Just 'cause she's a woman doesn't mean she's playing straight with you. We're not all sugar and spice."

Daylight saving makes the early morning look like evening and the evening glow like dawn, the shoulder hours stretching out the middle, slowing time until it almost stops. Father Murphy drops by to check on Alan, to exercise a little pastoral care, the two men poking about in the tomatoes, like that has anything to do with God. He catches hold of Harry on his way out. "You're not going to do anything rash, are you, son? No need to quit the team to make a point. Your dad's worried enough about you as it is. He doesn't

need any additional stress." Like the article is Harry's fault. "This is a good opportunity for both of you. Time for some mutual healing."

You look after him then, thinks Harry. You tell him everything's okay and this is just a blip, that his new sponsors won't find out, that he'll be back on track again before he knows it. You call the doctor at three in the morning and help strip him and wash him while he's hurling his abuse: "Pussy, pussy, pussy," hissed under his breath, then the following day no sign of recalling any of it ("You're weak. Toughen up. I would have fixed you up alright," his father trying to punch him in the stomach, then collapsing again on the floor, sobbing like a child. The doctor telling the old man to quit it, to cut it out, and to Harry, not to take it on, not to take it to heart. Part of the sickness, he says).

Everyone's always got such good advice about what *he* should be doing. But why don't you try it, he would like to have said to Father Murphy. You and all your do-gooder friends with all your Christian energy and best intentions. You take care of the shit and stink and mess for a change then show up to practice on Monday after school fresh as a daisy like the two things have nothing to do with each other. But he doesn't. He doesn't say anything much, other than "Thanks for coming," and then shows Father Murphy the door.

"What a know-it-all. But I told you, I told you, I told you." She keeps saying it, over and over, that they have come for her, that this is the way it would be. The sound of knuckles hammering at the door. "Let us in." Or is it, "Let me in" (and that voice again with the vaguely familiar ring)? He isn't sure now. The fluid nature of dreams frustrating any sense of accurate recall. The girl laughing to herself, then daring him. "So, will you?" Sitting there calmly and unafraid as all hell is about to break loose.

"Will I what?" says Harry. *Will I what?* Picturing himself saying it as he speaks, his mouth wide open, unnaturally so, bellowing in the tiny hotel room (though what sort of nasty hotel is that?), as though he is addressing a crowded stadium, and then his jaw opening wider and wider, hinged, like a cartoon character, until that is all one can see of the room, his oral cavity, like a player's race, the floor bounded by his tongue, a thick pink spongy carpet on which the girl now sits, a perfect dummy, expertly balanced between his teeth.

... I'm a sexy mama ...

"Be quiet, can't you?" he says, as fists continue to pummel the door (or perhaps they are using something more forceful, a battering ram?), the frame visibly shaking as they hit it, the structure threatening to give at any moment.

Sometimes he mixes them up, the girls. *What happens at Sportsman's Night stays at Sportsman's Night.* He'll be dreaming about one and then the other will appear, her features miraculously reconfigured. His girl. His father's girl. Increasingly interchangeable. Neither of them clear enough in his mind's eye to definitively dislodge the other's image, to delineate whose role is whose, which one belongs in which man's fantasy.

*

The girl peered out at the crowd but from the stage you couldn't really see anything. That was the biggest surprise. The venue wasn't especially large, but the lights were bright and obscured the best part of the audience, the area beyond the first two rows an overbright unknowable galaxy. The girl fixed on a point at the back of the room, where she imagined the back to be, and performed to that, fashioning herself as Beyoncé addressing the camera, her secret admirer; countless people might be watching but she was dancing just for one.

Everything was so strange. She felt herself staring dead ahead, knew she was going through the motions, completing the steps as she'd been taught to do, but it was like she was watching herself at the same time, as though she was both herself and someone else, neither fully in or out of the situation. She had expected to feel nervous, had been worried that she'd forget the sequences, but she wasn't nervous at all. Or maybe she was but the feeling didn't stick long enough for her to focus on it. By the time she came back around to it she was thinking about something else.

Line formation, spin, dissolve, do it again.

It was over before she knew it. Act one.

Greta said she did well. Very well. That was good. Better than doing poorly. Good was always better than bad, though in all honesty the girl didn't really care.

*

Embrace the challenge. That and *See it, believe it!* Positive affirmations, Club psychologist Judith's prescription, a daily mantra of platitudes to help him develop his

winning imagination (in-house counselling one of the Club's non-negotiable conditions during Harry's hiatus). His father walks into the bathroom as he is running through them, practising making stupid faces in the mirror as he does it, his chin jutted forward (the skin drawing in around his scar), lips pursed in a cat's bum, though it might look like he is blowing himself a kiss, dumb idea either way, their eyes meeting briefly across the mist before the old man walks out again, quietly closing the door and that is the end of the matter, no mention of Laurie's house call, no indignant claims of being quoted out of context, no examination of events other than to say he isn't going to rehab again, no way, no how. They'll work it out at home. It was just a couple of drinks and given the situation, who can blame him? A few more days and he'll be himself again. Their lives turned upside down by a renewed round of interview requests, eager junior reporters camped at their front gate, keeping pace with their various errands as the two of them gamely persist with their routines. But this is exactly as desired, according to Diana, who doubts her ex's every move, right down to his choice of toilet paper. "Selfish turd. Couldn't he stay on message for once, say something about the t-shirts and keep his mouth shut about the rest of it? What else did he think would happen? Really, tell me," she says. "How else could this play out?"

Harry doesn't know. He just wants them to back off.

"Never mind, darling. They'll forget about you again soon enough," she says, a truth as incontrovertible as it is irrelevant when reporters are knocking at their front door.

He's stopped listening to the phone messages, ignores the machine's incessant blinking. Margo has left him another one, something she wants to run by him (he isn't touching that) – carefully transcribed in his father's peculiar hybrid script, capitals and lower case run madly together on the back of a power bill envelope, the note slipped under his bedroom door like a peace offering – but otherwise they are all for his dad.

"You wouldn't say anything to anyone, would you, son?" Alan ventures the next time they are out in the car together, another bland afternoon en route to the pharmacy, the same banged-up white Corolla following them all the way to and from the shops. Meaning, especially your mother, *don't tell her about my little breakdown, will you? No need for her to know.* Like Harry has to be told (not that it has stopped him from telling her, and Father Murphy would have said something if he hadn't). Doubtful though that it would modify Diana's opinion. Set as it is already. Benevolent pity. Well, she might pity him a little more. But it is too late to be worrying about that.

At the Club they run a battery of tests: eyes, ears, chest, nose, throat. Harry sounds out the letters on the eye chart, large to small, as though he is scanning the crowd for familiar faces at the MCG.

"Now the other eye," says Dr Preeta.

Harry switches his hand from left to right, blinking as his pupils adjust to the light.

"You look like a pirate," she says, as he cups his hand over his eye socket. "Lucky you've still got all your teeth."

"Mouthguards. Are you going to make me walk the plank?"

"No. But if you ever need to get up in the night, if you keep one eye closed like that you won't lose your night vision." She brings her palms up to her face, alternatively covering and uncovering each eye. "That way you won't have to wait half an hour again before you can see where you're going."

But what if he doesn't want to see? Can night blindness stop his dreams? His memories? Thinking of that night, the way the girls tottered out on stage, eighteen of them in team colours, in various stages of undress, as though each one represented a progressive frame in a short cinematic striptease. How the crowd leant forward, lurched to the flesh, a beery vapour enveloping the scene in its own hot humid mess. "Tits," they'd called. *Live tits on stage* (that's what they'd been promised) as Harry clung to the bar, his heart thumping, fog swirling in the footlights (dry ice) as the women began to gyrate, the music so loud the sticky floor vibrated, a skeletal rattle, though the tune was barely discernible above the wolf whistles and jeers, just a steady drum through his feet and shins, a bass Jurassic caution. From the back of the room, his eyes fixed upon the girl: a blonde, young (too young?), in fishnets, high heels, blue hot pants and a matching sequined bikini top. She looked familiar – so many women looked familiar. Did he know her? Like the others, her eyes appeared closed, or perhaps it was just the angle, for as the group turned she seemed to return his gaze, as though she felt his stare across the writhing mass.

Harry covers both eyes with his hands, takes a deep breath. What he wants is to be relieved of this ordeal, to sleep a dark empty sleep that will carry him through to morning. That's what his father's pills do. Leave him dazed but wiped clean. Reborn. Does Dr Preeta have something that can guarantee him that?

"You want a sleeping pill?"

"That'd work."

"Tell me about it," she says. So, of course, he changes his mind.

At his next appointment Dr Preeta says there is nothing wrong with him. "The results have come in and you're fine. Physically, that is. Fit as an Irishman's fiddle."

"That's good," he manages, Dr Preeta smiling as he makes his way out of the office, though in actual fact he is disappointed, fucked up as that sounds. He would greatly prefer if there was something officially the matter with him. What can he do with an "all clear"? She may as well have handed him her jar of jelly beans.

Rosie has let herself into the shed, big muddy prints on the cement floor, though Harry smells her perfume before he has fully opened the door, the brackish fragrance heralding her visit like an omen. "It was meant to be a surprise," she tells him when he doesn't say anything. "I needed a break from work."

"What if Dad had been home?"

"His car's not here."

It is still raining. Water hammers the corrugated iron as he opens the slatted window, hoping the fragrance will dissipate before his next workout.

There is nowhere comfortable to sit. He leads her back to the house where they fuck silently on his unmade bed, him withdrawing at the last minute to come on her thigh because he doesn't want to use a condom.

"Some of the girls at work were talking about you this morning."

"Who? Which girls? What were they saying?"

"About leaving the Club. They saw you on the telly."

"What of it?"

"Is it true? Are you going to quit?"

"What do you care? I didn't think you followed footy."

"I don't know. I'm just asking."

Harry isn't used to spending time with her during the day, the natural light illuminating the gaping chasm of their respective disappointments. When he looks down, the smears of her eye shadow are gathered so distinctly in the creases of her eyelids, it is as though someone has attempted to cross her out, to rule a line through an unfortunate chapter.

“Rain, rain, go away, come again another day.” Rosie rolls over, drapes her arm across his midriff. “Don’t you love that rhyme?” she says. He can hardly stand to look at her, let alone to feel the touch of her body as she presses herself against him, tackled – the tangle of legs, the taste of blood in his mouth. He turns his back to her, closing his eyes, willing her to leave.

Shouldn’t you be getting back, he suggests. Or perhaps he just thinks he does, the clunky numbers on his digital clock clicking over the minutes as she prattles away about the locum pharmacist, English, just granted his residency visa, filling the room with small talk about his travels (six months in the Northern Territory preparing tranquilisers for alcoholics before transferring to Bondi where it was all drug overdoses), proposing plans for joint activities, as though they are a real couple, impregnating his sheets with that perfume (he is going to have to do laundry now when she leaves), making no secret of what she wants, to insinuate herself into his life. She is like his mother in the way she has it all worked out, how he should renew his contract and then the two of them can move in together. She describes a three-bedroom house. Nothing fancy, it can be single storey, but it will have a carport and enough room for a clothesline and a barbecue and somewhere for the children to play out the back.

“How many children?” he asks, though he knows his mother would never green-light the match – Rosie is too skanky, too needy, too not good enough for him.

She smiles. “Maybe three.”

It is news to him, the specifics, but not really. He can see this is the direction it is heading, the obvious way she is expecting it to go (more than six months and most girls assume you are engaged). Just like his mum and dad had been, and her mum and dad. Love and marriage, horse and carriage. And baby makes three. Or four. Or five.

Except that they aren’t really together, much as he and the Club aren’t really together so much as proximate and convenient, an untenable way to continue a relationship.

His thoughts run to bunk beds. Bunk beds and unflushed toilets. And his mother’s endless carryings on (still) about all their dirty washing piling up on her laundry floor (“Will you two ever be old enough to wash your own clothes?”), the strictures of happy family life beyond him for the time being. No wonder his dad had left them. Not that he’d had much choice. But Harry can see that this is the way it might have happened. One too many straws and he was off (pushed!).

"I don't know why everyone goes on about your brother," says Rosie. "You're much better looking than him."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, definitely," she says. "No doubt. Guess what, I think I'll take the afternoon off work." She adjusts her position to the side and he feels her chapped lips begin to inch across his exposed spine.

The house feels dark, gloomy, the blinds drawn, windows closed, but he is reluctant to get up and turn on some lights lest she mistake it for an invitation to stick around. *Can I have a cup of tea?* and so forth. He wants her out before his father returns. Not that the old man would object too strongly to there being a lady in the house (he'd have a nerve if he did), but Harry doesn't want Rosie getting too comfortable, asking questions, presuming an intimacy borne of blurred boundaries and forced politenesses. Right now he has no tolerance for his dad's shtick, the gentleman celebrity in his ratty clothes, trying to cover the gap with a chipper mood. *Pleased to meet you, young lady,* and all that crap. And Rosie would suck up too. All the way up. It makes him wish he could replay his father at his worst. Let her listen to a grab of that and then see how much she likes him.

Now that the word is out, people want to know what he is going to do. Harry's an expert at avoiding eye contact but they still stop him in the street and demand explanations: *Will you be back next season, Harry? Will we see you training again on the home ground?* But what to say? That they might? Probably. He doesn't know. He isn't even sure what the questions mean anymore, beyond the obvious – whether or not he'll be listed on next year's roster, if he still considers himself part of the side. It is the scale of the issue that stymies him, its breadth. Pinioned there between the everything he's ever done and the everything he'll ever likely do, the possibilities looming larger than the universe, greater than any footy field he's ever played, the answers as unknowable as the vast pale sky stretching above it.

Walking along, absent-mindedly bouncing the football, he directs his thoughts to his next meat pie. Curry or onion? With or without sauce? Angling the ball across the cracks at just the right pitch, up, down, without a hint of top spin, so that the ball returns to the matching curve of his hands as though attached by string.

On the field he doesn't think too much about it, the technical specs. All that concerns him is the trajectory of the football after he kicks the shit out of it, its subjection to his foot, bent to his will, flying through the air, ever forward.

The management committee urges Harry to get out of town, to take a break, clear his head, fresh legs sometimes making all the difference, could change the whole momentum. Ted saying for the life of him he doesn't understand why Harry didn't take off with the others, that none of this might have happened if he'd just had a holiday. The same strategy you use with young children, distract them until the problem goes away.

"It's not too late. Why not spend a week in Tahiti? Practise your French. Bora Bora's nice. We'll set you up in a hotel, five stars. You'll have a suite. Everything at your fingertips. Spend your days sucking rum out of a coconut. Sleep in, get drunk by the pool, eat too much, have a massage. You might even get lucky with one of the local girls. Or don't. If that's not your poison. Go fishing with some mates in Yarrawonga instead, that's always popular. Or skiing. Or camping. Somewhere off the beaten path. Whatever you like. It doesn't matter to me what you do, just so long as you're not here. No wonder you're burnt out. Even I'm sick of the sight of you."

Harry considers it for about five minutes, Alan letting it be known that he is keen to reprise their childhood hunting expeditions – father, sons, a tent and three rifles out in the middle of nowhere – but Harry has long had designs on Ningaloo Reef. Ever since primary school when Dean's parents visited the area, returning with snapshots of dugongs and nurse sharks in water so clear it took nothing for him to imagine sitting on the edge of a weathered old rowboat trailing his feet over the side. Riffling through dozens of photographs of brightly coloured tropical fish, Dean's mum saying that you could rent a glass-bottomed boat and spend all day in it if you wanted. Matt can't understand what you'd do all day if you couldn't surf, but Harry has no problem with it, exchanging the rush of the waves for dozier occupations – fishing and scuba diving, whale spotting from sheltered coves, fossicking for unusual shells.

"I might come with you," says Diana, as the two of them stuff holiday cards into company envelopes. *Season's Greetings from Irwin Mercantile*. One of his mum's clients. "It sounds like *Blue Lagoon*."

"What's that?"

"Just a movie. Though seriously, you might want to double-check if you can swim there. They've got crocodiles in the west."

His father doesn't see the point of it when the Barrier Reef is that much closer, but Harry is enticed by the distance, by the fantasy of being so far away from home. At very least he might be able to walk into a pub without being stared down all the way to the bar. "Imagine taking a leak in a public dunny without everyone trying to guess the size of your cock."

"So do it," says Alan. "If you think it'll make you happy, leave."

Embrace the challenge!

It isn't difficult for him to arrange it all in his head. He has the car. He has the rucksack. All that is missing is a dog for the passenger seat. Man's best friend. A blue heeler or a kelpie, one of those working dogs, something hardy to keep the riff raff away (not a runt like that terrier next door). A breed only a mother can love, says his mother, who'd steadfastly resisted her sons' adolescent entreaties. But Dean had had one, Ruben (fuck-stick name for a pet), now buried under a camellia tree (he just keeled over one morning beside his kennel, his tail extended as though he'd been chasing rabbits). "His ticker gave out," the vet said, he was pretty sure, though it could have been anything really. Ruben was sixteen years old.

Harry missed Ruben possibly more than Dean did, the stupid animal, keeping pace with them on a run, or tearing up and down the beach barking at the waves when they were surfing.

If Ruben was still around he might have borrowed him; loaded up the car and hit the highway. Without the dog though it would just be him out there, him out there again doing it on his own.

The street shines with the false gleam of early holiday cheer. Harry cruises past the formal-wear hire shop – Michelle is there, the one his mum likes, the same girl who'd fitted him for his tux – then circles the block and parks a few doors down where he has a good bead on her but is sure she can't see him. His back pocket vibrates and he responds to it automatically, too distracted by his surveillance activity (metaphorically trying her on for size) to check the number before answering it, a decision he regrets the moment he recognises her voice. "G'day, Harry," says Margo, all charm. The double doors at the front entrance to the shop automatically open and close as passers-by, on their way to the wine store next door, veer too close to the motion sensor. Michelle

doesn't even look up, she must be so used to it. Again, Margo wants to know if he has any news.

"What kind of news? I've told you a million times, Maggie. I don't know anything. I don't know what you want me to say."

He isn't about to deliver any kind of meaningful information (he can't imagine she thinks he would) and he knows better than to lie, might as well dig himself a trough and lie down in it right there, but Margo has a sixth sense about things – it's what makes her so good at her job – and he feels her dogging him like he's caught a hard tag.

"Come on Harry, you're not playing fair. Why haven't you returned my calls? I did that Make-A-Wish piece on you and Matt at the hospital. It's a two-way street. All I want is something to work with. There's a couple of stories floating around, the usual Jack horseshit mostly, the Grand Final, something about a girl, but I smell smoke. Is it fire or am I sucking a stale ashtray?"

Fire, smoke, smoke machines, the volume so loud he can't hear himself think ... *You keep fronting ...*

But he won't budge. "Time to give up smoking, I reckon, Margo. There's no fire here."

"What about you, then?" she tries. "Where are you sitting with your plans?"

The formal-hire shop is empty of clientele. It is too late in the year for much of that kind of dressing up. Too hot. Michelle leans against the counter, staring out the window, trancelike, as though she is looking right at him. He knows she can't see him from that angle but he leans back anyway. "Mum says I shouldn't talk to you," he says, his eyes firmly fixed on the automatic doors.

She snorts. "Really? But we're old friends. I would have thought she'd be all for—"

He hangs up before she finishes talking, for once the simplest solution seeming like the best – knowing he won't have a comeback for whatever it is she is going to say next – a flash of certainty guiding his hand, and then the inevitable hollow as it evaporates, the familiar nothing that trails his indecision. Looking at the phone, thinking it might explode from his insolence, he quickly switches it off before Margo has a chance to ring back to chastise him – *who do you think you are?* etc. – finding it hard to distinguish between her and the other maternal figures in his life, despite their supposed professional relationship.

Team officials tend to stick to the sidelines, but business is business and when it comes to her family, Diana is nothing if not pragmatic. Harry hears the car door slam and then her voice carrying down the hall. “I thought I told you to tell that old bitch to fuck off,” she says, fuming at the front door. “You know how I feel about those people. It’s bad enough that she rings – I don’t know why she bothers, I’m never going to call her back – but to come to the house. And speaking gibberish, some garbage about you and a girl at Sportsman’s Night. It was like a flashback; at first I thought she was talking about your father. Are you trying to give me a heart attack? I told you not to go. I virtually begged you not to go. Didn’t I say that? Didn’t I say, ‘Don’t do it?’ But no, you were going to go anyway. Fine. And now I’ve got reporters at my door again asking me about strange women like it’s 1989.” She stands there staring at him through the screen door, kicking the doorstop but refusing to come inside. “She wanted to know if you’d said anything to me about it.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her to piss off and get off my property, that’s what I told her, but do we need to call the lawyer, Harry? Is that what we’re dealing with here? You understand, she came to the house. She says she spoke to you but that you refused to answer her questions. Is it true? Did you do something? Did you? What did you do?”

If Harry could have hit someone, something, he would have. He knew Jack had had a few beers already on Sportsman’s Night, a few more than usual, not that you could really tell, staggering being his default posture, that, and grabbing his dick, preferably in public, whenever he got a chance, but this, this trying to drop him in it, was a new low.

“Pity he’s so famous or he’d probably be in jail,” Diana had said, issued at report of his last stunt, exposing Mr Happy to some woman at a Family Day meet-and-greet, news of which reached the major networks within minutes of the woman’s husband telephoning the police. She didn’t press charges (an omission rumoured to have cost the Club a small fortune – her children were now enrolled at a very expensive private school – the woman going on record only to say that she was keen to put the matter behind her), but it was enough to get Jack suspended for a couple of weeks on Club ethics violations. He’d been pulled up on more than anyone in recent history, but when you are the greatest full forward since Tony Lockett, who really cares if you can’t keep your hands to yourself?

Eddy is more demure, but not much, tending to follow his older brother's lead (less a question of character than courage, Jack holding the majority share of both), the adage being proved yet again that the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree, stunted, gnarled and diseased though it might be (and if you knew their father you'd know it was true, cruel bastard that he was).

Harry knows he has to keep it under control, to hose it down and put a lid on it before his mother decides to take matters into her own hands. The last thing he needs is her involvement, the meddling of an activist coach come out of retirement. "There's nothing to worry about, really. Nothing. I didn't do anything, I didn't. I promise. I said there's nothing going on and there's not. I told Margo too, that's why I had nothing to say to her. I don't know what she wants." He is about to add, *I can't believe you had to ask*, a stab at moral indignation, but he knows it is a step too far. His mother is perfectly within her rights to doubt him. It is part of the deal, the reality they've come to accept, that when it comes to football no accusation is too far-fetched.

"She seemed pretty sure of herself."

"Of course she did. She's a journalist. You taught me that. But there's nothing to it. Really. Did she say where she got her information? I keep telling her that nothing happened, that there's nothing going on. You know what those nights are like. Strippers and whatnot. But it was all pretty tame. Maybe someone got me mixed up with someone else, or one of the other blokes is having a lend of her, trying to get her to leave him alone by fobbing her off on to me. But I swear to you, I didn't do anything. Nothing. She's just digging for something to write about, trying to join the dots to make something that isn't there."

His father advises him to deal with it head-on. "It's a pretty bold play to drop in on someone like that, especially someone like your mother. She obviously thinks there's more to this business with the Club than you're saying, otherwise why take the risk?"

"Obviously."

"So is there?"

"No."

"I'd understand, son. Of all people, you know I would."

"I said no."

"So set her straight. The sooner you make a decision the sooner life will get back to normal around here. These people are relentless. Do you want me to talk to her?"

"Don't be daft," says Harry. He doesn't want that. Certainly not. "I can handle it," he says. But even if couldn't, he wouldn't want his father talking to her. He never wants his father to talk.

He is having that dream again: groggy, waking from a deep sleep, and she is there, her hair spread over his belly, warm wet mouth on his cock, her breasts grazing the pale skin on his thighs. He ejaculates as he wakes, just as he realises what is going on; Kate, his brother's girlfriend, has hijacked his imagination.

Harry feels ill. Why won't the women let him be?

At the Club a directive is issued reminding the boys to keep their mouths firmly shut. Off the record: Margo has been calling people making all sorts of crazy accusations and they are trying to get a handle on it. *It is imperative that all media requests however small be channelled through the publicity office*, the email says.

What happens at Sportsman's Night stays at Sportsman's Night.

Matt is despatched to make sure Harry gets the message. He comes bearing boxes, mostly football memorabilia their mum has threatened to throw away if it isn't cleared from under the bed. Harry helps him get it out of the car, an open carton revealing a publicity still, the good old days, the family patriarch taking a mark.

There are fewer photographs of the groupies and the gambling parties ("extracurricular activities"). Fewer still of the kids. Alan's stash hidden in their junior comp trophies. Their Monopoly money rolled into little tubes. Images of the great man snorting speed off the credenza at 4 am then not eating for five days straight filed indelibly in the murky archive of their childhood memories. Golden moments. No wonder the old man's career went off the rails.

"Do you ever think about after, about what you'll do next?" Harry asks Matt, a rare moment of ease between them.

"That's a way off, isn't it?"

"Is it? I don't know. You never know."

"I take it you've been giving the matter some thought. Does that mean you're in or you're out?"

"Jury's still out."

"If you're having that much trouble making a decision maybe you would be better off doing something else."

Easy moment over.

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, well stop making your problems my problems."

The days feel perennially grey, a great tarpaulin draped across the city, the sky somehow lower than usual, lower and wider, like it is flattening out on top of him, flattening and pushing, draining him of colour the way a leaf is flattened and loses its pigment when pressed down by a book.

Harry pulls up outside of Our Lady of the Assumption about five minutes early but already people are mingling on the front steps, early departers, or others, like him, tasked with the job of collecting someone. He doesn't feel like waiting in the car, sitting there almost as awkward as being benched in the first half (*taking one for the team*, that's what his high school coach had called it, his tone of voice a reminder that Harry was lucky he hadn't been forced to take a couple more, and at fourteen you didn't argue with your coach, even when you were up by twenty goals and it was the one time that year your dad had been sober enough to come and watch you play).

Lately his dad has taken to lingering long after the service, chatting with the special ministers, helping to put away the collection, anything to prolong that semblance of autonomy, to avoid returning to the aegis of his son's scrutiny. It could be hours before he makes an appearance, leaving Harry feeling like a jilted bride.

Harry slips into the back pew, rests his eyes for a second and focusses on his breathing. Counting backwards from one hundred as slowly as he can. Another of the counsellor's exercises. A way of making the time pass. You'd think it would be easy, thinking about nothing, letting the clock roll down to zero but his mind is an amateur brass band, each discordant trumpet louder than the last, the past reaching into the present more and more insistently so he is as good as there again, Sportsman's Night, watching the show.

"Tits, tits, tits, tits, tits," the players roared, flooding the forward area, the scene a fervent zoo of inebriation, the atmosphere so thick that the occasional sickly lungful of dry-ice smoke was actually a blessed relief from the alcohol and sweat and stifling pheromones. Packed in against one another, their bodies a tight scrum of desire giving off the disembodied chant, imploring the women to remove their clothes, until one by one the ladies took off their tops.

They were wearing pasties. Silver stars attached to their nipples that did little to conceal their breasts. Yet they were strangely chaste with the decals, like youngsters in bikini tops at the beach.

Nevertheless, Harry had a hard-on, despite himself, despite Jack whispering into his ear like a lover – "How's that? Could you tap a piece of that?" – as the women, some just girls really, jiggled and shook, the wry false modesty of their "adult" performance.

He starts counting again. One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven, ninety-six, forcing himself to focus on the numbers, to block the rest of it out, the girls, the boys, the music. Ninety-five, ninety-four ... his feet pressed firmly to the floor, the present.

Alan is right up the front near the altar, has no idea Harry is sitting there watching him hobble about, bowed and limping as he stores away the wine, snuffs out the candles, almost impossible to believe it is the same man who once proudly snorted six lines of cocaine in one sitting, drank vodka shots for breakfast, Harry and Matt making hay as best they could, turning his recklessness into lemonade ("Sign this, Dad," then flogging the autographed booty to their school friends). Years spent climbing on and off that transport, the toll like a winch, prematurely drawing him in, tightening. If Harry didn't know better he'd have assumed his father was an invalid visiting from the local convalescent home, that, or he was there on some kind of community service order.

The church is shabby modern. Built in the 1980s – blond brick, wood panelling, a simple pulpit, the walls adorned with large impressionistic copper plates depicting the Stations of the Cross, the carpet runners thinning regal Berber. There is no choir. Altar boys operate the tinny sound system. *Renée Geyer sings Songs of Joy*. Or very occasionally a local duo will treat them to an out-of-tune sampling of devotional hymns set to their acoustic guitar.

Harry could have sworn there was a choir at the church they'd attended as kids. If you could call their visits "attending", Easter, Christmas, the occasional confirmation or first communion, he and his brother like Switzerland, sandwiched between his warring parents, an anodyne territory regularly breached. At the time his thoughts were more concerned with his latest district carnival performance than with prayer, the service seeming interminably long. That's mostly what he recalled. That and working on his short kick and eating Chiko Rolls, their snacks on the way home (piping hot, he

always burnt his tongue), purchased to offset the deleterious effects of the inevitable quarrelling which resumed seconds after they all returned to the car.

His stomach issues a decided rumble. He could go a Chiko Roll now.

Father Murphy makes his way up the aisle to farewell the remaining parishioners, ducking into a squat beside Harry when he reaches his pew, close enough that Harry can see the short flecks of ginger and grey stubble on his chin. "What do you think of this," says the priest, closing his eyes and reciting a couple of lines.

"Say it again, Father."

"*The nothings you can never put into words*. I thought of you when I read that, your situation."

"What's it mean? Is it from the Bible?"

"No. It's a poem."

"A poem?"

"'Small-Scale' by Gig Ryan. She's an Australian poet."

Harry laughs. "You're bullshitting me. Like Ryan Giggs?"

"Who's that?"

"Never mind."

At the Point mist rises from the sea, the temperature of the water cooler than the temperature of the air, gulls gliding across its surface to escape the heat. Harry dives into the waves, head first through the surf, his thin blond hair pressed against his translucent scalp framing his face like an acanthus garland. There is more than a little malice in that black morass, the way its unrelenting purposefulness lands one wave on the shore after another. He ducks his head again, his chest swollen with breath. And then it crashes right on top of him, the thrust of the ocean.

Jock Riley, team legend and Club board member (also known as EG because he set such a fine example), had been roped in for the Sportsman's Night presentation ceremony. First he delivered the annual "Swinburne" speech, a bit of spruiking about Club glories, past and present, after which awards were presented while the boys ate dinner. The dancers returned to the stage, more modestly dressed in translucent Club-coloured chemises, taking it in turns to hand out the gongs. *There you go* and a kiss on the cheek:

Best Club Man

Most Improved

Leading Goal Kicker

Best And Fairest (First, Second, Third)

Most Courageous

Striving for Excellence

Best Finals Player

Player-Voted Award

Coach's Award

Rising Star

Best VFL Player

They were all attractive enough, the women, but Harry didn't really see the others, the young blonde having scope-locked his attention, the way she seemed to be there but not there, startled and slightly lost, like a foreigner at a tourist attraction wandered into someone else's family photograph.

He wanted to talk to her but not like this, dreaded the sound of his name being called, knew it was coming but almost tripped when he was invited forward, second-last prize of the evening.

He tried to smile. Who else could they have given it to? "Rising" what? Any other player would have been insulted.

Someone booed as he stumbled across the stage. Half-hearted. He didn't care. All he wanted was for it to be over, to accept his honour and to step down.

Laurie was up there. And Ted, the Club president, flanking Jock, all awkwardly extending their hands:

"Good onya, mate."

"Give my regards to your dad."

"Well done, son."

Harry didn't dare look towards the women. One of the other dancers kissed him, presented him with his prize.

The trophy now lay atop a box of calendars in his mother's living room. Someone else might have been pleased to receive it but for him it was just one more in a house full of trophies, another placeless keepsake looking for a home.

Again his father wants to know what he is going to do. “You can’t just sit around all day scratching your behind. This labouring work’s a dead end.”

“Jesus was a carpenter.”

“Save your bullshit for Laurie, right. So—”

“So I don’t want to talk about it,” says Harry, for the thousandth time thinking, *fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck off*.

He doesn’t want to talk about a lot of things – like his past or his future or the other night when he found his father broken down on the kitchen floor, his composure strewn like the jigsaw puzzle, scattered in a million pieces (thinking of the first time his mother walked out, TAB stubs sprayed across the living room, Alan swallowing diazepam like aspirin, coming down from a week-long bender – now that was a morning after). It is plain his father doesn’t want to talk about it either and Harry is more than happy to remain ignorant of his father’s particular demons spelled out for him in all their idiosyncratic detail. Or so he thinks. Except that this wilful Lethe allows for figments of his own invention, projections created in his own image, and thus he imagines them the same as his father’s; an equivalent palette of sorrows, one colour bleeding into the next, there being no clear distinction anymore where one torment starts and the other ends. Which girl is it who keeps him up at night? Whose injustice does he cry for? What is it that he is losing, has lost?

What he wants, what he’ll miss, is mud. The kind his grandfather called jungle muck. The thick, slimy, New Guinean sludge caked on his boots after a game. In summer, dust blackens his feet, wedging itself between his knuckly toes, so abrasive, it is the very opposite of slick.

Even when he’s been surfing, his toes remain filthy. A melanoid souvenir. A visceral stubbornness. A refusal to be wiped clean.

Rosie knocks on the front door.

He answers in his bathrobe, his hair clumped, eyes puffy from watching too much TV.

“What?” she says, as he stares at her in disbelief.

“I told you not to come here. Not unless you rang first.”

She laughs. “Oh, lighten up. A few of us are going to the movies.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think?”

He glances back, knows his dad is dozing off on the couch. Surely it is alright to leave him alone for a couple of hours. He probably won't even notice he is gone. "Okay," he says, "but not as a couple or anything. We're not holding hands." Not that she has ever tried to hold his hand. Not in public. But he knows what she is after, that unspoken desire for legitimacy, has long had an inkling of it, a dogged shadow of an idea that is now forcing its way into the open.

She watches him disappear barefoot down the hall, the light from the telly flickering through the frosted glass door, separating the living room from the front entryway.

At the cinema, Simone looks like she has a football stuffed under her jumper. Lank hair, thick ankles, she is up the duff, easily six months gone. In the ticket line, as she waddles along beside Katia and Katia's boyfriend, Pete, Harry has to remind himself that he knows her, that she isn't just another faceless mum.

Inside, they throw popcorn at the girls. "Fuck off," yells Rosie.

"Stick it up your arse," calls Simone.

Picturing Simone in Grade 2, flat-chested with lace-patterned white knee-high socks.

Stick it up your arse.

She wouldn't have said that then.

They sit through nearly two hours of *The Devil Wears Prada*. Ladies' choice. The girls' rapt faces flickering before Anne Hathaway's simpering attempts to impress her vicious boss, played by Meryl Streep, while he and Pete and Pete's mate, Chris, wait it out (junk time), such is the price of consensual sex. The theatre is barely half full. Usually he likes going to the movies, especially during the day, sitting in the dark, as indistinct as everybody else, a matinee reprieve from reality. But since the press conference he feels like he can't get away, that he is conspicuous even here, an aura of infamy surrounding his very being.

Rosie sits across the aisle but her presence is so immediate she might as well be sitting right beside him. Every time he looks across she is looking back at him. Or she isn't but he can feel her thinking of him, as though she's just been looking but has managed to turn away in time – a clumsy strategy, faking her intermittent interest in the film, so that he won't notice her obsessing.

His skin feels itchy. He imagines himself blushing, the red patches clawing up his pale neck. Back at Rosie's flat, he tries fucking her but finds it hard to sustain any

interest, the sound of Katia and Pete rooting in the adjacent room off-putting, or perhaps he has had enough of ferreting about in the knickers of this girl he doesn't care for. "Maybe we should call it quits, I think we should call it quits," he says, as she pumps again at his penis as though it is her fault (poor technique, she worries), meaning the whole relationship, not just this current botched attempt at sexual congress, the idea of being free of her an immediate relief to him, realising this is what he's wanted for a while now, to politely tabulate their score and move on.

Rosie understands all too well what he is getting at but she persists anyway, determinedly coaxing at his genitals like bashful stress toys, bent on eliciting a response. When she finally has him inside her she doesn't waste any time, flicking off the light and keeping quiet as she agitates her hips, giving him a chance to think of someone else.

The Rising Star trophy was surprisingly heavy – a bronze figurine taking a grab. Why were the manikins always arranged in the same pose? He lobbed the statuette on the table as he contemplated what remained of his meal while Jack said, "Get a look at that, Nipper." And Eddy followed reflexively with: "What do you think about that?"

2006 Rising Star ✶

His gravy had largely congealed on his plate. He picked up the cutlery then put it down again, the fatty lump of meat easily wider than his head. He cast his eyes about for his brother, but Matt was on the other side of the venue, seated almost as far from him as it was possible to be. He fingered his bow tie, wished he could take it off.

Keith Slattery and Richie Moore were on their table. Along with Jonathan Knight and Nick Hartigan from the forward line, heads tipped towards each other, engaged in their own conversation. Most of the boys were pissed as farts, drinking much more than they ate as Marty ran through another comedy routine, entertaining the crew with digs at the coaching staff and cheap swipes at the Club sponsors. Something about an American and a wombat had the room in stitches.

Not in his corner though. With Jack and Eddy downing shots on either side of him, theirs might as well have been a private party of three. The brothers, nicknamed "Dumb" and "Dumber" by the press, tag-teaming him with intimations about his sexual

preferences and predilections, making suggestions about what he might like to do with the various performers, pressing him for details about his romantic experiences.

Harry squeezed his fists until they throbbed but he refused to answer their questions.

It is a habit he hasn't tried terribly hard to break, digging deep half-moons into the calloused skin whenever he forgets to trim his nails. The smell of Preen wafts up his nostrils, the comforting scent of Sunday nights in front of the telly at home as he gouges and jabs his palms while his mother works at the buttons on her tennis dress. "Are you really still thinking things over," she asks, "or have you already made up your mind? I, for one, would like to know your plans."

He realises he's been doing neither, no tossing around, no deciding. He is simply suspended upon a high wire in space, wavering on a wobbly leg, waiting for fate, the breeze, to tip him in one direction or another.

It is an approach that has stood him in good stead until now, following along, letting circumstances dictate his next move, the vicissitudes of prevailing conditions determining his course. And there has been no reason to do otherwise. The path has always been clear. Easy. One foot in front of the other and that is that. The precedent well and truly set. This time, however, precedent won't do. He has to make a decision. His hand is being forced. It is the first time he is aware of having to make such a choice, the first time he has been instrumental in establishing the conditions leading to that decision-making.

"They're not going to wait for you forever," continues Diana. "I know they say to take your time, but they're just words, Harry. They'll say anything to buy themselves a bit of breathing room. Especially after your father's latest episode. Whatever they think you want to hear if that will put the ball back in their court. Bottom line though is they want an answer. You know that, don't you? They're not going to let you swan right through pre-season without turning up to training. 'Family issues' are only going to get you so far."

Harry closes his eyes, can see two bright round discs clearly reflected on the inside of his lids. "You sound like you're working for Laurie. Dad always said you had a thing for him. That he was a ladies' man."

"That's funny, coming from your father."

"Well why are you hassling me about it? A few more days isn't going to make any difference."

"Maybe. Maybe not. I don't know. I don't want to see you forced into a position you don't like, though, because you've left things too late. You don't want to be swept along on someone else's timetable. It's important to be realistic, to take control. Have you written it all up, the pros and cons? Those human resources people always say you've got to do that, to make a list of your strengths and weaknesses."

His father thinks it is fear that is holding him back, capping his ambition as surely as a botched knee reconstruction. Good old-fashioned apprehension. What if he is crippled after copping one in the shin, or fractures some vertebrae and does his back? But that is just the name of the game. Everyone goes out with a use-by date. You could break your neck, you could break your arm. Any round could be your last.

When Alan started out there was none of this whining about personal safety; you ran out there and gave it your all, your attention monopolised by the ball. "Tough it out," the coaches would say after a nasty tackle. "Push through the pain." Stiff upper lips were the order of the day. You had to be strong. Shake it off. No one cared if you copped an elbow in the jaw, lost all your teeth. Anyone worth their salt would soldier on. You'd have to have been knocked unconscious to get off the field. And that didn't always work. The only thing that mattered was the game. You kept on going until the final siren call.

"So when are you seeing that psychologist lady again?" his father queries, venturing a jolly tone as though he has no problem with them at all, the medical fraternity, magnanimously setting aside his pronounced scepticism ("Never done me any bloody good, not then, not now") in exchange for supportive counselling for his son.

"What difference does it make?" asks Harry. "It's all crap. You can go and talk to her if you like."

"Not bloody likely."

Senior adds twenty kilos to the bench press and eases himself down, Harry peering up his father's nose as Alan tilts his head back to check his position, wondering if his father is as well acquainted with the interior of his (Harry's) nasal cavity.

He hasn't heard anything from the Club in nearly a week, but he knows time is running out. That's just the way it is. Sooner or later someone will come asking, a

deadline will be laid down. But can't it wait? The season is months away. What is the hurry?

Sanding floorboards for Dean, seeing the way the materials change under his manipulations, the rough knots and blemishes gently pressured into giving way to the freshly hewn veneers, caressing the points again and again until the surfaces seem almost new. "Harry, can you do the lunch run?" asks his friend, holding out the keys to the ute.

Harry leaves the sander where it stands and take orders for the shops. As he tallies the items in his head – two burgers, fries, etc. – he thinks, this is how it goes, this is an option, another way to be, if he walks away, another road to tread; allowing the possibility for a moment, him and Dean going into business together, both their names on the company letterhead.

Dean wants to go to the pub, Parma and Pot special, but Harry can't face it tonight, the smell bound up with his last image of Eddy, at Sportsman's Night, retching all over the bathroom floor. Proudly regaling Harry with the details, his putrid breath right in Harry's face. And then Marty stepping back onto the stage, this time wearing a top hat and carrying a magician's cane, and on it went. "Abracadabra, gentlemen," he'd said, waving it around, the unfurled ribbon of hair banging him in the eye. "As you know, this is traditionally the business end of the evening, so I have one question for you: are you ready?" Harry didn't know what he was talking about but then Marty posed the question again. "Well are you?" And that is all it took. *Blood oath*. There was a whoop from one of the other tables (Matt?) and then wholesale pandemonium. Foot stamping, whistling, a tuneless rendition of the Club song. More grunting than melody as the room united behind the anthem. Red-faced Eddy grinning from ear to ear, banging his palm against the table as the lights went down and the music started up again – *Loosen up my buttons, baby* – and the dancers were back, sparkling in the footlights, all sequins and tassels.

The music seemed faster now but the dancers' movements appeared slower, almost measured, the caution of someone previously wrong-footed trying to avoid the same mistake (though wasn't the quickest way down a flight of stairs to monitor each careful step?). He thought of those pink Energiser Bunnies. Imagined some air had been let out of their tyres. Knew it was a mixed metaphor, that it didn't make sense. Editing

his thoughts as he went along, leaping from one unrelated image to the next, until he ended up home again, peering into his mother's fish tank, thinking it was like the women were dancing underwater.

If you could call what they were doing dancing. A form of erotic line-dancing, perhaps. Part Madison, part Can Can. In boots and custom babydolls, opaque panels suggesting so much more than if they had been completely sheer.

They strutted through the rest of the song and then the music changed and the group dissolved, dividing off into traditional pairings for a waltz; the titillation of semi-naked women in intimate proximity one step nearer to that fantasy realised, then one of the ladies broke formation, veered into the centre – hands on hips, spreading her legs in an unabashed proposal, inviting her partner to kneel before her, face planted in her crotch – while the other women continued their sexless box steps.

He was drunk enough that he could watch without flinching. Though not so drunk that his cock didn't stiffen in his pants. It was the idea more than the reality. Wouldn't know what to do with them if he could take them home. Witnessing without really seeing. Coveting without actually wanting. He stared and stared until their features effectively disappeared. Like repeating a word until it stopped making any sense. What did they look like, he might have asked himself later? How exactly did it go?

Jack elbowed him. "Look at her, Squeaker. That one. Wouldn't mind taking her for a spin around the track."

Blinking, trying to focus. His eyes awash with the flash of silver lamé and gold.

He thought he'd made his position clear to Rosie – it was over, they were done – but she wants to talk to him nonetheless. "I think I'm pregnant," she says, when she finally gets him on the telephone, dropping a bombshell into the middle of his morning tea.

"A baby? You think or you know?"

"I'm pretty sure," she says. "I'm late. I've done two tests."

He casts his mind back, tries to remember, the timing, when they were last together, or the time before that, if he used a condom, the implications rushing at him like flood-borne leaves converging on a stormwater drain. And just when he thought he was clear of her. Free of that monkey on his back. One less complication. If only it was someone else's. He wonders if she is really sure. She must have had other boyfriends.

"You do know it's yours, this child, the little one," says Rosie, as though she can read his thoughts, standing in the phone box quietly rubbing her abdomen as she listens to the silence on the other end of the line. "This baby, your responsibility, your kid."

His mind flashes to his father all those years ago, to that poor, stupid girl on that dark, lonely street.

Only sixteen, the little one.

You do know it's yours.

He agrees to meet with her to discuss their options, so flummoxed by the implications that he has trouble breaking it down, the details. How far along is she? What does she want to do? Unable to form an image in his mind's eye of what the baby might look like, if it would be better or worse if it looked more or less like him. "Do you reckon it's true that babies look like their dads?" he says to Dean as they dry off next to his ute.

His friend laughs. "I don't know. It's a fair bet. Why? Don't tell me Kate's been moonlighting with the younger brother?" He says this as a joke, to be funny, because there is no way in hell Kate's been playing the field. Dean reckons she's so straight-laced she doesn't even take her clothes off in the shower, has probably never even seen herself naked.

"Oh no, she's seen herself naked," Harry reassures him, allowing himself the memory of Kate sunbathing topless on his brother's balcony, her toned lotioned back glistening in the heat.

"You should give her one. That's what she needs. Next time Matt's away. Loosen her up a bit. He might even thank you."

Harry ignores him.

"So what's white and hangs from the clouds?" says Dean.

"What?"

"The coming of the Lord."

"You've got a problem, mate."

Rosie sits up the back of the cafe in her chemist assistant's uniform (or he thinks it is her uniform) drinking a Coke. He's chosen the least conspicuous place he can think of, the coffee shop next to the florist, but he sees her before he's fully stepped inside, the white of her dress outlining her form against the varnished pine chairs and plastic floral

tablecloths as distinctly as Joffa's gold jacket against a flock of Magpie guernseys. She has a huge pimple on her chin but she doesn't look any fatter than usual, not particularly pregnant. She raises her hand at him in greeting. "When did you find out?" he asks, in lieu of hello.

"The other day," she says. She's seen a doctor. "I figured as much, but he confirmed it."

It is exactly the situation he's been warned about. Every athlete's worst nightmare. No, he knows about worse nightmares. But it is up there. And so obvious it is almost comical. Except that it is happening to him.

"What do you want to do?" he asks, knowing what she is going to say, his mind scrambling nevertheless (are abortions performed around here, does he know anyone who's organised one?) as she mutters the words "Catholic" and "devout."

Convenient.

Any other time and he would immediately be on the phone to Geoff, the team manager – the classic definition of finding one's self in hot water – but given their current contract discussions, he is going to have to go this one alone.

His mother hits the roof. "There's 'devout' and then there's 'Devout'. You say she saw a doctor? Which doctor? I want his name. When? Where are these results? Who is this girl? Did she ask you for money? Who does she think she's dealing with here?"

Harry immediately regrets his decision to discuss it with her. "It's only a 'what if'. Nothing's happened. I was only thinking out loud, what to do if that kind of thing did happen. If. If. That's all. But it's nothing to worry about. Nothing. This is why I don't talk to you about stuff. I knew you'd be like this."

Diana shakes her head. "No you don't, Harry. You can't pull that with me. Of course you knew I'd be like this. That's exactly why you told me. So is it true or not?"

He shrugs.

"We'll see about that."

Where are all the bus drivers? The happy men in trucks? As a child, Harry liked them best, more than the fire engines and trains, tractors, taxis and planes. More even than the cars with their team colours and tiny seats. While other kids raced Matchbox cars up and down the street, he occupied himself ferrying imaginary school children to and from the local primary school.

His mother likes to say that he is the eccentric one of the clan, the rebel, the dark horse, the wolf in sheep's clothing. Claiming him, when it suits her, as the child most

resembling her side of the family (when he isn't giving her the shits, that is) – doing everything on his terms, his way, right from the outset – itemising his differences, like a party trick. He was even born breech.

At the computer he thinks for a minute before typing in *p-r-e-g-n-a-n-t,* not really sure how to tailor his search to find what he is looking for. Never mind. There isn't much information anyway. Well, there is, but it doesn't tell him anything he doesn't already know, nothing to help him feel clearer about what it is that he should do. What he is looking for is a cheap exemption clause, a way to rationalise forgetting the whole thing. He feels so stuck, is having trouble getting beyond simply not wanting to be in this position, is struggling to think through the reality of the situation in any practical way.

Surely marriage is out of the question? He can't bring himself to contemplate the details, a proposal, a ring. There'd be no getting down on one knee. Preposterous in this situation. Any ceremony would be perfunctory at best.

He can already hear his mother's objections: *You're doing what? Not if I have any say in it.* His mother never having approved of any of his girlfriends (not that Rosie is exactly a girlfriend, though doubtless she'd qualify now – the mother of his first child). Trollops, most of them. Trollops and sluts. Their characters invariably flawed, their motives corrupt (yes, Rosie would fit that bill). "Ask yourself," Diana would say, "would she still be interested if you were a plumber?" Harry knows the answer, of course he does, but in this circumstance he isn't at liberty to protest.

He hears the meow of the screen door as his mother returns from the car. He hits the home key but not fast enough, the image of a bikini-clad pregnant woman filling most of the screen.

"Looking at porn again, are you sweetheart?" says Diana breezily as she passes by the den lugging another box of last year's calendars.

Gulls balance on the fence beams overlooking the beach, gently buffeted by the squally wind. He opens a loaf of bread, doughy white, the kind the Club says they shouldn't eat, and pulls out a slice, rolling it into a fat cigar which he swallows in one mouthful. The sky is a smoky shade of blue, like the flat afternoon of mid-season, the ladder still an open scramble, the contest anyone's to win. He knows it would be easier – for the Club, for his family, for the fans – if he just renewed his contract and got on with it but he

can't bring himself to do it. It feels too much like rolling over, too much like giving in. Though what is he trying to prove? That he's too witless to be held responsible for his actions? That he is beyond reproach? Or rather, unable to be held to the same standards as other people – childlike in that respect, beneath blame? He thinks of his father, dropping him at the shops that morning, the man like a child on a play date swearing to be good, waving him off, Harry promising to collect him outside the hardware in a couple of hours.

He winds down the window a couple of centimetres to throw out some crumbs, the winding action itself enough to draw the birds' attention. They converge on the vehicle en masse, a battle cry of squawks and beating wings. The ocean makes a divine racket. He lowers the window the rest of the way, sticking his arm right out, inviting the possibility that they'll go for him, that in their rampage they'll enter the car and attack. But he doesn't care. Bugger it, he thinks, let them peck me. Almost willing them inside, wanting to be overcome by their savagery.

"Who are you angry with today?" asks Judith, the counsellor, at their next (and final) "chat" before the new year, absent-mindedly smoothing her skirt, her thoughts already on lunch.

"Why do you think I'm angry?" he answers, though he plainly is. *See it, believe it!* He hates those kinds of questions almost as much as he hates the people who pose them: the double-talkers with their hidden meanings, eternally poised to trip him up. Why do people expend so much energy looking for side entrances when they can go directly to the front door? If the corridor's open, the corridor's open. The only reason to avoid it would be if you didn't trust your team. She could have said, what exactly is the nature of your problem with the Club? He'd have gladly confided a home truth or two if she'd asked him that.

"So is there anything else?" she says, madly jotting down consultation notes, details of their plan going forward: "Take a few days off, continue with the mantras and relaxation exercises, maintain your fitness program, commit to a decision date," action items that she will report to management and the leadership group. "Remember, if you can imagine it, you can do it! Everyone has the power to step up. You are not your father. You are your own man. I believe in you, Harry."

As she speaks he concentrates on her eyes – wide set, yellow-speckled brown – staring at them until the image starts to distort, her chin narrowing, the skin scaling, her

high cheekbones moving further and further apart. When he next blinks it all fits back into place but he still half expects to see a fork-tipped tongue.

And then their time is up. He grabs a juice from the foyer vending machine and drinks it in one go, pitching the bottle in the empty recycling bin.

The Club rooms feel deserted. Most of the staff are already on holidays, there isn't even a receptionist stationed at the front desk. In the restaurant, a couple of uniformed caterers are preparing for a private function, setting tables for some three-course event, a Christmas party most likely, glasses and polished cutlery gently clinking under their loveless ministrations.

The smell of fried onions reaches around the block, people lined up as far as the ATMs on the corner for their sausage and sauce and white bread roll but there is no sign of his dad. Father Murphy waves Harry over and tells him Alan has gone home. "I tried ringing but your phone is off. Dad's had a bit of a run-in. He's alright. Don't worry. He got a touch hot under the collar, that's all. A couple of kids got wind of who he was, set up over there and started calling out names. I told them to pull their heads in but they wouldn't. You know what kids are like. Ratbags. Then the boys' father arrived and he and your dad got into it. I sent Alan home before it could get out of control."

"When was that?"

"About an hour ago."

Shit. Harry rings the house but there is no answer. He races home expecting to find his father on another tear – preparing himself for it along the way, deciding he's just going to leave, that he'll call Matt, wait for him to get over there and then go, he's not sure where, let Matt deal with it for a change – but instead his father is sitting in the kitchen, stone-cold sober, red-faced and sweaty beside a packed overnight bag, a nice bruise developing above his right eye, a packet of once-frozen peas making a wet mess of his barbecue-splattered trousers. "Drive me to the station, will you? I need to get to the Skybus. I've got a five o'clock flight."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"Away for a couple of days, clear my head. Get a bit of perspective. I haven't been out of town for months. Look, before you say anything, it wasn't my fault."

Harry almost laughs. "Who do you think you're talking to? Fuck, Dad, you could be done for assault. And with your reputation. What if he calls the police?"

"He won't." He points to his eye. "He was a big guy. I came off worse than him. Much worse."

"You're lucky you're not in hospital." Harry pulls out a seat opposite and sits down, his fists squeezed so tight the knuckles are white beneath the skin. "You always say that, that it's the other person's fault, like you think it makes you tough or something, that it's better because he could have killed you but he stopped short. What if he didn't?"

For once the neighbour's dog isn't barking. Harry feels the same old fury rise up from his gut, knows it would take nothing for him to reach across the table, grab his father by the throat and squeeze until the breath leaves him, it not being about this guy versus that guy and which one's more in the wrong, but about not picking fights with total strangers over stupid shit that means nothing but that could land you in all sorts of hot water because you're a prize dickhead. "Why didn't you just ignore him?" he says. "Why is that so hard for you to do?"

"Because that reporter bastard lied to me. He set me up. He put us all in a terrible position. And now two brats at the shops, two brats not old enough to wear long pants, think they can fling shit at me in public because of something they heard someone say about some horseshit newspaper article that should never have been published. Every day it takes everything I have not to go to that arsehole's house and torch it. Do you understand? Every day, Harry. I could put a fist through his front door right now." Alan pinches the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger as though he is trying to remember something then seems to collect himself. "I'm not like you. I can't sit on my hands, work it all out in my head first. I can't deal with something by not dealing with it. It's not my style."

"Piss off. Don't try to make this shit about me. Just because I'm not getting into fights with people or shooting my mouth off to anyone who asks me a question doesn't mean I'm not doing something."

"Yes, but everyone's paying attention, aren't they? They all want to know."

"So?"

"So make them go away."

"What, by making some snap decision? I told Ted and Laurie I'll make a decision when I make a decision and then I'll let them know. Laurie's the one who says, "Step back, play smart, think things through." Sometimes not doing something is doing something. Did you ever think about that? Sometimes it's the only thing you can do."

"Yes, but my future doesn't hang on me not punching in that scumbag's door. No one's waiting on my decisions."

Maryborough is only three hours away by plane, easy enough to get to but far enough to feel well away, the idea of accompanying his father tempting but not as tempting to Harry as having the house to himself. "What do you want me to tell your aunt?" says Alan, as Harry pulls up outside the station.

"Tell her I said hello."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know."

At home a note on the fridge lists a set of chores to be performed in his father's absence – put out the rubbish, lock the shed, water the tomatoes – and at number one, make up your bloody mind! His dad's parting words, that he needs to get his shit together. "That's a joke," says Harry, "coming from you."

"Watch yourself," says Alan. "I'm still your father. I've made my mistakes. You though, you need to figure out your priorities."

Harry blows into his mother's in a foul mood, happy to exchange his father's badgering about his future for her badgering about his father, the word "future" having taken on enormous significance for the old man all of a sudden, as though prior to Harry's resignation he had no future, or at least no future worth worrying about. His mother and Matt are decorating the Christmas tree, the same skeletal armature that has been in the family for years, its flimsy battered branches barely able to support their plastic coated weight; little flecks of artificial Douglas fir needles floating to the ground as Diana, perched on the kitchen stool, attaches a glass Santa bauble to one of the upper limbs.

"What are you doing here?" asks Matt. "I thought you were going with Dad."

"Nice to see you too," says Harry, having assumed he'd have the run of the place, the home ground advantage, each of them slightly wrong-footed by the other's presence on his turf.

"Wimp," says his mother when she realises her ex has gone away without Harry. "It's such a pattern. A real man would stay and face the music."

"What music?"

"You, for one thing. Has it occurred to him that maybe he shouldn't be leaving you alone right now, that you might need someone to talk to?"

"No I don't. I wanted him to go. I'm sick of him moping around the place. It's only a couple of days."

"Yes, and God created the earth in six."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"A lot can happen in a couple of days."

There is some star-shaped shortbread on a plate on the coffee table, softening in the afternoon heat. "Help yourself," says Diana, conveniently ignorant of the animosity between her progeny running back and forth across her new café au lait Freedom rug like an exposed electric current.

Matt's complexion is slightly pink, the florid glow of a newborn during a bowel movement. He puts down the fairy lights and gestures for Harry to step into the kitchen. "I was going to ring you later anyway. I had an interesting call from Margo before. She wants to know if I can shed any light on your situation."

"Margo?"

"Yes. Margo. The reporter. You know who I mean. Mum told me she came over. You're quite friendly, apparently. 'Old mates,' I think she said, 'always good for a natter.' Until you hung up on her the other day." He crosses his arms. "What are you doing even answering her calls? She's a journalist. You get that, don't you? She writes for the newspaper. What have you said?"

"About what?"

"Cut it out, Squib. You know what. Tell me you haven't told her anything. Christ. Even small talk. It'll be something you think doesn't matter. That's how they work, these arse-wipes – they collect little details and string them together. They can turn a shit into a daisy chain if they have to."

"Nice."

"Call it what you like. The fact is, she's making people paranoid."

"What people?

"Some of the boys. You got the email. That's why they don't want us talking to her. They reckon she's got an insider at the Club."

"*She* rang *me*," says Harry, emphasising his passive role in the exchange. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Not talk to her for one thing."

"I told you, I didn't." Harry thinks his brother's beard looks even patchier than usual. When Matt first grew it he'd felt sorry for him, thought he'd done it to stave off commentary about his growing bald spot. Now he just wants to spit on that spot. To spit on it and polish it with a dirty tissue like one of the trophies in their mother's cabinet.

"It is bullshit, right?"

"I hung up on her."

"Yeah, but you've got to admit it doesn't look good. You are the only one who didn't take off at the end of the season."

"It was just a phone call. What difference does it make?"

"'Cause it looks like you're about to drop everyone in the shit, that's what. And people don't like being dropped in the shit. You don't like it. I don't like it. And I don't like looking over my shoulder every two seconds waiting for it to happen. If the boys get wind of this—"

"What? What are they going to do, throttle me for not talking to her?" Harry wonders how can it be that he is so close and yet so distant from these people, pressed up against each other on the field, knitted together in sweaty Gatorade-drenched post-game jerking circles, singing the Club song, or naked, side by side, in the showers, exchanging tired barbs about soap and bollocks and *watch it you don't slip over*, week after week, year after year, some from as long ago as primary school; their intimate knowledge of each other as close if not closer than many of their lovers, yet he feels about as welcome as Wayne Carey at a Stevens family christening. When it gets down to it, they are more likely to beat the crap out of him than show him any respect. "They don't trust you, darling," explains his mother, not that he needs to be told. If he's feeling sorry for himself he'll maintain that he's been crowded out; that there can only be so much love for their family and Matt holds the lion's share. But the antipathy comes as no surprise really, not given Harry's personal ambivalence about playing in the AFL (he's done nothing to endear himself to the side); it is a fair bet they feel the same way about him, especially in light of his contentious recruitment, so much for the team-building effect of the father-son rule, but he sees now the truth of it, the clarity of his aloneness, stark and clear, that his teammates would sell him down the river before they'd admit to any complicity. "You know what, stuff you," says Harry. "I don't have to listen to this shit. If you don't believe me, that's your problem."

"No, I think it's your problem," says Matt.

Harry can't understand how Matt is able to rationalise everything so effortlessly, to only see what he wants to see. He casts his mind back to Sportsman's Night, the dancers, the way they left the stage before the song had fully ended creating a vacuum in their wake which Marty immediately stepped in to fill. Harry found it awkward, seeing Marty up there, a tuxedoed old-timer being serenaded to the strains of Christina Aguilera's "Dirrty". But it was part of the game (Harry would have understood that had he attended the previous year), pretending the girls had stormed off and he had to cover their tracks. Marty said something to the effect of an apology, about that being the end of the scheduled entertainment for the evening, that it had been a long day, thanked everyone for coming, invited the boys to enjoy themselves at the bar, then picked up the microphone stand to carry it off-stage.

But the crowd wouldn't have it. They refused to accept *that's all, folks* for an answer. Shouts of "more" and "encore" struck up about the room as Marty paused, listening to their appeals, a mounting chorus of individual petitions fast becoming a group chant as more and more joined in, until soon everyone was calling out. "Encore. Encore."

Marty mocked that he didn't know what to do. Camp gestures accompanying the words – "Golly, I am so sorry, but my hands are tied" – animated expressions like a circus clown. He might as well have been wearing braces and oversized shoes.

Jack and Eddy were plainly excited by the charade. They started clapping and calling "encore" again, setting off yet another round of chanting, some of the boys now leaving their assigned seats to make their way to the foot of the stage. This was the point at which Marty appeared to relent. He threw up his hands and shook his head, saying that the ladies were very tired. "Very tired," he emphasised. But if the boys would give him a moment, he'd double-check and see what they had to say.

The answer was implicit. Yes.

The room went strangely quiet as he veered back and popped his head into the wing presumably to confer with the weary performers.

Everybody was drunk but it was only then that Harry realised how drunk everybody actually was. He could hear the steady pump of his blood circulating through his temples or maybe it was just the drum track, the music never having fully ceased. Jack winked at him as Eddy stood, picked up the Rising Star trophy and engaged the rest of the table in a display of simulated masturbation.

Harry heard himself speak. "Put it down."

"What's that, Squeaker? You want me to stop flirting with your boyfriend?"

Jack and Richie laughed. "Don't hog it," said Keith, "give the rest of us a go." He reached for the statuette and commenced his own version of a rub-and-tug just as Marty returned to centre stage.

Marty was aping "forlorn". "It's not great news," he said. "I was right, the ladies are completely worn out. Regrettably they won't be able to perform another full set. But they hate to disappoint you. So they've made a generous offer. If you ask very nicely, one of them will come back for a special encore. But only one of them. Who that will be, however, is up to all of you."

"Now you're talking," said Jack.

Harry looked over and saw Matt, two fingers in his mouth, whistling.

Mitchell Baines of Baines Sports Management has been trying to sign the Furey brothers for years – "Let's talk," his notes always say, hundreds of business cards pushed into pockets and under front doors – but neither Harry nor his brother have ever bothered with personal managers. If they need professional advice who better to counsel them than their father? His words. Their mother being no slouch when it comes to business matters either. Hers. A decision they took as teenagers, each of them wanting it to be true, telling themselves they preferred the independence – *we are free spirits, the Fureys* – but a choice he finds himself revisiting in light of present circumstances. How much easier it would be to assign his "Margo problem" to a minder. Nice, clean and dispassionate. *I'll take care of it*, he imagines them saying from the comfort of their high-rise corner office, bespoke suit pressed into their Eames Soft Pad leather desk chair surveying the multi-million-dollar view, the smoothness transmitted down the telephone like free vodka shots at 21st Century.

His first instinct is to ring back Margo himself, to ring her and tell her to back off, to leave him and his family the fuck alone. Though he knows that is about as smart as delivering a short off-the-ball jab to the ribs, more likely to land him in front of the tribunal for rough conduct than to afford him any reprieve. Ransacking his memory for an inadvertent hint, did he give something away? He's been so careful not to let anything slip, but has he been careful enough?

All that scrambling for a diversion, riddling his way around, such a familial strategy, his mother's theory, the real reason for his father's drinking (and everything

else). The great hole Alan always finds himself in. Because he refuses to deal with anything with any honesty. “After so much bullshit for so many years, he doesn’t know what the truth looks like anymore,” she reckons. The number of times Harry has heard her say, “You’ve made your bed.” That it is impossible for his father to face himself when he can’t find a way clear to a mirror. Even his religion is more of the same, a smokescreen. His personal relationship with God an excuse for avoiding other personal relationships. Always devaluing the real in favour of the abstract. God. Team. Country. How about family, friends, himself? It sounded reasonable at the time but what Harry hadn’t understood back then was the dread. The constant lurking menace. Yes, the media has always been a presence in their lives. But when you know you are culpable it is an entirely different experience. Closer to fear than revulsion. Like a hare in the path of sight-hounds. Exhausting, the relentless pursuit. It doesn’t matter that they are only trying to turn you around. You are being hunted and can easily end up trapped.

He takes his usual route home, wandering past the footy field, giving the public toilets a wide berth. Not in the mood for junkies, their suppurating sores and bad attitudes. There is nothing chic about heroin. It rises up, grabs its user by the throat, choking the life out of them in a series of bleak, hopeless nods. One, and down goes their chin. Two, and the life drains from their eyes. Scabs perforating the skin, paper thin and pale. The girls dressed in long sleeves and tights, always cold, even in the middle of summer.

When he is sleeping sometimes it is as though he is there on the street, a third presence on that terrible scene with his dad, urging the girl to stop. *No*, he calls. *Don’t do it*. But she can’t hear him. Light glinting off the needle as it pricks her skin, then her body, wraithlike, wading into the night. The squeal of tyres, a terrible thud and she is gone. Out. The final siren. Game over.

The house is dead quiet. He creeps around at first trying not to make too much noise, as though his father is asleep in the other room, his absence initially more inhibiting than his dull ubiquitous presence steadfastly lining the atmosphere like the unsealed floorboards running the length of the hall. It is so quiet Harry feels like someone is watching him, that same prickly sensation he used to experience as a kid when they went pig hunting, out with his dad and his brother in the middle of some desolate backwater, the khaki brush closing in, blanketing them in the dense scrub, the busyness

of the landscape confusing his senses so that after a while, after the cordial had run out and the sandwiches had run out and they were operating purely on adrenaline, it became harder and harder to determine which shadows were prey and which were tricks of the eye, the yellow Banksia flowers looking increasingly menacing under the heat of the blazing afternoon sun.

He turns on the television, grateful for the useless clamour. At least with his dad away he can watch whatever he wants. He flicks the channel to *Rage* and farts loudly on the couch.

For a person who swears he doesn't believe in God, he resorts to prayer more often than is sensible. If you can call it praying, muttering requests under his breath (a sublimated form of profanity). Down the street. In his car. Sometimes at the shops.

"Jesus Christ, can you make the line move faster?"

"Holy Father, get this lady out of my way."

"Please Lord, let it rain*."*

That kind of thing. Small-scale prayers, like the line from that poem of Father Murphy's.

At night he extends the ritual, praying for his family: *for Mum and Dad and Matt, keep them healthy and safe*. He used to pray for the girl too.

Dear God, dear God, dear God ...

But after a while that didn't seem right anymore, or maybe it just didn't make sense, not knowing what to want for her.

His father's sleeping pills make his eyes scratchy, leave his body bloated and unsteady as though he could easily overbalance if he pauses too long in one place. He can't remember which day it is. Making coffee, he stumbles twice, losing his footing while standing on the spot. Maybe he should have only taken one?

It is late morning but it feels early. Too early for breakfast. Certainly too early to go outside. He nurses the coffee until it is tepid, then tips the liquid down the sink, the smell rushing back up at him as it circles the drain. As usual, the dog next door is barking (a bird landed on the fence, some kid ridden past on his bike – it could have been anything, nothing). Shut up, he thinks, though he can't rouse the energy to actually say it (*shut the fuck up you stupid mutt*).

He can't rouse the energy for anything much. Not for anger. Guilt. Regret. His sensibilities blacked out, his feelings hanging weightless in the stuffy air.

Someone is mowing their lawn. He opens the back door then closes it again, the action setting off an association (dream or hallucination?), something about Jack stalking him, one of their camping trips, the sound of dingoes scrambling into the thicket, keeping a hand over his left eye as he flicks on the torch, aims it into the bitumen dark, then flicks it off again and machete-hacks his way through the twisted ragged branches. His leg is sore. Did he trip, knock it on the edge of the bathtub drunk-stumbling to the bathroom in the middle of the night?

He checks his shins for new bruises. Nothing.

The limbs are covered in scars. Long-faded evidence of kicked and torn, ripped and shredded skin. The wounds stitched, iced, massaged, salt-bathed, Dencorubbed, each mark separate and unique, its message as plain as any gang-affiliation tattoo.

*

The dancers filled the green room, collapsing on the stackable plastic chairs and kicking off their high heels, subdued, tired, sitting quietly as in any workplace break room, massaging their toes, some lighting cigarettes as the music continued to thump outside, footballers having an endless capacity for beer and noise and crappy stand-up comedians. The girl was probably tired too, but the thrill of having got this far without any major cock-ups had left her bright-eyed and chatty. "Was it good? Was it good?" she demanded as Greta brandished a large bag of soft jubes, sugar to keep up their energy.

"Yes, it was good," said Greta, as her young protégé helped herself to a fistful of lollies, the excited flush of her cheeks visible beneath the powder blush. "Very good. You're doing really well. The fellas really like you. I've even had a couple of offers for you to do a solo performance. What do you think about that? Do you want to make some more money? I could pay you nearly double."

Four hundred dollars. The girl's eyes lit up.

It was more than she could have hoped for, the whole evening was, but she'd earned it, she deserved it, all those sessions, twirling herself this way and that, flirting with her reflection in the mirror, the slippers and dirty underwear being kicked to the corners of her bedroom as she stumbled through the routines, trying to remember to

perform with pep and punch, maintaining her poise and attitude, until finally her body came to fit with the music, a rivulet finding the stream, as though it was meant to have been all along, her hips mirroring Beyoncé's womanly hips, her teenage eyes flashing *come hither*, just like in the music videos.

When she'd first started the lessons, Greta had said that it was all about building rapport. Yes, it was good to get the steps right, but that wasn't as important as making a connection with the audience. Studying Rihanna together, the Pussycat Dolls, the way they maintained their line of sight even though the show was televised, not a live performance. But that was what she was going for, that sense of concentration, focus, of keeping it between her and each individual in the room. "Lock your eyes on them and they'll be yours for the night," Greta told her. "Eye contact is the cornerstone of intimacy. Men want to feel wanted."

The girl knew what she meant. Practising intensely for hours – she wanted to feel wanted too.

*

Harry has prepared himself for morose Dad, for sorry Dad, for tail-between-the-legs Dad, but not for this, the Dustbuster set up on the potting table along with a bottle of Nifti, a Chux wipe and the cable grease, everything sparkling and smelling of chemical cleaning fluid, his father having returned from Queensland with a renewed mission to save Harry from himself, to deliver him from the jaws of indecision into the arms of Jesus. The bruised skin around his eye has turned from red to pale yellow, barely noticeable now against his sallow complexion. Harry is midway though his third set at the bench press, Alan looming above him, spotting, extending an invitation to Midnight Mass. "It would mean a lot if you came along," he says (the implicit threat of a fumbling hand). Plus, he doesn't want to go alone, or is it just that he's reached that age where he doesn't like driving at night?

Harry doesn't want to go at all; he doesn't want to see Father Murphy for one thing (having promised to return and then not), and also because he is starting to palpably resent the place, his father's renewed faith provoking in him associations of betrayal and loss, the early stirrings of a reckoning, wanting some explanation for God's absence when he was growing up, or more particularly the absence of the church and all its charity (as he is coming to understand it) back when it might have had some

measurable effect. But his dad has that tone in his voice – his way of saying please without saying it. *It would mean a lot*. Harry finally acceding as long as his father agrees to sit up the back of the church. He is not going to make that long march up the aisle, the trembling virgin. He'd rather feign injury than feel the heat of all those eyes burning a hole in the back of his head.

Christmas Eve is typically so hot it isn't unheard of for people to roll up in shorts and thongs, the relative cool of the church no answer for the persistent heat. Not this night though. This night it is like the middle of winter, everyone in jumpers and scarves. Harry hugs his arms to his chest throughout the service, crosses his legs to maximise his body heat.

The church is full. Mostly families doing the Christmas thing, bored children and crying babies, harried parents trying to keep them all in line. Behind them though the men are drunk, two fathers, deliberately mucking up the hymns, encouraging their kids to outdo each other, belching, the general stink of barbecue, loudly singing invented lyrics while their wives feign disinterest:

O come, all ye unfaithful ...

Dirty looks exchanged all round but there is nothing to be done, other than to sing a little louder, eyes fixed dead ahead. *Love thy neighbour ...*

Is this what it had been like for his mother, a stepped-down version of the detachment – impassively shivering on the couch after they'd got home, trying to come to terms with the disaster of her marriage as the old man ran through his paces, periodically vomiting and convulsing spastically on the bathroom floor – Harry and Matt being hurried back to bed, "Daddy's sick," until she couldn't take it anymore?

Bless me, Father, for our lives have become unmanageable.

Dodging questions about his father's hospitalisation. They still called them steroids then.

When Harry and Alan get back to the car the window is all frosted up. Senior's teeth chatter (*Hark! The herald angels ...*) as they slowly creep through the dark streets; the sound of wind whistling through the gum trees so incongruous with the formality of the hymns. He wonders what they'd be singing about if Christmas had been an Antipodean invention. An ode to kangaroos? Hard to believe it is winter in Europe. One day, he promises himself, he'll visit the northern snow.

As he opens the front door, a small gold-foil-wrapped gift drops out from behind the fly wire. *Merry Christmas from Rosie*, the tag says. So typical. He got her nothing.

He quickly explains it away as the offering of an overly zealous fan, embarrassed to tell his dad the truth. My lay, mother of my child, my future wife? I don't think so. Scrag, more like it. He opens it reluctantly, finds two intertwined pink and white crocheted hearts.

Damn Rosie. Damn the girl. He lies in bed trying not to think about either of them as his mind fights harder and harder to join the women together, the hearts the conduit, the tails like the tails on the girl's corset, his hands clammy as he seeks to press away the memory but there he is again, Sportsman's Night, the Club calendar's night of nights.

"SexyBack" was on, the women marching out in single file, lining up across the stage. Marty surveyed them like a drill instructor, winking at the crowd as he commanded one to stand up straight. "Yes, sir," she replied. And then he expertly unsnibbed another's top button. "That's better, isn't it?" he said to the room, though he could barely be heard above the din, a guttural rumble akin to an approaching freight train.

It was a fuckability draft, pure and simple. The women standing in line, all identically clad in tight-fitting military style jackets, as Marty directed, progressively encouraging each one to step forward while inviting the lads to clap for their favourite. Marty extracted a pen and pad from his jacket, making an elaborate show of keeping tally while the boys clapped and whistled for each performer. When the blonde girl stepped forward the room went berserk. "Yeah, she's the one," said Eddy, as though stating a fact. Then he repeated it, so deeply and low most people would have strained to hear.

This was the real show, what the veterans had been waiting to see. Marty heralded the next act with a nod to the selection process. "I've surveyed the results and she's your top pick by far. So without further ado, back by popular demand, please put your hands together and ..."

And back she came through the curtain. The girl. The young one. The one he couldn't seem to ignore. Wearing a distinctive twenty-six. His number.

The noise was deafening as she approached the front of the stage, her gait slow, slightly unsteady, gingerly walking the line like a drunk in a field test (*no, officer, I haven't been drinking* – much!), the stage now black but for one spotlight aimed at a low banquette that had been placed in the middle. Dead centre. The military jacket was gone, replaced by a blue and gold satin negligee, a diamante-studded blue collar tied

around her neck. Marty gestured to the bench and she took a seat. He then slowly removed the cravat from his neck and waved it about as he spoke. “So gentlemen, do we have any volunteers?”

He was addressing Harry, of course. Their dedicated rookie. It was his number on her back so she was “his” girl. His duty to do the honours.

The mantelpiece is lined with Christmas cards, mostly from people Harry doesn’t know:

A little reminder of God’s love for you.

For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given.

Peace!

Dean calls Alan’s place “the commune”, regularly sticking his nose in, making jokes about whose turn it is to scratch the other’s back. “You’ve got to move out, get your own digs. It’s not natural. You’re starting to act like a married couple.”

“You’re just jealous,” says Harry, wishing his friend would shut up, because he realises that it has suited him for the moment, this living arrangement. Making up for lost time perhaps, sharing a home with a father who (for the most part) keeps regular hours, who (when he’s sober) insists on making his bed each morning and preparing meals for dinner each night. This man, once cautioned for tormenting his neighbours with mid-week fireworks parties, has become the epitome of quiet enjoyment – a person who keeps a tidy house, never leaving it without straightening the embroidered throw pillow on his three-seater couch: *This is the day that the Lord has made: rejoice and be joyful in it*.

Their Christmas Day traditions aren’t much. Over breakfast, he and his father exchange token presents, a Saint Christopher medal on a chain for Harry, a shirt for his dad. Harry has bought a tea-light burner for his mum that he will give her later at their family lunch.

The plan is to eat at around half twelve, early, so that Matt and Kate can then visit her family in the afternoon. Harry and Alan arrive with orange juice and a packet of Barbecue Shapes to find the lovebirds already there, seated on the sofa in front of the tinsel-decorated fish tank, the coffee table set with dishes of cashews and salted peanuts.

“Are you here as a private citizen or is this a Club-sanctioned media event?” asks Matt, then nudges his girlfriend. “Careful what you say, princess. The walls have ears.”

“Shut up, dickhead,” says Harry. “I told you, I had nothing to do with it.”

“Don’t start,” says Diana, aiming to distract them with a bowl of potato chips. “It’s Christmas. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing,” says Harry.

“All you men, it’s always ‘nothing’.”

It is meant to be relaxing, fun family time, just the five of them, but they haven’t been there ten minutes before Alan and Diana are bickering. “What’s that hairstyle called?” Senior asks his ex-wife. “Are you trying to look like that Rebecca Twigley?” There is plum pudding ice-cream for dessert, though it is freezing cold outside. Diana calls Alan an arsehole. “There,” she says, taking out the bobby pins. “Are you happy now?”

His parents give him a headache. Or maybe it is the ice-cream. Matt strokes Kate’s cheek and Harry experiences that singular distortion, glancing between his parents and his brother and his girlfriend, as though they are the same couple at different points along the continuum of time. Picturing his parents as they might have been when they’d first met, his mum a pretty debutante, his dad a major catch – each younger than he is now, with no idea what they were getting themselves into.

As soon as the television goes on, Harry announces that he is going to lie down. He retreats to his former bedroom, pushes the oilcloth up against the wall and shuts his eyes, the back and forth of their sniping quietly flattening out to a background hum, an empty patter, the soothing hush of the familiar. He thinks back as far as he can remember, as far as he has ever known, to early days with his mum and dad still playing house under the same roof and it is all still here, in this room, in this house, vestiges of what they’d all been; the ceaseless yelling, accusations and counter accusations, *who is she, tell me her name*, their mother forever threatening to pack it all in and leave if his father didn’t sort himself out, if he didn’t get his shit together, if he didn’t stop.

Playing kick-to-kick at the park, trading footy cards and X-Men comics in the bus terminal, hours on end, anything to avoid coming home. The world flat and locked, cracked concrete footpaths stretched along the baking streets all leading to this place.

Harry’s world circles and repeats, catching back up to itself faster than he can outrun it. Round and round he goes in an elliptical whirl of decisions, options, paths,

until there is no point trying to outpace it, feeling like he is spinning in place, the scope of possibilities cradled in this very spot.

His bed is his boat in safe harbour. He moors there, lashes himself to the rigging as the winds of circumstance howl about his errant conjugations. His father keeps saying be part of the solution, that God helps those who help themselves, but these are calculations he can't make by himself, sums he can't solve on his own.

He knows he doesn't give a shit about Rosie but he keeps thinking about the baby. *Rock a bye baby.* The image of the child and the girl bookending his anxieties, closing a loop as though they also are one and the same person, before and after, a cautionary tale of sorts, and he is responsible for it all.

Laurie passes a message via Matt that if Harry renews his contract for another year, Laurie will see to it that he only plays eight or so games, give or take injuries. The board is very keen to keep him onside. They like the image of the brothers playing together. Jack and Eddy. Matt and Harry. Blood and water. The family club. It is a story they are keen to promote, with or without his permission, the importance of stability, tradition, legacy, their eyes all dollar signs, weaving him into their kin as surely as the cheer squad stitches together the banner week after week, its sole purpose to be torn down, ripped and snarled, then reconceived, reborn and resurrected.

Matt's Jeep idles in the driveway, Evermore blaring as he checks his messages, while Harry fiddles with the wonky latch on the letterbox, flicking it up and down, trying to get it to catch. "Go on, Harry. You should do it," says Kate from the passenger seat, "it'll be fun, both of you playing in the finals again," as though the decision is as uncomplicated as hers was to purchase her skinny iced latte that morning (a beverage to match the weather like her shoes to match her dress), her fuchsia lipstick visible on the takeaway cup which she holds aloft as she speaks.

"Perhaps you should pray on it," says Matt, all sarcasm. "See if Dad can pull some strings for you upstairs."

"Yes. That's an excellent suggestion. I'll run it by him, see what he has to say."

Harry could push back harder, conjure some demands, make it seem like he has something personal on the line, but what for? He understands his value to the organisation, his role in their story, he can see that. Much the same as it is for Matt, his brother's insouciance an expression of that allegiance, the Club as family, his future

anchored to that dock (any connection with the Furey family heritage only of interest in so far as it advances that purpose, now his purpose) Kate inserting herself into the conversation as surely as a close relative might, having now made his business her business, his future part of her purview.

Rosie has hardly spent any time at his place but she too has done her best to weave herself in there, leaving remnants of her efforts, seemingly innocuous traces littered amongst his things. A tube of lip gloss on his bookcase. Under the bed, a scrunched-up receipt for disposable razors, a button. One of her pens wedged next to the seat in his car. And the intertwined hearts, now supporting a couple of waxy ear cleaners in his dustbin.

Why are women always leaving him with things, his mum and Grandad's cufflinks, Margo and her notes, Rosie and her woollen keepsakes? The signed photographs, the keys, the underwear. What do they think he is going to do with all their shit? Treasure it? Cradle it? Worship it at some kind of private altar?

His dad still has a tonne of stuff given to him by Diana. Mostly practical items, a belt she bought him when they were courting, a watch he never wears. But they aren't gifts so much as relics, flotsam bobbing about the wreckage of their marriage.

Rosie's deposits are the opposite, miniature down payments, an advance on a future life, slipped in so he won't notice (might overlook the next fifty years). In which case he might as well simply renew his contract and be done with it.

There are worse things in life than loveless marriages, he supposes. His parents are testament to that.

Most of Harry's clothes are still hanging in his wardrobe at his mother's. He sorts through a couple of things while Diana prepares lunch, leftover-chicken sandwiches with lettuce and mayonnaise, which they eat on their laps on the back steps. He inhales it. "How come it tastes so much better than mine?"

"Because you make everything in the microwave," says Diana. "But you can't do that with poultry. It's disgusting. You've got to roast it or fry it or grill it. It has to be properly cooked."

"Microwaving's cooking."

Diana grimaces. "No, it's not the same thing. You've got to sear the meat."

They sit side by side, Diana sipping a coffee while Harry keeps her company, savouring the brief interval of calm, a break from her left-brain style of nurturing. Since his career announcement she's been riding him about the Club, asking if anybody has had a proper conversation with him yet, a serious talk about his long-term plans, the Club's lackadaisical attitude to his time-out as good as baiting him to quit, their willingness to give him as much space as he needs evidence in her opinion that they aren't looking after his best interests, that they aren't invested in the longevity of his career on the field or off it. The reprieve doesn't last long. "If they're not going to get into it with you, the real details, the nitty gritty, then you've got to bring it up. Career planning, professional qualifications, how they'll support you through the transition. I don't know how it works, but if you're going to do some study you might need extra help. Have they suggested a tutor, someone to give you a hand? What about starting next year, even part-time? These things won't wait. There are application deadlines. You've got to force them to look into it," she says, picking up the conversation as though there'd been no lag. "Your father's no bloody use. Has he been any help?" she says. "No, of course he hasn't. When was he ever?"

"Dad's been okay."

"How the worm turns. You're joking, aren't you? Tell me one constructive thing he's done on your behalf? Exactly," she continues, before Harry has a chance to answer. "Too obsessed with his own bullshit. Can't let you have five minutes in the sun. He could have called that Margo and told her where to stick it. That's something he could have managed instead of drinking himself into another stupor. Have you heard any more from her?"

"No, nothing there. I think she got the message," he lies.

"Good. So she should."

One of the neighbourhood cats leaps onto their fence, spine arched, hissing, surprised by a bored Labrador barking in the adjacent yard, courtesy of a vacation rental. "Poor puss," says Diana. "Last I knew they weren't meant to have dogs in there. They're up all hours of the night too. Partying, playing music. February can't come soon enough."

It is a favourite sport amongst the locals, complaining about the holiday season. The tourists clogging up the streets, descending on the town like cashed-up Vikings, six weeks of raping the landscape and pillaging supplies before getting back in their SUV longships and returning home. "Every year it gets worse and worse," says Diana. "It's

madness. At the shops today I waited ten minutes for a park. I nearly gave up and came back again." Harry pays scant attention as she rambles on, a familiar tirade, how she can't find half the things she wants because the place has been ransacked by out-of-towners, how the council is going to have to put in another roundabout if they want people to use the south entrance of the shopping centre, that there are kids everywhere, running around the car park. "The parents are on holidays so they just switch off. Somebody's going to get hurt. I'm surprised there hasn't been an accident already. Though on that topic, I popped into the chemist while I was down there, saw that girl that you are friendly with."

"What girl?"

"You know who I mean."

"Rosie?" says Harry.

"Yes, that's it. Rosie," repeats his mother. She holds out her hand displaying her new nail polish, a bright cheery citrus redolent of his grandmother's kumquats. "Pamplemousse," she says, referring to the colour. "French for grapefruit. Rosie and I had a good long chat. She was very helpful."

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What is heroin but a deep warm bath of nothingness, hours slipping away in a series of narcotic nods, the past and future merging into a soft empty present of blurred lines and comfortable ellipses. The girl watched the others inhale the smoke from the battered foil, more ladylike than having a needle pierce their skins, something to take the edge off, though Greta suggested a pill for her instead, assuring her that that was the best way to go, much easier than performing straight, and she was happy to take her word for it. Observing the way the other girls closed their eyes as they leant forward, the sharp sickly sweetness of the struck match.

She swallowed two tablets with half a glass of wine. And then the drugs worked their magic and she lost track of time.

Countdown on Furey decision

By Margo Milne-Arthurs

December 28, 2006

Pressure is building for Harry Furey who is expected to announce a decision about his future in early January.

Furey has been keeping a low profile, swapping pre-season training for the Melbourne sun and surf.

Club president, Ted Parker, said a decision should come any day now. “We’re happy to give the lad some time, but it’s not the sort of thing that can wait forever. I need to know. The boys need to know. And most importantly, the supporters need to know. This is bigger than one person.”

Furey could not be reached for comment.

Pressure Building On Star Recruit. *No Time For Dilly-Dallying. Where There's A Will There's A Payday.* These are the kinds of headlines appearing in the newspapers, but as January looms Harry is driven by no clearer purpose than he had been in December. At issue is not so much the will he or won't he, but the why – the prospect of an infant introducing a wildcard into the equation, the idea that he would renew his contract for this reason unimaginable barely weeks ago.

Walking to the milk bar, he counts random things – light poles, cats, the number of steps between cars – the sky curved wide above him, translucent, a giant sphere, like a cerulean football field with the middle hollowed out, as he stares up at it, waiting for a game plan to reveal itself.

Matt and Kate take off for the Gold Coast, a last-minute holiday before Matt flies out to Arizona when pre-season training begins in earnest. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Diana says to Kate, farewelling her with a kiss on the cheek, daughter-in-law in waiting – Diana having made no secret of her desire to see the couple engaged, already bragging freely about the likely handsomeness of her winsome brown-eyed grandchildren.

In different circumstances Harry might have gone with them, piggybacked on their arrangements, dragged a couple of the other boys along for the ride (*the family club*). But that life is gone for him now. He has joined the ranks of the initiated.

Laurie invites Harry to yet another informal lunch, just him and a couple of board members at home on his back deck, ham sandwiches, Crown Lager, a bit of gentle pressure – *what happens at Sportsman's Night stays at Sportsman's Night* – and a tall frosted glass (they don't want him going off the reservation, telling tales out of school; another nail in the coffin of the Club's reputation). Laurie's house is like a mini version of the Club executive suite, a padded leatherette aesthetic that's probably the real thing. It's the kind of scene Harry hates, everyone pretending to be his mate, Laurie slinging an arm around him as he skites about his contribution to the team culture, one of the good guys – talking up his leadership potential, his popularity with the party faithful – the fact that they're wearing polo shirts rather than suits meant to suggest that business isn't at the forefront on their agenda.

"Doesn't he remind you of Bobby Skilton," says Gerry Cooper, as he spills mustard pickles down his front. "His decision-making, the way he can read the play."

Ted agrees. "A real ball magnet. All these camps and retreats they send the kids on these days, I'm all for it, but they can't teach you that, how to anticipate the play.

Experience can get you so far but it will never compensate for instinct. Either you've got it or you don't, and Harry, you've got it in spades."

"The whole family does," says Jock.

"It's in the genes," says Gerry. "Your grandad had it, your father, your brother. Bloody banana-benders. There must be something in the water up there."

E. coli, thinks Harry.

Laurie leans forward to tackle his sandwich. His back is covered in flies.

"They want me to commit for at least another year," Harry reports to his father afterwards. "Ted says that way I've got a solid stint under my belt; then if I want to move on, no one can dispute I've got those runs on the board. He says it'll give the old man something to be proud of."

"I've told you before, don't do it 'cause you think it'll make me happy," advises his dad. "You've got to want it for yourself. Otherwise there's no point doing anything."

"Yeah, but then you say I'm not doing anything with my life, that I have to make a decision, find a direction, sort out my priorities. This is a decision. I thought you'd be happy."

"But is it the right decision?"

See it, believe it!

"I don't fucking know. You don't fucking know. When did you ever have to make the right decision? No one ever asked you to do that. You've always done whatever the hell you wanted." He thinks about the girl, about Sportsman's Night, his clumsiness, the absurdity of her red satin underwear, hating himself, the situation, wondering if anyone ever makes the right decision, or if right decisions are simply chanced upon, less intention and more timely accident.

What he'd give to be able to go back. It was a make-or-break situation – hadn't he known that at the time, that all he had to do was say no? – but Marty motioned for Harry to join him on stage, he needed assistance securing the cravat across the girl's eyes, and Harry didn't know how not to go. The girl sat there, neither here nor there, not welcoming nor objecting to the situation, as the two men tangled with her hair. No one appeared to mind about that but clearly Harry wasn't executing his role with enough flourish because the cravat slipped down, setting off a disgruntled cry from the audience, Jack rising out of his seat yelling at him to stop piss-farting around and put his

back into it. Harry tried again, making more of a show of tying it tighter this time and then Marty asked the girl if she could see anything. She shook her head. No. He waved his hands in front of her face, invited Harry to do the same, but "No," she maintained, she couldn't see a thing.

"She can't see anything," Marty said to the room and then he began to fan himself. "It's so hot up here. Aren't you hot?" he asked Harry. A blatant move to incite the crowd, who dutifully obliged, starting up a new chant. chant. "Strip," they yelled. "Strip. Strip." It was Harry's cue. Marty indicated he was supposed to untie the girl's corset, unravel a series of loops through a panel of eyes down her back like an overly complicated bootlace.

Harry gave it a go but fumbled the attempt, his fingers too broad for such delicate work.

This was precisely the moment Jack had been waiting for. He jumped up on stage and offered to show Harry how it was done, Harry stepping aside as Eddy joined him there, Rising Star trophy in hand, the brothers a perfect storm of Club fidelity.

Margo continues her campaign, ringing incessantly, creating a tide of messages in her wake, a verbal slipstream of inquiry that Harry seeks to sidestep and avoid despite being inexorably drawn to the momentum of her quest, feeling himself on that ledge, wanting to step off, to plunge headlong into danger. Mostly it has been about his future: has he reached a decision yet, when does he plan on letting everyone know? But today it is about the girl again. She has dug up more information about the girl. "Someone thinks they know her. It could lead to an address."

Harry feels light-headed as he listens to her message, his field of vision narrowing at the prospect of more information. Why can't she drop it? He already knows more about her than he could ever have conceived of wanting to know. Has reached his limit of her vague particulars. What he craves is a stay from her, to excise her from his awareness, to rule a line under it, under her; he wants to forget she ever happened.

He picks up the telephone and punches in Margo's number, then puts it down again almost as quickly, in that extended first ring seeing his future dissolve before him, his career unravelling like one of his father's moth-eaten footy jumpers, the pulled strands meaningless when not integrated with the whole. He feels his inability to

properly reconcile his accounts closing in on him, the peculiarities of his character determining his fate.

The following afternoon Margo tails him to the park. “Fancy seeing you here,” she says from her car window as he jogs past, trying to pretend he hasn’t noticed her as she paces him down the street. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?”

“What cat?” he says, stopping by the side of the road.

She laughs. “See, I knew you wanted to talk to me. You’re not the first rookie to go through this. You know that, don’t you. It’s not just superstars like your dad. That’s what I want to write about, the culture of the sport, the way you’re forced into situations you can’t deal with, encouraged to engage in antisocial behaviour right from the get-go. It’s like a pressure cooker, something’s going to happen, it has to. It’s a recipe for disaster. Why don’t you go home and change and then we can go and grab a coffee somewhere quiet and talk about it properly?”

“No. I don’t want to talk to you. I really don’t.”

“That’s what your dad used to say. He always put the Club first too.”

The Club first? What was he to make of that? “What are you suggesting?” says Harry.

“You’re a proud bunch, that’s all. They breed you tough. It’s a compliment. Don’t read too much into it. Unless, of course, there’s something to read?“

Harry stares right through her.

“I’m still going to write the article. You might as well take the opportunity to give your side of the story, to seem cooperative. The less you say, the worse it looks.”

Harry spits on the ground, then turns and resumes his run.

“What were you ringing about yesterday?” she calls after him.

“I didn’t. Leave me alone.”

“Don’t be silly, Harry. We both know you did. Your number’s in my log.”

“I didn’t,” he says again, before accelerating into a sprint. As though that makes it real. His new strategy, to deny everything.

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The lights were so bright the girl couldn’t really see. She knew she was moving, she was walking, but she felt so heavy, so lethargic, she didn’t really care which way she went. She took a seat and then the room went dark. It was all so very loud but distant, as

though she was toggling the mute button while watching herself in a movie. Now she was here. Now she was not. The optional audio track keeping time with her vacillating engagement.

Somehow she was forced to her knees. She felt woozy. She could hear the men talking to her, knew what was happening, but was powerless to act. *It's okay*, she told herself. *It will be okay*. The noise, the thrusting, the ad hoc bursts of light. It was like a thrill ride in a light aircraft, the kind her father piloted, but during an electrical storm, the floor dropping away, her body rocked around, disoriented, her senses confused. But she would see him soon. Happy. This must be how it felt to be floating. Giving way to it. The idea filling her with a feeling of comfort and warmth, a sensation she tried to inhabit as her body was splayed, parted at both ends and occupied, the men calling her repulsive things as they lunged at her, as though she was somehow responsible for this treatment, *you make your own luck*, though to the best of her knowledge she'd not met any of them before. Something flashed. Through a gape to her right she thought she saw someone with a camera phone. She closed her eyes beneath the draping as the audience heartily clapped and stomped to their three-person'd dance.

*

Rosie leaves Harry a note. She doesn't say much, bare bones. Her period has finally come, three weeks late. "But better late than never, right?!" And isn't it funny how these things happen? Probably all for the best. Though it has got her thinking and she doesn't think they have a future together after all. She agrees they should call it off. Adieu.

"Good riddance," says Dean, when Harry tells him he and Rosie had been seeing each other. "Seriously, fat Rosie from high school, the chemist girl? No wonder you kept that one quiet. What's wrong with you? It's such a waste. You could bag any honey you like. You know that, right? Instead you head to the nearest heifer. Unless you get off on that kind of thing. Kinky bastard. Is that it? You like some junk in the trunk. Shame though about the personality. I remember Scotty said she was a bit of a talker."

"Leave it alone. She's alright."

"Alright for what?"

Harry lets it slide, glad to be relieved of the situation, to have one less stress to worry about. He lets his head hang, examines the veins on the backs of his hands,

wonders what his palms might reveal of his future. “Have you ever wished you could have done something differently?” he says.

“What like?”

“I don’t know. Something you wished you could take back. A do-over.”

“You’re not having second thoughts already, are you?”

“Not like that.”

“I wish I’d grown a bigger dick.”

“No, fuckwit. Something you regret, something you wish you could change, something you could have changed.”

“Shit, I don’t know. Probably. Of course. Everybody does. Like right now I regret quitting footy training all those years ago. Who knows, if I’d stuck with it then maybe I’d be in the AFL too and I’d have a shot with that hottie on the beach. Either that or I wish I was a better looking cunt. Did you see the way she was ogling you? I reckon every bloke in the water is thinking about fucking her.”

“Holy shit,” says Harry, slamming his fist on Dean’s board. “That’s not what I’m talking about. Is that all you ever think about?”

“Pretty much,” says Dean. “Watch it mate.”

“Watch what?”

“The board.”

“Oh fuck your fucking board.”

Dean thinks it is hilarious. “Jesus, when did you become such an uptight bastard?” he says, laughing. “Maybe you shouldn’t have called it off.”

Harry’s dreams are his comeuppance. That night the warden is well out of earshot. Not that he would have done anything for him anyway. The staff likes to torment the inmates like that, by withholding favours, not declaring when they’ll protect them and when they won’t. And this time Harry is on his own. Trapped in the wrong cell, a pillow case over his head, a dirty sock stuffed in his gaping mouth. Obviously, screaming will make no difference, there is no avenue from which the sound can escape, but it is still his instinct to scream, finding himself less concerned with his stifled airway than with his silenced vocal cords. It is better than thinking about the pain. Because there will be pain. It is intended to hurt. That is the whole point. What the perpetrators want to emphasise, an eye for an eye, an anguish for an anguish. He is here to face his punishment. They are going to abuse him like he abused the girl.

Humming. Someone is humming. Does he recognise the song? He tries to listen but they grab at his ankles and he braces for the tear, the searing agony, recalling something he's heard about psychopaths, their inability to feel fear, their brains being wired differently, dulling any capacity for anticipation or dread. Of all times to consider it, that at least he isn't crazy. Not that kind of crazy – blood chillingly oblivious. No, he is a living checklist of normality: accelerated heart rate, rapid breathing, uncontrollable sweating. Terrified. And yet for all the horror of it a part of him is grateful, acknowledging (even long after he has woken) that it feels right, this debasement, that at last he is getting what he deserves.

Neither Harry nor Dean remembers falling asleep. They're roused at around 5 am by a sharp rapping on the rear window, followed by bright torchlight shining in their eyes. It's still dark outside, the soft smudge of dawn another hour away. For a second Harry doesn't realise any time has passed, thinks they might still gather themselves as planned and head out to a club, but then the penny drops, about the same moment he registers the throbbing pain behind his eyes.

"Right then boys, out of the car." His head feels foggy. He heaves himself out of the back seat, bracing himself against the body of the vehicle as he inhales deeply, trying to clear the confusion.

Above them, thin clouds blot the stars; the Southern Cross, usually so distinct, is barely a smear in the night sky.The cops want to know what they're doing there, no funny business they hope, examining their driver's licences then double-checking the vehicle for drugs, just in case. They immediately twig to Harry as soon as they can see his face, local royalty, excited by the opportunity for a one-on-one, now that they're clear he hasn't been dealing amphetamines or fucking some minor or both. "We should get you down to the station some time," says the shorter of the two, a stubby choir boy in regimentals. "Give the squad team some pointers."

"Sure," says Harry. "Be glad to."

Theirs is the only car still in the car park, a lone bucket on an empty beach.

After a bit more small talk Dean pulls out his keys, makes noises about heading home, but there's no way the cops are letting him back behind the wheel until he's had a couple more hours of shut-eye.

“I’m fine to drive, really,” insists Dean. “Look at these hands.” He extends them palm upwards. “I could do brain surgery. They’re steady as a rock.”

The cops ignore him. “Jump in,” they say, gesturing to their back seat.

The vehicle smells of Chinese takeaway. Harry’s there of his own accord but he feels like he’s been arrested as he tentatively digs for the belt clip between the seats, leery of what else he might find. It’s almost like being in a taxi with its radio crackling on the dash, if not for the uniforms sitting side by side up the front.

They swing past the pub which looks forlorn now that everyone’s gone home. There are a couple of houses with lights on, young kids gearing up for their paper rounds, hospital staff on the early shift, but mostly the streets are empty.

They drop him off first, pulling the patrol car right into the driveway, extracting a couple of autographs before he leaves. He signs his name more loopily than usual, paying undue care to its legibility as though it were a test to demonstrate his sobriety. He can’t get out of there fast enough, trying not to look like he’s running away as he beelines for the front door, the headlights spotlighting him on the porch as they reverse back out onto the street, before departing with a gentle toot.

Afternoon arrives on the heels of yesterday, the sky a drift of patchy clouds, Senior’s tomatoes fire-truck red beneath the greying blue. It’s not what Harry thinks of as “December”, a sunny blur of beachside Saturdays, but that applies to another time and place – childhood summers long past, or more recent holidays spent overseas amongst a community of like-minded revellers drawn together by their distance from home; a season bookended by a late return in time for Christmas, a couple of hangovers, and then it’s the new year. Father Murphy comes by to drop off a pair of tongs and some other bits and pieces still lying around from the sausage sizzle, the parish van backfiring as he reverses into a park. “It could have waited ’til Alan was home,” he says, indicating the missing car, “but it was a good excuse to say hello. There’s been a lot of talk. How’s it all going?”

“Fine, Father. Thanks. Yes, good.” The master of the one-line response. Harry’s about as interested in gasbagging with Father Murphy as he is in visiting the police station, less so, but he knows the priest is concerned about his dad and that if he doesn’t greet him now he’ll just come back another time. He steps outside and ushers the priest around the back, opening the shed as the minister talks.

"Fine. That is good, it's one of my favourite words. 'The boys will be fine this year,' I said in round four, and look, you came home with the flag. Can't get much more fine than that."

"No, that's right, " says Harry. "Can't argue with that."

"'It's fine. I'll be fine.' That's what I said to myself when I quit the seminary, years ago now. I didn't want to do it anymore. Or did I? I didn't know. Which was why I had to walk away, to find out. All fine."

"But you're a priest now."

"Yes. I went back. Nearly three years later, I went back. But I didn't know that I was going to do that until right before I did. I nearly ended up an English teacher."

Harry laughs.

"You're right to laugh. Imagine that, me at a desk marking essays. But it was okay. I had a knack for it. Putting the words in the right order, the commas and full-stops. If I'd stuck with it that would have been 'fine' too. That word again. 'Fine.' Whatever I'd ended up doing. All fine. That's the thing, Harry. The 'what' doesn't matter. What's important is the doing. I'm not talking about going to church. I know you're not a believer. What matters is the process of finding out what you want to do. I understand it can't be easy, everyone telling you your business, everyone thinking they know what's best. But there's no right or wrong way, no law that says it's this path or that path, now or never. All there is, is your path. Only your road. That's your job. That's what you've got to worry about, to find your way. In your time. When you're ready. And when you do, the people who love you will still love you. And you'll still love them. That's all that matters. Understand?"

Harry nods. He wants to. He could use a little faith.

For the first time in months the surface of the kitchen table is clear; no *Tower Bridge*, no *Dawn*, no *Ducks at Lakeside*. In the hall cupboard there is an unopened two-thousand-piece jigsaw of the Palace of Versailles, a Christmas gift from the Tiptons, but Alan is saving it, he doesn't say for what. Harry scans the room as he stirs the spaghetti sauce – notes his father's tooth glass on the window sill, his favourite mug on the dish drainer, the clean blue checked tea towel folded beside the sink, his 2007 Rotary calendar, already opened at January, hanging from the nail on the back of the door – his mind closing around each object as he clocks it, a brief experiment coming to an end.

They eat dinner on their laps, the two of them kitted out in matching black *MADCITYSPORTS* tracky-dacks, the hush broken by the clank of forks on crockery as they clean their plates. Senior picks up the remote control and adjusts the volume on the telly, stiff fingers stabbing the tiny arrows. They sit quietly watching as Peter McKenna delivers his fifth goal for the half, taking Collingwood to a 65-22 lead.

"Tell me what happened that night," says Harry as the crowd starts counting its chickens. He hadn't planned to say it but now that he has he is relieved, voicing the question he sees now he should have asked a long time ago.

"You know what happened." That night. The night in question. Alan doesn't need to ask which one.

I ain't seen nothing.

"Yeah, but not from you."

Alan turns down the sound. "Then read the bloody articles again. I'm fed up with talking. I've been over it with you a thousand times."

"No you haven't. You say you have, but you haven't. I don't want to read about it. I want you to tell me." *The nothings you can never put into words.* "I want you to lay it out for me, the way it was for you."

"You want me to tell you?"

"Yes. I want you to tell me. Your words. I don't want to read someone else's version of events. For once I want to hear it from you. Clean. Straight from the horse's mouth."

Alan mutes the television and looks at his youngest son. "Why? What difference does it make? It's the same outcome. It doesn't change anything."

"It does to me. I want to know the truth. Just once. No bullshit."

His father laughs.

"What's so funny?"

"Right there, that's bullshit. There's always bullshit."

"Well, your bullshit then. Tell me a story if you have to."

"You want me to tell you a story? Once upon a time ... like that? A fairy tale. Where do you want me to start?"

"That'll do. Once upon a time there was this girl."

"Yes."

"And?"

"And she stood about so high," he says, raising his hand above his head. "She had light brown hair, brown eyes, young, not even twenty years old."

"And then what, Dad? Then what?"

His father shakes his head. "And then nothing. I'm tired. I'm going to bed."

"Don't do that. It's way too early. Stay. Tell me the rest of it."

"No. This is fucked. I'm done with stories. You want to judge me too. For me to tell you how I destroyed her, how she got in the way before I could move her out of it? That it was all too late, too late before it had even started. The misery of it, the slow dragging endlessness. An hour doesn't pass where I don't think of her, how kind she was, how sweet, how funny. You think I didn't do everything I could to get her to give it up? I even offered her money to stop stripping, to get off the drugs. The diaries didn't say anything about that. They don't say how hard I tried."

"I think you could have tried harder. I think you could have done more."

"Like what? What could I have done? I bent over backwards to get her right."

"You could have left her the fuck alone."

"Is that right?"

"Yes."

Baby, can't you see.

Harry watches his father hoist himself out of his chair and make his slow rheumatic way to the door, recognising for the first time his father's sadness, seeing at last the truth of the situation, the tragedy of it, at 8.30 pm on New Year's Eve in front of a paused DVD of the 1970 Grand Final. Improbable as it was, she hadn't been just a girl. His father had loved her in his way, could admit everything except the fact of it, his havoc, what needed to be said.

A sign on the chemist window says *Free Ear Piercing Every Day with Piercing Stud Purchase*. Harry waits for Rosie outside, watches as she repositions her hair clip, puts on some lip balm, checks her teeth for food, turns off the lights and then locks up the shop. She is wearing her ankle socks over her stockings again; he can almost feel the sweat trickling down the backs of her knees, the pinch of the blisters forming between her airless toes. "What do you want, Harry?" she says, as he looks her up and down.

"I don't know. I thought you might want a lift home."

She glances at the sky then opens the door though there is no hint of rain, the scent of perspiration and rancid perfume rushing at his nostrils as she settles herself in the passenger seat. He lowers the window.

They sit silently in the car, Rosie holding the pull strap, her feet planted on the floor in brace position as they round the eight blocks to her house, Harry aware that he can do this drive blind drunk in the dark, a skill he'd happily eliminate from his current catalogue. "Do you want to come up?" she offers when he pulls up out the front, a final rally. "Katia won't be home for at least an hour."

The engine trembles, threatens to stall.

No, that won't be happening, thinks Harry as he taps the accelerator, shakes his head. "Not this time."

"Okay, well thanks for the lift," she says, sounding less than sure of herself, her face flushed despite the air conditioning; his thoughts leaping back to that time at the supermarket not long after they first got together, Rosie pushing past him and his mother in the freezer aisle, making a great show of bumping them with her trolley even though there was plenty of room to get around, the distinctive trail of her stale lavender scent, the family-sized tub of neopolitan ice-cream nestled beneath the packet of par-cooked white dinner rolls, Diana (with no idea then who she was to him) saying, "Now, they're breeding hips."

"So is any of it true?" he hears himself ask as she opens the door. "Did you ever really think you were pregnant?"

"Did I ever think I was pregnant?" Rosie repeats slowly. "Is that what you said?" her response almost a pantomime, Harry glad at least she isn't wearing lipstick (already always picturing her with too much lipstick, a bright pancaked grin even if she's wearing none). "Of course I did. Is that why you came, to accuse me? What do you think I am? How could you say such a thing?"

How? It isn't hard, he realises. Not hard at all.

Fuck them! Fuck you!

But that isn't why he is there. Rosie clutches her bag with one hand, the other wiping at a stray strand stuck to her shiny cheek, her lips pressed tightly together. "Look, forget that. It doesn't matter," Harry says. "It doesn't matter. I just wanted to say, it's done. It's not important."

"But I was pregnant," Rosie insists. "I did the tests, I went to the doctor. I didn't get my period for weeks. You know that. It was terrible. I didn't know what to do. You know that."

I ain't seen nothing.

She reminds him of his father when he is cornered, unable to keep his story straight but incapable of any honesty.

"Okay. I just don't understand why you'd say that when you know my mum knows Arlene at Dr Kirby's."

"That's not right. That's confidential."

"Don't blame me. I can't help the way things work around here. It's not like you're not in everyone's business. A place like this, you've got to mind yourself. People talk."

"But, no, she wouldn't. No. I know she wouldn't. Anyway, I don't believe you."

"Fair enough," though he knows she does. He taps the accelerator again just because. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

"Maybe what was a bad idea? You coming over pretending to be nice then accusing me of lying? Yes, that was a bad idea. You're an arsehole, Harry. I thought you were different but you're not. You're as mean as any of them. Forget I invited you in. I didn't. You're not invited. You're uninvited. From everything."

"Fine, off you go then. Why don't you do that. See you later."

Rosie blinks a couple of times, quotation marks on her thoughts, before sticking her feet out the car door. "You know, it must be nice being famous, everyone wanting to know you, to do you favours, going around taking this or that, everyone acting like you're special, but you're right, it is a small town and you're just a big fish in a small pond. That's all. People only notice you because of your brother and your dad. Local hero. Whoopty-do. If it wasn't for them, people wouldn't care about you at all. Not one little scrap."

Her torso shakes as she rails at him and he thinks about fucking her, the way her buttocks wobble as he enters her, dimply and loose, her body so stable in the centre of the bed; regretting slightly the passing of that, that he hadn't paid more attention (hadn't registered it was the last time, the last time they were together).

He waits until she has closed the door before leaning across and dropping the bag of tchotchkes out the window. "There's the rest of your stuff," he says, gladly off-

loading it, the balance of their short season together. He drives off, leaving her and the Safeway bag side by side on the footpath.

They were deft mentors, Jack and Eddy, the way they threw themselves in, fast assuming control of the situation – in so far as the situation was still under control – but that didn't mean there was anything to admire. Harry suggested they stop, said it a couple of times, "This isn't a good idea," but they were well beyond that. Trousers around their ankles, dress shirts hanging at their thighs, the rest of the boys urging them on, to put on a good show. And Harry was more than welcome to join them, they'd made that clear – after all it was his privilege, his prerogative, he could have her first if he liked. He'd earned that much. *Rising star!* But why cast himself in that drama? If there was one lesson to master, certainly his mother had taught him that (... *if you can't be useful*). And he couldn't stop this train. So he scoffed his Jack Daniel's as he left them to it (left her to it).

The trophy was still on the stage when he departed.

Harry would like to wait for time to do its passing, for it to soften the edges and heal the wounds, for it to temper his impatience with a dose of enlightenment, but time is a gradual instrument and he can't stand it anymore. Not any of it. The idea of Jack and Eddy strutting around like they've gotten away with something, another pair of knickers for their famed trophy drawer, one more in a gluttony of misdeeds, nearly enough to send him over there. Not because he needs to be told what happened after he left Sportsman's Night, and not because it would make any difference if he did hit them for six, but just for once to even up the fixture, to make them own their offences, to force them to suffer for their trespasses the way others have been forced to suffer theirs. But Harry knows it would be about as effective as pissing into the wind.

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been fourteen years since my first confession and I have never told the truth. I have been lazy, cruel and indecisive. I have lied. I have committed the sin of omission. I have twisted and turned, I have squirmed. I have been weak, afraid and uninspired. I have not taken the higher road. I have chosen the easier path when it has been expedient and it has always been expedient. I have not stepped up. I have gone along. I have baited and switched. I have avoided. I have been

undone and I have blamed others for my undoing. I have hidden when I could have led. I have not come to the aid of those I could have helped. I have turned my back on those who needed me. I have turned a blind eye. I have abandoned, judged and sinned. I have failed.

He puts down the cricket bat and grabs his car keys.

The letter itself he gets Dean to write:

"To whom it may concern ..."

III. Renunciation

From the little that Matt said later, it could be extrapolated thus: with one in front and one behind, the brothers were effectively screwing each other.

And then the party really got started.

The girl didn't remember much. There was the music and the lights, the dancing. Then afterwards, when she woke up on the stretcher in a side room downstairs, or rather, when she came to, the rest of the girls long gone, groggy and dazed, her mouth dry, the tight scratchy feeling of cracked lips. It wasn't until she went to the bathroom that she noticed her underpants were missing, special red sexy ones she'd nicked from work. Blood on her thighs.

She needed to wee but the burning sensation was so intense she had to stop before she got started. It was as though someone had taken a knife to her pelvis, searing her in her most sensitive place.

She bent forward letting her head fall between her knees, the motion fanning the tiny wisps of pubic hair ringing the base of the toilet.

Tears landed on the tiles between her feet but she wasn't aware that she was crying. It's just that it hurt so much, the tiniest little drop stinging sharper than any open wound she'd ever treated, yet she was busting. She couldn't remember the last time she'd felt such an urgent need to go.

She braced herself and released another drip, the splash blotted by her heavy intake of breath, time seeming to stop as a thin veneer of sweat broke out across her top lip. Was it possible for the pain to feel like both a burn and a cut?

She flushed the toilet, then balanced herself over the bathtub where she rinsed her vagina with warm water cupped from the calcified faucet. *"*Please stop*,"* she whispered, willing the pain away.

Gradually it subsided and her thoughts were overtaken by a swirl of images, of smoke, of crushed velvet, and of the men, dancing with her as the audience clapped, clapped, slow careful dancing, and then the dancing stopped and they laid her down, the audience still applauding as a distinct yeasty scent overtook her, a feeling of drowning, and then her mind went blank.

She closed her eyes and shook her head as though in doing that she could make the images go away.

And perhaps it wasn't even true. She might have been hallucinating, been ill with a fever. Imagining things. Terrible things. No, they couldn't be true. Her mother often said she was fanciful, had an overactive imagination.

But then Greta returned to the room. “Three hundred bucks,” she said, opening the girl’s handbag, stuffing the cash inside. All twenties. And then the man who met her at the station (when was that, days ago, weeks ago?) bundled her into the back of a silver Audi and dropped her home, the early hours, Greta smoking in the front passenger seat, the smell of cigarettes mixed with the distinctive musk of Greta’s perfume, easy listening on the radio for the entire hour’s drive, the green-skirted hula doll on the car’s dashboard madly swivelling at every turn.

Greta tapped the side of her nose as the girl prepared to get out of the car. “You did good, kiddo,” she said. “Keep this to yourself and there’ll be more work if you want it.”

Ray’s Mazda was parked in the drive. The front door was unlocked. The girl tiptoed inside, her stilettos in hand, ladders in her fishnets, the stockings all torn around her feet.

*

In the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit. Amen. He’s had this dream before. Or he’s dreaming that he’s had this dream before. Except that this time the priest is young. Too young. In his pinstripe suit, ankle boots and goatee. Making lame comparisons between Tracy and Deborah Harry songs (“Die Young Stay Pretty”). People dabbing at their eyes as he lunges at cheap gambits, God taking the special ones early, that she must have been too good for this world. It is humid. Sticky. The ground dry and lumpy as though it has rained and then dried again, the surface hard and irregular as coral. *You are dust and to dust you shall return*. Harry feels his armpits dampen inside his jacket, sweat run down his back. He watches himself rise from the folding seat and join the procession of other mourners approaching the grave. *I am the resurrection and the life*. The coffin is partly scattered with red roses. The scene reminding him of a movie, though even in the dream he can’t remember which one. He holds out his arm and drops his rose. It seemed to catch on a burst of warm air and spirals slowly down. An eternity until it lands. Then he turns without saying a word to anyone and makes his way back to the waiting car.

Halfway between the city and oblivion the sea is black. On the highway cars concertina in their rush to the coast, piling up on each other like waves.

Each year dozens of people die at the beach. Half cocked weekend warriors way out of their depth.

Only the day before Dean swore he saw a body drifting near the Bluff – it was face down, he said, floating in the sea – but when they went back later there was no sign of it, just the busy tide as always thrashing between the lighthouse and the Rocks.

In his fantasies everyone is dead: Diana, Alan, Matt, Kate, Rosie, Margo, Laurie, Ted, Jack, Eddy, all lined up on a motel bed. Only the girls survive, getting on with their lives as though the others have never existed. Occasionally he envisages them together, his girl, his father's girl, always fixed in time, running through native flower meadows, the warm sun high in the sky as they course hand in hand through hip-height grasses. Or they might be dressed as cheerleaders, standing side by side on a curated winter field, bright and brassy, happily singing the Club song as the players stream onto the field, glorious warriors in their gold and Prussian blue.

Baby, can't you see?

At night, when it is quiet, he lies listening to the breeze. *Sssssssss.* The soft rustle of the leaves penetrating his sleep, its own melody, blowing through the eucalyptus leaves like a promise.

Sopping wet with perspiration, back from a run, Harry approaches Margo's Citroën, which is parked in front of the house. This time he can afford to be sociable. "Do you want to come inside?"

Margo smiles. "Can I take a raincheck?"

"Suit yourself."

It is a perfect morning for footy practice, the kind he used to almost look forward to, the rote formula of it, trading the polished cowhide back and forth, firm and dry between his calloused fingers. He rips off a shoe, pulls at his sock to line up the stitching, then leans a hand against the car as he stretches out his quads, first one leg and then the other, the gentle breeze loosing a steady supply of gumnuts on the hood as they make small talk about Christmas, how she spent a few days at the family beach house, swam, read a book, ate too much plum pudding. Magpies chortle on the power lines. "I should probably go in," he says when he is done. "Take a shower."

Margo nods. “Just one thing,” she says, removing her sunglasses. “And I promise it’s off the record, way off, strictly between us, I swear, but was it you? I need to know. Did you write it? Do you want to tell me more about it?”

“About what?”

“The letter, this business with the girl. You know I can’t do anything with it. Not unless I get someone else to confirm the allegations. But the Club’s hardly going to admit to anything, are they? Or any of your compatriots.”

He scoffs. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I really don’t.”

She smiles. “That’s funny.”

“Why?”

“No, that’s not what I mean. It’s just I thought you’d say that, that’s all. That’s alright. I get it, because what are you going to do? You’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t, right? Don’t want to be a dobber. Not in this country. A crime greater than treason. But that’s as good as shooting yourself in the foot. You look guilty as sin or you compromise the team. What a choice. You give them half a chance, step out of line and they’ll let you wear it. That’s it, isn’t it? I’m right, aren’t I? You’ve got nowhere else to go. No other way to play it. Maybe you can just give me a sign so I know I’m not completely off-track. A little hint. What do you say, a wink for ‘yes’, a frown for ‘no’?”

“Sorry Maggie. You’re barking up the wrong tree here.”

“Is that so? Which tree should I be barking up then?”

He shakes his head and laughs. “I don’t know. I can’t help you. I don’t know what you mean.”

Little league, juniors, TAC Cup, VFL, AFL. That is enough. Harry slips the St. Christopher medal into his pocket, then loads his tent and rucksack into the back of his car.

Diana is always saying that the men in the family are cursed, their talents having leached from them as much as they’ve bestowed, keeping them fixed in a one-note existence of speed, intensity and strength, a dead-end combination of diminishing returns. And maybe, Harry thinks, she is right, everyone dipping into the well too many times, putting nothing back (and he doesn’t mean the weekly tenner for the church collection plate). Compounded as interest, handed down from father to son, each

generation shouldering what their forebears couldn't, lugging it in its own clumsy fashion, that inherited dead weight, on and on until finally someone says *stop* and takes care of business.

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

In 1837 Alexander Thomson, the first elected Mayor of Geelong, named his home 'Kardinia', after the Tasmanian Koori word meaning 'sunrise' or 'new beginning.' "Kar-din-i-a," says Harry, emphasising each syllable. It sounds like something magical. Happiness. The warm briny smell of the sea filtering through Manna gum at Jan Juc.

End of an era as Furey quits.

January 8, 2007

By Margo Milne-Arthurs

Star recruit and youngest member of the Furey football dynasty, Harry Furey, has turned his back on AFL football.

The shy centre halfback says he's achieved everything he set out to in the game and is ready to move forward. He is eager to explore other career options.

"It's not for everybody," said coach Laurie Holden, who played alongside Harry's father, Club legend Alan Furey, in the 1980s. "We'd love to see him stay but players have to be honest with themselves and if their hearts aren't in it they'll never be any good. Quitting like this takes a lot of guts, but in the long run it's best for him and it's best for the team. We wish him every success."

Furey and his brother were recruited under the father-son rule but while Matt Furey has thrived in the spotlight, Harry appears to have struggled with the family legacy and with his father's notoriety off the field.

"We are sorry to see a skilled footballer turn his back on such a promising career," said Ted Parker, Club president. "Harry is part of the family. The door is always open if he changes his mind."

Furey was recruited from high school, playing his first AFL game at seventeen.

"It's been a wonderful run for the Furey clan," added Parker. "Let's hope it's not the end of an era."

A journalist once asked Alan Furey about his game strategy, what went through his mind when he ran out onto the field. “That's easy,” he said. “Don’t let the other team have the ball.”

Harry takes his Sherrin, sticks it on the front seat, then drives out slowly along the familiar streets. Past his mum’s. Past his old school. Past the units where the paddock used to be. At the oval, kids run free as birds. He pulls over, turns off the ignition and watches them tear around. Then he grabs the football, gets out of the car and drills it clear across the ground.